



A CHILD-CENTRED EARLY YEARS CURRICULUM? HOW DO WE  
INCREASE CHILDREN'S VOICES TO REALISE THIS?

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## **Abstract**

This study considers the insights and challenges in attempting to listen to young children's voices in a pre-school in England. The study was motivated by the political and social agendas in the United Kingdom (UK) which assert the fundamental involvement of young children as active decision-makers in all aspects of their lives (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC, 1989; the Children Act 2004).

The researcher aimed for participatory, action-based research with the children, staff and parents to explore effective ways in which young children's communications might be supported through the co-creation of their early years curriculum. The intention was to focus on 'tools' and techniques that might support children's voices, based on those proposed by Clark and Moss (2001), Lancaster (2003a and b) and Lancaster and Broadbent (2003 a – d).

As a recent early years practitioner at the pre-school, the researcher offers a frank view of the potential complexities of implementing such participatory research. The researcher took an innovative, flexible and highly reflective stance to adapting the research approach in response to the challenges to establishing participation that emerged, using a postmodern framework to assist meaning-making.

A substantive finding was that although the 'tools' and techniques studied opened a significant space for beginning to listening to children's voices, it was the constructions of the underpinning relationships that offered the most potential (and the greatest challenge) for genuinely participating with and hearing children. The ways in which participants (to include the researcher) constructed themselves, and each other, and the complexities of the interrelations seemed to have a substantial influence on the nature of participation and the impact on listening to children's voices. Amongst the challenges that emerged, to establishing constructive and equal relationships with the children, was the pressure to implement the statutory early

years curriculum in England (DfES, 2008a), in particular in relation to documenting children's progress. The researcher's exploration of including the children in their own documentation process emerged as significant to the pre-school beginning to consider children's participation for future pre-school practice.

A key message from the study is that establishing genuine relationships with children in early years settings needs to be the focus if children are to be accorded their rights to be heard as active decision-makers. The construction of relationships must be explicit to understand how such promote or inhibit children's voices. A recommendation for further research is a focus on the workplace challenges for practitioners, taking the view that understanding experiences for practitioners is in the interest of enhancing participation and provision for children.

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Anthony and Barbara Bowden, for their amazing strength of character and limitless love and support.

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## Abbreviations

EAL	English as an Additional Language
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYPS	Early Years Professional Status
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills

## Glossary

Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage and Birth to Three Matters Frameworks	The curriculum that preceded the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008.
Early Years Advisory team	Provide consultancy and training services to early years providers on behalf of the South Gloucestershire Council Department for Children and Young



	People
Early Years Advisory team early years forum	A forum hosted by the Early Years Advisory team for local early years settings in South Gloucestershire to discuss issues of common interest
Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	The curriculum that early years providers were legally bound to implement from September 2008
Early Years Professional Status (EYPS)	A postgraduate status recognising competencies against nationally defined standards working with children aged 0 to 5
Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) mentor	A university academic who supports students in achieving EYPS.
Enhanced Disclosure	An Enhanced Disclosure is required to work with children. It shows details of any spent and unspent convictions, cautions, reprimands and final warnings
Key children	A specific group of children assigned to a specific pre-school practitioner (key worker)
Key worker	A specific pre-school practitioner assigned specific children (key children). The role of the key worker is to be the primary support for their children.
Learning Journey	A record of an individual child's learning and development prepared by pre-school staff
Level 3 qualification/qualified	This is a recognised level (within the National Qualifications Framework) at which early years practitioners can work in supervisory roles. It assumes a related level of detailed knowledge and skills
Level 2 qualification/qualified	This is a recognised level (within the National Qualifications Framework) at

	which early years practitioners can work with children under the supervision of at least a Level 3 practitioner
Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)	Official inspectorate and regulator of services that provide care and education for children and young people
Parents	'Parents' to be read 'parents and/or guardians'
Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector early years providers	Early years settings run by private, voluntary or independent organisations. They are not part of the state education system (maintained by Local Authorities). Largely self-funding.

## **Chapter 1 Introduction to the Study and Thesis**

This chapter introduces my research as an early years practitioner, at the time of designing my study in 2009, into young children's voices at a pre-school in England, an early years setting providing education and care for children aged 2 years 9 months to 4 years 11 months. The reference to 'voices' throughout the thesis is intended to be interpreted in the widest sense as encompassing both verbal and non-verbal expression. The background to my research and my professional and personal motivations in this area of study are outlined. The challenges that I faced, both in carrying out the research and documenting it in a comprehensive and cohesive fashion are a deliberate focus in this introduction, as such challenges shaped the direction and redirection of the research in ways that I could not have envisaged at the planning stage of the research. The style of this thesis is purposefully reflective (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000), in an attempt to make the process as visible as possible to the reader, both acknowledging that the account offered is one perspective of the research and presenting the possibility for other perspectives to be made by the reader (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009, Holliday, 2007).

### **1.1 Overview of Study**

In the 12 months prior to conceiving the study, both as pre-school practitioner and a postgraduate student studying for the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), (see glossary), I found myself in the midst of political and social initiatives to raise the profile of children's voices in acknowledging them as fundamental to shaping all aspects of their lives. This focus was reflected in the many early years agendas (for example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN, 1989; the Children Act 2004; Every Child Matters, DfES, 2004). However, professionally, I was experiencing, as asserted by Pascal and Bertram (2009), that despite a paradigmatic shift in the view of childhood, a gap existed between policy and practice. Despite the declared fundamental principle to place the interests of the child

at the centre, (a concept that I will problematize), I was experiencing that practice remained predominantly adult-initiated and led.

An illuminating report by UNICEF (UNCRC, 2008) further raised questions as to whether children's rights were being honoured. The report provided a league table in 25 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries illustrating the extent to which early years providers were satisfying measures to protect young children's rights to a positive experience in early years settings. Particularly disturbing to me (in a personal and professional capacity) was the low ranking of the UK.

### **1.1.1 Introducing the study aims**

Such initiatives prompted self-reflection and reflection on the pre-school practices to which I was actively contributing as a practitioner. I questioned at that time whether I and other practitioners really did know how children felt about 'their' pre-school experience, whether we were actively seeking children's views. Were we consulting the children in shaping their pre-school experiences or tuning into their non-verbal expressions? Or were we making assumptions that unless children were demonstrating obvious discontentment, then all was well? I wondered whether we might be relying on our adult decisions to create an environment that we assumed was in the best interests of the children (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000). Such questions and reflections began to shape my interest in researching how to hear children's own voices more clearly and underpinned my research aims and questions, introduced in the sections below.

Specifically within my study I aimed to understand more about children's opinions of their daily activities in pre-school, (informed by the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum, DCSF, 2008a), as well as children's reactions to pre-school life in general, such as routines and pre-school rules. A main motivation for the study was to determine where and how improvements might be made to enhance children's experiences. A fundamental aim was how I and the other pre-school practitioners could engage in discourses with the children that enabled

them to express their opinions in a number of ways which were the most engaging for individual children (Clark and Moss, 2001; Lancaster 2003a and b.; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003 a-d).

My study included a focus on illuminating attitudes and beliefs towards ‘child voice’. The research was intended as an exploration, with openness and frankness, of the potential and actual enablers and challenges to ‘tuning into’ young children’s voices with an overall view as to how we might begin to realistically increase children’s participation, respecting the rights of children to be heard (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton et al, 2007; Prout, 2003; Morrow, 2005, Alderson, 2008).

### **1.1.2 Early challenges to participatory research**

I drew on participatory approaches based on the Mosaic approach, (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005) and approaches by Lancaster and Broadbent (Lancaster, 2003 a and b; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003 a-d) in an attempt to illuminate children’s perspectives towards their pre-school experiences and to determine where and how improvements might be made to enhance such experiences. I was initially discouraged by the limited active participation of the practitioners. Despite declaring an interest in the study, other work pressures seemed to lead to me largely (independently) implementing the research activities with the children. However, as I joined the children, other unanticipated research activities emerged which provided potentially wider insights into children’s voices than I had imagined.

### **1.1.3 Using postmodern theory to understand complexity**

My early analyses of the data revealed a richness and complexity for me which led to my methodological approach developing in alternative ways than my stated participatory, action-based approach. Although initially disconcerting to me as a new researcher, by referring to the concepts of postmodernism (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998), I learnt the value of reflection on the process of the research and being brave enough to reflexively adapt the process to

the research environment rather than struggle to make the environment ‘fit’ my initial planned research strategy. Equally revealing to me was my influence on the research. I became increasingly conscious about how I reflected on my actions during the process, the language that I used to represent my perspectives and my responsibility to make clear to the reader that I understood that what I was presenting was not fact but my perception drawing on my (life) experiences. Such a way of thinking became increasingly essential as I accepted that co-construction with the other practitioners in the setting was to be limited and that, rather than the multiple accounts, it was my voice that would be predominantly heard. Moreover I came to realise the multiplicity of my voices, as researcher, as former practitioner, as ‘expert’ Early Years Professional, and the influence of these on the research process. This required transparency in capturing the research process and my offering of findings (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000). This is further discussed in section 1.7.

#### **1.1.4 Overview of study findings and conclusions**

Substantive findings arose from my realisation that a methodological re-think was appropriate when I began to experience challenges to my participatory approach with the pre-school practitioners. My decision to ‘relax’ my action-based approach, to participate with the children without an explicit change agenda, appeared to have made space and time for other issues to come to the fore.

The top-down pressure from the EYFS curriculum, (DCSF, 2008a and b), to demonstrate children’s progress towards pre-defined targets (Lee and Eke, 2009, Alexander, 2010, Wells, 1989) emerged as a significant challenge to participating with children and listening to their perspectives. In particular the increased documentation requirements of the EYFS, with the primary reaction to this being an adult obligation, was presented as a barrier to spending time interacting with the children, unless the interactions were aligned with the specific ‘teaching’ and ‘developmental’ targets that the practitioners were seeking to fulfil.

Other factors were also influential to challenging children's participation and expression. 'Preservation' of resources from 'damage', to include the children's documentation, emerged as a tension in the alternative viewpoints expressed by the practitioners (as well as some parents).

However it was the development of genuine relationships with the children (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; O'Kane, 2008, Punch, 2002; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Lancaster 2003a), and moreover the complexities of the relationships, that emerged as the most illuminating finding for me in terms of creating a space for voices to be expressed and heard. Amongst other factors, the research illuminated how daily pressures that faced the practitioners in the pre-school were significant potential barriers to creating such a space for listening to the children. As a recent practitioner myself I had not been aware of the extent of such pressures until 'stepping back' and viewing from a researcher perspective. Whereas I had anticipated that the focus of the research would be on exploring specific approaches to listening to children, inspired by the 'tools' and techniques from the Mosaic approach, (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005) and from Lancaster and Broadbent (Lancaster, 2003 a and b; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003 a-d), this was ultimately not the case. Although such approaches opened the space for exploring listening to children, I came to the conclusion that such risked limited effect without attempting to understand the underpinning relationships. It was making meaning from the alternative constructions of such relationships, and my shifting focus on this in the study, that impacted on my growing understanding of the deeper issues that affect the possibilities and challenges to genuine participation with children. Similarly I reflected on my relationship with the practitioners, again on the alternative constructions of the practitioners and myself. I concluded that such a focus assisted in making meanings as to the difficulties that, not only I experienced in attempting to establish participatory research, but more widely, and more importantly, the difficulties in establishing a participatory context in which children can be active partners. Equally such a focus assisted in offering potential for understanding how to build a space that might support children's voices.

## **1.2 Early motivations for the research**

As well as the influence of wider initiatives and published research discussed above, the motivations for my research into pre-school children's voices steadily grew out of my own experiences in my professional role as a relatively new pre-school practitioner. The next section recounts briefly how my professional practice with the children, impacted by the introduction of the EYFS curriculum (DCSF, 2008a and b), focused my interest in exploring children's voices in more depth.

### **1.2.1 Impact of the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**

Although from September 2008, with the introduction of the EYFS, I became part of the initiative, in my daily work, to re-shape practices to be 'child-centred' (as seemed to be the newly coined phrase), I became increasingly uncertain as to what this actually meant for the children. I was aware that I was not alone in the seemingly wider confusion, where the pre-school and other early years settings wrestled with 'abandoning' pre-determined daily and weekly planning in favour of spontaneous planning around observed children's interests, (as guided by the Early Years Advisory team. See glossary). Yet at the same time, I recall a personal sense of optimism at the notion of making practice more attuned with children's needs. At least that was how I decoded this overall brief to make practice more 'child-centred'.

As time went on, I became less convinced that anything had really changed in terms of adapting practices to becoming more 'child-centred'. However, and this is a significant 'however', what had clearly changed was the increased amount of paperwork (Brooker et al, 2010) that needed to be produced for each child. A common objection from practitioners related to the reduced amount of time to spend interacting with the children. If this was being 'child-centred', then I felt uncomfortable about the process.



It was this discomfort that further motivated my research, fuelled by the desire to look in more depth at children's experiences at pre-school, from the children's point of view. Without initially intending to take an in-depth critical look at the EYFS (although some further visiting became significant as the research progressed), I wanted to explore the notion of 'child-centred' in much more detail. My start-point at that time was taking a wider view of the definition of 'child-centred', in terms of involving the children in shaping their own experiences, taking my cue from my understanding of the initiatives referred to in the opening paragraphs above. I was keen to know more about what children thought about their experiences, in the first place, as this, I reflected as a practitioner, was something of which I knew relatively little. I was accustomed to responding to children's perceived needs on a daily basis, largely relating to providing care. However, I felt that children were not involved in shaping their experiences to any significant degree and I was eager to explore how this might be different.

### **1.3 Defining the purpose of research**

The purpose of the research was shaped, both by my professional reflections and my personal belief, that children should be accorded equal respect and rights as adults and that their voices deserved to be heard. The primary purpose of the study was to explore how I, together with my recent colleagues, could practically support children in their expressions, to enable their active participation in shaping their own pre-school experiences. I was clear in my belief that the research purpose needed to have a practical application that not only 'talked' about children's rights to a voice but actively looked at how this could happen in practice (Morrow, 2005, Prout, 2003). The following two sections discuss further how the research purpose was defined by my work as a practitioner, my experiences as a parent and my own experiences as a child reluctant to express myself.

### **1.3.1 Professional Influences**

My professional experiences, outlined above, not only motivated my interest in children's voices but were influential in shaping the direction of the research which I was fortunate to have the opportunity to undertake from the autumn of 2009.

I knew that, as a researcher, I had the professional curiosity to further explore the 'reality' of hearing children's voices in practice and that the research opportunity represented the chance to 'step back' from my daily role as a practitioner and explore children's involvement in their pre-school experience in more depth. I started from a place of some disbelief, or at least of not being comfortable, that the rhetoric of the children's participation 'movement' was finding expression in practice (or at least the extent of such). Such discomfort was borne out of my own experiences as a practitioner, from my observation of other practices in other early years settings in my professional role as mentor to EYPS students (see glossary) and from literature. In particular, the literature relating to participatory research approaches with young children (discussed in chapter 2) influenced my resolve to explore *practical* ways to support children's voices.

My wider professional background is discussed in section 1.6.3.

### **1.3.2 Personal influences**

My personal perspective is that not only should children be respected but that their views from the youngest age are inspirational. I remain hesitant in feeling that all adults share this opinion, with one belief seemingly being that age is *the* measure of wisdom. Whereas this might well be *a* measure, I continue to learn much about life from my children and have done since they were very young.

When I reflect on my own childhood, although very early recollections are not vivid, I do remember my reluctance to answer questions from primary school age, to offer suggestions, for 'fear' of being 'wrong' or appearing 'stupid'. I recall the sense of 'dread' remaining even on entering further education and higher education that I

might be asked to contribute to discussions where I did not feel confident in expressing my views. Although, of course, there are likely many contributing factors, I wonder whether I was supported in my expressions as a young child entering early years schooling in the late 1960s, and whether a possible lack of active support might have been one influence. Although I admit I cannot really remember much of that time, such wonderings contributed to my desire to understand more of what the experiences are like for the youngest children today.

I reflected on my son and daughter (5 and 15 at the time of beginning my study) and realised that I knew little of their early years experiences, and their feelings towards such, in pre-schools and nurseries. Although ten years apart, there was little difference in my insight into what it was really like for either of them. Apart from the occasional 'report' that would be sent home, or the brief dialogue with pre-school or nursery staff at the beginning or end of the day (again usually around care matters such as bathroom accidents or not eating sufficient lunch), much of what happened to my children between drop-off and pick-up was a mystery. As a parent, I relied on my children's willingness, or more precisely lack of refusal, to go to their early years settings as being testament enough to their well-being. On becoming more involved in my son's pre-school as a volunteer, and subsequently as a practitioner, it became increasingly apparent that although I was actively involved in the children's daily routines, I still understood little of what the children felt about their time at pre-school and involved them rarely in any of the shaping of the activities or routines.

## **1.4 Overall research aims**

This section outlines the aims for the study as envisaged at the beginning the research. These aims are necessarily revisited in the thesis, to reflect challenges to the research methodology in practice, and specifically reflected upon in the analysis discussions and conclusions.

A core belief underpinning my study was the need to actively involve participants in the research process, to aim to create multiple perspectives on how to support expression of children's pre-school experiences and to take and reflect on action. Of

significance was my perceived understanding of the potential challenges this might present to the pre-school staff and to myself, in acknowledging frankly and openly potential barriers alongside the possibilities, to supporting children's voices. By aiming to develop a participatory approach, I believed that the study had the potential to become more relevant to those directly affected, allow for a sense of shared ownership and therefore the potential for the essence of the study and findings to influence practice after the research had completed (Kotter, 1996, Schön 1983). Such initial aims and objectives are summarized below:

- To conduct a rich study of pre-school children's voices in practice in one particular pre-school setting. To explore the 'realities' of children being involved in and consulted on their pre-school experiences.
- To ground the research in action. The study was not to be limited to an account of what was being observed but to seek to make 'improvements' to supporting children's voices and participation, in this particular pre-school context, to implement such 'improvements' and to evaluate their 'effectiveness'. Action was envisaged that might potentially make a difference to practice as part of the study, rather than suggesting recommendations to be implemented after the study had published its findings.
- To directly involve those who might be affected by the research – the children and the pre-school practitioners as well as parents – and to blend the research, as far as possible, with normal pre-school routines and activities, as relevant to this particular pre-school.
- To adopt a critically reflective, reflexive and transparent approach to the design, implementation and analysis of the study and for the writing style of the thesis to mirror this approach. To present the findings as 'realistically' as possible, meaning to give equal attention to potential challenges as to the possibilities of supporting children's voices.

## **1.5 How might the study add to existing research?**

As a researcher with direct and recent experience as an early years practitioner, I was in a privileged position to explore and offer meanings as to the ‘realities’ of hearing young children’s voices, as to their participation in shaping their own experiences. In other words, drawing on my very recent role, the study had the potential to provide insight from ‘the ground’ and ‘bottom up’.

Much published existing early years research around children’s voices in the UK is provided by professional researchers, often on behalf of funding bodies (for instance research by the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children (Coram, 2011) in association with the Department for Education or key studies such as The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al, 2004) funded by the Department for Education and Skills). Although these are clearly significant studies, the voices of early years practitioners, especially those in non-management roles, have been significantly quieter within in-depth studies. I questioned whether the funding requirements and the status of such bodies might influence levels of cooperation, apparent levels of interest and ultimately the outcome, the determination of ‘success’ of the study. In the majority of early years settings in the UK, there is not a budget for such research. Therefore my research has the potential to offer explorations and insights that might not have aligned with the specifications of funded research.

After reading many of the studies, I was left with a sense that some of the challenges and barriers that face early years practice, in my experience, were not being fully explored. Such a realisation strengthened my aim to conduct my study as transparently as possible, taking a reflective and reflexive approach using a postmodern framework to assist making meaning from the challenges (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998). I further acknowledged my advantageous position in not being required to present ‘positive’ outcomes over ‘negative’ (as might be the case with some funded research), to explore the *challenges* as well as the possibilities of supporting children’s voices.

## **1.6 Overview of research design approach**

This section introduces the overall approach to conceiving the design of the study and considerations for its implementation. A brief insight is given into the management of the research process, the way in which the process was structured, and the acquisition and flow of data through the process. The rationale for my choice of setting is outlined and my positioning in the research, introduced above, is further clarified.

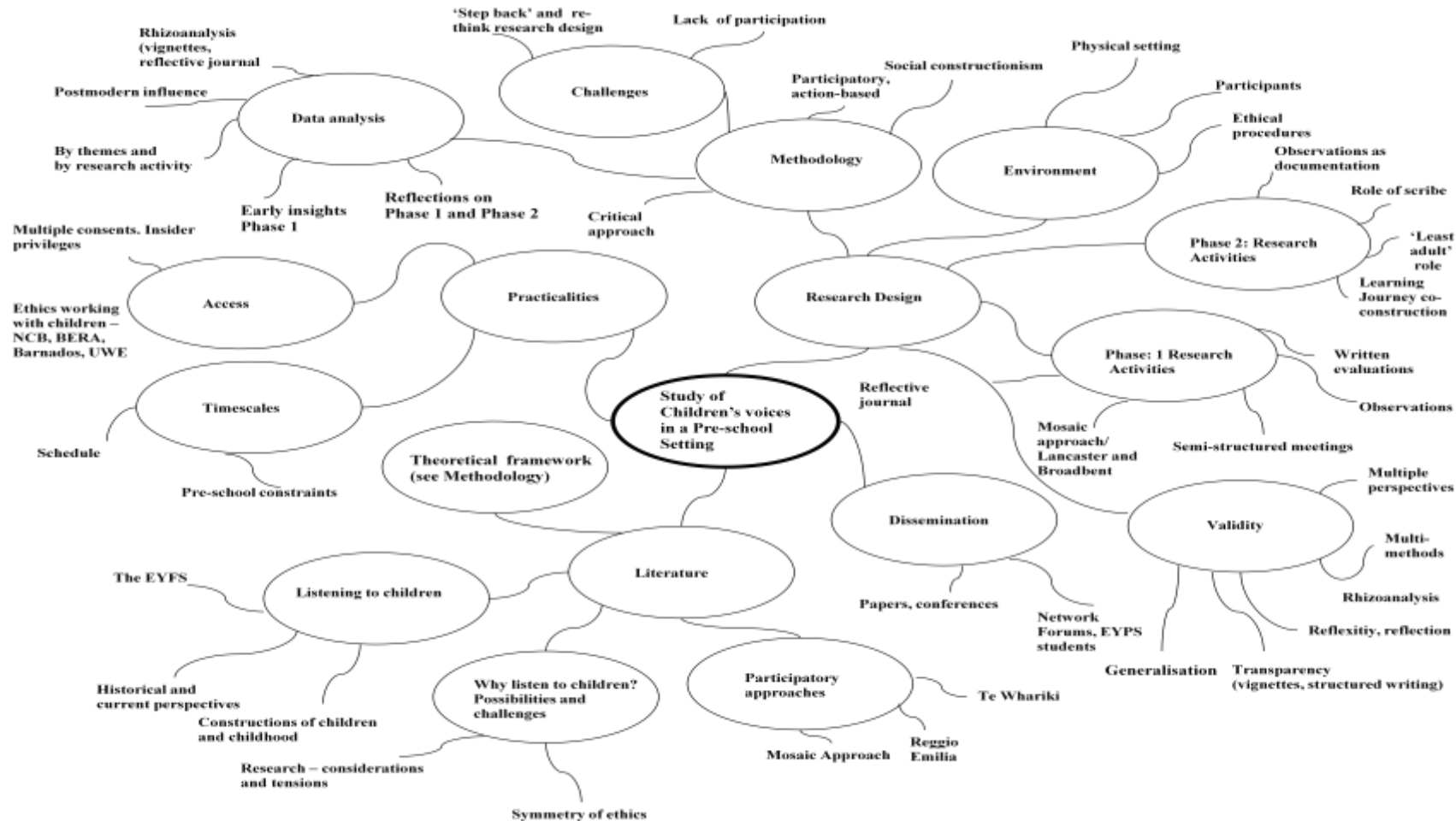
### **1.6.1 Conceptualising the framework**

This section provides an overview of my approach to structuring and organising the study.

#### **1.6.1.1 Mind mapping**

During the conceptualisation, it was useful to adopt the visual approach afforded by using a mind map (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002), (see Figure 1). The map acted as a visual reference to 'grow' the research framework as influences from literature as well as experiences and challenges from the field work shaped and re-shaped the framework.

The map enabled an overview of the individual parts of the study to be considered within the overall framework. For example, the philosophical underpinnings were able to be depicted whilst keeping a check on practical aspects of the project such as negotiating access. Similarly, key discussions from literature were captured whilst ensuring that these would harmonize with ethical considerations pertinent to the study setting, such as suitability of methods to consulting with children at the pre-school and the time pressures for practitioners to undertake the research. The map was updated to reflect the research design in progress. This was particularly useful when adaptations to my approach became necessary.



**Figure 1 Mind map of research process**  
(adapted from concept by Easterby-Smith et al, 2002)

### **1.6.1.2 Spreadsheets and Tables**

Spreadsheets were used to plan and manage the information relating to the research design. Separate spreadsheets were designed to capture key issues in consulting with children, overviews of published research with children and methodological issues relating to participatory and action-based research.

As an alternative to using databases, the spreadsheets proved a useful visual tool, especially in browsing large amounts of related data (in an A3 format) without the need to generate query reporting.

Tables were used to support the structuring of the research. Specifically the tables assisted in the definition of an envisaged flow from initial research questions through to the approach to analysis. Examples of tables are given in Chapter 3 and Appendix D.

## **1.6.2 Overview of Pre-School Setting for the Study**

The study takes place in a single pre-school setting in which I had been employed as a practitioner for 2 years until undertaking my study. The setting was attended by 69 children, (at the commencement of the research), in the age range 2 years 9 months to 4 years 11 months. The setting is in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector managed by a voluntary management committee (of parents together with the setting manager). The pre-school staffing comprised the setting manager, the deputy manager and 6 practitioners. The pre-school operated on a session basis, with children being able to attend up to 10 sessions per week, with each session being 3 hours long (3 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon, on a daily basis). Therefore a maximum attendance of 30 hours per week was possible.. The provision of a Local Authority grant provided up to 15 hours of financed attendance for children from the term after their 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Typical attendance for children in receipt of the grant was either 2 ½ days per week or 4 morning or afternoon sessions. Younger children typically attended 2 morning or afternoon sessions per week.



### **1.6.2.1 Why one pre-school and why this one in particular?**

Situating the research in one specific pre-school setting, a setting in which I was a recent employee, was a deliberate choice with the aim of potentially developing a rich, in-depth study rather than a broader study across more than one setting. Permission to have ‘open access’, in terms of when I was able to visit the pre-school to carry out my study, was particularly attractive. This not only removed possible access complications (Cohen et al, 2007, Miller and Bell, 2002) but also offered greater potential for a detailed study. However, I was conscious that I was not intending to adopt a naturalistic view, where researching in the field for longer suggested a level of completeness, of ‘saturation’, with the belief that all that was to be ‘found’ would be (Holliday, 2007).

I was keen to use my perceived advantage of working alongside participants with whom I had existing professional relationships (management team, other practitioners, parents and children). As a member of the team, this removed the need to become ‘accepted’, afforded me the resource of time (a rare commodity in many early years settings in my experience) and dedicated energy to conduct the study (akin to ‘outsider’ researchers). At the same time, I considered it advantageous to have a detailed working knowledge of the setting and its practices from within the professional team (as the ‘insider’, perhaps likened to the ‘teacher-researcher’ (Brooker, 2001, Pring, 2004, Holliday, 2007)). My arguably novel position in the research, my duality (or multiplicity) of roles as a recent ‘practitioner turned researcher’, adopting an outsider researcher role with insider knowledge, the impact on the study and on myself personally is intentionally elaborated as an integral part of the study.

The pre-school could arguably be considered an ‘average’ setting. It is located in a residential location, with mainly medium income families of largely white British ethnicity, with a small representation of children from other cultural backgrounds. At the time of conducting the research, the most recent Ofsted inspection ranked the pre-school as ‘satisfactory’ overall with a few ‘good’ ratings. At start of study, the practitioner team had a range of early years qualifications (non-graduate, from

unqualified, junior to senior levels) that are typical of early years settings. It is this 'average' nature that I considered significant to my study as I wished to gain insights in a 'non-remarkable' setting. Although it was not my intention to attempt to generalize findings, I felt it conceivable that some aspects might resonate with other 'similar' settings (Pring, 2004, Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009).

#### **1.6.2.2 My relationship to the setting**

Prior to beginning the research, I was employed as an unqualified practitioner for approximately 2 years. My employment followed a brief period of voluntary work. After the first 10 months I became aware of EYPS graduate training (see glossary) and subsequently undertook this over a period of 15 months. The training was work-based (with day release to study at postgraduate level at university). An inherent part of my training was to be able to 'evidence' that I had been influential in making changes to current practices. This role is explored when reflecting on my choice of methodology and its implementation in practice. The EYPS training 'blended' with my then current role and responsibilities as a practitioner.

The opportunity to undertake the research coincided with the completion of my EYPS status. It was necessary to terminate my contract of employment to dedicate to the research on a full-time basis (this was also a requirement of the university funding). The pre-school management was supportive of my proposed study and commented on the potential benefits of my continued contributions, in terms of bringing new ideas to the pre-school. The benefits were likened, by the management, to those that had been brought to the pre-school from my research in early years, as part of my EYPS training.

#### **1.6.3 Overview of my professional background**

I have included a brief overview of my wider professional background in the belief that aspects of one's history affect how one approaches new life experiences to some extent. This concept is further developed in the sections below.

After graduating from university with a first degree in modern foreign languages and information systems, the majority of my career (some 15 years) has been in professional business roles, largely based in the aerospace and software industries. Many of these years were focused on implementing quality assurance procedures in the development of airborne software. The obvious safety implications of such work required evidence of adherence to stringent processes; legal industry directives and standards were tightly specified to direct the work. Below (section 1.7.1) I reflect on how familiarity with such rigorous modes of operation impacted on my approach to developing my research.

A career break and second child in 2004 resulted in my interest in pre-school a few years later, with the realisation that I knew little of my son's experiences during his time in the setting (as introduced in section 1.2). Volunteering at the pre-school that my 3 year old son attended, which was to become the subject of my study, resulted in an offer of temporary paid work leading shortly to a permanent role. It is here that my on-going journey into early years began.

## **1.7 Thesis Presentation**

This section considers the writing style and structure of the thesis. The writing style presented challenges which are outlined below.

### **1.7.1 Writing Style**

As introduced above (section 1.1), I decided to purposefully adopt a reflective writing style with the aim of giving visibility to the design process, to suggest meanings to the reader yet equally raise questions to promote further thinking as to other possibilities. The style that I have chosen was informed by postmodern theory (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Pring, 2004, Crotty, 1998) in respect of the absence of absolute 'truths' in favour of multiple perspectives of 'reality'; perspectives that are dependent on individual experiences, attitudes and

feelings. Writing in the first person is a further attempt to clarify to reader that the accounts represent my own thought processes, the meaning that I have made of the research (Holliday, 2007). Further discussions on the influence of postmodern thinking on the study are developed in the thesis.

### **1.7.1.1 The challenges of the writing style**

Adopting a reflective, and often self-reflective, writing style was not without uncertainties, confusions and inconsistencies. I sought to make sense of the complexities and pondered the transitions in my life that might have had some influence. Specifically I considered living through what one might perceive as more ‘modern’ thinking (as opposed to postmodern) in my childhood and in my education, mainly in the 1970s and early 1980s. Especially I reflected on my former career in the mid 1980s and 1990s, predominantly in quality assurance roles in a safety-critical business that relied on accuracy, measurement, assessment and proven evidence. Such a career had little space for reflection, multiple possibilities, feelings and impressions- qualities that are amongst the fundamentals of postmodern thinking (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998) and, for me, the fundamentals to ‘tuning into’ children’s voices.

I asked myself how such transitions might potentially impact on my writing. In particular two areas of my writing seemingly struggled to flow with my ‘newer’ postmodern thinking – *terminology* and *language*. Each is considered in turn.

#### **1.7.1.1.1 Terminology and Language**

My use of terminology in my earlier writing did not ‘fit’ on occasions with my stated postmodern approach to the study. A common example was the notion of ‘uncovering’ data, with the explicit word ‘uncover’ finding its way into my writing, initially without my realisation. Such an expression was in direct contrast to my conscious belief that we create experiences, and hence data, rather than the data pre-

existing waiting to be discovered. Yet the concept appeared in my writing, causing me to stop, step back and reflect on my unconscious motivations.

I became increasingly aware of the language that I was using in writing the thesis. This became more conscious and more considered as I thought more deeply about my own thought processes and how these had developed during the study. I considered how my perception was only one perception, borne of my own experiences, affecting what I chose to 'see' as significant in my study and how I chose to represent this. I found myself amending statements which sounded as 'facts' to try to illustrate that these were possibilities in my view, with many others being equally conceivable. Early drafts of my thesis included concepts of 'measurables' and 'results' which I later re-thought as exploring 'themes of interest' and 'potential meanings'. The term 'measurables' was particularly conceptually challenging as, although I felt the terminology was misplaced, I considered and re-considered whether I was indeed seeking to illustrate degrees of 'success' or otherwise. This consideration is explored in chapter 7.

#### **1.7.1.1.2 Impact of methodology**

The unanticipated challenges to participation with the pre-school practitioners (introduced in section 1.1.2) led me to be increasingly aware of the necessity to bring as much transparency (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000) as possible to my own thought processes, my actions and to make these visible in the writing style of thesis. Such visibility, it is hoped, will enable the reader to gain clarity of my motivations, actions and conclusions and to enable a critique of these, to enable alternative analyses and conclusions to be developed alongside (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009, Winter, 1996).

### **1.7.1.2 Approaches to meet the challenges of the writing style**

Although, above, I outlined the possible disharmony between my former career and my intended research approach, there is equally a potential strength in the difference. My former career was necessarily underpinned by precision to meet critical safety requirements, a process that I have likened to more a modern paradigm. Such precision demanded transparency throughout the process – a highly methodical process, with each stage documented to a ‘standard’ that facilitated review by independent parties before moving through to the next stage in the process. Visibility of each stage and traceability between the stages that illustrated how each stage was reached, which decisions were taken, which changes were made. Such transparency, that I have been accustomed to demonstrating, I have chosen to promote in my study, not with the aim of measuring precision, but with the aim of enabling others to understand how I have made meanings in my research (Holliday, 2007).

#### **1.7.1.2.1 The use of vignettes and data throughout the thesis**

I have used vignettes as one such means to provide transparency. Vignettes are widely used throughout the thesis to provide ‘windows’ for the reader to view the interactions between myself and the other participants. In the vignettes I have attempted to provide contextual information, transcripts of dialogue, immediate reflections and comments on the ‘scene’ being captured and subsequent re-reflections during preparation of the thesis.

I have approached the use of the vignettes equally as ‘documentation’ of the *process* of the research (and the challenges that emerged) as well as a representation of substantive findings relating to children’s voices. In attempting to fulfil this aim, I have not restricted the use of data to a specific data analysis chapter. For example, I have used data in chapters 5 and 6 to assist the reader in understanding my decision to adapt my approach to the study where challenges to establishing participatory research emerged. I have aimed to clearly distinguish between data, analysis and my comments in the vignettes by the use of text boxes, indentation and fonts and largely including the vignettes as figures.

## **1.7.2 Structure of Thesis**

**Chapter 1** introduced the motivations for my study and outlined some of the challenges that influenced my methodological and conceptual approach, both to the design and implementation of the research as well as to the presentation in this thesis. Research aims and project management processes have been outlined. The context in which my study took place and my positioning in the study has been introduced.

### **1.7.2.1 Reviewing the literature**

Chapters 2 and 4 critically discuss the literature that informed my study:

**Chapter 2** explores substantive issues relating to the challenges and potential of listening to children voices, as presented by key authors.

**Chapter 4** considers literature that influenced my methodological framework. Underpinning philosophical and epistemological approaches are considered that informed my attempted action-based, participatory design.

### **1.7.2.2 Developing research questions**

**Chapter 3** defines my intended aims and objectives for the study and discusses how I translated these into specific research questions.

### **1.7.2.3 Attempting to establish action-based, participatory research**

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss and reflect on my approaches to exploring alternative ways to listen to children.

**Chapter 5** represents *my initial attempts to establish participation* and the challenges that this represented for participation with the practitioners. Reflections

are included on the early insights that emerged through participation with the children. Data is included in this chapter to illustrate both the insights into children's perspectives as well as the challenges of attempting to establish participation. This process is referred to as **Phase 1**.

**Chapter 6** represents my *adapted, flexible approach* to the study in response to limited participation with the practitioners. Again data are used in this chapter to illustrate the research 'story' as it emerged chronologically (both substantive issues in listening to children as well as the adapted approach to the research). This process is referred to as **Phase 2**.

#### **1.7.2.4 Making meanings from the attempts to listen to children's voices**

**Chapter 7** analyses and reflects on both the process of the study as well as the substantive issues that emerged for children's voices over both Phase 1 and Phase 2.

#### **1.7.2.5 Overall reflections and conclusions**

**Chapter 8** reviews the study findings and explores how literature supported overall meaning making. The aims for the research and the research questions are reconsidered in the light of the completed study. Overall conclusions are offered related to the study findings in terms of the potential influences on listening to children's voices. My personal learning throughout the study is reviewed. Recommendations for further work are outlined and potential contributions to existing research are offered.

#### **1.7.2.6 Structure to represent research timeline**

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 aim to present the research activities within an overall chronological timeframe. I considered that such an approach might best illuminate the complexities of the research process as it emerged and add clarity to the potential impact of the research process on the research findings. Chapter 7 overlaps with the



previous chapters in that both existing data is re-visited (with further reflections) as well as new data presented.

Throughout chapters 5, 6 and 7, I have attempted to structure the presentation of the research process and findings from 3 distinct angles – from that of the children, the practitioners and myself. Viewing from such perspectives assisted me in making meanings (both insights and challenges) of the underlying significance of the relationships and construction of participants and offering this as a substantive finding for child voice to the reader.

#### **1.7.2.6.1 Overview of timeline of research activities and processes**

**Table 1 below** outlines the overall structure of chapters 5, 6 and 7. A brief overview of the contents of the table is given here for further clarification.

**Phase 1 (Chapter 5)** of the research, (introduced above in section 1.7.2.3), represents the period from May 2010 to October 2010, the first phase of the fieldwork in the pre-school. During this period, I attempted to introduce my planned research activities to both the children and the pre-school practitioners. Such planned activities were based on practical, hands-on approaches, such as inviting the children to use cameras to represent their pre-school experiences. Although the children engaged with the activities, and early insights into their perspectives were encouraging, the pre-school practitioners did not engage to any significant extent. My attempts at actively promoting engagement and revisiting some of the activities during the latter months did not prove as fruitful as anticipated.

Such an unanticipated position resulted in me adapting my research approach. As introduced above, I termed this **Phase 2**. Phase 2 (**Chapter 6**) represents the period of research from November 2010 to June 2011, which encompassed both further fieldwork as well as the beginnings of the more dedicated data analysis phase. During Phase 2, I adapted my research activities, which included a period of exploration and reflection with regards to ways in which to engage with the children and practitioners other than those that I had originally planned. The research activities largely *emerged*

during the explorations and provided the space for me to reconsider my positioning within the research, or more precisely my re-positioning from practitioner to researcher and the implication of such on the research process.

The transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2 was not linear. Using the process of rhizoanalysis (Mac Naughton, 2005), a process of making alternative meanings from viewing data from multiple angles, my understanding deepened of listening to children's voices. The process of rhizoanalysis and how it assisted the process of meaning-making is described and discussed in detail **Chapter 7**. Although I was beginning to making meaning from the data from the early stages of Phase 1, May 2011 to July 2011 (**Chapter 7**) represented the more dedicated time period of analysis where I viewed and re-viewed data from both Phase 1 and Phase 2. Significant insights into listening to children emerged, to include challenges and barriers.

Chapter 5 Attempting Action Research: Phase 1 (May 2010 – Oct 2010)		Chapter 6 Adapting the Research Approach: Phase 2 (Nov 2010 – June 2011)	Chapter 7 Rhizoanalysis: Making Meanings (May 2011 – Jul 2011)
	Reflections on Phase 1 (September 2010 – Oct 2010)		
<b>Children:</b>  Introducing research activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early insights to children’s voices</li> <li>• Emerging challenges</li> </ul>	Re-implementing research activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further insights</li> <li>• Further challenges</li> </ul>	Joining children in their play (without specific ‘agenda’ of research activities) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research activities emerging</li> </ul>	Analysis of the insights, challenges and barriers in attempting to listen to children
<b>Practitioners:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attempting to engage</li> <li>• Limited participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning to consider barriers to participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconsidering practitioner participation</li> </ul>	Analysis of the barriers and insights to practitioner participation
<b>Me:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning to contemplate own positioning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realisation that needed to reconsider and adapt approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing my positioning: from practitioner to researcher</li> </ul>	Analysis of my transition from practitioner to researcher

**Table 1 Timeline of Research Activities and Processes with Participants: Organisation Thesis Chapters 5, 6 and 7**

### **1.7.2.7 Appendices**

**Appendix A** includes the tailored research consent agreements for the practitioners, the setting management and the parents with their children.

**Appendix B** provides an example of the pro forma which the pre-school uses to specify pre-school activities. The example illustrates how I adopted the pro forma to communicate my intentions to the practitioners for one of my research activities, with the overall aim to support participation and to make the paperwork directly useable for pre-school practices.

**Appendix C** is a collation of practitioner written responses to an evaluation that I requested relating to my research activities during Phase 1 (see chapter 5, section 5.2.7.2).

**Appendix D** is an example of the tables which I used to plan my research design. The table included demonstrates how I aimed to approach the analysis of the type of data that I envisaged.

**Appendix E** is a collation of practitioner written responses to my request to evaluate the children's Learning Journey documentation (see chapter 6, section 6.2)

**Appendix F** is a collation of parent verbal responses, from parent meetings, relating to an evaluation of the children's Learning Journey documentation (see chapter 5, section 5.2.4.6.2)

**Appendix G** includes the research findings dissemination documents that I prepared for the children and their parents.

## **Chapter 2 Literature relating to Listening and Hearing Young Children's Voices**

This chapter reviews the literature that relates to listening and hearing children's voices and in particular young children's voice. Although the context for my study is a pre-school in the UK, research from other countries is also considered where it assists in making meanings as to the wider discussions that relate to young children's voices.

Historical and more recent influences are discussed that have, and are, impacting on how children's voices are being heard and respected, or otherwise. Such influences include legislation, policies and initiatives as well as theories on how children and childhood have been constructed, both in terms of research and in society.

The controversial Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) early years curriculum (DCSF, 2008a and b) is considered in some detail in relation to children's voices, since this is the legal framework within which early years settings in England must operate at the time of writing (with the exception of a small amount of exempt settings).

The reasons are debated as to why listening to children is important, together with some of the challenges that this presents. Specifically in terms of research, consideration is given as to whether research with children is different from research with adults. It is debated whether special methods are needed to enable research with children to be possible. The complexities of developing symmetrical and ethical relationships between adults and children are reviewed.

Focus is given to participatory approaches as these are receiving increasing attention in researching with children (for example Clark and Moss, 2001; Lancaster, 2003a and b; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a-d; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Pascal and Betram, 2009; Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010). The nature of participatory approaches is considered as well as examples of frameworks that are considered to be influential.

Further literature that directly relates to the methodological decisions that shaped my research design is discussed in chapter 4.

The process of constructing the literature review was not linear but both informed, and was informed by, my research study as it progressed. In this respect, the review reflects my earlier thinking, as well as my rethinking, as to which issues were significant and the apparent weighting of such, as well as the emergence of new issues. To elaborate, as I began the study and framed my research aims and questions, I had intended a focus on existing participatory techniques, or ‘tools’, and how these might be explored in the pre-school to support active listening to children. However, as the study began to unfold in an unexpected way (with limited participation from the pre-school staff) my thinking shifted away from the use of ‘tools’ and refocused on the significance of developing relationships with the children. This is apparent in the more directed gaze in the literature review on constructions of children and the influences in such constructions. Similarly, I had not intended scrutiny of the EYFS curriculum (DCFS, 2008 a and b). However, the emerging influence on practitioner time and attitudes, and hence on my research study, warranted closer attention. The literature review therefore might be considered a *reflexive* process that adapted in the same way as the study adapted to the research context.

## **2.1 Listening to children: Historical and current perspectives**

Listening to children, actively seeking their views and perspectives as citizens in society has only begun to find legal and political expression in relatively recent times (Pascal and Bertram, 2009, Smith, 2011). According to Prout (2003: 20), the so called ‘century of the child’ ‘...paid far more attention to the contribution of society to children than the contribution of children to society’ and that is only towards the end of the century that children have started to be considered as citizens with rights. It was the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) and the Children Act 1989, that were instrumental in beginning the shift towards recognition of the rights of children to be respectfully listened to and heard,

both internationally and in the UK (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Smith, 2011, Lancaster, 2003a, Morrow, 2005). Although the active protection of children and a right to a safe, healthy life was legally affirmed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1904 (in Pascal and Bertram, 2009), the responsibility for this was given to the primary care-givers to determine how this manifested (within pre-determined limits). Children were not actively involved in shaping their own lives, in being consulted in making the decisions that allowed them to feel safe or healthy. Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) specifically changed this in making the requirement for children to be active consultants and decision-makers in all areas of their lives; hence the beginning of re-shaping the view of children and their rights in society (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Mac Naughton et al, 2007; Lancaster, 2003a; Brooker, 2007, Morrow, 2005). It was some 15 years later before the rights enshrined in Article 12 were specifically extended to the youngest children (from birth to 8 years) in the publication of the General Comment No. 7, 2005 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006) (Mac Naughton et al, 2007, Brooker, 2007). Smith (2011: 12) argued that acknowledging young children's rights to participation is both 'innovative' and 'controversial', as rights have tended to be mostly related to safeguarding in the past. According to Pascal and Bertram (2009) it was the ratification of the UNCRC in the UK in 1991 that initiated the movement to listen to children, both in research and in practice.

Since the early 1990s there has been an increase in the political initiatives that have apparently sought to listen to the views of children (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Prout, 2003; Brooker, 2007, Lancaster, 2003a). A direct example of this is the Building a Strategy for Children and Young People, issued by the newly established Children and Young People's Unit (2001), a consultation document setting the framework for listening to children in the provision of services (Prout, 2003, Lancaster, 2003a). Other more indirect examples are the development of the Early Excellence Centres (in 1997) and the initiation of the Sure Start Scheme in 2004 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2002) (Brooker, 2007, Lancaster, 2003a) with the intention of reaching and supporting families with young children, in mainly underprivileged areas, recognising the importance of working in partnership with families, and the implications of poverty, in affecting the choices and decisions in young children's lives.

### **2.1.1 The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum**

Of significance to early years providers was the introduction of the Every Child Matters: Change for Children (ECM) national framework (DfES, 2004), which was underpinned by the Children Act 2004 (Brooker, 2007, Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). The framework was intended to foster the integration of children's services to provide a more continuous level of support and to seek children's views in the decision-making on the services that were of relevance to them. ECM (DfES, 2004) defined 5 key outcomes that were considered as crucial to the well-being of children in the provision of support, which included children 'making a positive contribution' through *active decision-making* (my emphasis) and positive relationships (2004: 9). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008a and b), the curriculum that early years providers were legally bound to implement (in 2008, under the Childcare Act 2006), had the fundamental aim of implementing the 5 outcomes of ECM (DCSF, 2008a:07).

Interestingly, however, despite the stated underpinning of the EYFS by the ECM outcomes, personal experience in working with the framework has shown that there is an absence of further reference to children being actively involved in decisions which affect them, or indeed being consulted in any decision-making, in the rest of the text of the Statutory Framework of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) (Screech, 2009). Although the statutory EYFS sets out the requirements for learning and development, including those for Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) there is a focus on the children rather than on the practitioners. For example, there is reference to the *children* needing to 'form good relationships with adults and peers' and to 'understand that they can expect others to treat their needs, views, cultures and beliefs with respect' (DCSF, 2008a: 12). However there is little reference to the obligation on practitioners to specifically listen to the children's 'needs', 'views' and 'beliefs'. Rather, the brief statutory requirement on practitioners is a focus on positive attitudes towards inclusion and diversity and being alert to signs of need that might involve the support of other agencies. Apart from the requirements relating to safeguarding and health and safety, the only other reference to practitioners'



obligations is in their support of children to achieve the early learning goals (DCSF, 2008a :11). Curiously this does not seem to imply any obligations towards their own (the practitioners') personal practices in the interactions with the children. This is particularly surprising given the explicit requirement of the Childcare Act 2006 to involve children in decision-making and given the history of the decade preceding the EYFS.

#### **2.1.1.1 Positive relationships and sustained shared thinking**

At the very least, it might have been anticipated that some echo of the significant enquiries, whose findings supported the 'quality' of interactions between practitioners and children, be found in the statutory EYFS (DCSF, 2008a and b). The Rumbold Report (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1990), for example, referred to the 'skills' and 'attitudes' required by those working with 0-5 year old children, such as 'interactive and communication skills', the importance of sharing 'talk' and 'high expectations of children and *self* ... [and a] genuine liking for, and sensitivity towards, children and readiness to value them as *people in their own right*' (DfEE, 1990: 47, my emphasis). The influential Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study, (Sylva et al, 2004), large-scale longitudinal research into the progress and development of 3000 children from their pre-school experiences at age 3 through to the completion of their primary education at age 11, found that effective communication between adults and children, termed as 'sustained shared thinking' was a key factor in what they deemed 'quality' provision (2004: ii). Paige-Smith and Craft (2008) described 'sustained shared thinking' as communication which 'develop[s] a depth and meaning for all involved' (2008: 14) and likened it to the type of conversations researched by Tizard and Hughes (1984 in Paige-Smith and Craft, 2008, Tizard and Hughes, 2002) in their comparison of home versus early years settings (see section 2.1.1.3.1 below). The EPPE study findings (Sylva et al, 2004) revealed a low occurrence of such sustained shared thinking and made strong recommendations for this to be a focus in early years practices. The Statutory EYFS (DCSF, 2008a), however, does not make a reference to the latter nor to practitioners considering children 'in their own right', arguably a prerequisite for

actively seeking children's views and opinions in decision-making. The Practice Guidance to the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008b), the *non-statutory* documentation that accompanies the Statutory EYFS, does, however, make some reference to the role of the practitioner in supporting children to express feelings and to develop positive relationships. There is also an explicit, although very brief, statement on sustained shared thinking (DCSF, 2008b: 9). Lee and Eke (2009: 148) made the comment that given the joint delivery of the Statutory and Practice Guidance parts of the EYFS, the Guidance has the status of being 'quasi-statutory' in intent. Personal experience has shown that this tends to be the case, certainly in respect of the Ofsted (see glossary) inspections and in terms of 'pressure' from the Early Years Advisory team (see glossary) to implement aspects of the Practice Guidance. Nonetheless, omitting to declare the importance of children's active participation in decision-making in the Statutory document does seem to set the tone for the government's lack of priority in this respect and hence does raise the question as to how this is to become a focus for early years settings implementing the EYFS. Even given the notion that the Practice Guidance might be considered as obligatory, a further review of the references to supporting children in expressing views and feelings seems to reveal a similar positioning of the adults more powerfully than the children, as discussed above with reference to the Statutory document. As Lee and Eke (2009) pointed out, the original definition of sustained shared thinking (see Sylva et al, 2004, Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) was based on a more *equal* relationship, where adults and children developed their thinking, their viewpoints, together and adapted, where relevant, when thinking moved on. The Practice Guidance, however, although making some reference to adults 'encouraging' and 'supporting' children to talk and express their feelings (for example, DCSF, 2008b: 30), makes little reference to the *content* of the children's expressions being of value in its own right, or of being influential in contributing to decisions. Lee and Eke (2009) made a similar observation relating to the wording in the Practice Guidance, relating to how the power for deciding what is important and merits action is accorded to the adults.

The Common Core (DfES, 2005) was published prior to the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) with the aim of defining key skills and knowledge required by all professionals working with children. This was one response to the government's aim to re-shape

the workforce providing children's services (Brooker, 2007). In the document there is an explicit link to the ECM (DfES, 2004) agenda and the need to directly involve children in the construction of provision and in related decision-making: 'It is important *to consult with them* [children] and consider their opinions and perspectives from the outset' (DfES, 2005: 6, my emphasis). Yet, again, such a clear and direct message is not found in the EYFS curriculum (DfES 2008a and 2008b).

A contrary and far more positive picture, however, seems to be provided by the development of the new postgraduate status, the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) (see glossary) in 2006 (Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), 2008) (Screech, 2009, Paige-Smith and Craft, 2008), another response to the focus on the early years workforce (Brooker, 2007). The then Labour government created the status in an attempt to raise the 'quality' of early years provision with the requirement that every early years setting employ an Early Years Professional (EYP) to lead on the implementation of the EYFS by 2015. Achievement of EYPS is dependent on evidencing Standards (CWDC, 2008), a number of which were focused on positive relationships with children, in which children's views were sought and acted upon and in which sustained shared thinking (CWDC, 2008: 34) was an explicit requirement. Interestingly the Statutory EYFS does not make a link to EYPS (other than in terms of permitting a greater ratio of children to be the responsibility of an EYP) nor the potential benefits that the thinking behind the EYPS framework afforded children in raising their status to that of active decision-maker and co-constructor through sustained shared thinking.

#### **2.1.1.2 The Tickell Review**

At the time of writing, the UK Coalition government (in office since May 2010) has reassessed the EYFS curriculum, after requesting an independent review by Dame Tickell (Tickell, 2012), and has published the revised Statutory EYFS (DfE, 2012b) and guidance document (Early Education, 2012) to be implemented from September 2012. To begin with the Tickell Review (Tickell, 2012), and specifically relating to hearing children's voices, it appeared encouraging that the recommendation that personal, social and emotional development and communication be among the key

foci for the new EYFS framework (Nursery World, 2011). ‘Improving the experiences and life chances of all young children must remain at the heart of the EYFS’ (Tickell, 2012: 9) equally appeared a positive declaration. However, on an examination of the Review, and with the assumption that actively consulting with children might be stated as essential to ‘improve’ their ‘experiences’, it was evident that such a sentiment did not exist. With echoes of the previous Guidance to the EYFS (DCSF, 2008b), there were references to what the children needed to learn rather than how the children might be involved in creating their learning environment together with adults. There was motivation to form ‘partnerships’ with parents and carers (suggesting the desirability of an equal, sharing relationship), yet the notion of a partnership with the children was absent. *Relationships* and *interactions* with children seemed in place of partnerships, appearing to be less suggestive of working together in a more equal capacity. In an annexe to the recommendations, Dame Tickell stressed the importance of children developing confidence and self-esteem and building a sense of ‘agency’ which she defined as ‘the belief that what you do can make a difference’ (Tickell, 2012: 99). However the detailed recommendations in the main body of the document do not appear to incorporate the notion of children’s agency in any clear, direct way. Possibly the most telling aspect of the Tickell Review, in terms of children’s voices, was that of absence – children were not part of the consultation process into views on their curriculum.

Given the flavour of the Tickell Review, it is arguably not remarkable that the new EYFS (DfE, 2012b and Early Education, 2012) does not explicitly recognise children as active partners and decision-makers within their early years provision. The guidance part of the EYFS, (Early Education, 2012) makes a single-sentence reference to sustained shared thinking (2012: 7), in a similar vein to the existing guidance document (DCFS, 2008b), and the emphasis is on what the children need to learn with the support and guidance of adults (in other words, as the more ‘knowledgeable others’). A perhaps surprising addition to the guidance document is a reference to *collaborating* with children within the context of developing setting rules to support positive behaviours: the guidance to practitioners is to ‘collaborate with children in creating explicit rules for the care of the environment’ (Early Education, 2012: 13). Unfortunately this is the only explicit reference to joint

collaboration in the document. The opening paragraph to the guidance document appears positive with a reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). However this is in relation to respecting diversity; a reference to children's rights to a voice, to be consulted on matters relating to their lives (UN, 1989: Article 12) is not included.

### **2.1.1.3 Curriculum and pedagogy**

There have been divided camps on the concept of a curriculum for the youngest, pre-school-aged children, with the 'nappy curriculum' being a term that was made popular in the press at the inception of the EYFS (for example, The Times, 2008). There is one camp that views the EYFS curriculum as potentially harmful to young children, as inappropriately 'grooming' for school and imposing an 'earlier is better' philosophy; of intervening in a natural process of development by attempting to normalise children rather than honouring each child's individual rate of developing maturity (House, 2011). The Open Eye campaign, a voluntary organisation of academics and educationalists opposed to the legal and prescriptive nature of the EYFS, has been especially vocal in this respect (Edgington et al, 2012). There is another camp that gives the EYFS 'broad approval' in regards to its 'holistic view of the child' and underpinning by reputable research (Brooker, 2007, referring to the 2008 EYFS, DCSF, 2008a) and in its ambition to improve the quality of early years provision for all children (Tickell, 2012). There is the claim that the EYFS (again specifically referring to the 2008 EYFS) benefits from the emotional theories of Daniel Goleman, in the recognition of the importance of social and emotional development, and the awareness of nurturing children's dispositions and attitudes to learning that are a focus in the renowned New Zealand early years curriculum, Te Whāriki, (Brooker, 2007). There is a further view that, although exercising caution as to terms such as 'school readiness' and being sceptical of an over-burdensome assessment process, children benefit from learning life skills that are equally essential to prepare for life in formal schooling (Tickell, 2012).

#### **2.1.1.3.1 ‘Talk’ in the classroom versus ‘talk’ at home**

In terms of situating the support of children’s voices within the arguments, it would seem that the nature of the curriculum is significant, or rather the pedagogy within the curriculum, rather than a curriculum per se. Lee and Eke (2009: 143), referring to the work of Bernstein, discussed the notion of pedagogy being either ‘official’ or ‘local’ and ‘tacit’, with official relating to educational settings and local and tacit to more informal contexts such as the home. In the case of the latter, ‘teaching’ happens in a natural context, through both verbal and non-verbal communications, as parents and carers ‘instruct’ children in the social ways of life. Communications between adults and children tend to be more equal rather than adult-dominated, more exploratory and open-ended than the ‘talk’ that is observed in formal educational settings (Tizard and Hughes, 2002, Wells, 1986). Parents have an intimate knowledge of their children’s interests, and conversations often reflect such awareness, such shared experiences; as both parties understand inherently the nature of the dialogue (Wells, 1986), there is less reliance on explaining (or misinterpreting) the context. In their research into the communication differences between the home environment and nursery, which interestingly took place prior to the introduction of an early years curriculum, Tizard and Hughes (2002) found that children often had difficulties in making themselves understood at nursery. Tizard and Hughes attributed this to the nursery teachers not being able to benefit from the contextual information that children omitted to offer (or that teachers missed the opportunity to inquire). This was particularly the case where children made frequent attempts to make reference to their home lives, on which Tizard and Hughes commented certain attempts ‘failed to establish communication’ with the nursery teachers (2002: 199). Tizard and Hughes observed that there was generally a lack of incidence of children initiating questions with nursery teachers or offering the ‘kind of remarks that keep a conversation going’ (2002: 198); responses to nursery teachers’ questions tended to be short. By contrast, Tizard and Hughes found that conversations between children and their mothers (fathers were not referenced) relating to children’s experiences at nursery were much more fluid, with some mothers taking an apparent equal interest in the content and attempting to make sense of the context, where not clear initially from the children’s descriptions, by questioning and using their imaginations. This

appears to have a similar feel to the concept of sustained shared thinking (Sylva et al, 2004) described above.

Wells' (1986) longitudinal study into the differences in language and learning experiences at home and on beginning formal schooling, found similar distinctions to that of Tizard and Hughes (2002). Wells reported conversations between mothers and children (and siblings) that were of apparent interest to each participant, were constructed together, with individual viewpoints being represented. Similarly to Tizard and Hughes (2002), Wells (1986) commented on the shared *context* upon which the conversations were founded, which did not seem to be an issue for the children and their families but might be more challenging to make sense of as an observer. Wells (1986) equally made reference to the sustained nature of the dialogue between the participants.

Although not a specific study of the differences between educational and home environments, the Oxford Preschool Research Project (Bruner, 1980, Wood et al, 1980) led by Bruner (initiated by the Department of Education and Science and the Scottish Education Department, in the early 1970s, to investigate ways to expand nursery education) reported similar findings relating to the type and nature of 'talk' in pre-schools. Interestingly, the Project referred to the very low occurrence of 'sustained conversations' between adults and children (Bruner, 1980: 63), which again appears related to the notion of sustained shared thinking that Sylva et al (2004) found lacking in early years settings some 30 years later.

#### **2.1.1.3.2 The impact of developmental targets**

In more formal learning environments, however, obligations to demonstrate pre-defined learning targets risk steering the type of 'talk' towards that which enables 'progress' towards targets to be evidenced (Lee and Eke, 2009, Alexander, 2010) rather than engaging in more natural conversations. This was evident in Wells' research (1986), where Wells reported occurrences of children attempting to engage with teachers on issues that were of apparent significance to them, but were

overlooked by teachers, who seemed to be focused on their chosen curriculum theme. Wells (1986) described occasions where children had initiated conversation, relating to something of clear interest to them, yet the teacher had taken the subject to develop into a learning opportunity (according to the teacher's agenda), often asking 'display' questions, to which the answer was known to the teacher, rather than following the children's lead. Whilst this has a purpose in teaching terms, in developing reflection and furthering thinking, Wells (1986) noted that children's interactions became shorter and changed in nature to 'a simple labelling response' (1986: 88). Wells commented that often teachers did not return to the children's original interest, in an attempt to share more of their perspectives. The Oxford Preschool Research Project (Wood et al, 1980: 80) similarly commented: 'Those [adults] who ask lots of questions tend to get answers but little more'. The Project reported that children's answers became 'monosyllabic' where children felt their relative lack of power compared to the adult. Wells concluded children's 'enthusiasms dampened' (1986: 89) and they became less inclined to initiate conversation and attempt to explore their thinking with teachers. Lee and Eke (2009) described a similar concept where young children become aware of 'what counts as talk, who can talk and what counts as knowledge (what is worth talking about)' (2009: 150) as they encounter more formal pedagogies and curriculum.

