

Witnessing the Possible:
Investigating the parent and child audience
experience at Theatre for Early Years (TEY)

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Declaration

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29/10/25

Date

Abstract

Live performance designed for children from birth to six years old is a growing field of study and artistic practice. Little research has taken place however into the experience of the adult spectators who accompany the very young children. In live performance for the very youngest, birth to three, these adults are often parents. This thesis investigates how Theatre for Early Years (TEY) spectatorship can be understood within the context of the parent-infant relationship. 50 adults who had attended live performance with a baby or toddler were interviewed, and a case study performance of an immersive theatre event for babies, *Float*, was video and audio recorded. An interpretive, embodied approach to analysis was taken and themes generated from the multi-modal data. Parents were found to value both unpredictability and safety in TEY; positive experiences were associated with prior knowledge, good communication from artists, and fortuitous alignment with current needs and interests. TEY attendance was found to support parent-child bonding and promote child voice in three ways: 1, enhancing and enabling engagement through responsive companionship; 2, centring the needs and interests of the child when accessing culture; and 3, perceiving aesthetic capacity in the child as a marker of personhood. The conclusions of this study uphold the value of TEY as part of our cultural landscape, emphasising the importance of inclusivity and choice in access.

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May your time ahead contain unmeasurable experiences of awe and delight.

Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures.....	ix
List of Tables	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Background and aims	1
1.2 Terminology	3
1.3 Thesis structure	5
Chapter 2: Navigating My Position	6
2.1 Professional Background.....	7
2.2 Ethics and Power Dynamics	9
2.2.1 Power and status	10
2.2.2 Starcatchers	11
2.3 Philosophy.....	12
2.3.1 Ontology.....	12
2.3.2 Epistemology.....	13
2.4 Pedagogy	18
Chapter 3: Literature Review	21
3.1 TEY in Practice and Research	22
3.1.1 History and availability	22
3.1.2 Form and aesthetic.....	25
3.2 TEY and Pedagogy.....	31
3.2.1 Conceptualising pedagogy.....	31
3.2.2 Play	34
3.2.3 Creativity.....	37
3.2.4 Relationships	41

Table of contents

3.2.5	Spirit.....	45
3.2.6	TEY and Pedagogy Summary	47
3.3	The Triangular Audience.....	49
3.3.1	The spectatorship experience of the accompanying adult.....	49
3.3.2	Parenting in TEY.....	52
3.3.3	TEY as an introduction to theatre	55
3.3.4	Theatre etiquette at TEY.....	59
3.3.5	TEY as a site of community	64
3.4	Shared Experience.....	68
3.4.1	Intersubjectivity.....	70
3.4.2	Empathy	73
3.4.3	Attachment and bonding.....	76
3.4.4	The spectatorship experience of the very young child	82
3.5	Research Questions	87
Chapter 4: Methodology.....		89
4.1	Philosophical reasoning.....	90
4.2	Design	93
4.2.1	Learning from the quasi-pilot project	97
4.3	Procedure	99
4.3.1	Phase One collection and participants	99
4.3.2	Phase Two TEY event.....	102
4.3.3	Phase Two recruitment	105
4.3.4	Phase Two filming.....	106
4.3.5	Phase Two video transcriptions and selection of screenshots	108
4.3.6	Phase Two interviews and Casefiles.....	109
4.4	Challenges and limitations	112
4.5	Ethics.....	114
Chapter 5: Process of Analysis.....		118
5.1	Phase One Contextualising Metadata	119
5.1.1	Metadata.....	119

Table of contents

5.2	Phase One Thematic Analysis	128
5.2.1	Familiarisation with the dataset	128
5.2.2	Coding	131
5.2.3	Generating initial themes	132
5.2.4	Developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes.....	133
5.2.5	Questions taken into Phase Two data collection and analysis.....	134
5.3	Phase Two Analysis	136
5.3.1	Reflections at the event	139
5.3.2	Video transcriptions	139
5.3.3	Screenshot selection	141
5.3.4	Interview transcriptions	142
5.3.5	Initial noting	142
5.3.6	Movement mapping.....	142
5.3.7	Deductive coding.....	146
5.3.8	The Mirror Game.....	147
5.3.9	Engagement Signals	150
5.3.10	Adult Action Categories	152
5.4	Bringing the Two Phases Together.....	155
Chapter 6: Findings - Case Portraits.....		158
6.1	Beth and Joni.....	159
6.2	Diana and Violet	162
6.3	Emma and Lucy	166
6.4	Gill, Nick, and Quinn	169
6.5	Hannah and Innes	171
6.6	Kate, Matt, and Thomas	174
6.7	Orla and Calum	176
6.8	Paige and Amber	178
6.9	Shona and Freya.....	181
Chapter 7: Findings - The Themes		183
7.1	Attention	186

Table of contents

7.1.1	Direction of Focus	187
7.1.2	Taking Care	194
7.2	Sharing	204
7.2.1	Being in the Experience Together	205
7.2.2	Gifting the Experience.....	215
7.3	(Un)known	222
7.3.1	Knowing my Child	223
7.3.2	Welcoming Something Different.....	230
7.4	Summary of Findings	239
Chapter 8: Discussion – A Set of Three Dances		240
8.1	The Dance of the Rules	242
8.1.1	The Rebel Baby	243
8.1.2	Permission and participation.....	245
8.1.3	Parenting in public “A lot of should about it”.....	249
8.1.4	Knowing the rules of the game	253
8.1.5	The benefit of rules.....	257
8.1.6	Conclusion to Dance of the Rules.....	259
8.2	The Dance of Space and Time.....	261
8.2.1	Thresholds	262
8.2.2	Situating of bodies.....	265
8.2.3	Human becomings.....	267
8.2.4	Being present.....	269
8.2.5	Making memories.....	271
8.2.6	Conclusion to Dance of Space and Time	272
8.3	The Dance of Self and Other	274
8.3.1	What’s the difference?.....	274
8.3.2	Building community.....	277
8.3.3	Rupture.....	279
8.3.4	Witnessing.....	281
8.3.5	Love	284

Table of contents

8.3.6	Conclusion to the Dance of Self and Other.....	288
Chapter 9: Conclusion and Recommendations.....		290
9.1	How TEY Spectatorship Supports Parent-child Bonding	292
9.1.1	Creative Attunement.....	292
9.1.2	Concerted Inclusion.....	294
9.1.3	Witnessing the Possible	296
9.2	Recommendations for TEY	298
9.2.1	Create a Safe Space	298
9.2.2	Find Effective Communication on Expectations	298
9.2.3	Quality Matters.....	299
9.3	Suggestions for further research	300
9.3.1	The Mirror Game.....	300
9.3.2	Growing into Aesthetic Distance	301
9.3.3	TEY Spectatorship in ECEC settings	302
9.3.4	Attention.....	302
9.4	Why We All Need Theatre for Babies.....	303
References.....		304
Appendix A: Performance Works Cited		338
Appendix B: Consent Forms and Participant Information Sheets.....		343
Appendix C: Questionnaire for demographic monitoring (Phase One participants)		355
Appendix D: Sample advertisements for recruitment.....		357
Appendix E: Filming <i>Float</i>, Guidance for Videographer.....		359
Appendix F: Additions to Consent for selected images		361
Appendix G: Interview Schedule: Case Study		363
Appendix H: Demographic Questionnaire Results.....		366
Appendix I: Starcatchers Engagement Signals.....		369

List of Figures

Figure 1: Design Diagram.....	94
Figure 2 Location of interviews	99
Figure 3: Phase One recruitment	101
Figure 4: Inside the Performance Space	102
Figure 5: Outside the performance space (before the performance)	103
Figure 6: Outside the performance space (after the performance)	103
Figure 7: Baby Studio floor plan	104
Figure 8: Map of camera views	107
Figure 9: Design Diagram with Phase One focus	118
Figure 10: Phase One participants placement on SIMD by postcode	121
Figure 11: Phase One participants by relation to me	122
Figure 12: Phase One stories by how long ago they took place	123
Figure 13: Phase One participants by relation to child in story	124
Figure 14: Age of children in stories	124
Figure 15: Events attended in Phase One stories by form	126
Figure 16: Experiences in Phase One stories by emotional quality	127
Figure 17: Phase One doodled data	130
Figure 18: Coding Phase One interviews	131
Figure 19: Generating initial Phase One themes	133
Figure 20: Phase One interim themes.....	134
Figure 21: Design Diagram with Phase Two focus	138
Figure 22: Empty Float performance space, Camera A.....	143
Figure 23: Beth and Joni movement map	144
Figure 24: Hannah and Innes movement map	144
Figure 25: Casefile extract with notes and coloured highlighting	147
Figure 26: Design Diagram connecting the two phases.....	155
Figure 27: Mapping Phase Two samples into Phase One themes.....	156
Figure 28: Journey map of Beth and <u>Joni</u>	159
Figure 29: Journey map of Diana and <u>Violet</u>	162
Figure 30: Journey map of Emma and <u>Lucy</u>	166
Figure 31: Journey map of Gill, Nick, and <u>Quinn</u>	169
Figure 32: Journey map of Hannah and <u>Innes</u>	171
Figure 33: Journey map for Kate, Matt, and <u>Thomas</u>	174
Figure 34: Journey map of Orla and <u>Calum</u>	176
Figure 35: Journey map of Paige and <u>Amber</u>	178

List of figures

Figure 36: Journey map of Shona and <u>Freya</u>	181
Figure 37: Theme Map in full	184
Figure 38: Three images from Float illustrating ‘Attention, Sharing, and (Un)known’	184
Figure 39: Theme Map section, 'Attention' and subthemes	186
Figure 40: Image from Float illustrating 'Direction of Focus'	189
Figure 41: Image from Float illustrating 'Taking Care'	195
Figure 42: Theme map section, ‘Sharing’ and subthemes	204
Figure 43: Image from Float illustrating 'Being in the Experience Together'	205
Figure 44: Image from Float illustrating 'Gifting the Experience'	216
Figure 45: Theme Map section, ‘(Un)known’ and subthemes	222
Figure 46: Image from Float illustrating 'Knowing my Child'	225
Figure 47: Image from Float illustrating 'Welcoming Something Different'	233
Figure 48: Image from Float illustrating parental enjoyment	287

List of Tables

Table 1: Phase One Data	95
Table 2: Phase Two Data	96
Table 3: Who was at Float?.....	106
Table 4: Phase Two Digital Data	108
Table 5: Phase Two Participants and contributions.....	111
Table 6: Metadata sources.....	121
Table 7: Example of initial coding	132
Table 8: Phase Two analysis processes	137
Table 9: example from screenshot selection table	141
Table 10: Engagement Signals with examples from Beth and Joni Casefile	151
Table 11: Adult action categories.....	154
Table 12: Style reference for presenting Findings.....	158
Table 13: 'Direction of Focus' and subthemes	187
Table 14: 'Taking Care' and subthemes	195
Table 15: 'Being in the Experience Together' and subthemes	206
Table 16: 'Gifting the Experience' and subthemes.....	215
Table 17: 'Knowing my Child' and subthemes	223
Table 18: 'Welcoming Something Different' and subthemes.....	230

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and aims

In 2022 I completed an MPhil research study entitled *Missed Connections and Silver Linings: researching Theatre for Early Years audience experience during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Allan, 2022). That project served as a quasi-pilot for this one, though as the title suggests, there were important differences brought about by the limitations placed on live performance by lockdown restrictions. The rationale for this doctoral thesis however does build on the aims and findings of that earlier, smaller, project. Namely, to explore the relational experience of TEY spectatorship and investigate the potential of this activity in supporting parent-child bonding. Both studies build on my professional practice as a theatre maker and performer, and my experiences watching TEY performances and audiences.

The importance of relationships in early childhood cannot be overstated. They are the context in which the baby grows and exists, Reddy compares them to being as air is to the bumble bee, or water to the fish (Reddy, 2010). Positive relationships with trusted care-givers enable young children to learn and develop and are a core tenet of Scottish Early Years policy (Crichton et al., 2020). Supporting these relationships through artistic activity can take many forms from direct, personal interventions (Armstrong, 2021) to representation and celebration in cultural output (Isaacs & Elliot, 2022). It is also the case that accessing the arts is a route many adults choose to support their own mental, social and emotional health (Bu et al., 2022). As a small, niche art form, little research has so far taken place looking at the potential impact of attending live performance, specifically made for the youngest of audiences, that is babies and toddlers. The findings from my 2022 study suggest that parents value TEY as a way of supporting their children's connection to others, and as a way for them to experience something meaningful together.

The 'triangular' (Desfosses, 2009) audience of TEY is an unusual form of spectatorship, with the performer, child, and the child's adult companion forming the three points of the triangle. There was a need to explore in more detail how the adults attending TEY understood and valued the experience, both in terms of the relational impact as already stated and to describe the nature of TEY spectatorship. Most post-show questionnaires are directed at such adults and return positive, if shallow, responses (Starcatchers, 2022) and the small but insightful field of TEY research has been conducted with a focus on the artwork, the children, or both (e.g. van de Water, 2023). By turning the focus to the accompanying adult, this study bridges the research

gap between the pedagogic understanding of early childhood and the dynamic, aesthetic offer of TEY. The current discourse on children's rights and the voice of the baby following the incorporation of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) into Scots Law in 2024 makes this thesis a timely insight into how very young children have a place and voice in our shared culture.

Research aims

- To describe the unique properties of TEY, triangular spectatorship
- To understand how parents value live performance experiences for babies and toddlers
- To explore the potential of TEY spectatorship as a bonding experience

1.2 Terminology

Throughout this thesis I use the acronym **TEY** to stand for Theatre for Early Years when I need a general term. It is used in the literature (e.g. Fletcher-Watson, 2013b; Hovik, 2019a; Schneider, 2009b) with Theatre for the Very Young (TVY) being the North American equivalent. Performance is also used as a general term and has the advantage of more obviously including musical performances. The risk in continuing to use ‘theatre’ is that it is inaccurate if thought to only mean dramatic staging taking place in a purpose-built venue. To support building on existing literature however I will stick to TEY, on the understanding that as descriptions and research progresses it will come to take on its own meaning as an acronym and phrase. Theatre as a form in TEY is promiscuous and inclusive and may include (but not be limited to) dance, circus, live music, performance art, opera, and installation. My working definition of ‘theatre’ within TEY is: a live, performed event delivered with artistic intention. Where specific art forms are foregrounded, or relevant this is highlighted.

The ‘Early Years’ in TEY have a variable boundary, different to the standard in education research where it is understood as the ages between 0 and 8 (Bertram et al., 2016). Within TEY it is rarely taken to include children over 6, a product of the form emerging underneath an already established children’s theatre scene (Fabretti, 2009). TEY is for audiences of children who are below the age for which theatre for young audiences is habitually made. Due to the relationship between children’s theatre and education this often coincides with the start of formal schooling, which varies between national systems. The international network for the promotion of performing arts for Early Years, Small Size (Small Size, 2025), define TEY as having a target age range within 0-6 years and this reflects how the majority of work is conceived and marketed.

My use of the word **artist** includes reference to many creative roles and art forms. Often, though not always, performers, **TEY artists** are referenced throughout this thesis and my meaning is: those who are professionally engaged in the creation and/or production of live performance for audiences under the age of 6.

Babies, and **toddlers** are overlapping categories I use to describe people of around the ages of 0-2 and 1-3 respectively.

The word **parent** is subject to slightly different meanings depending on the context. In the discussion and conclusion chapters (and the title of this thesis) I use it to refer to the parent or carer accompanying the child at the performance, the assumption being that this is a person with a close and ongoing relationship with their child companion. Where distinctions are relevant

these are made, and this is reiterated at the opening of the discussion chapter. In the literature review, terms such as parent, mother, or care-giver are used with the precision in which they are applied in the research and writing under discussion. Most, though not all, of the adult research participants in this study were parents to the children they brought to live performance, with mothers having the strongest voice. When using parent as a generic term my aim is for it to be inclusive. If the descriptions of a TEY spectatorship experience that involves loving curiosity, responsibility, and delight towards your child companion ring true, then the findings apply regardless of the formal definition of your relationship.

1.3 Thesis structure

I begin with Chapter 2: Navigating My Position. I felt it was important to open this way to share my background as an artist, and the choices I have made as a researcher to give the fullest picture on the journey I took to arrive at my conclusions. As an interpretivist study with an embodied approach, sharing as much as possible the perspective from which I conducted the research is a crucial aspect of achieving necessary rigor. This perspective informs the whole project, including the review of literature which forms Chapter 3. As well as summarising existing TEY literature, I review studies from the disciplines of early childhood, psychology, and education which relate to my research aims. The literature review is concluded with the research questions, asking chiefly how parents value TEY and to what extent TEY spectatorship is a shared experience.

In Chapter 4: Methodology, I lay out the study design, how the positionality of Chapter 2 informed my approach, and the procedures taken for data collection and analysis including ethical considerations. The data collection consisted of two phases: Phase One where I interviewed 50 adults who answered ‘yes’ to the question “have you ever attended live performance with a baby or toddler?”; and Phase Two, observation at a TEY performance, *Float* by Kerry Cleland, followed by adult participant interviews. Chapter 5: Process of Analysis, provides visualisations of collated metadata and describes the steps taken in a reflexive thematic analysis of Phase One data. The additional analysis methods applied to the Phase Two data and the relationship between the two phases are also detailed.

Findings are shared as two chapters, Case Portraits and Themes. Chapter 6: Case Portraits details the TEY experiences of the families who took part in Phase Two of the study. Chapter 7: Themes describes the themes generated from data analysis with the inclusion of data extracts in the form of interview transcripts, video descriptions, and still images from video taken at *Float*. Three primary, umbrella themes are presented: *Attention*, *Sharing*, and *(Un)known*, each with secondary and tertiary subthemes. In Chapter 8: Discussion I move to how these themes can be understood in relation to my research aims, offering a way of thinking about the tensions and movements present by naming them as ‘dances’: The Dance of the Rules, the Dance of Space and Time, and The Dance of Self and Other. In Chapter 9: Conclusions and Recommendations, I make suggestions for TEY practice and future research, and put forward three ways in which I have found that TEY supports parent-child bonding. These are: the enactment of Creative Attunement, Concerted Inclusion, and the process of Witnessing the Possible.

Chapter 2: Navigating My Position

The purpose of this section is to serve as an opening for the reflexive narrative taken within this study, based on the understanding that credibility of qualitative, interpretative work is impacted by the effective communication of the researcher's, potentially very specific and personal, journey (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is true for research where there is an established set of assumed or prior knowledge around either the subject matter or methods, even more so where this is lacking (Moss, 2022). That my contribution to knowledge is within an area without a body of literature itself but with connections to other disciplines heightens the need for specificity in my positioning as a researcher. Broad, interdisciplinary interest necessitated a lot of framing and selection, influenced by my ethos, approach, and research aims. That my voice is present in every chapter is itself a meaningful choice of approach, an ongoing intention to make visible the process of reflexivity (Dean, 2017).

This calibration of the research instrument (Creswell, 2013) begins with a description of how my professional work in TEY informed the direction of this study at its outset. Throughout this thesis I use recollected moments of audience interaction and observation to provide context or illustrate connections being made. A description of my involvement with TEY since 2011 provides the background to the origin of these reflections. Not data in themselves, they are a feature of my voice in this thesis, giving detail to the varied ways in which I have met the phenomenon under study in the past. In 2.3 I describe the ethical approach taken and discuss some of the power dynamics present in the study. This is in addition to a description in the methodology section on how ethical procedures were followed and is offered here to support the reader in understanding how ethical considerations shaped the research at different stages. My aim in introducing the philosophies and experiences that have guided me, ahead of the literature review, is to give a background to the choices made in charting the course made through multiple disciplines within the academy. The topics within [2.3.2](#), epistemology, are returned to in the methodology section describing how methods were chosen.

Lastly, my approach to pedagogy is described under a separate heading. As with the other sections in this chapter, it reveals a way of thinking and contextualises this study within wider research. As a social and forward-facing endeavour, it is also the main framework through which the value of this research in terms of impact and application is discussed.

2.1 Professional Background

The beginnings of this PhD stretch back to when I first became aware of and interested in making TEY. This was initially through encountering Starcatchers' artists residences and presentations of work in the late 2000s. The work of Starcatchers, Scotland's Arts and Early Years Organisation, is described in section [3.1.1](#) of the Literature Review, and their connection to this thesis in the following section of this chapter. Since graduating with a degree in Acting Studies in 2003 I had developed a strong interest in working creatively both for and with children, being drawn to the freedom of imagination that was often available and the energetic exchange of ideas amongst colleagues. Having worked as a playwright, my starting point however had often been script-based. The non-narrative forms common to TEY were unfamiliar to me and challenged me to consider immersive approaches, with multiple modalities given even weight rather than meaning relying on the structure of story.

In 2010 I attended a Starcatchers seminar where Zeedyk presented on the neuroscience of baby brain development, emphasising the vital importance of human connection (Zeedyk, 2006). 2010 was also the year I became a mother for the first time and I was enjoying the discovery of writing and thought on early childhood such as Gopnik's (2009) *The Philosophical Baby*. Zeedyk talked convincingly about the value of creativity and the arts from the very beginning but the description of laying down neural connections like the re-treading then paving of a well-worn path, a process defined by repetition, left me with a puzzle. How can the theatre, which is essentially transient, lay down any of these metaphorical roads? What impact on a baby's experience and growing brain could half an hour of the extra-ordinary have? These are the questions which sparked my interest in creating work for under 3s, motivated by this challenge to create something meaningful and enjoyable that could also have a life for the audience beyond the performance. The theme of relationships, particularly the early parent-child relationship, became a key feature of my artistic work and, ultimately, the central driver for this research.

My interest in the accompanying adults, as well as the babies and toddlers, continued into the performances I made, each one initiated by a question posed by the previous project. My decade of work with Ipdip Theatre could be viewed as a form of practice as research, though it lacked the detailed and continuous documentation that characterises academic study (Nelson, 2013).

*Calvinball*¹ for example, created in 2014, arose from the question – how can we create a performance where an active toddler is able to move wherever they please should they wish to? Where adults feel permitted to join in with play? Testing, observation, reflection and adaptation were methods applied during the rehearsal process and enacted within each partially improvised performance. By providing opportunities for families to engage playfully with the props and performers my aim was to create an experience that modelled, whilst also creating the conditions for, positive, creative communication between adults and children. Across a variety of projects, I have taken the roles of performer, director, producer and production assistant. Each of these brought me into relationship with the audience in a different way.

As well as creating my own plays and interactive performances I was fortunate to be able to attend high quality work by both Scottish and European artists as an audience member. These included experiences had alongside one or both of my children, as well as alone or with adult colleagues. Performances with seriousness of intention and large investments of time and resources showed me that it was possible to create art of universal language that welcomed very young audiences unconditionally. Though my interest in TEY as a family gift that could inspire future play and creativity remained, I also began to see the potential in the form as primarily an aesthetic experience. There are some good examples of research as practice in the field of TEY (Hovik, 2019b; Morley, 2022), my choice however has been to pursue a social science thesis rather than continuing to answer my puzzlements practically and artistically. This was led by my curiosity into the audience experience which took me away from my own artistic impulses, and towards a phenomenology of an experience that is not my own.

As an artist, a parent, or an unattached adult I have shared audience spaces with thousands of young children. This has given me experience of a huge range of responses, and with the case of my own work a variety of responses to the same performance. This knowledge influences my analysis of the data gathered in this project, giving me a sense of the expected and exceptional. Most importantly however it provides me with an abiding awareness of how situated and individual all theatre experiences are. An awareness that contributes to my methodological choices and how I conceptualise the notion of audience.

¹ A full list of TEY performances cited is listed in Appendix A

2.2 Ethics and Power Dynamics

I try to take a positive approach to ethics. That is, not only seeking to avoid harm, but to take actions that are conducive to good, those that are kind, honest, generous and thoughtful. This is a principle rather than rule-based approach that is ongoing and situated, manifesting in this research not as a list to be worked through and completed but a way of meeting each component of the work mindful of consequences. How the ethical impact of the specific data collection procedures were considered is detailed in methodology, this section deals with how my approach and position interacted with the research project more broadly.

The moral implications of researching parent-child relationships goes beyond how I interact with participants and manage the data collected. I review literature on the importance of attachment and bonding in section [3.4.3](#) but I wanted to highlight here a study which illustrates the importance of context when making claims for the impact of an intervention. Troller-Renfree (2022) demonstrated increased brain activity in babies from an intervention with low-income families, a large monthly unconditional cash payment given to the mother. Their work was quantitative, $n=435$, and not comparable to this study in many ways but I believe its simplicity serves as a useful reminder of the importance of certain necessities. Young families require a range of support for thriving, and my intention in pursuing this research is to investigate an activity that can contribute towards that goal. Emphasising the limitations of TEY's impact is necessary for accurately describing its strengths.

Describing the structures and limitations within which this research took place helps locate the knowledge produced. Many families found positive experiences in attending performances, it would not be correct to infer that all parents therefore 'should' do the same. All kinds of barriers exist, beyond the scope of this research to explore, that impede arts participation and implying otherwise places an inappropriate implication of responsibility on individual parents.

2.2.1 Power and status

Foucault described power as “exercised from innumerable points” (1982, p. 94) and my own presence within the lifeworld of the children and adults taking part in the research is a part of their experience. The transparency necessary for valid social research includes a description on how I am seen, as well as what I see, as it impacts the production of data (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019). Meeting me you get a white woman in her forties who presents as able bodied, is of average height, and when I speak, I sound like I am from the north of England. My position as a PhD researcher and my use of language mark me as culturally middle class. When comparing my own demographic categories to those of participants (see [5.1.1](#), Metadata), I am mode average, or typical. Sometimes there were specific connections made between my feelings and experiences as a mother and audience member and those of participants, as detailed in [4.5](#), Ethics. These were always individual and contextualised, though I may be typical in some regards and a relatively unmarked body (Gatens, 2013) amongst the general public, I actively try to avoid an egocentric bias of considering my experience the standard from which others deviate. My insider/outsider status in relation to the research participants and TEY artists was not binary or fixed (Milligan, 2016), though as the ultimate collector and interpreter of data I held an unavoidable position of power. It was important to communicate to participants that I understood the responsibility attached to this.

My own personality, experiences and beliefs influence the choices I have made as a parent and an artist. There is a danger, most acute for mothers, of such choices being viewed within an ethical hierarchy; implying different choices made by others are in some way inferior (Bourdieu, 2018). This was brought to the front during interviews, especially the more extended case-study ones, but was a risk I was also alive to during analysis and writing up phases. The rights-based, ethical prerogative to respect individual voice has had a strong methodological impact. There was a commitment in the interpretive aspects of the research to seek and support an authentic contribution from all participants, including being open to the multiple ways voice is communicated in young children (Scottish Government, 2023).

2.2.2 Starcatchers²

Though Starcatchers did not remunerate me or directly fund this research I have had a long-standing professional relationship with the organisation, which is important to clarify and consider any limitations this could bring. Starcatchers supported this project in-kind, through supervision by their CEO, Rhona Mathieson and by providing access to the performance used in Phase Two of the data collection.

As detailed in the Literature review in [3.2.1](#), History and Availability, the story of TEY in Scotland is in large part the story of Starcatchers. Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years Organisation, a charity which receives regular funding from the Scottish Government, Creative Scotland, and other sources. Their remit includes producing public work, running participatory groups, supporting artists, and the training of the Early Years workforce. Since 2016 I have worked for them in a freelance capacity and benefited from artist development opportunities such as workshops and festival and conference trips. I also agree with their aims and values; and know and like many of their staff members and other regular freelancers. Such closeness could be considered problematic were I offering to assess the quality of work produced notably *Float*, created by Kerry Cleland and produced by Starcatchers, which features in this thesis as a case study. Emphasising the study focus of audience experience mitigates against both an unreliably positive critique of the artwork, or unfair scrutiny that could harm the artists.

When considering concerns around bias or professional reputation that may be impacted by this research it is important to point out that the Early Years arts sector in Scotland is small and there is no organisation comparable to Starcatchers that could be considered 'competition'. Starcatchers, as a national organisation, has a role in supporting and promoting all quality arts for the very young, making it the best organisation to partner with in Scotland to meet my research aims. My interest is audience experience, and explorations around value are offered with a view to furthering practice for the benefit of all future artists and audiences, aims which Starcatchers supports.

² <https://starcatchers.org.uk/>

2.3 Philosophy

As well as informing methodology, my positioning in terms of how I understand the process of knowledge acquisition and sharing has shaped my research aims and selection of literature. Some philosophical writing does enter into that literature, notably around the ‘problem of other minds’, this section however is addressing my research philosophy: the foundations on which my knowledge claims are built. My ontological position is followed by descriptions of three key epistemological concepts: interpretivism, phenomenology, and embodiment. My approach to pedagogy, which draws on my positionality as a whole, is presented in a separate section which concludes this chapter.

2.3.1 Ontology

Stating that theatre is not real life (and is not supposed to be) does not feel controversial. The experience of spectatorship is lived by real people however, within their lives. As an investigation interested in the experience of theatre, questions around what is real, imaginary, fake, or true are worth exploring. My ontological approach is constructivist in that truth is sought in what is felt and shared, rather than looking for things which exist independently on their own persistent terms. Puppets are helpful in illustrating my approach, and we can use the world’s most famous puppet as an example. There are many ways of answering the question, “who is Kermit the Frog?” that are not, in themselves satisfactory. A specific assemblage of cloth and ping-pong ball eyes perhaps; but is he still Kermit when unanimated in the prop room? We could say the performer is Kermit, but we would not recognise him as such if we could see him, under the stage set. More than one puppeteer has taken the role (controlling arms, voice, and facial responses), and there are many physical Kermit puppets in existence. This invites questions around authenticity, and a potential scale of realness where some Kermits are more Kermit than others. Jim Henson, Kermit’s creator, is no longer with us but his art lives on. Spending time with these questions however may not get us any closer to understanding what it feels like to watch, or even meet someone like Kermit the Frog. In footage from *Sesame Street*³ with preschool children as well as in an interview for an adult audience with the puppeteer fully visible⁴, we can see that Kermit is real, or perhaps we could say ‘real enough’ for his human interlocutors to fully engage in the interaction. Kermit’s slipperiness of being

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYIRO97dhII>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EstIJB-Lp8I&t=21s>

illustrates the ontological basis of this study; a temporary, real enough person is valid within the context of meaning and value construction. Within constructivist research knowledge of social reality is “situated, partial and subject to revision” (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019, p. 3), in the theatre social reality often includes non-human and insubstantial persons.

A constructivist paradigm also allows for multiple, sometimes contradictory, truths to be held and considered together. It is common in theatre spectatorship for more than one accepted reality to be held at the same time. The action of suspending our disbelief allows us to understand the needs, feelings and responses of people, puppets, or mythical beings that we know do not exist in the same way that we do. Adults and older children are familiar with this game, for younger children it is harder to know how they meet the representative. This is a useful puzzle for this study to discuss and relevant literature is reviewed in [3.4.4](#). All audience members bring their personal notions of reality to theatre spectatorship, and this influences not only suspension of disbelief but potential experiences of wonder and magic. Taking a position of meaning understood as being intersubjectively co-constructed, makes welcome plural perspectives, and in the playful moment of performance plural realities.

The purpose of this openness is to support interpretation of a phenomenon that intentionally engages the imagination and non-representative sense experience, the research aim of exploring the potential impact of TEY spectatorship on and through relationships brings us to a real life context. Here, beyond the phenomenon at the heart of the study, life with others is substantial and persistent. The ‘magic’ reality of theatre is less solid, though rich in meaning and influence, and its location and endurance are important concerns for this thesis. Relationships are placed as central scenes of meaning-making and impact, resting on a belief in human agency and the rights of the child. I see the rejection of singularity not as a fragmentation of reality, but an opportunity for overlap. The goal is to find the moments of connection and disconnection within something which is always dynamic, ever becoming.

2.3.2 Epistemology

When working with truth that is porous and playful, clarity in approach to knowledge production is consequently very important. My approach to qualitative research falls under what Braun and Clarke categorise as “Big Q” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 7), the distinction of big and small Q qualitative approaches are emphasised in their work towards high quality research,

accountability, and clarity of methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2020). ‘Small q’ qualitative research may still draw on positivist paradigms, for example using multiple coders for consistency of approach to linguistic data or seek validation through generalisability measures. ‘Big Q’ is qualitative from beginning to end, with all knowledge held as situated, partial and subject to change. As my research area is small, unpredictable and artistic there are obvious resonances. There are inherent risks in unboundedness however, though ‘mess’ is embraced and fallibility acknowledged something coherent must still come of it. Quality, and significance markers are different to those used with positivist leaning work, with authenticity, veracity and applicability being the signifiers of good Big Q qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2020). I aim to meet these markers through transparency of method, rigor of analysis, and clarity of communication.

Three theoretical concepts that I have drawn on to shape this project are described here: interpretivism, phenomenology, and embodiment. They are returned to in [4.1](#), Philosophical Reasoning in the methodology chapter where their application is detailed, here it is their influence on my approach which is highlighted.

2.3.2.1 Interpretivism

There is not a body of interpretative work within audience studies to reference an established framework. However, I share a, “theoretical assumption” (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 4) common in theatre research that art has inherent value. That is, I believe that the aesthetic experience, the process of person meeting art, has a value not dependent on any additional application or impact. Discussing consequences are important to this study, but I do not believe their existence necessary to validate the attempt of art broadly and TEY specifically.

Taking an interpretive approach has allowed me to position my experience, knowledge and skills as resources (Braun & Clarke, 2020). There is opportunity for creativity within interpretive research (Mills & Birks, 2014), balanced with a need to focus or reign in artistic impulses, a middle way Finley and Knowles (1995) compare to the work of the artisan. How the concept of creativity is positioned in Early Years pedagogy is discussed in [3.2.3](#) of the literature review, and it is one which applies well to creativity in research. Crucially it is about making connections, combining previously separate things in a new way. Creativity need not be confined to the activities of the researcher, an interpretive position can make space for and

illuminate the creativity of participants (Finley & Knowles, 1995). An analysis of suspicion (Larkin et al., 2006) is avoided, influenced by my understanding of agency, and respect for individual voice. Claims made on behalf of pre-verbal children must be approached carefully (Arnott, 2017). There are layers of interpretation in this research, these include the parent being held as the ‘expert witness’ for their child, my own embodied reflections, and the double interpretation inherent in audience studies (Sedgman, 2019). Such layers are not bounded or hierarchical in a strict way, Haraway’s image of the net bag (Haraway, 2016) is useful - my role becomes one of a knot-tier and connector, enabling the cross-links that together contain a story, or meaning. The aim is not to pin down a single interpretation but include the reader in an offer of possibilities, embracing and not just tolerating the ambiguity that comes with working with young children (Chesworth, 2018).

Moss (2022) observed the dominant tendency of positivism in Early Childhood research as being influenced by psychology and economics. The question of whether only things that can be counted count is highly charged within education as well as the debates around the research on it (Sims, 2017). When the unmeasurable is dismissed or ignored it risks being lost, particularly when there is pressure on time and other resources. Either through finding tools to measure the imagined, fleeting, and felt or through finding the words to describe them there is work to be done (James et al., 2019). There is a vulnerability in the interpretivist paradigm as it relies on the receptivity of the reader for completion. Moss called for a “a reflexive citizenry engaged with reflexive researchers” (Moss, 2022, p. 14) to develop the field of social science. This large-scale co-construction of meaning requires us to be response-able (Haraway, 2016), a quality that is needed and nurtured in engagement with the expressive arts.

2.3.2.2 Phenomenology

The philosophical discipline of phenomenology is concerned with experience and its meaning, qualities, and relationship to the world. As this study has experience at its heart a phenomenological approach is appropriate, with clarity around the level of description and understanding sought. The relational and aesthetic nature of TEY presents both challenges and opportunities. Following Husserl and seeking an ultimate ‘essence’ (Shinebourne, 2011) of TEY might not be helpful when the thing itself and the bodies experiencing it are so varied, though it could still serve a focussing purpose if not a tangible goal. A more helpful concept is Heidegger’s ‘Dasein’, or being-in, which holds that “beings are connected to and surrounded by a world of objects and relationships” (Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 49). This maps well onto

the theatre space with its temporary community and temporary approach to reality. The process of experiencing theatre can be thought of as a way of being, one where, “to search does not mean to find” (Fabretti, 2009, p. 144), and Dasein helps to describe this relational, mid-process state.

Any description of phenomena is a work in translation. Words are great, but they are signifiers and signposts, experience is another realm. Merleau-Ponty is referenced by many phenomenological researchers as his epistemological theories on embodied knowing hold relevance for a growing area of research (Francesconi & Tarozzi, 2012). He also emphasised the relational nature of experience, a position supported by writers on social emotion (Gallagher, 2014) and early brain development (Trevarthen et al., 2018b). Merleau-Ponty’s concept of lifeworld is characterised by ambiguity, it cannot be reduced to either the objective or subjective, as it is created in relation and is therefore always both. I have found imagining the lived experience of babies as aiding my comprehension of these concepts, living as they do as beings less abstracted from their immediate living (Johansson, 2017) than adults in our walls of words. The non-verbal aspects of TEY were important to be able to include in this study, as well as the non-verbal participants, and finding a language to approach this was part of the process. Entanglement (Haraway, 2016) helps to describe the interconnectedness of different things and people and the way meaning is created and transmitted through the sensorially experienced material world (Arculus, 2020). I consider images and metaphor as useful tools in the phenomenological enterprise, able to hold different ways of knowing whilst being open to shared thought and meaning-making (Todres & Galvin, 2008).

Hermeneutics is a term taken from studying text but is now applied to various kinds of research and analysis processes that include the construction of meaning through cycles of reflection between the part and the whole. This ‘dance’ (Finlay, 2005) where relations, influences, and meanings are considered from multiple angles and distances is highly suited to a study seeking richly subjective, and intersubjective understanding. I have found it a helpful process to refine the images and descriptions that are greater than the sum of their parts.

2.3.2.3 Embodiment

Disregarding the body has been a normative consequence of the conceptual mind/body split strong in our wider collective understanding. Such Cartesian Dualism is challenged by many,

including within Early Years pedagogy (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016) and broader education research (Agostini & Francesconi, 2021), though it is a pervasive ideology that can therefore pass unnoticed as a base assumption. This is less the case within the discipline of theatre, and more obviously dance, where the interconnectedness of feeling, thought and action are studied in detail. For all of us however, including trained actors, feelings about the mind and body are individual and influenced by many factors. This was found by Bueno researching Mindful Somatic Pedagogy, some teachers more than others for example felt comfortable with requests for imaginative engagement such as breathing into the feet (Buono, 2019). As well as having trained and worked as a theatre performer I have experience with somatic practices such as yoga and Alexander Technique. These practices have given me insight into how the body, emotions and imagination can be brought intentionally to work on one-another; including an awareness of how unobserved most of this interplay is and how any willed change occurs slowly.

Embodied knowing, as conceptualised by Merleau-Ponty can be a way to understand one-another, an empathy which goes beyond emotional understanding, existing as a felt experience (Agostini & Francesconi, 2021). My methodological approach to the inclusion of embodied knowing, and what becomes its interpretation and description, is detailed in the methodology. The inclusion of the body is also a key component to social research that is open to how the way we ‘do bodies’ impacts our interactions with the people and structures we live amongst (Ellingson, 2017). Many spaces are made for a default, ‘unmarked’ body (Gatens, 2013) and how we fit, and the ease at which we move through them shapes our experience. Such considerations were brought to this research, with particular interest paid to how the radically different bodies of babies and adults found their place in the TEY space.

Ideology, as the saying goes, is an invisible teacher, and noticing the water one swims in is an ongoing enterprise that is never complete. In this research endeavour I have striven to be open-minded and curious, the better to understand and represent the experiences of others, thereby deepening and advancing our shared knowledge.

2.4 Pedagogy

How TEY has been discussed in terms of its potential as a positive, or educational, activity for young children is approached in more detail in section 3.2 of the literature review. Here, as part of the positionality of this thesis, I set out my own stance on pedagogy and the frameworks on which my claims for impact are built. As well as being informed by theoretical reference points, it is a position arrived at through my knowledge and practice as an artist and educator.

This study belongs to a discussion around Early Years pedagogy that foregrounds relationships (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009) and holds a concept of pedagogy as working towards the optimisation of human flourishing (Trevarthen et al., 2018b). The German term *Bildung* is a valuable concept here, often translated as ‘self-cultivation’ it is the process of individual growth and integration, realised through interaction with the world. This “making oneself at home in the world” (Frimberger, 2024) is made possible through the actions, ideas, and creations of others. Though the word ‘self’ is centred in ‘self-cultivation’, it is a collaborative and creative process which can include affective meetings with artistic works (Frimberger, 2025). The emphasis on self however does serve as a reminder of the agentic presence of the individual engaging in the process. Recognising agentic personhood in babies and toddlers is a component of relational, child-centred pedagogy, with an understanding that even the youngest children are active participants in their learning and development (Delafield-Butt & Reddy, 2025). When seen as an ongoing, ever-unfolding process *Bildung* is an appropriate lens through which to view the pedagogic impact of TEY, where the individual not only meets novel, intentional artwork, but does so in responsive company.

Educational practitioners undertaking research are encouraged to connect their own pedagogic practice with their research methodologies (Wall, 2018). Practice research within the arts also has this active stance (Nelson, 2013) and though this study is not shaped around my own artistic output I found resonance with such an approach. From my own pedagogic praxis with children and adults I bring a commitment to the role of the facilitator as a creator of conditions (C. Edwards et al., 2011), using my own creativity to support the expression of it in others and help strengthen connections (between people and ideas). I see the recurring motif of the offer, present in artistic work as well theories of interaction and creativity, as a pedagogic gesture. This thesis is itself an offer, in the form of careful observations and ideas, shared with an invitation to build and respond.

At the time that I was developing my first TEY piece, *Head in the Clouds*, I had my own first baby and was immersed in the world of early parenthood with easy access to other children and parents with whom to try out ideas. I was enjoying the theme in popular science books describing recent discoveries in early cognition (e.g. Gerhardt, 2004), and Heckman (2012) had published his famous equation demonstrating the financial value to governments of investing in supporting children early in life. The simplicity of Heckman's equation was powerful, and important for drawing attention to a section of society it may be easy to overlook. However, as Macvarish (2016a) argued, economic or population-level research can be unwelcome at the level of personal relationships where an instrumentalist approach can have a dehumanising effect on children and their parents. There are two connected and complimentary approaches which counter this risk whilst maintaining the value of investing time, money, and effort in Early Years. These are: upholding the universal rights of the child (UNICEF, 1989), and placing an emphasis on community (e.g. Marinopoulos, 2019).

Recognising individual agency and personhood in very young children aligns with a process-oriented pedagogy. Within performing arts for the very young the call for children to be seen as "an audience of now" (Creative Scotland, 2021) rather than of the future also asks us to take a break from future-oriented thinking (Uprichard, 2008). This avoids a deficit model of childhood where a child is seen as an incomplete adult (Jenks, 2020) and allows for a better opportunity to meet the actual person in question. The Scottish Government's long-standing policy, *Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)* (Scottish Government, 2022) aims to support all children to "reach their full potential" (ibid). The goal is clear, but individualised, with recognition that a child-centred approach respects individual differences and needs. This approach to learning and development is highly situated, taking place with, through and alongside the people, culture, activity and institutional norms for that individual (Li et al., 2017).

Emphasis on individuality does not contradict the value of the group, we learn and build among and for each other (Riggle, 2017). Neoliberalism can offer a false freedom through a concept of individualism that reduces us all to consumers, resulting in an atomised homogeneity. I agree with Vallelly (2021) that an important weapon against this commodification is community, especially those that run on forces that cannot be packaged and sold. Art, education and research are all areas in which meetings between the individual and the wider community are in living, shifting motion; rich with potential for enacting the cultivation of the self. The aim of supporting individual flourishing is also connected to a broader amelioratory hope, that of bettering our shared world of experiences through improving society. *The Child's Curriculum* (Trevvarthen et al., 2018b) which frames my review of pedagogic literature in Chapter 3, does

not shy away from this stated ideal and purpose. Though my focus in this thesis is on a short-lived phenomenon, later greater good is not irrelevant. By bringing attention to the child of now, the conditions are created which allow the child (and adult) of the future to continue navigating their positive trajectory.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The path this literature review takes through the work that informs this study calls attention to several perspectives, or layers. Initially I felt it was important to paint a picture of what TEY *is*, describe its recent history and give some relevant examples of practice. This is followed by a review of pedagogical theory that supports the approach to learning and development taken by this thesis, drawing connections to studies and theories with relevance to the TEY experience. I frame this around four key concepts: those of play, creativity, relationships, and the spirit of the child. The next perspective is to sit in the TEY triangular audience of artist-child-adult and explore the expectations, complications, and possibilities this brings. Having set the scene we then zoom into the inner experience, drawing on theories which afford insight into how the phenomenon of TEY spectatorship is felt individually and together. I conclude by highlighting the knowledge gap this study aims to help fill and introduce the research questions.

3.1 TEY in Practice and Research

3.1.1 History and availability

TEY does not have an extensive history either as an art form, or as a field of research. The earliest works commonly cited took place in England and France towards the end of the 20th century, pioneered by Oily Cart (Webb, 2023) and Agnes Desfosses (Desfosses, 2009) respectively. It was from the turn of the millennium onwards however that a broader awareness, curiosity and excitement around the form began to grow, considered by Koch “one of the most important innovations of the independent theatre for children since the 1990s” (Koch, 2017, p. 235). The shape and form of growth has varied, with individual performances often being cited as gateway moments for artists who then went on to produce their own work (Schneider, 2009b). There were important organisation-led projects such as Starcatchers in Scotland (Young & Powers, 2008), and the pan-European network Small Size, initiated by Roberto Fabretti in 2006. Such projects brought interested artists into communication with one another and provided a ripple effect of inspiring others by doing the essential work of showing what is possible. The actions of individual artists and companies going on to have snowballing effects fits with what Fletcher-Watson identified as a “conversion narrative” (Fletcher-Watson, 2016, p. 180) in his doctoral thesis from interviews with artists in the field. The experience of witnessing an audience of babies engaging in and responding to live performance that met their interests was for many a completely novel experience, and one which prompted their own curiosity in creating work for the very young. Rather than hearing, or reading about it, artists were inspired once they had encountered TEY and its audience in person, a reaction which connects to a common sentiment in literature on TEY of, “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes” (Schneider, 2009a, p. 80). In the context of the history of TEY this need for physical presence contributed to the organic nature of growth in the field. The process of people seeing it, believing it, and then going on to make, commission or seek out more of it was not only culturally informed but influenced by the nature of the art form. The embodied and often non-verbal, multi-sensory nature of the work, and the essential presence of the audience resists a more rapid or widespread dissemination through for example, text or film.

To give a sense of scale and spread we can look at the members of Small Size, a network for TEY artists and companies. In 2023 it listed 102 members from 5 continents and 37 different countries (Small Size, 2023). Activity, both artistic and academic, is strongest in continental Europe, with Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany and Italy all home to annual festivals and strong TEY sectors. Demand is such that in 2022 The Royal Conservatoire Antwerp introduced a two-year postgraduate course specifically in training musicians to work with audiences aged

0-5. Publications on TEY have been an international conversation from the outset, with *Theatre for Early Years: Research in Performing Arts for Children from Birth to Three* (Schneider, 2009b), a good early overview of the emergent form. In 21 chapters by writers from 12 different countries, perspectives were offered from artists, producers and pedagogues. More recent English language contributions referenced in this review have come from scholars in Singapore (Tse, 2021b), South Africa (Cowley et al., 2020), and England (Morley, 2022). The international and varied contributions to the literature are valuable to expanding and understanding the form and insights are often transferable across cultural contexts. My interest in audience expectation and reception however requires a greater focus on the specific context in which the TEY performances included the data collection for this study took place. The majority of research participants were based in and attended performances in Scotland, a more detailed description of how TEY developed in Scotland is therefore given.

Looming large in the story of TEY in Scotland is the story of Starcatchers. What began as a project supported by North Edinburgh Arts bringing artists to nursery settings in 2006 (Young & Powers, 2008), followed by a phase under the umbrella of Imagine⁵, is now “Scotland’s Arts and Early Years Organisation” (Starcatchers, 2025). Their remit includes producing touring work, community engagement projects, artist development, and training the Early Years workforce. Starcatchers operates with a core administrative team and regular collaborations with independent artists and/or production companies, an approach which has enabled a variety of ideas and voices, as well as expertise in diverse art forms to be platformed. From the beginning of Starcatchers there was an ongoing, fruitful exchange between the organisation and researchers in early childhood development and education. This included hosting seminars and podcasts with speakers from higher education and third sector organisations who spoke from their expertise on the benefits of art for the very young, and the development of Engagement Signals (Martlew & Grogan, 2013; Young & Powers, 2008), a method for observing arts engagement (5.3.9 and [Appendix I](#)). More recently Starcatchers has commissioned research into the voice of the baby (Drury et al., 2024) and supported this thesis. The potential of art activity for the very young which Starcatchers initiated was picked up by large established companies such as Scottish Opera⁶, tiny independent ones such as my own, Ipdip Theatre⁷, and others of varying scales. In 2016 Fletcher-Watson completed his doctoral thesis with St Andrews University and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, setting out the high artistic ambitions of the

⁵ National organisation in Scotland which “develops, celebrates and presents theatre and dance for children and young people”. www.imaginate.org.uk

⁶ Scotland’s national opera company. <https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/>

⁷ Independent charitable theatre company creating work for under 5s and their families <https://ipdiptheatre.co.uk/>

Scottish TEY scene (Fletcher-Watson, 2018) and making strong early contributions to the literature (Fletcher-Watson, 2013a).

High artistic standards are also part of the ongoing success of the Edinburgh International Children's Festival, which according to Festival Director Noel Jordan, will always now have something in its programme for the youngest audiences (Dibdin, 2019). Imagine, who host the festival, are an organisation committed to inspiring young people through theatre and dance, the Theatre In Schools Scotland project in collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland⁸ includes nurseries with an aim for all children from the age of three to have access to at least one high quality theatre or dance performance a year (Imagine & National Theatre of Scotland, 2025). This is an aim which, for those who take the arts for young audiences seriously, aligns with the Scottish Government's stated ambition for Scotland to be "the best place to grow up" (Scottish Government, 2022, p. 3). Starcatchers focus on the youngest audiences, and advocate for the important role the arts play in children's lives impacting their development, learning, and the realisation of rights. Organisations with strong visibility and (relatively) reliable funding are important, but a thriving arts sector also requires grass roots activity for variety, spread and plurality of vision.

One place to take a gauge of what is currently being made is the world-famous Edinburgh Festival Fringe which takes place annually in August and presents thousands of live performances across the capital. In 2024 the Fringe Society reported 3746 shows as having been presented that August (McCarthy, 2024), a programme which included 104 listings in the 'Children's Shows' section, or 3% of the total. Of those 104, 8 were advertised as specifically for babies and/or toddlers (EFFS, 2024). One of these, *Sing, Sign and Sensory* by Effectus Theatre (England) listed for ages 0-24 months was promoted as "first of its kind" (EFFS, 2024, p. 40). A detail which suggests TEY, though well established in some areas, was perceived by others (including some artists) as unusual, and new. When I began this study, the impact of covid lockdowns was still being felt in the sparse quantity of work available, concern expressed by the participants in my earlier research which took place in 2020 and 2021 (Allan, 2022). A few years on however and the situation for TEY in Scotland, and the UK more widely, at the time of writing gives me some cause for optimism. *Float*, which was in development when included as a case study in this thesis mounted a Scottish tour in spring 2025, and fresh work for

⁸ "A theatre without walls, for everyone, that sparks connection between people, between communities, and between Scotland and the world" <https://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/>

the very young is being regularly supported in England by companies such as The Egg⁹ in Bath, Hullabaloo¹⁰ in Darlington, and Polka¹¹ in London.

The low prevalence of TEY remains the main barrier to access. The assumptions and anticipations the adult brings to the idea of TEY however are potentially important in how the work is received. Children's theatre is part of the wider theatre sector, which itself is part of an arts landscape that is subject to influences and changes within the wider culture. Considering audience members as individuals, which this thesis does, allows for discussion on the influencing factors, connected to other parts of their lives, which are brought into the TEY space. The following section describes the varied content and form of TEY developed in recent decades, an overview which aligns with the variety of performances attended and related by research participants.

3.1.2 Form and aesthetic

The central premise of TEY is the offer of an artistic experience to a very young child. This manifests in a vast array of possibilities and, for the artists, the opportunity to play with or take down barriers between artforms can be what draws them in (Pinkert, 2009). As stated in 1.2, Terminology, TEY has taken many forms of expression that align with existing categories of performance. Examples include dance (*Tah Dam*), drama (*The Gruffallo*), live music (*Sprog Rock*), opera (*Bambino*), circus (*Little Top*), installation (*Blue Block Studio*), puppetry (*Sea Dragon*), storytelling (*Special Delivery*), and non-narrative object performance (*Le Son de la Sève*). Distinctions are not held strictly, Scottish Opera's *Bambino* for example included puppetry and physical storytelling as well as operatic singing. With such variety it is difficult to make claims for what a 'typical' TEY performance looks and feels like, though connective threads can be found. Within the academy Fletcher-Watson sought to describe a dramaturgy, or theory of practice, in the emergent body of artwork. His published articles and PhD thesis included investigation into artistic integrity (Fletcher-Watson, 2018), play (Fletcher-Watson, 2013a), and audience interaction (Fletcher-Watson, 2015), and provide a background which this study builds upon. A more recent publication is, *Mapping Research: A map on the aesthetics of performing arts for Early Years*, a collection of essays edited by Manon van de Water (2023).

⁹ <https://www.theatreroyal.org.uk/your-visit/the-egg/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/>

¹¹ <https://polkatheatre.com/>

This ‘map’ is not a quantitative survey of productions, rather provides a window on the range of curiosities and questions motivating researchers and artists within TEY.

Though the exact numbers assigned vary (and are culturally informed by, for example, school starting age), there are three rough types of TEY audience: babies, toddlers, and pre-schoolers. As the target age lowers, languages change, and it is with the youngest audiences that TEY has taken the biggest steps away from traditional, i.e. narrative, theatre. Serving the “lantern consciousness” (Gopnik, 2009, p. 129) of babyhood has led to multi-sensory and multi-focus presentations. Abstract, material-based performance for example such as *Circles* which sensorially explored the texture and movement of sand, or the installation *Blue Block Studio* with free movement within a curated space and a flow of action drawn in sound. Established, mainstream children’s theatre relies heavily on spoken narrative, often a story that is already known to the adults, if not also the children in the audience (Reason, 2010). Book adaptations are popular and can be found from the smallest to largest scale productions. There are not many examples of TEY for venues that count their seats in hundreds but those that do offer live representations of familiar characters from television such as *In the Night Garden Live*, or *Bluey’s Big Play*. Taking a phenomenological approach and imaging the kind of schemata that would enter into a one-year-old’s understanding of their experience highlights the difficulty of broadly describing the aesthetic of TEY. *Blue Block Studio* is perhaps relatable to playing at home with mum and dad, *In the Night Garden Live* more like when they take you along to meet friends for coffee in a shopping mall. All these situations may contain opportunities for excitement, frustration, familiarity, novelty, and bonding. Where the intentions of the artists meet the expectations and experiences of the audience is underexplored, particularly when it comes to adults choosing to bring small children to the theatre.

Research that has taken place so far within or on TEY is dominated by work that is small scale, artist-led, and often experimental. One explanation for this is that it is new directions which draw academic interest. Large-scale work such as *In the Night Garden Live* follow established lines of large, bright puppetry, skin suits, spectacle, and cinematic sound. There is a homogeneity of style and a clear link to the kind of experience many traditional theatres were built to accommodate. Experimental work on the smaller scale however branches along many different paths, setting a richer scene for the theatre scholar. Finding a voice as a new art form also played a part. Fletcher-Watson suggested that TEY artists might be motivated to seek “ever greater radicalism” (Fletcher-Watson, 2018, p. 7) as a means to prove legitimacy. Radicalism becomes then a component of artistic integrity, encouraged by a negative perception of commercial children’s theatre that can be found within the funded arts sector; in an interview

with *The Stage* for example, Noel Jordan, Imagine Festival Director, compared commercial children's theatre to junk food, describing it as "not satisfying or full or wholesome" (Dibdin, 2019). Quality within the arts is notoriously difficult to describe or agree upon, the idea that popularity has an inverse relationship with quality is itself a cliché and it is not within the scope of this study to explore how economic pressures influence artistic output. Within live performance specifically however, scale has a material impact on audience experience; sharing a room with twenty or two-thousand co-spectators is very different and necessarily influences the art presented. Reason made a good case for defining quality in children's theatre by retaining a focus on the audience; markers of quality being ambition, and a respect for the audience as "active spectators and interpreters" (Reason, 2010, p. 4). Koch similarly called for theatre makers to "Stop underchallenging children! Strive for a complex simplicity" (Koch, 2017, p. 462). Taking an interest in the capacities of the audience from a strengths-based perspective is a recurring theme in TEY. Understood in these terms 'radicalism' is not a pose struck for attention or status, but another consequence, alongside the tend towards quality, of taking very young audiences seriously. Maintaining this ambition helps avoid the normative traps of cuteness and childishness (Rabl, 2009), aesthetics that may say more about how we wish to see children than what they themselves wish to see.

Led by an understanding of child development (Drury & Fletcher-Watson, 2017), work is often created with specific age brackets in mind, for example 0-18 months for *Little Top*, or 2-4 years for *Bubbles*. When artists are led by the capacities, needs and interests of children sharing a particular developmental moment, their work may not be suitable for those outside of that bracket, particularly when it comes to mobility. *Little Top* for example, relies on babies being happy to sit with their adults and enjoy the surprises of acrobatics and juggling at very close quarters. An active toddler who is meeting the world in locomotion must, for safety, be held back and depending on how they feel about this restriction, may not enjoy the show at all. This is not to say that acrobats cannot tumble safely amongst crawling babies, as deftly shown during *Be Kind*, but these issues must be accounted for. Small audience numbers, perhaps 20-50, short running times and changes to standard seating arrangements such as cushions on the floor, or seating in the round rather than end-on are all common. It is also common for a performance to be followed by, or flow into, an open play session with audience invited to explore the set, props and performers at their own pace. Where free play is offered, the surroundings and sounds of a space, with or without playful 'inter-actors', create social openings for children and adults to interact spontaneously with one another (E. Miles & Nicholson, 2019).

Though levels of direct interaction between performer and audience vary, I have never seen a fourth wall in small-scale TEY. Performers meet their audience eye-to-eye, a consistent output that stems directly from the central interest in young children and consequently, connection. Hovik has described the various forms of play and interaction which occur in the theatre space between performers and young children (Hovik, 2019a). Taking her extensive experience as performer, choreographer, and researcher she has unpicked the artistic choices made and their implications for performer-audience relationship (Hovik, 2019b). She has also written insightfully on the embodied experience of moving between these roles. In her work, with its direct and physical responsiveness, she was able to include the actions and responses of children and describe the tangible effect of artists trained in sensitive forms of communication. The finely tuned interpersonal skills of TEY performers are likened elsewhere in the literature to improvising musicians (Tse, 2021b) or the child-like openness of an artist like Picasso (Custodero, 2009). Fletcher-Watson (somewhat provocatively) suggested that the coerced interaction, such as directed call and response, commonly found at the theatre, including TEY, and much children's theatre, could be seen as a form of tyranny. He described how the performer-spectator relationship created an unavoidable power imbalance, then gave examples of some TEY work that had a structural openness which he proposed enabled a truly child-led experience (Fletcher-Watson, 2013a). Certainly there exists a great range in the way TEY artists invite their audiences to respond, interact, or control themselves which could be seen as more, or less, 'tyrannical'.

The presence of children during the development and rehearsal phases is near ubiquitous in TEY; processes involve spending extended time in the company of children as inspiration (Young, 2004), conducting weekly "field experiments" (Wartemann, 2009, p. 52) or at the very least new work is tested before being presented (Ramsey, 2017). Orin Edelman-Griffiths is listed as a co-director of Oily Cart's *Great Big Tiny World*, notable as he was less than a year old during its development. Edelman-Griffiths' contributed through "non-verbal feedback" (Oily Cart, 2025, p. 2), helping to shape the content and delivery of the work. Unnamed children have had similar input in other performances, in my own work with Ipdip Theatre visits to a local toddler group assisted in making artistic choices and in developing the performers' sensitivity to non-verbal communication. TEY emerged alongside a wider public interest in child development research that emphasised the early capacity of the youngest babies for connection and communication (Reddy, 2010). Some artists, myself included, were inspired to explore TEY through the work of scientists such as Zeedyk (Keating, 2022). Tailoring the artistic offer to fit the developmental capacity of the intended audience brings many artists to take a multi-sensory approach, seeking to meet the open and overlapping sensorium of the young child. There is also a conceptual interest in what Taube described as not simplification,

but “concentration” (Taube, 2009, p. 21). An ambition echoed by Balliol in her assertion that “to communicate with children we need to use our best language, not the easiest” (Belloli, 2009, p. 160), language here not necessarily being words. Fletcher-Watson identified much TEY as ‘postdramatic’ (Fletcher-Watson, 2013a), describing forms of theatre which did not rely on story, character, and representation. To enter into such performance experiences, as an adult or a child audience member, is to be immersed in the unusual and unrepeatable. Qualities which may work towards the flattening of adult-child hierarchy, allowing a “common creaturehood” (Trevvarthen & Fresquez, 2015) between the unique assemblage of persons in that moment.

In seeking to ‘say’ something meaningful to an infant, the artist looks for communication modes outside of the linguistic or representational, communication the adult is not excluded from. Artists have reported anecdotally the responses of the adults; Katy Wilson for example, who created *Blue Block Studio*, described in a podcast interview how adults would express a desire to stay longer in a space made to serve the interests of toddlers (Starcatchers, n.d.). Other artists have not aimed so much for universal content as created intentionally layered work, with elements designed to appeal to different demographics within the audience. Ramsey (2017) described drawing on the creative process employed by the animation film studio Pixar (Scott, 2014) to inspire work where adults are offered poetic space to bring their own interpretations, emotions and knowledge to a piece that also delivers an immediate, felt experience. I took a similar approach to creating a layered experience by using spoken poetry alongside multi-sensory and musical storytelling in my play *Anonymouse. A Tale of Us*, by Tiny and Tall (England) demonstrate a further move towards speaking directly to the adults present, described as “blending drama and multi-sensory playtime” (Tiny&Tall, 2025, p. 1) it tells the story of the first year of a baby’s life from the perspective of the mother. More commonly however, adults are framed in terms of how they enable the experience of their young companions. Hovik included the accompanying adults when describing their support, or hindrance, for their children engaging with the performance. She described how they “experienced insecurity about their own role as caregivers” (Hovik, 2019a, p. 42) in relation to how much freedom to allow their children. This is a familiar description and prompted me to question why this insecurity could be present, or potentially mitigated if problematic. Agency and power hierarchies can be manifested in the TEY space by the choices performers make about how permissions are given, taken, or negotiated within audience-performer interactions (Fletcher-Watson, 2015). Though the form and aesthetic of TEY is tailored to the varied needs and interests of young children, responsively through the artistic impulses of its creators (van de Water, 2023), where the accompanying adults fit into this picture is much less clear.

The close relationship TEY enjoys with its audience has seen artists take up residence in the places where young children can be found together. Nicolai Fabretti named his visits to nurseries as the starting point of Italian TEY (Fabretti, 2009), and Starcatchers artists residences in Scottish Early Years settings resulted in multiple productions (Young & Powers, 2008) and long-term relationships between artistic and educational organisations. Venues and producing companies also often seek ongoing relationships with educational and care settings as part of audience development. The Hopper Strategic Touring project in England for example brought emerging artists to nurseries with the aim of building infrastructure for TEY touring (Jackson, 2018). As well as finding and/or growing an audience such visitors may be working towards a project specific outcome. For example there can be an intention to support child development (Impact Consultancy, 2015), encourage playfulness in the adults (Allan, 2019) or it can be that the artists are keen to test ideas and thereby learn from the children (Herans, 2009). A model similar to the more established Theatre in Education (TiE) approach for older children involves taking performance work aligned with the learning curriculum into education settings, sometimes with accompanying workshops before and/or afterwards (Nicholson, 2014). There is not a long history of issue or curricular based TiE for the very young, though shows with clear messages are presented, for example opening discussion on inclusion and prejudice (McNally & Rutter, 2021), or catalysing social and environmental change as with the work of Eco Drama¹². Such performances, along with other nursery visitors, are generally aimed at children aged over three and happen in the company of professional Early Years practitioners, bringing them outside of the focus of this study. Pedagogic research however supports the foundations of my knowledge claims, and is expanded in the following section.

¹² <https://ecodrama.co.uk/>

3.2 TEY and Pedagogy

I use the term pedagogy in its broad sense to discuss approaches, actions and observations concerned with learning and development. To aid clarity I use the word education to draw a smaller circle within pedagogy, referring to structured systems, for example curriculum based Early Childhood Centres or other ‘pre-school’ settings.

As detailed in Chapter 2: Navigating my Position, the thinking which I draw on to describe the impact of TEY emphasises individual growth and flourishing arrived at through affective and creative meetings with others. In this section I discuss how pedagogy and TEY have met in the literature, including writers who have offered alternative approaches and priorities. Not all TEY artists and researchers would recognise their work as having a pedagogic intention, and some are very clear in rejecting identification with education and pedagogy (Fletcher-Watson, 2016; Rabl, 2009). This partly reflects a status issue within theatre for young audiences, particularly strong in the UK, where Theatre in Education has a poor reputation for artistic quality (Reason, 2010). There is also concern that declaring an outcome-focused intention prioritises the child (or adult) of tomorrow over the child audience member of the moment (Taube, 2009). I would argue however that any art that affects the people who encounter it can be drawn under the umbrella of pedagogy. Impacts such as an embodied response, being emotionally moved, imaginatively transported, inspired or in any way changed are moments for development and learning and not restricted to childhood.

Though literature within TEY concerning pedagogy is limited, there is a rich academy on Early Years pedagogy more broadly, some of which offers valuable insights for the activity that is TEY spectatorship. This section examines the theory and practice within Early Years pedagogy where such connections can be drawn.

3.2.1 Conceptualising pedagogy

The shared human process of rearing our young has been conceptualised in different ways. The metaphor of gardening holds the child as a natural wonder who the adult can support in their growth by maintaining optimum conditions. This metaphor was favoured by early childhood

pioneers, like Froebel and Montessori (Nutbrown, 2008), and can be found cropping up again in child centred pedagogy, especially the notion of capacities developing at their own pace (Clark, 2022). Woods identified a shift from the garden to the construction site, with building metaphors being employed, notably the need for firm foundations (Woods, 2017). This is a metaphor commonly used to describe brain development (e.g. AFWI, 2025) and emphasises the importance of the earliest experiences. I find two troubling aspects to the construction metaphor, one is the risk of deterministic thinking if a building constructed with some wobbly lower floors must inevitably crash, the other is the accumulative nature that is a little too close to the empty vessel or blank slate. Of greater resonance to how children are met in TEY is the image of the journey, or adventure. Children are taking paths (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009), climbing mountains, (C. Edwards et al., 2011) and navigating new places (Arculus, 2020), often with the help of a more experienced guide (Rogoff, 1991). A great strength of this metaphor is that it moves. This is pedagogy as a process, always active, the path is not a path to knowledge with some fixed and specific end point but a moving, turning, twisting route of ongoing discovery. And crucially, it is a path which is constantly crossing, connecting, and sharing space with others.

Within the discipline of theatre studies the standard when considering the impact of theatre on the individual concerns adults observing, or taking part in, a performed character based, narrative. Aristotle's Catharsis and Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* though very different experiences, emotional immersion and critical analysis respectively, both rely on a story that makes sense to the audience (Freshwater, 2009). Claims made for the power or impact of theatre will not easily transfer to TEY if they are based on an assumed capacity in the audience and a certain tradition of performance. That is not to say they are irrelevant, but the mechanisms need to be considered. Similarly, though Theatre in Education is also a well-established form of applied theatre for young audiences (Nicholson, 2014), with a variety of aims, and approaches to measuring outcomes, the school context is such a defining component that insights for TEY are difficult to extract. One area of theatre scholarship where I found valuable insights into how spectatorship impacts the individual was the history and theory of Dramatherapy which includes, in a very deliberate way, "the uses of theatre in relation to personal change" (P. Jones, 1996, p. 57). Though as with other scholarship developed from work with adults, or older children, elements building on for example the use of verbal language or established semiotics needed to be considered critically, therapeutic approaches emphasise holistic, personal impact. This prioritising resonated with pedagogy for the under threes and offered connections to the emotional and relational experiences of the adult spectator that this study is concerned with.

An important text which I drew on in describing my approach to pedagogy in Chapter 2: Navigating my position, is *The Child's Curriculum* (Trevarthen et al., 2018b). Edited by Colwyn Trevarthen, Aline-Wendy Dunlop, and Jonathan Delafield-Butt, the work referenced is a collection of essays which grew out of a conference held in 2010 and an interest group meeting with the aim of championing best practice in Early Years education and care in Scotland. Contributors include educational practitioners as well as researchers with multi-disciplinary expertise and international experience. In defining *The Child's Curriculum*, the editors emphasise the weight placed on individual agency, and how the agentic individual thrives within an environment of creative opportunity and affectionate companionship. It also aims to affirm what we, as educators and researchers, stand to learn from very young children. There is a moral imperative to the work, in recognising the future good, not only for young individuals now but the society they will create and maintain.

The following extract neatly summarises the key concepts which hold relevance for discussing TEY's relationship with pedagogy:

The primary source of 'the wealth of nations' is the playful creativity of children in affectionate relations with companions in understanding. (Trevarthen et al., 2018b, p. 1)

Within this single sentence the concepts of play, creativity, and relationships are brought together and connected to high collective aims. In this section of the literature review I look at how TEY and pedagogy meet under each of these three headings to build a multi-layered view of how this form of theatre is received by its young audience. . Insights from participatory approaches and creative learning environments inform this study, through examining the processes involved I suggest how they may, or may not, transfer to a spectatorship context. Under the fourth heading, Spirit, I discuss the connection which can be drawn between Early Years pedagogy and TEY practice in the recourse to, or reaching for, high ideals. Non-dramatic and immersive TEY made with the intention to connect and move its audience can be seen to draw on the tradition of experimental theatre of the 20th century such as Grotowski (Machon, 2016). Both invoke images of small-scale society, or early human ritual theatre as ways to connect current live performance with deep and universal truths (Tse, 2021b).. When it comes to Early Years education it does not seem to be that art needs to bend or diminish to support the goal of children's flourishing, but rather that the same qualities which make high quality art make for a high-quality learning experience.

3.2.2 Play

Young children learn through play. In active, embodied learning through engagement with a world of things and people (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016) they develop skills, acquire and test new knowledge, comprehend the laws of physics, and understand people. It is also often through observing play that researchers learn about the motivations and understanding of pre-verbal children (Blaisdell et al., 2018). Though the Scottish Early Years curriculum is built on this understanding that play is central to how young children learn (Scottish Government, 2019) the reality of what this looks like can be a challenge to those who conceptualise play and learning as separate activities. Even when we do value both work and play and call for balance they are often still recognised as binary concepts. Historically play has been conceptualised as ‘child’s work’, seen as a rehearsal for adult activity, or else a necessary ‘letting off steam’ that enables better work (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). Though the pedagogic value of play may be, or be becoming, well established within the Early Years education context, its role within the lives of older children and adults is less secure. The expressive arts are an exception to this, Bruce et al’s statement on play in Early Years, “lack of purpose is not the same as lack of function” (2017, p. 43) also works well as a reference to artistic practice. Professional artists can take play just as seriously as young children, engaging in a third way of being Castro (2023), (playfully) describes as ‘plork’.

Hutt (1981) described a taxonomy of play with the three modes; epistemic, ludic, and games with rules, each having pedagogic value based on their qualities and actions. On the surface the exploratory, curiosity-driven epistemic play may seem easy to set against ludic play of the imagination as another version of the work/play divide. Or at least there is resonance with how theatre, particularly children’s theatre, is often divided between the edifying and the entertaining (Reason, 2010). In epistemic versus ludic play however the emphasis is less on product than intention, that is the intention of the child engaging in the play. Active engagement and intrinsic motivation, whether for discovery or fun, is a feature of play which contributes to learning (Crichton et al., 2020). This brings an emphasis on child-led activities and personal learning experiences which, as an approach, aligns with the interests of artists who seek to be and meet authentic and creative individuals. Play pedagogies are often brought in to discussions on the expressive arts in Early Years learning (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009) though the emphasis is usually on participatory, child-led activity. A whole group activity, such as sitting together and being an audience, could pull away from child-led goals, though it would perhaps fit into Hutt’s third variety of play within her taxonomy, that governed by rules and structure (Hutt, 1981). TEY performances can offer free play, either throughout the experience or as part of a designated open session after the completion of a rehearsed and performed element (Fletcher-Watson, 2013a). Post or pre-show activities are common as ways to enhance or situate learning in theatre for children (Nicholson, 2014). In TEY a play-pedagogy lens could help us view a

34

post-show play session in these terms. In her research with 3 and 4 year olds visiting the Theatre however, Miles described the importance of the theatre space itself a site of learning, with aesthetic experiences during the moment of encounter essential to the pedagogy (E. Miles & Nicholson, 2019). Miles used a framework of learning as relational, sensory and somatic to analyse her research, a methodology which makes her work applicable to audiences younger than three, and concluded that the theatre encounter itself had pedagogic value, in addition to planned learning activities framed around the visit

Developmental capacities are important for play engagement in the theatre space. As children grow, the performance space that welcomes exploration is a rich environment in which to meet and play with developing understandings of symbols and the intentions of others. Fletcher-Watson used the term *paieda*, from Roger Caillois, to describe the “unpredictable and unrepeatable hedonic experiences” (2013a, p. 14) of postdramatic theatre for babies and toddlers. He conceptualised the whole performance event as an extended play session, with space available for audience interactivity and sensory discovery throughout. Such fully fluid offers do fit well to a concept of play as freedom, though as Hovik relates in her research into different levels of open and closed choreography, the role of the accompanying adult in such a space can be ill-defined (Hovik, 2019a). Something that happens in the move into a post-show play session, is a shift in role for the parents who up to this point had been sharing in spectatorship with their children. Having been sat in a position of ambiguous passivity, they are now invited to move and talk freely as they engage with props and performers, and play with their children. By exploring the world of the theatre in this active, self-directed way, the audience members are able to play with what they have just seen whilst still within it. The parents in this context fulfil the role of theatre pedagogues, expanding and enhancing the theatre experience, helping their children find meaning and routes to further explorations that, “long-lastingly enrich the personality of everyone in their ordinary, everyday life” (Desfosses, 2009, p. 104).

Theatre Improvisation, or Improv, is a mode of performance (DePasquale & Lewis, 2012) and training technique (Johnstone, 2012) that has a lot of similarities with the play of children. Lobman has written on the potential of applying skills such as the principle of ‘yes and’ to early learning settings (Lobman, 2006). From training practitioners in improv skills she reported improved creativity, connection, listening and sharing of control, all associated with “responsive teaching” (Lobman, 2005, p. 317) p317. Responsiveness is a quality found in TEY performers, especially within work that is designed to flow and move with the audience as full participants. MacRae and Arculus (2020) suggest the theatrical concept of *complicité* could be useful in

giving weight to non-verbal, creative and intersubjective interactions. Complicité is similar to 'ensemble' (Hewett, 2014) and both are well represented by the metaphor of flocking birds or schooling fish, group action that is embodied, connected and greater than the sum of its parts. Lobman has demonstrated the potential for applying training in skills drawn from the theatre, and Arculus argues for artists in settings and the building of long-term relationships to support staff development. What is less clear is whether playfulness, ensemble or complicité can be 'caught' from simply being in the audience.

