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Embodied Identity and Meaning-Making in Early Childhood Education: Reading Identity as Bodily Practice

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Abstract: Children claim agency and belonging not only through words, but through their bodies. In fact, identity in early childhood education (ECE) is not expressed by the body so much as constituted through it. This paper discusses a view of identity formation in ECE settings, leaning on the praxeological "children's perspectives" approach (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2020), and read through two theoretical lenses: Mead's (2015) account of the social self and Gallagher's (2023) theory of embodied and enactive cognition. Drawing on observations from German-language childcare centers in South Tyrol, Northern Italy, the paper examines how free and risky movement, dress-up play, and sensory exploration — shaped by participatory rule-making and the physical environment — allow children to claim agency, belonging, and social position through bodily practice. Identity, in this view, is not a fixed attribute children gradually acquire, but a situated embodied process: something children already are, continuously become, and have already grown into through milieu-specific experience. The paper closes with transferable principles for designing multimodal, movement-rich, relationally safe and participatory ECE environments, suggesting that behavior often read as "troubling" — running, testing limits, physical exuberance — may instead be children's identity work showing up bodily, in progress.

Keywords: children's perspectives, risky play, embodied identity

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1. Introduction

Early childhood education and care once treated identity as a stable set of psychological traits that a child gradually internalizes. Contemporary research instead frames childhood itself as a social construct enacted in social practices, with children as rights-bearing actors who co-produce meaning within generational orders (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2024). Identity, hence, is something children actively *do* as they narrate and interact with their world (e.g. Gee, 2001; Colilles et al., 2026). According to a praxeological understanding of embodiment, children *are* their body, and it is through the body's resonance with the human and more-than-human world that meanings and orientations take shape. This matters beyond early-years, since how a field conceptualizes selfhood in young children shapes curricula, caregiving practice, and policy on children's rights.

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Experiential-learning theories anticipated part of this shift: Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984) for instance emphasized "learning by doing," and Montessori and Reggio Emilia pedagogies incorporate movement (Barton & Garvis, 2023). Sharing an emphasis on movement and creativity, this paper foregrounds non-directed, sometimes risky, child-initiated play. Aligning with a practice-oriented perspective, it conceptualizes learning as inherently embodied, and cognition and identity formation as inseparable from bodily practice and physical world-appropriation.

This view requires seeing children as social agents and co-constructors of their lives rather than passive recipients of care, a stance reinforced globally by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which frames identity as constructed through social, relational, and multimodal engagement, and obligates educational settings to support children's participation and agency. This paper treats childcare centers as primary social arenas where identity is enacted through children's doing, thinking, and moving, in interaction with both the human and more-than-human world. Play is central here: Farné (2020, p. 77) invokes Rousseau's *Émile* when calling play an "anti-pedagogy," since no one teaches children how to play, yet play is precisely how they develop skill, knowledge, and self-authorship.

The paper's approach to understanding how children's physical presence shapes their developing identity within ECE centers —detailed in the next section —relies on Mead's account of the social self and Gallagher's (2023) theory of embodied and enactive cognition, with Nentwig-Gesemann et al.'s (2020) praxeological "children's perspectives" approach serving as an orienting stance rather than a third theoretical lens.

2. Framework and Methods

As children navigate institutional rules and peer norms, they use their bodies as the primary tool for relating to themselves and others, doing identity daily through movement, language, clothing, facial expressions, and behavior.

One theoretical lens relies on Mead's (2015) "social self," where identity oscillates between the socialized "Me" and the spontaneous, creative "I." This lens comes to life in ECE through the "play stage," a phase where young children move from mimicry to consciously trying on different roles. Through imaginative role-play, they test who they are and might become, balancing the tension between autonomy and belonging. As ECE centers function as a child's community beyond the family, they help constitute the self even as the self continually reconstructs the community, since neither mind nor self can develop without social interaction. Although sometimes criticized for its universalist assumptions, Mead's framework remains foundational to interactionist accounts of selfhood and serves as effective lens through which to read empirical situations.

