Children's Empowerment, Play and Informal Learning in Two After School Provisions

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Abstract

This thesis explores current ideas about children and childhood in Britain through an examination of empowerment, play and learning as identified by policies, professional playworkers, and adult and child service users in two State run after school provisions in a London borough. Conducted in two quite different physical and social environments, the primary research involved an ethnographic study during the academic year 2007 to 2008, based on participant observation and interviews with managers, playworkers, parents and children at both sites.

The research found strong connections between playworkers' attitudes to children's play, learning and empowerment, and their descriptions of their own priorities and responsibilities. That play and activity were occurring in supervised, closed access, paid-for settings meant that free play and regulation of behaviour were held in constant dynamic tension. Perceptions of playworker's jobs as both controlling children's behaviour and facilitating their play highlighted ambiguities inherent in these contexts and produced tensions felt by playworkers and children. Though masquerading as mechanisms for each child's individual development and fulfilment, play, informal learning and empowerment were imbued with strategic endeavours to steer children's experiences in particular directions. Furthermore, these ideas and their related practices were understood and implemented differently in the two after school settings.

The research focus evolved to look at the impacts of social constructions of children and childhood on playworkers' practices and children's experiences. Far from being fixed concepts whose meanings were consistent over time and contexts, ideas about play, learning, empowerment, children and childhood all referred, in fact, to fundamentally dynamic social processes that this thesis reveals and explores. Two key aspects of the complex meanings attached to children and their childhoods emerged. Firstly, the child and childhood are 'relational' concepts (Aries 1962) or 'conceptions' (Wyness 2000), fluid in their meanings yet constant in their social significance. Secondly, social constructions of childhood can only adequately be understood in their real life social, economic and political contexts (Hendrick 1997a: 35).

Reflecting both recent and more conventional ideas, playworkers presented contrasting constructions of the children as victims and products of their social circumstances with predictable futures, or as rights bearers and social agents with a say in their current and future possibilities. The ways in which playworkers controlled or facilitated the children were tied in with these ideas and a matrix of intersecting influences impacting on their confidence, trust and skills - as individuals and as teams - in allowing children to direct their own play activities and to deal with issues.

This thesis contributes to gaps in current knowledge and understanding about notions of the child and childhood operating in playwork settings and the effects of these on practices and experiences in these contexts.

Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis presents findings and discussions based on an ethnographic study of two after school provisions in a London borough. The research set out to explore children's empowerment, play and informal learning in these settings from policy, professional and service users' viewpoints. The thesis engages with contemporary debates about instrumental, outcome-orientated valorisation of children's play (Lester and Russell 2008) and popular but under-defined notions of children's empowerment. Drawing on primary research conducted during 2007 and 2008, in dialogue with current social policy and academic debates, the thesis presents an exploration of contemporary ideas and practices around provisions for children in these contexts.

Highlighted both by the literature and the views of participating playworkers, parents and children, underpinning social constructions of the child and childhood informing the guidelines, practices and experiences in these settings emerged as important. As the research evolved, it became evident that to understand how children were being conceptualised and treated required exploration of childhood frameworks operative in these contexts (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998: 22). These are explored and located within larger social, historical and political processes, simultaneously imbued with the past and contending with the present.

Thus the thesis maps the various perceptions and objectives of participants in the two after school settings, locates these within policy and academic debates, and engages critically with how contemporary notions of childhood were operating in and through these contexts. Through detailed exploration, the thesis argues that at this time, particular tensions characterise perceptions, provisions and practices relating to children and their childhoods at these sites. The arguments presented

connect the research findings with contemporary debates about British children and childhoods. The thesis engages with how and why children were constructed as they were in these contexts at the time of the research, and how these may be taken to reflect broader social, political, and cultural conjunctions, shifts and trends.

This brief chapter introduces the context of the study and areas for exploration through the thesis. The chapter provides basic terminology and presents the initial research aims and questions and key aspects of their evolution during the research. It introduces the methodology employed and some limitations of the research. Following this, the chapter outlines the rationale for the thesis' structure, indicates the contribution of the research to evolving knowledge and provides executive chapter summaries.

Context of the Study

The study of children and childhood has emerged particularly since the 1990s as a popular topic of social scientific investigation, and methodological and theoretical development (Brown 2008; James *et al.* 1998; James and Prout 1997; Jenks 1996; Qvortrup 1997). Shifts in attitudes, government agendas, and funding opportunities have spurred expansion of this research into diverse facets of childhood (Back 1996 and 2004; Barker and Smith 2000; Barker, Smith, Morrow, Weller, Hey and Harwin 2003; Connolly 1998; Corsaro and Molinaro 2000; Entwisle, Alexander and Steffel Olson 1997; Goddard, McNamee, James and James 2005; Hey 1997).

Notions of the natural, universal, biological condition of childhood are being critically re-evaluated (Jenks 1996). Two key ideas have significantly gained currency. Firstly, that children are socialised according to the expectations and patterns of a particular culture at a particular time (Aries 1962). Secondly, that children are 'active subjects, not objects' in their worlds (Alldred 2000: 150).

The interdisciplinary and multifaceted new social studies of childhood critically engage with these ideas and contribute to understandings of how children have come to be socially and academically conceptualised in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Corsaro 2005; James *et al.* 1998; Jenks 1996; Mayall 2002). Through focus on children and childhoods, sociologists, social anthropologists, human geographers and others are engaging with epistemological and methodological questions of ethics, structure and agency, generalisability and specificity, constancy and change, and the local and the global.

At a time of rapid demographic change, with their proportion of the population reducing (Harper and Levin 2005: 157), there is widespread and intensified focus on children and young people in Britain. They are experiencing 'unprecedented' levels of intervention into their lives, for example in the form of academic expectations, surveillance and restrictions on their mobility. It has been argued that this is an 'era marked by both a sustained assault on children and a concern for children' (James *et al.* 1998: 3).

The impact of changing social patterns and concerns for children has contributed to instrumental ideas about learning through play becoming a key part of policy and research debates (Ailwood 2003; Lester and Russell 2008). Ideas about how play contributes to cognitive and social development are forming the basis for new attention and investment in children's play opportunities. Initiatives such as the first ever National Play Strategy (DCSF 2008b) have emerged out of this recognition of the importance of play and concerns about the personal and social ramifications of its contemporary curtailment particularly in urban settings (Brown 2008; Gill 2007; Hughes 2001: 67).

Furthermore, with changing employment and family structures, more and more children spend significant amounts of time in after school provisions; some spending their third largest amount of time in these environments, after home and school (Barker and Smith 2000). Therefore after school settings, diverse in their provenance and organisational structures, have become important contexts of their childhoods; particularly as they sometimes constitute the main locations outside of school in which children play and socialise together.

Research into the out of school lives of children has developed greatly since the mid 1990s (Petrie 1994: 41). That there is now significant data about children's lives and views reflects a number of developments and current concerns. Amongst these are changing attitudes towards children as social actors and concerns about risk aversion and the growing restriction and control of their free time (Gill 2007). However, little exists that examines the impacts of social constructions of children and childhoods on playwork views and practices in State provided after school settings.

State provided after school clubs constitute important convergence points of government agendas in relation to children and efforts to ensure that they are learning through their play, and playwork approaches which stem from concern to preserve children's play free from adult-led agendas. Important practical and theoretical questions are raised about the relationships between play, learning and playwork, and children's experiences in after school environments. These questions, reflecting particular views, values and agendas (Petrie 1994), are important beyond the specificities of after school provision as they reflect and put into relief, broader contemporary relations between society, the government and children.

The new social studies of childhood have greatly contributed to destabilising traditional concepts about the natural condition of childhood, helping to entrench its redefinition as a cultural phenomenon (Jenks 1996). Correspondingly, how children are perceived and provided for is changing in areas beyond academia (Freeman 1998). These shifts are affecting how social scientists, policy makers and professionals conceptualise and work with children as both the objects and the subjects of their childhood experiences. This research emerges therefore out of academic, social policy and other professional contexts in which the institutionalisation of childhood (James *et al.* 1998: 133) and the pursuit of how best to understand and provide for children are urgent issues high on local, national and international agendas (Davies 2006; DfES 2003; NACCCE 1999).

Basic Terminology

After school provision - The empirical research for this study focussed on State provided after school care sites. Both sites involved in this research collected children from their schools and looked after them in closed-access contexts until their parents/carers collected them. Therefore the term *after school* is used as opposed to *out of school* to denote the exclusion of other types of settings such as State, private and third sector breakfast, holiday and mobile play provisions, children's centres, adventure playgrounds, leisure centres and so forth.

Child - The ages that a child is considered a child vary historically and culturally, imbued, as this thesis explores, with various reified ideas. The legal definition of a child in Britain is currently 0 to 18 years of age (Children Act 2004 [1989]; UNICEF 1991; Play England 2009). This thesis focuses on primary school aged children, 4 to 11 year olds, an age range that often sparks 'some of the sharpest debates about freedom, protection and responsibility.' (Gill 2007: 12)

Empowerment - According to a playwork perspective, empowerment denotes processes of confidence and self-esteem building, child-centred approaches to learning and participation, and enabling and facilitating decision-making and self-direction (Brown 2003; 2008). As this thesis explores, though used in diverse contexts, this is a 'complex and somewhat fragile concept whose role is neither straightforward nor static' (Stein 1997: 13).

Informal learning – Learning which is not structured by the formal institutional requirements of academic educational agendas or according to a set curriculum (Jeffs and Smith 2005).

Play – 'Play is a generic term applied to a wide range of activities and behaviours that are satisfying to the child, creative for the child and freely chosen by the child. It has frequently been described as what children and young people do when not being told what to do by adults' (Play England 2009: 6). Thus,

'[p]lay is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons' (DCMS 2004).

Playwork – A theoretically grounded professional framework and qualification structure. 'Playwork facilitates children's play outside the educational curriculum for 4 – 16 year-olds... [It] takes place where adults support children's play in settings that include: after-school clubs, holiday play schemes, adventure playgrounds, parks, play buses and breakfast clubs.' (Skills Active website accessed 29.9.08)

Playworker – The professionals working in the after school provisions in this research. While a playworker is technically someone qualified in playwork, staff employed in these after school provisions were not obliged to be playwork qualified. Other 'relevant' qualifications were also deemed sufficient; for example, level two and three National Vocational Qualifications in 'early years care and development'.

Research Aims, Initial Questions and Developments

In the light of pertinent contemporary debates about children, their childhoods and their futures, the research set out to explore ideas about empowerment, play and informal learning in two after school provisions. The research questions asked what relationships between empowerment, play and informal learning were occurring in the after school clubs; how playworkers, parents and children in these contexts perceived these concepts and relationships; and how current policies and professional viewpoints relating to them underpinned activities in these settings.

As a former playworker, my interest in this study began as an engagement with playworker's professional support of processes of children's personal and social development in after school provisions and a desire to explore these further. As the research progressed, influenced by the new social studies of childhood literature and the emergence of the views and agendas of the research

participants, considerations of social constructions of children and childhoods became necessary to understanding these contexts. With this approach, the study evolved into a critical engagement with the challenges and contradictions inherent in competing ideas and practices linked to children's empowerment, play and informal learning in these after school provisions as founded on multi-faceted, ambiguous, even antagonistic constructions of the child and childhood.

Methodology

Investigations into children's play and learning specifically, and children and childhoods more broadly, span diverse theoretical and disciplinary terrains, from the quantitative to the qualitative, and the experimental to the interpretive. Areas of research range from history, psychology, sociology, philosophy and anthropology to more recently, human geography. They also reflect different schools of thought, focuses and agendas within these disciplines.

In agreement with James *et al.* (1998) that the study of children and childhood represents a necessarily interdisciplinary area of investigation, this thesis draws on insights from various social science disciplines and schools of thought; most notably from social anthropology, sociology, particularly the new social studies of childhood, and playwork theory. The thesis draws on research reports, journal articles, anthologies and monographs, read from a critical, post-structuralist perspective, to explore temporally located trajectories of how children are conceptualised and addressed in contemporary British society. In the pursuit of analysing social constructions of meaning and their resultant practices, ideas about the power of discourse (Foucault 1980) are influential throughout the thesis.

The scope of the research was limited to two local authority-run, closed-access after school provisions for primary school aged children. It was conducted at one self-contained, and one school-based provision, centrally governed and managed by the same Early Years and Childcare unit of the local authority Education Department. At the time of the research both sites had recently been awarded a

'good' grade by Ofsted. The smaller, school-based site catered for up to 23 children daily. The larger site catered for up to 45 children daily. The sites had between two and five permanent staff.

These contexts were chosen as pertinent convergence points of the various agendas and tensions highlighted during the literature reviews. As a former playworker in the Borough, existing professional relations facilitated access to the fieldwork sites. The limited scope of the study excluded the various other environments in which after school care and playworkers operate, such as open access play sites. Although this focus inevitably misses many children who do not access such services for reasons that may be relevant to the broader interests of the research, this scope has enabled the production of detailed data and analysis.

The mixed-method ethnographic fieldwork was conducted between October 2007 and July 2008 and involved participant observation and semi-structured interviewing. Each of the two after school provisions was attended twice weekly throughout the academic year. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation addressed the research questions in two ways: hearing people's views and experiences, values and hopes, and also observing and being involved in individual and collective processes daily. As what people say and do often differ, the combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews enhanced the quality of the data and analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

In this research I take the position that thought and perception are culturally produced; and that there is no direct, unmediated, knowledge of the world. What people say and do is an interaction with and reflection of meanings generated in particular socio-cultural contexts (Bourdieu 1992; Foucault 1980). Whilst social contexts provide the language and concepts through which we experience and respond to the world, culture exists within the meanings that are (re)produced (Geertz 1973; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Therefore people are also creative beings; social actors constrained but not determined by social structures (Carspecken 1996); and the social world is constituted through a dynamic interaction between culturally and historically located discourses, and human

responses. Meaning, then, can be understood as fluid, generated and reproduced through the language used in everyday lives. The meanings that people attribute can thus be understood as an expression of personal, social, cultural and historical phenomena (Silverman 2001).

Through immersion in naturally occurring contexts over time and the added use of documentary analysis, the ethnographic 'product and process' (Tedlock 1991: 72) provided opportunities for extended qualitative study and triangulation of data generation techniques to explore these meanings. As a result, ethnography is able to make important contributions to the study of children's lives (Corsaro 2005).

One approach could have been to use particular definitions against which to structure the fieldwork enquiry. However, this research endeavoured to suspend such ideas and to explore notions presenting themselves during the fieldwork. This approach was 'theoretically driven by the assumption that social phenomena derive their meaning from how they are defined by participants' (Silverman 2001: 17). Thus the research did not aim to measure or operationalise particular predetermined concepts but to listen to participants' ideas, values and experiences; to participate in, and observe their actions over time, and to explore relationships between ideas about empowerment, play and learning and quotidian playwork practices, and the impacts these appeared to have on the children (Corsaro and Molinaro 2000).

This research sought to avoid treating a moving reality as if it were static, but to make dynamism and process integral to its considerations. A reflexive, ethnographic approach was thus appropriate. While some of the ethnographic description is presented synchronically for the purposes of articulation, it is a key premise of this thesis that the topics, experiences and meanings discussed are matters of process: by nature, in flux and partial (Hall 1997), selectively captured for the purpose of discursive exploration. By this definition, this thesis

involves being open to the complexities and incomplete nature of present-tense experience, while at the same time avoiding reduction, fixing, and closure. (Back 2004: 50)

Contribution

By critically investigating two complex, institutional urban settings, the thesis contributes to evolving knowledge about the varied social contexts of children's lives and understandings of the impacts on them of social policy implementation. While the very recent government change heralds unknown but in all likelihood significant social changes, the thesis aims to add to this important body of knowledge at a time of increased and multifaceted focus on childhood. It also aims to contribute to recognition and development of the important work done in after school settings and to give voice to people on the ground.

This research looks at playwork in its immediate and broader socio-cultural contexts, through a close ethnographic examination of two settings, and explores the impacts of playworkers' social constructions of the child and childhood on their practice. Using a social construction lens this research endeavours to contribute to Petrie's (1994) still pertinent argument that different values, goals and agendas impact on after school provisions and to scrutinise how these ideas can themselves enable or hinder play processes and desired outcomes. Little research exists that endeavours to contextually understand notions of the child and childhood operating in playwork settings. At the convergence point of various views and agendas, with the anticipation that the limited scope of this study and the complexity of the terrain in which it is located are likely to provide more questions than answers, this piece of research constitutes the beginning of my examination of the intersecting issues outlined above.

Thesis Structure

The structure of this thesis aims to facilitate examination of the various facets that together both respond to and develop on the research questions. One of the possible pitfalls of ethnography is that it can be excessively descriptive (Hammersley 1998: 6). This thesis attempts to avoid this by drawing together the ethnographic data, documentary analysis and policy and academic discussions to explore the multi-layered complexity of lived experiences. The playworkers, parents and children who were kind enough to share their thoughts and allow me to observe their practices are given fictionalised names, and certain references are concealed to preserve the anonymity of the contexts and those involved.

The first half of the thesis outlines the conceptual parameters of the discussion by locating this study historically, theoretically and methodologically. The second half uses the concepts, questions and methods outlined in those early chapters to explore what was happening in these settings. The organisation of the thesis reflects an ethnographic funnel approach; it begins with a broad focus, this reaches a focal point in chapter five where the two sites are ethnographically described, then the focus broadens back out, using the data analysis to answer the research questions, assess the methods used and further explore the issues introduced in the earlier literature chapters.

Following this introduction, chapter two explores notions of the child, childhood and empowerment. The chapter begins with discussion of some historical concepts of British children and childhoods. It then explores some current discourses and debates concerning children and childhoods in contemporary Britain. The chapter then looks at notions of empowerment and their currency in childhood debates at present. These debates and social constructions play a significant role in the establishment of provisions for children. To understand the after school provisions with which this thesis is concerned, therefore, requires beginning with this discussion. The concepts and social constructions explored here constitute important foundations for discussing after school provisions in later chapters.

Chapter three examines playwork and after school care policy initiatives as organised responses to some of the issues introduced in the previous chapter, and how those debates impact on contemporary provisions for children. The chapter addresses the research questions by examining current perspectives on children's after school club experiences, the types of play and learning sought there, what these opportunities are intended to provide, and how play and informal learning relate to children's empowerment from playwork and policy viewpoints. Thus the chapter maps the relevant policy terrain that determines how the primary research sites were run and initiates critical discussion of some discursive and practical contradictions inherent in these settings.

Chapter four outlines the underpinning theoretical frameworks for this research and the methods employed to respond to the key research questions. The chapter discusses why ethnography, as an approach and set of methods, is fitting for this investigation, and explores epistemological questions. The chapter then details the application of the research design with particular focus on sampling and selection, gaining ethical approval and site access, conducting semi-structured interviews and reflections on fieldwork processes and relations. It concludes with a discussion of the analytical approach and limitations.

Chapter five draws on fieldnotes, transcribed semi-structured interviews and policy documents to introduce the two sites as if describing a 'typical day' in the 'ethnographic present' (Pina-Cabral 2000). The chapter begins to link this 'thick' description (Geertz 1973) with playwork theories and practices, and with local and national policies. The chapter begins to draw out themes for exploration in greater depth in relation to empowerment, play and informal learning in the following chapters. Thus this chapter starts to explore relationships between organisational and structuring frameworks, playwork approaches, everyday service delivery and experiences in these settings.

Chapters six and seven explore children's empowerment, play and informal learning through investigation of participants' views and extended fieldwork observations of playworkers' practices. Chapter six focuses on how children,

parents and playworkers saw the purposes of the after school provisions, the playworkers responsibilities and the challenges faced. The chapter begins to identify tensions between perceptions and practices at the two sites. Chapter seven explores the different participant groups' perceptions of play, learning and empowerment and how, and whether, play and learning were considered to relate to children's empowerment. The chapter begins to explore how these findings may be more broadly contextualised by issues introduced in earlier chapters.

Chapter eight builds on the previous three findings chapters, the discussion introduced in chapter two about social constructions of children and childhood, and in chapter three about how children are currently understood and provided for in State after school provisions. The chapter draws on a synthesis of findings from the semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and fieldwork observations to explore knowledge and more implicit beliefs about the child and childhood in these settings. The chapter identifies the divergent ways in which children were construed, notably distinct between the sites, and looks at the influences these views had on playworker's practices with the children and their expectations of the after school provisions.

Chapter nine revisits the original research questions and assesses the methods used and how the project evolved. The chapter develops the themes emergent from the analysis interpretively to explore the key findings, contributions and implications of the study. It connects the research participants' perspectives and actions with broader social processes and discourses to argue that as play and activity were occurring in supervised, closed access, paid-for settings, free play and regulation of behaviour held a constant tension. Despite contemporary rhetoric around children's rights and empowerment, rather than sites of social action or agency, these settings were geared towards providing responses to wider perceptions of society's needs.

Chapter ten summarises the thesis, outlines the contributions made and concludes with some thoughts about potential further directions.

Chapter Two

Childhood and Empowerment

Introduction

The position and welfare of a Nation's or culture's children holds 'immense symbolic significance' (Ansell and Smith 2008: 1). As a result, how a society conceptualises and provides for its children represents strategic domains in which complex social, political and moral agendas are mobilised (Freeman 1997). Indeed, some leading childhood theorists go further and suggest that understanding concepts of children and childhood is essential to understanding a society or social context as a whole (Jenks 1982; James and Prout 1997; Corsaro 2005). Furthermore, in the words of this childhood historian, ideas about childhood

> … can only be fully comprehended within the context of how
> different generations and social classes have responded to the
> social, economic, religious and political challenges of their
> respective eras. (Hendrick 1997a: 35)

During the 20th and now early 21st century, ideas, practices and provisions relating to children and childhood have received unprecedented social, governmental and academic attention on local, national and international levels (Evans and Williams 2009; UNICEF 1991; Wells 2009). In Britain, in this contemporary moment of burgeoning acknowledgement of children's rights, as individuals and a social group, ideas about empowering children and supporting their active participation in their lives and broader society indeed articulate particular social, political and economic concerns, with which this thesis engages.

To begin to contextualise these, this chapter introduces influential discourses about children and childhood in Britain since the major social and economic shifts of the mid to late 19th century. This is followed by an exploration of current debates concerning children and childhood and an examination of ideas about children's empowerment in connection to these issues. This chapter provides some historical and theoretical foundation for exploration throughout this thesis of the role of ideas about children and childhood, and their rights and empowerment in the establishment and delivery of current after school provisions.

Historical Constructions of Childhood

The brief historical account provided here begins with the late nineteenth century. This is because the particular characteristics of that period in British history promoted children and childhood as distinct from adults and adulthood in ways that remain particularly relevant to the contemporary discourses explored below.

Late Nineteenth Century

The radical economic and social changes instigated by the industrial revolution and the development of a universal schooling system had a significant impact on ideas about childhood in Britain. Though valued for their unskilled, subsistence and wage-earning capacities, amidst the rapid mechanisation and expansion of trade, the widespread employment of children during this time was publicly opposed, mostly by the middle and upper classes. Working class children became subject to a discourse that viewed them as worth protecting as future assets to society (Hendrick 1997a: 37).

In his influential and much debated text, Aries (1962) identified how upper class Europeans generated an age-based hierarchy in the mid 19th century which was institutionalised as a dichotomous power relationship; with that between adults and children arguably mirroring that between the upper and the lower classes.

21

While some of his ideas have been severely criticised (Pollock 1983), he did contribute an important, explicit disembedding of previous ideas about children and childhood. He identified them as relationally defined and culturally and historically contingent concepts. Adults were considered rational, complete and superior by nature of being fully grown. Children were positioned as irrational, incomplete and inferior.

In addition, the notion at this time that if left to itself the child would become feral and wayward were influenced by longstanding ideas about original sin that regarded the child as evil, base and corrupt (Cunningham 2006: 109). Alternatively, the child was also described as innocent and pure. These notions of children's natural waywardness or goodness, representing negative or positive qualities lost by adults, remain embedded in modern, Western ideas of childhood (Lister 2005).

These discourses and resultant political agendas emphasised children's particularity and difference from adults. In the years following the 1870 Education Act and three Reform Acts, for example, as the future 'masters' of the Nation it was considered that poor children could be trained more effectively for the future in schools than if left to their own (or their family's) devices (Cunningham 2006: 141). Whereas, traditionally seen more like small adults, children of the lower classes had worked from young ages amongst adults; with these shifting attitudes, child labour became synonymous with exploitation:

> …children here are represented as the victims of super-exploitation who were rescued from the predations of capitalism by the combined influences of social reformers and moralists and by the certain economic transformations which shifted demand away from unskilled towards more skilled and educated labour… children were relocated in 'childhood' – an idealised and romanticised state… (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 101)

Childhood was now to be a time of innocence and dependence, during which the foundations for later integration into adult society could be taught. The establishment of schools for working class children played a key role in

addressing these concerns and creating this new conceptualisation of childhood. Rescued from the purported exploitative domains of unskilled work, schools would provide the context in which children could be trained to become part of the adult workforce. Schoolwork, too, was seen as preparation for later life, for real adult work. This theme of the decoupling of school 'work' from paid 'work' continues today; involving particular, moralised Western notions of children's economic labour as exploitative (James *et al.* 1998: 102; Goddard, McNamee, James and James 2005).

Linked with agendas to morally and socially educate children were ideas of the child as a *tabula rasa*, a citizen of the future without innate capacities, in need of adult inscription; the *immanent* child (Wells 2009). Their growing absence from everyday involvement in adult society during this time helped to distinguish a new separation between childhood and adult society. Underpinning these practical and conceptual formulations was a desire to find ways to prepare children for their future integration into the 'more broadly conceived sense of order and universality that comprises adult society' (Jenks 1982: 10).

Social reformers sought to remove working class children from the adult worlds of work, to 'civilise' them through education. Schools would transform the wild nature of the working class child (often through physical punishment) into a deferential being. The sense of moral and social superiority inherent in the establishment of the schooling system, the hierarchy taken for granted between the rational social reformer and the uneducated, irrational working class child, resulted in schools negating the child's familial and social 'knowledge'. Schools replaced these forms of knowledge with those considered appropriate and worthwhile (Hendrick 1997b). These are attitudes and practices which, with various permutations, continue in schools today (Entwisle, Alexander and Steffel Olson 1997; Gillborn 1995; Maybin 2009; McDermott and Raley 2009).