Alexander's definition of the 'repertoire of teacher talk' (2010: 289) in primary school classrooms offered further meaning as to how context and language affects the type and nature of children's interactions. Alexander referred to the necessity to create an ethos which enables children to challenge thinking and to have opinions that differ from teachers. However he asserted that classrooms habitually use 'talk' that involves 'rote', 'recitation' and 'exposition' (introducing new learning) (Alexander, 2000) rather than inviting discussion and dialogue. Although Alexander is referring to primary school classrooms, such 'teacher talk' is evident in early years settings, especially at 'carpet time' or 'circle time', a whole-group activity that is practitioner-led (Dahlberg et al, 2007). Dahlberg et al's (2007) research in early years settings found that such group sessions can be seen as an opportunity for the practitioners to teach as part of, what Dahlberg et al (2007: 54) term, a 'game' of 'Guess what I am thinking of?'. In the example given by Dahlberg et al (2007: 53), the practitioner is attempting to teach the group about mosquitoes, or rather attempt a



recall of the learning from the previous week. The children, however, try to guess (unsuccessfully) the answer by offering birds, bees and wasps in response to the practitioner's statements such as 'something that flies in the air... we talked about last week' (2007: 53). The practitioner persists then resorts to disclosing the 'correct' answer. My professional experience in several early years settings has demonstrated that 'carpet time' is often used as the opportunity to recite rhymes to practice phonics and the days of the week and to sing songs to practice number and to review the 'weather board' (where children are asked to 'work out' the date, month and year from visual cues). This is not to suggest that such 'circle time' activities do not have a purpose (Moyle, 2005), but, as Alexander (2010) advised, there is a need to understand that different outcomes result from using specific types of 'teacher talk'.

Since the introduction of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) in early years settings in England, practitioners in early years settings have been under (legal) pressure to implement the 'official' pedagogy (Lee and Eke, 2009). In terms of young children's voices, Lee and Eke warned of the possibility of some children not readily understanding or identifying with the language 'codes' (Lee and Eke, 2009: 153, also see Dahlberg et al, 2007: 54) of the 'official' pedagogy, the strategies and type of language that practitioners use to impart curriculum knowledge and seek confirmation that the knowledge has been received and understood. Similarly to Wells (1986), Lee and Eke (2009) further cautioned that young children's voices might only be heard in early years settings if they are consistent with the formal learning objectives and targets of the curriculum.

Alexander (2010) highlighted the importance of language in his recommendations for re-shaping primary education, considering both the style of dialogue that the teacher uses to engage the children and the key role of small group and whole group discussion. He also emphasised the importance of 'productive social interaction' (2010: 289) as being key to learning, where children have the opportunity to share and reflect together on their experiences of life, and commented that this was observed to be lacking from primary classrooms. This is consistent with the findings of the EPPE review (Sylva et al, 2004) discussed above in relation to early years settings.

### **2.1.2 Constructions of children and childhood**

Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000: 60) asserted that the ‘...reluctance to give children a voice has historical and cultural roots and certain models of childhood can be identified which tend to justify this reluctance’. They referred to the concept of constructions of children and childhood being socially constructed by adults (see also Dahlberg et al, 2007), where the beliefs of adults and the relationships with children ultimately affect the participation status of children. It is the nature of the construction of children and childhood which determines ‘...children’s ability to express their feelings and articulate their experiences’ (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000: 15).

In the last 20 years, the paradigm of childhood has changed (Dockett et al, 2011). There appear to be several influences that have contributed to viewing children and childhood through alternative lenses. One such influence is the re-thinking of the positioning of children within ‘a new sociology of childhood’ (Moss et al, 2005: 3) where children are considered as ‘social actors in cultural contexts’ (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008: 27) or as a ‘co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture’ (Dahlberg et al 2007: 48). Dahlberg et al (2007) considered this an emergent construction that was influenced both by social constructionist and postmodern thinking, in the fields of sociology and philosophy, as well as within developmental psychology itself. This new sociology of childhood began to emerge in parallel to the rights and citizenship movement evident in the late 1980s, most significantly represented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (UN, 1989) and the Children Act, 1989 (Moss et al, 2005), where children are acknowledged as having rights to active participation in decision-making in significant areas of their lives. A further influence is the positioning of children within the ‘discourse of consumerism’ (Moss et al, 2005: 3). Children are increasingly considered as active consumers whose voices are sought in the pursuit of honing goods and services to harness a now significant share of the market (Smith, 2007). According to Moss et al (2005), early childhood provision is a significant target area for consumerism.

Moss (2007) elaborated further on what he termed the ‘paradigmatic divide’ (: 229) between modernism and postmodernism. Moss referred to the dominant discourse in early child education and care being mainly informed by child development and economics, which he linked to modernism. He considered that such a discourse prevails in the UK and America. According to Moss (2007: 1) key concepts relating to the discourse are meeting targets, measuring quality and ‘readiness for school’. He also referred to the definition of processes that reflect objective truths, truths that have a universal applicability; in other words, if a solution can be found, then the problem will be solved. This has the notion of reducing complexity, to manage the situation in a rational and logical way that will be understood and applicable to all, as it will reflect reality determined and proven by science. In terms of education, those affected are considered recipients receiving knowledge, which exists as an entity to be uncovered (see next section). However, Moss (2007) highlighted other discourses which, according to Moss, have been critical opponents to the dominant discourse. Such discourses include postmodernism. Postmodernism contests the notion of objective truths; truths are constructed in specific contexts, are fluid, temporary and multi-perspectival (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007, Crotty, 1998). Moss (2007) considered both the challenge and the need to establish a space for discussion between modern and postmodern discourses, in the overall interests of furthering political thinking in early education and care. Moss (2007: 5) made the strong statement ‘[t]he absence of dialogue and debate impoverishes early childhood and weakens democratic politics’. He warned that without such debates, policies will continue to be formulated according to the dominant discourse, without question, risking missing valuable contributions from other perspectives that have the potential to enrich early childhood.

The next section discusses further some of the ‘models’ of children and childhood that have been constructed both historically and more recently.

### 2.1.2.1 'Models' of children and childhood

Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000: 64) drawing on the work of Jenkins (1993, in Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000), defined one construction of children as 'possessions'. In this construction, the rights of children are accorded to the adults who have legal responsibility until children reach the level of adulthood which is legally defined by society. Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000: 64) referred to this stage as society's definition of 'the age at which children are able to behave in a rational manner'. They also considered discipline and how this might be used as a means of directing and controlling the development of children into 'docile adult bodies' (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000: 64). Prout and James (1997: 13) debated the concept of 'socialization', initiated in the 1950s, whereby an 'asocial' child gradually becomes a 'social' adult. Writing in 2000, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr believed that this was a view of children that was changing, primarily with the increased focus on children's rights. Woodhead and Faulkner (2008: 22) discussed a similar notion of the 'managed child', drawing on Skinner's behaviourist principle that children's behaviours need to be controlled by adults, by reward and punishment, to avoid unacceptable conducts emerging. Woodhead and Faulkner commented that such an approach negated any responsibility on the part of adults to examine their *own* behaviours in relationship to children.

Dahlberg et al (2007: 44) defined a construction of the child as a 'knowledge, identity and cultural reproducer', which they linked to 'Locke's child'. In this construction the child is considered an 'empty vessel' that awaits 'fill[ing] with knowledge, skills and dominant cultural values' (Dahlberg et al, 2007: 44) in order to prepare for future life as a contributor to economic prosperity. Archard (2004) also referred to Locke's perspective with the child being 'a blank sheet' that becomes filled during the journey from 'imperfect, incomplete versions of their adult selves' (Archard, 2004: 1-2). The notion of 'school readiness' is a concept in this process for Dahlberg et al (2007), who attributed such a construction as being of increasing interest to politicians and other influential parties seeking economic furtherance.

An alternative construction is the notion of Rousseau's child, as an 'innocent', the child in need of protection by adults, to nurture self-discovery away from the harsh, contaminative influences of the wider society. Dahlberg et al (2007) considered this perspective disrespectful and misguided given children exist within society and therefore should not be removed from participation. Whilst Archard (2004) expressed a similar view of the need for children to be active in society, he equally emphasised Rousseau's positioning in respecting children's rights to a childhood and opposing Locke's view of grooming for eventual economic gains.

A further construction, that is often attributed to Piagetian theory, is that of the 'biological' or 'scientific child' (Dahlberg et al, 2007), or the 'developing child' (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008) where the child systematically moves through pre-determined stages of development. Children acquire knowledge as constructivists, interacting with their environments, rather than through direct teaching and knowledge transference. Although Dahlberg et al (2007) were critical of the focus on specific areas of development (such as cognitive and social) at the expense of an overall, holistic view of children, Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) and Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) cautioned against overlooking the importance of development psychology in progressing educational and social reform. Although Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) articulated the criticism of Piaget in viewing children as adults in the making, they considered Piaget encouraged listening and respect for children's perspectives through his approach that promoted children talking during the research process.

Dahlberg et al (2007) considered discourses, such as those above, as being situated within the modern paradigm, an influence which they believed continues to dominate and influence provision in early years. James (2005: iv) referred to such thinking as 'children should be seen but not heard', whereas Hendrick (2008: 42) termed this 'adultism' which he asserted has led to children not being accorded a voice in history. Hendrick further elaborated the inequalities in power between adults and children which deny children the opportunity to access and challenge adult recorded representations of children's lives and experiences.

The more recent construction of the child as a 'social actor', is depicted by Dahlberg et al (2007: 49) as a child who is 'rich', capable and resourceful, with an audible voice that is worthy of being heard. In contrast to the individual constructivists of Piagetian theory, children co-construct not only their own identities but those of others with whom they interact; learning is not an individual activity but one in relating to others (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Prout and James, 1997). Much of the thinking on children as co-constructors is attributed to the theories of Vygotsky, with his emphasis on children co-constructing meaning through positive collaboration with peers and adults who are attuned to supporting children's thinking and exploration. Within this model, Dahlberg et al (2007) considered that children contribute to the construction of culture and society, that they have agency and rights as citizens. Constructing children from such a perspective values childhood in its own right (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Dahlberg et al, 2007), and children as 'complete and identifiable persons' (Hendrick, 2008: 42) rather than as 'becomings'. Whereas the tendency has been to view childhood as a single entity, to which overall judgements could be made and assumptions applied, Dahlberg et al (2007) elaborated the view that there are many children living many childhoods, influenced by cultural and societal experiences; there can be no single childhood and no collective view of children (Connolly, 2008; Hendrick, 2008). Dockett et al (2011) added to the argument that children's individual experiences relate to their personal contexts with influencing factors such as gender and socioeconomic positioning. They also related the nature of children's agency to their individual circumstances.

Although developmental psychology has been criticised in the light of the sociological discourse on children and childhood, Smith (2011) argued that it would be unwise to move away from developmental psychology within the rights and participation discourses. Drawing on Woodhead's perspective (2009, in Smith, 2011), Smith asserted that it is too significant an area, too influential to discard, since children, albeit capable, do have a need for the guidance and support of adults. Smith's (2011) argument is for discourses of participation to reflect the essences of developmental psychology and equally for developmental psychology to reflexively consider the new sociological thinking; in this way children are respected and listened to whilst retaining the awareness that adult support is needed.

### 2.1.2.2 Constructions of children in research

Specifically in terms of research, models of children and childhood have been constructed which reflect and intersect discourses of rights and the sociology of childhood (Hoffman-Eckstein et al, 2008, in Dockett et al 2011). Common constructions that reflect how thinking has changed within research are from children as objects to subjects through to active participants (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008).

From a predominantly western perspective, developmental psychology has been a significant discipline in determining how research has been conducted (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). Beginning in the 1970s, there was a growing criticism of the theories of developmental psychology from both within the field and from other fields, most significantly from sociology and philosophy (Dahlberg et al, 2007), with regards to how children were being constructed in research. There has been a history of children either being relatively absent from documented research prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hendrick, 2008), or being the *object* of research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008) with research being conducted ‘*on them*’, generally without their direct consent (with this responsibility being accorded to parents). Little attention was given to ethical considerations, most notably ‘care to do no harm’ (Morrow, 2005, Alderson 1995). Seemingly disturbing examples to current thinking are the Strange situation (Ainsworth et al, 1978, in Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008: 20) and Watson’s behaviourist experiment (Watson and Rayner, 1920, in Woodhead and Faulkner: 2008: 22) where very young children (typically under 2 years of age) were isolated from parents under laboratory conditions. In the Strange Situation, to test levels of emotional attachment, the young children were alone briefly, then joined in a room by a stranger, before being reunited with their mothers. Despite obvious distress, this was justified as being only temporary. In the Watson experiment, babies were tested for fear reactions by accompanying the presence of a furry toy animal with loud noises that caused the babies to cry, eventually even on sight of the toy. Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) hypothesized as to how such experiments might have been approached differently if older children, with a ‘voice’ (literally) or adults, had been subjected to such emotionally unsettling conditions. They concluded that such

approaches in research were reflective of the cultural stance towards the youngest children's well-being at that time (late 1970s).

Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) elaborated the perspective of children as *subjects*, a model in which fundamental welfare rights (primarily protection) are acknowledged, yet the control for decisions remains with the 'responsible adults'. They attributed much of this model to Piaget's influence (as discussed in the previous section) with the notion of biologically determined ages and stages of development. Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) provided examples from the fields of special educational needs and healthcare where the notion of protection is foregrounded, with little consideration as to the perspectives from the children directly affected. They claimed that despite the Children Act 1989, which set out requirements for agencies working together with families to provide social care to include children's perspectives, children's voices are not necessarily being heard when they differ from those of their guardians. Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) concluded that unequal power relationships affect children's agency within the context of this construction. Morrow (2005) added to the debate on the inclusion of children's voices, describing research with children in the 1990s as being by 'proxy', with parents and those working with children assuming the role of 'proxy informants' (2005: 151). Morrow attributed this to a political and social climate of limited civil rights for children, child protection from research and the adult view of children's inability and lack of credibility to make decisions. Morrow (2005) quotes Alderson's ethical work (1995) as being seminal in changing attitudes towards children in research. Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) elaborated a positioning of children as subjects in educational research. They espoused that, although there is now recognition of the rights of children to be considered in research, and for their consent to be sought, much of the research in classrooms does not focus on children's feelings about being involved in research practices. One example of this was researching the learning effects of children working with peers (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008: 31); although children agreed to take part, Woodhead and Faulkner questioned the invisibility of children's thoughts and feelings, for instance, where they might be paired with a peer with whom they might be uncomfortable or where they might prefer to work individually.



According to Alderson (2008) the most common way in which children are *participants* in research is within studies that have been framed by adults. There is a significant number of such published research studies from diverse fields, many relating to children's perspectives on the services they receive in health and social care as well as in education (such as O'Kane, 2008, who consulted with looked after children, and Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley, 2008, who sought the views of children in hospital and in specialist units). Children Crossing Borders (Pascal and Betram, 2009), a large-scale international research project, is an illustration of how attempts were made to understand young children's perspectives of their early years provision within research framed by adults. In this study, young immigrant children (aged 3 and 4 years) and their families (as well as practitioners) were invited to share their experiences and expectations of attending early years settings. Flewitt's research (2005) studied the alternative ways in which three year old children communicate and make sense of their worlds. Her comparative study between home and pre-school involved the children participating with the researcher in ethnographical case studies.

Prout (2003) expressed scepticism that children are actually being consulted on their own terms, rather than within a framework of adult direction. Nonetheless children as *active participants*, where children design their own research, is a construction that Alderson (2008) considered is now becoming more widely used. This is the more recent positioning of children within the paradigm of the sociology of childhood (discussed in the previous section) as capable, competent co-constructors, with audible voices (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). Writing in 2000, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr were sceptical of such a paradigm as they considered this challenging in terms of the adult attitudes. In their words:

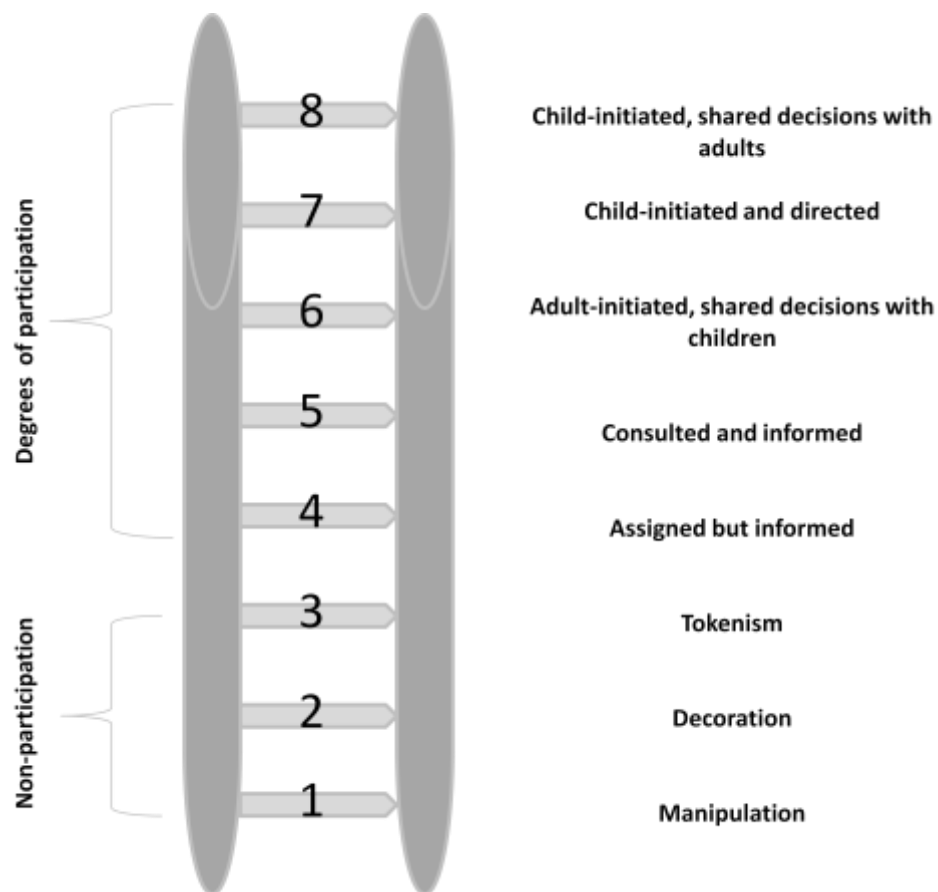
A vast conceptual leap is required to ensure adults begin to consider the opinions and views of children seriously enough to encourage them to speak their minds and express their opinions. (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000: 67).

They considered this was not happening sufficiently in practice in areas such as education, particularly with reference to special needs. In the opinion of Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000), children need to feel that they are able to have their say before they

can be listened to by adults. Children need to be *acknowledged* as being capable of being active participants in the research process (Dockett et al 2011). However, for Alderson (2008), the evidence of such research is becoming visible, largely through initiatives by non-government organisations in response to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). An example of such research is the *Sort it Out!* Study (Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London, 2001, in Alderson, 2008: 280) where children designed and implemented a large-scale survey of children's views of living in London, with the aim to raise awareness of issues and services that needed attention. Some of the study findings have subsequently informed early years advisory team policies. Similarly, young children (from 3 to 8 years of age) surveyed and interviewed other children in a project reviewing community facilities which made a successful contribution to the overall community improvement initiative (Miller, 1997, in Alderson, 2008).

#### **2.1.2.2.1 Hart's ladder: Conceptualising participation**

Hart's ladder of participation (Hart, 2007: 22) is useful in conceptualising the different levels (models) of participation of children in research that have been discussed above. The stages of the participation ladder are reproduced below in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 Stages of Hart's ladder of participation (reproduced from Hart, 2007: 22)**

The lowest rungs, representing non-participation, appear to echo the positioning of children as objects in research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008), most notably prior to the Children Act 1989 where their voices were largely absent from research. Equally, the depiction of children as subjects (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Morrow, 2005), with parents and carers attempting to represent children's interests, appears to struggle to elevate children above the lowest rungs of non-participation.

Rungs 4 to 8, representing levels of participation, might reflect the differences in attitudes and approaches to involving children in research. Woodhead and Faulkner's (2008) representation of children in educational research might relate to rung 4, where the children are aware of their involvement in the research but their voices are not directly heard in shaping their research experiences. Children being involved in research that is framed by adults (Alderson, 2008; Pascal and Bertram, 2009, Flewitt, 2005) might correspond more closely to rungs 5 and 6.

The highest rungs of the ladder seem to reflect the concept of children as active participants in research, where children take the lead in framing and implementing research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Alderson, 2008, Miller, 1991 in Alderson, 2008).

Although Roberts (2003) acknowledged the potential value of Hart's ladder, she advised that adhering to the model risked participation not reaching its fullest potential if there was the perception that achieving a higher rung might not be achievable satisfactorily. Roberts considered this could restrict participation to a lower rung where success could be demonstrated. In her words, the ladder could be used to '...paralyse action if those who do not quite reach the right rung on the ladder soon enough feel that it's safer to do nothing than to get it wrong (2003: 35).

## **2.2 Why listening to children is significant: Possibilities and challenges**

The discussions so far have reviewed some of the policies and discourses, both historical and more recent, relating to children and childhood, both in society and in research. Developmental psychology, and more recently, sociology have had an influence in the extent that children are regarded as being capable of having options that merit attention. Legislation and policies over the last 20-25 years have made it clear that children have the right to be listened to and to be involved in decision-making (O'Kane, 2008). This granted, this section considers some of the other arguments for listening to children, both in terms of benefits as well as some of the cautions that have been expressed.

Lancaster's (2003a) comment seems to state the position clearly:

With a clearer understanding of children's lives, parents and practitioners are able to respond to the changes in children's lives, to meet their diverse needs, and to improve care and services (2003a: 4).

However, a reservation for some adults is that acting in accordance with children's expressed needs and rights might be at the expense of adult judgements, representing a role reversal with adults becoming disempowered. An example of this is the controversial practice in a Danish nursery (Kjørholt, 2005), (as part of 'Children as Fellow Citizens' project initiated by the Danish Ministries of Social Affairs and Culture in the early 1990s) where the young children were granted the right to determine when they have soiled nappies changed. If children opted to continue playing rather than have a clean nappy, staff respected this as being the children's right. Rudduck and Flutter (2004), believed that for some teachers in schools there is the concern of loss of power should children be consulted. They raised the additional issue of teachers not wanting their provision and practices to be scrutinised. Sinclair Taylor (2000) offered an alternative position that some teachers are wary of reversing the power balance lest this result in behavioural issues amongst pupils. Writing in 2000, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr stressed the importance of involving children in quality measures aimed at progressing provision in schools and commented on how this was an under-emphasised area at that time, largely with the adult views dominating. Although there have been initiatives since 2000, there remains the view that provision is designed and evaluated by adults in the main (Alderson, 2008). A most recent example of this in early years is the Tickell Review (2012) of the EYFS curriculum, where the contributors were predominantly adults. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) asserted an adult tendency to disbelieve a child where there is a difference of opinion. Dockett et al (2011) gave an example which illustrated such a principle in practice where pre-school practitioners did not accept children's opinions on activities which children claimed to be less appealing. The practitioners attempted to discover the specific children who had made the comments and to hold them responsible, by virtue of their personalities, rather than respect their views and reconsider pre-school practices. Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) offered a more provocative perspective as to why some adults might be unwilling to listen to children's perspectives in their assertion that there are 'powerful cultural and social tendencies to keep them [children] in their place' (2000: 62).

A further challenge was raised by Rudduck and Flutter (2004) whereby children might not confidently engage with the consultation process, possibly as not accustomed to having their views sought. Rudduck and Flutter envisaged that

‘...pupils are perhaps too accepting of the status quo and their position in it’ (2004: 148). Although referring to older, school-aged children, examples (discussed in section 2.1.1.3), (such as those from Lee and Eke, 2009; Dahlberg et al, 2007 and Wells, 1986) suggested that younger children become aware of the ‘rules’ and the ‘codes’ that are used to construct discussions in early years settings that can have the effect of minimising children’s initiation of conversation and their participation in discussions which are practitioner-led. House (2011) termed such a process the ‘schoolification’ of young children. Punch (2002) articulated a similar position in relation to the power relations between adults and children. According to Punch, the lower status that is granted to children by adults is felt by children, where children learn their positioning and anticipate being controlled by adults. Children are not used to being consulted by adults and therefore are not accustomed to offering their opinions naturally. Einarsdóttir (2007) added that children might be tempted to try to gain adult approval where they view adults as figures of authority.

The risk of surveillance is an issue raised in attempting to understand children’s perspectives more fully (Moss et al, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2005; Dahlberg et al 2007, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010, Einarsdóttir, 2007). For Moss et al (2005), surveillance links to the notion of control, with children being ‘ever more constantly under the adult gaze’ (2005: 11) with implications for managing children’s behaviours. Similarly, Prout (2003) considered that as a result of increased attention from adults ‘...the space of childhood becomes narrower, more specialised...’ (2003: 13). Smith (Mac Naughton, 2005: 57) drew on Foucault’s ideas of surveillance and regulation in challenging her own practices in observing children in her research with the intention to know more about them. She questioned the power aspects of this and reflected on how much of herself she would chose to reveal to others, yet she was making the assumption that it was acceptable to expect the children to do so. Similarly Dahlberg et al (2007) in their research with children referred to Foucault’s positioning on knowledge and the link to power. They asserted that the acquisition of knowledge is a political undertaking. They considered the concept of truth as a construction, rather than existing as a given pre-defined entity and highlighted the risks of an increased knowledge of children being submerged in the processes of discipline and regulation, to conform to the truths that such processes represent. Einarsdóttir (2007) became aware of her own positioning in her research with young

children and the tension between attempting to engage children as active participants and risking comprising the children's privacy and confidentiality by discussing the children's research data with staff at an early years setting, discussions of which the children were not aware or involved in.

Lancaster (2003a: 5), however, articulated a more positive position with her analogy of bringing 'another chair' to the discussions to enable views from *both* adults and children to be considered *together*. Mac Naughton et al (2007) asserted that children are more likely to value the decision-making process and the outcomes if they have been actively involved. Clearly this is not limited to children; participation theories such as those of Schön (1983), Kotter (1996) and Hart (2007) emphasised the importance of collaboration for participants who might be affected by the implications of change. As Rudduck and Flutter (2004) emphasised, there is a mutual benefit for both adults and children when adults recognise the significance of actively involving children. Children's views provide the opportunity for adults to reflect on their own practices and to reflexively adapt where relevant. Mac Naughton (2005) took a wider perspective in asserting that listening and acting on the youngest citizen's views, in the interests of well-being, has the potential to benefit society as a whole. Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000) and Dockett and Einarsdóttir (2010) highlighted a significant issue, in that where children are not actively consulted, their perspectives cannot necessarily be represented by others. Different meanings might be made by children other than those by the adults who have attempted interpretation. Punch (2002) expressed a similar caution that without direct consultation with children, adults might make assumptions about what it is to be a child in the particular context, based on their own lived experiences of being a child.

### **2.2.1 Children in research - methodological considerations and tensions**

This section takes a closer look at the published research with children and discusses some of the methodological issues and challenges that such research represents to

tuning into children's voices. A focus on particular methods and approaches are considered within the discussions.

### **2.2.1.1 Researching with children different from with adults?**

A frequent discussion centres on whether researching with children is different from researching with adults (for example Prout, 2008; Christensen and James, 2008; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2007, Punch 2002). Punch (2002) identified the apparent paradoxical tension in declaring children as competent citizens on the one hand, equally able to participate in research as adults, then, on the other, defining methods that are labelled as 'child-centred' or similar. Punch (2002) and Dahlberg et al (2007) have problematized the concept of 'child-centred' and 'child-friendly' suggesting that this implies directing a gaze on children as a separate entity, rather than as equal research partners. Punch (2002: 17) suggested 'research-friendly' and 'research participant-centred' as more appropriate terms since research should be equally engaging for participants, whether adults or children. All participants should be respected in research, considering individual interests and preferences, as well as the contexts in which research is carried out.

Punch (2002) highlighted the developmental differences of children in research in terms of language. Although Prout (2008) asserted that attention to language challenges are not limited to children, Punch (2002) nevertheless stressed the importance of considering young children's developing vocabulary and experiences in relating to adults. Einarsdóttir (2007) similarly referred to children's experiences being different from adults and that children might not be aware of the expectations of research. This echoes the constructions of children by adults and children's recognition of these from an early age (discussed above), which might result in children offering answers to research questions that aim to please the researcher or represent attempts to understand what answers might be expected. Similarly to Punch (2002), Dockrell et al (2000) considered the appropriateness of the language used to ask research questions and whether children would interpret the questions in the way the researcher intended. Lewis and Lindsay (2000) argued the case for consideration of children's development as well as their status relative to adults:



‘...taking a children’s rights position does not absolve researchers from conducting research which is appropriate to the children’s developmental and power status’ (:194). Punch (2002) reminded us that children are marginalised and that adult attitudes need to be actively explored.

As well as viewing from a developmental position, whether children have the linguistic experience to respond in a way that reflects their thoughts on the subject, Dockrell et al (2000) emphasised the need for researchers to ascertain whether it is children’s desire to engage with the research questions, either at all, or in that particular time and space. For Punch (2002), some researchers struggle in this respect by being uncertain as to how to develop a working relationship with children. A similar view was expressed by Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2000: 61) where they suggested potential ‘lack of confidence’ on the part of some researchers in implementing participatory research with children. Mac Naughton et al (2007) suggested that early years practitioners are especially well positioned in their daily practices to tailor research to individual children’s needs, to select methods and approaches to facilitate consultation with young children.

To further contemplate the *process* of the research, Dockrell et al’s (2000) perspective on the approach to research with children is seemingly also applicable to research with adults. They cautioned to reflect on the reasons to ask specific research questions in the first place, in terms of what the questions are aiming to know and how is it planned to understand meanings from the responses. The context in which the questions are asked of children is of importance to Dockrell et al (2000), especially events which might have preceded the research activity, where children might be relating their responses to previous experiences. Einarsdóttir (Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010) emphasised the importance of children being engaged in environments with which they are familiar and in which they feel comfortable. Donaldson (1978) similarly highlighted the context in research with children. Her approach was focussed on ensuring the research was presented to children in ways that were meaningful to them, in order for them to be able to make sense of the research questions and activities. Donaldson (1978) was critical of Piaget’s research processes which she considered were often implemented in contexts with which children could not readily identify.

Lewis (2010) elaborated the tension between a statement of purpose to seek the views of children and the constraints of research, such as agenda, budget and time. Lewis cautioned against false expectations and how this can contribute to tokenistic attempts to seek children's voices. '...researchers need to be explicit and transparent about what is reasonable and feasible concerning 'child voice' (2010: 16).

#### **2.2.1.2 Special methods needed in research with children?**

For Prout (2008: xv) the answer is clear in his claim that it would be 'a lazy assumption that unique methods ... are needed'. He justified his claim in expressing how children's challenges in research, such as engaging with language or being accorded a lesser position of power, are equally experienced by some groups of adults. Mac Naughton et al (2007) made a similar observation in that the most important aspect for them is the *design* of the research enabling *all* participants to be fully and fairly involved in the process. Methods will not always be suitable in every context or over time. There needs to be flexibility in responding to changing needs. Einarsdóttir (2005b) agreed with the importance of considering the context and added that creating a climate where listening to children is emphasised by adults is crucial. Similarly for O'Kane (2008), it is the *process* of the research, the willingness to work together in joint reflection and action that is most critical. She advocated that participatory techniques are particularly suited to such an approach and especially in working with children. Punch (2002) added a caution regarding a focus on innovative methods being restricted to research with children, as this might imply considering children as less capable. She added that more innovative could equally apply to research with adults, with the focus being on enjoyment in engaging whilst providing meaningful data. Dockett et al (2011) added to Punch's (2002) caution that there is the risk of creating methods for the sake of creating which can result in tokenism. In fact in their research, Dockett et al (2011) experienced that children engaged with more 'adult' methods rather than those associated with children, such as drawing and role play. Whereas Dockett et al (2011) and Einarsdóttir (2005b) acknowledged the potential for inviting use of various methods to appeal to children's preferences, to offer choice, Dockett et al (2011) guarded against getting

‘carried away’ with creating ‘innovative and novel’ methods (2011: 73). Again to emphasize the importance of the underlying approach to research, Dockett et al, quoting Bessell (2009, in Dockett et al, 2011: 72), articulated how ‘methods alone do not facilitate children’s active engagement in research’. Punch (2002) suggested a combination of traditional and innovative methods might be considered, again with the recognition that this be suited to individuals (for example supporting a visual way of expression), rather than whether the participants are adults or children.

### **2.2.2 Asymmetrical relations and symmetry of ethics**

As introduced above, a key theme in research with children is the notion of power relations and the risk for such to be asymmetrical (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2007, Dockett et al, 2011). Dockett et al (2011) considered the potential for power to be equalised and the factors that required attention for this to be possible. Crucial influences are the attitudes of adults, for example towards children’s competencies and rights, and the theoretical framing of the research. This section takes a closer look at some ethical challenges.

Dockett et al (2011) discussed whether children and adults are viewed differently in research and argued that, as a basic right, respect should be accorded to all participants. They elaborated an incident where this was apparently not the case; during a conference a delegate questioned the validity of a research project where some children had chosen not to participate in sharing opinions on their communities (Dockett et al, 2009a, in Dockett et al, 2011: 72). The attitude of the delegate was that if the study was considered to be significant then the children should have participated, without an option to do otherwise. Barker and Weller (2003) expressed a similar dilemma in their research in schools where children’s rights to participation and expression were compromised by teachers, with children’s completed questionnaires being vetted before passing to the researchers. Barker and Weller (2003) alerted a further power issue when researching with children in the context of their homes. In their experience, parents can influence the interpretation of research data and can take control by correcting the children's input, particularly if it relates to

the parents and is potentially embarrassing. An example of this was when a child referred to a parent's driving misdemeanours (2003: 219). Lewis (2010) was of a similar opinion, asserting that adults have reservations about changing the balance of power, of empowering children. She claimed children's voices risk being 'subverted' if their views challenge the adult perspective; for Lewis (2010) the classroom is one example where power relations struggle to favour children. A different context was reported by Abbott and Langston (2005: 42) where the voices of the children were 'silenced' during their research towards the Birth to Three Matters framework (DfES, 2003). This was as a result of tensions between the camera crew 'getting the shots' and the researchers wishing to capture what 'was naturally happening' (Abbott and Langston, 2005: 41).

Dahlberg et al (2007) were very clear about their positioning of children in research. Similarly to Dockett et al (2011), they believed that as researchers, and as humans, it is crucial to construct respectful relationships between oneself and the others to whom we relate, irrespective of differences. They referred to this as the 'ethics of an encounter' (Dahlberg et al, 2007: 145). Regarding difference, Dahlberg et al (2007) asserted a crucial philosophy of celebrating difference, with the plural accounts that different individuals and different voices can offer. In their research, they take the explicit positioning of not making the Other into the Same (2007: 156), of being aware of how one has constructed oneself and the responsibility for attitudes and actions towards others (Foucault, 1986, in Dahlberg et al, 2007). With reference to practices in early years, practitioners need to be aware of their positions of power in the way that they construct children. For Dahlberg et al (2007), an abuse of this position is evident where children are viewed according to developmental categories, with the potential to normalize rather than individualize children. Lancaster's (2003a) research in early years similarly emphasised the key role of developing 'socially inclusive relationships' (2003a: 6) between adults and children. She added the focus of supporting other participants in the research, such as parents and other practitioners, to aim to construct equal, respectful approaches. Morrow (2005) was conscious of her positioning in her research with children and took another vantage point, wondering how she was perceived by the children as a researcher. In a study in school settings (with children aged between 8 and 16 years) Morrow (2005) reflected on her relationships with different children, with boys and girls, and

contemplated how their perspectives of her might differ and how the research might have been influenced differently if she had been male. Connolly (2008) reported similar reflections in his ethnographic research in a multi-cultural school (with children aged 4 to 6 years) where he was focussing on race and gender in children's social worlds. He became very aware of being white and male and how children appeared to use this in their reactions to him, for example in making racist remarks in his presence, which he speculated might not have happened if he had been black or Asian. Connolly (2008) became unsure as to whether the nature of conversations, which included sexual references, were as a result of the children viewing him as a ally or whether it was an attempt to reverse the control of authority that children are used to experiencing from adults.

Lewis (2010) reflected on the ethical challenges in promoting the 'voice' of children and advocated 'stepping back' and reflexively re-visiting the concept of 'voice' to guard against an adult-led 'crusade' (2010: 15). She advised a fuller consideration and respect for 'child silence' alongside 'voice' and advocated a clear strategy for capturing, analysing and reporting silences in research. Amongst the considerations proposed was a reflection on the potential meaning of silence on the part of researcher as well as the children (for example, space to think, control, peer pressures, not wishing to answer, not understanding, cultural implications) and the acceptance of neutral responses (such as 'don't know') as positive choices. According to Lewis (2010), it is uncommon to publish accounts and evaluations of children's choice to withdraw from research and therefore little is known about children's views and choices not to participate.

As discussed above, participatory research is considered an approach in which the potentially asymmetrical research relationships with children can become more equal. O'Kane (2008) considered balancing power by involving children in determining where and how discussions are to happen, giving responsibility for managing equipment and communicating appreciation and respect for children's input. Morrow (2005: 154) reflected on how participatory, 'non-invasive, non-confrontational methods' might be instrumental in the avoidance of 'undue intrusion ... and diminish power imbalances'. Alderson (2005) agreed with such participatory intentions but highlighted the ethical challenges that such approaches face, most

notably with regards to children's consent. Equally Alderson acknowledged that such potential difficulties should not present a barrier to including children fully in research (2005: 33). Morrow (2005) elaborated an experience in her research with school children (aged 8 to 16 years) which represented the need for ethical reflection around informed consent. Her particular concern was relating to the context of the classroom which she considered a 'captive sample' (2005: 158). Morrow's approach was to seek consent verbally within the group, rather than engage with each child individually. Morrow questioned whether the children might agree to participation as being the 'right' response given their status as members of a group and given their familiarity with agreeing to participate within classroom activity. Morrow equally considered whether individual children might not feel confident to voice a contrary opinion within the group. However, Morrow (2005) found that some children did opt not to be involved in the research activities. When seeking feedback on being involved in the research, some children responded that being part of a group, or being in friendship groups (the latter tended to be the view of younger children) was preferable to responding on a one to one basis. However other children (mainly boys) suggested that they would have preferred to have answered in writing rather than verbally. Morrow (2005) reported mixed responses from children as to whether they were more comfortable speaking to an outside researcher than with their teachers.

Morrow's experiences highlight how ethical considerations present a challenge and need constant reflection in each particular research context. Morrow (2005) agreed with Alderson (2005) that the challenges must not represent a reason not to attempt to engage with children in research; indeed Morrow considered it unethical to consider not fully involving children. Dockett and Perry (2007: 55), specifically referring to researching with young children in early years settings, offered an approach to assist with consent uncertainties. They advocated interviewing young children in the setting in which they are familiar (rather than move to another space), where it becomes evident that children would rather not participate, or continue participation, but would prefer to re-join other children in other (non-research) activities. Einarsdóttir (2007) expressed ethical challenges around consent in her research with young children (2 to 6 years) in an Icelandic early years setting. Given her belief that young children might find it difficult to express non-consent, she

sought their agreement to participate before each research activity and was mindful of non-verbal expressions from the children. However, she later reconsidered whether this was sufficient and whether she should have involved the children in the overall consent process at the outset to avoid the possibility of the children being 'tricked' into engaging with individual research activities (Einarsdóttir, 2007: 205). Einarsdóttir (Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010) also considered the concept of consent more widely and questioned whether young children really can know the implications of being involved in research which might well be visible over time, especially with the use of communications technology.

Morrow (2005) raised a crucial ethical concern, echoed by Prout (2003) and Einarsdóttir (Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010), relating to taking action in response to children's expressions of interest, need, concern or suggestion. For Morrow (2005), research in listening to children is established as necessary but she emphasised the need to take action, to give children confidence in the process:

We now have a clear, well-researched picture of what matters to children, and it makes sense to build upon what has been done, not least because there may be a danger of 'consultation overload' or 'burn out' - asking children similar questions, repeatedly, without any sign of change, sends negative messages to them about research and its effectiveness (Morrow, 2005: 162)

### **2.2.3 Participatory approaches**

As discussed in the previous section, participatory techniques are considered as potentially instrumental in equalising the power relationships between adults and children (and indeed between other more powerful and less powerful groups). Although there are clearly challenges, most notably around adult attitudes to children in research, developing ethically underpinned relationships and the risk of more innovatory techniques being tokenistic, there has been an increase in the use of such techniques in recent years. Some key approaches are visited in this section.

### 2.2.3.1 Mosaic approach

One significant framework is the Mosaic approach (Pascal and Bertram, 2009; O’Kane, 2008; Christensen and James, 2008, Lancaster, 2003a), introduced by Clark and Moss (2001). The framework was developed as part of an exploratory project to find ways to improve listening to young children (initially under 8 years of age). Underpinning the framework is the use of techniques that support communication not limited to the verbal. The Mosaic approach is informed by participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques (O’Kane, 2000, in Clark and Moss, 2001: 1; O’Kane, 2008). PRA techniques aim to empower groups which have not been heard previously (to any extent) to become actively involved in issues affecting their lives, through representing their life experiences *themselves* rather than have others attempt representation on their behalf. Freire (1972) has been identified as one of the influences of the technique through his participatory work with adults on literacy initiatives. A further influence in the development of the Mosaic approach is Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a), a philosophy which inspired early years provision in this region of Italy. In the Reggio Emilia approach, children, pedagogues, families and the wider community construct experiences together with an emphasis on long-term project work. Documentation is considered a key focus for joint construction and reflection on experiences, a focus that is shared by the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001). The Reggio Emilia approach is considered further below.

The Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) uses a selection of tools and techniques that are intended to offer choice to young children to how they prefer to represent their experiences. Examples of such techniques are the use of cameras, where children take the lead in taking photographs to represent their perspectives; tours and map-making, where children present their experiences in a physical and visual way through tours of their surroundings and creating maps to support their tours; ‘child conferencing’ (Clark and Moss, 2001: 15), where children are interviewed in groups or individually, and role play. Although the voices of the children are prioritized, this is not to exclude those of the researchers, the practitioners and the parents, whose observations and comments are recognised as important and are added to those of the children to form the parts of the ‘mosaic’.



Clark and Moss (2001) emphasised the significance of observation, observations that entail '[s]lowing down enough' (2001: 12) to listen to children's voices through 'watching'. Nonetheless, Clark and Moss reminded us that observations represent adult's interpretations of children's worlds hence the need to consider as part of the mosaic alongside children's own interpretations. In their research with young children (predominantly children aged under 2 to 5 years) in the Thomas Coram Early Childhood Centre, Clark and Moss (2001: 46) demonstrated how a parent's perspective gave clarification to a child's responses (aged 3) regarding the significance of adults at the centre. The parent was able to explain how early attachment issues with a particular member of part-time staff had caused problems for the child attending on a full-time basis. On the other hand, Clark and Moss (2001: 47) reported that the parent had seemingly overstated the significance of adults when considering the child's accounts alongside; hence the Mosaic approach provided the space to contemplate the different perspectives.

Pascal and Bertram (2009) viewed the Mosaic approach as being generally well-regarded in its supporting expressions wider than the verbal. With reference to Gardner (1983, in Pascal and Bertram, 2009: 253), Pascal and Bertram acknowledged the potential for the Mosaic approach to capture different intelligences: '...during tours and mapmaking activities, children can exercise their visual/spatial, body/kinaesthetic, interpersonal and verbal/linguistic skills.' Equally they considered the approach useful in highlighting the importance of creating 'diverse and multiple opportunities for dialogue' (2009: 259). In their research, *Children Crossing Borders* (Pascal and Bertram, 2009), with young immigrant children and their families to understand their perspectives of using early years settings, Pascal and Bertram included methods from the Mosaic approach as well as other participatory techniques, such as those introduced by Lancaster (2006, 2003a), (see below for further discussion). However Pascal and Bertram (2009) emphasised that despite the potential of such participatory techniques there are challenges, both methodological and epistemological, in the implementation of the methods. Developing constructive relationships in which children are truly respected as equal partners and ensuring the methods are inclusive for all, enabling all voices to be captured, were considered amongst the challenges for Pascal and Bertram (2009). Specifically they referred to prerequisites such as focussing on communication and

listening skills and developing an environment conducive to listening. They considered professional development essential to enable participatory techniques to be implemented in practice, to make a genuine difference to the children's participation in the settings. This is a view shared by Clark and Moss (2001), equally drawing attention to the time required to effectively enable engagement with the participatory techniques. Clark and Moss emphatically asserted the need for increased non-contact time in early years settings in the UK, which they defined as generally insufficient and particularly so by comparison to Reggio Emilia settings in Italy who, according to Clark and Moss (2001), typically have around a day a week, in terms of cumulative hours, to focus on the documentation that is generated from the participatory approach between adults and children.

Einarsdóttir (2005a and b) referred to the Mosaic approach, together with other participatory techniques, as a basis for her research with young children seeking their views of their experiences in an early years setting in Iceland. As well as exploring such participatory methods with the children and the setting staff and declaring the usefulness of such, Einarsdóttir emphasised that the *climate of listening* (that was foregrounded in the setting as part of a project) was influential in supporting children's communication. Dockett and Perry (2005a and b) similarly referenced the Mosaic approach in the Starting School Research Project in Australia. Dockett and Perry used photography to assist children to express their views on their transition from pre-school to school. A key finding in their research was that there was a difference in the children's and the adults' perspectives of the transition. For Dockett and Perry, this adds to the argument that it is essential to consult directly with the children, using such participatory methods, as adults cannot assume they are able to represent children's experiences.

Lancaster and Broadbent's research (Lancaster, 2003a and b; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003 a-d) was aimed at promoting listening to young children (from birth to age 8) to practitioners and parents, with an emphasis on the role of arts to enable children's expression. The research was an exploration of the suitability of the methods and approaches with a focus on inclusivity. Equally Lancaster and Broadbent focussed on understanding children's perspectives of their early years provision, schools and related services, in the belief that not only would such

establishments benefit from actively seeking children's opinions, but also that children's sense of self-worth would be supported. Lancaster and Broadbent developed a number of participatory techniques, drawing inspiration from the Mosaic approach (as discussed above), which enabled non-verbal as well as verbal expression. The use of musical conversations where pace and rhythm were used to communicate (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003d), painting on a large scale using the whole room space (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c) and photography (Lancaster, 2003b) were amongst the methods that were introduced. However more traditional research methods were also used, such as focus group and semi-structured discussions, as well as questionnaires, with the recognition that young children are able to engage with methods more usually associated with research with adults (Lancaster, 2003a). Group discussion methods were used as a space for reflection on previous research activities. Questionnaires were adapted to be engaging for the children by using symbols, colours and drawings to respond to the questions Lancaster (2003a). Lancaster and Broadbent (2003c and 2003d) found that some of the methods were especially strong in promoting non-verbal communication, such as painting and musical conversations, with the latter seemingly engaging for children with special educational needs. Lancaster and Broadbent observed an increase in eye-contact and other body language in such activities, in communication both amongst children and with children and adults. A significant finding for Lancaster and Broadbent was the role of repetition of the research activities. One example of this was where children were invited to evaluate their outdoor space at nursery, using both modelling and a 'wishing tree' (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a) to capture their ideas. Lancaster and Broadbent observed that the ideas developed as the activity was repeated over a period, with general thoughts on changes becoming more specific. This is reminiscent of the project work in the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards et al, 1998a) which underpins children and adults co-constructing their experiences.

As well as reporting positive experiences however there were also challenges for Lancaster and Broadbent (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b). As expressed by Clark and Moss (2001) and Pascal and Bertram (2009), Lancaster and Broadbent experienced that time was a significant factor, especially in allowing the space for children and adults to become familiar with the techniques. Technology, such as

experimenting with digital and disposable cameras and the processing procedures required commitment from the adults to support the method. The key role of reflection, supporting all voices to be heard was a challenge for Lancaster and Broadbent (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a). They experienced that an attempt to engage the older children as researchers with the younger children, intended to encourage the younger voices, had the opposite effect, with the older children assuming a more powerful, dominant role. Lancaster and Broadbent viewed such a power dilemma as being similar to that observed with the adults researching with the children. Explicit effort had to be made to attempt to avoid the adults taking control of the implementation of the methods and the direction of the data gathering.

### **2.2.3.2 Reggio Emilia**

Participatory practices in the Italian pre-schools of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a) have been influential to wider practice (for example, Clark and Moss, 2001; Moss, 2007, Dahlberg et al, 2007). Although not a research methodology, the attitude that the teachers in the pre-schools need to equally take a role as researchers is significant. The justification for this is that ‘practice cannot be separated from objectives or values’ (Malaguzzi, 1998: 73), and therefore it is essential to collectively engage in continuous reflection. Particularly noteworthy is Malaguzzi’s (1998: 87) belief that teachers as researchers ‘must retain the same sense of wonder that children live through in their discoveries’; both adults and children explore and re-explore together. Malaguzzi further explained how the children’s experiences inform the development of practice rather than the practice being imposed on the children, in his words, ‘the children are not shaped by experience, but are the ones who give shape to it.’ (1998: 86). There are cautions to attempt to replicate such an approach outside the strong family and community spirit and the firm focus on individual rights, which underpin the philosophies of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998b). Moss (2007) warned of the temptation to try to modify some of the principles such that they ‘fit’ with thinking that is situated within other paradigms. Moss likened this possibility as making the Other into the Same, rather than reflexively contemplating uniqueness. Whilst giving this due consideration, there are

features of participation that have acted as a ‘source of energy and inspiration’ (Edwards et al, 1998b: 13). One such feature, mentioned above, is the (extended) project approach, where significance is given to the ability to re-visit and reflect on experiences constructed through the project work. To enable such reflection and re-evaluation, documentation is of paramount importance to the Reggio Emilia way of working (Rinaldi, 2005). Documentation is not limited to the written word but is a term used to encompass all means of recording an experience, with much emphasis on forms of artwork. Whereas documentation might be considered an adult activity that represents children’s experiences, in Reggio Emilia both adults and children collaborate to produce the documentation which is often a natural outcome of the process of developing projects (Edwards et al, 1998b; Katz, 1998). Katz (1998) emphasised how the nature of the project work is to build on experiences with which children are familiar, such as visiting a supermarket, rather than new experiences which would risk children being reliant on adult interpretations. The aim is to re-look at familiar experiences to explore from other viewpoints, with the notion of ‘unpacking’ or ‘defamiliarizing’ (Katz, 1998: 33). Katz (2011) made an interesting comment regarding project work in education in the UK: ‘... I used to see wonderful project work all over the UK in the 1960s and the 1970s – where did it go, and why?’ (2011: 125).

Reggio Emilia bases its philosophy on the notion that children represent their experiences symbolically, through the ‘The Hundred Languages of Children’ (Edwards et al, 1998b: 9) with the key role of adults being to create opportunities for children to communicate in ways of their choosing and for adults to ‘tune into’ such communications. Whereas the participatory approach appears to be highly regarded, one criticism relates to the approach not being underpinned by a formal, and hence regulated, curriculum (Soler and Miller, 2003). Although this is defended by the detailed recording of activities in the documentation, which is made visible to wider audiences (Soler and Miller, 2003), an argument that does not appear to have been made is the potential for exposure to scrutiny of the children (and adults) given the visibility (and permanence) of such documentation and especially given the documentation is exhibited both locally and more widely.

### **2.2.3.3 Te Whāriki**

Te Whāriki is the early years curriculum in New Zealand and as an approach has received positive attention. Similarly to Reggio Emilia, although not a methodology as such, some of the principles that underpin the curriculum are interesting to the development of participatory approaches to research (for example, Clark and Moss, 2001; Pascal and Bertram, 2009). Such principles include the empowering of children through positive relationships and children's rights to participation, where children are considered as capable and competent (Carr and May, 1993, 2002). Communication and exploration are among the key curriculum aims of Te Whāriki and are expressed as strands throughout the framework. Inclusivity is a core principle of the curriculum, symbolised by 'a woven mat for all to stand on' (the Maori translation of Te Whāriki), developed to provide provision to meet the needs of the diverse communities in New Zealand. In the same vein as Reggio Emilia, there is much emphasis on the child within the wider context of the family and the community, a quality that needs reflection in attempting to adopt a similar approach in research in the UK. Lee and Carr (2012) emphasised the importance of re-visiting experiences in Te Whāriki, for both adults and children, and to reflect together on the experiences that have happened and their significance for present as well as future explorations. Learning stories (Carr, 2001) is the process which enables reflection through detailed documentation. Practitioners, children and parents contribute to the learning stories adding their narratives of the learning that that has taken place. Such a joint construction allows a potential space for each voice to be heard, rather than observational documentation solely being constructed by the adults to represent children's experiences.

Although the principles of Te Whāriki have been widely acknowledged as admirable, there has been criticism towards the lack of research into Te Whāriki (Blaiklock, 2010). Blaiklock (2010) questioned whether the principles might be rather more aspirational than reality. Without empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the principles in practice, Blaiklock questioned how it can be claimed that the approach does benefit children in the ways that are intended. Specifically with reference to the learning story process, Blaiklock commented that it would be

difficult to form an opinion of whether the process does enhance children's experiences.

## **2.3 Conclusions**

The importance of listening to children, and in particular young children, has been a philosophy which has struggled to find expression until relatively recently and indeed continues to face challenges. Although, largely in the last 20 years, there have been significant political and social initiatives which have attempted to raise the profile of children as active citizens with rights to participation and to have their perspectives respectfully considered, realising such in practice has been slow, notwithstanding some notable exceptions. In the time of the new sociology of childhood and the rights movement, there has been a shift in perceptions of children as 'becomings', as weak, dependent and awaiting the transmission of knowledge, to 'beings' who are capable in their own right, are decision-makers who actively construct knowledge by interacting with others and their environments. According to the new thinking, childhood is a valid stage of being in its own right rather than being a preparation for adulthood. In terms of research, there have been noteworthy attempts to reconstruct children, including young children, as social actors, as active participants, as co-constructors in the research process. This had marked a move away from the research paradigms, mainly influenced by developmental psychology, where children were the objects or, at best, subjects of research. Adults assumed the powerful position of choosing the nature of the research and represented the children's experiences through an adult lens. Although the introduction of ethical codes of conduct raised awareness and obligation to consider children's consent to the research process, this responsibility did not usually focus on understanding children's feelings about being involved to any extent (Hendrick, 2008).

Participatory approaches and methods are being increasingly used in research with children and seemingly have been influential in realising the construction of children as social actors to some extent. Research in various fields has aimed to actively consult with children on their experiences and their opinions of services that affect

their lives, which reportedly are considered to be of some success. However this has not been without significant challenges, which remain on-going. One of the key challenges has been equalising the power balance that has previously tended to favour adults over children. Some adults remain hesitant to the implications of equalising, or more pertinently, reversing the power balance, fearing blurring of boundaries and loss of status which might result in behavioural issues in children. Other adults are unclear as to how to construct meaningful and equal relationships with children without the temptation to assume control at some level. The challenges are not limited to adult attitudes and perceptions. Typically, children are not accustomed to being actively consulted and are aware of an adult position which seeks to hear the 'right' answers from children. In response, children tend to be hesitant in deciphering what is being asked of them, the adult expectations, and the consequences of their responses or actions. Specifically in terms of framing the research process, there are complex ethical issues that extend beyond a preliminary consent agreement. There is the difficulty of knowing whether the aims of the study are in the genuine interest of the children, unless the children have either designed the research themselves or have been active participants in the design. Similarly, the research questions and methods need to be meaningful and engaging for the children. Researchers need to manage the potential for voices in the research to dominate or silence others, especially when the interests of children do not align with those of the adults (although this is equally applicable where adult voices are diminished). Researchers need to be explicitly aware of their own positioning in the research and how this impacts on the process and the children (and other participants). However the challenges of participatory research, the challenges of viewing children as capable and active participants, must not present a reason not to engage in such approaches. On the contrary, it is essential that such practices be attempted to the benefit of children and to wider society. Children are key consumers of services, not least education, and their active consultation is required to ensure such services meet the needs of its customers. Arguably, more importantly, children are citizens with rights who need to feel that these rights are being acknowledged, both for their well-being today as children and for their continued well-being in the future as adults. Only children can represent their own experiences, responsibility should not be accorded to adults to attempt to do so without direct consultation with the children.



## **2.4 Influence of the literature on my research**

Of most significance for me from the arguments in the literature, which resonated with my own beliefs and experiences working within early years and wider, was the need to endeavour to establish a participatory approach to my research. The literature reinforced the potential for challenges in attempting such, as well as the urgency of finding ways to meet the challenges, if according children the right to a voice is to become realisable. In particular, I was mindful of the relatively lengthy history of children struggling to be recognised as partners in research, in relation to the more recent attempts to make amends. Such a history, coupled with significant efforts to begin to change the landscape of the positioning of children in research, impacted on my resolve to attempt to make a contribution to the latter.

The participatory approaches explored in the literature, especially the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005) and those of Lancaster and Broadbent (2003 a-d) were of particular interest to my research, not least given the origins of the approaches in early years. The hands-on, practical application of the ‘tools’ within the approaches and the multi-method nature of such were appealing as a start point for considering ways to engage children in my research. Albeit I heeded the cautions from the literature that such innovative ‘tools’ and methods aimed at research with children need careful consideration to avoid tokenism, the creative nature of the ‘tools’ appealed to me in blending with the creative approach that purports to underpin the current EYFS curriculum in England.

I had not imagined a scrutiny of the EYFS in my research at the outset. I had intended my research be harmonious with the implementation of the EYFS, not least for reasons of practicality and familiarity, which I envisaged would more readily support engagement with and participation in the research methods, both by the children and by the practitioners at the pre-school. Significantly, I considered that by blending my research with existing pre-school routines and processes, the findings from the research had greater potential to be adopted in practice, to potentially continue to support children’s voices in pre-school. However as my field work progressed, I increasingly came to consider whether the EYFS itself was having a

seemingly negative impact on practitioner participation. This led to a closer reflection on the content of the EYFS (and its implementation in the context of my research), in particular in relation to the representation of children's voices and participation within the curriculum (as well as within a wider policy context). Hence the literature relating to the EYFS became significant to my research.

The viewpoint expressed in the literature resonated strongly with my intentions for my research in that participation resulting in action is of fundamental importance to demonstrate to children that their views are respected. From the outset, I intended that my study had the potential for reflection on current practices in early years (amongst the participants in the particular context of the pre-school in my research) with a view to making changes to support children's voices and participation in their pre-school experiences.

Again with reference to the history of children in society and in research, the various models of children and childhood that have been defined in the literature became increasingly influential to my research. I envisaged such models would contextualise my research in illustrating how I intended my research to be firmly amongst those models relating to children as active, equal partners and co-constructors. As my research developed, the complexities and paradoxes of how I and the practitioners constructed the children, as well as each other and ourselves, led to a significant re-reflection on the models of children and childhood. Thus the literature illuminating such models became of greater significance and less confined to history than I had imagined.

## **Chapter 3 Defining Aims and Research Questions**

This chapter defines the aims and objectives and specifies the research questions which frame the study. The rationale underpinning the framing is discussed in detail, drawing on both insights from literature and my professional experiences working in both early years and industry. A strong focus on participatory research is explored with the perceived challenges outlined.

Reflections on the early definitions of the aims and objectives include a comparison to later thinking and to some re-working as a result. This process is elaborated for transparency. The wording and concepts used in both the aims and the objectives and the research questions are explained in terms of their intended meanings within the study.

A review of the aims and objectives and research questions and how they have been met, or otherwise, is discussed in chapter 8.

### **3.1 Main aims and principal objectives**

The aims and objectives for my study are summarized as:

1. To add to existing research in exploring effective ways to facilitate pre-school children's 'voices' (for example, Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a-d, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, Bertram and Pascal, 2009) in co-creating a child-centred curriculum
2. For the research to be inclusive, participatory and child-centred (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Alderson, 2008; Prout, 2003, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000) by actively involving practitioners, children and parents in investigating and reflecting on ways to co-create a fair and equitable child-centred curriculum in a particular pre-school
3. To consider how the findings might inform the creation of a child-centred curriculum in which young children's voices are fundamental as an embedded part of practice in a particular pre-school and to provide a

reference for other early years settings, educationalists and academic audiences

4. To present the study in a structured and transparent way using critical reflection and reflexivity (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000) in illuminating the potential challenges of such research as well as the possibilities.

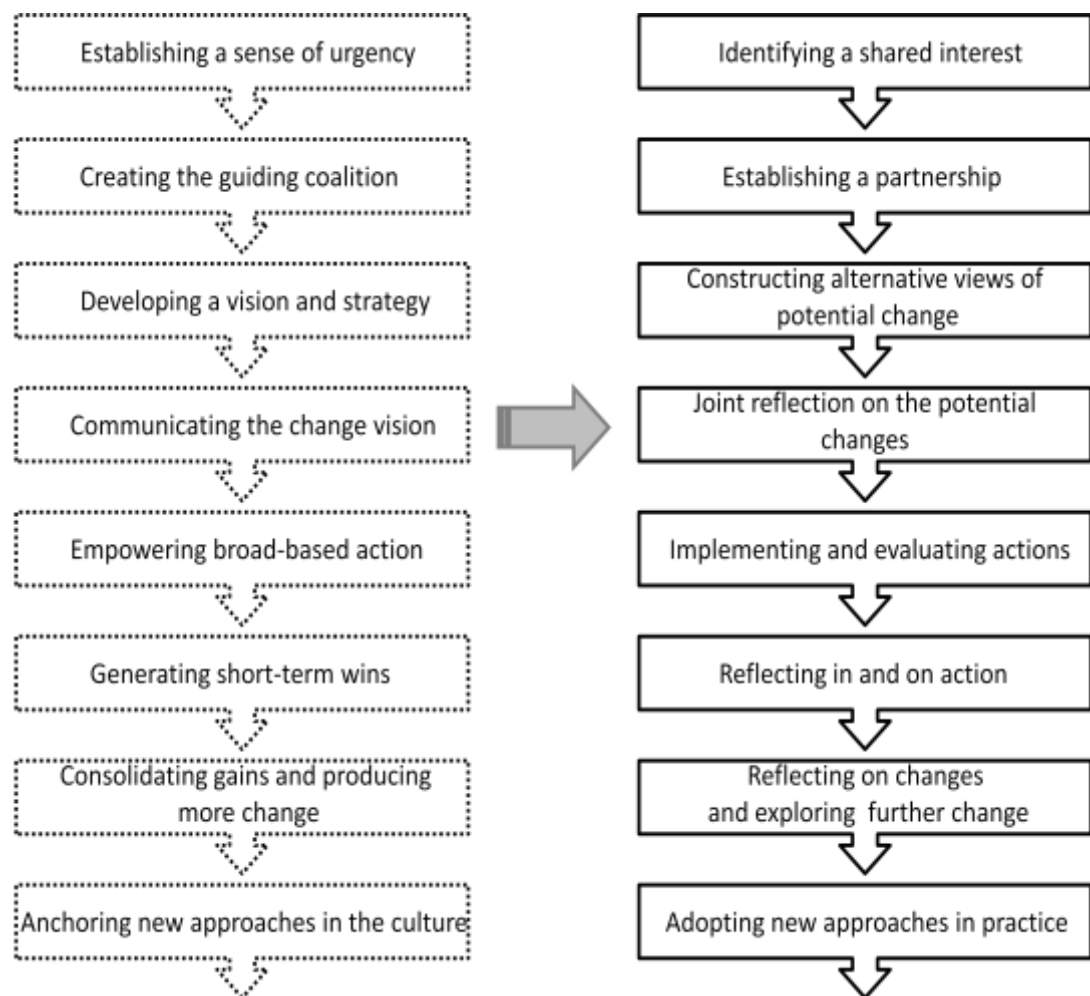
As introduced in chapter 1, my overarching aim was to explore ways in which young children's voices could be heard in the decision-making processes (UN, 1989, the Children Act, 2004) that construct the EYFS curriculum (DCSF, 2008a and b) at pre-school. My aim was motivated by my professional experiences in actively working and consulting in early years settings where, on the one hand, I considered that children are not being accorded their right to a voice (at least not fully) in decision-making that is directly relevant to them. On the other hand, I believe strongly that children from a young age are capable of being actively involved in such processes for the benefit of the children themselves and for the quality of their provision. At the time of writing, although the EYFS curriculum (DCSF, 2008a and b) espoused to be 'child-centred', underpinned by the principles of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004. See chapter 2, section 2.1.1), I was uncertain as to how this looked in practice, from my own experiences of implementing the curriculum (as discussed in chapter 1, section 1.2.1.), and was keen to explore how the interests of children might be strengthened in the implementation.