While Mead captures the social emergence of identity, grounding it in the physical world requires a complementary theoretical lens: Gallagher's (2023) theory of embodied and enactive cognition, which holds that the body does not merely support cognition but constitutes it. Gallagher distinguishes the pre-reflective "body schema" from the consciously perceived "body image," viewing identity formation as a continuous loop between the two. Unlike Mead's interactionist account, where the self emerges only through social reflection, Gallagher argues for a pre-reflective bodily self-experience, active from the start, that precedes but is subsequently reworked through social mirroring. This aligns with the embodied, embedded and en-

active paradigm's rejection of mind-body dualism (Faella et al., 2025), reframing the body as a dynamic and subjective site of meaning-making rather than a mere vessel for physical activity (Kosmas et al., 2019). Put differently, children think with their bodies because physical action is their primary means of exploring, regulating, and making sense of their world. From this perspective, identity and meaning-making are two faces of the same embodied process: children make sense of the world by acting in it, and in doing so, they constitute themselves.

Rather than competing lenses, these frameworks operate on complementary timescales: Gallagher's pre-reflective body schema functions moment-to-moment, while Mead's social "Me" forms more gradually as peers and educators validate that bodily mastery. Embodied self-experience does not oppose social reflection; it supplies the raw material that social reflection and recognition work with.

Beyond these two theoretical lenses, Nentwig-Gesemann et al.'s (2020, 2021) praxeological "children's perspectives" approach serves as an empirical orienting stance for this paper. Grounded in the sociology of knowledge and interpreted through the Documentary Method, this framework emerged from a two-year study of roughly 200 children across thirteen German ECE centers. By analyzing conversations, videos, and children's drawings and photographs, the study identified quality dimensions — such as children "expressing themselves in many languages… to be heard, seen, and understood" — and demonstrates how deeply a child's self-understanding and peer status are tied to sensorimotor exploration and spatial familiarity. This approach frames children as "enthusiastic researchers of their own lives," showing that they act with greater agency and confidence once they are familiar with a center's routines, rules, and materials. Though not applied as a formal methodology in this exploratory paper, the study serves as guide for understanding child-centered quality dimensions in ECE centers.

Methodologically, this paper draws on participant observation and conversations with educators and children in several German-language ECE centers (*Kindergarten*) for ages three to six in South Tyrol, Italy. To protect privacy, all names are omitted, and examples reflect patterns observed across centers. Guided by Nentwig-Gesemann et al.'s (2020) commitment to children's perspectives, these observations are read through the theoretical lenses of Mead and Gallagher to apply and test this conceptual framework, making it a work of theoretical application.

Together, these frameworks motivate the paper's aim: to examine how free and risky movement, construction and dress-up play, and sensory exploration function as embodied languages of agency and belonging, and how participatory rule-making and physical environments shape these processes. The analysis suggests that movement and sensory experience are constitutive of how children make sense of themselves, others, and the world. Ultimately this underscores the need for educators to design movement-rich, relationally safe and participatory environments that respect children's rights and foster rather than hamper self-exploration.

3. Readings of observed practices

In line with the praxeological framework of this study, the following section does not present static results; rather, it offers interpretive readings of observed practices, decoding how children navigate space, rules, and identity through their bodies.

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3.1. The importance of movement

Movement in early childhood is not merely physical exercise but constitutive of how children make sense of themselves and society. An educator expressed how after mastering physical challenges such as climbing or balancing, children often appear visibly more upright and confident — an impression consistent with Gallagher's (2023) claim that pre-reflective motor mastery becomes a consciously felt sense of competence and self. An example is a five-year-old girl who regularly dances at the center of the group circle, establishing herself as "translator" of the songs and encouraging peers to join — in Mead's (2015) terms, consciously trying on an "I" that the group reflects back as a confirmed "Me."