Objections to child labour and shifting attitudes to childhood in the late nineteenth century related to the wider moral and social concerns, and criticisms, of the changes and upheavals brought about by the industrial revolution. Class and economic power relations pervaded questions about the state of society,

capitalism and what kind of society different factions wanted to create. To contend with their concerns about children, childhood, child labour and education, figures in positions of authority proposed new definitions and new legislative frameworks (Mayall 2002: 3). Here began the powerful legal support for the fundamental, moral separation of childhood and children's activity from the realms of 'work'.

To contextualise these shifts more broadly, in the pre-First World War period, from the 1880s to 1914, the European colonial empires were at their peak thanks to the wealth generated by their overseas possessions and by domestic industrial production. Britain's relationship to and within Europe at this time was competitive - trade and manufacturing were booming. Within Britain, new social ideas, urbanisation, economic competition, and other social, economic and political changes could be focused on a sense of The Nation (Anderson 1983).

But this time of upheaval, with its considerable imperial, political, military and economic national rivalries, also engendered great domestic anxieties about poverty and the Nation's progress. These volatile contexts of economic and political change, threats and competition, meant that children and childhood became implicated in, and necessary to, the pursuit of the National interest. Then, as now,

> techniques for intervening in childhood were developed as a means to intervene in the future of the State. (Lee 2001: 22)

At this time the British State became more interventionist through its funding and legislation. Significantly, between the 1880s and 1914, child welfare laws were passed to protect infant life and welfare, to establish the age of consent, and to prevent cruelty and neglect of children. The effect was a refreshed articulation of children and childhood, further distinctions between childhood and adulthood, and legal enforcement of the moral necessity to treat children differently.

The proliferation of educational institutions that could enforce these moral and economic agendas, having so many children in the same place, made it possible

to study children and childhood. At this time, popular versions of Charles Darwin's evolutionary ideas fuelled concerns about 'civilisation' and fears of racial deterioration. Politicians, philanthropists, and scientists were fascinated with questions of mental and physical handicap, evolution and solutions to poverty. These investigations enabled social problems to be understood through an evolutionary paradigm. There was great interest in the effects of environment on the development of the child's mind and further evidence for the distinctiveness of the 'primitive' child's mind from that of the 'civilised' adult.

From the late 19th century onwards, the growing interest in the relationship between human development and the nature and meaning of childhood propelled notions of the importance of social, psychological and educational welfare during childhood. Given this distinction between childhood and adulthood, and the adult agenda of finding ways to tame and nurture children in order to integrate them productively into society, it is by no means coincidental that

> … the child emerges in contemporary culture as a formal category
> and as a social status accompanied by programmes of care and
> schemes of education (Jenks 1982: 10-11).

Post World War Two

Significant moves away from evolutionary paradigms, perhaps due to the atrocities of two World Wars and their connections with notions of 'racial' superiority, characterised early to mid 20th century imaginings of children and childhood. Developments in psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry made important new contributions to concepts of the child, childhood and the family. Mental conditions came to be seen as more important than economic ones within the family. This perspective considered family relationships as the source of problems with and for children; leading to dysfunctional adults. This period broke with the notion that children's minds functioned in radically different ways from those of adults (Isaacs 1930 cited in Hendrick 1997a: 52).

Concepts from the field of developmental psychology, and particularly Piaget's (1973) notion of the 'naturally developing' child had great influence in the post World War Two period. Piaget's work is based on two key assumptions: that children are 'natural' phenomena and that part of their natural condition is the inevitable progression of maturation. In a hierarchic progression, it is a child's nature to move from low-level infantile, 'figurative' thought to high status 'operative' intelligence. This progression from infantile incapacity to logical intelligence demonstrates that competence is achieved. As with the ideas discussed above, differences between adults and children were hierarchically established; to be a real human being, again, was to be an adult.

It is possible, then, to identify two important viewpoints here. One outlined the importance of education and the responsibility of the State to positively influence children; while the other highlighted the significance of the family in the child's development. Now straddling 'private' and 'public' realms, by virtue of their right to free health and social services, the child became a form of citizen with legal rights embedded in the Education Act (1944), the Family Allowances Act (1945), the National Health Service Act (1946), the National Insurance Act (1946) and the National Assistance Act (1948). Of particular importance, the Children Act of 1948 sought to ensure that the 'best interests' of the child were pursued, particularly those of children in care. Although constructed within a paternalistic and protective notion of childhood, a child was now formally considered to have the right to a supportive family life.

Ideas of the child as a class of being with needs, desires, rights and an innate potential capacity for reasoning, and adult society as responsible for supporting their growing up, informed post-War attitudes towards children as individuals and concepts of child-centred learning. Here we see the 'belief that children are everybody's concern and that they constitute an investment in the future in terms of the reproduction of social order' (James *et al* 1998: 15).

Though still articulated by elites in positions of governmental decision-making power, the notion of childhood had become 'natural', making it applicable across social divisions. It is significant that in this period women were heavily

encouraged to return to the home, despite their considerable participation in the wartime workforce. The ideal and 'natural' image of childhood was further supported by a domestic ideal, with the home a context in which the child, nurtured by the family, could grow with the right morals and codes of conduct. Beyond the nuclear family, the child was further embraced as the responsibility of its immediate community, as well as the State. The atrocities of war had reinforced this sense of each individual child being the child of the Nation, the future of the Nation, to be protected and nurtured (Cunningham 2006: 178).

In addition to the significant impact of these developments on attitudes to children and childhood, in a period of recovery from war, they reflected desires to explain and to generate models of social order. Children and childhood were addressed as fundamental to social coherence, representing 'a structured becoming' answering to a larger picture of societies' needs (Jenks 1982: 13). As explored throughout this thesis, these are characteristics that remain redolent in contemporary debates, practices and social policies pertaining to children.

1960s to the end of the Twentieth Century

In the climate of anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, civil rights movements, decolonisation and then also feminism, unprecedented attention was focused on issues of human and social rights. Insistence on the expression of alternative, non-hegemonic perspectives had significant implications for social scientists also. For example, it became incumbent upon social scientists to re-assess their research goals, methods and representational practices (see chapter four).

Ideas about freedom and respect were also evident in radical, progressive attitudes to children at this time. Despite concomitant resistance, during this period there was augmented recognition and experimentation with child-centred approaches to parenting and learning. These drew, for example, from the thinking of Montessori (1972) and Neill (1960). Also, this period saw the Gillick ruling in 1986 (Freeman 1997: 19) and the end of corporal punishment in UK schools. In addition, following the launch in 1979 of the International Year of the Child, in the late 1980s the international community agreed and instated further policies for the protection of children (Stone 1981). One hundred years after the

first major child welfare laws, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) significantly contributed to a legislative and to some degree a discursive repositioning of the child. Though not a suggestion without contentions, it has been argued that this constituted a paradigm shift in thinking about children (Freeman 1997).

The Convention, ratified by the UK in 1991, provided a new moral and ethical framework for the provision of children's cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure opportunities, as well as enshrining their rights to be respected, to gather, to express opinions, and to be consulted (UNICEF 1991). The Convention puts the child at the centre of its considerations, shifting older conceptions of children towards the rights they deserve as individuals, not just as members of families, households, or schools:

> the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in
> society, and [be] brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in
> the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of
> peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.
> (UNCRC Preamble, UNICEF 1991)

This ratification added to the stipulations of the 1989 Children Act which requires agencies to act not only in the interests of the child's welfare, which has often been tied to paternalistic practices, but also to heed 'the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned' (section 3a, Children Act 1989).

These concomitant changes presage potential shifts away from children being conceived predominantly in deficient terms, regarded solely as a social category, their value a product of their futurity; to being morally instated as capable and entitled social actors, as citizens with rights (King and Piper 1995). Legally children were henceforth repositioned as having a right to express themselves, to be heard, to be informed and to participate in choices affecting them. A discursive space had been established in which children were positioned as individuals whose right to autonomy merited safeguarding and nurturing in the present (James *et al.* 1998: 6-7; UNICEF 1991). Importantly, the Convention

provided an ethical framework within which advocates have been able to lobby for children (Cole-Hamilton, Harrop and Street 2001: 10).

These shifts suggest that the close of the 20th century saw an appreciation of childhood that began to view the child as a partial citizen, afforded rights and considered reasonably competent. Influenced by new frameworks for understanding social inequalities determined by gender, class, race and ethnicity; we see ostensible advance in respect for the individual child and childhood, supported by strong arguments for the necessity of listening to the perspectives of the silenced, the socially disadvantaged, disempowered child (Mayall 2002). But to suggest such straight forward trajectories would be simplistic. This brief account of some of the developments in conceptions and legislation pertaining to children in Britain in recent times brings the discussion to the early 21st century.

Contemporary Childhood Debates

In early 21st century Britain, with trajectories tracing back at least two hundred years, notions of children and childhood are imbued with deep rooted ambiguities and ambivalence (James and James 2004). As reflections of anxieties both about society and the nature of childhood itself, these are tied to augmented contemporary pressures on children and young people. In some situations children are perceived as individuals with rights to participate in decisions affecting them. Yet counter trends and practices continue to characterise children as fundamentally distinct from adults, in need of supervision and regulation (Moss and Petrie 2002). Linked with this thesis' later discussion of children's play being increasingly confined to supervised contexts, the world outside the home has come to be considered a place of danger from which children need protection (Gill 2007).

Instigated by responses to recent crimes against children and young people at the hands of trusted adults, legislation, policies, structures and procedures engineered to protect them have changed greatly (Children Act 2004; DfES 2005a; Laming 2009). In the Children Act 2004, for example, there is a very strong and justified

conviction reminiscent of those explored above of childhood as a state of innocence that must be preserved, a state of 'becoming' (Qvortrup *et al.* 1994) to be protected, cared for and educated, and a sense that the world harbours grave threats, particularly to the vulnerable young.

Simultaneously - also partly in response to crimes against children, but perpetrated by children - there are strong current trends, often visible in the media, which stigmatise children and young people, reinforce apprehension about them, and emphasise the need to control their behaviour. Groups of young people are reported as dangerous, unlawful and anti-social, their games or gatherings often forbidden in public social areas. Anti Social Behaviour Orders are issued against individuals and young people can be dispersed from public areas using ultrasonic devices. In October 2008 the United Nations Committee responsible for monitoring State compliance with the UNCRC published its report on Britain's recent performance. National newspaper *The Guardian* reported as follows:

> The demonisation of young people was a prominent theme. The
> report regretted a 'general climate of intolerance and negative
> public attitudes towards children' in the media and elsewhere.
> (October 4th 2008: 18)

Amongst other points, the report criticised Britain for having a lower age of criminal responsibility than most other developed countries (thus, amongst other effects of incarceration, interfering with convicted children's statutory educational rights). It expressed serious concerns that there may be systematic violations of children's rights through practices such as the dispersal of groups of young people, failure to ensure educational rights for all, and maintenance of databases holding records of children's DNA regardless of whether they have committed crimes (Bascombe 2008).

These contradictory notions and practices in relation to children and young people reflect both well-established and newer discourses. In particular they connote the responsibility of the State to safeguard children and young people

whilst protecting the broader social order from the threats they are deemed to pose. Despite the changes in terminology and rhetoric, many fundamental ideas about childhood appear to have changed little since the beginning of the last century. On one hand, childhood is articulated in legal documents, the media and political rhetoric as a natural and vulnerable stage of life, a time when adults are responsible both for their protection and for enabling their rights. Yet, in a reference as seemingly innocuous as the labelling of young people who wear hooded jumpers as 'hoodies', young people are also perceived as errant, incomprehensible, mischievous, threatening and in need of control and discipline.

Clearly, this is a situation in which children both receive and provide mixed messages. The child's moral status is at best ambivalent (Mayall 2002: 87). A child is encouraged to exercise their moral and legal rights; to express themselves and to be respected; to make choices and govern their own conduct. But they are also chastised and distrusted, routinely subject to control by various forms of surveillance and monitoring both in public and in private. As James and Prout point out,

> [t]he ideology of the child-centred society gives 'the child' and 'the interests of the child' a prominent place in the policy and practices of legal, welfare, medical and educational institutions… But despite this rhetoric, any complacency about children and their place in society is misplaced, for the very concept of childhood has become problematic... (1997: 21)

Core contradictions appear to permeate the trajectories through which children are simultaneously gaining and losing rights (Moss and Petrie 2002; Beck 2006). These illustrate Hendrick's (1997a: 35) assertion at the beginning of this chapter that constructions of childhood are intimately connected to the responses of particular generations and social classes to social, economic, religious and political challenges. The complex movement of concerns about childhood to the forefront of contemporary British social, political and academic debates and its

role as a key focus of State legislation must be understood in connection to rapid changes in overall social conditions. These include:

> a repositioning of personhood given the disassembly of traditional categories of identity and difference; a search for a moral centre or at least an anchor for trust in response to popular routine cynicism; and an age-old desire to invest in futures now rendered increasingly urgent. In parallel with these ideational currents we might also note the more concrete aspects of contemporary social life which sharpen our focus on children and childhood: the demographic shift to an ageing population providing the idea of the child with an increased scarcity value and thus more 'precious' attention (Zelitzer 1985); and the well-documented change in family structure, instancing a fragmentation from an identity as a unit to the experience of a coalescence of individuals. (James *et al.* 1998: 5-6)

New Social Studies of Childhood

Amidst the attitudes explored above, recent decades have seen major developments in theoretical understandings of children and childhood pertinent to this thesis. Key to these are the works of Corsaro (2005), James and Prout (1997), James, Jenks and Prout (1998), Jenks (1982), Mayall (2002) and Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, and Wintersberger (1994). Influenced by academic backgrounds in anthropology and sociology, they seek to theorise childhood as socially constructed phenomena.

These theorists build on two key distinctions of particular significance here. The first is that understandings of childhood, as argued above, are socially constructed. Though rooted in biological realities, childhood is neither a 'natural' state of being nor uniform across (or even within) temporal or social/cultural contexts (Jenks 1982). There is a deeply-rooted and common tendency to see childhood as 'natural' due to its biological truisms. But childhood denotes both a constant part of any social structure (Qvortrup 1994) and a site of necessarily

shifting relationships as its inhabitants constantly change (Corsaro 2005; Mayall 2002). Mayall supports the argument that since childhood is a permanent component of any society, social analysis cannot omit the ideological and concrete status of this social group. I would add that, despite commonalities such as children being excluded from formal political engagement, it is important to speak both about childhood when considering similarities between and across social contexts (Qvortrup *et al.* 1994) and childhoods when studying differences (James and James 2004).

The second key distinction concerns children and childhood as sites of social action and agency; the contention that children are both affected by and affect society (Corsaro 2005; James and James 2004). While children's lives are shaped by policies and practices, they are also agents who construct their lives through their relationships. Children's agency, therefore, also impacts on both their environments and adults' ideas about them.

As demonstrated above, the child has traditionally been constructed as an abstract entity, continuous with and determined by the structures, goals and means of society; and childhood has been positioned as a universality in which the 'content of socialization is secondary to the *form* of socialization' (James *et al* 1998: 25, emphasis in original). Newer approaches to the study of childhood endeavour to move away from traditional theories of socialisation as straightforward processes of internalising social constraints through external regulation. These theorists advocate a move away from pre-sociological models that imbue the child with natural characteristics. Influenced by insights into the operations of discourse (Foucault 1980), their engagement with childhood seeks to rescue children from their social and theoretical marginalisation within, amongst others, powerful developmental psychology discourses. Instead many argue for the importance of listening to children to inform valid theoretical understandings of their lives and the position and meanings of childhood in society.

This focus enables new critique of existing sociological theories as well as 'movements towards' (Mayall 2002) an explicit disembedding of understandings

of children and childhood through what James *et al.* (1998) refer to as 'transitional' sociological models. These theorists argue that understanding childhood as a social category is necessary to understanding society as a whole. Thus the aim of the new childhood studies is to locate childhood in the domain of reflexive social theory in its own right (Corsaro 2005; Mayall 2002; Moss and Petrie 2002), and thus to contribute substantively and theoretically to broader social understandings. The methodological implications of these ideas are explored in chapter four.

The emergence of this re-thinking reflects a belief that

> [I]t is time to develop a new discourse about children, childhood and the relationship between children, parents and society. It is time for a new approach to services, policies and government structures informed by this new discourse. It is time to welcome children, with all their diversity, as young citizens, equal stakeholders with adults in a common social enterprise. (Moss and Petrie 1997: 15-16)

In their pivotal book *Theorizing Childhood*, James, Jenks and Prout (1998) contribute a useful synthesis. They suggest four contemporary models through which the child and childhood may be understood as 'socially constructed', 'tribal', 'minority', and 'social-structural'. They distinguish the ways in which the often contradictory motifs of pre-sociological theory continue to mix with more sophisticated contemporary theoretical understandings; implicating 'a series of discourses that are both of modernity *and* informed by earlier traditions of thought' (James *et al.* 1998: 9, emphasis in original). Thus they identify conceptual tensions inherent in current academic and societal debates about childhood reflected in the discussion above and this thesis' later analysis of findings from the two after school provisions. Although for the purposes of analysis they disentangle discourses which in fact intertwine in real life, these models are outlined below as they identify themes and perspectives useful later in the thesis.

'Socially constructed' child

Partly as a reaction to positivism and a renewed interest in relativism and liberalism, this approach requires a re-examination of accepted meanings. This approach removes the child and childhood from conceptions based on biological determinism to consider their explication in the social realm. In opposition to pre-sociological models, this approach sees no 'universal' child and locates the child systemically rather than causally. The model recognises and explores the temporal and societal factors that influence how and why we construct childhood as we do. This model does run the risk, however, of 'abandoning the embodied material child' (James *et al.* 1998: 28).

'Tribal' child

As part of a larger concern with the agency of children and their social, political and economic status, the idea of the 'tribal' child constitutes a moral reassessment of the power relations between children and adults. It values children's 'worlds' and the meanings generated there, rather than just seeing them as transitory spaces whose function is in their lead-up to adulthood. Instead of imagining children as inferior and yet-to-be socially inculcated, childhoods are appreciated as having degrees of autonomy. The early ethnographies of the Opies exemplify this approach (1977). There is a sense in which, while affected by adult worlds, childhoods are meaningful spaces, with their own folklore, rules and rituals, worthy of social scientific exploration. James *et al.* suggest that

> childhood intentionally welcomes the anthropological strangeness
> that has been recommended by ethnographic and interpretive
> methodologies for, if the tribes of childhood are to be provided with
> the status of social worlds, then it is to be anticipated that their
> particularity will systematically confront our taken-for-granted
> knowledge of how other (adult) social worlds function. (1998: 29)

Reminiscent of criticisms of ethnography itself (discussed in the methodology chapter), this approach has a potential for generating a wealth of tales and fables. These can artificially separate children's worlds, theoretically and discursively, from their broader contexts. Therefore an endeavour to acknowledge and explore

children's experiences can result in their continued marginalisation. Detailed observation and mapping of children's practices, self-representations, motives and assumptions should therefore be used in conjunction with other data to provide a solid base for more rounded understanding, as in this current research.

'Minority' child

The binding feature of the 'minority child' approach is its politicisation of childhood that links it with agendas concerned with institutionalised, structural discrimination in society.

> [B]y recognising them as a minority, children can be placed in emancipatory frameworks (Moss and Petrie 2002: 104)

Identifying children as a minority group in this way highlights and challenges these structures. Mayall (2002) explores and aligns herself with this approach from a viewpoint established in women's studies. Beyond their social links are interesting methodological and political questions about the relationships between the minority group status of women and children, and how they have been treated as objects of academic study. From this perspective the origin of interest in children arises from an 'indictment of a social structure and an accompanying dominant ideology [which] deprive some people of freedom in order to give it to others' (Oakley 1994: 32 cited in James *et al.* 1998: 31).

Since the 1960s there has been a drive amongst many social scientists towards the conversion of the 'natural' into the social, to unveil covert forms of power and social stratification, in an attempt to re-democratise understandings of society. Regarding the relationship between generating reliable theoretical understanding of the position of children and childhoods, and informing equitable social change, Mayall sums up her position:

> I regard children as a minority social group, whose wrongs need righting, in particular in the UK, and I do think that a clear theoretically informed understanding of the social status of

childhood in relation to adulthood is an essential key to working

towards righting those wrongs. (2002: 9)

The important contribution of this approach is its intention to generate a sociology 'for' rather than 'of' children. In this sense childhood studies can be overtly political; a part of recent decades' focus on social, economic and political disenfranchisement linked to race, gender, sexuality, age, and physical and mental ability (Mayall 2002; Moss and Petrie 2002). This said, the socially and politically located notion of the 'group' should not be reified at the expense of a recognition and investigation of its inner complexities. In addition, as conducting this research has demonstrated to me, the values and agendas that underpin such an 'advocacy' approach require careful scrutiny if data is to be collected and analysed rigorously. Notwithstanding this, this approach is useful here as it highlights the relevance of contemporary power relationships and their impacts on children's childhoods.

'Social structural' child

This approach begins from the standpoint that children are a constant feature and fundamental component of all social worlds, although their manifestations vary. They constitute a group of social actors, not deemed deficient until they reach adulthood, but as citizens with needs and rights.

[W]ithin the social structural approach, the constancy of the child is acknowledged, as is also its essentiality. From this beginning, theorizing proceeds to examine both the necessary and the sufficient conditions that apply to childhood within a particular society or indeed to children in general. (James *et al.* 1998: 32)

In this approach, childhood and society are mutually dependent constructions. This approach seeks a comparison of childhood, as an age group, with other age groups in the same country. This comparison is possible because the larger formative societal parameters are the same. While they may have different sets of competencies, the child here constitutes a research subject with the same status as adults. Like adults, children are to be understood in relation to the complex

institutional arrangements and constraints of the overall social structure in which they are located. Qvortrup (1994) argues that this approach enables us to look at processes of 'generationalisation'. Using the same types of economic, political, social and environmental parameters, he suggests that this approach makes it possible to compare childhoods between nations and cultures. Thus, he approaches an important and as yet unresolved issue in this field of study - how to theorise childhood instead of childhoods:

> The 'social structural' child, then, has certain universal characteristics which are specifically related to the institutional structure of societies in general and are not simply subject of the changing nature of discourse about children or the radical contingencies of the historical process. (James *et al.* 1998: 33)

According to James and James (2004) the new social studies of childhood - which these models elucidate - constitute an endeavour to understand three key elements of 'the cultural politics of childhood': the cultural determinants of childhood, the processes by which these determinants are put into practice in any given context at any given time, and an examination of how children themselves experience and respond to those determinants. James and James describe the social construction of childhood as

> the complex interweaving of social structures, political and economic institutions, beliefs, cultural mores, laws, policies and the everyday actions of both adults and children. (*ibid.*: 13)

The four models above provide a broad framework of contemporary approaches to understanding these structures, meanings and processes. With their different agendas and focuses, they position the child and childhood's relationships with the social and cultural environment in different ways. As suggested, these models are not without their overlaps and tensions. Qvortrup's endeavour to find broad theoretical frameworks through which the social category of childhood can be

understood removes accounts from the specificities of lived experiences, for example. While each of these approaches adds important and varied perspectives to the whole area of childhood research, their viewpoints and agendas offer greater or lesser degrees of utility for this particular study.

To answer the research questions, this thesis draws particularly on the 'socially constructed' and 'minority' child models to disentangle specific aspects of the 'complex interweaving' to which James and James (*ibid.*) refer. Interestingly, as explored in chapter eight, these models also resonate with how some of the participants in this research made sense of their own and the children's social positions.

The discussion above provides the backdrop for the following exploration. To address the current research aim of investigating contemporary approaches to children's play, informal learning and empowerment, the following section introduces key aspects of the terrain relevant to empowerment. It responds to the research questions by beginning a dialogue between contemporary social constructions of children and childhood, and empowerment debates and agendas. Play, informal learning and playwork approaches to empowerment in after school provisions are explored in the next chapter.

Empowerment

In 2006, the year this PhD project was devised, Ian Kearns, deputy director of the Institute for Public Policy Research stated that:

> concepts of power and empowerment are taking centre stage in British politics in 2006. This is evident in the policies and statements of both government and opposition. For Labour, talk of a double devolution from the centre to the local level and from the local authorities to neighbourhoods leads the way… This 'new empowerment agenda' is the main political parties' response to a growing sense of powerlessness among the general public and to the crisis of participation being faced by

our political and governing institutions. It is also a response to a cultural

climate in which citizens and consumers demand more control over

decisions that affect their everyday lives. (Kearns 2006: 1)

This statement highlights the strength of contemporary governmental ideas about empowerment as responses to reports of a public sense of lack of control over matters that concern us, resultant apathy, and demand for greater personal and local powers. Governmental efforts to devolve greater responsibility to local levels and to build more 'capable communities', connote changes in relations between the citizen and the State; giving more decision-making powers at local levels, and changing relationships between service providers and service users.

Examples of these ostensibly empowering processes range from giving National Health Service users direct payments so that those who are ill have the power to chose the support they need; or empowering professionals in schools by giving them more decision-making powers. The rationale for these kinds of changes centre around the idea that empowerment is a means of developing individual and community capacities, enabling them to be more responsible for themselves. But where have these ideas about empowerment come from, and what might be their underlying agendas and actual outcomes? The following discussion examines ideas about empowerment and how its meanings have shifted with the agendas for its use.

Empowerment Historically Located

Ideas about empowerment became popular during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly for the Civil Rights and a bit later feminist movements, and decolonisation and anti-imperialism struggles in the Third World (Spivak 1994; Fanon 1967). In the context of the historical denial of rights that each of these movements addressed, empowerment referred to personal, social and political processes through which disenfranchised groups sought to address the psychological, social and political effects of institutionalised inequalities, and to have a say in changing their immediate and structural surroundings. For these movements, empowerment meant personal change, replacing feelings of

inferiority with pride, and structural change, enabling self-determination through new or augmented social and political power (Appiah and Gates 1999: 262).