My theatre company, Ipdip Theatre, has a stated aim of "encouraging play and playfulness" (Ipdip Theatre, 2016) which was based on an understanding of the importance of high quality play for young children. *Calvinball* is explicitly a "play about play" (ibid) with three players who have lost the rules, and a stretchy mix of structure and freedom. We performed it outside which meant toddlers could come and go as they pleased, and adults did not need to overcome the messages of conformity and compliance that come with being invited into a room to watch a show. Both *Head in the Clouds* (an earlier show) and *Calvinball* received funding to tour groups of families where there were barriers to experiencing the performing arts, and as part of their evaluations this impact on play was investigated. The response was entirely positive from group leaders, parents and others, with some moving responses such as a dad who said watching the performers inspired him to get back to being more playful after a time of poor mental health (Allan, 2019). In a case of very typical negativity bias however I can remember one piece of less enthusiastic audience feedback from *Calvinball's* first run at the 2014 Edinburgh Fringe, where a disappointed mum compared it to little more than a toddler play session. This stung my artistic ego – we were aiming for something *more* than just play and had seemingly failed to do so. This person's expectations for theatre were disappointed by something that looked, or felt, too much like play, suggesting that the two are mutually exclusive activities. In our aim to encourage play, and flatten hierarchies within the theatre space, we ran the risk of losing the sheen of professionalism that says, 'I am worthy of your attention'.

As well as facing value judgements based on notions of frivolousness or simplicity, play is also at risk of being undervalued (and therefore underfunded) in education due to outcome driven pressures that prioritise the measurable (Bruce et al., 2017). Neoliberalism, with its utilitarian demands, can create systems within systems which reward predictability and leave little space for wonder (Sims, 2017). What play and theatre share, and what we sought to express through *Calvinball* is a joy in the uncertainty that sits at the edge of discovery. The space of not-knowing is a daily familiarity for young children, but something adults will each have their own relationship with, some enjoying it more than others. Working theories, a framework that

describes the ongoing, unfixed and situated way in which children build up their understanding of the world are supported in “environments where uncertainty is valued” (Peters et al., 2018, p. 299). Applying a posthumanist lens to literacies in early childhood Hackett (2022) suggested space be made for “divergent, complicated, irrational, playful and non-functional language practices” (Hackett, 2022, p. 244), liminal space TEY is able to offer. This is the pedagogy of the poet, active and investigative, leading with joy and bringing understanding afterwards (Faria & Richter, 2009). Courage is needed to enact such spaciousness as there will be critics and dead ends, as well as tiny rewards and invisible triumphs. Tolerating ambiguity is a powerful skill, and of particular benefit to those who enable and join in with the play of young children.

3.2.3 Creativity

Creativity is strongly linked, but not exclusive to, the expressive arts. Canon works of renowned artists demonstrate virtuosity and are widely recognised as valuable, these are the products of ‘large C Creativity’ which can be bracketed off to distinguish it from the ‘little or small c’ process-oriented creativity that is available to all (Craft, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Additional levels have been added of ‘mini c’ (even smaller) and ‘pro c’ (between the two) (Hargreaves, 2012), helpful when considering how ‘everyday’ creativity, applied to a field of endeavour can grow into big C virtuosic creativity. What distinguishes the latter is culturally defined, potentially contentious, and vulnerable to power dynamics within the arbiters of taste. A definition with less baggage focuses on uniqueness. If we define creativity as making a connection between two things in a way that is new to you, the individual, big C creativity is the version of this where nobody else has got there first (Hargreaves, 2012). What seems to be agreed upon is that in the realm of Early Years education it is small c creativity that matters. Creative thinking as a process can be present and benefit all kinds of situations, across a curriculum and life in general (Craft, 2003). The creative response requires some kind of fresh input, an element of choice or will, which in doing so adds to the ongoing creative project of the self. Framed as a universal capacity it removes the perceived need for virtuosity that can be a barrier to adults engaging with the arts, often assigned to specific disciplines through declarations such as, ‘I can’t draw’ or ‘I can’t sing’. TEY has made claims to both large and little c creativity, with artistic and pedagogic aims across both.

Large C creativity comprises an important part of our economy that the education system supplies with minds and bodies (Bakhshi & Windsor, 2015). Small c creativity, taken as a valuable skill or capacity, also has future-oriented value in preparing children for the world of

work. Duffy states that “if we do not promote creativity and imagination children will not become the people we need them to be” (Duffy, 2006, p. 12). From an economic perspective what we do not need them to be is robots. The increasing sophistication and application of Artificial Intelligence spurs us to consider what the future world of work will look like (Bakhshi and Windsor 2015). The rise of AI also encourages questioning into the nature of authentic human intelligence as we consider if there are aspects to our minds which an AI could never replicate. A computer-model notion of the mind falls short in answering this conundrum and invites consideration of an affective and embodied mind (Panksepp & Trevarthen, 2009). Within the creative arts the intuitive, empathetic, emotional and aesthetic aspects of living with a human body and brain are not only permitted but celebrated. Qualities which, as a society, will help us face the unknown and potentially dehumanising challenges that lay ahead, be that global pandemic, occupational obsolescence or climate change.

That participation in the arts has intrinsic value for the individual and society is not a universally accepted truth. When the dominant culture values what is measurable (Duffy, 2006), the battle to make space for the invisible must be constantly, and creatively, fought (Sims, 2017). Qualities and capacities in children are harder to measure than work produced or responses to a test, for creativity and many social and emotional skills this difficulty in measuring contributes to a lowered status within education (Fumoto et al., 2012). For the very young the benefits of the arts take part within conversations around early brain development, and the recognition that 0-3 is a crucial and sensitive age. A risk in this area is a form of “defensive instrumentalism” (Farrell, 2016, p. 16), which can draw artists, educators and parents into “mythic brain traps” (Dekker et al., 2012). An example of this would be playing a recording of Mozart’s music to a baby in the belief that it has a unique capacity to improve brain function, not a problem, unless it is replacing perhaps the live, connected experience of a trusted person singing to the child. If we can avoid these pitfalls however neuroscientific and psychological research can “inspire us to be confident in the human condition” (Trevarthen et al., 2018a, p. 250) such that we trust that creative and artistic offers to very young children have value and meaning. The same path of thinking also tells us that it is necessary that such experiences take place within the context of positive relationships. Utilitarian ideas of the arts and pedagogy can be resisted through research, but also on the ground (Sims, 2017), by those who spend time with young children. As with play, there is courage needed to make space for the moments of not-knowing and failure as well as the moments of delight and discovery. Both teachers and children need “imaginative freedom” (Stephenson & Dobson, 2020, p. 470).

An AHRC cultural value project sought to frame the debate, going further than an instrumental/intrinsic dichotomy and offering richer insights (Crossick & Kaszniska, 2016). Creativity was recognised as important for quality of lived experience as well as future development. Without this focus on the human the expressive arts can become reduced to tools, used in the service of capitalist aims and assigned value on the basis of economic impact (Goouch, 2008). The *Durham Commission on Creativity and Education* (James et al., 2019) cited the benefits to individual wellbeing, mobility and identity, and addressed the issue of social injustice that comes from artistic experiences being available only to those with the means to access them. This is an important point and pertains to the ‘attainment gap’ in Scotland, which describes the difference in progress made by a typical learner from the most, and least, deprived household categories. Where studies show that participation in the arts improve attainment, we must question who, generally, is able to access this advantage. With children below school age activities such as reading stories and mark-making together were shown to support the development of cognitive ability, with the authors highlighting Early Years as a crucial stage in which efforts to diminish the attainment gap should be targeted (Bradshaw, 2011). Again, knowledge which is only beneficial if able to be followed up with provision and access to the material and cultural resources required for the home learning activities recommended.

The qualities and capacities nurtured through participation in the arts may lead to higher grades in other subjects, but perhaps more importantly they confer personal and social advantages that benefit throughout the life course (Jindal-Snape et al., 2018). A study using drama and creative writing with primary school teachers, artists, and children concluded that the arts encouraged “agentic learning capacities, well-being and flourishing” (Stephenson & Dobson, 2020, p. 470). If such advantages are only available to the privileged few, this limits the potential richness of our society as a whole, and the quality of our art (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2019). TEY is not a common family activity, there is no longitudinal or large scale studies available as there is for, say, shared book reading (Barnes & Puccioni, 2017). As a shared creative experience however TEY could contribute to a learning environment for young children that makes a difference to their future, this study aims to investigate how the experience is shared and perceived by the adult and child together.

If we accept that “human beings need the arts for holistic development” (Nutbrown, 2013, p. 239) then there is a strong case for them in education contexts. The particular role that TEY has to play is underexplored. The Scottish Government’s published guidance for Early Years practice, *Realising the Ambition*, is grounded in a belief that every child is a curious and

capable individual (Crichton et al., 2020). The importance of creative and exploratory play, and the role of the adult in supporting it, is detailed at length. This confidence in the value of creativity offers artists a potential position within Early Years care and education either working directly with children or supporting educators in their creative practice. The artist in an Early Years setting is found in the Reggio Emilia system where the physical and curricular space is made for an artist to work alongside and with the nursery community on an ongoing basis (C. Edwards et al., 2011).

Research into how the arts support creative thinking, social and emotional learning and the development of agency and voice tend to focus on participatory experiences for children. Some TEY is very interactive, and interaction can take many forms, but TEY is also commonly a situation where the art is something delivered by artists rather than a process owned by the child. There is also less research into creative engagement with children under 3. When children are not already gathered, as in a nursery, artistic engagement can be an instigating element in creating community. Providing a platform for multiple productions, the *Little Big Bang Project* sought to reach families with young children through Children's Centres in the belief that artistic and creative activity are "the essence of what makes community whole healthy and vibrant" (Monks, 2012, p. 15). The power of the arts to bring people together and the importance of that for young children is also contained in Marinopoulos' report to the French Government on the cultural health of young children which calls for space and resources that enable their "artistic awakening" (Marinopoulos, 2019, p. 1). Li et al used the term *perezhivanie* to help define the "essence" (Li et al., 2017, p. 44) of everyday creative acts between young children and their families, theorising that this social and cultural experiential and affective meeting point was key to learning. Creative activity with the very young relies on relationships and supports them, not only the relationship between one child and their particular adult but the wider network of interacting humans that we call community.

Perhaps the greatest strength of arts engagement is its power to connect. The centrality of relationships is emphasised throughout *Young Children's Creative Thinking* (Fumoto et al., 2012) and participation in creative experiences for very young children is bound up in high quality interactions with their trusted adults. There are also connections being made between small world toys interacting, the child and their drawing, or the imagination of a centuries-dead musician. Even when engaging alone, creativity is fundamentally relational.

3.2.4 Relationships

Relational pedagogy is dynamic and process oriented, outcomes are delivered but it is the ongoing relationships in, and through which the learning takes place that are prioritised (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009; Rogoff, 1991). The principle of deep respect, of seeing children as in-the-moment beings, underpins relational pedagogy and resonates with the approach taken by TEY artists. There is an ethic of care in both that highlights the importance of sensitive, responsive attention. A perceptive and responsive adult is required to enact the Vygotskian pedagogy of identifying the zone of proximal development where a child is ready to gain a new skill and the adult supports them to “close the gap of knowledge” (Malaguzzi in C. Edwards et al., 2011, p. 58). Close “contingent and responsive” (Payler, 2008, p. 121) attention is also necessary for effective scaffolding of the child’s learning where educators introduce responsive changes to their guidance (Rogoff, 1991). This is influenced and influenced by a positive, caring relationship with the child, in Early Years practice this is the ‘professional love’ that forms part of the skill set (Page, 2017; Rouse & Hadley, 2018). Researchers have evidenced the benefit of a relational approach, for example lowered stress hormones in children (Badanes et al., 2012) and the development of compassion in children in receipt of compassionate care (Taggart, 2016). In group settings there is a web of relationships, and the role of the adult involves not only close and individual attention but skill in creating an environment which supports positive interactions. Sometimes this means doing less rather than more, in one study for example pre-school children engaged at a higher level in play when their teacher was nearby, available, but not interrupting (Singer et al., 2013). As well as enacting professional skills in responsiveness, TEY artists engage consciously in the engineering of atmosphere.

When we are thinking about systems and ecologies within learning spaces, there could be insights to be gained from theatre, which is powerfully atmospheric. This is not unique to TEY but environment is very important in Early Years learning when looking at a pedagogy that seeks to create the conditions for core capacities to be strengthened (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A child-led pedagogy seeks to expand upon opportunities for creativity within the day, there is encouragement to make offers and provocations, but always with a view to receiving and responding to whatever the children bring. In this way practitioners are creating what Riggle describes as “social openings” (Riggle, 2017, p. 45), moments that make space for potential “mutual appreciation between people when they break out of their norms and routines by expressing their individuality in a way that gets others to express theirs” (ibid), his definition of being awesome. This description of awesomeness crucially does not prioritise the ego or esteem of the individual over the group, the intention remains to work towards collective harmony, a strengthening of each team member for the common good. In creating the optimum conditions

for creativity, the Early Years pedagogue echoes the role of artists who deliver environment-based experiences, both are – to borrow a term from ecology – ecosystem engineers, making a difference to the world with the aim of it having a nurturing and enlivening effect on those who inhabit it.

Influenced by Vygotsky, relational pedagogy has an anticipatory quality as regards the zone of proximal development (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009). The responsive educator can plan and predict changes to the zone in which the child is able to meaningfully meet new discoveries, a pedagogic skill which is informed by knowledge of the activity undertaken and of the individual child. In contrast, when an adult brings a child to TEY the encounter may be surprising for them both. In the context of pedagogy, it may be that by taking some of the powerful fore-knowledge from the adult, the potential for scaffolding learning is reduced. This would be mediated by how well adult expectation matched the experience, our understanding of which is missing from research. Borghi considered the role of the parent in the development of secondary intersubjectivity crucial in communicating “what in narrative semiotic terms is called *sanction*: the positive or negative recognition of what has been accomplished” (Borghi, 2012, p. 70). Accomplishment in spectatorship, or audiencing is contextual (Sedgman, 2019), and explored further in [3.3.3](#). The normative behaviour of an audience to be quiet and still may in itself present a challenge to parents seeking to scaffold their child’s experience. In my previous study I found parents were able and keen to gently support their child’s engagement through asking and answering questions (Allan, 2024), but this was ‘Zoom theatre’ conducted online and they were able to chat freely behind the mute button without fear of disturbing others. Adults are likely to feel and respond differently in a live, in-person situation.

The performers’ skill in communicating with very young children is recognised as a feature of effective TEY (Branner & Poblete, 2019; Webb, 2023). Described as being able to, “see with the whole body” (Argent & Lewis, 2009, p. 174), it is a responsiveness to the often subtle shifts in attention and affect of the young audience and is what enables communication to flow. The honesty and direct presence of performers is important, and ties into considerations of poetic reality and illusion. In accepting that babies only inhabit the real world, no matter how it is dressed up, the actors learn to meet them in this current moment, to “find the same breath” as the children (Rabl, 2009, p. 108). Actors new to TEY may need to unlearn previous training (Kapstein & Goldstein, 2019) to enable them to confidently shed character and artifice, bringing a present, honest self to the performance. Research into and with Music Therapy, whose practitioners work with great sensitivity and intuition with what is “ephemeral and viscerally experienced in interaction” (J. Edwards, 2019, p. 1) provides a related theoretical reference

point. In therapeutic contexts, as with Early Years education practice, there is recognition however that “developing effective relationships takes time and effort” (Peters et al., 2018, p. 30) especially trust. Can anything be gained then from a brief experience of a TEY show? The relationship between performer and audience member may not be deep, but it is meaningful and could provide insights for methods in tuning in quickly and effectively.

Multi-modal communication is a feature of TEY, and artistic activity in general, which has powerful potential for Early Years practice. Artists who are trained to make space for sound and touch and the kinaesthetic response can find a shared language with children (Hovik, 2019b). The Reggio Emilia approach allows for the ‘100 Languages’ of children to be discovered, developed and used in creative communication (C. Edwards et al., 2011). Such an approach is fully embodied and involves the authentic engagement of the adults and children. Recognising the individuality of the adult is significant, though not always given emphasis when the focus is on child development. There is no neutral or fixed approach to forming pedagogic relationship, it is not delivered but lived through, co-created by those involved. This gives relational pedagogy the potential to highlight and champion the unique gifts that everyone brings to the situation. Goouch (2008) found when studying ‘exceptional’ teachers who shared values and approaches, that they differed in how they communicated with the children. Framing heterogeneity as a strength is political and relates to Riggle’s ethics of awesomeness where the group is strengthened by recognising the individual’s potential (Riggle, 2017). In Reggio Emilia, nourishing individuality through the arts and the discovery of shared languages amongst children, teachers, artists and families is considered a route to strong community (C. Edwards et al., 2011). Conversely there is the splintering effect of a conformist neoliberalism that emphasises personal achievement of predetermined goals (Sims, 2017). Both may seem to invest in the growth of the individual, but the key difference is how much value is placed on connection with others as part of this process. A market-driven agenda where productivity and countability are privileged silences discourse on love and care (Rouse & Hadley, 2018), and authenticity. As an art form interested in direct human connection TEY is positioned to appeal to a pedagogic approach that values relationships. It would be valuable to understand the extent to which this is implicitly or explicitly sought by the adults accessing the work.

Claims that TEY enhances adult child relationships are common. For example Novak states, from his own observations that, “after the performance the habitual child-parent or child-teacher relationship is deepened and enriched” (Novák, 2009, p. 76). *“I know That It’s Something That’s Creating a Bond”: Father’s Experiences of Participating in Baby Theater with their Infants in South Africa*, (Cowley et al., 2020) is a paper describing a project that set out to

support father-infant relationships. Actors, with special training, modelled the kind of sensitive interaction needed to communicate with babies. The play, *SCOOP* by Magnet Theater, offered to “reveal innovative ways to connect and communicate with infants” (Magnet Theater, 2025, p. 1). Performed inside a purpose built, snug tent, audiences of 6 parent-child dyads met three performers who sang, moved, and played with the babies. Harmonic song and music, comfortable seating, and careful lighting were chosen to create a welcoming and easeful atmosphere for audience members large and small. Themed around familiar objects and images from the kitchen and home, *SCOOP* aimed to playfully explore how the ordinary could become extraordinary and demonstrate approaches to play and communication with babies. In this way the adult audience members were positioned as learners, developing their own communicative skills through observation and participation. Crowley et al developed their research project with a specific interest in fathers, but their findings and conclusions are a welcome addition to TEY impact literature where similar research without a gender focus has not taken place. As well as a positive influence on bonding being highlighted, fathers in the study are quoted as saying that they learned things about their children from attending *SCOOP* (Cowley et al., 2020). The theme of parents learning about their own children is anecdotally familiar and reported by artists, “many parents tell us that they learned a lot about their children... they learned to respect them as individuals” (Höjer, 2009, p. 92). Bonding and attachment are explored further in [3.4.4](#) but while considering pedagogy it is important to note that when TEY is framed as a parenting intervention it carries a risk. Poor parenting advice can “undermine parental self-efficacy and confidence” (Sparrow, 2018, p. 269). Strengths based approaches are most effective (Fuller et al., 2019), and there is a risk in attending a public, group event that a parent’s strengths may not be highlighted. In other words, is it possible to ‘fail’ at taking your child to TEY and if so, what are the consequences?

In Early Childhood Education and Care, the relationships between educators and the parents (or other adult/s at home) is important and represents a further dynamic of care. Seeing the child as embedded in their family and community context, upholding the rights of the child necessitates consideration for their whole, networked self (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The psychosocial environment at home impacts cognitive development, and even more so socioemotional capacities (Kelly et al., 2011), toxic stress in childhood leads to poorer outcomes across physical and mental health (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Investing in care for the very young, as shown in Heckman’s (2012) curve, saves money over time, it is “intrinsically the right thing to do and it is also economically the right thing to do” (Sinclair, 2018, p. 168). In a context where the divide between education and care can put academic competencies above needs (Page, 2017), and professional love is undervalued (Aslanian, 2015), making the case for loving the adults as well as the children is hard. Care for the carers, a meaningful part of relational pedagogy (Ben-Tov,

2008; Ministry of Education, 2017), is not consistently expressed in TEY. Though some work is made expressly as a shared, bonding experience (Cowley et al., 2020), the attending adults are also sometimes seen as merely necessary gatekeepers, and a purity of the art is maintained by making it clear that they are not the intended audience (Morley, 2022). This variety in intention may well lead to a variety of experience, though as a group experience with the deliberate ambiguity that characterises art, straight lines and homogeneity are not likely. What is noticeably absent from the research is the intentions and expectations of accompanying adults, how they perceive their role in the theatre space, and their understanding of relationships and pedagogy through the encounter.

3.2.5 Spirit

The Early Years curriculum of New Zealand, Te Whāriki, names the “spiritual dimension” as part of a child’s wholistic development, recognising the Maori view of the child as being part of a chain connecting their ancestors to the future (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 19). The equivalent UK documents (Department for Education, 2014; Scottish Government, 2019) do not include reference to the ‘soul’ of a child or their spirituality, though this was a fundamental consideration for foundational European early education writers such as Froebel, Owen and Carlyle (Nutbrown, 2008). This change reflects the secularisation of our society and discourse, though risks implying that Scottish children lack a spiritual dimension requiring nurture as their New Zealand cousins do. The Child’s Curriculum does recognise this need and presents a background to how it can be achieved (Trevanthen et al., 2018b), recognising the space for the spirit in the shared experience of artistic expression and appreciation. With its interactive, present nature TEY is particularly well provided to offer a “social compensation mechanism in an industrialised society” (Rodrigues et al., 2009, p. 589). Spirituality, like art, is both social and highly personal. Relational consciousness was observed by Hay and Nye (2006) to be the core category of children’s spirituality. If love is difficult to bring into serious conversations on pedagogy, spirituality is perhaps even harder. It does not help that spiritually is a slippery and subjective concept (Champagne, 2003) that can rouse strong emotions as to its nature, relevance to early childhood, and existence. I should stress that I am not describing instruction within specific doctrine, or religious education, these have less relevance for the open, aesthetic experience under study and would require additional discussion. This thesis is concerned with value however, and some investigation into how the value of TEY might be understood or described in spiritual terms is useful. For example TEY artist Myrto Dimitriadou described her intentions in her work in these terms, “art signifies a moment of pause, and through it the possibility of an inner unfolding of the soul” (2009, p. 148).

Historical pioneers Froebel and Owen were writing in a context where they assume a shared cultural understanding of, and belief in, the notion of soul (Tang & Corrado, 2024). Their placing of inherent value in the child can be compared to current rights-based approaches in outcome, with being a rights-holding person as an irreducible essence. Language of ‘spirit’ was helpful in drawing together elements of learning and development in the *Core Capacities for Living and Learning* developed through research by UNICEF, which placed a ‘spiritual’ capacity as embracing and connecting all others (Richardson et al., 2021). Arguments can be found in other disciplines for valuing relationships and art. In anthropology care and kindness to support our extended childhoods and complex societies has been described as an evolved capacity (Bregman, 2020), one which Dissanayake (2015) directly connects to the emergence of artistic practice. Writers on neuroscience have explained how important emotions are in learning contexts (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), and the prescription of culture has been considered within the framework of medicine (Marinopoulos, 2019). The benefits of the aesthetic experience of spending time in nature (Oh et al., 2017) may be comparable to engaging with the arts, though in the latter there is also the potential for nurturing our connective “human sense” (Donaldson quoted in Dunlop, 2018, p. 266).

Though art, poetry, and philosophy are the traditional home of discussions about “Big Stuff” (C. Miles, 2018, p. 99) there is a good case for bringing these conversations into Early Years education (Nutbrown, 2013). Csikszentmihalyi links his concept of Flow to personal life satisfaction and protection from ‘psychic entropy’, the loss of balance, stability or integration within the individual that can lead to poor mental health outcomes and that can therefore cause damage to the whole community (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The antidote he suggests is addressing the subject hierarchy within education that does not value arts and sport as essential. The holistic spirit of the child connects to discussions on mental health and well-being where “well-being implies cultural agency, human growth, trust, recognition and participation” (von Bonsdorff, 2018, p. 126), the ideal of a whole self within a whole community. Te Whāriki, centring the spirit of the child, emphasises community and relationships with space for local adaptation. Interconnectedness is made explicit though the whole curriculum being built on a metaphor of weaving, interlocking contributions standing for “interpersonal and collective levels of consciousness and unconsciousness” (Nye, 2018, p. 142)

Life with a baby can be incredibly mundane and utterly magical at the same time (Senior, 2014), artists working with this age group have sought to reflect this reality and offer “deep existential experiences” (Belloli, 2009). TEY artists have also not been shy of exploring grand ideas such as the origins of life: Tse played with the idea of the music of the spheres and offered a

connection to “the first vibration that occurred in the Universe” (Tse, 2021a, p. 171). In Hovik and Perez (2020) the authors describe the presentation of *Baby Becomings*, a TEY performance based around Haraway’s (2016) writing on worldlings, with a particular interest in ‘sympoiesis’, a co-creation of meaning, self and world. As an art form rich in the unknown and unspoken, TEY can offer space for exploring interpersonal relations outside of habitual patterns or expectations. *Baby Becomings* offered to hold this playfulness within the framework of a postdramatic and posthumanist dramaturgy, playing with “the relation between humans and animals, and the spaces in between those well-known categories” (Hovik & Pérez, 2020, p. 100). . “Relationships which leave room for ‘not-knowing’” (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009, p. 14) are important for the developing child, and if their most trusted adults are able to share in experiences of wonder and surprise, this could be positive for both the encounter in the moment and that relationship in later explorations. In the ambiguity, the “floating intentionality” (Cross & Morley, 2010, p. 68), of aesthetic communication not yet defined and shared in concrete ways, we form a “tiny temporary community” (Newell interviewed in Keating, 2022)

Something TEY also has to offer, of significance to learning environments, is fun.

Environments that support the development of infants 3-12m are characterised by: adults who are attuned to the rhythms and expressions of the infant they care for and who enjoy developing this relationship through active play (Stephen, 2003, p. 5)

In this quote we again see the themes of care, sensitive attention, and play, with the inclusion of the caveat that the adult enjoys the process. When Delafield-Butt states that “Education depends on ‘storytelling’ for fun” (2018, p. 17) it is a form of pleasure in mastery, a concept coined by Piaget, joyfully shared. Though connections can be drawn in multiple ways between TEY and Early Years pedagogy, that an encounter is enjoyable cannot be discounted or taken for granted. It could be that if the children, or perhaps even the adults, do not enjoy the experience that any benefits for development and relationships are absent or even negatively impacted.

3.2.6 TEY and Pedagogy Summary

A pedagogical lens helps to describe how TEY acts upon the individuals who encounter it. Much research on arts in Early Years however has taken place with, and is geared towards informing, environments with an open structure. There is a gap in knowledge on how or if spectatorship can confer similar benefits to other creative activities such as mark or music making, or free imaginative play. It may be that its strengths are different. Addressing this

requires understanding the mechanism of the process, and the nature of the spectatorship experience, not as from an individual perspective but one embedded in relationships.

TEY is an art form where the material resources needed for a production cannot be met by the target audience. Whether funding bodies or ticket buyers, there are adults to be persuaded that the endeavour is one worth making. One argument made is that we all have a right to art and culture, including our youngest children (UNICEF, 1989). Other, perhaps more instrumentalist arguments, that express in detail the individual and social benefits of such access, do not contradict this rights-based case, but add to it. Koch, when reviewing the emergence of TEY, was circumspect about its potential. She stated that claims that it offered something more than a “rainbow, or... playing with sand, or wood, or on the piano” (Koch, 2017, p. 449) were yet to be proven. ‘Proof’ may be illusive, depending on what she was looking for, but through exploring the connections between TEY and early childhood pedagogy some of what TEY stands to offer is presented. I believe it is significant that none of the examples Koch puts forward include another person, or people (excepting the piano makers). Natural wonders and playful exploration have power of course, what TEY offers that they do not is the intentional, imaginative connection with other human beings, in company.

3.3 The Triangular Audience

Desfosses used the term ‘triangular’ to describe the TEY audience while reflecting on the role of the accompanying adults:

The adult is doubly a spectator – both of the play and of the child... It is a triangular relationship between the adults, the show and the children. (Desfosses, 2009, p. 103)

This neat description of what characterises the TEY audience has been taken up by other commentators, and while the content and form of work varies widely it is, by definition, the audience which makes TEY what it is. The younger the target child audience, the higher the adult to child ratio, and the more likely these adults are to be primary caregivers. This has implications which are interesting to consider against scholarship on theatre audiences. When discussing audiences, the assumed standard is an individual within a sea of similar individuals, whereas the TEY audience consists of audience islands, each relating to one-another within their unit as well as with the performance and the rest of the audience. The triangle quickly begins to look more like a complicated three-dimensional web. As well as the adult’s ‘double view’ (Morley, 2022), seeing child and performer, the child’s experience is mediated through communication with their adult (Pinkert, 2009). Both of course are also affected by (and affect) the other spectators.

I begin with descriptions of the experience of the parent as spectator, expanding on aspects of the double view. I then turn to how discussions on parenting interact with the production of TEY, before looking at the impact on audience when TEY is framed as an introduction to theatre. A discussion follows on how the TEY audience might fit into scholarship on theatre etiquette before looking at how TEY is placed when the communal experience of live performance is highlighted.

3.3.1 The spectatorship experience of the accompanying adult

Desfosses’ (2009, p. 103) description of the adult being “doubly a spectator” taken at its simplest is one of split focus between the child and the show. Another aspect is not a split but a *through* view. “Seeing through their eyes” (Branner & Poblete, 2019, p. 81) was cited as a means by which the experience of theatre is enhanced for the parent. Given the importance of how the parent and child mediate each other’s experience the mechanism for this is explored

more deeply in [3.4](#), Shared Experience, through considering literature on empathy and intersubjectivity. Both the split and the through views of the parent at TEY are considered here in relation to audience and theatre scholarship.

In Audience Studies, discussions on empathy and identification deal with how spectators relate to the actors and characters they observe onstage. Brecht was an early 20th century German playwright who had strong views on the effect he wished to have on his audience (Frimberger, 2022). His application of *Verfremdungseffekt*, variously translated into English as alienation or estrangement, aims to keep the spectator at a critical distance from the drama, able to observe the political and structural messages rather than being merely caught up in the alternative reality presented. Perhaps we can consider the parent at TEY as alienated, or estranged from the theatre through their split view, simultaneously considering the performance and their child. The through view however could bring the parent closer to the performance as they experience it as they feel their child does. Nicholson pointed out that “empathy and identification are not always the same thing” (Nicholson, 2014, p. 79), citing Brecht’s elicited empathy with the performer against Freud’s view on identification with character being connected to narcissism. In *SCOOP*, parents reported identifying with the performers as they were inspired in their play (Cowley et al., 2020), Branner’s (2019) experience of *Tube* is an example of how the empathy for his daughter that it inspired brought him to a new, and pleasurable experience.

It is fair to assume that parents attending TEY expend far more emotional energy on the activities of their child than the real or fictional desires of the beings on stage. Reviewing further spectatorship theories may not therefore be helpful, though the work of Boal should be mentioned as his invitation to become “Spect-actors...[who] cannot go on being passive victims of the theatre” (Boal, 2008, p. 155) relates to the active audiences invited to share in the creation of fully interactive TEY work. Boal had political aims, his work invited people to get on stage and role play alternative actions to address a thorny problem relevant to society. Interactive TEY does not have this structure or representative layer of meaning, the spect-acting rather is a felt, immediate, aesthetic exploration. The participants are not trying out alternative ways of being in an ‘as if’ scenario, but trying them out, for real, in the very here and now. Who may come away with thoughts for change are the observing parents as their split view becomes singular when their child becomes part of the performance. Dramatherapy, which has connective roots to Boal’s Forum Theatre, uses ‘witnessing’ as one of the core processes through which to effect change (Sajnani, 2012). As well as the familiar process of observing performance of some kind, witnessing in Dramatherapy also includes observational insights, the witnessing of self, which is considered “of equal importance” (P. Jones, 1996, p. 110). In TEY

we bring in the witnessing of the child, who may at points become part of the performance, at others a fellow spectator.

Writing on audiences, Bennet (2013) questioned whether considering horizons of expectation, the pre-existing knowledge audiences or readers bring to work, was applicable to children's theatre. Knowledge is assumed when figuring the adult audience member, whereas the child is more often taken as uninformed and unprepared (Reason, 2010). Though the child at TEY is unlikely to be informed by their existing knowledge of the form, book adaptations and television transfers offer familiarity with content. Shows such as *In the Night Garden Live* replicate familiar characters and moments from television, and book illustrations are often faithfully rendered in puppet form for example for Jon Klaasen's *I Want My Hat Back*¹³ by Little Angel Theatre. The experience of a toddler hearing and seeing the familiar words and visuals of a regular bedtime story will be different to one where everything is new. How the ticket-buying adults feel about these choices and experiences may be informed by the factors explored by Bennet (2013) such as associative work and reviews, with the additional consideration of what they believe their child might gain from the experience.

Artists can be mindful of adult preferences when creating potentially challenging, esoteric work for the very youngest; efforts are sometimes made to include adults through adding reassuring elements such as narrative structure, or familiar use of harmony (Tse, 2021b). Adults may "need extra encouragement to rediscover and become conscious of their autonomous and artistic expression" (Fröhlich, 2009, p. 499). As well as artists not wishing to alienate half their audience, there is an awareness that the experience of the adult impacts that of the child (Desfosses, 2009). This aligns with an understanding that a child's interests and opinions are moderated by their trusted adults (Woods, 2017). When sharing attention in an object or event "the adult's responses act as a kind of emotional regulator" (Violi, 2012, p. 73). Some artists and researchers however have found parents to be overly involved in moderating their child's experience, potentially distracting from the child's direct engagement (Martlew & Grogan, 2013; Morley, 2022). This concern was expressed by parent participants in my earlier research; though they supported their children's engagement well, in interview afterwards they questioned the extent to which they 'should' have directed attention, or made verbal connections (Allan, 2022). This was one of the ways parents enacted the role of 'Educator', one of the five parent roles in TEY that I identified the others being: Provider, Law-maker, Law-enforcer, and Biggest Fan (Allan, 2022). 'Provider' relates to their position as enablers and gatekeepers,

¹³ <https://youtu.be/WBX868dQ5Ic>

bringing the child to the experience; and both law-prefixed roles have greatest resonance with discussions on etiquette. ‘Biggest Fan’ can be expanded on in the context of both the split and through view as it involves observing and delighting in the experience and achievements of the child. A parent, or similar vital adult, has a huge amount of knowledge and expertise in their own child, as well as their approaches and choices – the cultural capital of parenthood (Sparrow, 2018, p. 258) supportive of relational pedagogy. There is pleasure in the mastery of the child that reflects positively on the sense of efficacy and confidence in the parent (Coakley, 2006). Conversely, it may be that the adult’s awareness of their, and their child’s, visibility would contribute to more acute negative feelings, such as embarrassment or shame should the encounter go less well. This experience of ‘parenting in public’, is considered in the following section.

3.3.2 Parenting in TEY

This history of advice and instruction issued to those seeking to raise children reveals stories of shifting priorities and assumptions in society. Parenting, the verb, emerged in the later decades of the twentieth century alongside a sharp rise in the quantity of advice offered (Knott, 2019). ‘Mothering’ has been in usage for a longer time, though in her research into the history of this activity Knott (2019) found it curiously absent from historical records. Parenting has been enacted far more than written about, and though this does not automatically mean it has not also been thought about or discussed, the preoccupation with ‘optimum parenting’ is part of our 21st century Zeitgeist (Murthy, 2024). Parenting advice can take the form of information, a sharing of knowledge considered useful in planning or solving problems as they arise. It can also be attitudinal direction, not only suggesting what parents should do, but who they should (ideally) *be*. Both forms can be enthusiastically received though it is the latter which tends to be more emotionally charged, and where TEY has at times been placed.

The TEY performance *SCOOP*, centred in Cowley’s (2020) research is positioned as a novel, and successful parenting intervention, supporting fathers in their relationships with their babies. Performers, already skilled in their art forms, were given additional training in non-verbal and playful communication with babies, and materials and actions were chosen that were considered accessible to families outside of the theatre space. The performance offered observable modelling of positive, playful interaction as well as opportunities for the fathers in the study to talk to each other, reflect and connect. These factors align with what parents in a 2019 study felt

were key aspects to the success (or otherwise) of parenting advice for improving behaviour around food (Fuller et al., 2019). Active modelling, peer learning, and a sense of inclusion, which could also be called belonging, were mechanisms in both studies which were seen as necessary for enacting positive change. Though the studies looked at different outcomes, bonding and dietary habits respectively, both are aspects of parenting which are personal to the parent as well as the child, and potentially very sensitive areas to address. Considering the whole environment around the educative offer demonstrates an ethic of care that encompasses the parent as well as the child, the performers, and the wider community. Able to engage, in a relaxed way, as their whole selves, the parents in this form of TEY are given space to learn about themselves and their children. This approach is supported by research that observed interventions designed to shift parental attitudes towards positive engagement with their child's development (List et al., 2021). List et al. found delivering information had limited short-term impact whereas an interactive programme with space for action and reflection resulted in lasting change and positive outcomes for the children in literacy, numeracy and socioemotional behaviour.

Though the benefits to young children are sometimes cited, it is unusual to see performances marketed to the general public as a learning experience for the parent. Performances could risk putting parents off by, the participants in Fuller's study articulated a desire to be supported, not "educated" (Fuller et al., 2019, p. 8). When approaching a project of applying theatre to achieve social or educative outcomes Nicholson warns that "good intentions are not always good enough" (Nicholson, 2014, p. 31) with an analysis of power relations always necessary. There are many positive examples of artists engaging with communities, groups and families through long term participatory projects (Adediran, 2020). Offering a stand-alone performance as a learning, or development offer is less common. Partly this is down to resources, the Hopper project found that though the Early Years settings and their communities appreciated and benefited from the TEY work offered as part of the project, there were not the systems and resources in place for this theatregoing to be continued independently (Jackson, 2018).

Nicholson suggests, "Creative spaces are those in which people feel safe enough to take risks and to allow themselves and others to experience vulnerability" (Nicholson, 2014, p. 129). Deep, trusting relationships, the strength of community arts work, are built over time, during a singular event the responsibility lies with the performance to create this inclusive atmosphere and enable playful relationships. Without a base in slowly acquired, real world, real person knowledge the realm in which these relations operate is artistic, symbolic, or atmospheric, with the limits of the event providing safe containment. In this way strangeness can be a strength,

with the potential for sustained impact. The ‘other’ world, created by a theatre performance, can permit a freedom from usual rules, one where adults, for the duration, “give up the role of being omnipotent and infallible” (Novák, 2009, p. 76). Scale also has an effect, larger audiences necessitate the communication of messages such as, ‘you are seen’ and ‘you belong here’ through modes which are broadcast rather than specific and direct.

Not all TEY claims to support parent child bonding, and it cannot be taken for granted that all TEY spaces provide a universally welcoming atmosphere. In her chapter on ‘Marked Bodies’ Sedgman, writing on theatre etiquette debates, notes that it was only as a breastfeeding mother that she noticed “feeling for the first time the weight of being judged by strangers” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 142). Her experience was relevant not only to questions of accessing theatre, but a broader awareness of how most public space is adult space by default, and how largely unknowingly she was able to freely navigate the world before that point. This feeling of being judged as a parent can be acute and painful, Bourdieu’s “ethical snobbery” (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 459) describes a sequence of reasoning that can be summed up as ‘what I do is best so you must be wrong’. When applied to parenting, especially public parenting, this premise sets up whole sections of society impossibly stuck in reciprocal judging and fear of being judged. If we layer this onto the public space of a theatre audience, where expected codes of behaviour may or may not be applied, we can easily see the potential for confusion, anxiety, and stress. None of which support open and playful relationships, a willingness to be vulnerable or try new things. Macvarish, who problematised various parenting interventions in her book, *Neuroparenting*, described her pleasure in the “unselfconscious, instinctual” (Macvarish, 2016a, p. 81) interactions with a baby being lost when a sense of being observed was introduced. In a lot of TEY the staging makes the audience highly visible to one-another, sometimes with clear invitation to be part of the ‘action’. *Bebé Babá* combined process and product-oriented methods by working with a group of parents and children in repeated sessions who then went on to ‘perform’, alongside professional artists for a public audience. Amongst other benefits the project helped “develop mothering skills” (Rodrigues et al., 2009, p. 593), with the artistic framing viewed as central to success. Clearly such impact relies on participants being willing and interested, those taking part in researched performances of *Bebé Babá* or *SCOOP* (Cowley et al., 2020) were aware that what they signed up for purported to support their parenting, and had a positive disposition towards the idea. The expectations of somebody who has simply bought a ticket for a show may be quite different.

How parents at TEY view other audience members may impact their experience of feeling judged or supported. A participant in my earlier research described an imagined scenario, light

heartedly comparing herself and her (chatty) child negatively to the “perfect Bearsden¹⁴ mum with her perfectly coiffed children who sit nicely” (Allan, 2022, p. 45). There was no suggestion that such an experience would encourage her to spend more time coiffing her children, but it is a scenario that would potentially discourage her from attending theatre. We each have our own relationships with the concepts of ‘fitting in’ and ‘being told what to do’, influenced by experience and personality. It may be that real or imagined ‘perfect’ parents enacting Bordeaux’s ethical snobbery perform a patronising, repelling function. The parents who choose not to bring their children to TEY are, of course, a difficult group to study but fears around behavioural expectations may be a factor in that choice. It is reasonable to assume that parents who feel lacking in confidence are even less likely to put themselves at risk of being judged or called upon in public. The danger here is that only parents confident in their own parenting choices, and the predictability of their child’s behaviour, are able to access TEY. The result being that those who stand most to benefit from TEY’s power to empower parents, miss out.

3.3.3 TEY as an introduction to theatre

TEY can be thought of as a preparation for later theatre experiences, both in terms of developing familiarity with the form (Koch, 2017) and somewhere “children gradually learn how to be an audience” (Meiners et al., 2006, p. 117). There is quite a journey from awestruck baby to curious toddler, to a child who knows what is expected and chooses to follow. There is not a simple consensus on when and how the skills involved in being able to ‘sit still and pay attention’ are best encouraged though theatre, as “one of the last bastions of concentration” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 65), in a world of commodified attention (Williams, 2018) has a role in providing a field for practice. Within our triangular audience, the adult is well placed to support such social learning. A parent’s desire to help the child learn ‘how to be’ at the theatre can be unwelcome when interaction is desired by the performers; Martlew and Grogan, observing TEY audiences, suggest the parents’ “tendency to over direct the children... thereby encouraging [them] to be passive listeners instead of active participators” (2013, p. 8) might have been avoided by clearer communication on expectations.

¹⁴ Bearsden is a town in the suburban fringe of Greater Glasgow with a reputation for comfortable affluence

As a communal space where things happen in a structured, sometimes ritual manner, the theatre is rich in ‘invisible pedagogy’ (Goouch, 2008). Subtle, and not so subtle signs advise on what things mean and how to respond in a socially acceptable way. Martlew and Grogan took the participation in applause by children at a TEY performance as an indication of familiarity with “societal norms” (2013, p. 9). In adult audiences Sedgman (2018) viewed applause as codified behaviour, as opposed to the spontaneous expression of gratitude or appreciation it represents. As an audience member at *Little Top* I observed a curious interplay between the clapping performed by one baby, and the contagious applause across the rest of the audience. The audience were seated in a circle, around the performers, who share impressive skills in acrobatics and juggling. The ‘sit and watch’ component of the event shifts gently into the ‘join and play’ portion, without a clear equivalent of a curtain call, and sometimes, according to co-creator Kim Donahue, there is little or no applause throughout the show. At the performance I attended however there were quite frequent moments of applause, and with the seating in the round it was not obvious whether we were applauding the skill of the acrobats or the skill of the baby, initiating the applause. She was being watched, and appreciated, and her ability to perform a social gesture appropriately was met with collective approval. Could this be apprenticeship in audiencing? It fits Rogoff’s description of “guided participation with other people” (Rogoff, 1991, p. 349). Being part of an audience may be the only way to learn how to do it, to join in with the ritualised moments of stillness and activity, ultimately building the kind of “theatre confidence” (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 66) that enables enjoyable and enriching encounters in the future. This fits well with a framing of TEY as something to “launch a theatre-going habit” (Davies, 2016, Section Reviews), though invites the question of why such a habit might be considered desirable.

‘High Culture – for Babies!’ is something of a trope in TEY. Opera, e.g. *Bambino* or Shakespeare, e.g. *Shakespeare’s Stars*, are named alongside ‘baby’ in attention grabbing juxtaposition. What could be more sophisticated than Opera? Who could be less sophisticated than a baby? The premise, before more detailed exploration of content, is humorous or surprising, but in capitalising on our existing assumptions does it support or challenge these expectations? In the tug-of-war between these opposing ideas, does the baby humble Shakespeare or does Shakespeare elevate the baby? The answer is potentially both, and in a different combination depending on who is taking it in. What would be beneficial to understand better is the extent to which the promoters’ intentions match the audience’s reception. In her theory on audiences Bennett emphasises the importance of prior knowledge stating that, “established cultural markers are important in pre-activating a certain anticipation, a horizon of expectations” (2013, p. 114). If the established cultural marker is Opera, this could be loaded with a message of elitism, and perhaps the ‘for babies’ offers a way in for those who would not

consider attending a ‘normal’ production. Again, less is discoverable about the people who might enjoy a live, musical performance with their baby but were put off by the word Opera.

Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital, habitus and hysteresis (Bourdieu, 2018) are often brought into discussions on access to the arts. Sometimes referred to as ‘fish out of water’ syndrome, hysteresis is an uncomfortable state of being under-equipped for a social situation, feeling ‘I don’t belong here’ at the theatre might be offered as a classic example. Anderson et al found that “theatre confidence” (2014, p. 66), developed in the context of family life, supported young people’s positive engagement with theatre. Access can sometimes be simplified to a question of attendance but even once through the door, anxiety around correct protocol, of dress and behaviour, can be a problematic distraction from accessing the artistic experience in a meaningful way. This confidence is supported primarily from the family and can be seen as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018), shared with the next generation, that permits them entry to the theatre and all it has to offer. More than education, it was the cultural resources of parents that was the most influential factor on arts attendance in children in Anderson et al’s (2014) study. Bennett similarly states that a love of theatre is “not culturally innocent” (2013, p. 100), and is grown from our accumulated cultural norms, what Bourdieu (2018) termed habitus. Which would all be fairly benign, of course people share what they like with their children, were it not a story bound up in privilege, and entrenched inequalities across class and race.

The notion of arts existing within a hierarchy with ‘high’ culture associated with higher classes and so on down the scale is a belief, though often challenged, that is nonetheless shared and perpetuated as a backdrop to many of our cultural discussions. Anderson et al., in Australia, found non-white families to be excluded from “Anglo-centric theatre” (2014, p. 72). Various studies in the UK (and elsewhere) have established a gradient of arts engagement related to cultural capital and economic status, with Willekens and Lievens (2016) also finding that having children decreases arts and heritage participation, especially for women. Mak et al. (2020) found that geographic location also played an important role, not simply a case of physical access, but the community influences which cut across individual characteristics. Bourdieu’s (2018) habitus offers a framework for considering the complex factors that influence arts engagement, above an over-simplified notion of affordability. There are no studies into the demographic characteristics of TEY audiences on a wide scale, the field is still quite new and small, so it is difficult to say how these influences manifest specifically within TEY. The matter is further complicated by the wide and varied nature of the genre, for example are audiences for *Hup*, with its classical music focus drawn from a different pool of families than *Little Top*, a circus show? The limited data available from Starcatchers does not suggest this to be the case,

and it may be that audiences put TEY within a category of its own. It remains the case however that the typical (mode) adult to attend a TEY performance in Scotland is white, female, and living in an area low on the index of multiple deprivation (Starcatchers, 2022).

Both the work itself, especially if postdramatic content that “privileges the neophyte” (Fletcher-Watson, 2013a, p. 18), and the behavioural expectations that surround the event are often new for the adults as well as the child. Bennet’s (2013) list of cultural markers influencing audiences can now be updated to include changes to media and its consumption, and an audience member’s expectations for TEY will be built from many indicators outside of the world of theatre. The genre is still young and rare enough not to have established interpretive communities (Fish, 1980) critics or other arbiters of taste, who help the public make choices and the artists reflect on their practice. When considering how parents view TEY, frequency and availability support, in a very practical way, familiarity. We can expect that adults who arrive with knowledge around the format, behavioural norms, and likely aesthetic of what they are walking into will meet the work differently to those for whom it is a novel (and potentially daunting) experience. Naming a known art form, such as opera, brings benefits and risks as expectations may follow that inhibit or encourage theatre confidence in the adults. Exploring such experience would be valuable knowledge to have. It is possible that the strangeness of TEY has a levelling effect on hysteresis, if all the fish are out of the water it begins to feel intentional.

An important theme found in my earlier research was in how parents valued TEY as an opportunity for human connection (Allan, 2022). Introducing their young children to theatre experiences was framed both as an act of bonding and inclusion within the family and outwards, to join wider society. The exclusion from this possibility that came with having a young child during the 2020 lockdowns resulted in a “painful experience for the parent, expressed in the findings in strong terms, “devastated”... and “grief” (2022, p. 58). This connects to research into how shared values influence choices made within families, (Tonyan & Paredes, 2017). A child’s habitus, all the learned, inherited and absorbed cultural norms which they hold and operate within, begins at home with their family unit. Family culture, rituals and expectations matter enormously and support a sense of belonging, vital to wellbeing (Bethell et al., 2019). A better understanding of what brings parents to TEY will provide insight into what parents believe theatre, and perhaps other art forms, are *for*. When artists write on wishing to “win small children for art and for the theatre”, (Dimitriadou, 2009, p. 14) to support “the inner unfolding of the soul ” (ibid) there is revealed a belief in theatre’s inherent value, power, and goodness. If parents are bringing very young children to the theatre as hopefully a first experience of many,

if audiencing is a skill worth developing, it implies that theatre attendance has value. The specifics of which this study aims to explore.

3.3.4 Theatre etiquette at TEY

In her 2018 book, *On the Reasonable Audience*, Sedgman picks apart the public debate on theatre etiquette, one fuelled by “shared value judgments about manners, respect, and common sense” (2018, p. 43). She details how audience expectations have shifted over time, how though etiquette can be weaponised to enforce hierarchies, it can also be framed as an act of kindness. Theatre etiquette is “an ethical puzzle” (2018, p. 20) where we must ask, “when it comes to public coexistence what – and whom – are we prioritising?” (2018, p. 7). Theatre made for a young audience is not within the scope of her work but many of the issues she highlights do transfer to a TEY context. Two ideas discussed that seem immediately relevant to the adult bringing a young child to the theatre are distraction and behaviour policing. I will look more closely at the form of attention expected at the theatre and how this manifests in TEY then turn to the enforcing of rules, subtly and overtly by different sources. Unlike mainstream events, with their “unspoken theatre contract” (Suvin, 1985, p. 12) the ‘rules’ of any given TEY performance are usually announced, out loud, before the start of the performance. I have observed however a wide variety of responses in the behaviour of the accompanying adults that I believe give insight into held assumptions of propriety that can supersede such pre-show information.

The history of audience behaviour is not a simple story of chaos progressing into order and we owe much of our current notions of institutional norms to the freshly hushed auditoriums of the Victorian era. The pit of Shakespeare’s Globe is often invoked to remind us that raucous interaction was once the norm (Kershaw, 2001), before the stratifying splits of culture during the age of empire that Bourdieu (2018) described, and we still carry with us. The residue of snobbery around the idea of ‘proper’ behaviour and the perceived honesty of an audibly responsive audience has led some to equate quietness with an undesired passivity (Kershaw, 2001). Having been the parent of a child who sat tight lipped throughout all the sing-along sections only to deliver the entire song in the car afterwards, I am mindful of Reason’s (2010) work with school age children where outward expression did not give away the intensity of internal experience. Both Sedgman and Reason have argued against a simple value judgement of quiet meaning passive and therefore ‘bad’, rather that audience members can be actively

engaged in the co-creation of meaning in a variety of ways. In their development of the Starcatchers Engagement Signals as a method for observing very young children at arts encounters (Martlew & Grogan, 2013; Young & Powers, 2008), the authors included descriptions of the ‘absorbed’ and ‘attuned’ children, where active engagement can manifest as stillness.

There are reasons to seek an experience of still concentration, Sedgman draws on the philosophy of aesthetics to describe how for many the ‘ideal’ theatre experience is one of a powerful, shared intensity, of full attention (Sedgman, 2018). Such full attention relates to the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and mindfulness practices, ways of being known to have positive impact for the individual (Zhang et al., 2019). The assumption that full, rapt focus is the intended, and therefore validating response of an audience can be seen in the frequent praise given to TEY productions on exactly this measure in printed reviews. Successful TEY “captivates” (Davies, 2016), “tiny engrossed faces” (Kavanagh, 2019), are “utterly transfixed” (One4Review, 2016). Though the mode of interaction, particularly for toddlers, can be invited to be more free-flowing, eliciting attention remains the aim. Anna Newell for example creates purpose built tent-like arenas for her TEY work, specifically so as to offer a “distraction free space” (Schulman, 2016, p. 1).

Distraction, “anathema” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 35) to the absorbed, transporting experience of peak theatre, is a constant threat and frequent reality at TEY. What constitutes distraction however is influenced by both personal disposition and shared norms. The children and adults are distracted, and distracting, in different ways. The attention of the babies, the prized ideal, is vulnerable to internal and external pulls of focus that are mitigated by artists and attendant adults. Although an adult may have learned to habitually ignore elements of a theatre space such as the lighting rig above, architectural swoops, drapes, or the usher standing by, these could all be new and fascinating to a young child. Performances therefore have been brought as physically close to the babies as possible, sometimes inside a purpose built room within the room as with *Little Top*, and the work of both Anna Newell (Schulman, 2016) and Oily Cart (Webb, 2023). By minimising sensory input, artists are more able to lead the focus of the babies and avoid overstimulation, the attending adults play a role in not adding extra stimulation of their own. The advice for parents not to direct their children’s attention is linked to this desire in the artists to control, as much as possible, the environment in which the child engages with the art (Morley, 2022). The situation is further complicated by the fact that babies can become a distraction to one-another, either through being inherently interesting or by making show-stopping interruptions through noise or movement. Again, some performances allow for such

interaction as integral, all audience members are to some degree part of the show. Where the audience have been sat down however and asked to keep their babies from the centre as in *Little Top*, or the musician's platform as in *Bambino*, the accompanying adult must make a judgment call on when the actions of their child are 'too much'. I believe this will partly depend on how they conceptualise the engagement of their child, and partly on how they absorb the implicit and explicit rules of the space.

If the absorbed attention of the young children is a common desire of TEY, can the same be said for that of the adults? Perhaps their dual view is such that true, transporting engagement is impossible. Certainly concern for the actions and needs of their child can be incredibly distracting. I remember meeting a friend after one of my earliest Ipdip Theatre productions, eager to hear what she and her toddler had made of the show. She, though sat in close proximity to the action, had barely any awareness of the content as she spent the entire time worried that her daughter would need the toilet (the noisy hand-driers at the venue meant she could not do her pre-show pee). The toddler engaged well with the show, and her cushion stayed dry, but I was left with no grown-up feedback and a healthy reminder that when adults wrestle with internal distractions, they tend to be invisible from the outside. Attending adults may support the attention of their children by, for example, feeding them if they are hungry or answering an urgent and distracting question. The child can then go on to enjoy the performance rather than ramping up the volume on their request for food or reassurance. This is a judgement call the adult must make however and is influenced by their view of the parent-child relationship, for example how they view the value of the child's "unfiltered response" (Allan, 2022, p. 43), as well as their understanding of the rules of the space. It may be that anxiety around correct behaviour, and behaviour policing, especially if this clashes with practiced modes of parenting is the biggest distraction they face.

Bennet stated, "the conventions of particular cultural codes determine an audience's ability to tolerate disattendance factors" (2013, p. 73), a flexibility Sedgman also reflected on, suggesting that "readjusting audience expectations to normalise distractions" (2018, p. 148) could lead to a more broadly inclusive atmosphere. Tolerating disattendance factors in TEY, is more than, as in Bennet's context of traditional theatre, an ability for example to tune out the sound of passing traffic at an outdoor performance. It includes the shared judgment of what is tolerable, perhaps invited, action. The 'codes' at TEY are necessarily inclusive of the sounds, and to some extent, the movements of young children and, as there are no standard conventions in place, are affirmed at the outset of each performance. The content and delivery of 'the talk' ahead of a performance is an art within the art of TEY and a lot of time and consideration is put into the

wording and tone. The framing of etiquette sharing, or rule listing as a “benevolent gesture” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 52) makes sense in TEY, especially if there are production specific instructions to give. The key difference to generic theatre etiquette instructions is that nobody is expected to know the rules of any given TEY performance in advance.

As an example, on the online listing for *Shakespeare’s Stars*, permitted behaviour is shared as a ‘did you know?’ fact about the company and performance:

Staged in the New Victory Theater’s lower lobby space, *Shakespeare’s Stars* is designed as a safe and judgment-free space where babies can be babies, whether that means crawling curiously into the performance space or taking a much-needed break. (Clayman Pye, 2025)

As well as the permission to move given in this description, there is the express permission not to actively engage. When an adult does, or does not, need to scoop up a curious crawler is often clearly communicated, the message here is also giving subtle direction towards the adult who might feel obliged to keep their child interested. The motivations and judgments of the accompanying adult are important to unpick, how important is it that their child pays attention? If they do not, who is responsible for bringing them back in? Also, what assumptions are made about the behaviour of other adults, especially in a parental peer situation as discussed above? When a toddler wants to cross the line and get in with the performers, and loudly asks to be able to move but is neither allowed on stage nor taken outside of the space, who is to ‘blame’ for this distracting scenario? The toddler for not ‘behaving’? The parent for not removing them? Or the show for being the wrong kind of interesting? Perhaps fellow parents, familiar with the ‘cultural codes’ of baby and toddler spaces, do not register such noise as a distraction.

The TEY audience is often physically and visibly intimate, with audience members able to watch one another and be aware of being seen. This could potentially heighten anxiety around ‘correct’ behaviour, whether that is rooted in theatre etiquette or perceived parenting judgments. It can also heighten solidarity, once some adults are seen to move, breastfeed, or allow their baby to crawl forwards, the more others begin to relax into such permissions. When Sedgman argued, “behaviour policing causes harm, this harm is asymmetrical, and yet these asymmetries so often go unacknowledged” (2018, p. 145) she was referring to what amounts to snobbery within theatre audiences, in TEY the risk of harm is increased by the layering of the ethical snobbery around parenting choices, itself bound up in class hierarchy (Bourdieu, 2018). Preventing such harm requires greater understanding of whose needs and how are prioritised within TEY, and what is expected of the adults in the room, performers or otherwise, when it

comes to meeting those needs. The encouragement of children into theatre socialisation (Koch, 2017), when motivated from fears of impropriety could become “the violence of normativity” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 89). Theatre etiquette rooted in colonial thinking aimed at saving the “uncivilized” or “barbaric” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 32) from themselves is repugnant, and the infantilizing of other adults is felt as morally unjustifiable. Can the same be said for policing the behaviour of actual infants? In TEY, more than in theatre for older children, this policing is the responsibility of the parents or guardians. Though others, such as ushers, do occasionally step to physically catch and return a child, most direct holding, advising, guiding and calming of children is enacted by the adult they came in with. The communication of rules and expectations, both explicit and implied, is directed at these adults. How they experience and conceptualise this experience is a question this thesis seeks to answer.

It would be possible to share many anecdotes of rule breaking and distractions in TEY audiences, observed from my perspectives as performer, parent, and unattached audience member. Often the most obvious reason is a mismatch between child and performance, and as the form develops there does seem to be a steady trend towards specific age/stage banding for TEY work. In remounting *Bambino* for example Scottish Opera changed the recommended age from under 18 months to under 12 months (Patterson, 2025), signifying that the performance is less appropriate for those endowed with self-propulsion but not yet self-control. This approach presents difficulties for programmers, who would like to offer work to all their patrons but can perhaps only afford to present one show for under 5s in a season. It also presents a challenge to families with more than one child. When I experienced being the mother of a child asking to leave, I also had to consider the needs of their sibling, happily sitting still and listening. In considering traditional and relaxed versions of performances, Sedgman suggested that “conflict arises when these two models of audiencing collide” (2018, p. 3). Such collision is built into TEY and audience members are often mid-process in their developing capacity to enact both positions. There has been a variety of models explored offering more, or less, immersive experiences as appropriate to the needs of the target group. Communication and flexibility mitigate potential feelings of exclusion, or struggles with expected behaviour, but it is hard to see how an already a niche offer could remove such conflict entirely.

Finding the balance between the needs of the group and the individual is a dance that takes place across many arenas. Sedgman described theatre etiquette as a microcosm for bigger “defining questions of our age” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 51), and it is possible to see TEY as a real time, social experiment at the edge of etiquette every time it is attempted. Her title, *On the Reasonable Audience*, reminds us that toddlers are famously the most unreasonable members of

our society, and may be exempt; but the forces that operate on those parenting toddlers in public bear some resemblance to the difficulties of ‘getting it right’ at the theatre. Perhaps, when successful, TEY provides a space for exploration within the dance of conflicting needs. When free from polarising fears, it can be a lived experience of the ongoing balance game, where shifting and moving to change is the constant and we are neither denying ourselves nor ignoring our neighbours. Though such a description may seem utopian, theatre is a dynamic, embodied art form experienced in community. It can be deeply moving, and for TEY, the nature and interaction of other audience members creates the event in a very immediate way.

In summarising the argument for maintaining the protected, distraction free space the powerful connective power of theatre is also invoked: “The art experience becomes relational in and through its aesthetic value, and this aesthetic value can only be fully realised if the event itself is *not* relational” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 61). The very nature of TEY would seem to preclude this possibility, but the press reports of attentive babies and the refrain of “I would not have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes” (Schneider, 2009a, p. 80) suggests otherwise. In my personal and professional experience, though distraction and refusal do occur, attention is more common. Compliance with rules and expectations cannot be assumed in TEY, for authentic engagement audiences must be invited and not compelled (Allan, 2024). If the risk of social failure is a present reality all adults in the space are aware of, the payoff from this risk could be a heightened sense of achievement from success. Success which may also be felt socially, as a shared achievement of the assembled group. The etiquette of TEY is not standardised, and with such variety of form available it may not be in anyone’s interests to attempt to do so. It is an important discussion to bring into this study however for two reasons; informing an understanding of adults’ behavioural expectations, and being one framework from which the collective experience of audiencing is considered.

3.3.5 TEY as a site of community

Holding the idea of community as a group of people amongst whom something is shared, it is a word that can be applied to groups of a great variety of sizes, purposes, and duration. Although there have been successful projects involving TEY which have been delivered as community-based art, e.g. *Early Hurly Burly* (Impact Consultancy, 2015), these rely on long-term relationships between artists and audiences and are therefore less relevant to this study. In considering the audience experience at TEY, how spectators find, and perhaps look for, a sense

of community will support an understanding of its value and impact. The two approaches to community I would like to draw attention to here are how ideas of human connection are found in the wider culture within which the art and audience are situated, and the unique temporary community of the singular event.

The capacity of theatre to expand outwards a limiting “mafia-style” (Daly, 2016, p. 303) empathy and present a wider concept of shared humanity is a strong theme in theatre for older children, particularly in Theatre in Education. Whilst considering community, it is important to remember those islands within the TEY audience and that any cultural expectations and impact are seen not in individualistic terms but through the experience of meeting the world as a family unit. Where theatre was found to be a bonding experience for families, shared memories were an important factor (Anderson et al., 2014). At TEY, where a child may not form narrative memories of the event, the parent holds the responsibility of taking on this aspect of family-as-community connection.

The art we access is part of how we understand our in-group, where affiliation to people and things creates a “feeling that life is meaningful” (Feldman, 2017, p. 87). Traditional cultural expressions connect us backwards in time as well as laterally to the peers we share them with in the present. Research into how mothers experience a sense of belonging has found it to inspire confidence and agency within a community (Marwick, 2017) and its lack to lower self-confidence and wellbeing (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009). Content of TEY can be consciously chosen to maintain the traditions of a particular audience, for example Tse (2021a) used Chinese instruments to help preserve and promote traditional music forms within an environment in Singaporean education that tended towards western orchestral music. Bookbug song and rhyme sessions, delivered by the Scottish Book Trust and funded by the Scottish Government, ensure that as many children as possible hear and join in with rhymes and songs in Scots and Gaelic (Scottish Book Trust, 2025). Nursery rhymes are particularly potent units of culture as they are traditionally passed orally through families, they have been found for example to be a valuable way to support migrant families maintaining their sense of belonging as they enter new systems (Robles-Melendez et al., 2024). These live experiences happen against a backdrop of digital content that, in its broad reach, tends towards homogeneity. *Cocomelon*¹⁵, a USA based Youtube channel that delivers animated nursery rhymes, was in 2025 the most watched English language Youtube channel worldwide (Ceci, 2025). Live performance, necessarily geographically situated, can be a site of upholding and affirming diverse cultural practices.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbCmjCuTUZos6Inko4u57UQ>

For the duration of the event there also exists what Schechner termed the “community for the time being” (Nicholson, 2014, p. 93). The temporary community of the live audience has been described as a uniquely powerful shared experience (Bundy et al., 2012). This can be a collective investing in an imagined reality, but is not tied to the representational; there is a lifting together in resonant feeling in music that brings us together in as yet unspoken potentiality (Cross & Morley, 2010). This is an idea of community that is not based on history, memories or shared notions, but in being in relation to one another in the moment. The individual can experience a sense of wellbeing as in Haidt’s Hive Hypothesis (Gabriel et al., 2020) where the self is lost to the group. This being ‘lost into’ does not preclude gains for the self as elements of the collective identity are taken on in the process (Neville & Reicher, 2015). Research into the phenomenon of Collective Effervescence, as described by Durkheim in 1912, shows participants experience positive affect and a sense of empowerment from collective gatherings (Páez et al., 2015). Collective Effervescence has its roots in descriptions of religious experiences but has also been applied to secular gatherings as a way to describe a heightened experience of unity and joy when a group comes together. The experience of collective effervescence is one of enjoyable connectedness, and a sense that the whole has become greater than the sum of its parts. Again, the specifics of these experiences are explored further in the next section but as with bonding, point towards a role for TEY in meeting a human need for connection in community. We have a need for community, for belonging. A need heightened by isolation and during life transitions, both conditions which families with very young children are vulnerable to.

Live performance is an art form experienced in company. For some this constitutes its unique power, Novak describes attending theatre for the very young as a “real liminal ritual experience, where adults form a community with children, the actors with the audience” (Novák, 2009, p. 70). Ritual practice, universal to human culture (Gabriel et al., 2020), is generative as well as consolidating of shared meaning. Looking to a prehistoric past can ground an argument for arts as being an evolved capacity, valuable to the success of our species (Merker, 2009). Mindful of the risk of “cultural recapitulation” (Burman, 2016, p. 14) that places ancestors, isolated tribal peoples, and babies, at the same ‘primitive’ point on a line of unidirectional rising progress, there is nevertheless a rich source of connections made between early humans and Early Years. In *Art and Intimacy: How the arts began* Dissanayake (2015), offered an anthropological perspective, describing an origin story for art rooted in mothers’ love which emphasises the innate aesthetic capacity of very young children. The scholarly work of Dissanayake (2009a) and other contributors to *Communicative Musicality* (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009), have

provided inspiration and validation to TEY artists (Tse, 2021b). Though we might not ‘prove’ the value of TEY through reaching into a speculative past, it adds further weight to the idea that meaningful, collective human connection is available to all of us from birth.

In teasing apart what an experience of TEY may offer that sets it apart from, for example, a sing-along nursery rhyme session at a playgroup, it is important to look at the experience of the heightened and unusual. To frame ‘unusual’ we need to understand how parents’ expectations are met by the offer and their existing cultural reference points. Self-transcendent emotions of awe, gratitude, and compassion have pro-social benefits to the community (Stellar et al., 2017) and these out-of-the-ordinary experiences may be what are sought (and found) at TEY. The literature discussed in this section suggests that there may be a tension between the rapt attention required of transcendent arts experiences, what Sedgman described as the Western ideal of “an active form of receptive absorption that connects body to mind, self to others” (Sedgman, 2018, p. 35); and the bodily needs of young children that must be negotiated at the levels of individual, family, and group. Powerful bonding experiences are possible but may be contingent on environmental factors.

In attempting to describe the TEY audience, the experience of the child, especially when including events before and beyond the performance, needs to be understood in the context of their relationship with their accompanying adult. There are processes involved in theatre spectatorship such as empathy, aesthetic comprehension, and shared language that cannot be either assumed or ignored when the spectator is an infant. These two areas, the adult-child relationship and questions of perception and comprehension each have a rich scholarship which is discussed in the next section as it pertains to a better understanding TEY spectatorship.

3.4 Shared Experience

Central to this thesis is the phenomenologically challenging concept of shared experience. Our everyday lives, including the use of language, rely on shared understanding. There is a functionally useful level of knowing what each other is thinking and experiencing, even if a deep, full understanding is ultimately impossible. The ambition of this thesis is to neither accept the limited scope of the former nor get lost to abstraction in seeking the latter. In this section I will share research and theories which I believe help bring us closer to conceptualising what it feels like for a baby and their parent to attend live performance together. Our perception of what the very young audience understands has artistic and moral implications. The endeavour of TEY is premised on the belief that what is offered has meaning for the children attending, a belief informed by developmental research (Drury & Fletcher-Watson, 2017) as well as direct experience with audiences. Framing the baby as a percipient (Morley, 2023), agentic being makes room for them as a full person, in the context of aesthetic encounter. Literature from neuroscience and philosophy reviewed in this section is brought to support this position and provide ways of considering how the shared parent-child spectatorship experience can be explored.

Understanding the minds, or an embodied and enacted cognition distinct from a notion of mind, of the very young has implications for ourselves, our societal interactions, and psycho-social difficulties of various kinds. Writers have drawn on studies with very young children to make a case for the expressive arts being given adequate value and attention across the life course, the argument being that if creative connectivity is innate, then it matters to all of us (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2010). With a view to furthering the philosophical study of ethics, Gallagher drew on developmental research to make a “naturalistic interpretation” (2014, p. 1) of the transcendent experience of responding to faces. Implications are also drawn from developmental studies for understanding Autistic Spectrum Disorders (Stevanovic & Koski, 2018) and pathologies of behaviour of various kinds (Aitken & Trevarthen, 1997). The theory of Communicative Musicality, based on observations of infants, is also credited as bolstering therapies that use music (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2009), dance (Bond, 2008) and somatic work (Öry, 2018). Developed by Malloch and Trevarthen (2010) the theory of Communicative Musicality describes the innate human capacity for communication as being built around musical qualities such as rhythm and timing. Drawing on close observation of mothers and babies, Trevarthen and Malloch were able to describe the structure underneath the communication which makes our shared world possible, leading on to language and artistic expression in many forms. Most commonly, understanding early consciousness is framed as important for understanding adult consciousness (Trevarthen & Reddy, 2007). In some respects

68

TEY could be considered a curious by-product of this scholarship, the “intersubjective turn” (De Jaegher, 2018, p. 1) which places babies as interactive, agentic persons from the outset. Creating live performances for infants is only one of many responses to Malloch and Trevarthen’s (2010) theory of Communicative Musicality, though, as seen with *Bebé Babá* (Rodrigues et al., 2009) TEY can offer something of a demonstration of the principles. Intricate, laboratory observations provide the details that ordinary living and being misses; being present in a room of performers, babies and their adults enables a real-world, real-time comprehension unavailable in the laboratory; the felt experience of communal meaning-making. An investigation into the experience of TEY therefore is not only influenced by the work reviewed in this chapter, but contributes to the advancement of knowledge. TEY, a space designed for collective cross-generational aesthetic connection, can be an arena where the theories of early perception and communication can be inhabited and given space to breathe.

Creating high quality art for the very young is one way that wider society has responded to seeing the child as capable, agentic and creative, as one of us. Macvarish feared society positioning the baby as an “ideological and emotional anchor” (2016a, p. 15) for uncertain times, pouring our hopes and energy into them whilst continuing to position them as ‘other’. She saw this as having a potentially negative impact for families, when the idea of the ‘correctly’ nurtured baby is held as the solution to all problems, but our complex realities contain a mix of priorities and needs. How babies are represented and spoken to in culture is a component of this message, and one way that TEY and other arts for Early Years can counter fears such as those held by Macvarish is through meaningfully including babies and creating offers which celebrate rather than lecture. The principle of invitation rather than instruction underpins successful TEY (Allan, 2024) and allows for powerful moments of shared attention that are not commanded but emerge from the assemblage of the material and human present (Arculus, 2020). Macvarish also expressed concern that recourse to ‘the science’ allows policy makers and others to side-step what are complex debates on morality and social expectations. TEY is one way of placing that conversation within culture, informed by and informing our shared understanding of what it means to live well together, as families and communities.

The key purpose of this section is to develop a framework for conceptualising the phenomenological experience of shared TEY spectatorship. Debates around the reach and applicability of research into brain development are relevant however, as they relate to parents’ understanding of the value of TEY. Similarly, a review of literature into attachment and bonding serves to ground this study’s knowledge claims regarding the impact of TEY, and to put in context how parent attendees of TEY relate and respond to these theories. The section

begins with intersubjectivity, a key concept which is discussed sequentially in relation to dyadic encounters, shared attention, and communal experiences. Empathy is then discussed, followed by the impact of shared experiences on bonding and attachment. The section concludes with a focus on the very young child, considering what a live performance encounter might mean for them.

3.4.1 Intersubjectivity

Trevarthen has written extensively on intersubjectivity and contributed important insights on how the youngest of humans communicate, with implications for art, education, and the philosophy of mind (Trevarthen, 2011). Trevarthen described three levels at which intersubjectivity operates: primary between two subjects, secondary where the outer world is brought into shared understanding, and tertiary where symbolic understanding, such as language, plays a role (Trevarthen, 1978). They do not supplant each other through development but are layered, nested like Russian dolls (Daly, 2016), and are all three therefore of continued interest when looking at interactions with adults as well as infants. Our capacity and desire for connection is innate. What Trevarthen was able to describe, through observations of minute detail aided by technology, were the patterns within parent-infant interactions that could be understood as part of a continuity towards more complex forms of shared meaning. Interactions which have since also been observed in non-laboratory contexts (White, 2017). Developed with Malloch, the theory of Communicative Musicality explicitly describes this early intersubjectivity in artistic terms; tiny, even prematurely born babies, engage in shared communicative moments that have ‘pulse’, ‘quality’ and ‘narrative’ (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2010). It is an idea that has influenced scholars in many disciplines, the book of essays of the same title contains contributions (amongst others) from writers on anthropology, music therapy, education and TEY.

De Jaeger (2018) described a 21st century intersubjective turn and we can see how the timing of shifts in how we conceptualise early childhood runs alongside the growth of TEY. This turn was a shift away from how Piaget had conceptualised the personhood of the neonate, who though not unintelligent, is learning through sensing and reacting (Rojcewicz, 1987). Primary intersubjectivity sees agency already present, the infant as a subject who engages in the intersubjectivity (Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2020). Recognising babies as persons is a key concept in TEY. The young audience members are not treated ‘as if’ they are persons, but understood to have capacity in the endowment of personhood themselves. Which, as Cassidy

(2009) suggested, is the mark of personhood. Embodied concepts of cognition, another area of scholarship with connections to the performing arts, are vital to this positioning. The very young are also not the only ones who can be excluded by an overly cognitive approach. Zeiler (2014) argued for an intercorporeal conception of personhood using the example of joint musical activity in dementia care. Zeiler not only challenged a computational model of cognition, but a strict one-body-one-person formula; suggesting that their personhood is held in the temporal, responsive, creative interaction. A description which makes a great deal of sense to those engaged in the live, temporal arts (MacRae & Arculus, 2020).

“Subjects are animate, bodily, experiencing persons, who live in a meaningful world, and to whom things happen and matter” (De Jaegher, 2018, p. 1). For these subjects to enter into intersubjectivity there must be a recognition of ‘other’. Initially this is experienced bodily, and grows from a state of what Stuart termed enkinaesthesia where “co-feeling comes first” (Stuart, 2012, p. 14) and our understanding of a social world peopled with agentic persons starts from an essential understanding of a responsive other, feeling as we do. The innate capacity for other-sensing has been argued through observations of in-utero twins, who respond differently to contact with their own body parts, the womb wall, and their sibling (Castiello et al., 2010). At the heart of Trevarthen’s primary intersubjectivity is the knowledge that we are never truly alone, inert, or not relational. That we are formed already holding a “powerful motivation for sharing discovery of meaning in joyful companionship” (Trevarthen & Fresquez, 2015, p. 3) is an idea with great resonance. There is a connection to relational pedagogy (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009) with innate intersubjectivity taking this opportunity to learn with children to early, pre-linguistic interactions (Aitken & Trevarthen, 1997). From an arts perspective it is interesting to pick up on how often, and how easily our attempts to understand pre-verbal connection reach for arts analogies or examples. It has been suggested that innate intersubjectivity is the basis from which our cultural expressions grow (Marwick, 2017). It may also be that all our attempts at artful communication are reaching back to this fundamental puzzle of how to understand the self in the other and the other in the self.