A core principle for the research was to motivate action, by way of exploration, such that research findings might be immediately relevant to the pre-school practices. It was not intended to present findings at the close of the study which might only then be able to be put into practice. A firm belief underpinning my study, from its inception, was the need to actively involve all participants in such a process, in a joint exploration of ways to support children to voice their opinions, to be active decision-makers in co-creating their pre-school environment.

My belief in working collaboratively was informed by my professional experience, both actively working in early years settings and in industry, where I have been involved in projects that required changes to be implemented, equally from a

management perspective and as a team member. Change management models that have influenced my thinking include Kotter (1996) and Argyris and Schön (1978, Schön, 1983), where key principles include motivating those affected by potential changes to be an active part of the process, ensuring that participants understand the implication of change and acknowledging that change can be challenging both as a concept and in practice. Although it is accepted that aspects of the proposed changes might be more acceptable to some participants than others, the aim is to attempt to make the implications of change visible, to open a discussion space. Common resistance to potential changes was expressed as ‘complacency’ by Kotter (1996: 40), which includes aspects such as being pre-occupied with existing (and often time-consuming) routines; being accustomed to focussing on pre-defined, short-sighted targets and being unmotivated by existing working conditions, such as low pay or limited recognition for current work efforts (David, 2007, Katz, 2011). Other factors which Kotter (1996: 20) deemed detrimental to enabling change include absence of team working, weak leadership, politics and bureaucracy, and ‘fear’ of not knowing what change would entail. As some of the features described by Kotter resonated with my experiences in working in early years in particular, it seemed even more pertinent that my study aimed for a collaborative effort in which challenges could be raised and discussed as part of the process.

Kotter’s (1996: 21) eight-stage model for implementing change was a useful reference for my research as ‘a pathway through’ the potential change process, although I adapted the approach to reflect my own thinking. This is represented below in Figure 3. The left-hand side of the Figure is a re-production of the labels of Kotter’s model with my adaptation shown on the right-hand side.



**Figure 3 An adaptation of Kotter's eight stage model (Kotter, 1996: 21)**

Kotter's reference to constructing 'a guiding coalition' (stage 2 of the model) that exerts power over the other participants is an approach that I intended to actively avoid. Rather, I envisaged attempting to establish a more equal working relationship that encouraged multiple perspectives (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009, Winter, 1996) on how to support and 'tune into' children's expressions of their pre-school experiences.

Kotter's (1996) notion of constantly making visible how the changes might look (stage 3 of the model) resonated with my aim to make the process as transparent as possible (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000). However whereas Kotter's (1996) approach was to affirm the 'vision' and to remove barriers that might jeopardise this, I aimed to promote

flexibility and continuous reflection to enable the ‘vision’ to be created, evaluated and re-created to adapt to new thinking and inspiration as my study progressed. Arguably my approach might be considered as taking Kotter’s more modern model of change (that focused on the outcomes) and applying more postmodern principles which value the richness of multiple voices, multiple and co-constructions as a *process* to adapting situations to support all those affected (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998). This could equally be considered an example of attempting dialogue between the modern and the postmodern (Moss, 2007), to explore how aspects of each might be useful in approaching my study, rather than try to replace one approach with another. This is of particular relevance to me personally as this enables reflection on my previous professional experiences with a view to re-thinking and adapting such thinking as my personal values have shifted over recent years to adapt to my professional transition.

Kotter’s (1996: 21) notion of ‘generating short term wins’ (stage 6 of the model) by creating ‘visible improvements’ and ‘rewarding’ those responsible for the ‘wins’, I interpreted as reflecting *in* and *on* action (Schön, 1983. Also see Schön, 1987 in Paige-Smith and Craft, 2008: 15), together with the participants, to create dialogue around our thoughts and feelings of the study as it unfolded. I did not envisage any ‘rewards’ for individuals, as such, but rather aiming to establish a supportive context that actively respected each other’s perspectives.

Kotter’s stage 7 of the model (1996: 21) uses the changes identified to create further changes; this is an aspect with which I identified as part of my planned exploration of how to support children’s voices. I envisaged that the nature of an exploration, where reflection is a core component, would naturally raise several avenues for further consideration rather than be confined to seeking one, overall ‘solution’ to the research questions.

Finally Kotter referred to ‘anchoring new approaches in the culture’ (1996: 21, stage 8 of the model). Although the notion of ‘anchoring’ has a sense of permanence, which I would prefer to express as provisional and flexible (Pring, 2004), (until on-going reflection inspires other explorations), the concept of adopting approaches as part of current practice that have been explored during the study is appealing. I was

hopeful that experiences from the research study would resonate with the participants such that they would choose to incorporate aspects of the study and the findings into their practices. For such to be possible, I felt a participatory approach was essential to enable the study to become more relevant to those directly affected, to provide an opportunity for power to be more equalised, to allow for a sense of shared ownership, and therefore the potential for the essence of the study to influence practice after the research has completed (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Dockett et al, 2011; Schön 1983).

My previous personal and professional experiences alerted me to the significant challenges that creating such a participatory study would likely entail. The majority of my professional career has involved working together with *adults* in situations which required some form of change, both imposed in a top-down fashion from organisational constraints and deemed desirable in more of a bottom-up way from members within a team. Typically the latter tended to appear to be more ‘effective’ in terms of members actively contributing to the change process and being more accepting of the impact of the change. The former, on the other hand, often was met with resistance, at least initially, where changes were largely imposed without consultation from those that were to be affected. Even where there was not resistance, there tended to be some sense of resignation to changes that were implemented, where the changes were not considered positive, as if there was little power to act other than to accept. Given my desire to collaborate with both adults and children, I was mindful of the challenges, such as the typically lower status of children in decision-making, adult attitudes and reservations in equalising the power with children and children not being used to being consulted by adults (Punch, 2002; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Sinclair-Taylor, 2000; Chapter 2 section 2.2.). Equally I was aware of the potential complexities in developing relationships with both the practitioners and the children at the pre-school that reflected ethical symmetry (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010, Dockett et al, 2011. Chapter 2, section 2.2.2) where, from my experience, ethical considerations are given relatively little attention beyond obligatory measures relating to basic care, health and safety. Drawing on the seeming positive experiences of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1989a; Clark and Moss, 2007; Moss, 2007, Dahlberg et al, 2007. Chapter 2, section 2.2.3.2) and Te Whāriki (Carr and



May, 1993, 2002; Lee and Carr, 2012; Clark and Moss, 2001, Pascal and Bertram, 2009. Chapter 2 section 2.2.3.3) in actively involving families and communities in working together with the children to co-construct their experiences, I equally heeded the warnings that such approaches are underpinned by strong communities and rights movements. As I considered the pre-school in my study, I was aware that parental and community involvement was relatively limited by comparison. Nonetheless, I did not consider this an impossible challenge to attempt to increase the participation. Given this and the other challenges previously described, I felt strongly that effort needed to be made to meet the challenges, as far as possible, to enable supporting children's voices to be explored in earnest.

### **3.1.1 Reflections on aims and objectives**

The aims and objectives represent both my original framing of the research and some amendments to reflect my re-thinking, as a result of the on-going literature review and of progressing with the field work. Although challenges in the participatory nature of my research meant that I was unable to fulfil the aims and objectives in ways that I had envisaged (as introduced in chapter 1, 1.1.2), I retained them in essence as they continued to guide the intentions of the process, the intentions for a participatory approach, in spite of the challenges. Discussions on the challenges to the process are furthered in the chapters 5, 6 and 7 with final reflections in chapter 8. The amendments to the original aims and objectives as well as clarifications on the use of particular words and terms are explained below.

As introduced in chapter 1, the definition of 'children's voices' or 'child voice' was intended to encompass more than the verbal (Clark and Moss, 2001; Lancaster, 2003a, Lancaster and Broadbent 2003a – d; Edwards et al, 1998a). For clarity and given the key nature for my study, my definition is re-iterated here. I have used other descriptions relating to 'child voice' in the thesis, such as 'children's expressions' and 'children's perspectives'. In essence each description has the same intention, that being to 'tune into' children's communications, however they choose to communicate. This aimed to take account of the different preferences and learning styles that individual children are exploring in a particular time and space. I hesitate

to use the term ‘ability’, however it is clear that at young ages (in my study from 2 years and 9 months) children are at different stages and have different experiences in their verbal communication (Punch, 2002; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). My intention was to embrace all such aspects of communication in my study, whether through verbal, through action (such as role play and body language), or other representations such as drawing, modelling or photography.

In aim and objective number 1, I use the term ‘to facilitate’ children’s voices. Elsewhere in the thesis, I refer to similar concepts such as ‘supporting children’s voices’, ‘listening and hearing children’s voices’, ‘acknowledging children as decision-makers’ and ‘children as co-constructors’. Again there was a common intention behind the various wording, of an explicit aim to join with children in hearing all voices, both children and adults, who wished to contribute their views on the implementation of the EYFS curriculum (DCSF, 2008a). There was the implicit intention to go beyond *understanding* what was communicated (although this was certainly the first stage), to *taking action* (Morrow, 2005; Prout, 2003). However *taking action* might equally mean to explain why specific suggestions or opinions could not result in changes to provision. The key point was that the intention was for children (and other participants) to *know* they have been heard and their communications respected regardless of eventual outcome (which may be subject to restrictions). This is discussed further below with reference to subsidiary question f.

I modified the wording ‘exploring’ in aim and objective 1 from my original wording of ‘uncovering’. This is an example of how my thinking from a more modern perspective collided with my intention to move towards a more postmodern expression (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss, 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998) (as discussed in chapter 1, section 1.7.1.1). Although I was intending to co-construct meaning with the other participants, I ‘slipped’ into suggesting that meaning already existed somehow, as if the research aim were to ‘find’ the answers rather than create them in that particular context, in that time and space.

The use of the term ‘child-centred’ was influenced by the problematisation of the concept ‘child-centred’ (Punch, 2002, Dahlberg et al 2007) (a term which I used in earlier planning of the study), discussed in chapter 2 (section 2.2.1.1) and is the

subject of further reflection in chapter 7 (section 7.2.1.1). The term in my study was intended to have the more neutral interpretation of being ‘of appeal’ to children rather than directing adult gazes on children’s actions, behaviours and utterances for purposes such as to label and classify children according to categories or to manage behaviours.

My reference to ‘curriculum’ was not intended to be interpreted other than as recognition, on my part, that currently early years settings require to work within a curriculum framework, the EYFS (2008a and b). The implications of a ‘curriculum’ on hearing children’s voices, discussed in chapter 2 (section 2.1.1) were not fully appreciated when I framed my research aims and objectives. Even given my experience in working with the EYFS, it was not until my fieldwork was underway that the wider influence of the EYFS on my study became more visible. My intention when constructing the aims and objectives was to actively involve the children in implementing the areas of the EYFS, an activity that was restricted to practitioners at this time in the pre-school, in order for the implementation to have the most opportunity to be directly relevant and of interest to children.

Although I appreciated that my study, a detailed study in one pre-school context, was not intending to create findings that could be generalized to other contexts, my experience in working in other settings and in my role as mentor to students studying for EYPS (chapter 1, section 1.3.1), strongly suggested to me that aspects of my study would resonate with other early years professionals and settings (aim and objective 3) (Pring, 2004, Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009). In the same vein that Reggio Emilia is considered to inspire, rather than be a framework that could be adopted (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss, 2007, Clark and Moss, 2001) (chapter 2, section 2.2.3.2), I was hopeful that my study might inspire other practitioners to reflect on their approach to listening and consulting with children.

Aim and objective 4 was not included in my original study planning in its present wording but was amended when my early field work did not unfold as I had imagined. The challenges that I experienced in establishing participation (introduced in chapter 1, section 1.1.2), even given my prior professional experiences and my practical knowledge of the research setting, led to the realisation that it was

imperative to the study to capture the challenges (as well as the potential for children's expressions). This became increasingly evident as the study progressed. The need for transparency (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000) in the research process became poignant as I came to accept that, despite best intentions, my voice would be louder than most others, in particular the practitioners.

## **3.2 Research Questions**

Within the framework of the aims and objectives described above, specific research questions were formulated. Similarly as for the aims and objectives, the research questions were reconsidered to reflect the process of the on-going literature review and difficulties I experienced with establishing participation. In essence, the research questions remained the same as my preliminary drafts, with the addition of question 5 to reflect the challenges. This is discussed further below. However subsidiary questions were added with the aim to aid continuous reflection on the underpinning issues in answering the main research questions, of some of the more general challenges to researching with children explored in the literature.

### **3.2.1 Main research questions**

1. How has existing research approached supporting young children to articulate their voices?
2. How might an exploration be carried out, in the context of one particular pre-school, of the approaches from existing research enabling young children to be able to articulate their voices?
3. How 'effective' (engaging, inclusive, fair and equitable, practical and useable) do the participants consider the approaches and techniques in this particular pre-school context?
4. How might the participants build upon, or adapt, the approaches and techniques identified to be of most relevance to this particular pre-school's practices and policies?

5. How does the exploration challenge the participants, their current thinking and practices?
6. In what ways might participants reconsider their existing local policies and procedures to incorporate learning from the research experience in engaging children's voices in the implementation of a child-centred curriculum?

### **3.2.2 Subsidiary research questions**

- a. How do children typically express their opinions in this pre-school?
- b. Which situations appear to support expression or otherwise in this pre-school?
- c. How do children approach the expression of negative opinions in this pre-school? (Lancaster, 2003a, Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b).
- d. How do participants, respond to negative opinions from children in this pre-school (especially if participants' practices are implicated?) (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Barker and Weller, 2003; Dockett et al, 2011; Lancaster, 2003a).
- e. How do children communicate whether they feel they have been heard in this pre-school?
- f. How do participants know that they have listened and heard what children intended to communicate? How have participants taken action in response? (Morrow, 2005, Prout, 2003).
- g. How are participants constructing children as equal co-constructors and decision-makers in this pre-school? What are participants' attitudes and beliefs? (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Moss et al, 2005, Alderson, 2008).

As introduced in chapter 1, I was motivated to further explore ways to engage both children and adults, to work together, jointly to attempt to create an environment that would be of benefit to all those directly affected. It was the existing participatory research with children that was inspirational initially, especially approaches as the Mosaic (Clark and Moss, 2001; Pascal and Bertram, 2009) those introduced by Lancaster and Broadbent (Lancaster, 2003 a and b; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003 a-

d) and well as Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a) and Te Whāriki (Carr and May, 1993, 2002; Lee and Carr, 2012) (chapter 2, section 2.2.3). It was my intention to offer and further consider such approaches and underlying philosophies to the pre-school as starting points for exploration. This was the intention underpinning research questions 1 and 2.

I feel it important to re-emphasise at this point that, at the inception of the research in October 2009, I was employed as a practitioner. Therefore my research design would include me as an active researcher-practitioner together with my colleagues. Although my position was to change shortly after beginning the study, from practitioner-researcher to researcher (see chapter 1, section 1.6.2.2), I considered that the research questions, and in particular, the joint exploration, remained relevant and achievable. The implications of my positioning are considered in depth in chapters 5 to 7. However I will outline my thinking here for clarity.

A participatory approach to reflecting on current pre-school practices was a clear aim for my study. Research question 2 introduces this intention. In my practitioner role and during my then recent achievement of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), I was used to working as part of the pre-school team to reflect on practice and to bring about changes to improve practice as we deemed appropriate. During the study for the EYPS, my role was to lead on reflecting and instigating change, which had happened fairly ‘successfully’ I believed, both in terms of achieving the EYP Status (in early 2010) and in motivating changes to the pre-school practices. The decision to progress to a more in-depth study at the pre-school, again collaborating with my colleagues (albeit more precisely ‘former colleagues’) appeared a natural step both for me professionally and for the benefit of continuously improving provision at the pre-school. Hence the choice of a participatory, action-based research approach seemed the logical choice.

My desire to focus the research on increasing children’s voices in jointly improving provision equally appeared to be of relevance to the rest of the team, not least as this was an area which I believed was given both implicit and explicit weight in the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a and b) (although this was subsequently somewhat arguable as a closer look at the EYFS text demonstrated – see chapter 2, section 2.1.1). I believed

my own professional and personal interest in the subject (chapter 1, section 1.3) would give strength to initiating the study. The involvement of the children as participants was the most exciting part of the study, certainly for me, and I anticipated would also be the case for the other practitioners. At that time we had begun to reflect on balancing our practice between adult-led and child-led (again a requirement of the EYFS) and therefore I intended the focus on this by the study to benefit both practice and participants. Additionally I was aware that for the research findings to have the potential for longevity, the support of the practitioners was needed (Kotter, 1998, Schön, 1983). I aimed for active participation, both in choosing and implementing approaches, as well as reflecting on their strengths and limitations for pre-school practice. Involvement of parents in the joint provision for their children was an area to be developed (as personally experienced and as required in the EYFS), and an initiative that the pre-school had acknowledged and began to explore. Involving the parents in the research, in discussing how to support their children's expressions, was an aim of the research. Hence the wording 'participants' in the research questions (as well as in the aims and objectives) was intended to include the practitioners, the children, the parents and me.

Research question 3 relates to the 'effectiveness' of the approaches that were selected, from those that I intended introducing from the literature. From experience, I was aware of the importance that the research 'fit' with everyday routines. Hence the 'practical' and 'useable' qualifications were added. In first instance, this was to enable the research to be carried out and, then, to enable approaches to be implemented, where deemed beneficial, after the research was concluded. Previous practical experience had made me aware of the requirement to make activities at pre-school 'engaging' for children (research question 3), if children were likely to gain genuine benefits from participating (Mac Naughton et al, 2007; O'Kane, 2008, Punch 2002, Dockett et al, 2011). Failure to do so, in my experience, risked either limited usefulness, as children tended to decline participation, or arguably more disconcerting, practitioners attempting to coerce children into participation at some level in order to demonstrate ('superficially'?) that a target had been met. In terms of my research, I was keen to avoid such behaviours and practices and therefore aimed to attempt to co-create, with the children, research activities that were genuinely engaging. Similarly, I have been aware of pre-school activities not being as

‘inclusive’ (research question 3) as we might like to have imagined and despite the declared principle of the EYFS (‘the unique child’, EYFS, 2008b) to recognise children as individuals with different needs and learning styles. Hence I aimed in my research activities to explicitly raise awareness of such ‘inclusivity’ as an area for discussion (in research question 3). Notions of ‘fairness’ and ‘equity’ were related to inclusion in my research question. I envisaged opening the space for discussions that considered how individual children were appearing to choose to express themselves and whether the approaches and techniques that we were exploring in the research were assisting individual preferences (or having a ‘turn off’ effect).

Research question 4 was aimed at recognising that approaches need specific consideration in particular contexts. This resonated with the caution that was raised in relation to the approaches in Reggio Emilia and Te Whāriki (see above). Equally I was aware of the requirement for pre-school practices to work within the EYFS framework (DCFS, 2008 and b) in terms of areas of learning and development that needed to be demonstrated. As my intention was for the experiences of the research (and specifically the techniques and approaches) to be relevant (i.e. useable) to the pre-school, both during the study and after completion, I was keen that the approaches that were explored were adapted to align with pre-school practices in the first instance. However, research question 6 was intended to have the potential to reflexively consider existing pre-school practices and policies – although this was a consideration that I envisaged would be a later stage in the research process, once the techniques and approaches had been contemplated. I imagined that focus would most usefully be on the ‘*tools*’ first (the approaches), and dependent on their considered level of appeal, the pre-school might focus on the *processes* (the policies and practices), should it be deemed that a re-consideration of these would support the overall implementation of approaches to support children’s voices in the construction of the curriculum.

Research question 5 was a later addition to the questions when the planning and early implementation began to alert me to the potential challenges of exploring supporting children’s voices. The literature sharpened my awareness of potential barriers that I subsequently deemed needed more explicit consideration in my study (for example, potential reluctance for adults to equalise the power relations with



children and the differing adult constructions of children and childhood. See chapter 2.). I had envisaged that the research question would motivate a discussion space for exploring some of the challenges highlighted in the literature review.

The subsidiary questions (defined above) were intended as ‘prompts to thinking’ that relate generally to interactions between practitioners and children. I intended such prompts to underpin the discussion spaces opened by the (main) research questions and enable reflection on overall practice in relation to sharing dialogue and decision-making with children. Although the aim of the research questions was to introduce approaches that specifically raised the focus on and supported children’s voices, I felt that the subsidiary questions presented an opportunity to relate the research activities within the context of current practices. Equally the main questions and the subsidiary questions considered together were intended to explore how adults know that the children feel their (the children’s) opinions have been heard and respected by adults, regardless of whether any changes to provision can be made as a result. Subsidiary question g. was designed to act as a ‘bottom-line’ reflection to guide interaction with children in that it reflects the need to recognise children’s *right* to participate in decisions that directly affect their lives (UNCRC, 1989, the Children Act, 2004) and hence should underpin all participatory research with children.

Table 2 summarises the scoping of the research questions and depicts how the questions were envisaged to guide the process of the research. Top-level methodological considerations (and initial, potential challenges) are specified in relation to the research questions. Methodology and the challenges that emerged are discussed in detail in the chapters 4, 5 and 6.

**Table 2 Scoping of Research Questions**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Research Aim and Objective</b>	<b>Reflections/Subsidiary Research Questions</b>	<b>Research Method (potential)</b>	<b>Potential Challenges</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Analysis Method</b>	<b>Scope for Study</b>
How has existing research approached supporting young children to articulate their voices?	To add to existing research in exploring effective ways to facilitate pre-school children's 'voice's in co-creating a child-centred curriculum.	Key themes in listening, hearing and acting upon children's voices. Issues? Significant methodologies and methods. Issues? Influence of early years policies?	Literature review.	Child voice 'hot topic', much literature available: Identification of key authors, key research within time constraints. Literature relates more to older children than pre-school children?	Tabulation of key themes. Separate tables for : Identification of existing research projects. Themes and issues in consulting with young children. Themes and issues in methodologies and methods.	Critical analysis of themes. Identification of potential techniques and approaches for initial introduction to pre-school.	Initial wide search of literature relating to consulting with children of all ages, in areas not restricted to education and not restricted to the UK. Follow up by narrower search of literature relating to pre-school children and to education.
How might we approach exploration, in the context of our pre-school, of the approaches from existing research enabling young children to be able to articulate their voices?	To add to existing research in exploring effective ways to facilitate pre-school children's 'voice's in co-creating a child-centred curriculum.	How are we constructing children as equal co-constructors and decision-makers? What are our attitudes and beliefs? How do children typically express their opinions in the pre-school setting? Which situations	Literature review. Focused conversations. Written evaluations (Delphi technique).	Ethical symmetry – establishing spaces for all voices to be heard. Practitioner time constraints: To establish participatory research within other setting obligations.	Tabulation of techniques and approaches. Transcripts of Focused conversations. Questionnaire responses.	Critical evaluation of techniques and approaches. Qualitative analysis. Identification of key themes (to include initial, potential barriers).	Identify potential methods (techniques or approaches) for initial implementation over 8 weeks. Based on initial experiences, define scope for implementation of techniques or approaches (i.e. adaptations, extensions). Practitioners, setting management. Establish potential barriers

Research Question	Research Aim and Objective	Reflections/Subsidiary Research Questions	Research Method (potential)	Potential Challenges	Data	Analysis Method	Scope for Study
		appear to support expression or otherwise?					and enablers to selection and implementation of techniques and strategies.
How 'effective' (engaging, inclusive, fair and equitable, practical and useable) do we consider the approaches in our pre-school context?	For the research to be inclusive, participatory and child-centred by actively involving practitioners, children and parents in investigating and reflecting on ways to co-create a fair and equitable child-centred curriculum.	How do children communicate whether they feel they have been heard? How do children approach the expression of negative opinions?	Camera Tours, Pictures/model making, Charting, Book-making.  Semi-structured interviews.  Focused conversations.  Written evaluations.  Observation (participant and non-participant).	To 'hear' the 'voices' of all children. Children used to lower status and unaccustomed to being consulted. Participation of families as typically low involvement.	Photographs, Pictures/models; Charts and associated narratives.  Learning Journey (children's profiles).  Interviews and Focused conversation narratives.  Written evaluations.  Observations Learning Stories).	Qualitative data: Analysis by identification of themes relating to engagement, inclusion, fairness and equity, practicality and usability. Specifically to analyse the data to explore both supporting and inhibiting child voice.	All children (64) and families, practitioners, setting management initially invited to be part of research. Based on assumption response rate will be manageable (anticipate less than 33% response from families and 100% response from practitioners). Should response rate exceed expectations, selection criteria will be applied.

Research Question	Research Aim and Objective	Reflections/Subsidary Research Questions	Research Method (potential)	Potential Challenges	Data	Analysis Method	Scope for Study
How might we build upon, or adapt, the approaches identified to be of most relevance to our pre-school practices and policies?	For the research to be inclusive, participatory and child-centred by actively involving practitioners, children and parents in investigating and reflecting on ways to co-create a fair and equitable child-centred curriculum	Need to be practical and usable, initially within framework of existing pre-school practices and policies.	<p>Camera Tours, Pictures/model making, Charting, Book-making.</p> <p>Semi-structured interviews.</p> <p>Focused conversations.</p> <p>Written evaluations (Delphi technique).</p> <p>Observation (participant and non-participant).</p>	To work within constraints of EYFS. Time pressures. Reluctance to make changes.	<p>Photographs, Pictures/models; Charts and associated narratives.</p> <p>Learning Journey (children's profiles).</p> <p>Interviews and Focused conversation narratives.</p> <p>Written evaluations.</p> <p>Observations (Long/short – Learning Stories).</p>	Qualitative data: Analysis by identification of themes relating to engagement, inclusion, fairness and equity, practicality and usability. Specifically to analyse the data to explore both supporting and inhibiting child voice.	All children (64) and families, practitioners, setting management initially invited to be part of research. Based on assumption response rate will be manageable (anticipate less than 33% response from families and 100% response from practitioners). Should response rate exceed expectations, selection criteria will be applied.

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Research Aim and Objective</b>	<b>Reflections/Subsidiary Research Questions</b>	<b>Research Method (potential)</b>	<b>Potential Challenges</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Analysis Method</b>	<b>Scope for Study</b>
How does the exploration challenge us, our current thinking and practices?	To present the study in a structured and transparent way using critical reflection and reflexivity in illuminating the potential challenges of such research as well as the possibilities.	How do children approach the expression of negative opinions? How do we, as adults, respond to negative opinions from children (especially if our practices implicated?) How do we know, as adults, that we have listened and heard what children intended to communicate? How have we constructed children as equal co-constructors and decision-makers?	Semi-structured interviews.  Focused conversations.  Written evaluations (Delphi technique).  Observation (participant and non-participant).	Reluctance to self-reflect and share feelings with others. Fear of exposure – respond to be politically correct and to ensure meeting setting policies. Reluctance to equalise power balance with children.	Interviews and Focused conversation transcripts and narratives.  Written evaluations and observations.	Qualitative data: Analysis by identification of themes relating to beliefs, attitudes, values, stated challenges and tensions. Specifically to analyse the data to explore both supporting and inhibiting child voice.	Practitioners, setting management.

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Research Aim and Objective</b>	<b>Reflections/Subsidary Research Questions</b>	<b>Research Method (potential)</b>	<b>Potential Challenges</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Analysis Method</b>	<b>Scope for Study</b>
In what ways might we reconsider our existing local policies and procedures to incorporate our learning from the research experience in engaging children's voices in the implementation of a child-centred curriculum?	To consider how the findings might inform creation of a child-centred curriculum in which young children's voices are fundamental as an embedded part of practice.		Semi-structured interviews.  Focused conversations.  Written evaluations (Delphi technique).	Reluctance to change existing policies and procedures (time, complacency, costs).  Reluctance to equalise power balance with children.	Interviews and Focused conversation transcripts and narratives.  Written evaluations and observations.	Qualitative data: Analysis by identification of framework of approaches, to be adopted by pre-school. How do approaches 'fit' with existing policies? Do policies need re-thinking/adapting?	Practitioners, setting management.

### 3.3 Conclusions

The development of the research aims, objectives and questions was a process that required some fluidity, to reflect my experiences from reviewing the literature as well as early findings from the field work. Experiences included informing re-wording, to reflect new understanding of concepts such as ‘child centred’, and knowing that challenges needed to be an explicit focus.

The aims, objectives and research questions provided firm guidance as to how I intended to approach the research even though the challenges of establishing participatory research with practitioners meant they were not able to be met or answered in the way that I had envisaged. My rationale for attempting to create a joint research effort remained constant even though I needed to adapt my expectations to what extent this would happen (discussed in chapters 5 and 6).

It was tempting to re-formulate the design of my aims, objectives and research questions in response to the challenges of participation. Although I added an explicit focus on the challenges (aim and objective 4 and research question 5), I avoided amending my (strongly felt) intention to explore approaches and techniques with the participants, in my aims, objectives and research questions. Although relationships with children became a stronger focus in my research than exploring specific ‘tools’ for listening to children’s voices with participants (see chapters 6 and 7), it seemed more fitting to discuss the importance of relationships as a *finding* rather than attempting to amend my aims, objectives and research questions to reflect my new experiences and thinking. I considered that attempting to amend my aims, objectives and research questions might distort the research ‘story’, might risk losing traceability of how the research process unfolded. If I were attempting similar research today, an explicit focus on underpinning relationships in supporting children’s expressions would be a key element in design of my research aims, objectives and questions.

## **Chapter 4 Research Approach: Developing a Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter I explore the theories and philosophies which underpinned my rationale for choosing a collaborative, action-based process for my study. I consider some of the potential tensions in such an approach, especially relating to validity when attempting to view from a postmodern perspective, and ethical challenges.

Chapter 5 explores my attempt to translate theory into practice.

### **4.1 Beginning with a participatory, action-based approach**

Crotty's research model (Crotty, 1998: 4, Figure 1) provided a useful framework in conceptualising my study with Crotty's notion of working from the 'bottom up'. This resonated with my thinking as I had a strong sense that my research needed to be action based, with methods that were not only appealing to the children but able to blend with existing pre-school practices. Taking this view, I reflected further as to why I had this 'strong sense' and how my philosophical reasoning was informing my choices. Below I explore my thinking in determining a theoretical framework to support my research.

A further exploration of approaches to research supported my early 'knowing', or at least belief, that participatory, action-based research was, for me, key to not only seeking multiple perspectives on how children might be consulted on their pre-school experiences but to enable an environment in which the research findings might be actively employed, during and beyond the duration the study. This related to the management theories of Kotter (1996) and Schön (1983), that participants will 'own' the process if they have been actively involved throughout.

My decision to initiate action-based research was strongly motivated by my desire to explore approaches from existing research, in the first instance, to improve my *own* understanding and practice in facilitating children's 'voice' (Somekh, 1995). Carr



and Kemmis (1986) elaborated that action research is ‘... ‘self-reflective enquiry’ by participants, which is undertaken in order to improve their understanding of their practices in context with a view to maximising social justice.’ (1986:162). However my aim was not only to *understand* how to increase children’s voices in participating in their pre-school experiences but to introduce and evaluate *changes* that might actively support this. Despite criticism from some (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009) that action research studies are too contextual or small-scale to be effective to more wide-spread change, I believe that change often is the accumulation of smaller efforts, the ‘ripples in the pond’ effect. As suggested by Cohen et al ‘[a]ction research is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level’ (Cohen et al, 2007: 297). Pring (2004) added to the argument that experiences from contextual studies have the potential to resonate with other contexts and thus promote further thinking.

From the early stages in the study, an initial reflection was how my changing position from employee to researcher might impact. My concern was whether action research might be possible (in terms of initiating action) or indeed ethical given my change in status relating to my existing social as well as professional relationships (Delamont, 1992; Miller and Bell, 2002). Equally I became interested in ethnographic approaches (such as those elaborated by Corsaro and Molinari, 2008, and Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). I was inspired by the attention to detail of the approach, the attempts by the ethnographers to ‘live’ the lives of the participants, to ‘represent’ their voices by identifying with them as closely as possible. My opportunity to adopt an insider role would enable me to conduct such research. Equally, my initial doubts over my positioning in the research to initiate action, led me to consider an ethnographic approach. After some contemplation, however, I concluded that attempting a participatory approach, albeit potentially challenging, was more strongly aligned with my personal values and philosophies, where participants have the potential to be empowered by representing *themselves* through their own accounts (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Punch, 2002; Edwards et al 1998a). I referred to Cohen et al’s depiction of action research (Cohen et al, 2007: 298) as a researcher and practitioner working ‘alongside ...in a sustained relationship’ as a model for my study rather than the alternative

notion of the practitioner-as-researcher, (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Pring 2004; Stenhouse, 1975).

#### **4.1.1 The principles of action research**

Action research is distinguished from other approaches to research in that the basic principle is to *transform practice* (for example, Pring, 2004, Carr and Kemmis, 1986, Crotty, 1998), *to take action*, through systematic action and reflection. Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009) made a distinction between action research for professional change and action research for social change. Essentially, the former focuses on improving practices to increase effectiveness at some level (for example of process, practice or policy), whilst the latter aims for social change (for example, through explorations of power relations, inclusivity and equity) (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009, Crotty, 1998, O'Connell Rust, 2007). Lewin (1946) made the case for action research for social change simply but powerfully: 'Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice' (1946:35). Such an interpretation for social change resonated with my own research aim to explore listening, hearing and acting on children's voices in the co-creation of their pre-school experiences.

Action research is typically a collaborative undertaking (for example, McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, Mac Naughton et al, 2001), where those who will be affected by the change are actively involved (although action research may also be an individual pursuit (Marshall and Mead, 2005). There have been many models defined to capture the process of action research (Cohen et al, 2007), with Lewin's model often being quoted as influential (for example, McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Mc Niff and Whitehead (2002: 40) referred to Lewin's model as the 'action-reflection cycle' and depicted the model as recreated in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4 Depiction of Lewin's model (recreated from McNiff and Whitehead, 2002: 40, figure 3.1)**

Common to all models of action research is the iterative, cyclical process (Mac Naughton et al, 2001). The process includes overall planning, implementing initial actions in line with planning, evaluating the findings, before planning the next cycle of actions (and repeating the process). It is typical for the cycle to be repeated as many times as required, building on findings from each cycle of action, within the overall framework of the original planning (although the framework itself may be adapted as part of the evaluative process (Cohen et al, 2009).

My choice to use an adaptation of Kotter's model (Kotter, 1996: 21) to support the action research process in my study was introduced in chapter 3.

#### **4.1.2 Considering validity**

Tensions were apparent in contemplating validity, specifically in relation to action research and more generally when considering qualitative research informed by postmodern thinking (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998). There appeared to be conflicting viewpoints as to what form claims to validity should take and indeed, in some cases, whether validity needed acknowledging as relevant in interpretative, context-specific research. Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009) critically claimed that some social science research avoids the issue completely. Mac Naughton and Hughes as well as Pring (2004) specifically referred to the challenges facing action research, as a process that needed to respond to

criticism of not being scientific and unable to demonstrate sufficient rigour. Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009: 122) further asserted that ‘validity refers to how you conduct your research project to ensure that its findings are sound and carry weight and authority. It is a measure of the truth.’. This was a specific example of a tension that required reflection during the design of my approach to the research. My immediate reaction was that, within the framework of postmodern thinking, I was not intending for my research to be ‘a measure of the truth’, given a belief that ‘truth’ does not exist as a definable entity (Dahlberg et al, 2007). Equally notions of findings being ‘of authority’ did not resonate with my intentions for multiple perspectives being offered as possible meanings in my research. On the other hand, I did intend for my research process to be considered as ‘sound’. Thus I was mindful of such tensions in designing a ‘valid’ approach to participatory research.

#### **4.1.2.1 Reflexivity and Methods to promote validity**

Of most relevance to my particular design, to demonstrate a rigorous research process, was the concept of reflection and reflexivity and the willingness and ability to capture the process in a transparent manner (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000). Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009) commented on the opportunity to check assumptions, develop knowledge, render values underpinning the research explicit and ensure the processes are transparent. In particular Mac Naughton and Hughes emphasised the need to demonstrate how reflexivity has influenced findings. This particularly resonated with my research aim to encourage multiple perspectives from the pre-school practitioners, children and parents and a sharing of reflection and evaluation to determine potential changes to practice. Winter (1996: 14) advised of the advantage of multiple perspectives in increasing reflection and reflexivity in place of a ‘single, authoritative interpretation’.

My decision to use vignettes (introduced in chapter 1, section 1.7.1.2) was a deliberate choice to use as a basis for reflexivity amongst participants (during the reflection part of the action research process) as well as an attempt to provide rich

contextual information to the reader, to enable as much transparency to how the analyses and findings have been constructed.

My later decision to use aspects of rhizoanalysis (Mac Naughton, 2005) (see chapter 7, section 7.1.2), in response to limited participation from practitioners, was an attempt to increase reflexivity by enabling alternative meaning to be made from the data. Used together with vignettes, I was keen that other interpretations of the data be made visible and offered to the reader to avoid single accounts, largely from my own perspective.

#### **4.1.2.2 Multi-methods**

I considered the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) and approaches from Lancaster and Broadbent (Lancaster, 2003a and b, Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003 a-d) as being of potential interest as they have been used in research with young children in early years settings (see chapter 2, 2.2.3.1). I envisaged that the use of multi-methods might provide greater potential for participation and inclusion, by increasing the opportunity for individual children to choose techniques which might be the most appealing to their preferred learning styles, individual interests or moods in that time and space, and for their current cognitive and developmental abilities (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005; Bertram and Pascal, 2009; Lancaster, 2003a, Edwards et al, 1998a). Such methods included the use of cameras for children to capture their experiences, children leading ‘tours’ of their early years settings (Clark and Moss, 2001) as well as more traditional use of pictures and other artwork as means of expression. To promote reflexivity, Mac Naughton et al (2009) emphasised the importance of triangulation through multi-methods and multiple perspectives, and the ‘accurate’ representation of participant’s data. My intention was to use the ‘documentation’ from the various methods (i.e. the children’s representations in their many forms) as a basis for reflection, amongst the children, the practitioners and the parents, and as potential motivation to influence any changes to practice that might be identified from the discussions. Dahlberg et al (2007), Edwards et al (1998a) and Mac Naughton (2005) emphasised documentation (not limited to written form) as a

significant means to revisit initial analyses with the potential to make further meanings.

#### **4.1.2.2.1 Focused Conversations and Delphi Technique**

I was inspired by Nutbrown's Focused Conversations (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007), group meetings with the intended emphasis on 'balanced' reflection amongst the participants, without an authority voice leading the direction of the meeting discussions. This reflected my intention to encourage the practitioners to 'own' the process of potential change to practice through joint reflection rather than me, as researcher, being the potential 'catalyst for change'. My thoughts echoed Hall's view (1996) as well as Dahlberg et al's (2007), in the belief that knowledge is *constructed* and that each participant's perspective is equally valid. In particular, attention should be given to ensuring that the theoretical knowledge of the researcher is not accorded more weight than the contributions from any other participant. Although this was, for me, an aspirational position, I was mindful that 'hearing' all voices in such a Focused Conversation (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) would be challenging. Issues such as seniority and personality would likely influence, at least in part, the amount and nature of contributions. However, bearing the latter in mind, I was keen to attempt such group discussions to review and reflexively evaluate 'documentation' from the research process, to share and deepen our understandings of individual and group perspectives.

I was equally drawn to the Delphi technique (Cohen et al, 2007: 309) as another means to capture multiple accounts. This appeared to have the potential to complement Focused Conversations (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). Whereas Focused Conversations use verbal communication, the Delphi technique is based on the written response. One of the attractive aspects of this technique for my study was the management of time. I was aware from experience that group meetings might be challenging to schedule in an already time pressured pre-school environment. The technique would allow practitioners to respond potentially more conveniently. The essence of the technique is for a coordinator to pose initial questions and seek written

responses. The coordinator then collates the responses and offers these, again in written format, for the participants to comment on further, permitting agreement or dissent, or raising further discussion. The process is iterative until the coordinator deems the issues have been sufficiently discussed. Although my reservation was that I would assume the role of the coordinator, rather than the more equal relationship possibly afforded by Focused Conversations, other ethical issues potentially would be addressed such as confidentiality, power and status where individual views might be made anonymously.

#### **4.1.2.3 A structured approach**

Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009) advocated a carefully planned and specified research strategy to increase claims to validity. As introduced in chapter 1, (section 1.6.1), it was my intention to use visual techniques (such as the mind maps (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002), spreadsheets and tables) to conceptualise and organise my study.

The action research approach is inherently structured in that it requires the deliberate use of documentation to capture the process, to enable transparency, traceability and reflection in order for action to be planned, implemented and evaluated. With reference to my adaptation of Kotter's model (Kotter, 1996), (see chapter 3, Figure 3), a structured approach would be essential to enable the cycle of 'Joint reflection on the potential changes', 'Implementing and evaluating actions' as well as '...exploring further change'.

#### **4.1.2.4 Generalization**

There are divided views on the place of generalization in interpretative research. This is particularly the case for small-scale, qualitative, in-depth studies, where the focus is in constructing rich, contextual meanings. Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009) deemed generalization a measure of validity, a necessity in demonstrating the causal links and

thus the ability to provide generalizations. Pring (2004: 96) asserted that much of the resistance to considering generalization is in relation to positivism: 'In rejecting what is thought to be positivism, many theorists wrongly reject, not just the narrow form of verification, but the very idea of verification itself'. Pring added to Mac Naughton and Hughes' (2009) argument in distinguishing between generalization according to positivism and the type of generalizations that interpretative research might seek to offer. Whereas positivism defines 'certain truth conditions' (Pring, 2004: 96) against which claims can be made, interpretivism needs to verify research but in a different way, by being able to offer 'tentative ... and causal explanations' (ibid) of the study findings.

My research was not attempting to make claims relating to the 'truth' of my findings and their application in other contexts. As Einarisdóttir (2005a) elaborated, views represent a particular time and space, with children living many different childhoods: Different times and spaces and different children will mean expression of other views. Whilst I certainly feel similarly, I imagined that there might be aspects of my research that would resonate with other early years settings (Pring, 2004). My belief was influenced by my experiences of mentoring EYPS students in a variety of early years settings, where it was not unusual for similar issues to be common to many settings to some extent. Some students shared similar beliefs and expressed an interest in critiquing findings from my research in the light of their own experiences.

I was mindful of the potential for making my research available for critique by a wider audience. Sharing experiences from the study with local early years forums was one way in which I had anticipated enhancing validity. However external financial factors prevented the continuation of such forums during the period of my field work. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that future forums will be a potential space for dissemination of my research (see chapter 8, section 8.5).



### 4.1.3 Ethical considerations

The practices that I implemented to respect ethics within the study are discussed in chapter 5. Below is an account of the theoretical principles that guided my practices.

In the design of my study, general ethical procedures were considered as well as specific ethical processes appropriate to the young age of participants, the participatory and collaborative approach and the iterative nature of action-based research.

Ethical considerations were informed by guidelines published by the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2004) the National Children's Bureau (NCB, 2004) and the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002). Additionally publications from key authors in the field of ethics in research with children were referenced, such as those by Morrow (2005) and Alderson (1995).

Underpinning my research was a strong desire to promote just and equitable relationships with young children, specifically within a pre-school context. I was of the belief that collaboration of all those parties that have a potential effect on such relationships was essential for any lasting effects to be made. In terms of my methodology, I considered that developing *genuine* participation was key to the 'effectiveness' of not only the research process but of the findings from the research potentially having a sustainable effect on pre-school practices. Indeed I was of a similar mindset to Mac Naughton et al (2007) and their suggestion that the most important aspect is the design of the research enabling all participants, including children, to *fully* and *fairly* be involved in the process (my emphasis) (NCB, 2004 §1). I was keen to explore this concept and especially to involve the children in the action research process itself, to explore claims that the children will engage more eagerly and their contributions will thereby enrich the research. As Mac Naughton and Hughes (2007: 462) asserted: 'The most successful consultations include young children's views about the consultation process itself'.

Research involving young children requires informed consent from parents or guardians and consent (or assent) from the children themselves (BERA, 2004:6;

NCB, 2004 §3, BSA, 2002: 4), which due to the young age of the children was potentially problematical. I planned to seek parents' assistance in explaining the aims of the research to the children and in ascertaining the children's willingness to be involved as far as possible. Throughout the research, I was mindful of the need to continually assess and re-assess the children's consent by checking for any signs of apparent discomfort or disinterest (Alderson, 2005). This was not only an issue with the age of the children but also affected by the dynamic nature of action research where the exact direction of the research cannot be clearly defined in advance (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009). I planned to re-assess willingness (consent) to continue at key stages in the research from the children as well as from parents, practitioners and the setting management (BSA, 2002: 3).

Confidentiality and anonymity were problematical within the context of action research and especially so in an open, interactive pre-school where it might be possible, despite using pseudonyms, to relate findings to individuals (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009). I was well aware I needed to endeavour to explain the implications to all participants (including the children) (BSA, 2002: 5) and check that consent was given under this condition.

The nature of the research aiming to give children 'a voice' required specific ethical consideration. I was sensitive to the concept that listening to children needed to be a genuine commitment to not only hear but to act on children's contributions as failure to do so risked tokenism (NCB, 2004 §2; Morrow, 2005; Prout, 2003, Dockett et al, 2011) and might discourage children from participating further. Attempting to hear children 'voices' raised issues of power where certain voices might be louder than others. To make multi-methods available to children required planned time to enable children (and equally practitioners) to become familiar with the tools and techniques (NCB, 2004 §1, Clark and Moss, 2001). Sensitivity to children's current preferences and capabilities was required to ensure the approach was fully inclusive.

Within the context of action research, equality amongst participants and shared ownership required explicit consideration to avoid the power being with the initiator of the research (Nutbrown, 2002). Within my research I acknowledged the necessity to ensure participants felt valued and their views were equally represented

(Nutbrown, 2002) and the potential challenge in managing differing and opposing viewpoints. Workload was a factor around which I planned to seek agreement, based on availability, desired amounts of involvement etc. I was aware of the potential impact on daily routines and a main objective was to be flexible in performing the research as far as possible (BERA, 2004:8).

I acknowledged my responsibility to inform the setting management of any child protection and safeguarding issues which might arise during conversations with the children (DCSF, 2008a:22; DfES, 2005:13, BSA, 2002: 4) and which might require the support of other agencies.

## **4.2 A critical approach**

In contemplating my desire to choose a participatory, action-based methodology, with a strong thread of reflection and reflexivity, I found critical theory assisted me to understand my potential deeper motivations, my philosophies and assumptions, and to refine my tentative research questions in the early stages of the research. Cohen et al (2007: 301) made the link between action research and a critical approach, declaring that participatory action research is ‘rooted in critical theory’.

In the light of critical theory, I reflected on my research questions and my research aims, I re-considered the assumptions I had made, the knowledge I had drawn upon, what I know, the sense I make of ‘reality’ (Crotty, 1998), of equity and social justice. I considered how the philosophy underpinning critical inquiry supports and grounds such assumptions such as the existence of unequal power relationships, the possibility of emancipation through participation and the need to give ‘voice’ to the marginalised (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009).

Cohen et al (2007) provided a clear distinction between critical approaches to educational research and positivism and interpretivism: positivism and interpretivism seek to illuminate, critical inquiry seeks to transform. Specifically comparing interpretivism and critical inquiry, interpretivism ‘...strive[s] to understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors’ (Cohen et al, 2007: 26) whereas critical

inquiry ‘... is deliberately political – the emancipation of individuals and groups in an egalitarian society’ (ibid). This comparison is echoed by Crotty (1998: 113) who added that interpretivism ‘...accepts the status quo’ whilst critical inquiry ‘...challenges ... seeks to bring about change’. Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Grundy (1987) depict participants in action-based critical research as having a ‘voice’ and influence over their own circumstances.

Critical inquiry poses questions such as whether equality is being promoted and to what extent; what power-relations exist, who is this supporting and suppressing, who creates the curriculum and for whom, who is really benefiting, is this socially just and equitable (Cohen et al, 2007, Mac Naughton and Hughes 2009). With this in mind, Cohen et al (2007) drew an interesting comparison between critical theory and what they claim has been the dominant positivist approach in educational research and beyond. They depict the positivist approach as prescriptive and selective in presenting a curriculum to ‘passive recipients’ (Cohen et al (2007:31) with the power firmly remaining with those instrumental in its design. The approach of critical theory, according to Cohen et al (2007), is to question and challenge whose interests such a top-down, dominant system serves, with a view to re-focusing in the interests of those it should be serving. I re-considered my own approach in aiming for inclusive research methods, reversing the balance of power to enable children to lead in the research process and to express significant issues in the potential co-creation of their pre-school experiences.

Critical theory is not without its own critics. The typically small-scale, contextualised action research projects have invoked scepticism as to their impact within a political, statutory education system (Cohen et al, 2007; Pring, 2004). Crotty (1998) counterclaimed it is justifiable to improve the current situation to some extent, that an intention to move towards a more egalitarian society justifies the research effort. My own view is sympathetic to this and is reflected in my research objectives. The researcher in critical theory has been accused of having an agenda as opposed to being neutral and objective. Cohen et al (2007) presented the argument that researchers do not achieve a neutral position in research generally. Where a collaborative research is designed, Kemmis (1982, in Cohen et al, 2007) argued that a ‘safeguard’ is afforded through multiple perspectives.

My research questions (see chapter 3, section 3.2) sought to explore unequal relationships (Dahlberg et al, 2007, O’Kane, 2008) between adults and children in the first instance. Mac Naughton and Hughes (Mac Naughton, 2005: 42, Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009: 106) referred to this as reflection on ‘knowledge-power relations’ and ‘troubling truths’. I was keen to attempt to establish an environment of critical reflection (Crotty, 1998, Schön, 1983) where we were able to look reflexively at our own attitudes, biases, insecurities and how these might impact on our practices (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

### **4.3 Social Constructionism as an epistemology**

A study of social constructionism, of the creation of knowledge through collective experience, influenced by historical, cultural and societal factors, assisted me to make sense of why I felt from the outset that a participatory approach was fundamental to my research, to the fulfilment of the aims that motivated the study. Carr and Kemmis (1986) asserted strongly that where the aim is to bring about educational change, this is achieved through individuals reflecting on their own understandings and practices together with others, looking openly at the commonalities and discrepancies and how these shape overall practice. Carr and Kemmis (1986) explored the concept of how knowledge becomes accepted (or rejected) by individuals as authentic, as relevant (or not) to one’s own perceptions, and therefore of value to underpin action. They particularly related this to what they termed ‘the politics of persuasion’ (1986: 190) in educational research and how they disregard ‘persuasion’ as a successful approach to creating meaningful improvements in educational practice. This resonated and further explained the early notion that I held regarding the need for the other practitioners at pre-school to share the ownership for the research, to jointly offer perspectives on how to enhance our practices, not least in order to increase the likelihood of the findings being of practical use after the study had completed.

According to Hamlyn ( 1995: 242) epistemology related to ‘the nature of knowledge, its possibilities, scope and general basis’. I considered what epistemology was inherent in my choosing to position my research within critical inquiry and to adopt

an action-based participatory approach. Social constructionism reflected my view of how knowledge is created through collective experience. This is in opposition to knowledge existing independently (of us) and waiting to be discovered (for example, Crotty, 1998, Schwandt, 2000, Pring, 2004). This belief underpinned my desire to initiate a collaborative methodology whereby multiple perspectives would be sought rather than my own particularised view of 'how things are'. Such a belief presented challenges for my research, in particular relating to how my research might be viewed in terms of validity (see above). Related issues of truth, facts and knowledge are explored further.

For social constructionism, Crotty (1998) illustrated how different perceptions can exist of the seemingly same reality, raising the issue of what can be considered to be the 'truth'. Social constructionism contrasts with the objectivist view where 'there is objective truth ... appropriate methods of inquiry can bring us accurate and certain knowledge of that truth...' (Crotty, 1998: 42). My subscribing to the view of the co-construction of knowledge and reality thereby raised the issue of validating my research (discussed above) if, as Crotty (1998: 42) espoused, there is '*no* true or valid interpretation'. This was echoed by Pring (2000: 60) that different perspectives of research participants be accorded equal weight and that '... truth or falsity does not and cannot come into it'. However Pring did offer a useful approach which might be viewed as an ally to social constructionism, acting as 'reality check' on socially constructed meanings. Pring (2000: 62) suggested 'stepping back' from subjective perspectives and questioning whether an objective view exists 'independently of my wishing it [my subjective perspective] to be so'. One way that Pring suggested that such a 'reality check' might be enabled is to ensure that research is made available for others to critique. Relating to my own research, my intention was to involve participants actively in the process of data analysis. For a wider perspective, I envisaged the possible use of local early years forums to share findings with other early years settings and professionals.

Pring (2004) problematized the notion of 'asserting truths' further and claimed that this sits uncomfortably within educational research. He related the problem to the 'correspondence theory of truth' (Pring, 2000: 72) where language statements are made intending to reflect 'how things are' without acknowledging that they are

subject to alternative perceptions of reality for different individuals, cultures and societies. Such statements although exerted as ‘fact’ are value-laden and might be considered simultaneously ‘true’ or ‘false’ by different audiences: ‘[V]alues permeate our descriptions of reality’, (Pring, 2000 :77). Pring (2004) asserted that although there may be disagreement as to the truth or falsehood of such statements and claims, they are based on some common perception of reality, a *negotiated* (my emphasis) view of reality, and it is the fact that they do generate debate that moves understanding forward. Pring (2000:77) continued that research has a role to ‘...persuade others of a different way of seeing things in the light of further evidence’ and to determine adequately whether statements and claims represent the situation sufficiently, whether a defensible account has been depicted. For me this represented the necessity of establishing a reflective and reflexive approach to developing the research, whereby my own and others’ accounts of our ‘truths’ and realities, our assumptions, ideas and beliefs, were made available for debate (Schwandt, 2000, quoting Longino, 1990, 1993, 1996). Schwandt quoting Longino (ibid) emphasised the nature of socially constructed accounts of reality, as opposed to individually constructed accounts, in enabling open scrutiny and critique. Equally of significance to ensuring that my research was able to be critiqued by wider external audiences, was the attempt to provide a structured, transparent approach to the research process itself (as introduced in chapter 1, section 1.7). This related to Longino’s acknowledgment of the value that such an approach to inquiry can bring to the analysis of socially constructed data.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

An exploration of some of the theories underpinning participatory action-based research assisted in making deeper meaning as to my motivations for my study as well as beginning to understand how to approach putting theories into practice and the potential tensions that merited consideration in the research design. Tensions relating to a valid and ethical approach were especially significant for attempting to reflect my research aims and objectives. Social constructionism and critical theory illuminated my thinking with regards to the importance I attached to co-constructing the research with participants, not only to understand more deeply from many angles,

by constructing alternative accounts, but to aim to improve pre-school practices for the participants. Seeking to understand unequal power relationships and how these might be constructed was an aspect of critical theory that increasingly resonated with my research as it progressed. Of enduring influence for my study was the notion presented by both critical theory and social constructionism that a research attempt is justified which has the genuine intention of moving thinking forwards in the interests of those affected, irrespective of the small or contextual nature of the research.



## **Chapter 5 Attempting Action Research: Phase 1**

This chapter discusses how I attempted to motivate and implement action-based research with the children and the practitioners at the pre-school. The participants and the pre-school setting in which the study took place are introduced. The specific research activities and approaches that I aimed to explore are described.

As introduced in Chapter 1 (section 1.1.2), this process was significantly more challenging than I had envisaged at the planning stage of my study. In view of this, this chapter includes data to illustrate the challenges and to begin to make meaning as to how they became a significant influence in understanding the wider implications for listening to children's voices. Nonetheless, amidst the challenges of implementing the research there were early insights into the children's perspectives. Reflections on these are included in this chapter, again illustrated by data.

Phase 1 of the study represents the time period from May 2010 to September 2010.

### **5.2 Research Environment**

Chapter 1 (section 1.6.2) provided an overview of the pre-school setting and staff and provided my rationale for selecting this particular pre-school for the study. The account included details of my prior working relationship with the setting as a pre-school practitioner. To recap briefly, I was keen to carry out research in an environment in which I was permitted full access, most likely due to my positioning as a recent member of the team, in which I had developed existing relationships with the practitioners, the children and their parents and the management.

#### **5.2.1 Physical setting**

The pre-school was sited within a local community facility with a dedicated room for the pre-school's sole use. The area comprised a main room with segregated areas for

kitchen and bathroom facilities as well as storage and office space. The room was arranged into areas to reflect areas of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) curriculum such as a book corner, craft area, construction area, home corner and carpet area for group time. In my experience such an arrangement is typical of early years settings. Insights into how the areas and their resources were used by the pre-school are explored later (with a specific focus in chapter 7, section 7.2.2.4).

Access to an outdoor area was not ‘free-flow’ and required supervision by practitioners at pre-determined sessions. The outdoor area was a ‘marked-off’ space near to the building maintained by the Local Authority. It was not a dedicated play area and not resourced with play equipment. The pre-school either took resources to the area or used the space for children to ‘run around’.

#### **5.2.1.1 Setting routines**

The pre-school operated a daily schedule which determined the pre-school activities and the timing of each. Typically each session (morning and afternoon) began and ended with a Carpet time activity. This was a whole group activity with a focus on teaching the children, with a primary focus on learning numbers and letters.

Much of the session was dedicated to ‘free play’, where the children could interact with the resources provided, although there would be planned adult-led activities on a daily and weekly basis.

Outdoor play took place towards the end of the morning and afternoon session.

The practitioners supervised aspects of the session according to a pre-determined daily rota. Duties included leading Carpet time, preparing Snack time, maintaining the bathroom and preparing children’s documentation relating to their progress.

## **5.2.2 Research Participants**

The parties that were invited to be participants in the study were the pre-school staff, to include the practitioners and the setting management, the children and their parents. The invitation to participate was purposefully inclusive, offering the opportunity for all parties to be involved that would be potentially affected by the study. This is discussed further below.

### **5.2.2.1 The practitioners and setting management**

The team of practitioners comprised 6 staff with the additional of a setting manager.

The practitioners held a range of early years qualifications and had varying levels of experience in the role, from 6 years to 3 months. Half of the practitioners were considered senior. The practitioners were actively involved with the children during the daily routines.

The management role was largely office based focussing on overall strategies for planning provision and implementing the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) curriculum. Although maintaining overall management for the pre-school, in terms of shaping provision, the manager reported to a pre-school committee (as required to satisfy Local Authority funding). The committee was comprised of parents with the chair elected annually; it was the chair that liaised directly with the setting manager. The nature of the liaison was dependent on the amount of involvement desired by chair. During my study period, the chair in post chose a more active role in working with the pre-school manager to determine overall strategies.

The age range of the team was from early 30s to mid 40s. Each team member was a parent of children in the age ranges one year to eighteen years, with the majority of the children being of primary school age. The team was exclusively female.

#### **5.2.2.2 Children and their families**

The children were aged from 2 years 9 months to 4 years 10 months. A total of 69 children were attending, of which 31 were boys and 38 were girls. Seven children were acquiring English as an Additional Language (EAL). Attendance at the pre-school varied between 2 sessions to 10 sessions per week.

The parents were mainly working fathers and non-working mothers or mothers working on a part-time basis. There was a small representation of single parents. The age ranges of parents were predominantly in the thirties with a smaller number in the late twenties and early forties.

#### **5.2.2.3 Me**

As introduced in chapter 1, I began the research as a recently employed member of staff at the pre-school. My qualifications in early years differed from my colleagues as I had achieved Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) (CWDC, 2008), a postgraduate level qualification. Although I was not aware of the full significance of the latter for my research, this is something I later came to reflect on. Similarly the transition in my role from practitioner to researcher became increasingly more central to the study than anticipated.

#### **5.2.2.4 Engagement of participants**

Given the small staff size, I invited each member to participate in the research. My choice was influenced by my perception of action-based research having the greatest potential where those that are to be affected directly are actively involved. Although I was given permission to access the pre-school freely to carry out the study (regardless of any specific methodology), consistent with my research aims I was of the belief that fully involving the setting offered the possibility for the research to be meaningful both during the study and beyond (Kotter, 1996; Schön, 1983; Mac Naughton et al, 2005; Hart, 2007). I was fully aware that levels of participation

would vary, especially between the setting management and the practitioners, and in particular in the involvement of practical activities. My intention was to offer alternative ways to become involved (Punch, 2002), enabling personal and professional choice.

The numbers of children, and hence their families, that might wish to participate was considerably larger. Again my initial intention was to invite every family to participate in the research for the inclusive reasoning that I applied to the pre-school staff. I realised that in the unlikely event of a large number of families responding positively, I would need to re-think some of my methods, such as one-to-one interviewing. I based my assumptions on my personal experiences of the typically low response rate of seeking parental involvement at pre-school (and similar experiences in other early years settings with which I am familiar).

I anticipated the situation with the children would be somewhat different. Although a large number attended the pre-school, normal provision allocated the number between the practitioners such that each practitioner had the overall responsibility for a smaller number of children, termed 'key children' (see glossary). In practice, although any practitioner would interact with any child, the more formal aspects of the learning, such as reporting on each child's progress was carried out by the 'key worker' (see glossary) for that child. It was the intention that each key worker developed a deeper knowledge of the learning and development of their key children. The significance for my research was the potential for each key worker to participate in the research activities with their key children, although not exclusively. I envisaged this would support their normal practices in enabling a further understanding of their children through the joint working on research activities. Equally this would address the issue of me attempting to undertake the research with larger numbers of children than would be manageable and which would necessitate a selection process (Cohen et al, 2007; Holliday, 2007). I was keen to avoid the latter since to make the research exclusive would not be in harmony with my research aim of inclusivity. As a result, all the children were invited to participate in the research. However it is important to make a distinction between being involved in the research activities and actively contributing to the research data. The latter has consent

implications, both from the children and parents' perspectives. The distinction is discussed further in the section below.

### **5.2.3 Ethical procedures**

The sections below give an account of the ethical measures which I implemented during the study. I was very aware that 'free access' to the pre-school required ethical protocols to be carefully observed to preserve the integrity of the research. Overall I was aware that access did not negate the need to reaffirm permissions at key stages in the study (BSA: 3).