Thus, empowerment was conceived as a structural, collective and individual issue linked with ideas about: participation, education and collaborative learning, self-esteem, self-determination, critical social and political consciousness, efficacy, and social and political change (Friere 1972). The term carried individual and collective implications for people working together towards just goals, to afford human dignity, to offer some solution to perceived problems; to challenge unequal access to resources that prevented them from meeting their needs; whether these related to matters of survival, subsistence, education, employment, sexuality or spirituality (Robinson 1994: 11-12). Claims were made for the human right to meet one's own needs and to live in contexts that allowed the choices and autonomy necessary for individuals and groups to do so. For these radical movements, change for individuals and groups was canvassed and demanded on the basis of moral pressure that all people had rights and needs and deserved to be able to meet them.

Claiming a voice for the disempowered and disenfranchised, in response to paternalistic, imperialistic paradigms, altered the parameters of perceived rights and whose perspectives were represented. Thus, from outside the dominant 'centre', empowerment ideology enabled a critique of the prevailing social order and demanded that things could and should be different for those on the 'peripheries' of social and political power.

Following these and other radical movements, and some resultant social and political changes, the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of many books and articles on empowerment by people with left and right politics (Humphries 1996). Now in the early 21st century, empowerment is a vague concept with currency across national and international academic, professional and governmental domains: from health and education, to community development and civil and human rights; from substance abuse prevention programs to business management contexts and conflict resolution endeavours. It has become a generic term, something that is good for those deemed to be without power and

also for professional practice, business and society generally. On the surface, empowerment has become a buzzword promoting the vanquishing power of will, both for the disempowered and those able to empower.

In Britain, empowerment ideas can be found in government agendas about empowering the unemployed ('New deal for welfare' green paper 2006), local communities ('Putting communities in control' white paper 2008) and health service users.

Early empowerment ideals involved fundamental questioning of existing connections between social, political and personal structures of power, and of the interaction between individuals of the disenfranchised collective and larger society. As indicated in the 'minority' child model above, this perspective is clearly relevant for children who are structurally, politically, economically and socially disenfranchised (Mayall 2002; Freeman 1997: 75). As empowerment ideas have gained currency in different contexts, however, inevitable questions arise; particularly, who defines the problems, according to whose perspectives and in whose interests? The following section looks at ideas about empowering children, the potentially contradictory nature of such ideas and the contexts out of which such agendas are generated.

Empowerment of Children and Young People
As discussed above, the 1990s saw what some consider to be a paradigm shift in the social as well as the legal position of children (Freeman 1997), symbolised by the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1991). Demonstrating the influence of earlier Rights struggles, the convention requires Nation States to ensure children's needs and rights are met:

> without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his
> or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language,
> religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin,
> property, disability, birth or other status. States shall take all
> appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all
> forms of discrimination… (Article 2, UNICEF 1991)

States now have an international obligation to safeguard all children's rights to an education that develops their personality and talents 'to the full' (Article 29), to obtain and share information (Article 13), to meet together and join groups (Article 15); to preserve and protect their dignity, happiness and self-expression and their rights to be listened to, to feel valued, and, importantly, to have a say in decisions that affect them (UNICEF 1991).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Convention caused a sea-change in official ideas about children and their civic participation, impacting on their legal position and provision for them on a number of levels. Empowerment is generally linked to devolution of centralised power in favour of local participation and citizenship responsibility. As a result, discussions emerging since the 1990s, in areas such as child protection, education and youth political engagement, address children and young people's participation and rights as citizens, and how to empower them in affecting decisions that affect them (Cloke and Davies 1997).

In the Department for Education and Skills' *Five-Year Plan for Children and Learners* (DfES 2004), for example, Secretary of State for Education and Skills Charles Clarke described 'a reshaped role for Local Government and for [the DfES], moving away from direction towards an enabling and empowering role.' He argued that empowerment 'depends on freedom for those at the front line to personalise services and to improve them', creating 'a system that drives its own improvement more and more' (*ibid.*: 7).

One way in which this agenda of supporting young people's engagement with social and political issues is being implemented is through the teaching of citizenship education. Since becoming a compulsory component of the national curriculum in England and Wales in 2002 (Wyness 2006: 220), the teaching of citizenship engages secondary school children in discussions about civil rights and responsibilities. Through this they are informed and ostensibly empowered to have a say in their lives and larger society. Through involvement in decisions affecting them, children and young people are given opportunities to learn about

participation in particular ways and to develop particular skills and attributes. National and local youth parliaments and children's councils in schools are examples of children and young people being given these opportunities. Questions are raised, however, as to whether these devices and opportunities amount to children being involved in significant decisions affecting their lives.

Moves to empower children and involve them in larger adult society resonate with earlier Rights movements' struggles to be included, acknowledged and valued as part of society, and to be structurally and socially enabled to enact choices (Mayall 2002). However, there are also significant differences between earlier conceptualisations of empowerment and its current use in relation to children. Stein argues that a key to empowerment endeavours is that they are driven by the needs and aspirations of those they represent (1997: 64). Given that children remain outside of major social and political power structures, their rights only become manifest through adults' perceptions and provisions for them. Unlike earlier movements, instigated from within the groups they represented, adults are advocating for children's empowerment in forms and to degrees decided by adults. This raises questions about how the concept is being employed and in whose interests. As discussed above, concepts of children and childhood are significantly shaped by social, political and economic agendas. Arguably, it is these very structures of social, economic and political decision-making that define what empowerment is desirable and for whom. Chapter nine returns to this question of whose interests are served by current ideas and actual practices related to empowering children.

The mixed messages and moral ambivalence outlined in the discussion about perceptions of children and childhood above are redolent in ideas about empowering children and young people to exercise their rights. For example, as children hold a particular, essentialised and relationally defined position in social and political discourse, discussion of their empowerment involves questions of competence (Freeman 1997: 12). While children are theoretically to be empowered to exercise their rights and have a say in decisions that affect them, adults decide whether a child is competent and therefore what rights they may exercise, when and where.

There is a pertinent example here from the world of those advocating children's rights in child protection hearings. While their remit and commitment is to represent children's wishes and to support the execution of children's rights in such contexts, in fact, children's voices are often over-ridden (Ansell and Smith 2008). Even in these roles intended to empower and represent children's voices, workers often see them as immature and therefore not fully cognizant of what is best for them. Therefore advocates' testimonies often reflect their own sense of what is best for the child even when this opposes the child's wishes (Cloke and Davies 1997). Existing legal structures support this relationship because of the persistent view of the rational adult versus the child's immaturity, irrationality and even 'arationality' (Freeman 1997: 217).

There are, therefore, a number of issues that arise from government policies that promote empowerment. One is that empowering people to be responsible for themselves fails to recognise the constraining contexts in which they operate. The second stems from the view that those who 'speak for' those without power, may in fact reinforce rather than challenge powerlessness (Servian 1996: 31).

Empowering children is purportedly based on conviction about children's needs and rights. However, as the child protection example above indicates, social constructions shape how and in what circumstances children are empowered and supported in exercising their rights. Ideas about children's empowerment are necessarily informed by belief in the 'opposing characteristics of children' (Hill and Tisdall 1997: 19) discussed above in which they are seen as vulnerable, dependent, unreliable and distinct from adults, both in need of protection and potentially dangerous; and also increasingly current ideas about them as individuals with views, capacities and rights. The first of these positions requires adults to act on children's behalf, while the second recognises children's rights to act for themselves. As a result, ideas about the empowerment of children, rather than being straightforward, are highly socially and emotionally charged, complex, ambiguous and ambivalent.

As Kearns (2006) points out, current concerns, about social cohesion and local-level responsibility, are high on the present government's agenda. Discussions about empowering children and those who work with them, engaging them in decision-making about their own lives and resources, also reflect these concerns. Informing children of their rights and directing them in exercising them effectively potentially reinforces childhood as a transitional period during which children learn, or fail to learn particular skills and sensibilities. Provision of desirable understandings and skills, like those gained through citizenship education, is intended to enable them to function more effectively in society when they become adults. In line with the discussion above, children are often articulated as investments for the future (Lister 2005). The implication is that the value and purpose of children being empowered is that they will grow into adults who, through 'improved capacity to participate' (Kearns 2006: 1), will become well integrated into society as responsible citizens.

Since gaining power in 1997, the New Labour government has put emphasis on the transformative power of 'education, education, education'. Endeavours to empower children and young people to learn and to build their confidence and transferable skills during their education reflect concerns about Britain's future citizens. As explored in the following chapter, focus on transferable skills, social cohesion, future employability and citizenship responsibilities is also reflected in contemporary debates about the importance of children's play.

We are in a period of considerable national and international pressure to be seen as child-friendly, to support children's rights and to appear to work towards their interests. However, amidst endeavours to make these things happen, other agendas are also being worked through. It could be argued, therefore, that despite diverse radical backgrounds, the term empowerment has been adopted broadly, for non-radical purposes within existing power structures. It has come to imply conformity, a means of generating particular models of citizenship (Lister 2005). As the United Nations Committee report indicates, it is these very structures of social, economic and political decision-making that are simultaneously limiting children's rights and freedoms.

Conclusion

Before embarking on an investigation of the after school provisions, this chapter has begun to locate some of the contemporary ways of thinking which inform those settings. Ideas about children and their childhoods are important to the contexts in which after school childcare services are provided (Statham, Lloyd and Moss 1989). This chapter has discussed some of the shifting historical, social and theoretical terrain pertaining to constructions of British childhoods at this time. Notions of the child and childhood have been addressed here as cultural and historical concepts, and as qualitative, social constructions (James *et al.* 1998: 62).

The chapter has explored how children and childhoods have been articulated at different historical moments, as expressions of society's concerns, and how they have been conceptualised as passive recipients of culture (James and Prout 1997: 7), as incomplete 'becomings' (Qvortrup *et al.* 1994), as both vulnerable and a threat, and as superfluous to 'public' topics (Ribbens and Edwards 2000: 151). These understandings are important throughout the remainder of this thesis in the exploration of how and why the after school provisions operated as they did.

The chapter has explored contemporary debates about childhood, created by new social urgencies and a combination of discourses informed by both modern and older traditions of thought. Deeply socially and structurally entrenched, yet influenced by new issues and theories, complex and often contradictory motifs signify how childhood is socially constructed (Bennett 2003; Moss and Petrie 2002). Such approaches continue to underpin common ideas about children, childhood and empowerment, and they are still evolving. It has been argued that children's status in what Hardman called 'muted groups' (1973: 85) is changing (Freeman 1997: 75). This is occurring in conjunction with national and international requirements to recognise children as competent, active social agents and to involve them in decision-making processes (Cockburn 2005: UNICEF 1991). But these shifts are intertwined with the contradictory constructions of children described above. Manifestations of combinations of

these contrasting ideas and resultant practices are explored in the findings chapters.

Of formative importance to this thesis, the new approaches to the study of childhood discussed above endeavour to move away from traditional socialisation theory. Conceptualisations of children and childhood are seen instead as fluid constructions tied to social, economic and political contexts. James *et al.*'s (1998) perspectives on current constructions of children and childhoods draw attention to the existence of reified truths about them.

Children are reified and essentialised, located low down in the hierarchy of social groups. Discourses about them operate within these power relations. Acknowledging this, some proponents of the new social studies of childhood suggest that instead of *childhood* we need to consider *childhoods*, thus recognising the diversity of experiences during this life stage. Labelling children in the ways we do, implying unity and homogeneity of the group, maintains their subordinate positions, even, perhaps, when using empowerment concepts. Therefore Yon argues that the ways empowerment ideas often label and position the child and childhood, may in fact be both 'enabling and limiting' with 'seemingly paradoxical possibilities for empowerment and disempowerment to be present at the same moment' (1999: 28).

Discussions about children's empowerment pose fundamental questions about how we conceive of children and childhood. Certainly, governmental agendas to empower children - to give them a voice in decisions that affect them, to help them to build their social competence - reflect consideration of the adults they will become. The UNCRC is influencing how British children are positioned and provided for – in schools, children's services and so forth. These changes also reflect how pressing contingencies of our times - changes in family, education, community, and employment structures - impact on the transferable skills deemed vital to the future lives of today's children (Lee 2001: 25). Central to such concerns are contemporary contexts of cultural, social and religious diversity. Citizenship lessons in schools, for example, endeavour to support social cohesion by arming children and young people with skills for

understanding, appreciating and contending with the changing and diverse world around them.

It is perhaps no accident that the rise of the term empowerment appears in these ways during times characterised by an increasing awareness of complex losses of choice, voice, and individual and collective power (Beck 2006: 15; Kearns 2006). Arguably, therefore, if the position of children in society is to change for one that truly reflects endeavours to involve them in decision making, for example, the process may require transformation on individual, organisation and structural levels. As Freeman argues:

> Putting children on to decision-making committees – school boards or community homes – only scratches the surface and does little to undermine entrenched processes of domination. More is clearly required – ultimately a re-thinking of the culture of childhood. (1997: 75)

A genuinely child-centred empowerment endeavour may then require a candid reassessment of existing power structures and discourses, and a critical re-evaluation of whether current agendas, as implemented, are challenging or, in fact, in some cases reinforcing the social inequalities that children face.

The thesis develops around the ideas discussed above to probe two after school provisions. Particularly the 'socially constructed' and the 'minority' child models offered by James *et al.* (1998), with their historicity and sensitivity to both agency and the formative influence of social discourses, resonate with the approach to understanding these issues in this research. Alongside play and informal learning, the thesis investigates empowerment as a goal for today's children in after school provisions, and how or to what degree agency is recognised and rewarded in these contexts; or whether only certain sorts of agency, and therefore empowerment, are encouraged and legitimated. The next chapter explores State after school provision, play, informal learning and the fundamental position of empowerment in playwork approaches to children's play as organised responses to some of the issues and discourses introduced here.

Chapter Three

Play, Playwork and After School Provision

Play 'has become among other things a socio-political matter of some complexity' (Sutton-Smith 2008: 111)

Introduction

As outlined in chapter one, the current research set out to explore children's play, informal learning and empowerment in two after school settings, according to formative policies and guidelines, and the perceptions and experiences of playworkers, parents and children. This chapter examines the broad content and intent of current State after school provision. It explores ideas about children's play, informal learning and empowerment in these settings from playwork and policy viewpoints and their implications for workers and children.

Firstly the chapter discusses playwork theory and provision, followed by discussion of government policies. These strands have evolved simultaneously, developing discourses that superficially appear to converge around the value of play and child-centred approaches. However, the chapter argues that the meeting of playwork theory and practice with local and national government policies and procedures intermingle as a 'socio-political matter of some complexity' (Sutton-Smith 2008: 111) and thus generate tensions in practice. It is these issues that this thesis explores. Thus this chapter combines with the previous to provide the groundwork for the thesis' engagement with contemporary provisions for children, in particular, the types of play and learning sought and goals of empowering them in after school clubs. This leads onto discussion of the methodology in the next chapter.

Play

The wealth of literature on children's play shows that it has been extensively explored across the neuro and human sciences: from studies of the function of play amongst animals in general (Huizinga 1971); to psychoanalysis and cognitive and behavioural psychology investigations into the formative, developmental, therapeutic functions of play. Play has been characterised as diversely as a civilising cooperative act or an unruly exertion of excess energy (Spencer 1872 [1994]); a cathartic process (Freud 1922 [1974]); a key part of cognitive development and assimilation (Piaget 1951); a potentially self-healing process (Axline 1964), a reflection of culture and an evolutionary drive (Hughes 2003).

Research evidence suggests the vital role of play in cognitive, personal and social development (Burghart 2005; Pelegrini, Blatchford, Kato and Baines 2004). The benefits and value of play are crucial to short and longer-term development of skills and aptitudes such as resilience, empathy and emotional capabilities for social relations, creativity and imagination. These are beneficial not only for the individual and their immediate surroundings, but for communities and larger society (NPFA 2000; Gill 2007).

The influential report *Best Play: What Play Provision Should do for Children* (NPFA 2000) argues that in the light of solid evidence, for the individual, local community and larger society, there is a strong case for public investment in play. It has been argued, for example, that play can reduce youth crime, not just as a diversion but also as an enabling process to address underlying emotional and psychological causes of such behaviour:

> low self-esteem, lack of concern for the consequences of one's actions and poor empathetic abilities are all closely associated with criminal or anti social behaviour… play provides opportunities for children to develop their sense of self-identity, self-esteem, to empathise with the situation of others and to grow more aware of

the consequences of their actions… Happier, more fulfilled, less
frustrated children are the direct and immediate benefit for the
community (*ibid.*: 14).

Therefore, play is of value to the individual and the immediate environment
because it provides positive developmental experiences, which support children's
adjustment to school, social and cultural life (Bennett 2003). Play is of value to
parents as their children have opportunities to have fun, be active, and learn at
the same time. Play is of value to communities as it supports individuals to grow
into autonomous adults; and to the economy and society generally as play can
support children to grow into individuals who are 'effective in society as parents,
workers, informed consumers, active citizens, and in a range of other roles'
(NPFA 2000: 14). Amongst other government objectives, play has important
potential impacts on health targets, social and economic regeneration, and crime
rates (DCMS 2006).

There has been growing public concern for childhood experiences in late 20th and
early 21st century Britain due to 'cultural, social and economic factors' (Ball, Gill
and Spiegal 2008: 10). These are linked to urbanisation and concerns about
traffic and increased use of cars (Wheway and Millward 1997), computer and
television use, fears for children's safety, and shifts in family structures and
employment patterns. These are all impacting on children's freedom to play
unsupervised in public spaces (Brown 2008; Moss and Petrie 2002; Play England
2009). Reductions in children's use of outside environments for unsupervised
play, activities and travel is a matter of concern, and linked to increases in
supervised play and care provision. These factors erode children's vital
opportunities to freely enjoy, explore and learn through their play. Indeed, British
children's time outside of school to engage in play and socialise with other
children occurs increasingly in supervised contexts, with after school care
comprising the third largest portion of many children's lives after home and
school (Barker and Smith 2000).

Concerns about social inclusion, poverty, obesity, youth crime and
unemployment, as well as mounting evidence about play deprivation and the

positive impacts of implemented play opportunities, highlight the vital role of play in children's lives (DCSF 2008a; DCSF 2008b). As a result, play is now afforded much greater recognition and advocacy in social policy than ever before (Wragg 2008: 169; Play England 2009). The launch of the first National Play Strategy (DCSF 2008b) indicates that play is securely on the current government's formal agenda. Amongst the important influences on contemporary thinking about urban children's play are playwork approaches, which have evolved from the first junk play spaces in Denmark, later known as adventure playgrounds.

Playwork Historically Located

In 1940s Copenhagen, Denmark, architect C. Th. Sorenson established the first junk playground (Benjamin 1974; Hughes 2009). This was partly an endeavour to counter the effects of urban environments on children's play, to recreate aspects of the rural freedom children had in the countryside, within increasingly play deprived urban settings (Cranwell 2003a: 22). Junk playgrounds reclaimed derelict sites for children to play on, often strewn quite literally with junk. The children were encouraged to play creatively and imaginatively with and amongst whatever they found. Nicholson later called this approach the 'theory of lose parts' (1971). Children of all ages were welcome to play and parents and other local adults had a background presence.

In 1947, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, interested in Sorenson's playgrounds, corresponded with him. In her book *Planning for Play* she notes his approach:

> The object must be to give the children of the city a substitute for
> the rich possibilities for play which children in the countryside
> possess … It is opportune to warn against too much supervision …
> children ought to be free and by themselves to the greatest possible
> extent … one ought to be exceedingly careful when interfering in
> the lives and activities of children. (1968: 55)

These themes of children controlling their play (Hughes 1996), the importance of both rich play environments (Brown 2003) and adult avoidance of interference (Sturrock and Else 1998) remain strong in contemporary playwork.

After Lady Allen's visit to Denmark, she supported the establishment of junk playgrounds in England (Allen 1968: 9). The first was in Camberwell in south London (Cranwell 2003b: 18). This post war adoption of derelict spaces for children's play spread in England. Thus adventure playgrounds were born on bombed out sites, creating children's spaces amidst the rubble. Similar to the Danish model, these were open play spaces for all ages, staffed by volunteers (Allen 1968; Cranwell 2003a). Children were largely left to their own devices or supported by adults on site. Creation of these children's spaces addressed concerns for children's freedoms and play opportunities and stimulation of their creativity and imagination (Cranwell 2003b: 18). Playwork evolved out of this low-interventionist approach and informal, voluntary adult roles, referred to initially as play leaders. The adventure and creativity fostered by such play was later called 'risky play'.

Since the 1980s there has been a drop in the number of adventure playgrounds across the country (MacArthur 1996: 17). This is partly due to a growth in litigation culture and concerns about local authorities being responsible for children's risky play (Ball *et al.* 2008; Gill 2007). The Child Protection Policy aspect of the 1989 Children's Act resulted in limitation of their free 'come and go' approach; requiring more formal monitoring and tighter controls over children's use of provisions (Cranwell 2003b: 23). In addition, the drop in adventure playgrounds was linked to the 1998 launch of the National Childcare Strategy. As a result of which, with augmented social concerns for children's safety, regulated, paid-for play settings in which children are supervised have increased. In paid-for out of school provisions, children must be registered and leave with a parent/carer. Concomitantly, playwork has become focused less in adventure playgrounds and more in closed access sites. The location of playwork in these contexts has ramifications relevant to this research, explored below and throughout the thesis.

Playwork Theory

> There is no grand unifying theory on play or playwork, nor should there
> be. (Russell 2007: 149)

Playwork theory, practice and professional training have been recognised since
the 1980s when Brian Sutton-Smith devised the first higher education playwork
course. It has continued to evolve in its practice and theoretical understandings
since and there are now a number of recognised higher and tertiary education
courses and qualifications, structured around the National Occupational
Standards.

Playwork theory and practice denote a set of approaches to working with
children at play in settings as diverse as hospitals, outreach projects, conflict
zones and adventure playgrounds. For some, playwork is about redressing
developmental imbalances (Brown and Webb 2002), recognising and enabling
evolutionary necessities (Hughes 2001) or a form of psychotherapy (Sturrock and
Else 1998). For others, playwork is importantly about providing children with
contexts in which to explore social and cultural identities (Navidi 2007; Sutton-
Smith 2008) or safeguarding play spaces simply for children's fun.

What unifies playwork is a fundamental belief that children experience, enjoy,
learn and develop through their play in irreducible and irreplaceable ways. It is
the role of the playworker to take the child's agenda as a starting point and help
create and enrich the circumstances for children's play. While not theoretically
unified, professional playwork practice is structured around the playwork
principles.

Playwork Principles
The former playwork values and assumptions outlined the fundamental
principles of the profession. They were updated in 2004 by a scrutiny group of
experienced playworkers and playwork trainers in accordance with developments
in theory and practice (Conway 2008). The eight nationally recognised playwork

principles (PPSG 2005) establish playwork's professional and ethical framework and, taken as a whole, are intended to structure and inform playwork practice in any context in which it is provided.

The first principle outlines that all children need to play, as a fundamental necessity for the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities. The second principle defines play as a process that is 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' and that children need to be able to determine and control the content and intent of their play. Thirdly, the key essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process. This essence and understanding should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education. Fourthly, the play process should take precedence, with playworkers as advocates for children's play, when engaging with adult-led agendas. The fifth principle asserts that the playworker is to support all children in the creation of their play space. The sixth principle is that the playworker's up-to-date knowledge of play and reflective practice inform their responses to children playing. The seventh principle requires that playworkers recognise both their impact on the play space and the impact of children's play on the playworker. The eighth principle states that playworkers are to use an intervention style that enables children to develop their play and that their intervention balances the developmental benefits of exposure to risk with ensuring each child's safety and well being.

The influence of models of childhood discussed in the previous chapter are evident in these playwork principles; for example, that the child's right and need to play, as an essential aspect of childhood, is to be protected, even in the face of opposition from other adults. The following discussion explores these principles and aspects of the theories that inform them.

Play, Informal Learning and a Playwork Approach
The fundamental premise of playwork theory and practice is that play is a vital aspect of children's lives (Hughes 2001; Sturrock and Else 1998; Sutton-Smith 1997). Opinions differ as to whether this value is in the moment and/or as an investment in the future (Lester and Russell 2008). Nevertheless, through play,

children can explore, experience and develop the capacities, skills and understandings that provide them with what they need, both in and through their play.

Within a playwork framework, play is the realm in which children explore decision-making, negotiate a place and find a voice (Paley 2004: 24). In this sense, play is a child's spontaneous, driven and 'natural mode of learning' (*ibid.*: 24). The playwork profession considers that children know what play they want and need; therefore adults should demonstrate trust in them and adopt a low intervention approach. Informal by nature of being unstructured and self-directed, unlike formal structured learning, children learn through their play in their own ways, at their own pace.

On the reverse, it has been argued that children who are play deprived,

> whose play opportunities are restricted or denied can suffer
> developmentally and we believe that the communities and families
> they live in are impoverished as a result. (NVCCP 1992: 3)

Connected to the importance of emotional exploration and exposure through play are Sutton-Smith's ideas about 'play types'. In his influential text, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) he explains the function of play as the human struggle for survival. Whereas animal survival is a question of food, territory and reproduction, he argues that human survival involves complex emotive processes of 'progress', 'fate', 'power', 'identity', 'imaginary', 'self' and 'frivolity'. Different forms of ordered and seemingly disordered play facilitate the child's need to experience and explore these fundamental emotions and social relations. Sutton-Smith argues that through these experiences humans develop 'adaptive variability' essential to survival. This links with questions of human rights discussed in the previous chapter.

Later recognising these seven key emotive processes as largely historical and philosophical, Sutton-Smith subsequently added to his idea in more biological and psychological terms. He developed his theory influenced by consideration of

emotions divided into primary (shock, fear, anger, sadness, happiness and disgust) and secondary (embarrassment, shame, guilt, envy, empathy and pride) categories. Sutton-Smith argues that while play's location within an evolutionary framework remains, with the consideration of these primary and secondary level emotions, ludic outcomes can be additionally understood as 'having to do with the political civilizing of the participants' (2008: 141). This question of the 'political civilizing' aspect of play is relevant to the discussion below of the more instrumental government agendas regarding the value and outcomes of play.