The dyadic interaction is the simplest form of human connection, and richly complex. Siegel (2022) coined the term ‘mwe’ to describe an expanded approach to considering the self as being fundamentally relational. Rather than being a radically challenging notion however, this way of being is perhaps so familiar that we do not see it. . Synchrony, observed between mothers and infants is associated with positive outcomes for both (Leclère et al., 2014), but operates at a level hidden to our normal experience of conscious volition. Reddy (2010) provides a valuable description in theorising a ‘second person’ consciousness, ‘you’ being the missing link between

‘I’ and ‘them’. The parent-child dyadic encounter is the one most present in literature, and the relationship which this study is investigating how TEY can support. Performer-child encounters however, especially where there is space for music or physical improvisation, can also be considered through a frame of primary intersubjectivity. The TEY performer has practiced skills in awareness and responsiveness that enables them to step quickly into collaborative relation (Taube, 2009). Though it may not have therapeutic aims, TEY shares some of the processes of music or dance therapy when these highly interactive elements are present (J. Edwards, 2019). That there could be therapeutic consequences therefore is also a possibility. There is a “spontaneous joy of learning in companionship” (Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2020, p. 4), trying, failing and succeeding in trusted company is how we grow. Broadly speaking the arts give space to try out new ways of being and being with, in TEY the shared space of comfort and trust is maintained by the group and the attendant adults are vital for its success.

From around the age of 9 months, or perhaps as early as 3 months (Stevanovic & Koski, 2018), our direct relationships begin to include references to other people and things that we are both aware of, described by Trevarthen as ‘secondary’ intersubjectivity (Hubley & Trevarthen, 1979). This is the version of ‘shared experience’ that maps most obviously onto a theatre event (Trevarthen, 2012), with audience members checking in with each other for confirmation on collaborative decoding of a shared spectacle (Bennett, 2013). In TEY this is held within the triangular audience island, and the tension previously discussed in how much direction parents should offer their children can also be seen in terms of primary and secondary intersubjectivity. Where the child is expected to engage as much as possible directly and independently with the performance their primary relationship to the work is prioritised. If considered in secondary terms the actions, and possibly words, of the adult is of ongoing concern as understanding of the events external to the dyad is negotiated together. If we understand children to best make sense of their world though shared, joyful discoveries (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016) it will be helpful to see what is shared and how during a TEY event.

Psychological research on group experience tends to take place with adults, though as with the idea of collective ritual, there are useful insights for TEY. Gabriel et al. (2020) argued the powerful and positive force of collective effervescence is found not just in the awe-inspiring and traditionally sacred but also far more common and everyday experiences, “simply being with others in a group event can bring about a sense of connection and sacredness that can improve the quality of life” (Gabriel et al., 2020, p. 129). It could be that there is a level of ‘good enough’ theatre that still holds meaning and benefits for families without being transcendently awesome. Brown and Fredrickson (2021) summarised research that points towards co-

experienced positive affect having beneficial impacts and that these arise from qualities in group experience not found in the intrapersonal. Research that looks directly at the physical body and brain also picks up on how we are affected by the people around us and atmosphere of the space. Babies' brain waves synch with their mothers singing nursery rhymes (Leong et al., 2017), choral singers synchronise heart rate and breathing (Vickhoff et al., 2013), and the inter-brain synchrony between spectators of dance and the performers was both measurable, and reduced when spectating took place via video (Rai et al., 2024). We regulate our physical, autonomic systems, without thinking about it, and we do so in response to the active and reactive people with whom we are sharing space (Delafield-Butt, 2018).

Though this study is not building methodologically on work with for example, wet electrode EEG (Rai et al., 2024), the findings of such studies, as with research employing frame-by-frame video observations (Pérez & Español, 2016), are a valuable perspective on phenomena I am approaching from another angle. The description of positivity resonance, with shared positive affect, caring, and biological synchrony are all recognisable experiences within the TEY space. Observations such as atmosphere, "affecting the whole room" (E. Miles & Nicholson, 2019, p. 277) can leave a strong impression. What is missing is the perspectives of parents in terms of the extent to which, and the reasons why, they might experience a felt sense of connection, to their child or perhaps others present. An exploration into how both child and adult might experience, or comprehend, the feelings of others is the subject of the next section.

3.4.2 Empathy

Terms 'empathy', 'sympathy' and 'compassion' each have their own "semantic and philosophical history" (Breyer, 2020, p. 13) with current usage often taking empathy as an umbrella term. Breyer advised writers to be clear on what they mean when using the word empathy and suggested adding qualifying terms to make clear the form of empathy under discussion. Processes taking place bodily, emotionally, perceptually and cognitively may all be described as empathy with the unifying feature being some kind of experience of 'we'. From Gallagher (2012b) we can clarify two types, embodied and cognitive, both of which have relevance to TEY. Embodied empathy is a directly perceived, felt experience available to all, including infants. Cognitive empathy requires levels of perception and mental representations which develop through childhood.

Gallagher (2014) described how we respond to faces to illustrate embodied empathy and the perception of the self-in-other and other-in-self as a vital, and ethically important, component of human interactions. Holding an considering direct comprehension and response that. We respond to faces in a manner of “all-at-onceness” (Quaeghebeur, 2012, p. 1), an understanding of other that contains expectation of response and awareness on both our parts. Gallagher argues this seeing of the other, and their expectation, transcends a cognitive understanding and brings us to a shared imperative to continue the interaction. That this can be seen in the youngest of babies forms part of the argument for it being an innate capacity. De Jaegher (2009) described direct perception as a phenomenon that is best understood as interactional, not just happening to you, but with the other, and there are clear links to primary intersubjectivity. Offering structure to what can feel like a tangled path of crossing concepts, Daly (2016) created a table of Trevarthen’s three levels of subjectivity and organised the connections that have been made to them across fields of research, considering phenomenology, psychology, neuroscience, and empathy (including theories of mind). Building from this structuring I suggest the following as to how TEY could map onto Trevarthen’s levels in the way audience members perceive performers and each other:

- Everyone present experiences primary intersubjectivity, connecting to others with fellow feeling.
- Babies from sixth months or so join with their older companions in ‘projective empathy’. This perspective taking, necessary for jointly shared tasks such as playing with an object or pointing something out, usually takes place in an automatic easy way such that we don’t notice it.
- For adults and older children, we can additionally draw on our skills in tertiary intersubjectivity, to try and work out the motives and feelings of others.

Mirror neurons described by Rizzolatti et al. (1996) at the end of the 20th century, offered another insight into embodied empathy (Lohmar, 2006). Measurable neuronal activity could be seen in the brains of both a monkey reaching for something it wanted, and another monkey, who was just watching. The brain of the watching monkey was activated in the same pattern, but less strongly, as would be expected if it were reaching itself (Rizzolatti et al., 1996). Lohmar (2006) used film spectatorship to illustrate how we might experience for ourselves the embodied, empathetic response, describing people drawing up their legs whilst watching the T-Rex chase the truck in *Jurassic Park*. This physical, but not consciously chosen, response shows sympathy with Jeff Goldblum getting his feet nibbled but not a full-scale fear response where we might use our legs to run out of the cinema. If children and adults have observable, perhaps mirroring

reactions to live performers (Martlew & Grogan, 2013), can we take these to mean that they are empathising in this moderated way?

Though direct resonance is supported by the natural science of mirror neurons and laboratory work with neonates, there is less consensus around “higher-order” (Gallagher, 2012b, p. 3) empathic understanding, what Gallagher termed cognitive empathy. Two theories on how we understand the minds of others, Simulation Theory and Theory Theory involve mental processes to access the experience of another. Simulation Theory is the ‘as if’ placing of the self in the position of the other, not dissimilar to Stanislavski’s approach to character study developed for naturalistic acting training (Stanislavski, 1989). In audiences, this describes how we might imagine ourselves into the characters we observe, would I make the same choices as Hamlet given the circumstances he finds himself in? Theory Theory describes applying our existing knowledge of how minds work to help us understand the behaviour of another person. Here we might be considering Hamlet’s difficulties based on our awareness of how different people respond to grief and fear. Though stimulated through drama for children, as well as for adults, neither of these cognitive processes available to babies and toddlers. Alternative approaches to understanding our understanding of other minds are therefore necessary for describing TEY spectatorship.

Gallagher (2012a), influenced by the writings of phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (1968), offered an addition to the theories of mind that rest on cognitive processes. His Interaction Theory describes how we respond socially through a known sense of the other and better supports what we see in toddlers and their prosocial capacities (Gallagher, 2012b). Young children, from 12-18 months, will (with preference for familiar people) help an experimenter who drops or cannot reach something, without being instructed or having the problem explained (Allen et al., 2018). Another study found children of 18 months will point to the ‘correct’ box when the experimenter is struggling to get an object out of a box the child knows it is not in (Buttelmann et al., 2009), a socially sensitive approach that may or may not imply a cognitive understanding of false belief in another. Development into a capacity for cognitive empathy was described by Violi as “a progressive ‘thickening’ of meaning more than a radical shift” (Violi, 2012, p. 64). Gangopadhyay and Miyahara (2015), reminded us that direct perception does not negate theories of mind and that both can learn from one another. The essential ‘problem of other minds’ does not go away through lengthy discussion, or the discovery of mirror neurons. The debate does however support the attempt of TEY, and the felt sense that parents may have of their children’s experiences. It is also significant that the stages of intersubjectivity are not progressed through with earlier stages left behind, but rather accumulated (Daly, 2016). TEY

may present an opportunity for adults to engage in both cognitive, considered empathy *and* direct, uncomplicated fellow-feeling.

Dramatic theatre as all about empathy, it is how it works. Daly (2016) begins her chapter on fellow-feeling with a discussion on a quote from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a play. Uniquely in TEY however the most potent form of empathy at play may not be directed towards real or imagined people on stage but to fellow audience members, specifically one's own children. 'Seeing through their eyes' was an important component of the TEY experience for participants in my previous research (Allan, 2022), an observation also often made by journalists attending shows with their children (Davies, 2016). Arts-based interventions can be ideal for allowing parents to see agency in the child, to be "curious about their infant's experience" (Armstrong & Ross, 2022, p. 1). The novelty of the situation for both parent and child creates a distance that allows care-ful, potentially fresh observations, as occurred with the fathers in Cowley et al. (2020). Empathy can be alive, felt and acted upon, for both children and adults in the TEY space though no existing studies bring attention to this potentially rich area.

3.4.3 Attachment and bonding

The importance of attachment and bonding, how loving, trusting relationships are built between children and their caregivers (usually parents) cannot be overstated. There is a large literature from which to draw, alongside key thinkers, I have looked to respond to writers whose work relates to the specific areas of interest in this thesis, for example considering how parent-child relationships are brought into public spaces. It is helpful to define the two terms 'attachment' and 'bonding' according to direction of travel though both are relational experiences in which child and adult take part. Attachment, especially as it relates to the development of relational patterns which impact later experiences, can be seen as belonging to the child whereas bonding is the felt experience of affection and connection from the perspective of the adult (Ettenberger et al., 2021). This is not to suggest that they are two poles of the same process, both are intersubjective and inhabited concurrently, but this division helps when discussing the literature in this area, especially as it pertains to impact. In this section I will look at why attachment and bonding are highly valued and what suggestions have been put forward to support them that have meaning to TEY. I will also consider how knowledge of this value could impact parents' approach to TEY.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982), further developed by Ainsworth (Mooney, 2010), is possibly the most impactful theory in early childhood studies of the past century. From initial observations on the negative effects of maternal separation in institutionalised children, to Ainsworth's more detailed categories of insecure attachments, Attachment Theory laid the foundations for a wide breadth of scholarship that explores how the experiences and relationships in the first few years of our life go on to impact who we are and the choices we make as older children and adults. Attachments are formed with primary care givers and can be measured and categorised, for example using the 'strange situation' test where a child's reaction to a (previously unknown) experimenter is observed as their trusted adult is present, then leaves the room (Ainsworth, 1969). Reminiscent of the opening line of *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy, 2011, p. 1), these categories are 'secure' and sub-categories of 'insecure': avoidant, anxious, and disordered. Secure attachments are associated with emotional regulation (Cabrera, 2020), coping with difficulties (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2017), hormonal homeostasis (Feldman, 2017) and cognitive development (Commodari, 2013). Attachment Theory in adult psychology observes patterns being repeated, with the different forms of insecure attachment each presenting particular challenges in adult-adult relationships (Campbell & Stanton, 2019).

TEY is a strange situation. How a dyad behaves in response to the space and performers may give insights into the security of their attachment, though the multiple influencing factors on the behaviour of adult and child make for a rather muddy laboratory. Strange situations are a part of life, as well as an assessment tool, and challenging experiences offer the opportunity for risk, comfort, rupture and repair (Zeedyk, 2006). Attachment bonds are created together, "co-developing adaptive systems that are bidirectionally associated over time" (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2017, p. 16), and TEY could be a positive environment for strengthening these bonds. For a healthy challenge to be effective however, it cannot be overwhelming. Everyone involved in TEY is invested in providing a positive experience for all audience members, but success is by no means guaranteed. It is not clear how much benefit is gained, against what risk, and who must make the judgement call on if attendance is worth attempting. I was once in an audience near a child on her mother's lap who after a few repetitions of "I want to go home" began to say, "I want Daddy". By the end she was smiling, waving and talking to a puppet, but it took her a while to get to that point and when she was not comfortable, she made it very clear where she would rather be and with whom. I am not trying to suggest that the show we saw damaged a mother-child relationship about which I know next to nothing, but I feel this anecdote illustrates how emotional and relational TEY spectatorship is, and we therefore should expect a variety of responses that could be related to attachment styles.

Therapeutic interventions to support attachment difficulties such as school Nurture Groups operate with a powerful ethic of care towards the children they work with (Warin & Hibbin, 2016). A visual arts-based intervention to support families at risk of attachment difficulties found participants benefited from taking part in the novel activities, but also appreciated the ‘gift’ from the organisation making the offer (Armstrong & Ross, 2022), the parents’ increased capacity for connection was linked to their sense of feeling supported. In TEY work for babies such as *SCOOP*, *Float*, or *Great Big Tiny World*, care was extended towards both the adults and children, with consideration for example for unhurried time, personal welcomes, and provision of designated areas outside of the performance space to enable free movement (Oily Cart, 2025). Parental mental health is crucial for secure attachments (Marwick & Murray, 2010), with a strengths-based approach most effective in supporting positive change (Mooney, 2010). Therapeutic relationships are personal, adaptive, and usually long term, none of which is characteristic of the theatre experience. An audience situation may offer different strengths however, as somewhere “collective bonds are formed shockingly easily” (Gabriel et al., 2020, p. 130), and affect is contagious. In the TEY space where beauty is foregrounded and an atmosphere of wonder is collectively supported, the individuals composing the group are implicitly celebrated and the gift of the experience shared with all present.

The short documentary to accompany *SCOOP*, available on Youtube¹⁶, documents some of the positive interactions described in Cowley et al. (2020). For example at 2:22 a father delights in his daughter’s reaction to the performer, he is not at that moment engaging in direct communication with her but witnessing her experience. The experience of felt and cognitive empathy operating together in TEY and support bonding was described by Branner, an academic and theatre maker at the University of Hawai’i:

Seeing the show with her—almost literally through her eyes as I engaged in the immersive show alongside her for the duration of the performance—opened the possibilities of the form experientially... Collectively, [the] dramaturgical elements created a truly aesthetic experience, enthralling both my daughter and myself... Attending Tube allowed for me as a parent to enjoy the reality of my daughter’s life at age two, bonding us in a way that few other experiences in my life have been able to do. (Branner & Poblete, 2019)

As a point of aesthetic and emotional focus that left him changed, Branner described what Maslow termed a peak experience (Maslow, 1959). There is not research into how common

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vQ5GV55DU>

such experiences are at TEY, or what factors may lead to them. *SCOOP* strengthened bonds through established methods of modelling, reflection and peer support with the art framed as a lure and atmospheric tool (Cowley et al., 2020). In Branner's experience the bonding mechanism was the universality of the aesthetic encounter that allowed Branner a new kind of access to his daughter's reality (Branner & Poblete, 2019). It could be that these two seemingly different experiences are points on a scale, or the same process viewed through different lenses. In both cases TEY provides the space, in time and location, for a new kind of view of the child. Both situations are infused with wonder and love.

Mechanisms are important to uncover and describe as there is a risk that observations, taken uncritically, can read as instructions. Research into the associated impact of attachment difficulties give weight to the importance of early relationships but do not, in themselves, suggest what can be done. Attunement (Stern, 1985) is useful to consider and has already been highlighted as a potential area in which the skilled responsiveness of the performing artist has something to offer. Maternal attunement affects social, cognitive and linguistic development, the musical elements of modulated speech and synchrony were absent in mothers with depression and this negatively impacted their attachments to their babies (Marwick & Murray, 2010). It is not simply a case however of 'the more contingency the better', in the two-way conversation of attunement the anxious parent who tries too hard is also a risk to attachment security (Beebe et al., 2010). Peery and Stern (1975) made this point in their work on shared gaze, hypothesising (and supporting Ainsworth) in the idea that it is not about staring at babies as much as possible, that mothers and infants are "seeking to maintain a comfortable level of arousal" (Peery & Stern, 1975, p. 212). Parenting advice that recognises the uniqueness of every parent-child dyad guards against the kind of instrumental behaviourism that Macvarish saw as a problematic component in 'neuroparenting' (Macvarish, 2016b), a term she coined to describe parenting choices being guided by interpretations of scientific research into early brain development. Mavarish (2016a) considered advice around attunement to be cold and instrumental, and an inappropriate intrusion of the laboratory into family life. Not an outcome supported by Trevarthen's work, where he advised that in the application of attachment based therapy an honest emotional response was essential and "scientific or clinical detachment is to be avoided" (2006, p. 56).

The previously discussed phenomena of intersubjectivity and direct perception are at play in person-to-person interaction, at home and in the theatre. The TEY performer with their "ability to react on the slightest fluctuations of the spectators' mood and to rebuild the communication balance" (Taube, 2009, p. 19) is more instrumental than a fun family member when meeting a

child, they are trained and practiced in certain kinds of action and reaction and may deliberately elicit specific responses at chosen moments. I would argue however that their heart still needs to be in it. Like successful companionship art does not work if you have to force it, and the infant reaction is an honest reaction. The cello bow creates a resonant note when held not too loosely, and not too tight. An attuned relationship is likewise effortful but unforced, an idea explored by Tse in her musical performance for babies through reference to the Chinese concept of ‘wu wei’. Found in (but not exclusive to) Tao, Tse uses the English translation “effortless action” to describe wu wei, a quality of being and interacting that inspired her work (2021a, p. 171). Seeking to support connection through art or joy aligns with non-artistic research into the mechanisms behind establishing attuned relationships, both aim to affect positive outcomes. It is worth addressing why this shared aim, bonding, is considered so important.

From our position of viewing children as autonomous, intentional beings who thrive on love (Gerhardt, 2004) it is hard to imagine a time when mothers - in 1950s USA - were issued advice by the government on the dangers of cuddling their babies too much (Mooney, 2010). The work of Harlow with rhesus macaques is still discussed as it had a significant impact, along with that of Bowlby, in moving intellectual opinion and official guidance away from an approach that considered only the gross physical needs of a baby. Harlow’s experiments included maternal separation which demonstrated the devastating effects of isolation on a female macaque’s future success as a parent herself - with unmothered monkeys showing signs of distress in company and going on to neglect their young (Harlow et al., 1966). From our position in the 21st century the significance attributed to Harlow’s work speaks strongly of the perils, and potential absurdity, of a reductionist scientism. I believe it reasonable to consider that an epistemological paradigm that requires someone to torture monkeys to prove that hugging babies is ‘good’ is not one able to meet all needs. The scientifically proven importance of the time parents spend cuddling, playing with, and singing to their baby, offers a validation of role that might not otherwise be valued (Knott, 2019). The risk this carries is the implication then that parents hold the sole responsibility for their child’s future successes in life, a heavy burden made harder by the modern atomised societal structure (Macvarish, 2016a). Such over-simplified determinism is not only unhelpful at the level of the individual family, but actively damaging (Murthy, 2024).

TEY has a role to play in the cultural conversation around how we welcome, view, and value parenthood. The expectations placed on parents have normative power with an implicit vision of the ‘good’ parent (Senior, 2014). If work is framed within a discussion on bonding and attachment this is a vision that goes deep, not only suggesting how you should behave but how you should love. In Maslow’s (1959) description of peak experiences he uses the example of a

healthy mother's perception of her child to explain cognition of being, where one sees another with love and care in their whole, unified, worthy entirety. Parental love, and especially motherly love, are often held up in this ideal form, the ultimate model of altruistic, benevolent compassion. In Buddhism, those following the Bodhisattva ideal of seeking enlightenment for the benefit of all beings are instructed to cultivate loving-kindness with a mother's selfless love of her child as inspiration (*Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness*, 2013). The Bodhisattva ideal is an absolute notion of empathetic compassion, directed with equanimity towards all sentient beings. Such high ideals can be problematic for real parents meeting the demands of daily life and falling short of perfection is an experience we all meet in our own way. With supportive conditions attachment and bonding become a virtuous circle, where "compassion would seem to be an outcome of, as well as a condition for, secure attachments" (Taggart, 2016, p. 6). Parental love is the powerful, essential basis for the success of our species and has cause to be celebrated (Dissanayake, 2015). In Daly's description of empathy she acknowledged that "the reality is, with the exception of the Bodhisattva, fellow-feeling is susceptible to limitation" (Daly, 2016, p. 299); but those Bodhisattvas learnt that compassion from mothers.

When investigating the impact of TEY, it would be valuable to understand how parents conceptualise and value ideas of attachment and bonding. In a survey conducted by Ipsos (2022), from a UK sample weighted for age, sex, ethnicity, working status and region, 91% agreed the period of early childhood is very, or fairly important in shaping a person's future. Although 51% responded that future relationships are what is most affected by early life experiences only 8% chose "the science tells us it is hugely important" as a reason to invest in early childhood. The most popular choices as to why it matters were "every child should have a fair opportunity to realise their potential" and "it will help us build a happier and healthier society" (Ipsos, 2022, p. 11). The broad message from this survey was that in the UK there was strong support for investment in early childhood that is perceived as investment in health and happiness of individuals and society, upheld by a core value of fairness. Lay neuroscience "the mundane practices based on neuro-knowledge that is not necessarily professionally recognised but remains widespread and influential" (J. Chen, 2019, p. 71), is a place where science and culture meet. Among other values, what the adults in TEY audiences bring to the experience in terms of lay neuroscience is likely to influence their expectations, judgments, and perception of their child's experience.

3.4.4 The spectatorship experience of the very young child

In this section I look at research into the cognitive and social capacities of very young children and the insights they offer into how we can expect children to meet TEY. Even adults with extensive language skills find audiencing hard to explain; on attending an opera Pavlicevic and Ansdell wrote, “writing this is clumsy and complex, experiencing it is simple and obvious” (2009, p. 367). Very young children may also have such a ‘simple and obvious’ experience at live performance which, when shared with their trusted adult companion, can have a profound and impactful resonance for both. The transformative power of performance has been connected to a present experience of the “embodied mind” (Fischer-Lichte, 2016, p. 99) being moved by that of another. Sharing a deeply moving, aesthetic experience with a toddler tells us something about the capacities we share, flattening for a time the habitual hierarchy and inviting a heightened experience of common creaturehood. This does not imply any shrinking, or regression on the part of the adult; no pretending to be a child in a way that includes being 'less than'. Rather allowing qualities which are innate and powerful in both adults and children to spend time in the foreground. Engaging in what Nye called for in *The Child's Curriculum*, “a proactive search for the deepest qualities of childhood both in children and adults” (Nye, 2018, p. 153).

There is almost a paradox in how we are able to come closer to somebody by being less specific with one another. By connecting through a liminal space of “floating intentionality” (Cross & Morley, 2010, p. 68), we allow enough of ourselves to be present with the other – or others - to share a safe place of potentiality. Communities thrive on the benefit of the doubt. Crucially, it is emotion, above information, which is being communicated in art – the ghost of the artist remains in the work (Brandt, 2009). In a similar way, it is feelings, and not information, that a child must engage with to be able to understand the knowledge of another (Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2020). That emotions are experienced “in and through the body” (Violi, 2012, p. 72) is central to an understanding of embodied intersubjectivity. TEY is space where affective resonance, the “dynamic entanglement of moving and being moved in relation” (Mühlhoff, 2015, p. 1001) is both subtle and overt, intentional as well as responsive.

TEY for under 3s can be postdramatic, and eschew the traditionally essential ingredients for theatre of character, story, and dialogue (Fletcher-Watson, 2013a). Taking a position that sees a cognitive perception of abstract representation, and Theory of Mind (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), as prerequisites for understanding the game of theatre this makes sense. Theatre for the very young, under a definition of dramatic performance, is not possible. I believe this is an

assumption worth problematising however and contend that TEY for the very young does not need to be abstract to be meaningful. The ‘post’ in postdramatic refers to the movement that built on previously established traditions in the history of 20th century theatre (Lehmann, 2006). Our youngest TEY audience members could be thought of as pre-dramatic, everything they encounter is *real* and this presents opportunity and responsibility to the artist. Perhaps they do not see ‘character’, but, as we know from the work of Trevarthen and others, they do see ‘person’. Additionally, Walle and Campos (2014) found 19 month old babies could discern authentic emotions in others from the incongruous, exaggerated or vague. Research which echoes the performance practices in TEY of unlearning acting techniques (Kapstein & Goldstein, 2019), knowing that falseness will not be tolerated and performers must be able to meet the babies directly person to person. This other-awareness is the root of symbolic thinking (Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2015). Engaging in proto-semiosis, “emotionally affective meaning that is completely embodied” (Violi, 2012, p. 64), the intentions, actions and feelings of the characters/performers matter to even very young children. Though slightly older children may become heavily preoccupied in decoding theatre, seeking verbal reassurance and information on what is happening and why, the pre-dramatic child is responding immediately and directly to the performance. In a sense they are closer to the characters’ reality than that of the adults and older children who perceive the artifice.

Although not framed as TEY, or containing entertaining or artistic objectives, many research studies into child development have involved forms of theatre. In acting out scenarios, such as the experimenter dropping things, or showing preference for different foods, theatre is brought into the baby lab as a methodological tool (Buttelmann et al., 2009). Performance, in controlled settings, becomes a means to access the minds of infants. I find the use of puppets particularly interesting. Hamlin et al. (2007) studying social evaluation concluded that preverbal infants (aged 6-10 months) assess others by observing their behaviour and show a preference for people who display helpful, rather than hindering action. The ‘people’ used to conduct this experiment were blocks of wood with eyes glued on, and the participants watched a puppet show where one shape either helped or hindered another to climb a hill. That the researchers were able to draw conclusions on early social mechanisms entirely rests on the babies’ ability to endow rudimentary, unrealistic puppets with a form of personhood. Other experiments also use puppets to create example scenarios and test comprehension of social interaction (Leavens, 2013) and early moral code (Hamlin, 2013). When Reason (2010) asked primary aged children to draw a theatre performance they had seen that featured a puppet goose, the majority drew a realistic goose, some even flying, and not a wooden object with wheels held by a puppeteer. They were able to see the goose as both real and imagined, person and puppet, effectively suspend their disbelief in order to follow the story and relate to the character’s experiences. What does the

baby see watching a triangle with eyes trying to get up a two-dimensional hill? They see a person, but do they see a puppet? Understanding the illusion is an abstraction that develops later, and continues to be refined over time (Schonmann, 1999). The adult relationship with fiction, magic, and unverifiable belief is a personal one though usually held as an aspect of life that brings joy and meaning (Hutson, 2012). A capacity that grows through childhood, there is no point before which the actions of another being are completely meaningless.

Alongside the perception of character, a connection to narrative also has early beginnings. Gratier and Trevarthen (2008) found narrative in pre-linguistic interactions between babies and mothers and Delafield-Butt described the origins of narrative in the “innate sensorimotor intelligence” (2015, p. 1157) of humans, tracing a line from mid-term foetuses, through the interactions of infants, early language, and on to what ultimately becomes our shared culture of expression and understanding. At each point the four components of narrative are present: introduction, development, climax, and resolution. Well-crafted narrative theatre, for any audience, takes us on many of these journeys, contained artfully within and supporting the main story arc. This applies to non-verbal forms as well as what we might think of as storytelling, each act, scene, action, and beat having their own journey that all feeds into the layers of meaning experienced by the audience. When I attended a babes-in-arms showing of the play *Vagina Cake* (for ages 14yrs+), I shared an understanding of the story with the other adults watching through our common culture and language. We laughed at the funny parts, and knew we were not alone in hearing the characters’ struggles. The babies were invited to enable their parents to attend, their underage presence permitted on the assumption that they did not mind swearing or understand the references to sex and drugs. Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen’s work does not suggest that babies do secretly see the significance of a divorce party or Jaegerbomb, but it does help us understand why so many of the babies were engaged by the performance. One of the actors told me afterwards that she felt as if one baby could understand her because of the appropriate timing of his laughter; she did not mean this literally, but it was an observation of a connection she did not expect. Even when no accommodations are made for their cognitive and perceptual differences (Drury & Fletcher-Watson, 2017), there are elements of the theatre experience that infants still ‘get’. Theories on innate intersubjectivity and embodied narrative impulses both support why this is the case.

An element of the ‘simple and obvious’ enjoyment of live performance is that it is sensorially satisfying. There is pleasure in repetition, repetition with build that has a “procreative effect” (Belloli, 2009, p. 131) speaking to our need for development in a balance between structure and freedom. There is structure in music, but a huge amount of freedom in how we, as individuals

make sense of it with our bodies and mental formations. Music, as opposed to language, is “about itself” (Trevvarthen, 2008, p. 68) and TEY often meets its audience on such terms of “essential ambiguity” (Cross & Morley, 2010, p. 68). The principles of Communicative Musicality apply to all temporal arts as well as music and it is noted that in many cultures there are not separate words for music and dance (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2009). Hearing is itself a specially adapted form of touch, made from the tiny shimmers of air that move our inner ear apparatus. Ubersfeld (1982) theorised that theatrical pleasure is derived from the semiotic completion gap being filled. In TEY, and other art forms, there is a satisfying sense of completeness that does not rely on semiotics. In connecting these ideas to observations on the interactive responses of very young children we can see that the elements of repetition, harmony, and narrative completion are available as sources of aesthetic pleasure.

Whatever experience occurs in an audience occurs in company. When a group of diverse individuals come together to experience live performance, they are able to temporarily inhabit the same experiential space and exist as a community despite varying ages, assumptions, temperaments or moods. “Immersed in the human intersubjective matrix and confirmed in their self-identity” (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2009, p. 369). Though pre-lingual children may not share the decoding of symbolic representation, emotional contagion and its “attentional, emotional, and behavioural synchrony” (Hatfield et al., 2014, p. 160) may still allow access to a group experience. One outward way in which both children and adults connect with the emotional state of another is through mimicry, which plays an important role in our emotional understanding (Zeedyk, 2006). This was reported by Hatfield et al. (2014) who found people who had paralysing Botox injections into their face not only limited their own emotional expression, but had increased difficulty in reading other faces accurately. Mirroring of gesture and expression was noted as an engagement signal in infant audiences (Martlew & Grogan, 2013; Young & Powers, 2008). The embodied process of mimicry informed my approach to observational methods in my analysis of video data, which included noting instances of mirroring, and the development of a novel analysis method the Mirror Game, detailed in [5.3.8](#) of Process of Analysis.

As well as a social experience TEY offers an encounter with the extraordinary, a “chance to thrill together” (Belloli, 2009, p. 60). Awe in adults has psychological benefits and boosts a sense of the interconnected self, the feeling of being small associated with positive benefits from awe experiences (Bai et al., 2017; Sturm et al., 2020). Our experience of time expands (Rudd et al., 2012), and we exist for a moment in a state of presence that perhaps brings us closer to the experience of the pre-symbolic responsiveness of babyhood. Some people are more

“awe-prone” (S. K. Chen & Mongrain, 2020, p. 3) than others and will seek out awe, these people also have a higher-than-average tolerance for uncertainty. Preferences which influence choice in leisure activity, including arts engagement. Csikszentmihalyi’s concept, Flow, may also be useful to consider when discussing moments of aesthetic transcendence, though he described it as occurring “at level commensurate with one’s skill” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 117), which would seem to imply different levels of experience for infants and adults. In a romantic partnership, doing new and exciting things together improves relationship quality (Aron et al., 2000) and families also benefit from shared, novel activities that build their family narratives (Anderson et al., 2014). In Goodenough et al.’s (2015) study with families on woodland walks, parents placed greater value on the specialness of an event whereas children were more likely to cite recurring shared activities as bonding experiences. This valuing of the unusual can be seen in TEY when the status of an experience being the first of its kind is emphasised, influencing the framing of an event as part of the story of a child’s growth within the family culture (Allan, 2022; Marinopoulos, 2019). Within the experience of the performance itself, the dual view provides another bonding mechanism, opening up a form of powerful empathy as the adult actively seeks to understand their child’s perspective.

Many artists have become fascinated by the possibilities of communicating with a very young, previously underestimated audience (van de Water, 2023). The narrative of “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes” (Schneider, 2009a, p. 80) speaks to the embodied nature of TEY that is, by definition, hard to describe. In meeting something that holds meaning for pre-verbal, pre-dramatic children, adults are also taken somewhere outside the realm of words; somewhere not representational, but immediate, felt and very real. The ‘temporal arts’ is an important definition used by many of the authors in *Communicative Musicality* (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2010). The art is in the happening, the intersubjective realm of potentiality ever unfolding in presentness. TEY may offer a liminal space that permits a different way of being for both child and adult, or an opportunity for the adult to share a way of being that is more familiar to the child.

3.5 Research Questions

In theatre scholarship Taube stated that “the theatre for the youngest always needs to be a common artistic experience for the players and the children” (Taube, 2009, p. 19). How the parents, or other adult audience members fit into this common experience is not clear. The parental relationship is the originator of all others, creating an “intersubjective matrix of we-ness... the scaffolding for all future development” (Ammaniti & Trentini, 2009, p. 537). The arts are drawn on to help describe intersubjectivity: music (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2010), storytelling (Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2015) and dance (Kimmel, 2012). This helps us adults imagine, or remember, what the early experience of direct perception and the growth into secondary intersubjectivity might feel like. Dissanakaye (2015) and others bring the art and the baby together in theories around the evolution of art, mutuality, and human society. Taken together, these varied strands and methodologies of research provide an effective grounding for the seriousness of intention made by TEY artists. For this study, they offer perspectives on the importance and constitution of the parent-child relationship, valuable for approaching my argument for impact.

The multi-disciplinary nature of this literature review provides a conceptual framework that is networked rather than linear. Certain works and theories however have been essential to the development of my research questions. These are: the relational pedagogy of *The Child's Curriculum* (Trevarthen et al., 2018b), innate intersubjectivity (Trevarthen, 2012), theories of attachment and bonding (Mooney, 2010), Gallagher's (2012b) distinction between cognitive and embodied empathies, and the vital connective power of the temporal arts as described in *Communicative Musicality* (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2010).

Synthesising literature from pedagogy, psychology, and philosophy there is a good case for TEY having a powerful and positive impact on its audience. Central to the argument for impact is the relational nature of the experience, and for the very youngest audience members this begins with the close parental relationship. However, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to describing or listening to the experiences of these parents. Research into theatre audiences more widely (Sedgman, 2019) demonstrates the complexity of the challenge and emphasises the need to understand expectations and desires as a way to frame the encounter. The following research questions were posed to fill a gap in our understanding of this unique form of spectatorship.

1. How do the adults who bring young children to TEY value the experience?
 - 1.a What are their expectations?
 - 1.b What impact have they observed?
2. To what extent is TEY a shared experience?
 - 2.a What are the emotional journeys undertaken by children and adults at TEY?
 - 2.b What are the relational dynamics of the TEY space?
3. What are the implications for pedagogy in a better understanding of relationships in TEY?

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter I will describe how I chose to go about answering the research questions using a two-phase study. I begin by setting out my Philosophical Reasoning, connecting the assumptions on which this research is founded, as laid out in Chapter 2, to the methods chosen. This is followed by an overview of the research Design, which describes the shape and chronology of the data collection and analysis, Procedure details the data collection and analysis, and the relationship between the two phases including information on participants and data collection methods. Challenges and Limitations are shared including any adaptations that were made mid-process. This is followed by Ethics, describing the procedures followed and decisions made within the ethical approach taken.

4.1 Philosophical reasoning

As introduced in [Chapter 2](#), Navigating my Position, this research uses an interpretivist paradigm (Given, 2008) informed by phenomenological and embodied approaches to knowledge building. In choosing methods I was keen to explore methodologies that were guided by the needs of the research and were based on sound principles without losing my path through overly strict following of existing structures (Kaszynska, 2021). This seeking of balance reflects the interpretivist tension of how knowledge production is grounded in the meeting of the researcher and the researched. Kaszynska stated that “what emerges from the Cultural Value project is the imperative to reposition first-hand, individual experience of the arts and culture at the heart of enquiry into cultural value” (2021, p. 7). Keeping participant experience central to this study was an important driver, not least because it included young children for whom attention to voice and inclusion requires additional attention (Armstrong et al., 2022).

Including a TEY event as part of my process felt necessary from a phenomenological perspective and led to the Case Study component (Mills & Birks, 2014). Being present at a live performance with research participants provided the opportunity to observe and reflect on an experience of TEY in which I also shared. Considering a wholeness approach (Li et al., 2017) and drawing on Kaszansky’s (2021) macro, meso and micro parsing to investigating multiple perspectives in a social context I sought to include the broader context that might influence the TEY experience. Taking the individual perspective as the micro, and the audience experience as the meso, the macro of wider societal knowledge informs understanding around ideas of etiquette and expectation. This brought me to a design which included eliciting descriptions of TEY spectatorship experience from a variety of individuals, interviews which also included meso and micro insights. Chronologically this Survey of Narratives was undertaken first and is labelled throughout at Phase One. Aspects of data collection in Phase Two, Case Study were then able to be informed by interim analysis of Phase One data, following a principle of ongoing methodological reflexivity.

Interviews were a key component of the research design in both phases. Inviting Phase One participants to share a memory, as a narrative story, was chosen as a way to elicit that which was considered important by the interviewee (Litovuo et al., 2019). The Phase One interviews have an element of “autobiographical narratives” (Fivush, 2008, p. 49); the stories which shape us, are shaped by our family culture (and which contribute to shaping it). In telling their story the participants are interpreting and shaping, evaluating the memory as it relates to themselves, and in this way

participating in a creative act. These interviews provided an opportunity for detailed and nuanced descriptions of audience experience, difficult to arrive at from the post-show feedback forms commonly used in the sector (Armstrong et al., 2022).

Interviews are a common method in seeking situated knowledge and knowledge of lived experience (Mills & Birks, 2014). They form an important component of this research and provided a significant portion of the data brought to analysis. I was keen not to rely on the interview alone however as I felt this would give too narrow a perspective on the phenomenon (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019) and risk marginalising non-verbal participants and non-verbal communication. The potential creative ways to engage with very young children in research where the researcher aims to elicit child voice (Thomson, 2008) could be seen as a form of interviews with alternative languages. These include participatory visual methods (Thomson, 2008), play (Blaisdell et al., 2018), and dance (Hovik, 2019a). Though work by Drury and Blaisdell (2023) spotlights how the arts can be used as a tool for consulting with infants, this was not a route I chose to pursue. This decision was influenced by the age of my child participants, 14 months old and younger, and the one-off nature of the TEY event, which could easily have resulted in a reduced, and therefore tokenistic (Lundy, 2007) engagement with the children.

Remaining aware that etymology is not definition, it is interesting to note that the word infant comes from the Latin *infans*, meaning ‘one who is not able to speak’. A deficit model that within a words-based practice such as writing a doctoral thesis, is all too easy to fall into. Arculus (2020) considered film to be a useful method to decolonize an adult-centric view when working with small children, allowing for observations of physical interaction with space and reducing the “tyranny of talking” (MacRae & Arculus, 2020, p. 63). The camera lens brings its own limitations and challenges however, with a risk of inferring that a moment captured on film offers a form of objective truth in contrast to fallible memories or description (White in Li et al., 2017). This is a study concerned with how people value and understand an experience, with interpretation of interaction of interest beyond the action itself.

My research journal, which included field notes, and memos (Mills & Birks, 2014) provided ongoing reflection and present descriptions, which constituted an element of the data. This reflexive journaling was a means to understand my ongoing relational positioning (Macht, 2022) and to provide a space for descriptions of events and encounters that went beyond an itemisation of action (Arculus, 2020). It supported clarity in navigating the muddy waters between reporting and generating within the interpretative process (Biernacki, 2012), particularly during Phase Two data collection. Film, and still

images taken from footage, were used within the interpretive framework of this study as means for me to engage with the phenomena and to direct participant reflections towards areas that I had highlighted from earlier Phase One analysis. Procedural details on how these critical moments were selected and utilised is detailed in Procedure [4.3.5](#), and Process of Analysis [5.3.3](#) respectively.

Miles & Nicholson (2019) , Reason (2010) and Morley (2022) each sought to include the embodied and synesthetic responses from children at the theatre in their research. It may be that aesthetic experiences are essentially individual, and un-shareable, but it is my belief that there is value in the attempt and that a partial understanding is preferable to dismissal. Theatre is an embodied, social, and emotional art form, it has been used in research with children as a method to gain knowledge around happiness in 8-12 year olds (Roerig & Evers, 2017), and moral impulses in babies (Hamlin, 2013). It was imperative to me that I reach towards an inclusion of “affective knowing” (Finley & Knowles, 1995, p. 110), within my epistemology and one of the methods applied was the inclusion of my own emotional and embodied responses. These were reflected upon in my ongoing journal and brought more formally as a novel analysis technique. Drawing on Laban movement practice (Laban & Ullmann, 2011) and physical approaches to acting training (Čechov, 2002; Demidov, 2020), I combined Buono’s (2018) body writing with an ‘outside-in’ approach to inhabiting the role of another. In this case the other being Phase Two research participants. Titled the ‘Mirror Game’, this method is detailed fully in [5.3.8](#).

When bringing still images into post-show interviews with Phase Two participants there was the opportunity to discuss the feelings and experiences of those in the photographs, often, though not always the participant and/or their child. Li et al (2017) used Vygotsky’s concept of *perezhivanie*, which can be loosely translated as lived, or lived-through experience, to describe infants emotional experiences, emphasising the situated and social aspects. They used the close analysis of film clips to interpret the *perezhivanie* of three young children, with perspective-taking an important component of understanding. I did not apply as detailed an approach to individual moments of film, though by collaborating with parents there was a similar goal in describing the inner experience, or lifeworld (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) of very young children. As part of the interpretivist approach I took it as an ethical responsibility (Chesworth, 2018) to take care not to claim to be speaking on behalf of the children, and to always keep my presence in data generation visible.

4.2 Design

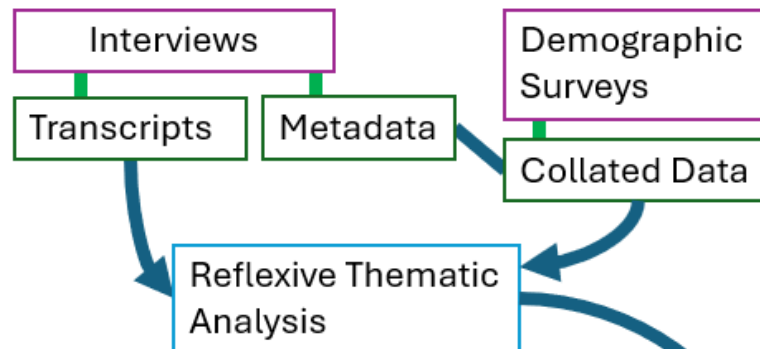
The study has a two-part facilitatory design consisting of a Survey of Narratives, Phase One, and a Case Study, Phase Two. This design enabled the inclusion of participant reflection and observation of the central phenomenon of TEY spectatorship, the former supporting analysis of the latter.

Figure 1, Design Diagram, maps the chronology of data collection and analysis, with the key moments of how Phase One activity informed Phase Two highlighted. This diagram is returned to and expanded in Chapter 5: Process of Analysis. Interim analysis of Phase One data informed the selection of critical moments within the video footage, which guided the interviews with Phase Two participants through the use of screenshots.

Phase One Survey of Narratives

May – June
2023

July – August
2023



Key

Raw Data

Indicating where
processed data is
drawn from

Processed Data

Indicating how
data or findings
were used

Descriptor of action

Analysis

Phase Two Case Study: Float

September
2023

October
2023

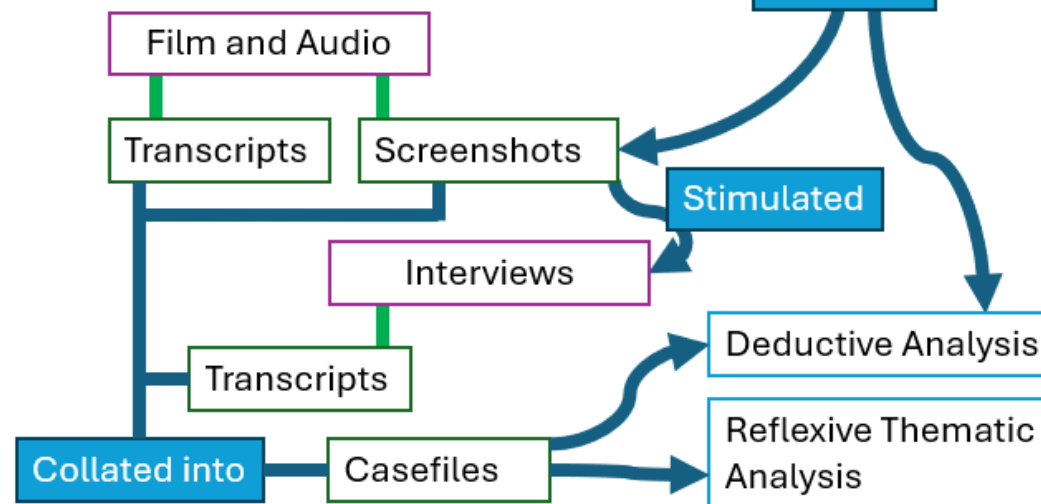


Figure 1: Design Diagram

Phase One consisted of interviews with adults who answered ‘yes’ to the question, “have you ever been to a live performance with a baby or a toddler?”. They were asked to describe their experience and other than questions to clarify timescale, or age of child, there was very little further probing. The Phase One data collection was designed to elicit plural perspectives, helping to answer the research questions dealing with valuing and expectations. Interviews were conducted both online and in-person, and the data generated were interview transcripts, relevant non-identifying information on the interviewees, context of interview, and answers to a demographic survey not linked to individual interviews, Table 1 below. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was conducted with the interview data.

<i>Material</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Size</i>
Phase One Interview transcriptions	Audio recordings of interviews with adults who had attended TEY	Word documents	48 interviews including 50 adult interviewees totalling 248 minutes of audio
Metadata notes	Researcher notes on circumstances of interview	Handwritten or typed then transferred to Word docs	48 7-line tables
Answers to demographic survey	Anonymous survey completed on paper or online	Excel spreadsheet	43 completed surveys from 50 adult participants

Table 1: Phase One Data

Phase Two was centred around a performance of the TEY production, *Float*, [see 4.3.2](#). With 9 families, observed and interviewed in greater depth, at a single event with children aged 0-14 months, this phase was designed to address the research questions concerned with the phenomenology of shared experience. The event, including time before and after the performance, was filmed and audio recorded. Two to three weeks later, adult participants were invited to interview online, where screenshots taken from the film were used to guide the discussion. From Phase One analysis I had developed themes and highlighted key questions to bring to Phase Two which informed screenshot selection and the subsequent interviews. Data generated, see Table 2, were video and audio recordings of *Float*, transcriptions taken from this footage, the screenshots of selected moments, and interview transcripts. Video and interview transcripts, along with the selected screenshots, were collated into

a Casefile for each parent-child dyad or parent-parent-child triad. These became the data to which inductive noting and three deductive lenses were applied: Phase One themes, Engagement Signals (Starcatchers, 2024), and Adult Action Categories (Morley, 2022). Video footage was analysed for journey tracking, and the embodied analysis approach of the Mirror Game applied to the selected screenshots. Analysis processes are described, with examples, in [Chapter 5](#), Process of Analysis.

<i>Material</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Size / Quantity</i>
Video and audio of <i>Float</i>	Filming of <i>Float</i> with four cameras and three additional microphones	MP4	5.3 hours of video plus an additional 4.5 hours of audio
Transcripts of <i>Float</i>	Observations of video and audio	Word documents	9 documents
Field notes of <i>Float</i>	Researcher journal	Handwritten	One page
Screenshots	Video of <i>Float</i>	Jpeg	66 images
Phase Two Interview transcripts	Recorded Zoom interviews with adult participants	Word documents	6 interviews

Table 2: Phase Two Data

Though the phases had their particular strengths in addressing different research questions this was not a hard boundary and both were able to inform the analysis. Hermeneutic circling, where meaning is derived from viewing both how the part informs the whole and the whole the part, supported this relationship phases. Similarly, the varied forms of data were not conceived of as additive or triangulatory (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019), rather complementary and expansive. Complementary in that the Phase Two data sources gave additional depth and detail to some of the themes drawn from Phase One. For example, observations on different forms of engagement. It was expansive where it offered insights unavailable from Phase one. This includes a more direct inclusion of the child's experience, and a focus on the embodied experience of all participants.

4.2.1 Learning from the quasi-pilot project

In early 2022 I completed an MPhil research project that had many elements similar and informative to this doctoral study (Allan, 2022). The four research questions were:

1. How do adults, bringing a child to TEY, make sense of the experience in the context of their relationship?
2. In what way does the intersubjectivity within TEY spectatorship support parental attachment and bonding?
3. To what extent is Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) an effective tool in seeking to understand the TEY audience experience?
4. What was gained and what was lost in the adoption of the digital communication tools that enabled the research study to go ahead despite lockdown restrictions?

I filmed and interviewed parent-child dyads attending a TEY event, though as data collection took place in 2021 during a UK-wide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this event took place online over video call. The use of video call led to many essential differences between that project and this, which made it unsuitable to be a fully integrated pilot. However, there were some important elements which influenced the methodology of this study.

I used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2009) as an approach to analysis, and a component of the thesis was reflection on the benefits and drawbacks of IPA. I found IPA to be valuable as a systematic approach that made space for the individuality of the researcher (Engward & Goldspink, 2020) and well suited to an in-depth case-study design. I felt constrained at times by the reliance of text as data, though was aware that more experienced researchers might have felt more confident in pushing the possibilities IPA's application (Finlay, 2006; Kirova & Emme, 2006). My reflection on IPA also included the suggestion that:

Considering hermeneutic activity as 'reading into' in a broader sense could support insight, as well as engaging reflexively with the bodily responses of both researcher and subject. (Allan, 2022, p. 67)

This led me to the use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) as a way to build on my experience with IPA, with greater room for exploring embodied methodologies.

Leaving a two-week gap between observed live performance and follow-up interviews was part of the MPhil design that was found to be an effective way of making space for deeper reflection on the part of adult participants, and the potential inclusion of child responses. In the design of this project, this gap also enabled the inclusion of still images at interview by giving time for me to observe the videos and select critical moments.

4.3 Procedure

4.3.1 Phase One collection and participants

Before any recruitment, Consent and Participant Information Forms ([Appendix B](#)), were finalised and formatted with digital sharable versions uploaded to the University of Stathclyde secure OneDrive, with paper versions printed for in-person interviews. Printed and online versions of the demographic questionnaire ([Appendix C](#)) were prepared and QR codes generated and printed for in-person access to online files. The QR code for the demographic questionnaire was particularly useful as participants could scan it on their phone at the end of the interview. In-person interviews were recorded on a hand-held digital voice recorder, Sony PX470. Online interviews took place over Zoom where they were recorded using the software's in-built recording capacity. The audio file and AI generated transcription were uploaded to the secure OneDrive as soon as they became available, after which all files were deleted from the Zoom cloud.

More interviews took place in person than online, though Zoom interviews tended to be longer, illustrated in Figure 2 below.

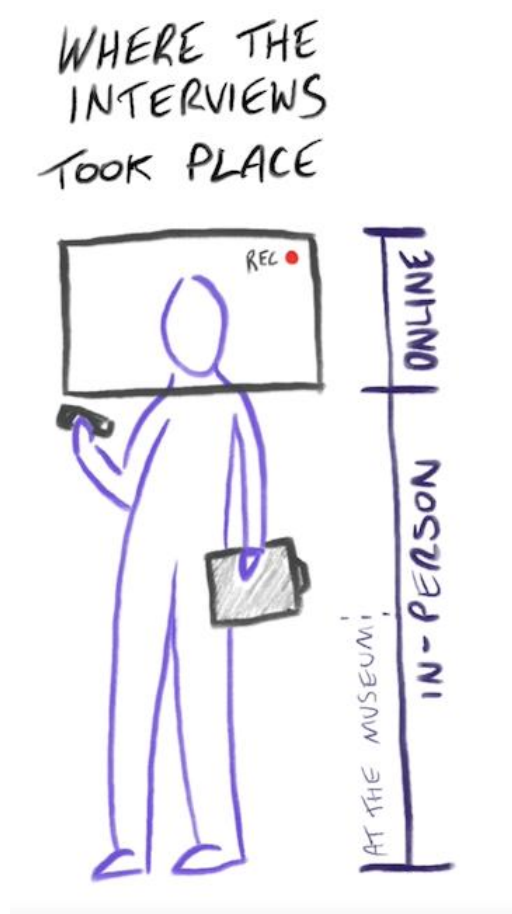


Figure 2 Location of interviews

I sought to limit probing within interviews and focused on the following prompts:

- What was the performance you attended?
- Why did you choose this performance?
- What happened?

The first few interviews undertaken were with people I knew, and I took time to reflect on how my words in the interview served my research questions, confirming my choice of minimal probing. Wider recruitment for data collection was launched as part of the Family Encounters day taking place at the National Museum of Scotland, produced by Imagine as part of the Edinburgh International Children's Festival (EICF, 2023). This event was chosen as the event was free and open to all, and as it was attractive to families with an interest in the arts, I suspected I might find people who had past experience of attending live performance with very young children. Various free performances and installations were present across the day, and I approached adults to ask if they would like to take part in my research. Approaching strangers was challenging for me but made for valuable additions to the dataset as a greater range of individuals and experiences were collected. There were also some interviewees who I knew in some capacity who happened to be at the museum that day, this gave me the opportunity to reflect on how my personal relationship to participants impacted the interview.

Having undertaken the museum interviews I felt confident that my approach was meeting the needs of my research question and issued a wider call-out through social media, supported by Starcatchers, ([Appendix D](#)). I had responses through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and conducted interviews both online and in person. Some participants who I already knew were recruited after my research came up in conversation, others I asked directly. Though I was not seeking to create a representative sample of either TEY audiences or the population more widely, I was keen to hear as broad a selection of experiences as possible. *Play Café* at Platform¹⁷, in Easterhouse, Glasgow is a regular free event for families with children under five offering arts experiences and snacks. Approaching attendees there I widened my sample in terms of location and socio-economic background, again with a view to inviting greater variety in terms of performances attended. A lot more people were contacted by me initially than responded to a call out on social media. Almost half of whom were approached at the Imagine Family Encounters Day at the National Museum of Scotland, see Figure 3.

¹⁷ <https://www.platform-online.co.uk/>

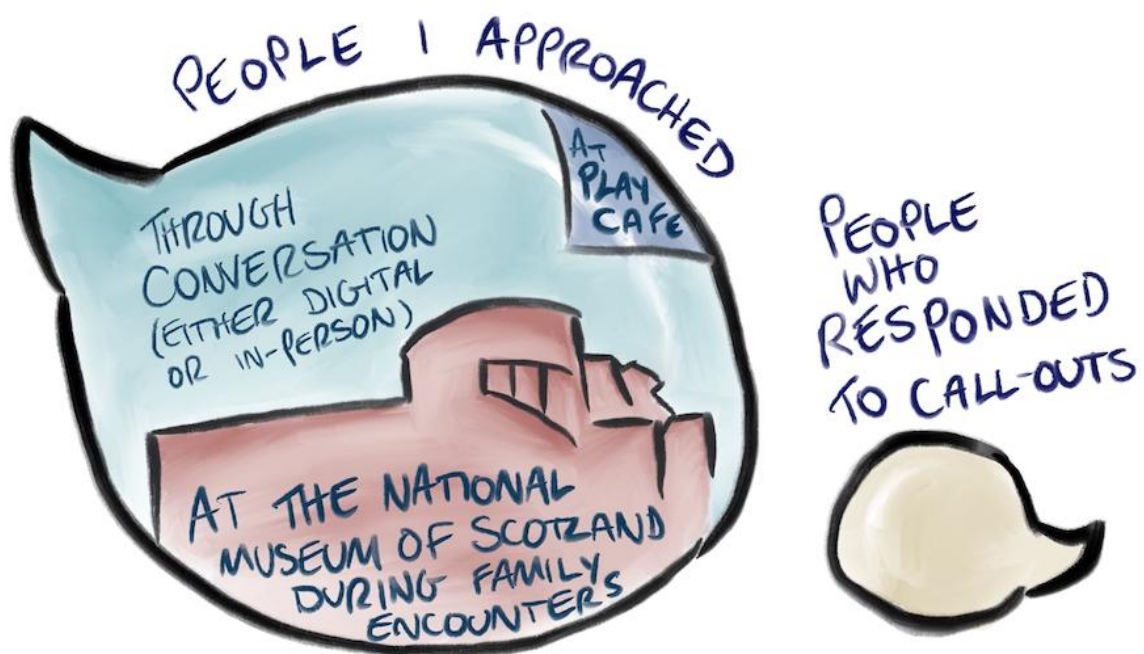


Figure 3: Phase One recruitment

At the end of my Phase One data collection period, I had collected 48 interviews with 52 participants (4 interviews had 2 participants taking part), 50 of whom were adults. 37 interviews were held in person and 11 online. Only four of this total sought me out in response to my call for participants, the majority took part after I initiated the conversation, either in person or a direct message of some kind.

Though demographic data was gathered, “identity categories” (Brooks et al., 2022, p. 13) were considered relevant within the interview data only as they were framed and offered by the participants (Mellor et al., 2014). The wording of the initial question, “have you ever been to a live performance with a baby or a toddler?” was deliberately open to allow for participant interpretation. For example, ‘baby or toddler’ rather than a defined age range, and ‘live performance’ rather than the potentially restrictive ‘theatre’.

4.3.2 Phase Two TEY event

The first consideration for the case study component of this research was finding a TEY performance to provide the context for data collection. Starcatchers supported this by providing an in-development performance of *Float* by Kerry Cleland to be used.

The iteration of *Float* used in the study was an interactive performance installation for babies under 15 months old and their accompanying adults. At the time it was included within this research process it was in the late stages of development, having been presented to audiences on previous occasions but still being altered and refined as the artists learned from each meeting with audiences. This ‘work in progress’ status was made clear to participants.



Figure 4: Inside the Performance Space

The performance element took place within an 8m x 8m inner room created by curtaining off an area of floor space, Figure 4. Outside of the curtained area was a spacious room where participants could sit, prepare, leave buggies and so forth, Figures 5 and 6. The venue was the Starcatchers Baby Studio, a former retail space in the Wester Hailes shopping centre, Edinburgh. Figure 7 is a floor plan of the studio was traced from a hand sketch I made on the day.



Figure 5: Outside the performance space (before the performance)



Figure 6: Outside the performance space (after the performance)

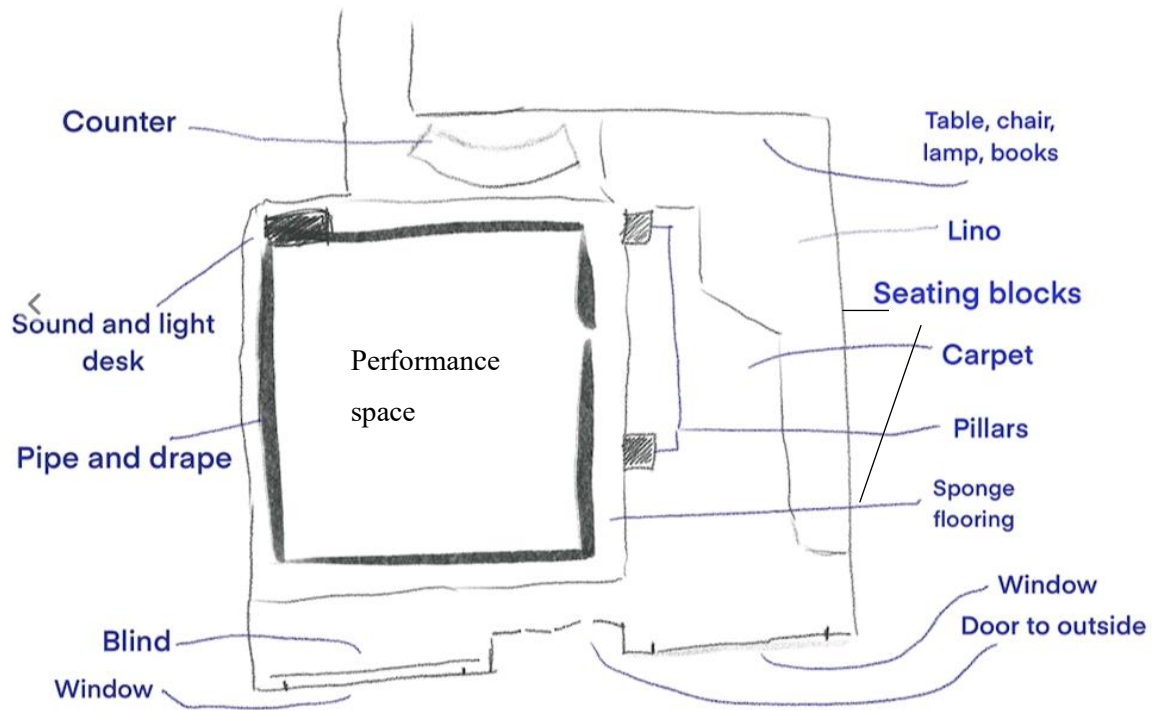


Figure 7: Baby Studio floor plan

Float was inspired by the healing properties of water (Cleland, 2023) and features a glowing tank of water in which a dancer moves. Other performance elements were singers, reflective costumes, performer manipulated set-pieces, sculptural boxes, sensorially engaging props freely available, textured floor, projected lights, soft beanbags and mats. Conceived as a durational performance where audience members are invited to come and go from the inner room as they wish, the performance element lasted around an hour. There were periods of 30 minutes before, and after this hour where audience members could use the non-curtained areas of the Baby Studio.

I was able to attend a rehearsal, ahead of the performance, which gave me the opportunity to meet the performers and production team and answer any questions they had about the research process and aims. It also gave me the chance to reflect on the performance content separately from my observations of the audience and freedom to move and observe from different levels and positions.

4.3.3 Phase Two recruitment

Starcatchers, who produced *Float*, supported the recruitment of an audience for the research performance. All participants were recruited on the understanding that the event would be filmed and that their consent for this was required to take part ([Appendix B](#)). Recruitment took place through Starcatchers' social media and e-mail newsletter channels on a first-come, first-served basis and all places were swiftly taken up ([Appendix D](#)). The number of participants was influenced by show capacity, a maximum of 12 babies was suggested by lead artist Kerry Cleland. In the event 9 babies, 11 accompanying adults, and 9 other adults were present.

As detailed in consent forms, participant pseudonyms were used. Children were given names with an equivalent gender clarity or ambiguity to their real names. The real names of others present, such as the performers, were used with permission. Numerical ages of children, though known for those whose parents attended interview, were not shared as their mobility within the space more accurately described their role and self-identity. Listed in Table 3 below, 'crawling' describes a baby with mobility on all fours, 'cruising' includes upright movement but requiring support from an object or person, 'toddling' is bipedal travel, and 'reclining' is prone requiring full support. For disambiguation of role, performers initials were used for names, and children's underlined, a convention I took into the writing up of findings.

<i>Name(s)</i>	<i>Role</i>
Kerry (KC), Hailey (HB), Hayley (HE), and Claire (CD)	Performers
Diana and <u>Violet</u>	Mum, toddling baby
Hannah and <u>Innes</u>	Mum, toddling baby
Beth and <u>Joni</u>	Mum, crawling baby
Shona and <u>Freya</u>	Mum, toddling baby
Paige and <u>Amber</u>	Mum, cruising baby
Orla and <u>Calum</u>	Mum, toddling baby
Gill, Nick and <u>Quinn</u>	Mum, Dad, crawling baby
Emma and <u>Lucy</u>	Mum, toddling baby
Kate, Matt and <u>Thomas</u>	Mum, Dad, reclining baby
Jenny	Producer
Ben	Videographer
Charlotte	Researcher
Gemma	Producer (stayed outside of curtained area)
Emma	Technician (stayed outside of curtained area)

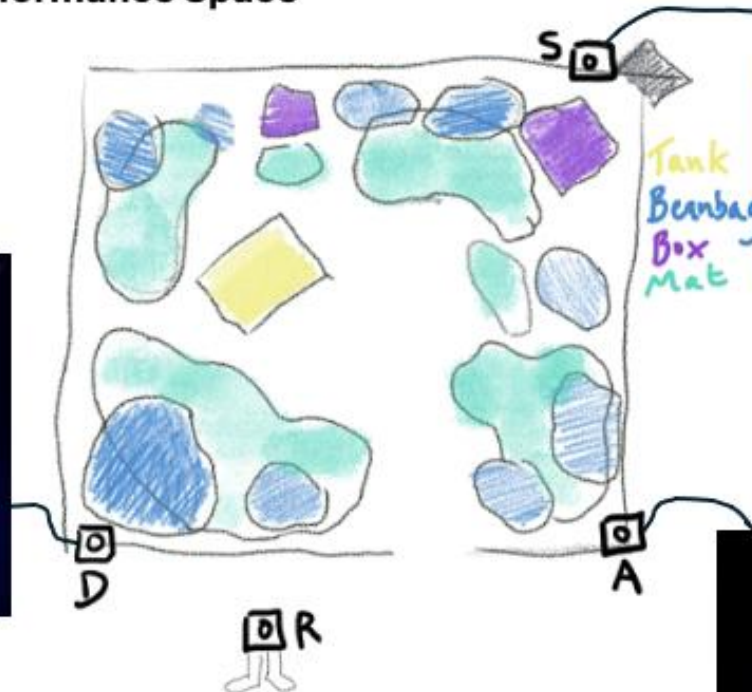
Table 3: Who was at Float?

4.3.4 Phase Two filming

Four cameras recorded the event which, including pre and post-show activity, lasted 80 minutes. Three were static and only recorded inside the curtained area, positioned in corners. The fourth was operated by Ben Winger, a videographer who captured activity before, during, and after the performance. Figure 8 shows and describes the different angles, strengths and weakness of the four cameras.

Placement of Cameras within Performance Space

D (Door) Camera was fixed near the large beanbag, diagonally opposite from the sound desk. Unfortunately the light from the tank bleached the image from this camera, and although still usable for following action, this made screenshots from this camera less detailed.



S (Sound Desk) Camera was fixed in the corner where Kerry was also often positioned to give cues for transitions and performers brought in new materials.

R (roaming) Camera had the highest quality images in the dim lighting, and Ben was able to zoom and focus on individuals. The example here is cropped from a larger image. Filming began in the outside area as participants were arriving, followed them into the space, and concluded when they had left the studio. The higher quality of focus enabled images to be cropped and still retain detail. This was beneficial in being able to isolate individuals for observation and respect participants who did not approve image use (see ethics).



A (Above) Camera was positioned higher than the others and provided a complete view of the space. This view was particularly useful for mapping movements.

Figure 8: Map of camera views

Ahead of the event I discussed with Ben the aims of the research and provided him with details on what I was hoping to get from the filming, ([Appendix E](#)). As an experienced videographer of TEY I knew he was skilled in being unobtrusive as well as capturing good quality images, one key difference that he brought to this project was to not prioritise engagement over disengagement as might be the case when creating promotional material. Participants were informed that no images would be reproduced without their specific, additional permission ([Appendix F](#)). Although this risked me being unable to use certain images, I felt it was important to enable participants to relax more into the situation and feel less ‘on show’. The cameras each recorded audio and three of the adult participants wore radio microphones, these were offered on arrival and were voluntary.

For each camera angle there were four versions of the film, each with different audio. For example, Camera R provided four full-length films, one with audio from the camera, and three further versions each with a different radio microphone providing the audio. Across the cameras this amounted to over 21 hours. I have used 5hours 20minutes in Table 4 below however, which is the sum of each camera once, as this describes the length of non-repeated visual footage.

<i>Material</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>File size</i>
Camera footage	Raw	5hrs 20min	Mp4	134.52GB
Radio mic audio	Raw	4½ hours	Mp3	3.81GB
Screenshots from film	Processed	61 images	Jpeg	28MB
Video Transcriptions	Processed	77 pages	.doc	296KB
Interview audio	Raw	3 ½ hours	Mp3	214MB
Interview transcripts	Processed	68 pages	.doc	271KB

Table 4: Phase Two Digital Data

4.3.5 Phase Two video transcriptions and selection of screenshots

The selection of screenshots, guided by the thematic analysis of Phase One data and reference to the research questions, brought focus to specific moments within the *Float* experience. The

filming was itself a narrowing process, with the moments observable on film determined by videographer choice and chance.

No family group was filmed fully from beginning to end, but by cross-referencing the different cameras, and audio from radio mics, the video transcription documents became thorough narratives for the journeys taken. Each dyad or triad had their own transcript which included words spoken by or to them and a description of actions and interactions observed. I began by following the dyad/triad on the roaming camera, as it had the best focus, noting the timestamps where they were not in frame and the other camera likely to be useful to pick up from. The camera which offered the most useful footage would depend on the positioning and movement of the observed participants in the space.

During this process I took screenshots of potential moments of interest to bring to interview. These choices were informed by analysis of Phase One data, as detailed in [5.3](#), Process of Analysis. Each picture was given a code and added to a spreadsheet tracking the participants, camera and timestamp, action observed, and potential questions to bring to interview. Once the Video Transcript was complete, the selection of screenshots was further edited to avoid repetition or an overlong interview. The selected screenshots were then pasted at their chronological points into the Video Transcription along with any interpretations or questions I had noted.

4.3.6 Phase Two interviews and Casefiles

All participants who had brought children to the performance were invited to interview, of which six accepted. These interviews took place over Zoom, after an interval of two to three weeks and lasted an average of 35 minutes. The interviews began with a question around general impressions of the event, which provided data for my research question on how the experience was valued. [Appendix G](#) lists as an interview schedule the areas and types of questions I asked, though these were adapted to each conversation guided by the participant's experience of *Float* and areas of interest. The interviews were structured by the screenshots of the video that I had brought to the interview which followed the chronology of the performance of *Float*. These still images were chosen to prompt discussion on both how the interviewee, and their child, experienced *Float*. Sometimes there were moments that I was looking for clarification on my interpretation of a child's reaction. Other pictures highlighted an expression

109

or movement by the adult which I asked for the details and memory around. Once completed, interviews were transcribed.

I incorporated the screenshots and the video and interview transcripts for each dyad or triad into a single document which I have termed the Casefile. The Casefiles were brought to analysis, as detailed in [5.3](#). I chose this consolidation approach as I wished to maintain cohesion of the cases. The interviews pertain to events within the room, guided by the sharing of images, a contrast to the process during the quasi-pilot where participant interviews had a broader scope. Another reason to create this form of dataset was to not lose sight of the babies. By returning to the observations and the photos, as they connected to reflections in the interviews, the babies were brought into consideration throughout. Through what the parents remembered, their interpretations, what can be seen through the camera lens, and my descriptions of activity. This gave broader opportunity for the voice of the child to be present.

I considered how slotting in the interviews to the observations would break the sequence of the interview. Although there was a structure to them where we looked at photos in the chronology of the recorded action, sometimes comments were made that related to different moments, or outside thoughts. Responses to my opening question about general impressions and feelings I formatted differently, aligning to the right margin, to retain that specificity so that if placed at a specific point in the event they related to I could immediately see that they were responses to my initial question. Existing notes and questions that I had made on both the observation and interview documents I transferred to the Comments function in Word to clearly distinguish from the transcribed data. As part of the process of creating the Casefiles I rewatched and relistened to the event videos, improving the detail of the observations and transcriptions.

The variation in participant contribution and its impact on data quantity is shown here. Where participants did not respond to invitation to interview, I was additionally sensitive to the ethical consideration of representing their actions and those of their child. Although they gave their written, informed consent to be recorded at the event, and for that footage to be used in research, I did not have the rapport that I was able to build with those who attended the post-show interviews. The size of each Casefile, which includes video transcription, screenshots shared, and interview transcription, reflects the quantity of data then used for coding and reflexive analysis as shown in Table 5 below.

Adult(s)	Radio mic	Interview	Screenshots	Pages of Casefile
Diana and <u>Violet</u>	Yes	Yes	13	40
Beth and <u>Joni</u>	Yes	Yes	6	31
Emma and <u>Lucy</u>	No	Yes	11	29
Orla and <u>Calum</u>	No	Yes	12	28
Shona and <u>Freya</u>	No	Yes	8	23
Hannah and <u>Innes</u>	No	Yes	11	21
Paige and <u>Amber</u>	Yes	No	0	17
Gill, Nick and <u>Quinn</u>	No	No	0	12
Kate, Matt and <u>Thomas</u>	No	No	0	6

Table 5: Phase Two Participants and contributions

4.4 Challenges and limitations

When designing this PhD research building on the quasi-pilot project I initially hoped to recruit participants for the case study with children of a comparable age. At the time the data collection needed to take place however there was not a performance available designed for the 1-3 years age range. Participants in the quasi-pilot study reported children incorporating elements of the performance into their play, that this was not observed in this study is attributable to the younger age of the children (Liebal et al., 2010). Participant numbers were led by the design of *Float* as an immersive experience for babies under 15 months, with the intention to maintain the event as usually experienced with other audience members. The open, installation style of presentation at *Float* enabled the observation of spectatorship appropriate for the form. Had the stimulus event studied been one where a seated audience are kept apart (albeit at a short distance) from performers, this would have taken the research in potentially very different directions. Twenty or more dyads could have been recorded, impacting the level of detail possible in analysis, allowed for a stronger focus on the nature of attention, and potentially observing a shift from traditional audiencing to the after-show play session.

Working with any live performance includes an inherent stress point in the design where everything needs to come together at a specific time, date and place to enable data collection. Although a number of participants experienced delayed arrival due to unusually heavy traffic, holding the performance was not possible as there were time limitations of the returning of hired equipment. This did not cause significant problems for the performance or the research study but is an example of how little room for error there was. Further studies of a similar nature should be aware of the implications in placing so much necessity in the operational functioning of a relatively brief moment, where contingency is not possible thorough preparation becomes even more important.

Although demographic data was collected on Phase One participants, they were not recruited purposively to be a representative sample of a larger population. One of the ways in which this played out was that women were far more present in the data than men. Neither of the men who attended *Float* responded to the offer to interview, further compounding this and providing little in the findings to discuss. How men feel about attending TEY could be asked in further research, important as it touches on gendered expectations around parenting in shared spaces. Another important absence from this research are the voices of people who do not choose to attend TEY. In considering how parents value the art form, ‘why not?’ is a potentially very

revealing question to ask alongside ‘why?’ Methodologically, such participants are harder to identify and recruit though understanding barriers to access would be valuable knowledge.

4.5 Ethics

Ethical approval for researching with human participants, including children under 5, was given by the School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde. Guidance given in the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2016) was followed. Key considerations for Phase One data collection were informed consent and anonymity. Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms are included in [Appendix B](#). Providing options for how participants could access information, and withdraw consent was important for insuring the former. This was particularly true of ‘walk-up’ participants who were sometimes disinclined to read a page of information ahead of the interview, in these cases a verbal summary was given, and assurance that they could contact me and withdraw their consent should reading the Participant Information Sheet - available digitally or printed - give them any cause for concern. Interviews were numbered as names were not taken. The process of anonymisation involved redacting names if used within the story told, and other potentially identifying information such as workplace or named home location. Care was taken during the writing up phase of analysis to anonymise artworks discussed, due to reputational risk. Some performances or artists were named in interviews, with others easily identifiable (to me) by description, and I was mindful to maintain focus on the experience of audience members distinct from a judgment of the performance.