#### **5.2.3.1 Seeking informed Consent**

I informed each group of participants individually of the proposed study, using both verbal and written explanations, to enable the details of the study to be made relevant and delivered appropriately to each group (NCB, 2004 §3.2; BERA, 2004: 6, BSA, 2002: 4).

Parental consent was two-tiered, seeking essentially consent for their children to participate and additionally consent for their own involvement (see Appendix A). The consent agreements set out the nature of the research, the type and extent of the involvement of participants, withdrawal rights and how the information would be used, maintained and protected (NCB, 2004 §3.2., BERA, 2004: 6).

As I outlined in chapter 4, I gave particular consideration to the possibility of gaining informed consent from the children, especially amongst the youngest age group of 2 years 9 months. I requested that parents discuss the study at home with the children and to feedback children's reactions. As written informed consent was not appropriate from the children themselves, I sought verbal and non-verbal assent (or equally verbal and non-verbal dissent). This was continuously re-assessed throughout the study and specifically prior to and during each 'activity' constituting the research. I used both verbal and visual cues to attempt to ascertain children's willingness, interest and

comfort, or otherwise, to continue (Alderson, 2005). This was considered part of the normal pre-school process, however I was aware that coercion, whether consciously or otherwise, did happen at times, in my own former practice and in my observation of other's practices. I was keen to raise awareness of this in my research and to consciously avoid coercion to participate initially and to continue participation.

#### **5.2.3.1.1 The setting management**

I approached the setting manager to seek approval in principle for the study to take place. Initially the approach was informal and verbal, outlining the framework for the study including the aims, methods, the potential involvement of staff and parents (in addition to the children), ethical issues and the time scales for the study. On the basis of our initial discussions, the setting manager sought the preliminary consent of the pre-school committee. Once granted, I followed up with a formal written consent form, providing an outline of the plans for the study (see Appendix A).

#### **5.2.3.1.2 The practitioners**

Once approval in principle was granted from the setting management, I informally discussed the study with the practitioners. I had intended to discuss in a group at the monthly team meeting but circumstances prevented the meeting from taking place that month. As an alternative, I sought opportunities to speak with the individual practitioners. This was not straightforward due to the setting not operating non-contact time. Typically the conversations were during 'snatched moments' in the kitchen (as practitioners are not permitted formal breaks, so these were extremely brief), or when I noticed a practitioner was not actively engaged with the children or was attending to a task that might permit conversation alongside (sweeping the floor was a popular choice!). As these moments tended to be brief and subject to interruption at any time, I was not always convinced that the details of the study were being heard. Nevertheless, I continued to attempt to approach each of the practitioners. Written consent forms were then offered to each practitioner, setting out the detail of the study, including the basis on which participation was being

sought. Consent was agreed with each practitioner. Reflections on the consent process and wider implications for engagement are explored in section 5.2.7.

#### **5.2.3.1.3 The parents**

My intention had been to brief parents at a dedicated meeting and invite them to join the study on the basis of the briefing. However this was not practical as during my second week in my research role, the manager requested on my arrival, (most likely with committee suggestion), that I send a letter to parents as soon as possible to explain my presence in the pre-school. Desiring only a smooth start to the study, I compiled letters which had the dual purpose of explaining my presence and requesting consent from the parents. As part of the communication, I attached a booklet explaining the study in detail (Appendix A).

A total of 23 families granted permission for their children to take part in the research, with 13 parents consenting to their own involvement. This response rate was similar to anticipated and did not require any significant revision to the methods that I had planned for parental involvement. It was stated in the letter that the research activities would be available to all children as part of their daily routine as pre-school policy does not exclude any child from an activity; consent was being sought on the basis of *using data* relating to a particular child.

As the study progressed, where I wished to use the data from a child whose parents had not replied to the consent letter, I approached them in person seeking their permissions. In these incidences, all parents, with the exception of 1, subsequently granted their verbal and written permission.

#### **5.2.3.1.4 The children**

Due to the requirement to check consent (or assent) on a continuing basis, I sought children's permissions to use their data on a per activity basis. My discussions with children did not seem to suggest that parents had discussed the study (as suggested in the consent letters). I outlined the purpose of the activity in terms of research to the



children (in groups or individually as appropriate) prior to each activity. I used my professional and personal judgement to ascertain children's interest, either through verbal discussion or through non-verbal means (Alderson, 2005).

At the outset and during the activities, I considered that the children be able to choose whether to participate (NCB, 2004 §3.4). Children seemed to make their expressions clearly as noted in my field notes:

*Jane [4 years 2 months]: Can we do this later? [Asking if Jane wanted to tell me about more about her photos].*

***{Camera Tours, May 18th 2010}***

*Penny [3 years 9 months]: I'm done! [Asking Penny about her photos after she had commented on a few].*

***{Camera Tours, May 26th 2010}***

*Simon [4 years 7 months]: Can I not do any more questions! [This was clearly the end of our open-ended interview! I respected Simon's wish to continue with his craft activity without any more interruptions from me!].*

***{Wisher Catcher, June 15th 2010}***

*Sarah [4 years 1 month]: We don't want to tell you about our maps! [Another indication of when my questioning was not welcomed!].*

***{Field notes, general observations, November 25<sup>th</sup> 2010}***

I reflected further on the children declining to participate in activities in my reflective journal:

*Children seemed to express their wishes not to participate (or continue participation) in various ways. My impression was that they seemed confident in doing so. Their responses varied from walking off, shakes of the head, a simple “no” or suggestions that they would do it later. The ‘later’ often did not appear to happen. However there were incidences of children instigating participation at a later stage –I wondered if this was the children exercising their choice to participate in activities they had declined earlier?*

*{Reflective journal, February 8<sup>th</sup> 2011}*

### **5.2.3.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity**

During the consent process, I made participants aware that their input to the research would be anonymised (BSA, 2002: 5; NCB, 2004 §3.4, BERA, 2004: 8) i.e. the setting name and real names of participants would not be used either at the data collection stage or in final reporting. I had considered an exception to this in the case of participants expressing an explicit wish to be acknowledged for their input. However the setting management requested that all names be changed. Nevertheless, due to the nature of the research, a detailed, rich qualitative account in one setting, I advised the setting management and practitioners that it was likely that input might be linked to individuals, certainly internally amongst participants. This was reinforced by the participatory methodology where I explicitly intended to have open, shared discussions of the research in progress (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2007). I discussed my intention to disseminate findings from the research with other early years settings, through established local forums and with academic audiences, such as students engaged in early years education courses. Whilst this was accepted as satisfactory, the

setting management stressed the need to protect the identities of children in any written accounts for publication. We agreed that changing gender when referencing children would be one way to achieve this. In particular, the setting management made reference to children who might be receiving extra support from external agencies and the need to remove any such reference in material that was to be read by audiences other than pre-school staff. I emphasised that the design of the research intended participants to be actively involved in the analysis of the research findings, enabling written transcripts and analyses to be discussed and agreement to use of the material in published accounts. In this respect all extracts and vignettes described in this thesis have not used original names (or names of other members of the pre-school who might be implicated).

#### **5.2.3.3 Child Protection and Safeguarding**

I reminded the adult participants of the limits to confidentiality in that, as researcher, I shared the same ethical and legal obligation as practitioners to report any issues that might relate to child protection and safeguarding during the research (DCSF, 2008a; DfES, 2005; BSA, 2002: 5, BERA, 2004: 9). My obligation was to inform the setting management should I become aware of any potential issue.

I was in receipt of an Enhanced Disclosure (see glossary) specifically to work at the pre-school for the duration of the study.

#### **5.2.3.4 Care to Do No Harm**

My experience and training as a practitioner enabled me to offer active research participation to the children whilst using professional and personal judgment as to whether prolonging a potentially uncomfortable situation might not be in the best interests of the child (NCB, 2004 §4.1, BERA, 2004: 7).

I was aware that during the research certain children might form an emotional attachment which could potentially be detrimental once the research was concluded and I was to exit from the setting. To minimize this potential I regularly discussed with

the children throughout the study that I was a ‘visitor’ rather than a permanent member of the setting staff. As the study reached conclusion, I prepared the children for my departure by discussing my next plans.

#### **5.2.3.5 Right to Withdraw**

During the consent process, I informed adult participants that they would be able choose to withdraw from the research, either fully or partially, at any stage in the process (BSA, 2002: 3, NCB, 2004 §3.4, BERA, 2004: 6). To protect the research, I made clear that any data that had been submitted and reviewed (either jointly or by me individually) were not eligible for withdrawal as this had transferred ownership from the participant to the study at that stage. Any preliminary data which had not received research effort in terms of transcription or analysis (as appropriate to the type of data) might be withdrawn if required. This might include observations made by the participants, non-transcribed interview data or non-analysed written responses. Equally this might refer to field notes taken by me referring to the participant. I stressed to the adult participants that the right to withdraw did not require justification.

As children’s consent to participate was re-assessed throughout the study (see above), children readily had the opportunity to decline to participate (NCB, 2004, §3.4). I made a conscious effort to avoid the use of language that might support coercion.

I intended flexibility in the ownership of data provided by children to allow for children not fully understanding the implications of using their data. During the transcription stage, I sought permission to use that data further. An example of seeking a solution to use one child’s work as potential data is described in my reflective journal:

*Today I wondered whether there was a way forward where I was keen to use Jade's picture as data but she objected:*

*Jade [3 years 3 months]: No, I done it for my mummy.*

*I asked Jade whether I could take a photocopy for my research and demonstrated how that would work by showing her the copier. Jade seemed interested in the copying process and agreed to me having the copy whilst she retained the original as her property.*

*{Reflective journal, October 5th 2010}*

#### **5.2.3.6 Participatory Research**

Through the use of a mixed-method approach, I aimed to provide alternative ways to encourage children to be able and to want to engage with the study. However I was mindful of the caution that some methods might be exclusive and this was an issue that would require sensitive awareness by the participating adults. This related to my expressed aim of promoting inclusivity and my research question exploring the inclusivity of the mixed methods in practice. Therefore I intended explicitly to encourage co-reflecting on the effectiveness of each method in the context of this specific setting. To minimise such occurrences, I intended discussions with the children, observing and consulting with other practitioners and parents to become informed of preferences and abilities.

Using methods based on the verbal not only raised the ethical issue of including those children who were less verbally confident but raised the issue of power and dominance in the group versus peer support (Morrow, 2005). I was aware that whereas group discussions might encourage participation with peers, equally this might inhibit less verbally able or quieter children. As one response, I considered where individual interview or interviews with a peer might be more appropriate (NCB, 2004 §4.1). I intended this would be an on-going issue for reflection and reflexivity.

I was aware that participatory action research required specific practical as well as ethical considerations regarding the ownership of the research, the balance of power and the amount of time that individual participants were able or wished to contribute (which could be considerable due to the iterative nature of action research). Given the significant contact time required by early years practitioners in their daily routines, I aimed to suggest a schedule for the study which would blend with current commitments as far as possible. I suggested that I assume some of the daily routine activities, as appropriate, to enable practitioners to complete their contributions to the research.

#### **5.2.3.7 Reporting and Dissemination**

During the collaborative process, I intended that general findings from the study would be shared with the participants. However it was intended that a final formal summary of the findings would be presented to the practitioners and the parents (BSA, 2002: 2). Equally, I explained that a separate summary would be prepared to share with the children using appropriate language and images (NCB, 2004 §6). I advised that any publication of data or findings during the study (for example, for student conferences) would be made known to the setting management.

#### **5.2.3.8 Storage and Management of Data**

During the consent process, I informed participants as to how data were to be collected, recorded, managed and used. I explained how the data would be stored safely, either at the setting or in my personal files (BSA, 2002: 5, NCB, 2004 §5.2). The setting management was aware that I would need to remove certain field notes from the setting for analysis and granted me permission given that the notes were anonymised as far as possible.

Where I desired to use children's work directly (for example photographs, other artwork), either in the thesis or during dissemination, specific permission was sought from the children, their parents and the setting as appropriate.

Due to the planned dissemination and reporting on the study to academic audiences, to include students on early years education courses, I envisaged that the data be usefully maintained over a period which could not be specified in advance. I advised my dissemination intentions as part of the consent process.

## **5.2.4 Approach to introducing research activities**

This section discusses the design of the research activities that were planned at the beginning of the study. Section 5.2.6 below discusses the challenges of implementing the activities. Reflections on the effectiveness of the activities led to a re-think and adaptation of the overall methodological approach, (discussed below, section 5.3). This section distinguishes the research activities that might support listening and hearing children's voices in pre-school practices from more general research methods. The former were not intended to be limited to use in the study; they were explored for their potential for continued use after the research has been completed. This is not to suggest a segregation of approach in the belief that 'special' methods are needed to be used for children whilst more general research methods are only applicable for adults (Mac Naughton et al, 2007; Punch, 2002; O'Kane, 2008, Dockett et al, 2011. See chapter 2, section 2.2.1.2). The particular research activities were explored for their appeal to and engagement of the children (Punch, 2002, Dockett et al, 2011).

### **5.2.4.1 Research activities with children**

As I reflected on how to introduce the research activities with the children, I decided to use the existing process employed by the pre-school which is based on an activity planning sheet pro forma. The pro forma sets out the aims for the activity and the resources needed and has sections for in-situ observations and evaluative comments. (See Appendix B for an example of a pro forma that I completed for one of my research activities). I considered that use of a known, workable process would aid ready understanding of the research activities and the ability to integrate the research into existing routines. The observation and evaluative comments sections would potentially, I felt, provide narrative data for the study gathered as part of normal pre-

school procedures. Of particular significance, I believed the observations and evaluations could be directly useable by the practitioners in documenting and planning, generally, and specifically for individual children, in their Learning Journey profiles (see glossary). I was very aware, from personal experience, that the practitioners at the pre-school felt pressurised by paperwork, especially since the introduction and the obligations of the EYFS (2008a) curriculum (Brooker et al, 2010). I hoped that this dual-purpose, practical approach might be an effective way to both introduce and create interest in the study thus gradually leading to increased participation.

After researching the participatory techniques used in other research with young children (see chapter 2, section 2.2.3), I selected key techniques which I felt would be potentially applicable and of most interest to the pre-school. I drew upon my existing knowledge of the pre-school environment, routines, resources and staff in making a selection. At the same time, I was aware of the limitation of this being my perspective at this early stage in the study before sharing the perspectives of others.

Initially I drew mainly on the hands-on practical techniques of Clark and Moss (2001) and Lancaster (2003a) in choosing Camera Tours, (Clark and Moss, 2001), the Wish Catcher, the Tree of Feelings and painting to music (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a-d). The theme common to the techniques is alternative forms of expression.

Appendix D gives further details of the aims for each activity introduced to the pre-school, in terms of potential themes, criteria and questions for exploration and foci for analysis.

#### **5.2.4.1.1 Camera Tours**

Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001), or similar use of camera as a research activity, had been generally well received in the studies from literature (for example, Pascal and Bertram, 2009; Dockett and Perry, 2005 a and b; Einarsdóttir, 2005 a and b. See chapter 2, section 2.2.3). An immediate appeal for my study was that the



authors reported the balance of power being reversed, with the children leading tours of their early years settings (with adults in the audience) or independently capturing significant images then re-telling their stories. A practical issue was the use of equipment, with questions posed as to how adults might react to children being given this responsibility (Lancaster, 2003a). On the other hand, it is just this granting responsibility that was potentially empowering to the children. This dualism was clear in my mind as I selected the activity for introduction.

I intended using my own camera for the study to offer its use to the children (fully realising the ethical implications of demonstrating that all images were erased before removing the camera from the setting). My own camera was inexpensive and I accepted that damage might occur before I opted to use it. The pre-school had a similar camera which was used by the staff, mainly to document the children's Learning Journeys. However I had no intention to seek permission to use it for the study at this stage, not least because of the potential for damage. Equally, even if permission were granted, I felt this would prejudice the activity, with the likelihood of attention to preserving the camera exceeding that of enabling the children responsibility. At this stage in the study, I firmly wished to give priority to and explore the children's agency.

I opted to use a digital camera as opposed to a film-camera (with the single-use disposables in mind) as I believed that the option to process the images sooner rather than later would be more attractive to the children and more beneficial to the study. Clark, in her study (Clark and Moss, 2001) reported that some children's recall was adversely affected by the delay in returning the printed photographs. In making my choice, I deliberated over this issue of recall versus the practicality of using disposable cameras and the possibility of enabling more than one child at a time to partake in the activity. I decided to proceed with the single digital camera, with the intention of reviewing this choice as part of the analysis of the activity. The setting gave permission for the in-house printer to be used to process the images.

I outlined the activity to the practitioners (on typically a one-to-one basis following the same 'opportunistic' process discussed above in section 5.2.3.1) and discussed the initial arrangements for offering Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001) to the

children with a senior practitioner. We agreed that the most practical approach was to invite the children to take part in the activity according to key groups (where each key group of approximately 12 children was allocated one day each per week to engage in activities requiring more individual adult support). This approach would ensure that each child had an equal opportunity to participate if they chose.

I had intended to consult with each practitioner on how to introduce the aim of the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001) to the children, however time pressures resulted in brief discussions. Two main approaches were chosen dependent on whether the children were transferring to school or remaining a further year at pre-school. For the former group, the children were to be invited to consider what they would like to remember about pre-school once they had moved on to 'big school'. The latter group were to be asked what they thought the new children arriving in September would like to know about pre-school. Whilst framing the activity with the two questions, I was well aware that this might or might not resonate with some children and that the mere act of offering the children the camera might be enough focus. Existing studies reported on such an initial reaction and suggested that with repeated use the children became more focussed on the subject of their pictures (Clark and Moss, 2001, Lancaster, 2003a, Pascal and Bertram, 2009). Therefore I approached the activity with an open mind as to whether the questions would be a useful framing at this stage. Equally I considered the activity the early stages of establishing and exploring working together with the children and the practitioners (see Figure 3 An adaptation of Kotter's eight stage model (Kotter, 1996: 21).

#### **5.2.4.2 Wish Catcher**

The Wish Catcher was an adaptation of one of the participatory methods introduced by Lancaster and Broadbent (2003a) aimed at research relating to listening to young children. Consistent with the approach, children were invited to consider their wishes, represent them in multiple ways of their choosing (e.g. drawings, models, photos, talking) and literally 'capture' them (in a suspended net in this study) to give them a material presence. Once materialised, children were invited to discuss their wishes.

The intended aim of the Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a) was to facilitate expression of feelings, aspirations, opinions and wishes. One avenue for exploration in my study was whether children felt it was ‘safe’ to explore their wishes. Another angle was to explore adult attitudes towards sharing children’s wishes (for example, when they cannot be actioned). The questions that were envisaged related to children’s different interpretations of the definition of a ‘wish’, what children know about whether wishes do or do not come true and whether children have wishes related to pre-school.

More general reflections were envisaged relating to participants’ impressions of the activity, taking into consideration usability and practicality, supporting children’s expression and being inclusive/exclusive.

#### **5.2.4.3 Tree of Feelings**

Similarly to the Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a), the Tree of Feelings (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b) was my adaptation in support of children expressing their feelings. Children were invited to represent what they considered made them happy/ sad, laugh/cry, excited/afraid etc by using materials of their choosing (paints, drawings material, other craft materials, voices and to physically hang their representations on the Tree of Feelings).

The overall aim, shared with the Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a), was the support of expression of feelings. Even more pertinent to the Tree of Feelings (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b) was the exploration of children’s attitudes to feeling able (‘safe’) to express feelings, both positive and negative. Equally I envisaged the opportunity to explore adult attitudes to sharing and valuing children’s feelings (even when we might be uncomfortable with what the children express i.e. their negative feelings). One of the considerations was whether children would have a preference for expressing positive feelings over negative. Another

consideration was whether children would express their feelings in relation to their pre-school experiences.

The general reflections were envisaged to be similar to those discussed above for the Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a), relating to the practical and ethical aspects of the technique.

#### **5.2.4.4 Painting to music**

Painting to music (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c and d) was inspired by Lancaster and Broadbent's use of music to represent non-verbal communication. In my study, painting materials were provided and background music was played (representing the seasons, seashore and woodland). Children were invited to freely choose what they wished to paint without adult suggestion or attention to the background music.

The overall aim for the activity was to explore whether music might influence children's expression through their painting. A further aim was to consider in what ways adults might share and value children's non-verbal expressions. One of the planned angles for reflection related to children's choice to discuss what they intended painting, were in the process of painting or had finished painting. A further intention was to reflect on adult attitudes, for instance, to respect that children might not know what they are painting - they may be exploring without a 'finished product' in mind. Equally a focus of the activity was envisaged to be adult reactions to children's paintings or explanations of paintings.

#### **5.2.4.5 Small group interactions**

Small group interactions with the children, or one-to-one, as appropriate, were planned to review the experiences of exploring the research activities described above (see Figure 3 An adaptation of Kotter's eight stage model (Kotter, 1996: 21). I was mindful of the ethical tensions of supporting individual voices to be heard within a group context (Nutbrown, 2002, Morrow, 2005). Equally I was aware of the

potential for children to support each other, to ask each other questions or to prompt thinking (Einarsdóttir, 2007, Brooker, 2001) Hence I considered children both choosing peer groups for support and/or discussing with me/the practitioners individually as they preferred. I noted Brooker's (2001) advice that groups exceeding 2 or 3 might not be the most effective due to young children's 'egocentricity' (: 168). The timing of such interactions was intentionally flexible, although it was the aim for discussions to take place within a short space of time after completion of the activities to support children's recall. Inputs to the interactions included the children's photographs, craft or other artwork, or transcriptions of the children's reactions to the research activities (in the form of field notes or observations (see below, section 5.2.4.6.3).

I intended the format for the group interactions to be semi-structured, as a means to stimulate initial discussions, with the possibility for unstructured discussion to ensue (Cohen et al, 2007) should the children be motivated to explore other issues and interests. I heeded Brooker's advice (2001) that research has shown that direct questioning risks children assuming they are being tested in some way or risks children aiming to please. In this respect, I envisaged the availability of the children's photographs and art would act as an indirect means to explore children's responses to the research questions.

#### **5.2.4.6 General research methods**

The follow are the methods that I intended to support the activities with the children.

##### **5.2.4.6.1 Practitioner meetings**

I envisaged that regular meetings be held (most likely as part of monthly pre-school team meetings) to review the research activities during that period (see Figure 3 An adaptation of Kotter's eight stage model (Kotter, 1996: 21). I was aware of the ethical tension of hearing all voices to be heard (that wished to be heard), especially in a forum where there is a 'hierarchy' from management to more recent and junior

staff. However I was hopeful that my awareness of the tension would be a starting point to encourage voices, especially given my objective to hear alternative viewpoints rather than seeking a consensus on one course of possible action only (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss, 2007, Mac Naughton, 2005).

The intended objective of such meetings was to reflectively evaluate the research activities (Mac Naughton et al; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004, Griffiths, 1998) in which we had participated with the children, as well as to explore wider related issues such as attitudes, beliefs and current practices about 'child voice', its place in the curriculum and ways to make 'child voice' visible.

Appendix D illustrates the types of questions that I had envisaged as part of such meetings. I intended that such a collaborative approach offer different perspectives on potential changes to be introduced (see Figure 3 An adaptation of Kotter's eight stage model (Kotter, 1996: 21), stage 3), to enable the implications to be discussed and be visible to all practitioners and to maximise the potential for the team to 'own' the changes.

I had hoped that Focused Conversations (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) would be a potential format for such meetings (see section 4.1.2.2). The significant appeal offered by the approach is the attempt to equalise participation amongst attendees by having a flexible agenda that is shaped by the direction of conversations amongst the participants.

I envisaged that a blend of meetings and Focused Conversations would offer the opportunity to explore issues in both a semi-structured fashion (from the former) (Cohen et al, 2007) and a more open format from the Focused Conversations (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). Unfortunately such meetings struggled to materialise in the research, as discussed below (section 5.3). Instead brief, ad hoc discussions took the place of the intended meetings.

#### **5.2.4.6.2 Parent meetings**

I had envisaged inviting parents to participate in the research process on largely an informal basis. I was experienced at working in partnership with parents in my former practitioner role and intended to use such practices to translate to my research approach. In my practitioner role, I was accustomed to discussing children's 'progress' with parents both at more formal parents meetings and more on an informal basis where I used opportune moments to have conversations with parents (either on dropping or collecting their children). Inspired by approaches such as Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a. See chapter 2 section 2.2.3.2), I planned to use a similar approach that I had used in my practitioner role but with a view to developing this further, for discussing research data and assisting with meaning-making. I was aware that as a researcher I would have more time to dedicate to working in partnership with parents. Therefore I envisaged I would invite parents into the pre-school on a more frequent basis than is usual, to actively involve them in the process.

On reflection this was somewhat aspirational. Although I attempted to engage parents on an informal basis, I had not given full attention to their other daily commitments. It seemed that previously parents had made the time to discuss their child's progress ('official' pre-school business) whereas they were less keen to give unplanned time to my attempts to engage with them relating to their children's research experiences. However, I was able to arrange some planned time with 6 parents on a one-to-one basis, to come into pre-school specifically to discuss the research. The setting management advised when this would be convenient and suggested about 15 minutes would be a reasonable amount of time to allocate to each.

The meetings were semi-structured in format (Cohen et al, 2007) and related to parents' perspectives of their children's Learning Journeys in terms of 'hearing' their children's voices. Examples of questions and responses are included in Appendix F.

#### **5.2.4.6.3 Observation documentation**

Observations, written by the practitioners, essentially formed the basis of the documentation that was required to be produced for each child at pre-school, a process that is very familiar in early years settings (Bruce, 2005; Luff, 2007). Observations were typically a blend of planned and spontaneous decisions made by practitioners to document the children's 'progress'. For example, a practitioner might plan to observe a particular scheduled activity or might notice a child demonstrating some 'learning' that she decided was noteworthy.

As one of my research aims was to 'blend' my research methods with existing pre-school practices as far as possible (see chapter 3, section 3.1.1), it seemed logical to use the existing pre-school process to attempt to document children's experiences during the research. To reflect this aim, I planned to use the pre-school observation paperwork as a key source of documentation to capture the data from implementing the research activities with the children.

My intention was to use the observations as one of the inputs to meetings with practitioners (as well as parents) and small-group interactions with children, for use as a tool for joint reflection on practice in the context of children's expressions of their pre-school experiences.

An added advantage that I perceived, from the point of view of research being useful and 'usable' to the pre-school during the research process (rather than in the future), was that in using existing pre-school documentation, data from the research could be used directly in the children's Learning Journey profiles (Learning Journeys are discussed further in chapter 6, section 6.1.1.4).



#### **5.2.4.7 Written evaluations**

I envisaged multiple approaches to capturing written evaluations of the research that would act as documentation on which to base reflections (such as an input to practitioner and parent meetings).

My starting point was to use existing pre-school documentation, a similar process as discussed for children's observations. I intended to use the pre-school standard activity planning sheets to document written evaluations of the research activities. The activity planning sheet has an evaluation section which is completed by practitioners on completion of an activity. On this basis, I envisaged that practitioners and I would follow this process when exploring the research activities. Completed evaluation sheets as well as observation sheets (see previous section) would act as input to the practitioner (and parent) meetings and be an impetus to developing the research process further after joint reflection.

I used the sheet to set out overall aims and suggestions for ways to implement the research activities (see Appendix B for an example of a completed activity planning sheet used in the study).

##### **5.2.4.7.1 Delphi technique**

As introduced above (section 4.1.2.2) the Delphi technique (Cohen et al, 2007: 309) was an approach that I had intended to use alongside practitioner meetings to explore specific themes or issues that were raised at the meetings but would benefit from a deeper consideration (not permitted within the meeting timescales). To briefly recap, the aim of the Delphi technique is for individual perspectives to be captured in written form then collated and considered. Such consideration might give rise to further issues which could re-initiate the process of individual (written) contemplation. Although potentially lengthier as a process, I imagined that it would permit practitioners to offer viewpoints which they might not wish to do as part of a

group meeting, hence addressing my ethical concern of offering a space for all voices to be heard (without the risk of the loudest dominating).

However the lack of opportunity for practitioner meetings (see above) equally limited the scope for the Delphi technique as I had envisaged each complementing one another in determining and following up issues and themes. Nevertheless I did attempt the technique when I became aware of the challenges with face-to-face practitioner meetings. This is discussed further below (section 5.2.7.2).

#### **5.2.4.8 Reflective Journal**

This was one of the first research methods that I employed, impressed by the recommendation to begin to capture thoughts and impressions on the research process from its earliest conception (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007, Holliday, 2007). Initially I had intended the journal for my own use, to reflect on how the process was developing. However I began to see the value in using the entries to share reflections with my supervisors, to assist with exploring other meanings or current challenges. Entries in my journal were made on a daily basis, either to capture thoughts as they occurred in the fieldwork or to respond to issues raised in reviewing the literature (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). The significance of such entries became more poignant when challenges to the research process began to emerge (discussed below, section 5.2.6). As I reviewed my thoughts and impressions in the journal I was able to make more meaning of the direction and wider implications of the research.

An unintended use of the reflective journal was to use entries (as data extracts and vignettes) to analyse and re-analyse the data. This is discussed further in chapter 7.

#### **5.2.5 Early insights from implementation of research activities**

This section reflects on some of the earliest insights from the research activities. In the main the reflections relate to the Camera Tours activity (Clark and Moss, 2001) as this was the activity that received the most attention. There were issues that

prevented the other activities, namely the Tree of Feelings (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b), Painting to music (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c and d) and the Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a), being explored beyond an initial brief introduction. The reasons for this are discussed below (section 5.2.7). Nevertheless there were insights from these activities that are noteworthy of inclusion. The insights from the Wish Catcher activity are presented in section 5.2.6 which discusses the challenges that began to emerge from implementing the activities.

### **5.2.5.1 Camera Tours**

The following reflections relate to some of the children's experiences from the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005) activity. Entries from my reflective journal and examples of the children's photographs (with their captions that I recorded verbatim) illustrate the early findings. Only photographs which do not identify individuals are included.

### **5.2.5.2 Reversing the power balance**

The notion of reversing the balance of power (for example, Dahlberg et al, 2007; O'Kane, 2008; Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010; Lancaster, 2003a, Clark and Moss, 2001;) seemed to represent a positive beginning with the children taking ownership of the camera and making choices as to which photographs to take. I was anticipating some initial 'experimenting' with the camera as advised by Clark and Moss (2001). However many of the children's photographs appeared 'purposeful' from the initial stage. Jane's (4 years 2 months) photographs are one example. An extract from my journal:

*I invited Jane to share her photographs with me. Jane explained how she had taken pictures to show her sister who would be starting pre-school next term (Dockett and Perry, 2005 a and b). Although it appears that equally Jane is reflecting on her own experiences. [Examples of Jane's photographs and captions are shown below in Figure 5].*

*A consideration of the photographs appears to show quite purposefully how Jane has used the camera opportunity to 'catalogue' significant experiences for her. An examination of the photographs shows how Jane has appeared to capture the key areas around the room (which would presumably best illustrate to her sister the pre-school context) i.e. the Carpet area, the book corner, the role play area, the sand/water play area, the construction area (incidentally very typical areas generally in early years settings from my experiences). Jane has included a close-up of the Weather Board (an interactive Board enabling a few selected children each session to add the date, weather to the board), which as she says she likes and wants to remember when she leaves for primary school at the end of term. I wonder if Jane was thinking this was a part of the routine (Dockett and Perry, 2005b) that her sister would need to know as the Board represents a key part of the (twice) daily routine where the practitioners discuss (perhaps teach or test?) the day, date and weather with the children. Similarly Jane's depiction of her lunch box represents another routine at pre-school. I was grateful that I had printed both pictures of the Cushion Frog. I could have easily overlooked the second picture thinking it was a duplicate of the first and was 'accidental'. However, Jane's explanation (see caption to photographs) shows a deliberate motive to express the attention she wishes to give to the Frog.*

**{ Reflective journal, June 9th 2010 }**



**Photo 1**

*I really like playing in the home corner, with the food. I cook it.*



**Photo 2**

*The books. For when I go to [primary] school to remind me.*



**Photo 3**

*I like the weather board. I want to remember this as pre-school when I go to big school.*



**Photo 4**

*I want to remember when I go to big school where I put my lunchbox.*



**Photo 5**

*This is where I put the cushions.*



**Photo 6**

*This picture is the same but I wanted a closer one.*

**Figure 5 What I want to remember about pre-school (and tell my little sister)  
{Camera Tours, Jane, June 9th 2010}**

Although some children did seem to take seemingly less ‘purposeful’ photographs, I became aware of the need to exercise caution in making this judgement. Jane’s ‘duplicate’ photograph of the Cushion Frog was one illustration. Such awareness led me to a further exploration of what is meant to attempt to reverse, or balance, the adult-child power relationship and how dialogue with the children is a key contributor (for example, Alexander, 2010, Dahlberg et al, 2007; Tizard and Hughes, 2002; Wells, 1987; Wood et al, 1980).

### 5.2.5.3 The importance of dialogue for meaning-making

The next extract from my journal is a poignant example where I had been tempted to overlook dialogue with a child whose photographs seemed to represent ‘experimentation’ rather than his thoughts about his pre-school experiences.

*Before sharing Terry’s (3 years 11 months) photographs, I admit to finding myself making a comparison, in developmental terms, between Jane and Terry, and making the assumption that Terry’s photographs might not ‘tell such a story’ as was the case for Jane. In fact this was not the case at all. I am rather ashamed to admit that I imagined Terry would take ‘random’ pictures with little thought as to what he was doing. [Examples of Terry’s photographs and captions are shown below in Figure 6].*

*When I first glanced at Terry’s photographs, I was initially drawn to the one of the radiator (which I wasn’t able to identify immediately) and a ‘blank’ one [below, photo 1], and this confirmed my thinking that this might not be as ‘fruitful’ an exercise as I had recently with Jane. My first thoughts were that I was unlikely to glean any insights into how Terry felt about his pre-school experiences and even more unlikely to take any action to make any improvements. Terry’s excitement on seeing his photographs, and then wanting to talk about them, changed my initial reaction. Terry typically did not initiate conversation with practitioners and was often ‘off doing his own thing... in his own world’ (description from his key worker). In fact Terry appeared most excited about the photograph of the radiator [below, photo 2], exclaiming:*

*Look at that one! It’s the radiator! I want to count them.*

**{ Camera Tours, July 13th 2010 }**

*Terry then rushed over to count the bars of the radiator. I thought I might well have lost his attention. I was wrong, Terry quickly returned to examine his photographs and interestingly commented on the 'black' one, (the one that I would have most likely disregarded, in fact probably de-selected from the print menu):*

*Look which one I done there [pause 1 second] I like black!*

**{ Camera Tours, July 13th 2010 }**

*Terry hailed a child walking by to look at his photographs. To my surprise (again ashamedly), Terry identified some photographs that I had mistakenly printed as being his:*

*James did that one, and that one [pause 2 seconds] I did that one  
[Terry began to tick the photographs]*

*I need to check these, [pause] the ones I taked.*

**{ Camera Tours, July 13th 2010 }**

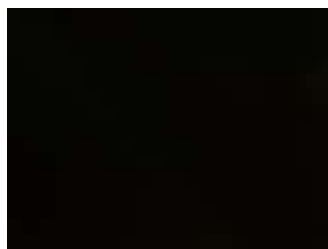
*At this point, I began to feel the effects of the 'adult-child power reversal' although not as I had imagined. I was feeling inadequate that I had muddled the individual children's photographs, something I had taken care not to do. I was feeling uncomfortable that I would not have thought that Terry would have noticed anyway. And this added to almost disregarding the 'black' photo, and most likely the radiator too. Terry moved on to the photo through the window (where the 'park' is not visible [below, photo 3]), and called to a girl on the next table:*

*Mary! I like the park... you went there, didn't you and Sophie did?*

**{ Camera Tours, July 13<sup>th</sup> 2010 }**

**{ Reflective journal, July 13<sup>th</sup> 2010 }**

This example illustrates how Terry's expressions of his interests would have been completely missed without opening a space for dialogue and certainly would have differed from my own (adult) interpretations (Clark and Moss, 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2005a and b; Dockett and Perry, 2005b). Although it might be argued that Terry chose to engage with the Camera Tours activity, the activity risked to be tokenistic (Dockett et al, 2011) from my point of view without attempting dialogue, and dialogue with an 'open mind' as to what might emerge. The dialogue offered the opportunity for Terry to clarify his interests in the park and to engage other children who he considered might share his interest. Equally other aspects of Terry's experiences were becoming visible, such as the importance he placed on identifying with his own achievements, in taking his photographs, and sharing those with others.



***Photo 1***

*Look which one I done there! I like black.*

***Photo 2***

*Look at that one! It's the radiator!*

***Photo 3***

*I like the park. [Calls across to some children] Mary, you went there didn't you and Sophie did?*

**Figure 6 'Look at my photos I taked!'.  
{Camera Tours, Terry, July 13th 2010}**

My own preconceptions of children's 'abilities' is an issue to which I return in chapter 7 (section 7.2.2.1).



#### 5.2.5.4 Beginning to understand children's pre-school experiences

Jane and Terry's experiences are examples of where I began to make meanings of children's expressions as to which aspects of pre-school were of significance to them. Jane's photographs of the pre-school resources and routines were common subjects in other children's photographs, often accompanied by explanations of how children enjoyed specifically interacting with particular resources. Popular choices were playing with the dolls in the home corner, the cars and the garage, reading books or making things with the play dough.

##### 5.2.5.4.1 The significance of other children

Photographs of other children featured highly (Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010, Clark and Moss, 2001, Lancaster, 2003b). Explanations for taking the photographs included mainly friendship and a few accepting offers to act as photographer!

*That's Sally. She's my friend.*

***{Penny (3 years, 9 months), Camera Tours, September 14<sup>th</sup> 2010}***

*'Cause I like her.*

***{Sharon (3 years, 6 months), Camera Tours, September 20th 2010}***

*Tom wanted me to take his photo. He wanted to talk to me.*

***{Maddy, (4 years, 4 months) Camera Tours, June 23rd 2010}***

#### 5.2.5.4.2 The significance of practitioners

Practitioners also appeared in many of the children's photographs (Clark and Moss, 2001). Some of the comments related to the practitioners and their roles according to the children whilst others suggested perhaps seizing the opportunity to be in 'charge'!

*This is one I took of Lynne. She wasn't looking! [Henry laughs].*

**{Henry, (4 years, 8 months) Camera Tours, July 5<sup>th</sup> 2010}**

*I took a picture of the computer because Laura was on it [pause 1 second] she cuddles me.*

**{Juliet, (4 years, 7 months) Camera Tours, July 19<sup>th</sup> 2010}**

*Julie's in there [only just visible in the storeroom]. I wanted to take her photo. She reads me stories.*

**{Eliza, (4 years, 7 months) Camera Tours, July 19<sup>th</sup> 2010}**

#### 5.2.5.4.3 Inaccessible areas and resources

Some of the children chose to take photographs of either resources or areas of the pre-school room that were inaccessible to them (Dockett and Perry, 2005b, Clark and Moss, 2001). Examples of these included the entrance to storage cupboards, the manager's office and the kitchen. Some of the photographs and the children's explanations for their choices are shown in Figure 7.



***Jane's photo***

*I really like to look at the giraffe loads and loads of times.*

***{Jane (4 years, 2 months), Camera Tours, June 9th 2010}***



***Penny's photo***

*That's the dolls up high.*

***{ Penny (3 years, 9 months), Camera Tours, September 16th 2010}***



***John's photo***

*I took a picture of the whistle because I wanted to blow the whistle.*

***{John (4 years, 6 months), Camera Tours, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2010}***



***Sally's photo***

*I like to watch, they're working. I like to say 'hi'.*

***{Sally (4 years, 10 months), Camera Tours, July 19th 2010}***

**Figure 7 Inaccessible resources and areas to children**

The giraffe and dolls pictured in Jane and Penny's photographs are toys that the management explained had been moved out of the children's reach as some of the

removable parts had been misplaced in the past during the children's play. Although it would be permitted to play with them, this needed to be supervised to avoid potential damage. Both the issue of the giraffe and the dolls are contemplated further in chapter 7. The whistle referred to by John is used by the practitioners to signal key events in the routine, such as snack time and tidy-up time. Children are not permitted to use it other than as a 'special privilege' with adult supervision.

I was curious as to whether Sally would like to join the practitioners in the office rather than hail them over the child safety gate:

*Sally: They say we can't go in there. Allowed not.*

*Me: Would you like to go in?*

*Sally: No! Because they are not going to allow us at all.*

*{Camera Tours, July 5th 2010}*

A further example of a response to the 'rules' is illustrated in the next section.

#### **5.2.5.4.4 Life beyond the pre-school walls**

Photographs of the entrance door and views through the windows were included by some children. Similarly to Terry (see previous section), children tended to have specific reasons for taking the images, of which several related to the access to outdoor play, the outdoor pre-school activities, as well as one representing the doorway as the transition from pre-school to home. A selection of the photographs and the children's explanations are given next in Figure 8.



***Sharon's photo***

*This is the door for going for a walk. We have to hold hands. Can't go through it.*

***{Sharon (4 years 0 months), Camera Tours, June 17th 2010}***

***Bill's photo***

*That's where I go outside to play!*

***{Bill (4 years 2 months), Camera Tours, June 17th 2010}***

***Penny's photo***

*My mummy will be ringing on the doorbell...I don't know when.*

***{Penny (3 years 5 month), Camera Tours, July 9th 2010}***

**Figure 8 Doors and windows and their representations**

In Sharon and Bill's photographs the door and the view through the window represent the access to the outside play area. The pre-school does not have a 'free flow' access to the outdoors, perhaps being alluded to by Sharon's remark that the children are not allowed to exit without scheduled supervision. This is contrast to the children in Einarsdóttir's (2005 a and b) research, where Einarsdóttir commented that the outdoors is an important space in Iceland as it is accessed in all weathers by early years settings. Perhaps consequently the outdoors featured highly in children's photographs. It was not clear from attempted discussions with Sharon and Bill whether they would prefer to be able to freely access the outdoor area:

*Me: Would you like to go out and play when you want?*

*Sharon: Not allowed.*

*Bill: [Shrugs.*

***{Camera Tours, June 17th 2010}***

Implications of the pre-school rules for children's expressions are explored further in chapter 7.

Penny's representation in her photograph appears to have another intention, with thoughts of returning to her family life:

*Me: Yes mummy will be coming soon, Penny, at home time.*

*Penny: When's time home?*

*Me: About an hour. See the clock over there? When the big hand goes round to the 3. So not too long.*

*Penny: I miss mummy.*

*{Camera Tours, July 9<sup>th</sup> 2010}*

Such differing interpretations add weight to the significance of opening the space for dialogue with children around their (photographic and other) expressions to avoid the risk of making assumptions about children's representations (Dockett and Perry, 2005 a and b; Einarsdóttir, 2005 a and b; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Punch 2002).

#### **5.2.5.5 Tree of Feelings and painting to music**

Both the Tree of Feelings (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b) and the painting to music (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c) activities presented challenges for me in 'managing' the practicalities of typically 'messy' paint-based activities with the children (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c). This issue is explored further in chapter 7 (section 7.4.1.). The children appeared to engage enthusiastically with the activities, possibly since painting is not offered on a frequent basis as part of pre-school provision. The challenges meant that the activities were largely without the (dialogical) interactions with the children for which I had hoped. However there was a poignant illustration from the Tree of Feelings activity that seems to suggest how

the activity might offer potential for listening to children's expressions. The conversation is between Justin (4 years and 7 months) and Noel (3 years and 9 months) and I, relating to the colours that they had chosen to paint the leaves of the Tree of Feelings:

*Me: What colours have you chosen Justin?*

*Justin: Orange.*

*Me: And how does orange make you feel?*

*Justin: Makes me think of the sunset.*

*Me: Oh yes, the sunset... And how does the sunset feel to you?*

*Justin: Happy, as think of bedtime and going to sleep.*

*Me: And yellow, is that one of the colours you chose?*

*Justin: Yes, it makes me think of the sun, bright outside, hotter.*

*Me: How about this black leaf you've painted?*

*Justin: Reminds me of night [pause 1 second] and sleeping.*

*Me: Oh yes. You said you like sleeping didn't you.*

*Me: Noel, how about you? What colours have you chosen?*

*Noel: Yellow makes me happy, pink makes me happy. All colours make me happy.*

*Me: How about the green bit? How does green feel to you?*

*Noel: Green is in my dreams [pause 1 second] Saturdays and Sundays.*

*Me: And the black part of the branch here?*

*Noel: Black reminds the tree of thunder [pause 2 seconds]. Some trees die, ok to be sad.*

***{Justin (4 years 7 months), Noel (3 years and 9 months), Tree of Feelings, July 1st 2010}***

*I have to admit to being surprised (yet again, the limitations of the developmental and deficit model (Dahlberg et al, 2007, Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008) with which I viewed children at times) with the flow, the naturalness and the depth of thought that the conversation appeared to illuminate. I could not have imagined such a rich depiction (so again I had some expectation of what I might hear) from such a brief dialogue. Justin and*

*Noel appear to be making connections between colours and the feelings which they appear to invoke with ease, and equally relating their feelings both to their lived experiences (night time and sleep, the sunshine and the weekend) as well as their thoughts on death, giving permission to be sad, or maybe contemplating sadness as an acceptable emotion.*

**{ Reflective journal, Tree of Feelings, July 1st 2010 }**

### **Figure 9 Children's creative expressing of feelings**

My tendency in the early stages of my research to 'discount' children's participation, if it apparently was not aligned to my research objectives, is an issue on which I came to reflect. The notion of children being 'able' to express their feelings is a further issue which I discuss in chapter 7 (section 7.2.2.3).

#### **5.2.6 Emerging challenges from implementation of research activities**

This section reflects on the early challenges to listening to children's voices that emerged through the implementation of the research activities.

##### **5.2.6.1 Attempting action on children's voices**

Whilst sharing the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001) with the children, a wider discussion with a practitioner and the pre-school manager raised a significant question relating to being able to action children's voices (Morrow, 2005, Prout, 2003). This was especially significant for my study as a core aim was to involve children as active decision-makers (Moss et al, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010; UN, 1989, the Children Act 2004). The incident involved a follow-up with Jane on her photographs



that she had taken (above, Figure 5), specially relating to the toy giraffe hanging on the wall.

*Me: So what have you taken here, Jane?*

*Jane: A giraffe [giggles] [an alphabet giraffe hanging on wall.*

*Me: A giraffe? What do you do with the giraffe?*

*Jane: Nothing. It stays there.*

*Me: Oh, it just stays there, does it? Why do you think you don't do anything with it?*

*Jane: Because it always stays up there.*

*Me: Stays up too high?*

*Jane: Yes.*

*Me: Ah, I see. Perhaps what we could do is put it lower it so you could reach?*

*Jane: Maybe on that hook there? [points to a hook lower down on wall].*

*Me: That's a great idea! I will ask Eileen [pre-school management] about that.*

*Sarah: [4 years 7 months] [Who had joined towards the end of the conversation] We could change them [the letters are in pockets and removable]. I was playing 'a-b-c' the other day [laughs].*

*I felt enthusiastic that the photo activity had enabled Jane to highlight an aspect of pre-school provision that would not have been realised by the adults and that was apparently easily remedied. I immediately took Jane's photo to Laura, [practitioner], and explained Jane's suggestion. Laura appeared to share my enthusiasm both for the photo activity and for moving the giraffe to make it accessible. As Laura reached to remove the giraffe from the hook, she hesitated and explained she suspected that Eileen [pre-school management] had moved the giraffe purposely out of the children's reach. I was puzzled and queried why.*

*Eileen was concerned that the removable alphabet letters were not mislaid, as had happened in the past. However Laura decided to move the giraffe to the lower hook. I was eager to show Jane that we had not only listened to what she had to say but had acted on it. Jane beamed. Unfortunately Jane was unable to play with the giraffe immediately as the daily routine prevented this at that time.*

*Towards the end of the session, Eileen called across the room:*

*Eileen: What is that giraffe doing there?*

*Laura: [explains rationale to Eileen].*

*Eileen: I moved that purposely to stop the letters from getting lost! Well if they get lost it's up to you to find them.*

*Laura: Oh, ok then.*

*The following day I noticed that the giraffe has been moved back onto the higher hook. Laura saw me looking and remarked "yes, Eileen moved it".*

**{ Reflective journal, July 9th 2010 }**

*A week later, I was working with Jane to cut and stick her photographs into her Learning Journey. When the picture of the giraffe was being glued in the diary, I realised that I had not had any conversation with Jane regarding the giraffe being made inaccessible again. I attempted to remedy this, wishing that I had discussed this with Jane at the time. As Jane was cutting and sticking her photographs, we were revisiting the reasons for her choices of images. Jane's recall was strikingly the same as the original accounts she had given. I anticipated a similar repeat of the conversation about the giraffe and intended using this opportunity to explain why the giraffe had not remained on the lower hook as Jane had suggested. I was surprised when Jane simply commented "that is the giraffe". I opened what I anticipated was a conversation about its positioning:*

*Me: Oh yes the giraffe. It was up too high to play with, wasn't it?*  
*Jane: [nods].*  
*Me: Did you want to have it on the lower hook so you could reach it?*  
*Jane: No.*  
*Me: No? Oh I thought you did?*  
*Jane: [shakes head, looks away] It's not allowed.*  
*Me: Oh right. In case the pieces go missing, I think. Do you wish it was allowed?*  
*Jane: [shakes head] No.*

**{ Reflective journal, July 16th 2010 }**

### **Figure 10 Attempting action on children's voices**

This incident appeared an early indication of some of the challenges relating to power relations (for example, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, Punch, 2002) on which I came to reflect as the study progressed. At that time I questioned whether Jane actually regretted making the suggestion, perhaps feeling that she had acted against the pre-school rules. I imagined this might prevent Jane from making further suggestions readily and apparently naturally as she had done. My intention to listen to Jane's voice in the first instance and then to act upon this appeared to be counterproductive and potentially detrimental. I questioned in whose interests my actions had been (Dahlberg et al, 2007, Mac Naughton, 2005; Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009, Cohen et al, 2007). My own positioning in the episode is discussed below (section 5.2.8).

### 5.2.6.2 Valuing children's wishes when they represent fantasies?

The Wish Catcher activity (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a) was implemented by Lynne and Julie (practitioners), with the children. Brief follow-up discussions revealed doubts from both Lynne and Julie that the children understood the concept of wishes (aside from linking to presents at birthdays and Christmas). Lynne added that there was a sense of children copying each another to decide on what to wish. Lynne and Julie evaluated the activity as follows:

***Lynne:***

*The children found it hard explaining what a wish is.*

*Two said a wish is "a princess".*

*One child said, "a fairy".*

*Mary said, "you make a wish in the night. A teddy person". Another child said, "a fireman". John said, "my wishes are pink".*

***Julie:***

*Catherine said, "I wished for a doggy last time, now to meet an alien!"*

*Catherine made a green paper alien with 3 eyes.*

*Tom said, "I'm going to make a shooting star because that's a wish!" Tom made a picture with wool and shiny materials.*

*Eliza didn't know what to do when I explained about wishes. She made a picture using different materials. When I asked her what it was, she didn't know.*

**{ Written evaluations, June 18th 2010 }**

**Figure 11 Do children understand wishes?**

On contemplating the accounts that Lynne and Julie documented, I was surprised that the children's wishes did not seem to represent the doubts expressed by the practitioners. My initial impressions were that the children had expressed creatively their wishes, including exploring their desires to meet fantasy characters. Lynne's comment that the children tended to copy each other's ideas, perhaps suggesting that the loudest voices had dominated the quieter, I viewed differently as one child's voice most likely inspiring another, therefore a tension in the perception of the power dynamics of group work (Morrow, 2005). I was curious as to why the practitioners had suggested the children did not understand the concept of a wish? I wondered whether they had particular expectations of the nature of the responses from the children, perhaps that the wishes represented 'reality' rather than fantasies.

It was just such alternative meaning-making that I aimed to discuss at the Focused Conversations (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) with the practitioners, to allow reflection as to other possibilities rather than rely on one meaning as representing the 'truth' (Moss, 2007; Dalhberg et al, 2007; Crotty 1998, Pring, 2004).

### **5.2.7 Attempting to engage practitioners**

Section 5.2.4.6 set out the research activities that I had designed with the aim of supporting practitioner participation, activities that were intended to blend with existing pre-school routines, predominantly the completion of documentation.

However, at an early stage in the study, there appeared to be an expectation both from the setting management and from the practitioners that I would introduce and carry out the activities with the children alone. With the notion that creating participatory research might well start slowly and need nurturing (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, Cohen et al, 2007), and with my intentions to establish a shared interest and a working partnership (Figure 3 An adaptation of Kotter's eight stage model (Kotter, 1996: 21), I felt that the introduction of the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001) would attempt to practically demonstrate, as a starting point, some of the aims of the study and to visibly show the study underway.

I introduced the research activities with the children over a period of 10 weeks. The introduction was intended to be an equal exploration of each activity (for approximately 4 weeks each). The aim was to follow each activity by a joint reflection (Figure 3 An adaptation of Kotter's eight stage model (Kotter, 1996: 21), stages 4- 7) to inform the next phase of the action research (i.e. how to take each activity forward, adapt each activity as appropriate). However, a lack of participation by the practitioners impacted on the introduction and the length of exploration of each method.

Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001) was the initial activity to be introduced. I allowed extra time, in total 6 weeks, in the hope practitioner participation would increase. However, despite my efforts to engage the practitioners (by sharing the children's photographs and comments, often presented as documentation for use in the children's Learning Journeys), I continued with the activity alone with the children. Although the activity was insightful in terms of beginning to make meanings with the children of their pre-school experiences, the minimal adult support limited a further exploration of the activity at that stage.

A decision to move onto the other activities (Tree of Feelings (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b), Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a) and painting to music (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c and d)) proved no less fruitful in terms of practitioner participation. I had hoped that the more familiar use of craft resources (rather than camera technology) might encourage participation. As again this was limited, these activities were much briefer than intended and in fact mirrored the pattern of pre-school activities, where each activity typically does not extend beyond a week. Although my research activities were 'accommodated' for their week, I had the sense that the following week other pre-school activities were planned, despite my offer to align my research activities with those planned.

Even though the research activities again were of apparent interest to the children (and to my research), it seemed inappropriate to attempt to continue the research activities at this point. As the end of the pre-school term was approaching (July 2010), the research had a natural break which afforded me the opportunity to reflect

on the process before re-starting the study in September. This is considered further below.

#### **5.2.7.1 Reflections on limited participation**

I reflected on my intention to support practitioner participation through the use of the normal documentation used in pre-school to plan activities and document children's learning. Although such use of the documentation had appeared to assist participation, overall this was relatively minimal. Practitioners had appeared to respond positively to receiving my completed documentation on the research activities that I carried out with the children; however I observed that there seemed little follow-up. The documentation was added to the children's Learning Journeys, without further contemplation to my knowledge. Further attempts to encourage practitioners to complete research activities on the days when I was not in pre-school were met with a lower response than I had anticipated.

The realisation that participation with the practitioners had not gained momentum in the three months that the study had been underway required a rethink as to the possible meanings. Primarily, I reconsidered the appropriateness of attempting a participatory methodology, and in particular one based on implementing potential change to practices. Equally I re-contemplated the 'reality' of my aim for the research activities to integrate with the daily responsibilities of the practitioners. I revisited my assumptions that the research was of interest and potentially useful to the practitioners in performing their role. In terms of Hart's (2007) participation ladder (see section 2.1.2.2.1 Figure 2), I had some concerns that the research was struggling to move from the non-participation stages (rungs 1 to 3). This was significantly removed from the levels of participation (represented by rungs 6 and 7) that I was hopeful of achieving.

A significant barrier was fully understanding practitioners' reactions to the initial phase of the study, often reliant on casual, informal snippets of dialogue rather than planned sessions to share each other's perspectives. Ideally I would have had

dedicated weekly meetings where we could have discussed the progress of the study and planned the next stages. However limited non-contact time within pre-school working hours (Clark and Moss, 2001, Katz, 2011) meant that such meetings were not realistic. Monthly staff meetings were the only planned opportunity for practitioners to discuss provision together. It was such meetings that I had intended as a space for developing Focused Conversations (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007, above, section 5.2.4.6.1). Unfortunately this proved unrealistic equally. The limited time allotted to the staff meetings (1 paid hour during one evening) meant that there was not sufficient space to develop the Conversations as I had hoped. Other pre-school business took priority leaving only a brief opportunity for the research to be discussed. As a result this tended to be my overview of the research in progress without time for wider discussion. Given this restriction and the fact that the meeting agenda primarily related to pre-school business, I decided that it was inappropriate for me to continue attending.

#### **5.2.7.2 Rethinking seeking practitioner perspectives**

As an alternative to Focused Conversations was needed, I decided to attempt a written approach (above, section 5.2.4.6.1.) with the aim of understanding more of the practitioners' perspectives on the research activities. As the summer term was ending, I considered the break from normal pre-school obligations might be an opportunity for the practitioners to consider and respond to the research. The written approach was in the form of an evaluation. (Refer to Appendix C for questions and collation of responses). The evaluation was a blend of structured questions with an invitation additionally to record 'open' comments relating to the practitioners' perspectives on the research activities to date and opinions on how to progress each research activity in a subsequent cycle of action research.

A positive response from the practitioners was given to the request to complete the evaluation, although only 3 of the 6 practitioners responded. Responses from these practitioners did appear to demonstrate an interest in the study, from which I took encouragement. In particular positive feedback was given in relation to the Camera Tours activity. Although again there were positive comments about the Tree of



Feelings (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b) and Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a) activities, doubts were expressed as to children's understandings of the concepts underpinning the activities and some children's ability to express their feelings. Similarly the painting to music (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c and d) activity was not considered to have been effective and children's young age was given as one reason for not being able to make a connection between the music and expression through painting. Such doubts added to the challenges of perception regarding children's 'abilities' that were beginning to emerge (introduced above section 5.2.6.2).

My reflections on the practitioners' responses to the evaluation and the impact for the next phase of the study are discussed below (5.4).

### **5.2.8 Beginning to contemplate my own positioning**

The early stages of the research provided opportunity for much self-reflection (Dalhberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Pring, 2004, Griffiths, 1998) as I began to understand how my repositioning to researcher from employee was influencing the study. Figure 10 Attempting action on children's voices (section 5.2.6.1 above) represented a critical moment where I began to reconsider my 'authority' (professionally, *practically and morally*) *to attempt to instigate change in the pre-school. I considered* what 'right' I had to suggest to Jane that I might be able to take action on her wish for the resources to be accessible to the children (Delamont, 1992, Miller and Bell, 2002). This issue was given weight by the limited participation of the practitioners. Without participation, where action might be possible if determined or agreed by practitioners (and the setting management), I began to wonder how listening to children's voices would be possible.

However the responses from the written evaluation suggested that participation might increase now that (some of) the practitioners had begun to engage with the research. Equally I hoped that the evaluation might have demonstrated that it was significant the research sought perspectives other than mine.

### **5.3 Reflections on Phase 1**

In August 2010 I considered how to approach the study to be recommenced at the pre-school in September. I decided to continue with my original objective to re-implement the activities taking into account the practitioner comments and suggestions for adaptation (from the written evaluation). For example, there was a suggestion to use the photographs from the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001) to make a display.

Prior to planning a schedule for the re-implementation, I created a chart which illustrated the findings from the written evaluation. The aim was to share the different perspectives (in a visual way) and provide a space for the practitioners to develop any ideas further relating to the research activities. I organised the comments and suggestions as pros and cons for each research activity. The chart was displayed on the staff planning board for a few weeks inviting comments/amendments. Comments were not provided and verbal discussions with practitioners suggested agreement with the initial findings.

#### **5.3.1 Re-implementing the Camera Tours activity**

The outcome of the evaluation was a preference for the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001) activity. On this basis I planned to initiate re-implementation of this activity with the children and was optimistic for increased participation from the practitioners.

##### **5.3.1.1 Children beginning to be researchers?**

Some of the children with whom I had introduced the activity had transferred to school so there was the sense of starting again with the new children (to include a period of familiarisation with the use of the camera).

However some of the original children supported me in my role of ‘mentor’ by independently assuming responsibility for demonstrating to the new children how to use the camera. I was particularly interested to overhear one of the children not only explaining the mechanics of the camera but also, apparently recalling our activities of last term:

*You can take pictures of pre-school for your book [Learning Journey] to show your mummy and daddy, or when you go to big school.*

***{Penny (4 years 3 months), Camera Tours, September 8th 2010}***

Children were beginning to assume the role of researchers perhaps (the beginning of a role reversal, or rung 7 of Hart’s (2007) participation ladder? (See section 2.1.2.2.1 Figure 2)), or certainly participating as previously. Children initiated use of the camera and often declared their intentions to me or to other children as to whom or what was to be the subject of their photographs. My reactions at that time to occasions when the photographs were not adding data in response to my intended research questions is an issue that I came to reflect on (chapter 7, section 7.4.1.2).

### **5.3.1.2 Further challenges**

A few weeks into the new term, I was encouraged by the pre-school management making a children’s camera available. This was a camera specifically designed for use by children. I considered this a positive action in support of the study and allowed for the children and me to familiarise ourselves with the technology.

The children seemed to need little instruction with the new camera and soon enough were taking their photographs. Then the snags emerged. The camera battery life was short and re-chargeable batteries were not suitable. This was not only inconvenient, as activities had to be disturbed midway to change the batteries, but clearly had cost

implications for a pre-school with limited funding. The additional functionality of the camera I considered a hindrance at that time. As I noted in my reflective journal:

*The new camera, although clearly enjoyed by the children, is proving a distraction. The large orange, protruding, wobbly button is a bit of a nightmare! This seems to allow access to pre-stored frames to 'enhance' your photographs – I seemed to feature rather a lot today wearing large bunny ears!! Also there is access to games applications which the children had no trouble in finding and playing! There does not seem to be a way of inhibiting selection of the extra functions.*

*{Reflective journal, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010}*

I reflect on my reaction (my apparent unawareness of the children beginning to lead the direction of the research, to express their interests?) in chapter 7 (section 7.2.1.1).

In view of the issues with the camera, I sought permission from the pre-school management to reuse my camera as previously. However, given a then recent child safeguarding incident in the press (where mobile phones were implicated), the setting management were very clear that this was no longer an option, regardless of the ethical procedures that I had put in place. I was reminded of Dockett and Perry's (2005b) research where they had made an explicit choice to offer children the use of 'proper' cameras to actively demonstrate to the children that they were valued and respected as equal researchers. Unfortunately a similar approach was not able to be taken with the children in my study from this point.

An additional challenge to the study, again relating to new safeguarding measures implemented by the pre-school, was the restricted access to the computer (which required the intervention by the pre-school management). This impacted on the spontaneous use of the printer to print and review the children's photographs.

### **5.3.2 Considering the barriers to practitioner participation**

During the further exploration with the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001), practitioners did not participate as I had hoped. I was aware, from experience, that the beginning of the autumn term is a pressured time at pre-school, primarily to establish paperwork for each child (to begin documenting their progress).