A playworker is 'a person who works with children in the expansion of their potential to explore and experience through play' (Sturrock and Else 1998: 2). This holistic approach to the 'expansion' of 'potential' was previously referred to as engagement with the child's Social, Physical, Intellectual, Creative/Cultural and Emotional development (S.P.I.C.E., Brown 2003). This convenient and quickly adopted acronym has since been criticised, including by its creator, for over-simplification and loose terminology (*ibid.*: 61-63). In what has subsequently become a more tightly theorised playwork terrain, it does, however, indicate an early attempt to communicate the playworker's holistic approach to the child.

While much playwork operates within dedicated environments (Bonel and Lindon 2000: 15), and although this thesis focuses on closed access State provided play settings, playwork is about understanding and supporting any child at play in any context. For example the Leeds Metropolitan University playwork degree encourages its students to travel for work based experiential learning to places as far and diverse as Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Ghana. Therefore with different practice and environmental implications, in different contexts or at different moments, playwork's objectives may be defined somewhat differently. For example, it may focus on the therapeutic aspects, but the child's process is always the central focus (Axline 1964). In contexts in which children's play is restricted in various ways, referring back to Lady Allen and Sorensen and key contemporary debates about childhood and empowering children, a playworker's role is to create the conditions conducive for play to be effective in these processes and outcomes (Brown 2003: 53). Thus, the playworker supports the

child's self-fulfilment, or in Maslow's words 'self-actualisation' (cited in Brown 2008: 8).

The playworker removes barriers to children's play, some as mundane as checking play spaces for hazards like broken glass. But this can also involve playworkers dealing with the barriers that children themselves make that obstruct or interfere with the play of other children, such as racism or bullying. As explored below, barriers to children's play can also be about adult attitudes and agendas. In short, it is the playworker's role to ensure all children can play. This protection of children's play space, however, can at times require balancing this with trying not to interfere (Sturrock and Else 1998). A child's play frame, their absorbed zone, can be a highly emotive and involved place. The unaware or unwittingly intervening adult can disrupt a sensitive and vital process for the child, with potentially damaging effects.

This sensitivity about adult intervention is an important aspect of balancing children's freedom to play, and the playworkers' contribution to this process; the problem of over-supervising and over-protecting. For example, Hughes (1996) argues that risk is something that children naturally gravitate towards in their play. If children are over-protected they may be more likely to get hurt later on, due to not having learned to manage risks when younger. Neuroscience evidence suggests that children seek out uncertainty in their play as a vital means of cognitive development, and that therefore such play is more connected to fundamental brain development necessities that direct acquisition of 'skills' through play (Burghardt 2005; Lester and Russell 2008). Through experiencing the intense emotions made available though such behaviour, the brain physically develops its capacities. Thus it is in the very fundamentals of brain development that such behaviour is to be valued, more than the learning of particular skills. Therefore, according to this approach, taking risks is vital and playworkers need to allow children to take risks, to play in their own ways (Hughes 1996). So children and their play are to be protected, but they are also to be left to their own devices, allowed to learn perhaps hard lessons. Clearly such a balance is likely to be easier in theory than in practice, as discussed later in the thesis.

In addition to safeguarding play spaces and leaving children to control their play process, the playworker aims to provide contexts that stimulate imagination and creativity. An important aspect of playwork, as Sorensen and Lady Allen realised, is ensuring a flexible environment that children can adapt and play with. According to Nicholson and Schreiner,

> children should be empowered to structure their own play environment because human beings are inherently creative (1973 cited in Brown 2003: 57).

Nicholson's 'theory of lose parts' argues that

> in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it. (1971: 30)

These variables include the discursive environment playworkers provide, in which ideas and opinions can be experimented with, adapted, challenged. The playworker is not there to impose their views but to assist the child's explorations. Given the importance of creativity and inventiveness beyond observable activities, behaviours or outcomes, Sturrock and Else argue that play is the 'active agency of an evolving consciousness' (1998: 11). The creative processes of play enhance the child's developing awareness and understanding of the physical world, of themselves and of others.

Through such approaches, children develop what Brown calls 'compound flexibility' (2003: 56). Developing on Sylva's (1977) earlier ideas about play and behavioural flexibility, Brown argues that the degrees of flexibility children experience in their worlds allow them to experiment and experience control. This in turn can generate positive feelings of achievement and success, and help to build a child's confidence and awareness. Thus the child is more likely to develop a range of perceptions and behaviours in relation to situations and problem solving skills. This then comes full circle to influence how the child

interacts with and feels about themselves and their environment. This connects with Hughes argument about the importance of risk-taking. As Brown argues:

> [c]hildren who have little control over their world inevitably have fewer positive experiences, which in turn slows the development of their self-confidence. Children who lack confidence are less likely to take risks or try out different solutions to the problems they encounter. (2003: 58)

The playworker's ability to provide such flexibility is often more of an ideal than a reality; due to notions of children and childhood, even amongst playworkers, which often preclude real flexibility as the choice of the child in favour of 'variety' as the choice of the playworker (*ibid.*: 61).

Hughes (2001) also highlights the importance of the child's experience of autonomy. Most aspects of children's lives are dictated and over-determined by adult agendas. This is particularly relevant to the lives and play of urban children, where opportunities to experience autonomous play are often restricted. In the artificial play environment of play provisions, playworkers try to encourage some sense of this autonomy. But as Brown (2008: 123) highlights in his critique of the new playwork principles, children do play in whatever circumstances, though this may not always be 'freely chosen' or 'self directed' as the principles outline. This does not mean that they are not valuable play experiences. Particularly in play contexts such as the after school sites explored in this thesis, children are often there because of adult agendas and choices, and their playing occurs within adult limitations and notions of what is acceptable. This may involve autonomy, even if, as Brown suggests, that means choosing to be involved in play that children themselves are not 'choosing' or 'directing'.

Playwork and Empowerment
The discussion of empowerment in the previous chapter considered some of the above issues. Indeed, ideas of autonomy, choice, and self-direction are also central tenets of playwork theory and practice as they relate to children's empowerment (Hughes 1996: 22-23). Bonel and Lindon define empowerment as

'conferring power to an individual through an enabling or facilitating process' (2000: 280). Key to this are themes explored above such as the location of the child as central in the play environment, relating to children as individuals, 'endeavouring to meet their needs', allowing children to 'make their own choices and discoveries' and 'ensuring an atmosphere of respect and cooperation' (*ibid.*: 16). Brown suggests that a good playwork environment:

> empowers its users by offering freedom of choice in a stimulating
> and empathetic setting, with the result that children constantly
> create and recreate their own play environment. (2003: 59)

Thus, in playwork settings children are intended to be 'empowered to take care of their own physical safety' (Palmer 2008b: 230). So empowerment in a playwork sense denotes a child's personal and social experience of freedom of choice and being in control, in an empathetic setting, being listened to and their opinions and desires valued.

This connection of empowerment to the child's sense of being respected and having choices echoes the playwork values of building resilience, a positive sense of self and self-reliance. Indeed, as playwork principle number four states, the playworker is the child's play advocate, even in the face of opposition to adult-agendas. This advocacy may require the playworker to engage in; honest reflection on oneself as an individual and playworker, how and whether one truly implements underpinning playwork theories and practices, and recognition of how one's own frameworks and past experiences may impact on practice (Cole, Maegusuku-Hewett, Trew and Cole 2006).

This aspect of reflective practice is also important as the quality of the relationship between playworker and child is key. Touching on a number of significant points, chief executive of London-wide play advocacy organisation London Play's Ute Navidi outlines the value of the relationships a playwork approach enables and how this often differs from children's other relations with adults:

At a time where there are many social concerns about children and young people, trained playworkers know when to intervene and when to stand back when children and young people grapple with aspects of an increasingly adult-dominated world. Children and young people value their presence as well as enjoying the freedom and choice provided. This often differs significantly from institutional parts of their daily lives as well as from other activities restricted through adult-imposed constraints. (2007 Conference paper)

In summary, due to more conventional attitudes towards children explored in the previous chapter, being academically and professionally knowledgeable about play has traditionally been little acknowledged (Kilvington and Wood 2010: 36). In this time of its apparent limitation, and larger surrounding social issues, however, children's play has become an important topic for debate, policy and funding (Wragg 2008: 169). It is now increasingly seen as fundamental to children's current and future development and well-being (DCSF 2008a). Moreover, since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, play is recognised as a child's right (Article 31, UNICEF 1991).

Concurrent with the apparent erosion of opportunities for children's free play, then, researchers and play advocates are providing evidence that play is vital to human and humane development; worthy and in need of policy support (Cole-Hamilton, Harrop and Street 2001; Sturrock 2005; Voce 2008c). According to many leading playwork practitioners and theorists, understanding play is relevant to 'everyone' (Brown 2008: 1). Such developments could have an impact across the boundaries of practice.

As the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close, playworkers, play therapists, early years and care professionals are amongst the only professionals working with children who are specifically trained to understand play theory and the child at play (Ramtahal 2008). This is set to change as some understanding of play is now included in the Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the

Children's Workforce (DfES 2005b); playwork training is mooted as something that should be available to professionals across the children's services (Voce 2008b); and the Play Shaper national training programme aims to support professionals who design, build and manage community spaces to understand the importance of play and child-friendly, playable spaces. This suggests an increased official recognition of both the importance of children's play and the contribution that adults can make to the playing child (Play England 2009: 20).

This augmented focus and appreciation of play is also a reflection of the urban changes discussed above - children's loss of autonomy and the increasing likelihood that children's play occurs in staffed or supervised contexts. It could be argued that the professionalisation of play expertise is another example of treating children and childhood as something fragile and something to be wary of, and as a time for optimum preparation for adulthood; thus the need for supervision and the justification of unprecedented levels of adult intervention in children's lives (Petrie and Moss 2002). Before exploring these issues, the following section discusses State after school provisions.

State After School Provision

To locate the provisions that form the focus of this current study, this section briefly discusses the background to State after school provision in this country, the present policy contexts, and the ways in which contemporary ideas about children's play are influencing them.

After School Provision Historically Located

Historically there has been a clear separation between care and education. For example, Kindergarten-type institutions have evolved with educational goals and connections with schools, while childcare has developed most often within health and welfare frameworks, particularly catering for low-income families.

> The division between kindergarten and day-care has its roots in the
> late 19th century, when these institutions began to increase rapidly

in many cities across Europe. In general, kindergartens had sprung
from the work of inspired educators of young children, while day
care was developed from charitable initiatives to look after young
children coming from backgrounds of disadvantage… over the
generations, these two strands of early intervention have stabilised
into parallel institutions, one under a ministry responsible for social,
family or health policy, the other under the ministry of education.
(Bennett 2003: 25-26)

Childcare and education reform 'has been a major strategic feature of
government policy over the last 25 years' (Macdonald 2006: 87). The ideologies
underpinning New Labour approaches to childcare and education in Britain in
the early 21st century are contextualised by shifts during the Thatcher era. Both
the New Labour Government of 1997 and the Conservative Government of 1979

were elected on manifesto promises to modernise public services,
including education, and to enhance economic growth as a response
to the change in the world economy. (Macdonald 2006: 88)

This prioritising of market forces and agendas underpins the content, delivery
and opportunities of current childcare reforms.

In the late 1970s, in opposition to earlier approaches, Margaret Thatcher's New
Right government lambasted the 1960s as a decade of educational and economic
failure. The new government explained social and educational policy changes as
responses to fresh requirements for success in a new global context. The market
economy became a key 'value and mechanism for the delivery of public services'
(Macdonald 2006: 87). This shift away from Welfare, towards economy driven
notions made explicit the link between economic policy, employer requirements,
childcare provision and mainstream educational goals (Macdonald 2006: 89).

Post Second World War politics took an assimilationist approach to social
difference (Deacon 2002: 3). The assumption was that everyone wanted and
deserved to be part of society; and that society wanted them. Politicians

promoted the notion that together British society would progress to ever-greater prosperity and assimilation, and education and affordable childcare for all were part of this (Young 1999: 26). An environment of economic progress, high levels of employment and optimism prevailed. Poverty was considered the source of social problems and crime. The State provided education and the Welfare State provided short-term support to those in need.

However, contexts of rapid social and political change since the 1950s (particularly in employment, housing, health care provision, immigration and education) have given rise to poverty and its incumbent social realities being seen as the fault of the poor:

> [From] a society which both materially and ontologically incorporated its members and which attempted to assimilate deviance and disorder to one which involved a great deal of both material and ontological precariousness and which responds to deviance by separation and exclusion. (Young 1999: 26)

The rhetoric of mid 20th century ambitions to elevate all British inhabitants to their entitlement of full citizenship shifted fundamentally. The Conservative government moved away from the Welfare State as the site for the redistribution of opportunities and endeavours to counter the stratifying effects of society, towards an ideology that conceived of individual choice, unencumbered by the safety net of the Welfare State, as the means to personal, social and economic progress.

It has been argued that Margaret Thatcher's notions of individualism have pushed the changing climate of political opinion away from attempts to homogenise society, towards stigmatisation, separation and blame (Donnison 2002). This shift assumed that the behaviour of specific perpetrators must alter for social problems to change (Deacon 2002: 125). The Thatcher years thus changed fundamental discourses around citizenship and social cohesion. Then, as now,

[e]ducation [and childcare] policy has not only been viewed as the
means to enhance opportunities for individual achievement but also
as an instrument of economic and social policy. Specific reforms
reflect the values and ambitions of the political group and also the
contemporary social, economic and political pressures, which in the
1970s were those of economic stability and social disorder linked to
youth unemployment and a claim of falling standards. (Macdonald
2006: 88)

Youth were portrayed as wild and disruptive, in need of supervision. This further
reinforced government arguments for the need to re-establish British values
through schooling, and support employment through provision of childcare for
working class families. This demonisation of the young (often first generation
immigrants or working class youth) took the focus away from the socio-
structural issues generating unemployment and falling standards (such as the
unstable economy, changes in workforce and production, prevailing racism, and
larger global economic shifts and their effects in Britain) in favour of notions of
the power of individual agency.

Amidst these shifts towards individualism and intensified economic productivity,

highlighting the importance of out of school care to economic
growth, the Conservative Government launched the 'Out of School
Childcare Initiative' in April 1993 and invested nearly £60M to
create 50,000 new out of school places. The explicit aim of the
initiative was to enable mothers to (re)enter employment by
improving both the quality and quantity of out of school childcare
available in the local area. (Smith and Barker 1999: 3)

The considerable growth of out of school child care sites during the 1990s has
impacted significantly on the 'social and cultural landscape of childhood' (*ibid.*:
3).

In addition, the 1980s and 1990s saw radical increases in general living costs across Britain. This period saw a concomitant increase in full-time working mothers, often returning to work while their children were still young. Households with two full-time working parents, as well as single parent families increased. Living less inter-dependently, the numbers of families living further from each other also grew. The care that had been largely provided within families and neighbourhood networks increasingly became a childcare industry. While the wealthy were and continue to be much more likely to use nannies, the less wealthy needed affordable childcare.

As noted above, alongside a gradual reduction in funding and support for freely accessible adventure playgrounds, the government focussed on development of paid-for childcare for the young children of working parents. As Bennett points out,

> [b]ecause of changes in child-rearing and labour market patterns most OECD governments had decided by the late 1980s to invest in early childhood services so as to facilitate the increased labour participation of women and, in some cases, to guarantee women with young children equality of opportunity with regard to work. Research during these decades was also pointing to the value of positive early childhood experiences in promoting the cognitive, social and emotional well-being of children and, later, their long-term success in school and life. (2003: 21-22)

Through what Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, and Wintersberger (1994) refer to as 'familialisation', policies affecting children have largely been directed at the family or 'households'. Children have therefore traditionally been 'invisible' in British social policies (Daniel and Ivatt 1998; Petrie and Moss 2002). It is only recently that children have become recognised in their own right and policies developed specifically for them. The discussion now looks at these and the implications for the articulation, aims and implementation of provisions for children.

Current Policy Context

The key frameworks and national policies impacting on the after school settings in which the current research was conducted were the Sessional Childcare National Standards (Ofsted 2001), the Children Act (2004 [1989]), the Childcare Act (2006), the Every Child Matters: Change for Children (DfES 2005a) programme of national and local action for transformation of children's services, and the Playwork Principles (PPSG 2005). The Extended Schools agenda (DfES 2005c; Ofsted 2005) and the National Play Strategy (DCSF 2008b) also feature.

Though with different key focuses, these frameworks and policies emerged out of unprecedented attention to, and regulation of, provision for children and their families. Amongst other factors, significant catalysts for this focus were growing concerns about social inclusion and children's achievements in schools, New Labour Back to Work initiatives, and endeavours to protect children from abuse. These frameworks and policies articulate endeavours to improve children's chances later in life, provide childcare for working parents, and redress communication gaps between children's services. The National Standards guidelines outline this combination of agendas:

> The Government is committed to promoting the welfare and
> development of all our young children. Good quality care and
> education in the early years raise educational standards and
> opportunities, and enhance children's social development. The
> Government is determined that all child care services, be they new
> or established, provide a secure and safe environment for children,
> not least so that parents can have confidence that their children are
> well looked after. (Ofsted 2001, National Standards: 2)

As outlined in chapter one, the legal age of a child is 0 to 18 years, or 21 for those leaving care or with a learning disability (Children Act [1989] 2004). All sites providing childcare for children under 8 years old must be registered with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). This means that all such sites and details of their users are registered centrally with Ofsted. To obtain registration

requires observing specific regulations and evincing ongoing meeting of the National Standards (Ofsted 2001). A number of requirements must be upheld. Amongst these, the site must be fully health and safety risk assessed and

> all supervisors and managers must hold a full and relevant level 3 qualification (as defined by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC)) and half of all other staff must hold a full and relevant level 2 qualification (as defined by CWDC). (DCSF 2008a: 30)

Interestingly, there is no reference to playwork in the Ofsted guidelines list of 'relevant' qualifications for sessional childcare (Ofsted 2001: 10). Presently, to be employed as a playworker does not necessitate possession of a playwork qualification (Conway 2008).

Certificates of qualification and additional training are to be displayed for parents and visitors; regulation requires the presence of a qualified first-aid staff member on-site during working hours. All staff must have up-to-date Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. From November 2010, all staff will be required to register with the Independent Safeguarding Authority as part of the Vetting and Barring Scheme (Singleton 2009). Staff to child ratios are to be at least one staff member to eight under eight-year-old children. All sites are required to display a current Ofsted registration document and public liability insurance certificate.

In accordance with the 14 National Standards, Ofsted (2001) requires that childcare providers develop, display and implement a number of key policies. These include a mission statement to summarise the aims and objectives of the provision, and good practice and code of conduct guidelines. The Health and Safety policy outlines key regulations, requirements and procedures. The Child Protection policy lists procedures to be followed should a disclosure be made, or should a staff member or other person raise concerns about a child's welfare. The Illnesses policy describes actions to be taken to avoid the spread of infectious conditions. The Complaints Procedure outlines the steps to be taken to make

informal and formal complaints and the steps that will be taken by site and council employees to address concerns and complaints.

In addition, the Behaviour policy outlines how challenging behaviour is to be addressed and the procedures to be followed prior to potential exclusion of a child. The Equal Opportunities policy sets out the local authorities' approach to equal inclusion regardless of ethnicity, religious or cultural backgrounds, and physical ability. The Inclusion and Special Needs policies link with the Behaviour and Equal Opportunities policies to outline steps to be taken to ensure that all children, and their families, exercise their right to a welcoming and accessible environment. As this list demonstrates, these are highly regulated contexts.

Appropriate staff, visitor, medical, individual dietary needs, accident, risk assessment and fire procedure books must also be maintained. Although not an Ofsted requirement, many settings also display the playwork principles outlined above. The Ofsted National Standards are a set of guidelines and regulations to 'ensure good quality provision for all young children' (Ofsted 2001 Sessional: 4). Childcare providers are to aim to achieve these in their own ways. Upon Ofsted inspection, the rating of 'adequate', 'good' or 'outstanding' is granted. The display of locally drafted policies and procedures (i.e. by the local authority or the specific site) provides parents with important information and sets out, in various ways, the ethos of the childcare provisions.

Beyond the guidance and regulations specific to childcare settings, the Children Act 2004 and the Childcare Act 2006 require that local authorities manage the provision of 'sufficient' childcare spaces for parents who are either working or making the transition into work. This can be through direct provision or outsourcing to private, public, third sector or independent organisations. In addition, as part of broader endeavours to encourage non-working parents into work, government initiatives such as the Extended Schools agenda require expansion of wraparound school-based childcare between 8 am and 6 pm from Monday to Friday (DfES 2005c; Ofsted 2005). The aim is that:

[w]ell-organised, safe and stimulating activities before and after
school provide children and young people with a wider range of
experiences and make a real difference to their chances at school. It
gives them the opportunity to keep fit and healthy, to acquire new
skills, to build on what they learn during the school day or simply
to have fun and relax. (DfES 2005c: 4)

Formative to the current rationale and operation of after school provision are the
Every Child Matters (ECM, DfES 2004) initiative and the Children Act (2004
[1989]). With a strong focus on 'protection and early intervention', ECM
proposes significant shifts in how children's services are planned, commissioned
and delivered. The key focus of the Children Act is to ensure 'joined up' action
on the part of children's services. But the ECM and the Act have ramifications
relevant to the current research. The Every Child Matters initiative outlines five
key areas of achievement for a child-centred, outcome-orientated approach
through which children's services are to be measured: being healthy, staying
safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving
economic well-being. Mirroring these, the Children Act (2004 [1989]) outlines
five key aspects of children's well-being: physical and mental health; protection
from harm and neglect; education, training and recreation; contribution to
society, and social and economic well-being.

These are significant to after school settings as they outline the areas for children
and their families that the settings aim to impact on. Amongst other things, this
means staff following health and safety procedures, observing children's
development and providing activities to expand their experiences and skills in the
outcome areas. This focus on children's development links with the National
Standard number three, 'Care, Learning and Play' which outlines the goal of
promoting every child's 'emotional, physical, social and intellectual capabilities'
(Ofsted 2001 National Standards: 7).

Both of these link with the playwork principles' outline of the playworker's role
in the support and promotion of children's social, physical, intellectual, cultural
and emotional development through the benefits of quality play opportunities and

low interventionist playwork approaches (PPSG 2005). All of these – the National Standards, ECM and the Children Act, and the playwork principles – highlight the importance of building a child's self-esteem and confidence, enabling children to have a voice in decisions affecting them, and the importance of children's services having common goals in the form of the five ECM outcomes. For this research, these are key aspects of the ethos underpinning childcare settings and key to what playworkers said about their goals in relation to empowering children in their care.

These policy frameworks regulate and monitor contemporary childcare provisions. But there are also the practice frameworks. A number of governmental, local and playwork frameworks influence these. The practice guidelines and principles draw from the sources outlined above. It is also worth noting here that due to growing official recognition of the value of play, there are shifts in the recognition of the value of play and playwork approaches. As the National Play Strategy exemplifies, play is increasingly seen as a valuable means for children to learn skills for later life (DCSF 2008b). Therefore playworkers' expertise is beginning to be recognised (Voce 2008b).

Play on the Government Agenda

The government is currently in the process of providing 'wrap around' care for all primary school aged children during working hours. The Extended Services agenda aims to provide financially and locally accessible childcare to enable parents to work full time (DfES 2005c; Ofsted 2005). This provision is linked to larger national and international processes; greater numbers of women in the workforce and changes in family structures that mean that both parents are more likely to be working, and working parents increasingly needing childcare external to the family unit. Linked to this, care sites have become competitive in the services they deliver and an unprecedented growth in private and third sector provision of out of school care since the early 1990s (Barker, Smith, Morrow, Weller, Hey and Harwin 2003). These agendas, as well as being connected to national goals, are also part of larger international goals of boosting Britain and Europe as economically successful and competitive.

As discussed, at the close of the first decade of the 21st century in Britain, issues of unemployment, educational underachievement and anti-social behaviour, are linked to current debates around young people and social cohesion. These have helped to bring play and informal approaches to learning onto government agendas (DCMS 2006). At least two divergent tendencies have emerged in this process. On the one hand, the multifaceted formative and developmental benefits of play have become increasingly recognised across academic, professional and policy terrains. On the other hand, given the increased restriction of children's free play, there are concerns that these positive processes are being curtailed and the value of play under-mined, with detrimental contemporary and future ramifications. Indeed, missing out on play opportunities has been associated with deprivation, discrimination and social exclusion, particularly for poor, asylum seeking, ethnic minority and disabled children (Gill 2007; Hughes 2003; Smith and Barker 2004).

Nearly one quarter of London's population is 18 years old or younger (Harper and Levin 2005: 159). Child poverty rates are almost twice the national average and youth crime is a significant inner city issue. Researchers advocate more quality provisions for children and young people to support those who are functioning inadequately in classrooms and other settings and are often lacking more fundamental skills than literacy and numeracy. These include overall well-being, self esteem, interpersonal and social skills, and positive connections with their communities. The current government recognises these problems and the policy drives outlined above demonstrate conviction that after school settings can provide contexts for the development of these skills as well as play and enjoyment.

Shifts in government agendas relating to play and children's out of school time are not occurring within a vacuum. Children's rights and play lobbyists are pushing for the importance of play in the lives of children, families, communities and larger society (Cole-Hamilton *et al.* 2001; Voce 2008c). Ever-increasing research and evaluation practices provide growing evidence of the personal, familial and community impact of play and play provision (Cole Hamilton *et al.* 2001; DCMS 2006). For the first time, play and playwork are now included in

key policies, such as the National Play Strategy (DCMS 2008). This is a significant official acknowledgement of the value of play to children and communities and potentially gives playwork a value and professional status beyond that to which it has been accustomed.

According to the National Play Strategy, play means:

> children and young people following their own ideas and interests, in their own ways and for their own reasons, having fun while respecting themselves and others (DCSF 2008b: 11).