Good communication with the producers and staff of the Imagine Family Encounters Day was necessary for safe and ethical data collection as part of an organised event in a public space. My research intentions, conduct and permissions were all discussed ahead of time. When approaching potential participants, I found it important to stress from very early on that I would not be troubled if they did not take part, and to read reluctance hidden behind politeness. I was keen not to interrupt people’s day, or distract from positive family time, and found that there were optimum ‘milling around’ times between performances in the large open areas. For participants with whom I arranged interviews, these were conducted at their convenience and included: Zooms in the day, evening or weekend; a visit to their house or mine; or a park bench, depending on our relationship and geographical distance. In two instances at the museum, primary age children contributed to the interview being given by their parent and consent for their inclusion was added to the signed form. Assent was also sought with a brief discussion on who I was and why I was collecting stories.

Phase Two brought additional ethical questions, notably around the inclusion of the babies and engaging directly with a professional artistic work. Considering the question of informed

consent with regards to the babies I built on a similar approach taken in the quasi-pilot, where the parent was positioned as the key person in reading and responding to how their child felt about being involved. The decision around anonymity in imagery was similarly given as one to be made by the parent. To enable this, parents needed to feel supported in their decision making and parenting, including being fully able to withdraw at any point should they feel that was appropriate. In regards to assent, it can be a common practice to cease researching should a child become distressed (Arnott et al., 2020). This would not be an appropriate blanket statement for this project, as the research took place during an (albeit unusual) real world event, where parents were free to respond to their children as they would under non-observed circumstances. Additionally, children's engagement or disengagement is of relevance to the research questions.

Allowing myself to be present and honest with participants supported the development of rapport, and the framing of participants as research collaborators (Brooks et al., 2022). Sharing my past experiences as a mother and an artist, including moments of difficulty, emphasised my interest in all possible feelings and responses and commitment to non-judgmental curiosity. This level of rapport achieved with the parents who accepted the invitation to interview was not present with those who only attended the event. Though signed, informed consent was given and not retracted, their relationship to the study was not collaborative and reflective. This had the impact of reducing their presence within the dataset, in addition to their already smaller Casefiles, as I felt it was important not to represent them in any way they might not be comfortable with and had no way to check.

Due to the small number of participants in Phase Two, 11 adults and 9 babies, I did not feel that I could collect demographic information in the anonymous and unlinked manner possible in Phase One. I was also keen that participants knew that they were researching with me, and not being researched 'on', as they engaged in in-depth reflective interviews, a position that gathering identity data did not sit well with. Nor was there a compelling enough reason to include them in terms of how valuable demographic data was in answering the research questions.

Image use permissions were not requested at the outset. This was to avoid participants feeling self-conscious, and to increase and emphasise parental involvement in the publishing of any images of their child. Where contact was maintained, i.e. with participants who took part in interviews, an additional consent form requesting image use was sent with all the specific

screenshots for which usage permission was sought. This is included in [Appendix F](#). I chose to pursue the option to be able to use images of children's faces within this research as interpretations from images, including those around the emotions and intentions of the children, form a key part of this research.

The performers did give blanket consent to image use, as well as use of their real names, and Kerry Cleland, who has artistic ownership of *Float*, gave permission for the use of any images from the performance. This was approached ethically through early and detailed conversations with the production company Starcatchers and then Kerry, to ensure any reputational risk or employment risk could be mitigated. It was discussed how performers could opt out of photos being used and not risk losing work for example, though this did not become necessary. For reputational risk around centring her artwork in a research project Kerry needed to place trust in me, my approach, and my research aims. Emphasising my interest in the audience, rather than the performance, was important, as was my position as a TEY artist with an understanding of the artistic development process and the great variety in potential audience responses.

In Chapter 2 I introduced Starcatchers and the role the organisation played in this project, including a discussion around the ethical question of potential conflict of interest. Starcatchers enabled the inclusion of *Float* in this project as part of their ongoing aims to further knowledge in and of arts practices for Early Years. There was no evaluative or critical aspect to this study, which would be harder to navigate as a reputational risk to the organisation. I had an existing working relationship with Starcatchers, experience shared in some capacity by – to my knowledge – three of the Phase Two research participants. This was unsurprising as participants self-selected to a call-out from Starcatchers. Familiarity with the organisation, as well as other people in the room, or the work, were all discussed as appropriate at interview and were informative to findings around relationships and expectations. I also knew one of the Phase Two adult participants very well personally. Reporting these findings was an area in which I needed to exercise caution around maintaining the anonymity of participants.

As with Phase One data, files were kept on the university secure server. Audio from Zoom recordings were added as soon as they were available and then all files deleted from the Zoom cloud.

Chapter 5: Process of Analysis

I began analysis of Phase One interview data before Phase Two data collection took place. Alongside the interview transcripts I collated data from the demographic surveys and additional metadata on the interviews. These latter forms of data provided contextualisation for reflexive analysis of the interviews, and are not themselves framed as findings. The diagram below, Figure 9, shows the process taken at this stage, with additional, orange, boxes labelled ‘output’ added to the first half of the Design Diagram (Figure 1). The questions produced by analysis of Phase One data guided Phase Two data collection, and the themes informed Phase Two analysis. The Phase Two expanded diagram is presented later in this chapter, [5.3 Phase Two Analysis](#), with accompanying details on the approaches taken to analysis of the video, audio, and interview data collected.

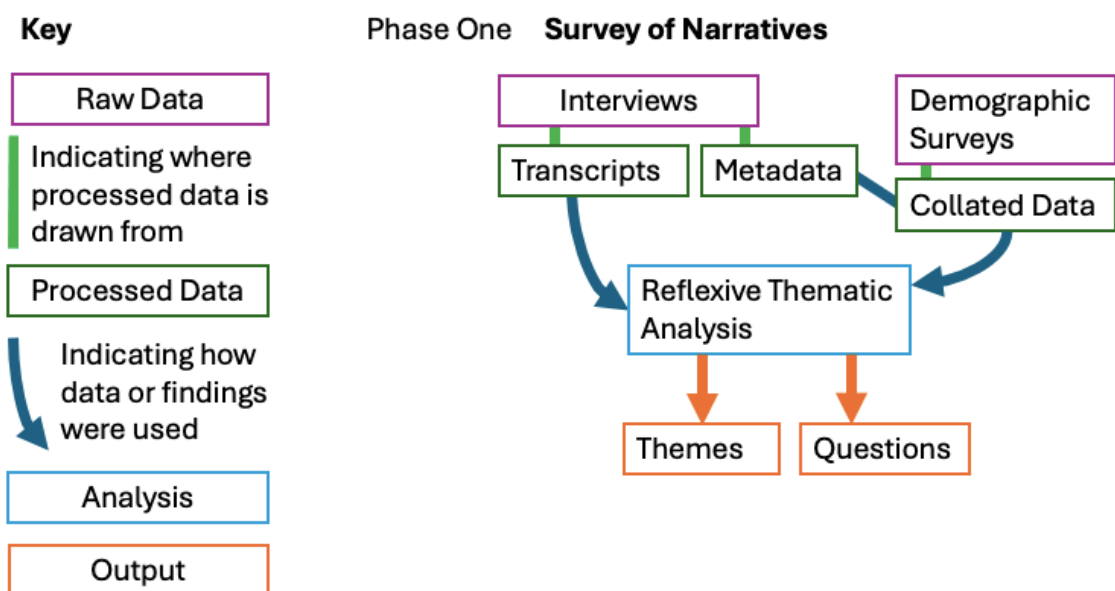


Figure 9: Design Diagram with Phase One focus

5.1 Phase One Contextualising Metadata

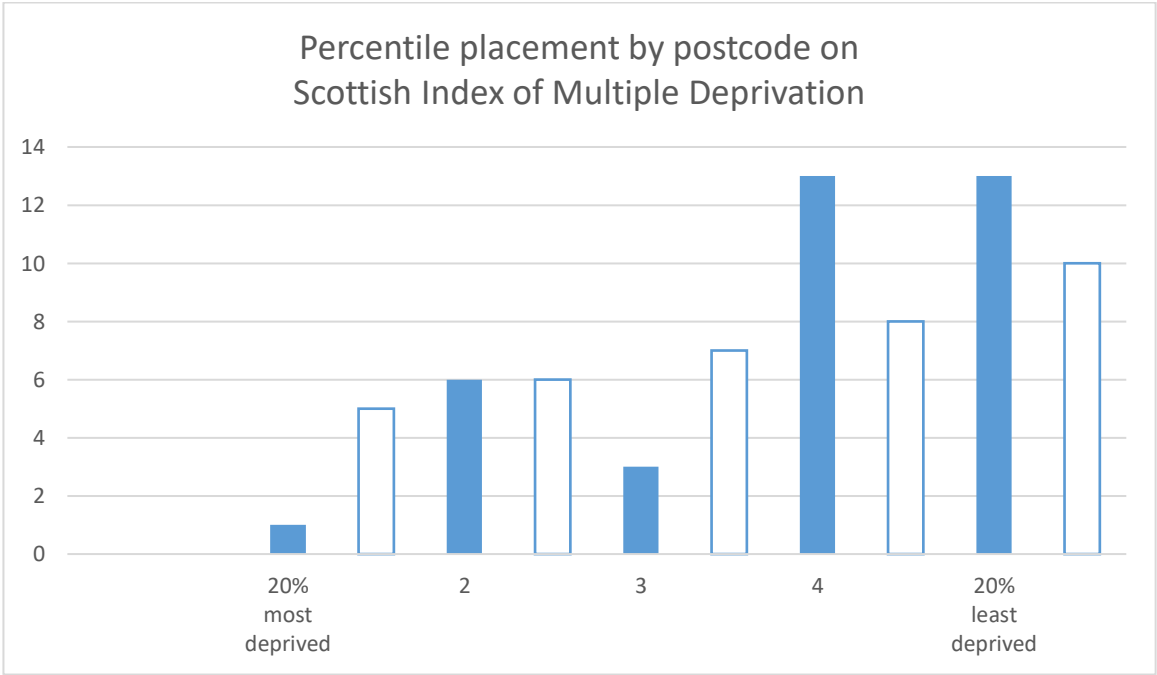
Being mindful that context is essential when seeking a situated understanding of a phenomenon I spent time analysing and structuring the metadata I had collected from my interviewees and the interviews. Mapping the range of people and experiences that were the sources of my data supported the analysis I then conducted with the interview transcriptions.

Phase One metadata was collected from two sources, demographic questionnaires and the interview transcripts. The questionnaires were anonymous and unconnected to the participant interview. In presenting information from these two sources, depicted the questionnaire data through charts ([Appendix H](#)) generated using Excel and Powerpoint, with information gathered from the interviews rendered as hand drawn images. This visible difference was intended to reflect a distinction between the information contained. The charts are sharing data inputted by participants, the drawings offer data which included an element of interpretation by me at the point of collection. For example, assessing what categories of theatre ‘type’ were being described (Figure 15), or assigning complex emotional descriptions to a five-point scale (Figure 16) required me to make choices. Even seemingly quantitative data such as the age of children (Figure 14) was not simple as these were offered in different formats and not all descriptions of experiences were neatly bounded anecdotes.

5.1.1 Metadata

The demographic questionnaire, ([Appendix C](#)) was well completed at 86%. 24 by hand and 19 online. On religion, ethnicity, and disability status the study participants were comparable to distributions found in Scotland’s population as a whole (Scotland’s Census, 2011) and within Scottish TEY audiences, as documented in production reports published by Starcatchers for their shows *Little Top* (Superfan & Starcatchers, 2019), and *MamaBabaMe* (Starcatchers & Curious Seed, 2017). The most obvious difference to a general population is in gender, though a strong female majority does match the findings of Starcatchers audience data (ibid.), as well as my own experiences as an artist and observer. The age of interviewees also resembles those for adults in TEY audiences, though trending a little higher as many participants related stories from attending events when they themselves were younger.

The recruitment process included interviews with friends and acquaintances, creating a potential tendency in participants towards being somewhat ‘like me’. On some factors this influence would be hard to notice as on gender (female), ethnicity (white), and disability status (able bodied) I already resemble the mode average TEY audience member (at 45 I am a decade older than the current typical attendee) according to Starcatchers audience data (Starcatchers, 2022). The most notable impact of personal recruitment was on geographic location, with a cluster of interviewees giving postcodes found in the village in which I live. Another common location was the city of Edinburgh, as expected from recruiting at the Imagine Family Encounters Day. I used the postcodes given in the questionnaires to provide a broad idea of economic background by using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation map tool (Scottish Government, 2024). The SIMD is a geographically zoned, relative measure of deprivation across 7 domains (income, employment, health, education, geographic access, housing, and crime) that is used by the Scottish Government as a standard approach to identify areas of deprivation. I had expected the day in Edinburgh to push results towards the higher end of this scale, though as my home village sits on 7th percentile this also influenced the overall tendency towards less deprived postcodes. Although theatre attendance in Scotland is higher amongst those living in areas lower in multiple deprivations (Scottish Government, 2020), the difference is smaller than that found amongst my study participants as shown in Table 10 below. Four participants gave postcodes outside of Scotland and two were incomplete. Published data is not available for TEY audiences specifically.



120

 Solid bar = Study participants

 Hollow bar = equivalent if distribution matched Scottish population who reported theatre attendance in past 12 months to the Scottish Household Survey 2019

Figure 10: Phase One participants placement on SIMD by postcode

Household income information was not requested and the method of using postcode only gives an approximation, though as this was also used in the Scottish Government survey cited it is useful for comparison. Perhaps more importantly it shows the risk in my research of potentially amplifying the voices of more affluent attendees. Relevant notably when looking at how barriers to participation were discussed.

Metadata collected from the interviews derived from two sources: notes made on the circumstances of the interviews, and the content of the transcripts, see Table 6. Notes made on the order of interviews, date conducted, and situational details additionally supported my memory of individuals when conducting analysis, retaining access to situational context for interpretation. They may for example have been referring, or talking to, a child who is nearby.

<i>Source</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Example</i>
Notes	Recruitment	Walk-up
	How well known to me	Not at all
	Number and date	#10, 27 th May 2023
	Location	National Museum of Scotland
	Interview situation	Busy atrium, rest of family nearby
Transcript	Relationship to child(ren) in story	Father
	How long ago did the event(s) in the story take place?	Recent weeks
	Age of child(ren) at the time	18 months old
	Type of event(s)	Small-scale TEY
	Quality of experience(s) (1-5)	4

Table 6: Metadata sources

Categorising the participants according to how well we knew each other reveals a balance between the known and the unknown. As with other images illustrating these data, Figure 11 was created using the chart generating tool in Powerpoint to guide the relative sizes of objects then transferred to a hand-drawn format using Procreate.

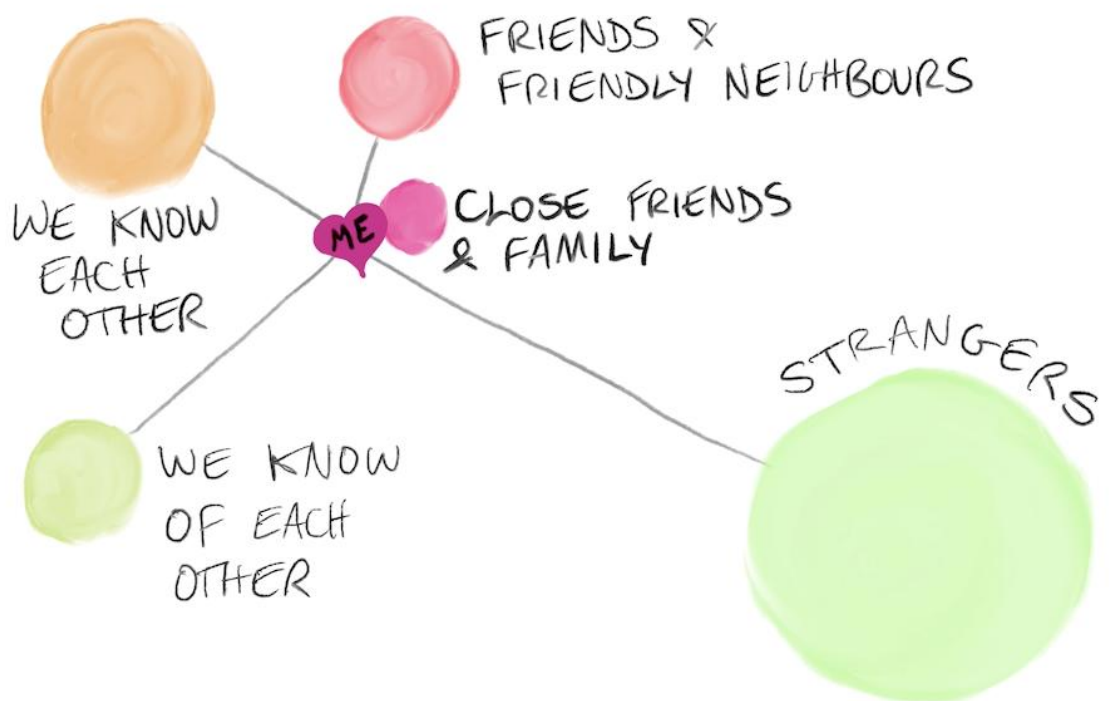


Figure 11: Phase One participants by relation to me

Longer interviews and some of the richer data however came from the closer circles, as noted in this journal extract:

Two (different, unconnected) ... friendly former colleagues were not sure if they could help, that they had any 'useful' information, then went on to share heartfelt, detailed memories that brought up positive and unexpectedly strong emotions. There is a real benefit to me knowing these people, the trust that enables them to tell me how they actually felt, different to a stranger who isn't accessing the same levels of deeper feeling. Another way in which my years in the sector gives me access to knowledge, not just my own experiences but doors to those of others.

Researcher Journal- 27/5/23

Longitudinal reflection was present in many of the interviews where the event was some time ago and this was a useful addition. The time elapsed between event and interview ranged from 20 years to 20 minutes. As seen in Figure 12, there was a broad spread of narratives across time, with a bulge around 10-15 years ago. This aligns with when my own children were attending TEY so can be connected to recruiting of participants similar to me, though it also reflects a time of high TEY activity in Scotland, as detailed in [3.1.1](#) in the Literature Review.

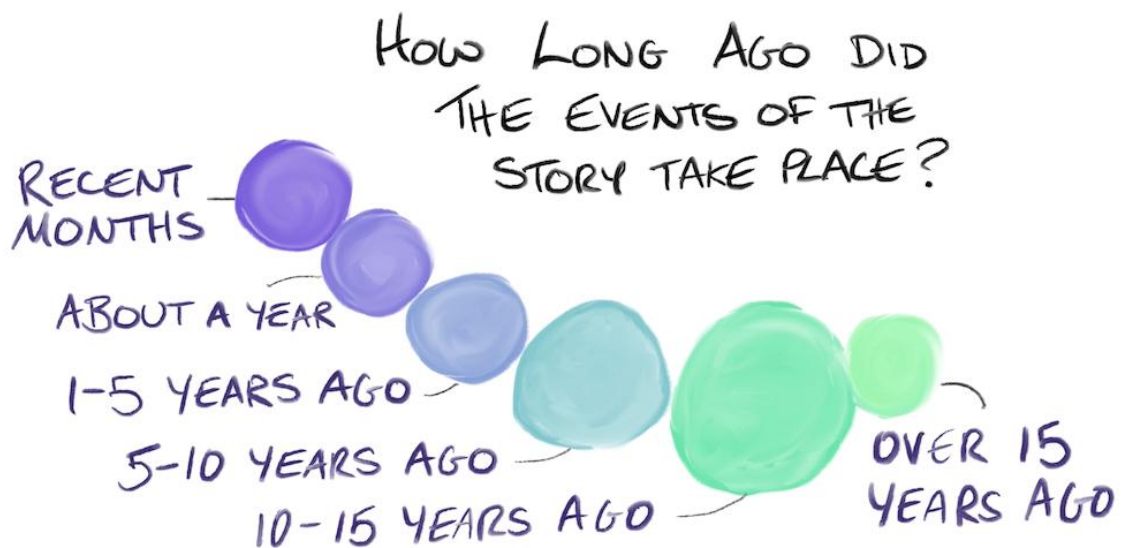


Figure 12: Phase One stories by how long ago they took place

Most of the respondents, as expected, were parents to the children in their stories. Other relationships, sometimes within the same interview, were also present. A participant recalled different events attended with her son and her niece for example. The frequency of these relational identities across the dataset is illustrated in Figure 13 below.

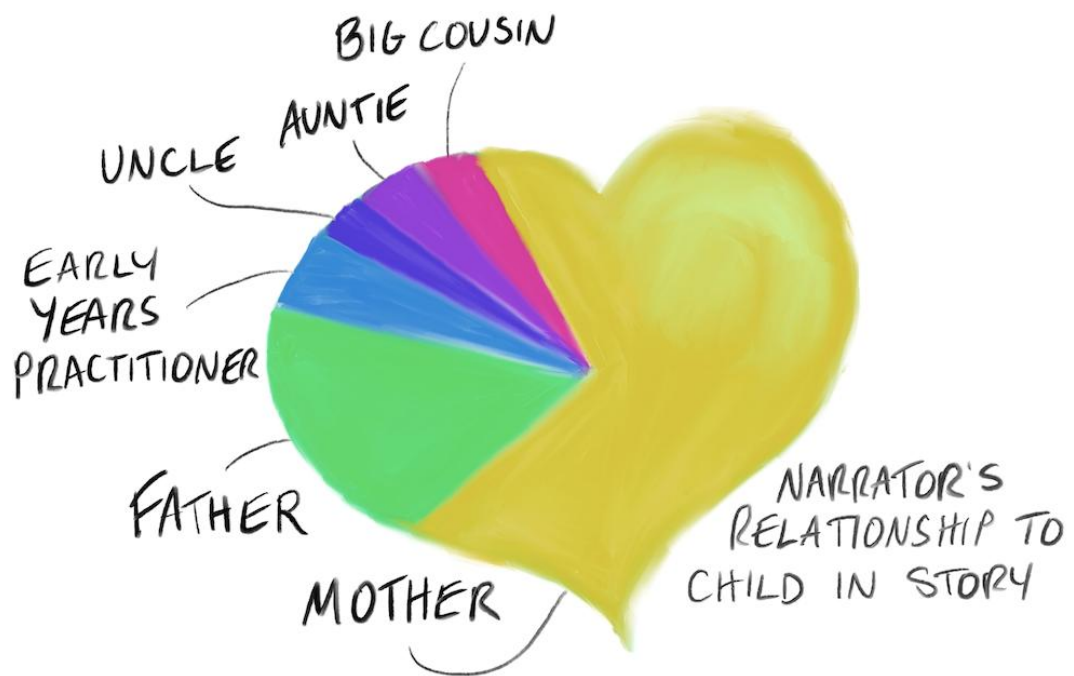


Figure 13: Phase One participants by relation to child in story

When noting the age of the children in the stories I took their age from the memorable or significant events described. Exact ages were not always give, and Figure 14 illustrates the frequency of different ages showing a peak around the age of one year.

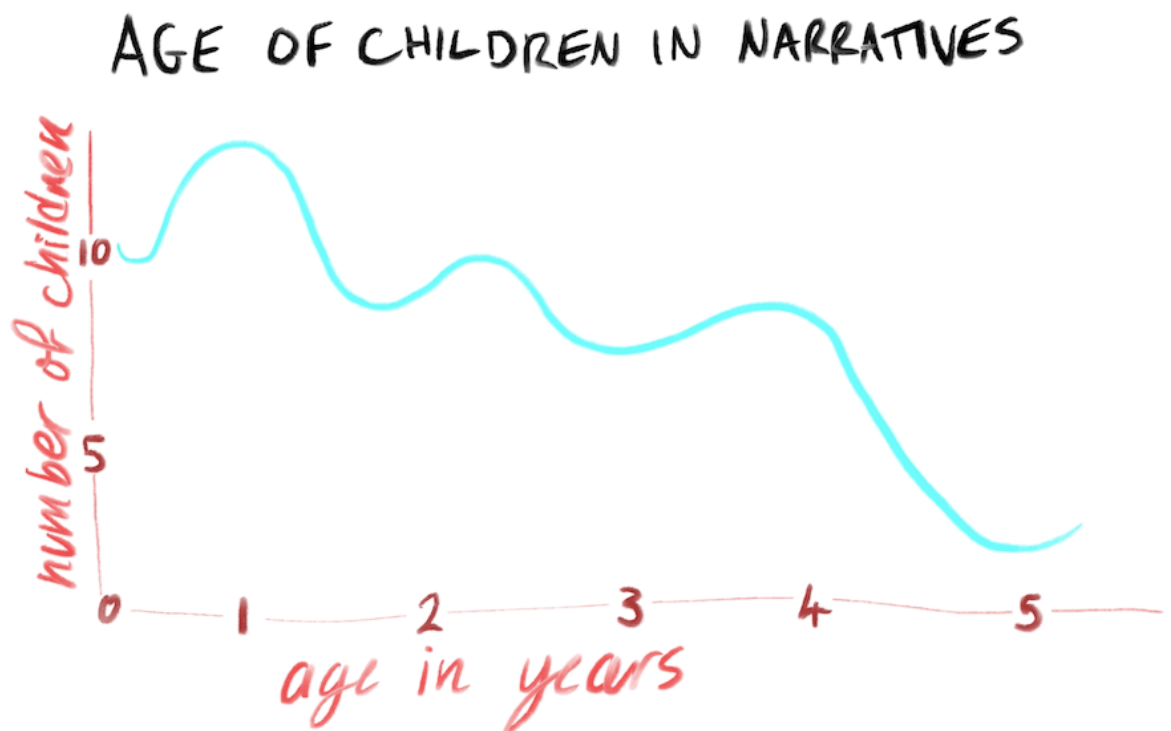


Figure 14: Age of children in stories

The initiating question for interviews invited the inclusion of experiences that differed greatly not just due to variety of interpretation but also in terms of the stimulus events the participants drew their descriptions from. Within the interviews multiple experiences were often recounted, as well occasionally, general impressions. From the use of the phrase ‘live performance’ rather than ‘theatre’ in my initiating recruitment question I gathered descriptions of small room to stadium events, and diverse genres and art forms. Categorising the style and genres of the work described in the interviews involved interpretation on my part. Participants sometimes named the works attended, though when recalling events from longer ago many such details were forgotten. I was often able to recognise TEY works from descriptions, though did not acknowledge my familiarity unless asked. This was intentional to allow space for the participant’s description and avoid assumption of shared knowledge that would limit their input into the interview.

In the illustration of genres, Figure 15, I divided TEY by scale and included additional sub-labels where they were specified by the participants. For size I took ‘small’ to be an audience of up to around 60, ‘mid’ to be 60-300 and ‘big’ to be over 300. ‘Small’ was the most well represented of these three, which was helpful for aligning with the Phase Two Case Study as this took place with small-scale installation style work with an audience capacity of 24. All the small TEY events described in Phase One interviews were original or traditional in content, with books and television providing the source material for many of the larger events. The smaller TEY also contained a broader range of genres such as opera or circus. Descriptions of bringing very young children to theatre intended for adults, though not a large portion of the stories, were a valuable addition to the data.

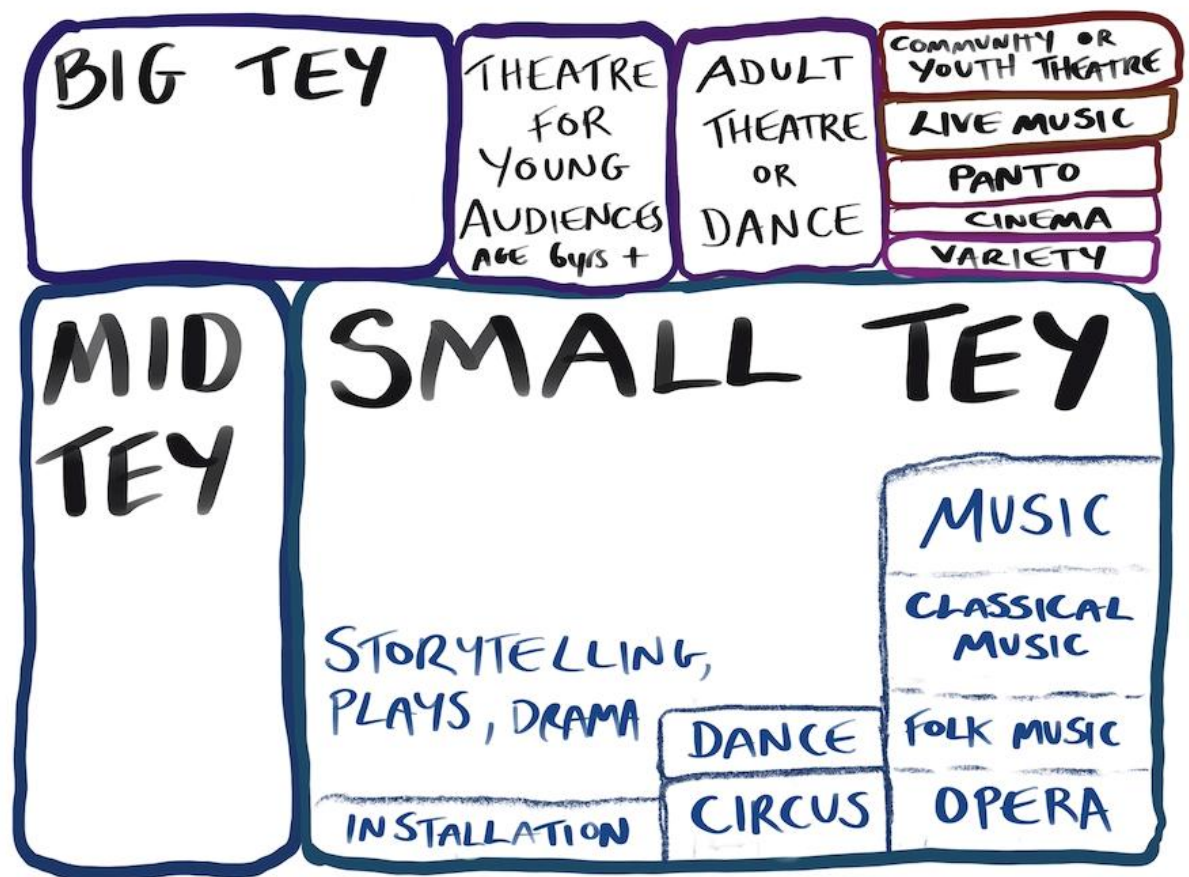


Figure 15: Events attended in Phase One stories by form

Understanding the emotional journey taken by spectators at TEY is a major component of this thesis that cannot be simply expressed in five emojis! However, I thought it helpful to represent, broadly, the general flavour of experiences that were described to me in the interviews, illustrated in Figure 16. These emojis refer to feelings of both the adult interviewees and their descriptions of their child's responses.

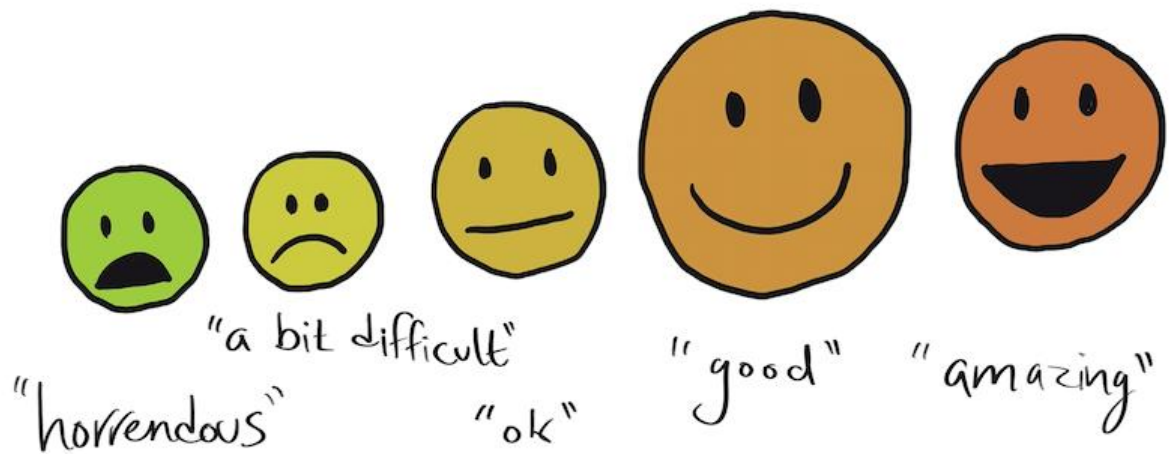


Figure 16: Experiences in Phase One stories by emotional quality

The mechanism of the data collection where participants self-selected the events they described created a tendency towards the memorable, in longer interviews I was also able to ask if they had contrasting experiences to share. Some of the negative experiences recounted were especially valuable to the analysis and discussion as they provided insight into impact and value through better understanding the conditions surrounding expectations being unmet. As the phenomena under study is a leisure activity it is reasonable to expect experiences to err on the positive and this is very much the case for quantitative post-show surveys (e.g. Allan, 2017). A note against “positivism creep” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 7) feels necessary here. This illustration reflects only the feelings within my dataset, where I was seeking range, and should not be taken as an overview of TEY. The size of emoji represents the frequency of occurrence within the data of experiences related.

5.2 Phase One Thematic Analysis

This contextual awareness was helpful in approaching analysis of the interview transcriptions in a way that moved beyond simple categories or “cherry-picking” from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 54). A compilation of topic lists, for example what participants thought were ‘good or bad’ about the performances they attended, offered limited insights and risked straying into the area of quality assessment or theatre criticism. As the questions posed to participants were not presented in these terms it was not appropriate to take and compare some participants’ opinions on specific shows but rather explore through thematic analysis common threads in meaning and value building. This also avoided potentially unethical promotion or disparagement of individual art or artists.

Having previously used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2009) as an approach in the quasi-pilot, I chose to take Braun & Clarke’s six phase guide to Thematic Analysis as my main source of guidance for thematic analysis in project (Braun & Clarke, 2021). One key difference between the two is the point at which codes, ‘notes’ in IPA, and themes are developed across rather than within cases. The dataset in this study had a wide range of shorter interviews rather than the few lengthy ones of the quasi-pilot. It was also not the case that I could give equal weight to the various interviews as illustrated by the metadata. Descriptions of emotions and relationships, central to my research questions, ranged in their level of openness and detail. Having taken a deliberately step-by-step approach with IPA as a novice researcher, I was also happy to embrace Braun & Clarke’s metaphor of the adventure map. This enabled theme ideas and connections to be considered along the way as I moved closer, and further, from the data. I have replaced Braun & Clarke’s term *phase* with *part* in the following description to avoid confusion with my two-phase design.

5.2.1 Familiarisation with the dataset

The first stage, familiarisation, began with listening to the recorded interviews. Transcription took place as soon as possible after each encounter, partly to keep on top of a large amount of data, but also to retain any important non-verbal communication. When all the interviews were transcribed, I checked them again to remove names of children and formatted the text to provide wide markings for physical notation. At this point each participant was given a randomised pseudonym from a deck of cards. They were later renamed Participants_1 to _52 for clarity in

reporting but there was a satisfying coincidence in there being exactly 52 voices (50 adults and 2 children across 48 interviews) and shuffling the interviews at this stage helped to break up my association with the time collected, spreading out the museum interviews for example and thereby opening up connections across the dataset.

Braun & Clarke's suggestion to doodle the data appealed to me as doodling is a technique I use to support focus when taking information in aurally and I expected it would help me listen. I was pleasantly surprised that it also served a useful, generative function in illustrating potential themes and connections across the dataset. The doodle can be seen in Figure 17. My emerging ideas for potential recurring motifs, as explored during the doodling, are described in the following journal extract:

10/7/23 Researcher Journal

Keeping the doodle to one piece of paper enabled conversations to begin between stories and offered a first overview of echoes and harmonies. The emotional content felt strong, and diverse, which was encouraging, and recurring ideas were popping up. Certain visual motifs recurred, the radiating lines, (similar to the wifi symbol) chosen as common indicators of movement, sound, or vibration, in line drawings. As a doodle these then sometimes crossed and expanded, and echoed the map of an auditorium. Dissemination from a central point, the ripple effect...

The most dominant visual motif was the circle. Found in objects such as balls, bubbles, balloons, CDs and teddy-bears, also stage sets and seating, cartoon faces, and recurring concepts of inclusion, containment, being-in. This brought me to reflect on how the world we create for the very young child is one of soft edges and rounded corners. There is a wish for safety, and a whole bubble-based aesthetic, babies themselves are very round versions of humans as the purveyors of cuteness know well. A physically safe space is part of what is needed for an easeful feeling of safety, how helpful is a concept of roundness when considering what else is necessary?

5.2.2 Coding

Using the wide margins, I noted codes by hand on printed copies of the interviews. Figure 18 below is a photograph of a small example.

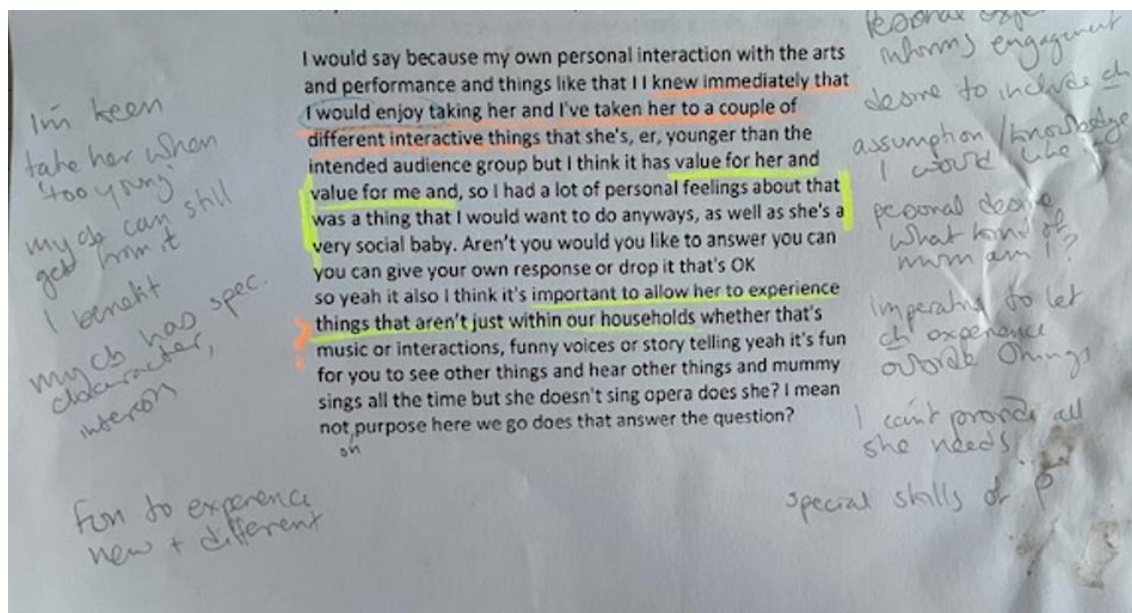


Figure 18: Coding Phase One interviews

From a starting point of around 40,000 words, I created 1860 lines of code. I felt it was important to code as much as possible to guard against cherry-picking from my widely ranging data, the intention being to bring a more discerning filter based on research questions once coding had taken place. After coding by hand these were typed up into an excel spreadsheet, sorting into columns as I did so. This process had an analytical function, as described in the following extract from my journal:

Dropping the codes into columns, and to an extent the coding itself, had a bit of the dry stone walling about it. Once you pick up a stone you don't put it down again until you have a place for it. This principle guards against indecision. I suppose the important point about candidate theming, is the idea of a place for now. A be-perfect mindset would definitely get in the way of the coding and sorting, or would at least make it take an unfeasibly long time.

Researcher Journal 14/7/23

These columns had some potential towards becoming candidate themes though they mostly took the form of categories of function, or topic lists. For example ‘Life Afterwards’ with sub-categories ‘child’ ‘adult’ ‘both’. These were developed as the codes were added and settled by about 10-15 cases into 13 categories with 29 sub-categories. Table 7 below provides an example of codes during sorting. Here the category ‘Life afterwards’, where mention was made of how the performance was retained or responded to later in some way, was divided into the sub-categories ‘child’, ‘adult’, and ‘both’:

Life afterwards		
child	adult	both
replaying performance just watched	Remember feeling more than details	still share joy of silly song
has grown into theatre appreciation	understand with hindsight why it was so hard	positive for us, despite no active engagement from child at the time
play as child’s way of understanding experience	memory that sticks out, means more	went back again and again

Table 7: Example of initial coding

5.2.3 Generating initial themes

I was aware by this point that I had *a lot* of data. Especially considering this was only Phase One of two. The strength of having so many interviews was the breadth of experience provided, my open interview questions also allowed for variety of response in terms of what participants considered to be important. The challenge was to find a way that these varied, sometimes contradictory experiences could be brought together into a coherent story. The purpose of the analysis was twofold: addressing the research questions, and providing some direction for Phase Two of the research. Building on the ordering of codes, candidate themes were centred on a sheet of paper and then the codes returned to hand-written format, mapped into clusters and sub-themes, see Figure 19 below. During this process very similar codes were not duplicated. The research questions focus on expectations, values, emotions, and relationships and this supported

the generation of seven candidate themes. These were: Effort, Who is it for?, Being Held, Learning, Unknown, Unique, and Shared Experience.

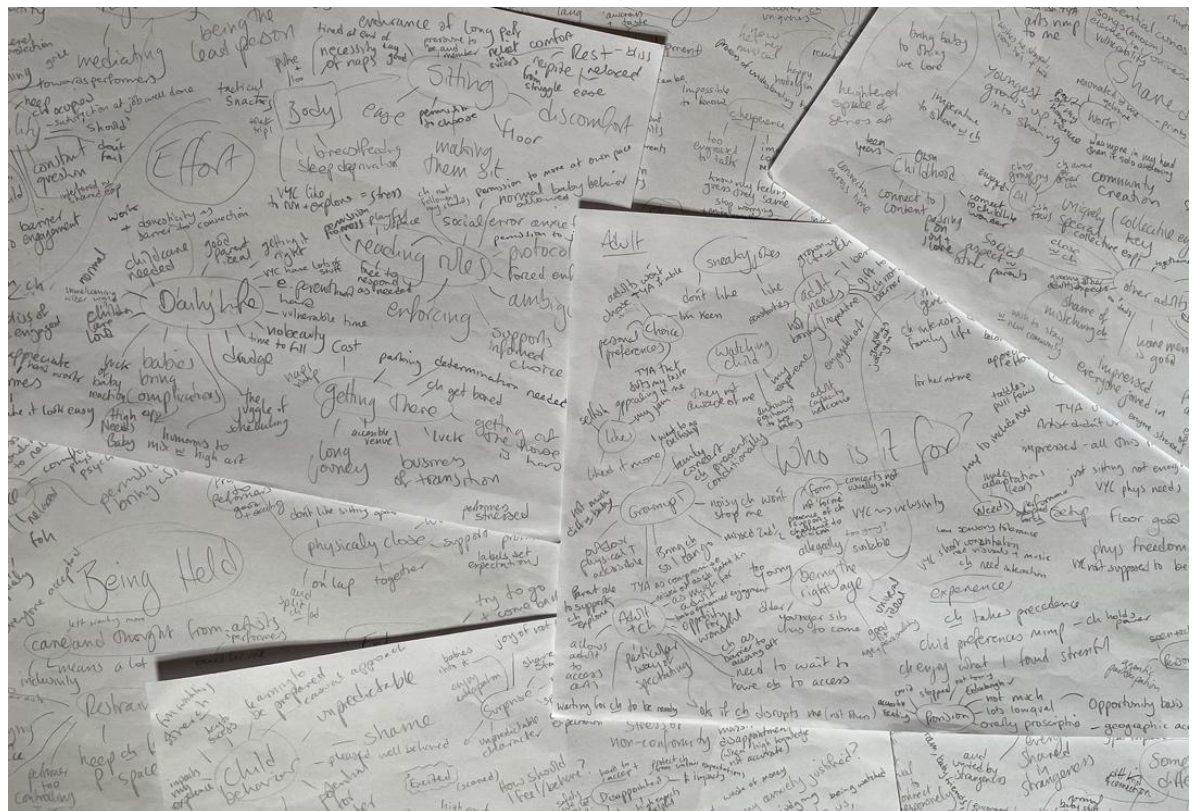


Figure 19: Generating initial Phase One themes

5.2.4 Developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes

Mapping these seven candidate themes allowed me to try out a different grouping where three main themes were able to contain those initial candidates. ‘Care’ (Effort, Being Held), ‘Surprise’ (Unknown, Unique), and ‘Sharing an Experience’ (Who is it for?) The ‘Learning’ theme was split and its sub-themes aligned to different candidate themes.

Returning to the transcribed interviews with highlighters, seeking to assign quotable sections to the candidate themes soon uncovered gaps and inconsistencies in this arrangement. The ‘Captivated’ aspect of ‘Being Held’ for example did not seem to fit easily under ‘Care’ without also including, or replacing it with ‘Attention’. More than just finding the right title, this phase of the analysis was an important search for cohesion. Making sure the themes were “bounded,

rich, coherent and important” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 99) was necessary for enabling a clear narrative in the findings. Certain areas, which felt important, seemed to be too peripheral in the theme scheme I was offering at this point. The idea of the event as a gift from parent to child for example, or an exploration of the barriers to attendance that participants faced.

Sorting the highlighted quotes into groups enabled the refining of the candidate themes. I used the following guiding concepts for each main candidate theme:

Attention: Being held and considered, the allocation of energies. Focus.

Sharing: Making connections and commonality

(Un)known: Seeking novelty and making discoveries with an unpredictable companion

I was then able to draw secondary and tertiary themes into the following map, Figure 20.

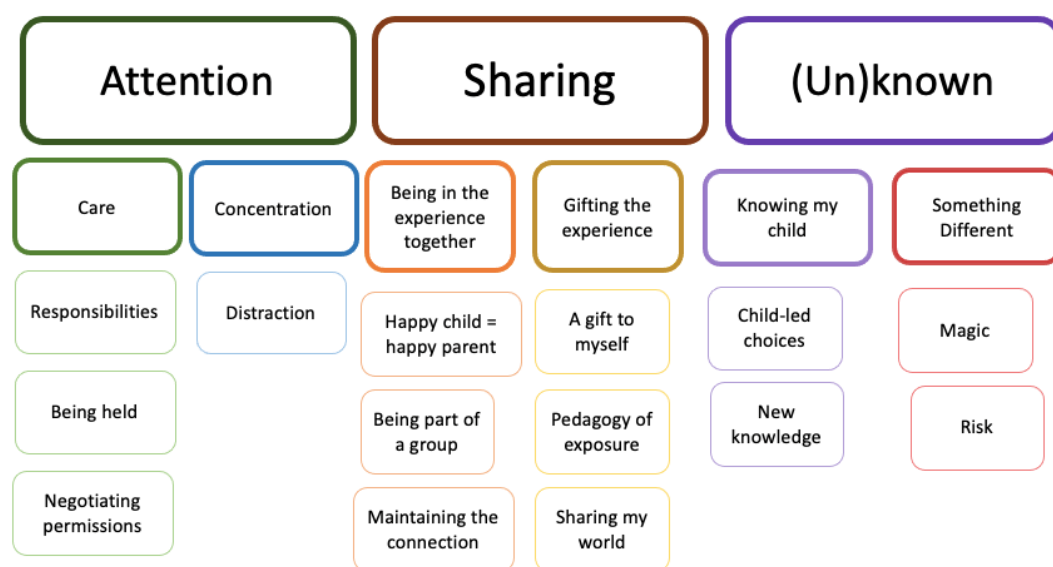


Figure 20: Phase One interim themes

5.2.5 Questions taken into Phase Two data collection and analysis

At this point I turned my attention to what was required from this analysis in terms of informing my approach to the Phase Two case study. Looking again at my candidate themes drawn from coding and potential yet-to-be-tamed themes that still called from the data, I considered what areas were most relevant to the fresh focus of filming an audience at an event. This brought

questions around voice and agency to greater prominence. Interview participants described the TEY environment as safe and inclusive, and child-performer relationships that were responsive; the case study gave me the opportunity to observe these dynamics in action. I moved into the second phase of data collection with the following additional questions as sub-questions of my second research question, ‘To what extent is TEY a shared experience?’

- How is individual agency manifested in the space?
- How is power shared?
- What, exactly, do the accompanying adults do during the performance?
- How is the environment created and received?

5.3 Phase Two Analysis

Analysis of Phase One data highlighted the gaps that Phase Two was better placed to address in answering the main research questions. In considering the phenomenology of the TEY adult experience, Phase Two provided opportunities to observe how parents responded in the moment to a performance and reflected on it shortly afterwards. In seeking to learn the extent to which TEY is a ‘shared experience’, Phase Two offered a group situation that was then reflected on by participants where power, roles, and other aspects of relational behaviour could be considered.

Methodologically, this half of the research was somewhat more complicated than that of Phase One. It included non-verbal data, and active choices I made during the process which informed data collection and analysis. The analytical processes conducted are listed chronologically in Table 8 below. They are mapped onto the Design Diagram in Figure 21 by number, which highlights their non-linear application within the multi-modal dataset.

	<i>Process</i>	<i>Data</i>	<i>Informed by</i>	<i>Product</i>
1	Reflections at the event	<i>Float</i> live performance	Phase One questions and embodied responses	Notes
2	Video transcriptions	Video footage	Research questions, participant voice, researcher interpretations	Transcriptions
3	Screenshot selection	Video footage	Phase One questions	Screenshots
4	Interview transcriptions	Interview recordings	Research questions, participant voice, researcher interpretations	Transcriptions
5	Initial noting	Casefiles	Research questions and researcher interpretations	Comments on Casefiles
6	Movement mapping	Camera A (above) footage	Observable participant movements	Digital drawings
7	Deductive Coding	Casefiles	Phase One Themes	Annotations on Casefiles
8	Mirror Game	Screenshots	Researcher embodied interpretations	Notes
9	Deductive Coding	Casefiles	Engagement Signals	Tables
10	Deductive Coding	Casefiles	Adult action categories	Tables

Table 8: Phase Two analysis processes

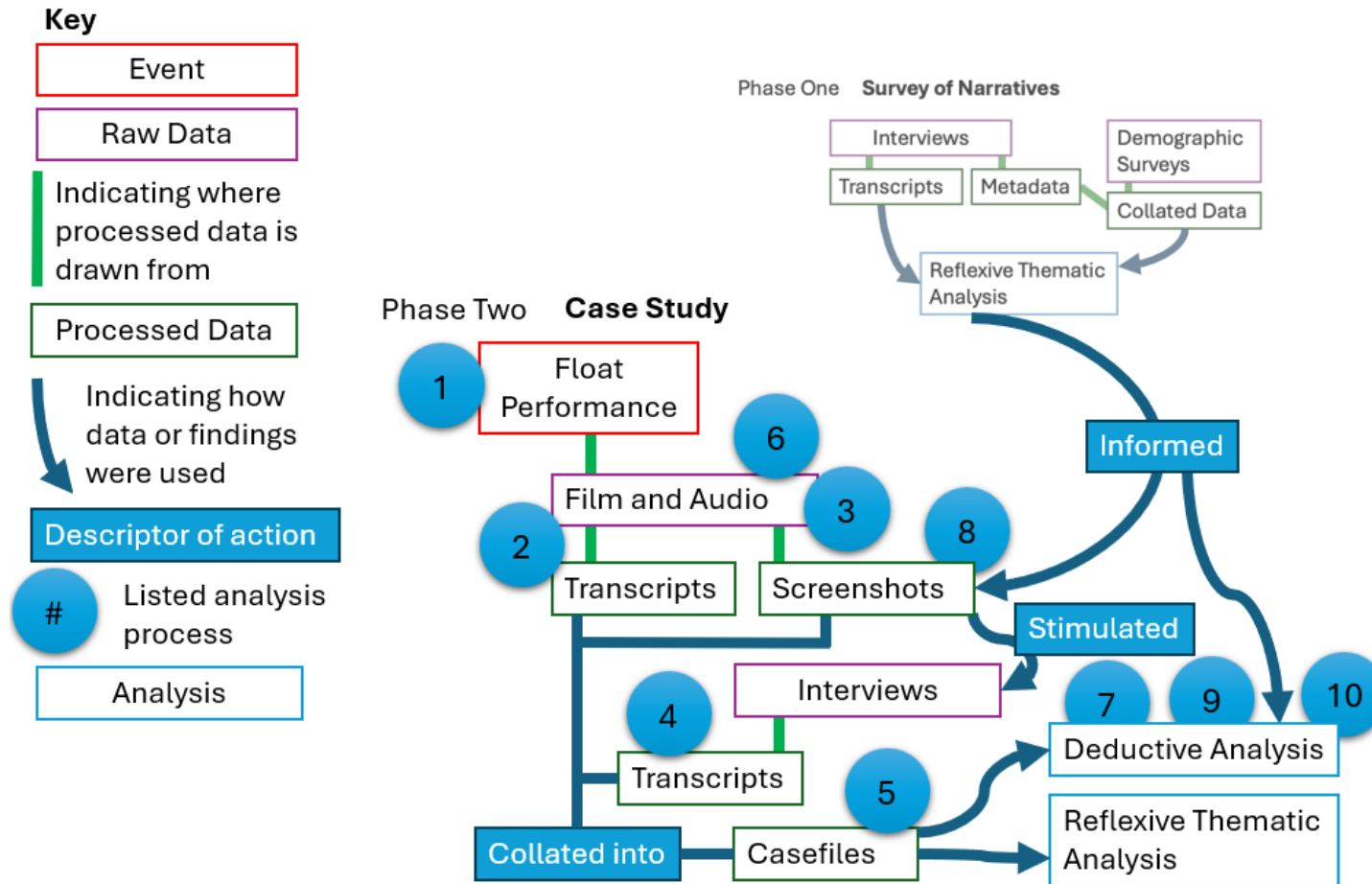


Figure 21: Design Diagram with Phase Two focus

5.3.1 Reflections at the event

The diagram above, Figure 21, includes the addition of the performance event, *Float*, as distinct from the audio and video data collected there. My analysis began at this live, in-person event, where I met the research participants, performers and production staff and joined the audience outside and inside the curtained performance area.

Attending a child-free rehearsal which took place in the morning of the event gave me the opportunity to move about the performance space freely, exploring the various heights and positions available to participants. During the filmed portion of the day, I took note of what felt sense of atmosphere I gathered from the room, outside the curtained area and inside, and changing with shifts in the performance. For example:

27/5/23 - Notes

A sense of calm and togetherness at introduction of song. -> Artists made same observation of shift in post-show chat.

By describing my immediate impressions of the *Float* event, I brought my personal interpretations to the surface early on, allowing me to interrogate my assumptions.

After the audience had all departed, I was able to chat with the lead artist and the performers. This was not a formal interview but helped me to understand their intentions and reflections on the work, which as a work in progress still included experimental aspects. A conversation which also supported my ethical approach through transparency as to my aims and affirming their written informed consent regarding image use and the representation of their work.

5.3.2 Video transcriptions

The description of action in the video transcription served the purpose of recording non-verbal activity to then enable a reflexive analysis. I aimed to describe the journey of each dyad as fully as the recordings would allow whilst bearing in mind the questions created by Phase One analysis. I strove to be accurate and complete within the scale of investigation. Units of action and interaction were described, as opposed to for example precise detail of hand movement or eye tracking.

Following one dyad or triad at a time I described action and transcribed audio where available, writing non-verbal vocalisations as speech in a script format. This helped maintain the flow of the conversations had between adults and infants and I felt that including a vocalisation for example as ‘eeuuu’ or ‘hnnnnn’ was more directly authentic than labelling them as ‘vocalises’, or ‘makes a noise’. Where there was an emotional quality to voice, this was included. E.g.

Violet climbs up onto Diana’s lap. Then flops, rolls, down and around.

Violet: (declamatory) eeeeeee

Diana catches her, chuckles a little. Watched by Kate.

Diana: Oop. Are you splish splashing? Are you splish splashing?

Violet: Euhnggg

Diana: Rhah

Diana+Violet 01:26:21

The camera clocks were synchronised with filming beginning at 01:00:00. Participants began to enter the curtained area from 01:10:00. In the example above we can see Diana and Violet had been inside the *Float* space for around quarter of an hour.

During the process of consciously seeking to observe and describe the participants’ feelings I was also aware of my own emotional and embodied responses. Having noted my own initial responses on the day I was then able to layer on additional viewpoints through following the individual journeys taken. These reflections informed my understanding and sensitivity to the variety of experiences had within a single event and provided prompts for questions to bring to the interviews.

It’s been really interesting watching it over and over again, but from different people’s perspectives. Feeling the energy differently. Watching [Beth and Joni] and listening to the audio there’s quite a lot of joy. Then watching some of the people who, though it’s not that they’re having a terrible experience, but there’s just a lot of moments of - here we go again. Mum sits down and then she has to get up again, and then she has to get up again, and, watching the video I’m tired and slightly on edge. More tense. It’s the broken, almost concentration, time and again.

3/10/23 Researcher Journal

5.3.3 Screenshot selection

The screenshots selected from the video footage were valuable interview prompts. During the process of video transcription, I would pause the video at a point of potential interest, take a screenshot and log it on a spreadsheet noting the time stamp, camera, participants featured, why I thought it was interesting, and what question I might ask the interviewee. Table 9 below gives an example of a small selection. These were then reviewed and edited to include a range of questions and a chronological spread through the *Float* event.

<i>Picture Code</i>	<i>Time Stamp</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Who in photo</i>	<i>Why chosen</i>	<i>Questions</i>
R0.22	01:18:41	E+L	Emma, <u>Lucy</u>	Early on, <u>Lucy</u> standing serious, Emma big smiles	Early impressions / interpretations?
R0.23	01:23:19	E+L	Emma, <u>Lucy</u> , <u>Innes</u>	<u>Innes</u> arriving with soft prop	What did Lucy think of other babies
R0.24	01:25:37	E+L	Emma, <u>Lucy</u> , HE	<u>Lucy</u> unhappy (briefly) lifted away from tank but pointing at it	What's going on?
R0.25	01:29:03	E+L	Emma, <u>Lucy</u>	Emma talking to <u>Lucy</u> , pointing at tank	What kind of things did you talk about, how are words helpful?
R0.26	01:31:49	E+L	Emma, <u>Lucy</u>	Looking at wave drum together	Shared experience?

Table 9: example from screenshot selection table

What constituted a point of potential interest was informed by my research questions, and the questions generated by Phase One analysis. This created a focus on relational action, and visible emotion. Some choices had a direct connection to the research questions. For example, a form of question on the triangular relationship between child, parent, and performer was asked of all interviewees, with a relevant and individual screenshot chosen for each to prompt discussion. Others were more individually responsive to the dyad observed, chosen to seek the parent's thoughts on a captured expression or specific action taken by them or their child.

5.3.4 Interview transcriptions

The procedure of transcribing interviews brought with it familiarisation with the data, and included interpretive choices on how or if to record non-lexical speech, physicality and tone. Once transcribed I assembled the interview and video transcripts, along with the screenshots used, into Casefiles. One for each dyad or triad.

5.3.5 Initial noting

I have used the term ‘initial noting’ to describe my early interpretive engagement with the data. This noting took the form of questions and curiosities, potential connections to literature or other parts of the dataset, and descriptors akin to Thematic Analysis coding. Coding implies a degree of thoroughness however that this noting did not fulfil, its main purpose was to highlight points in the data that could form potential connections. I made these notes, in the form of comments on the word document, during the process of video transcription and again ahead of the interviews.

5.3.6 Movement mapping

From screenshots from the fully lit, empty space taken at de-rig, Figure 22, I was able to trace a digitally drawn map of *Float*. This then became the base for tracing the journeys taken by the participants throughout the event. The camera placed above the space was not a perfectly central birds eye view. This resulted in an image that is foreshortened towards the opposite corner.

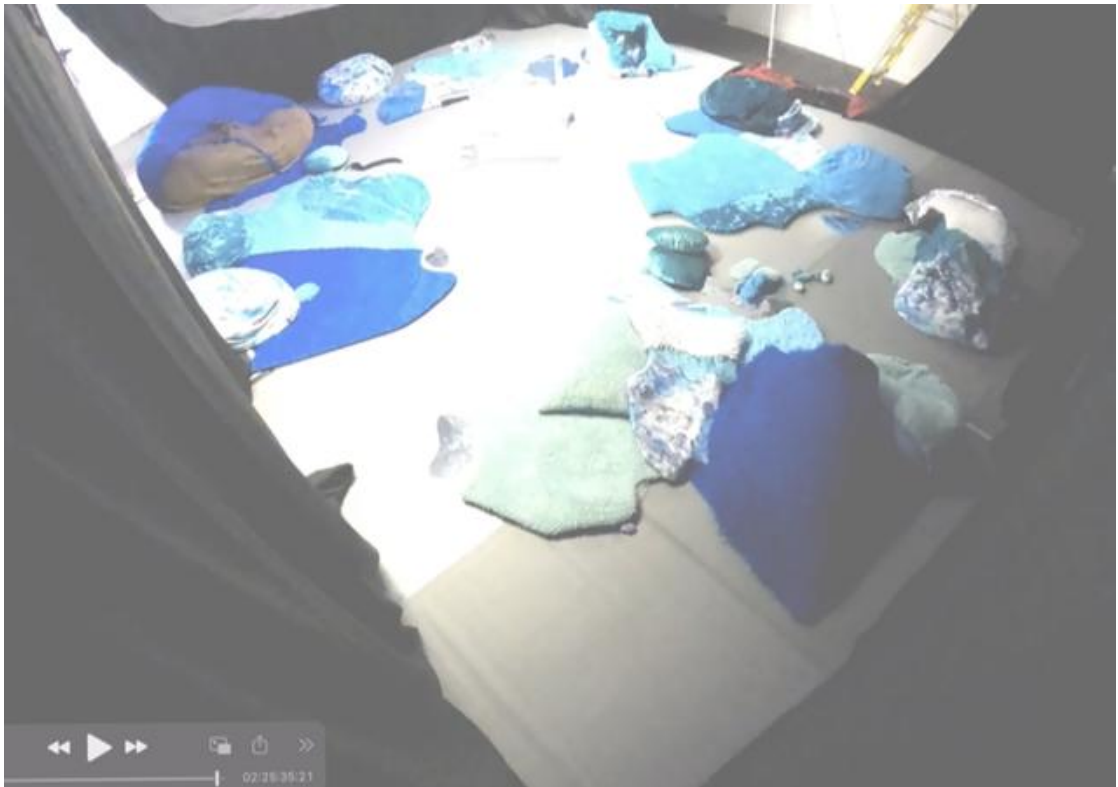


Figure 22: Empty Float performance space, Camera A

The examples here are: Beth and Joni, Figure 23, where Joni crawled away a little, and up to the tank, but generally stayed quite close to her mum; and Hannah and Innes, Figure 24, where Innes roamed and explored on his own more.



Figure 23: Beth and Joni movement map



Figure 24: Hannah and Innes movement map

The maps became a way in which I engaged with the different families' distinct embodied experiences, following the chasing, leading, encouraging, looping, sitting, rolling, carrying, and how it developed over the time there. These still pictures however only represent the total path taken and do not reveal how this was traced across the course of the 50 minutes spent within the performance area. It also does not reveal how much time dyads spent in physical connection to each other, or when apart, how far. For some participant dyads these temporal aspects were an important part of their story, and I looked for ways to investigate and represent these experiences.

I took note of Lucy's distance from Emma, also tracking who initiated the closing of the gap when they came together again. Numbers were approximations and included footage from the four cameras, taking in action outside of the curtained area as well as inside. Tracking how the distance increased over time, and the gap closing moved from child to adult-initiated told the story of Lucy's growing confidence, as reported by Emma in interview. Although interesting, this somewhat time-consuming tracking of child-parent distance did not create data of unique additional value. The potential use in taking measurements of other dyads for comparative purposes was not pursued as the relative mobility of the children was so different, the gross motor variation would hide any potential insights into relational movement.

The question of how important temporal observations were was also impacted by the form of the performance. *Float* was created to become a durational piece, with cyclical responsive actions by performers, it is not a story with a beginning, middle and end. Similarly, there was frequently multiple points of focus available to audience members who were themselves scattered throughout the space, intermingled with the performers. These elements meant that some questions around infant attention at TEY, such as those explored by Morley (2022), were not easily applied to *Float*. There were many moments of engagement to observe and that were discussed in interviews, as were moments of disengagement, and there were many instances of interactions between performers and other audience members. As my questions are centred on relationships and experience, I felt it was more important to find ways of describing these and looking for patterns there rather than looking at attention and movements across time in a granular way.

Following Emma and Lucy's partings and meetings led me to observing who closes the gap when they return to one-another. I relied on the observations to tally up these gap closings, finding that there was sufficient detail to do so. Counting these across the other dyads (and

triads) it became another way to get an understanding of, and illustrate, the relationships and in many cases the exercise of power.

5.3.7 Deductive coding

Though Phase One analysis had influenced data collection, it was after collating the video transcription, screenshots, and interview transcription into the Casefiles that I began to systematically apply deductive lenses during a coding process. The first of these lenses were the themes created in Phase One.

Hand coding was possible to do electronically by opening the Casefile document on an iPad and using the Apple Pencil stylus to hand-write in the margins, see Figure 25. This created a visible additional layer to the initial notes that I had been adding to the document. After testing of the technology, I created a colour code for the comments as they related to the themes, and questions, generated in Phase One.

- Attention, Green
- Sharing, Orange
- (Un)known, Purple

And

- Voice of the child, Highlighted Yellow
- Power, Red
- Ethical or methodological notes, Black

This enabled me to relate the codes I was creating, and extracts highlighted, to the Phase One themes and as part of the process discover where boundaries were potentially unclear, and what did not fit easily. There was a spaciousness to this phase of coding, with little pressure to make fixed decisions; I was working from themes of my own that were still at a 'candidate' stage, and open to finding new ways in which this phase of the data might communicate meaning.

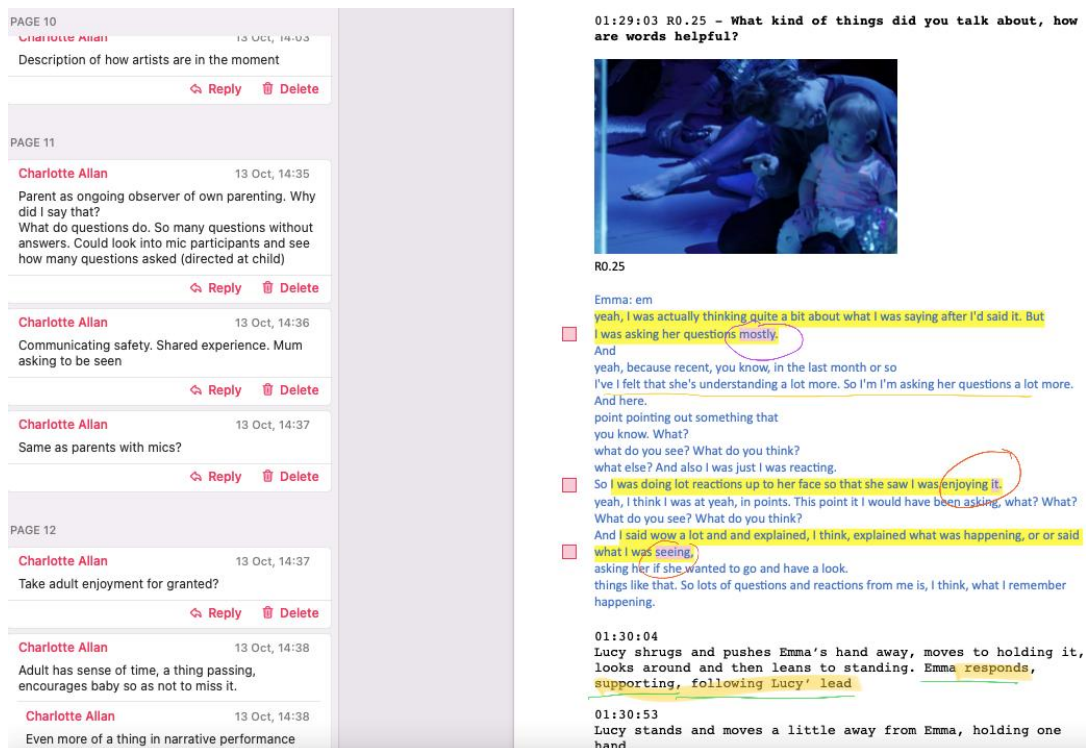


Figure 25: Casefile extract with notes and coloured highlighting

5.3.8 The Mirror Game

As part of my analysis process, I conducted a novel form of interpretive reflection informed by embodied practices within performance disciplines that I have termed the Mirror Game. ‘Mirror’ pertains to the act of mimicry I engaged in. I chose the word ‘game’ as it underlines the provisional and explorative nature of the process, and its roots in the performance rehearsal room where games have refining and generative qualities (Boal, 2005). A contribution towards the growing development of Embodied Inquiry (Leigh & Brown, 2021) within qualitative research, the Mirror Game was a process which informed my findings as a contribution within the other methods described. Utilising whole body mirroring and sensitive reflection it became another route by which to imaginatively and emotionally engage with the experience of infants and adults at TEY.

My initiating experience was observing a promotional image for a TEY show, which contained in the foreground a performer, an adult, and a baby. Both adult and baby were watching the performer, the adult smiling, but I noticed that the fingers of the child were gripping tightly to the adult. I copied this posture, facial expression, and tension, and it gave me a new perspective

on the intensity of the baby's engagement and the adult and child's differing experiences through their bodily tones. I was reminded of how a quick, surface level, view of an image can tell a different story to a closer observation. When I came to making detailed observations of the images chosen from the film footage of *Float*, I looked for a way to systemise this reflective, embodied, close observation, and developed the Mirror Game.

Multiple researchers have found mimicry and emotional perception across culture, gender, power imbalance, or in-group/out-group status (Hatfield et al., 2014). Such mimicry, of the face, posture or voice “produce emotional feedback that sparks contagion” (ibid. p169). Taking a method of studying emotion from images (Li et al., 2017) further, I was able, by drawing on my skills and training as a theatre performer to include mirroring as additional tool for working with the data. Embodied (Ellingson, 2017) and reflexive (Dean, 2017) methodologies require the acknowledgement of the researcher's body as an instrument and as an integral and impactful presence within the research. In addition to journaling which included descriptions of my physical, emotional and sensorial experiences, I applied a form of ‘outside in’ performance technique to the engagement with visual data. Motivation is important for the moves and choices actors make when expressing a character, and there are approaches taken which focus on finding this through working with physicality.

Whereas some acting approaches begin with an actor thinking about the character they wish to portray and then deciding how they might therefore move and inhabit space, there are established practices in performance development that take the body as the starting point, from which feelings and intentions (Čechov, 2002). An actor may learn about a character through inhabiting physical poses and gestures, knowledge which then goes on to inform an authentic and effective performance. Tensions and intentions are important to the work of Laban (Laban & Ullmann, 2011), who developed performance training and devising techniques centred on the body. Language was used by both Čechov and Laban to support communication across collaborators, as well as the performer's own personal reflections. Where embodied reflection has been employed for a therapeutic outcome however language, with the additional input of a therapist, can be a catalyst for bridging a perceived mind-body split thereby supporting personal integration (Chaiklin, 2009). I used language to expand my understanding of the individual embodied experiences of my participants, language I generated from close attention to my own sensorium including proprioceptive and interoceptive awareness.

The process I adopted was to observe an individual in a screenshot and mirror their posture and facial expression. I paid close attention to where tension, or tone, could be observed in the body and face and adopted the posture and expression of the participant. On occasions where the image was mid movement, with a suspension of gravity, the mirrored action became a repeated or explored movement rather than a still position. Once established in my position or repetition I brought my attention inwards, and spoke aloud what I noticed, words I captured as an audio recording. The third action was then to reflect on these short bursts of words and phrases, considering what the mirroring process had added to my understanding of that moment for the participant, and wider relevance across the study. I applied this process to all of the screenshots used in the interviews and included non-interviewed participants and performers. Some examples of text and notes generated from three different images are:

R0.10 Diana (Adult)

ready - to hold - to contain - weight is back - gaze is down - tension a little in shoulders – neck - strength in my arms

R2.2 HE (Performer)

the ease - tension that is dynamic – fluid – lifting – lifted - open – watching - ready

Notes: Performer bodies inhabit an ease, especially dancer HE, visible? Catching?

R0.4 Innes (Child)

tipping forward - keeping a pincer grip - just the tips of my fingers – fun – what?

Notes: The risk in reaching, knowing balance, holding excitement in fingertips

Using the third example, these words were at times descriptive of sensations experienced, such as ‘tipping forward’, other’s voiced from a feeling, a build of curiosity arrived at, ‘what?’ The notes made on the spoken words developed my interpretations, in the example here I reflected on reaching, which has physical and emotional content. These then informed my understanding of self-other relationships within the space.

For some of the adult participants I had transcriptions of the comments they made about the screenshots I used as stimulus for the Mirror Game. For some child participants I had access to

their parent's observations but not their own. For others I had neither. Bringing Mirror Game findings and participant reflections together created a richer picture though it was important to see these as distinct contributions, and not view the Mirror Game as a way of 'filling in the gaps' for adult participants who did not attend interview, or the inaccessible inner world of infants. Attempting to sit in the experience of another can only ever be that; an attempt. My own body has its limitations and strengths which differ from those I was mirroring. The image I draw my position from was limited by it being two-dimensional and a fraction of time. These impacted the location and extent of tone and tensions felt, and where a centre of gravity rests. I could also only approximate positions which were dependent on another person taking weight, though I used furniture and beanbags to help replicate different levels. Nevertheless, I found useful discoveries in this process with both adults and children, notably in exploring how volition and agency were experienced. I explored a felt sense of where energy was directed, which connected to Chekhov's (2002) work on 'centres' where imaginative layering of creating a character for performance is rooted in the body. Input from the Mirror Game process is included for each of the Case Portraits of Chapter 6, Findings.

5.3.9 Engagement Signals

Within the theme of *Attention* there were many actions and words in both Phase One interviews, and Phase Two Casefiles, coded for what was happening around engagement. Starcatchers (2024) Engagement Signals, initiated by Young and Powers (2008) and expanded by Martlew and Grogan (2013), are a useful tool to describe and thereby draw attention to the ways in which very young children engage with arts experiences. Seven observable signals, their titles are: Attuned, Absorbed, Mirroring, Responsive, Interactive, Instigative, Experimental. From the Casefiles I created a table of examples for the engagement signals observable in individuals, Table 10 provides some examples from one Casefile. The descriptors given with original emphases, are taken from the Engagement Signals document included in full as [Appendix I](#), with the examples from the Casefile of Beth and Joni.

Signal	Descriptor (Starcatchers, 2024)	Example (<u>Joni</u>)
Attuned	When a baby or child is intensely watching and cued in to what is going on	Screenshot R1.4 (<u>Joni</u> looking at HB with the microphone)
Absorbed	Intense attention for a period of time, including ignoring any distraction .	01:53:42 <i>Beth amused, by how totally into the floor mirror <u>Joni</u> is, a slight 'oh well' gesture</i>
Mirroring	Watching and reciprocating through repeating or copying .	01:23:22 <i><u>Joni</u> jumps up and down as HE splashes her feet up and down in the tank</i>
Responsive	Signs of responding positively can include positive or open body language - smiling, nodding, reaching.	01:23:22 <i><u>Joni</u> pats the tank. Turns back and moves to Beth, twisting her body to still look at HE's feet. Goes straight back to them again.</i>
Interactive	Physically responding to someone else, this is similar to responsive but it's a 2 way exchange with another person.	01:13:31 <i>HB leans down and sings, long rising tones. <u>Joni</u> sings very similar sounds</i>
Instigative	Provoking action in others through their own physical response or vocalisation.	01:39:30 <i><u>Joni</u> pulls at the fabric and HE leans into the pull, turning it into a shuggle.</i>
Experimental	Taking individual action with materials or props.	01:15:09 <i><u>Joni</u>: (Giggles) (Waving crinkly soft prop) eyeee! Beth: (laughing) Are you singing? <u>Joni</u> picks it up and throws it about a bit</i>

Table 10: Engagement Signals with examples from Beth and Joni Casefile

A separate table was then created for assigning Engagement Signals to moments in interviews where parents commented on their child's engagement in some way. This was more closely aligned to my research questions as it helped explore how the parents valued, encouraged, or supported engagement in its varied forms. In total there were five tables of Engagement Signal examples:

- Observed in children engaging with *Float* (as examples in Table 10 above)
- Observed in parents engaging with *Float*
- Observed in parents engaging with children
- Parents comments on child engagement
- Parents comments on own engagement

Fewer examples of Engagement Signals were observable in the adults, when looking at how they engaged with the performers and the environment of *Float*. However, when I looked again at how they engaged with their children there were many examples available across the spread of parents, including those observed but not interviewed. This notion of their own child being the most interesting thing in the room was an important finding. Where they did engage with the performance directly and independently it was with the material components rather than the human performers, which connects to my interest in the triangular audience and expressions of power.