I began to consider whether the experience of re-implementing the Camera Tours had moved forward my attempt at collaborative action-based research. Certainly there had been further participation with the children however this was not really the case with the practitioners. I contemplated how this affected my intention to revisit the other research activities (the Wish Catcher (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a), Tree of Feelings (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003b) and painting to music (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003 c and d)).

It was during this period of reflection that the setting management requested I avoid the use of the craft area for research activities, as there were priority craft activities that the pre-school had planned in the build up to the Christmas period that would need to use the craft area. Such activities included the fund-raising Christmas card making which needed to happen well in advance for commercial printing. Given my research activities would need to make use of the craft area, I decided a review of my approach to furthering my study was required.

### **5.3.3 Review of approach to study**

Although I had continually reflected on the action-based, participatory methodology, the decision to review it (with what I knew might likely mean making some potentially significant changes) was daunting. My initial feeling was one of anxiety, trying to make sense of why the process was not happening as I had envisaged. Despite my insider knowledge of the workplace and an acknowledged need to harmonize the research with the daily demands of the routines, I began to admit that

to listen and hear the children's voices together with the adults' was seemingly more challenging than I had envisaged.

My first avenue for examination was myself. I wondered whether I had made clear my intentions for a participatory effort, rather than mine alone with the children. I accepted that the practitioners might not have read the supporting material that I produced during the consent process (Appendix A) and wondered if I had not verbally shared sufficiently how I had envisaged us working together with the children. Relating to my adaptation of Kotter's (1996) model (Figure 3, stages 1 and 2), I considered whether I had identified a shared interest or whether I had made assumptions and over-relied on the practitioners' consent. Had I involved the participants in ways to promote their interests (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Mac Naughton, 2005; Schön, 1983). I had attempted to feed back experiences from my own research activities with the children, which I had assumed would ignite interest. Although there had been some participation, both directly in some research activities and in sharing my documentation, this had been limited. In short, I looked inwardly to see where I had 'gone wrong', where had I not approached the research 'correctly'.

## **5.4 Conclusions on Phase 1**

On considering the approach to the study that I originally envisaged, I felt that, in essence, the process that I attempted to implement aligned with my research aims and with my philosophical perspective. Namely, I aimed to co-create a research environment that actively involved participants who would likely be affected by the research. Equally, I intended that participation in the research activities provide an opportunity to jointly reflect on current provision and identify changes as appropriate. I had hoped that the process would engage participants and motivate multiple perspectives rather than primarily represent my own thinking, in the belief that the strength to making research relevant and useable in practice lay with individuals identifying and jointly owning the process (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Mac Naughton, 2005; Schön, 1983; Kotter, 1996, Hart, 2007).

The design of the approach was purposefully aimed to blend with normal pre-school activities as far as possible. The offer of activities from the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) and similar research with young children in early years settings (Lancaster, 2003a) I had intended as starting points, as potential inspiration for participants to extend and adapt to the specific needs of the pre-school. I had hoped that the variety of activities would appeal to individual preferences and abilities.

It was only gradually that I came to the realisation that I might be looking too closely at parts of the process, including my role within it. Whereas I was keen to attempt to be reflexive (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter 1996; Pring, 2004, Carr and Kemmis, 1986), I also considered that I might be taking too narrow a view, particularly in respect of my own 'performance' or the 'incorrectness' of the approach.

It was such a realisation that eventually led to my decision to 'step back' from the process and take a wider lens approach. The implications are explored fully in chapter 6.

I took a frank review of the limited participation of the practitioners. A significant issue appeared to be the time and effort required from key obligations. I was aware that the next part of the term (from November 2010) required practitioners to formally report to parents on children's progress, a process that takes priority in terms of time and effort. I felt it unlikely that practitioners would actively participate in research activities during this period. In addition to the report writing there were the pre-planned Christmas activities to complete. I considered whether this related to Kotter's (1996: 40) notion of 'complacency' (see section 3.1).

My concern was that I might well find myself in a circular 'waiting game'. Looking ahead, there would be further formal reporting in the following terms, other events to celebrate and other priorities. Although I had intended my research activities contribute to the processes, this did not appear to be the case. The re-consideration of such apparent obligations and pre-determined timetables strengthened my decision to revise my approach to the research.

I had intended that my research might be combined with the process of reporting to parents, providing an opportunity for me to share some of my research data with individual families. However, the setting management requested that I postpone meetings with parents as the priority was the required parent-practitioner meetings. Given the apparent separation of the research from the pre-school activities, I further reflected on the likelihood of less parental involvement than I had originally anticipated. My original notion of communications with parents, regularly involving them in jointly discussing the research data, seemed even less appropriate than I had realised in the early stages of my study planning. A re-think was necessary as to what practically could be achieved in terms of parental involvement in the research.

It was unquestionably the children's participation that encouraged and motivated me to continue to try to adapt my approach (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009) with the continued aim of making the research genuinely meaningful to the pre-school. From working more closely with the children, with longer sustained periods of interaction (than had happened in my role as practitioner), I felt I was beginning to make meaning of the children's perspectives. This was not necessarily in relation to their pre-school experiences, but generally how they might be thinking or feeling. However the challenges raised the question of how to move the study forwards. It did not seem feasible to continue to further explore the planned research activities. I had attempted to do so with the seemingly most popular activity (deemed from the practitioner evaluations), the Camera Tours (Clark and Moss, 2001). Therefore to persist in attempting to revisit the other activities did not feel appropriate. Again this added to my resolve to attempt a re-think to my approach.

Overall it was the limited participation with the practitioners that gradually led to my increasing awareness that it was time to release the 'struggle' and to find other ways to move forwards. At the same time, the 'struggles' represented a critical moment in my research where I realised that the *process* would be of far greater significance than I had envisaged when I had planned my research (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009). Although I had appreciated that a carefully designed study was essential, I had not fully anticipated that the design in its implementation would become significant research data in itself. Rather, I had imagined the research data would primarily focus on the 'effectiveness' of the practical research activities with the



children with a view to adopting or adapting for use in practice. Whilst planning to re-think and adapt my approach, I realised that it was crucial to my research to illuminate the *challenges* and to reflect further on these within the bigger picture of listening to children's voices.

## **Chapter 6 Adapting the Research Approach: Phase 2**

This chapter discusses the approach that gradually ‘emerged’ once I ‘stepped back’ from actively implementing the planned research activities. I followed an instinct that a period of ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’, initially, might increase my understanding of how the research could be approached differently. Although this created a tension in how to ‘label’ my methodology at this point, it was this ‘stepping back’ that ultimately proved more insightful than I had imagined and answered my research questions in perhaps different ways than anticipated. The research activities that ‘emerged’ are described in this chapter with initial reflections. The implications for the research are explored further in the chapters that follow.

As with chapter 5, this chapter includes data to illustrate the challenges of the process of the research and in recognition that the process and its complexities became a significant influence in beginning to understand the wider implications for listening to children’s voices.

Phase 2 of the study represents the time period from November 2010 to June 2011.

### **6.1 Joining children in their play (without a specific ‘agenda’)**

Initially I decided to spend a few weeks in more of an observational role (or more precisely a blend of observation and participation (Cohen et al, 2007)).

On reflecting on my former employment as a practitioner, I became aware that there had been little time and space for just joining the children without a specific aim in mind. In the practitioner role, the most common aim was to observe the children in order to complete specified documentation. Since the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008a and 2008b), I have become aware of a greater requirement, not only to maintain documentation, but to link observations of children to the specific early learning goals defined by the EYFS (Luff, 2007, Butcher and Andrews, 2009). In my experience of working in the pre-school, priority

was often given to recording observations relating to children's literacy and numeracy learning. There would be occasions when we were open to spontaneous situations that might merit a written observation, although often we would be looking for specific outcomes for specific children.

I began my 'stepping back' by joining the children either in their self-directed play or whilst participating in adult-planned activities. The process began by me looking for opportunities to engage with the children. An extract from my reflective journal illustrates my approach:

*Opportunities to join the children seem to be a mixture of invitations to play, by individual or small groups of children, and my deciding to join in spontaneously. Drawing on my previous professional experience, I hope that I am attuned to knowing when my company is acceptable and when I am either superfluous to the play or simply an imposition! When the latter has become apparent (!), again I hope that I am being sensitive to this. Typically I am trying to use body language to make this judgement; turning away I took as a firm clue on more than one occasion, or even getting up and walking away!*

*{Reflective journal, October 4th 2010}*

**Figure 12 Seeking 'consent' to join children's play**

### **6.1.1 The activities that emerged**

Whilst joining a group of children, a practitioner asked me if I could assist her with her documentation by making an observation of one of the children. The unexpected request inspired me to rethink how I might revisit existing pre-school documentation obligations more specifically in the research.

#### **6.1.1.1 Observations as documentation (for research and practice)**

Although I had used the pre-school observation paperwork to document some of my interactions with the children whilst carrying out the research activities in Phase 1 (chapter 5, section 5.2.4.6.3), I decided that I would review the role of observations, initially for my own exploration and understanding (Somekh, 1995. See chapter 4, section 4.1). The start-point was my own previous practice, where I had felt pressure to make the ‘right’ observations to fulfil the developmental targets in the children’s Learning Journeys. I decided to approach the process with ‘fresh eyes’ (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007).

An avenue that I was keen to explore was the learning story approach introduced by Carr (2001) whilst involved in the design of the early years curriculum in New Zealand, Te Whāriki (Carr and May, 1993, 2002). The aspect that was of most interest to me was the involvement of the children in the creation of their documentation, their learning stories. Essentially the learning stories documented children’s achievements, typically over a period of time. The children’s perspectives of their particular story were included, often in their own writing or with their words transcribed. This had a similar feel to the project approach in Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a).

By contrast, the pre-school’s Learning Journeys were primarily a practitioner perspective of the children’s progress, most often discrete, brief snapshots of a child’s assumed ‘progress’ in a given moment. Typically the snapshots were not developed to take the ‘story’ further. Generally the children did not participate in the creation of their Learning Journey, other than being the *subject* (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000) (or even *object*, Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008) of observations. Equally the children did not review their Learning Journeys whilst at pre-school; they did have the opportunity to do so with parents when the Learning Journeys were sent home to accompany the bi-annual reports to parents. Learning Journeys are discussed further below (section 6.1.1.4).

As I considered how to actively involve the children in the observation process, how to include their perspectives on their experiences, I was mindful that I had the advantage of time and space. Waller and Bitou (2011) commented that typically this is not usual practice for children to be co-constructors of their documentation in early years settings in England. My aim was to explore the process with a view to considering how this might be workable (perhaps adapted) for pre-school practice.

I decided to introduce the observation paperwork to the children during our play and use this as a tool to discuss and document our interactions. A journal entry captures how the process began to emerge:

*Interactions between the children and me are varied and include me actively participating in an activity with a child or children, inviting children to reflect on an activity or a discussion topic, or acting as scribe as requested by children. The ethical requirement and my desire to ensure I have captured the children's perspectives as they had intended are prominent in my mind. I find I am approaching this by attempting to write verbatim as far as possible and re-reading what I have written to the children. After every such occasion I am re-checking that I have their permission both to include their experiences in the observation and to use the observations in my research.*

*{Reflective journal, November 13th 2010}*

**Figure 13 Children co-writing their observations:  
Attempting to support children's experiences**

The requests that children started to make for me to act as a scribe became a critical moment in the research, as discussed next.

### **6.1.1.2 Becoming the scribe for children's perspectives**

As I continued to interact with the children, I began to notice a shift in our relationship. Whereas I had began the process by initiating the observation process, children started to approach me to request that I write down their stories or news. As I did so (and always re-read to the children what I had written) I became aware that some children would watch me write and check I had included certain key words in my writing (such as their name) (Brooker, 2001). The more the process was repeated, the increasing numbers of requests I would receive to act as scribe. Referring to Hart's (2007) ladder, I wondered if this were a further indication of the beginning of a movement between rungs 6 and 7 (see section 2.1.2.2.1 Figure 2)). An increasingly popular request from some children was for me to write their stories in my notebook. Some of these became quite lengthy and required use of my digital voice recorder (which was not always to hand unfortunately when a spontaneous offer of a story was made!).

As described by Corsaro (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008), I experienced I was not the only scribe in my notebook, with either requests from children to write for themselves or 'helping themselves' when my attention was diverted.

### **6.1.1.3 Co-construction with children**

Co-construction with the children was an approach that developed gradually. The apparent interest in my notebook appeared to lead to further interest in my other 'writings'. For example, when I was working with individual children to write observations other children began to gather round and ask me what I was writing. This marked a distinction for me as during my employment as practitioner children rarely appeared to notice my observation writing, whether they or other children were the 'subject'. I decided to take a reflexive approach to the children's potential interest and to explore further how I could support and extend this.

One of the most immediate actions I took was to work explicitly with children, not only on their own observations, but also in sharing observations of others. Ethical

considerations arose that caused me to reflect on my former approach as a practitioner as well as how my professionalism could support my researcher role:

*Whilst I find myself seeking permission to write the children's experiences quite naturally, I find it amazing that I had never considered doing so when I was making observations as a practitioner. I had followed a pre-school process without thinking of the wider implications for the children. Further ethical considerations with the children represent a tension, where children wish to share the experiences of another child. I wonder whether this might expose individuals to potential negative judgement from others. From my own experiences, children are not always positive about other children's achievements. However I believe my professional experience in managing such occurrences positively support taking the potential opportunity to support communication amongst the children. I take heart from Mac Naughton et al's (2007) belief that early years practitioners are well positioned to develop such constructive relationships.*

*{Reflective journal, November 23th 2010}*

**Figure 14 Re-visiting ethics of observing children: from practitioner to researcher**

#### **6.1.1.4 Learning Journeys**

As I worked more actively with the children in writing and sharing their observations and noticed the increase in children taking an interest in each others' observations, I decided to develop the activity further. My focus was widened to consider the possibilities of working collaboratively with the children on their Learning Journeys. There were issues that arose around this possibility.

As introduced previously, the Learning Journey was a pre-school requirement for each child that absorbed much of practitioners' time and energy. Each practitioner was obliged to prepare up to 14 Learning Journeys for their key children each pre-

school year as well as provide support (in the form of observations) for the other children's Learning Journeys (up to 69 children). Practitioners were allocated time per week for documentation whilst the pre-school was in session. The implications of this were that practitioners were not interacting with the children whilst preparing the documentation. Practitioners commented that they considered the process unsatisfactory in terms of being absent from the children. As expressed by a practitioner:

*Doing the books [Learning Journeys] takes such a long time, time that I should and want to spend with the children.*

***{Reflective journal, informal discussion, Oct 11th 2010}***

Such issues further informed my decision to look at working together with the children on their own documentation.

However I anticipated challenges. I was aware that there was a belief amongst some practitioners that the Learning Journeys needed to be maintained in a certain condition. Although the Learning Journeys were declared as the children's 'books', they were stored in a cupboard inaccessible to the children. From my experience in working and visiting other early years settings, this was not an uncommon approach. Nevertheless I initiated the process by seeking permission from a practitioner who I anticipated might be amenable to the idea. She agreed on the understanding that I would supervise the activity and not leave the Learning Journeys unattended with the children.

I began the process by working with children on an individual basis, using an observation that we had created together as a starting point. Typically I invited the children to file their observation in their Learning Journey which tended to lead to children being curious about what else was in their 'book'. Other children might join us and often the requests for their books followed. We would literally go through the pages, led by the children, and use as a basis for discussion. I was interested to see what reactions the children had. I focused on aspects such as the apparent interest



in the contents or otherwise, whether the children were proud/excited to tell me things about the Learning Journey, the balance of remarks/questions (whether by me, the child, or a mixture), whether they were familiar with the contents, whether their comments were similar to the adult comments (visible in annotated photos and drawings). I was also interested to see how much input the children had had, if any, such as whether their comments were included and where, and whether, they had selected pictures for inclusion and added them themselves (i.e. had ‘cut and glued’ the entries themselves).

During the activity I was aware that I was paying attention to ‘preserving’ the Learning Journeys from, at the worst case, damage. An extract from my reflective journal illustrates the tension in my mind between children participating in co-creating their documentation and possible practitioner attitudes:

*I am concerned about what might be acceptable to the practitioners in terms of any additions (or even more, modifications) to their original work in the LJs. I’m aware that I am moderating the approach that I might have taken if I were not aware of attitudes towards the Learning Journeys as well as the amount of effort that practitioners expend in their compilation. There is a sense of surveillance and restriction in my approach to working with the children. Nevertheless I am keen to continue with attempting the activity, albeit with this awareness.*

*{Reflective journal, December 7th 2010}*

**Figure 15 Children co-creating their documentation:  
Potential challenge of adult attitudes**

#### **6.1.1.5 Play – Taking the ‘least adult’ role**

Participating in children’s play is a well-researched role that early years practitioners are expected to assume as a fundamental part of their practice (for example, Bruce,

2005, Moyles 2005). This role was heightened with the implementation of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) that stressed the importance of play-based learning. As a practitioner I would have agreed that my role was underpinned by this philosophy. As I interacted with the children in Phase 2 of my study I retained my focus on 'just playing' with the children. This was interesting to me as I reflected that I had not 'just played' with the children during my attempts to introduce my research activities in Phase 1.

As I continued to interact with the children, this led to other realisations about the nature of play and my role within it. The most astonishing awareness for me was I began to feel 'less' of the adult (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008); the boundaries between the children and me were beginning to become blurred at times. To clarify what I mean by 'playing', this was to include any interactions with the children from participating in craft activities, reading stories, constructing with blocks to role-playing.

At the beginning of the process I heard myself 'correcting' the children, advising 'modification of behaviours', reminding of social requirements towards others or resources, reminding of the pre-school rules (was this my construction of children as possessions? (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008)). However, gradually my voice became quieter both as former practitioner and adult. At times this was with awareness; I would think to take action as the adult then I would decide not to. I hasten to clarify that this was not in situations where any child or property was at risk. Examples of situations were where children were moving resources to other areas of the room which I knew not to be in accordance with the pre-school rules or when there were 'minor' disagreements between children in which a practitioner would tend to intervene. In the case of the latter, I stress again this would not be situations where I considered any child to be at a disadvantage to another. I questioned my changing behaviour and came to the conclusion that I was attempting to 'see' things more from the children's perspectives, to see if I could understand more of their pre-school experiences if I were more of an equal than a 'rule enforcing' adult. Perhaps again I was attempting to make the 'familiar strange' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007: 49, Holliday, 2007: 13). Therefore my notion of not having an 'agenda' was not exactly accurate! Perhaps more of an 'implicit agenda'

might describe my approach. At other times I was not aware of my actions and became so engrossed in my play that I 'broke the rules' without realising.

Adopting such an approach was not without discomfort. I was aware that some of the children had apparently noticed my ('least adult'?) behaviour. Whereas they would approach me to intervene in 'minor' incidents, my response that I was not one of the practitioners any more, led unsurprisingly to children not including me as one of the adults to whom such incidents should be reported. I wondered how the children might react, whether they would consider I had 'let them down' if I did not 'sort' incidents as the other adults. Equally I was concerned that I might receive a negative reaction from the practitioners if they considered that I was not acting in the capacity in which I would normally. I recalled similar situations recounted by researchers working with young children undertaking ethnographic studies in pre-school and school settings, such as Corsaro (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008), Connelly (2008), Warming (2005) and Delamont (1992). Corsaro (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008), in particular, described his mixed feelings in 'allowing' children to play in a boisterous manner that he considered would not be acceptable if noticed by the class teacher.

Whilst I was not aware of either of my concerns taking shape, I felt that there was a significant change in how children began to relate to me. An entry in my reflective journal illustrates the beginning of the shift, with a later entry capturing how our relationship seemed to have more of an acceptance of me in a more 'least adult' role:

*I am becoming aware that children seem to be more 'familiar' with me in the sense that they are playing more boisterously, often pulling at me, or playing with my hair or face. At times I must admit this seems quite overwhelming. At first I accepted the increased attention (perhaps seeing it as some sort of 'initiation ceremony', or the children testing the 'adult' boundaries (Connolly, 2008), however I think I need to respect my own personal boundaries and say when the level of attention is not welcome! I sense that some children are*

*perhaps testing boundaries in other ways by doing something 'against the rules', such as being 'untidy' with resources then making direct eye-contact with me to see how I will react.*

***{Reflective journal, November 11th 2010}***

*It is really interesting that the children seem to have stopped 'testing' me when I join them in their play. I feel more accepted in the play without the heightened attention. Whereas initially there was the tendency to 'fight' to claim my presence amongst some of the children, my presence seems to either be accepted or ignored, as if there were 'nothing special' about my joining in.*

***{Reflective journal, January 19th 2011}***

**Figure 16 Taking a 'least adult role': A shift in relationship with the children?**

#### **6.1.1.6 Sharing quiet spaces**

Regularly during my interactions with the children I had struggled to literally hear what the children were saying to me. The volume in the pre-school's single room could be significantly loud at times when up to 26 children were actively engaged in play. Thinking this might be an adult-intolerance issue, I was interested when several children mentioned the noise at times in our discussions. There was not the useable space in the pre-school that could support such quiet conversations, either in the building or outside. The latter was due to the absence of connecting outdoor space and staff ratios (and routine commitments) not permitting leaving the pre-school room on an individual or small group basis.

The appearance of a small tent (during one week), as part of a practitioner planned pre-school theme of 'light and dark', provided me with a spontaneous opportunity to explore the potential of a quiet space to interact with the children. Although the exploration was limited to one week (I had been hopeful of a return of the tent or similar), and would restrict the amount of time to explore, I was nonetheless curious to see whether a quiet space would support children's communication as I was assuming this would be the case.

As with each activity that ‘emerged’ during the study there were further ethical considerations. My first encounter with the tent was being invited by a child to join him and another boy inside. After my hesitation as to whether I would actually fit through the opening, I further hesitated as to whether it was appropriate for an adult to enter a child’s space. It felt as if I might be intruding on their private conversations, that my presence might inhibit private conversation. On reflecting on why the tent felt different from joining the children in the home corner, for instance, I considered that the tent had a ‘den’ feel which children might choose to use to ‘escape’ adult gazes (Clark and Moss, 2005). However I had been invited on this occasion.

The small amount of dialogue that I was able to share from joining the children was nevertheless noteworthy and seemed to suggest the potential for ‘quiet’ spaces to literally create the space to develop shared discussion.

## **6.2 Reconsidering practitioner participation**

My increased awareness of the potential for sharing documentation with the children in their Learning Journeys was an area that I became keen to explore further. I re-attempted to engage the practitioners in the process given there had been some interest from practitioners in informally discussing the documentation that the children had co-created with me. There was a sense of ‘restarting’ to some extent according to my adaptation of Kotter’s (1996) change model (see Figure 3, stages 1 and 2).

To understand more of the practitioner perspectives I decided to try a questionnaire approach. I was mindful that my previous request to write an evaluation of the research in Phase 1 (see chapter 5, section 5.2.7.2), was not an approach with which each practitioner engaged. On this basis I opted for a blended approach to designing the questionnaire, using both closed and open questions, in the knowledge that closed questions might mean a ‘quicker’ option for practitioners. Whereas my

preference would have been exclusively for open questions, to enable practitioners the space to express their views on the Learning Journeys fully and individually, I accepted that a compromise might be the difference between a response or not. To this effect I opted for rank order questions, multiple choice and dichotomous questions (Cohen et al, 2007) to reflect whether I was aiming for a clear choice (in the case of dichotomous questions), or whether I was aiming for an indication as to different preferences. I was well aware of the limitations to interpretation of the question, the order in which choices are given and the potential difficulty in making a choice in some instances (Cohen et al, 2007). To assist with such occurrences I gave the option for each question to be answered 'freely', either as an alternative to, or in place of, the closed questions, with a 'comments' section.

The design was not an approach that reflected my desire for rich, qualitative data within a postmodern framework and in fact risked appearing as if it belonged more to a quantitative, positivist approach (Holliday, 2007, Cohen et al, 2007). However the 'unpredictability of practical living' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002: 52) seemed to resound more loudly than aiming for a 'correctly' designed questionnaire. Given the small numbers of participants I felt that the data (in whichever form provided) would be manageable in terms of analysis. I did not intend generating definitive, quantitative data from the closed questions but rather to begin to build a relative overall 'feel' of practitioners' perspectives by indicating the different weightings and the significance of aspects of the Learning Journey.

Each practitioner responded to the request to complete the questionnaire. As anticipated some did not choose to expand on the tick box answers; nevertheless the answers did provide an indication as to some of the challenges relating to children actively contributing to their Learning Journeys. Where practitioners did provide comments, this helped to identify some of the issues relating to working collaboratively with the children on their documentation.

Appendix E includes the questionnaire design and a collation of responses. The responses and their implications for listening to children's voices are discussed in chapter 7.

I continued to share my experiences with the practitioners in exploring participatory activities with the children, to which there were positive responses. However I was not aware that practitioners actively participated in similar activities with the children.

### **6.3 Review of my positioning: from practitioner to researcher**

During the initial ‘stepping’ back from my original planned research activities from Phase 1, I was surprised to find that I felt a sense of relief at ‘just being’ with the children. I contemplated that ‘just being’ was not a position that had been possible within my former practitioner role and considered that (unwittingly) I had brought that positioning into the research. On reflection, and by re-reading my reflective journal, I became aware of anxieties that accompanied the research activities in Phase 1. Such anxieties seemed to relate to ‘fitting’ in with the pre-school rules and routines, as I had perceived them as a practitioner. There were incidents where my attempts to ‘comply’ had restricted my capacity as a researcher to listen to the children’s perspectives. This is explored further in see chapter 7 (section 7.4.1.1).

I considered another aspect of my positioning that, with growing hindsight, affected my focus on the research at times. I had become aware of my unease if I was not taking an active part in the normal pre-school routines. By this I refer to basic duties, such as tidying, cleaning floors and catering duties. I experienced a sense of guilt when I observed practitioners trying to attend to such duties together with other responsibilities. At times I joined in with the tasks whilst at others I attempted to maintain a focus on the study. This acted as a distraction that I might not have felt as an outsider researcher. Viewed from another angle, it might be considered that attempting to ‘integrate’ with practitioners would be a positive approach to foster participatory working in the research (Delamont, 1992, Miller and Bell, 2002). Either way my approach served to illustrate to me that I was in transition, to some extent, from practitioner to researcher.

### **6.3.1 Making the ‘familiar strange’**

As my awareness grew of my changing position, I made the deliberate choice to make the ‘familiar strange’ (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007: 49, Holliday, 2007: 13). Although it was an environment with which I was familiar, I aimed to look afresh, to question the familiar, and to see what alternative meanings I might make. Initially I observed the physical setting (for example the layout, resources and availability of resources, see chapter 5 section 5.2.1) before focusing more closely on the pre-school routines and daily practices. I found I was noting and reflecting on aspects that I had not either ‘seen’ or reflected on to any extent previously. In planning my research design, I had not anticipated taking a wider view of the environment, feeling that I was sufficiently intimate with the pre-school operations. What began to become apparent to me was that the environment was contributing to some of the challenges to listening to children’s voices. These are explored in chapter 7.

### **6.3.2 From practitioner-led to child-initiated activities**

During the early stages of Phase 2, I felt a sense of uncertainty after the initial weeks of joining the children without specific research activities in mind. I reflected that such uncertainty again likely related to my attempts at re-positioning from practitioner. I was accustomed to planning and executing pre-school activities which I likened to the approach I had taken with the research activities in Phase 1 of the study. I had designed both the pre-school activities and the research activities with *outcomes* in mind. Although I had intended the research activities equalize the balance of power between the children and me (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Clark and Moss, 2001, Lancaster, 2003a), it would seem that, unwittingly, I had retained the power by focusing on my intended research outcomes. When the children began to take the lead, for example during the Camera Tours, I tended to disregard data that did not appear to answer my research questions in the way that I had intended. This issue is explored in further detail in chapter 7 (section 7.2.1.1).

It was a gradual process during Phase 2 of the study where the balance began to equalize. I began to feel more confident in a researcher role as children started to



lead in our interactions and I realised that data were emerging that supported my research questions in unexpected ways. Such moments were pivotal when I began to understand the distinction between my approach as a practitioner and my changing approach as a researcher. Equally revealing, it began to become apparent to me that it was the underpinning relationships that were developing with the children (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; O’Kane, 2008, Punch, 2002; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Lancaster 2003a) that were impacting on the wider implications for listening to children. An awareness and analysis of the relationships became a significant focus in the direction of the research.

### **6.3.3 Considering practitioners’ perceptions of my researcher role**

During Phase 2 I began to wonder how I might be perceived by the practitioners in a researcher role. I considered what expectations they might have from me in introducing the research to the pre-school. Although I had intended a participatory approach, given that this had not happened in the way in which I had aimed, I had felt the increasing need to make visible my own findings (Mac Naughton et al, 2007; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004, Holliday, 2007). At the same time this was a tension as I had not intended the research to be ‘my’ project and had intended findings to be constructed together (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, Schwandt, 2000, quoting Longino, 1990, 1993, 1996). I contemplated whether again my former position as a practitioner was having an influence, both in terms of my actions and the practitioners’ perceptions and perhaps pre-conceptions.

This was an issue that came more to the fore in Phase 2. I became aware that my joining the children might be perceived as not ‘doing’ research in the same way that the very visible research activities in Phase 1 had been. Interestingly practitioners did not query my change in approach. For me this fuelled my assumption that the practitioners considered the research my undertaking rather than a joint exploration. This is an aspect on which I reflect further in chapter 7.

## **6.4 Conclusions on adapting the approach to research**

The awareness of the requirement to re-think and adapt my approach to the research represented a significant shift in my own learning. I came to understand the need to attempt to reflect what was happening in ‘real life’ (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009), (or rather life as it was being constructed in that time and space), to be open to being flexible to respond to unexpected events. I had anticipated such a reflection on substantive issues relating to exploring ways to listen and action children’s voices. However I had not anticipated the extent to which the approach to the research would be influential (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; O’Kane, 2008), and be research data in itself, particularly in terms of the significance of my own shifting role, making meanings from the limited participation of the practitioners and the shifting relationships between the children and myself.

The transition in my approach from pre-determining research activities to allowing the activities to emerge was one that I did not anticipate. My realisation was striking that data were being created through genuine exploration with the children of activities that supported the research. I listened to my instinct (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) that being with the children was of more significance during the early stages of Phase 2 of the study than seeking specific answers to my research question. I felt it more significant to establish genuine dialogue with the children as a first stage. The attempt at equal, balanced conversations, on any subject (i.e. not restricted to my research interests in their pre-school perspectives) became a strong aim. This was intriguing to me as I would have said that this was something that I had established during my time as a practitioner. However I was beginning to realise that this was not the case, certainly not nearing the potential relationships that might be established.

However this was by no means a fluid transition as I continued to feel the tensions of moving into a researcher role, of developing the confidence to continue to be flexible in my approach to the research emerging, and viewing uncertainties and challenges as key to understanding the wider implications for listening to children’s voices. These issues are further explored in chapter 7.

## **Chapter 7 Rhizoanalysis: Making Meanings**

This chapter analyses and makes meanings from the exploration of listening to children's voices in Phases 1 and 2 of the study. This overlaps with the previous chapters (5 and 6) in that both existing data are re-visited (with further reflections) as well as new data presented.

An attempt is made to make meanings from the perspectives of the children, the practitioners and myself. The insights as well as the challenges are explored from the different perspectives.

The process of rhizoanalysis (Mac Naughton, 2005) and the use of reflection are discussed in terms of how they assisted in the meaning-making, specifically how they enabled alternative meanings to be made by revisiting the data in Phase 1 and 2 and further meanings to be made.

This dedicated analysis stage of the study represents the time period from May 2011 to July 2011.

### **7.1 Overall approach to making meaning**

As introduced in chapters 1 (section 1.7) and 3 (section 3.1), I aimed to present the data and the processes of construction as transparently as possible to enable the reader visibility (Holliday, 2007), such that the reader might make alternative meanings from those suggested.

#### **7.1.1 Use of vignettes**

Use of vignettes (introduced in chapter 1, section 1.7.1.2.1) was one approach that aimed to achieve visibility, as expressed by Cohen et al, (2007: 462), 'to keep the flavour' of the raw data. Holliday's (2007: 42) notion of 'showing the workings'

resonated here, with my awareness that any interpretation that I make on the ‘raw’ data represents my version of ‘reality’. Such an approach became increasingly significant as limited participation from practitioners led to the realisation that my own voice might likely be the ‘loudest’ in making meanings from the data.

A further intention in the use of vignettes was to enable data to be revisited during the study to provide the possibility for alternative meanings to be made, when reviewed with hindsight and from other angles. Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009) cautioned that vignettes or similar might serve to confirm emerging themes rather than inspire to ‘look beyond’. With this in mind, rhizoanalysis (Mac Naughton, 2005) became an approach that increasingly assisted in this process by explicitly seeking other meanings. This is discussed next.

### **7.1.2 Overview of the theory of rhizoanalysis**

The philosophical concept of the ‘rhizome’ was used by Deleuze and Guattari (1987 in Mac Naughton, 2005:120) to illustrate the difference between a fixed, linear, progressive approach to making meaning of the ‘cause-and-effect’ (Mac Naughton, 2005) and of a conceptualisation that is fluid, capable of lateral movement, being contradictory, starting new lines of thinking. The botanical definition of the rhizome is compared to the structure of a tree, where the tree’s growth from the fixed roots out to the branches follows a relatively predictable, linear progression. The rhizome, ‘a continuously growing horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals’ (Oxford dictionaries, 2012), is by contrast, unpredictable in nature. It is such ‘adventitiousness’, such unpredictability, which allows for other directions to be explored, other constructions to come forth in making meanings.

Mac Naughton (2005) deliberately used such concepts in making (wider, new) alternative sense of observing children in early years settings. Similarly Sellers (2010) used rhizoanalysis to make meanings of young children’s play. She described the approach as a space to allow ‘incipiently different readings’ to emerge ‘from/with/in the shadows’ (2010: 571). Such use of rhizoanalysis was of particular

appeal to my research. This was both in terms of researching with young children in early years settings and my growing awareness of the complexities that were emerging which required a deeper attention if I were to begin to understand the substantive implications for listening and hearing children's voices.

### **7.1.2.1 Applying rhizoanalysis**

A 'crisis of representation' (Dahlberg et al, 2007: 25) was a concern when contemplating the process of data analysis. The majority of the analysis was my own, representing my own subjectivities. I did not have the rich, multiple accounts of the analysis from the practitioners that I had intended (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009, Winter, 1996). It was the thinking offered by rhizoanalysis that proved insightful in addressing the issue to some extent, where multiple readings of data enable alternative meanings to be constructed. Although clearly this is not a substitute for multiple accounts, data can be deconstructed and reconstructed, both in the moment and over time, to benefit, from other thinking moving in different directions. Equally there is the potential to explore 'reading for voice' (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009: 186), to attempt to 'see' and 'hear' voices other than my own by seeking alternative readings.

Essentially my application of rhizoanalysis, drawing on Mac Naughton's (2005) approach, was to revisit my data from both Phase 1 and 2 of the study. One approach to this was to juxtapose my original texts with alternative texts to (re-)view the meanings that I had made. 'Texts' in this context are defined in the broader sense, not only to include other physical 'texts' from my data but also theories and beliefs. This was most applicable when taking a wider view of my research and re-looking at how I had constructed myself within the research as well as children and the practitioners.

Mac Naughton (2005) espoused that rhizoanalysis relates to postmodernism in that it dismisses absolute truths and fixed realities in favour of constructed realities (Crotty, 1998, Schwandt, 2000; Pring, 2004, Moss, 2007) that change in response to the

particular contexts in which ‘reality’ is experienced. Such a theory increasingly resonated with my research as I attempted to provide alternative meanings to the ‘reality’ that I was experiencing.

### **7.1.3 Reflective journal**

Although I had maintained a reflective journal from the conception of my research (see chapter 4, section 5.2.4.8), it became increasingly significant, initially during the period of contemplation on how to adapt my research approach in Phase 2. It was the challenges that I had experienced, and captured in contextual detail, which helped me to make meaning both in the period of uncertainty at the beginning of Phase 2 and when further analysing my data.

As the study progressed, I found myself re-visiting my earlier journal entries and re-considering my perspectives. I came to realise that the contextual data that I was choosing to capture often read as vignettes. Equally I found that I was re-referring to such vignettes, to see whether alternative readings could be made other than my initial reactions. Once I had become aware of its potential for supporting the overall sense making of the research, the reflective journal became a resource that I deliberately used (Cohen et al, 2007).

### **7.1.4 Following the rhizome: meanings emerging**

Using processes from rhizoanalysis (Mac Naughton, 2005) became increasingly powerful and relevant to my research context as the context began to emerge. It was only whilst revisiting some of my early analyses, and purposefully seeking alternative meanings, that I began to think more deeply about some of the underlying challenges to listening to children. Rethinking my own positioning in the research, my transition from practitioner to researcher, was especially illuminating when I looked with ‘fresh eyes’ (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) at the data in respect to how I was constructing the children in the research (as well as the practitioners and myself). For example, there were occasions where I felt I was promoting the children

as capable actors (UN, 1989; the Children Act, 2004; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Alderson, 2008; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010) by capturing their stories as documentation. Only by revisiting and challenging my initial assumptions, using rhizoanalysis, could I see an alternative perspective, one in which I might to said to be treating the children as subjects (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Morrow, 2005), by seeking their stories to satisfy a research outcome. Such constructions are discussed in detail in this chapter.

I visualise such revisiting of the analyses of the data as ‘wandering’ back, forth and sideways along the rhizome and its ‘shoots’. It was not simply a case of looking back at the data from Phase 1 (a unidirectional process). I found myself increasingly challenging my analyses *whilst in the process* of constructing them (‘sideways’ and ‘forwards’ from/along the rhizome) as I realized the potential for rhizoanalysis to support my particular research aim to construct alternative, rich meanings rather than a singular, authoritative account (Winter, 1996). A significant example for me was when I was seeking children’s views, looking from one angle, whilst simultaneously looking from another angle by challenging the ethics. I began to ask myself in the moment, “In whose interests?” especially as I was documenting children’s responses for others to potentially judge. I feel such ‘wanderings’ gave greater weight and depth to my aim to develop a reflective, reflexive approach to the research as well as offering a space for other ‘voices’, other interpretations of the research data. Constructing such as space for alternative meanings to be contemplated by the reader became increasingly important for my research when limited participation from practitioners in the data analysis process risked my own ‘voice’ being the most visible.

Although following the various directions of the rhizome enabled thinking and reflection to consider alternative possibilities for meaning-making, there were key areas (or ‘themes’) that emerged out of the ‘wandering’. Initially for me it was challenging to fully embrace the rhizomatic process as I had started my research with some ideas of the initial tentative themes that my research would explore. Such themes were influenced both from my own experiences of being in practice in early years (and in this particular pre-school) and from the arguments discussed in the

literature. Initial tentative themes (reflected in my research questions, see chapter 3, section 3.2) included:

- an exploration of the power relations between adults and children (in enabling children's voices to be heard more loudly in the creation of pre-school provision), (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2001, Lancaster, 2003a)
- exploring the challenges to supporting children's voices in terms of adult attitudes towards children's 'abilities' and 'rights' to be joint decision-makers (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Alderson, 2008, Rudduck and Flutter, 2004)
- the implications of adopting specific research activities as routine pre-school practices.

Appendix D provides an extract of the initial data analysis process giving visibility of the activities relating to some of the tentative themes that were identified.

The initial themes were intended as starting points with the aim of reviewing and adapting together with the practitioners as the research progressed. However, whilst continuing to acknowledge my starting point, I actively attempted to make other meanings from the data as the study progressed and I became aware of the potential for rhizoanalysis.

Three key areas for exploration emerged (or perhaps 'adventitious roots' in rhizome terms) which served to underpin the exploration of further areas (or 'lateral shoots'). The key areas for exploration were:

- 1. attempting to listen to children**
- 2. exploring the barriers to listening**
- 3. exploring the significance (and complexities) of relationships.**



The further areas that emerged were not in essence dissimilar to the initial tentative themes. However, rhizoanalysis enabled these to be viewed more widely and from other angles. These are summarized as:

- Power. This permeated the other areas for exploration – the unequal relationships (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Lancaster, 2003a; Mac Naughton, 2005; Abbott and Langston, 2005), the influence of a curriculum (Lee and Eke, 2009; Alexander, 2010, Wells, 1987), pre-school rules and routines and attitudes towards these.
- EYFS curriculum (DCSF, 2008a and b). The tensions of the ‘top down’ implementation of the curriculum with pre-determined targets became increasingly significant (Wells, 1987; Alexander, 2010, Lee and Eke, 2009) together with the potential to begin to collaborate with the children in creating their documentation (Carr, 2001; Edwards et al, 1998a, Dahlberg et al, 2007).
- Environment. The impact of the pre-school rules and routines as well as aspects of the physical environment emerged as influential (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Lancaster, 2003a).

## **7.2 Analysing attempting to listen to children**

This section reflects on and analyses the insights and challenges to listening to children’s voices that emerged during the study (phases 1 and 2).

### **7.2.1 Insights to listening**

As I reflected on my change of approach from Phase 1 to Phase 2, it became apparent that it was the relationships that I was building with the children through joining them in their play that were influencing the way in which we interacted and the nature of the dialogue (Mac Naughton, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Sylva et al, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Tizard and Hughes, 2002, Wells, 1987; Wood et al, 1980). The following sections explore our interactions and how the dynamics began to change and how I gradually became aware of the change.

### 7.2.1.1 Children taking the lead

As introduced in chapter 6, as I began to take a more background role in the research by joining the children in their play, children began to take the lead. Whereas I had driven the research (in the main) during the planned research activities in Phase 1, children approached me and requested I document what they wished to say.

The following extract is one illustration of such an occurrence. Rose, (4 years 2 months) had previously asked me to write about her (such as her news) in my field notebook, which she understood I might eventually include in my ‘book about children at pre-school’. On this occasion, seeing me with field notebook and pen to hand, Rose asked me to write down a story she wished to tell me, seemingly knowing that I would act as scribe:

*Once upon a time there was a bunny rabbit and he couldn't get off the roof! He was stuck and stuck and his daddy went over the moooon [in the tune of 'hey diddle diddle'] [Inaudible couple seconds – high background noise]. The daddy got his ladder and he and he carried the cat down and he was brave and brave and he didn't hold on, he was brave [Inaudible couple seconds]. He stuck his finger into the ladder. And the mummy, and the mummy came, comed up the ladder and someone pushed her down. And the bunny rabbit was happy because he was down. And after he thought he was on the roof again but he wasn't, he was in bed. And then the happiness caaame! And the policeman comed and he was very, very happy 'cause he thought it was the boy but it was the bunny rabbit. It was the little boy [pause 1 second] and the rabbit bitted the little boy.*

*[Pause, I ask Rose if that is the end of her story. She tells me 'no' and continues] And then the big, big monster came and he didn't come in the house. He went outside and he went to another house. And then the gruffalo came.*

**{Reflective journal, February 17th 2011}**

**Figure 17 Children's spontaneous expressions**

Such moments, where children offered to share in such creative detail as Rose, made a stark contrast to the typical documentation that is recorded *about* the children in their Learning Journeys. This is further discussed in section 7.2.1.5.1.

As I reflected back to the research activities in Phase 1, I came to understand how I had missed opportunities to embrace children initiating the research. One poignant and paradoxical example was during the re-implementation of the Camera Tours (chapter 5, section 5.3.1) where children were expressing an interest in experimenting by accessing the additional functions on the camera. Instead of considering their interests a hindrance to answering my research questions, I wondered in which other directions the research could have moved if I had been able to take a wider view at that point? In what other ways my research questions might have been answered and provided an insight into children's desired pre-school experiences? I had missed a significant opportunity to acknowledge children's participation was shifting from me initiating the direction of the research to the children initiating (in terms of Hart's (2007) ladder of participation, from rung 6 to 7. See chapter 2, section 2.1.2.2.1). I had not able to 'see' that this incident represented what I had espoused to be aiming for in my research design, children as active, equal research partners (Alderson, 2008, Dahlberg et al, 2007, Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). I contemplate my construction of the children further in section 7.2.2.

### **7.2.1.2 Creating the space for shared dialogue: building relationships**

Time and space to 'just talk' with the children is an issue that I have experienced as a practitioner and one which was expressed by practitioners. However, as I was able to create that space, I became increasingly aware of the amount and nature of the dialogue that developed between the children and me. The following vignette is an example.

*I am sat at the 'writing table', together with a small group of girls who are doing their writing (mainly mark-making). I ask Rachel (4 years, 5 months) what she is writing, to which she replies "about doing playing and lots of stuff". Jade (3 years, 11 months) shrugs in response to my question and continues to fill each line with marks. Kayleigh (4 years, 1 month) responds by asking me "what are you doing?" as she sees me making notes in my notebook. I explain I am writing about the different jobs that practitioners need to do at pre-school, such as Carpet time and Snack time and writing. I ask if anyone can help me by thinking of other things the adults need to do.*

- 1 Me: Can you think of the other things the adults need to do at pre-school?*
- 2 Lisa: I don't know.*
- 3 Kayleigh: I play so I don't know what they do. I play with all my friends [Kayleigh watches me write in my notebook].*
- 4 Me: Is it ok if I write what you are saying in my book about pre-school? [I read out what I have written].*
- 5 Kayleigh: [Nods].*
- 6 Lisa: [Does not answer].*
- 7 Rachel: They talk. They do the register. They get the box out with the painting stuff. They make the garden clean then all the kids can go out. Lynne, she plays with the children. Julie, sometimes she plays with me. Laura plays with the play dough. Julie plays with little children.*
- 8 Carly: Get the snack out, get out the lunch boxes, get the toys out, chatters, chatters, goes in the office.*
- 9 Me: [Again I read out what I have written] Is that what you said, Rachel and Carly? Is it ok to write it down in my book about pre-school?*

- 10 Rachel: *Yep.*
- 11 Carly: *[Smiles] Uh huh.*
- 12 Rachel: *Paula, she gets the snack out. I like Lynne, reads the books. Julie, gets the toys out. Eileen, goes in the office. Lynne, gets the toys out too. Laura, chatters, chatters.*
- 13 Me: *So do you think we need the adults at pre-school then?*
- 14 Kayleigh: *We need the adults because Carol likes my top. Getting out the snack, get out the toys. Tidy up with the children. When the children are gone, all messy, they tidy up without them. I like the pre-school ladies that read the books.*
- 15 Me: *And if the pre-school ladies weren't here, what would that be like, do you think?*
- 16 Carly: *No snack, no toys, not allowed!*
- 17 Me: *Are adults and children different, do you think?*
- 18 Carly: *Yes.*
- 19 Me: *How are they different, do you think?*
- 20 Rachel: *No, adults and children are not different. Laura and me got same hair.*
- 21 Kayleigh: *No. Because they are people. They do the same things. Lynne has got glasses on. Cus Eileen works in the office. Won't let them in the office [pause 1 second] because they are not big.*
- 22 Carly: *I go in the office when mummy helps out 'cus I don't want mummy to help out. I got a door on your room, not a gate. I'm allowed in my room.*
- 23 Me: *How about you, Lisa, are adults and children different, do you think?*
- 24 Lisa: *Yes, because they have got dresses on and they look different. Children don't do cooking because they put it on fire, adults have to do it.*
- 25 Rachel: *Sometimes I cook with mummy!*
- 26 Carly: *If they do something naughty, they tell the children off.*

27 *Me: Are the adults always right then?*

28 *Kayleigh: No way hose! Children tell mummies off as well!*

29 *Carly: Adults not always right. When my daddy plays eye-spy with me I say 'guess a colour' and he says trousers. That's not right!*

**{Reflective journal, May 18th 2011}**

**Figure 18 Sharing children's thoughts on the role of practitioners/adults**

This interaction represented a significant shift for me in my relationships with the children. There was a shift in how the conversation was constructed when compared to my earlier attempts to seek answers to my research questions. As I became less attached to a research outcome during Phase 2, I felt I was able to understand more of the children's perspectives, in this instance of the role of practitioners/adults, without over-directing the conversation. This is explored further below.

It is interesting that Lisa chose not to become involved actively in the conversation at its initiation (line 2), yet chose to join with her view further into the conversation (line 24). This appears to suggest a more natural conversation without pressure to answer in a particular way, or at all. Indeed, my initial question was not taken up particularly by either Lisa or Kayleigh (lines 2 or 3). This struck me as being in contrast to the notion of children responding to adults as they feel they are expected to do so and typically by providing answers that are 'correct' or aim to please (Punch, 2002). This is an issue that I discuss further in section 7.2.2.3.

Another view might be that Rachel only took up the conversation as she observed that I was writing the thoughts of Lisa and Kayleigh in my notebook (line 9) and wished for hers to contribute. Nonetheless, none of the children seemed overly attentive to check that I was writing their words (as they had been at other times). Therefore this might suggest that the notebook motivated the conversation yet the choice to continue the discussion was the children's choice.

#### **7.2.1.2.1 Children's construction of practitioners/adults**

Insight into the children's construction of the role of practitioners, and more widely adults, I feel, is an example of an opportunity afforded by joining the children and building genuine relationships. The children's insights appear to illustrate how they are considering both the role of practitioners and adults (as providers and protectors, for example lines 7 and 8, and rule enforcers, lines 16 and 26) as well as their physical similarities and differences to children (lines 20, 21 and 24). Interestingly the roles identified by the children are somewhat similar to those implicit in the more traditional models of construction of children and childhoods (for example, children as possessions, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, and as innocent, Dalhberg et al, 2007. See chapter 2, section 2.1.2). Kayleigh's conclusion and rather emphatic comment (line 28) perhaps suggests some movement in thinking away from the traditional constructions, where she considers adults and children more *equal* in terms of being right and 'naughtiness'. Although Carly has misinterpreted the notion of being 'right' in this context (line 29), her comment demonstrates her contemplation of the differences and similarities of adults.

#### **7.2.1.3 Comparing shared dialogue with children to (adult-led) directed dialogue**

As I reflected on the nature of the dialogue in the example above, I returned to the early stages in Phase 1 of the study and contemplated the difference in the interactions with the children that I had documented. Juxtaposing the texts, it became clear that earlier texts had my research questions firmly in mind. The following vignette from my journal relating to the Wish Catcher activity (see section 5.2.4.2) in Phase 1 provides an illustration.

*I am contemplating whether the Wish Catcher activity provided any insights into children's wishes for their pre-school experience. Similarly as with the Tree of Feelings, there was limited expression relating to pre-school. Despite my, (clearly evident and not particularly natural) 'best efforts' to include the pre-school aspects into the conversations, the children preferred to talk about*

*their home experiences and their fantasies. Perhaps John (3 years 5 months) and Tim's (3 years 7 months) explanations shed some light on the possible reasons.*

*John joins Tim and some other children who are making some representations of their wishes (at least this is what has been suggested to them by me!). Tim was involved in the Wish Catcher activity yesterday. I explain to John what the children are doing.*

*1 Me: What do you think a wish is, John?*

*2 John: The stepmother turned into a witch [pause 1 second]she wished [pause 1 second] she wished a red apple [pause 1 second] she bitted it then she was dead [pause 1 second] then the prince came.*

*3 Me: Oh yes, Snow White bit the apple didn't she? It was lucky the prince came to save her. That wasn't a very nice wish, was it?*

*4 John: [Shakes head] Hmm.*

*5 Me: How about you, John, do you have any wishes?*

*6 [Hard to hear exactly what John said from replaying the tape due to loud background noise. However John mentioned his dreams were where he made wishes. He explained that he had wished for a 'new bed' (actually a new duvet cover)].*

*7 Tim: I got Giggles bed! I gone with grandad in caravan.*

*8 Me: How about wishes for when you are at pre-school? What do you wish for at pre-school?*

*9 John: My wishes are for home [pause 1 second] my mummy says.*

*10 Tim: No, I don't wish at pre-school.*

**{Reflective journal, Wish Catcher, June 18th 2010}**

**Figure 19 Attempting to 'direct' children's expressions**

My reflections on the interaction at that time clearly show my agenda to use the activity as a means to direct the expression to gaining specific data (relating to the



pre-school provision). This was despite my expressed aims to explore and support children's expressions. I was certainly expecting some data that might match my research questions relating to children's opinions of their pre-school. My interaction showed my keenness to move the general exploration of wishes to something 'concrete' that I might be able to act on to 'improve' children's experiences at the pre-school.

As I later re-reflected on the vignette, I realised that John might well have taken up Tim's remark about holidays (line 7) and reflected on his own family experiences, or together they might have discussed their interest in their bed sets further, had I not intervened with my 'loaded' question (line 8). Had I taken a less direct approach (as in the previous vignette), it could be said that children having the time and space to share their family experiences, and other topics of mutual interest, with each other might contribute to a 'richer' pre-school experience, than my direct request to return a specific answer on the subject, that would give me the potential to 'fix'.

#### **7.2.1.4 Co-constructing documentation with children: equalising relationships**

As I began to explore the children co-constructing their own documentation in their Learning Journeys (chapter 6, section, 6.1.1.4), I noticed a further shift in our interactions.

Whereas children had been seeking me to act as a scribe during the initial months of Phase 2, therefore taking the lead, the relationships during our co-construction seemed to become more equal. There seemed more of a balance in who initiated conversation and the engagement of each party in the ensuing dialogue. I began to notice that I was more interactive in supporting the children to capture their ideas, to check that what I was writing was what they intended. A follow-up interaction with Rose to re-read her story (above, section 7.2.1.1) is one illustration of this.

*Rose and I were sharing her Learning Journey. As we re-read Rose's 'bunny story', that she had written some week previously with me, Rose offered "I've got a cat story for you":*

*Rose: I like dogs and cats. I like flower bags. I want one for home. I've already writted my list out. I'm going to tell you now [pause 1 second] I'll tell you my story.*

*Me: Ok, can I write it down?*

*Rose: [Nods]. This was a cat. He was walking across and he eating cat food.*

*Me: He was eating [writing down].*

*Rose: [Visually 'checks' what is being written] Cat food. He was on his way to his mummy's house. And then after he was on way to party [pause 1 second] no [pause 1 second] with his mummy and daddy.*

*Me: A party [writing down]. A party for cats?*

*Rose: All his friends.*

*Me: With his mummy and daddy [writing down].*

*Rose: And his friends.*

*Me: And his friends [writing down].*

*Rose: You be the granny and I'll be the mum. You look after that [doll and bag], I'm off to the party.*

**{Reflective journal, Co-constructing Learning Journeys, June 10th 2011}**

### **Figure 20 Actively supporting children's written expressions**

As a juxtaposed this encounter with Rose with our earlier interaction, the absence of my 'voice' in the latter is significant. I re-call that I was 'amazed' at the story and 'dared' not interrupt, anxious that I would miss the moment (and opportunity to capture some research data). My reaction is an issue that I discuss further below (section, 7.2.2.1). As I became accustomed to working with Rose to support her to capture her ideas in writing, both our voices became visible in our interactions. Brooker (2001) emphasised the advantages of adult researchers offering their own thoughts and feelings (the 'out loud thinking', Hutt et al, 1989 and Wood and Attfield, 1996, in Brooker, 2001) as an opportunity for children to respond. Wood et

al (1980: 80) similarly commented, ‘...adults who offer children lots of their own personal views, ideas and observations receive the child’s views back in return’. Rose appeared to acknowledge me as working in partnership with her; she took pauses to enable me to write down and check her story with her. Brooker (2001) acknowledged, in her research with young children, that such pauses enabled children to reflect on what they had said and amend if they chose.

This was a familiar pattern that developed with other children who chose to work together with me on their documentation. Often children would ask me to re-read things they had said or things that they had done (in some cases several times over the weeks). Sometimes the readings would be confirmed and at other times I would be asked to change something, or the children made their own changes through mark-making.

#### **7.2.1.4.1 Children sharing dialogue with peers**

Children began to share their Learning Journeys with each other in small groups, taking the lead in voicing their experiences. The activity tended to involve children highlighting areas of interest from their book to their peers or asking their peers questions about their books. The following provides an example.

*A small group of children asked me if we could read their books [Learning Journeys]. The children began discussing their book with each other and adding their own written comments:*

*Lisa (4 years, 3 months): Look I’ve done my name and my number [adding her name and age] to her book.*

*Hazel (3 years 9 months): [In discussion with Rachel (3 years, 10 months)] You want me to write “Rachel likes princesses and cats” in your book?*

*Eliza (3 years 7 months): [Asks me] Can you write, “I don’t like playing with cars”? [To her list of Likes and Dislikes chart].*

*Photos were discussed and further explanations given between the children as well reflecting on what they else were doing at that time of the photo:*

*Peter (4 years, 3 months): I’m cleaning the table for Laura and Lynne [practitioners] for Snack time. I got a ‘helping hand’ [a reward system].*

*Rachel (3 years, 10 months): [studying a photo of Lisa] What’s your favourite colour? [Pause 1 second] I say pink! [Lisa is dressed mainly in pink].*

*Drawings were explained; one of Peter’s was particularly intricate, with marks covering the entire page:*

*Peter: [Explains to me] I just got it out of my mind.*

### **Figure 21 Children co-constructing their documentation**

However, co-constructing the children’s documentation was not without significant challenge, in the main related to adult attitudes towards ‘preserving’ the Learning Journeys as adult records. This is discussed further below (section 7.3.3.1).

#### **7.2.1.5 The ‘least adult’ position in role play: insight into children’s interests**

As I began to join children in their play, I found that taking a ‘least adult’ position (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008) became increasing more automatic (natural). I found myself immersing myself in the roles and feeling more of an equal participant than a practitioner (or an adult/researcher) seeking outcomes, in terms of making observations on the children’s ‘progress’ (or seeking to ‘teach’, or gather research data). A significant realisation was that such ‘outcomes’ were occurring anyway and

arguably were more visible when the primary objective was to genuinely engage with the children. An interaction between Henry (3 years 8 months) and me is one illustration.

*Henry is standing by the Home corner, in which at this time other children are not engaging in play. Henry calls across the room inviting others to join him in his cafe. I am not engaged in play at the moment and accept his offer to his cafe. There are no further acceptances from other children at that time.*

- 1 Henry: Who wants to go to my cafe? [*Announces to the room, nobody responds. I acknowledge and accept*].
- 2 Me: I do Henry.
- 3 Henry: There's your seat.
- 4 Me: Thank you, Henry [*sit down*]. Actually I am feeling quite hungry as I have just realised that it is getting near Snack time. How about you?
- 5 Henry: Here's your whisker [*pause 1 second*] need my oven gloves. Mix this all up.
- 6 Me: Oh ok. I need to make the food first do I? I'll mix [*move whisk in bowl filled with pizza, strawberries and cake*]. What is it we're making?
- 7 Henry: That's your snack. I've just got to make you your tea [*gets kettle and hands me a cup*].
- 8 Me: Oh lovely, just what I could do with, a cup of tea.
- 9 Henry: You can have some sugar if you want to?
- 10 Me: No, thank you, it's fine as it is. Just a bit more milk would be perfect.
- 11 Henry: Here you go. Your main meal [*Henry puts a plate on the table in front of me*].
- 12 Me: Brilliant, I'm even more hungry now.
- 13 Henry: You have eggs and toast to start. And you Bailey [*Bailey joins the table. Henry hands a plate to her*]. Now I have to sweep up

now. I'm going to sweep up this apron – in it goes into the washing machine, all dirty.

14 Bailey: I'm finished.

15 Me: That was quick. I've still got a little bit left of egg left on my plate.

16 Henry: [*Returns to table with a comb*] Now you need a haircut.

17 Me: Oh ok then. It is getting a bit long.

18 Henry: You need a towel over you. [*Henry lifts my hair and makes cutting noises*]. You can have some apple and toast now. You've been a good girl.

19 Me: Thank you for my hair cut. Yum, some apple and toast. That sounds good.

20 Henry: Time to put this stuff away. In the washing machine [*Clears plates and cups from table and puts in the washing machine*]. Time to iron this. [*Takes tea towel and irons it*].

**{Reflective journal, 'The least adult role', May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2011}**

### **Figure 22 Insights into life experiences: joining children in role play**

The extract illustrates how Henry is expressing what seems to be of significance and interest to him in a particular time and space. He seems content to have me join him in enabling him to explore and make links between aspects of his experiences from his home life in some detail. For example, Henry explores the kitchen routines of meal preparation, assisted by use of equipment (lines 5 and 13) and blends this with hairdressing and ironing activities (lines 18 and 20). It is possible that the latter take place in his kitchen at home. My interaction with Henry is discussed further in the next sections.

#### **7.2.1.5.1 Play as a tool for checking targets?**

The interaction between Henry and me might be considered a fairly typical role play between a child and a practitioner. However, in my experience in this pre-school,

there is now much less evidence of such play since the introduction of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a). Although the children initiate such play, it is a more common scene to see practitioners with clipboards and blank observation sheets, in amongst the children playing, motivated to show progress towards the required targets. On sharing my experience with Henry, a practitioner remarked:

See I would love to get all that. But I just don't have the time anymore, the observations take so long.

**{Reflective journal, informal conversation, May 3rd 2011}**

I compared my interaction with Henry with a number of observations from the children's Learning Journey. I was surprised it was a challenge to find observations which captured the interactions between children and practitioners. The following extracts from Learning Journeys did record the interactions. The observations are reproduced exactly.

**Observation 1:**

John is playing with the construction materials. He says he is making a firework.

Adult: What colour is it?

John: Purple, orange and yellow

Adult: What shape is it?

John: Circle

Adult: What shape is the handle?

John: Rectangle

**Observation 2:**

John is dressing up as a lion.

Adult: What noise does a lion make?

John roars

**Observation 3:**

John is using a ruler to make lines/boxes on paper

Adult: How many boxes have you drawn?

John: 6. I'm making bricks for a house

**{Learning Journeys, May 4th 2011}**

**Figure 23 Practitioner observations. Over-focus on developmental targets?**

Although the limited context provided in the observations makes it difficult to make meanings other than those presented, it would appear that the aims of the practitioner are to demonstrate progress towards developmental targets (Wells, 1987; Alexander, 2010; Lee and Eke, 2009, Dahlberg et al, 2007) such as shape and colour recognition and number, through posing 'display questions'. It is possible that the practitioner joined in with play, took the opportunity to further John's interests (Wells, 1987), (in making fireworks, pretending to be a lion or constructing a house). However the focus on what the practitioner has chosen to capture (or perhaps feels needs to be captured to satisfy perceived obligations) suggests that these are considered the important aspects of the children's pre-school experiences that require documentation.

Following my interaction with Henry (above, Figure 22), I was intrigued to compare our interaction with the 'progress' documented in Henry's Learning Journey. An analysis showed different representations as described in my journal:



*From the observations in Henry's Learning Journey, I was able to glean that Henry needs to 'practice recognising and writing his name', can recognise numbers 1 to 10, some letters, and 'joins in with the phonics songs'. However I was not aware of Henry's ability to communicate, to develop creative scenarios, to richly express his life experiences, both through word and action, all visible in our interaction. Yet, without an agenda to capture Henry's developmental progress, spending time with Henry, genuinely being interested in what Henry wished to express, enabled his developmental abilities to become visible naturally. He clearly is able to use language for thinking and communication and develop imagination and imaginative play, main categories in the Communication, Language and Literacy and Creative Development areas of learning in the EYFS.*

**{Reflective journal, Learning Journeys, May 5th 2011}**

I could have taken an alternative position. I could have assumed a 'teaching role', in correcting Henry's misrepresentation of a dishwasher as a washing machine (above, Figure 22, line 20). Henry's 'unrealistic' choices might have been pointed out, pizza, strawberries and cake to be whisked to create a meal (line 6). Hygiene could have been discussed in cutting hair and preparing and eating food simultaneously (line 16). Display questions might have been asked along the same lines as asked in the observations above, for example, "what shape is the pizza?" (line 6), "how many plates do we need now?" (line 13) or "what colours can you see on the towel?" (line 18).