Also, the Children's Plan recognises that 'play has real benefits for children' (DCSF 2007: 6). In accordance with current agendas discussed above, in addition to providing care, after school provisions are also seen as informal learning contexts (Ofsted 2001). They meet

> children's individual needs and promote their welfare. They plan and provide activities and play opportunities to develop children's emotional, physical, social and intellectual capabilities (*ibid.*, National Standard 3)

According to the child-centred approaches advocated in the Children Act (2004 [1989]), the Ofsted National Standards (2001) and the five Every Child Matters outcomes, children are to be encouraged to explore their interests, their choices, and their own ways of playing: to gain from diverse experiences and from development of fine and gross motor skills; to develop their self-awareness and manage their emotions; and through these, to gain a sense of achievement, satisfaction, self-esteem, personal and social authority, and respect for others. Barker *et al.* found that many parents believe their children to learn through their play and therefore value the indirect 'positive educational impact' of out of school care (2003: 17).

The combination of these frameworks and the playwork principles are geared towards ensuring that children can choose their activities, be listened to, take

controlled risks, try new things and socialise with peers in supervised environments. Children are to be informed about their rights, and encouraged and supported to participate in decision-making in aspects of the running of centres such as activity planning, meal menus, and site layout (Palmer 2008a: 132). In some centres, children are also involved in interviewing potential staff, and communications and consultations with local authorities and other organisations (Barker and Smith 2000: 10). Through such approaches to informal learning, children are deemed to develop useful skills and confidence in dealing with themselves, peers and adults. Playwork theorists, commentators and practitioners define these as empowering (Brown 2008: 10; Sturrock and Else 1998: 42).

The perspectives currently shaping agendas, policies and practices in after school clubs reflect a social and political moment of focus on what children will require to function in contexts of rapid social and economic change as they grow up (Davies 2006; Prentice 2000; Qvortrup 1997). These link immediate government agendas around employment and provision of affordable childcare, with the direct and longer term benefits of play for individuals, families, communities and society. The precept is that being able to play, supported by trained professional playworkers, can help children to grow into healthy, responsible adults who will involve themselves productively in mainstream society (NPFA 2000; DCMS 2006). In such settings, with the added influence of UNCRC guidelines, empowerment, 'participation', and 'consultation' have become buzzwords connected to these endeavours (UNICEF 1991).

In the light of these current government agendas for after school provisions and the apparent convergences between playwork values and practices and policy initiatives, the following section explores more critical arguments about their practical possibilities and ramifications.

Opportunities, Challenges and Tensions in Practice

As discussed, the benefits of play for the individual child, for communities and for larger society are embedded in playwork theory, principles and practice.

Current policies pertaining to children's play and after school childcare appear to agree with these fundamentals. However, children's out of school provisions are contexts in which a number of values, goals, and organisational and practical approaches meet (Petrie 1994: 7). As a consequence, such provisions can be expected to incorporate sometimes contradictory objectives: of freedom to play with control and surveillance; exploration and risk with health and safety regulation; and of individual empowerment alongside specific socialisation outcomes (Ansell and Smith 2008; Lester and Russell 2008; Moss and Petrie 2002).

This and the previous chapter have described discursive shifts from a focus on parents rights and children's welfare, to talking about and enshrining in law, children's rights. Within legal frameworks, and therefore operations relating to the welfare of children, ideas about children's rights impact on how they are seen and treated (Cloke and Davies 1997). James, Jenks and Prout argue that the rights and opportunities that children are now technically afforded, or 'confronted' with, are constituted within an incoherent matrix of ideas and expectations concerning protection, development and participation, sometimes with giant gulfs between rhetoric and reality (1998: 6). These tensions reveal a spectrum of ambiguities from perceptions of children and childhoods, to the predictable outcomes of specific practices and regulations (Cockburn 2005).

Playwork began as an informal and voluntary approach and has now evolved into a recognised profession in highly regulated contexts. As discussed, playwork staff are required to be fully police checked and qualified to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 2. Ofsted must register all out of school projects working with children under the age of eight. To be registered, centres must meet Ofsted's assessment criteria; these include The Five Learning Outcomes, and more recently the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (Ofsted 2001; DCSF 2008a). All sites must demonstrate that they work in accordance with legislation and good practice policies and guidelines. Without this registration, sites cannot operate legally. If parents are dissatisfied, complaints procedures are set out and stringent.

These developments have culminated in a relationship where parents are clients of competitive service providers. These changes parallel larger processes of professionalisation and regulation generally in Britain and in childcare specifically. Alongside the positive effects of these changes on children's safety and the services provided in after school projects, there are less obvious impacts worth exploring, with which this thesis engages. It has been argued, for example, that playwork is changing and 'there exists the potential for it to degenerate into types of 'soft policing'' or 'soft forms of social control' (Sturrock and Else 1998: 4-5). Also

> playwork theory can be idealistic and removed from 'real world' scenarios in that they suggest formulas and prescribed ways of being a playworker that do not always take into account the often unpredictable behaviour or situations that can arise in practice. (Newman 2003: 46)

As this thesis explores, if these concerns hold weight, questions are raised about the broader implications of what Sutton-Smith refers to as the 'political civilizing of participants' in play (2008: 141).

In an increasingly competitive society, ideas about the relative merits of work time versus leisure time (Adam 1990) also impact on after school club agendas. Activities achieving measurable outcomes, such as those developing skills, are often considered the most worthwhile. Policies relating to play thus take an instrumental focus (Lester and Russell 2008). In an ever growing consumerist and litigation society, this helps parents feel that they are getting 'quality', 'service' and 'value for money' (Ball *et al.* 2008). Questions are raised, however, about the restrictions and requirements being put on play and the impact of these on children, playworkers and the priorities of after school provisions.

The playwork principles stipulate the safeguarding of the play space for all children, free from discrimination. But

> [t]he limitations of the setting, or constraints imposed by the nature
> of the service, may limit the extent to which playworkers are able to
> work in this way. (NPFA 2000: 16)

Certain groups, for example, find barriers to their use of such provisions. These are often barriers of cost (Barker *et al.* 2003: 48) or provisions failing to meet the requirements of children with special educational needs, disabilities and children and families from minority ethnic groups (Smith and Barker 2004: 15). These various factors indicate mixed agendas in after school provisions; such as admissions policies prioritizing working parents and the impacts of this on other groups who wish to use the services. This indicates that on practical levels various factors affect the successful implementation of policies on play and playwork in the interests of all children.

Furthermore, playworkers are often in a contradictory position, with tightly defined policies and procedures to follow. These can be challenging to combine with inclusion, accessibility and valuing children's freedom to play and learn through play. Although there is now new guidance around risk (Play England 2009) that aims to counter recent risk aversion trends, playworkers remain in something of a tricky position. For example, in allowing risky play – how much, as a playworker, to allow and enable children's diverse play-type experiences, empowering them to make their own choices and explore; and how much to exercise health and safety regulation in favor of risk aversion to avoid possible problems, accidents or parental complaints.

It could be argued that policy-makers approve of play as self-directed, empowering or encouraging autonomy only in so far as play behaviour 'mirrors or stimulates socially acceptable behaviour, or is understood to relate directly to instrumental policy objectives' (Lester and Russell 2008: 2). This suggests that empowerment through play and playwork is only considered 'good' to the extent that it conforms to and occurs within the limitations of policy objectives and definitions, and parental approval.

Indeed, Lester and Russell (2008) evince challenges to whether play is being valued as a process in itself or solely in the interests of the social impacts of particular anticipated outcomes. They suggest that largely instrumental notions of play abound in social policy initiatives; prioritising skills-development, diversion, and possibilities of children's greater academic interest and success, rather than principles essential to playwork such as flexibility and autonomy. The skills and experiences made available through instrumental ideas about play are considered valuable for the types of people children will grow into:

> Good play experiences also support the development of
> autonomous adults, with a strong sense of personal identity, who
> are effective in society as parents, workers, informed consumers,
> active citizens… (DCMS 2006: 10)

The result evokes Moss and Petrie's argument that these settings often appear more like

> factories processing children on behalf of adults, in order to
> produce 'better' adults for the future, than places where children
> can be in the present. (1997: 9)

This raises questions about whether playworkers are providing a service for parents or children and how this may compromise playworkers as purported advocates for children and their play (Wragg 2008: 169). These tensions, while on some levels practical, point strongly to the tensions generated by

> initiatives often originating from different agencies with different
> values, cultures, policies, concepts and objectives. (Moss and Petrie
> 2002: 5)

Moss and Petrie usefully argue that antagonistic ideas about children and childhood underpin social and governmental discourse and therefore children's services policies and practices, and that it is these very models that cause practice contradictions. Play is often seen in policy and practice as a

vehicle for learning and social development, a tool for social

cohesion, a diversion from crime or antisocial behaviour or a way

of tackling obesity. This leads adults to intervene in play to ensure

that children play in ways that are 'productive and socialising'

(Meire 2007). (cited in Lester and Russell 2008: 1)

Such conceptualisations marginalize other articulations and forms of play, with an implicit sense that this is the only correct approach (Moss and Petrie 2002: 6). This is despite evidence of the value of play as enabling 'processes' (Russell 2008) through which children can experiment and get things wrong; explore themselves, their possibilities and limitations, and ways of having and interacting; and engage in different friendships and social relations. Such activities, in safe environments with supervising staff, support children's vital needs to experiment and take risks, and to experience degrees of control over themselves, their playmates and their environment.

As Daniel and Ivatts argue, beneath the rhetoric that 'children come first' in policies such as the Children Act (2004 [1989]) or the Child Support Act (1991), the State's concerns to reinforce parental responsibilities and increase work incentives take precedence over the interests of children:

policy towards children is developed according to a set of implicit

assumptions and values, often embedded in wider concerns such as

the relationship between the state and the family, or the future of

the nation. (1998: 5)

Instrumental views of play and the role of adults in after school settings, in contrast to playwork approaches, carry underlying perceptions of children as human 'becomings' rather than human 'beings' (Qvortrup *et al.* 1994); despite the fact that

the evidence from research across a range of disciplines suggests

that the benefits of playing may be more relevant to the experience

of a good childhood today than to preparing children for adulthood
tomorrow – although there are connections between the two.

(Lester and Russell 2008: 2)

Shifts in attitudes to the value of play have had positive impacts on perceptions
of playwork as a serious profession (DCMS 2008). At the same time, however,
the evidence suggests that playworkers often operate in restrictive contexts that
require them to compromise child-centred approaches in favour of official,
ostensibly empowering, instrumental ones (Conway 2008; Russell 2008).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrined in law the moral and
ethical principles of children's rights (UNICEF 1991). Social policies and
professional frameworks advocating children's right to play and empowerment
appear to value these. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, given that
children's voices remain outside of major social and political power structures,
their rights only become manifest through adults' perceptions and provisions for
them. While the ratification of the Convention has supported lobbying and
changes in social policies relating to provision for children and children's play,
the value of play in and of itself is notably absent from government initiatives
(Voce 2008c), unveiling tensions in official desires to value play and empower
children through the choices available to them (Cockburn 2005: 109). It would
appear that current perceptions, agendas and policies relating to children's play
and empowerment in fact mobilise conflictual agendas stemming from differing
ideas about the purposes and priorities of and for childhood.

Conclusion

Over recent years, there has been rapid growth in initiatives pertaining to
children and young people, with significant financial and human resources being
invested in provision, research and policy development (DCSF 2008b; Lester and
Russell 2008). Currently, with a very recent change of government, there is
considerable uncertainty about future directions but considerable changes are
likely.

This chapter has explored aspects of the policy and practice terrain pertaining to after school provision, play and playwork. By looking at after school sites as convergence points of various agendas, discourses and priorities, the discussion here has explored tensions. In part, it could be argued that after school club providers are not prioritising the child's play over government policies and parental choices due to lack of training in playwork theory; legislative-heavy training and playworker job descriptions (Conway 2008) and concerns around consumer satisfaction of parents. To look beyond these, linking with the previous chapter, these tensions originate in broader debates about children and their childhoods, contrasting notions of what children and childhood require that inform after school provision and equivocal ideas about what it means to empower children and value their play in these contexts.

This and the previous chapter have mapped aspects of the key contemporary conceptual and practical terrain relating to children, childhood, and their play and after school provision. The discussion has explored how these debates articulate key broader issues current in Britain at this time. These are linked with themes explored throughout the thesis, of children as future citizens, their rights, surveillance and supervision, and the restriction and regulation of how and where they play. Looking at and evaluating the literature underpinned my research focus and activity. The following chapter further builds on these themes as they apply to methodological debates, and the planning and application of the current research. Following that, the thesis elaborates on these issues through exploration of the views and experiences of playworkers, parents and children at two of those provisions.

Chapter Four

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses why ethnography, as an approach and set of methods, is fitting for the investigation outlined in chapter one. It draws on literature from a range of disciplines, including historical and philosophical texts, linguistics, sociology and social anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach is increasingly common in recent studies of children and childhood (Barker and Weller 2003; James, Jenks and Prout 1998[2005]). The chapter discusses epistemological questions, ethnographic understandings of the social world, the relative strengths and limitations of such an approach, and the specific characteristics of the participant observation, semi-structured interview methods and use of documentary information employed. The chapter explains the research design and its application with particular focus on: sampling and selection, gaining ethical approval and site access, conducting semi-structured interviews, and reflections on fieldwork processes and personal relations. It concludes with discussion of the analytical approach.

Research Design

In light of pertinent contemporary debates about children, their childhoods and their futures, this research set out to explore relationships between play, informal learning and empowerment in two after school provisions in a London borough. As outlined in the introduction chapter, the research questions asked what relationships between play, informal learning and empowerment were occurring in the after school clubs; how playworkers, parents and children in these contexts perceived these concepts and their related practices; and how current policies and

professional viewpoints relating to children's play, informal learning and empowerment underpinned activities in these settings.

To do this, an ethnographic approach was employed. Ethnography is a generic term for a collection of related techniques; different ethnographers, by definition, *do* ethnography differently. An ethnographic approach does however have some key characteristics. Essentially, as discussed further below, ethnography is based on participant observation. This involves continuous or intermittent immersion in the lives of one's host community. This enables the researcher to observe patterns of behaviour, to determine values, perspectives, similarities and differences, and to 'take the role of the other' (Woods 1996: 11). The ethnographer seeks to soften the effect of their presence by learning appropriate social behaviours and by the long duration of their fieldwork. Thus,

> [g]iven time, people forget their 'company' behaviour and fall back
> into familiar patterns of behaviour. (Fetterman 1998: 36)

Lengthy immersion affords the researcher the opportunity to refine questions, to check ideas, to challenge concepts formed prior to fieldwork, and to search for ever-deeper understandings of social, cultural and personal meanings.

The approaches social scientists adopt to investigate meaning vary greatly, often determined by their disciplinary backgrounds and objectives. These are essentially questions of one's standpoint, as a researcher, in relation to notions of power, structure and agency. Methods such as interviews and surveys are considered to have traditionally under-estimated the influence of the social and historical context. Critical discourse analysis and cultural criticism approaches can over emphasise sociological and ideological factors; and micro-analytic approaches, like conversation analysis, can overlook the broader context of communication and, thus, omit significant sources of meaning and understanding. These approaches can arguably miss the meanings of interactions or experiences for the participants involved and the ways in which they may have brought their own agency to bear. To delve into participants' views, the current research utilised semi-structured interviews as part of the ethnographic enquiry.

In contrast to survey-based or structured interview approaches,

> the acquisition of ethnographic knowledge and understanding is a
> cyclical process. It begins with a panoramic view of the
> community, closes in to a microscopic focus on details, and then
> pans out to the larger picture again – but this time with new insight
> into minute details. The focus narrows and broadens repeatedly as
> the fieldworker searches for breadth and depth of observation. Only
> by both penetrating the depth and skimming the surface can the
> ethnographer portray the cultural landscape in detail rich enough for
> others to comprehend and appreciate. (Fetterman 1998: 37)

Participant observation involves a complex balance between generating positive,
trusting relationships with participants and maintaining a distance to allow
adequate observation and data recording. The delicate process of developing
trust between researcher and participants takes time and careful negotiation. As
Corsaro and Molinaro (2000) argue, the process of being accepted by children in
a way that enables them to relate to the researcher is a slow and delicate process.
Before further description of the current research, the following section discusses
key developments in ethnography relevant to the current research.

Ethnography Historically Located – Key Developments

Ethnography has been the 'staple research method' (Hammersley 1998: 3) used
by social and cultural anthropologists since the early decades of the 20th century
and became popular amongst sociologists from the 1920s. Anthropologists in
unusual locations, and sociologists in urban areas, conducted extended fieldwork,
using participant observation methodology in which they both observed and
often participated in the everyday practices of the groups they studied (Foote-
Whyte 1969; Malinowski 1961).

Participant observation denoted a departure from 'armchair' social research and enabled an active engagement, combining periods of immersion, participant observation, interviewing and close contact with informants. This embedded approach sought first hand understanding and, embracing complexity and diversity, endeavoured to penetrate different world views. These new approaches to empirical verification legitimated anthropology and ethnography as academically rigorous.

Emerging from a history intertwined with imperialist and colonial discourses, through epistemological and methodological challenges, ethnographic methods have become valued by researchers from widespread academic disciplines. Ethnography's historic connection with questions of power and representation are often reflected in the topics it is used to engage with. To contextualise the use of ethnography for this research, the following discussion outlines some theoretical trajectories. These relate to research and objectivity, the value of different perspectives, and the recognition of the researcher as a research tool.

Research, Objectivity and Western-centrism

Early ethnographic monographs provided little information about the author other than introductory words or an appendix. Personal reflections were kept separate from the 'facts' of the text, existing 'only on the margins of the formal ethnographic description' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 31-32). The researcher often afforded little analytical attention to their own perspectives or to the larger geographical, political and economic contexts surrounding their study. This textual absence signalled a separation between the native and the ethnographer and reinforced notions of objectivity. The belief that one could become an 'insider' and understand fundamentally different societies and cultures, and that social 'facts' could be documented in similar ways to the collection of cultural artefacts, underpinned such approaches.

Though resistance was a constant feature of imperial control, pressure for decolonisation increased after the Second World War. Post-war economic strains, growing colonial independence, rising indigenous education and literacy rates amongst the elites, as well as intellectual responses to the horrors of war

and issues of inequality and prejudice, created new demands on how debates about international power relations, national struggles, identity and de-centralisation of political, economic and ideological control were articulated. Authors engaged with subaltern discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, both from the 'centre' and the 'peripheries', critiqued white, male, bourgeois paradigms and power relations (Fanon 1967; Said 1978; Asad 1973).

These writers, and others, scrutinised the relations imbedded in social scientific method through which much knowledge about the world was generated. In particular they criticised 'self' and 'other' hierarchies. They argued that both the agendas and findings of social research often had negative ramifications, and were irrelevant to the people being studied, since they were 'geared to problems defined by social science disciplines, not to those that face the people themselves' (Hammersley 1998: 16). This is an important consideration in contemporary research into the lives of children (Alldred 2000; Barker and Smith 2000; Hey 1997).

Debates in this period focussed on power relations and the politics of representation. The white Western male perspective was criticised for emphasising a homogenised, fundamentally different 'other', with implicit and explicit underpinnings of the superiority of the articulating voice. In an endeavour to redress the structural violence inherent in international power relations, in which social research was implicated, the other – female, ethnic, native – claimed a voice and critiqued the notion of knowledge as truth, identifying it instead as a construction that often masked economic and political agendas. Challenges were made to representational authority, as the experience of being represented was critiqued from the position of the 'other' (Brettel 1993: 14). In relation to anthropology's role in how the 'other' had been formally represented, wider local and global readerships, and anthropologists from more diverse backgrounds, meant that representations could no longer homogenise groups as they had done.

It became incumbent on researchers to deconstruct their cultural and academic precepts, and their role in institutionalised power and order relations:

> Any latent tendency to treat people as objects or distant curios [had]
> to be confronted, not left repressed. (Okely 1984: 6 cited in
> Strathern 1987: 16)

The new social studies of childhood have resonant parallels in endeavours to challenge the traditional marginalisation of children in research and society, to question social constructions, to enable a voice for children, to validate their lives and to use research findings to advocate on their behalf.

Truth and Meaning

These debates coincided with broader philosophical deconstructions of 'fact', 'truth' and 'meaning', and their relation to scientific methodology. Kuhn (1970), in his influential *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, argued that rather than a gradual progression towards ever-greater knowledge, science had a history of radical paradigm shifts. These upheavals and rejections of previously accepted assumptions occurred when new empirical data forced abandonment of previous theory. Destabilised notions of science and objectivity, coupled with wartime demonstrations of the destructive capacities of science-based technologies, questioned whether science represented a means for social progress.

This view was reinforced by post-structuralist deconstructions that challenged Enlightenment notions that sentient man was able to objectively comprehend his surroundings and have direct, objective knowledge. Saussure (1972) argued that meaning is created by the relation of signifier to signified and rather than reflecting 'reality', language constructs our understanding and, therefore, what we consider 'truth'. Furthermore, as language is a cultural phenomenon, what constitutes truth is necessarily culturally dependent; we learn to think about and articulate our realities in ways that, in turn, structure *how* we act and experience and, therefore, what we consider 'reality'.

> There is, for man, no such thing as pure nature, pure need, pure interests,
> or material forces, without their being culturally constructed. (Marcus and
> Fischer 1986: 142)

According to this approach, meaning is constituted in and restrictive of words and actions; an approach that Foucault (1980) developed in his investigation of discourse and Bourdieu (1977) in his explorations of the relationships between structures, habitus and practices.

Derrida (1968) argued that we all have a desire to believe that through thought we make sense of the world and ourselves. What he also posits, however, is that meanings are invented and in constant motion; constituted by 'arbitrary closures' along meaning continuums, ultimately subject to interpretation (Hall 1997). These are profound implications for social researchers and the cultural 'meanings' we seek to discern, understand and represent.

If, as Saussure (1972) suggests, language is not referential but differential, and we owe our ideas to differences which are the effect of language itself, then we can never be certain that what we assert about the world in language or, indeed, in any other signifying practice, is true in any objective sense. Furthermore, if different languages categorise the world and attribute meaning differently, we can no longer think that our (cultural) reality is any truer than anyone else's. Access to a truth beyond language, then, is not available, and the notion of finding universally governing social structures necessarily shifted as a social science agenda. Questions are raised about structure and agency as the subject is considered split between rational, deliberate action and linguistic articulation. This perspective is useful in delineating the distinctions between research engaging with and analysing what is said, and evaluation of the unconscious being formulated by the cultural meanings and discourses that generate the subject.

Alongside debates about its scientific validity and credibility, ethnography was criticised for failing to meet ostensibly a-cultural scientific standards (Hammersley 1998; Clifford and Marcus 1986). As an approach and set of techniques, it had been criticised for deficiencies in quantifiable, empirical precision due to lack of concern for controlling 'experimental' variables, scientific standards of methodological reliability, and the perhaps inevitable

subjectivity of ethnographic processes and productions. Due to their often semi-structured style, interviews were criticised as rendering data and its analysis unscientific, due to the fundamental lack of a replicable methodology through which other scientists could confirm research findings. While not intrinsically opposed to quantification, ethnographers argued that they could produce meaningful cultural descriptions without resource to these forms of precision. Furthermore, as replicability was not always possible in natural science research either, it was not the only means by which scientists could assess each other's work.

Studying processes over time, ethnography traces 'patterns of relationships among social phenomena in their natural context in a way that neither experiments nor social surveys can do' (Hammersley 1998: 11). This approach attempted to counter the argument that ethnography involved ignoring variables and was unable to identify causal relationships. Ethnographers argued that while causal relationships may exist in the social world, they are not the same as those in the physical world and are not accessible to 'techniques modelled on investigations in physics' (*ibid.*: 11). Instead of gauging findings in terms of quantifiable outcomes,

> [w]orking with people, day in and day out, for long periods of time
> is what gives ethnographic research its validity and vitality.
> (Fetterman 1998: 36)

Ethnography distinguished itself as an endeavour to capture the character of naturally occurring behaviour, using an inductive, discovery-based approach that ostensibly allowed the researcher to develop theoretical and thematic frameworks during, not prior to, the research process (Woods 1996: 7). Distinguishing its agendas and truth claims as distinct from natural science, ethnography argued that 'common-sense' knowledge, highly contextual and often contradictory and messy, constitutes the currency of the social world (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In the pursuit of understanding the social world, subjective perceptions of reality are more significant than 'objective' measures in shaping social beliefs and

behaviour; a mundane 'web' that deserved investigation and description (Geertz 1973).

There is a warning here, however. These processes of the construction and representation of meaning, and the power inherent in the position of the researcher, continue to be debated in research involving the domains of children. As the previous chapters have discussed, the sphere of the child has been ensconced in the private domain until relatively recently. In their discussion of the challenges of representing from the 'private' domain, Ribbens and Edwards explore the common expectation that the public domain and academic or institutional forms of knowledge are 'objective, abstract, detached, rational, neutral, broad, institutional epistemologies' (2000: 11). Such qualities are often separated from and considered superior to daily or everyday forms of knowledge which tend to be 'grounded, subjective, involved, emotional, specific, detailed' (*ibid*: 11). There are parallels here with notions of children and childhood explored in the previous chapters, and implications for the contentious terrain of representing domains in which children are a significant presence. Two points are important to emphasise. Firstly, such investigations must not fall into excessively ethnographic description but anchor themselves in the larger debates of our times. Secondly, the social harms dominant notions have traditionally inflicted in validating the 'public' sphere and separating the 'private' merit challenging. A critical ethnographic approach is employed in this thesis in an attempt to address both of these imperatives.

Critical Ethnography

Amidst the deconstruction of questions of power and representation in research topics and methodologies, some researchers moved towards a conscious politicisation of social research, actively engaging in questions of inequality and social justice. Emerging from the critical theory school, critical ethnography sought both to challenge social, political and economic inequalities and for research findings to contribute to positive social development (Carspecken 1996; Denzin and Lincoln 2003). Critical ethnography is explicit about its social values; that social power relations, at 'home' or abroad, are unequal and the lives of those negatively affected by such inequalities could be improved. Linked with

these, and the debates explored previously, social science departments have seen significant contributions to an existing body of knowledge about education; and a rise in research interests in children and young people more broadly. The critical ethnographic methods discussed below have been found to have particular utility for such research (Robinson 1994; Corsaro and Molinaro 2000).