5.3.10 Adult Action Categories

A similar process was then conducted seeking examples in the actions of the adults which corresponded to the categories described by Morley in her (2022) thesis.

Morley's focus was the responses of infant audience members, and her Taxonomy of Relative Stillness describes the precocious attention often reported at TEY. I did not pursue using this aspect of her work to frame my analysis however as our stimulus events were too dissimilar. Participants at *Float* were not called upon to maintain a shared focus of attention in the way that those attending the performance central to her study, *Sixteen Singers*, were. Conceived as a

durational performance with flowing and sometimes multiple points of interest, *Float* was not designed for the engagement described by Morley. This was established at the outset in the way the seating was offered, and that performers engaged with individuals and small groups around the space. As reported by lead artist Kerry Cleland, this effect was even more pronounced at earlier *Float* performances given in larger rooms, where there was less interaction between family groups. Children were also encouraged to roam freely from the beginning. Morley's work on relative stillness however is still very relevant to bring into wider analysis of the whole dataset, given the frequency of the expression of surprise and pleasure in how very young children engaged with performance as reported in Phase One interviews. That it would not be appropriate to try and find what Morley described in my video footage is also illustrative of how much TEY performances can vary from one to another.

Morley's description of adult action categories however I did find a helpful lens. She observed four actions: Intervention, Interpolation, Interruption and Companionship (Morley, 2022, p. 119). In Table 11 below I list these categories with descriptors from Morley (2022) and a sample for each from a Casefile.

<i>Action Category</i>	<i>Descriptor (Morley, 2022)</i>	<i>Example from Paige and <u>Amber</u> Casefile</i>
Intervention	Safety and comfort... according to physiological need and safety	01:13:30 <u>Amber</u> moves forward and Paige supports her, kneel walking. Lets go of her as she reaches tank
Interpolation	Forced engagement... forcing engagement with the performance according to the parents' own cultural habitus	01:16:04 Paige: What's over there <u>Amber</u> look? Paige moves <u>Amber</u> around so they are both looking in the same direction.
Interruption	Fussy parenting... fussy parental behaviours unrelated to the performance, with a strong crossover to the idea of 'performed parenting'	01:26:14 <u>Amber</u> sits in front of Paige looking at HE with hair in water. Paige picks up a pebble and hands it to her, <u>Amber</u> puts it in her mouth, Paige looks at her
Companionship	Mutual viewing... close to a mutual or intersubjective viewing experience	01:54:33 Both sit and watch HB with <u>Joni</u> and mic

Table 11: Adult action categories

Although I had been actively interpreting data from the outset, this was the first time I felt a discomfort in my labelling and sorting. This unease came from what felt like a judgmental aspect to the categories, 'fussy parenting' for example is not a phase I would have chosen and was not easy to find in my dataset. The example of observed activity given above relates to a more expanded descriptor of the category of 'Interruption', where the parent's action breaks the focus the child had on the performance. Taking the Adult Action Categories to the interviews however yielded examples of the parents' perspectives on their own actions, explanatory and at times critical. Crucially there was expansion on what parents hoped to achieve with their actions: the thoughts and feelings behind what can be observed as Interpolation or Interruption.

5.4 Bringing the Two Phases Together

After these varied approaches to engaging with the Phase Two data my next task was to return to the Phase One analysis and work towards a coherent set of themes that made sense of the patterns I had found across the whole dataset. An encompassing action illustrated by Figure 26 below.

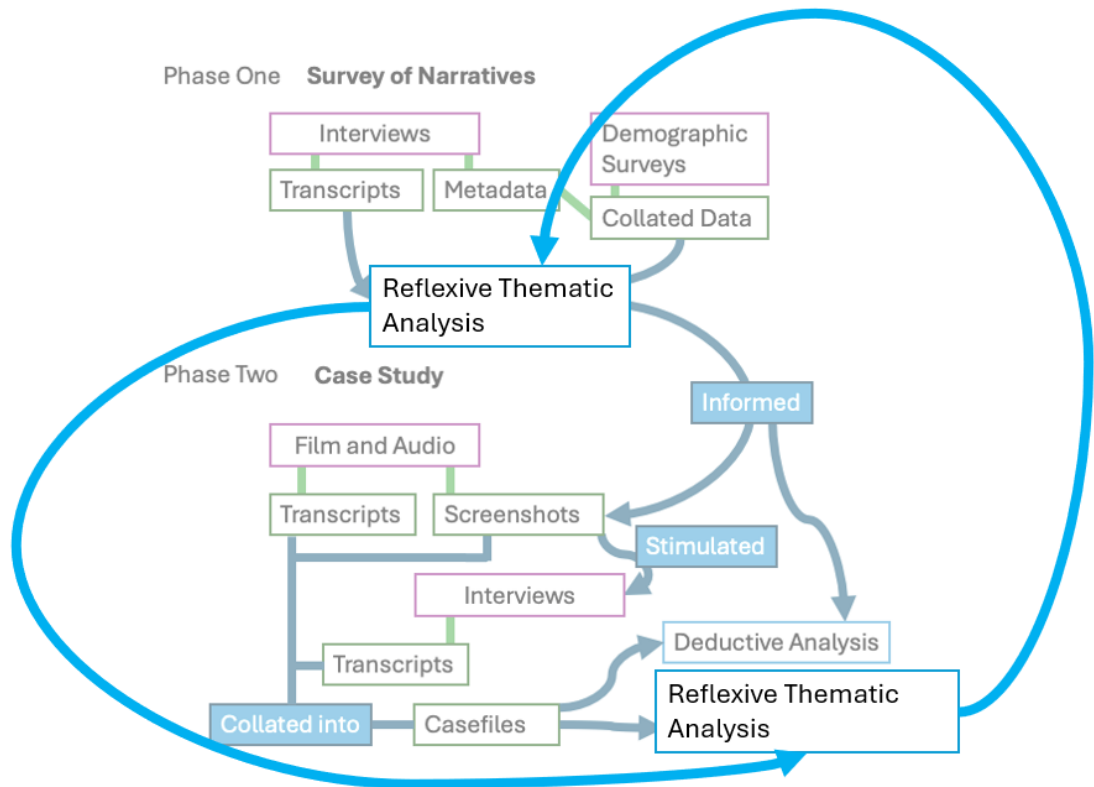


Figure 26: Design Diagram connecting the two phases

To allow the two analysis processes to talk to one-another, I needed to generate movable components from the Phase Two processes. I used different coloured paper for each of the dyads or triads and printed extracts from the Casefiles, mirroring analysis, and tables of Engagement Signals and Adult Action Categories. Using scissors, large sheets of paper, coloured pens, and a round table I brought the two phases together onto the Phase One theme map, highlighting ill-fitting codes or questions as I went along, see Figure 27.



Figure 27: Mapping Phase Two samples into Phase One themes

In reviewing the candidate themes from Phase One, now including Phase Two data, I found them to be holding well though better definitions of subthemes were required. The main themes expressed the key components of the adult TEY experience and provided a meaningful structure to share findings. Some sub-themes seemed to be superficially appropriate for the Phase Two extracts though were revealed to have distinct meaning, for example ‘Child-led choices’ which in Phase One described the influence children had on the events adults chose to attend but with Phase Two data mainly related to action within the space. It was also clear that Phase Two had more to say about certain themes than others, the connecting factor being extracts relating to interactions and relationships within the space.

My intention was for the two halves of the research to be balanced in status, both offer aspects that the other lacks, and for their relationship to be primarily complimentary (Bryman, 2016). Deferring entirely to themes formed in Phase One could imply that Phase Two had more of a triangulatory function and there were important insights from the Phase Two that I did not want to include in a peripheral way. Crucially, Phase Two was home to relational content and the presence of infants as participants. In wrestling with this conundrum I determined not to fall too easily into the path of least resistance. Words are easier to theme than images, processes, embodied feelings, or sense impressions. If I leave aside the difficult to describe I take away the opportunity to give voice to aesthetic experiences, and space to listen to the voices of pre-verbal children.

The Casefile approach retained the distinct journeys taken by the different families, informed by and enacted through their individual bodies. This specificity brought out some of the immediacy I was seeking. I drew on Phase Two analysis to create a ‘Case Portrait’ for each family. Using the movement map as their profile image, I describe their experience at *Float* and include extracts from interviews, video transcripts, and Mirror Game analysis. These Case Portraits serve as introductions to voices appearing throughout the findings and are presented in Chapter 6. The refined themes and subthemes are then described in Chapter 7, drawing on data extracts from both Phase One and Two. Screenshots from *Float* are shared and described in the presentation of themes. To protect identities, pseudonyms are not included in image descriptions.

Chapter 6: Findings - Case Portraits

For clarity, and to support contextual understanding, I use the following conventions laid out in Table 12 below, when sharing samples from the data:

<i>Category</i>	<i>Style</i>	<i>Example</i>
Video transcription	Courier font	<u>Joni</u> reaches for the mic
Interview quotes	Times New Roman italicised	<i>she doesn't always respond in that way to everyone</i>
Phase One Adult participants	Randomly assigned number	Participant_25
Phase Two Adult participants	Pseudonym	Beth
Phase Two Child participants	Pseudonym underlined	<u>Joni</u>
Artists in <i>Float</i>	Initials	HB

Table 12: Style reference for presenting Findings

The Case Portraits focus on the seven dyads and two triads who attended *Float*. They offer windows into the variety of paths taken and, where available how parents reflected on their experiences. I am sharing these before the themes as, alongside the Phase One metadata presented they introduce the people whose participation enabled the generation of the themes.

6.1 Beth and Joni

Beth wore a lapel microphone and took part in a follow-up interview.

At *Float* Joni was crawling.



Figure 28: Journey map of Beth and Joni

Joni spent a lot of her time with, sat upon, or held by Beth, especially early on. She also crawled towards people and objects of interest. She is the orange line on the map and dotted moments indicate when she was being carried. Beth, in red, moved between a few settled positions and was never far away from Joni.

Joni engaged with people at her own pace and maintained engagement if this was met, as with HB:

Joni bounces more and HB mirrors, they have a bouncy arm/body conversation.

BETH+JONI 01:23:08

She turned away from attention that was too direct, as with another adult leaning in to say hello after the performance had finished. Joni had repeated meetings with HB, playful and friendly interactions that consisted of vocal and physical non-verbal conversations.

HB holds a stick microphone

HB: bah, bah

Joni: babubaaaar

HB and Beth laugh

Beth: good job

HB: good job

Beth: well done, be a singer

Joni: (squeals)

BETH+JONI 01:27:24

Beth brought up this relationship in interview, finding value in the rarity and sensitivity.

I mean, she was lovely. And I think as a parent when someone interacts with your child like really gently. And they respond, really, well, there's something really special about that, because you know that she doesn't always respond in that way to everyone.

Beth

During *Float* Beth laughed frequently, spoke with excitement, and whispered with joy. She chatted easily with other adults present before and after the event, some of whom she had an existing friendly acquaintance with. During the performance her focus was on Joni.

I think, my level of comfort and ease might have made Joni more relaxed as well

Beth

Uniquely, Beth and Joni had attended an earlier version of *Float* four months previously at a different venue. Now Joni was crawling Beth was interested in how she would engage differently with the various elements. Beth made some suggestions and offers of redirection but mostly looked for and followed Joni's interests, joining in with and building on Joni's actions.

Beth is amused by how totally into the floor mirror Joni is. Beth makes a slight 'oh well' gesture.

*Beth moves to sitting to side of Joni and mirror.
Beth points to the mirror.*

Beth: Who's that, is that Joni? Who's that?

BETH+JONI 01:53:42

Beth was very pleased at Joni's confidence in the space. In interview she reflected on how she had been concerned about returning to work as Joni was 'clingy', and that her sociability at *Float* had been reassuring. Watching Joni gave Beth a vicarious delight in her discoveries, and a comfort in Joni's capacity to take on new challenges ahead.

I just really enjoyed her independently, exploring the space, and kind of discovering things

Beth

Beth brought a lot of confidence into the experience which enabled her to enjoy moments of discovery, including observing increased confidence in her child. The Mirror Game analysis supported my understanding of Beth's social comfort in the space, an ease which enabled her to give her full attention to Joni. This ease was supported by positive, friendly relationships with acquaintances and strangers met in the space. Aspects which connect to themes and discussion concerned with care, and the responsiveness of performers.

6.2 Diana and Violet

Diana wore a lapel microphone and took part in a follow-up interview.

At *Float* Violet was walking, running, stumbling and wriggling.



Figure 29: Journey map of Diana and Violet

Violet was often in active forward motion. Some dotted lines on the map indicate where she was carried back into the space by Diana. Drawn forward to objects of interest or open space, Violet resisted being restrained, stumbled at times and had a moment of lying down, whole body wriggling. She was only unhappy when subjected to a nappy change. Diana stayed close behind her, guarded other children, and sometimes caught her stumbles.

The Mirror Game allowed me to feel into the contrasting physical experiences of Diana and Violet. Diana's poised readiness, described by her in interview as 'vigilance' was felt in an anticipatory tension across points of balance and connection to floor, or furniture. I felt Violet's centre as ahead of herself at times, and meetings with surfaces and people as wholly present

experiences. Her moment of supine wriggling, though peculiar, perhaps even concerning to observe from the outside, was huge fun to explore from the inside. Complete abandonment to the present moment, pure action, and the living self.

Diana was very vocal. She sang when the performers sang, and talked to Violet about everything they encountered. She directed Violet's attention and offered interpretations. She also used her voice to advise and reassure Violet when she was out of arm's reach.

Diana keeps hold of Violet as she goes towards other babies. Lying across Diana's legs Violet waves her legs near Freya who is on hands and knees.

Diana: Yeah. (gasp) Gentle with your feet, gentle. There we go.

Diana lifts Violet up and away from Freya. Freya follows Violet's movement with her gaze and looks up at Diana

Diana: (to Freya) Hiya

Freya crawls back towards Shona, Diana points at the floor where there are moving projections and lifts Violet down on to it.

Diana: (gasp) Do you see the lights bubba? See all over. Are they like stars?

Violet: (pointing at floor) Da

Violet gets up and toddles to tank. Stands looking at it, walks backwards, stumbles and falls to bum, still looking forwards. Diana puts out an arm, guiding the fall, protecting Joni.

DIANA+VIOLET 01:35:37

Diana came down to Violet's level often and supported her interactions with performers and props. When reflecting on the experience of *Float* in interview however, Diana's need to be 'vigilant' and feeling 'whatever the opposite of relaxing is' was her dominant memory. She did not remember singing along for example, but the worry of Violet hurting others or herself.

I felt like she had very few limits in a really beautiful exciting way for her, my limits were there because I'm responsible for her as well as her interacting with other people in the space
Diana

Diana had a strong sense of her social responsibility in a public space as well as that of carer to Violet. The unspoken rules of the environment exerted a strong force on her.

*Violet walks towards the entrance curtain, Diana
moves to hold her back*

KC: It's alright go on in

Diana: Are you sure?

DIANA+VIOLET 01:09:41

As *Float* was at development stage, there were still elements which limited the ambition of what Kerry Cleland described as creating a Yes Space. A Yes Space should be somewhere where permission is easy, and participants receive the answer 'yes' (verbally or otherwise) to whatever action, observation, interaction or request their curiosity and needs guide them to. The message given by the built environment was not fully able to echo the spoken rules. Although told explicitly that she could enter and leave the space as she wished, the presence of a company member at the exit curtain, and the knowledge that the performance would last for a fixed time gave Diana conflicting information.

I think we had enough before it felt like we were allowed to be done
Diana

The process of the research interview gave Diana an opportunity to revisit *Float*, and appreciate some of the moments that had been overshadowed by her need to keep Violet and the other children safe all the while being:

*acutely aware all the time of how big I am... taking up more space in a space that was
already very full*
Diana

Observing some of the screenshots of Violet engaging with *Float* in ways that were attentive, gentle and receptive, Diana was grateful that these moments were also highlighted.

Summing up Violet's experience she observed:

*I don't think it was her like – Oh my god this is the best day of my life – because I think
every day is the best day of her life right now which is awesome*
Diana

Diana was committed to allowing her "very active child" to fully experience an opportunity such as *Float*. This cost her to expend mental and physical energy, not just in the room, chasing and guarding, but in the organising of the whole day to best schedule food, sleep and travel.

Diana's thinking always of what has come before, and where they will go next, "keeping balls in the air", was the essence of what delivered for Diana and Violet such divergent experiences. Diana holding the edges of past and future safe so that Violet could inhabit a delightfully unknown, ever unfolding present.

Diana's experience connects to discussion on public behaviour and behaviour policing in *The Dance of the Rules*, particularly in the way she inferred rules in addition to those given. Their divergent experience of time connects to *The Dance of Space and Time*.

6.3 Emma and Lucy

Emma took part in a follow-up interview.

At *Float* Lucy was walking

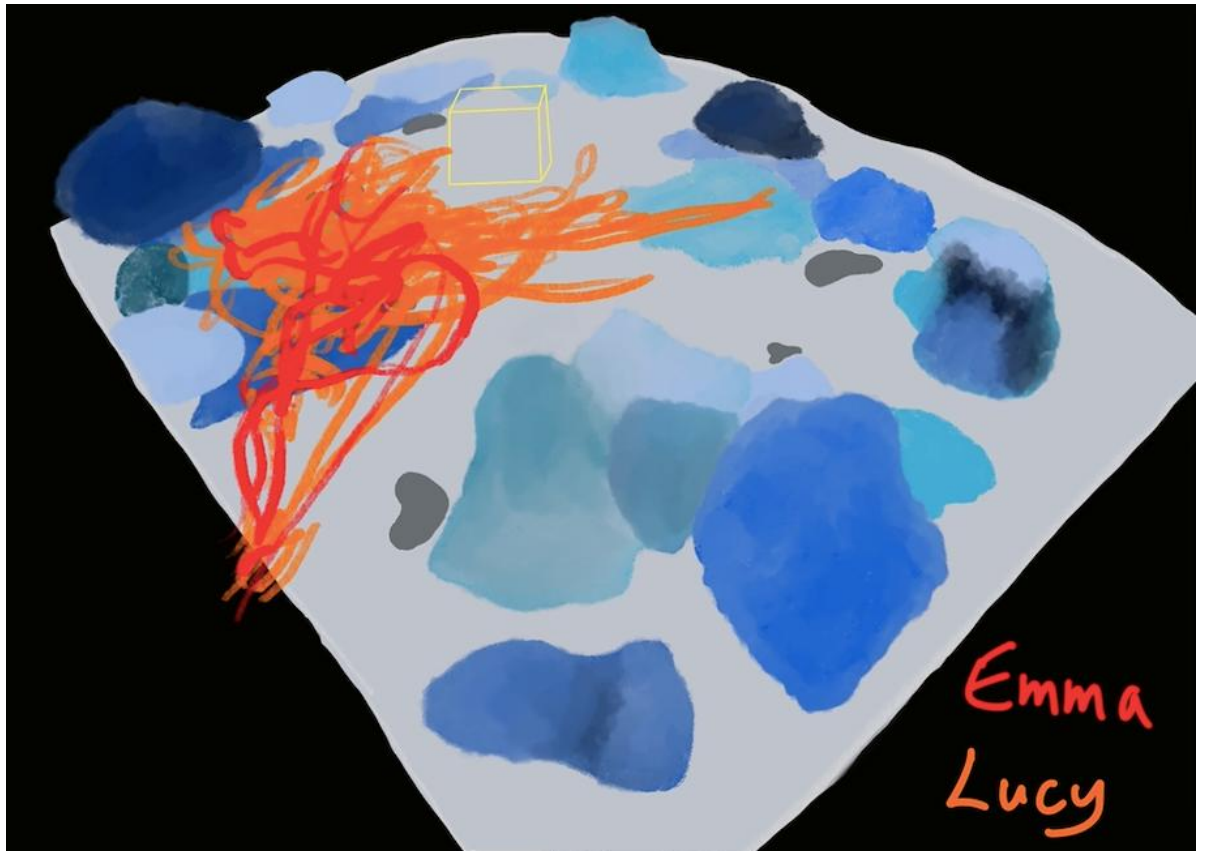


Figure 30: Journey map of Emma and Lucy

Lucy began sitting on Emma's lap and holding her close. She gradually became bolder, moving towards people or the tank, returning to Emma, then leaving again, going slightly further each time. Her return to Emma with smiles and cuddles became a game with rhythm – how far will I go this time?

Lucy turns away from tank and stands and looks at the people near her, waits for babies to pass. Lucy catches Emma's eye (who has been watching her the whole time) and runs to her with a smile.

Lucy holds Emma's hand for a while then moves into the open flat space. Squats down.

This established Emma's position, physically in space, and as Lucy's safe place psychosocially. For Emma, the physical proximity did not mark their closeness:

It was almost like we had an unspoken kind of agreement together. You know I would be there... It didn't take anything away from it being shared if she was kind of on the other side of the room.

Emma

Later, with her confidence established Lucy also greeted and hugged another parent, Shona, who she did not know beforehand. In interview Emma speculated that perhaps she had gone to her by mistake, though observing the film where Lucy looks at Emma whilst she is with Shona, this does not seem likely. Emma enjoyed this confirmation of Lucy's sociability and the open friendliness of *Float*.

yeah, the space just was made for building friendships

Emma

As well as the friendliness of other audience members, Emma appreciated the sensitivity and kindness of performers. She referred to the term Yes Space and felt the atmosphere benefited from being built, intentionally, with this freedom in mind.

But yes space is good for the babies, but it's so good for the parents as well. You know but the artists just immediately. It's also like we're in this, together with the baby, like we're doing it together as a team. So you're not on your own here type of thing. That's how it. That's how it felt

Emma

When Lucy was with Emma, Emma drew her attention to people and things and spoke to her, "asking her questions mostly". She also recalled consciously making deliberate facial expressions and eye contact to show Lucy that she was happy, and unafraid in this strange new place.

In the Mirror Game I found a rooted, groundedness in Lucy, particularly when she was making considered observations. Her movements from a place of strength were felt bodily from herself, as well as from the steady, reliable connection to Emma.

Emma felt lucky to be able to access an experience like *Float* and delighted in Lucy's confidence and her interactions with artists, and other audience members. Afterwards, outside the curtained area, Lucy was happy to see, be seen and go anywhere.

There was this one moment I saw her go in and she like, threw open the drapes, made this massive entrance. I was like Oh, God (laughing) I think, that captured it beautifully. I think she at that point she was just like - Oh, I know this space, now, this is just fine. This is my space now as well, just go in here and do what I want... this is my space now

Emma

Emma and Lucy's elastic connection is relevant to discussion in *The Dance of Space and Time*, as well as *Self and Other*. Emma's enjoyment of observing and reflecting on Lucy's experience is an example of the joy in discovery many participants reported.

6.4 Gill, Nick, and Quinn

Adults did not attend interview

At *Float* Quinn was crawling, and cruising a little

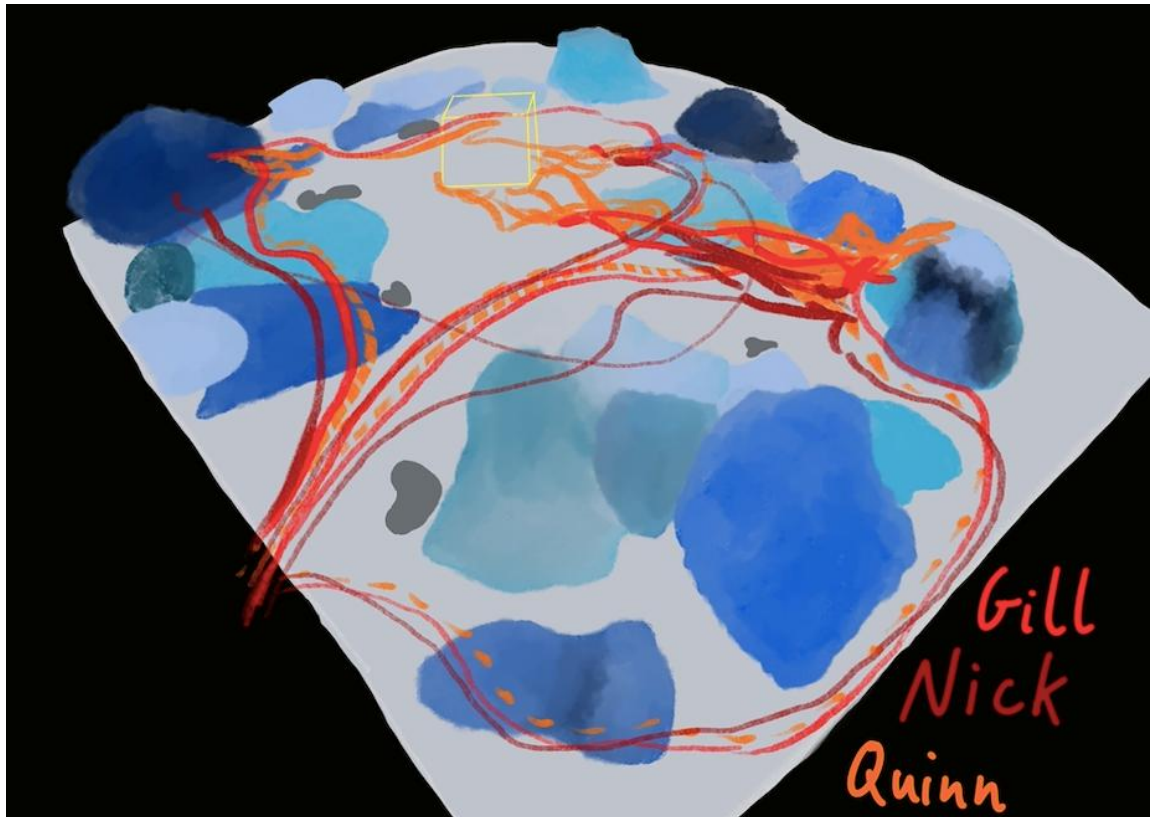


Figure 31: Journey map of Gill, Nick, and Quinn

Quinn crawled, and cruised a little, she always stayed close to one or both of her parents. She made a tentative friendship with KC. Gill and Nick took turns bringing Quinn to the tank. They played with some of the objects with Quinn. Gill smiled and waved at other babies. Most of the time the family sat together as a trio, in the same small area. After the performance had concluded and the other audience members had left, they returned to the space and spent some time exploring the tank close up together.

Gill and Nick were both amused by Quinn's initial amazement, and smiled at her explorations. They chatted to one-another, directing each other's gaze to artists or children, commenting on amusing interactions.

Nick and Gill talking and looking at Calum walking up to the tank. Nick says something and Gill giggles, covering her mouth. Nick makes a fist banging gesture with big open mouth. They both giggle, Nick looks back at Gill*

GILL,NICK+QUINN 01:24:41

*Gill and Nick knew Orla (and Calum) well but had not seen them for a while

Quinn was tentative and cautious in her interactions with people who were not her parents. KC had a number of gentle moments with her, taken at Quinn's pace.

KC shining torch on Quinn. Who looks at it, and at HB. Gill and Nick watch Quinn. Quinn makes small reach to Gill and KC moves back. Shines light on floor. Quinn reaches for floor and strokes the textured ground, crawling on to it. Gill feels it.

GILL,NICK+QUINN 01:18:47

In the Mirror Game I sat with Quinn's watchful wariness, and Nick's contained tiredness. One position, where Quinn crawled forward and Gill was on hands and knees above her, felt secure and welcoming for both. At one point Nick yawned with his whole body. When they had the room to themselves, Nick moved with a lot greater freedom, sitting on beanbags and the floor in different areas. By this point however Quinn was not happy, and not interested in the water tank or props.

As they did not take part in interview I was unable to ask Gill, and/or Nick about the experience of being a 'three' at the event. Their interactions with each other brought a different dynamic from the dyadic families which would have been interesting to hear about. They seemed to take turns, with one having more focus on Quinn, and the other freer to observe the performers and other audience members. Displaying levels of split and dual view available within the event.

6.5 Hannah and Innes

Hannah took part in a follow-up interview.

At *Float* Innes was walking and climbing



Figure 32: Journey map of Hannah and Innes

Innes was a confident walker. He was curious and friendly with other babies and artists. He was happy sitting on an artist's lap and clambering on beanbags, watching new moments of movement unfurl, exploring the edges of the tank. Hannah pulled him away from physical contact with other babies, and monitored high beanbag play, but otherwise watched him from a seated position, sometimes close together, sometimes well beyond arm's reach. The frequency and distance of their movements had a high contrast, for Hannah this was a choice which supported Innes' explorations.

If he goes off then I like to stay in the same spot. So he sort of knows where to come back to and find me
Hannah

In the Mirror Game I felt a quality of brightness with Innes, a light openness. Hannah's seated positions were especially relaxed and settled, with a comfortable dropped weight.

Hannah found the experience fun and relaxing. An effect she attributed to the freedom which Innes was permitted within the space.

Because there's rules like all the time... even around the house, it's always like, no, don't touch this, don't touch that... I think that's why I was so relaxed because there weren't really any rules which was nice, that he could just go and explore wherever he wanted, and I felt like, the environment was safe
Hannah

Her only interventions with Innes' explorations were when she perceived a risk to other babies that he might cause, for example disentangling a tight hug with a smaller child. She also guarded Innes and Calum from potential large beanbag tumbles, though did not restrict or redirect their climbing. She brought herself physically close to Innes in moments that might require her action, paying close attention to his activity. For example when he showed interest in very young, sleeping Thomas in Kate's lap.

Hannah leans forward, becoming a ball, to be eye to eye with Innes. Hannah shares a smile with Kate as Innes looks at little Thomas.

HANNAH+INNES 01:48:00

Even when close together, Hannah and Innes' communication with one-another was largely non-verbal. From screenshots shared in interview, Hannah described her interpretation of Innes' turns to her during his interaction with a performer; a deliberate invitation on Innes' part to share in his meeting of something new and exciting.

He would just occasionally look to me for like, not even reassurance. It was like, it felt like almost like amazement. Like - are you seeing this, too?
That's what it felt like he was he was saying to me.
Hannah

At other times Innes was in closer physical contact with a performer than he was with Hannah. She perceived her role in the space as primarily an observer, when the performer actively included her this was felt as an act of care.

[He was] sat in the performer's lap some of the time in a way that he would often do with me like I felt like he felt quite secure, and at one point she looked back to me like, just like smiled at me. I guess like that, was quite nice to sort of feel like she was acknowledging that obviously like they were, you know, having quite a, sort of intense interaction with Innes, and I was like not there. I thought that sort of brought me in a bit, which was quite nice, not that they have to do that. But like, I did sort of quite like that.

Hannah

The overall experience for Hannah was transporting, she felt absorbed by the gentle action and atmosphere presented.

I came away like feeling like I hadn't been there for an hour at all, like I felt like it had just been like, like ten minutes or so, it went really quickly

Hannah

Hannah made non-verbal connections during *Float* with Innes and with artists. In interview she was able to share how much she enjoyed these. As with other participants, her expression of gratitude for the opportunity connects to themes of care and the notion of a 'safe space'.

6.6 Kate, Matt, and Thomas

The adults did not take part in interviews

At *Float* Thomas was very young, and sleeping in his parents' arms

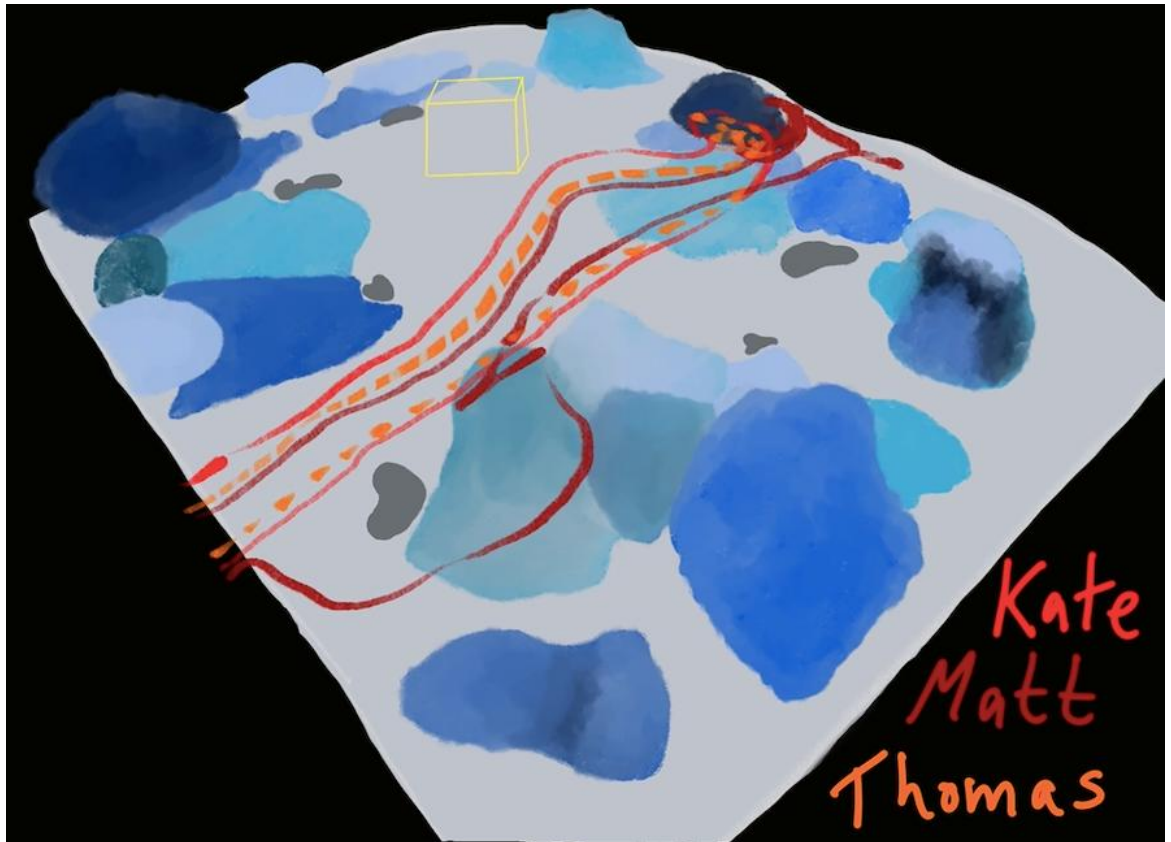


Figure 33: Journey map for Kate, Matt, and Thomas

Kate and Matt carried or held Thomas, who slept throughout. They watched the other babies and the performers, talking quietly to each other, sometimes pointing a thing out to the other, sharing a giggle. They loved watching children interact with the artists. Matt was quick to give friendly smiles and waves to children who came up to or looked at him. Matt and Kate were both ready to guard Thomas from stumbling toddlers.

Kate smiles at Innes who stands and looks towards her. Matt is looking at Thomas, some glances at the room, but mostly baby. Matt looks where Kate is looking. Then back to Thomas, Kate follows his gaze to Thomas and they both look at him, sleeping in Matt's arms.

KATE, MATT+THOMAS 01:47:00

In the Mirror Game I explored the quality of centring both Kate and Matt had when they were the one holding Thomas, and when they were not. A gathered focus of concern. The Mirror Game with Thomas was a search for complete relaxation and safety.

Other parents, who attended interview, mentioned their awareness of Thomas as being especially vulnerable due to his age. Diana, whose *Float* experience was defined by her following of her active toddler Violet, commented on the more traditional spectatorship experience that Kate and Matt seemed able to enjoy.

They looked so serene and happy (laughs) they really enjoyed how lovely this was, it's a very different level of chaos
Diana

Kate and Matt had different watching styles. Kate held her focus on one baby or toddler for a sustained period of time while Matt tended more to glance about the whole room. They both smiled a lot and laughed though Matt especially was highly amused by children's boundary crossing antics; such as Calum dodging Orla to make a run to the door, or Joni passing HB's proffered microphone and grabbing her hair.

Beth's lapel microphone picked up on Kate's comment to her about Thomas as they were leaving the space:

Kate: This is the calmest he's been in days its lovely

KATE, MATT+THOMAS 01:59:49

As with the other triad, Kate and Matt did not attend interview, therefore reflections on their experience are missing. Their freedom to sit and watch other children, and performers, was different to most other parents present, it would have been good to hear how this was placed within the broader context of their first few weeks of being Thomas' parents.

6.7 Orla and Calum

Orla took part in a follow-up interview.

Calum was, often, running.

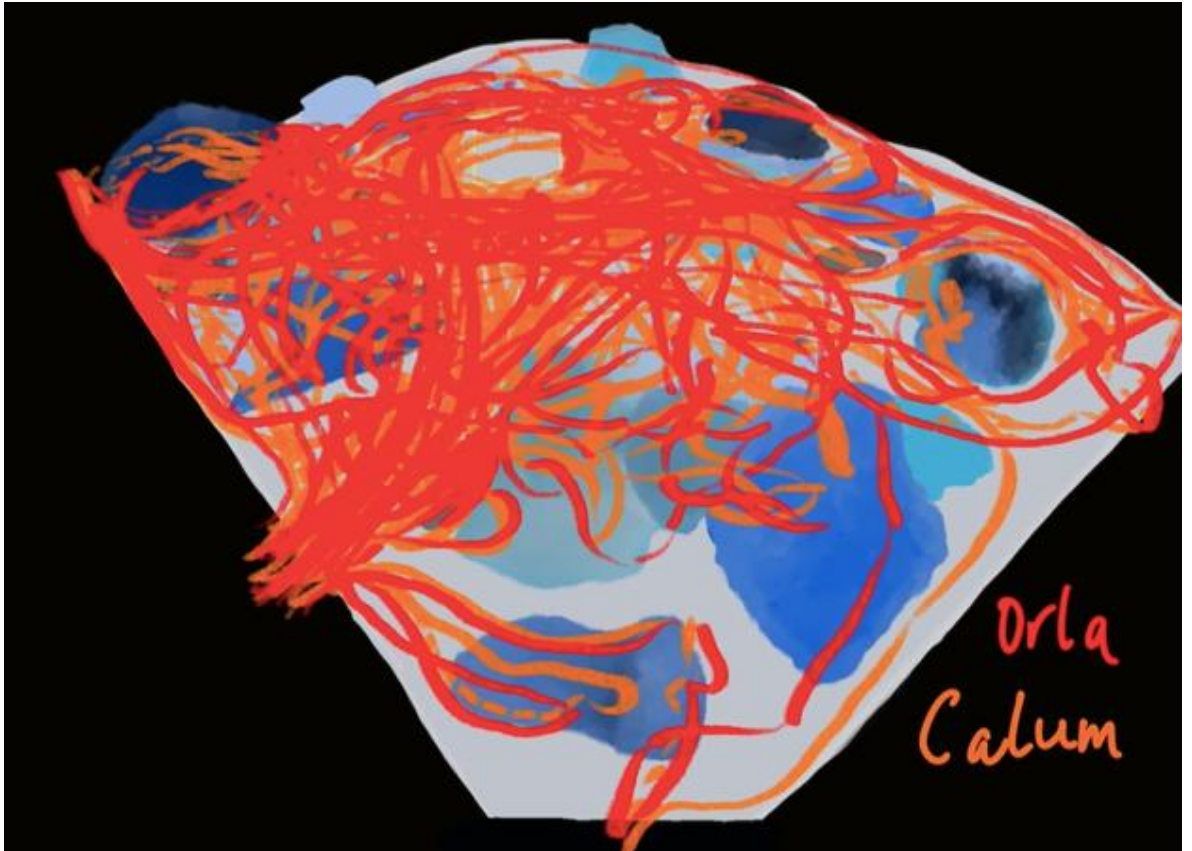


Figure 34: Journey map of Orla and Calum

Calum brought himself to close proximity with people and objects that caught his interest. He watched the performers and the other children, following their gazes. He investigated the edges of the space as well as the central focal point, going up to the sound desk, finding gaps in the drapes, and leaving (through both the official and unofficial doors) many times. He did not stay in any one place for an extended time.

Calum walks back around the tank clockwise, pointing to people on way past. Orla smiles and waves at him as he comes closer, he goes towards her. She opens her arms wide. He stays on his feet, turns, and goes back to CD

ORLA+CALUM 01:22:53

Calum, followed by Orla, covered more space together than any other family. Orla was aware that getting everywhere could be disruptive if she, “a big galumphing adult”, was physically in the way. Such concerns did not hold her back from giving Calum what she felt was the appropriate amount of freedom for the space. Following him was necessary for his safety but also afforded her a view of the space that she would not otherwise access.

But also it was fun. It meant that I got to see all the space, and see all the different bits, and see every corner, and nook and cranny, and that was, that was cool.

Orla

In the Mirror Game I explored a stooping walk as enacted by Orla, which I named Sasquatch after famous grainy images of the cryptid. Similar to the ducking creep used when exiting a traditional theatre mid performance there can be a performative demonstration of the desire to be small, or invisible, in this gait. When chasing a toddler it was also informed by attention moving down and towards a thigh high person. I found the position restricted my breath, with tension held in the upper back.

Orla physically lifted Calum back into the space and away from the sound desk, or from playing with Matt and Kate’s shoes. She also physically supported him in engaging with HB.

HB comes closer with microphone. Orla holds Calum’s body as he uses his arms in communication

ORLA+CALUM 01:31:06

Orla deliberately avoided sitting near Gill, who she knew well but had not seen for a long time, as she felt it was important to avoid “chatter” inside the performance space. Orla enjoyed reflecting on her own interpretations of, for example, the sculptural boxes at the edge of the space. She felt that the value of the experience for Calum did not rest on layering on of meaning, but in his direct and interactive experience of the event.

He’s not trying to think about like concepts of whatever he’s just, it’s just kind of - engage

Orla

Although Orla did not have a settled, calm experience, she enjoyed her time at *Float*. Partly for the opportunity to explore that it gave Calum, but also for the discoveries she made herself. This

connects to discussion on how TEY can offer fresh experiences for adults, with the child as conduit.

6.8 Paige and Amber

Paige wore a lapel microphone but did not take part in an interview

At *Float* Amber was crawling, cruising and walking with Paige holding her hands



Figure 35: Journey map of Paige and Amber

Amber crawled and cruised, needing Paige's hand(s) to walk. At times Paige walked on her knees to assist Amber walking across open areas. Amber pointed and vocalised to draw Paige's attention to objects of interest, for which Paige would offer observations and questions. Paige verbally reinforced action with descriptive or onomatopoeic words.

Paige: yeas, Splish Splash. Splish splash.

Amber climbs up onto Paige's lap and waves towards tank.

Paige: Do you want to go and have a look?

PAIGE+AMBER 01:24:02

Paige brought Amber to different areas, questioning her interest, and rerouted if Amber was not keen. Amber was intrigued by the performers and by other babies. Paige encouraged social meetings and when speaking to Amber referred to the other babies as “friends”. Paige chuckled at some of the rumbunctious moments between children.

Amber reaches out to touch Violet

Paige: Aw that's. Are you being nice?

Diana: Those are nice gentle hands

PAIGE+AMBER 01:37:04

Paige did not know any of the other audience members or staff socially and the Mirror Game allowed me to explore a potential discomfort in Paige. *Float*'s open structure did not offer an obvious position to take (unlike an audience situation with chairs for example). Paige kept her focus and connection with Amber, whose engagement provided a certainty of purpose, and permission to take up space. Amber and Paige could counterbalance one-another, taking a shared centre and each relying on the other.

Amber engaged receptively and expressively with many of the aesthetic provocations of *Float*. She sang in reply to KC, eliciting impressed responses from Gill and Nick who were watching nearby. Amber reached for children and objects gently, she waited for responses from performers she met. Paige was always present and they engaged in an extended ongoing conversation with Amber's movements and sounds interpreted, responded to, and described by Paige.

Paige: Are you having fun? Dancing? Are you dancing?

PAIGE+AMBER 01:22:31

Paige's experience connects to discussion on ownership and ease within different spaces. The mutual support between them also brings out the blurred boundaries in The Dance of Self and Other, as well as discussions on who the event is 'for'.

6.9 Shona and Freya

Shona took part in a follow-up interview.

At *Float* Freya was walking, and crawling.

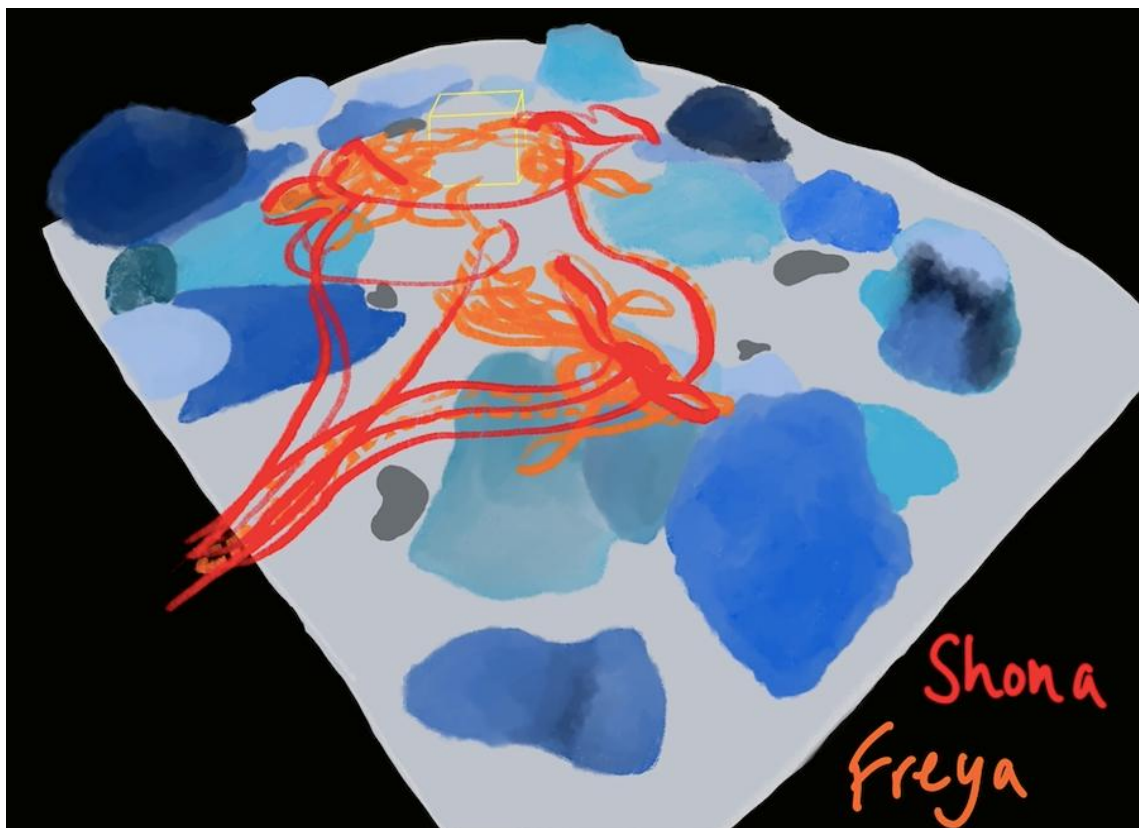


Figure 36: Journey map of Shona and Freya

CD taps Freya's foot gently to the music

Freya taps back

Shona's smile gets bigger

SHONA+FREYA 01:53:32

Shona watched for Freya's interests and lifted her and brought her closer to what she wanted to see. She also moved her away from busy moments with larger, more active toddlers. Both Shona and Freya were friendly with other adults and children. Freya had many meetings and explorations whilst staying close by Shona. Shona expressed both her enjoyment of being physically close to Freya whilst encountering something new, and her acceptance of Freya's autonomy.

But like I love it when she sits and cuddles, and watches something with me, cause like obviously like, I'm her wee safety net. And I don't know it's a, I think she, she's very independent. So once she's away from me, she's not fussed.
Shona

In the Mirror Game I found both Shona and Freya to have a lightness, and balance in their movements and positions. Outwardly focused energy that came from a place of comfort, and confidence.

Shona enjoyed the novelty of *Float* and delighted in watching Freya engage with objects and people. She described in interview how she had wondered how to replicate some of the show's elements at home. Freya was fascinated by the glowing tank of water.

Shona expressed her appreciation that they had been asked not to take photographs during the performance as she felt this supported her being in the moment with Freya and fully enjoying the experience. It was meaningful that all participants were asked not to have their phones out, as she felt that other people's phones would have been a distraction to Freya, not just her own.

Yeah like at no point during it, I thought, Oh, I want to get my phone out and take pictures because I was just really enjoying it. And that's just something we don't do these days.
Shona

Shona's appreciation for the novelty of the experience, her enjoyment in watching her child, and her immersion in the present moment connect to experiences found across the interviews and observations. That the most important thing was that she was having the experience *with* Freya speaks to The Dance of Self and Other, and ultimately the conclusions of this thesis regarding impact on bonding.

Chapter 7: Findings - The Themes

The Case Portraits, with the opportunity they give to follow some personal journeys through a TEY event, feed into the following description of the themes, and on into the Discussion chapter where the Case Portraits and themes are considered against literature and the research questions. The themes were developed from the whole dataset, the key components of which were the Phase One interviews and the Phase Two Casefiles. Though some Phase One interviewees described performances of a similar style to *Float*, many other genres, forms and scales were also represented. A central point of focus, and stationary, quiet spectatorship – norms of theatre – were present in most stories related. Identifying details of performances described in Phase One interviews were redacted to avoid implied criticism or endorsement of specific artists or work, though contextual detail was often necessary, for example ‘mid-scale musical performance’. A screenshot from Phase Two is included within each of the secondary themes, and three used in the introduction, to support description of the ideas communicated. *Float* is the only performance visually represented but again, the themes pertain to many performances as well as *Float*. To support anonymity, I have not included the participant pseudonyms or identifying details within the descriptions of the images.

Aiming to communicate the key ideas present in the data which address my research questions, the themes are my core findings. As a study interested in values and qualities of experience, the themes are an important link between the gathered data and the proposals and conclusions I make in the Discussion and Conclusion chapters. The themes are not a summary of the qualities of the experiences described and observed, but a systemised description of the conditions which give rise to the experiences. They describe areas of meaning, with declination through primary, secondary and tertiary themes offering levels of detail and difference. Salient data samples are used from across the dataset to support these descriptions.

The Theme Map, Figure 37 below, shows how the primary, secondary and tertiary themes are organised. The primary themes, *Attention*, *Sharing*, and *(Un)known*, frame the deeper nuance of those nested below them, which this chapter will go on to describe in detail.

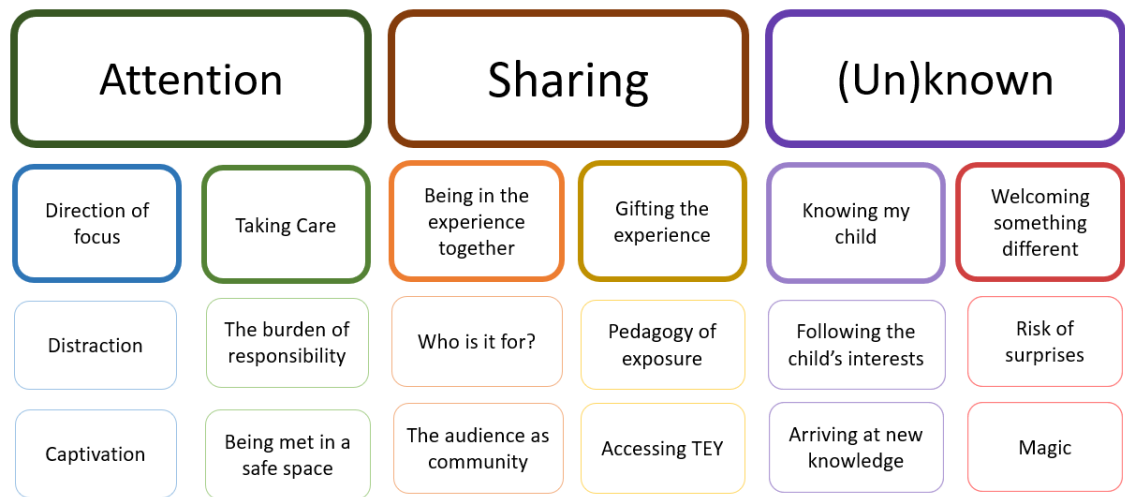


Figure 37: Theme Map in full

The three primary themes can also be seen as expressing a core action within TEY spectatorship, that of a person bringing another to share in something remarkable. The set of three images below, Figure 38, illustrate shared attention to a novel stimulus occurring at *Float*. The mother in these pictures has brought her child to the event, and the child has brought her into the moment.



Figure 38: Three images from *Float* illustrating ‘Attention, Sharing, and (Un)known’

Images description: A performer, mostly out of frame, offers movement with a shiny cushion which a baby finds interesting and pleasing. The baby then turns to their mother sharing smiles and eye-contact. The mother has been watching her baby throughout, enjoying their reactions.

The data contain many successful encounters where new, unique experiences were enjoyed in the warm company of a temporary community. Some of which had significant and lasting impact on the participants. Participant_51's description below is typical of a TEY theatre experience that might be considered successful, or positive.

It felt really good, because like I was excited, she was excited, and we were sitting together so at the beginning we were maybe cuddling, she maybe didn't know what to expect, so she was just watching but as she felt a bit more confident she could move about and interact a bit more. You know and I'd be with her the full time, but if she wanted to, crawl away and then that would be fine too. So it was a safe space. And just about enjoyment really.

Participant_51, parent describing TEY attendance with her 18month-old child, over 10 years ago

Beth, and Emma, in Phase Two made similar observations from their comparatively recent experience. Contained within this brief description are some of the key ideas explored in this chapter: the excitement of the unknown; the possibilities for different forms of engagement; the interplay of freedom and reassurance; seeking positive affect. All held within the context of the parent-child relationship.

There are also less pleasant experiences described, where expectations were disappointed, and lack of connection led to feelings of exclusion. By sharing the range and detail of experiences, reported and observed, within a thematic framing I offer to draw connections and highlight patterns across my findings in TEY spectatorship.

7.1 Attention

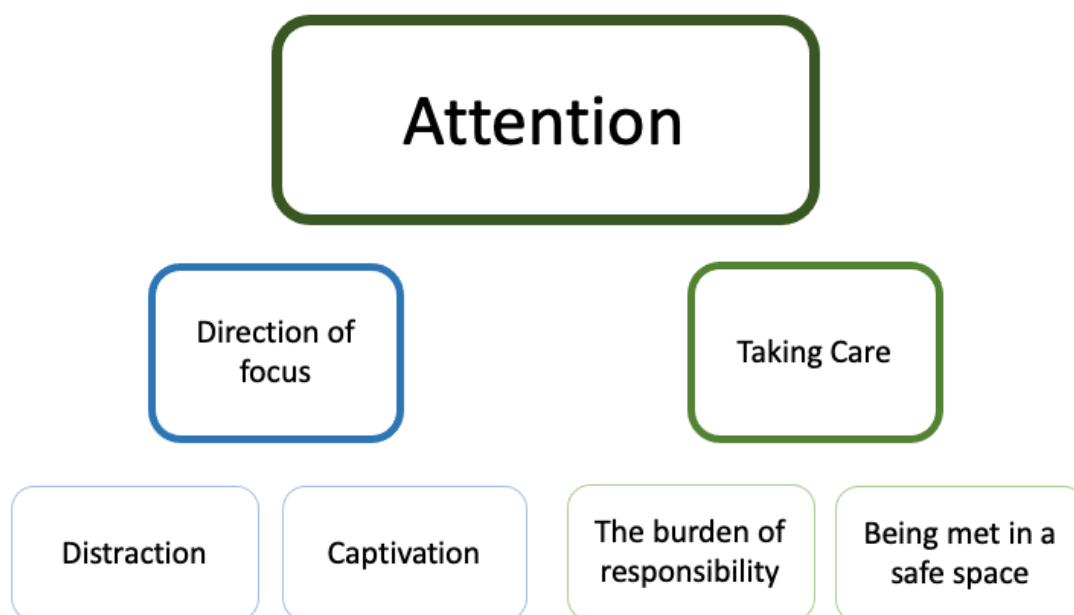


Figure 39: Theme Map section, 'Attention' and subthemes

The two secondary themes within *Attention* are *Direction of Focus* and *Taking Care*. An audience is manifested by the paying of attention, and within TEY, an art form defined by the identity of its audience members, I needed to ask questions on who pays attention to what and when. Looking at how ideas such as distraction and concentration were present in the data helped me to understand how these were valued and what the expectations were around spectator behaviour. Through the secondary meaning of attention, that of care, I was able to consider how participants experienced, or looked for, love and personal consideration at a TEY event. It is possible for both of these themes to be in action together, for example Shona neatly describes how her caring responsibility for Freya directs her focus, “Yeah it doesn’t matter what’s going on around me, I always have my eyes on her”, (Shona). Taking them into separate branches on the themes tree however helps to disentangle some of the TEY specific experiences.

From *Direction of Focus*, the tertiary themes are *Distraction* and *Captivation*. From *Taking Care* they are, *The burden of responsibility* and *Being met in a safe space*. These are presented in tables at the head of the section with a short description and a relevant sample from the data.

7.1.1 Direction of Focus

There is a general understanding that the traditional audiencing skill of sitting quietly and paying attention cannot be assumed in very young children. It is celebrated when it occurs and forgiven when it does not. The onus is on the parent to choose carefully the correct live performance that will match the needs and interests of their child. Expectations on behaviour vary across events, though parents are always positioned to assist in gathering and directing the attention of their child(ren). For parents of babies and toddlers their child is the show, drawing more attention and sustained focus than the spectacle on offer. This connects directly to the process of witnessing described in the conclusion, one of the mechanisms which deliver a positive impact on parent-child bonding. Table 13, below, gives descriptions and examples for the themes within this section.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Direction of Focus	The significance of what is paid attention to	<i>So you arrive and there's lots of other kids around and it was all very noisy but then when the show started, all the kids were just transfixed</i> Participant_29
Distraction	Being drawn away from maintaining focus on the performance	<i>Depending on the age of them there's an element of stress because they're going to run</i> Participant_37
Captivation	Being held in place by fascinated attention, and/or physical and social restraint.	<i>I had the confidence to be able to just leave if I wanted to leave whereas I don't know that all parents would be like that</i> Participant_3

Table 13: 'Direction of Focus' and subthemes

Expectations on children to perform the normative audiencing behaviour of sitting still and listening were moderated by the contexts of the type of performance attended and knowledge of the individual child. Seated, focused attention was not always demanded by performances, though children who displayed this behaviour were invariably described in positive terms. Very young children, sitting and watching for an unexpectedly long time was cited as enjoyable for parents to observe, and used to emphasise the power of TEY. A child's specific capacity around sustained focus was commonly expressed as age related, with a general assumption that the youngest children cannot be expected to sustain their attention. It was also sometimes framed as particular to the child, who may be "very active" (Diana) or "placid enough to sit through the entire thing" (Participant_46). This informed parental expectation on attention and related behaviour, expectation that was sometimes delightfully exceeded.

And what I remember is her being on my lap and me supporting her to stand and she was absolutely mesmerised for the whole performance, it was unbelievable.

Participant_43 on a small-scale TEY event

Although there was acceptance around child capacity for stillness as being an unwilling aspect of their current state of being, the role of the parent in working with this capacity was active. Participant_49 brought her children from "five minutes old" to a range of live performance experiences, and was able to reflect on how their engagement changed as they grew:

When they were really little they would go off and crawl round a thing, but when they were bigger you could get them to mair¹⁸, to sit and watch

Participant_49

The performances Participant_49 attended were offered in such a way that to 'crawl round a thing' was possible, but she describes a transition towards normative audiencing as the children develop their capacity to 'sit and watch'. It is at this point that the parent is mobilised to 'get them to' conform to this behavioural expectation.

The position of the adult in the photograph below, Figure 40, is common with parents often describing what the child is looking at, or directing their focus.

¹⁸ Scots - more



Figure 40: Image from *Float* illustrating 'Direction of Focus'

Image description: A baby sits on mother's lap and looks across the space, the mother is speaking and leaning over to look at the baby's face and pointing in the same direction as the baby's gaze

Point, gasp, look! Is a very common refrain from parents at TEY, and this attempted direction of child focus was found in the data to have various motivations. These include managing negative emotional experiences. A parent struggling to persuade her distressed child to stay at an unexpectedly loud musical event described trying to draw her attention to the performance, reminding her of songs she knew. Similarly, Emma sought to move Lucy's unhappiness at not being allowed to get into the water tank by "trying to distract her with what the artist was doing in that moment" (Emma). Other parents at *Float* described being keen to share with their child what they thought was "cool" (Orla), tempered by a desire to allow their child to follow their own interests. This tension was particularly relevant at a performance such as *Float* with free movement and a variety of potential focus points available at any given moment.

Children's gaze at *Float* followed the suggestions made by their parents through gestures, gasps, and comments. They also followed the direction of their parents' gaze without instruction, though not as consistently as parents followed that of their children. Calum, an active toddler, takes his cues for attention in this extract from his own curiosity around the people in the space, their activities and interests.

Calum walks to CD, who is on her front with Violet and mic. Calum squats down next to Violet. When Violet turns towards the tank he watches her, also turns to tank. Looks between Violet and (her mum) Diana.

ORLA+CALUM 01:20:40

Calum was physically confident in taking himself closer to what he found interesting. Freya also enjoyed looking at and touching the glowing tank of water, but only once Shona had carried her across the space to be closer to it. Parental support was necessary for the children to engage in *Float*, the point at which parents held back from interpolation, allowing their child to freely direct their own focus, varied across the group.

A consistency across the whole data set, reported and observed, was the parental interest in the child. This was made starkly clear through the analysis of Phase Two data using the lens of Starcatchers Engagement Signals (Starcatchers, 2024), where the adults were seen to partially engage with *Float*, but displayed all forms of engagement when the ‘show’ was their child. Phase One participants also frequently reported the pleasure of watching their children watching a performance. For Participant_29 his own children were the main event, the other young spectators second, and the actual theatre performance they were attending coming in third.

*I don't think I really watched the show. I just watched, [my] kids loving it...
You could look round the audience and see kids staring in wonderment at these adults,
you know telling them a tale*

Participant_29 on a small-scale TEY event

7.1.1.1 *Distraction*

Distraction came in various forms. A traditional concept of distraction in an audience context might involve attention being drawn away from the stage, whereas in the example above Emma used the word ‘distraction’ to describe drawing her child’s attention *to* the performance. Lucy was being distracted from her unmeetable desire in that moment. Similarly, Participant_33 labelled the strategic use of food to keep children in place as “distraction snacks”. Using food this way was frequently mentioned, with one participant describing a situation where being asked by the artists not to bring snacks into the space contributed to her having a difficult experience, as one of her tools for supporting her children’s engagement was removed.

Avoiding an unwanted distraction for other audience members was a desire expressed by many parents. With a lack of attention, and a change of focus to the ‘wrong’ thing, the distracted child becomes distracting to others. The responsibility for dealing with the difficulties arising was placed on the parent. This was especially the case where a young child had been brought into an event that was not designed for their age. Where events were for children, or ‘everyone’, there was a confidence in parents that a degree of noise and movement from their young child would be tolerated.

If a child was bored, distressed, and/or wanting to leave this was usually attributed to a mismatch between the chosen performance and the specific child. Occasionally the event was found to be at fault, for example having an unrealistic expectation on toddlers. More often, especially if other children were seen conforming to expectations, parents took this as a failure on their part, the chosen performance having been “misjudged” (Participant_17). This is a mistake that is public, and potentially subject to judgment. Here Participant_32 describes avoiding bringing her youngest child to panto out of concern for other patrons.

I felt like she's quite a little live wire, she wouldn't sit still, and as much as I would, happily take it, it's the, I'm a bit conscious of people having paid money to go and see these things
Participant_32

Although Participant_32 is confident that she could ‘happily take’ her daughter’s liveliness, other participants described their parenting responsibilities as pulling them away from being able to focus on the performance. Children could be loud or active in ways inappropriate for the situation, or distressed and asking to leave, leading to parents being distracted or leaving and missing the rest of the performance completely. Sometimes ongoing worries, anticipating rather than responding to a child’s discomfort was distraction enough in itself:

You find yourself kind of missing the show because you're looking out for whoever's scared of balloons or whatever
Participant_25

A very different experience was had by Participant_34, who took her young daughter to an intimate contemporary dance performance aimed at an adult audience.

She was copying the dancer. She was making noise when she was not supposed to like it's completely silence. Everybody was in that contemporary mood zone, and then she starts on stripping back the shoes. So everybody got start laughing, and got distracted by her. And in one sense I say, yeah. Well done, [name], because it's really boring this show.
Participant_34

Here the child became the show, not just for the parent, but for other audience members too and in this small-scale setting, the performers. Participant_34 valued her child's contribution as an audience member, responding honestly to the 'boring' show, and enjoyed her confidence in the space. That her distraction provoked laughter, and not judgmental glares or shushing, perhaps contributed to the confidence of both Participant_34 and her daughter. It is nonetheless an interesting contrast to stories of attention drawing children in an audience where parents experienced unpleasant emotions of shame and disappointment. The large middle ground in this area was described well by Participant_17, "it's always funny in hindsight and a bit embarrassing at the time". The longitudinal nature of Phase One interviews brought out a few of these 'funny in hindsight' anecdotes.

Another important meaning to draw out of distraction is as a term for low value attention. When Participant_5 described an impactful TEY experience she had with her then 6-month-old son she said, "it wasn't even distraction it was real engagement". Distraction is used here to describe a lower form of drawing attention where the child's attention is given in passive way. Distraction in this meaning can be a technique, one with the aim of keeping a child quiet and still for a time. 'Real engagement' however speaks to a relationship between the performer and child, and that the end goal is not an observable behaviour but an artistic experience owned by the child.

7.1.1.2 Captivation

The success of a theatre encounter was often emphasised through descriptions of how closely and consistently children paid attention to the performance. Words such as mesmerised, captivated, transfixed, enchanted, and obsessed were used to describe children held by an invisible beam of fascination, "they were just fixated on it as if they were entranced" (Participant_21). Always considered a positive thing, there is a pause of will in the captivated child that connects to an idea of spectatorship as being taken out of oneself, transported elsewhere.

The experience of surprise at a child who sustained attention beyond the parent's expectation was common. Here Participant_18 describes the risk and relief in bringing her two-year-old to a stage adaptation of one of his favourite books.

We weren't sure how he would have been I think that was probably the first time he'd seen something that wasnae¹⁹, get up and dae²⁰ the actions and dance, get involved it was a kind of sit and watch the, the play basically. But he loved it, he loved it
Participant_18 on a mid-scale TEY event

The image of the awed, still child was not the only one evoked to describe engagement. Active enjoyment was also celebrated such as Participant_21's jumping son who, "pogoed and pogoed and pogoed", or Participant_40's daughter who "didn't sit in her seat the whole time, she just was up, loving it, just dancing along".

Children were captivated by spell-like fascination, and contained by the actions and instructions of their parents. Adults were held captive by social norms and theatre etiquette. Outdoor performances were cited as being freer in this regard, and therefore well suited to active children (and their parents). Convention can also be reassuring, Participant_45 drew a contrast between a performance in a traditional theatre space where she felt more confident, and one in a studio where expected etiquette felt less obvious and therefore increased her discomfort:

*At a theatre if you had to leave cause one of your, you'd just be – excuse me excuse me. So the social norms are already, I know exactly what to do if one of them, needs a nappy change and there's a problem...
[in the studio] you're very much part of it and you can't just sort of sneak out the back door, in quite the same way.*
Participant_45

Being more visible to other audience members in the studio left Participant_45 with an increased fear of judgment should she, or her children, behave in the 'wrong' way. Committing to becoming part of an audience involves temporarily letting go of freedom in when to speak, move, or leave the room. The parent can be caught between their role as a 'good' spectator, and as a carer, meeting the needs of their child.

¹⁹ Scots – wasn't

²⁰ Scots - do

7.1.2 Taking Care

Care was expressed in many ways within the data, and this theme contains a broad range of what it can mean to take care and be taken care of. As a subtheme of *Attention*, care is considered here as a form of directed focus towards another, with the needs and wellbeing of the other a guiding concern. Parents' caring responsibilities are brought into the TEY space. The structured nature of a performance event and its public quality can put extra pressure on parents. However, these same factors can also be the basis from which extra support is found. Creating a shared environment where needs for physical, emotional, and social safety are met allows parents to be included and to feel seen. Table 14 below gives some examples of these different ways in which care is highlighted within this thematic framework.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Taking Care	The experience of needs being expressed, met, and unmet, at TEY	<i>... and clearly every time you try and leave the house somebody needs a nappy change. So you'd be all last minute trying to park, and then a scramble to get into the venue</i> Participant_3
The burden of responsibility	How the general and specific requirements of caring for small children are brought into the TEY space	<i>Now I have to think about that I can't enjoy the performance with my little ones, because I'm just concerned that they're going to hurt themselves</i> Participant_30
Being met in a safe space	Feelings and experiences of support and comfort	<i>its just also being in a space where you know your needs and your little one's needs have been thought about that just kind of allows you to relax into it,</i> Participant_25

Table 14: 'Taking Care' and subthemes

I have chosen to use the term 'parent' in this thesis (see 1.2 terminology) to describe the accompanying adult at TEY, alternative terms available were carer, or parent-carer. Central to their identity within the space is their role as a care-taker, with responsibility for a more vulnerable companion. How this was experienced varied from dyad to dyad and moment to moment, from delight in closeness and the opportunity to provide, to caretaking as a stressful demand. A consistency was that the parent is always 'on duty' when accompanying a young child, that whatever else occurs their priority is expected to be their child. Illustrated here by Figure 41, a photograph from the outer, non-performance area of *Float*, where a mother is taking the opportunity to provide her child with food before making the transition away from the venue.



Figure 41: Image from Float illustrating 'Taking Care'

Image description: A mother sits next to her baby who is looking towards the camera. The mother is looking at her baby and offering them fruit pieces from a tub.

I found it revealing when participants mentioned putting their own needs first, for example choosing a performance they wished to see rather than centring their child's tastes, this would be accompanied by a small laugh.

I mean I think I enjoyed it as much as [my son] did for sure if not more (laughs).
Participant_47 on a small-scale TEY event

In making an analysis of when and why these small laughs occurred in the data, softening a statement of 'selfishness' or 'bad parenting' was common. Describing strong feelings also often came with laughter. I interpreted laughter, drawing on the benign violation theory of humour (McGraw & Warren, 2010), as being used to signal the safety of a potentially risky statement. It also served to build rapport, when I return the laugh with a smile or laugh of my own it reassures the participant that we both understand the norms that are being played with. That I will not take them too seriously for example when they tell me they are a bad mother for only bringing sugary snacks. By gathering these violations, they can be used as a negative against which to construct the norm, or ideal, within which the participants operate. Central to this norm is that parents should always put the needs of others first. Their own children, but also the children of others, and in a social situation like a theatre event, the needs of other audience members more generally.

Care at *Float* was not confined to parents caring for their own children. Multiple instances of physical support and reassurance through friendly responses were observed between parents and other children.

Wherever he turned, there was usually like someone to interact with. And get that reassurance from.
Hannah

The forms of care parents enacted towards a child who was not their own were physical, for example helping a child fall safely from a beanbag, and emotional, such as a friendly smile. Artists also enacted sensitive, playful interactions with children. Their care was focused on the immediate affective and embodied experience of the individual child. In the following extract, the role of the artist within the artwork is felt by Innes as he moves from taking in the unusual spectacle to meeting a friendly face.

Innes' expression is wide eyed observant. Breaks into smile when HE makes direct eye contact with him.

H+I 01:20:41

Within the longitudinal data of Phase One interviews there was an acknowledgement of early parenthood as being a distinct period of life, with its own vulnerabilities. The state that Participant_52 describes led her to have a deep emotional response to the event she attended with her child, as her sensitivity found her relating to the aesthetic offer in a way that was, for her, beautiful and immediate.

I was in quite a delicate, like fragile state as a mum. Because I was breastfeeding, and I was exhausted, and I was confused about my, place in [my field of work] which was really central to my wellbeing, and my sense of who I was.

Participant_52

Similarly Participant_7 relished the opportunity to attend a babes-in-arms showing of a play for adults, where the welcoming of her status as a new mother boosted her confidence.

So there was something quite nice about going, going on my own with a baby, and you feel a bit more vulnerable if you're on your own rather than if you're with a mate or a partner, and that's quite a nice vulnerability... I'm going to this of my own accord, and I'm watching this theatre.

Participant_7 on a 'babes-in-arms' adult theatre event

After the performance of *Float*, audience members chatted to one-another in the outer area of the venue. Some of these people were friends catching up, others were strangers to one-another. One topic of conversation revolved around 'mother's thumb'²¹, as a common shared experience. Recalling this chat in interview, Beth considered the condition as a good example of the non-optional aspects of motherhood that are accepted by mothers and overlooked by wider society.

*Someone said, - Oh, I didn't know that that existed.
And we were like, - Yeah, of course, of course it does. But, but we're mums, and we, we can't. You can't do anything about it. No one can help you. The only thing you can do to get rid of it is to rest it. And I think it's just, probably something that women bear with, because we don't have an option, to not. We don't have the option to not pick up your children.*

Beth

TEY can relieve some of the ongoing load of parenthood. Rest that occurs within the context of the experience, the parent's spectatorship becomes more relaxed but they remain engaged with the performance. Within an immersive event such as *Float*, (most) parents described enjoying the relaxing aesthetics, and active engagement with babies was observable throughout. Care for the children was enacted through lots of checking of the child's state, needs and interests. Questions were asked of children through words and signs, they were touched, sniffed, and watched. The child's comfort was considered before, after, and during the performance, not

²¹ Common name for De Quervain's syndrome, a painful condition of the thumb and wrist tendon(s).

only as an ongoing necessity but as contributing to the conditions that would enable engagement.

‘Cause I knew that he would like get more out of the show if he had, had a clean nappy and had eaten beforehand.

Hannah

7.1.2.1 The burden of responsibility

For some parents, attending TEY was understood within the context of making the right, or best, choices for their children. For some, activity in the form of entertainment was one of the many things the parent is called on to provide, “you’re always trying to keep them occupied” (Participant_18), for others there was in accessing TEY a desire to provide something “nourishing” (Participant_38). Here the parent’s responsibility is to the child’s developing personhood, and all the implications that come with that, such as their future happiness and place in the world. It has the potential to be felt heavily. Participant_49 describes a sense of urgency in the parent’s role in shaping their child stating, “you’ve got this three year opportunity to make them as amazing as they can be”.

For Participant_31, her son’s dislike of a TEY event felt to her a personal failure. Her confusion as to why he did not enjoy it the way other children did impacted negatively on her self-efficacy as a parent.

*I felt like I should be taking him to things like that...
and we had to take him out [of the performance], so, and back then I didn’t know why
so I felt quite a failure, like you know, I’ve taken, I’m doing the right thing!*

Participant_31 on a small-scale TEY event

‘The right thing’ for Participant_31 was to put effort into bringing her child to experiences deemed beneficial to his development which connects to future-oriented approaches to attendance discussed in the following chapter. She found the performance and artists there to be “lovely” (Participant_31) and observed other families engaging with and enjoying the immersive aesthetic. Although with hindsight she acquired an understanding of the event as being unpredictably unsuitable for her son, at the time her conclusion was that she, personally, was somehow at fault.

Parents frequently described and displayed taking responsibility for the actions of their child. For Participant_45, how her children followed the non-traditional rules of an interactive performance caused a degree of anxiety.

Where the children were sort of involved a bit more I found that actually a bit more difficult, because my children wouldn't say or do what I felt was expected of them
Participant_45 on an interactive small-scale TEY event

Participant_45 was doing the work of reading the expectations communicated by the artists, then holding responsibility for the extent to which her children met these. A similar sense of projected responsibility could be seen in how often Phase Two participants said “sorry”. Phase Two parents frequently apologised when their child came into contact with another child or adult. As in this example the response was usually verbal and/or physical reassurance.