However, rather than add value to the scene that was being created, I believe quite the opposite, as I risked interrupting Henry's exploration of learning, his flow of thoughts, linking familiar scenes from his experiences and perhaps exploring representing combinations of experiences (Bruner, 1990). The paradox seems striking. A more narrow focus on developmental targets, influenced by practitioner interpretations of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a), would seem to risk not seeing the wider, richer qualities of children (including developmental), and their abilities to express themselves if adults are open to listening. The impact of the EYFS curriculum is discussed further in section 7.2.2.2.

## **7.2.2 Challenges and barriers to listening to children**

This section reflects on the difficulties that I experienced whilst attempting to listen to the children's perspectives.

### **7.2.2.1 Children as competent social actors? Reflections on the constructions of 'the child'**

Whilst I declared my intention was to explore supporting children's expression within a framework of putting the child at the centre, I came to reflect on what the notion of 'child-centred' actually meant (Dahlberg et al, 2007, Punch, 2002). I had initially assumed that 'child-centred' created a positive image of re-thinking early years practices to move away from adult-led agendas to a consideration of practice from children's perspectives.

Whilst re-reading earlier drafts of my thesis, I realised that I had used the phrase without consideration of what this might mean outside of prioritising children's interests and well-being. For example, I referred to 'child-centred mixed methods', a phrase which is associated with texts relating to the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) which I was keen to explore in my study. Whilst analysing the data from the study, I began to re-think what assumptions I had made and how this might affect the data and whether other readings of the data could be made.

This re-think was supported by the problematisation of 'child-centred' being an overused phrase in early years (see chapter 2, section 2.1.2) with the risk of classifying all children into the group 'child' without consideration of the individual children experiencing unique childhoods (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Hendrick, 2008, Conolly, 2008). Was this something that I and the other practitioners did and how did the data assist in answering this? This was a particularly interesting concept to me given the language of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) which referred to the 'unique child' as one the four overarching principles guiding the approach to implementing the curriculum. So firstly how were we interpreting this principle in practice? This was one signpost that I took in my analysis of the data. Secondly this led to my

realisation that a closer look at the language used in the elaboration of the Guidance to the EYFS (DCSF, 2008b) might usefully help to understand how the child is perceived and whether this might be considered another reflection of how the data in my study have been constructed. This was explored in detail in chapter 2 (section 2.1.1).

As I further considered how the practitioners and I had constructed children in the pre-school, I began to question whether we considered the child as ‘an empty vessel’, as a ‘biological child’ or as a child in need of protection (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Archard, 2004; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008). Or were we embracing the more postmodern view of the child, where children are viewed as competent meaning makers, as equal citizens who have valuable contributions to make to their own learning and society as a whole (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Prout and James, 1997)? Some of these possibilities are considered next.

#### **7.2.2.1.1 The biological child?**

As I revisited my encounter with Rose (above, section 7.2.1.1, Figure 17), where Rose asked me to be a scribe for her story, I reconsidered whether I had constructed Rose as a competent meaning-maker. Although I had considered this the case in my initial analysis of the text, where I had acknowledged Rose as taking the lead, a further reading of the text suggested alternative meanings.

I recalled my amazement at the richness of Rose’s story, the plot development, the suspense, the emotion and the conclusion (these were the qualities that I was keen to highlight when sharing with practitioners). Given my amazement, I questioned whether I was actually seeing Rose through a deficit gaze? Why was I amazed? Did I see Rose (children) as less capable rather than actually honouring her as innately capable? If the latter, then would I have reacted with amazement? A paradox seems apparent of which I had not been aware immediately.

### 7.2.2.1.2 The empty vessel?

Related to the above, I reflected on a practitioner-led pre-school activity that I had observed. This is one of many similar activities that I observed at the setting and in which I had actively participated during my role as practitioner. The activity involved each child having the ‘opportunity’ to make a lantern to celebrate Diwali (using a tick-list to mark who had participated). The activity involved a one-to-one between practitioner and child:

***[Practitioner and first child, Carly 4 years, 5 months]***

- 1 Practitioner: What colour paper? [Writes name – Carly is able to do this herself]*
- 2 Practitioner: Need to do slits down each edge [pause 1 second] next one, next one, next one*
- 3 Carly: [Makes the cuts apparently confidently]*
- 4 Practitioner: Good cutting Carly. Keep going all the way along. No more! No more!*
- 5 [Practitioner takes from Carly and staples]*
- 6 Carly: [Carly watches practitioner’s face. Then looks away. No verbal communication. Carly gets up and leaves.]*

***[Practitioner and second child, George, 3 years 10 months]***

- 7 Practitioner: You need to cut all the way down there [momentarily distracted by another child]*
- 8 George: [Makes cuts the length of the card]*
- 9 Practitioner: You are not supposed to cut it all off! Little cuts all the way down there*
- 10 Practitioner: [Leaves to find stapler]*
- 11 George: [Attempts to cut his lantern further]*
- 12 Practitioner: [Takes the lantern and staples]*
- 13 Practitioner: Lovely, off you go and play.*

***[Practitioner and third child, Joe, 4 years 2 months]***

*14 Practitioner: [Explains how the lantern is to be made as before, slits down each edge etc].*

*15 Joe: [Appears to follow the instructions closely]*

*16 Joe: [Hand apparently poised to do the stapling]*

*17 Practitioner: [Takes the lantern and again does the stapling]*

*18 Practitioner: Good Joe, all done.*

**{Reflective journal, Nov 22nd 2010}**

### **Figure 24 Not respecting children as capable participants?**

The significance of this activity for me was that the practitioner appeared to dominate the task with the end goal, of producing a lantern, taking priority over any genuine participation from the children. The practitioner's concluding utterances (lines 13 and 18) seem to give the activity the status of a task to be completed, and completed in a specific way (lines 2, 4, 7 and 9). This appears to be irrespective of the children's abilities and willingness to make the lanterns themselves (lines 3, 8, 15 and 16). What was striking for me was the complete absence of verbal communication from the children (all of whom are able speakers). It might be that they were so absorbed in the activity that they did not need speech. Or it might be that were they were awaiting the next instruction, aware that this was a situation where the adult was the deliverer of some (pre-formed) information and they, the children, were the recipients. Either way it does not seem that the practitioner has respected the children as equal, capable participants in the activity.

I juxtaposed a similar pre-school craft activity in which I had participated with the children (during the same month) with the above activity to make meanings from the comparison:

*I joined Jacob (3 years 6 months) and small group of children. The children were freely using craft resources which had been left from a planned pre-school activity earlier in the session where the children made pirate masks. I joined the group out of curiosity as to what they are*

*doing. I did not have a consciously planned agenda for what I was looking to 'see' and 'hear':*

- 1 Jacob: I'm making me! [Laughs] I'm making my body! Body, body,body [pause 1 second] this my arm, 'nother one. This big one, this massive one [pause 1 second]. Can you just hold this minute, please?*
- 2 Me: Yes I can do that, Jacob. Those arms are looking good, aren't they?!*
- 3 Jacob: Need to cut this bit, doing my cutting, cut in middle, look [pause 1 second] that's brilliant!*
- 4 Me: That is really brilliant, Jacob, reckon it looks like you!*
- 5 Jacob: Sometimes Lauren's birthday and Auntie Terry. It's going to be Ella then my birthday.*
- 6 Me: Oh right, it's your birthdays soon? What are you going to do?*
- 7 Jacob: I'm going to have pirate birthday and Ella is going to have princess birthday, at my grampy's.*
- 8 Me: Both at grampy's? Wow, that sounds good fun!*
- 9 Jacob: [plays with the craft sticks] Matchsticks [pause 1 second] smoke. Like nanny and grampy [pause 1 second] like Paul. Like windows! [Jacob arranges the sticks into squares].*
- 10 Me: Reminds you of nanny and grampy? Oh yes, that does look like windows, doesn't it?!*

**{Reflective journal, Nov 8th 2010}**

### **Figure 25 'Space' to respect children as capable participants?**

In contrast to the Diwali lantern activity, the activity with Jacob provided the opportunity for Jacob to explore physically, creatively and verbally, to make links with his family life experiences (lines 7 and 9) and look forward to future events (lines 5 and 7).

I sought meanings as to why such an ‘empty vessel’ approach might have been taken with the children. I reflected on my own positioning as a practitioner, tasked with the production of up to 69 Diwali lanterns within a given timeframe, and wondered whether I would have constructed the children differently. I questioned whether I would have made the space to be able to respect Jacob as a capable participant when faced with pressures of time and pre-school expectations of producing an outcome, a finished product. From similar experiences, I suspected that I might well have resorted to more of an ‘empty vessel’ approach. The challenges of pre-school routines, expectations and targets and their impact on listening to children’s perspectives are explored in the next sections.

#### **7.2.2.2 The EYFS curriculum: the impact of targets**

The controversy of the legal introduction of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008 a) in September 2008 in terms of a formal curriculum for the youngest children was discussed in chapter 2, (section 2.1.1). In my study it began to emerge that the interpretation and implementation of the EYFS at the pre-school seemed to be having an impact on the nature and type of dialogical interactions between the practitioners and the children.

From my own experiences, prior to the EYFS, there was a significantly lesser focus on documenting the children’s learning and development. Although documentation was made, according to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA/DfEE, 2000) and Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2003) frameworks (see glossary), this was a more of background activity in the pre-school that tended to be ‘driven’ by observations that occurred whilst playing with the children. It might be considered that the EYFS has had the opposite effect in the pre-school, with the observations ‘driving’ the play. The impact on the EYFS on pre-school practices from practitioners’ viewpoints are considered further below (section 7.3.3).

### 7.2.2.2.1 Carpet time as a platform for ‘delivering’ targets?

Reflections emerging from my research experiences seemed to suggest that it was more than the paperwork commitments that were having an impact. The necessity to show progress towards development targets and early learning goals in the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) in particular seemed to affect the nature of the interactions. An observation of a Carpet time activity is a poignant illustration:

- 1 *Practitioner 1: Sit on your bottom, and listen. All of you! [Some of the children are still moving around and talking to each other].*
- 2 *Practitioner 2: Now Carpet time is getting a bit silly. Doing your work is important. I know you are tired, hot and want to run around [pause 1 second]. Sit here in silence. I can sit here all day. I'm tired [practitioner's comments to other practitioners as she sits on chair at front waiting for children to be quiet].*
- 3 *Practitioner 3: Listen! Our work's important! Learning words and sounds. And really important for our children who don't speak English as a first language.*
- 4 *Practitioner 2: You play all day. This is our time to do our work.*
- 5 *What letter have we just sung about? [No response from children who are appearing to be listening].*
- 6 *Practitioner 3: What letter? If you had listened you would have known. Its 'C'.*

**{Reflective journal, January 13th 2011}**

**Figure 26 The impact of curriculum targets on sharing dialogue?**

What was striking to me was the sharp distinction made by practitioners between ‘work’ and ‘play (lines 3 and 4), seemingly suggesting that learning was being interpreted as occurring (exclusively or predominantly?) through the ‘work’ element



of pre-school, the adult-led ‘taught’ part. The notion of the ‘privileged voice of authority’ (Dahlberg et al, 2007) came to mind, where children were asked to ‘guess what I’m thinking’ (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Lee and Eke, 2009) in providing the expected answers to the literacy challenge (line 5). The apparent discomfort of the practitioner to carry out the phonics teaching, both in terms of attempting to engage the children and her own tiredness (line 2) led me to question why the activity was taking place at that time and whose interests were being supported. Equally noteworthy was the focus on children with English as an Additional Language (line 3). Practitioners had expressed the challenges in showing evidence of progress for children who were at the initial stages of acquiring English. Perhaps the pressures of the EYFS obligations were being demonstrated in the insistence that the Carpet time activity continued despite the difficulties.

My wider observations of Carpet time seemed to illustrate delivering pedagogy within a curriculum framework, where pedagogical talk tends to be instructional, directed towards desired outcomes, encouraging learning by rote and recitation (Alexander, 2000). Equally the notion of ‘school readiness’ resonated (Edgington et al, 2012, Dahlberg et al; 2007, Moss, 2007). In addition to a focus on phonics, children were required to recite days of the week, months of the year and numbers on a daily basis.

Although the EYFS specifies 6 areas of learning and development (DCSF, 2008a) the pre-school tended to give greater weight to the literacy and numeracy targets. This appears to reflect attitudes more widely in the education system, such as the introduction of National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and the National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999) in primary schools, in the late 1990s, aimed at improving attainment in these areas.

It would seem that such practices reinforced the notion of children as the ‘biological child’ or empty vessels, discussed above. Given that Carpet time represented the only group time for the children, such as a focus on ‘teaching’ suggested a challenge in considering Carpet time as a potential space for a more equal sharing, of listening and sharing children’s experiences.

#### 7.2.2.2.2 Reflecting on pedagogical ‘talk’

As I reflected further on the instructional nature of the Carpet time routine at the pre-school, I reconsidered the other practices that I had observed, such as the children making Diwali lanterns (above). This particular episode seemed to illustrate how the type and nature of ‘talk’ used in delivering the pedagogy within a curriculum tends to be distinct from natural conversational talk more associated with home environments (Tizard and Hughes, 2002, Wells, 1986) (discussed in chapter 2, section 2.1.1.3).

#### 7.2.2.3 Adult attitudes: Considering children’s freedom to express dislikes

Several incidents of children appearing to offer positive expressions when asked their opinions raised the question for me as to whether the children felt the expectation to offer positives or ‘feared’ the consequences of a less ‘agreeable’ response.

During Phase 2 of my study, an apparently positive addition to the Carpet time routine was the pre-school’s introduction of Likes and Dislikes charts. The charts were the outcome of the Early Years Advisory team (see glossary) encouraging settings to take account of children’s preferences at pre-school. The aim was to ask the children at the end of a pre-school session to express their likes and dislikes relating to that session. However, from observing the introduction of the charts, there appeared to be a distinction between accepting the children’s likes and dislikes. The following extract illustrates this:

- 1 *Practitioner: So, Amelia, what did you like at pre-school today?*
- 2 *Amelia: The books. I like to read them.*
- 3 *Practitioner: The books? [Writes on the Likes chart].*
- 4 *Practitioner: Andrew, what did you like at pre-school?*
- 5 *Andrew: Playing cars...dog food.*

- 6 Practitioner: *Dog food! At pre-school! I don't think so!*
- 7 Practitioner: *How about you Sam? What did you like playing?*
- 8 Sam: *I liked playing everything [pause 1 second] cars.*
- 9 Practitioner: *Cars again.*
- 10 Practitioner: *Ok, so what didn't you like playing with at pre-school today? Frank?*
- 11 Frank: *The garage.*
- 12 Practitioner: *Oh, why didn't you like playing with the garage?*
- 13 Frank. *'Cause I didn't.*
- 14 Practitioner: *[Laughs]. You usually like playing with the garage!*  
*[Apparent tone of disbelief].*

**{Reflective journal, January 4th 2011}**

### **Figure 27 Children needing to qualify dislikes?**

Line 12 suggested the apparent need to qualify the choice when expressing the *dislike*, whereas *likes* seemed to be accepted, whilst line 14 seemed to a judgement of the child's dislike as not being credible. The exception to acceptance of the likes was the seemingly rejected response of 'dog food', line 6, without furtherance with the child, presumably as this equally represented a response that was not considered credible.

After some attempts with the Likes and Dislikes chart, a practitioner remarked to me that the children were offering more likes than dislikes. An extract from my reflective journal serves to illustrate a context that preceded the practitioner's remark which offers one potential meaning as to why children might not offer dislikes to the same extent as likes. The interaction is between Katy (4 years 4 months) and me during the morning prior to the practitioner's Likes and Dislikes activity:

*I was not surprised that Katy did not join in the Likes and Dislikes activity this afternoon. This morning she had expressed a dislike to me during our conversation which related to the dolls that are out of reach on the wall. However*

*her apparent discomfort was striking. In view of this I was not surprised that Katy did not offer her opinion (and quickly checked myself from 'voicing on her behalf'), this afternoon at Carpet time. Our conversation from this morning:*

*It seems that Katy will not be drawn into a conversation with me about dislikes readily. At almost every session she initiates interactions with me, requesting I write her comments in my notebook. After dutifully doing so, I eventually 'came clean' and explained that although it was wonderful to hear about all the things that children like, I was equally interested in hearing about things that children like less.*

*As there was little response, I offered some of the things that I am not keen on, such as having to leave whatever I am doing once the whistle is blown for tidying up time and sitting on the carpet if I am staying for lunch waiting for the children to arrive for the afternoon session and registration. Anticipating either another non-response or a repetition of my comments in some form, I was surprised when Katy, with some apparent passion in her voice, responded:*

*Katy: I don't like the dolls hanging up there. They never come down.*

*[I was not aware of them ever being used other than as wall decorations]*

*Me: I will mention that to the pre-school ladies to see if something can be done*

*Katy: [Lowered her head slightly, did not further the dialogue but instead offered fairly quickly] I like the drawing area, I like the books, I like the sand [pause 1 second] I like everything.*

*Recognising Katy's unease, I did not further the discussion, instead returning to writing Katy's likes while Katy checked to see that I was doing so.*

**{Reflective journal, February 17th 2011}**

**Figure 28 Children's discomfort at expressing a dislike?**

This episode seemed reminiscent of the interaction with Jane in the early stages of Phase 1 of the study, where Jane had appeared to regret voicing a similar opinion regarding the out-of-reach toy giraffe (chapter 5, section 5.2.6.1). On juxtaposing the texts, I considered whether both children re-thought the acceptability of expressing displeasure and feared (or experienced in Jane's case) a negative adult reaction. I wondered whether the children might feel they were being 'naughty' and risked being 'told off' as a consequence.

The Likes and Dislikes charts at Carpet time would seem an opportunity to engage in discussion, yet there was limited evidence of this in practice. I question whether this is because there is not an ethos of 'open discussion'? Whether the *context* and the *type of talk*, was less conducive to expression (Wells, 1987; Tizard and Hughes; 2002, Lee and Eke, 2009, Alexander, 2010, Wood e al, 1980), (see chapter 2, section 2.1.1.3)? Often the Carpet time routines are timed to enable moving to the next planned part of the day. Whereas the activities which might be termed the 'rote, recitation and exposition' activities (Alexander, 2010), enable such timing to be predicted, the introduction of the Likes and Dislikes Charts, with a potentially more 'open' format, was not familiar to the children nor to the practitioners.

#### **7.2.2.3.1 Parents' reluctance to express children's dislikes?**

It would appear that the children's tendency to name *likes* more readily than *dislikes* was echoed by parents to some extent. I observed from children's Learning Journeys that similar Likes and Dislikes charts had been completed at home. Whereas the Likes were completed, the Dislikes were often only partially entered. I wondered about the possible reasons for this, especially as the entries appeared to be mainly the parents' representations of their children's feelings. My reflections in my journal assist with possible meaning making:

*On analysing a sample of children's Learning Journeys (approximately 30) there seemed more emphasis on likes than dislikes. Such entries from the Likes charts referred to activities that the children might do at pre-school (writing,*

*drawing, puzzles, crafts, dolls, cars) and activities at home (baking, gardening), hobbies (swimming, dancing, football) and food (pasta, fruit).*

*The Dislikes charts were rarely completed in full or only one or two entries. Where dislikes were given, they included taking baths, washing hair and foods. In particular, I interpreted the following entries as parents' representation of how they perceive their children. Dislikes included: 'Big risks – I am quite cautious', 'Too much variation in my routine' and 'Can't think of any'.*

*I wondered if some parents feel it is more (socially) acceptable to present their child in a positive way? Do they feel less inclined to 'reveal' their child's dislikes? Do they imagine a (negative) judgement of their child if they commit dislikes to a (very visible) chart? Might this be especially so if the child's dislikes implicate the pre-school in some way – such as a dislike of a routine, the facility or the resources?*

**{Reflective journal, Learning Journeys, February 18th 2011}**

Notably, during a brief interview, a parent discussing her perception of her child's pre-school experience commented:

*Actually I feel I know what he likes. He talks about friends he likes and things he likes playing with [pause 1 secon but I am not really sure what he dislikes, if anything, about pre-school. He doesn't really say and I don't suppose I ask really. I guess I just assume if he wants to come to pre-school, then everything is ok.*

**{Parent interviews, March 15th 2011}**

I reflected on the wider implications of a society view that tends to advocate 'positive thinking' over negative and considered whether this was an influence in the

children's choice of expressions. Given parents seem to ask 'positive' (often closed) questions about their children's experiences in pre-school, school and so on, do children learn that a positive response is desirable? How often do we, as parents, greet children with "did you have a nice time?" How often do we ask "so what wasn't so good then?" once we have heard the typical 'yes, all was fine', response, a response that tends to signal closure (Gamble and Reedy, 2013, forthcoming)? Therefore how acceptable, or possible, is it for children to answer, "no", and to do so comfortably?

#### **7.2.2.4 Attitudes and pre-school rules relating to children's participation and creativity**

An insight into children's participation and creativity was illustrated above (section 7.2.2.1.2) where it might be considered that children were less than active participants in the activity aiming for all children to produce an end product, in this case a lantern to 'celebrate' Diwali. However I was aware that this was a wider issue, drawing on my prior practitioner experience in the pre-school. In particular there were certain rules regarding the usage of the pre-school resources. Some of these rules were inherently visible in the organisation of the room and the inaccessibility of resources to the children. During the initial stages of Phase 2 of my study, I took a closer look at the environment with a view to assist meaning making as to how the environment might not be supporting children's participation and creative expression. An account in my reflective journal provides an illustration of some of the issues:

*Today I reconsidered the physical setting as well as the related rules and routines with 'fresh eyes' as to whether such was supporting children's participation. I reflected on aspects which did not seem to reflect the latter:*

***Arts and Craft area.** It is noticeable that the children only have access to certain resources in the adjacent shelving, such as 'junk' modelling and old magazines. The more 'interesting' resources are visible to the children,*

*such as shiny paper, coloured threads, sequins and beads, glitter and pasta shapes, yet out of their reach. Use of these resources is according to adult planning and supervision. I wonder what message this gives in terms of children as active participants and decision-makers in their pre-school experience?*

**Home corner.** *Although the labelling of the kitchen resources (with storage boxes displaying photographs of the contents) is aimed at providing a system for tidying the area, does this not restrict the children's choice in how the resources are used? My observations of Tidy up time are that there is much emphasis put on re-establishing neatness with the potential for reprimanding if resources are used as unintended. For example, the resources are not allowed to be used in the Sand and Water area (although in the main they are plastic). Yet is this not an active demonstration of children's interests in creatively exploring the resources in other contexts?*

**Construction area.** *This area has varied associated resources such as building blocks, vehicles, train tracks and farmyards. The resources are visible and accessible to the children. However there is a process that requires the children to select certain resources by a show of hands at Carpet time. Although this includes children's participation to some extent, the underlying motive is again one related to tidiness. Such a 'selection' prevents the resources from becoming muddled in the wrong storage boxes and the additional effort this would require to sort at Tidy up time. Again I question tidiness being priority over children's exploration and expression of their interests at pre-school?*

**Book corner.** *The book shelf for children's use is capable of displaying approximately 30 books. The pre-school has a large stock of books in the store cupboard. Why are the books refreshed only rarely in the book corner from the store and why don't the children actively participate in the choosing?*

**{Reflective journal, October 4th 2010}**

**Figure 29 An 'enabling environment' for children's expression?**



During an interaction with the children, in which I was joining in the play, I was rather sharply reminded of the pre-school rules regarding the ‘correct’ use of resources:

*I was invited to play by a small group of boys heading for the water tray. I noticed that animals and cars (taken from the carpet area) had been put in the water. I am aware that previously cars (and generally anything not designated for water play) are not permitted in the water. As the play seemed to have been happening for a while, I assumed that this was ok and began to play with the children. We used the cars and animals to splash from towers and make makeshift rafts to float them to the other side. After around 20 minutes of further play, the whistle was blown for Tidy up time. Across the room came the question and reprimand:*

*Practitioner: Right, who has put the cars and animals in the water tray? You know that it is not allowed don't you! The cars must stay on the carpet with the garage and the animals stay on the carpet too. I want to know who did it? [Pause 3 seconds] I'm waiting. Ok, in that case, I saw you Bradley, and you John, playing with the water. So take the cars and animals and dry them up please. Go on.*

**{Reflective journal, ‘least adult’, May 6th, 2011}**

**Figure 30 Children’s creative expression silenced by resource ‘preservation’?**

I reflected that such a ‘public’ reminder of the rules was most likely an effective way to reinforce and to dissuade children from attempting to creatively use the resources in future. Not only were their voices silenced (literally), but their demonstrated viewpoint, that the resources from one other area of the curriculum be appealing for use in other areas, was both overlooked as a point of reflection and reprimanded by action.

### **7.3 Analysing the barriers and insights to practitioner participation**

As I reflected on the challenges that I had experienced in attempting to actively engage the practitioners in joining the research activities with the children, I began to attempt to make alternative meanings.

One of the influences on meaning-making was the unanticipated opportunity to feed back findings from my study to practitioners and the pre-school management during the final weeks of the field research period (July 2011). This is discussed next.

#### **7.3.1 Unanticipated Feedback sessions**

Although participation had been limited, as the field work period was nearing its final months, (which I had planned to coincide with the end of the pre-school year in July 2011), I decided to re-try approaching the practitioners, as well as the setting management. My intention was to express my wish to share some of the data, as part of the overall analysis process, with a view to hearing responses to some of the meanings that I had made.

##### **7.3.1.1 Practitioner feedback sessions**

With the exception of one practitioner (whose response was neutral and who subsequently did not participate), each practitioner responded positively. Without

exception, the reason for accepting the invitation was given as having time since the children's reporting process had completed. What this meant was that the end of year reporting was finished to both parents and to schools (for those children transferring to school the next term).

Based on my previous experiences of the difficulties in engaging practitioners whilst pre-school routines required attention, I suggested that we might meet away from the pre-school setting. I hesitated to make this suggestion given my awareness that away from the setting would mean in the practitioners' own time. However fortunately practitioners agreed and suggested they would prefer to meet with me on an individual basis to avoid trying to co-ordinate already busy non-work schedules. There was request from three of the five practitioners to limit the meeting to one hour. Clearly this presented a tight timescale to share findings from the study. On this basis, I identified data that I considered might initiate most debate. The data were a blend of interactions and observations with the children, as well as an overview of questionnaire feedback (from parents and practitioners) on the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a). One example was my experiences in co-constructing the children's documentation. Another example was the potential challenges of Carpet time as a conversation space with children beyond implementing the curriculum.

#### **7.3.1.2 Management feedback sessions**

Prior to meeting with the practitioners, I discussed my intentions with the setting management who advised that they would be interested in the practitioners' feedback, as well as hearing more about my findings. Although it was challenging to find an available time, we were able to have an hour feedback session in the management office at pre-school.

I had some concerns around sharing some of the data. My main consideration related to potential judgement, given that practitioners' work practices were captured in some of the data. I did not intend the session to be a critique of practitioners' work.

As some of the data included observations of individuals' practice, although anonymised, I took the decision not to include these in the meeting.

Both the practitioner and management meetings were more insightful than I had anticipated and led to me re-making meanings as to the process of the research, how it was perceived by the practitioners and the setting management and my role within it. This is discussed further next.

### **7.3.2 Reflection on the construction of the practitioner**

In a similar way that I reflected on the different ways in which the practitioners and I had constructed the children at pre-school, I more latterly came to consider ways in which I might have constructed the practitioners (and they might have constructed themselves). I contemplated whether such constructions potentially had impacted the participation of the practitioners in the study. Equally I considered my own constructions, from my perspective and from the practitioners' perspectives, as I attempted to make the transition from practitioner to researcher.

It was a gradual realisation that there were noticeable paradoxes, in attempting to motivate research that was socially constructed (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Schwandt, 2000, Pring, 2004), in what I thought was happening and in how I was acting. On closer re-exploration of the data, a significant finding was that there were moments where I appeared to be aiming to 'teach' the adults, to teach what might be achieved if they took the time to listen more to the children and respect what they say. Clearly this contradicted my purported aim to create an equal, shared exploratory experience. Mac Naughton and Hughes's (Mac Naughton, 2005: 42, Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009: 106) notion of 'troubling truths' reminded me to look further at my initial analyses.

### 7.3.2.1 Constructing practitioners as the non-experts?

An analysis of the feedback sessions provided instances of where I became aware of my own position, my own voice, which at times was louder than that of the practitioner. Whereas throughout the study, I believed that my philosophy was sharing perceptions whenever I had the opportunity, valuing different viewpoints for the possibilities that this would open, I was surprised at hearing my own voice literally talking over the other at times. The following extracts from feedback sessions illustrate this:

#### ***Extract 1***

*I shared a vignette with Paula with the expressed aim to “see what you think”. The vignette relates to the toy giraffe on the wall out of the children’s reach [see section 5.2.6.1]. Jane’s request to play with it was overturned by the pre-school management.*

- 1 Me: [Reads out the vignette whilst Paula listens.*
- 2 Me: So at that moment I suddenly realised there was more to this whole thing. It wasn’t only about listening and hearing what children thought. It was a case of acting on it as well, wasn’t it? And the child, she was quite nervous, she probably won’t want to voice anything again!*
- 3 Paula: Probably not, no, I [interrupted by me]*
- 4 Me: I wouldn’t think so either. I felt awful for creating a situation which was, you know, quite counter-productive really.*
- 5 Paula: Well yes, I can imagine. Hmm, tricky.*

**{Feedback session, July 13th 2011}**

#### ***Extract 2***

*I found myself justifying why I had decided to ‘step back’ from implementing the planned research activities to spend time ‘just being’ with the children:*

- 1. Me: I decided to take the pressure off [from attempting the research activities with intended outcomes] by just being with the children.*

2. *Sarah: Oh yeah, you learn so much by just sitting with them[interrupted by me]*
3. *Me: Oh it was amazing!*
4. *Sarah: Hmm.*
5. *Me: [Continued] I would not have got what I did from just doing the activities. I have got some, but I was trying to sort out the computer, access problems, all this was going on.*
6. *Sarah: I see.*

**{Feedback session, July 12th 2011}**

### **Figure 31 Viewing practitioners as the ‘non experts’?**

Although this was not a conscious action, clearly I interrupted practitioners’ sentences (extract 1, line 3), or added my own extension to a view being expressed (extract 2, line 3), without leaving space for the view to develop, which might well have differed from mine.

To assist with making meaning of my approach, I re-viewed the transcription using other texts. I used a deficit model as one such text, asking myself whether I was too eager to ‘fill up my vessels’? (Dahlberg et al, 2007, Archard, 2004). This was intriguing as I had considered such a position in interactions with the children (above, section 7.2.2.1), but had not imagined constructing the practitioners in a similar way. I contemplated whether I was assuming that I had more ‘expert’ knowledge as the researcher? My dialogue appeared to have more of a reinforcing effect on creating a singular account than attempting to move towards the multiple. I appeared to be seeking consensus at times (extract 1, line 2; extract 2, line 5) rather than valuing the richness of multiple voices. Was I viewing the other practitioner as the Other, the Other that I desired to make into the Same? (Mac Naughton, 2005; Moss, 2007; Dahlberg et al, 2007, Holliday, 2007; Fine, 1994). If this were the case, this conflicted with my intended reference to the postmodern framework, where (alternative) meanings are constructed and valued rather than attempting to assert my belief in the ‘truth’ (Crotty, 1998; Pring, 2004; Schwandt, 2000). My intention to promote joint reflection in my adaptation of Kotter’s (1996) model (see Figure 3, stage 4) was not being realised.

#### **7.3.2.1.1 The pressures of time and expectation**

I was aware that I had finite time to discuss my research data and preliminary analyses with each practitioner in the feedback sessions. I had explained the sessions as feedback opportunities, therefore I believed I had set the expectation that I would ‘feed back’ my experiences from the research. It would seem reasonable that feedback implied a certain amount of ‘imparting’. On reflection I did feel it was expected to ‘impart’ my findings. For my part, there was eagerness finally to have an opportunity to offer the data, and hopefulness that the other practitioners would find it inspiring. The restricted time to feed back even the highlights left less space for discussion and jointly reflecting on my preliminary interpretations to construct further, alternative analyses. I wonder whether this might have been an (over) eager attempt to keep the pace moving, to hold attention, to share the data that I had found inspiring.

#### **7.3.2.1.2 Parallels to practitioners delivering the EYFS?**

Interestingly for me, parallels began to emerge between the setting practices that I had been observing, which constructed the children in certain ways, and my approach to the research with the practitioners.

My apparent actions to ‘teach’ the practitioners, to some extent, might be considered as a barrier to creating an environment where collaborative thinking could flourish. An immediate analogy is the time pressure that the practitioners expressed in implementing the obligations of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a). This could influence the way in which practice is shaped, often ‘teaching’ and ‘getting done’ leaving less opportunity to share and create with the children. As I reconsidered my own actions, and their paradoxes, through different analyses of the data, this assisted in re-thinking some of my earlier interpretations of the practices that I had observed. These are explored further in section 7.4.

### 7.3.2.2 Time to move towards participation?

There was an opportunity for one of the practitioner feedback sessions to be longer in duration (over 2 hours). The nature of the interaction in this session suggested more of a collaborative way of working might be possible. A more balanced dialogue between the practitioner and me became apparent, more of an exploring rather than 'debriefing' (which probably describes closer the nature of some of the feedback sessions). In this instance, more of the challenges for both the practitioner and me were shared. This more natural conversation is visible in the following extract:

*I was discussing with Chris how I would have liked more active participation with practitioners in exploring hearing children's voices:*

1 *Me: In offering the techniques [research activities] I was hoping that others*  
2 *would join me in giving their views of whether they'd be of use in pre-school.*

3 *Chris: Did any of the others join in with your activities? The camera one? I*  
4 *know I didn't, as I'm feeling the pressure of getting everything done with the*  
5 *planning and reports and all that stuff.*

6 *Me: Not as much as I would've liked. There was some participation in the*  
7 *craft activities, when I wasn't in... after I asked if anyone wanted to*  
8 *try it out.*

9 *Chris: Ah there, you see, you didn't ask! If you don't ask then things don't get*  
10 *done. That's what I find. There's not enough thinking for yourself in here. It*  
11 *can be really frustrating. You need to ask!*

**{Feedback sessions, July 22nd 2011}**

**Figure 32 Making time for participation**



Overall, I questioned whether the Focussed Conversations approach (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007, see chapter 4, section 4.1.2.2.1), if such had been possible, would have offered the potential to genuinely share and create other possibilities.

Chris's response to limited participation, whilst adding to the challenges of time of the EYFS (2008a) (lines 4 and 5), provided a significant insight to other difficulties relating to practitioners not taking initiative (lines 9 to 11); an insight that I had not been aware of in my research. This is discussed further next.

### **7.3.2.3 Practitioner participation a wider issue?**

During the feedback sessions the pre-school management expressed a similar viewpoint regarding the challenges in encouraging the practitioners to take a more active role in pre-school practices. Moreover the management expressed how the lack of participation, in making decisions, put additional pressures on the management to fulfil other managerial obligations. An extract from the feedback back session demonstrates this:

*Management: Staff initiative is lacking in most. They look for too much direction which puts pressure on me when I am already feeling under pressure. This is massively added to by the volume of paperwork to support SEN [Special Educational Needs] referrals, which has been up to 5 children this year. I expect that the staff will use initiative when ideas are discussed in meetings, but this just doesn't seem to happen really. So I feel I need to keep checking and reminding them to take action – it's very exhausting.*

*Me: What sort of things would you like to have more initiative taken?*

*Management: Well Makaton is one example. They all did the training then did not use what they had learnt afterwards, other than starting to use at Carpet time. But that stopped in no time.*

**{Management feedback session, July 17th 2011}**

Such a revelation was unanticipated and prompted me to re-think an initial reading of my data in Phase 1, where I had assumed that the practitioners had limited scope for taking initiative. A key illustration of this was the management's response to a practitioner taking action on moving out of reach resources to enable the children access (chapter 5, section 5.2.6.1). Whereas my initial assumption might reflect one aspect of the situation, the management's perspective seemed to suggest there were other aspects, perhaps relating to practitioner attitudes that impacted the construction of a participatory environment. My own reactions to my perceived restrictions that I constructed as a practitioner (relating to the pre-school rules and expectations), and how this influenced my approach to my research, are explored below in section 7.4.

### **7.3.3 Further reflections on the EYFS for practitioner participation**

Practitioner and management perspectives on the pre-school's implementation of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) both added to the challenges that I had observed from my own perspectives as well as offering alternative meanings.

#### **7.3.3.1 Challenges to practitioners co-constructing documentation with children**

As I had anticipated from earlier observations and own experiences, time and pressure to complete the children's Learning Journeys and related documentation were highlighted as problematic by practitioners. Time was given specifically as a barrier to sharing the children's documentation with them, as expressed by practitioners:

*I try to go through the Learning Journey with each child who shows interest. Time is a major factor. It can be frustrating.*

**{Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, January 2011}**

*My main concern is not having time with my key group children, to go through their books. Other pressures of certain number of obs. being done, reports, comments in communication books seems to have to take priority.*

**{Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, January 2011}**

The issue of the documentation being an adult creation that risked ‘damage’ if the children participated was one that was acknowledged both by practitioners and the management. However there were alternative viewpoints. One practitioner expressed a positive attitude toward ‘damage’:

*Allowing the children to do it themselves encourages interest in their Learning Journey and they will come back to do it again. Perfection is not and should not be the issue in my opinion.*

**{Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, January 2011}**

Whilst another expressed a more cautionary approach:

*If a child asks to go through their LJ I let them look at it. I do sit with them because it may get written on or destroyed not necessarily by that child.*

**{Practitioner T, LJ written evaluation, January 2011}**

The management acknowledged such an attitude towards ‘damage’, which risked potential participation with the children in their own documentation, as an on-going issue that needed further attention.

#### **7.3.3.1.1 Parent’s perspectives**

Although I was unable to seek parents’ views to the extent that I had hoped, I was able to hear the voices of 6 families (from the 21 that expressed an interest in the study) in relatively brief (15 to 20 minute) individual discussion sessions. An overview of the discussion questions and a collation of responses are included in Appendix F. The questions were structured in view of the restricted time allocation and related to parents’ perspectives on their children’s documentation and the children’s participation in its creation.

During the analysis of responses, I was especially interested to understand whether parents' perspectives added to the arguments relating to challenges to practitioners working collaboratively with the children.

There were different opinions as to whether parents perceived their children could relate to their documentation, the Learning Journey, as being 'theirs'. The opinions seemed to suggest the varying amounts of interaction that the children had with the practitioners in creating the documentation. One parent, whose child had actively co-constructed her Learning Journey with me (as a research activity) commented:

*B knows her Learning Journey by heart and can 'read' most of it including the writing!*

***{Parent Meetings, March 10th 2011, Parent AB}***

Other parents' views varied from there being some interest to little interest from the children. One parent was especially emphatic in her viewpoint that her son was not a participant in his documentation creation:

*I try [to share the LJ] but it is like pulling teeth! J really is not interested at all – I don't think he identifies with it as his book. I don't think he was involved in putting it together.*

***{Parent Meetings, March 10th 2011, Parent JT}***

Asked specifically whether there was visibility of the children's own voices in the Learning Journeys, one view was that the child had directly made comments and participated by contributing her own work whilst in pre-school (again this was a child actively involved with me in the research) and was continuing to participate at home:

*B has stuck her work in the book and added her own comments – she also asked me to add other things, such as new things she likes or doesn't like to the bit on these [the Likes and Dislikes chart].*

***{Parent Meetings, March 10th 2011, Parent AB}***

Other parents apparently referred to practitioner *representation* of their child's voice, rather than the child's direct participation (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Punch, 2002). There were different opinions as to whether the practitioner representations resounded. One positive comment was:

*I particularly enjoy reading J's comments because I can 'imagine/hear' him saying them, which makes me laugh, and they provide a true representation of his character.*

***{Parent Meetings, March 9th 2011, Parent TG}***

For other parents, there was no evidence of their children's voices:

*... I wasn't aware he was cutting/sticking photos etc. I don't think his actual words were quoted or his opinion was asked for.*

***{Parent Meetings, March 10th 2011, Parent SC}***

Notably for me, parents' perspectives as to whether their children should be active participants in creating their Learning Journeys with practitioners tended to reflect the cautionary view regarding potential 'damage' discussed above:

*A would have loved to have taken some of the photos himself. This would need to be with the adults, of course, to stop the Learning Journey being trashed possibly!*

***{Parent Meetings, March 9th 2011, Parent TK}***

*This is fine [children's direct participation] as long as well supervised to avoid it getting messed up.*

***{Parent Meetings, March 10th 2011, Parent SC}***

In fact there was not a view which considered children's participation should take priority over potential 'damage'. This is somewhat contradictory to some of the positive views about participation expressed by parents above. The strongest view against participation was related to the documentation being intended as a practitioner perspective of children's development:

*I don't think children should make entries in the book as it's an adult record of their abilities. I'm interested in how C is progressing from a professional view.*  
**{Parent Meetings, March 14th 2011, Parent RE}**

### **7.3.3.2 Potential for practitioners co-constructing documentation with children**

Whereas I had made assumptions that lack of participation might equally be lack of interest in the research and, more importantly, in sharing the children's experiences of documenting their own 'progress', practitioners expressed other viewpoints:

*...this [sharing the children's LJ with them] would be my chosen means of developing the Journey... It is possibly the only true reflection of the child's individual perspective.*

**{Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, January 2011}**

*I feel that the key workers should share the LJs with the children on a regular basis (time available??). The children should add their own ideas etc., rewarding for both concerned.*

**{Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, January 2011}**

### 7.3.3.2.1 Unanticipated management revelation

Whereas I had assumed that my research activities with the children had received little attention from the practitioners and management, I was surprised that during the feedback sessions an alternative perspective became visible, both from management session and from a session with a senior practitioner. The revelations were specifically in relation to the implementation of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) and how my interactions with the children had motivated discussions on how the pre-school processes needed re-thinking. As the management expressed in relation to me constructing the Learning Journeys with the children:

*We took the lead from you and brought this up in staff meetings. We noticed how you were getting the children's comments on their work. We talked about the issue of presentation [of the Learning Journeys for some practitioners] and how this should not stop them doing it together with the children.*

**{Management feedback session, July 17th 2011}**

The management referred to the current process of practitioners writing children's documentation and expressed how this tended to be insufficient in developing insights into the children's progress. Lack of *context* (Wells, 1987; Tizard and Hughes, 2002) and purpose of the observations were reasons given for this:

*The quality of observations is often lacking. They are quite simplistic e.g. counting, recognising numbers and letter, doing jigsaws and cutting. But they have not developed beyond this.*

*We have compared the sorts of observations that you have been doing with the children, the long observations with lots of detail and with the children's comments.*

**{Management feedback session, July 17th 2011}**

Time pressures were acknowledged but the management added an alternative viewpoint:

*I don't feel staff are alert to what they should be looking for when doing observations with the children. Lots is missed as not all of them are tuned into hearing general conversations and knowing what to write in obs. They don't seem to know how they relate to the EYFS areas [of learning and development].*

**{Management feedback session, July 2011}**

Both the management and a senior practitioner explained the approach that they were planning for the following term (unfortunately after my fieldwork had completed, but encouraging for children's voices). They aimed to motivate practitioners to reflect on the way that they approached documentation, to take more ownership and to develop a deeper understanding of the children:

*We are changing the way we do planning. Each practitioner is going to be in charge for certain weeks. I am dying to see what they do with it – they have got loads of talent! It's going to be really interesting. I think it's necessary – it's the only way going to learn how it all connects to the EYFS and get to really know the children. This will help with reports, obs etc. So we are going to be challenging some of the issues you are raising.*

*Every 3 months... going to sit down and ask what they know about their key group children, without looking at documentation. It's going to be a little bit scary! But exciting too I think.*

**{Practitioner feedback session, practitioner C, July 22nd 2011}**



### **7.3.4 The influence of rules and routines on practitioner participation**

A significant issue, from my perspective, is the influence of the pre-school rules and routines on practice. Some of these have been illustrated in earlier discussions. One example of this was the management attitudes to the preservation of resources (section 7.2.1.1), where a practitioner's decision in making the resources available to the children was overridden.

Probably a most striking example of pressures of the routines (combined with pressures of the implementation of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a)) was the Carpet time vignette (section 7.2.2.2.1) where both the practitioners and the children seemed under pressure to 'perform', rather than engage in genuine participation. Although my initial analysis was from the children's perspectives in this particular instance, in reflecting on how such routines were potential barriers to listening to the children, I latterly re-visited Carpet time and considered the position from the practitioners' point of view. This is discussed next.

#### **7.3.4.1 Carpet time and the challenges for practitioners**

What was not visible from my earlier discussions was the lack of support that Carpet time permitted for the practitioner on 'rota duty'. Typically one practitioner 'led' the 26 children without the participation of other adults (unless there was a 'challenging' child, in which case a dedicated practitioner joined that child). The pre-school management seemed to take the approach that Carpet time was an opportunity for the other practitioners to attend to agenda and rota items such as cleaning the room and bathroom areas, organising children's coats and bags for 'home time' and preparing the room for the next session. Often such activities were not quiet and seemed a distraction for the children.

Given the limited support, perhaps it is more understandable why Carpet time seemed reserved for activities that permitted limited 'free' conversation. I recalled my own experiences as a practitioner and feelings of needing to compromise between attempting to stimulate dialogue with the children then being

‘overwhelmed’ with ‘opening the floodgates’ as many of the children were keen to contribute at the same time and less keen to adhere to any sort of turn-taking. Various views towards Carpet time were given by practitioners that seemed to suggest this was an area that was potentially problematic for some. One senior practitioner expressed that she had requested not to be included in the Carpet rota as she felt under pressure to complete the other required pre-school routines and was unable to give her full attention to the children during Carpet time:

*Sometimes the children are expected to sit on the carpet for too long and get bored. At these times I can't keep control, it's not fair on anyone. I have asked to come off the carpet as I am feeling stressed by trying to organise the room and everything. This is not me, I don't want to be running around – I want to be spending time with the children.*

**{Practitioner feedback session, practitioner C, July 22nd 2011}**

I observed similar scenes at snack and lunch times where one practitioner would ‘struggle’ to provide food, clear up spills, to ‘keep control’ whilst the other practitioners busied themselves with allotted tasks. Such opportunities to join the children seemed overlooked, especially in the social contexts provided by meal times, to share conversation, to listen and hear others. This appears in sharp contrast to the routines in Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a) where mealtimes are celebrated as social occasions for pedagogues and children to share meals together.

However Carpet time was not considered challenging for another practitioner who expressed quite the opposite:

*I love carpet time. When I read stories, not one of them speaks. Last week, I read 2 stories, one after another and not one of them said a single word.*

**{Practitioner feedback session, practitioner T, July 12th 2011}**

At first reading, I was not convinced that this provided a positive example of actively listening to children, in that the practitioner seemed to prioritise the fact the children were *not* speaking. However another view might be that the children were actively engaged in the story and therefore their silence expressed their choice to listen to the story.

The same practitioner continued and expressed doubts as to the approach of some of the other practitioners:

*I don't think many of them can control the children to be honest with you. They don't listen to a word. It's all about thinking how to get their attention, instead of getting yourself more and more stressed. Find something that they like. Forget about the letter, the number of the week.*

**{Practitioner feedback session, practitioner T, July 12<sup>th</sup> 2011}**

What I found particularly interesting was the practitioner's acknowledgement of the obligations of the phonics and number routines and the suggestion that she would overlook them if she considered appropriate to do so. This seemed to relate to the management's opinion that there was a tendency for practitioners to avoid using their initiative (above, section). Other practitioners voiced an alternative view, as one practitioner concluded:

*Things have to be done a certain way here, you know what I am saying, rules and stuff. I don't like to rock the boat.*

**{Practitioner feedback session, practitioner P, July 13<sup>th</sup> 2011}**

Therefore there appeared some tensions around the perception of pre-school practices (and their associated 'rules'), such as Carpet time, as to which actions were desirable as well as acceptable for practitioners.

## **7.4 Analysing my transition from practitioner to researcher**

I reflected on my transition from former employee and practitioner to researcher over the 2 phases of the study. As I reviewed some of my earlier data, the shift in my positioning became increasingly visible. Although I had become aware of the need to adapt my research approach, and my role within it, in the conception of Phase 2, the extent to which I brought my practitioner role to the research was more of a gradual realisation during Phase 2.

### **7.4.1 Constructing myself - Researcher or practitioner?**

Discussions above have illustrated some of the challenges that I faced in shifting my positioning to that of researcher. Most striking for me was that the implications of the shift were largely unconscious. I had not envisaged the complexities that would emerge once I started to become aware of my own impact on the research.

#### **7.4.1.1 The pre-school ‘rules’: Becoming aware of the extent of influence**

One of my realisations was my ‘conditioning’ towards the pre-school ‘rules’ as a practitioner (chapter 6, section 6.3). I only became aware of the extent of the influence of such ‘rules’ on revisiting my earliest thoughts on attempting to introduce the research activities in Phase 1.

A striking example is provided by my approach to the Tree of Feelings research activity (chapter 5, section 5.2.4.3). The following vignette is an extract from my reflective journal which describes how my anxieties to ‘comply’ with my perception of the pre-school ‘rules’ appear to have dominated the potential opportunity to tune into to the children’s expressions of interest:

*‘Tree of Feelings’ activity. Creative expression through painting? – well, yes, certainly anxiety! I attempted my version of Lancaster’s Tree of Feelings today:*

1 A group of children gathered. I outlined the nature of the activity which was  
2 met with a rush to grab the four available aprons. After some negotiation with the  
3 unsuccessful children, we came to an arrangement over whose turn would be next.  
4 There did seem to be a sense of urgency with the children busily selecting their first  
5 paint colours. I was pondering I could probably do with a hand from another  
6 practitioner but they all seemed preoccupied. I was keen to have some discussion  
7 around the colours the children had selected and how this might relate to feelings  
8 but the children seemed engrossed with painting the leaves. Perhaps in a moment, I  
9 thought. And sure enough the children did begin to engage with my questions...I  
10 frantically took notes as I couldn't risk my new digital voice recorder around the  
11 paint which seemed to be dripping more than I had planned. I looked up from my  
12 book to see Gary (3 years 1 month) without an apron dipping brushes into the  
13 paint. I quickly reacted, moving towards him and telling him he must get an apron  
14 before he can paint, most definitely the pre-school rule. He quickly grabbed the  
15 paint and launched a blob towards the tree. I firmly repeated the need to have an  
16 apron first to protect his t-shirt. He ran around the other side of the tree, grabbed  
17 another brush and quickly painted the nearest bit of the tree he could reach, whilst  
18 at the same time knocking the pot over and stepping in the spillage. Not too much  
19 as the pots have child friendly lids. By the time I managed to reach Gary, he ran off,  
20 spreading the small spillage across the room with his shoes. I had the painting cloth  
21 to hand (the yellow one reserved to clean up paint) and quickly trailed after the  
22 footprints wiping them up as I went. I looked around to see if I have been noticed by  
23 the staff and identified, ultimately, as the culprit of the mess. Everyone seemed to  
24 be busy. Fortunately the trail seemed to run out. I turned back towards the craft  
25 area. Oh no, the girls were on their knees right under the tree, painting the lower  
26 branches ... but they have already painted the upper leaves. Gosh was that paint on  
27 Fleure's white hair band, and in her hair as well and on those white leggings. I  
28 hurriedly asked the girls to stand up, pointing out that there was quite a bit of paint  
29 spilled on the floor. "It's on my shoes!" declared Jane, pointing to the black and  
30 orange paint splashed on the embroidery on her pink shoes. "And mine!" added  
31 Fleure. I demonstrated to the girls how they could squat down but not put their  
32 knees on the mat. I was aware that the manager was looking from across the room  
33 and some of the staff had begun to laugh rather nervously, well sort of shriek,

34 intermittently. "She's wearing those clothes on holiday after pre-school", the  
 35 manager advised from across the room. Feeling the girls had understood the  
 36 distinction between squatting and kneeling, I rushed off to the bathroom in search  
 37 of wet wipes. My return to the craft area with the wipes was delayed as the scene  
 38 awaiting me in the bathroom needed attending to. The children had been  
 39 independently washing their hands on completion of their painting, as per the  
 40 normal procedure. They must have had some difficulty removing the paint from  
 41 their hands as the sides and base of the sinks were covered in paint, as were the  
 42 surrounding walls. Not too much effort was required to clean up (and before the  
 43 staff member on toilet duty did the next inspection). The white cotton towel roller  
 44 proved more challenging. I returned and set about cleaning the craft area, several  
 45 trips required to the kitchen to clean the cloth before having another go. I was  
 46 aware that a couple of children were still painting the tree, fortunately they seemed  
 47 to be doing it sensibly and not really adding to the mess on the mat and  
 48 surrounding floor. Actually the paint was running out in the pots, I noticed. This was  
 49 probably good as it would be Tidy up time soon, so no need to re-fill the pots. This  
 50 gave me a chance to finish making the area look reasonable, I hoped. The whistle  
 51 for was blown. I didn't really notice which children had chosen to paint the tree  
 52 after I left to find the wet wipes. I hoped they didn't have too much paint on their  
 53 hair, or clothes. I wondered if they would have had anything to say about the  
 54 colours they had chosen and how these might represent their feelings? Oh dear, I  
 55 really did want to capture this for my field notes. Fortunately the craft area did  
 56 clean up reasonably well after I stayed in during outside play to ensure the mat was  
 57 scrubbed, as is the requirement after every session where it has been used. I was  
 58 particularly relieved that the children lining up to go home gave me the opportunity  
 59 to see who still had paint on their hair, faces, sleeves, knees and shoes. I used the  
 60 wet wipes to good effect hopefully. I hoped parents would not complain to the  
 61 setting manager. If they did I would hear at my next visit anyway.

**{ Reflective journal, Tree of Feelings, July 1st 2010 }**

**Figure 33 Researcher role impacted by practitioner 'rules'**

Probably unavoidable humour aside, there are clearly some significant aspects that I believe were influenced by my anticipation of potential disharmony with the pre-

school ‘rules’, drawing on my practitioner knowledge. The limited aprons for painting activities (line 2), the ‘franticness’ with which children anticipated a painting activity (line 2), the rules over keeping the areas clean from paint by using paint pots with lids and special ‘dirty’ cloths (lines 19 and 21), half-hourly bathroom rotas to check for tidiness (line 43) and the need to ‘reinstate’ the room to its former orderly state prior to each session (line 57). These were rules and routines to which I would have been unlikely to attune at such an early stage in my study as an outsider researcher. Similarly, parents and practitioner expectations (as well as children’s, line 34) that children did not ‘spoil’ their clothes during pre-school activities was an attitude of which I was aware. Such pre-occupations on my part clearly limited my capacity to listen to the children’s thoughts on the painting and how their colour choices might represent different feelings.

However, with the hindsight of Phase 2, it would seem that children were expressing themselves quite clearly through their actions. Many of them seemed more than content to experiment with the paint without my attempts at intervening with dialogue. Gary’s actions seemed testament to this (lines 12-19)!

#### **7.4.1.2 Focusing on a ‘teaching’ outcome as practitioner?**

An apparently similar situation was created by me in my attempts to introduce the painting to music activity (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003c and d) in Phase 1 (chapter 5, section 5.2.4.4). Again my intentions for the activity were influenced by my preoccupation with the potential ‘mess’ and concerns over the pre-school reactions. In fact I did not intend to include any of the data from the activity, as I dismissed it as being ‘unsuccessful’ for my research purposes.

A re-visit of the activity in Phase 2 enabled an alternative construction. My original reflections in my journal on the activity shortly after its completion illustrate my ‘frustrations’ with the activity:

*Four easels were set up and a selection of paint colours were made available, representing moods that might be associated with nature, so blues, yellows and oranges for sea and 'earthy' colours for forest. (I always underestimate how long it takes to sort the paint in the kitchen and was aware that the children were getting restless out in the room as they had been promised 'painting'). Large sheets of paper were attached to each easel (this proved tricky as the clips were not particularly secure). The CD player was positioned nearby ready to play the selected tracks. After some delay in sorting the resources, the first 4 children to show interest began to paint at each easel. The noise levels in the room meant that I had to adjust the volume of the music, however it was still quite difficult to hear. I asked each child whether he/she could hear the music, which was responded to with either nods or silence. So I trusted that it was just about audible. I had intended to spend time with each child, discussing their painting and wondering if the music has been inspirational. However the reality was that it all became quite difficult to manage. The sheets tended to fall out of the clips, so a large part of the time was spent re-fixing; children were becoming impatient when waiting for blank sheets to be fixed for their turn and began to paint all over the easels instead; there were arguments over paint colours, with more than one child grabbing the same pot or children mixing the colours so each resembled the same shade of 'muck'. Given that I was the only adult available, I found myself becoming quite agitated, with more time trying to 'keep control' than focussing on the children's paintings themselves. The noise levels and the lack of adult availability seemed to be barriers to the potential of such an activity. Given a couple of practitioners commented that the music was 'driving them mad' and thank goodness it could be turned off, the repeat of such an activity seems unlikely? I feel a sense of frustration over my own inability to focus on what I really wanted to. The anxiety of trying to keep the 'messy' activity under control, by myself, seems to take precedence over everything else. I didn't like how 'bossy' I was becoming to try to keep control.*

**{Painting to Music, June 15th 2010}**

**Figure 34 Confusing research with seeking a (teaching) outcome?**



The issue of ‘mess’ and rules aside, I was intrigued to re-read the extract. Although I initially almost dismissed this activity as being of little ‘value’, as echoed by a practitioner in her feedback,

*Children didn’t put the 2 together (music and painting). Just painted what they wanted. Didn’t really relate dark colours to sad music/bright colours to ‘jolly’ music.*

**{Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010}**

I later re-looked at the episode from another angle. Why did I dismiss the data? As introduced in chapter 6, (section 6.3.) it was during the early stages of Phase 2 that I began to consider that my approach to the research was being influenced by my focus on research ‘outcomes’ to the extent that other data were being overlooked. Although this might be related to my developing confidence in becoming a researcher, I later came to consider that my approach might be influenced by my practitioner role in which I was accustomed to demonstrating outcomes had been met.

I reconsidered what outcomes I was anticipating from the painting activity and how such did not appear to happen. There was no ‘evidence’ that the children had been inspired by the music in their paintings. Yet given the children seemed to engage with the activity by continuing to paint, despite the paper falling off and paint colours becoming ‘muddied’ then this would seem to suggest children were voicing their interest.

On reflection, my actions seemed to mirror other pre-school activities (discussed above), such as the Carpet time routines and the children’s documentation, where a primary focus on (developmental) objectives is visible. This further suggested that my ‘researcher thinking’ was being influenced by my practitioner experiences.

In the spirit of research, in the spirit of my espoused co-construction, I could have offered the activity on further occasions with a more open-ended approach, offered painting on large sheets of paper on the floor (to overcome the restriction of the

easels and paper falling off), and provided mixing palettes to embrace experimenting with mixing colours.

### 7.4.1.3 A ‘rhizomatic’ transition

In chapter 6 (section 6.3.2), I discussed how I began to take the children’s lead in play, to move from seeking outcomes to enabling the data to emerge in response to my research questions. Whereas this might be considered an illustration of me gaining confidence in the research process, equally this might be considered me moving from practitioner to researcher.

Once I began to gain awareness of how my practitioner knowledge was appearing to influence the way in which I was approaching the research, the attempt to re-view my approach was not a straightforward one. There were several incidences where I could see and hear myself re-assuming a practitioner stance in working with the children. The following vignette from my journal illustrates one such occasion during Phase 2 where I was encouraged by joining the children as they began to take the lead in the research:

*Working with the children on their Learning Journeys. All was looking positive as a small group of children (Lisa, Hazel, Rachel, Eliza and Peter) asked me if we could look at their ‘books’ today. It is brilliant that the children are now initiating the activity! Also noticeable is how children are beginning to interact with other children’s LJs, to ask questions of each other or make comments on the contents of each other’s books.*

*Wonderful, I thought, the beginnings of sharing expressions, listening and hearing each other. That was until I noticed that some of the children were becoming rather exuberant and ‘writing’ more and more on the adult arranged pages. I quickly suggested that maybe post-its could be used (to avoid too much permanence to the sheets in case practitioners and parents did*

*not approve). This was initially a more 'comfortable' option for me, and seemed acceptable to the children. That was until more and more post-its (usually an adult-only resource) were being enthusiastically used up. So time to limit the post-its (and the children's chosen method of interaction with their 'books'...). And to hastily re-compile the Learning Journeys where the file fixing had come open, spilling the pages, with the comments on one practitioner in mind who had responded to my request to share 'her' Learning Journeys with the children:*

*Well, ok, but you are going to sit with them aren't you? There is a lot of stuff in there and I don't want it lost.*

***{Practitioner J, informal discussion, March 3rd 2011}***

*I was immediately aware of the need to resolve the robustness of the Learning Journeys if the activity were likely to be adopted as part of pre-school practice. The term making 'child-proof' came to mind and, whereas I immediately checked myself on the contradiction in terms, I reminded myself that ultimately the activities need to be practical and acceptable to the pre-school in the longer term.*

***{Reflective journal, Co-constructing Learning Journeys, March 3rd 2011}***

### **Figure 35 Practitioner 'knowledge' continuing to limit children's expressions**

Clearly it would seem that my working knowledge of the pre-school expectations could not be separated from embracing my growing researcher instincts regarding the value of the children instigating our activities. Realistically it would appear unlikely that the two roles could be distinct from each other. However, as the last paragraph of the vignette demonstrates, it was with increasing awareness that I was approaching the distinction between research and practice. In this incident, I was actively thinking, in the moment, of ways to make the research findings directly useable to the pre-school, hence making links between research and practice rather than being dominated by practice. I was confident of the benefits to the children of

leading and participating in their own documentation and saw the next step as seeking how to make such possible (in terms of practicalities of the Learning Journeys). This is in sharp contrast to my approach to the painting to music activity.

#### **7.4.1.4 Researcher or ‘expert’ practitioner?**

As introduced in chapter 6 (section 6.3.3), I began to consider in Phase 2 how the practitioners perceived the study as being ‘my project’ and whether this affected their participation. One area of reflection more latterly was whether I was perceived as an ‘expert’ both in my former practitioner role and in my now researcher role. Specifically I refer to my role as an Early Years Professional (EYP), a status which (theoretically) distinguished me from the other practitioners as a university graduate in early years. Although a clear indication is not visible in the data, the possibility remains.