It has been argued that ethnography enables insider advocacy; representing and thereby amplifying the voices of those hitherto silenced by unequal power relations (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 124). The example of children as a socially silenced group is relevant here, connecting to the previous chapters' discussions of the impacts of social constructions of children. Seen as not quite complete beings until adult, research into children's lives had hitherto been conducted *on* rather than *with* them. Indeed, the notion of getting into children's 'worlds' reinforces the idea that children and adults inhabit fundamentally different worlds. Alldred argues,

> [i]t is not unless children are seen as people in their own right that
> they can be thought of as participants of research. (2000: 150)

Such endeavours have been linked with struggles over identity and representation, against being socially silenced - of women, black and Asian people, homosexuals, people with disabilities (*ibid.:* 2000: 148). Moving away from former approaches that failed to recognise the impacts of wider contexts, studies began to produce detailed critical ethnographic engagement with questions of power, structure and agency, set within larger economic, political and historical settings.

This use of a critical ethnographic approach in educational settings is useful to this thesis as it enables exploration of a number of key issues. For example, Carspecken (1996) details a five-stage approach to conducting critical ethnography in educational research through which the researcher can arrive at an analysis contextualised in immediate and broader details. Stage one involves observation and taking detailed fieldnotes. Stage two involves initial analysis of these fieldnotes to lend further focus to particular areas of interest arising from

them. Stage three involves conducting interviews and discussions which allow for dialogical data generation in which participants' views and experiences can be explored. Stage four involves revisiting observations and interview transcripts to cross check truth claims. Further observation, participation and interviewing may be conducted at this stage. Stage five involves looking critically at the larger institutional framework within which the educational setting exists, and assessing the limitations, possibilities and constraints this may impose. This approach outlines valuable, clearly demarcated stages that should enable a validating cross checking between researcher and participant perceptions.

The research for this thesis used a broadly critical ethnography framework. This was chosen in an endeavour to strike a balance between a synchronic (descriptive) and diachronic (historically located) approach. It sought to understand the meanings participants attached to the purposes and priorities of after school clubs and of playwork. Linking with previous chapters, the research questions sought to locate these meanings within particular social policy contexts; and more broadly, to locate these within larger socio-historical contexts. Carspecken's (1996) five stage methodology influenced this thinking.

Carspecken's discussion of 'social sites', 'settings', 'locales' and 'social systems' (1996: 35) addressed these levels of investigation. He defines social sites as the immediate locations of interactive routine activity between people that are geographically and temporally delimited (i.e. after school sites, involving children, playworkers and parents). 'Settings', in Carspecken's use, signify not geographical boundaries but the certain shared understandings and boundaries of expected behaviour:

> a setting is something directly observable, defined by a tacit understanding shared by actors that makes their interactions possible. (1996: 35)

Thus this approach seeks to enable an exploration of the rules and relations between the site in question and nearby sites, in terms of the broader social, cultural, economic, political conditions that influence 'sites' and 'settings'.

'Locale' refers to the wider areas surrounding the research sites. They can be large or small, clearly or less clearly demarcated, depending on the type of site and the nature of the research questions. In this research the demographic locales surrounding the sites became an important part of responding to the research questions as they influenced the interpretations and implementations of policy and practice. Finally, social systems, according to Carspecken, are the larger conditions such as economic and political systems that do not 'originate on one site but rather shape activities throughout a large number of sites: a 'society'.' (1996: 36)

The approach of this research sought to investigate these various levels of meaning – from ideas about childhoods to local experiences - as they were occurring at the research sites. This approach pursued an understanding of how these different levels of interconnected meaning impacted on the meanings tacit within the research settings. Carspecken suggests that actors are not *forced* to act in particular ways, but are strongly influenced:

> Conditions that *resource* and/or *constrain* action operate *externally* to an actor's volition. They are conditions (like the physical environment, available money, laws) that have to be coped with regardless of an actor's beliefs, values, and social identity…. Conditions that *influence* operate internally to actor's volitions by helping to constitute their values, beliefs, and personal identity…. By acting in accordance with economic, political, or cultural conditions, actors 'reproduce' system relations. There is always some degree of freedom for acting otherwise: acting against conditions rather than in conformity with them. (1996: 37, emphasis in original)

This approach supported the current endeavour to explore locations of power within both structure and agency. This research seeks to investigate subjective experiences common to actors on the research sites; but also to locate the significance of these activities in relation to the larger social system. The

particular interest in children's play, learning and empowerment implicated a set of questions with complex power permutations through both subject matter and methodology. Carspecken's framework provided a useful orientation:

> Issues of power and inequality necessarily permeate social research of any type and at any stage. The models presented … will help the researcher who strives to spot and analyse power relations. (1996: 40)

Linked to this endeavour to critically analyse is the key importance of reflexivity in research.

Reflexivity

Deconstruction of notions of objectivity and scientific 'truth', and challenges to traditional power and representation relations necessitated introspective re-evaluation of the traditional positioning of the ethnographer; seeking to identify and locate the ethnographer as integral to the construction of ethnographic data. From the viewpoint of all knowledge being personal and cultural in some sense, ethnographic data collection processes and outcomes necessarily implicate the researcher's paradigms and agendas. This 'perspectival' notion of knowledge involves the recognition that who we are and where we are makes a difference to the knowledge we produce (Ribbens and Edwards 2000: 4). Ethnographers thus came to recognise that '[t]he ethnographer is a human instrument' (Fetterman 1998: 31). Such reflexive shifts began to enable a new dialogue between researcher and researched.

The practice of participant observation thus shifted to an 'observation of participation' (Tedlock 1991: 69), as anthropologists began to recognise their cultural and political positions, using their knowledge to turn back on themselves and recognise their own contingencies. Thus reflexivity is a multi-faceted critical analytical process and 'mode of awareness' whose development marks a shift in what researchers endeavour to achieve, including those primarily working with children (Connolly 1998: 189).

Through this reflexive awareness and a desire to democratise research relations and products, the role of the anthropologist comes to be recognised as the mediator between two systems of meaning. This mediation, involving 'more experiential and affective modes of knowing' (Kondo 1986: 75), is reconceptualised as a learning process that rests upon, and facilitates, the exchange of understandings through interaction, communication and comparison. The ethnographic endeavour becomes

> a means to an understanding of different worlds, but also a way of achieving knowledge of different ways of communicating about worlds and about different epistemologies. (Hastrup 1993: 155)

This shift in relations between 'self' and 'other' signifies an increasingly dialectical, reciprocal, probing of both concepts as each stimulates further questions about the other.

This multi-layered reflexivity, 'bringing home [of] the strategy of defamiliarisation' (Hastrup *ibid.*: 148) or 'distanciation' (Jackson 1987), changed traditional relations with informants. Similar to the new approaches to ethnography in more exotic locations, with a greater reflexive humility, subjects now became 'privileged knowers' (Hastrup *ibid.*: 151). The anthropologist's endeavour was to generate an understanding through experiential diffusion and de-construction of the power-laden boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other' (Corsaro and Molinaro 2000).

The anthropologist sought to be a more competent actor and observer; to recognise and negotiate different roles within the group, interacting from different sites of cultural knowledge as a means of grasping how experiences constitute understandings. Studies closer to home involved 'learning another language in the words of [one's] mother tongue' (Okely 1996: 23) and a rejection of the idea that we implicitly understand other people's lives, even within our own societies (Back 1996). Thus, questions of identity, power, and the politics of positionality (Barker and Smith 2001: 142) remain key to reflexive research practices.

Conducting ethnographic studies in one's own cultural context offers benefits. For example, it can be quicker to reach a point where language and customs under study are familiar. Examples like practitioner research, conducted from an 'insider' viewpoint, can generate different relations between researcher and researched, and enable unique opportunities for understanding and development (Brettell 1993). However, one must guard against illusions of over familiarity with a setting whereby the ethnographer perhaps takes things for granted, not noticing or noting important data (Fetterman 1998: 36). Composed of more than simply the phenomena they describe, insider accounts can inform us about the people and contexts that produce them.

These compounding factors led to acknowledgement and legitimation of the constructed nature of this kind of social scientific knowledge and representation. The reflexivity that ethnographers had formerly relegated to their private notebooks or field diaries became fundamental aspects of social research processes (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

The discussion above has outlined key understandings on which the research design and implementation were based. Before examining the application of the research design, the following section provides some information about the origins of the research from my personal and professional backgrounds.

About Myself

In the attempt to negotiate the complex terrain of self-location, I have yet to find better words to express my starting point than those of Peter Woods:

> My own experiences, background and personality dispose me
> towards principles of freedom, equality and justice as they are
> understood in moderate left-wing politics. I am fascinated by the
> struggle of human agency against the forces of structure and
> society. I have empathy for those labelled as 'deviants' or

'delinquents', and an interest in the circumstances that produce such actions and reactions. I am excited by the flowering of human capabilities and dismayed at their inhibition. My research is aimed at promoting the first and removing or limiting the effects of the second. (1996: 9)

I completed an undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology in the late 1990s and as a young Londoner, I was particularly interested in studies about how urban young people, often socially disenfranchised, claim forms of social power through, for example, language, music and dress (Hebdige 1979). As a playworker and youth worker in London since 2000, I became interested in the use of the term empowerment. Policy and practice documents and training events presented empowerment as a positive and vital child/youth centred approach through which to support young people in feeling valued and listened to, encouraging their confidence and skills development, and sharing decision making powers so they could see their choices affecting their lives and environments.

As a playworker I saw the inspiring contribution we made. There were poignant experiences, seeing children overcome fears and parents expressing profound appreciation for how much the centre and our work had helped their children to deal with their emotions, to gain confidence, and learn how to develop friendships. All this led to a desire to look more closely at what it is that playworkers do, how we conceptualise what we do, the relationships between how policies and procedures may empower children in these settings, and what contributions this may make. This research therefore evolved from professional interests in the potential contributions playwork can make and also from broader personal and academic interests in the roles and relationships between young people and society.

As a result of these predispositions, when the fieldwork began, I was aware of being acquainted with these environments as a playworker. My training and experience had taught me to see the profession as a means of helping children to develop positively both in relation to themselves and others. But I also knew that

I sought to explore the views and experiences of the participants. To do this required critical evaluation of how I had been trained to think about playwork in these settings. My research diary provided space in which to question this both during and after the fieldwork, and to see how my own perspectives evolved in response to the fieldwork experience and my ongoing reading of the existing literature.

Applying the Research Design

This chapter has thus far discussed the connections between the ontological and epistemological positions upon which the research questions and methods were predicated and outlined some of the relevant shifts in ethnographic approaches.

This research sought to investigate participants' experiences and values in relation to play, learning and empowerment in two after school settings. The use of participant observation and semi-structured interviews enabled this. There are, of course, inherent contradictions and complexities within the ethnographic goal of presenting 'how things are'; aiming to democratise the research process, through involving participants, coupled with the ultimate requirement to determine ethnographic findings. The following section discusses how the research sought to contend with and temper these challenges.

I take the position here that thought and perception are culturally produced; and that there is no direct, unmediated, knowledge of the world. What people say and do, are interactions with and reflections of meanings generated in particular socio-cultural contexts. But people are also creative beings; social actors constrained but not determined by social structures (Carspecken 1996). Thus, the social world is constituted through a dynamic interaction between culturally and historically located discourses and human responses. Whilst social contexts provide the language and concepts through which people experience and respond to the world, culture exists within the meanings that they (re)produce (Geertz 1973). The meanings that people attribute in their lives can, thus, be understood

as expressions of personal, social, cultural and historical phenomena (Silverman 2001).

However, if perception involves socially constructed concepts, unchecked participation and observation are not, in themselves, valid bases for research arguments (Carspecken 1996; Silverman 2001). Therefore, this research also used in-depth investigation into the views and experiences of the participants. Through this triangulation of observation, participation and conversation, plus documentary analysis, the current research sought to generate rigorous data (Silverman 2001).

The use of ethnographic methods here allowed for analysis of what people said and did over time, and provided situated knowledge about their world. Furthermore, through attempts at transparency, and employing a reflexive, inductive approach, the present research sought to facilitate participants in having a 'direct voice' in the production of data (James and Prout 1997: 5).

Gaining Ethics Approval

Research with children using participant observation raises particular ethical considerations, including questions of consent, rights to withdraw, confidentiality and considerations of harm to participants (Cocks 2006). Following approval from Middlesex University ethics panel (see Appendix one) and the Borough (see Appendices two and three), the research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists and the Economic and Social Research Council.

All participants were informed about the project, in person and in writing. Confirmation was given that involvement was voluntary and withdrawal at any point would have no negative consequences. Throughout the research, I was available to discuss any questions participants had and, in the interests of not imposing conceptual frameworks, described the research broadly as a study of the centres.

Anonymity was maintained throughout the project. Comments or discussions between participants and the researcher remained confidential, and all names in the final thesis are fictionalised. In accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998), all data was stored on a computer accessible only to the researcher. To investigate what people really thought, it was important they were facilitated in expressing themselves in confidence. At times this meant not tape-recording conversations at the participant's request, or reaffirming that I would only pass on information should matters of child protection arise. On occasions when participants expressed concerns, I directed them to appropriate channels to convey their issues. I regularly discussed my fieldwork relations and reflections with my supervisors for their feedback and guidance.

The negotiation of ethical practice proved to be a dynamic process requiring ongoing consideration throughout the research (Mason 2002). There were a number of occasions when I felt conflicted. Some of these are explored below.

Access

Gaining access to research sites, particularly those involving children, necessitates negotiation of hierarchical networks. Rather than simply a matter of one-off approval, gaining and deepening access can be seen as a chronological, multifaceted and ongoing process of engaging in the 'politics of access' (Barker and Weller 2003: 212). For this research, the initial stages of gaining permission, morphed at various institutional levels and access became a question of establishing positive relationships with individuals. Gaining and maintaining access required switching between different roles with different relationships; sometimes I was a professional colleague, or a naïve questioner, or almost a playworker, and sometimes I was clearly a researcher.

Access was conditional upon senior management approval, beginning with the director of the local authority's Education Department. I obtained this by writing to, and meeting with, senior management members, who liaised with the director on my behalf (see appendices two and three). During our initial meetings, I outlined the research background, methods and desired duration. In the interests of serving a purpose for the local authority and its service users, I proposed a

final report for management and participants outlining the research's key findings. This idea was approved.

Senior management agreement constituted the initial, largely bureaucratic process of gaining access and took almost six months longer than anticipated. As expected, they required confirmation of ethics approval from the university, evidence of a full up-to-date Enhanced Disclosure Criminal Records Bureau police check (CRB) and a volunteer induction at both sites. All of these requirements were met. We agreed that the sites would have the choice to be involved in the research. Actual access depended, therefore, on the site management and staff, the children and the parents/carers.

Prior to commencing, I was concerned that senior management may have expected a convergence of agendas with mine. This raised questions regarding the involvement they might wish to have in the focus of the study or that they might grant conditional access. Indeed, senior management imposed restrictions on which sites I could chose from. The reasons given for this were that at a time of short staffing, only those sites with permanent management were good options for the study due to questions of stability and consistency. This was the only condition management put on the research access and they made no requirements regarding the research focus.

Staff at one of the sites approved by senior management chose not to be involved in the research. Despite my efforts to suggest otherwise, they were concerned that the research would involve an evaluation of their practice, to which they were already subject from Ofsted. Therefore I met individually with the management of two other sites. On agreement with them, I then met with the staff teams. This meeting involved outlining the research, ethical formalities and approval, why their sites were being approached, the length of the study and what participation could involve for interested staff, parents/carers and children. We discussed matters concerning researcher independence, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, what the team might gain from involvement, and what the research aimed to produce upon conclusion. I encouraged staff to ask questions and to consider the option, individually and as a team, before

responding. I also encouraged them to approach me personally or by email if they desired.

Following staff agreement, I met with children, then parents/carers. Presentation of the project to the children involved describing the research as similar to a big project they might do for school. The same key aspects were covered with the children regarding research outcomes, confidentiality, voluntary participation, etc. The children were asked if they had any questions and if they agreed to the research happening at their site. They were encouraged to talk to their parents/carers or staff, or myself if they wished. I introduced myself to all parents/carers and explained the project, covering the same areas.

Further to these initial meetings, I gave all staff, parents and carers an accessibly worded one page document outlining the research background and procedures (see Appendix four). The document detailed background information about myself, the institutional base and expected outcomes. In a 'frequently asked questions' style, the document included information about participants' voluntary role in the study, issues of anonymity and confidentiality, and my contact details and site attendance days. I consulted with staff as to whether this document should be offered in different languages, to maximise inclusivity. Staff considered this unnecessary for the parents/carers currently using their sites.

My formal introduction at one of the sites involved completion of a volunteer induction with the site manager. During this meeting the manager outlined a volunteer's roles and responsibilities, gave me a tour of the site, and detailed council policies and procedures on equal opportunities, health and safety, fire procedures, complaints procedure, use of equipment, attendance at staff meetings, etc. The induction at the other site was more informal, though some policies and procedures and agreements about my attendance were discussed.

Gaining access proved to be a matter of recognising that different gatekeepers had different agendas. Negotiating a position required catering to this. Senior management's agenda appeared to be primarily concerned with bureaucratic and confidentiality issues, whereas the staff teams were interested in how my insider

view, as a former playworker removed from the daily necessities of being a staff member, could bring insights. As explored below, determined by my sense of myself and by other's sense of me and their agendas, my positionality involved taking on distinct roles.

Fieldwork

At the time of the research, the local authority ran 10 after school play sites in diverse catchment areas across the Borough. They were fee-paying facilities in which employed, unemployed and studying parents/carers registered their children's attendance at the beginning of the school term. The senior management team managed the sites according to local council policies and procedures. Each site catered for between 20 and 40 children daily, aged 5 to 11 years old. Operation hours were between 3.15pm and 6.15pm each weekday. Sites had between 3 and 6 staff, and 1 or 2 management staff. The children left only when signed-out by parents/carers.

The sites provided primary contexts in which, through examination of their similarities and differences, I was able to explore the complexity of the issues affecting them; rather than the comparison of these sites providing an explicit fulcrum of the research. The sites were in distinct catchment areas with different economic and social concerns; they catered for different numbers of children and had different resources in terms of their location and staffing. These distinctions allowed investigation of how policies and procedures, needs and requirements, were being implemented and responded to in different settings in the same Borough. Contrasts in these factors were of interest in investigating how the 'space' of after school club was created; being not just a question of location but socially constructed in ways that provide for different types of relationships with explicit and implicit codes of behaviour and expectations (Barker *et al.* 2003: 209).

Fieldwork was conducted twice weekly at each site – Ferns and Dexters - between October 2007 and July 2008. The primary data collection period

comprised a total of three academic terms. Quite evenly split between the two sites I conducted a total of 48 visits, almost 200 hours of participant observation. Like the staff members, I was present between 2.30pm and 6.30pm. My attendance days shifted from term to term to enable observation of differences such as alternative staffing patterns and activities, and different children's attendance.

I made fieldnotes during site visits when there was an area available where I could gain some privacy, i.e. in the office or a quiet corner. More detailed notes were compiled following each visit. These early fieldnotes detailed the daily procedures and accounts of what happened, what was said, and where events occurred. As pointed out by Hammersley and Atkinson:

> As analytical ideas develop and change, what is 'significant' and what must be included in the fieldnotes also changes. Over time, notes may also change in character, in particular becoming more concrete and detailed. (1995: 180)

Therefore, as the research progress, later fieldnotes focused more detail on interactions.

The use of a research diary provided a space for extended notes, and ongoing reflection and re-evaluation of my research approach, process, questions and aims, and issues arising (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight 2002: 49). It also provided a space for articulation of frustrations, confusions and occasional bouts of research fatigue.

Fieldwork Term One

The research approach was based broadly on Carspecken's five-stage design (1996). Corresponding approximately to his stage one, during the first term, I took more of an 'observer' role. I devised a simple initial observation template comprising date, time, people present, activity, what was done and what was said. Observations sought to detail how people interacted in, and created, the after school club environment. I took detailed notes pertaining to the site layout

and how people used it; noting interactions between staff and children, between staff and staff, between parents/carers and staff, to generate a picture of relationships and organisational processes (Robinson 1994: 44-45).

I observed setting up, escorting, play and snack time procedures, staff meetings, parent/carer, child and staff interactions, end of day procedures such as tidying up and communications with parents/carers as they collected their children. Thus, data was accumulated on routines, events and activities. Notes on these observations lent further focus or raised questions for subsequent observations. The level and breadth of data accumulated during these fieldwork sessions was at times overwhelming. I considered this to be part of the ethnographic process and a reflection of my endeavour throughout the research to balance planning with flexibility.

On a typical visit I would spend some time in each area then move to another. This move was sometimes spurred by a sense that it was time to move on (perhaps the children appeared to be conscious of my presence or I felt that what was happening was more of what I had already observed) and sometimes this move was instigated by action happening elsewhere. With a little practice and reflection I knew I was particularly interested in relations between children and staff. This involved looking at what roles emerged from the group; how decision-making occurred; what patterns arose within interactions, and what attitudes the interactions appeared to reflect.

Fieldwork Term Two
During term two, out of these earlier observations and revisiting the fieldnotes, preliminary questions began to arise, regarding, for example, professional identities and power relations. I was curious about what underlying agendas interactions might illuminate; what unsaid rules might be governing them; what the social contexts were; and how the groups and staff related to each other. I was interested in the content of conversations, who talked and who listened, and what views and beliefs might be revealed. I was interested in the meanings staff attributed to what they did and what values and beliefs might be implied. The

approach in stage two therefore involved more directed observations and participation.

With the staff's agreement, I shadowed them. The intention with this was to hone my observations. By focussing on staff/child interactions closely, I could ask playworkers to explain their actions. In practice, however, this plan was often impractical. Staff were generally fully occupied with diverse tasks and addressing children's needs. Therefore I adapted this idea and talked with staff about their thoughts and actions only when they appeared to have a moment.

Fieldwork Term Three

During term three, I conducted the semi-structured interviews with staff, parents and children. The fieldwork process over the previous two terms had helped hone the interview questions. During this stage I also sat with my laptop at teatimes, when all the children were in one place, and asked them about what they did, liked most and least at play centre, and whether they felt they got to choose their activities. On a couple of occasions a child volunteered as an interviewer. We devised questions together based on how to describe after school club to someone who had never been there. They used my Dictaphone to record interviews with other children.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed for exploration of the participants' experiences and worldviews within a framework instigated by the researcher but expanded and developed by the participant. Interviewing is recognised as an effective method for delving into participants' understandings, feelings and experiences (Kvale 1996; Mason 2002). These explanations are considered to constitute valid accounts of experiences, reflections and observations at the time they are expressed.

It must be borne in mind, however, that an interview is a distinct setting. I was aware of the ineradicable 'effects of audience, and indeed of context generally, on what people say and do' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 130-131). It corresponds that what is shared in an interview may not be the understandings

that underpin the participants' behaviour elsewhere. Hence I also had unsolicited conversations with participants (*ibid.*: 126). The later analysis of the interviews transcripts and fieldnote observations and conversations enabled exploration of what participants said when asked questions alongside what they said and did on a daily basis.

I was mindful that particular filters and agendas necessarily influence the interviewer's and the interviewee's inputs and interpretations in interactions throughout the research. Attempts to understand the objects of research and the meanings they inhabit necessarily arise from one's own contextually determined 'instruments of thought' (Bourdieu 1992: 40; also Denscombe 2002: 158). The data generated in the interview interaction is no exception (Kvale 1996: 159; Mason 2002). The role of the researcher as interviewer therefore also requires reflexive scrutiny (Tedlock 1991). An interview is understood as the site of the construction of knowledge in which a co-production of meaning is generated:

> literally an *inter view*, an inter-change of views between two persons
> conversing about a theme of mutual interest (Kvale 1996: 14, emphasis in
> original).

As discussed below, during the analysis, trying to understand both what had been said and why, shaped my efforts.

This research takes the position that whether provided by participants or researchers:

> every narrative or representation is a version rather than an objective
> and neutral description (Mason 2002: 168).

Therefore, while the participants' accounts constitute neither an objective truth, nor a direct account of lived experience, the analysis values their 'insider view' (Blaikie 2000: 115) as they currently articulate it. The semi-structured interview approach thus seeks to provide a discursive space in which participants might

reflect, construct and present their perspectives (Flick 2002: 202-203; Mason *ibid.*: 63).

During the first few interviews I stuck most closely to the interview schedule (see Appendix six). As I became more relaxed and able to respond on the spot to participants, the interviews became more like focused conversations, as I had planned. In these later examples, I followed on from points that participants raised, to encourage them to explain further. On occasion I paraphrased what I had understood in search of confirmation or correction of my interpretation. Having developed relationships with the participants over the previous months, we were also able to refer to events we had both witnessed or matters broached previously.

Transcription is also considered part of the analysis process, a subjective activity and a decontextualisation of a social interaction. It involves the translation from one narrative mode to another, from oral to written language. If we take meaning to be contextual as explored above, then transcripts, taken away from the contexts in which their articulations occurred, are necessarily removed from simply representing, in written form, the meanings generated in the conversation interaction. More than

> copies or representations of some original reality, they are
> interpretative constructions that are useful tools for given purposes
> (Kvale 1996: 165-7).

Though fixed on paper, the transcripts represent processes of meaning construction. Thus, the analyst's role is to interpret and endeavour to reliably argue for the underlying meanings the words represent (*op. cit.*: 183). With these considerations in mind, I transcribed all of the interviews. All participants were offered a copy and encouraged to give further feedback on the content of the transcripts. This was intended as a means of verification and further understanding. None of the participants who accepted a copy of their interviews made any further comments.

All staff, parents and children at the two sites were informed about the research. Staff and parents who agreed to interviews gave signed consent (see Appendix five). Children who agreed to interviews had prior parental permission. I completed one brief or semi-structured interview with the following participants; 2 managers, 1 deputy manager, 4 permanent playworkers, 1 agency staff member, 34 children and 12 parents/carers. Lasting between 15 minutes and 1 hour, I conducted most of the interviews at the after school sites, mainly between May and July 2008. I sound recorded and transcribed them verbatim and made additional notes of my thoughts immediately after the interviews. On one occasion an off-site interview was more convenient for a working parent so I went to her workplace. Occasionally I did not sound record interviews at the participant's request. Also, recording of some interviews was not practicable; for example, when the spontaneous nature of the conversation was such that to set up recording would have stilted its flow. In such cases, I made notes, as verbatim as possible, during and/or immediately after the conversation.