Joni crawls up onto Diana's lap.

Beth: oh, sorry

Diana: no that's alright, (to Joni) hello

Joni looks up at Diana

DIANA+VIOLET 01:37:01

In *Float*, with its many meetings between babies, there were multiple instances where parents physically interrupted their child from touching another child in some way. As well as it being observable in the films, protecting other children was cited by Phase Two parents as the only or main reason for why they might interfere with their child's journey of exploration. For the mother of a larger toddler this concern seems simple enough though even Beth, whose daughter Joni was one of the youngest participants, and moved by crawling, still framed her daughter as the potential risk:

Only thing I was watching out for was to make sure that, like other kids didn't trip over her or anything. If I moved towards her, that probably would have been the only reason why
Beth

Parents were not cavalier about the safety of their own children. Shona described her concern as exceeding that of her child's:

Like she'd just sit and watch as she gets poked in the eye and just stand there. But I'll like for me, I'm like (worried noise) you know.
Shona

This was mostly a baseline responsibility however, that did not need to be spoken. Before, after, and during the performance all the parents kept their children safe. The unusual challenge of *Float* was in being a good, responsible social actor in a new situation of meetings and discoveries.

When responsibility becomes anxious vigilance, it can impact the whole spectatorship experience. Participant_30 shared a memorable performance where instructions from a stage manager to be careful of going near certain lights created very divergent experiences for her and her two children. Whilst they enjoyed the performance she was entirely distracted by an unwelcome responsibility to protect all the children from serious harm.

But I did have the fear of - oh, no, I need to be really aware that they don't go touching that. And also, maybe there's a part of me watching other children, too, that maybe didn't have adults near them, because I somehow feel because I was at the front. I then had this responsibility, which is totally bizarre.

Participant_30 on a small-scale TEY event

As well as these performance specific pressures, the ongoing, relentless effort of early parenthood was a running thread throughout the data. From the practical reasons behind events being chosen, to descriptions of momentary respite, the ongoing nature of responsibility at this particular stage of life was a steady hum in the background.

This is also where I am at parenting right now, but I can acknowledge that, a lot for me. I had to hold a lot of balls in the air, in a really er, like continually conscious kind of exhausting way

Diana

7.1.2.2 Being met in a safe space

A sense of safety impacted quality of engagement. When the elements of physical, emotional, and social safety were met TEY is, “a safe space for them to fully, you know, get into it” (Participant_11). With its soft surroundings and the careful attention of the other adults *Float* was described as a “safe space” by Orla. It allowed Calum to explore and Orla to relax from feeling she needed to keep him contained.

Don't mind letting him roam around a bit within the bounds of safety, but I thought it was quite a safe space

Orla

Physical safety is prominent for very young audience members, everyone at *Float* was careful and aware of the physical vulnerability of weeks-old Thomas who slept in his parents' arms. Emotional safety needs were high for children coming into this new, busy, aesthetically stimulating situation. Phase One data contained anecdotes of parents' relief at welcoming spaces, and the difficulties of responding to children's fears when they did not feel safe. For parents their experience of safety was often social, and intertwined with their relationship with their child. Parents reported feeling personally cared for by extension of the care being directed towards their child(ren), and experienced a sense of being seen and understood in their role and personhood. In attending a babes-in-arms performance of adult theatre, Participant_7 described the event as one safe from social judgment and embarrassment.

For Participant_52 it was the attentiveness of the artists which felt specifically non-judgmental, in contrast to other baby group contexts where she often feared disapproval from other parents. Her acute feelings of vulnerability in the period of early parenthood and of feeling welcomed and seen at a TEY event were strong memories for her. She creates the words 'dredgery' and 'mundacity' to illustrate the low-dragging, heavy dullness that the repetitive nature of early parenthood can engender.

I'm I'm I'm full of the em, dredgery of like nappies and feeding and sleeping, and just like just the mundacity of life. And isn't it incredible to be welcomed into this like almost spiritual, experience, in this place?

...

And I know it was just watching acrobats (laughs), but like they they cared about me in that moment, and they cared about my baby, and they they, my baby, was special to them, and not just to me, and that was so so nice.

Participant_52 on a small-scale TEY event

For Participant_52 she did not want to be taken away from her role as parent, challenging though it was, and her powerful experience of feeling cared for was interwoven with how her child was also seen and included.

Emma described this experience of being brought in through her connection to her child. When asked to give her thoughts on a screenshot from *Float* where she was watching Lucy interact with a performer, Emma described feelings of inclusion via her child.

The artist is really engaged in Lucy. But Lucy is my baby. So you know, I felt. Really em. It's very inclusive

Emma

Inclusivity was also described by Participant_25 who in addition to appreciating, “being in a space where you know your needs and your little one’s needs have been thought about”, found the experience enhanced by the content of the performance, which dealt with ideas of inclusivity, something that was of personal concern to her with her “small diverse family... oh it was actually proper comforting. Yeah, proper comforting” (Participant_25). For Participant_47 it was the aesthetics which were “quite therapeutic, you know you get that, from a sensory environment, it’s about wellbeing and, sort of de-stressing”.

From these and other experiences where the atmosphere left a strong positive impression, parents came away with respect for the artists who had created the conditions. Acknowledging the rare welcoming of the youngest children into artistic spaces as “a really big deal” (Participant_6). The serious and considered effort put into the artistic work was felt as a form of care and respect for the audience.

The amount of work, and thought, and preparation that went into that one hour of engaging these young kids really effectively and profoundly
Participant_49 on a small-scale TEY event

Also within the theme of *Being met in a safe space*, are the many stories in the data that did not describe powerful, moving, relationship-shifting theatre, but rather something that was ‘nice’, or ‘lovely’. Participant_22 is one of many who used these terms, and was aware of their potential weakness:

I guess lovely is not necessarily a very descriptive word but that’s how it felt it felt like a nice place to be, and quite often things are stressful when you have a tiny baby and you take them somewhere but I don’t remember it being like that
Participant_22 on a small-scale TEY event

‘Nice’ can have an edge of tweekness, or blandness, which does not seem to suit theatre, an art form known for drama. When bringing a baby or toddler into a live performance however, that the experience is “good... quite easy” (Participant_10), counts as a success. From the context of a life where the management or anticipation of distress is a constant, nice is respite and relief.

Normally they’re always uncomfortable and crying, a moment from being upset, but for that forty minutes they were just transfixed
Participant_29 on small-scale TEY event

That ‘nice’, or ‘lovely’, or ‘easy’, are compliments is not a sign of low expectations for this audience in terms of the artistic offer. Rather it is a reflection of the specific sensitivities of a time of life, for the infant and their parent. As laid out in the earlier chapters of this thesis, the parent-child relationship is crucial, and benefits from support from many directions. For

Participant_23 recalling her memories for our interview brought happy tears she described as being stimulated by connecting to a time in her life where she was unusually vulnerable but supported by others, sometimes strangers. When life is otherwise full of “dredgery” (Participant_52), or discomfort is normal (Participant_29), we should not underestimate the importance of lovely. Through care-ful provision of aesthetic encounters, TEY has the opportunity to provide positive experiences that support parent-child bonding.

7.2 Sharing

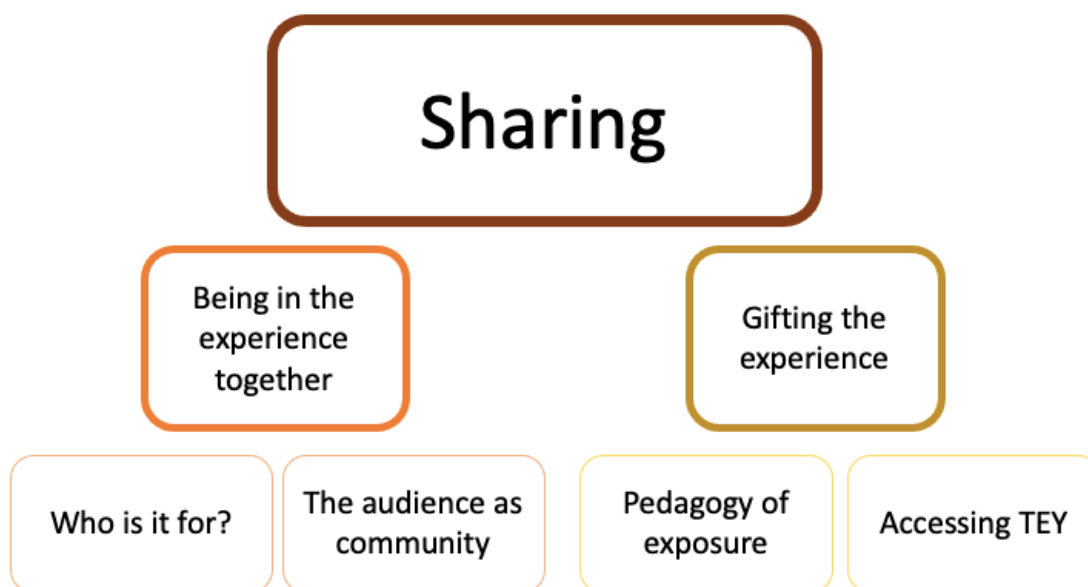


Figure 42: Theme map section, 'Sharing' and subthemes

This theme group has obvious connections to the research question on shared experience. The present tense is important to distinguish as 'shared experience' can sometimes be taken to mean a commonality of history, for example you and I may have a shared experience of teenage heartbreak. Sharing *in* an experience requires those involved to be together, in time and space, sharing the bounds of the happening itself. Unlike our hypothetical heartbreaks which may have taken place years and continents apart. As Participant_38 describes below, the TEY spectatorship experience is one had together, with family and peers:

More often it went well than hard work, because I learned to take snacks, and, and you felt like you'd given everyone a nourishing experience, to see something nice, you've done something nice for yourself as well 'cause you've also sat and watched this thing... And yeah and, it was always lovely, and you'd see something that was pleasant for yourself and also see other parents, and it was a bit, you know, community
Participant_38

Between adult audience members commonality of the experience of early parenthood was a form of shared experience present in the data, which could inform the process of sharing in an experience. Participant_38 also speaks to the second theme within *Sharing*, that of gift-giving as she describes gifting the experience to her family and herself. Through exploring the question of how TEY is accessed there are also examples of where the child has an enabling role in the adult accessing TEY.

7.2.1 Being in the Experience Together



Figure 43: Image from Float illustrating 'Being in the Experience Together'

Image description: A performer sits with her back to the camera holding her hand above a baby's foot. The baby is looking towards their foot. Another baby sits further away, looking at the first baby. The first baby's mother sits near her baby and the performer, she is looking at her baby's foot and smiling.

The extent to which parents felt that they shared in a TEY experience with their young child(ren) was impacted by the extent to which they felt the offer was also intended for them. Delighting in the engagement, and happiness, of their child, as can be seen in Figure 43, was a positive way in which parents experienced TEY through, rather than alongside, their child. Powerful experiences were created and elevated through their group context, the temporary community of an audience providing an opportunity to see and be seen.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Being in the Experience together	Sharing in the dynamic, embodied experience of TEY	<i>and that felt like one that we very much experienced together</i> <i>'cause we're sitting there family and, singing along to songs that we know</i> Participant_12
Who is it for?	Whose experience is prioritised.	<i>I enjoyed it because she really enjoyed it – it was aimed at children but it was still music everyone would enjoy</i> Participant_48
Audience as community	The meaning attached to sharing in an experience with, sometimes many, others	<i>you know nobody's gonna judge you because everyone's in the same boat</i> Participant_27

Table 15: 'Being in the Experience Together' and subthemes

The imminent, dynamic experience of shared spectatorship is developed further in The Dance of Self and Other, where a lens of affective experience is taken to the tensions and relationships observed and described in the data. Many participants however did offer broad, or summed descriptions of the felt experience of togetherness as a warm and pleasurable aspect of TEY attendance. Many had the positive experience Hannah describes, “I would say it was generally, I think over all just loads of fun for him. Loads of fun for me” (Hannah). An enjoyable, entertaining experience where the needs of both are met.

The extent to which this was understood as something experienced not only at the same time and place as one-another, but dependent upon each other, varied. For Participant_52 it was “an emotional journey together” that created a lasting physical memory.

I'm holding my chest here, because I've got this mem- this, like physical connecting memory of a little, person with total vulnerability being exposed, to er, a kind of new environment and, the, kind of me like really experiencing it through them, as much, an and them experiencing it through me, and us, having that kind of connection in a heightened environment, and in a stimulating, beautiful environment
Participant_52 on small-scale TEY event

When both the needs of the parent and child were met, and the environment supported feelings of confidence and safety, the conditions were created as Participant_52 describes, for parents to delight in their child and their connection. In *Float*, Emma's joy watching Lucy was observed and reported, and whether they were in a close cuddle or across the space from one-another, Emma felt an invisible shared connection.

That feels very shared. You know the kind of unspoken thing between you and your, your pre-verbal, baby where you can't, you can't explain that but it's just understood.
Emma

Babies and toddlers are usually expected to sit at TEY, at least initially, with a caregiver. For older children however they may be asked to sit separately from their adults, something Participant_12 encountered with her two-year-old. This was a disappointment to Participant_12 who remembered much more fondly a different, large scale performance where both parents and their daughter sat together, and were therefore able to share in glances, gasps, laughter, and songs. There were also instances where participants were aware of how though physically very close, their inner world was radically different to that of their child. One described a stressful event with a recently separated co-parent and their two children, an event where the theatre served as a cheery distraction from a difficult social combination. As with the previous theme of *Distraction*, when parents have adult concerns taking up space in their mind this pulls them away from being able to share more fully in the experiences of their child.

For Participant_36, who was looking for the meaning being communicated by a dance piece whilst guessing at her daughter's thought processes, the puzzle of cognitive empathy distracted her from a more direct enjoyment of the performance:

So you think like you know, what is she getting out of it but what do I get out of it and how do I understand it. So I was trying to rationalise and maybe more than I would if I was watching the show myself, on my own, which was quite bizarre because I was thinking – oh stop thinking and just enjoy it – you know?
Participant_36

Had Participant_36 been able to “stop thinking”, she might have had a more directly comparable experience to that of her daughter, even if only at the level of shared enjoyment. She felt that her analytic, rational approach was not necessary to enjoy a physical performance designed for a young audience.

The content and form of an offer was felt to impact the extent to which an experience could be shared between adults and children. “Tactile sensory type stuff” was considered by Participant_42 and as being “really important because I think you can experience that together”. This was observed in *Float* where the emotional, embodied impact of the environment on adults was something they could imagine their children also enjoying. Shona was surprised to feel as positively as she did when entering *Float*, laughing with the idea of finding a performance designed for babies ‘great’. She uses that experience though to support her interpretation of Freya’s experience, going on to endow her with a heightened receptivity.

I was just... I don’t know as an adult I was like, this is great (laughing). So yeah, I assume that she was very much like, even more, taken with it
Shona

Participant_47 made a similar assumption, drawing on her own responsive feelings to speculate as to how her child received the work. Particularly for young, pre-verbal children, this accessing of their own experience was important to enabling the parent’s conscious empathy.

It’s hard to know, really what impact it’s having on them, but you know yourself you know how it makes you feel, and so as a parent you can’t help but, er, think but they must be feeling something similar
Participant_47 on small-scale TEY event

In gathering stories from the past there were thoughts shared on impact, not just in terms of comprehension in the moment, but lasting over time. Having been there together was an important component to how the relatively short experience of a live performance could have a longer life. Music played a specific role in how a number of the participants maintained a connection to an event, embedding memory for the adult and creating a new and specific shared cultural engagement with their child. Participant_9 reported still occasionally singing a song from a TEY performance 14 years on “it’s become this kind of ludicrous family joke”. There was great variety in the styles of music used this way including opera, chamber music, rock, pop, showtunes and folk. This was enabled through CDs being given, or sold, after a performance, or more recently the music accessed through streaming services. As a repeatable component of a live performance, music can be a powerful way to connect back to a time and place.

We took the CD away with us and then played in the car, forever and still even now, eight years later, revisit that music and it's just, a lovely, like it's got so many positive associations for us, even though at the actual performance time, the baby was sleeping. Very much like, taking it in
Participant_42 on a small-scale TEY event

For Participant_3, a similar call back is experienced when she attends theatre with her now teenagers. The sharing of theatre brings continuity and comfort. As with sensory immersion and music, the physical act of sitting together and a gasp of awe or surprise is something that can be shared between humans of all ages.

And it's still quite exciting to sit between the two of them, or next to one of them, and just go (gasp)... it's a nice link to when they were tiny
Participant_3

Attending a performance with pre-school age children, Participant_45 experienced connection to her children during the experience by shared enjoyment of humorous content. She appreciated the largely visual humour “jokes at a five-year-old level” and drew a contrast to performances which include jokes for the adults that are supposed to “fly over the children’s heads”. Participant_37 considered the inclusion of jokes for the adults more favourably, seeing it as a way for their presence to be acknowledge and adding value to his experience. Of course there are many forms of theatre for many different tastes, Participant_45 and Participant_37’s preferences however also reflect their differing expectations towards how much attending live performance with a very young child would be a shared experience. The range of assumptions in the data around this idea is explored in the next section.

7.2.1.1 Who is it for?

TEY is defined by its intention: live performance created for a very young audience. Within the dataset as well as stories of babies and toddlers being brought to performances advertised for their age group, they were brought to those pitched at older children, the whole family, or adults. These stated, advertised, intentions of performances impacted the way parents understood their role, and expectations around experience and behaviour. The question of whose needs and interests are prioritised within a shared space reveals something of the power dynamics in the TEY encounter, themselves informed by the existing norms around theatre spectatorship.

There were parents who reported enjoying a performance with their child, where they felt that that it really was for both. For very young children an aesthetic offer which stimulated the senses was welcomed as something accessible to both ages at the same time. For Participant_25 it was the universal themes of the piece, visually communicated, that elevated one particularly memorable show.

It felt like real, beautiful art, that I could attend with my family. As opposed to some kind of compromise where we were all just kind of erm, having to tolerate each other's tastes

Participant_25 on a mid-scale TEY event

Other parents describe this 'tolerating' when attending performances, Participant_7 makes explicit here a frequently implied assumption that it is shared, common knowledge that if the child is happy, so is the parent, and that is good enough. We could compare this kind of experience to a parent happily watching their baby devour a tube of tepid pureed lasagne, without any desire to take a spoonful.

It wasn't very exciting for me, as the mum with her, but it was very sweet. But yeah its not something I, I wouldn't go for my benefit it was to entertain her. And you're a mum yourself, so you'll know it's when your little one's entertained it, it makes you happy doesn't it?

Participant_7 on a small-scale TEY event

Memorable, positive experiences of TEY attendance such as that had by Participant_25 often had an element of expectations being exceeded. Though the newness of TEY created an openness of expectation, as explored further in *(Un)known*, there was a general baseline assumption that theatre for young audiences should entertain them, but not necessarily the adults. Participant_49 appreciated performances which made active demands on the adults, where there was, "a wee bit of brain work for you as well as for your kids". Other performances, such as *Float*, aimed to include parents through the offer a relaxing, sensory environment.

For Shona this was her first impression, that she was affected by the atmosphere, "I loved it like walking in just as an adult, I was like, oh, this is this is so like sensory and nice". Her use of the phrase 'just as an adult' emphasises that she had her own personal response alongside what she might consider as interesting or appropriate for her child. She understood her role as being a more passive spectator than the babies however. Though they were permitted to explore and interact directly with the performers and set, she was concerned with keeping to the usual invisibility of the audience member.

In my head I'm like, no, this is. This is like for babies experiences. I was always trying to be like part of the background and not getting in the way of, their experiences. I guess I wasn't trying to be a part of it. I guess.

Shona

As *Float* was such an immersive performance, with no delineated performer/audience spaces, not being a part of it was something Shona had to try and actively avoid. This was also experienced by Diana, who felt so visible whilst following Violet she “felt almost like I should have worn an outfit that matched” (Diana)

I would say at this point in their development Violet got way more out of this experience than I did and, and I would not have described it as an experience for both of us to share in that I was definitely more for her, than for me

Diana

If Diana, who “had to be so vigilant” (Diana) was the least relaxed at *Float*, the most relaxed would be Thomas, who slept through the whole thing. On leaving his mother Kate commented,

Kate: This is the calmest he's been in days its lovely

KATE, MATT+THOMAS 01:59:49

The idea of an atmospheric, sensory experience being ‘for’ both parent and child came through most strongly with the youngest babies. Participant_42 also had a sleeping child at a performance she attended, though she did not understand this as her daughter missing the event. At this early stage, described by Participant_19 as “getting used to her being on the outside of me”, there is an intimate connectedness and continued physical closeness where what impacts one, impacts the other. For Participant_42, a sleeping daughter did not interfere with the parent’s role as a receptive spectator.

My daughter had basically slept through the whole thing, and breast fed, and just been there, whereas I absorbed all this lovely, kind of, lighting and drapery and stage design that we were all sort of sitting in amongst

Participant_42 on small-scale TEY event

Similarly, safe and calm babies at a babes-in-arms performance for an adult audience enable parents to enjoy an artistic encounter without the additional complications of being away from their child.

Many participants had a love of and lengthy experience of attending theatre, and sought out work that appealed to them personally. There is an element of the ‘tolerating’ in

Participant_46's description of how she changed her approach after having children, though she is keen to also get the theatre fix she is looking for for herself.

You have to change your expectations of what you go along to... probably one of the reasons why I go along to so many live kids things is to get the experience myself (laugh)

Participant_46

Participant_46 also gives an example of the little laugh which softens a potential declaration of selfishness, affirming the shared knowledge that children's experiences 'should' come first. It is also present in this comment from Participant_13, who described a number of instances where her TEY attendance was motivated primarily by her own interest in the work.

She liked it. She wasn't, she wasn't crazy about it. I thought it was great! (laugh)

Participant_13 on small-scale TEY event

As well as the selfish mother taboo, this laugh also perhaps acknowledges the deviance of an adult enjoying artwork created for children. A lot of participants had good experiences at TEY that involved the adult directly enjoying the content and delivery of the performance, independent of their child's experience. Participant_39, attended a mid-scale TEY show that she remembered for its beauty, heart, and theatrical magic, "one of the most thrilling things I'd ever actually been to see... genuinely happy crying", though her child was sleeping throughout.

Unlike the pureed lasagne, the adult cannot avoid consuming the live performance if they attend with their child. When the baseline of expectation is low, a moving, beautiful, or thematically meaningful performance for the adult is a welcome surprise.

7.2.1.2 Audience as community

Theatre attendance as a social leisure activity included extended family or multi-family groups. The event attended was sometimes the centre, a fixed time and place, around which a day out or longer trip was planned. It was also the centre for socialising and building connections, when Participant_42 describes "a social experience for us as parents as well", she touches upon the social value of any space where groups of parents with young children meet. This value was observable at the before and after moments around *Float*, where parents discussed their experiences of transitions, changes, and upcoming opportunities in their lives. Where they knew one-another already, they were deliberate in avoiding "chatter" (Orla), during the performance

as this was “not the point of being there” (Orla). Further emphasising the importance of the time and space around a performance event for building connections.

Participant_21 attended an event with her two children and husband as part of a day out where she arranged to meet another family. In her description of the audience her interest in her son widens to an observation of the other families present which she remembers as a ‘feeling’.

I remember just this feeling of, all these kids and families all sitting down, and everybody was just so into it, it was just, it was just one of those times you just think, he's loving this everybody's so into it, everybody's so focused

Participant_21 on mid-scale TEY event

Participant_11 draws a distinction between the focus her child directs at television and the group, public experience of a live performance. As with Participant_21, the presence of others makes a qualitative difference.

But with TV they're just so like trying to understand. I don't know, like if it's because she's quite young but she just gets really like hyper focused on trying to understand the thing. What's going on in the screen... It's not a social experience. Whereas I felt that watching [performance], You know it felt quite social as well just like when you're there, amongst other kids and everyone's enjoying it together.

Participant_11 on small-scale TEY event

As well as connecting in the moment of shared enjoyment, it was also possible for some events to engender a “fan” experience, with “whole audience interaction and dressing up” (Participant_2), many attendees bringing existing knowledge to create a community of shared interest. This was possible with long-running acts, or events that were based on books, television, or film. Where there was a direct personal connection to the performers, such as a friend in the band, auntie dancing, or mum in the orchestra, the children are brought into the shared witnessing of a family or community member as artist.

At *Float*, social interactions during the performance were welcome and frequent.

Freya getting closer. Paige lifts Amber to her feet to meet Freya

Paige: Hello? Who's this Amber?

Paige and Shona make eye contact, both smile

PAIGE+AMBER 01:32:58

Friendliness was enacted between babies and other parents, babies and babies, parents and parents, artists with all. Parents were encouraging of their children's social actions and commented in interview on their enjoyment of their child's confidence and interest in others. Although I had picked up on some of the families knowing one-another ahead of the event, it was only in interview that I had confirmation of who the friends and strangers were. Outside of the performance space, recorded conversations made sense along those lines, but in observing the video during *Float* for smiles, waves, greetings and meetings, the friend/stranger difference was not obvious.

Participant_23 remembers an experience of what felt like a transition from stranger to friend during a TEY performance. Noting that the children were able to play and connect without barriers, she saw the effect on the adults as being freeing.

It just felt like people could, sing and play in a way that they probably wouldn't have, had it not been for the context of the overall show. 'Cause everybody felt quite stuffy and stiff to begin with and by the end of it was like everybody was like, totally engaged and best pals and, less self-conscious maybe?

Participant_23 on small-scale TEY event

The solidarity of shared awkwardness breaking into shared openness can be powerfully connecting, or at least socially reassuring. Performances with a high level of audience participation such as *Float*, or the one described by Participant_23, these connections can be acknowledged and affirmed in the moment. Other performances, with a central point of focus and normative audiencing, perhaps rely more on an imagined, or felt sense of the temporary community.

Participant_52 compared her moments in TEY of a felt sense of collective knowing to group experiences at faith and sporting activities. What was particularly meaningful to her was that this was an opportunity to experience an intangible sense of community *with* her baby. It was fully inclusive.

If it holds, if that magic holds, if all the babies are held. Then it, it it's just a really special thing... you get that connection with people and you're welcome into a, a community and you're all together. You've got a moment of togetherness. And finding that when you have a baby is, impossible (laughs). And then it happened. And you're like – yes that's it! That's it.

Participant_52

7.2.2 Gifting the Experience

Parents bring their children to TEY as a gift of a positive experience. They anticipate benefits for the child through exposure to artistic encounters. Parents who have a love of live performance also seek to share their passion for the form and hope to include their child in something which brings them personal joy. Barriers to access include cost, geography, and the practical difficulties of parenting young children. The main access barrier is the scarcity of TEY performances. Table 16 below describes the sections within this theme:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Gifting the Experience	The opportunity to experience live performance presented from parent to child	<i>I wanted her to experience fun things, that I couldn't offer her, you know things that I couldn't do at home</i> Participant_51
Pedagogy of Exposure	Framing the provision of TEY experiences as beneficial to development	<i>And I feel like it, surely, it's good to train them up (laughs)</i> Participant_11
Accessing TEY – who is able to give?	Barriers and access points to experiencing TEY	<i>hard to, give them those opportunities when it is so expensive</i> Participant_39

Table 16: 'Gifting the Experience' and subthemes

As discussed in the tertiary theme *Who is it for?*, the assumed norm, and commonly stated motivation for attendance was that it would be something good for the child to experience. In this way the parent acts as provider for the child, giving the gift of theatre amongst the many other energetic, time, and material gifts they offer their child as a matter of course. Present throughout, they are able to observe, as the mother in Figure 44, their child's engagement and affirm their choice.



Figure 44: Image from Float illustrating 'Gifting the Experience'

Image description: A performer kneels in a tank of water which reaches her waist. She is making eye contact with a baby who looks up at her with happy excitement. Another performer sits near and looks at the first performer's hands, the baby sat in her lap. The baby's mother is sitting further back and looks, smiling, at her baby.

For some parents theatre was a commodity bought from an external source and brought into the family, for others there was also a personal motivation where the parent sought to pass on specific values, knowledge, or experience. Participant_6 and his partner for example were both theatre makers, and their home is one where this art form is passed on as a native language:

It's just a really big part I guess of the way that we interact with the world so it's become part of the way they interact with the world as well, if that makes sense
Participant_6

Participant_34, a professional performer, took this further. She understood the expressive arts as a fully universal need, and was keen for as many children, and adults, as possible to have access to participation in and attendance of arts experiences.

It's part of our culture, that part of our sense of human being. You know. We sing before we talk. We dance before we crawl. I truly believe this
Participant_34

As well participants who worked professionally in theatre, I met committed amateur performers, and those who stated theatre attendance as an important part of who they were as a person. Family history was mentioned, with a lineage described of a love for theatre passed through generations. There was a desire from those who took such great personal joy in something, to share this pleasure with those closest to them. Participant_35, referring to Participant_4 with whom he shared an interview confessed, "I only started going because I married her" (Participant_35), but was now a regular attendee and enjoyed seeing his baby responding positively to theatre. Participant_12 understood the event she attended with her daughter as part of a longer process towards her daughter sharing in her love of a specific music genre. She valued the TEY event as a "bridging" opportunity, between what she thought of as children's music, and the kind of adult-oriented events that she would attend.

The giving of the theatre experience in these contexts, where the giver identifies with the gift, includes a giving of the self. There is an element of vulnerability in hope expressed by Participant_12. When the gift is well received it is a heartening experience, there is deep pleasure in the handing on of something once received and treasured finding its next grateful home. Participant_41 experienced compounded pleasure in watching his son at a performance where a familiar folk tale was shared. It connected him to memories of hearing this story as a child, and taking on the message of it, not only a nice tale but one which communicated important moral values.

He thought this was wonderful and I was really pleased because I, I, it resonated with me because I'd grown up with that, that story as well
Participant_41 on small-scale TEY event

As well as connecting Participant_41 to his son and his former teacher, as a folk tale from their national history the story had an extra capacity for resonance with uncountable others who have heard, told, or enacted the story over the centuries. Using commodity-based analogies in

conceiving theatre experience as something giftable is limited, as unlike a box of chocolates it is not a zero sum exchange. As with many stories in the data Participant_41 ‘gave’ his son a ticket to a live event, but in the process of enabling this gift was himself in receipt of a moving, memorable experience.

7.2.2.1 Pedagogy of exposure

The provision of interesting and diverse experiences for their young child was understood by many parents as part of the job. Live performances, especially where tangible skill was observed, were valued for what they offered beyond the skills of the parent. “Mummy sings all the time but she doesn’t sing opera does she” (Participant_19).

You don’t have time to be that kind of parent, well I certainly didn’t so, and you’re working as well in amongst all of that. So like I suppose it was engaging for me, engaging for the kids and it salved some of that guilt
Participant_49 on small-scale TEY events

As stated by Participant_49 above, there can be a degree of pressure, and accompanying guilt around parents providing their children with the right, and enough, stimulating experiences at a young age. Participants brought up brain development, and the crucial first three years. For Participant_3, her understanding of how wonderful theatre was brought an obligation, “I mean to fail to sort of share that with your child” (Participant_3). Some parents sought out specific content in performance, for example exposure to a second language that their child is being brought up with. Participant_11 cited “bumping up her cultural awareness” as one reason to seek out live performance from a culture different to what she had at home. Another described the importance of seeing a range of emotions played through and contextualised. There were participants who saw theatre, and the arts more widely, as crucial ways to open windows to worlds beyond their immediate circles. A purpose for which Participant_32 considered there was, “nothing more powerful than live performances”.

The notion of building towards theatre familiarity was present, though not often explicit, in the data. Participant_34 valued the power of theatre and therefore, “wanted to educate my child to be okay in the theatre space”, and Participant_11 proposed (softened with a laugh) the idea of exposure as training, “surely, it’s good to train them up (laughs)”. Parents who sought to build a capacity for theatre engagement understood repeated visits as part of this journey. After a few experiences of being neither delighted or distressed Participant_13’s daughter had, at the age of

five, an encounter that inspired awe, excitement, and many follow-up conversations. “It’s hit her. The, the thing about, live theatre. She’s finally like, got it like – whoooooahhh!”

(Participant_13). For parents who hold live performance as an important component of being in our shared world, repeated and early exposure was an obvious way to include their children.

Exposure to TEY also has a specific potential to provide a learning opportunity to parents, described here by Participant_47 who references the work, or career of parenting through the acronym CPD - continued professional development.

But for me it was, I don’t know I kind of this is almost more important (laugh)... it’s almost like a CPD session it’s almost like teaching, it’s almost like demonstrating how you can create an environment for your baby

Participant_47 on small-scale TEY event

For Participant_47 the invitation for the parent to engage thoughtfully went beyond the performance. Shona commented on how she might try to “sort of re-enact” some of what she saw at *Float*. As well as material inspiration, the way artists engage with very young children, and the responses of the child can bring adults to new knowledge of their child and/or their relationship. This is explored further in *(Un)known*.

7.2.2.2 Accessing TEY – who is able to give?

All participants, by inclusion in this study, had necessarily overcome barriers to attendance at least once. In describing why they chose to attend the event(s) they did however, many also shared details on why they chose *not* to attend other events. It is worth noting though that the voices of parents who have never attended, or perhaps never even considered TEY, are absent from this study.

A lot of participants cited practical aspects such as travel distance as reasons for attendance or non-attendance. Reasons such as public transport links, parking, the time of day, and the ease of fitting around other commitments were given with a slight apology for their ‘boring’ nature, though it was clear that these conditions did matter. Whether travel costs or disrupted nap routines might be considered ‘worth it’ depended not just on what individuals could tolerate, or afford, but on the adult’s perception of how valuable the experience would be.

The cost of tickets was mentioned, particularly in reference to large scale commercial events. A cost that could be prohibitive to larger families, and potentially too much to risk when a young child might not want to stay for the full length of time. Having more than one child also added the difficulty of finding something to suit a range of ages and tastes, performances with specific advertised age ranges require an audience to fit a specific profile.

Another barrier cited, especially by participants whose children were babies or toddlers after 2020, was the availability of TEY performances. Participant_32 felt that, “cause [my child]’s a lockdown baby we’ve missed out”. Geography was also important, an issue for all theatre-goers that is heightened by the added work of travelling with young children. As well as the convenience of local work, Participant_51 valued small-scale touring as offering the intimate performance experience she felt was best suited to younger children. She noted that this provision had lessened in the past decade.

There’s lovely spaces there where it’s just about small scale, maybe twenty people or whatever and that appeals to me rather than large scale productions because it’s much more interactive and inclusive isn’t it

Participant_51

Edinburgh was considered as having the greatest quantity of work available, with more rural areas suffering from limited options and often nothing at all for under 5s. As well as participants who noted the loss or lack of performances in their area, there were those with better access who were aware of their good fortune where access to TEY was understood as a luck-based privilege. This could be due to living close to a specific arts venue, or, as Emma describes below, from confidence built through experience:

Although I’m used to, you know, crossing over those kind of thresholds. So there wasn’t that kind of, like access barrier and I’m really privileged and lucky to be able to do that

Emma

Emma was one of the participants who had experience of TEY both in a professional capacity and as a parent, which she found to be “an entirely different experience”. Others described waiting for their child to be old enough, and the excitement of accessing a form of theatre as a true audience member rather than a professional observer. “When I was finally able to take my own little one along I was just really chuffed” (Participant_8).

In this way the child is what allows adults access to a fuller TEY experience. During *Float* Orla was able to explore all areas of the performance space whilst accompanying Calum’s wanderings, something I, as a solitary adult, was only free to do during a baby-free rehearsal.

Participant_9, though an experienced theatre attendee, found the close proximity to performers at TEY opera to be an unusual privilege.

Of course you've never been as an adult, you've never been, close up to an opera singer in your life, they're always miles away at the other, you know, behind a proscenium arch

Participant_9 on small-scale TEY event

The sharing of live performance is one of many, many things that parents provide their children. It can also, through access to something enjoyable, unique, or moving, become a gift given from child to parent.

7.3 (Un)known

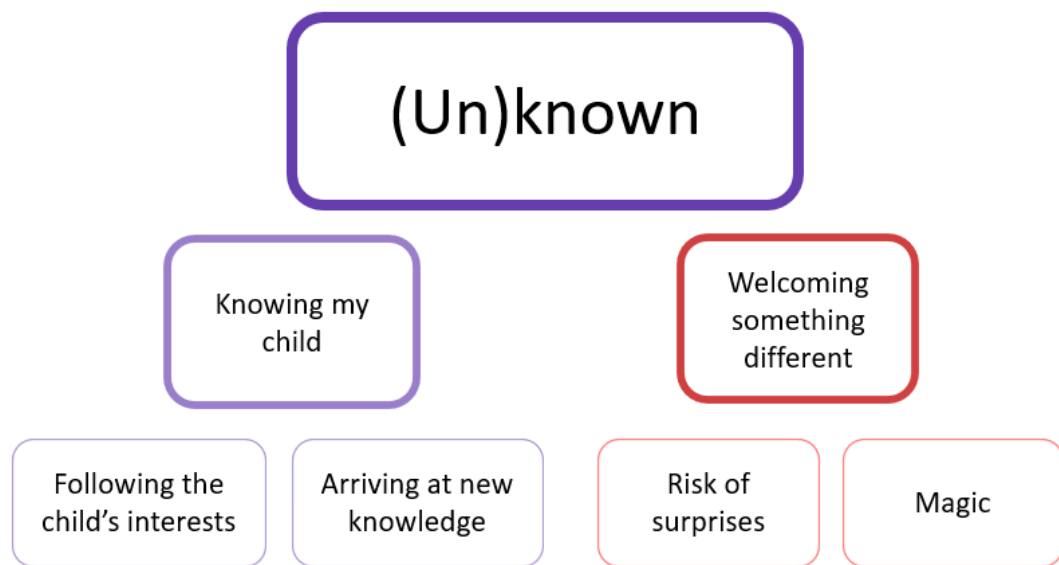


Figure 45: Theme Map section, ‘(Un)known’ and subthemes

Adults, for all kinds of reasons, know a lot more than babies. Amongst my adult study participants their knowledge and experience formed the expectations they brought into a TEY encounter. It also affected the way they responded to events on stage and off. In choosing to attend live performance there could be an existing interest to the content, company, or producer of the work. Or, as Participant_25 described when asked why she chose to attend the events she did:

A mixture of real deep knowledge, and total instinct (laughs) Which is probably how I make most of my decisions in life
Participant_25

Following the interests of the child was also cited as a reason for attendance, particularly for those based on existing work in print or on screen. Another motivation, particularly for parents of the youngest, was that it was ‘something different’. TEY being a novel offer amongst things parents might do with young children. Parents had to strike a balance when taking children to events that it was new enough to be interesting, but not so strange as to be frightening.

Moments of shared newness were also described. “Tippy” (Participant_50) performances where “the first two minutes was the freakiest experience for everybody” (Participant_9). These brought the adult and child to a similar place of naivety, an unusual and memorable experience

in itself. For some parents the TEY encounter brought them to a new or affirmed way of seeing their child and their relationship.

7.3.1 Knowing my Child

Parents chose live performance events based on their knowledge of their children as unfolding individuals. Agency and the voice of the child were upheld through: sensitive and engaged responses from performers; artistic offers which met the interests and needs of young children; and the choice made by parents to centre their child in family activities. The novelty of TEY and their status as spectator of their own children allowed parents to arrive at new perspectives on their children and relationships. Table 17 below sets out the secondary and tertiary themes with descriptions and examples:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Knowing my child	The TEY experience as personal and specific, understood by the parent as dependent on what their child is bringing and who they are	[my daughter] was always really, could not do participation, you know, couldn't talk or anything like that, but I think [the show] was very, optional Participant_13
Following the child's interests	TEY engagement led by the child's interests and/or actions	because he loved that book he literally sat all the way through and he loved it Participant_18 On a stage adaptation
Arriving at new knowledge	Where the adult learns something about their child or their relationship.	I felt like really proud of her that she'd, just like, been cool Participant_8

Table 17: 'Knowing my Child' and subthemes

Age, personality, and how they combine were the key factors through which parents understood their children's experiences. Participant_45 understood her daughter's dislike of one event they attended as personal preference influenced by, but not entirely dependent on her age.

And we didn't stay to the end because it just wasn't her thing but then obviously the majority of children there were having an absolute ball, and she was maybe too young
Participant_45 on large-scale Children's Theatre event

Broadly there was a drive to achieving fit, where the offer matched the child such as Participant_8's daughter who "was the perfect age for it". This was not just a case of being old enough as some toddlers for example could be "too old" (Participant_47) for a piece designed for non-walkers. Although there was recognition that young children could be unpredictable and changing, often parents described traits or preferences in their child that were framed as aspects of their personality. Participant_47 for example already had an understanding of her baby as an attentive, curious person who enjoyed visual stimuli. This contributed to the event attended being a good fit for them:

He was pretty, alert, and responsive baby, child, he had his eyes on everything he was really engaged, just his personality so he was watching everything and, and loving it
Participant_47

Children like Participant_47's son, or those "placid enough" (Participant_46), could slot more easily into the normative role of the spectator in terms of their behaviour. Other children did not, and this was invariably understood as a part of who that child was and though something that could potentially be worked with, no cause for blame or approbation.

High needs child the hospital called her... genuinely don't know if we're gonna get through this because she was just so unhappy so often, and it wasn't her fault she was in, you know, pain and stuff
Participant_43

I definitely don't have that expectation for my very active child to just be able to sit and watch
Diana

Although 'sitting and watching' was acknowledged as the assumed theatre norm, there was variety amongst the events described in the data when it came to performer-audience interaction. Some performances placed an expectation on audience members to interact in specific ways, or respond on cue. Participant_13 described such participation as something her daughter could not do and appreciated when sitting and watching was also a permitted form of

engagement. A feeling shared by Participant_34 and others. As Orla observed, “There’s not gonna be one ideal way of engaging for all of them”.

Parents at *Float* were keen observers of their own children, displaying a fascination and enjoyment in following their movements and interactions. There was space at *Float* for dyadic play and communication, as in Figure 46 below:



Figure 46: Image from Float illustrating 'Knowing my Child'

Image description: A mother and her baby face one another. She is clapping her hands together and looking intently at her baby's face with raised eyebrows and a smile. The baby is looking at the crinkly tactile prop in their own hands which they are animating by bringing their hands together in a clapping motion.

Parents also gained pleasure from watching other children. Here Beth comments on Freya, Shona's daughter.

Beth: (to Shona) She's totally in her element, she's like really confident

Shona: She's like this is so me

Beth: Yeah

BETH+JONI 01:32:35

For Shona, Freya's mother, to have this interpretation of Freya's experience as "so me", she is working from an existing position of rich knowledge on who her daughter is and who she is becoming. Being able to watch her encounter something new feeds into this ongoing learning project. Similarly, Emma can describe Lucy's stance and expression as informative to her state of mind, built from her understanding of who she is.

That's what I call her process face...
That's just how she's always been, even as a new teeny baby
Emma

7.3.1.1 Following the child's interests

The immersive and interactive nature of *Float* made the curiosities and desires of children visible their parents.

Paige lifts Amber up and puts her on the big beanbag
Paige: Ok
Amber straight away crawls down and off
Paige: Not a fan
PAIGE+AMBER 01:30:24

Parents who were interviewed described enjoying the discovery in allowing their children to follow their interests in the new and stimulating environment. Interactions were guided by the performers in the space.

Every artist that engaged with Lucy picked up on something she'd, shown a bit of an interest in which I would have considered to be a passing interest, but they picked up on it
Emma

This attuned awareness on the part of the artists was also picked up on by Hannah who thought, "they seemed to know what Innes wanted". Whereas the parents enjoyed watching the children follow their interests, the artists were positioned to build and expand upon them. Participant_5 was similarly impressed by the actor-musicians who engaged with her baby at a performance. For the youngest children their expressions of self and voice are embodied and responsive, expression that TEY can make space for.

To have agency available to very small kids and to know how to make that work was really interesting for me... and, in a way your child is not a passenger they have an active part to play in doing something really good

Participant_5 on small-scale TEY event

Participants who described taking an unhappy child out of an event, largely cited following the desires of the child, though Participant_27 below does also hint at how unpleasant it would be for herself and others if her son stayed only to be ‘horrible’. Most also remembered a period of trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade the child to stay. Children who were overwhelmed by the sensory stimuli remained clear in their requests to be taken out. The amusing irony for Participant_27 is that her son now regrets leaving a loud and energetic performance he has no memory of attending as a toddler.

And now to this day he always says – why did you just take me out? And I was like – because you didn’t want to be there, and you said you didn’t want to be there and you were going to be horrible all the way through it and he’s like – I kind of wish I’d stayed now. At 9 he’s saying that. Cause now he’s really into it, he’s really into the theatre.

Participant_27 on large-scale Children’s Theatre event

Participant_27 was not one of the participants who expressed an explicit desire to encourage a love of theatre in her children, though she was pleased to continue to support her son’s interest and was proud to share his enthusiasm for performing, writing, and directing.

Participant_32, who was keen to introduce her children to theatre with a view to this being a repeated experience, considered the “easiest way to start is something they’re interested in”. This led her to a large-scale performance based on a television show. Other parents also took their children to shows that featured characters or stories of which their children were already “a big fan” (Participant_48). When this was a strong interest in the child, the parents delighted in being able to provide such a heightened, thrilling experience. Participant_2 took her daughter to a performance that they were familiar with from watching a filmed version of the live show at home.

So it’s a bit like going to see a rock band for children you know it’s like there’s the people I know, I know their songs...

[My daughter] was just overwhelmed with excitement at seeing these people that she’s watched endlessly on the television on stage

Participant_2 on large-scale Children’s Theatre event

When the child was already a fan, their prior knowledge and interest heightened the specialness of the live event. Though they may recognise characters, the experience of liveness and being in an audience group were new.

The scale of a production limits the possibilities of the performer-audience relationship. The intimate responsiveness seen at *Float* and described in other small-scale TEY is not possible with an audience of hundreds, or a production style where bulky puppets are manipulated in time to pre-recorded dialogue. Respect for the agency of the young child can be found at these large events in the choice made by their parents to attend. Whole weekends, large costs, and long journeys are organised around centring the interests of the child.

7.3.1.2 Arriving at new knowledge

The enjoyable curiosity in the child's experience brings with it a learning opportunity for parents, as Orla describes:

Part of the fun I guess is you don't know which bits they're gonna be really taken by, and sometimes its not necessarily the things you expect, that are really fascinating to them

Orla

Partly this is created by the parent's positioning as spectator of the child, the stepping away from direct involvement to a watching position.

It's kind of a different type of connection that you get with your child compared to I suppose ordinary kind of one on one time, or stuff where maybe I'm, you know where it's me or her like leading the play. Like when it's something else happening that we're watching, it just feels like it's a different connection. It's like seeing a different side to them, or something, a different like insight into where they're at developmentally.

Participant_11

Parents took an experimental approach to discovering what appeals to their children.

Participant_1 discovered through attending different events what her children's preferences were for noise and crowds, "I'm kind of learning as I go what they could tolerate and what is not good". When experiences were particularly good, or bad, this triggered parents to engage in imagining the perspective of the child and speculate on their understanding. Participant_17 speculated that her daughter saw a man dressed as a lion as real, Orla imagined Calum feeling like he was under the sea. Participant_28 was attending with a child who began to quietly weep during a piece of music, the child did not want to leave and stopped when the music changed, and Participant_28 was left pondering on the power of music and the different ways we process strong emotions.

Given the long view of some participants stories, there were occasionally connections made between early experiences and later skills and interests. Parents made sense of responses with the perspective of hindsight. A baby who delighted in a musical performance is now a musical child, a little boy who always struggled with any audience situation has long standing claustrophobia, Participant_31's son's later diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) helped her understand why he did not enjoy the sensorially immersive show they attended. For Participant_3, her son's ASD did not present a barrier for him enjoying theatre, with hindsight she believes that it was regular attendance from an early age that led to the theatre being a predictable and familiar environment for him. Though many public spaces are challenging for him, the rituals of the theatre format provide the balance of the familiar and new that he needs to feel safe.

Sometimes a TEY performance can have a very powerful impact on someone's life. For Participant_47, attending a performance with her baby son opened up possibilities for their time together that she had not imagined.

It totally changed it totally changed, and introduced me to the world of theatre for babies... it just kind of changed my perspective not just on theatre and on performance and on it being relevant and, appropriate for, for such early such early years, but also just interacting, with babies

Participant_47 on small-scale TEY event

Two participants, Participant_43 and Participant_5, shared stories where bringing their baby to a TEY performance had a strong and positive influence on their understanding of their baby and their future relationship. Here, Participant_43 describes how she came to a new way of seeing her daughter which reflected on how she also saw herself and her role. In recalling this important moment, she emphasises the significance of the surprise, that expectations or assumptions were far exceeded. Seeing her daughter connect with the performance she was able to perceive her as an agentic person, the slight distance of the watcher giving Participant_43 the space needed to take in a wider perspective on their first six months together.

She was absolutely mesmerised for the whole performance, it was unbelievable. I, and I saw a different side to her, and we'd had such a hard six months up to that point with so much crying and worry and just to see her like properly engaged, really absorbed, concentrating so much. You would never think, like a little baby, particularly a baby that wasn't very well, would be able to concentrate and be so absorbed in something but she absolutely loved it.

And it absolutely changed the way I felt about being her mum because I just thought – oh my goodness she is amazing. This is difficult, what we've gone through in the last six months was difficult, and I already knew I loved her, but I could look at her and just be like – she is amazing. She is able to really genuinely take part in this, really properly absorb what's going on

Participant_43 on small-scale TEY event

7.3.2 Welcoming Something Different

TEY has the potential to deliver a unique experience for adults as well as children which is valued for its rarity. The success of a pleasurable surprise rests on being in the Goldilocks zone of not too familiar and not too strange. In some cases performers are able to be responsive to individual children's reception. Parents must gauge in advance if an event will be a good fit for their child, a decision based on known and unknowable factors. Powerfully positive experience in part rested on an awareness that this was not guaranteed, a high payoff for a high stakes risk. TEY can be so wonderfully unusual, it can feel like magic. This secondary theme and tertiary subthemes are divided as described in Table 18 below:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sample</i>
Welcoming something different	The draw of the unusual	obviously kids hear music all of the time, but this was like – something else. D'you know? Participant_49
Risk of surprises	The danger of the new, where limited knowledge creates the conditions for potentially unwelcome experiences	we can't justify always having like that amount of money for as much as it might be an amazing experience, it also might not be (laughs) because they might get bored. They might hate it. Participant_39
Magic	How the impossible or inexplicable is sought and encountered	people put in a good amount of effort into making there be magic Participant_13

Table 18: 'Welcoming Something Different' and subthemes

I know, from many conversations with people outside of the field, how surprising the idea of theatre for babies can be. For many this piqued curiosity is the initial lure.

I thought that was quite, unusual, so we went along to that, purely because I thought the novelty of it, hadn't really seen it before

Participant_46

For parents in their first year, the desire to experience something new and interesting can be heightened by the repetitive and home-focused nature of daily life. In attending an artistically constructed live performance it felt to Participant_49, “you weren’t only having the same week lived over and over again”. Participant_9’s first experience of TEY followed a pattern he later saw in other attendees as he went on to take a professional interest in the form.

The journey that most people go on when they got to it for the first time of, up to like – what is this? This is mad! What are you doing? – but by the end of it going – ooh, ooh it’s really rather good isn’t it?

Participant_9

The ‘really rather good’ expresses surprise that could be born from having no, or low expectations. Surprise that so much time, effort and artistic sincerity was dedicated towards meeting the aesthetic interests of very young children reveals the status they are generally held in our society. The effort of considering the child’s perspective was not taken for granted by Participant_6,

I think we’re really lucky to take them to a lot of things that are really, people have thought really carefully about, a young person’s experience of going somewhere new for the first time

Participant_6

Another participant described her feelings of pride when a friend visiting from London went on the journey described above by Participant_9 whilst attending a TEY performance at her local regional theatre. Experiencing small-scale, high-quality performance for young children challenged the friend’s assumptions on where ‘good’ theatre is to be found and who gets to see it.

The strangeness of a TEY encounter can be hard to explain without recourse to shared reference points.

I just don’t think we’ve sort of been in a situation where there’s been anything quite similar...

Yeah, it was really good. I really enjoyed it, and I just cannot explain it to people

Shona

The second part of the quote above reveals how much we rely on the perceived existing knowledge of others when trying to describe our experiences. In interviews TEY was compared to other forms of entertainment: television, cinema, theatre for older children or adults. It was also compared to other situations where families with young children gather, such as singing sessions or toddler groups. Going into an event for the first time there was a common uncertainty around what to expect – will it be more like panto or nursery rhyme time? It could be little like either.

The younger the children, the greater the assumption that they enter with even fewer expectations. In Figure 47 below, a baby at *Float* meets the movements of the performer and the materials of the performance with curiosity.



Figure 47: Image from Float illustrating 'Welcoming Something Different'

A baby stands with the palms of their hands against the wall of the glass tank. A performer faces them, also with her hand against the glass. The baby looks at the performer's hand, spreading and moving their own hand in a mirror of the performer's gesture.

For very young children there is an absence of boundaries in considering what is 'supposed' to be interesting:

They don't distinguish, they don't differentiate, between this part is this, the, the piece of the performance and this part is, you know, the nuts and bolts

Orla

Entering into this openness of mind can be quite freeing for adults, as described below by Participant_6. He had a background in theatre before attending multiple TEY performances, building a knowledge base from which he could confidently express his preferences. In seeking out work that required skills to access he shared with his child, he could meet his own need for new experiences in pleasurable collaboration.

Ooooh.. I really love, erm, experiences that... allow us to have, like experience something together if that makes sense. Erm, so I don't, we don't seem to see many kind of like plays. Something like that do you know what I mean, we tend to take, to see things that are very playful...

And we can sort of both experience that at the same time rather than kind of, needing to have, need to know how to understand a, play text or something like that. Much more kind of fun and open that way I think

Participant_6

7.3.2.1 Risk of surprises

In describing how she watched her daughter Freya exploring the environment at *Float* Shona illustrates the ever-present tension of risk in the new:

I'm always worried in case she's like going to slip, or I'm always curious as to like how she interacts

Shona

If she allowed her worry to hold Freya back from exploration, she would miss out on seeing her making discoveries and creating her own experiences. Shona also knows however that not all surprises, like a slip and fall, are happy ones.

The qualities of peekaboo, tension and release within a safe relationship, give rise to pleasurable surprise and are delightfully discovered by babies and parents the world over (Addyman, 2020). The same mechanics are a popular and effective component of performance for all ages. When the performer understands the audience's expectations, they are able to exceed them just the right amount and deliver delight.

The boys just loved it I think for that element of surprise, he was jumping in and out, and they were just mesmerised by it

Participant_1 on small-scale TEY event

When there is a mis-match however, surprise becomes shock.

So she was fine very engaged but at one point, er, the guy in the lion costume went, like, turned to the audience (makes clawing gesture)... and - I'm gonna eat you! And [my daughter] freaked out, (laughs),

Participant_17 on small-scale Children's Theatre event

A child not liking the performance, to the point of needing to be taken out, is one of the risks parents take. When playing peekaboo together we can quickly gauge when we might be 'too much' at that moment and draw back or change. Inflexible situations put greater pressure on

parents to ensure children conform to behavioural expectations, and for some being contained in a room for a set length of time felt like a very risky undertaking. Fears named or implied were judgment from other audience members, that their child would disrupt the performance, that they would be put in impossible situations of needing to meet divergent needs of different children. As Participant_21 put it, “when you’ve just had a baby it can go really wrong really quickly”. There was a sense of success when none of these were realised. Participant_23 recalls the trepidation felt as she realised that the audience would be so close to the performers, removing a more familiar comfort of feeling anonymous in a dark auditorium.

It did feel like – oh god we’re, we’re in this and we’re part of it and what’s it gonna feel like, and yeah, it just felt great

Participant_23 on small-scale TEY event

An inverted experience was had by some others, who anticipated a good experience only to be disappointed. Participant_45 speculated that her negative experience, of needing to take her daughter out of a show very early on, was partially brought about by her imposing her own expectations. Though she had her own happy memories of an older version of the same performance, seeing it through her daughter’s eyes it was now “horrendous”.

[The show] was terrible, but that was just from my child’s because obviously the vast majority of people thought it was great. I loved [this show] when I was younger (laugh) So, I was expecting good things, maybe it was my expectations maybe that’s what it is

Participant_45 on large-scale Children’s Theatre event

For Participant_31, her enthusiasm in organising a small group to attend a TEY event together heightened her disappointment when her child became distressed and she instead spent the time walking around outside the venue, waiting for the others.

When your kid doesn’t respond in the way, that other children are, or that you think that they should be responding, and you think about everything about this show is great, it’s a lovely place, and it’s a great show, and they’re lovely people and it’s really artistic, and entirely appropriate for that age group why isn’t it working for my kid? Yeah, it was quite, it was disappointing.

Participant_31 on small-scale TEY event

Participant_31 experienced confusion, and a lowered sense of efficacy in her parenting. The painful opposite of those such as Participant_8 who came away proud of their child and themselves, “as a first experience for her and for me, it couldn’t have gone any better actually, cause she was so engaged in it”. That families living this ideal experience was known, visible, and to Participant_31’s eyes normal and appropriate, only served to heighten her sense of isolation.

Other parents encountered failure at live performance and, especially when recounting stories from longer ago, described their experiences mostly in terms of embarrassment or irritation. Participant_41's phrase, "a bit of a disaster" to describe taking his toddler son to a loud gig, is a good example of how event experiences are understood as both dramatic and mundane. Though the day out was a 'disaster' within its own terms of success and failure (a child was upset and a plan abandoned) a deeper lasting significance was not attached. The legacy of the experience was that Participant_41 learned about ear defenders, knowledge he went on to share with friends who were also parents.

The vulnerability of parents and babies in the early months heightened how risk was experienced in TEY. For Participant_5 her younger son's unpredictability was part of how she knew him as a person,

We called him Angry Baby 'cause he would kind of burst into flames, metaphorically speaking, I can remember being quite scared of him.

Participant_5

Her memory of taking him to a small-scale TEY performance, over ten years ago, was vivid and detailed, "one of those really seminal moments" (Participant_5). The event happened within the context of a family not bumbling along on an even keel but reacting day-to-day to challenges, Participant_5 was looking for support in understanding her baby and willing to try things out.

I'm gonna cry now 'cause it was actually really emotional. But it was in a lovely, lovely way because you were just, I (laughing) I want to stay in the [venue] I didn't want to go home, 'cause I struggled with him. Em, struggled to find his, mojo... and that was really a bit of a gamble because even [husband/dad]'s going – he might hate it he's gonna scream the house down we'll have to take him away this is going to be terrible (laugh) you know. And, he didn't, he loved it, loved it. So that was, that was a really positive step forward for us with this, angry baby... it was one of those things that just gave us so much it was like the golden ticket

Participant_5 on small-scale TEY event

For Participant_5 the 'gamble' of attending a TEY performance, with an unknown story, in a small-room venue where audience and performers were all visible to one-another paid off. One of the reasons the payoff was so great was that the stakes were so high.

This we thought this is either going to be a complete disaster, or it's going to work its magic, and fortunately for us all, it worked its magic.

Participant_5 on small-scale TEY event

7.3.2.2 Magic

Magic was understood in two ways: as connected to the illusion of theatre, and as descriptive of ineffable spectatorship experiences. They were not mutually exclusive.

Relating to theatrical trickery and spectacle, parents enjoyed the cleverness of a good trick or surprise. Whilst watching their children following the alternative reality some parents speculated as to what they understood as real or pretend. The sophisticated adult knowledge of the real and unreal in a theatre space created a form of dramatic irony in the parent as spectator of the child. When Sleeping Beauty fell into her cursed slumber at the interval Participant_39's niece, who had been so excited to see one of her favourite princesses, became very upset when she 'died', "she was completely inconsolable. Ah she was broken (laugh)" (Participant_39). Although hard work at the time, this anecdote is now an amusing family memory, based on what Participant_39 understood as a young child's confusion of the real and unreal. A distinction she grew to understand. Similarly, the lion who so frightened Participant_17's daughter, was explained by how, at the time, she "obviously could not tell the difference between reality and em, make believe".

Participant_12 saw her child's lack of awareness of the construct of theatre as adding to the strong positive impression her daughter had.

For her the people dressed up as the characters are 100% that is [cartoon character] and that's like, whoever it is she loves
Participant_12 on large-scale TEY event

Drama asks us to suspend our disbelief, though Participant_12 knew the character on stage was a person in a costume, she could still enjoy the performance as if it really was a giant cartoon animal. For the parents who described 'fan' experiences, sitting with their delighted child gave them access to enjoying child-pitched content vicariously. The awe experienced by Participant_12's daughter is harder to access as an adult, but in witnessing it Participant_12 experienced a different form of joy through her daughter. One that she can call up and think about as a snapshot memory.

just thinking about her wee face like the sheer wonder and amazement at that one was quite emotional for me, like this is magic for her this is like, what theatre is all about really
Participant_12 on large-scale TEY event

Magic was sometimes the best word to describe intangible heightened experiences like awe, or a sense of unspoken communion with others. The various descriptions of mesmerism, as described in the tertiary theme *Captivation*, have something of the magic spell about them. When together with a group of strangers, something unexpected is experienced collectively, it can feel magical. Knowing that the conditions have been created to enable this unique collective of people to share in a moment of common wonder.

And I was captivated and all the children which I couldn't quite believe because they were so tiny and small, were captivated

Participant_23 on small-scale TEY event

Though perhaps familiar to those who seek out live performance, this kind of magical sharing in an experience of rapt attention is unusual to find when half the people in the room are infants. Success is not guaranteed but,

If it works, moments of sheer joy and magic...

And then just sitting there and being like - Yes! This is this is beauty. This is like, this is, so stimulating for my soul. This is what I've been missing

Participant_52 on small-scale TEY event

7.4 Summary of Findings

Through examples and interpretative analysis of a range of experiences, the themes describe the most important areas and qualities of the TEY experience for parents attending with young children: where and how attention is paid, the specifics of living through the encounter together, and the appropriate level of novelty. In offering the Case Portraits ahead of a description of the themes, my aim was to keep the data alive for the reader in terms of its ideographic and dynamic qualities.

Bringing these findings to discussion, I will return to literature discussed in Chapter 3 and draw connections to relational pedagogy, theories on intersubjectivity, empathy, and factors influencing the parent-child relationship. The findings contain variety, and I continue to resist a 'pinning down' of any typical or normal experience in the Discussion chapter. By exploring the interplay of tensions however, I build towards answering my research questions and detailing the properties of TEY which can lead to a positive impact on parent-child bonding.

Chapter 8: Discussion – A Set of Three Dances

The aim of this chapter is to lead a coherent path towards the conclusions and implications of Chapter 9. It is where the following research questions are addressed:

1. How do the adults who bring young children to TEY value the experience?
 - 1.a What are their expectations?
 - 1.b What impact have they observed?
2. To what extent is TEY a shared experience?
 - 2.a What are the emotional journeys undertaken by children and adults at TEY?
 - 2.b What are the relational dynamics of the TEY space?

The final research question, asking what the implications are for pedagogy, is answered in the conclusions as a culmination of this discussion.

When analysing the data in this study it became clear that I would not be able to describe a ‘typical’ TEY spectatorship experience. Nor did the subject of this investigation and my choice of focus lend themselves to neatly bounded themes. Sharing, as an idea, is inherently connective. Intersubjectivity is one way to describe this entanglement, an empathic connection which is affirming and constitutive of human relationships (Trevvarthen, 2012). In exploring the felt experience of intergenerational spectatorship, I looked for ways that I could bring to the page the active, intersubjective, and embodied. The word *dance* is a useful term with a precedence in developmental literature (Zeedyk, 2006). When we dance together, within an imposed structure or without, at any level of training, we move each other. The Dances below frame a discussion of the findings through exploring the dynamic tensions alive in the data, in the moments of encounter. The Dances do not sit apart from the themes as an alternative parsing of the data but move amongst them. They draw attention to how TEY is experienced in the moment of happening, guided by the research questions. Also joining The Dances are ideas and discussion from the literature introduced in Chapter 3 and observations from my own TEY experiences before and during the process of this research.

The names of the three dances describe areas within which the adults and children at TEY manoeuvre. The Dance of The Rules deals with permissions, agency, and consequences of non-adherence. The Dance of Space and Time with how bodies move, meet, and experience time within an allocated area. The Dance of Self and Other with connections, rejections, and personhood. They are fluid, and non-exclusive. For example, in the action of a parent pulling a

baby back from the stage all three are in play as the parent negotiates expectations and the specifics of the space responsively with their child.

Experiences of push and pull, proposal and response, discovery of balance, interplay, and sensitivity are present physically, emotionally and conceptually in the TEY encounter. It is also worth pointing out that dance, as a rhythmic response, felt and expressed through the body also occurred in the data not as a metaphor, but an observable action. An action which, as in the extract below with Amber and her mum Paige, was understood as joyful, self-willed, and responsive. All qualities which relate to the conclusions drawn on how accompanying adults value TEY.

*Amber turns and faces Paige, holding both hands.
Amber bobs up and down*

Paige: Are you having fun? Dancing? Are you dancing?

PAIGE+AMBER 01:21:23

8.1 The Dance of the Rules

That the temporary world within the theatre performance is not ‘real’, makes space for a social and moral freedom. Protected by the insubstantiality of fiction and the unrepeatability of liveness, things can happen in the theatre for which the actors need not be held accountable. In the fictional worlds on stage even our most fundamental rules for society can be broken, the core value that babies should be protected from harm (as observed in the participants attending *Float*) is not upheld by Medea or Mrs Punch. The very young audience brings a new offer to this tradition of subversion, not through breaking societal rules in fictional contexts but by breaking the illusion of pretence all together. The baby audience is an honest audience and the fear of failure brought by artists and parents serves to heighten the sense of wonder at success.

The theatre, as a public space, is itself a site of many spoken and unspoken social rules. Sedgman has written on theatre etiquette as a way to examine how we operate in shared space, how rules and expectations change over time, and to trouble the exercise of power (Sedgman, 2018). As with all conventions, protocol at a live performance is a collection of shared norms built over time and influenced by many factors. How an individual then meets, or challenges, conventions is an additional area for exploration. When we slip easily and habitually into convention we may not notice the choices we make or the parts we play in a shared dance of social engagement. TEY spectatorship, though often pleasurable, is rarely easy and habitual.

Looking at how rules are met, overstepped, or policed at TEY reveals their presence and can give insights into wider society as parents with young children bring their expectations and concerns into the space. Unlike traditional or mainstream theatre, TEY as a form does not assume a standardised etiquette; artists have continued to explore flexibility in the performer-audience relationship in areas such as immersive theatre (Webb, 2023). At TEY even certain basics such as ‘sit still and look at the thing’ cannot be assumed and the rules of a given event can vary. It is common for small-scale (under 60 spectators) performances to be introduced with clarification around what is expected of children and their adults during the event. These verbal statements operate in addition to the implied rules of the immediate environment and the ever-present norms of social interaction. Rules may be tight, and firmly enforced, loose and open to personal interpretation, or anywhere in between. *Float* was designed to be as far towards the loose end of this spectrum as possible and offer a Yes Space where babies were free to make their own journeys of discovery. Larger events are less likely to begin with show-specific rule setting, but rather follow established norms of the theatre or other performance space in which they take place.

The Dance of the Rules moves through many of the themes presented in the previous chapter. The burden of responsibility sits with the parent, navigating the rules for themselves and on behalf of the children they bring. Questions on the direction of focus also ask when and how attention should be supported. Confidence and knowledge brought into the event holds some insight into accessing TEY, as well as being tied into the theme of *(Un)known*. The perception of what it might mean to fail at TEY connects to the fulfilling of expectations, our own, and those of the people around us. A degree of uncertainty connects many experiences of TEY spectatorship. Exploring how expectations on behaviour are communicated and met gives insight into what is often a dance between structure and freedom. Insights that connect to wider discourses on parenting, with implications for the parent-child relationship.

8.1.1 The Rebel Baby

Babies and toddlers are not famous for their self-control. Their noise and mess has been documented as intruding into organised grown-up spaces from churches to aeroplanes since at least the seventeenth century (Knott, 2019). At the most negative end of the discourse on sharing space with very young children, babies are dehumanised and dismissed, reduced property of the parent who is shamed for selfishly bringing their problem into contact with others (Sedgman, 2023). As described in the following quote, the world at large is not often set up for exploratory toddlers:

Because there's rules like all the time... even around the house, it's always like, no, don't touch this, don't touch that... I think that's why I was so relaxed because there weren't really any rules which was nice

Hannah

TEY can offer a safe space where our youngest community members are welcomed and celebrated, thereby upholding their right to participate in cultural life (UNICEF, 1989). The image of the unpredictable, disruptive baby lingers however, and meets the idea of being an audience through the art presented, and the expectations brought by adult audience members. The figure of the Rebel Baby existed for many parents as a potentiality, a version of their child that could be provoked or suddenly appear with unpredictable consequences. Participant_5 shared a strong visual image of volatility remembering how when caring for her son in private or in public, “we were quite afraid of him” given that he might at any moment “burst into flames”.

A deficit model of early childhood (Trevvarthen et al., 2018b) can be seen in the restriction of early spectatorship according to perceptions of what babies ‘cannot’ do. In theorising on aesthetic distance in audiences of 2-6 year olds, Schonmann (1999) observed an optimum level of involvement in the fictional world presented. Over-immersion in the work, and lack of self-control of the body, precluded the enactment of spectatorship. Drawing such a line invites makers of TEY such as Roberto Fabretti to ask if the theatre he makes ‘exists’ (2009, p. 135), as the worlds created may not fit everyone’s definition of theatre. Multiple spectatorship experiences were had by very young children observed or described in this study, many of which were at events described as theatre. Fears around whether children were ready, or could tolerate a performance influenced some parents’ decisions on attendance. These concerns, strengthened by marketed age banding, fits with a linear idea of child development where theatre attendance can be thought of in terms of milestones and thresholds. Here, TEY participation is how children learn to be an audience (Meiners et al., 2006), working towards what we could term theatre readiness, with the onus on the parent in matching the event to their child’s ‘level’.

The Rebel baby in the linear model is kept out of the room until such as time as they can be effectively controlled. As well as pre-assuming limitations on the part of children, the linear model of child development attracts criticism from a post-colonial perspective, as an overly neat and complete view of a complex situation (Burman, 2016). The experiences and observations from many adult participants challenged deficit and linear development models, particularly in the way personal and specific knowledge was brought to interpretations and descriptions of their children. It is through the attendant adult that the gardening, or journey (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009) pedagogic metaphors are enabled. The keen interest of the parents created space for enacting personal and responsive scaffolding for how their children negotiated a highly novel environment. This making of space for relational response allowed individual temperament to inform the experience, itself an important component in the parent-child relationship (Malik & Marwaha, 2023). The linear model of staged child development and associated stereotypes was present however, as a background template from which to compare individual response.

When Gopnik played with the narrative of capacity stating that babies are “bad at not paying attention”, (Gopnik, 2009, p. 191) she invites us to see the TEY child spectator as exceptionally skilled; an open, awe-prone (S. K. Chen & Mongrain, 2020) neophile who will meet any artistic offer with a full and present engagement. The Rebel Baby can be a voice or body of truth, freely

crashing through boundaries and norms. Disruption of a variety which artists may invite and celebrate (Novák, 2009), particularly when it introduces the possibility of alternative power hierarchies within a space. In *Calum* bringing his mother to every corner of *Float* and Participant_34's daughter improving a "boring" contemporary dance performance we can see parents delighting in their child leading the way. Though it is the adult buying the ticket and wheeling the buggy, it is the young child who has brought them there. Participants who reported surprise at their own enjoyment of TEY events followed their babies to new aesthetic experiences including circus, immersive sound installations, or alternative cultural traditions. Experiences made possible by artists responding to the challenge of a different kind of audience (Drury & Fletcher-Watson, 2017).

Another common surprise, reported by artists (Schneider, 2009b), press (Davies, 2016), researchers (Morley, 2022), and the participants in this study, is the frequency and extent to which babies do not conform to the expectation of being distracting and distracted. Though the singular Rebel Baby, perhaps screaming or charging onto the stage, was feared and sometimes encountered, captivated young children were also described. The sensitivity of babies to their fellows as observed in lab conditions (Liddle et al., 2015), can in TEY become group entrainment of attention, an audience. Parents enjoyed watching their children entranced, but it was the rebellious antics of other people's children which elicited the most laughter from adults at *Float*. Young children can be effortlessly entertaining, to both those who know them and strangers, and some TEY artists have attempted to build this into their work e.g. *Whipped Up* where the young audience were positioned as part of the show for the adults sat further away. More often than not observing their own children, what mattered to the participants in this study was the perceived authenticity of the child's response and the permissions this was met by. Whether wild freedom of physical curiosity, or extended peaceful fascination, the highest value was placed by parents on TEY experiences which enabled their child to meet work on her or his own terms. A valuing which is supported by child-led approaches to pedagogy (Trevanthen et al., 2018b).

8.1.2 Permission and participation

One of the ways care was experienced by study participants was when they felt supported in allowing their children freedom to move, vocalise, or follow their curiosities. A number of TEY productions have offered as the central encounter a free-flowing and immersive experience,

(Fletcher-Watson, 2013a). An offer characterised by Kerry Cleland, creator of *Float*, as a Yes Space (Cleland, 2023). Permission was communicated multimodally at *Float*. Cleland met each adult in person before they entered the curtained performance space. She verbally explained the work-in-progress nature of the event, its inspiration and her ambitions for its future, and asked shoes to be taken off and for photos to not be taken until the end. She also interacted playfully and sensitively with the children as they arrived and began to explore the outer, ‘foyer’ space. This friendly and open beginning allowed parents to ask questions and for the babies to become accustomed to one of the performers they would see inside the performance space. Once inside the artists engaged non-verbally with the babies, picking up on their hesitations and interests and enacting the responsiveness often observed in TEY (van de Water, 2023). Permissions were signaled through, for example, a baby being held at the door while their parent caught up with them demonstrating a boundary, or objects being moved or held demonstrating shared ownership. Safe, and relieved of the policing duties described below, parents were better able to observe their child interacting with and exploring the novel and stimulating environment. The babies could observe and explore at their own pace, groundwork for an enriching experience based in play (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). This also set up the conditions for the parents to be able to enjoy the witnessing of their child, a route to learning and bonding.

Attempts to create the greatest freedom within an audience context cannot escape that we are putting human beings together, likely strangers in close proximity. Sedgman’s (2018) suggestion of theatre as being a live social experiment applies well to the Yes Space. Not just in terms of observing the curious explorations of babies, but in how their parents support, observe, and interrupt them. The limit to this freedom in *Float* was when it impinged on either their own, or another child’s safety. Expressed in clear terms here by Diana to a very squirmy Violet:

Diana: You can get up. Yeah. Or you can lay down. What would
 you like? You just can’t kick the other babies

DIANA+VIOLET 01:25:53

Although babies were encouraged verbally to interact with one-another, their physical contact was very closely monitored and they were pulled away from holds, grabs, and embraces. The biggest rule of all, that babies must be kept safe from harm, trumped all others and could contradict the intentions of the Yes Space. In the following example power is swiftly switched back to the adult when risk to another baby is perceived.

Amber reaches out to touch Violet

Paige: Aw that's. Are you being nice?

Diana: Those are nice gentle hands

Paige: Oh, don't grab

Paige grabs Amber's arm and pulls her towards her

Amber: (complaint noises)

PAIGE+AMBER 01:37:04

Unlike rules around, for example removing shoes, the rules around how babies touch one-another were ones which the parents needed intuit and potentially enforce.

Though the artists were laughingly happy to be touched, grabbed, even sat upon, the parents felt that if a limit was reached it was their responsibility to interrupt the interaction. They did not need to protect the artists in the same way as the collective desire to protect weeks-old Thomas, but they did feel it was their role, and not the artist's, to lift away hands or bodies that they felt were breaching reasonable limits. The uncertainty of parents' roles in the TEY space described by Hovik (2019a), may be exacerbated by this felt need to remain the true boundary setter. That they are watching their children intently during a performance means that no action, or interaction, goes unobserved and potentially policed.