Movement also operates as a language of agency through peer recognition, establishing a sense of belonging, often even unveiling aspects of a child's identity not otherwise visible to peers or educators. An example was observed in the "movement construction site" — a gym-like room for free play. A three-year-old boy repeatedly failed to climb a vaulting box on a peer-created obstacle course before finally succeeding, lifting his arms as peers cheered. This aligns with children's need to be seen, heard, and understood (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2020). Read through Mead's (2015) account of the socially reflected self, it also illustrates how recognition from peers confirms an emerging sense of self. An educator observed that for some children mastering something "difficult" is less about performance than about belonging, recognition, and visibility. Elsewhere, children trying to tie a rope to an old tractor tire failed individually, succeeding only once an educator suggested they cooperate "like *Paw Patrol*," the popular children's show featuring dogs who act as first responders and work together to solve missions. This illustrates how adult-scaffolded cooperative play can convert individual frustration into shared success, collective problem-solving, and a sense of belonging.

Movement functions as groundwork for later academic learning, since sensorimotor experience builds the root of conceptual thought and self-expression (Sando et al., 2021; Kontra et al., 2012). One girl, offered a place in a read-aloud session, explained that her legs needed to move and were "not ready yet" to sit and listen, before running laps outside — articulating a bodily need and illustrating the loop between body schema and image that Gallagher (2023) describes. Conversely, over-regulating movement for acoustic or safety reasons can suppress this modality of meaning-making. To limit this, several centers designate zones for vigorous movement (outdoor spaces, "movement construction sites") alongside calmer zones (media room, pretend-play room), governed by norms such as "calm feet."

Together, these examples suggest that how a center handles movement — whether channeling it, naming it, or simply making room for it — shapes not just behavior but how children come to understand who they are and where they belong.

3.2. Risky Play and Bodily Sovereignty

An important component of embodied identity is risky or daring play, which Smith (1998) frames as a precursor to risk-taking in emotional, affective, and social domains. Facing physical challenges and confronting fears help build self-esteem and resilience, fundamental to long-term mental wellbeing. Sandseter (2009) identifies six categories of "risky play" — great heights, high speed, dangerous tools, near-dangerous elements, rough-and-tumble play, and disappearing or exploratory

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play — several included in South Tyrol's ECE guidelines (Deutsches Schulamt, 2008; Kindergarteninspektorat, 2017). In-center wood workshops, for example, let children use saws and hammers for creative constructions under safety rules such as using "worker gloves" and capacity limits. Minor injuries happen but are treated as occasions for learning about risk and one's own body rather than failures of supervision. Educators also underline that risk perception is highly individual: some children find tools riskier, others climbing, and confident children reportedly worry less than shy peers.

Establishing safety rules in cooperation between educators and children has proven more effective than outright bans: one center, for instance, allows unsupervised garden access, but only once children demonstrate awareness of safety rules. Some centers even co-created a "fighting ring" system bounded by mats, mutual consent, and the "power of the word stop" — underlining the role of the center as "society" whose rules the children help build and hold each other to. This echoes Mead's (2015) sense that the self and the social world make each other. Across these examples children show calibrated self-assessment — asking for help with a knife while still wanting to try something risky, such as cutting an apple themselves during snack time —revealing self-trust and awareness of their limits that grows with familiarity. This mirrors Nentwig-Gesemann et al.'s (2020) finding that agency develops once children feel at home with a center's co-constructed norms.

Conquering a self-chosen challenge supports "bodily sovereignty:" pre-reflective mastery becoming consciously felt competence (Gallagher, 2005) translating into a felt sense of agency. This echoes the self-esteem and resilience gains that Smith (1998) locates in children's confronting of physical and personal fears. Adults often tend to limit risk, yet educators must balance protective responsibility with the child's right to test their own limits — shifting from an "avoid-harm ethic" toward a "do-good ethic" (Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023). For example, one educator chose not to stop a four-year-old riding a handcart downhill, instead voicing both concern and recognition of his skill. In another instance, a five-year-old tumbled off a nest swing after peers pushed it too vigorously. The resulting "safety talk" focused on joint problem-solving rather than a ban, keeping children as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible.

3.3. Dress-Up Play and Sensory Environment

Identity formation is not confined to high-energy or risky play but happens through multimodal practices and sensory exploration. Dress-up or role play, for instance, allows children to explore who they are and might become, directly instantiating Mead's (2015) "play stage" and offering a safe space to explore identities and cultural narratives (Colilles et al., 2026; MacNaughton, 2000). Clothing and appearance matter for self-image and autonomy, not only to embody roles but to identify with one's own sense of self. One educator described a five-year-old who found it genuinely difficult to participate in certain activities without "the right" clothing, illustrating Mead's (2015) point that the socialized "Me" must feel coherent before the spontaneous "I" can act freely.