As I reflected back to my practitioner role, although I would have considered I participated in the pre-school daily practices as an equal team member (and was considered as such by the other practitioners), there were moments when I became aware that my practices were being used as ‘models’ for other practitioners. Given this, I wondered whether the revelations in the feedback sessions (above, section 7.3.3.2.1), regarding observations of me working together with the children on research activities, were a mirror of my former role to some extent. Although I had intended and aimed to communicate the opposite, I contemplated whether there was an expectation, both from the management and the practitioners that I would ‘deliver’ some sort of ‘solution’ by the end of the study that could be adopted by the other practitioners. Such paradoxes are considered further next.

#### **7.4.2 Encouraging participation: Reviewing the challenges and paradoxes**

As I focused on the challenges in attempting to establish participation with the practitioners, alternative meanings emerged only when I began to become aware of the apparent paradoxes, not least in my own attitudes and actions.

My initial assumption that the study was of limited appeal to the pre-school, or was 'my study', was challenged by the revelations in the management and practitioner feedback sessions. Although not the participatory approach for which I had aimed, there were encouraging signs of the study having some influence in the longer term, an aim that I had come to accept during the majority of the study was unlikely to manifest.

As discussed above, a study of my relationships and interactions with the children had inadvertently assisted to make meaning of some of the potential difficulties in engaging the practitioners in the research. Issues such as attempting to 'teach' rather than allowing data to emerge had featured in my interactions with both children and practitioners. Whereas I had begun to make the transition from leading activities to supporting the children in initiating and leading, unfortunately the insights from the management and practitioner feedback sessions at the end of the field work did not permit opportunity for further exploration into the relationships with the practitioners. In chapter 8, I consider whether a more participatory approach might have been established.

A focus on my own challenges in moving from practitioner to researcher did assist in my understanding of some of the potential difficulties for practitioners in listening and actively participating with the children as part of the pre-school routine. Perceptions (and misperceptions, potentially, as expressed in the management feedback sessions) towards pre-school 'rules' and the restrictions that such might present, as well as the focus on targets and outcomes associated with the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a), not only influenced pre-school practices but unwittingly my approach to my research. Interestingly and paradoxically, whereas time was expressed as a major barrier for practitioners, I had unlimited time yet experienced similar difficulties.

## 7.5 Conclusions

Attempts to listen to children's voices proved both challenging and insightful, not only in terms of what children wished to say and do at pre-school, but in terms of approaches I explored to making listening possible. For me, one of the most significant findings was the realisation that it was the underpinning relationships between the children and me that appeared to create an environment conducive to listening (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; O'Kane, 2008, Punch, 2002; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Lancaster 2003a). I found it fascinating to be able to look back at how such relationships developed, especially between Phase 1 and 2 of the study and how my awareness was not immediate as to the significance. I had taken for granted in my practitioner role was that I had developed constructive relationships with the children. It was only when re-viewing through the progress of the study that I was able to see that some of my actions and intentions had not supported children's expressions as I might have chosen. My attempts to equalise the power in our relationship (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Lancaster, 2003a, Clark and Moss, 2001) had at times served to achieve the opposite where I directed the research activities and focused on specific anticipated outcomes. Such a focus prevented avenues of exploration that might have led to greater insights into children's interests at pre-school. Equally other facets of power appeared significant in their potential as barriers to listening, such as the impact of the implementation of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a), as well as pre-school attitudes towards rules and routines. Not least was the risk of children being considered as subjects or objects, viewed from deficit and developmental gazes, rather than as active, capable partners (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008, Alderson, 2008).

Although, unfortunately, some of the children's interests were unable to find expression (literally), there were encouraging incidents when our relationships became to develop in more equal ways. Creating and sharing the children's documentation together with the children (Edwards et al, 1998a; Carr, 2001, Dahlberg et al, 2007) appeared to have the potential not only for children's expression in the research process but for being adopted in practice by the pre-

school. This would seem to be an encouraging initiative that might address some of the challenges that the practitioners expressed, most notably having little time to be with the children outside of paperwork obligations.

Clearly there were other challenges to practitioners participating with children and listening to their voices. Pre-school rules and routines were not only time-consuming but appeared to impose restrictions in terms of 'creative' use of resources, perceptions as to the role and content of Carpet times as a 'teaching' space and the initiative that practitioners were able to, or wished to, take to make adaptations where these did not seem in the interests of either children or practitioners. Adult attitudes towards the potential 'messiness' of involving children in activities and documentation added to the tensions of children's participation. Similarly adult attitudes towards expressions that might be considered 'negative' appeared a challenge for some children to feel confident in making such expressions (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000).

My own transition from practitioner to researcher was seemingly more significant than I had anticipated. I had not imagined that the challenges I experienced in attempting to listen to the children would assist my understanding of some of the difficulties for practitioners. Although their direct participation would have been far more preferable for the study, nevertheless their limited participation did enable me to look more closely at some of the underlying difficulties. In turn this assisted my contemplation of some the wider issues in listening to and hearing children. A final paradox was that my action-based approach to the study, which I had accepted was not to happen during Phase 2, did appear to motivate some potential action, albeit not made known to me until the final weeks of the study. I contemplate further whether a participatory approach could have been achieved in chapter 8.

## **Chapter 8 Overall Conclusions**

This chapter concludes on the discussions from the study, explored in the preceding chapters, and considers how, taken as a whole, the study has added to the existing body of knowledge relating to ‘tuning into’, listening and acting on young children’s voices. Specifically I review the aims for the research and the specific research questions and reflect on how the study, within its theoretical framework, was able to respond to the questions.

Where responses to aims and research questions have not been possible, or were adapted, the potential reasoning is revisited with conclusions drawn. The methodological choices that I made, and adapted, are necessarily related to the research findings and are recapped here with some further discussion as to their significance to the overall research process, including my own personal learning. In terms of impact on findings, I review the research activities that I planned (based on techniques and approaches, ‘toolkits’, from Clark and Moss, 2001 and Lancaster and Broadbent, Lancaster 2003a and b, Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003 a-d), as part of my action-based strategy, and those that emerged on ‘relaxing’ my approach to the research.

A reflection on the analysis and findings particularly focuses on the construction and nature of the relationships between the participants, relationships that emerged as a vital thread in furthering my understanding as to what might be achievable in terms of promoting and ‘tuning into’ children’s expressions. My own personal journey within the research is elaborated with conclusions as to the significance of reflection and reflexivity in making meanings of the research process and its findings.

Opportunities for further research are outlined. Specifically I recommend a re-focus on the perspectives of the practitioners, on their motivations and lived experiences relating to providing a pre-school provision for young children. This focus is driven by my underpinning belief, a belief strengthened by my research, that genuinely hearing children’s voices in co-creating their pre-school experiences, needs the



engagement of willing and informed practitioners who feel they are supported in their roles.

## **8.1 Review of aims, objectives and research questions**

This section reviews the original aims and objectives that I envisaged for the research and indicates either how these were furthered or the circumstances in which adaptations were made, in the light of new thinking, as the study unfolded.

### **8.1.1 Aims and objectives**

The original aims as discussed in chapter 3 (section 3.1) were:

1. To add to existing research in exploring effective ways to facilitate pre-school children's 'voices' (for example, Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003a-d, Dockett and Einarsdóttir; Bertram and Pascal, 2009) in co-creating a child-centred curriculum
2. For the research to be inclusive, participatory and child-centred (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Alderson, 2008; Prout, 2003, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000) by actively involving practitioners, children and parents in investigating and reflecting on ways to co-create a fair and equitable child-centred curriculum in a particular pre-school
3. To consider how the findings might inform the creation of a child-centred curriculum in which young children's voices are fundamental as an embedded part of practice in a particular pre-school and to provide a reference for other early years settings, educationalists and academic audiences
4. To present the study in a structured and transparent way using critical reflection and reflexivity (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000) in illuminating the potential challenges of such research as well as the possibilities.

With the power of hindsight, aims 2 and 3 have the feel of being somewhat aspirational in terms of engaging all the envisaged participants. As discussed at length, establishing participatory research was far more problematical than I had envisaged with the practitioners (as well as parents). Although this realisation began to take shape in the relatively early stages of the study, which motivated the addition of the 4<sup>th</sup> aim to explicitly focus on the challenges, the full extent of the difficulties in establishing participatory research with the practitioners became an on-going theme throughout the research. Although this theme was 'relaxed' when I decided to 'step back' from actively pursuing practitioner participation (as discussed in chapter 6), I continued to attempt to make meaning as to why participation might be limited. Equally, although I moved away from an explicit action agenda a 'subtle' agenda remained, both in intention and action, aiming to keep practitioners informed of data and potential findings, rather than being actively consulted. A similar situation emerged with the parents although this was a comparatively early realisation, without the complexity of that with the practitioners. Pre-school requirements influenced the amount of involvement or otherwise that was acceptable in terms of timing and scheduling of visits by parents to the pre-school and the amount of information that was made available to parents.

The limited participation of both practitioners and parents naturally led to participating with the children becoming the focus of the research. Although the primary stated intention was to actively involve children in the construction of their curriculum, this would have required the participation of the practitioners, in the first instance, to enable any changes to the implementation of the curriculum. Clearly my changed role as a (outsider) researcher, rather than an employee, precluded establishing change directly. Nevertheless, although changes that could directly impact on the curriculum in that moment were not feasible, potential changes that could influence the curriculum were explored with the children and shared with the practitioners and pre-school management. Although the feedback sessions with the practitioners and management suggested the potential for some of the study findings to be put into practice, whether such will become an embedded part of practice will be a choice that lies with the pre-school in the longer term. This was not able to be explored during the active research period as was initially envisaged.

However, I am hopeful that some of the findings will resonate with wider audiences, as suggested by Pring (2004) and Mac Naughton and Hughes (2009). I have begun to experience the beginnings of this process in my work with under and postgraduates training to be EYPs. Examples of such are discussed below (section 8.5).

I have taken an explicitly reflective and reflexive approach to the study (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Winter 1996; Pring, 2004, Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Arguably this is most evident in the transition from my planned approach to the research (chapter 5) to allowing the research to ‘emerge’ (chapter 6). Equally, I have aimed to present the data and analysis in a reflective and self-reflective manner, within a postmodern framework, to offer possible meanings whilst providing as much contextual detail as possible to enable the reader to make alternative meanings (Mac Naughton, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss, 2007, Holliday, 2007).

Although I have retained the original term ‘child-centred’ in my aims, I have problematized the definition, as advised by Dahlberg et al (2007) and Punch (2002) (see chapter 7, section 7.2.2.1) after reflection on its potential meanings and intent, such as objectification, or neglecting to acknowledge children as individuals in their own right with their own lived experiences (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Connolly, 2008, Hendrick, 2008). Inspired by Punch’s (2002: 17) revision of the term to ‘research friendly’ and ‘research participant-centred’, a more apt definition to reflect my intention in my study might be ‘engaging for individual children’ in place of ‘child-centred’.

### **8.1.2 Research questions**

The original research questions as discussed in chapter 3 were:

1. How has existing research approached supporting young children to articulate their voices?

2. How might an exploration be carried out, in the context of one particular pre-school, of the approaches from existing research enabling young children to be able to articulate their voices?
3. How 'effective' (engaging, inclusive, fair and equitable, practical and useable) do the participants consider the approaches and techniques in this particular pre-school context?
4. How might the participants build upon, or adapt, the approaches and techniques identified to be of most relevance to this particular pre-school's practices and policies?
5. How does the exploration challenge the participants, their current thinking and practices?
6. In what ways might participants reconsider their existing local policies and procedures to incorporate learning from the research experience in engaging children's voices in the implementation of a child-centred curriculum?

In the same vein as for the aims and objectives, the research questions were not able to be answered in the way I had intended from my research planning. Lack of participation from the practitioners and pre-school restrictions (such as in terms of use of resources and other planning priorities) limited the planned activities (chapter 5), the exploration of the tools and techniques from literature, namely the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) and similar techniques from Lancaster and Broadbent (Lancaster, 2003 a and b; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003, a-d). As largely the activities were carried out by the children and me, only a partial study of the tools and techniques was possible. The extended trialling, evaluation and possible adaptation to practice with practitioners were not practical.

With specific reference to question 3, I was able to explore, to some extent, the appeal and practicalities as well as challenging aspects to the planned activities. This was illustrated in particular with the use of cameras, both the positives of the activity with the children as well as the difficulties relating to the application of the technology. However the inclusive nature, or otherwise, of the technique was an aspect that I was unable to explore as fully as intended. For example, I intended to explore with children with English as an additional language (EAL), of which there were a small percentage at the pre-school. Although 2 of the children who did

participate with me did have EAL, their level of communication was such that additional support was not particularly needed. However there were additional children who were in the initial stages of acquiring English. I fully intended their participation in the research however this was not practical without the participation of other practitioners. The children to whom I refer were assigned by the pre-school to a key worker; these children tended to rely on the key worker for support and were hesitant to make additional attachments to other adults in the setting. Equally I was aware of Brooker's (2001) advice that researchers must gain children's trust before it is appropriate to attempt to explore their thoughts and feelings. Whilst aware of this, I had envisaged that the children would have participated in the study with the support of their key worker. Very regrettably this was a missed opportunity. The planned research activities, as intentionally they did not rely solely on the verbal, (Clark and Moss, 2001; Lancaster, 2003a; Pascal and Bertram, 2009; O'Kane, 2008; Christensen and James, 2008) would most likely have engaged the children with EAL and supported their communication.

It was not possible to (directly) collaboratively determine and define new pre-school processes and procedures in response to the research question 4. Again positive feedback from the feedback sessions (chapter 7, section 7.3.3.2.1) suggested the beginnings of reflection on current practices with the potential for new processes in the future.

However, although the research questions might not have been able to be answered in the strategic way that I had planned initially, the research activities that emerged with the children did permit my own understanding to be expanded and challenged (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, Somekh, 1995). Moreover, as I have suggested in chapters 6 and 7, I feel that the less strategic and more spontaneous approach that emerged perhaps answered the research questions overall in deeper, more meaningful ways by the very nature of spontaneity, allowing for more open thinking. This is discussed further below.

## **8.2 Reviewing the theoretical framework**

From the conception of my study I held the strong belief that a design based on action and participation presented the greatest opportunity for all participants at the pre-school to benefit from the research (Kotter, 1996; Schön, 1983; Hart, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000).

For my own part, I was aware of my limitations in conducting the research as an individual and was keen to explore the wider possibilities of thinking and reflecting on practice collaboratively as elaborated in the literature (Cohen et al, 2007; Winter, 1996; Clough and Nutbrown, 2007, Schwandt, 2000, quoting Longino, 1990, 1993, 1996). From a professional viewpoint, my changing role from practitioner to researcher was an area where the implications were unclear to me in the early stages. I had hoped that working collaboratively would have shed light on any issues in an open fashion, issues such as my changed status removing my authority to initiate change. I had imagined that I might play a more supportive role, an advisory role, or as Cohen et al (2007: 298) depicted, working ‘alongside’ as far as deciding on which actions during the research might be translated into practice. From a personal viewpoint, I considered from experience (including former professional roles in business) that working in collaboration with others, notwithstanding the challenges, offered greater opportunities to increase, challenge and change my own knowledge and beliefs.

Consistent with certain literature, I considered the active inclusion of the children in the action research approach a conceptual challenge in the research design (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Alderson, 2008; Prout, 2003; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000). Although influenced by the literature that makes a strong case for active participation to uphold rights and in the pursuit of emancipation (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Alderson, 1995, 2008), I equally felt strongly that the power would remain with the adults, the pre-school staff, to implement changes to practice. Given my perceived conceptual challenge, involving the children in the research activities was probably one of the most insightful and rewarding experiences for me personally. From the outset their active participation in the

planned activities began to bring the essential nature of underpinning relationships into sharp focus (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; Punch, 2002; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Lancaster 2003a).

Notably for me, it was the combination of limited participation from the practitioners and increasing enthusiastic participation from the children that signposted my perceived need to re-think my approach (chapter 6). The most pressing need came from my realisation that participatory action-based research was unlikely to make progress in its then current form. Despite my fundamental philosophical belief in the need for collaboration to make action relevant and achievable (Kotter, 1996, Schön, 1983) and despite a significant period of anxiety and uncertainty, it was my equally strong (and increasing) belief in the need to keep trying to ‘tune’ into the children’s voices that fuelled my resolve to ‘find another way’. It was at this point that I was determined to explore an alternative approach, together with the children, and largely with the acceptance that this likely would be without the adults.

As I reflect back, I could not have known just how significant an alternative approach (chapter 6, Phase 2) would be. In spite of my uncertainty as to how to move forward from my planned approach (chapter 5, Phase 1), I came to experience that ‘tuning into’ the children’s perspectives was a far more complex, multi-layered process than an exploration of the ‘tools’. This is not to trivialise such ‘tools’; on the contrary. The tools provided a significant space within which to open the exploration together with the children. This is discussed further below.

Although my expressed intention was to look at ways to support and interpret children’s expressions, my focus often drifted to seeking what was in need of ‘fixing’. This is especially evident during the transition from planned research activities to enabling the activities to emerge together with the children. I question whether, at least in part, I was looking for tangible methods to support tangible outcomes. In other words I was seeking ‘things’ to act on. I feel that when I started the study, when I was trying to make sense of my own thought processes, I envisaged a definitive list of techniques and strategies to support children’s expressions of their pre-school experience. Partly, I think I imagined I would

conclude the study being able to confidently present how children had advised their improvements to their pre-school and what actions had been taken in response.

It was only when my own thinking moved in a different direction, once my awareness increased that the research did not ‘match’ my planned model of how the study would emerge, that I feel I began to really understand what it meant to ‘hear’ children’s voices. For me, it became much less about a ‘list’ of things to ‘fix’, and much more about insights into children’s thinking and feeling, in which contexts children choose to voice their opinions and in which they appear to be less willingly engaged.

Below, I reflect further on my intention to establish an action-based approach (section 8.3.6) and whether participation with practitioners might have been possible given an alternative approach (section 8.3.3).

### **8.3 Review of analysis and findings**

In this section I reflect on the analysis and findings and how these were influenced by the construction of the particular participants within the specific pre-school context.

#### **8.3.1 Developing relationships: The significance of a methodological re-think**

Whereas my espoused focus of the study was an exploration of particular ways (tools and techniques) to ‘tune into’ children’s perspectives, it was the relationships, the rapport with the children that, for me, emerged as the fundamental focus.

Although I did not construct a ‘set of tools’ that I might have imagined at the outset, I feel I have added to the debate on the importance of underpinning relationships in listening to children, as well as the potential challenges (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005; O’Kane, 2008, Punch, 2002; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000,



Lancaster 2003a). In fact, Graham and Fitzgerald (2011), in their work supporting children experiencing difficult life circumstances, cautioned against the use of 'packaged programmes' (:454), which might bear some resemblance to the definition of a 'toolkit'. They warned of the potential oversight in the consideration of children's individuality. This realisation appears to parallel the research process itself where, although the 'tools', or methods, of research are necessary and need careful consideration to 'do the job', it is the thought processes, the beliefs and values - or methodology - that direct how the 'job' is to be done. In other words, for me the development of relationships with the children, where I was genuinely interested in communicating and making meaning together, was of greater significance than the methods per se. Dockett et al (2011: 69) expressed a similar viewpoint: 'Methods are not the main driver of the research...they exist within a broader, theoretical framework'. Interestingly, this represents the reverse of my planned approach to my study, where, drawing on Crotty's model (1998: 4, Figure 1) I focused on the methods, the 'tools' as a starting point.

Although the research activities (the 'tools') were contributory in establishing the relationships, I believe they would not have been as meaningful in my research without a *specific* focus on the nature of the relationships. Any of the research activities (both planned and those that emerged) that might be adopted by the pre-school, as part of practice, require significant reflection as to why they are being used and how they might assist with hearing children's perspectives. Such thinking poignantly was echoed by Dockett et al (2011) in their view that it is the underpinning reasons for doing the research which is an area for critical reflection in research with children. Similarly, Einarsdóttir's (2005b) reminder that her work in co-constructing with children and staff in an early years setting in Iceland, which was similar in its aims to my own, was within a *climate of listening*, both within the particular early years setting and within the wider socio-cultural climate. This echoes the experiences of the participatory approaches in the early years settings in Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a) and in New Zealand with the influence of Te Whāriki (Carr and May, 1993, 2002).

Perhaps I did not heed the advice as closely as I might have, at the outset of my study, in that such approaches from abroad, that are widely admired, should not be

attempted to be replicated without significant consideration of the national and local philosophies and culture that likely impact the research context (for example, Moss, 2007). Nonetheless, my own experiences with the children in the exploration of the research activities did begin to illustrate the potential for such participatory ‘tools’ to be of interest to the children beyond the research, to inspire them to engage with such to support their expressions and communications, as reported in research both overseas and in the UK (for example, Dahlberg et al, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2005a and b; Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010; Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005; Bertram and Pascal, 2009; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003 a-d, O’Kane, 2008). Had participation with the practitioners been achieved, the study might have been able to add more greatly to the existing studies in exploring further the significance of such participatory approaches.

The next sections review the nature of my relationships with the children and with the practitioners in more depth.

### **8.3.2 Conclusions on relationships with children**

As I reflect back on the relationships that I developed with the children, and the increasing significance that I placed on them, (eventually over and above the development of a ‘toolkit’), it was fascinating for me to gaze at the complexities that gradually became evident (through the assistance of rhizoanalysis, Mac Naughton, 2005, Sellers, 2010). The most noteworthy of these was the paradoxical positions that I constructed, where my actions did not reflect my stated intentions. On the one hand, I was declaring to be working collaboratively with children in ‘tuning into’ their expressions, viewing them as the competent actors in their own lives (UN, 1989; the Children Act, 2004; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Alderson, 2008, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010), whilst on the other, I was unwittingly ‘teaching’ the children. Similarly, in situations where I might have co-constructed with the children, where my own voice could have joined theirs (Wood et al, 1980), I witnessed myself as the ‘empty vessel’ (Dahlberg et al, 2007, Archard 2004). I observed myself so intent on capturing certain children’s expressions, without fully acknowledging their competencies, that I misplaced acknowledgement

with amazement. It might be considered I viewed them using a deficit model (Dahlberg et al, 2007), or as Piaget's 'biological child' (Dahlberg et al, 2007, Archard 2004), constructions that I was precisely claiming to refute.

It was illuminating that the use of the planned research activities (chapter 5, Phase 1) appeared to affect how I constructed the children, tending to result in me teaching and directing (to some extent) whereas the research activities that emerged (chapter 6, Phase 2) appeared to create a space for more genuine sharing. It seems to me that gaining confidence is pivotal to allow data to emerge in such unplanned, unstructured (or semi-structured) activities, something that I was not completely comfortable with at that time. Equally illuminating was how my own actions, whilst attempting to explicitly focus on collaboration, appeared to parallel those of the practitioners when undertaking planned pre-school activities, with the focus tending to be more on directing towards an outcome than on the process of experiencing together.

However where I was able to 'relax', without an explicit, planned research agenda, the data began to have a different feel, with power relations appearing more equalised. The nature of the 'talk' was more one of discussion and dialogue (Tizard and Hughes, 2002; Wells, 1987; Alexander, 2010; Lee and Eke, 2009, Wood et al, 1980). In such encounters, the children and I together seemed to know more instinctively when to actively participate, when to listen and when to speak. For me this had a more genuine feel of treating the children as equals rather than attempting to 'control' them at some level and to consider them as less capable (Punch, 2002; Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008, Hendrick, 2008).

The opportunity to work closely with the children, without the wider participation with the other practitioners, appeared to have avoided some of the pitfalls, to some extent, that other researchers have reported. Respecting 'ethical symmetry' (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Lancaster, 2003a) was less of an issue than might have been, avoiding the potential for practitioners to 'quiz' over which children had made certain comments (Dockett et al, 2011) and attempt to alter children's perspectives (Barker and Weller, 2003). However, I did experience the

beginnings of this, on attempting to share some of the data, where I began to feel the dilemma of making the process of the research transparent, yet keeping the confidences of the children. Perhaps as I was aware of this at an early stage (particularly so in the ‘giraffe’ episode, chapter 5, section 5.2.6.1), I was able to be mindful as the study progressed. It would have been interesting to see how ‘ethical symmetry’ might have been different in terms of keeping children’s confidences had a more participatory approach with the practitioners been achievable, particularly in such an environment where, in my experiences, children’s confidences are barely considered in terms of what is openly discussed amongst practitioners and documented.

Related to ‘ethical symmetry’ was my awareness of potential surveillance or compromising children’s privacy (Mac Naughton, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss et al, 2005, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010) from developing close relationships with the children where children are encouraged to express themselves in terms of emotions and feelings. Early signs of potential surveillance were visible, such as in initial reactions from practitioners to individual children’s expressions of their ‘dislikes’ (chapter 7, section 7.2.2.3). Although I was sharing verbal and written observations of the children’s expressions, with the intention to motivate reflection and reflexivity as to the appropriateness of existing pre-school practices, this could not avoid the possible use of the information for judgement or assessment purposes (Lee and Eke, 2009). This was an issue that I had hoped to explicitly explore had greater participation with the practitioners been achievable.

In response to the growing literature advocating children’s agency in research (for example, Dahlberg et al, 2007; Morrow, 2005; Alderson, 2008, O’Kane, 2008, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010; Dockett and Perry, 2007), I question whether my study promoted children’s agency at all. Although I would like to have felt that this was the case, at least to some extent, my belief is that this was some way off in this particular pre-school context. In hindsight, the challenges of having the children acknowledged as competent and hearing their perspectives was probably the most feasible aim in an initial staged approach, with the later stages of *active consultancy* being more aspirational in this time and space. The feedback sessions with the practitioners and the pre-school management (chapter 7, section 7.3.3.2.1) did appear

to have some positive recognition that working more collaboratively with the children (especially on the co-construction of their own Learning Journey documentation) would be beneficial to pre-school practices.

Hart's ladder (Hart, 2007), (chapter 2, section 2.1.2.2.1) might assist in making sense of the nature of the relationships between the children and me. Overall rung 5 ('Consulted and informed' Hart, 2007: 22) seems to reflect the relationship between the children and me, especially at the introduction, when I was attempting to explain the aims of the research and seeking the children's perspectives in implementing the planned research activities. As I moved in another direction, by 'relaxing' my approach and enabling research activities to emerge, there were moments when it would appear that participation might be represented by the higher rungs 6, ('Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children'), or 7 ('Child-initiated and directed'), (Hart, 2007: 22), moments when the children led the direction of the research. Children making explicit requests for me to capture their stories or their opinions in my field notebook might be an example of rung 7. However, although the children influenced the research activities (such as the interest in working collaboratively on their Learning Journeys) I was well aware fundamentally that the research was anything other than directed overall by me, in terms of aims for the research and research questions (Alderson, 2008).

Although I did have notions, at the planning stage, of the children becoming researchers ('interviewing' each other for example) and developing their own research methods (Alderson, 2008; Nutbrown, 2002), this seems rather too ambitious (or more precisely did not 'fit' with my research design) in hindsight, in my own positioning at the beginning of the study. My more 'narrow' gaze that I unwittingly brought to the research in the early stages (most likely whilst making the transition from practitioner to researcher), as well as the unanticipated limited levels of participation from the practitioners, I believe influenced the direction of the research. I feel my own sense of anxiety at my carefully researched plan of action not appearing to 'work' in practice led to me 'holding tighter' to try to maintain some sort of 'control' over the research process. Again my thinking seemed to be hovering around the modern (Moss, 2007). I really did want to move to a postmodern viewpoint but I was 'bound' to a certain extent by my perceived need to 'deliver'

something that was predicted to an extent. Basically, I imagined I was looking to define a set of ‘tools’ and strategies that would directly answer my main research questions.

I feel I was not ‘brave enough’ to hand over to the children, the ‘acknowledged’ experts in their own lives (UN, 1989, the Children Act, 2004; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008, Alderson, 2008, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010), as there was part of me that was struggling to ‘hang on’ to being an acknowledged expert myself. The children might not have engaged with the subject area of the research that I had planned in detail, they might have preferred to explore something else. Or they might not have wanted to engage at all. For me, what this illustrates is that to embrace research that purports to be reflected by rung 8 of Hart’s ladder (Hart, 2007: 22, (‘Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’), or at least rung 7 (‘Child-initiated and directed’), where children are the initiators of the research, the research needs to be designed specifically. I had notions of the children being involved ‘at every stage of the process’ (Nutbrown, 2002, Christensen and Prout, 2002), yet realistically they were not involved in the crucial part – *defining* the research. I wonder how differently the process might have looked if this were the case.

### **8.3.3 Conclusions on relationships with the practitioners**

Not dissimilar to the position with the children, the most astonishing realisation for me in my relationships with the practitioners was the apparent paradoxes (again becoming visible through the application of rhizoanalysis, Mac Naughton, 2005, Sellers, 2010). Whereas I had espoused the essential creation of an equal, democratic relationship the reverse was apparent in the final feedback sessions. Not only was my voice often louder and dominated the ‘discussions’ in part, but my intent appeared to be one of ‘teaching’, of directing and imparting knowledge, rather than genuinely sharing and making meanings together. Although, on the one hand, I was sharing ‘raw’ data with the practitioners, equally I was quick to add my own analysis and reflections, perhaps keen that certain ‘lessons be learnt’, that the practitioners see

things the way that I did, perhaps making the Other into the Same (Mac Naughton, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Holliday, 2007, Fine, 1994).

A further revelation for me was that such an approach had the appearance of mirroring the pre-school practices of directing children's learning towards pre-defined targets, an approach that was the opposite of what I had intended. What I found even more intriguing was that I was actively attempting to develop equal relationships with the children, yet I had not apparently taken similar actions to do so with the practitioners. Whereas there were illustrations of me giving children space and time to engage, this was less apparent with the practitioners. Although I did afford myself the reasoning of eagerness at finally having the opportunity to arrange feedback sessions with the practitioners (and the expectation that I would feed back the research findings), nonetheless this provided another opportunity to look below the surface.

For me, the most significant aspect of the relationships with the practitioners in the research context has been the personal learning in 'troubling truths' (Mac Naughton, 2005: 42, Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009: 106) and making the 'familiar strange' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007: 49, Holliday, 2007: 13). It was the choice to step back from the research process, afforded by the lack of practitioner involvement, that initiated the process of looking more widely (and eventually more deeply), that has been the most revealing in starting to make meanings. I was able to take alternative gazes at the significant issues, such as the prescriptive interpretation of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008 a and b, Lee and Eke, 2009) and the time and other pressures under which practitioners work, all of which have key implications for hearing children's voices. It was the discomfort of this process for me, the challenges to my own understandings (of the nature of what I was aiming to research, and my positioning within it), without which I doubt I would have began to look in more depth at what I now feel are the fundamental issues to listening and hearing children's voices in the pre-school setting. Similarly powerful for me, has been the recognition that what I initially considered a 'failing' in my research design has been the catalyst for looking further, and in alternative directions, at the possible underlying issues.

The practitioner feedback sessions (chapter 7, section 7.3.3.2.1), although serving to illuminate my own positioning and misconceptions in the research, equally provided a potential positive in motivating further thinking, both for me and apparently for some of the practitioners, in respect of future pre-school practices. This was evident in longer feedback sessions which illustrated a shift in the energy between us, a more balanced communication and dialogue most likely, for my part, in being more relaxed, given the extra time for contemplation of the research data (over and above the perceived ‘obligation’ to ‘feed back’).

Again Hart’s ladder of participation (Hart, 2007), (see chapter 2, section 2.1.2.2.1), was useful in assisting to conceptualise the levels of participation for which I had aimed and those that emerged in practice. I envisaged collaboration between rungs 6 and 7, ‘Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children’ and ‘Child-initiated and directed’ (Hart, 2007: 22). When expressed in terms of my research, rung 6 would be me initiating the research activities and sharing my decisions with the practitioners (and children), while rung 7 would be the practitioners (and children) initiating and directing the research. I had envisaged moving between these rungs. At times, I had imagined I would initiate the research (especially at the introduction) and, at others, I had imagined individual practitioners (and children) leading, when they were exploring and sharing a strategy that had inspired them. However, the way the participation was constructed (here I refer specifically to the practitioners) seems to be reflected more closely by rung 4, ‘Assigned but informed’ (Hart, 2007:22), where I requested practitioners to complete evaluations and attempted to make visible the data that I was gathering in the moment. Although, at least, I would like to have achieved rung 5 of the ladder, ‘Consulted and informed’ (ibid), the lack of engagement on the part of the participants made this largely unachievable to the extent that I had envisaged.

As I reflect on my adaptation of Kotter’s (1996) model of change management (chapter 3, Figure 3), although I had envisaged the research be guided by moving through the 8 stages, this did not happen in practice. In fact, again with growing hindsight, the research struggled to establish the 1<sup>st</sup> stage, ‘identifying a shared interest’. If I take a similar stance as with the children (in the previous section), in reflecting on my involvement of the practitioners at every stage of the project, their



limited participation may not be as surprising as I found it to be at the time. Although I had *assumed* we had a shared interest in supporting children's voices, I did not discuss this in detail with them at the planning phase of my study. In fact, my planning was already submitted, in the form of my official proposal for my study to the university research degrees committee. I merely discussed my proposal with the practitioners and pre-school management and took positive comments (and consent) to be a sufficient basis on which to go forward with participatory research. It may have worked, particularly without the time pressures of the pre-school routines and perceived documentation obligations. However I now believe effort in developing a *shared* research idea and design would have been the appropriate approach to participatory research and would have aligned more with my purported research aims.

My aim to 'establish a partnership' (stage 2 of my adaptation of Kotter's (1996) model) with the practitioners did not emerge in the way that I had hoped. Although there were some moments of shared reflections and evaluations (mainly through written evaluations and at the end of the field work), this was not the active working partnership throughout that I had envisaged and attempted to construct. We were unable to 'construct alternative views of potential change' (stage 3 of my adaptation of Kotter's (1996) model), and attempt to implement them together. Although there were some positive suggestions that the approaches that I had explored with the children were to be 'adopted... in practice' (stage 8 of my adaptation of Kotter's (1996) model), this was short of my aim to jointly identify experiences from the research to be used by the pre-school as part of their practices. Although potentially encouraging for children's voices, there is the risk that practitioners might feel 'my' practices are 'imposed', rather than them actively owning the practices as I had intended (Kotter, 1996; Schön, 1983). Ironically this is the reverse of what I had intended in my research aims and further illustrates the possibility that I was acknowledged as the 'expert' (see chapter 7, section 7.3.2.1).

The next section looks at whether participation might have been achieved.

### **8.3.4 Could participation with practitioners have been established?**

As I reflect on my overarching aim to establish participation, a more considered initial viewpoint might have been my recognition that participation (here I specifically refer to co-construction) was not the usual *modus operandi* of the pre-school. I should have been aware of this in my previous employment where largely the ‘agenda’ was set by the pre-school management. This is not to suggest that practitioners were without any power to make suggestions (although the ‘giraffe’ episode perhaps suggested differently, (see chapter 5, section 5.2.6.1), however largely practice was directed in a top-down manner by the management. It was interesting to hear the view of the management, in the feedback session, (chapter 7, section 7.3.3.2.1) that the practitioners did not contribute to practice as much as would be desired; a response that I had not anticipated. For whatever reasons, in my experience, practitioners tended to fulfil duties rather than reflect on practice. In my latter role as an EYP, I had (without full realisation at that time) become part of the management, in some respects, by actively initiating changes to practice. At that time I had not acknowledged that the other practitioners were tending to implement ‘my’ changes; I had imagined we were working together, but on reflection, this does not really appear differently to the practitioners acting out the responsibilities directed by the management. As I relate this context to the new context of the research, I had not fully appreciated that my (outsider) researcher role, combined with an atypical way of working in the pre-school, was unlikely to enable collaborative research without significant challenges.

However, despite not anticipating the challenges to the full extent, I did take steps that, according to Arieli et al (2009), promote participatory relationships and equally often present hurdles for new researchers. For instance, my attempt to align the research activities with pre-school planning and completion of paperwork was one step. In contrast to the researchers depicted by Arieli et al, who prioritised inquiry even though their participants expressly asked for action, I attempted to share my findings with the practitioners, findings that included ‘directly observable data’ (Arygris 1985, cited in Arieli, 2009: 26) which, according to Arieli et al (2009), represented a significant promotion of participatory working.

Moss's (2009) theory of the challenges relating to moving from a modern to a postmodern viewpoint (chapter 2, section 2.1.2), seems to resonate in helping to illuminate my own struggles, as well as some potential for participation. Moss's (2009) notion of an 'interpreter' to make meaning between the modern and the postmodern, might describe the role that I had attempted. Perhaps I stepped into this role (albeit without specific intention). One significant example for me was attempting to illustrate, through action, how the documentation obligation for practitioners might be reconceived as a key opportunity to move away from trying to represent children's developmental progress towards targets, and towards collaboration with the children, to co-construct children's experiences and expressions.

The next section looks at what might be achievable in the pre-school and the environment that might be necessary to promote children's participation further.

### **8.3.5 The environment: What might be further achievable in children's participation?**

Essentially I am advocating the construction of an ethos of communication and dialogue (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Lancaster, 2003a) amongst practitioners and children (supported by the pre-school management) as the basis for 'tuning into' the children's voices. The 'quality' of the communication is of fundamental significance in creating an environment in which to encourage children (as well as adults) to engage. Here I refer to the type of 'talk' that is used in pre-school (Tizard and Hughes, 2002; Wells, 1987; Alexander, 2010; Lee and Eke, 2009, Wood et al, 1980). In my study I came to realise that the types of talk that related to instruction and directed teaching often dominated, leaving less space for another type of communication that courted collaboration, joint exploration and meaning-making (chapter 7, section 7.2.2.2). I was familiar with research findings that reported similar use of the former types of language (most notably Sylva et al, 2004. Chapter 2, section 2.1.1.1) yet only through doing the research was I able to begin to feel the distinction. Clearly to construct an environment where a dialogic approach is favoured, or at least acknowledged alongside the more familiar didactic processes,

requires *awareness* in the first instance, accompanied by *willingness* on the part of the practitioners (Einarsdóttir, 2005b). Importantly, the practitioners need to feel supported to be able to do so. As suggested in my study, this would most likely be a challenging transition, given the current focus on the interpretation of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a and b) as target oriented (Lee and Eke, 2009, Butcher and Andrews, 2009) and the rather rigid routines in place to reach these targets. However equally this would not seem impossible.

It might well seem unlikely that a Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a) or a Te Whāriki (Carr and May, 1993, 2002) type approach would be achievable, not least given prevailing societal values in the UK. For example, put more precisely in the pre-school context in the study, there had been little progress made to involve parents in the pre-school experience beyond childcare and the formal reporting process. From my own experiences, this is not an uncommon occurrence in other local early years settings. Without such participation from the parents and even more unlikely from the wider community, the responsibility (and power) is with the practitioners to create an ethos that values children's participation. Interestingly Moss (2007) cautioned against attempting to re-create the practices of Reggio Emilia which he likened to the postmodern. The basis of his caution related to the very different philosophical approaches to children's assessment against pre-determined targets, as he put it, across 'much of the English-speaking world' (2007: 13). He suggested that the current assessment offered children a 'modicum of protection' (ibid), whereas attempting to move more towards a postmodern paradigm of meaning-making, without the underpinning theoretical thinking would put certain children at risk. As Moss (2007) pointed out, detailed documentation with provisional, contextual meaning as a tool for 'measuring' quality requires an investment from the early years settings, in terms of time, commitment to learn and reflect and professional guidance. Moss suggested rather than attempt to replace one paradigm with the other (i.e. postmodern with modern), new thinking between and amongst the different paradigms might be more desirable.

With Moss's (2007) caution in mind, one practical place to start, as suggested by my study, would seem to be the creation the children's documentation with the children, in re-framing a curriculum obligation as a creative, shared experience. Viewed from

another perspective, a time-consuming, stressful activity that tends to take the practitioners ‘away’ from the children could become an activity that is offered to the children during their ‘free play’, for example. As I experienced in my study, not only did children request the activity (which suggests this was not a ‘poor’ replacement for other kinds of play) but, in my professional opinion, the data that we created together more than exceeded that required to fulfil the targets specified in the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a).

The physical environment plays a significant role in either fostering or limiting children’s participation. Again, there is the enviable comparison with Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998a), whose early years settings have dedicated quiet areas for reflection, for both staff and children, as well as ‘ateliers’ that have the feel of a creative ‘oasis of calm’. This represents a rather stark distinction with the environment at the pre-school where creative resources were largely ‘out of reach’ to children on high shelves (chapter 7, section 7.2.2.4), under the control of the practitioners and ‘released’ to the children, largely under supervision, for specific, pre-planned craft activities. Quiet spaces were not available. Whether my study has prompted a re-think of the use of resources is unclear from the practitioner feedback, although there was recognition that noise and providing quiet space needed to be reconsidered.

### **8.3.6 Conclusions on establishing action-based research**

Certainly my approach in practice did not reflect the action-based research model that I had intended (my adaptation of Kotter’s model, 1996. Chapter 3, Figure 3). It was not the socially constructed partnership in which multiple perspectives were embraced and critically explored (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, Pring, 2004). It was not the actively participating team endeavour that I had hoped for; an endeavour that was jointly reviewed and reflected upon with cycles of changes ensuing. It was not the shared critical approach where power relations were explicitly explored and issues of equity and inclusion for children’s voices were debated amongst participants, with

the aim to transform circumstances as deemed appropriate (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2009; Cohen et al, 2007, Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

However, somewhat paradoxically, it could be said that the research *process* became the subject of action research. Equally it might be said that I was touching on first-person action research (Marshall and Mead, 2005) in my reflexive approach to my positioning between Phase 1 and 2 of the study. Carr and Kemmis' (1986: 162) definition of action research as a "self-reflective enquiry" by participants, which is undertaken in order to improve their understanding of their practices... resonated with my own experiences. Although I did not have the benefit of the group contemplation on my personal action-reflection-action process, as elaborated by Marshall and Mead (2005), I did have my writing of this thesis to help me to understand my emerging thinking (Marshall and Mead, 2005). As I began to write, think and re-think about my actions within the study, assisted by the principles of rhizoanalysis (Mac Naughton, 2005, Sellers, 2010), a large part of my making meaning gradually became visible whilst I explored unanticipated directions. This was an aspect of the study that I had not anticipated to its fullest extent. Although I had intended to reflect on my beliefs and attitudes which were informing my then pre-school practices, together with the practitioners, I had not expected this to be such a key and recurring theme throughout the study.

Has my research led to action within the pre-school? Although I cannot claim that any changes in respect of pre-school practices were *implemented* as a result of my study, it did appear that some shift in thinking might be occurring. This appears to reflect Cohen et al's (2007) depiction of action research as being able to be initiated by an individual whose work might eventually involve more participants affected by the changes. For me, despite the disappointment of not having been able to actively explore this further in the study, I was heartened by the potential that another (action research?) cycle of 'planning and doing' to re-consider children's active participation might follow on from my study, in the light of some of the positive comments and apparent plans from the pre-school. In respect of the children themselves, I can only hope that our moments of 'sustained shared thinking' (Sylva et al, 2004, Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) provided some sort of change, in the moment, to some of the more typical interactions with adults. One can hardly escape the inevitable - that the

power remains with the pre-school staff as to whether (or to what extent) children's voices will be heard in co-creating their experiences (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000, Alderson, 2008).

## **8.4 Personal Journey**

My own learning within the research process has probably been the most remarkable in the sense that I had not imagined that so much focus would be inwards. Although I had expected to review myself professionally in terms of my practice with children and in my role as a new researcher, I had not anticipated that I would reflect on myself to the extent that I have.

Although I was disappointed, at the time, that participatory action-based research was not established as planned, it was perhaps this event that enabled a self-reflection that might not have been afforded otherwise. Whereas I had thought that the 'stepping back' from the action process (chapter 6) had been an opportunity to establish more of a rapport with the children, equally it presented the opportunity to look more deeply at myself and my embedded positioning in the way the research was being constructed. It gradually became apparent that I was not always doing as I was claiming to do (Argyris, 1985). My espoused theory based on social constructionism (Crotty, 1998; Pring, 2004, Schwandt, 2000) had the appearance of reflecting a modern approach on more than one occasion. Interestingly such occasions often emerged when I was feeling under pressure to produce some sort of outcome, or avoid contravening a pre-school 'rule'.

It was the role of reflection and reflexivity (Mac Naughton et al, 2007; Winter, 1996; Pring, 2004; Griffiths, 1998, Johnston, 2000), sometimes alone and at other times together, with supervisors and colleagues, which became my ally in making sense of a research process with unforeseen complexities. Only by exploring alternative positions, whether in thought or in action, was I able to have a sense of 'a bigger picture' and my place within it. Reflexivity, for me, was at its most powerful in trying to make sense of where I had 'gone wrong' in failing to establish participation and my reactions to this (both professionally and personally). Thereafter, instead of

‘leaping’ to take some remedial action when further complexities emerged, I used reflection before deciding if action or rethinking might be feasible.

As I reviewed postmodernism (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998, Pring, 2004) alongside reflection and reflexivity this represented a further epiphany for me. Although I began using postmodern principles together with rhizoanalysis (Mac Naughton, 2005, Sellers, 2010) to make alternative meanings when analysing the data (deliberately in an attempt to lessen the risk of my own singular accounts in the absence of accounts from the practitioners), it was during the supposed sharing of the data with the practitioners towards the end of the study that I reviewed myself more sharply. Whilst claiming to strive for plural accounts (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Pring, 2004; Schwandt, 2000), it was often my own account that I was prioritising. Even given the possible ‘excuse’ of over-eagerness, this did lead to me examining my intentions, to re-think whether I was attempting to ‘push’ my views of what needed to be changed in practice. This did resonate to some extent, albeit uncomfortably. I could not avoid acknowledging I had my own personal action agenda (Cohen et al, 2007). What would have been interesting was if the practitioners had participated throughout. I wonder if then I would have had the opportunity to acknowledge my own agenda, to have brought it into the joint discussion space and thus created the potential to rethink, to negotiate alternative meanings explicitly.

A similar, though opposite realisation, occurred to me in my research with the children which served to illuminate my ‘struggle’ to move away from more modern thinking. Although I felt I was developing rapport with individuals, beginning to understand their perspectives, at times I omitted to join them in offering my own contributions to discussions. Such occasions served to demonstrate to me that I was struggling to acknowledge the construction of the children as, *equal*, capable actors in their own lives (UN, 1989; the Children Act, 2004; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Alderson, 2008, Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010).

I took comfort from the literature (for example, Moss, 2007) that claimed that the transition from a more modern to a postmodern approach is challenging. Given my upbringing, my own education in modern times, my career which largely focussed



on demonstrating compliance to targets and given the prevailing dominant pedagogy even from the early years (DCSF, 2008; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Wells, 1987; Lee and Eke, 2009), it would seem rather aspirational and naive to expect that such a shift in my thinking would happen seamlessly in a linear fashion. Again the virtues of reflection might assist me in continuing to explore moving towards more postmodern practices.

Despite the unanticipated complexities of the research process, the discomfort from doubts and anxieties, I concluded that my personal journey had been enriched by my listening to my 'inner voice'. Whereas my audible voice might have faltered in knowing when to speak and when to listen, my inner resolve to continue to try to make a difference, despite outward appearances, apparent barriers and misconceptions urged me to continue. I have held the belief in recent years that the responsibility for change begins with self-reflection. Or as Mohandas Gandhi is claimed to have said (although not apparently proven, Morton, 2011): 'Be the change that you wish to see in the world'. Therefore from a personal perspective, the research process has been fundamental in calling me to look and re-look at my own attitudes and beliefs and how these appeared to impact tuning into children's voices in the widest, theoretical, as well as narrowest, practical context.

## **8.5 Contributions to body of knowledge and dissemination**

I envisage my own research being a reference for other early years settings, hopefully inspiring an exploration of other ways of working (relevant to specific contexts), in collaboration with children and practitioners, to actively involve other children in their own learning. Although currently the EYFS (DCSF, 2008a and b) framework is 'imposed', there are other ways to demonstrate how children are meeting developmental targets. As I have attempted to illustrate in my work with the children, the documentation that 'grew' (often quite spontaneously) from our working more closely together, focussing on our relationships, had the potential (perceived and actual) to be able to demonstrate the EYFS targets in abundance. Therefore this is one example of the different approaches being able to contribute to the overall aim to provide 'quality' early years provision (Dahlberg et al, 2007).

Although my study was intended to motivate change in one particular context, its affects have the potential to stimulate thinking at other levels. Should the setting continue with the changes they were beginning to contemplate as a result of the study, the setting's participation in the Early Years Advisory team early years forum could be a space for the changes to be discussed with other local settings. My mentoring role with the trainee EYPs has provided opportunity to share thinking relating to my work in progress and has, I believe, had some influence in provoking thinking in the trainees and their approaches to practice in their own contexts. Arguably the most noticeable impact has been in the way students have reflected on the nature of documentation and how this typically represents the adults representations of the children's development with little (or most often no) input from the children. Some students have started to include children's voices in the displays of children's work, where previously work would be annotated by adults. Children's use of photography has started to be introduced by students in some settings. Other students have commented that they have reconsidered the ethics of making observations (including the widely used photographic images in early years) and have begun to discuss children's thoughts on their use. Students remarked that previously they did not consider seeking children's permissions as this was not the normal procedure that seemed to be employed by other more experienced colleagues.

My professional plans for the future include working (training and mentoring) with practitioners who are qualified (or qualifying) at a non-graduate level. This is based on my belief that more awareness needs to be shared from the 'bottom up' as how to actively demonstrate respect for children, to consult with them and to demonstrate that their views are being acted on. I feel this is particularly pertinent in the current economic and political climate where the future of the graduate Early Years Professional (EYP), instigated under the previous labour government, is unclear. At the time of writing, although the political claims by the current coalition government are for the furtherance of graduate level training in early years, (DfE, 2012a), funding amounts for EYP training and the numbers of training providers has been reduced (DfE, 2012b) and the former target for an EYP to be employed in all early years settings by 2015 to lead on practice has disappeared (Gaunt, 2011). It will be interesting to see whether the strong message for a graduate-led early years

workforce in the independent Nutbrown Review (Nutbrown, 2012) of early years qualifications and training (as well as the Tickell review of the EYFS, Tickell, 2012) impacts on future government policy. Whereas I have been encouraged by the philosophical thinking of many of the EYP students (thinking which, from my own experience, was fuelled by the EYPS training programme, CWDC, 2008), perhaps the timing is now ripe for a similar theoretical framework to underpin non-graduate training. The type of concepts to which I am referring are ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) and developing mutually respectful relationships with children (CWDC, 2008). It will be interesting to see how training programmes (both graduate and non-graduate) develop in the wake of the Nutbrown review (Nutbrown, 2012) of early years practitioner qualifications. It is encouraging to read the recommendation in the review for non-graduate qualifications to be a minimum of a Level 3 (see glossary) in the next ten years. However of more significance, for me, will be the content of such qualifications and whether children’s voices will have a focus.

Where my study could contribute is in the identification of strategies (together with their challenges) that have the potential to increase active participation of the children with the practitioners. I am not only referring to the physical ‘tools’ and approaches that emerged in the research, but more importantly the development of the relationships with the children that led to a context where we were beginning to choose to work together as part of a more natural process. This is as compared to a more ‘contrived’ adult-child group working scenario, commonly seen in early years setting routines. This could well serve as an example of Moss’s notion of ‘agonistic politics’ (2007: pg 234) at the local level, where I acted in the role of ‘interpreter’ between the differing paradigms.

I envisage dissemination on several levels, directly to students with whom I currently work and will work with in the future; to colleagues (in contributions to further and higher academic programmes), directly to academics (to include other postgraduate researchers) via seminars and conferences, and to wider academic forums via professional journal articles and conference papers. I am particularly keen to share my experiences with the early years community (either through forums such as the Early Years Advisory team early years forum or through training in the workplace),

where new thinking has the potential to be trialled and debated and made directly relevant to the individual contexts. Bradbury-Huang (2010) emphasised the significance of making meanings through ‘local’ knowledge amongst peers and how this is able to become applicable to wider audiences.

My initial and, for me, key space for dissemination was with the pre-school participants in my study. In addition to the feedback sessions with the practitioners and the pre-school management (chapter 7, section 7.3.3.2.1), I prepared summary documents of the research findings to share with the children and the parents (Appendix G). My aim was to use the documents, preferably personally, to feed back to the children and hopefully to their parents, time being permitted by the pre-school management. As an alternative, with pre-school time pressures in mind, I had intended that the documentation ‘stand-alone’, to be passed on to the children and parents via the pre-school. The documentation was forwarded to the pre-school management for their pre-approval (at their request) at the beginning of the term following the end of the field work (September 2011). Unfortunately, despite several attempts to contact the pre-school management, I have been unable to follow up the dissemination process. The reasons for this remain unclear and I can only make an assumption that the pre-school management were either not in agreement with the research findings, as presented in the documentation, or with the findings being passed on to parents. This is a significant disappointment for me as a researcher and, more importantly, has ethical implications for the research participants as they have a right to be involved in sharing the outcomes of the study (BSA, 2002: 2). However, as overall gatekeepers, the pre-school committee are entitled to exercise their right to withdraw from the study (BSA, 2002: 3, NCB, 2004 §3.4, BERA, 2004: 6), if indeed this is what they have decided, without having to explain their reasoning.

## **8.6 Recommendations for Further Work**

Given the crucial role that practitioners take in either tuning into children’s voices, or not, that my study is suggesting, I believe that the focus needs to be here in future research. Although further research with children directly will continue to raise awareness of children’s perspectives in many contexts, as it has previously (for

example, Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005; Lancaster, 2003a; Einarsdóttir, 2005a and b, Dahlberg et al, 2007; Pascal and Bertram, 2009), the power ultimately lies with adults who assume responsibility for the children.

I recall, as a practitioner, how often I would be inwardly protesting, “but what about me?” when requested to adopt a new procedure that was focused on improving an aspect of provision for the children. Although I would comply with the requests (from top-down), acknowledging that I was putting the interests of the children first, part of me would question whether in fact I was doing so given the compromises I felt to myself in terms of my working conditions (David, 2007, Katz, 2011). The type of compromise to which I refer would be working for 5 hours with only a 20 lunch minute break which I was obliged to take on-site (to avoid my minimum wage being reduced even further) typically alone, according to a rota system, perched on a chair in a small galley kitchen with sandwiches on my lap. And I was aware that this was reasonable compared with other local settings, where staff do not have any official breaks, eating with the children whilst still being on-duty (to clear spillages, open food and drink packaging etc). I refer to the absence of non-contact time to reflect on practice with colleagues, to plan the children’s provision (Clark et al, 2001), to have a break from the demanding physical, mental and emotional daily routines. I refer again to being paid the minimum wage to assume a role that has the power to influence the current and future experiences of young children in early years education and beyond.

Although I welcome the recent large-scale research into early years professionals’ perspectives on their experiences relating to the EYFS (Tickell, 2012) and to their professional training and development (Nutbrown, 2012), I question whether responses were representative of the practitioners ‘at the coal face’ as opposed to more senior managerial staff and other early years professionals. Neither report specifies the numbers of participants consulted according to role. Certainly, within the setting in my study, the practitioners had not taken part in the surveys and some were hardly aware of their existence. A similar picture was presented by small-scale research by the Department for Education (Brooker et al, 2010) that sought practitioners’ experiences of the EYFS. In this case, the numbers of participants and their qualifications was specified. Out of 179 participants, less than 10% had Level 2

(see glossary) or no qualifications (Brooker et al, 2010: 106). In my experience, it is just these practitioners that represent the majority of staff in early years settings.

As a complementary approach to such research, I recommend in-depth, context-specific, studies where the individuals who mainly do the hands-on work with young children are consulted on their own experiences. I had hoped to encompass such an approach within my own study; however I now realise with hindsight that the emphasis was in the wrong place to enable such a line of enquiry. Had I made an explicit aim to understand how the practitioners felt about their work, rather than a more outward focus on the children, I wonder if participation would have looked somewhat different. In my experience, practitioners have little space to express how they feel about the nature of their work in, as I see it, challenging working conditions. That is not to say that practitioners are not engaged in their work with the children, in many cases this is quite the reverse in my experience.

However, what of the tension between EYFS (DCSF, 2008a) targets (Lee and Eke, 2009, Butcher and Andrews, 2009), of a dominant discourse of child development, and the desire to implement more postmodern practices (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998, Pring, 2004)? There was some suggestion from the practitioners at the end of my study that they would like to move towards more collaboration with the children yet the obstacles still remained in their opinion, not least time and other curriculum pressures. My study only touched on these challenges in terms of hearing voices other than my own, and I had the advantage of time and space away from practice to express myself. I feel further work would be invaluable (to both policy and practice) to really understanding what the influences are that have a direct effect on providing provision for young children, with a clear focus on the practitioner, on the motivations and perceived obstacles from those that actually do the work.

## 8.7 Closing comments

Participation needs to be genuine in action-based research initially and then beyond research studies. Without such, children's right to a voice, although having significant potential to speak and to be heard, will not be fully honoured. Attitudes of adults, specifically in roles within early years education and care, are key to enabling children's rights. As expressed by Einarsdóttir (2007: 207), 'Children's voices reflect the environment of which they are a part'. Unless awareness is raised (through early years training programs and wider (Mac Naughton et al, 2005, Dahlberg et al, 2007)) enabling the possibility and willingness for attitudes to change, it is doubtful that children in many early years settings in the UK will be accorded their legal entitlement to respectfully be listened to and actively participate in matters directly affecting their lives (UN, 1989; the Children Act, 2004; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Alderson, 2008, Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008, Dockett and Einarsdóttir, 2010) .

For me, my study only brushes across the surface. There is much to learn about intention and action not always being aligned. With the 'best' intentions, and with as much awareness as I could muster in the moment, I did not always, as researcher, former practitioner and adult, accord children the full respect that I was purporting in actively involving them as social actors in their pre-school experiences. However, for me, this has been a start and a significant one. I now believe it would be fruitless to attempt a research endeavour if my aim were to know all the answers by its completion. I believe to know the answers would be to thwart the process of continuous reflection, re-thinking, de-constructing and re-constructing meanings (Mac Naughton et al, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007). I feel I have learnt much from the experience that fuels my desire to explore further, to keep trying to make meanings, however temporary and contextual (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Moss 2007; Holliday, 2007; Crotty, 1998) that might support children to raise their voices, to be acknowledged as authorities on their own life experiences, authorities that adults (researchers, practitioners and policy makers) actively consult to shape and reshape early years provision.

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## **Appendix A Consent Agreements**

### **Pre-School Management**

Dear [REDACTED] Pre-School Management Committee

#### **‘Child Voice’: A Study of Working together with Pre-School Children to Implement the EYFS**

Thank you for your agreement in principle to my undertaking doctoral research at [REDACTED]. I am now in a position to provide details of the planned study to enable you to decide whether you are able to give formal permission for the research to take place. The total study is over a period of 3 years planned to complete by September 2012, however my contact time at pre-school will be significantly less than this (see below).

Thank you for taking the time to read. Should you require any clarification or further information please do contact me.

#### **What is the research exactly?**

The aim of the research is to explore how young children can be actively involved in deciding, planning and implementing the EYFS and subsequently reviewing and making changes as necessary. The research reflects the underpinning philosophy of the EYFS to promote a curriculum which is child-focused.

The study will investigate practical ways in which children are able to be involved, to have their views expressed, heard and actioned. Several approaches and methods will be used drawing and building on existing research with young children. Some examples are inviting children to use cameras and video to capture aspects of pre-school life that are significant for them; to act as ‘tour guides’ leading adults or other children around the pre-school, to use drawings and other artwork, stories and role play to represent their views. The aim is to provide varied and alternative ways in which the children can be involved to appeal to different ages, abilities and preferences and to ensure all children that wish to participate are able to do so.

The children who wish to participate (and whose parents give their consent) will work in collaboration with me and ideally other staff at the pre-school (see below). The children will be supported in choosing, carrying out and discussing the activities and to design some of their own. The children’s views will be used to reflect on possible enhancements to pre-school experiences; these will be implemented on a trial basis and reviewed for effectiveness.

As part of the review and reflection process, I would like to invite parents to participate to enable a fuller picture of their child's view (see below).

**Where and when will the research take place?**

I would require being in pre-school to undertake the practical part of the study from mid November 2010 to end of October 2011. Some preparatory work will be necessary to enable me to acquaint, or reacquaint, myself with the children and to enable trials of the methods and techniques (for example, time for children to become familiar with cameras and video). I would like this to begin in May. I envisage that initially I will spend from 2 sessions (half days) per week with this increasing to from 5 during the main study from November.

**Who is invited to take part?**

Initially I would like to extend an open invitation to all pre-school children and their parents. I anticipate that the response will result in a manageable number of children and parents being interested. In the event that the response exceeds the scope of the study, I will initiate a selection process to enable a representative group to be established (for example a range of ages, linguistic and cognitive stages, boys and girls). I will inform parents should such a selection be necessary. In any event I am keen to not exclude any child from participating in any of the research activities but will not be able to include their input in the published study.

I would like to invite the pre-school staff to be involved in the research.

There is no obligation for any invited participant to take part and it is perfectly acceptable to withdraw participation without reason at any time (subject to negotiation regarding the use of any existing work relating to the participant).

**What is expected of the children?**

The children will be invited to participate in a series of activities. I envisage that this might be as part of their key group work, although with flexibility. The children will be involved in either using existing methods for promoting children's expression or trialling new techniques (designed by the children themselves and/or me and possibly the other staff). The output from the activity will be discussed between the children and me and possibly other staff. Part of the discussions will plan the next steps in the research e.g. are there changes that could be implemented and trialled?

**And parents?**

I would like to invite parents to take part in the process of reviewing their child's contribution to the research to build a fuller picture of their child's views. I envisage such participation would involve the parents attending 3 sessions at pre-school (of approximately 30 minutes) around the beginning, middle and end of the study to discuss their child's work with me on an individual basis (for example, looking at the photos and descriptions that their child has produced). Additionally or alternatively it might be practical to send copies of such work home for comments.

**What is expected of staff?**

I am able to take full responsibility in supporting, implementing and evaluating the activities with the children and trialling any changes that are suggested. However I would like to invite the staff to work collaboratively with me to enable a fuller more varied account of the research to be built. I am, of course, fully aware of the time constraints of the daily routines and would aim to work with these to avoid additional workloads. I have the following suggestions:

- That staff work with me and their key group children on a research activity for part of their key group day
- That I assume staff duties to enable a staff member to undertake a research activity with the children
- That output from the research activity be used directly to contribute to children's Learning Journeys

In order to discuss the findings as the research progresses, I would welcome the opportunity to attend monthly staff meetings (perhaps with a 15 minute agenda slot where time and other pre-school matters permit). Additionally I would like to invite staff to complete periodic brief evaluations to capture their perspectives on the research progress.

**What about resources?**

I will provide the required resources although would welcome the use of the pre-schools general materials (such as pencils, crayons) for activities that would routinely be provided.

**What are the possible disadvantages in the pre-school taking part?**

See the section below regarding anonymity.