Parents are intermediaries in the assertion of power between the event and the child. Entering the theatre contains "that pressure to be an audience member and learning how to sit still" (Participant_33) unless actively dismantled. For solo adult spectators, adherence to the rules of the theatre space is often framed as a moral choice. Transgressions impact not just the individual in terms of censure, but the experience of other audience members and the performers (Sedgman, 2018). For parents this moral responsibility is compounded as they are held accountable for their child's behaviour, and experience, as well as their own. In the quasi-pilot I explored the roles taken by parents at TEY and described two of them as the "Law-maker" and the "Law-enforcer" (Allan, 2022, p. 59). In this study I found that though Law-enforcer was understood as an essential caring responsibility, the extent and detail of the Law-maker role varied across the many different types of TEY described. Discomfort was experienced when parents were asked to enforce rules they felt inappropriate for their child or the situation, a disempowerment within their role as Law-maker.

The experience of the parent as Law-enforcer is influenced by their relationship with the theatre event, and the people delivering it. Producers, stage managers, designers, ushers, marketeers, and many other professionals all have an influence on what it is that an audience member walks into. The person or people delivering verbal instructions, advice and information hold a power that is underscored by traditional power dynamics of live performance. Participant_30 for example was irritated by what she felt were unfair demands placed on her to police her baby's engagement with physical objects that the artists shared. She confirmed the unreasonableness of the artists' requests by citing other parents who she interpreted as having similarly stressful experiences. The roles and rules of the space however were such that, as good social actors, she and the other parents complied as best they could, "wrangling" (Participant_30) these things off babies and toddlers.

Rule setting, and the associated encouragement, or enforcement of them are activities which belong to the powerful. Fletcher-Watson described the theatre of coerced participation as a site of 'tyranny' (Fletcher-Watson, 2015). In my own research, I found that the positive benefits parents ascribed to interaction at TEY relied upon a principle of invitation over instruction (Allan, 2022). This was supported by this study, with the understood qualities of the individual child being the strongest influencing factor on how parents valued TEY. For some, permission *not* to join in was very important, applied to both children and adults:

Nobody was made to perform like a seal which I really liked (laugh)
Participant_5, on a small-scale TEY event

The image of the circus seal, bullied into unnatural activity, evokes a strong power imbalance. Yet many people knowingly enter this relationship when choosing the theatre as a leisure activity. The power temporarily leant to artists in a theatre setting can be part of the entertainment when adults willingly submit to being told where to sit, when to speak (and not to). In pantomime the calling out of specific responses and phrases forms part of the tradition, a relationship also commonly found in UK Children's theatre (Reason, 2010). Though theatre has a history of directly engaging audiences for political intentions (Boal, 2008), that participation of any sort is automatically a route to empowerment is rightly questioned (Freshwater, 2009). Both Lundy (2007) and Hart (in Nicholson, 2014), who have theorised on authentic participation in education and other contexts, suggest models with space for individual engagement, avoiding tokenism which could be the case in a call-and-response interaction. The negotiation of participatory activity with young children is not simple, fed as it is by many contexts (Blaisdell, 2017) and this was reflected in the TEY observed and described in this study. Some participants in this study cited interactivity as positive qualities in a production aimed to engage a young audience. Many described a preference however, in themselves and/or

their child, for retaining greater autonomy in voice and movement. These participants sought out non-traditional work that they hoped would match their preference. It is not a stretch to imagine how a strong aversion to being coerced into specific responses, combined with an assumption or memory of ‘tyrannical’ engagement forms could stop some people from attending at all.

An unspoken contract takes place in entering a performance space (Machon, 2016), Participant_23 remembered trepidation in entering a TEY space, a feeling of passing a point of no return. As in the theme of *(Un)known* there is a playful line between excitement and fear, the relief and delight Participant_23 went on to experience was partly built on that initial uncertainty. The physical enactment of thresholds are explored further in the Dance of Space and Time, here I wanted to draw out how the choice for the parent to enter a performance space with a small child is an act of trust. Trust that the power they are temporarily lending will not be used to humiliate, pressure, or restrict them in their parenting. When the additional responsibility that parents carry into a theatre space is not acknowledged, or supported, it becomes another public space where young families are unwelcome. Though intimate performances offer personalised experiences through meetings with attuned performers, they can throw parents into an unwelcome position of visibility. Observable by all present, parents can experience a greater pressure to ensure they and their child conform to the rules of the space, and that they uphold the rules of being a ‘good’ parent.

8.1.3 Parenting in public “A lot of should about it”

The quote in the above title is from Participant_31 describing her choice to attend a TEY performance, and she was not alone in expressing concern around making the ‘right’ choices as a parent - and to be seen doing so. Framing accessing arts activity for the very young as ‘good parenting’ fits with the pedagogic approach of concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2017), especially when the focus is on future benefits as discussed further in [8.2.3](#), Human Becomings. Also present in this study was an approach to live performance with lower stakes, where its sole purpose is to be fun. Although missing an instigating sense of duty, parents in this latter set still enacted their role as carer, and rule enforcer, within a public space. In the secondary theme *Gifting the Experience*, different motivations could be at play with the connecting factor being the hope of the parent in providing something positive, if not necessarily improving, for their child. Here I would like to focus on how the parents in this study brought and met rules for

themselves in their roles as parents at TEY, if they measured up to these expectations and if that mattered.

The word parent began being used as a verb towards the end of the twentieth century (Knott, 2019). To mother and to father have older usage, though each with their own distinct and additional meanings; ‘mothering’ has connotations of physical care and ‘fathering’ the instigating point of the whole process. ‘Parenting’ however, now includes not only direct physical care but the choices made in areas of discipline, education, communication, and the accessing of experiences for their child (Senior, 2014). A short visit to any social media platform can produce a myriad of opinions, admissions, jokes, advice and scare stories on the subject. Although the anonymity and accessibility of social media can provide an opportunity to resist an oppressive idealism (Pedersen, 2016), the perceived scrutiny from wider society can also add to a pressure to perform a perfect version of parenting, putting both parents and children at risk of negative mental health outcomes (Gawlik et al., 2024). It is also important to highlight the gendered aspect to much of the public debate, as well as literature within the academy, as I am using the term ‘parent’ throughout this thesis as a general stand-in for ‘accompanying adult’ or ‘carer’. Matrescence, the process of becoming a mother, describes a period of change that is hormonal, psycho-social, and existential (Athan, 2024). In the social realm matrescence gives a term to what can be felt as not an additional role to step into, as a new job, but an entire overhaul of lifestyle, body-image, and perception of the public self (L. Jones, 2023). Parenting stress, the mental and physical pressure experienced by many carers of children (Murthy, 2024), disproportionately effects mothers, one aspect of why Glaser titled her book on motherhood as “feminism’s unfinished business” (2022). In this study, all of the participants who discussed feelings of guilt or shame were mothers, though as discussed in [4.4](#), Challenges and Limitations, so were the majority of participants. The analysis of laughter within interviews also supported guilt as being a “taken-for-granted” aspect of motherhood (Sutherland, 2010, p. 318).

Turning to a consideration of the broader societal context, whether mother or father, and whatever their particular version of ‘right’, damage is wreaked by images of perfection. The ‘good enough’ (Winnicott, 1971) mother/parent is a concept returning to conversations around parenting advice and support. Any model or advice which suggests the existence of a perfect parent sets all, real, parents up to fail (Gawlik et al., 2024), an impact sometimes also found in cultural representations of parenting. *Bluey* is an animated television show created with the intention of being watched together by 4-6 year-olds and their parents (Isaacs & Elliot, 2022) and offers a model of parenting that is aspirational in its joys and relatable with its struggles,

winning praise from audiences and critics and an Emmy (amongst other accolades). Thousands of fathers value Bandit, the dad character, as a role model for creative play with young children (Lamont, 2022), in later series he was carefully written so as not to display an alienating level of energy and tolerance (Emery & Hesterman, 2021). I was able to witness some of the fandom in person when I attended the theatrical adaptation, *Bluey's Big Play* in Glasgow in 2023. The girls of a family I met on the train to the venue encouraged their dad to show me his “Bandit socks” whilst their mum admitted they were “more excited than the kids”. On stage the human-sized puppet Bandit struggled to keep his promise to stay off his phone, whilst all around parents were present for the children they had brought to the event. It is less common in smaller scale TEY to have such direct representation of parents on show, though approaches to play and interaction with young children may be modelled by the performers (Cowley et al., 2020). As well as the aspirational representation of fun parenting showcased in *Bluey* (Emery & Hesterman, 2021), attendees of the live show were surrounded by many, real, families. Whether represented on stage or met in the audience, parents observe and are observed by each other at TEY. The data in this study, and my longer-term observations, point to the majority experience as being, and observing, good enough audience members.

Within the tertiary theme *The burden of responsibility*, the particular flavour of early parenthood was important. The body suffers sleep deprivation and strains, and there is an increased vulnerability in exposure to the outside world. Also bearing heavily on participants were immediate plans and expectations for how an event such as TEY might impact a baby's eating and sleeping patterns. Further weight was then added by the knowledge of how crucial those first few years are for the child (Crichton et al., 2020), and within that how vital the parent-child relationship (Zeedyk, 2021). For some, bringing their child to an event where professional artists have created an intentional, beautiful experience was a way to share some of this last burden. Parents cannot be everything for their child and offering something different was highly valued, “mummy sings all the time but she doesn't sing opera does she”, (Participant_19). For some, the wonders of early brain development are fascinating and to be celebrated, not a source of pressure or anxiety but rather an invitation to closely observe and respond to their child with curiosity and creativity. There was however also resonance with Macvarish (2016b) and Burman's (2016) fears for a deterministic understanding of early development studies leading to pressure on individual parents. The crucial issue is one of access. When a potentially enjoyable experience, framed as ‘good’ or even ‘necessary’ for your baby is unavailable, the burden to fill that gap falls straight back onto the parent.

In their study on how guilt and shame around their child's behaviour affected parenting responses, Scarnier et. al. (2009) distinguish between the two, emphasizing the observed nature of shame. A feeling of shame around a child's behaviour was experienced as a failure of the parent-self and led to authoritarian, unconstructive responses whereas 'guilt' in this context, was a mistake which could be learned from, leading to more supportive responses towards the child. Using this distinction guilt associated with TEY 'failure' was experienced by participants who brought their children to events which they appraised in hindsight as a poor match, lessons for future attendance were learned. Shame, associated with a greater reduction in well-being and negatively impacting the parent-child relationship (Scarnier et al., 2009) could occur in the moment of rule infraction as other audience members observe the parent and their response. The findings of this study are not directly applicable however as though many spoken and unspoken rules were broken by children, such behaviour was never interpreted by parents as naughty or deserving of reproach. Though parents may not blame their children, their own public esteem is at the unpredictable mercy of their small companion:

Worried that he's gonna do something wrong or touch something, or say something, or cry, or be, somehow embarrassing. And, that I'm going to be judged by other parents
Participant_52

Regardless of how parents frame the value of the event they all must face the visibility of their parenting within a group of strangers in a potentially new environment. This is enhanced at intimate, small-scale work such as *Float*, or stagings where audiences are seated in a circular shape facing one-another, popular in small scale TEY. In the tertiary theme *Who is it for?*, the desire for parents to be invisible, or blend into the background speaks to this unasked-for exposure. The spectre of the judgmental parent was invoked by a participant in the quasi-pilot (Allan, 2022) to emphasise the relative ease and freedom of Zoom theatre with its optional camera and mute button. Enacting Bourdieu's (2018) ethical snobbery, the judgmental parent makes excellent choices in morals and etiquette and communicates their disapproval of lesser mortals through cold stares. I found no evidence in my research of parents judging others at TEY on how they acted with and towards their children, rather Participant_38 listed "other babies wailing when they're not supposed to wail" as one of the actions that created for her a positive sense of community. Though some parents did have concerns around the rambunctiousness of other babies at *Float* they exercised high caution around how they communicated this, the parents of the more physical babies doing the hardest work:

I think some of the time it's second guessing, because I think most of the time people are too polite to say you know
Orla

Perhaps there are judgmental parents at TEY, but they were all too polite, or ashamed, to tell me in interview. What was certainly present were parents afraid of being judged. Parenting failure, publicly witnessed, could be a compounding of pain, a reverse of the peer-led support that enhances parenting efficacy (Fuller et al., 2019). *Being met in a safe space*, as a tertiary theme described how participants often experienced care at TEY, from the art, the artists, and from other audience members. When considering the risks and fear around the potential of an unsafe, judgemental space, creating a safe space should be approached as not a cosy bonus but an essential component of TEY. Observed by Drury et al. (2024) in their research into baby voice in arts contexts, this attitude of care towards both the parents and the young children supports child rights and maternal mental health (Armstrong, 2021).

A protective factor for parents from the negative impact of TEY ‘failure’, was confidence and familiarity with similar experiences. Participants who related a “horrendous” (Participant_45) experience as one among many had a perspective on the unpredictability of TEY spectatorship that made room for a variety of encounters. As the child grows and meets with success, the sense of efficacy in the parent increases (Coakley, 2006), and a virtuous circle is created where positive experiences provide a map towards more positive experiences. Participant_3 reflected on how her relatively high knowledge and experience of theatre in various forms gave her the “confidence to leave and come back in again”. An established understanding of the rules, and consequences of non-adherence, enabled her to break them in ways necessary to enhance her child’s experience. As with the question of the ability to enact ‘good parenting’ which opened this section, access matters. Barriers, and the forms of capital enabling access to TEY, are the topic of the following section.

8.1.4 Knowing the rules of the game

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018) offers a way to describe the extent to which someone is in possession of the skills, knowledge, and attitude to successfully navigate public spaces and institutions. Passed on through families and institutions, Bourdieu argued that cultural capital is one of the mechanisms through which social class strata are maintained. Enacted as a ‘habitus’, the embodied disposition of an individual towards other people and situations, our cultural capital does not feel learned but rather natural and obvious. A valuable concept in sociology, though oversimplification in application must be avoided (Sullivan, 2002), it has a close association with theatre as alongside the university interview, attending the

theatre (especially opera), is often brought in as an example scenario. Someone with less cultural capital may feel unsure of themselves as they negotiate the various stages of a theatre visit, from choosing what to wear to when to applaud. As well as the boundaries this draws between classes of people ‘in the know’ or otherwise, concern for how best to behave is a distraction from engaging with the performance (Anderson et al., 2014). To usefully bring the concept of cultural capital to this study however we need to expand the idea of theatre beyond that of a gilded foyer stuffed with bourgeois gatekeepers. The ‘theatre’ in Theatre for Early Years encompasses a wide range of performance forms, all of which are brought into fresh presentations by artists seeking to make meaningful work for a very young audience. The habitus of an opera aficionado may or may not be useful in attending opera for babies where, as at *Bambino* seating arrangements, timings, and proximities all deviate from the norm. The participants in this study described a range of existing performance experiences from which they evaluated their impressions of TEY. As class background is one of many factors influencing taste and choice in leisure activities (Crossick & Kaszniska, 2016) we can assume this played a role in selecting what to attend though this was not a line of inquiry explored. Some participants had experience of contemporary theatre forms where, as with *Float*, you may be sat in a room with a handful of other spectators and observe wordless, non-narrative performance. Some had a deep familiarity and affection for big West End musicals. Others, like me, had professional experience within TEY in Scotland. This variety is important to stress as, layered on to the variety of performance attended with babies and toddlers, the influence of traditional high-status theatre knowledge becomes hard to pin down.

I do not wish to push away however the ideas of class and cultural capital entirely. When I am making claims for the positive benefits of TEY attendance it is important to question whether these are only available to those with privileged access (James et al., 2019). The tertiary theme of *Accessing TEY – who is able to give?*, considered some of the barriers experienced, including cost, though it would be misleading to put too much emphasis on ticket prices. There is no correlation between ‘high’ culture TEY such as opera or chamber music, and cost of tickets. As with theatre as a whole, the cost of tickets tends to rise alongside the size of the venue. Some of the performances cited in the data were free to access such as the Family Encounters Day performances, *Float*, or events at Play Café. The most expensive TEY event referenced by a participant, a live adaptation of a television show, had tickets on sale for £22.50 (including booking fee) at the time of writing (APA, 2025). Accompanying merchandise can also increase the overall cost of an event for families, again there was variety described from a free CD to large toy versions of characters. The emotional and energetic cost of travel with a young child was brought up by participants and as with geographical location, material capital informs this barrier. Confidence in the space brought an ease at TEY and, as previously mentioned, a

capacity to accept difficulties alongside success as chapters in a longer story. This confidence, understood as a luck-based privilege by some participants, could be considered as a form of TEY specific cultural capital.

Lack of prior knowledge, and open expectations are common at TEY, touched on many times in the primary theme *(Un)known*. The novelty of offering work for the very youngest is intriguing and can be reason enough to attend. The experience of being curious about the idea of baby theatre is present in the data from descriptions of attending recent work such as *Float*, and productions twelve or more years ago. Though literature and practice in TEY has grown in the past decades (van de Water, 2023), from an audience perspective Fletcher-Watson's (2013a) description of TEY as a radical new form is not yet out of date. This is partly due to the low availability of TEY performances, the largest factor in all access issues, though in terms of audience development there is a built-in flaw when it comes to repeat customers. Participants in this study described only becoming aware of TEY once they had become parents, others had extensive experience attending or working in TEY before bringing their own babies. Knowledge of the form brought expectations around potential content and style of performance; it did not however remove uncertainty as personal experiences were under the powerful influence of a highly unpredictable companion.

There is trepidation for the parent in TEY attendance around both whether their child will enjoy the event and if they will adhere to behavioural standards. This is especially true if they are bringing a young child into a non-TEY space where the usual rules of audiencing are likely to apply. Here Participant_17 describes her thoughts during a performance where the taboo against talking necessitated her needing to infer or guess what her appropriate action should be.

[My daughter] was probably like 9, 10 months and just very vocal making lots of baby noises - eeya, ooui, ah ah – the whole way through and I was like – oh god should I take her out? Should I be cool with this this? Is everyone cool with this? What should I do as a parent, am I ruining everything or, it's a very accepting kind of artist space – oh I'm sure everyone's cool with this I just don't feel cool,

Participant_17 on a small-scale performance for an adult audience

She was afterwards reassured by the cast and some other audience members that they had enjoyed her daughter's noises, her instinct to stay had been correct, but her ability to engage with the performance had been overtaken by her concerns for etiquette. An inner distraction comparable to descriptions of hysteresis (Bourdieu, 2018), the fish-out-of-water experience where habitus does not match the conditions and in the case of arts experiences concern for correct behaviour impedes direct enjoyment. Where traditional audience members may seek

signs of affirmation from other audience members in the decoding of the performance (Bennett, 2013), Participant_17 needed to draw on unspoken signals to ascertain her permission to remain.

Limited experiences and artists experimenting with form and structure lead to situations of confused or conflicting understandings of theatre etiquette. Audience members eating at the theatre is used by Sedgman (2018) as an example of an act that has been labelled rude or acceptable depending on the setting. For parents at TEY food could be a tool for managing behaviour, “learning to bring snacks” was cited by Participant_38 as an element of her learned success in TEY attendance. At large venues eating is permitted or even encouraged, with popcorn, ice-cream and sweets for sale. Seated in rows at the afternoon showing of *Bluey’s Big Play* I scanned the audience around me in the 1000 seat stalls and struggled to see anyone who was not either eating or helping someone else. Many, like the family beside me and the childfree couple in front, brought their own prepared food in boxes. Breast and bottle feeding were expressly permitted at *Float* and other events for the very youngest. Artists who consider the offering of food during a performance to be a form of interference or distraction are approaching spectatorship with the ideal of aesthetic absorption where the parent risks interfering in the relationship between the child and the art (Morley, 2022). This may be very valid. Peak moments of TEY spectatorship, instances of absorption, captivation and delight were not described as including food. The deployment of tactical snacks however were for moments where the alternative was (perhaps disruptive) disengagement. Simultaneously consuming snacks and entertainment is a cultural norm in many situations, it was found to be an expectation brought by many participants to TEY.

Another area of ambiguity at TEY is the physical boundaries of permitted movement. From the viewpoint of the stage, and from the audience, I have witnessed many attempted and many successful stage invasions. One of the more curious responses I have observed in adults is a sudden hesitancy when their child crosses the line between audience and performers. Are they caught between their duty to manage their child’s movements and their own need to abide by the rules of the space? When the child crosses the line do they come under the care of the performers, the stage inhabitants? I have seen performers, other on-hand adults, as well as immediate carers scoop up and carry children back to their designated place. *Float* had no such line to cross for parents or children, so this specific occurrence was not directly observed within this study, though the “element of stress because they’re going to run” (Participant_37) was referred to in interviews. The stuck parent, held back by the invisible forcefield of the stage-

audience barrier, fits with a recurring idea however of unspoken rules at TEY exerting a powerful force on adult spectators.

One of the reasons given for taking a baby or toddler to live performance was being led by the interests of the child. Ramsey questioned the extent to which the concept of horizons of expectation was useful when considering children's theatre (Ramsey, 2017). Although a three-year-old will not have been informed by years of experience, an awareness of trends in performance styles or the latest reviews, aspects which inform an interpretive community (Bennett, 2013) they can still bring content-specific funds of knowledge (Wallis & Noble, 2022) to live performance. Books, television, and other media can provide children with a familiarity and positive regard for a stories, characters, and fictional worlds, interest which parents build on. The shared 'fan' experience was an opportunity for parents to initiate delight, even more so when it was a fandom in which the parent was already a member. Another motivation for attendance was a strong, and often deeply personal, love of live performance. Parents reflected positively on bringing their children to what they enjoyed as a child, in one case labelling their children as fourth generation theatre-lovers. Theatre and live performance were not encountered as a status-building commodities but as fun, thought provoking, transporting experiences of an art form held close to the heart. The transference of cultural capital, or building of habitus, was enacted by parents at TEY as, to adapt Lareau's (2017) term, *Concerted Inclusion*. The message could be 'we are a theatre family', 'we are Scottish', 'we love Disney', or 'folk music', or 'ska', whatever the specific manifestation, under each act of *Concerted Inclusion* is an offer of belonging. The child has the opportunity to learn ways of being, perceiving and responding through the actions of those around them, especially their most trusted adults (Rogoff, 1991), TEY can be an apprenticeship in audiencing.

8.1.5 The benefit of rules

A live performance event relies on multiple agreements. As an audience we arrive at the appointed time and place, arrange our bodies as instructed, and gift our attention to the focal event. The performers rely on each other to fulfil their planned roles to perform and on the audience members to fulfil their roles to witness. When this succeeds, when expectations for attention and a spectacle worthy of attention are met, there is gratitude on both sides. When TEY delivered 'magic' it was through the collaboration of those present; gifts of wonder both given and received, made possible by attendance to an offered structure. The heightened

experience of awe (Monroy & Keltner, 2023), and that of being part of a group (Páez et al., 2015), have both been found to have positive and pro-social impacts on those experiencing them. The collective experience of TEY is discussed further in *The Dance of Self and Other*, here I would like to draw attention to how the way theatre is structured can enable or inhibit a sense of audience ‘togetherness’ in TEY. In Gabriel et al, (2020) the authors contended that collective effervescence, an experience characterised by a “sense of connection and sacredness” (Gabriel et al., 2020, p. 131) can be found in a variety of situations where people come together. This troubles the idea of the need for the curated or extraordinary if the positive impacts of group experience are available in everyday settings. As with many studies however, especially in psychology, the research was conducted with undergraduate students. The kinds of gatherings participants were asked about, “a church, a concert, a sporting event, a festival, a memorial, a wedding” (Gabriel et al., 2020, p. 133) are accessible to a nineteen-year-old in a different way than to a two-year-old and their parent. In the findings of this study the specialness of TEY was valued in contrast to a picture of daily life that offered few opportunities for collective effervescence.

You get that connection with people and you’re welcome into a, a community and you’re all together. You’ve got a moment of togetherness. And finding that when you have a baby is, impossible

Participant_52 on small-scale TEY event

Any intentional gathering requires organisation, and a congruence of will, what live performance typically offers in addition is a sustained point of focus for these aligned minds. Participant_52 and others found this a rare and wonderful experience, echoing those voices within TEY scholarship who were surprised that it was possible (Schneider, 2009b). The most powerful encounters reported involved children engaging positively with a performance, with everyone present fulfilling their roles for a successful event. The precocious attention seen at TEY, where babies display sustained focus for longer than typically expected for their age (Morley, 2022), can look like an unexpected capacity in young children to follow the rules of the theatre. Without artists creating the invitation for babies and their families to attend live performances where they are asked, if possible, to stay in place as they observe the spectacle, we would not know that it is reliably possible. Although *Float* offered a multi-focus, durational installation, many TEY performances, including many described by study participants in Phase One interviews, have successfully delivered rehearsed performances that ask for collective sustained attention. Attention which partly rests on the communication of and willingness to follow the rules.

Rules can also be comforting. Like the “physical boundary of a chair” (Participant_45) which helped Participant_45 allay her anxiety around permitted behaviour, the presence of clear

expectations, if able to be followed, removes unwelcome doubt. The burden of responsibility felt by parents includes the ongoing parsing and assessment of appropriate social behaviour, from themselves and their child. Awareness of protocol was found to be reassuring for some parents, enabling them to navigate a new situation, safe in the knowledge of what was expected of them. In the absence of confidence in the established permissions, the tendency was towards a cautious over-assuming of boundaries. The challenge for TEY artists is to create a structure appropriate for the needs of the audience, both child and adult.

8.1.6 Conclusion to Dance of the Rules

Within TEY social rules and theatrical norms are played with by artists in both content and modes of presentation as they explore the possibilities within what is still a relatively new form. These can be fresh and challenging for adults attending as they negotiate the whole process of the event, dancing between comfort and curiosity, safety and ambiguity. TEY offers variations of approach in the extent to which the audience are instructed, guided, or given free reign. The audience-performer relationship is additionally layered with accompanying adults required to absorb and follow instruction, managing the behaviour of their children on behalf of the artists. Rules were important to the participants in this study with gratitude expressed for both their presence and absence. When there is a variety of structures on offer, parents are more able to select the most appropriate one for their family. Whatever the type or extent of rules presented parents appreciated clarity in communication as it supported their confidence in how they respond to their child within the space.

Across all situations, with their different sets of rules, the central position of the parent was one of responsibility for how their child behaved. There were instances of support, described further in the following section, but parental responsibility was ever present. Although we know great power comes with great responsibility, parents often find themselves with only the latter, and it can be exhausting. The image of early parenthood as burdensome, repetitive and full of “dredgery” (Participant_52) was common in the data, particularly from those looking back at a time now passed. The relentless aspect of early parenthood, described by Senior (2014) in the title of her book as *All Joy and No Fun*, and the experience many have of their world suddenly shrinking adds to the power of TEY as ‘something different’. Positive experience of openness, curiosity, present experiencing, relaxation and transportation sit in contrast to repetitive cleaning tasks, incomplete sentences and cold cups of tea. There can be relief when a child engages with

the performance in a way that requires no additional, effortful, work on the part of the parent, Not only that feared public disruption has been avoided, but relief from the ongoing attentive course correction required around toddlers; “if they get sort of immersed in it then, that’s just bliss, because you get a bit of a rest” (Participant_37). This can arise from a performance fully capturing a child’s attention, or a Yes Space which accommodates movement and exploration. It is worth noting here some important differences between live performance and how parents engage with television, or other screen-based content with their children. In a family context though television is sometimes watched together (Isaacs & Elliot, 2022), TEY *always* is, with parents valuing experiences that they find affect them directly as well as via their child’s experience. The liveness and bounded aspects of TEY are also important, the audience is contained within a time and space directed by others which they have entered into. For parents such as Shona, at *Float*, the absence of phones was a contributing factor to her being able to inhabit more fully the present moment with her child. Many parents also noted the effort they put into attendance, emphasising the difficulty as a marker of how much they valued the activity. This would preclude using TEY as a form of ‘babysitting’ in the way sometimes ascribed to iPads and similar (O’Connor & Fotakopoulou, 2016).

The process of Concerted Inclusion, a mechanism returned to in Conclusions and Recommendations, was a driver for many parents in this study hoping to engage their children in an art form they themselves enjoy. The biggest barrier to accessing TEY is the low availability of events. When available however, ease and confidence in TEY spaces, including navigating the rules, was part of a virtuous circle leading to greater enjoyment and perceived benefits from attendance. Successfully navigating the social rules within a TEY event enabled parents to support their children’s learning from the new experience. Respect for the autonomy and personhood of young children was demonstrated in both how events were selected based on the child’s interests, and in the responses to children’s needs and curiosities during performances. In the following section, The Dance of Space and Time, I explore the movements of bodies in the TEY space and discuss further the expectations and value placed by parents onto the impact of attendance.

8.2 The Dance of Space and Time

This thesis is concerned with the experiences of events: live performances where particular, intentionally unusual, things happen for a period of time at a designated place. The movements of many people are corralled into position as they assemble to spend their immediate span of time, attending to an artistic presentation. The theatre ‘space’, is both the physical area demarcated for this purpose and a period of time, the duration of process. It is a space that it is possible to be physically inside or outside of, temporally before or after, and it is the crossing of such thresholds that creates the ‘other world’ of theatre. A liminal, ritual experience (Novák, 2009) that is a step out of, and out of step with the ordinary.

TEY artists think carefully about the environments they create, and are responsive to the pace of their young audience. As with the event described by Participant_47:

There was lots of space, lots of space in terms of physical space but also, in the, performance
Participant_47 on small-scale TEY event

Relational spaciousness allows for child agency (Li et al., 2017) and is essential for attuned listening on the part of the adult in spheres outside of theatre (Hackett, 2022). Arts engagement offers a way to create a safe, unpressured environment for young families which can support therapeutic outcomes (Armstrong et al., 2021), and foreground the voice of the pre-verbal child (Drury & Blaisdell, 2023). The secondary theme *Taking Care* described how significant the environment of the TEY space was for participants, which though temporary in its nature could at times be very impactful.

Questions of pedagogic impact are also explored in this section by discussing future-oriented approaches to valuing TEY, and the immanent experiences within the event itself. The past is carried into the space, which then has the power to create lasting memories, a perspective shared by many Phase One interview participants recalling experiences from ten years ago or more. Time and Space are experienced individually at TEY in embodied ways, with variations in comfort, proximity, and pace.

8.2.1 Thresholds

Drama, like other narrative art forms such as film and literature, can take us to other worlds on the wings of our imagination. Postdramatic work may play with poetic and abstracted modes of communication but retains an aim to move the spectator in some way, to take them elsewhere (Lehmann, 2006). Immersive theatre aims additionally to bring the audience bodily inside the world created. At *The Lost Lending Library*, a performance for children aged 6-11 years by the company Punchdrunk for example audience members are invited to explore the exquisitely detailed corridors of a magical travelling library. Unlike a traditional production where I would expect to sit in one place as I follow a story played out before me, at the *Lost Lending Library* I edged about the spaces, peered around furniture and perched on stacks of books, unsure as to where the next moment of action might come from. In writing on spectatorship in immersive theatre practices, Machon (2016) describes how important the transition moments are in taking an audience from this world to the ‘other’. Often there will be a process including an anteroom and a guide who introduces and initially brings audiences further in, perhaps through a special door or portal where the ‘real world’ is left behind. Immersive theatre is designed to play upon all the senses, as well as challenge the assumed relationship between performer and audience, and audience members with one another. Given the way that babies and toddlers meet the world in fully aesthetic relational immediacy (Trevarthen et al., 2018b) I suggest that from the perspective of very young spectators all theatre can be thought of as immersive theatre. Audience members may be, for a time, sat in an auditorium facing a proscenium arch, but all of the sights, sounds and physical freedoms they meet during the whole process of the event are what form the experience. Technical and architectural elements of the space, what Orla referred to at *Float* as the “nuts and bolts” which Calum did not distinguish from the “show”, are not bracketed in the way they can be for older children and adults.

The strangeness of TEY was valued by parents in this study, and there was an appreciation for the skill of artists in how they conceived and presented work that was tailored to the needs of very young children. This included how they were guided across thresholds, Participant_30 for example was surprised and impressed by a dancer “coming out to meet all of the children” thereby igniting curiosity and putting them at ease before the show began. Like the White Rabbit who Alice follows down the rabbit hole, a guide across the threshold into the performance space is often found at TEY, sometimes though not always a performer, whose presence in both ‘here’ and ‘there’ bridges the change in a fully embodied way. Transitions for young children are an important area of Early Years pedagogic research, with a lot of attention given to the transitions from home to nursery and nursery to school environments (Blaisdell & Bolger, 2020). When entering a new situation our identity can also shift as we take on and

adjust to new norms and expectations (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Parents at *Float* shifted in their relationships with one another once inside the performance space where their focus became fully trained on their babies and through them, the performers. Outside of the curtains, in the ‘foyer’ area, they chatted and checked their phones, as well as played with, talked to and provided food for their children. Inside, they retained their caring responsibilities whilst also shifting into a role of quiet spectator, keen not to interfere with the work of the performers and the experience of the babies. Seeing this kind of shift in his own work Novák (2009) described it as parents giving up their role of omnipotence, that the strangeness of the new space and offer of work directly for the children flattened a traditional hierarchy. This was described by the participants of this study in the context of an unburdening from responsibility, that if they were afforded a moment to ‘sit back’ and watch their child or the show it was a welcome gift.

Loss of agency is experienced by child TEY audience members when they feel trapped. Described within the tertiary theme *Captivation* this can occur for the child who is held back from getting closer to something interesting, or kept inside a situation that they are keen to leave. Adults can also feel held against their will (usually during moments of mediating their child’s freedom) by social protocol and theatre norms as explored in *The Dance of the Rules*. The affordances of the physical space are important to how the permissions of movement are communicated and boundaries can feel comforting or oppressive. The black theatre drapes at *Float* that contributed to Hannah’s feeling of safety contributed to what Diana described as a feeling of being “trapped”. Some TEY artists create performances for purpose built spaces, e.g. *Little Top*, and much of Anna Sewell’s work, which give them the ability to curate the atmosphere immersively experienced. Performances staged outside or in the corner of a large room lose the ability to control lighting and minimise sound and visual distractions, tools often used for supporting attention at theatre, including TEY. What can be gained from a more open environment however is the possibility for partial engagement as audience members find the physical distance which works for them, a freedom appreciated by Participant_1 who described her older child as particularly sensitive to noise. It may be that the ‘magic’ of a fully captivated TEY audience requires full commitment and a staging that can deliver a surround aesthetic for babies’ “lantern consciousness” (Gopnik, 2009). Some audience members however require a fuzzier threshold where immersion can be entered into more gently.

Extending physical distance can be a way for TEY audience members to manage their engagement with sensorially intense experiences. As well as big sounds and strange people this could include an intensely felt proximity to the imaginative world presented. In writing on aesthetic distance in audiences aged 2-6 years old, Schonmann described children at the

younger end of this range struggling to enjoy performances as they were too directly caught up in the action. Too great a distance and the performance ceases to be interesting at all. Schonmann argues that it is at an “optimal distance” (1999, p. 87) that art exists, the spectator perceives the game of the fiction but is engaged enough to be moved by story and characters. Between disinterest and immanent perception there is space for imagination and cognition and the goal of aesthetic pleasure is achieved. Like Participant_17’s daughter afraid of the hungry Lion or Participant_39’s niece, “broken” by *Sleeping Beauty*’s apparent death, too little aesthetic distance is “horrifying” (Vaughn in Schonmann, 1999, p. 6). My own experience with this was with my then nine-month-old niece who was shocked and upset by a puppet’s arm becoming detached. If babies of a similar age demonstrate in laboratory conditions an understanding of moving shapes with eyes having moral capacity (Hamlin, 2013), it should not be surprising that they might be unhappy about the dismemberment of somebody to whom they had attributed moral agency. Young children’s close aesthetic distance requires an ethic of care. This is enacted through the choice of content, and the sensitive responsiveness of performers though there remains a risk of any surprise being unwelcome. The role of the accompanying adult in these situations is also very important. Young children seek reassurance from their adults, they look to them for confirmation that what they are seeing is a safe kind of strange (Stern, 1985). I explore the relational implications of unwelcome experiences in *The Dance of Self and Other: Rupture*, what I would like to emphasise here is how the parent works to guide their child in their development of aesthetic distance.

As well as responding when strong feelings are evoked, the parent at TEY offers interpretations of the child’s experience. For some parents, supporting their child’s engagement included verbally bringing in connections to the outside world and existing knowledge, Diana for example commented on *Violet*’s attention being drawn to the light projection.

Diana: (gasp) Do you see the lights bubba? See all over. Are they like stars?

DIANA+VIOLET 01:35:37

She puts words to what *Violet* sees (lights) and offers a theatrical interpretation (stars). Other *Float* parents were observed or recalled making similar observations and questions. As well as the sights, sounds and textures of the performance, the immersive theatre experience for young children often also includes this personal audio description. In the presence or absence of a White Rabbit guide, it is parents who are the true continuity between the world outside and the one within the TEY space. In supporting sense-making they also scaffold the development of an aesthetic distance which will go on to enable the enjoyment of fiction.

8.2.2 Situating of bodies

Proximity in the TEY space is another way to look at how different roles and relationships are enacted. The parent and child often share close, intimate space. This can be at the invitation of artists, Morley asked for babies to be sat on laps for *Sixteen Singers* as a way to maintain comfort and connection to the adult whilst enabling the child to have an uninhibited view of the performance (Morley, 2022). At theatre created for older children and/or adults, the phrase ‘babes-in-arms’ is used to describe admission and ticketing policies for children, usually under the age of two, who by definition are not given their own seat. At *Float* the only babe who remained in arms was tiny, sleeping Thomas. The mobile babies also all spent some of their time sat or stood on, or held by their parents. The journey taken by Lucy began with clinging to her mum, Emma, then through increasingly energetic moves she expanded the distance between them, looping back and heading away again until she confidently ran the length of the outer room and back into the performance space. This pattern is repeated over a longer time frame in the way children move from arms, to laps, to their own seats as their need for their parent changes. From the age of around two or three years old, it can be that artists invite children to sit low and close to performers with their parents on chairs behind, a seating arrangement which disappointed Participant_12. Parents who value the close physical experience of sitting together with their children in an audience may have mixed feelings about their child confidently moving away. Shona described being both pleased with Freya’s confidence and enjoying the close cuddles when she was her “safety net”. Whether or not the production encouraged roaming the parent was home base, a safe place to keep close or return to from forays beyond. Communication is maintained through the beam of the parents’ constant attention, perhaps voice if permitted, and the “unspoken thing between you and your preverbal baby” (Emma).

Closer proximity to performers was seen by parents as enhancing the experience. Having the performers “right there” (Participant_18) emphasised the liveness of the event, with an appreciation by spectators of the bodily presence of the artists. Something participants in the quasi-pilot cited missing during an online event (Allan, 2024). Taking into account the development of vision and focal distances of young children, small-scale TEY work is often played to a single front row (Drury & Fletcher-Watson, 2017), making close proximity, even touch, possible. Hannah described how her son sat on the lap of a performer in *Float*. She felt included in this “intimate moment” by a glance of acknowledgement and smile from the performer. My role as an observer of these interactions was underscored by my position within

the space, keeping to the edge and, as with other non-performer adults present, trying not to get in the way. Works such as *Univers* seat the audience around a space that is populated by artists and, through the progression of the show, mobile babies and toddlers. The very young children on stage interacted with materials, performers, and other children, observed not only by those caring for them but all others making up the audience. The presence of the spectator who sits outside of the triangular audience emphasises the position of the children as part of the performance. Their close accompanying adults may become part of the show by association, a role many participants of this study were keen to avoid.

Comfortably taking up one's space, in a body that does not feel marked or monitored is a privilege not available to all (Gatens, 2013) and there may be elements of TEY which can work against including adult bodies. Avoiding interrupting the experience of others and physical collisions in a space designed for little children, Diane remembered feeling "acutely aware all the time of how big I am". The desire for invisibility felt by some adults at TEY potentially has layered motivations, foregrounding the child, politeness to others, but also an anxiety around being perceived in public. Inside the curtained area adults moved in ways they did not outside, such as walking on their knees or crawling as *Float* brought adults to child level with seating on the floor cushioned by mats and beanbags. Floor or very low level seating is common at TEY for the youngest. Participant_20 was someone this form of arrangement excluded, unable to sit on the floor she avoided TEY where she knew or suspected this would be expected of her. Age and disability are characteristics which impact mobility, men also typically have less hip flexibility. If the TEY space is created for its typical adult, an able-bodied female in her 30s, those who sit outside of this description may have bodies that are not only unusual but unsuitable.

Traditional auditoriums by contrast are designed, like most of the human-built world, for an able-bodied man. Here it is the young child who is too small for seats and sightlines. TEY, by framing an alternative space where bodies meet and move can trigger an awareness of scale, of life from the perspective of those much smaller. Not only adults and children, but children of different sizes.

The dynamic of a, big toddler, sort of romping toddler you know the scale of the toddler beside a baby is actually quite terrifying
Participant_47

The imagery parents who attended *Float* used to describe their fears of physical harm caused by babies were casually outsized: "Bulldozing... pulling ears off", (Diana) and "trampling" (Orla).

The placing and movement of bodies of radically different sizes and strengths informs the experience of empathy, triggered by the focus on the child experience.

The curiosity of the mobile babies at *Float* was manifested as physically reaching, tipping forwards, and moving towards, as well as watching from a still position. There was a fully embodied learning (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016) explorations with mouths as well as hands and feet, eyes, ears. The artists met this mode of connection and were part of the strange world available to discovery alongside the non-human elements (Braidotti, 2016) such as the soft pebbles and sculptural boxes. Though other parents moved out of the way for a crawling baby, artists were clambered over. HE turned a sleeve tug into a dance, and when Lucy sat on CD's head CD "took it as like an opportunity to engage with Lucy a bit more in a different way" (Emma). Through the curation of space and attuned responses the somatic learning observed by Miles (E. Miles & Nicholson, 2019) at theatre for 3-5 year-olds was made available to younger children in arts spaces that consider their embodied needs.

8.2.3 Human becomings

The future-oriented idea of babies as 'becomings' (Uprichard, 2008) emphasises an investment mindset, where activities such as TEY are considered valuable for the impact they could have on the child's future experiences. Focusing more on children as becomings, over their current status as 'beings' risks overlooking the detail of their living experience and denies an aspect of their whole personhood. As "little adults in waiting" ('Misopedia', 2022), or in a theatre context, "the audience of the future" (Creative Scotland, 2021), they are held against an idea of who they are not (yet). The findings of this study provide evidence of an interest from adults in future-felt benefits of TEY attendance though as they are rooted in the immanent, TEY experience these can be seen as layered with, and not contradicting, an interest in the present, whole, child.

The tertiary theme *Pedagogy of exposure* described the sense of purpose and value in bringing young children to a chosen environment or event. This had two forms which differed in their temporal emphases: arts as nourishment, and early exposure as a training ground. The premise that arts exposure generally is wholesome and necessary aligns with Marinopoulos' (2019) Cultural Health propositions, and other proponents of the value of arts for Early Years (Duffy, 2006). Participant_34 was one of many participants who felt strongly about access to aesthetic

267

experiences as an innate need, “we dance before we walk, we sing before we speak”. As with Participant_6’s description of theatre as “the way we meet the world”, expressive arts are conceptualised not as an unserious luxury, but essential to our understanding of being. Dissanayake’s work resonates here, as she draws connections to anthropology, making the case for the arts as generative in the construction of collaboration and culture, rather than tools or by-products (Dissanayake, 2015). The pedagogy of exposure in this regard is a concern for the development of the whole person, and not conceptually restricted to childhood or education. In providing something “nourishing for the whole family” (Participant_38), TEY can offer an inclusive aesthetic encounter, beneficial to adult as well as child. That it was possible to have a pleasurable, moving, even awesome experience together with a very young child was in itself a remarkable benefit observed by some participants. The future-mindedness of theatre as nourishment is indirect as healthy development at any age unfolds from healthy living, moment to moment.

More deterministic was the form-specific intention of introducing a child to live performance as early as possible with a view to their continued engagement with it. Exposure as the beginning of a journey towards theatre literacy (Koch, 2017) and etiquette puts greater emphasis on training for success in a specific environment. In habituating her children to the theatre environment, Participant_3 felt she had supplied them with tools they still use as young adults, benefiting through the excitement, community, and comfort theatre provides. Parents whose children were still young at the time of interview expressed a hope that they would grow into the enjoyment of live performance, that it would become a shared family activity. Exposure here is intent participation learning (Rogoff, 1991), children learn when to applaud, when to sit still, what is real and how effects are produced. Parents’ pedagogic role in guiding the children’s behaviour during performances may be empowered or inhibited by the rules of the space, as explored in the previous section. Where the production placed ‘reasonable’ (Sedgman, 2023) expectations on the behaviour of babies and toddlers, the opportunity was made for families to bring their youngest members in to “train them up” (Participant_11). For example, an orchestral concert promoted as accessible to all where Participant_11’s toddler could play (not too loudly) under the seats, and emerge to stand up and clap at the appropriate moments.

The nourishing or educational benefits of TEY may emphasise a growing, developing child, but I did not find evidence for these approaches diminishing a perception of that child as a current whole person. Theatre needs an audience to exist and those invested in its continuation, artists and critics, have valued TEY as a tool for igniting a lifelong interest in the form (Davies, 2016). Listening to parents talk about their hopes for their child, this interest had a different quality.

The future-child is not of potential use to the theatre, rather it is the as yet undiscovered performance experiences that are made accessible for the future-child's benefit. Where parents valued live performance experiences for their own wholeness and well-being, they felt the provision of TEY as a gift to the child. One that could provide a beneficially stimulating experience in the present, and potentially open doors to new and unknown delights in the future.

8.2.4 Being present

Sharing in the experience of TEY is a central idea in this thesis, that we enter into one another's worlds as we encounter a new one together. One aspect of this is how time is experienced by parents and children at TEY. Parents can be given an opportunity to take in the present moment in a way that aligns with how their young child habitually experiences life. Being able to enjoy the moment, without being caught up in thoughts of the past or plans for the future, was something that some parents described making an effort to do. This could be trying not to "get caught up in the result" (Emma) or like Participant_36, be distracted from her own immersion by wondering what her child was thinking. Parents bring a wealth of knowledge of their child and the responsibility of managing the structure of the whole day, with travel, sleep and food accounted for. The artist practiced in sensitive, present responsiveness, (Hovik, 2019b) whether or not they are playing a character, exists only for that span of time. They are able to meet the audience in a liminal place of not-knowing, learning at every fraction of a second something about the other and about themselves.

When von Bonsdorff described, "The aesthetic mode of childhood is typically not one of either contemplative reception, or creative production, but rather both at once in sensuous activity" (von Bonsdorff, 2018, p. 129) she refers to this active way of being. The babies at *Float* were often tipping, or reaching forwards, their balance held in active meetings with people and objects. Mirroring, one of the Starcatchers Engagement Signals observed, was a way in which babies, parents, and artists at *Float* caught the embodied moment of another. Physical mirroring and vocal echoing were common ways in which parents responded to their pre-verbal children, with the children responding in kind. These actions helped keep those engaged in them aligned with one another. The artists met young children's imminent, embodied way of being through acutely responsive and authentic interactions. Expressive gestures, sounds, proximity, and gaze were brought into non-verbal conversations with a child or children. The artists at *Float* demonstrated the attuned sensitivity of TEY performers described in the literature, a skill that

was noticed and appreciated by the parents present. Whereas the artists could fully inhabit their roles in the present moment, connecting dynamically with their young audience, the parents moved between positions of reflection and immersion. This could be seen in how the artists' movements were intentional but not demonstrative, and it was parents who at times made performative gestures and expressions for their children, for example drawing attention with a point and gasp. Emma's smile of joy at her daughter Lucy's enjoyment, an unguarded expression of feeling in the moment, has a different root and observable quality to her earlier performed smile intended to reassure.

In interview, two weeks after attending *Float*, Shona commented, "it was really good. I really enjoyed it, and I just cannot explain it to people". One of the aspects of TEY which makes it difficult to describe, and often surprising to encounter for the first time, is the way it is experienced as an embodied present flow. *Float* was being developed as a durational work with a circular rather than linear pattern of events and both Diana and Hannah described losing their sense of time whilst inside the performance space. Though both remembered a moment of surprise when realising that an hour had passed, their emotional experiences within that time were very different to one another. Diana held a ready tension in her body and felt a constant "vigilance", she moved and talked a lot compared to Hannah who recalled feeling "chill", and often observed from a still, settled position. I wanted to highlight these differences as two divergent ways of being in the space were both still experienced as a sense of shortened time, both parents were fully engaged in the activity of watching their children explore the world of *Float* though one found this more relaxing than the other.

Time feels different during experiences of awe (Rudd et al., 2012) and in the state of Flow, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1997). Experiences which the transporting power of live performance can induce. If experienced at TEY this can be especially impactful for early parents, Baraitser (2008) described the experience of time in motherhood as being defined by interruption. Whether accompanied by active or receptive activity, any form of sustained attention is difficult when your life is governed by another's unpredictable needs. Participant_52 movingly described how she valued TEY as a communal experience at a vulnerable time in motherhood. She also found it surprisingly (and therefore disappointingly) short in duration.

8.2.5 Making memories

There were participants in Phase One of this study who told me stories of events that occurred ten or more years ago. For them, the vulnerable phase of early parenthood had passed and they made sense of this time with a perspective of distance and change. Remembering it as a time when she was learning every day and relying on the moral support of others, Participant_23 was not the only interviewee moved to tears at the memory of her now teenager as a tiny baby at TEY. The pleasure of a positive first or early experience was enjoyable for participants to recount, specifically the memory of watching their child, watching the performance. Participant_41's emphasis, "he absolutely loved that, and he absolutely loved that, I'll always remember taking him to that" suggests the establishment in memory as a marker of importance. Similarly, Participant_49 reflected on her own recollection, finding "the fact that it's still so vivid as well is interesting for me". Her TEY experiences did not blur into the background of other more repetitive activities of early motherhood. For many, attending live performance was framed as a special event, something which contributes to embedding family narratives (Goodenough et al., 2015). This was the case even though there was no expectation that very young children would retain narrative memory of the event themselves.

Participant_16, who was about six years old, made a brief contribution to the data as she was sat near her mother describing a large-scale TEY event some years earlier. Asked if she remembered the event she said, "I remember like going there, and coming out, I don't remember in there". This response invites further questions around the child experience of live performance, beyond the scope of this study, and suggests something interesting around memory. The uniqueness of TEY, the 'something different', so valued by parents perhaps contributed to why Participant_16 did not retain a memory of her time within the performance space. The journey and threshold crossings to and from may have had relatable similarities whilst the performance itself was so unusual as to be almost dreamlike. This is very speculative, but relates to how some of the parents who attended *Float* felt there had been little opportunity to connect the experience to daily life with their child as it had been so different.

Parents take on the role of holding the memory of the experience on behalf of the very young child. During a time of rapid development, significant events become markers of time, for Participant_5 the "golden ticket" of TEY attendance which provided a breakthrough in communication with her son became an important chapter in the story of their relationship. His delight at the performance was a relief for her to watch:

He was just you know, absolutely in the moment for the whole time we didn't want to leave we wanted them to take him (laugh) and like make him like that every day
Participant_5 on small-scale TEY event

In the present living of the experience, there is a desire in the parent to capture and keep the magic combined with a knowledge that this is impossible. Participant_5 held on to her memory of that performance as precious in what it meant specifically to her family, linking it to her now teenage son's continued enjoyment of music. The feelings triggered by witnessing your child enjoying something you yourself enjoyed when young is more than a backwards casting nostalgia. There is connection to the present, and also the future, a looping of time through picking up on a constant, or a repetition. This feeling was strongest when focused on a nameable cultural object such as a story, band, or brand. Participating in cultural events and accessing the arts helps us navigate our lifecourse and understand who we are within our world. Participant_24 recalled feeling "very emotional" as he was able to follow the connective thread through his own adolescence to the more recent status of fatherhood, when a band he had long admired created a live show specifically for children.

Replaying music was a way some families continued to connect with an event, providing an opportunity to reconnect to a shared time, and create new shared experiences of listening together. As the music from a show attended long ago is repeated children are able to join in at a later point the bonding experience of a shared memory (Anderson et al., 2014). Music may be especially potent for shared experience both lived and re-lived, described by Gratier and Apter-Danon (2009) as "essential architecture for the experience of sharing existential time" it is inherently temporal. Unlike wholly physical performance forms however it can be recorded and reproduced with relatively high fidelity giving access to an event beyond its lived time, something which many participants described enjoying. Technology changes have led to the end of the free CD described by some participants, access to music heard in a show has more recently been provided through streaming services, e.g. *Sprog Rock* or offering audience members direct downloads, e.g. *Great Big Tiny World*. When appropriate this is a meaningful way to add longevity to an event that can be felt at the time to pass very quickly.

8.2.6 Conclusion to Dance of Space and Time

Nicholson described the empty space as "the great theatrical symbol of the modernist utopia" (Nicholson, 2014, p. 125). Babies remind us of the impossibility, or at least pure abstraction that

this idea represents. As soon as their whole, physical, percipient (Morley, 2023) selves enter the room whatever does, or does not occur is felt. We notice them and they notice us. Similar to how immersive theatre can challenge the binaries of stage and auditorium, or performer and audience (Machon, 2016), TEY can blur thresholds between spaces and identities.

Parents bring their extra knowledge and thoughts of time into the TEY space. They can layer hopes for the future onto a theatre visit today, planning ahead for a life of fun and varied events where the one today becomes an important 'first'. The specialness of TEY heightens its role in creating shared family narratives, held by the parent on behalf of the child as one of the anecdotal memories which collectively build the story of their relationship together. TEY can support parents in entering into the time-world of their young children through immediately responsive modes of presentation, particularly the non-verbal. Language tethers us to a time-stamp, often reaching outside of the moment to another place and time. Perceiving and communicating within what is the normal way of being for babies and toddlers can be challenging to adults (Arculus, 2020). TEY works to create environments where inhabiting the present moment together is more accessible. The skill of TEY artists in responding sensitively and dynamically to very young children, Creative Attunement, is highlighted in Conclusions and Recommendations as a mechanism that contributes towards pedagogic impact.

8.3 The Dance of Self and Other

In *Communicative Musicality*, edited by Malloch and Trevarthen (2010), many of the contributing authors describe arts practices or use arts metaphors to illuminate intersubjective, co-creative experiences of personhood. Art in its many forms can be thought of as always an effort in human connection. When I read a novel I learn about myself as I follow the lives of others, or when I listen to music it is not just happening ‘out there’, but inside me. The language we use to describe how we engage with the arts has embodied and relational imagery, both the novel and music might ‘move’ me, as I find myself ‘touched’ by artists whom I have not only never met but died centuries before I was born. Dissanayake’s (2015) *Art and Intimacy* draws attention to the resonance between the connecting and deeply human experience of arts practices, and our earliest relationships. TEY is well situated to support both art and intimacy, welcoming very new selves into a space where all are invited to be porous to the influence of others.

Although there is much that could be explored in considering how very young children encounter the non-human other in artistic practices (Braidotti, 2016), my focus in this study has been primary on human relationships. The dyadic unit of mother and child is a starting point for considering the emergence of a conscious self (Ammaniti & Trentini, 2009), and a common family structure found at TEY. In this section I look at how the self/other divide is often not felt as a firm border, beginning with the mother-child relationship then expanding out into broader communities, including the temporary community of the theatre audience. Challenges to relationships in the TEY space are then discussed. The process of witnessing, as experienced by parents at TEY is an important mechanism for many of the positive impacts recounted in this thesis. The most powerful of which is an elevation of the child in the mind, and heart, of the parent.

8.3.1 What’s the difference?

‘Where do I begin and end?’ Is the sort of question which can be answered in increasingly complicated ways as we pull apart the meaning of each word. In daily life it only requires a good enough answer, one which allows us to operate in a world that matches our assumptions around what is ‘self’ and what is ‘other’. Within a mother-child dyad this can be an area of emergent discovery, including the boundary of the corporeal body (Ammaniti & Trentini,

2009). Participant_19 described attending a TEY performance “whilst still getting used to [her baby] being on the outside of me”. Early motherhood is a time of rapid changes for both the mother and the baby, and interventions designed to support very young children rightly have a joint focus on the well-being of who is commonly the birthing parent and immediate caregiver. Winnicott’s statement that there is “no such thing as a baby” (Letourneau, 2020) was intended to guide against isolating the child from the mother as a unit for study. If I imagine watching the babies at *Float* as if their parents were invisible there would be smiles to nobody, wriggles from nothing and defiance of gravity. Parents support the intentional movements of their children in space like a responsive exoskeleton, gradually shed when no longer needed. When very young children engage in action and receptivity of TEY that is perceived as agentic and self-affirming it is made possible by the connected presence of their parent-carer.

TEY can be a space for exploring the extent to which the parent is in service of the child. As already discussed, it can relieve some of the many burdens felt by parents, or can be a site of additional stress that may, or may not, be “worth it” (Participant_3). There is an image of depletion of the self in the adage ‘you cannot pour from an empty cup’, invoked to remind carers that they must also be cared for. Similarly, a metaphor popularised by online content creator Lindsey Gurk compares new parents to flamingos, whose pink colour often fades when they channel their resources into their offspring, parents are encouraged to “get back your pink” (Andrews, 2024). Like the empty cup the flamingo is drained, and in doing so loses its essential flamingoness, while the young (vessels, chicks, and humans) are filled. TEY was understood by many participants as entirely ‘for’ the child, reflected in their desire for invisibility or as with Participant_7, welcomed work that was not “stimulating” for herself as long as her child was happy. Others however were enthusiastic about TEY that was inclusive in that it also offered a meaningful artistic encounter for the adult. The depletion metaphors of parenting call for support outside of the immediate dyad, the cup is filled and pink found through advocating for space and resources for the drained parent. Positive TEY encounters offer a fulfilling, “nourishing” (Participant_38) experience from an external source. Playful, immersive offers such as *Float* also offer real-time explorations of connection and distance as with the boldness of Jonj that so delighted Beth, or Emma and Lucy’s elastic connection.

There is a rich literature within and intersecting with developmental science which seeks to understand our consciousness at very young ages with a view to deepening our understanding of how we all experience knowing ourselves and others. The layered empathy reported by parents at TEY suggests that it can provide the conditions for this process to be experienced on a personal scale, that in perceiving the child the adult learns something about their own way of

being in the world. The intersubjective experience of being, responsively, with a small child is available to parents from their first meeting and requires each to perceive subjectivity in the other (Trevarthen, 2012). It is a dance which exists in the time and space of its unfolding creation, personhood is both necessary in each but also in a sense shared. Reddy's "second person approach to knowing other minds" (2010, p. 2) provides a framework for how babies understand themselves in present attentional and emotional interaction. Rather than assuming a disembodied hidden self-of-the-other that must be theorised to be understood, Reddy allows for a wholeness of perception. At TEY parents can find themselves on the outside looking in at their child perceiving and being perceived by others. Others who are often strangers to both and different to those found in normal life.

Space for reflection gives parents the opportunity to engage in cognitive empathy, imagining the world of their child. This can provide entertainment and delight for the parent, particularly when they interpret their child's experience as highly positive. Instances where children did not enjoy an event also triggered empathy, for example trying to understand as Participant_45 did, why her child hated a show she herself once loved. Responses to culture bring out our individual differences in taste and tolerance, and learning about these details can be part of getting to know somebody. This can be a warm and exciting arena of discovery in the parent-child relationship. Some parents described the intentional attempt to imagine the TEY experience of their child, both Orla at *Float* and Participant_36 found this required a letting go, or relaxing of their habitual meaning-making, to feel with someone who is "not trying to think about like concepts of whatever he's just, it's just kind of – engage" (Orla). Seeing through the eyes of the child involves not only a taking on of alternative notions, but a feeling into the embodied experience of another as they meet the world emotionally and sensorially. To inhabit a non-verbal experience is to live in the indescribable. There is always an element of live spectatorship which, though available to reflect upon, has its greatest power and essential meaning in the moment as it is lived.

Mirroring and mimicry are significant for theorising on empathy and were observable behaviours at *Float*. Reddy described imitation as having a bridging function, enabling those engaged in it to "touch each other psychologically" (2010, p. 45) and as an Engagement Signal (Starcatchers, 2024) mirroring was observed in the babies at *Float*. They mirrored gestures and sounds of the performers, who responded in kind, developing non-verbal conversations. The description of mirror neurons (Lohmar, 2006) gives us insight into how we live the experiences of others, our brains leading an internal and invisible synchronisation with the object of our attention. Parents also mirrored, though when in dyadic conversation with their children rather

than when observing the performance. Emotional contagion, where we take on the feelings of those around us, can be triggered by facial mimicry (Hatfield et al., 2014). Parents were aware of ‘catching’ their children’s feelings, and also drew on their own emotional responses to imagine those of their children. Many encountered a vicarious, or sympathetic joy, their own spirits lifted by the knowledge that their child was experiencing excitement or wonder. This pleasure was further enhanced through a sense of satisfaction, or relief, that all had gone well. The happy opposite of the parenting ‘failure’ described in *The Dance of the Rules*, here, publicly witnessed happiness confirms success in the moment.

As a first experience for her and for me, it couldn't have gone any better actually, cause she was so engaged in it. I felt like really proud of her that she'd, just like, been cool
Participant_8 on small-scale TEY event

The parent-child dyad is the base unit of society, as well as the TEY audience; all our cultural expression is grown from our innate capacity for intersubjective co-creation (Marwick, 2017). We always see a reflection of our self in the other, what TEY can provide is space for explorations and co-creation to be felt and reflected upon. The parent-self also emerges and changes as the child grows, always in collaboration and in the context of wider community. The artistic liminal space of floating intentionality (Cross & Morley, 2010) when felt as a safe space, is one where certainty is not necessary. The boundary between self and other, within the parent-child relationship, is given space to play and permission to be fuzzy.

8.3.2 Building community

At *Float* tiny Thomas was described by his mother as “the calmest he’s been in days” (Kate). Sleeping the whole time he shared, in calmness, the experience of other attending parents Hannah and Shona who both felt this as their dominant emotional response to the event. During the performance I noted shifts in atmosphere as the sounds, lights, and feel of the room changed, for example a moment where all the babies moved in for a cuddle along with a spreading sense of ease in the room. Describing atmosphere, or vibes, of a group within a space feels dangerously subjective, even within an expressly interpretive study. I am not only trying to describe a felt sense, but potentially projecting onto all of those around me. Though many did report the calmness of *Float* for example this was not Diane’s internal experience as she was preoccupied with not disturbing the peace. Nevertheless, the engineering of atmosphere is an important component in live performance and the impact of different moods or dispositions of an audience is familiar to all artists who work with them. In my own experience of performing

the same TEY show, three times a day for three consecutive weeks and then again on tour, it was possible to notice how factors such as the time of day affected the moods within and of the audience, something also noted by Morley (2022) in her practice research. From the stage looking out, an audience is often described as if it were responding as a singular being (Bennett, 2013), an effect fed by how the space is structured and processes of social contagion and referencing. Laughter is an audible example, feeding and fed by the laughter around and in adult theatre found to be timed collaboratively by the audience and performers (Broth, 2011). The convention of referring to ‘an audience’ as a singular entity can be unhelpful when describing the experiences of individual and diverse audience members. Heterogeneity of age status is a fact of TEY audience make-up and intimate performances celebrate individual audience members’ unique responses. Considering the group experience is nevertheless relevant to how TEY is a relational space where all those present are giving and receiving emotional cues to those around.

The experience of losing a sense of self within a group is a phenomenon studied with adults and associated with developing a collective identity (Neville & Reicher, 2015). The kind of self-transcendent moments described as collective effervescence can occur in theatre audiences (Gabriel et al., 2020), amongst other places, and have been found to have pro-social benefits (Stellar et al., 2017). This fits with the “almost spiritual” experience described by Participant_52 who found TEY to offer a shared, welcoming place for her and her baby. As with the theatrical magic of illusion, the ‘magic’ of collective effervescence at a TEY production is the result of effort and skill. Artists work to create the conditions where parents and children are able to meet them in a space of wonder. Ensemble performance practices, which aim to “eliminate dualism” (Hewett, 2014, p. 306) are adapted within TEY to include a direct, responsive relationship with the young audience. At *Float* the way artists interacted with the babies was experienced by their parents as care extended towards them both, Emma commenting that this was also a “vulnerable moment for the artist”. Relationships, though brief, were meaningful, and contributed to the sense of community experienced. There is a virtuous circle in social positive affect, where shared moments interpersonally ripple and spread, impacting others and lasting beyond the initial moment of interaction (Brown & Fredrickson, 2021). This was both observable in *Float* and reported by interview participants.

The TEY artist Anna Newell described the “tiny temporary community” (Keating, 2022) created at her performances, a phenomenon also encountered by participants in this study. *Float* “was just made for building friendships” (Emma), and Participant_23 described a performance where “stiff and stuffy” adult audience members became “best pals” by the end. Machon

describes audience members as bonding through the “shared responsibility” (2016, p. 38) they hold towards the success of the performance. In TEY this success includes the emotional and physical safety of the young audience members, something to which adults contributed at *Float* with children other than their own. Many interviewees also related how theatre trips were an opportunity to spend time with a larger group, for example extended family or baby-group peers. Participation in fandom (Dynel & Ross, 2022) was another way in which parents valued TEY as a communal experience. Participant_2 described the thrill she experienced with her child arriving at the theatre and seeing a whole audience of people dressed up, as they were, in themed outfits for the event. In TEY, feeling connected to other audience members within a version of community where babies are not only tolerated but welcomed is valued highly.

A sense of community, of shared common goals and trust is a mechanism with therapeutic impact in dramatherapy (P. Jones, 1996) and Early Years arts therapy (Armstrong, 2021). Positive feelings of togetherness align with the studied benefits of shared artistic activity (Kaszynska & Crossick, 2016) and other intentional group experiences (Stellar et al., 2017). Most relevant to TEY audiences is the heightened sense of belonging that shared positive experiences can engender. The need for belonging is common to all of us, its lack and acute necessity however is heightened for parents of very young children (Sutherland, 2010). For parents who attended TEY and experienced their vulnerabilities being seen and welcomed, the impact for them individually was powerful. The flip side to these buoyant, magical experiences is the feeling of disconnectedness that can arise from being excluded from the group. Instances of relationship rupture, and unhappy experiences are the subject of the following section.

8.3.3 Rupture

One experience had by adults at TEY is accompanying a child who, at some point, does not want to be there. When I experienced this with my niece, who was horrified by a puppet’s arm being pulled off, it had a direct impact on our relationship. We did not know each other very well at the time and though she allowed me to carry her out to the foyer, the urgency in which she reached for her grandad from whose arms she then glared back at me, felt very personal. The safety net that the accompanying adult provides for children entering the strange space of theatre (Schonmann, 1999) needs to be strong enough. For my niece I became part of the too strange strangeness and it took time, and shared play which included her dad, for her to lose her wariness of me. More commonly, as in the situations described by interviewees, an upset child

is comforted or taken from the situation by their safe person. Interpreted as a mismatch between event and child, the 'failed' TEY encounter led to feelings of embarrassment and guilt in parents, feelings that often softened into amusement by the passing of time. It is plausible however, that where there is a weak bond between adult and child, as with me and my niece, a negative experience could serve to weaken rather than strengthen a relationship. Caution must be taken in recommending TEY as universally positive for supporting attachment and bonding.

As with earlier discussions on cultural inclusion in the Dance of the Rules, the absence of a positive experience may have a negative impact. The experience of Participant_12, bringing her daughter into her shared love of a collection of stories and characters, can be compared to that of Participant_45 whose daughter hated a show she remembered loving as a child. There is disappointment if an anticipated joyful shared experience does not occur. It would be false to present this contrast as an even balance however as the good experiences reported were far better than the poor experiences were bad, lasting good was reported but not lasting damage. In the example above Participant_12 had a magical experience she will "always remember", whereas Participant_45 related hers as a parenting challenge that she learned from. Parents learned to bring snacks (Participant_38) or ear defenders (Participant_41) and tried again. An important exception to this was the experience of Participant_31 who felt shut out from something that others were sharing in and enjoying. As she waited for the rest of her friend group she literally became an outsider, making laps of the building with her son in his buggy and wondering what she had done 'wrong'. Most parents choosing to attend TEY do so with an acceptance of risk and broadly low expectations. This was seen in the surprise and delight in successful encounters, and the value attached to 'nice' and comfortable experiences. Whether educational or therapeutic in emphasis, if we are to promote TEY as 'good for' children and families it is vital that we are aware of the message this could send when, for whatever reason, things do not go to plan.

Dialectics, the interaction between contrasting positions often manifested as conflict or obstacles, is the process in drama from which many pedagogical positions are built (Nicholson, 2014). TEY is typically low in drama or committed to a non-dramatic form but this does not remove conflict from the room. At *Float* some of the babies met obstacles to their desires in the form of their parents who pulled them away from interesting cables, disentangled their tight hugs, or refused to put them in the water. Within a secure parent-child relationship, rupture and repair is an important process that supports social development in the child and the ongoing understanding of one-another (Ammaniti & Trentini, 2009). Teasing, humour and surprises all play with the safe edges of the relationship, reaffirming and establishing its security (Reddy,

2010). TEY as an offer from parent to child holds risk, which like any good surprise, has an affirming payoff (Addyman, 2020). Young children can learn through the dialectics of the theatre, not through considering the representations presented, but through their direct engagement with the performance and/or their parents. The strangeness of the situation requires support from a trusted adult, to assure its safety and to attach meaning.

Participants often softened comments in interview that decentred the child with a laugh. For mothers particularly there is a strong societal taboo around feelings of ambivalence towards their child, anything short of full love triggering suspicion (Senior, 2014). The self-other boundary discussed earlier, can be an area of difficulty for some parents as they negotiate new space around who they are to, with, and without their child (L. Jones, 2023). One *Float* attendee described during chat before the performance crying at her child's first haircut. From birth every change is a move away from the mother and towards the world, and the pleasure of watching a child grow can also contain a sadness for this loss. This was written physically in the *Float* space through the journeys of children away from and returning to or caught by their parents. Shona described how she loved being Freya's "wee safety net", there is a pleasure, and an identity in being needed that can be tempting to cling to. Paige, who did not move with ease in the space, was more comfortable when directly and physically caring for Amber. It was hard at times to watch the deflating rejection experienced by Diana, who knelt with open arms, wide smile and kind words asking Violet to come to her, only for Violet to turn and run towards the door. This asymmetry of attention, accepted laughingly in chat between KC and Diane before the performance, is an acknowledged component of parenthood. The daily reality of its enactment however can be hard work. TEY can offer a respite from the relentless boundary stating, as reported by Hannah, or become a space where transgressions are witnessed.

8.3.4 Witnessing

In Dramatherapy, the concept of witnessing is an important part of the therapeutic process (S. Cassidy et al., 2014). It includes different forms of perspective taking for the individual including witnessing their experiences represented, seeing themselves within and outside of action, and the presence of the therapist and the group as observers (Sajnani, 2012). I have found this useful to consider with TEY audiences and their layered spectatorship though lack of therapeutic focus and, (often) narrative are key differences. In considering the experience of the adult companion at TEY there are four types of witnessing I would like to describe: watching

the show, watching the child, watching the show through the eyes of the child, and watching other families. Though I am using the terms watch and witness interchangeably, and the word spectate implies the taking in of visual information, I am considering all these forms of engagement as potentially multi-modal.

In situations where the performance is promoted as ‘for’ young children, it is rare that parents prioritise watching the show. The memories of interviewees often centred around the child’s response and the analysis of Starcatchers Engagement Signals when observing data from *Float* revealed much higher engagement from the parents with their children than the performance. Some however, such as Participant_47, recalled details of the performance, citing how it opened her mind to the possibilities of creating art for and interacting with babies. Learning in this way, from demonstration, was part of the success in intentionally pedagogic TEY where parents picked up and reflected on the ways the artists engaged creatively and playfully with the children (Cowley et al., 2020). Similarly, parents may be inspired to replicate aspects of a show, as Shona was with *Float*, and this is something I have aimed for in my own TEY practice and reported by participants of my Zoom theatre research (Allan, 2024). Value was attached by many however to the opportunity to see extraordinary things that are made special specifically through being unavailable at home. Art can expand our idea of what is possible, for ourselves and others in our community. The idea of embodied watching, including the actions of mirror neurons, describes how we are lifted with performers, internally moving with them. Neuroscientific research with dancers and spectators has demonstrated the synchronisation that occurs with spectator’s brains sharing the same patterns of activation though they are not themselves dancing (Orgs et al., 2024). The babies at *Float* physically mirrored performers, and some Phase One parents reported children standing, dancing, or jumping as signs of high engagement with live performance. Watching performance can be inspiring in broad and specific ways, they can give us a sense of wonder or ideas to try at home, sometimes both. At the conclusion of *So Far So Good*, a circus performance for 3-5 year olds, the applause died down as the three highly skilled acrobat-musicians bowed after forty minutes of remarkable climbing and tumbling on their purpose-built concaved stage. It was then quiet enough to hear a statement from one of the nursery group children in the audience, a powerful two-word review, “my turn!”.

The extent to which parents watch their children at TEY was an important finding in the data. At *Float* the quality of focus changed between the space outside of the curtained performance area where parents chatted to one-another and checked phones, and inside of it where every action taken by the child was observed. As discussed in *The Dance of the Rules* the

responsibility felt by parents for their child's behaviour and safety was constant, and 'watching' could be dominated by this form of care. Participant_30, concerned about a hot light, needed to watch her children (and others) from a position of fear, not curiosity. This kind of monitoring is qualitatively different from witnessing which is enjoyable, and a gift to the parent. When the TEY environment feels safe, physically, emotionally and socially, and their child is engaged with the performance, parents are able to take up a position of observation that can provide new understanding of their child. Beth was impressed and relieved by Joni's social confidence, Participant_43 saw her daughter as "amazing" in a way she had not before in witnessing her engagement with live performers. As Participant_11 described, it was taking this slightly removed position of observer which made this possible. The artistic presentation, led by the skilful efforts of the artists, is what makes it remarkable.

The positioning of bodies impacts how parents watch their child. Immersive performances, and work such as *Bebé Babá* (Rodrigues et al., 2009), which incorporated parents as performers, give the adult greater freedom to see and be seen. At *Float* babies and parents spent time playing and having non-verbal conversations with one another, as well as moments of triangular audiencing (Desfosses, 2009), with the parent looking on as the child interacted with the event. Like a seat with restricted view, a baby on the lap may be tricky for the parent to see. Participant_19 described trying to watch her baby's face, "without sort of being in their way, or letting them know that you're not watching the performance in the same way". Morley found in her research on infant audiences, that this form of seating allowed for the most direct relationship between performer and baby, limiting the parents' interpolations (Morley, 2023). Though both parent and artist are keen for the child to engage with the work, their approaches to how best to achieve this may not align. A good view of, and physical closeness, to their child helps actions of support, which facilitate engagement and sometimes understanding, one benefit of Zoom 'theatre' was the self-view of the screen always enabling the parent to see the child as well as the artist and other audience members (Allan, 2022). In some settings, where audience are positioned around the performance, a parent can have an excellent view of a different baby. As with the experience of Kate and Matt at *Float*, watching other babies can be enjoyable and entertaining. Whilst less emotionally charged than watching your own baby, watching another family can invite thoughts of reflection or comparison. This could be anxiety inducing, as discussed in *The Dance of the Rules*, though it can also be affirming. Study participants described the solidarity felt by being amongst other young families, and the memorable view of so many captivated faces. Success in TEY spectatorship, publicly witnessed, can be felt as a success for the parent. Parental self-efficacy has many influencing factors but is an important component in child development, parental mental health, and the parent-child relationship (Albanese et al., 2019).

Many participants described imagining the experience of their child, engaging in cognitive empathy, they attempted to see through their eyes as described in Branner & Poblete (2019). This is the ‘double view’ described by Morley (2022) and Desfosses (2009), the parent seeing the performance through two lenses at once. A parent builds their interpretation of the child’s experience from how existing knowledge of their personality and interests meets their reactions in the moment. Interviewees in this study qualified their stories with details of what they knew about their child, knowledge that was always developing. When parents and children can share in the observation of an object, secondary subjectivity that usually develops around the age of 9 months (Hubley & Trevarthen, 1979), they begin to confirm one-another’s perspectives on the world they meet around them. Some parents, such as Diana at *Float*, were keen to draw verbal connections to what they saw together. This can be a challenge when the performance is itself non-representational and hard to describe. Participant_47 and others projected their own experiences of the atmosphere, or emotional impact of the performance onto their child. A wordless, ineffable experience, had alongside a pre-verbal child can be a powerful component of the double view. Encountering shared wonder, the parent does not so much imagine the child’s experience as momentarily step into it. Theories on the essence of why music, which is non-representational, satisfies and moves us, suggest that this is not an experience reserved for those above a certain age (Dissanayake, 2009b; Lee & Schögler, 2009). Entering into a shared space of aesthetic encounter, “real beautiful art” (Participant_25) that can be felt together flattens a traditional hierarchy between adult and child, making greater space for recognition of our common humanity.