Feeling represented in one's ECE center matters too (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2020) — in pictures, artwork, books, and playthings. Dolls of varied skin tones alongside superhero figures let children find counterparts to identify with, as when

two boys role-played "breakfast in bed" dressed as superheroes alongside a row of dolls, blurring lines of reality, fiction, and gender.

The physical environment deeply influences how children perceive and interact with the world. Familiarity with one's surroundings supports belonging and security, while open-ended "loose-parts" materials — repurposed boxes, crates, cups — inspire children to use materials as creative tools to extend their bodies and signal roles (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2020). In one center, donated pizza boxes and paper cups became elaborately rebuilt "construction sites"; elsewhere, children spent days building "the statue from New York" from repurposed containers, and another child fashioned a "Krampus" mask (a horned, anthropomorphic Alpine folk figure) from appliance packaging, felt, and paint, enacting local cultural identification through material construction. Children also value "secret places" shielded from adult observation, supporting autonomy and peer culture: one center added pillows to a closet with sliding doors turning it into a "mini retreat," while others offer large cloths for hideouts.

Sensory exploration is a further junction with the environment. Children delight in exploring water, wind, sun, and earth with their whole bodies, nourishing their own inquiry in the process. On a chilly spring afternoon several children spontaneously removed their shoes to run barefoot in the center's garden despite educators' call to leave them on, prioritizing sensory exploration and laughter over rules. Here, shared laughter functions as a kind of metacommunication, validating shared play worlds and easing tension between desire and institutional control; even rough-housing can be read as children explaining their position in the world rather than simply misbehaving.

4. Discussion

Guided by a commitment to taking children's perspectives seriously (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2020), these observations were read through two theoretical lenses operating at different levels: Gallagher's (2023) account of pre-reflective bodily mastery, and Mead's (2015) account of how that mastery is socially recognized and consolidated into a sense of self. Read together, the observations converge on one claim: identity in early childhood is a situated, ongoing accomplishment, constituted rather than expressed through the body — first enacted pre-reflectively, then confirmed through peers and educators — and continuously negotiated between individual spontaneity and social confirmation. Across the analyzed domains of movement, risky play, sensory exploration, and dress-up, children's bodily engagement with peers, regulatory rules, and material environments emerges as the primary engine of identity work.

For practice, these readings and the educators in this study point to several transferable principles: designing zoned environments that accommodate both vigorous and calm modes; co-constructing safety rules with children, since participatory rules tend to be more embodied than imposed ones — a tension between "avoid-harm" and "do-good" ethics in risky play that educators continue to navigate; stocking open-ended materials for children to creatively use; and encouraging educators to be attentive to children's own orientations and ways of making sense of the world, alongside their caregiving role. Future research could test these principles systematically and extend the framework to other linguistic and geographic settings.

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5. Conclusions

Identity in early childhood is best understood not as a fixed trait the body merely displays, but as constituted through it: something children already *are*, continuously *become*, and have already *grown into* through milieu-specific bodily experience — a situated, embodied process unfolding through movement, risk, dress-up, and sensory exploration in which individual and collective orientations remain deeply intertwined. When educators recognize these as primary modes of participation, they can design environments — rich in open-ended materials, zoned for both high- and low-arousal activity, and grounded in co-created rules and shared rituals — that cultivate trust, relational safety, and genuine self- and co-determination. These principles emerge from a praxeological reading of children's own perspectives (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2020), and align with theoretical accounts of embodied, socially negotiated selfhood (Gallagher, 2023; Mead, 2015). Joy itself is expressed not only verbally but through embodied, milieu-specific practice — gesture, expression, and movement that vary across cultures and communities — underscoring educators' role in nurturing an inclusive atmosphere attentive to these differences (Kangas et al., 2025). What is often read as "troubling behavior" — running, testing limits, physical exuberance — may instead be identity work that children are constituting through their body, in progress, pointing toward a more holistic, child-centered model of ECE quality development.

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