I developed first and second level interview questions from my research aims and key questions. First level questions represented what I wanted to find out. For example: What is the relationship between play and informal learning in these contexts? How do play and informal learning in these contexts relate to children's empowerment? What does empowerment mean, if anything, for people in these settings? What are the playworker's experiences, motivations, values, beliefs and self-perception? What are their attitudes to children, to their own learning and development, to parent/carer involvement? Second level questions related more directly to what I might ask participants. For example, their views on what the after school clubs were trying to provide, what children might be gaining from their attendance, and how they perceived playworker's jobs.

From this two-tiered mapping of desired data, I developed the interview schedules (see Appendix six). I was keen that the questions for the different participant groups would be sufficiently similar, consistent and systematic for later analysis purposes. In the interviews I tried to avoid wording that might make participants want to justify or explain themselves defensively. I avoided

saying things like 'why did you….' Instead, I used openings like 'how would you describe…' and 'what was your thinking…' This open questioning aimed to encourage a more discursive response.

Interviews with children consisted of interviews with individual children, group interviews, and informal conversations. Also, as children wanted to get involved, some children interviewed other children according to questions we jointly devised. I realised during this process that the children's confidentiality and freedom to express themselves was an issue as staff would pass by and listen to what the children were saying. In examples like these, balancing the children's confidentiality with my ethical requirement not to be alone with any child, I engineered seating positions that allowed the children some privacy and asked staff not to be too close.

Relations with Participants
To enable my relationships with staff and children to form and to make less conspicuous observations, I involved myself in activities from the outset. This shifted along a sliding scale of degrees of involvement; from uninvolved observation (trying to watch events without appearing to be observing too closely); to participant observation (directly involved in games or activities); to informal conversations. Reflexively, I was very aware that I was a visitor. I was keen to avoid potentially causing discomfort to participants through feelings of being watched, thus affecting both their behaviour and their ease with my presence. Therefore, while at times I was quite involved in activities and events, at other times I tried to be unobtrusive. For example, though I might have been observing a particular incident or event, I often moved away or redirected my eye contact or activity, in an attempt to appear disengaged.

I adopted a friendly manner, greeting parents/carers, talking with children and staff about general topics often instigated by them. These endeavours to communicate casually about various topics, and to appear approachable and interested, were geared towards putting participants at ease with my presence. I hoped that by establishing communication with participants, in addition to enabling participant observation, this rapport would enable me to learn about

their worlds and might contribute to their interest in participating in subsequent semi-structured interviews. In some cases it did.

Some participants expressed an interest in the research; others volunteered more general or lesser communication. Hammersley and Atkinson argue that it is important not to rely solely on solicited accounts or responses to questions as

> otherwise we may be misled by reactivity, by the effects of the researcher's questions on what is said (1995: 129).

Indeed, particularly in the early stages of the fieldwork, on occasions where my questions were more specific, their directness seemed abrupt. Some tentativeness about what I was doing and how to position myself may have contributed to this. Unsolicited accounts often flowed more comfortably. I endeavoured to minimize my effect on what participants said by asking few specific questions, engaging instead in informally chatting and through this searching for participant's perspectives. I had informed everyone why I was there and always wore my student card so was comfortable with this approach to gaining unsolicited accounts. This gentler approach seemed important to earning some trust with participants (Fetterman 1998: 33). As the research and relations progressed, I was able to engage some participants in more honed conversations.

It became clear that my negotiation of field relations was not only one of establishment and development, but one of quite distinct relationships with different participants. Although this was different from individual to individual, broadly speaking, this could be categorised as the roles generated and at times necessitated between myself and management, myself and staff, myself and children, and myself and parents/carers. This negotiation of various identities was, in part, an endeavour to negotiate what I perceived as the differing agendas and expectations of these groups.

The nature of identity is that we are different aspects of ourselves depending on who we are interacting with (Hall 1997). It is the same in research, both positioning ourselves and being positioned 'in different terms by different

members of the same institution' (Burgess 1984: 89). Amongst other things, this meant that over the course of the research, relations with different people were evolving at different paces. Contending with the fieldwork also meant contending with these dynamics. This was important as

> the negotiation of relationships between the ethnographer and the research population provides the means to, and constitutes a fundamental part of, an eventual understanding (Hall 2000: 122).

If I had established relations with other people in these settings, or the relations I had were different (i.e. the content and intent of conversations with people was influenced by the sort of rapport we shared), my impressions and the data collected would have been affected. Notwithstanding my occasional reticence on account of interpreting people as busy or even their 'indifference' to talking with me (*ibid.*: 127), I sparked as many conversations as possible during the fieldwork. Sometimes these were rich communications giving much to explore in the analysis stages, sometimes they were passing pleasantries, (which themselves told me about these kinds of interactions in these settings), sometimes they blossomed into regular interactions, sometimes they did not.

With staff, I was a volunteer playworker, at times quite immersed in setting up activities, supporting and playing with children. That this was the professional merit on which access had been attained held some sway. In search of a comfortable position, my desire to help-out reflected an inclination to get involved, to continue to be welcome at the site, wanting to contribute to the afternoon's tasks, to have fun with the children, and for them to have someone new to have fun with. Particularly when the sites were short staffed, the contribution that appeared most useful was simply to help with what needed doing. Indeed, there were occasions where it simply seemed inappropriate not to help. Staff expressed appreciation for this support.

Perhaps this desire to be helpful was because I am a former colleague of many of the staff and I wanted to help them out, and as a former playworker I know how busy after school sites can become, and perhaps I was also conscious that not

contributing might damage relations. While I was glad to support and contribute, at times helping meant slipping into my old familiar playworker role with the children, such as issuing safety warnings when concerns arose. This was a role that I sought to avoid. It was tricky at times to absorb the contradictions and balancing acts of negotiating and switching between different roles (Holt 2004: 13). I tried not to be the adult in terms of not telling children off or asserting any power. But I also needed to be able to switch to an adult role at times, particularly when dealing with adults. This was because of my sense of expected behaviour. But it was also about my sense of responsibility and the agreement I had made as an inducted 'volunteer'. So there were occasions where, for example, I felt that a child might hurt their self if I did not intervene and there was no other adult around to step in. At times like this, I felt, and other playworkers commented, that my familiarity with the setting was very welcome.

In a sense, being a practitioner researcher in moments like this seemed useful. However, I felt conflicted. I wanted to be useful, but also wanted to remain in the background and not influence behaviour. I came to realise that this conflicted feeling was also about questioning my own beliefs, views of children, views of playwork practice and policy requirements. These are discussed in chapter nine.

At other times I adopted a more unfamiliar, naïve and curious role; more researcher than practitioner. This involved asking questions that to some playworkers at times appeared odd, and reinstated my role as something other than volunteer or playworker. This was challenging at times. The research process and my identity as a researcher constituted an unfolding and new terrain, whereas I knew how to be a playworker. This crossing and blurring of boundaries and delineation of stark differences was highlighted at moments when staff would ask me to do something like supervise the children. As a volunteer, under agreement not to be left in a supervisory role, I had to decline. Staff were understanding about this, though it took getting used to for all of us.

This negotiation of different roles raises issues of researcher impact. Being involved or looking on from the sidelines clearly had different merits for the research findings, and different impacts on the research settings. Participation,

while impacting on the research context, afforded me a role of playworker, which seemed more benign and familiar than straight uninvolved observation (which, as one playworker commented, echoed evaluative inspections conducted by Ofsted). Being involved facilitated the establishment of rapport and communication with staff and children. Stepping back and observing, however, often yielded more in depth observational fieldnotes. Thus I tried to balance familiarity and 'distanciation' (Jackson 1987) both in my relations with participants and the contexts.

With the children, I encouraged them to feel comfortable and for my presence to be a positive contribution where possible by playing with them and being fun and friendly. This was a primary agenda in an endeavour to encourage them to enjoy my presence, and thus to be potentially more likely to be open with me and to want to be involved in an interview later on. I played games with them when invited, read to or listened to them read when asked, and sat and talked about topics mostly of their choosing while they ate their afternoon snacks. Some children, often girls, were vocal and quick to engage with me, others were less so. Not being a skilled footballer or avid computer game player was a disadvantage, particularly with the boys. My gender impacted upon relations (Barker and Smith 2001: 142). I noticed that it was often girls who befriended me. My relations with the children, and the impact of my gender, age and background, were reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's point about the necessary recognition of our physicality, and the non separation of our physicality from our interactions with the world; that 'we are in the world through our body' (1962: 206 cited in Back 2004: 33). I felt quite conscious of this physicality, myself as my ethnographic tool.

Establishing relations and generating much more than passing pleasantries with parents/carers, particularly in the early stages, proved challenging. Adopting a semi-playworker role was familiar with the children and the staff. However, this role fell away when trying to develop relations with parents. I was not a playworker. I was not a volunteer. I was a student with a vested interest in these settings and I found establishing a position with parents tricky. This was partly because parents often appeared hurried. As a result, I found it hard to approach

them for much beyond casual pleasantries. This was also a reflection of my nervousness with my new researcher role. Overtime I became more comfortable and established communications with a number of parents.

In addition to these differences, as the research evolved, I found that I was different at the two sites. I was often more involved with the children at Ferns, the smaller site; and more of an observer at Dexters. This was largely because of the different layouts of the sites and the influence this had on how the children and staff occupied them. For example, at Dexters the children had more space and therefore appeared more independent in their use of the space, also more children were present for them to play with. At Ferns, with less space, their choices were more limited, everyone was in closer proximity and there were fewer children. This made my presence stand out more. The children at Ferns also appeared keen for a new playmate.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature searches included original work in books and journals from a range of contexts and a selection of disciplines, focusing on approaches within the humanities. The secondary materials were also drawn from various disciplines – mainly sociology and social anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach is common to recent studies of the new social studies of childhood (Barker and Weller 2003; James *et al.* 1998). When researching child-related topics I used the specialist libraries of the Children's Play Information Service and the National Children's Bureau. For broader academic topics, such as methodology, I mainly accessed resources from the British and Middlesex libraries and Internet sources.

Searching for material involved the use of keywords and keyword combinations. In an endeavour to avoid excessive replication in repeat searches, I only looked for resources after dates previously searched. Some sources came from fortuitous browsing. Using various groupings of broad then more specific terms, I searched online social science databases. These provided references and full text documents. Peer reviewed journals were considered to provide the most up to

date work. Using library resources I searched for background historical and theoretical contexts provided in books.

My reading involved three key ongoing levels of response: locating specific readings within larger contexts; understanding and critically assessing specific readings; and responding to how these raised questions, supported or challenged my thoughts and evolving arguments. Reading the range of literature and engaging in the research processes continued to highlight the influence of my social anthropological, professional and personal backgrounds. I continued to unravel how these positions influenced what and how I read. Despite extensive preparation, the research process has been an unfolding one of finding 'the right questions'. This has related also to the primary research itself. As Fetterman argues,

> the best way to learn how to ask the right questions – beyond the literature search and proposal ideas, is to go into the field and find out what people do day to day. (1998: 33)

As a result, the secondary literature research has also been an unfolding process of finding the right questions to ask. I have therefore endeavoured to question my lines of thought throughout the process, to be reflexive in my reading, and to read outside of my disciplinary or professional zones. I have endeavoured to assess and understand the epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning the literature I have read, the schools of thought they refer to and build upon, and the quality of the texts in terms of their theoretical and substantive arguments. To this end, and to address the breadth of my research aims and questions, I have tried throughout the research to balance broadening and narrowing my focus (Hart 2001: 13). This has supported an evolving critical evaluation of my own and others' work, through my reading, writing and research practices.

The following section discusses the organisation of the data, the analysis and some limitations.

Analysis

The analysis employed deductive and inductive aspects to explore the research focus, unanticipated emergent themes, and ideas about childhood that became important as the fieldwork evolved. This involved three main stages that correspond to shifts in ways of reading the data from literal to interpretive (Mason 2002: 92). These are outlined below: the organisation of the data, initial responses to the research questions and thematic development.

During the course of the research, the distinctions between the sites, as well as between the participant groups, became pertinent for exploration. Therefore participants' views were analysed (and subsequently presented in the chapters) accordingly as parents, children and staff, and by which site they were from. Initial coding tables were generated that identified these. This approach enabled analysis of how the different groups perceived the provisions. This does not imply homogeneity within the groups and differences are explored in the findings chapters.

The data analysed includes verbatim interview transcripts, and verbatim and non-verbatim notes from impromptu conversations. Where notes are not verbatim, they were still worthwhile conversations, which I recorded after the fact as closely to the words used as possible. Where notes are not verbatim, these views are discussed rather than quoted. This reflects the real-life nature of ethnography and is indicative of my endeavours to contend with the practicalities of being in locations where staff were working, children were playing, and parents were coming and going. To engage with as many people as possible required 'considerable sensitivity' to how and when participants wanted to talk (Ribbens and Edwards 2000: 10). Disparities in the data could have been avoided by only conducting semi-structured interviews, but such an approach would also have missed valuable data.

Initially the interview transcripts were subdivided, with all answers to the same interview questions grouped together. Preliminary data organisation involved

repeated literal readings in which the content was coded and categorised tables were devised (Mason 2002). The vertical axis of the tables identified categories and subcategories of participants' responses, while the horizontal axis of the tables identified participant's group, i.e. parent, playworker, child, and which site they were from. This approach enabled me to begin to see broad responses to the interview questions and, by extension, aspects of the research questions. Some of the similarities and differences between the views of the participant groups and sites began to emerge.

It was useful to draw together, compare and contrast participants' responses to the same interview questions as a starting point for the coding and analysis. Beginning like this meshed with the ontological and epistemological standpoint because what people say and what is observed can be used to constitute knowledge about people's opinions, values and the meanings attributed to actions.

Development of the coding and the categories was progressed by returning to the original transcripts to include where participants discussed those categories less directly and not necessarily in response to a particular question. For example the themes emergent from participant's views of the importance of children's play emerged throughout the interviews, not just in response to a particular question. This stage of the coding served to refine and cross-check the categories, and ensured that the data was all coded. This level of indexing clarified how frequently particular categories and themes came up, from whom and in which contexts. A circular process of returning to the data and creation of the cross sectional coding enabled refinement and clarification of the categories. I began to see connections or disparities between them. These were then explored by cross referencing fieldnote excerpts. These developed, supported or challenged what people said in the interviews.

Coding the interviews first helped with coding the fieldnotes because the transcripts represented what participants said in response to the interview questions. Coding the fieldnotes uncovered patterns and showed that I had focused on some things and not others. This is discussed further shortly. Coding

the fieldnotes involved literal categorisation of what was said and what was happening, cross-sectional coding of similarities and differences between observations, and between observations and the transcripts. Thus, coding the observations helped with questioning the relations between what people said, what they did and what they said about what they did.

By cross-referencing the interviews with the fieldnotes I was able to challenge my impressions and create an analytical narrative built on both sources. This was then further developed through coding of pertinent policy documents which were used to contextualise the explanations and practices of playworkers and children. The outcome of these coding and categorisation stages was the emergence of the themes that later became the topics for the findings chapters.

Organising the data thematically, as opposed to perhaps chronologically, fits the thesis aims because the issues I sought to explore were constituted thematically. For example, the meanings of childhood, notions of what is good for children, ideas about play and learning. These concepts and themes interweave throughout the comparative perspectives and practices at the sites. Some diachronic analysis was relevant and is explored in the findings chapters. For example, the impacts of attendance fee changes during the fieldwork, and the ebbs and flows of new children settling in and how staff supported them. As explored earlier in this chapter, and further in chapter nine, chronology was also relevant to my own reflexivity and relations with participants.

The initial categories served as guides for further analysis and inferential readings of what participants said and did. In addition, to keep the analysis within the meaningful parameters of the complexity and nuances of real life, further readings of the data returned to more holistic induction. This involved detailed reading of the data, then pulling back to interpret it in relation to other factors; for example, social and professional processes, agendas and discourses. These different approaches to coding and categorising allowed perspective on the data from various angles. Supported or challenged by my further reading, both close-up and broader perspectives are represented in the coming chapters.

Systematic reading, cross-sectional coding and writing early drafts of the chapters gradually helped to solidify emergent themes. I developed the themes partly inductively, from the concepts participants used – for example the theme of the relationship between perceptions of the locality and expectations of the site provisions - and partly deductively from concepts influenced by the literature – such as perceptions of children and childhood. This approach involved levels of uncertainty or indeterminacy, but 'boundaries exist on the possibilities, boundaries that the researcher must discover and elucidate' (Carspecken 1996: 42). These slow processes resembled a distillation in which the material became more manageable and began to gain clarity. At the same time, my interpretations also became more nuanced and complex.

The after school provision policy and practice documents, obtained further to conversations with senior and site management, initially provided contextual information about the settings. This ranged from my understandings of instructions on procedures to beginning to infer the significance of concepts on the basis of their frequency in these documents. As frameworks through which participants, particularly the staff, rationalised and articulated their views and practices, more analytical subsequent readings enabled me to also look for patterns, as well as contrasts and similarities with what participants said and did during the fieldwork and interviews (Fetterman 1998: 102).

The analysis and writing of the chapters occurred in a circular, iterative manner. The evolution of the chapters provided space in which intangible impressions could become evident and be questioned; ideas could be tested, developed and challenged; distilling aspects of the analysis, returning to the transcripts to test interpretations, writing about those, finding challenges, inspiration or alternative perspectives in the literature; talking about my ideas or obtaining feedback from my supervisors; and exploring these ideas and responses further in the data and analysis. All of these processes helped to develop the chapters. Writing involved getting deeper into the data, reading 'through or beyond' it (Mason 2002: 149), chipping away at complexities to make sense of them and find ways to write about them. This was a simultaneous endeavour to carve the data into

manageable pieces in relation to the research focus and a pursuit of the unexpected.

The final analysis stage linked the key concepts introduced in chapters two and three, with the 'reconstructive' (Carspecken 1996) or what Mason calls 'interpretive' (2002) analyses of the fieldnotes, interviews and documents. This involved a higher level of inference based on the systematic analysis of the data, making deeper connections between themes emergent from the data and the literature. The findings chapters are divided to explore the various levels, contradictions, ambiguities and complexities revealed by this kind of research and analysis approach.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined why ethnography was appropriate to this study and the method chosen to address the current research interests. It has looked at some key underpinning trajectories relevant to the chosen approach and explored how this ethnography constructs understandings of the social world, its relative strengths and limitations, and the specific characteristics of participant observation and semi-structured interviewing employed for this research. The chapter has explored the backgrounds to a methodological and substantive ethnographic focus on questions of power and representation, begun to make links between these and the application of the research design and reflexively located my position as the researcher. It has also mapped some of the often contradictory personal and interpersonal processes engaged in during data collection.

Chapter Five

Two Case Examples

Introduction

The bombarding noise and frenetic movement all around strike me most as I enter the after school clubs on the first few occasions. It is only two years since I worked in such places daily, but now I am wondering how these playworkers do it! One minute dealing with the concerns of a crying five year old, the next moment supporting a group of ten year olds to resolve a football dispute themselves, all amidst the hustle and bustle of children starting one thing, moving to something else, climbing on outdoor structures, painting pictures, chatting, running about, singing, falling over.

Participant observation and interviews were conducted during the academic year 2007 to 2008. This chapter describes the settings ethnographically, drawing on fieldnotes, informal conversations, transcribed semi-structured interviews and information from policy documents. The chapter maps some of the Borough's demographic details and describes the physical environments and layouts of Ferns and Dexters after school provisions. Looking at daily patterns, play, activities and relationships, the settings are described as if describing a 'typical day' in the 'ethnographic present'. Though this idea has been criticised (Pina Cabral 2000), here it is employed in the interest of holding dynamic events constant enough to describe them. As both sites were attended throughout the fieldwork, rather than consecutively, there was a degree of simultaneity to the participant observation at each. The synchronic description is developed in this chapter and in subsequent chapters to look at the data more diachronically. Thus the chapter introduces some similarities and differences between the sites that emerged during the fieldwork.

The chapter begins to link this 'thick' description (Geertz 1973) with relationships between organisational frameworks and everyday service delivery and practices. The chapter introduces tensions observed, and that some participants identified, between requirements to supervise and control, but also to facilitate the children in their play and activities. These tensions resonate with current discussions about disparities between playwork theory and practice (Conway 2008) and the relationships between the State and children in these settings (Ansell and Smith 2008; Mayall 2006; Moss and Petrie 2002). Both levels, the practical and the conceptual, are explored in relation to playwork, play, learning, empowerment, and social constructions of children and childhood throughout the remainder of the thesis.

As discussed in the methodology chapter (see section on 'Gaining Ethics Approval') in the interests of anonymity, the names of places and participants are fictionalised and some details and information sources are omitted for ethical reasons. Inclusion of information participants gave about themselves is limited to occasions where it is deemed relevant to the larger discussion. This and the following chapters provide direct quotations from the three key data sources – interview transcripts, fieldnotes and policy documents. All quotations are followed immediately by parentheses in which the source of the quotation is provided. For example, those taken from transcribed interviews are identified by giving the participant's name, whether they are staff, parent or child, and the name of the site. Where quotations are taken from the fieldnotes or policy documents, this is indicated.

Background

At the time of the research, the economically and culturally diverse London borough in which it was conducted was small in area and population. Despite this, in 2002 it ranked amongst the highest in population density in London (Audit Commission 2002: 7) and in 2005, amongst the most deprived of the 342 boroughs in England (CYPP 2008-2011: 57).

According to the 2007 Job Seekers Allowance claimant count, the unemployment rate in the Borough in April of that year was slightly lower than the rate for London but higher than the national average (ONS 2008). The Borough comprised over 15 wards. Located in the north and centre of the Borough respectively, Ferns after school project was in the third most deprived ward in the Borough and Dexters after school project was in one of the top six most wealthy wards (CYPP 2006-2008; 7). Unemployment in the Ferns ward was 2% higher than in the Dexters ward (Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2008-2011: 8).

This disparity reflected a broader trend across the Borough in which the north was the most deprived and the south the least deprived (Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2008-2011). Housing ownership was also focussed in the south of the Borough (ONS 2008). Despite this, across the Borough business was strong - major shopping developments were reaching completion and health and social care provided large sources of employment (Annual Business Inquiry 2006; Audit Commission 2009). In 2009, the Borough was 'improving strongly' in relation to its Comprehensive Performance Assessments indicators, with good prospects for future development.

Deprivation was juxtaposed with growing wealth across the Borough, however. As a result, according to the Multiple Index of Deprivation, the Borough was reportedly increasingly polarised. Ethnically the Borough had a mixed population. Almost one in four residents were of black or Asian origin and around six percent were Irish. Ethnic composition varied between the Borough's wards. In the Ferns ward, the highest proportions of ethnic groups were the over 60% who identified themselves as 'white' and just over 19% as 'black'. In the Dexters area, the largest ethnic group was 'white' at roughly 80%, followed by 9% who identified themselves as 'black' (ONS 2001). The 2001 census found the Borough to be about 60% Christian, 17% 'no religion', and just over 6% Muslim. Under 5% of the total population came from Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, or other religious backgrounds.

In addition to the large proportion of Borough-wide residents aged between 17 and 39, according to the 2001 Census, both wards comprised over 20% young people between the age of 0 and 17 years, slightly higher than the national average (ONS 2001). Of these, around 12,000 were primary school aged (Childcare sufficiency assessment 2008: 5).

The 2009 Annual Audit and Inspection letter acknowledged the Borough as showing improvements in services for older people and children. In terms of children's services of importance here, across the Borough, at the time of this research, over 1500 out of school childcare places were available to primary school aged children (Childcare sufficiency assessment 2008: 10). Ofsted broadly ranked the Borough's non-domestic childcare provisions at 70% 'good' or 'better'. This was above average for similar areas and nationally (Local Area children's services performance profile, Ofsted 2009, downloaded February 2010). Both the Ferns and the Dexters after school provision gained 'good' grades in their most recent Ofsted inspections (Ofsted inspection reports 2008).

The picture these selected statistics describe is an ethnically and culturally diverse borough with simultaneous wealth and poverty, a high proportion of young people and children, and a collection of 'good' or improving out of school childcare provisions. That the children, parents and staff involved in this research came from diverse economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds reiterates the necessity to see social groups as internally faceted (James *et al.* 1998: 31). The following section introduces two of the Borough's after school provisions.

The Case Examples

As explored in chapter three, local authority provision of 'sufficient' after school childcare is a statutory requirement (Children Act [1989] 2004; Childcare Act 2006). Nationally, this provision is administered in a variety of ways; in schools, dedicated or shared buildings; and run by the statutory, private and third sectors. The after school projects that formed the focus of this research were two of the ten run by a local authority. When the research began in 2007, six were run from

council-owned self-contained buildings that normally offered year-round childcare. Four operated from local authority primary schools in dedicated rooms, during term-time only. Each site was centrally governed and managed by the Early Years and Childcare Services unit of the local authority's Children's Services department.

All ten projects provided daily after school care for primary school aged children between 3:15 pm and 6:15 pm. Each site catered for between 20 and 40 children daily. The sites received core funding from the local authority. Revenue from fees supplemented this. Full time working parents paid full fees and were able to apply for Working Families Tax Credit. Unemployed or fulltime studying parents paid a concessionary rate.

In 2008, marked by a change in logo and the colour of playworkers' uniforms from red to blue, control of the local government changed from New Labour to Conservative. A number of shifts impacting on provisions for children in the Borough also happened at this time. Amongst these were the increases in after school provision fees, and speculation that the Borough's self-contained after school sites may be sold, including one of the sites on which the research was conducted. By the end of the fieldwork, the local authority had announced that all after school provision would operate solely from school sites by 2012, and the closure of some self-contained sites had begun. The local authority linked these arrangements with the Extended Schools Agenda, through which schools would run 'free' or 'affordable' after school provisions (DfES 2005c; Ofsted 2005). The discussion returns to the issues and implications of these changes.

Though normally assigned to one site, permanent staff members were employed on a peripatetic basis as either playworkers or in management positions. Playworkers were qualified to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level two, management to level three. Most, though not all, held specific playwork qualifications others were qualified in 'Early years childcare and development'. Therefore, references to playworkers here and in subsequent chapters, mean staff employed as playworkers, whether or not they held actual playwork qualifications. Both sites also employed sessional staff from care agencies.