8.3.5 Love

The findings of this study were rich in love, care, affection, and joy. The primary themes, *Attention*, and *Sharing* both explored facets of relational experience infused with positive concern and interest in another. Within the third primary theme, *(Un)known*, I described how loving curiosity brought parents to new understandings about their children. The connection between love and attention is what I would like to emphasise in this section, as it is the space TEY makes for a certain quality of regard on the part of the parent which I found to be most impactful. The bonding experiences described by Cowley et.al. (2020) and Branner and Poblete (2019) at TEY were arrived at through adult-child shared participation in novel, aesthetic, and child-focused activity. Cowley et.al emphasised parental engagement and play as a route to learning and bonding, whereas Branner and Poblete brought out the powerful impact of shared

awe. These mechanisms and emphases were present in this study, parents described being inspired by the actions of artists and valued shared experiences of ‘magic’. In TEY spectatorship, love and attention are both process and outcomes.

Across our culture art and love have generated forests of words in the writing about them whilst being often simple and inexplicable in the living of them. Love can be a term too loaded for some, or at risk of misinterpretation, though Page (2018) argues well for its inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) through the framing of Professional Love. Professional love, enacted towards very young children by Early Learning Practitioners (Page, 2017) supports a pedagogy grounded in trusting and caring relationships and is complementary to the parent-child relationship. The findings of this study support the existence of a form of, if not professional love in TEY, a form of professional caring attention. In their short time, the relationships at TEY cannot replicate the depth and duration of the relationships found in education settings, but they can contain an intensity of attunement enjoyed by children and their familiar adults. Parents reported direct and personal interactions with performers which felt meaningful. For example, Participant_52, who felt the artists of the small-scale TEY performance she attended cared for her, and her baby “in that moment” described how “my baby was special to them and not just to me”. At *Float*, the attention given to the babies from the artists was physically close and responsive. Hannah described her comfort in observing the closeness her son Innes had with one of the artists, “quite a sort of intense interaction” and the sense of gratitude she experienced when the artist acknowledged and included her too. The triangular audience of TEY can, as with the temporary community created within the space, become a temporary version of Page’s Triangle of Love (2018).

TEY is not only characterised by its briefness. The relationships within the space are unusual in that they take place within a dedicated sphere of artistic intention. In creating meaningful work for a very young audience artists have intentionally (Tse, 2021b), and unintentionally (Addyman, 2020) resonated with Dissanayake’s (2015) argument for the shared evolutionary root of art and love. Dissanayake offers an additional way in to discussing concepts which are real, important and resistant to neoliberal utilitarian discourses. Though she wrote about art in early humans, not art made now for very young ones, her thinking fits well with an aesthetic which seeks a rich simplicity.

Both art and love are vulnerable to sentimentality, especially when children are included. This arises from a too general approach, Winnicott, who advocated for mothers to trust their loving

impulses, noted that loving babies generally was very different to loving one's own (Winnicott, 2021). Professional Love requires genuine interest in the specific child (Page, 2018). Similarly, any artist succeeds through specificity, bringing what they need to bring to the world rather than working to appease the lowest common denominator (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). When considering work that reaches a large audience, (or even 50 people), specificity may seem counterintuitive, and it is different to the personal specificity in caring for young children. What is held in common is an authenticity (Riggle, 2017) in the artist, or the carer, and respect for the audience, or child. Respect for the audience is a marker of quality in Children's Theatre (Chellini et al., 2022; Reason, 2010), in TEY parents can become included in this attention. Participants reported feeling cared for and included by the effort and skill of TEY artists and were appreciative of the level of care and seriousness of intention that had been put into the work. Not all events described by participants were felt to be high quality, moving and important. Some were thought to be misjudged, and many were more than anything, entertaining. Participant_7 described a performance that was "sweet" and though engaging for her child, not something she found interesting. Many of these 'good enough' TEY experiences however were described in warm, cosy terms.

For the participants who valued theatre participation highly, attending together as a family was a gift shared together. Participant_3 delighted in the ritual of being sat with her now teenagers, the lights going down, and their shared anticipation linking back to all the many times they have sat together in this moment at other events stretching back to toddlerhood. Other participants valued stories or themes of inclusion, hope, and connection. A performance that celebrates the sensitivity and aesthetic capacity of very young children gives permission for their parents to luxuriate in the love they hold for them. It was enjoyable for me to be able to share the screenshots from *Float* with the parents in interview. An additional view to those mentioned in the previous section on witnessing, the parents were able to see images of not only their children engaging with the event (who they had been watching intently at the time) but themselves. Candid images, for example Figure 48 below, where a mother sits in calm delight giving her full attention to her baby.

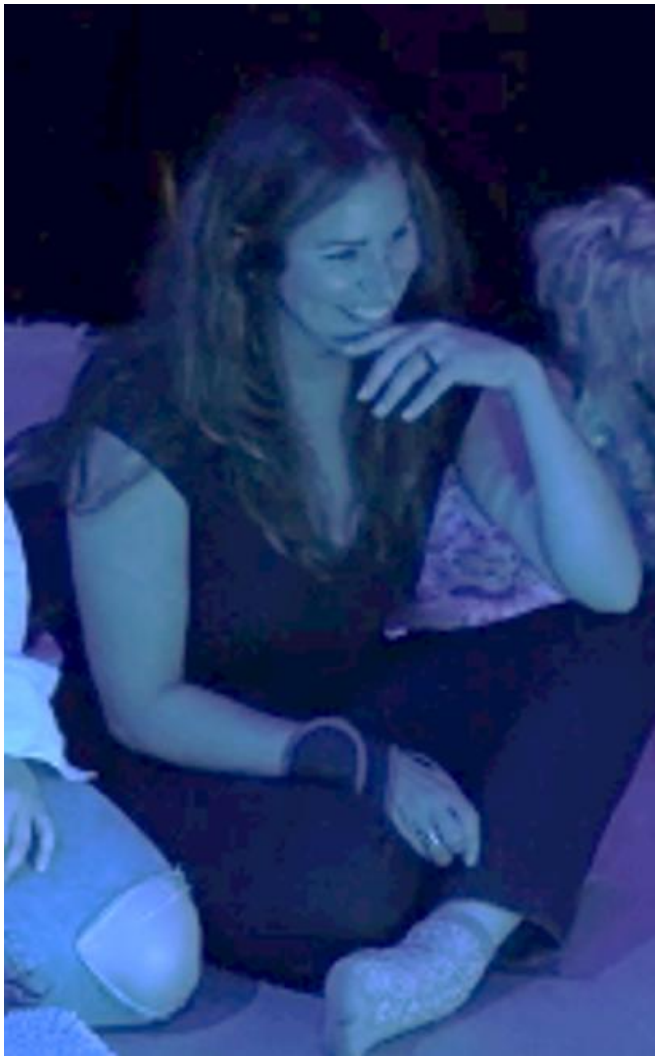


Figure 48: Image from Float illustrating parental enjoyment

Image description: A mother sits, watching her baby (out of frame), with curiosity and pleasure

Love is brought into the TEY space in multiple ways. Attending the event is often a gift given with the anticipation of joy, possibly magic. Participant_43 did not question her love for her daughter, but attending a TEY performance introduced a new dimension to their relationship.

I already knew I loved her, but I could look at her and just be like – she is amazing. She is able to really genuinely take part in this, really properly absorb what’s going on.

Participant_43 on small-scale TEY event

Participant_5 also saw a capacity in her baby, previously unknown. For these parents TEY was a turning point in their relationship, a shift to seeing their babies as persons with interests and not just needs. Reddy describes how mutual imitation can initiate a “turning point in parents’ relationship” (Reddy, 2010, p. 64), and perhaps for many seeing the growing personhood in their child is an unnoticeable incremental process. None of the parents who attended *Float*

reported a life changing experience, but Beth's enjoyment of Joni's social confidence for example held similar qualities of being surprised and impressed by her child. Surprise at young children's capacity to engage with TEY is very common, present in the data and found in TEY literature and press. Participants_43 and 5 had leaps in their understanding, for many other parents attending TEY with young children they experienced smaller steps in their growing awareness of who their little one is. Crucial to enabling this is the attention that parents pay to their children during TEY spectatorship.

In a world of apps designed to feed us advertisements our attention as adults is increasingly being seen as a commodity (Williams, 2018). A rather depressing thought when set against earlier writers such as philosopher Simone Weil who understood the giving of our attention to another as a powerful, spiritual generosity (Freeman, 2015) or poet Mary Oliver who valued it as a source of reverence and creativity (Oliver, 2019). Participant_12's treasured memory of her daughter's "wee face, the sheer wonder and amazement" was created by their both paying full rapt attention, though not to the same object. The finding from applying Starcatchers Engagement Signals to video observations of the parents at *Float*, confirmed the shift that took place once inside the performance space in the quality of their attention. When parents are able to relax from a vigilant attention, if they feel that they and their child(ren) are physically, emotionally, and socially safe, TEY affords space for a loving, curious attention that affirms and enhances positive relationships.

8.3.6 Conclusion to the Dance of Self and Other

The positive psychology movement was inspired by a desire not only to respond to minds in distress, but to better understand and work towards to human flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This approach has been valuable to me in constructing this thesis and though I have drawn on literature from therapeutic practices (e.g. P. Jones, 1996), it is in this context of supporting good health as opposed to treating ill-health that TEY sits best. As Marinopoulos (2019) set out, arts and culture for the very young can be considered as akin to a wholesome diet. In *The Dance of Self and Other* I have sought to focus in on some of the relationships at play within the TEY event, all underpinned by crafted artwork always being an intentionally connective act. Babies have been studied picking up on the stress of their mothers (Waters et al., 2014), and the joy of their peers (Jordan & Thomas, 2017). Their sensitivity to their social surroundings makes successful TEY spectatorship at least partly dependent on the

experiences of others. Just as TEY is defined by its audience, it requires an audience to exist, one made up of curious and receptive young children and their attentive adult companions.

Witnessing the Possible, the headline idea of this thesis, is described in the following chapter as a central mechanism in TEY that contributes positively to parent-child bonding. An academic or artistic observer may come to new knowledge about the capacity of babies in a broad sense, when seeing for the first time that theatre for the very young is possible (Schneider, 2009b). A parent may also have this appreciation, but in witnessing their own child exceeding their expectations this can be new knowledge with important, directly personal impact. Framing these experiences within the context of human rights, we can position TEY as a way the rights of the child are supported collectively and individually. The UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) was incorporated into Scots law in 2024 and all rights contained within it apply from birth. Access to culture is contained within Article 31 and arts practices are proving to be valuable in supporting the voice of the baby (Drury et al., 2024), upholding the right to participation as set out in Article 12. The experience many adults have at TEY additionally supports the project of child rights as a whole. Witnessing very young children engaging with art can support the adult's perception of the child as a full agentic person. Supported by artists with a deep respect for their young audience (Hovik & Pérez, 2020) adult audience members are given a glimpse of possibility that may then open doors to other shared adventures. The manifestation of a successful TEY event, created by artists, babies and their families, is on every occasion a bold statement of how including our youngest community members in some of our highest ideals is not only possible, but joyful.

By highlighting some of the most vivid and impactful experience of TEY described in this study, insights are available into its pedagogic potential more broadly. Taking a relational approach (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009; Trevarthen et al., 2018b) learning is enacted through interpersonal dynamics, with the parent-child relationship of highest importance. TEY can provide the conditions for supporting parent-child bonding and realising the rights of the child, conclusions described in the following chapter.

Chapter 9: Conclusion and Recommendations

The great variety of phenomenological experience at TEY necessitates caution about any pronouncements of its general or inherent powers. A family will have a very different form of embodied encounter at a stadium event themed around a beloved television show to a small room non-narrative exploration of materials and sounds. They could also have a very different experience attending the same show at a different time, years later or the afternoon instead of the morning. This thesis has sought to explore some of this variety and make space for understanding opposing phenomena that are equally true. I have also been looking for commonalities, the underlying drivers of the themes and accompanying ‘dances’ which can help explain how TEY can be an effective location for learning and bonding. It cannot be prescribed as a general panacea, some of the mechanisms necessary for impactful arts-based therapy with young families do not track onto TEY. It does however have the potential to offer very young children and their accompanying adults a unique opportunity for discovery: of previously unknown words, themselves, and each other.

My third research question, asking the implications for pedagogy in a better understanding of relationships in TEY is addressed in the first section, informed by the answering of the first two questions around value and shared experience. By sharing the mechanisms for impact contained within TEY spectatorship that I have concluded from this research I draw out the processes through and within which learning takes place at TEY. Supporting parent-child bonding is a common factor in these processes, as is the recognition and upholding of child voice which drives each of these three mechanisms in a different and contextual way leading to positive relational impact. They are:

- Creative Attunement - enhancing and enabling engagement through artistic responsiveness
- Concerted Inclusion - centring the needs and interests of the child when accessing culture
- Witnessing the Possible - perceiving elevated aesthetic capacity in the very young child.

The second section of this chapter is a summary of recommendations for TEY practice, directed towards anyone who plays a part in the production or presentation of live performance for the very young. These recommendations are focused on what audience-specific considerations may be made based on the best practice encountered through this research.

This is followed by recommendations, or invitations, for future research. As an exploratory study this research offers starting points in various potential directions. I highlight four potential lines of investigation that directly build on this research. These are:

- Further developing the embodied methods of analysis used
- Exploring how young children change in their response to live performance between the ages of 1 and 3 years old
- Exploring the shared audience experience of very young children ECEC settings
- Investigating how attention in young children is understood, valued, developed and directed by the adults in their lives.

The conclusions of this study uphold the value of TEY as part of our cultural landscape, emphasising the importance of inclusivity and choice in access. My final section summarises the wider societal implications of continuing to champion live, communal arts experiences created for our very youngest fellows.

9.1 How TEY Spectatorship Supports Parent-child Bonding

The proposals made in this section are underpinned by a model of positive adult-child relationships drawn from literature within relational pedagogy (e.g. Trevarthen et al., 2018b), and positive psychology. Bonding is understood as positive regard by the parent towards their child coupled with a desire to nurture them, now and into the future. Parent-child bonding is in every case personal and specific, and recognising and enjoying the unique personhood of the child is part of the bonding process. TEY can create conditions favourable to a growth in understanding and enjoyment within the parent-child relationship, applying the lens of child voice has enabled me to draw out the characteristics of the TEY spectatorship experience which contribute to this impact. For some families the need for support in parent-child bonding can be acute, requiring targeted and sustained help. The role of the majority of TEY is to meet the needs of a general population, not in acute distress but nonetheless in need of human warmth, shared joy, and wonder.

9.1.1 Creative Attunement

Sensitive, responsive communication between performer and audience member is a characteristic of small-scale TEY. It is a form of artistic communication which has been explored by practitioners and researchers within TEY, Hovik (2019a) for example described the non-verbal co-creation of a dance performance with the very young. There is a connection to developmental and pedagogy literature in the cultivation of a multi-modal listening on the part of the adult, who creates and adapts in collaboration with the child. Affective intersubjectivity lies at the heart of early communication described by Trevarthen (Trevarthen, 2012), with the term ‘attunement’ used by Stern (1985) to describe an open, sensitive approach to dyadic engagement with a young child. By describing the communicative mode of TEY performers as Creative Attunement I am drawing attention to the creative input they offer within these interactions. The focus and openness of TEY artists when engaging with a young audience member has the qualities of attunement with the addition of an artistic skill set and the invitation to be observed by others present.

Parents valued being able to observe Creative Attunement in action, seeing the way in which performers engaged with young children as a skill, alongside other artform specific skills, for example cello or circus. At TEY a responsive performer can support the voice of the child, i.e.

their interests, desires and curiosities, within the context of an event with overarching aesthetic aims. When space is made for the child to shape the direction of an artistic presentation the agentic power of that individual child is made visible (or audible) in a new way. Trained and skilled artists are able to enable this in ways specific to their artforms. Intimate and direct communication between performer and audience member is found in work with limited audience sizes. Webb, writing on the sensory TEY performance work pioneered by Oily Cart, argues that audiences larger than 50, including adults, restrict the ability of performers to respond to individual audience members (Webb, 2023, p. 146). It is the quality of responsiveness which enables the tailored, sensitive presentation of immersive sensory work by Oily Cart and others. The case study performance in this thesis, *Float*, is an example of immersive and responsive work though many of the events described by Phase One participants would not fit this description. What I am terming Creative Attunement is not a quality present in *all* TEY though it is made space for in the majority of work created for the very youngest (i.e. under 2 years of age).

The performer in TEY is usually a stranger to both the child and the parent, and the situation is very deliberately and often wonderfully strange. Unlike ‘real life’ relationships which build over time, the meeting with the TEY artist plays out within the confines of the event. It would be fair to assume that connection would be difficult in these circumstances, but the experiences of parents, as well as TEY artists and researchers, describe creative, trusting, and playful meetings. The boundaries of time and space which define a live performance event also define the intentions and purpose of the performers who bring it to life. In this way the narrow focus of the TEY artist is a strength as they are able to commit fully to the artistic aim of the moment, one which may revolve around a creative connection with a young audience member. The bounded ‘otherness’ of the TEY event, and the performance skills of the artists marks the Creative Attunement of TEY out from playful, sensitive engagement found in other contexts. In many respects however it is a mode of communication familiar to that found in playful pedagogies, therapeutic arts encounters, and creative workshops. What contributes to the impact on parent-child bonding is the meaning which parents attach to observing, or being included in live, creative explorations between artists and children.

As found in TEY designed to support parenting (Cowley et al., 2020), parents can draw on their observations of TEY artists engaging in Creative Attunement to inspire and enhance their own creative play with their children. This inspirational quality was reported by participants in this study, who also described the sense of inclusion and care they felt extended to them through the way the artists interacted with their babies. Within the world of the TEY performance the

curiosity and concerns of very small children are valued highly. The artists bring their training and skill to a collaboration where the creative impulses of the child are made visible, not only to the two engaged in the collaboration, but all others watching. The most interested spectator of all being the child's parents. Creative Attunement supports parent child bonding through welcoming each child's responses and providing inspiration for future adult-child communication.

9.1.2 Concerted Inclusion

It was a universal hope by study participants that the child they were attending TEY with should have a pleasant experience. For some there were additional layers of perceived potential benefit, for example awareness of how crucial the first few years are for a child's development. It was thought good parenting practice to provide a range of stimulating experiences for a young child and bringing their child to an event where professional artists have created an intentional, beautiful experience was framed in these terms. Novelty was valued, and experiences actively sought which were considered outside of the ordinary. Framing accessing arts activity for the very young as 'good parenting' fits with the pedagogic approach of 'concerted cultivation' theorised by Lareau (2017). Concerted cultivation describes the approach of parents who take an active role in the guidance of their children's development, seeing their provisions and involvement as necessary for their child's success. Success which is understood through culturally informed measures such as academic attainment. It is held in contrast to an approach where parents assume 'natural growth' in the child and concerted cultivation was theorised as a way middle-class parents transferred their class status on to their children. Although *Concerted Inclusion* could fit into patterns of group behaviour, I am proposing it as an approach taken by parents at TEY that has a different specific goal, that of fostering a sense of belonging.

Bringing a very young child to live performance includes a desire to forge and consolidate human connections. For parents who valued live performance highly in their own lives, bringing their child into the theatre was part of bringing their child into their world. Theatre and live performance were not encountered as status-building commodities but as fun, thought provoking, transporting experiences of an art form held close to the heart. The message could be 'we are a theatre family', 'we are Scottish', 'we love Disney', or 'folk music', or 'ska', whatever the specific manifestation, under each act of Concerted Inclusion is a confirmation of the child's place within a shared culture. In this framing, building theatre confidence in the child

is a path towards consolidating access later in life. Where parents valued live performance experiences for their own wholeness and well-being, they felt the provision of TEY as a gift to the child. One that could provide a beneficially stimulating experience in the present, and potentially open doors to new and unknown delights in the future.

The choice of TEY attendance can also be led by the interests of the child, with the parents enabling access to an event with content that the child has existing knowledge and enjoyment of. Although a three-year-old is unlikely to have been influenced by an interpretive community (Bennett, 2013) they can still bring content-specific funds of knowledge to cultural experiences. This is especially true of book and television adaptations, and where a child has a strong existing connection to a particular character or story this can be the driving force behind attendance. When a child is already a ‘fan’, parents take delight in offering a new way for them to experience a connection to culture that already brings them joy. Cultural engagement is part of the ongoing project of discovery and creation of identity, as an individual, family, and community. First and special experiences are important parts of the narrative created by parents around their developing relationships with their children.

We likely do not remember much about the experiences we have in the first few years of life, though these are understood to have important and lasting impact on our self-formation (Crichton et al., 2020). It is a time of life when we are utterly dependent on others and this process of becoming happens in creative collaboration with the world around us, especially our most trusted companions. Our cultural life becomes an important part of how we connect to the imaginations of others and make sense of our own experiences; through Concerted Inclusion parents look to bring their children into these possibilities from the earliest age. When considering other contexts that might overlap with the TEY experience, it could be that other leisure activities where the child’s interest is centred have similar motivations and impact, a trip to a farm park say for a child fascinated by cows. The artistic, live and communal qualities of live performance were highly valued however, and these are hard to find in other spaces. The specialness of live performance is created and appreciated by those who come together, willing to take a risk with a group of people also present for this shared purpose. The inclusion of very young children increases the risks of social embarrassment or that the experience will not be fun. It also increases the payoff when parent and child are included in pleasurable company. Concerted Inclusion invites the child to share in family time and community time, affirming the positive choices of the parent who initiates it and delivering a sense of belonging for both. The impact on parent-child bonding is contained in the parent’s motivation for attendance.

9.1.3 Witnessing the Possible

Watching performance can be inspiring in broad and specific ways. It can conjure new feelings or bring another world to life, where the knowledge of what is possible becomes stretched and room is made for new possibilities. Value was attached by many to the opportunity to witness extraordinary things, curated and presented by skilled artists. Art can expand our idea of what is possible, for ourselves and others in our community. For many parents at TEY, the most extraordinary phenomenon observed was the way that their own child(ren) responded to the performance.

Watching their child, watching the show, the parent at TEY perceives the impact of the performance as it is written through the responses of their young companion. This attention can be linked to parent-child bonding in the way that it fosters empathy on the part of the parent and can lead to a new understanding of the individual child. In recollecting TEY experiences parents described imagining themselves into the experience of their child. Reflecting on the experience, they built an interpretation of the child's perspective from existing knowledge of their personality and interests, knowledge that was always developing and to which the TEY encounter contributed. At *Float* the quality of parent's attention changed between the space outside of the curtained performance area where parents chatted to one-another and checked phones, and inside of it where every action taken by the child was observed. Imagining the experience and perspective of the child may be a regular, everyday occurrence that informs many of a parent's decisions and responses. What TEY was valued as providing was a novel stimulus for both parent and child, and the creating of space in which the parent was able to take a spectator role towards their child.

Though I am using the terms watch and witness interchangeably, and the word spectate implies the taking in of visual information, I am considering all these forms of engagement as potentially multi-modal. The 'seeing through their eyes' experience is more accurately 'sensing through their sensorium' and includes cognitive and emotional processes. Embodied empathy, as described by Gallagher (2014) is a directly perceived, felt experience. Gallagher challenged the cognitively focused theories of mind models, describing how we respond to faces to illustrate a capacity for direct comprehension and an awareness of the wholeness of the other, not contingent on a capacity for imagining the mind of another. That this can be seen in the youngest of babies forms part of the argument for it being an innate capacity (Gallagher,

2012b). De Jaegher described direct perception as a phenomenon that is best understood as interactional, not just happening to you, but with the other (De Jaegher, 2009). Neuroscientific research with dancers and spectators has demonstrated the synchronisation that occurs with spectator's brains sharing the same patterns of activation though they are not themselves dancing (Orgs et al., 2024). This understanding of perception is valuable to theorising on how very young children engage with others, including performers, both interactionally and in a mode of unidirectional spectatorship. It is also helpful in understanding the experience of parents who describe an increased sense of perceiving-with as they watch their child at TEY.

Conditions need to be met for parents to be able to take up an absorbed, empathetic perception of their child that supports their bond. Across the data, the responsibility felt by parents for their child's behaviour and safety was a constant, and 'watching' could be dominated by this form of care. Vigilant monitoring is qualitatively different from witnessing which is enjoyable, and a gift to the parent. When the TEY environment feels safe, physically, emotionally and socially, and their child is engaged with the performance, parents are able to take up a position of observation that, when reflected upon, leads to a new understanding of their child. This was the experience of Participant_5, for whom attending a TEY performance was a pivotal moment in their relationship. A "golden ticket" which allowed her, and her son's father, to see a previously unknown capacity for joy in their "angry baby". Similarly, a TEY event was a gateway moment for Participant_43 who described a shift to seeing her baby as a person with interests and not just needs. Steps in understanding, as well as such leaps, occur for parents at TEY when they learn something new about their child. Surprise at young children's capacity to engage with TEY is very common, and an important part of how parents value the experience from a position of hindsight. The impact on bonding of this Witnessing the Possible is generated through both the parent's awareness of being impressed by their child, and the more direct, embodied process of empathic connection.

There is pleasure in the successful attainment of a task. Successful TEY spectatorship generated feelings of satisfaction in parents, and pride in their children. The aesthetic capacities and confidence observed by parents were reflected in their own increased confidence in navigating the process of TEY attendance. Confidence which would then lead to more successful encounters as they felt empowered to make adjustments as necessary, such as leaving and returning. A performance that celebrates the sensitivity and aesthetic capacity of very young children gives permission for their parents to enjoy their own curiosity, fascination and loving regard of their children. Shared enjoyment, in a public environment where very young children are respected and welcomed, additionally allows the parents to be seen and validated.

9.2 Recommendations for TEY

This research studied audiences, not performances, and the recommendations given here are directed towards producers and promoters of TEY, rather than creative artists, (though I am aware there is often considerable overlap in these roles). One of my research findings was in the way negative experiences were understood as a mismatch between the performance and the individual audience member. Though ‘failure’ may sometimes be inevitable, these recommendations are given as suggestions towards creating the conditions that will give audiences the best chance of success, or motivation to try again.

9.2.1 Create a Safe Space

Safety, for a TEY audience can look like many things. Parents need to know that their children are physically safe, and this impacts their sense of emotional safety. Aspects to consider are what boundaries are necessary and how they will be enforced, and what parents might need to access to provide for their children’s physical needs. Children and adults will arrive with a variety of physical capacities and needs, which will influence seating for example. Think about what you need to do to make sure parents feel confident in doing what they need to do to keep their children safe.

Creating a socially safe space is also important and was highly valued by some of the participants who expressed the strongest appreciation for their TEY experiences. This is about relationships and communication, and an openness to the audience as they are. Accessibility might be a useful framework to approach how you might ensure people feel welcome. Who might not feel they would be comfortable, or belong in the space and how could this be addressed?

9.2.2 Find Effective Communication on Expectations

Everything that happens during the course of the fullness of the event, but outside of the process of the art experience itself, is relatively more important in TEY than other live performance.

This includes the time and space around the performance as well as the seating and/or movement within it. There is no established etiquette, nor likely for one to be developed as the variety of offers within TEY demand a variety of approaches. What does exist however are established norms in other contexts which might be ambiguously brought into the space and therefore necessary to highlight and counter if necessary.

Something which enabled parents to feel comfortable, and empowered to make the best choices for themselves and their children, was clear communication of what was expected of them. This could be delivered verbally, or textually, in advance, on the day or both, but unspoken rules had at least as much impact as spoken ones. The non-verbal and non-human messages given by the location and framing of the event may need to be worked against. Communication and marketing in advance of the event helps parents gauge the likelihood of 'fit'. Details on practical 'boring but important' information, on a website for example, reduces the quantity of unknowns leaving more energetic space for the good kind of surprises.

9.2.3 Quality Matters

The impactful process of Witnessing the Possible, described in the section above, resulted from contact with good art. The recommendations for good communication, and creating a safe space, are ways to create the best conditions in the audience for enabling this contact to take place. The conditions which support artists to develop and present high quality work are outside of the scope of this thesis, but the significance of the artistic content found at TEY should not be taken for granted.

Adults attending TEY are sometimes surprised by how much they enjoy the experience, for themselves. They appreciate the skill and effort of artists, will seek out art forms based on their own preferences, and find the work enjoyable and stimulating. TEY can have a powerful impact on families at what can be a very vulnerable time in their lives, with many opportunities for arts engagement hard to access. Knowing that arts experiences are available to their very young children, something that might only be discovered once inside one, can be very meaningful for parents. The children may not be able to describe their memories of TEY, but it can lay down a memory for parents that is carried as a beautiful moment into the decades beyond.

9.3 Suggestions for further research

I have chosen the four suggestions to expand upon below as they represent a range of potential directions for further study reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of this research. Further development of the novel method of the Mirror Game could be applied in many contexts. Considering the changes to how children experience live performance between the ages of 1 and 3 years old would bring developmental and psychological research to the under-explored area of child audience studies. Looking at relational TEY spectatorship in an education setting could seek the similarities and differences to the findings of this study with its focus on parents and public performances. Finally, an investigation into how attention is valued and understood in the context of Early Years pedagogy could take a sociological or an educational research focus on an important and developing topic.

9.3.1 The Mirror Game

Embodied research methodologies have shaped this thesis, as detailed in both the positionality and methodology chapters. One manifestation of this approach was the development of the Mirror Game as a novel method of working with images of people engaged in activity. An interpretative approach to the data, the Mirror Game offered a way to generate text through a systematic engagement with the physicality of participants as captured in stills taken from video footage. It is theoretically supported by approaches to acting training and research into the process of mimicry in neuroscience and philosophy. In its practice it drew on my own embodied skills and training as a theatre performer. One of 10 stages taken in engaging with the multi-modal data of Phase Two of this study, the Mirror Game gave me insights and sense impressions of participant experiences that complimented other analytical processes.

The Mirror Game had a small role within this thesis, but its novelty invites further research into its application and potential. As an interpretive and generative method it suits research that is open to creative methodologies, though not restricted to an arts context. It could also be valuable as a tool for developing embodied and interpretative skills in researchers. It is a method where the presence of the researcher is undeniable and requires acute awareness of one's own responses, within a structured approach to reflection. It could also be explored and adapted as a

method for generating creative responses to still images taken from non-research contexts. In any potential development, a robust engagement with the ethics of image use and interpretation will be important.

9.3.2 Growing into Aesthetic Distance

The case study performance, *Float*, was created for an audience whose engagement with live performance is immediate and direct. Although parents made associative links, for example describing “mermaids” or “stars” (Diane), there was no expectation within the performance that the children would engage with representations. Reason’s (2010) work with primary aged children describes their clear understanding of the fictional within theatre. Schonmann (1999) described the aesthetic distance necessary for theatre engagement as one of being close enough to be invested in the action, but not so close that you feel it is truly happening. Phase One interviews in this study contained instances of poor fit, where children were upset by action on the stage, interpreted by their parent-carers as evidence that they believed the fiction to be real.

There is a gap in the research into how very young children engage with theatre and how this relates to their concepts of play and pretend. Is their engagement with imaginative play linked to their understanding of fictional worlds represented on stage? Puppets are common across performance for the very young and developmental research (Kapstein & Goldstein, 2019). The conclusions drawn by researchers into the moral attitudes of babies through the use of puppets (Hamlin, 2013) suggest that they could be a powerful tool within social and emotional education. What are the ethical implications of manipulating an object with an understanding that the person watching believes it to be a living creature? Although it would present large methodological challenges it would be fascinating to explore how a young child’s understanding of fiction develops and is applied to different contexts. This could provide useful insight for Early Years pedagogy, as well as compliment theories on how older children and adults approach the suspension of disbelief and engage with aesthetic distance.

9.3.3 TEY Spectatorship in ECEC settings

By focusing on the parental experience and parent-child relationship I have not addressed another common form of TEY attendance for those aged 2 years and older, which is to attend an arts venue as a group alongside professional carers and educators, or to have artists visit their educational or care setting. Some of my findings however could be applied to this context, and further study could investigate how or if professional adult companions experience the three mechanisms for impact described above. The relationship between children and ECEC practitioners is an important focus within relational pedagogy, and research calls for open discussion around love and care (Page, 2018). Considering arts experiences through a lens of child voice and adult-child bonding, as this thesis does, could also be usefully applied to research in an educational setting. In this way it would build on the work of Emma and Nicholson (2019) with pre-school theatre audiences, and the ongoing *Starcatchers Voice of the Baby* research (Drury et al., 2024) into arts practices and child voice.

9.3.4 Attention

The concept of attention was a strong and recurring one within this study. As well as being discussed within interviews, there existed much unspoken assumption around the expectation and value of paying attention at live performance. The quality of the attention given by parents to their children within TEY was also significant. Morley (2022) described the precocious attention of the young participants in her research with babies at TEY, something I was not able to usefully contribute to from the *Float* case study due to the diffused focus of the staging. A similar methodology to the one I took, applied to a performance with a sustained central point of focus, could yield further insights into the nature of attention at TEY, in children and adults.

Attention is also a subject with great resonance for education research, and social research more widely. TEY that could ‘captivate’ and hold the attention of even very young children was described in positive terms by participants. This assessment of positive captivation could be considered alongside parent and educator attitudes towards children’s use of technology such as smartphones and tablets (Flewitt et al., 2024). We could also ask what kind of audience experience is valued within educational contexts and how it might intersect with child-led, play based approaches. Theorising on how attention is currently given, received, commodified, and

valued is a rich area for exploration and touches not only on pedagogy but societal shifts in technology use and associated impacts on well-being.

9.4 Why We All Need Theatre for Babies

Creative Attunement, Concerted Inclusion, and Witnessing the Possible are impactful through their appreciation of very young children as rights holding agentic persons. The choice of an event can be an honouring of child voice and their right to culture, as the parent demonstrates a respect for the child's interests through organising a day or whole weekend around a book or television programme they repeatedly engage with at home. Seeing the child's agentic capacity through observing their engagement with live performance was an empathy boosting experience that could be very powerful for parents. Outside of the specific parental perspective on their own child, there is another way of viewing child agency TEY and that is from a broader societal position on what we think we know about babies.

Although not evident in my research, there are examples in the public discourse of comments on young children existing in public spaces which can be cruel and dehumanising. At TEY however, babies and toddlers being themselves is not only tolerated but often actively welcomed. The approach taken by many TEY artists in creating their work is to fully realise their impulses within an aesthetic that holds meaning for very young audiences (van de Water, 2023). This leads to work that does not hold a stereotyped view of the baby, either as 'cute' or 'problematic', but rather holds them as persons not defined by their age or their limitations. Life, nature, childhood, and humanity are all messy and complex, yet capable of being seen and shared through doorways of artistic connection. Are we able to accept that there is no age for which live performances cannot be made? The existence of TEY demonstrates a belief in the value of arts encounters for the very young and faith in the capacity of the infant audience. As an immersive, embodied experience, witnessing the reality of an engaged audience of very young children may need to be seen to be believed. More people, therefore, need to see it. As the form continues to develop and grow, it has the potential to have a widening impact on the public perception of babyhood.

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Appendix A: Performance Works Cited

**Attended by author*

***Anonymouse.** Dir. Eszter Marsalko. Ipdip Theatre, Scotland. 2016

Multi-sensory play for under 5s and families with seasonal poetry.

<https://ipdiptheatre.co.uk/productions/anonymouse/>

A Tale of Us. Dir. Jade Lewis. Tiny & Tall, England. 2025

Play about first year of life together, for parents with babies 0-18 months

<https://www.tinyandtall.co.uk/projects/a-tale-of-us>

***Bambino.** Dir. Phelim McDermott. Scottish Opera, Scotland. 2017

Opera about a bird leaving the nest for infants up to 12 months

<https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/shows/bambino/>

Bebé Babá. Companhia de Música Teatral, Portugal. 2001

Hybrid workshop-performance project with music focus for parents and babies.

Described in (Rodrigues et al., 2009)

<https://musicateatral.com/en/constelacao/bebe-baba-2/>

Baby Becomings. Dir. Lise Hovik, Norway. 2019

Postdramatic, immersive performance for 0-2 year olds

Described in (Hovik & Pérez, 2020)

***Be Kind.** Dir. Emilie Weisse. Emilie Weisse Circus Theater, Netherlands. 2022

Juggling and acrobatics for babies 6-18 months

<https://weissecircustheater.com/be-kind/>

***Blue Block Studio.** Dir. Katy Wilson, Starcatchers. 2014

Creative play space for babies under 24 months and their grown-ups

<https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/blueblockstudio/>

***Bubbles** Dir. Florian Bergmann. Theater o.N, Germany. 2019

A performance exploring resonances with water as the main character. Ages 2+

<https://www.theater-on.de/de/inszenierungen/detailseite-repertoire/bubbles-2-10/1575389d8cb4a7f128d50d412be78a09/>

***Bluey's Big Play**. Dir. Rosemary Myers. HVK, Windmill Theatre, Australia/England. 2020

Large stage show based on the Emmy-winning television programme *Bluey*. For the whole family

<https://www.bluey.tv/blueys-big-play/?country=uk>

***Calvinball**. Dir. Charlotte Allan. Ipdip Theatre, Scotland. 2014

Outdoor play about play for under-fives and their families

<https://ipdiptheatre.co.uk/productions/calvinball/>

***Circles**. Dir. Michael Lurse. Helios, Hamm, Germany. 2018

Exploring circles, sound and big ideas with sand and puppets, 2+

<https://www.helios-theater.de/en/repertoire/circles>

***Float**. Dir. Kerry Cleland. Starcatchers, Scotland. 2025

Durational performance for babies under 12 months and their grown-ups

<https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/float/>

Flutter. Dir. Mara McEwin. Treehouse Shakers, USA. 2022

A discovery play for babies 6-18 months.

<https://treehouseshakers.com/productions/flutter-a-discovery-play-for-babies/>

***Great Big Tiny World**. Dir. Ellie Griffiths & Orin Edelman-Griffiths. Oily Cart, England 2025

Immersive sensory show for babies (0-12m) and adults

<https://oilycart.org.uk/shows/great-big-tiny-world/>

***Head in the Clouds**. Dir. Charlotte Allan. Ipdip Theatre, Scotland 2013

Storytelling and puppetry for under 3s and their accompanying adults.

<https://ipdiptheatre.co.uk/productions/head-in-the-clouds/>

***Hup.** Dir. Hazel Darwin-Clements & Abigail Sinclair. RSNO, Starchasers, Scotland. 2015

Chamber music and puppetry for babies 0-18 months

<https://starchasers.org.uk/work/hup/>

***In the Night Garden Live.** Dir. Will Tuckett. Minor Entertainment, England. 2010

Large stage show based on television programme *In the Night Garden* suitable for children 0-4

<https://www.nightgardenlive.com/>

I Want My Hat Back. Dir. Ian Nicholson & Sam Wilde. Little Angel Theatre, England. 2023

Puppet retelling of Jon Klasson's picture book. For ages 3-8.

<https://www.littleangeltheatre.com/on-tour/i-want-my-hat-back-trilogy/>

***Le Son de la Sève.** Dir. Benoît Sicat. 16 rue de Plaisance, France. 2012

Musical exploration of sculptural hollow trees. All audiences from 2 years

<https://www.16ruedepalaisance.org/benoit-sicat/artiste/spectacles/le-son-de-la-seve/>

***Little Top.** Dir. Ellie Dubois & Kim Donohue. Superfan, Starchasers, Scotland. 2019

Circus for 0-18 months and their grown-ups

<https://starchasers.org.uk/work/little-top/>

***MamaBabaMe.** Dir. Christine Devaney. Starchasers, Curious Seed. 2017

Dance and physical theatre about mother-child bond for 0-3 and their grown-ups

<https://www.curious-seed.com/mamababame>

SCOOP. Dir. Koleka Putuma. Magnet Theater, South Africa. 2015

Interactive performance based in kitchen routines for babies and their parents.

Described in (Cowley et al., 2020)

<https://magnettheatre.co.za/production/scoop-kitchen-play-for-moms-and-babes/>

***Sea Dragon.** Dir. Rachel Huggins. Dragon Song Productions, Scotland. 2023

Puppetry and storytelling for under 5s

<https://www.dragonsongproductions.co.uk/about-sea-dragon>

Shakespeare's Stars. Dir. Valerie Clayman Pye. Spellbound Theater, USA. 2023

Multisensory performance for 0-3 years based on Shakespeare's references to the cosmos

<https://www.newvictory.org/tickets-and-events/2223-live-performance-shakespeares-stars/?fbclid=IwAR27BQkd0c2r8aSycYuQQFT5g-rorTderYZEsDz18EJfrnjogTwmGyTKooM>

Sing, Sign and Sensory. Effectus Theatre, England. 2024

Most suitable for ages 0-2, an immersive, creative experience.

<https://www.effectustheatre.co.uk/sing-sign-sensory>

Sixteen Singers. Dir. Katherine Morley. Second Hand Dance, England. 2015

Musical, visual performance for 0-18 months

Described in (Morley, 2022)

<https://www.secondhanddance.co.uk/archive/16-singers>

****So Far So Good.*** Dir. Ellie Dubois & Kim Donohoe. Superfan, Scotland. 2024

Acrobatic performance for ages 3-5.

<https://superfanperformance.co.uk/portfolio/so-far-so-good/>

****Special Delivery.*** Dir. Dougie Irvine. Visible Fictions and Lantern House, Scotland. 2024

Puppetry, song and animation tell a festive story for ages 3-7

<https://visiblefictions.co.uk/special-delivery/>

****Sprog Rock.*** Katy Wilson and band. Starcatchers, Scotland. 2010

Interactive live music gig for Early Years

<https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/sprog-rock/>

****Tah Dam.*** Dir. Tahlia Laric. Tah Dam, South Africa. 2020

Music and dance performance for young children and their families

<https://www.tahdam.com/>

****The Gruffalo.*** Dir. Toby Mitchell. Tall Tales, England. 2024

Dramatic performance of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's book for ages 3+

<https://tallstories.org.uk/the-gruffalo/>

****The Lost Lending Library.*** Dir. Peter Higgin. Punchdrunk, England. 2023

Immersive, promenade performance suitable for children aged 6-11

<https://www.punchdrunkenrichment.org.uk/projects/the-lost-lending-library>

Tube. Dir. Tim Webb. Oily Cart, England. 2013

Immersive, tactile experience for babies 6 months to 2 years

Referenced in (Branner & Poblete, 2019)

<https://oilycart.org.uk/shows/tube-baby-version/>

****Vagina Cake.*** Dir. Megan Marie Griffith. Her Productions, England. 2022

Comedy drama for an adult audience that included babes-in-arms showings

<https://www.herproductions.co.uk/vagina-cake.html>

****Whipped Up.*** Dir. Jill Rogati. Soap & Rope Theatre, USA. 2023

Interactive show centring babies set in a 50s style diner

<https://jillrogati.wixsite.com/soapandrope/general-8>

Appendix B: Consent Forms and Participant Information Sheets

1a. Participant Information Sheet for: Adults with a Story

****Differences to this form when given to participants met online are highlighted***

Title of study:

Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

Introduction

My name is Charlotte Allan and I am a PhD student at the University of Strathclyde. Last year I completed a masters project on the same theme. Before these academic activities I worked as a theatre-maker, creating performances for under-fives and their accompanying adults

What is the purpose of this research?

This research seeks to describe the experience had by families with young children when attending a live performance that has been designed specifically for such an audience. Part of this includes hearing about the expectations and memories held by those adults.

This study is concerned with perceptions of connection and bonding in a specific context (watching a theatre show together), we will not be taking 'measurements' of parent-child relationships or assessing attachment styles.

Do you have to take part?

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time, up to the point of your contribution being anonymised for analysis. This will be at least two weeks after your story is recorded.

What will you do in the project?

In-person: You will be invited to share your experience of taking a baby or toddler to a live performance. This will be audio recorded and will take 2-10 minutes.

****Online:*** You will be invited to share your experience of taking a baby or toddler to a live performance. This will be over Zoom, at a time convenient to you. Only the audio will be used and you can choose to have your video on or off. It will take around 3-10 minutes.*

Who will be taking part?

People who have previously attended live performance with very young children and wish to share their story.

What information is being collected in the project?

Your story will be recorded as audio ****during conversation over Zoom**** from which transcriptions

will be used for analysis and writing up. If you use names in the story these will be changed or edited out.

There is an additional online questionnaire monitoring the demographic categories of participants. This is optional, completely anonymous, and not linked to your audio recording.

Who will have access to the information?

Only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the above information. Audio recordings will not be shared publicly and the identity of participants will not be included in any writing up or publication of findings. The exception to confidentiality would be the disclosure of serious, imminent harm, in which case any recording would be stopped and steps taken to support and protect.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

All information will be stored securely and privately using the researcher's University of Strathclyde OneDrive. If there is ever a need for information to be moved to a physical location (e.g. pen drive) it will be encrypted. Data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project. *
Zoom recordings will be deleted from the Zoom Cloud after being securely stored.*

Please also read our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#)

What happens next?

If you are happy to join in with this project please sign and return the attached consent form. If you have any questions at all, *or would like an electronic copy of this form*, contact Charlotte at charlotte.allan@strath.ac.uk.

If you don't wish to be involved thank you for your time so far.

This research project will be written up as a doctoral degree thesis which participants will be welcome to read. There will also be a shorter lay summary of the findings produced that will be made available to participants and the public.

A short poster summary of the researcher's MPhil research is available here:

https://www.ipdiptheatre.co.uk/media/documents/MPhil_A4_poster.pdf

Full thesis available here: <https://stax.strath.ac.uk/concern/theses/47429971p>

Researcher contact details: Charlotte Allan, Charlotte.allan@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details: Lorna Arnott, lorna.arnott@strath.ac.uk 01414448109

This research was granted ethical approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the research, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Departmental Ethics Committee

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee
Research & Knowledge Exchange Services
University of Strathclyde
Graham Hills Building
50 George Street
Glasgow, G1 1QE

Telephone: 0141 548 3707

Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

1b. Consent Form for: Adults with a story

Name of department: Education

Title of the study: Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of data analysis, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - audio recordings that identify me
 - my personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to being audio recorded as part of the project

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

2a. Participant Information Sheet for Parents

Name of department: Education

Title of the study: Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

Introduction

My name is Charlotte Allan and I am a PhD student at the University of Strathclyde. Last year I completed a masters project on the same theme, though researching with audiences at an online performance developed and presented during covid lockdowns. Before these academic activities I worked as a theatre-maker, creating performances for under-fives and their accompanying adults

What is the purpose of this research?

This research seeks to describe the experience had by parents and their young children when attending a live performance that has been designed specifically for such an audience. The particular aim of this research is to find out what sharing the experience together means for the parents and children who participate. We are interested in what you think and feel as a parent and as the best expert on the experience of your child. This study is concerned with your perception of connection and bonding in a specific context (watching a theatre show together), we will not be taking 'measurements' of your parent-child relationship or assessing attachment styles.

Do you have to take part?

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. This includes if you feel your child no longer wishes to participate during the performance, if you do not wish to participate in the follow-up interview, for any reason at all with no explanation necessary.

What will you do in the project?

There are two main parts to the research, a 'Survey of Narratives' where adult participants relate past experiences of attending live performances with babies or toddlers, and a 'Case Study' where parents and children attend a performance together where they are observed and then their experiences discussed. You have expressed an interest in taking part in the Case Study.

There are three parts to your involvement:

1. Attending the live performance of [*Show Title*] at [the time and date specified] along with your child(ren). The performance and audience will be video and audio recorded. The event will last around [x minutes] inclusive of an interactive play session which will also be recorded.
2. Staying aware, perhaps making notes in a format that suits you, of references made to the performance by yourself or your child over the following two weeks.
3. Taking part in an interview, two weeks after the performance, where you will be invited to share your thoughts, feelings and observations about how you and your child experienced the show. This recorded interview will take place over Zoom and last 30-45

minutes at a time best suited to your family schedule (children do not need to participate in the interview).

Who will be taking part?

People who are interested in attending a performance and taking part in a research project along with their young children. You will all be in an audience, with conditions as similar as possible to a 'normal' theatre experience that is not being observed for research purposes. We asked for children aged over 12 months as this is the age from which children tend to be able to share common understanding with their adults about shared objects or events; and up to 36 months as older children bring an increased independence that might take away from the joint attention that we are interested in. More than one parent may attend though both must complete a consent form.

What information is being collected in the project?

From the video and audio recordings of the event, interactions and responses made during the performance will be collected, transcribed, described and analysed. You will be sent the transcription of your interview to check for accuracy and clarity before it is also analysed. As part of the interview the researcher may show you stills taken from the research video to aid memory and discussion, you can choose (for yourself and/or your child) not to be visible in pictures shown to other participants.

There will be an additional, online, questionnaire monitoring the demographic categories of participants. This will be optional and completely anonymous.

Should the researcher wish to use an image from the recording in which you and/or your child are identifiable for public dissemination or inclusion in the written thesis, you will be contacted at that time for image specific consent.

Who will have access to the information?

Only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the above information. Video, stills, or audio recordings will not be shared publicly and the identity of participants will not be included in any writing up or publication of findings. The exception to confidentiality would be the disclosure of serious, imminent harm, in which case any recording would be stopped and steps taken to support and protect.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

All information will be stored securely and privately using the researcher's University of Strathclyde OneDrive. If there is ever a need for information to be moved to a physical location (e.g. pen drive) it will be encrypted. Zoom recordings will be deleted from the Zoom Cloud after being securely stored. Data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project.

Please also read our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#)

What happens next?

If you are happy to join in with this project please sign and return the attached consent form. Or if you have any questions at all contact Charlotte at charlotte.allan@strath.ac.uk.

If you don't wish to be involved thank you for your time so far.

This research project will be written up as a doctoral degree thesis which participants will be welcome to read. There will also be a shorter lay summary of the findings produced that will be made available to participants and the public.

A short poster summary of the researcher's MPhil research is available here:

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Researcher contact details: Charlotte Allan, Charlotte.allan@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details: Lorna Arnott, lorna.arnott@strath.ac.uk 01414448109

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2b. Consent Form for Parents

Name of department: Education

Title of the study: Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my and my child's personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my and my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - video recordings that identify me and/or my child;
 - audio recordings that identify me and/or my child;
 - my, and/or my child's, personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me and/or my child personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me and/or my child will be made publicly available.
- I consent to me and my child being a participant in the project.
- I consent to me and my child being audio and video recorded as part of the project
- I consent to me and my child being included in images shared with other research participants from the same event as part of the research process (please delete if you do not)
- I understand that I may be contacted at a future date with a request for permission to publicly use selected images from the research video that contain images of me and/or my child

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Name(s) of child(ren) for whom I am giving consent:

3a. Participant Information Sheet for TEY Artists

Name of department: Education

Title of the study: Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

Introduction

My name is Charlotte Allan and I am a PhD student at the University of Strathclyde. Last year I completed a masters project on the same theme, though researching with audiences at an online performance developed and presented during covid lockdowns. Before these academic activities I worked as a theatre-maker, creating performances for under-fives and their accompanying adults

What is the purpose of this research?

This research seeks to describe the experience had by parents and their young children when attending a live performance that has been designed specifically for such an audience. The particular aim of this research is to find out what sharing the experience together means for the parents and children who participate. This study is concerned with the perception of connection and bonding in a specific context (watching a theatre show together), and we will not be taking 'measurements' of parent-child relationships or assessing attachment styles.

An artistic work is central to the Case Study element of the project and the findings will include descriptions of the performance as they relate to the experiences of audience members. There is no aim to critically evaluate the artistic work or actions of the performers.

What will you do in the project?

There are two main parts to the research, a 'Survey of Narratives' where participants relate past experiences of attending live performances with babies or toddlers, and a 'Case Study' where parents and children attend a performance together where they are observed and their experiences discussed. You will be taking part in the Case Study as you are involved in the artistic work which the parents and children will attend.

You do not need to do anything in addition to or instead of what you would normally do as part of your usual professional involvement with the performance work.

If you expect to be with, close to, or interact with the audience your participation consent is requested as you will appear in the video recordings of the audience and performance. These videos will be used to collect observational data for analysis and further discussion with parent participants. Pseudonyms and/or descriptions of role will be generally used as identifiers when writing up and disseminating findings. If your role is public facing, for example as a named performer, anonymity may not be possible. Images of you will not be made public without first seeking your image specific permission.

If you are the owner of the artistic work your permission is requested for its use in the research project. Descriptions will be made of the work in writing up and disseminating findings. Images of the work will not be made public without first seeking your image specific permission.

Do you have to take part?

Participation is voluntary. Depending on your role it may not be possible to offer the option of withdrawal at any time, though the researcher will make every effort to accommodate requests for privacy and anonymity in how recorded data is used and disseminated.

Who will be taking part?

Any professionals involved in the presentation of the artistic work, and who may appear in the video recordings used for data collection will be asked for their consent. Parents and children aged 12-36month are the main participants in the Case Study and will form an audience for the artistic work presented.

What information is being collected in the project?

From the video and audio recordings of the event (including any after-show play session), interactions and responses made during the performance will be collected, transcribed, described and analysed. During interviews, two weeks following the performance, the researcher may show parents stills taken from the research video to aid memory and discussion.

There will be an additional, online, questionnaire monitoring the demographic categories of participants. This will be optional and completely anonymous.

Who will have access to the information?

Only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the above information. Video, stills, or audio recordings will not be shared publicly and the identity of participants will not be included in any writing up or publication of findings. The exception to confidentiality would be the disclosure of serious, imminent harm, in which case any recording would be stopped and steps taken to support and protect.

Should the researcher wish to use an image from the recording in which you are identifiable for public dissemination or inclusion in the written thesis, you will be contacted at that time for image specific consent.

For any image that shows elements of the artistic work, the owner of the work will be contacted for image specific consent once it has been given by the people visible.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?

All information will be stored securely and privately using the researcher's University of Strathclyde OneDrive. If there is ever a need for information to be moved to a physical location (e.g. pen drive) it will be encrypted. Data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project.

Please also read our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#)

What happens next?

If you are happy to join in with this project please sign and return the attached consent form. Or if you have any questions at all contact Charlotte at charlotte.allan@strath.ac.uk.

If you don't wish to be involved thank you for your time so far.

This research project will be written up as a doctoral degree thesis which participants will be welcome to read. There will also be a shorter lay summary of the findings produced that will be made available to participants and the public.

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Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

3b. Consent Form for TEY Artist

Name of department: Education

Title of the study: Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of data analysis, without having to give a reason and without any consequences. I understand that withdrawal may mean that my actions are still recorded but that they are not used in the study.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - Video or audio recordings that identify me;
 - my personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to being audio and video recorded as part of the project
- I consent to being included in images shared with audience research participants from the same event as part of the research process
- I understand that I may be contacted at a future date with a request for permission to publicly use selected images from the research video that contain my image

Owner of Artistic Work

- I consent to my artistic work [name] being used within this research study as a stimulus event for observations of and discussions with the participating audience
- I understand that the work will be described as part of the writing up of findings
- I understand that I may be contacted at a future date with a request for permission to publicly use selected images from the research video that contain images of the work

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Appendix C: Questionnaire for demographic monitoring (Phase One participants)

Thank you for taking the time to fill out the following questionnaire.

The information from this form will be used to help the researchers see how the volunteers in this study compare, as a group, to other populations, such as Scotland as a whole and theatre attendees.

This form is optional, anonymous, confidential, and not linked to the individual contribution you have made to the study.

1. What is your age?

17 or younger

18 - 24

25 - 30

30 - 39

40 - 49

50 - 59

60 or older

Prefer not to say

2. What is your ethnicity?

Please specify

Prefer not to say

3. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Other (please specify)

Prefer not to say

4. Do you consider yourself to be a disabled person?

Non-disabled

Visual impairment

Hearing impairment/ Deaf

Physical disabilities

Neurodiverse

I'd rather not say

Other long term/ Chronic condition (Please specify)

5. Do you practice a religion?

No religion

Christian

Buddhist

Hindu

Jewish

Muslim

Sikh

Prefer not to say

Any other religion (please specify)

6. What is your postcode?

Appendix D: Sample advertisements for recruitment

Phase One: Survey of Narratives

The Good, The Bad, and The Lovely:

research with tiny spectators

(in-person)

Have you ever taken a baby or toddler to a live performance?

I am looking for participants to help with my PhD research into how very young children and their accompanying adults experience live performance together. If you have a story to tell I'd love to hear it! Whether the event was recent or a long time ago, beautiful, disastrous or mundane, all tales are welcome.

The research is being conducted for my doctoral thesis with the University of Strathclyde School of Education and I'm happy to answer any questions about it. If you're interested in taking part come and find me at [location].

(Online)

Have you ever taken a baby or toddler to a live performance?

I am looking for participants to help with my research into how very young children and their accompanying adults experience live performance together. If you have a story to tell I'd love to hear it! Whether the event was recent or a long time ago, beautiful, disastrous or mundane, all tales are welcome.

The research is being conducted for my PhD thesis with the University of Strathclyde and I'm happy to answer any questions about it. If you're interested in taking part or would like to know more contact me on

charlotte.allan@strath.ac.uk.

Phase Two: Case Study

Audience wanted for research project

Do you have a child (or children) between the ages of 12 and 36 months that you would like to attend a new theatre performance with? I am interested in what the experience of going to a show together is like when the two people attending are an adult and a toddler. I am looking for families who are happy to attend and be recorded at a live performance of [Name of Show] by [artist]. Parents will then be invited to discuss the experience with me a couple of weeks later. The performance is taking place at [time, date, location] with free tickets available on a first-come-first-served basis. The research is being conducted for a PhD thesis with the University of Strathclyde and the performance is produced by [e.g. Starcatchers].

If you are interested in taking part and would like further details, please e-mail charlotte.allan@strath.ac.uk

You can find out more about the show here

[Show website]

Appendix E: Filming *Float*, Guidance for Videographer

I have a high confidence in your skills in both unobtrusively filming people and picking up on the most interesting moments in a performance for very young children. This document is a written version of what we have already discussed and also a bit more detail on the research, should that be helpful for you to know.

There is no pretence that we could capture *everything* that goes on during a performance, even more so with one like *Float* that does not demarcate audience and performer space along traditional lines. There will be a large degree of chance in what is ultimately included, especially with the fixed cameras. However, where there are choices to be made in the moment, these are the principles I'd like them to be guided by:

- The audience are the focus of interest
- Disengagement and 'negative' responses are just as important
- Interactions between the babies and the performers but also
- Interactions between the babies and their adults
- Or any other kind! (Babies and babies, performers and adults etc...)

Essentially, it's all about relationships.

The following is to give you more background detail on why this is the focus and how it fits into the wider research project.

These are my broad research questions for the thesis:

- How do adults accompanying very young children experience Theatre for Early Years?
- To what extent is Theatre for Early Years spectatorship a shared experience?

To help answer these questions I am interviewing people who have been to live performances with babies and/or toddlers, recording the audience at a live event (*Float*), and then interviewing

the adults from Float afterwards. These different kinds of data will work together to help me understand and describe the experience of TEY from the audience perspective.

The video and audio from Float, Phase Two data, is the only part of the research which directly includes children. I'm also hoping that elements of the recording will support the follow-up interviews with the accompanying adults. The responses of children therefore are very important to capture. Having already conducted some of the analysis on the Phase One data, there are also elements of the parent-carer experience that I'm particularly interested in. These are:

- How is individual agency manifested in the space?
- How is power shared?
- What, exactly, do the accompanying adults do during the performance?
- How is the environment created and received?

Appendix F: Additions to Consent for selected images

Consent Form for Parents – Updated [date]

Name of department: Education

Title of the study: Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my and my child's personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my and my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - video recordings that identify me and/or my child;
 - audio recordings that identify me and/or my child;
 - my, and/or my child's, personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me and/or my child personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me and/or my child will be made publicly available.
- I consent to me and my child being a participant in the project.
- I consent to me and my child being audio and video recorded as part of the project
- I consent to me and my child being included in images shared with other research participants from the same event as part of the research process (please delete if you do not)

ADDITION as of [date]

- I consent for the use of the image below of myself and my child for use in the PhD thesis and any future publication including but not limited to journal articles, book chapters, seminars and talks. I understand that these will be in the public domain.

[quality copy of image pasted in]

Name	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Consent Form for lead TEY Artist(s) – Updated [date]

Name of department: Education

Title of the study: Investigating the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years (TEY) with very young children and their accompanying adults

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.

- I consent to my artistic work [name] being used within this research study as a stimulus event for observations of and discussions with the participating audience
- I understand that the work will be described as part of the writing up of findings
- I understand that I may be contacted at a future date with a request for permission to publicly use selected images from the research video that contain images of the work

ADDITION as of [date]

- I consent for the use of the images of my work below to be used in the PhD thesis and any future publication including but not limited to journal articles, book chapters, seminars and talks. I understand that these will be in the public domain.

[quality copy of images pasted in]

Name	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Appendix G: Interview Schedule: Case Study

This schedule represents prompts and suggestions for discussion and is an available structure. The actual form and content of the interviews will be heavily influenced by the participants – the experiences they wish to relate and the points they feel most interested in sharing.

- Opening questions:

(setting the scene for talking about feelings, associations and engaging the imagination)

How are things today? What is the ‘weather’ ie your individual and shared moods?

How does this compare to the day when you attended the performance?

Which would be more typical – either, neither, both?

- Remembering:

(discovering what aspects of the performance were important)

What do you remember about the performance, that was noteworthy?

What surprised or disappointed you?

Do you think you and your child enjoyed the same parts?

What do you think your child found most engaging about the whole experience?

Tell me more about the references to the show that you recorded happening

- Critical moment(s)

(engaging in interpretation of child’s reaction prompted by still photo from recording)

What do you think your child is thinking/feeling at this moment?

What do you remember about this moment?

- Imagining:

(discovering thoughts on connection, empathy and bonding)

What your child enjoyed about the show, how does that relate to their general interests?

Do you share that interest?

What do you have in common, as personalities?

What kind of things do you do together that you both enjoy?

What kind of thing would you consider a 'bonding experience' for you both?

What do you think it would be like or what you would wish it to be like?

- Valuing:
(discovering opinion on the role of the arts, on priorities for children)

When choosing an activity to do with your child, what do you look for?

Have you ever been to live Theatre for Early Years?

How much influence do you think you have on their tastes?

Are the arts important to you? As a consumer? Or participant?

What about for your child? Children in general?

Appendix H: Demographic Questionnaire Results

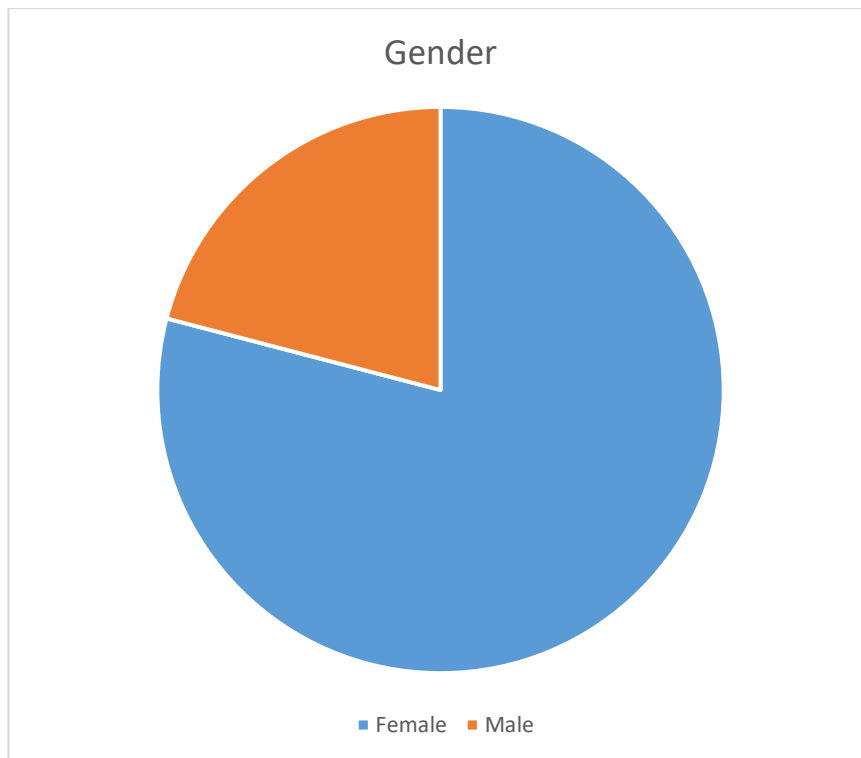


Figure H1: Phase One participants by gender

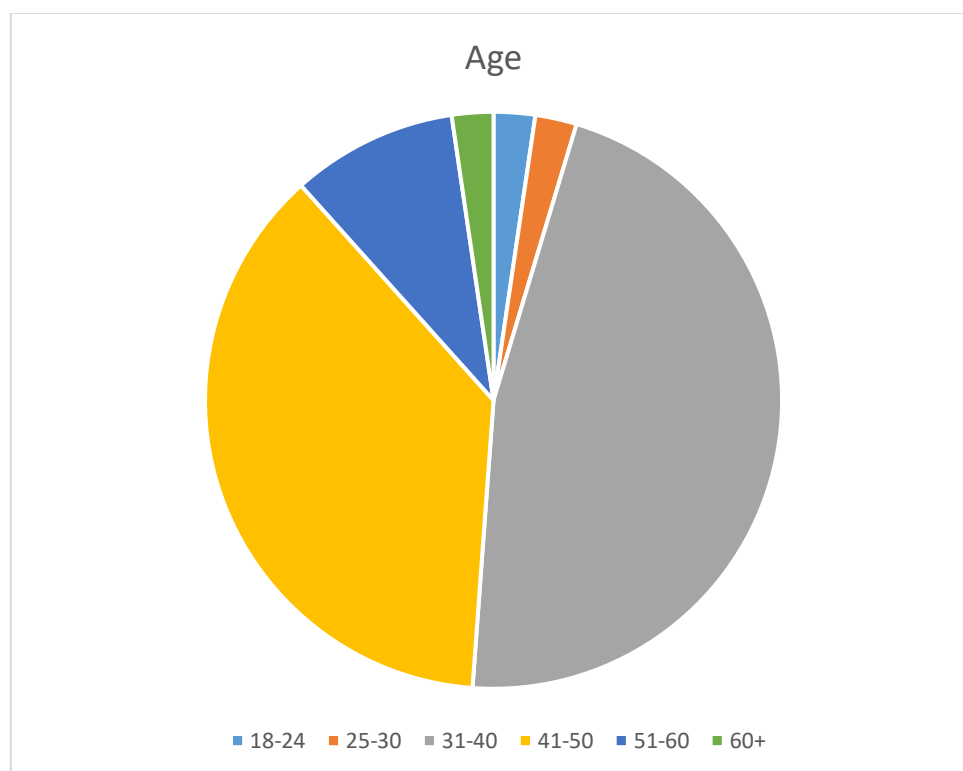


Figure H2: Phase One participants by age

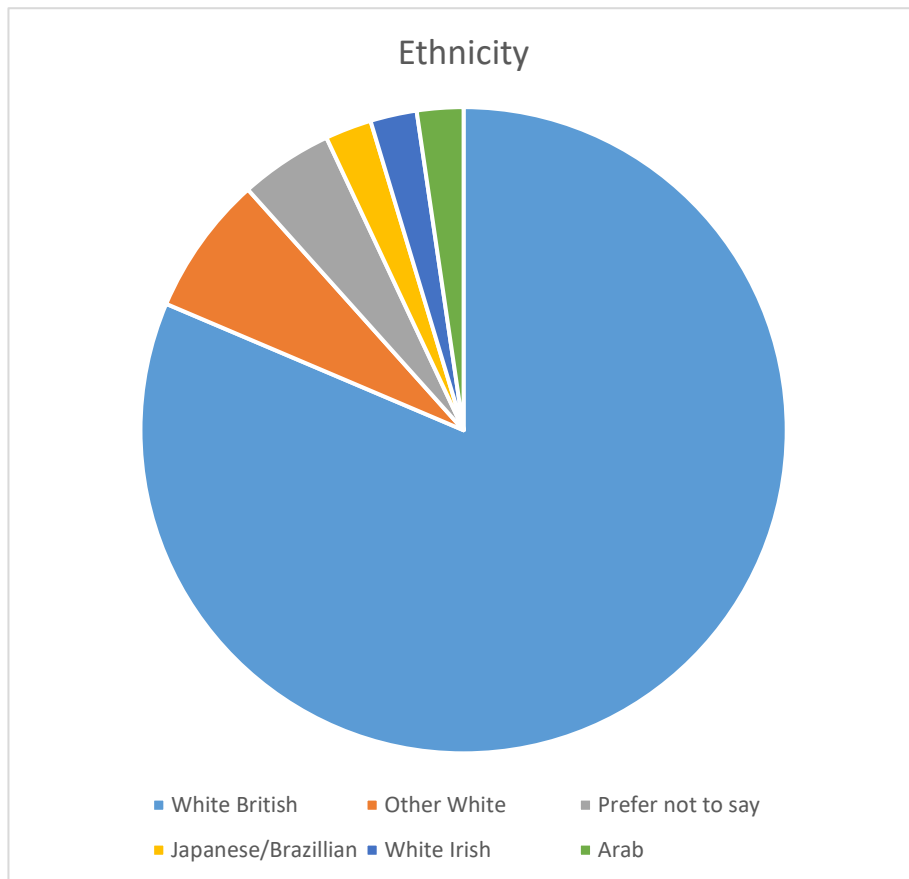


Figure H3: Phase One participants by ethnicity

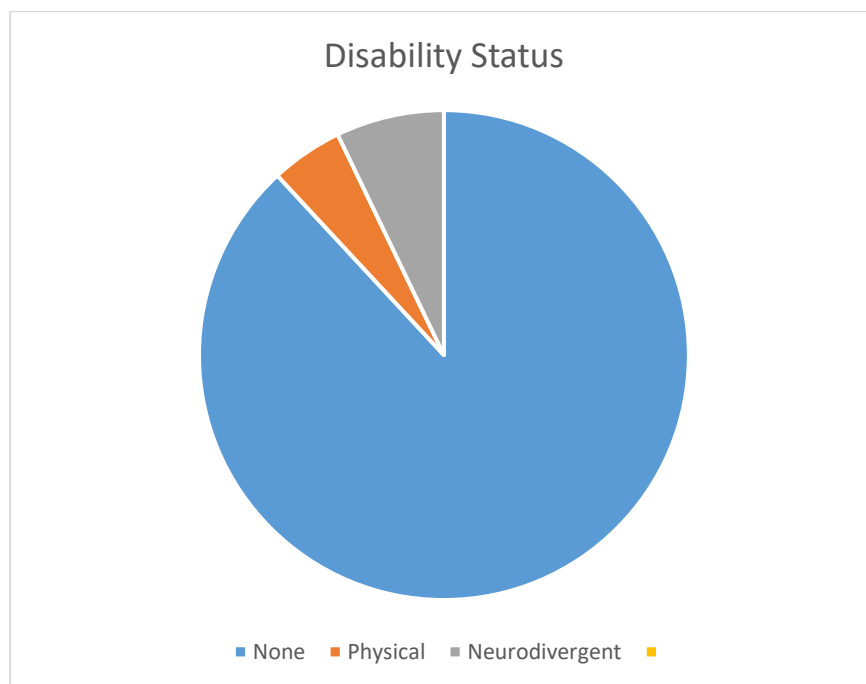


Figure H4: Phase One participants by disability status

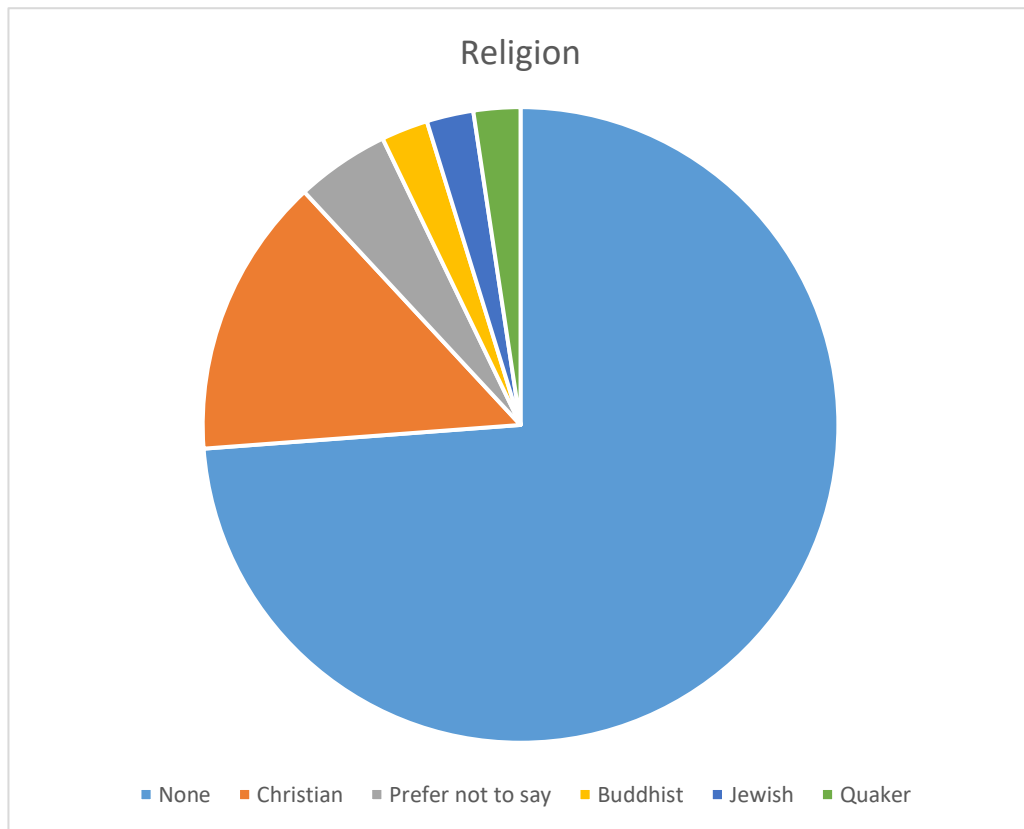


Figure H5: Phase One participants by religion

Appendix I: Starcatchers Engagement Signals



STARCATCHERS ENGAGEMENT SIGNALS

These engagement signals were developed across with researchers from the University of Edinburgh, University of Exeter and the University of Strathclyde across our pilot and second phase of work with children aged 0-5. They were used to inform the different ways babies and young children engage in expressive arts experiences in both our productions and workshop settings. We're sharing them here because we think they can be useful for your early years practice.

	When a baby or child is intensely watching and cued in to what is going on. This includes their eyes tracking or focusing on whatever, or whoever, they're attuned to. This doesn't necessarily mean eye contact - they may watch and follow your hands, or an object you're holding.	
	Intense attention for a period of time, including ignoring any distraction. This could be engaging an activity physically, or watching intensely (tying into attuned) for an extended period of time. There's no set period of time for it to be 'extended', you know the children you work with and will be able to sense what has grabbed their attention for longer than usual.	
	Watching and reciprocating through repeating or copying. This could be physically mirroring - e.g., copying or slightly adapting your movements, or it could be vocal - they might copy the sounds or noises you make. They also may not copy people - if they see a character or object spin, they might try spinning too.	
	Signs of responding positively can include positive or open body language - smiling, nodding, reaching. They may also indicate they are following what's going on by nodding, or responding with suggestions or questions. It can also include social referencing - which is the process whereby babies or young children look at other's facial expressions to understand how they are feeling. For example, a wee one handed a paintbrush may look at a keyworker for confirmation before playing with it.	
	Physically responding to someone else, this is similar to responsive but it's a 2 way exchange with another person. They are watching the other person and engaging with their actions or movements. For example, clapping in time with someone else or taking it in turns to mark-make together.	
	Provoking action in others through their own physical response or vocalisation. For example, making a noise doing a song that prompts the singer to incorporate it into the song, or making a suggestion for what should happen next in a story.	
	Taking individual action with materials or props. This will be self-led investigation, where they will be exploring "what happens if..." for example playing with an instrument that's been brought out during singing or music.	