**What are the possible benefits to the pre-school taking part?**

The desired intention of the study is to enable methods and techniques to be explored that will facilitate children contributing their ideas to the pre-school planning. Such an approach aims to promote the requirement of the EYFS to implement a child-centred curriculum.

Involvement of parents in the study will support the EYFS principle of working in partnership with parents.

**Will the pre-school's involvement in the study be kept anonymous?**

Published material will have the pre-school name, the names of staff, children and parents and other personal details removed. All stored data will be anonymised and maintained securely both during and after completion of the study. However due to the open, interactive nature of the pre-school it is likely that published material might be linked to the pre-school and that the input of individuals might be identifiable. Effort will be made to discuss material with you where this is a possibility.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The research findings will be published as part of my PhD thesis. A summary of these will be made available to both your and the pre-school staff as well as the children (in an age appropriate format) and to parents. The findings will be shared with other practitioners and with academics including students undertaking studies in early years education. This may be over an extended period of time (unspecified). As stated above, references to the pre-school and the research participants will be anonymised.

Please indicate your permissions on the attached consent agreement. Thank you for considering the study.

Nicola Bowden-Clissold

**Contact for further information**

Nicola Bowden-Clissold

Mobile: 07790413302

E-mail: Nicola.Bowden-Clissold@uwe.ac.uk

**Complaints procedure**

Any issues or concerns can be raised with me directly. If this is unsatisfactory, you may contact my supervisors at the UWE:

Dr Jane Andrews

Dr Penelope Harnett

Professor Ann-Marie Bathmaker

**Research Consent Agreement for [REDACTED] Pre-School**

I have considered and understood the research study explanatory letter. I accept that separate consent agreements will be sought from staff, children and parents.

I give/do not give \* consent for [REDACTED] Pre-School to participate in the 'Child Voice' research study to be undertaken by Nicola Bowden-Clissold.



Signed on behalf of [REDACTED] Pre-School:

.....

Print Name:

.....

Position:

.....

Date:

.....

***\* Please delete as appropriate***

## **Pre-School Practitioners (Extract)**

Dear

### **‘Child Voice’:**

#### **A Study of Working together with Pre-School Children to Implement the EYFS**

I have recently been granted permission by the pre-school management committee to carry out research at the pre-school. The project will continue until Oct 2011, with a final research report being submitted to UWE in June 2012.

Although I am able to perform the work independently, I would like to invite you and other staff to take part and work in collaboration with me. The pre-school management has agreed this possibility but it is your individual decision and you are not under any obligation to do so. Below I have outlined the research to enable you to decide whether you might like to be involved and what such involvement would entail.

Thank you for taking the time to read. Should you require any clarification or further information please do discuss with me.

#### **What is the research exactly?**

The aim of the research is to explore how young children can be actively involved in deciding, planning and implementing the EYFS and subsequently reviewing and making changes as necessary. The research reflects the underpinning philosophy of the EYFS to promote a curriculum which is child-focused.

The study will investigate practical ways in which children are able to be involved, to have their views expressed, heard and actioned. Several approaches and methods will be used drawing and building on existing research with young children. Some examples are inviting children to use cameras and video to capture aspects of pre-school life that are significant for them; to act as ‘tour guides’ leading adults or other children around the pre-school, to use drawings and other artwork, stories and role play to represent their views. The aim is to provide varied and alternative ways in which the children can be involved to appeal to different ages, abilities and preferences and to ensure all children that wish to participate are able to do so.

The children who wish to participate (and whose parents give their consent) will work in collaboration with me and ideally yourself and other staff should you wish to participate. The children will be supported in choosing, carrying out and discussing the activities and to design some of their own. The children’s views will be used to reflect on possible enhancements to pre-school experiences; these will be implemented on a trial basis and reviewed for effectiveness.

As part of the review and reflection process, I would like to invite parents to participate to enable a fuller picture of their child's view (see below).

**Where and when will the research take place?**

I will be at pre-school to undertake the practical part of the study from mid November 2010 to end of October 2011. However I will begin some preparatory work from May to enable me to acquaint, or reacquaint, myself with the children and to enable trials of the methods and techniques (for example, time for children to become familiar with cameras and video). I plan that initially I will spend from 2 sessions (half days) per week with this increasing to 5 sessions during the main study from November.

**Who is invited to take part?**

Initially I would like to extend an open invitation to all pre-school children and their parents. I anticipate that the response will result in a manageable number of children and parents being interested. In the event that the response exceeds the scope of the study, I will initiate a selection process to enable a representative group to be established (for example a range of ages, linguistic and cognitive stages, boys and girls). I will inform parents should such a selection be necessary. In any event I am keen to not exclude any child from participating in any of the research activities but will not be able to include their input in the published study.

*There is no obligation for any invited participant to take part and it is perfectly acceptable to withdraw participation without reason at any time (subject to negotiation regarding the use of any existing work).*

**What is expected of the children?**

The children will be invited to participate in a series of activities. I envisage that this might be as part of their key group work, although with flexibility. The children will be involved in either using existing methods for promoting children's expression or trialling new techniques (including those designed by the children themselves). The output from the activity will be discussed with the children. Part of the discussions will inform the next steps in the research e.g. are there changes that could be implemented and trialled?

**What is expected of me and other staff?**

I am able to take full responsibility in supporting, implementing and evaluating the activities with the children and trialling any changes that are suggested. However I would like to invite you and other staff to work collaboratively with me to enable a fuller more varied account of the research to be built. I am, of course, fully aware of the time constraints of the daily routines and would aim to work with these to avoid additional workloads. I have the following suggestions:

- That you and other staff work with me and your key group children on a research activity for part of your key group day
- That I assume staff duties to enable you and other staff to undertake a research activity with the children

- That output from the research activity be used directly to contribute to children's Learning Journeys

In order to discuss the findings as the research progresses, I have requested permission to attend monthly staff meetings (hopefully with a regular brief agenda slot). Additionally I would like to invite you and other staff to complete periodic brief evaluations to capture your perspectives on the research progress.

### **And parents?**

I will invite parents to take part in the process of reviewing their child's contribution to the research to build a fuller picture of their child's views. I plan to invite parents to discuss their child's work around the beginning, middle and end of the research. Additionally or alternatively it might be practical to send copies of such work home for comments.

### **What are the possible disadvantages to me and other staff in taking part?**

See the section below regarding anonymity.

As stated above, I am very aware of the time constraints in normal pre-school routines. Although my intention is to not add to the workload, there is the possibility that you might consider participation in the research an additional obligation. Should this be the case, I would welcome discussion with you and would take steps to overcome this. You would have the opportunity to withdrawal if you did not wish to continue.

### **What are the possible benefits to me and other staff taking part?**

As you are aware, the EYFS requires practitioners to implement a curriculum based around the interests of the individual child and to develop a balance of both adult and child-initiated and led activities. The intention of my research is to support this by exploring methods and techniques which facilitate children contributing their ideas to the pre-school curriculum planning. As stated above, I envisage a direct link between carrying out research activities and using the information from these to complete the children's Learning Journeys.

Involvement of parents in the study will support the EYFS principle of working in partnership with parents.

### **Will my involvement in the study be kept anonymous?**

Published material will have the pre-school name, the names of staff, children and parents and other personal details removed. All stored data will be anonymised and maintained securely both during and after completion of the study. However due to the open, interactive nature of the pre-school it is possible that published material might be linked to the pre-school and that the input of individuals might be identifiable. Effort will be made to discuss material with you where this is a possibility.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The research findings will be published as part of my PhD thesis. A summary of these will be made available to you and the other pre-school staff as well as the children (in an age appropriate format) and to parents. The findings will be shared with other practitioners and with academics including students undertaking studies in early years education. This may be over an extended period of time (unspecified). As stated above, references to the pre-school and the research participants will be anonymised.

Please indicate your permissions on the attached consent agreement. Thank you for considering the study.

**Parents and carers (Extract)**

Dear parents and carers

**‘Child Voice’: A Study of Working together with Pre-School Children to implement the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**

For those of you whom I have not met, I am Nicola (Bowden-Clissold) and until the end of 2009 had been working at the pre-school as a practitioner. It was with mixed feelings that I decided to leave since I was offered the opportunity to take up doctoral research with the University of the West of England (UWE). With the kind permission of the pre-school management committee I am carrying out the research in collaboration with the pre-school until October 2011. The final research report will be submitted to UWE in June 2012.

The purpose of this letter is to invite your child to be part of the research. Essentially the research is combined with normal pre-school activities. I interact with and observe the activities and use data from this for my research. I do explain why I am in pre-school to the children, usually showing them that I am ‘writing a book about pre-school’. Where applicable I ask children if it is ok for me to include something I have seen or something they have said in my book. A leaflet has been produced explaining the research in more. A copy of this is displayed on the [REDACTED] notice board.

As you would expect, I require your permission to include any of your child’s conversations with me or observations of your child (although these will be anonymous). If you are happy for me to do this, please would you complete the attached sheet and return to pre-school. Should you require any clarification or further information please do contact me (my details are at the end of the letter). Thank you very much for taking the time to read.

## **Research Information Leaflet (Extract)**

### **What is the research exactly?**

The aim of the research is to explore how young children can be actively involved in deciding, planning and implementing the EYFS and subsequently reviewing and making changes as necessary. The research reflects the underpinning philosophy of the EYFS to promote a curriculum which is child-focused.

The study will investigate practical ways in which children are able to be involved, to have their views expressed, heard and actioned. Several approaches and methods will be used drawing and building on existing research with young children. Some examples are inviting children to use cameras and video to capture aspects of pre-school life that are significant for them; to act as 'tour guides' leading adults or other children around the pre-school, to use drawings and other artwork, stories and role play to represent their views. The aim is to provide varied and alternative ways in which the children can be involved to appeal to different ages, abilities and preferences and to ensure all children that wish to participate are able to do so.

The children who wish to participate will work in collaboration with me and other staff at the pre-school. We will support the children in enabling them to choose, carry out and discuss the activities and to design some of their own. The children's views will be used to reflect on possible enhancements to pre-school life; these will be implemented and reviewed.

As part of the review and reflection process, I would welcome your participation as parents and carers to enable a fuller picture of your child's view (see section below: What is expected of my child and of me?).

### **Where and when will the research take place?**

The research is planned actively to take place in the pre-school from mid November 2010 to end of October 2011. Some preparatory work will take place prior to this to enable me to acquaint, or reacquaint, myself with the children and staff and to enable trials of the methods and techniques (for example, time for children to become familiar with cameras and video). This is scheduled to begin in May.

### **Who is invited to take part and does my child and I have to?**

The invitation is open to all pre-school children and their parents. In the event that the response exceeds the scope of the study, a selection process will be initiated to enable a representative group to be established (for example a range of ages, linguistic and cognitive stages, boys and girls). You will be informed should this be necessary. Such as selection will not prevent your child from participating in any research activities but will prevent data being included in the study. There is no obligation either for you or your child to take part.

Your child will be invited to take part in the research activities as part of the daily pre-school routine. The only difference is that where you have consented for your child to participate, there will be explicit checks to ensure that your child wishes to take part. For example, should the activity be a photo tour, your child will be asked if he or she agrees for others to look at the photos and share any comments made. However if you do not wish your child to take part (as indicated on the consent agreement attached to this letter), he or she may still join in the activity but the photos and comments will not form part of the research.

It is perfectly acceptable that you may wish your child to participate but do not wish to do so yourself (again this is indicated on the consent agreement).

It is equally acceptable for your child or for you to withdraw from the study at any time. In this case the use of your child's or your data provided to this point will be negotiated with you.

### **What is expected of my child and of me?**

Your child will be invited to participate in a series of activities as part of their key group work. Involvement will entail either using existing methods for promoting children's expression or trialling new techniques (designed by the children and/or me and the other staff). The output from the activity will be discussed between the children and me and/or the other staff. Part of the discussions will plan the next steps in the research e.g. are there changes that could be implemented?

As suggested above, I am keen to involve you as parents and carers in the process of reviewing your child's perspectives. Such participation will involve you attending 3 sessions at pre-school (of approximately 30 minutes) around the beginning, middle and end of the study to discuss your child's work with me on an individual basis (for example, looking at the photos and descriptions that your child has produced). Additionally or alternatively it might be practical to send copies of such work home for your comments. During the sessions we will agree specific work to be included in the final study report as applicable.

### **What are the possible disadvantages in my child and me taking part?**

In line with the EYFS and pre-school policy on child welfare and safeguarding, I and all other staff are obliged to refer to the pre-school management should a child or you disclose any information in confidence that I or other staff consider requires further professional attention.

### **What are the possible benefits in my child and me taking part?**

The desired intention of the study is to enable your child to contribute to enhancing his or her pre-school experience by providing accessible ways for your child to express his or her opinions, to have those views heard and acted upon as far as is possible. The research approach aims to be as inclusive as possible to enable every child who wishes to participate to do so.

Your involvement will assist in understanding your child's viewpoint more fully.

**Will my child's or my taking part in this study be anonymous?**

Published material will have names and other personal details removed. All stored data will be anonymised and maintained securely both during and after completion of the study. Your child's input and your input may be discussed between me and the other staff within the setting as part of the evaluation and change implementation cycle and therefore your child or you may be identifiable.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The research findings will be published as part of my PhD thesis. A summary of these will be made available to both your child (in an age appropriate format) and to you as well as to all parents and pre-school staff. The findings will be shared with other practitioners and with academics including students undertaking studies in early years education. This may be over an extended period of time (unspecified). References to the pre-school and the research participants will be anonymised.



## Appendix B Example of Pre-School Activity Planning Sheet Pro forma

### Activity Plan

#### Activity:

#### **Wish Catcher**

Part 1: In small groups explore the idea of wishes with the children (use stories to explain perhaps):

Do the children understand what wishes are?

What do they know about whether wishes can come true?

Part 2: Invite the children to 'capture' their wishes in any way they would like to  
Some examples:

Drawings; talking about them (write what they say); acting them out (observations, photos to capture), modelling them (play dough, craft area)

Part 3: Invite the children to talk about their wishes they have represented and 'capture' their wishes in the 'wish catcher' (suspended net)

#### **Grouping of children:**

4-6 children

<p><b><u>Main Learning Intention:</u></b>  <b>PSED, CLL.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To enable children to express their wishes and aspirations</li> <li>- To enable adults to share and value children's wishes (even when they cannot be actioned!)</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Key Vocabulary/Questions:</u></b>          See above for questions.</p> <p>Wishes, hopes, dreams, the future</p>
<p><b>Resources:</b>          Drawing/writing          Crafts          Malleable materials (dough, salt dough)</p>	<p><b>Adapting the Activity for Individual/Groups of Children:</b>          One to one support where needed          Pairs discussions</p>

## **Evaluations:**

### **20/5/10 My notes**

Video limited use due to background noise!!

Voice recorder not used as group activity in noisy room

Participants:

Am – GD, BA, AB, AR, EL, PT, ES

Pm – GD, LE, WS, ME, JA

Initial thoughts:

- Concept of wish seemed to be understood by children
- Wish catcher net seemed to be popular although may have been novelty of putting something in it rather than concept of catching your wishes so you could be reminded of them (and see if they might come true)
- One child commented that you should keep wishes secret (EL)
- Children generally related to things they wanted for presents – AR (3D glasses and bob CD); cuddly toys ('doggy's', cats, cows, chicks and horses) – most likely prompted by one child's ideas; ES (doll)
- When using salt dough – transport cutters were visible and probably 'biased' the children using them saying they wanted cars, ships. Only 2 of the 6 children choose to create their own design (BA, GD – bone- appeared to experiment with dough and decide it looked like a bone; Shawna, balls – these are easy to fashion with dough?) Children liked the idea that the dough would be permanent and that they could keep what they have made (usually dough is re-used)

- GD opted to use the craft table to make a second wish – this time he appeared to have considered what he wanted to make and relate it to a wish – he made a bat and said:  
“I didn’t go the zoo anymore ‘cause I not got any zoo tickets... K [brother] not got any tickets”
- EL was about to describe her wish but was put off when she saw the video recorder.

What to do differently:

- Sit with 2 children at a time and record their thoughts? (activity more of a doing rather than a thinking/communicating activity)
- Amount of adult interaction? Keep prompting with questions and video/note/voice record responses? Too intrusive for children?
- (Not sure that video particularly useful here if do not prompt with questions!)
- Specify some particular questions?? Whilst doing activity (or beforehand – in book corner)
  - Have you ever wished for something that did come true? (e.g. for birthday)
  - How about something that didn’t come true?
    - How did you feel about that?
  - If you could wish for something/something to happen at pre-school what would that be?

Extending the activity

- Going back at the next session and talking about children’s wishes again?
- Sharing wishes in small groups (6, 4 or pairs?)

**26/5/10**

**Lynne's notes:**

The children found it hard explaining what a wish is. Two said a wish is “a princess”. One child said, “a fairy”. Mary said, “you make a wish in the night... a teddy person”. Another child said, “a fireman”. John said, “my wishes are pink”.

**Julie's notes:**

Catherine said, “I wished for a doggy last time... now to meet an alien!” Catherine made a green paper alien with 3 eyes. Tom said, “I’m going to make a shooting star because that’s a wish!” Tom made a picture with wool and shiny materials. Eliza didn’t know what to do when I explained about wishes. She made a picture using different materials. When I asked her what it was, she didn’t know.

## **Appendix C Practitioner Evaluations (Research Activities)**

### **Child 'Voice' Study Evaluation: Phase 1 July 2010**

Thank you for agreeing to review the study so far. Your comments are valued to inform the next phase of the study from September, for example, which activities or approaches to use, adapt, disregard. I will discuss the outcomes of this evaluation with you as a group and seek your opinion on the next steps. (I will also complete an evaluation to share). You need not give your name if you prefer not to. In any case, names will not be used to identify individual input, either when discussing the outcomes or when using in written accounts.

Please respond to questions in a way which suits you e.g. bullet points are fine. If you wish to add comments which do not fit the questions 'neatly' then please feel free to do so. You need not fill the space allocated per question but equally please use additional sheets if required.

Any queries, please discuss with me to e-mail/phone/text me:  
E-mail: Nicola.bowden-clissold@uwe.ac.uk  
Mobile: 07790413302

- 1) The Children's Act (2004) defines 'child voice' as children's right to be actively consulted on all matters which relate to their lives. Thinking about our practice in pre-school, how do you feel we promote children being consulted about their pre-school experiences?**

*I don't think children are consulted enough – we need to have more input by children and also feedback on activities/topics we have done.*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*By offering them choices such as re-creating their Likes and Dislikes (charts)*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Show and Tell; activities relating to themselves e.g. All about me, small group activities*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

- 2) Consulting with children in practice might not always be straightforward**

- a. What do you consider are the possible/actual barriers to listening and consulting with children in practice?**

*Very rare you have chance to talk to a child on a one-to-one basis, without being interrupted by other children. Can be very noisy in pre-school (hard to hold conversations, especially with children that are quiet/shy).*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Not understanding what it asked of them/listening skills. Children copy, repeat what the other children are saying, until their own confidence is built.*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Large groups where all children talk at once. Where children are shy/quiet and cannot be heard above others.*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

**b. How do you think the barriers might be overcome (possibly in an ideal world!)?**

*Would be nice to take a child aside, maybe in a part of the room which could be made private/sectioned off. More small group activities (2-3 children at a time) and perhaps outside to make more detailed observations without interruption.*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Speak to the children on a one to one basis more frequently. When they gain your trust, they will hopefully open up more and relate their own feelings/ideas.*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Small group work to include sound bags. Taking turns/sharing/talking about families, interests to involve each child in conversation.*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

**3) Thinking about the activities that have been introduced, what were your impressions (taking into consideration usability and practicality, supporting children's expression, being inclusive/exclusive)?**

**a. Camera 'tours' (i.e. asking children to take photos of aspects of pre-school that they would like to remember, then adding to Learning Journey)**

*Great idea! Children really enjoyed it (taking responsibility for camera like a 'grown up'). Would be good idea to use this idea in future for wall display.*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Wonderful idea, children loved the use of the camera, learning how to use/operate it, and capturing their memories. Added to Learning Journey. Quality time for children, adults.*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*An excellent activity. Great confidence building*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

**b. Wish catcher (i.e. children invited to consider and make/model their wishes to catch in the wish catcher net)**

*Not sure all children understood this?! A lot seemed to relate this to making a wish at 'Birthday' time i.e. blowing out candles. Net a good idea as all 'wishes' displayed in a unique way!*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Children loved the concept of wishes, i.e. for birthdays and Christmas. The net concept added a lovely dimension to the room, talking point. Loved this idea!*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*The children tended to follow each others' answers. It could be they didn't really understand what a wish is!*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

**c. Wishing tree (i.e. children invited to paint the tree using colours to represent feelings/emotions, then make/model their feelings/emotions to hang on the tree)**

*Not sure if all children understood what was asked of them. Most children just painted leaves 'tree colours' i.e. green/brown. Some children find it hard to express feelings but others happily drew pictures to represent happy/sad emotions.*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Capturing their thoughts/feelings using colours on the tree, different/alternative way to gain their interests/worked really well, loved this idea!*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*The tree died making it unattractive but the children enjoyed painting and making items to hang on it.*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

**d. Painting to music (children invited to listen to CD of sea/forest whilst painting)**



*Children didn't put the 2 together (music and painting). Just painted what they wanted. Didn't really relate dark colours to sad music/bright colours to 'jolly' music.*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Didn't work on such a large scale. Offered to a few children on their own/no other distractions would be better. They loved the painting/ don't think the music inspired them at all!*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Not a popular activity. Although the painting is a great hit, as always, the children didn't take any notice of the music. I think they were too young to understand.*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

**4) What adaptations/extensions to the above techniques do you think would be useful for the main study in September?**

*Think 'camera' was great – children understood what was needed from them. Perhaps talk about emotions/feelings in more depth with children, using books, photos, pictures drawn by other children/artists etc.*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Camera study – give children clipboard/paper and pen and invite them to draw their likes/dislikes/interests in pre-school. Wishing tree – invite the children on a daily/weekly basis to record their feelings/emotions.*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*More activities or discussions about wishes before main activity i.e. stories about tooth fairy.*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

**5) What are your reflections on the Likes and Dislikes charts that have been designed by staff at pre-school for listening and consulting with children? (e.g. how effective are they, potential adaptations/extensions etc)**

*Typical adult design – more thought needed!*

**[Practitioner P, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*Excellent for children starting pre-school to complete with parent/carers at home, to gain additional knowledge about the child. Good idea to complete on a daily basis (or weekly), need to step up completion (all staff). But the children at carpet time do say the same things (copy each other) – need to build trust.*

**[Practitioner L, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

*These were sent home and filled in with help of parents/carers.*

**[Practitioner J, Activity Evaluation, July 2010]**

## Appendix D Design of Data Analysis

Primary themes (tentative)	Secondary themes (tentative)	Criteria for Exploration	Research Activity	Related Questions	Data Analysis Approach
Adult-child power relationships	Shifting the power balance to the children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explore how children are able to represent their perspectives of pre-school using cameras.</li> <li>▪ Explore adult attitudes to this</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Camera Tours</li> <li>▪ Small group interactions</li> <li>▪ Practitioner evaluations</li> </ul>	<p>“When you leave pre-school to go to ‘big school’, what would you like to remember about pre-school?” (Invite children to take photographs of their choosing around the setting)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are your impressions of the activity, taking into consideration usability and practicality, supporting children’s expression, being inclusive/exclusive?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse children’s reactions to being in charge of ‘adult’ equipment and leading the ‘tour’</li> <li>▪ Analyse adult’s reactions to children being in charge of cameras</li> <li>▪ Analyse the pictures children take for indicators of trends in what is significant to children at pre-school</li> <li>▪ What voices are absent/dominant?</li> <li>▪ Practicalities of method? Appeal?</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>
	Children reacting to adult expectations, rules etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explore whether/how the adult/child relationship changes if adopting the ‘least-adult role’</li> <li>▪ Explore adult reactions to adopting role</li> </ul>	Participant Observation	What are the ethical considerations in taking a ‘least adult’ role, regarding children’s potential disclosures, confidences?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse children’s reactions (acceptance, suspicion etc) to adult not reinforcing rules, behaviours etc</li> <li>▪ Analyse adult reactions to taking ‘least adult role’</li> <li>▪ Analyse the conversations for indicators of how children feel about being at pre-school</li> <li>▪ What voices are absent/dominant?</li> <li>▪ Practicalities of method? Appeal?</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes	Criteria for Exploration	Research Activity	Related Questions	Data Analysis Approach
Facilitation of Expression of feelings, aspirations, opinions.	Is it safe to express my feelings here?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To explore enabling children to express their wishes and aspirations</li> <li>▪ To explore enabling adults to share and value children's wishes (even when they cannot be actioned)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Wish Catcher</li> <li>▪ Small group interactions</li> <li>▪ Practitioner evaluations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do all children understand what wishes are?</li> <li>▪ What do children know about whether wishes do/do not come true?</li> <li>▪ Do children have wishes related to pre-school?</li> </ul> <p>Invite the children to represent their wishes in any way they would like (e.g. drawings, models, photos, talking) and 'capture' in the wish catcher net</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are your impressions of the activity, taking into consideration usability and practicality, supporting children's expression, being inclusive/exclusive?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse children's responses for definitions of wishes (realistic, fantastic, generic – birthday, Christmas – specific/personal)</li> <li>▪ Analyse children's responses for attitudes towards the 'point' of making wishes</li> <li>▪ Analyse adult attitudes towards children's wishes</li> <li>▪ Does method illuminate children's feelings towards pre-school?</li> <li>▪ Which voices are absent/dominant?</li> <li>▪ Trends in the choice of representations?</li> <li>▪ Practicalities of method? Appeal?</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To explore enabling children to express their feelings, both positive and negative</li> <li>▪ To explore enabling adults to share and value children's feelings (even when we might be uncomfortable with what the children express i.e. their negative feelings)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tree of Feelings</li> <li>▪ Small group interactions</li> <li>▪ Practitioner evaluations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Invite children to give examples of when they or others might feel sad, happy, angry, excited, afraid etc (in response to stories shared with them)</li> <li>▪ Are any of these feelings related to pre-school?</li> </ul> <p>Invite children to paint/ draw/take photos of things that make them happy, sad etc and hang them on the 'tree of feelings'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are your impressions of the activity, taking into consideration usability and practicality, supporting children's expression, being inclusive/exclusive?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse children's responses for range of feelings expressed (balance between positive and negative, mainly positive etc)</li> <li>▪ Analyse adult responses to feelings that might be uncomfortable</li> <li>▪ Does method illuminate children's feelings towards pre-school?</li> <li>▪ Which voices are absent/dominant?</li> <li>▪ Trends in the choice of representation?</li> <li>▪ Practicalities of method? Appeal?</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes	Criteria for Exploration	Research Activity	Related Questions	Data Analysis Approach
	Expressing feelings directly in a group.	Explore how children react to invitation to directly express likes and dislikes.	(Likes and Dislikes Chart at group circle time. A pre-school activity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Directly ask children to offer examples of things they like and dislike about pre-school in general or specifically (ie during today's session)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Which voices are absent/dominant?</li> <li>▪ Do the dominant voices encourage less dominant to speak or inhibit?</li> <li>▪ Do the dominant voices influence the responses of the less dominant (e.g. mimicking)</li> <li>▪ How authentic are the voices? (Are the responses feasible, are they reactionary e.g. naming randomly as look around room)</li> <li>▪ Analyse the balance or otherwise between naming likes and dislikes</li> <li>▪ Compare and contrast likes and dislikes about pre-school</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes	Criteria for Exploration	Research Activity	Related Questions	Data Analysis Approach
	Expression evoked through music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To explore in what ways music influences children's expression</li> <li>▪ To explore in what ways adults are able to share and value children's non-verbal expressions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Painting to music</li> <li>▪ Small group interactions</li> <li>▪ Practitioner evaluations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If they wish, invite the children to discuss what they intend/are in the process of/have finished painting. (However respect that children may not know what they are painting - they may be exploring without a 'finished product' in mind)</li> <li>▪ What are your impressions of the activity, taking into consideration usability and practicality, supporting children's expression, being inclusive/exclusive?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse children's reactions to painting with the addition of music</li> <li>▪ Analyse whether children offer/respond to questions about their paintings</li> <li>▪ Analyse whether choice of colours, shapes, discernible objects might be linked to the type of music (e.g. sounds of nature)</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> <li>▪ Analyse adult reactions to paintings/explanations of paintings</li> <li>▪ Analyse adult and children's reactions to potential 'messy' activity</li> <li>▪ Practicalities of method? Appeal?</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>

<b>Primary Themes</b>	<b>Secondary Themes</b>	<b>Criteria for Exploration</b>	<b>Research Activity</b>	<b>Related Questions</b>	<b>Data Analysis Approach</b>
Attitudes towards child voice in practice	Reflective Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Willingness to reflect on practice</li> <li>▪ Willingness to consider change to practice</li> <li>▪ Identify potential enablers/inhibitors to child voice</li> </ul>	Practitioner written Evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Thinking about our practice in pre-school, how do you feel we promote children being consulted about their pre-school experiences?</li> <li>▪ Consulting with children in practice might not always be straightforward. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What do you consider are the possible/actual barriers to listening and consulting with children in practice?</li> <li>○ How do you think the barriers might be overcome</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ What are your reflections on the techniques that have been designed by children and Practitioner at pre-school for listening and consulting with children? (e.g. how effective are they, potential adaptations/extensions etc)</li> <li>▪ Thinking about the techniques adapted from existing research that have been piloted, what were your impressions (taking into consideration usability and practicality, supporting children's expression, being inclusive/exclusive)?</li> <li>▪ What adaptations/extensions to the above techniques do you think would be useful for the main study in September?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse attitudes towards child voice in practice – identify enablers/inhibitors</li> <li>▪ Analyse attitudes towards reflective practice, especially critical reflection</li> <li>▪ Analyse attitudes towards change in practice</li> <li>▪ Synthesize opinions of effectiveness of each technique piloted</li> <li>▪ Synthesize opinions on adaptations/extensions for main study</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes	Criteria for Exploration	Research Activity	Related Questions	Data Analysis Approach
	Adult/child relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Incidents of listening/not listening</li> <li>▪ Active listening</li> <li>▪ Barriers to listening</li> </ul>	Observation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse incidents to determine whether generalizations can be made</li> <li>▪ Analyse enablers/inhibitors to listening/active listening</li> </ul>

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes	Criteria for Exploration	Research Activity	Related Questions	Data Analysis Approach
	Parent's perspectives on child's pre-school experiences	To explore ways in which children express their opinions about pre-school at home	Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do you think [child's name] feels about pre-school - which aspects are most/least important? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ From your own impressions? (e.g. attitudes to coming/leaving pre-school etc)</li> <li>○ From what [child's name] shares with you directly?</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ How does [child's name] share his/her experiences with you? For example, in response to direct questions? offers insights in his/her own or some other way?</li> <li>▪ Does [child's name] share negative as well as positive feelings about pre-school?</li> <li>▪ What do you think of the Learning Journey as a tool to share [child's name] experiences with him/her? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Can you identify particularly useful aspects?</li> <li>○ Less useful?</li> <li>○ Any overall improvements to the process?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Analyse how children share their pre-school experiences with their parents</li> <li>▪ Compare parents' perspectives of children's attitudes towards pre-school with those of practitioners</li> <li>▪ Compare children's willingness to express negative opinions about pre-school to parents as opposed to practitioners</li> <li>▪ Analyse parents responses to the value of documentation as a tool for sharing children's pre-school experiences with them</li> <li>▪ Which parents' voices are present/absent?</li> <li>▪ Analysis of unexpected findings</li> </ul>



## Appendix E Practitioners' perspectives of Learning Journeys

### Learning Journeys – Summary of Practitioner written evaluations [January 2011]

The following is a reproduction of each question that was asked on the evaluation, a collation of the written comments from practitioner (where given) and a graph representing the answers given in the boxes. Note that the graph is not intended as a definitive, quantitative answer but rather as a relative overall 'feel' of practitioners' perspectives by indicating the different weightings, the significance of aspects of the Learning Journey.

#### Staff Evaluation of Children's Learning Journeys

Please either use the tick boxes or complete the comment section (or both) according to how you prefer to provide your answers. Leave blank if you are unable to answer anything/ it is not relevant for you. There are no right answers, so any contributions are welcome!

#### 1. How do you rate the possible purposes of the Learning Journey?

(Please rate using 1 = most significant 6= least significant)

To help build a picture of what engages each child at pre-school to assist planning

☐

As a tool to enable reporting on how each child is achieving against the 6 areas of the curriculum (for parents/reception teacher)

☐

To help to build a picture of how each child feels about being at pre-school

☐

As a keepsake for parents of their child's time at pre-school

☐

As a tool to initiate conversation with children about their pre-school experiences

☐☐

Other (please specify) .....

#### Comments:

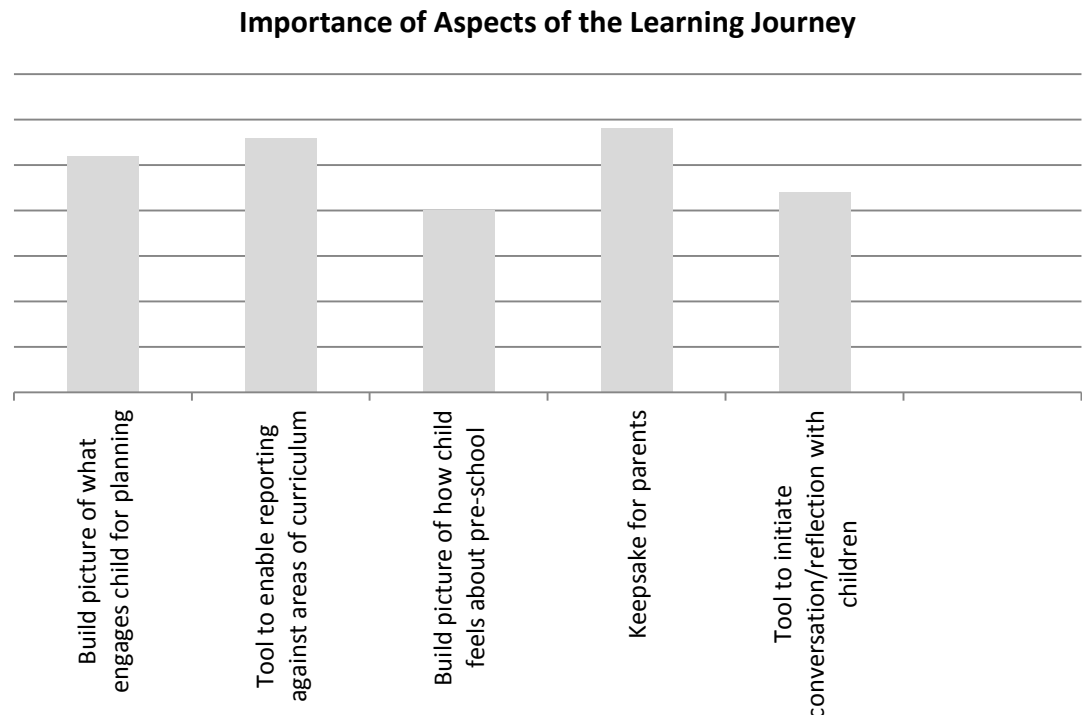
*For teacher and child to reflect upon previous work they have completed/events at school. And to get the child's perspective on a one-to-one.*

**[Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, 21/1/11]**

*Love the learning journeys, feel they're of value to all, children/parents and staff*

**[Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, 13/1/11]**

Good for the parents' point of view  
 [Practitioner T, LJ written evaluation, 20/1/11]



**2. Do you go through the Learning Journey with your key children? (Please tick one box only)**

Yes, I often go through the LJ with my key children

☐

I do try but find that many of my particular key children are not that interested

☐

I intend to but other pressures mean I don't get around to it (Go to Question 5)

☐

I don't really think about looking through the Learning Journeys as this is something more for the children to share with their parents (Go to Question 5)

☐

I prefer not to go through the Learning Journey as there is the risk that it might get damaged, particularly if I am distracted by other children (Go to Question 5)

☐

**Comments:**

*I try to go through the Learning Journey with each child who shows interest but I do not enforce it. Time is a major factor and as this would be my chosen means of developing the Journey it can be frustrating. It is possibly the only true reflection of the child's individual perspective.*

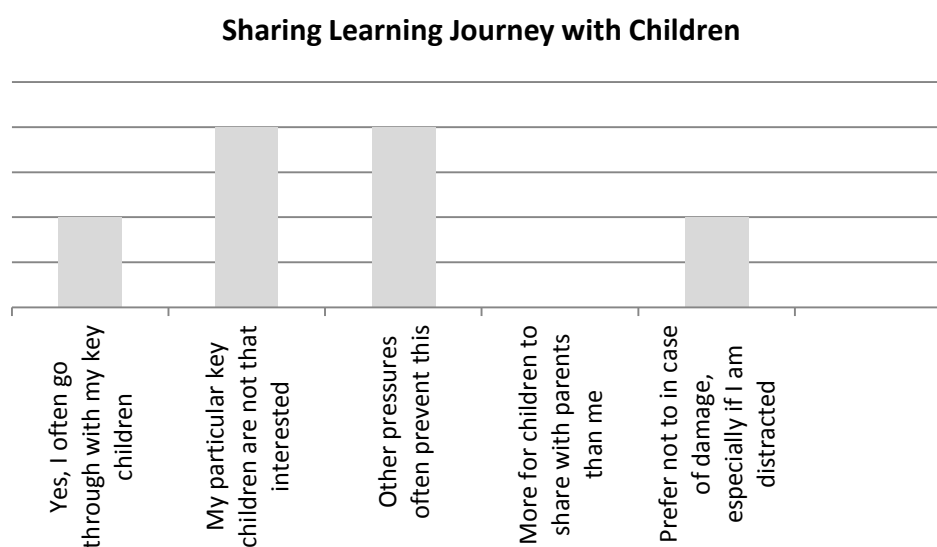
**[Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, 21/1/11]**

*Some children in my key group ask regularly to look at it, and I try to share this time with them. I find this useful for myself also, as the children make comments (you can include these in the LJs)*

**[Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, 13/1/11]**

*If a child asks to go through their LJ I let them look at it. I do sit with them because it may get written on or destroyed not necessarily by that child.*

**[Practitioner T, LJ written evaluation, 20/1/11]**



**3. How do you approach looking through the Learning Journeys with your key children? (Please tick one box only)**

I tend to take the children's lead and respond to how they react

☐

I tend to initiate conversation, mainly using the photos/children's work to prompt discussion. I feel the observations are more interesting to adults

☐

I tend to initiate conversation, using both photos/children's work and reading observations to prompt discussion

☐

**Comments:**

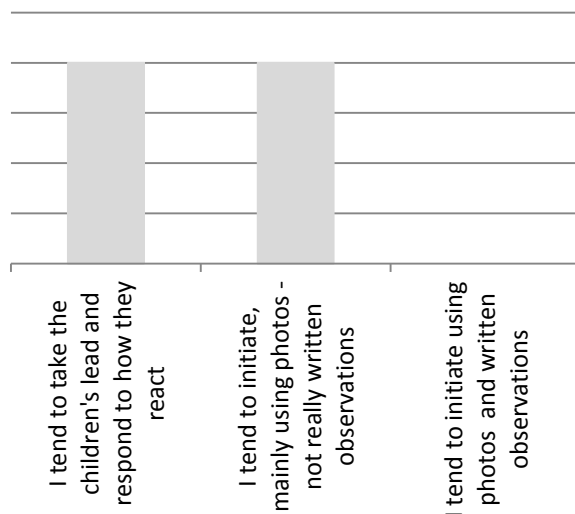
*The children usually remember about the photos and prompt discussion themselves.*

**[Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, 13/1/11]**

*I tend to look through the Learning journeys when we need to add something e.g. photos which the child brings from home to talk through with me.*

**[Practitioner T, LJ written evaluation, 20/1/11]**

### Specific Approach to Sharing Learning Journey with Children (1)



#### 4. How do you find your key children typically react to looking through the Learning Journeys with you? (Please tick one box only)

Most of my key children tend to comment on the photos and examples of their work and ask me to read the writing (observations etc)

☐

Most of my key children enjoy looking at the photos and examples of their work but tend not to be interested in hearing the writing (observations etc)

☐

Most of my key children really prefer to go and play instead!

☐

#### Comments:

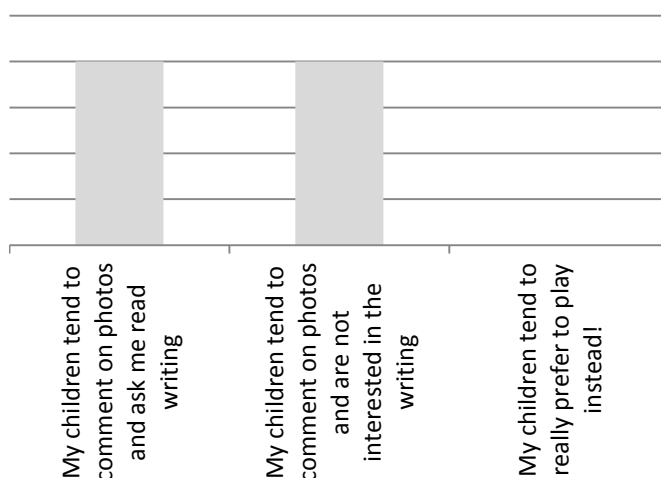
*Most children flick through and enjoy talking about themselves and comment about what is happening in the picture itself. They ask who else is in the picture with them after if they do not know their names.*

**[Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, 21/1/11]**

*Usually the same children ask.*

**[Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, 13/1/11]**

### Specific Approach to Sharing Learning Journey with Children (2)



**5. How do you feel about your key children directly adding to the Learning Journey (e.g. writing their own comments, sticking in their own work, taking their own photographs)? (Please tick one box only)**

I believe my key children should add to their Learning Journey, even if this does mean it is not perfect (written over, pictures not cut straight, stuck straight etc)

☐

This is ok as long as well supervised by adults to avoid it getting ‘messed up’

☐

I prefer to add the children’s work myself so I know if will be presented properly for parents to see

☐

**Comments:**

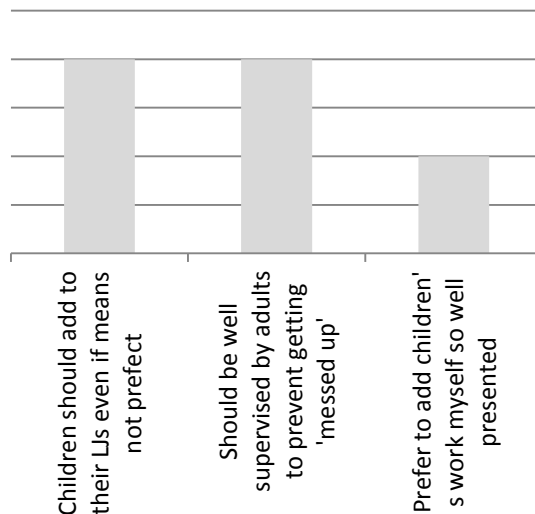
*Allowing the children to do it themselves encourages interest in their Learning Journey and they will come back to do it again. Perfection is not and should not be the issue in my opinion.*

**[Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, 21/1/11]**

*If there is a lot of pictures then I let the children stick them in and then write what comments they make.*

**[Practitioner J, LJ written evaluation, 24/1/11]**

**Children Adding to Their LJs  
Themselves**



**6. To what extent do you think the Learning Journey represents your key children's own voices rather than interpretations by adults? (Please answer either Y or N)**

The Likes and Dislikes sheets are generally my key children's own words

☐

If I discuss the photos with my key children, their descriptions are generally similar to the adult annotations

☐

If I describe observations, my key children tend to recognise these

☐

Observations include what my key children have actually said and in which situation rather than just adult only descriptions

☐

The Child Voice box in observations is generally completed and it is clear how my key children's opinions were sought (i.e. what questions were asked)

☐

Mostly my key children have actively participated in creating their Learning Journey (e.g. by cutting and sticking photos/their work, adding their own writing/pictures directly, reviewing and adding comments)

☐

Mostly my key children take pride in their Learning Journey and can talk me through most of the contents

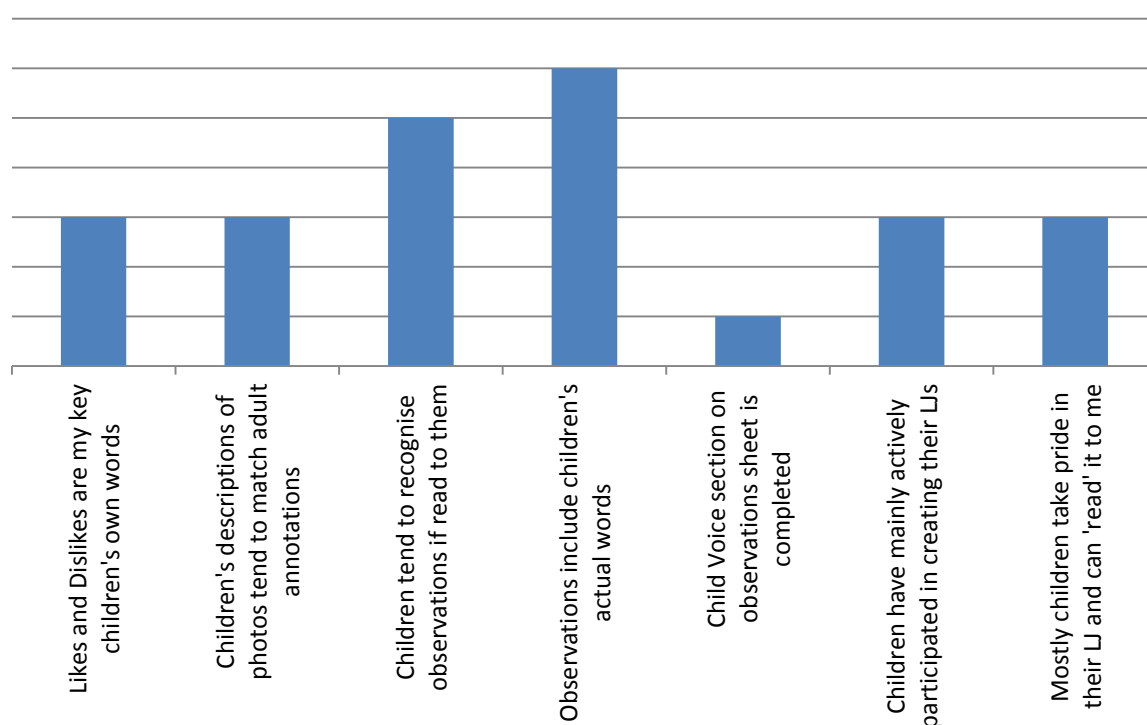
☐

**Comments:**

*My main concern is not having time with my key group children, to go through their books. It's a real shame as most children would like some input/enjoy adding things to their 'book'. Other pressures of certain number of obs being done, reports, comments in communication books seems to have take priority.*

**[Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, 24/1/11]**

**To what extent does the LJ represent your key children's voices rather than interpretations by adults?**



7. Can you think of anything you would change about the Learning Journeys or the way they are created?

*Would make them more available 'to children' during the week. Less complex, more of a daily diary of events using pictures and more of a child's personal perspective - "comment bubbles" perhaps by the photos. Would like them to be more colourful and true reflection of a three – 5 year old.*

**[Practitioner C, LJ written evaluation, 21/1/11]**

*I feel that the key workers should share the LJs with the children on a regular basis (time available ??). The children should add their own ideas etc., rewarding for both concerned. Preferred the LJs as they were last year, using coloured bubbles to highlight the areas of development.*

**[Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, 13/1/11]**

*Perhaps every journey should have a section set aside which is solely completed by the children. That way we would have to be given time to let the children do this and to work with them!*

**[Practitioner L, LJ written evaluation, 24/1/11]**

## **Appendix F Parent's Perspectives of Learning Journeys**

### **Learning Journeys – Summary of Parent Meetings [9- 10<sup>th</sup> March 2011 location: pre-school. Transcribed extracts]**

#### **1) What do you think of the Learning Journey as a tool to share your child's pre-school experiences?**

*I have only had it once at home and once in school before a meeting with his key worker. However I was unhappy as the key worker did not seem prepared to discuss overall observations of J and his character. So for it [the Learning Journey] to be more regularly updated and sent home would be great.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 10:36-10:54 Parent JT]**

*It has only come home once. This does not seem enough. I would like to either have the learning journey more often or to have another more regular information on how C is doing.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 12:25-12:46 Parent SC]**

*I particularly enjoy reading B's comments because I can 'imagine/hear' her saying them, which makes me laugh, and they provide a true representation of her character.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 11:53-12:14 Parent AB]**

#### **2) What emphasis do you put on the importance of different aspects of the Learning Journey (for example, as an insight into what your child does at pre-school, how your child is achieving against the curriculum, how your child socialises, as a discussion space with your child and/or the pre-school staff)**

*I feel all these elements are as important as each other. The Learning Journey acts like an 'interactive' report to inform parents and provide a means of contact between teachers and parents.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 11:24-11:41 Parent NH]**

*For me the most important thing is how A is doing at pre-school – I mean what she is learning, as this is what pre-school is all about, getting ready for school. I know how she gets on with other children from seeing her with friends and family.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 14:49-15:12 Parent TK]**

#### **3) Which aspects of the Learning Journey are of most interest to you (for example annotated photographs, short/long observations, your**



**child's drawings/writing, your children's own comments, pre-school reports)?**

*Hmm that is tricky as I think they are all interesting when taken together. I do like to hear what B has said herself though! And the photographs are lovely, to see what B has been doing and to talk to her about them.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 14:34-14:56 Parent AB]**

*It is all really good... I guess seeing C's drawings are less interesting, as she does loads of these at home. So it is good to see other things.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 14:46-15:07 Parent RE]**

*The reports are the most useful to see how A is getting on and what we need to help her with – the 'next steps'. Also the long observations as these give examples of where A is progressing and what to do next.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 11:24-11:41 Parent NH]**

*The observations just appear to be from a couple of occasions rather than added to every month or week. For example there is a reference to J being able to count to 7 – this was never updated as he can count well beyond that now.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 10:36-10:54 Parent JT]**

#### **4) Do you go through the Learning Journey at home with your child?**

*Yes, B loves to keep looking at it over and over! She loves me to read the writing (the observations and reports) and makes her own comments.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 14:34-14:56 Parent AB]**

*I try but it is like pulling teeth! J really is not interested at all – I don't think he identifies with it as his book. Sometimes he has said that he didn't do some of the things, such as the drawings. I don't think he was involved in putting it together.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 10:36-10:54 Parent JT]**

*We look at the photos together but A is not really interested in the observations or reports when I try to read them.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 14:49-15:12 Parent TK]**

*The photos definitely engage C and he enjoys telling me who's in them and what they are doing. He is not so interested in listening to the things that have been written about him.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 11:53-12:14 Parent SC]**

- 5) **How effective do you feel the Learning Journey is in telling you about your child's experiences at pre-school (for example understanding what you child likes/dislikes doing, how s/he feels about being at pre-school)?**

*I can't really tell any of that, I can't get a clear understanding purely from the Learning Journey. Also, it is difficult to separate what I already know about A and with what I learn through the Learning Journey.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 14:49-15:12 Parent TK]**

*Yes I get a really good overall picture of B's experiences from looking at it and talking through it with her.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 14:34-14:56 Parent AB]**

*I can see what C likes but not really what she doesn't like.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 14:46-15:07 Parent RE]**

- 6) **To what extent do you think the Learning Journey represents your child's own experiences rather than interpretations by adults (for example, the Likes and Dislikes sheets are your child's own ideas and words, observations include your child's own words, your child has actively participated by adding their work, your child takes pride in their Learning Journey and can talk you through it?)**

*B knows her Learning Journey by heart and can 'read' most of it including the writing! B has stuck her work in the book and added her own comments – she also asked me to add other things, such as new things she likes or doesn't like to the bit on these [the Likes and Dislikes chart].*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 14:34-14:56 Parent AB]**

*T can talk me through the pictures mostly. I wasn't aware he was cutting/sticking photos etc. I can't remember if his actual words were quoted or his opinion was asked for.*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 11:53-12:14 Parent SC]**

*J does not identify with it as being his and has no interest in it. When I showed him it, it seemed the first time he had looked at it. There was not much in it really other than some photos, which were nice. There was nothing that I could not have told you about him. It was not very useful in my opinion.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 10:36-10:54 Parent JT]**

- 7) **How do you feel about your child directly adding to the Learning Journeys (e.g. writing their own comments, sticking in their own work, taking their own photos.) Do you think it should be your child's own 'book', even if this does mean it is not perfect or do you think adults should supervise/ create the Learning Journey without children's input?**

*This is fine as long as well supervised to avoid it getting messed up. I also think this needs to be appropriate to the child's needs/abilities at that time. When initially completing the Likes and Dislikes sheet, T seemed so young he needed a lot of help and prompting to complete it. Now he is more able to add to his journal with me as a scribe. It needs to be a combination of both [adult and child together].*

**[Meeting: 9/03/11 11:53-12:14 Parent SC]**

*I do not think children should make entries in the book as it is an adult record of their abilities. I am interested in how C is progressing from a professional view.*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 14:46-15:07 Parent RE]**

*A would have loved to have taken some of the photos himself. This would need to be with the adults, of course, to stop the Learning Journey being trashed possibly!*

**[Meeting: 10/03/11 14:49-15:12 Parent TK]**

## Appendix G Dissemination Reports



**Faculty of Creative Arts, Humanities and Education  
School of Education  
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Frenchay Campus  
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BS16 1QY**

September 2011

Dear Parents/Carers

### **Feedback from the 'Child Voice' Study at [REDACTED]**

Thank you very much both to your children and to you for participating in the study over the last year. I have really enjoyed working with the children and learning more about the different ways that the children express themselves.

Sadly this part of the research and my time at [REDACTED] is now complete. The next stage in the study is to write-up for submission to the UWE in summer 2012. I would like to share an overview of the findings with you and have attached to this letter. One part of the feedback is for you and the other is to share with your children. (Copies will be displayed on the [REDACTED] notice board for all parents/carers and children to view). Please do contact me if you would like any further detail on the research or to make further comments.

I have shared findings with the [REDACTED] staff and have included their feedback in the overview of the findings. I would like to thank all the staff for their assistance in the study, which included discussing ideas in their own time. My special thanks to [REDACTED] and the management committee for giving permission for the study and for providing support throughout.

Again, thank you for your interest in the study. It has been very much appreciated. My best wishes,

Nicola Bowden-Clissold

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## **‘Child Voice’ Study Overview of Findings**

Nicola Bowden-Clissold, UWE

**The following findings include viewpoints of staff, parents/carers, children and my own observations.**

### **Tuning into children’s ‘voices’**

Sometimes this proved to be more difficult than imagined! Often the direct questioning approach was not effective. Children often did not respond, offered answers that did not seem to link to the questions (often by appearing to look around the room and naming whatever was in their view!) or tended to copy something overheard from another child. Practical obstacles were high noise levels at times and amount of interactions (making concentration on a one-to-one basis challenging). However some potential techniques and approaches emerged that did enable children’s voices to be ‘tuned into’. Not all were appealing for all children, however, so further reflection is acknowledged as being needed to overcome some of the issues with their use. Key issues are time, within an already busy routine, and selecting, or adapting, techniques to appeal to different children<sup>1</sup>. A selection of techniques and approaches is described below.



### **Co-creating Learning Journeys**

Some children were particularly enthusiastic at sharing their Learning Journeys with me on a regular basis, often greeting me on my arrival with requests to ‘read my book’. There was often enthusiasm for me to read the adult writing aloud, sometimes several times. This led to the some children adding their own comments, sometimes confirming the writing, sometimes disagreeing or adding updates. For example, one child wished to correct that she disliked certain foods, also bugs, now that she was four. A popular activity was children adding their own writing (or other mark-making) using post-it notes as the adults do, or writing directly in their books.

Staff and parent reactions to the children’s direct input into the Learning Journeys varied. Opinions included agreement that that children should be

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<sup>1</sup> Staff are currently reviewing their approach to planning and key group activities (within a broader appraisal of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum) with an aim to improving individual children’s engagement, enriching documentation and re-thinking time management.

actively involved, that learning was beneficial for both the children and the adults, even if this meant the appearance of the Learning Journey was not as presentable as if solely an adult record. Other opinions related to reservations over the records becoming damaged, illegible or lost, especially given the amount of time and effort in their creation. Other reservations were the lack of interest for some children, both from staff and parents; some children seemed happier engaging in more physical play, for example. Time, during an already busy daily routine, was also considered an issue in creating the Learning Journeys on a one-to-one basis. Staff are reviewing this as discussed above.

### **Children as authors**

Some children became very familiar with my research notebook and my willingness to write down whatever they wished to share with me. Certain children repeatedly offered to tell me 'stories' for my 'book'. I diligently wrote (verbatim) and re-read the 'stories' (or general news) to the specific child to check their accuracy. This seemed to appeal to some children with some amazing stories emerging, very ably demonstrating children's literacy skills! Staff are considering such an approach as part of the observation process.

### **Sharing play**

This one might seem obvious as Early Years is based on learning through play. However the pressure to complete paperwork has increased since the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Some staff feel this pressure has reduced their time to play with the children without the background pressure to complete the observation paperwork (against the set areas of learning in the curriculum) to accompany the play.

As a researcher without this pressure, I was able to absorb myself in play with the children without a specific aim to capture and impart learning. Sometimes I forgot I was an adult (and I think the children did too) and did not respect some of the rules (such as putting cars in the water tray) and needed to be reminded by the staff! However this allowed me to develop a more equal relationship with the children, in which we shared our thoughts and feelings, problem solved and explored through our play. Although my role was not to write observations, I found that my research notes could be (and were sometimes) translated into observations, often covering several areas of learning required by the EYFS.

Some staff have reported similar outcomes where they have been able to make more time to share play with a more relaxed approach to writing observations. The team are reflecting generally on approaches to observations during play (together with the re-thinking of planning and key group work) to enable richer accounts to be documented.

### **Creating quiet spaces**

The appearance of a tent one week led to children, notably quieter children, being more forthcoming in initiating and sustaining genuine conversation with me. Staff have been extending this idea by inviting small groups of children to join them away from the main room and have found greater levels of interaction and conversations.

### **Children as photographers**

After a familiarization period, children produced some insightful photos and even more insightful explanations for their choices. For example, several children took photos of resources that were not readily available to them and expressed their wish to be able to play with them (staff now offer a choice of such resources at the beginning of the session and are reviewing how resources are organised around the room to be the most engaging). One child took photos of the key areas around the room explaining this was to share with her younger sister who would be starting pre-school. Many children took photos of their friends and staff and added commentaries about why these people were special to them. Staff generally considered this a technique that they would like to use further; one viewpoint was that this would be especially useful for the children who are quieter without relying on language as the main means of expression. Again time was seen as a possible challenge by some.

### **Open-ended activities**

**Taking a flexible approach to creative activities – valuing the *process* as much as rather the finished product?**

A tendency emerged to support children at times (for example doing cutting/stapling activities) where children might be capable of tackling the process themselves. This was most apparent where there was an adult-initiated plan that aimed for each child to produce a final product (for instance, to make lanterns celebrating Diwali). Clearly staff aim to be inclusive, although one viewpoint was that this can be at the expense of children learning through experimenting with the techniques/materials - this may or may not result in an identifiable lantern! Equally there have been occasions where some children chose to explore cutting materials, often concentrating intensely, then threw the 'product' away. This was apparently frustrating for some adults, whereas other adults were of the opinion that the children were experimenting with the learning process of cutting, with a final product being of less importance. Some parents have expressed that their children tend to identify less with creative activities if they have had less input.

On the other hand, some children found open-ended activities difficult to engage with and seemed to find the suggestions and direct input from adults enabled them to be able to extend the activity themselves. For example, a child asked an adult to draw a flower as she was struggling to do so herself and was becoming frustrated; the child spontaneously coloured, cut and modelled the flower into a wand using junk modelling materials.

Some parents expressed disappointment that their children tend not to bring craft products home (as well as approval when children do). So clearly there are some varying viewpoints on the finished product as a desirable outcome of a creative activity. Staff are reviewing their intentions for such activities and to make clearer their objectives.

**Just a final word to thank you all for your views on some of the techniques and approaches discussed. The [REDACTED] team continues to work hard to earn its reputation as a pre-school. Hopefully some of the discussions resulting from the study will contribute to reflecting on and evaluating current and new practices.**



Dear children at [REDACTED],

Thank you very much for sharing your pre-school with me over the last year. I have really enjoyed playing and learning with you. I am still writing my 'book about pre-school' at home now. Thank you for all your stories and news that you allowed me to use in my book! Here are just some of the things that I enjoyed with you.

I enjoyed writing in my notebook about the things that you like and don't like so much at pre-school or at home; news about your birthdays and Christmas presents, your holidays, your families and friends and your new clothes. And thank you for adding your own writing to my book to help me.



I had to write very quickly in my notebook (sometimes using my little recording machine) to make sure I remembered the stories that you shared with me. Thank you for being patient with me whilst I re-read your stories to make sure that I had listened to them carefully.

I really loved your stories, such as about the one about the bunny rabbit stuck on the roof. Wasn't the daddy brave to get him back with that ladder?! No wonder the policeman came to see what was going on - he was a bit surprised that it was a bunny rabbit and not a boy that was stuck on the roof! Luckily the bunny and the daddy managed to come down safely. And those monster stories from a long, long time ago, gosh they were scary, when they destroyed all the houses and ate all the children and the men. And they wouldn't go away, like water does - yes that was a problem. And what about the elephant that came to the school, ate all the cake then sneezed over everyone! Good thing he doesn't visit pre-school!

It was fun looking through your Learning Journeys with you - haven't you changed since



your first photographs when you started pre-school? It was interesting to look at your Likes and Dislikes - some of these have changed haven't they? One of the children isn't scared of the dark anymore and another one likes eating vegetables now. Someone doesn't mind having their hair washed now in the shower, but still doesn't like baths as they take too long. Some of you wanted to add new things to the list - either writing them yourself or asking me to write them for you. I learnt lots of new things about you from looking through your books- you were able to add lots of things about the pictures (and some of the writing I read to you).



You were very good photographers! You shared lots of photos of your friends, things around the room that you liked (such as Boris the hamster, things made with play dough, books from the book corner) and photos of yourself!

As well as things you couldn't reach but would like to play with. Some of these you put into your Learning Journeys to share with your family later. I hope they enjoyed them too!

Thank you for sitting with me at the craft and writing tables and showing me how clever you are with your writing, drawing, cutting and sticking. You needed help some of the time but also can now do lots of things by yourself.



Thank you as well for including me in your games - I learnt about using different ingredients in the home corner (I think it was ice-cream, mixed with pizza - yum) whilst having my hair cut at the same time. And making telephone calls to your mummies as you wanted them to know what you were doing at pre-school. Interesting idea to put the plates in the washing machine at the same time as the table cloth - that could get the job done quickly!

*Thank you again for making my visits to pre-school such fun. If you are going to school now or staying at pre-school, I hope you have a lovely time with your friends and teachers.*

*From Nicola*