Senior management informed me that this was due to shortages of permanently employed, qualified playwork staff. Care agencies provided a pool of staff most often experienced in caring for elderly, ill or special needs people. Agency staff were without playwork qualification and, according to those with whom I had conversations, usually without playwork experience.

Ferns

Location

The primary school that houses the Ferns after school club was on the corner of two intersecting streets. On one side, a large housing estate and a community centre. On the other, the tall, smooth brown-grey walls of a prison, and the green grass expanse of a common, popular with joggers and dog walkers. A paved path slid between the prison walls and the open common, as a throughway for locals and workers, on foot and on bicycles. Juxtaposed against the bleak, punitive prison walls, the end of the path opened out to a modern, bustling hospital complex and a multi-purpose sports centre established by a local sporting hero to encourage and support young athletes.

The housing estate comprised over a thousand two storey red-brown brick terraced homes, with a garden area fronting each. Children's shoes, push chairs, mini garden slides and bikes hastily left on their sides are proof that many families live here. The uniform, tree-lined streets are narrowed or humped over speed bumps to slow traffic.

The community centre on the edge of the common, opposite the school playground, housed a crèche, a youth centre and a dishevelled-looking but popular outdoor games pitch. Gaggles of pushchairs often huddled by the crèche door. Sports coaches and youth workers sometimes lead team games on the pitch. Litter, the occasional brick or sports shoe on the roof, peeling paint on the walls and doors, vandalised fences, and a games pitch in need of resurfacing, made the place look run down. The centre needed a whole new roof, the school caretaker told me, because it was old and the local 'kids' had been climbing and throwing bricks onto it 'for years'.

Throughout the early stages of the research the centre was often closed, except for the crèche three mornings per week. Despite this, in dry weather, it provided an outdoor meeting place for young people, gathered by the front steps dressed in sports clothing, often with pet dogs and smoking cigarettes. Music from their phones, chatter, laughter and teasing were audible from the school playground while the after school children played. The site later closed completely for refurbishment and the crèche moved temporarily into one of the after school club rooms. The fresh-faced new site re-opened in early summer 2009 as a games provision and community events location.

Further down the road were two small shops. The kind that squeeze a little bit of most things you might need onto cluttered, sagging shelves and stay open from early morning until late at night. At the café by the station, a full English breakfast cost £3.80 (30/10/07). The after school club manager told me that although the area was well connected for buses and trains, her husband collected her by car every night, especially in the winter. She said she would not want to walk down these streets at night, as it was a 'rough area' and not well lit.

The estate was originally built to house the workers of local factories, now long since closed. By the time of this research, the people in the area – on foot, on bicycles, in cars, close to houses – were an ethnically diverse mixture of young and old.

Layout
The school housing Ferns after school club was built between 1921 and 1922 (Franklin 2009: 96) and catered for 357 children (Ofsted Inspection Report published 17/12/07). Beyond its external, dark brown brick Victorian austerity, inside was lively and colourful.

To enter the after school provision, staff and parents passed through the electronic security gate and crossed the playground at the rear of the school; past the basketball hoop perched on one of the walls; two grey metal equipment sheds in a far corner; a climbing wall on soft tarmac; a wooden picnic bench awaiting company, and chalk outlines of children's bodies, hop scotch grids and drawings,

half rubbed away on the grey, gritty ground. Two, low level, shiny stainless steel water fountains had recently been installed next to the double doors leading into the school.

Mostly the older boys used the football area, which was also the basketball area. The manager told me the climbing wall had been provided at the request of the after school children. I observed them use it on occasion. The small grey sheds in the corner held the after school club equipment – bats, rackets, balls, mini pushchairs, Hula-Hoops. This corner, out of the way of the hazards of the much used pitch area, was a good spot for other activities, like games with the parachute or skipping ropes. Boys and girls chuckled excitedly as they hastily pushed mini pushchairs and chased about. Children were allowed out to the playground when two staff accompanied them.

Tea and Games Room

The after school provision had two adjacent, dedicated rooms. Below the tall ceilings, the walls were bright green and densely populated with eye-catching posters about health and nutrition, and red and blued pin boards presented a combination of official paperwork, the children's artwork, and a cutting from a local newspaper of the children meeting a local councillor. Displayed information outlined: the site's behaviour, inclusion, equal opportunities, controlling infection and medications policies; plus Ofsted inspection report, registration and public liability insurance documents, complaints procedures, fees, term dates and information about working family's tax credit. The local authority and Ofsted required these policies and procedures to be well displayed; ensuring parents of the services provided and procedures followed.

The lime green walls and tall windows made the rooms bright with natural light. Child-size blue folding tables and plastic moulded chairs organised the centre of the room. Along one of the walls, resource cupboards oozed games, felt tip pens and coloured paper. Some drawers were labelled for children's easy access – 'Crayons', 'Stickle Bricks'. The parents' signing out book always sat here, next to the door through which they entered and left the club.

Children's coats and bags hung on named pegs along a wall below picture books about cooking from around the world, Dinosaurs, Mother Teresa, Bullying, Martin Luther King and Gandhi. Above them were colourful laminated posters about what foods to eat to get particular vitamins and minerals, and dividing and times tables.

On the other side of the room in the corner was a small kitchen area with a sink, a refrigerator, a preparation surface and a neatly stacked cupboard of colourful plastic plates and child-friendly culinary utensils. For part of the afternoon this room functioned as the snack room. Then it became a space for tabletop games, drawing and colouring, homework, and sometimes cooking.

When the fieldwork began there was also a small office area in one of the corners, separated from the rest of the room by a blue floor standing divider. When the regeneration work started on the community centre across the road, the crèche moved into this room in the mornings. So the 'office' moved temporarily into the computer and art room next door. This limited the space but was not a choice the manager of the after school club had any control over.

Computer, Arts and Craft Room
Linked by an internal door was the other after school club room, also lime green, with lively displays of the children's creativity on the walls and windowsills – tie-die t-shirts, Lego constructions, photographs from a dressing-up session, and pictures the children had made on the computers. Along one wall was a row of four computers with a variety of 'child-safe' games. Against the threat of pornographic or violent material, the 'firewall' was set on high and a member of staff monitored the children while they used them.

On the wall above was the computer rota; fifteen minutes per child, alternating between girls and boys, under 8 year olds and over 8 year olds on different days. This way, the manager informed me, everyone got a fair turn throughout the week. Next to the computer rota, a 'birthday chart' pinned to the blue felt display board. A month-by-month list, filled in with children's multicoloured handwriting, of whose birthday was when. Higher up on the same board, pink,

132

blue, green and red painted cut outs of aquatic animals entitled 'under the sea' swam against a blue-green underwater backdrop. The displays mostly stayed the same throughout the fieldwork.

Along the opposite wall were long shelves, reachable by adult arms, heavily laden with plastic containers and boxes of play resources - cars, bendy straws, Busy Beads, Connect 4, puzzles and at least thirty older and newer board games. Below them, a mock-wooden child-sized kitchen unit with an imitation cooker, cupboard, sideboard and small multicoloured plastic bowls, plates, cutlery and pretend fruit and vegetables. In front of an over-spilling bookshelf sat a small wooden table and chairs, sometimes used as a dining area for the continuation of role-play and the eating of pretend meals; and a rail of dressing up clothes from around the world - gold-detailed sari material donated by the Indian manager, high-heeled shoes, bags, hats, and child-sized fire, ambulance and police uniforms.

A floor standing screen with a scenic tie-dye picture of Brazil's Rio de Janeiro divided the small office area from the rest of the room. With only two rooms and up to 23 of the school's children daily, space was at a premium. Confidential files were kept in the filing cabinet next to the art cupboard. The lack of a separate office space sometimes made private conversations difficult.

Before the office moved in here, a low, comfortable sofa faced the television. Animated play station games were popular. In line with the behaviour policy of ensuring a 'good, healthy and safe environment' ('Procedure for promoting positive behaviour', updated October 2009), fighting games were not encouraged. Children took turns, squeezed together on the sofa, perched on its arms or huddled eagerly on cushions on the floor. Lively banter accompanied lively games. The main table in the centre of the room was used for creative activities. Children moved between the two rooms, from activity to activity, throughout the afternoons.

Staffing

A manager, a playworker and an agency staff member ran the site daily. They were a small team, mixed in age, ethnicity and background (for further details see Appendix seven). Nita, the manager and Noel, the permanent playworker, had worked together for around six years and both had many more years experience of working with children. When the fieldwork began, Anisha the agency staff member had been there for a month.

Parents and Children

Over the course of the fieldwork, the numbers of children registered and in daily attendance changed considerably. At the beginning of the autumn term 2007, the centre had a total of 31 children registered with an average daily attendance of 20 children. Of this total, ten paid full fees and 21 were on concessionary rate fees. Nine attended full-time, 22 part-time.

By the summer term 2008, after the fee changes discussed below, the site had 22 children registered, with an average daily attendance of 11 children. Of this total, 15 paid full fees, six paid concessionary rates, and one attended for free, subsidised by the school. Eight attended full-time and the remaining 13 part-time.

All after school sites run by the local authority aimed to be inclusive. At this site there was one autistic child. At after school club he did not have a one-to-one worker. There were also children referred either by the school's head teacher or social services for a variety of reasons – lack of opportunity to play and socialise with other children outside of school time, domestic or school issues such as lacking social skills or having additional educational needs. The school's head teacher and Nita the after school club manager told me that attendance at after school club helped the children with these and other challenging issues.

The Ferns children and parents came from a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. On a number of occasions, during semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, mothers, Nita the manager, Noel the playworker, the school caretaker, and the head teacher recounted fragments of

stories about the children and families here. They told me about how valuable the after school provision was for the respite and support it provided to employed and unemployed families. They talked about the 'rough area' and the harsh realities these children and their families faced: unemployment, the challenges of poverty and single parent (largely single-mother) families.

I was also informed about a child whom staff suspected was subject to physical violence at home. A senior professional had referred this child to the after school club to counteract a home situation that afforded few opportunities to socialise with other children. They told me about children who were young carers at home, at least two of the parents using the after school club whom they knew to be depressed and receiving counselling and medication, and the occasion when a group of children found a gun on the common. I did not endeavour to verify these stories. Their narration, however, formed part of the picture participants drew for me. As explored in chapter eight, perceptions of the local area emerged as significant to staff ideas and practices in relation to the children. I did not hear stories like these at Dexters.

Dexters

Location

The after school centre was in a quiet residential area comprised mostly of freshly painted, two storey terraced houses; with potted flowers in tidy front yards. The tree-lined, speed-bumped streets were litter-free and clean like the mostly new models of cars parked along them. A bustling high street, crowded with everything from chain retail shops and Starbucks coffee places, to pound shops and British produce market stalls, was under ten minutes walk away from the site that the children, staff and parents referred to simply as 'Dexters'.

Facing the site, as the road bends around a corner, was a community centre offering alternative health classes and treatments, yoga, massage. The centre appeared well maintained, with a modern glass and wood side extension with a winding external staircase and large windowed area. Cash-strapped like many community centres, however, in the warmer months the manager occasionally

made a small outdoor stall to sell donated clothes or plants she had grown to raise extra money. A wooden bench on the corner gave passers by a place to rest with their shopping bags or children, to smoke a cigarette or talk on the phone.

At the other end of the street was a cluster of shops; an independent butcher, speciality cake baker, hardware store, restaurant, and corner shop. On the corner, a delicatessen sold cheeses, freshly baked breads, lunches, and organic fruit and vegetables. A cappuccino cost almost £2 (08/11/07). A crammed bulletin board layered with information told of local activities and services; pre-natal yoga classes, handwritten flyers from cleaners and au pairs looking for work, and pictures of a school the shop supported in Mozambique. The people in the area – on foot, on bicycles, in cars – were ethnically mixed, young and old.

Layout

A purpose built bungalow housed the after school club. Between the pavement and the building sat the front playground; demarcated by a tall chain-link fence with an electronic entry system. On one side, the popular games pitch with its recently painted mural of an uneven but bright rainbow marked the main goal area. On most days, older girls and boys played team games like cricket and football here. The younger children tended to play on the other side of the playground, demarcated from the pitch by a vertical row of three foot high, sanded tree trunks. Beneath the fixed wooden climbing structure, slide and metal chain climbing grid, lay soft tarmac safety flooring. Fire engine red scooters often dashed around, powered by enthusiastic little legs. Children teamed up on the recumbent, four wheeled ones; one on the seat, one pushing from behind. The long, narrow garden area winding around the side and back of the building, ignored in the winter months, hosted gardening projects in the spring and summer as staff helped the children to plant flowers and seeds.

Reception Area

Upon entry to the building through the glass front, a reception area greets visitors; a red sofa with cushions, reception desk, soft chairs, a few plants and a small, often messy reading corner with overflowing shelves and precarious-looking stacks of children's books. The reception area was a colourful and lively

throughway, glass-panelled doors and internal windows optimised the natural light. The building had six main areas – art and craft room, office, reception, kitchen, hall and computer room. Staff, children's and accessible toilets sat to the side of the reception area.

Though used for other functions on some weekends, the site was primarily an after school club. On the walls, with sugar paper backing and shaped display borders, were photographs of the staff and the 'children's council' (described below), children on outings, displays of children's artwork. On the reception desk sat the staff and visitor's signing in and out book, the parent's signing out book, information sheets and booklets about local and other council services, and the occasional child or group of children playing on the swivel chair behind it, role playing, drawing, chatting.

On the other walls were policy and procedure documents, children's artwork, the week's teatime menu and staff rota. Next to the activity planner that outlined the week's activities, a child's handwriting in blue and red stated that the children chose the activities weekly for each area of the centre. The official paperwork displayed the inclusion and equal opportunities policies, Ofsted registration and insurance documents, complaints procedures, fees and term date information. As at Ferns, it was council and Ofsted statute that these policies and procedures were displayed to inform parents of the services offered and procedures followed. There were also site-specific agreements like the children's behaviour policy, devised themselves.

Signing in and out books reminded visitors that staff, children and other guests were to be registered when on site and signed out before leaving. Despite this book and the official paperwork on one wall, this feels like a structured yet child orientated place – information in children's handwriting about the behaviour they agreed to, the choices they made about the activities, photographs of the children's council next to those of the staff, bits of children's work dotted around; children running about (a playworker says 'please don't run inside'), children sitting or reading brightly coloured books on soft colourful chairs.

137

Along the corridor, rows of hooks for coats and boxes for bags. Daily flung in excited haste, their contents overflowing onto the floor.

Art and Craft Room

To the left of the reception area was the art and craft room. A bright bustling barrage of paints, bits of material, half completed masterpieces, paint brushes waiting to be washed, and a buzzing washing machine finishing off the dirty tea towels from the previous day. Labelled resource cupboards populated the walls. In the centre of the room were two clusters of tables. Near the window that looked out onto the playground, one table was high, with long-legged stools around it. The other was low, with moulded plastic chairs not quite tucked underneath. The tall table tended to be for the afternoon's main activity, often supported by the playworker. The lower table generally proffered pens, paper, coloured pencils and a cosy corner in which children often chatted while they drew. Sometimes children played with construction sets on the floor in the corner; grubby kneed and absorbedly commentating on their game's action to themselves or their play friends.

As the seasons and year's events changed, the room's displays changed. In springtime the windows were dotted with sugar-paper daffodils and potato print bumblebees. During black history month the children made pictures and wrote stories about historical black figures. During Eid the window ledges were populated with lop-sided, grey hand-pinched clay pots the children had made for candles.

Computer Room

The dedicated computer room had five computers and a play station. Like at Ferns, a playworker monitored the child-friendly games and restricted Internet access in case 'inappropriate' material arose. The computer rota allowed each child fifteen minutes to play so that everyone could have a turn. A small square window looked out onto the narrow back garden area, recently cleared by Princess Trust volunteers.

Office

The office at the back of the building had two desks, two computers, slightly bowing shelves and metal filing cabinets and was used predominantly for administrative tasks, storage of confidential files, and for conducting staff meetings and private conversations. The pin-boarded walls were busy with official information and policy and practice directives.

Staffing

Margaret the manager, and Maria, Steve and Rochelle, the three playworkers, had run the centre together for five years. During the research, Lewis joined them as deputy manager. They were all long-standing borough employees, with between five and thirty years experience of working with children. One additional agency staff member was employed as a playworker. A further three were employed for one hour daily to support the escorting procedures. The team were mixed in age, ethnicity and background (for details see Appendix seven).

Parents and Children

During the fieldwork, the centre had an average daily attendance of 48 children. Of the 84 total registered, 35 children were under 8 years old, 49 were over 8 years old. Of this total, 13 children had parents who were paying concessionary rates. The remaining children had full time working parents paying full fees. Parents and carers, almost entirely mothers but occasionally fathers or other relatives, collected the children throughout the afternoons, mainly between 5 pm and 6 pm.

The site's catchment area included three schools. Staff and escorts collected registered children from these schools daily. All sites aimed to be inclusive. At this site there was one Down's syndrome child who had a one-to-one support worker. There was also one child who attended both mainstream and 'special' schools and had been referred to the after school provision to help with 'behavioural issues'. The children came from diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds ranging from white and black British, Polish, Caribbean, African, Christian, Muslim and Seventh Day Adventist.

Stories playworkers told me about the local area included that they sometimes received donations of resources from people living or working nearby; often cardboard boxes, dressing up clothes, and brail paper. Some talked about wanting to integrate the centre with its surroundings more and to encourage the children to feel connected to their environment. Some of the parents who sent their children there had attended as children themselves. Beyond general concerns about children's safety from cars and strangers, parents did not tell me stories specifically about the local area. On occasion, staff and parents described challenges facing particular children - behaviour issues or family tensions. Despite these, I did not get an impression of the kind of adversity of local lives from things people said about the children and the area at Dexters that I experienced at Ferns. The following sections outline the patterns of afternoons at the sites.

Structure of Afternoons at Ferns and Dexters

The two sites operated essentially the same daily patterns. After the children arrived at the centres (see 'children's escort and arrival' section below), staff registered their attendance, gave them a healthy snack, provided 'childcare, learning and play for children aged four to 12 years' (Out of School Childcare Service statement, updated October 2009) within a safe, supervised environment, and ensured that parents or carers signed children out before departure each evening.

Many children had begun attending when they started primary school and would leave when they went on to secondary school. Others had joined more recently. So throughout the fieldwork year there were newer and older children, settling in or knowing the routines well. Both core staff teams had been working with each other and many of the children and their families for some years.

Preparing for the Afternoons
After daily arrival and signing in, staff would carry out their appointed preparation routines as outlined on the weekly staff rotas. They prepared the

snack and set out activities. At Dexters staff prepared the escorting bags that contained the collection registers and reflective safety jackets. Procedure guidelines required that alongside the staff rota, each site displayed an activity planner outlining the children's daily activities for the week. These comprised a combination mostly of arts and crafts, physical or computer-based activities. These ranged from outdoor activities such as football, cricket, tennis; to indoor table top games, like puzzles or construction activities; to art and crafts like clay modelling, papier-mâché, picture frame-making:

> Art table – decorating masks activity – different coloured black, light and dark brown, and white plastic masks are splayed across the centre of the table on top of a red plastic table cover with paint flecks on it. There are little jars of assorted sequins and different coloured glitter, a plastic tray overflowing with colourful and patterned bits of material, three bottles of glue, and a tub of glue applicators also in the centre of the table. One of the masks is already decorated with silver stars and red shiny material strips for hair. (Ferns fieldnotes, winter term)

The sites also sometimes hosted additional activities with guest sports or dance coaches. At both sites, additional drawing and colouring resources were often laid out on other tables so that children who did not want to take part in the main arts or crafts activity, but wanted to do something creative, had a space in which to do that.

Staff were rotated between the different areas and types of activities throughout the weeks. Some said they enjoyed or felt they were better in particular areas. At Dexters, for example, describing herself as a 60-year-old grandmother with an enthusiasm for creativity, Maria liked being in the art room. Steve, who described himself as keen on sports, preferred the playground. The children appeared to benefit from this variety, as different staff genders, interests and characters were reflected at times in the children they seemed to have particular bonds with; children who spent most of their time in the playground, particularly those who played on the sports pitch, often boys, gravitated to talking to Steve.

Children with greater creative interests, often though not always girls, tended to communicate more with Maria.

Children's Escort and Arrival

School finished at 3:15 pm. At Ferns, usually Nita, collected the younger children from their classrooms. The older children came on their own or with friends. A member of staff signed them in on the register upon arrival. At Dexters, depending on how many children there were to collect, groups of two or three staff collected from three separate schools. The children and staff met at appointed locations on each school site. Once signed in on the register, the children were officially in the care of the after school staff. Wearing obligatory reflective safety jackets to ensure optimum visibility, the staff brought the children to the centre:

> The children gathered, chatted to their friends as they went through the escort bag to find a reflective jacket of the desired size and colour… They conducted this process of arriving, getting their reflective jackets on and waiting for staff seemingly habitually, familiarly... They got into pairs, some without being asked. One staff member stood ahead, indicating with her hand that the children were to follow on behind her. The children followed in their pairs. One staff member was in the middle of the line, one at the back. The staff interacted with the children to give instructions - 'stay with your partner', 'move to the side', 'keep up please' – for now they operated mainly as guides to orientate the children safely along the road... When we reached a crossing, one staff member stood in the middle of the road to stop the traffic, one led the group and one was at the back… The children chatted in their pairs and to other children near them, some pulled leaves from trees they passed, others where quieter. The staff reminded the children to 'keep up' when a gap in the line formed… We arrived at the centre. Without being asked the children lined up along the wooden fence in the playground and took their jackets off. The escorted group quickly dispersed – running around, playing on the football pitch, climbing on the climbing frame… The escorting

registers were put with the others on the reception desk next to the signing in and out books… (Dexters fieldnotes, winter term)

As the children arrived, they hung their coats and school jumpers on the coat pegs and put their bags into the assigned boxes or hung them with their coats. Before teatime, the afternoons often began with a period of energetic play.

Teatimes

Around four o'clock was time for 'snack'. This generally lasted for 30 to 45 minutes. At Ferns snack time was taken with all the children together. At Dexters it was split into two groups, firstly the five to eight year olds, followed by the eight to eleven year olds. This was partly due to space restrictions and, according to Margaret the manager, partly to let the two age groups have some time apart, with the play areas to themselves. When permitted, similar friendship constellations characterised the teatime tables. The register was taken at this time, plus any further announcements or information staff wanted to pass on, such as the activities for the afternoon, or addressing behaviour issues collectively. The children were required to sit quietly for this official moment. Then they chatted and swung their feet as they ate, poured drinks for themselves and others. They would often tip back on their chairs, soon to be encouraged not to by a member of staff telling them or gently tipping their seat back into place from behind. On occasion staff moved children to another table if they considered them to be making too much noise, teasing each other, playing with objects when they had been asked not to, or had not been listening when they were supposed to.

Generally while one staff member served the food, other staff members would sit with the children, engaging in conversation, maintaining noise levels and helping out when required. Children also volunteered to help serve or clear away sometimes. The staff at Ferns often took a supervisory role, ensuring largely that children's behaviour stayed within desired behaviour boundaries. Two staff members in particular would sit between the tea tables, their interactions largely focused on restricting the children's noise levels. At Dexters, while there was

also attention to maintaining behaviour within certain boundaries, playworkers were more likely to sit at the children's tables and converse.

Teatime was sometimes a moment for group discussion, ranging from addressing behaviour issues to talking about holiday adventures or topics the children were exploring at school. Sometimes these interactions involved staff reprimanding children for their behaviour, sometimes these were moments of lively discussion in which children showed what they had learned. After 'snack' it was playtime. Staff encouraged the children to push their chairs under the tables and leave the room calmly. Excitement often took over, noise levels increased, and children rushed in various directions towards pressing, fun activities.

Activities and Play

A number of different activities usually occurred at any one time, in the same or different areas of both after school settings. These ranged from arts and crafts, sports and games, home corner role-play, computer activities, cooking, and any number of other activities the children chose indoors and outdoors. Throughout the afternoons, the children engaged with these activities, supported to greater or lesser degrees by playworkers. The children moved around the after school spaces seemingly at will, both during and between play activities. Attention span or input from others apparently inspired them to stay with an activity or move onto something else:

> Isaac (age 8) sewed for a while around a line picture of a house that Anisha [agency staff member] had drawn for him. Unfinished, he left it on the art table and went to the storage boxes. He got out bright coloured plastic blocks and started to build a road with a bridge and got cars out to play with on it. Minutes later he and Rafa (age 5) are working together to make a garage for the wooden lolly stick cars they made last week; at the art table Mustafa (age 10) and Luke (age 11) are making a complicated-looking two story building frame using the same lolly sticks and glue gun. M and L have a brief 'chase' around the table and between this and the other room before Noel [playworker] tells them 'Don't run inside'. Now they are back to the lolly sticks. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

End of Day

From around 5:15 pm onwards, parents and carers, almost always mothers, trickled in and out to collect their children, sometimes with other children in tow. On rare occasions, both parents collected together. Some parents collected their children's bags and coats, others hung around for a while, talking with staff or other parents, waiting for their child or children to finish what they were doing, to find their coats, bags, pieces of art work, things they have baked, or generally just to be ready to leave. Sometimes parents made fee payments in the office or office area. This was when staff sometimes relayed either positive feedback or concerns. This varied from being a brief to a lengthier conversation, sometimes including the child. Before leaving, parents signed the children out.

As the centres got quieter, while greeting or talking with parents, staff cleared away the afternoon's activities, sometimes with children's help. After the children had left and the tidying was complete, the Dexters staff team met to debrief. This included discussing positive achievements, incidents to be aware of, or behaviours to be monitored or addressed. At Ferns, after the children and parents departed and the tidying was finished, staff signed out and left.

Further to the daily patterns outlined above, the staff at the two sites showed differences in how they conducted afternoon activities and interacted with the children at play. These are introduced here and explored in greater depth in the following chapters.

Opportunities, Challenges and Tensions in Practice

Activity Choices

Planned activities were a combination of suggestions made by the staff and the children. Playworkers and managers told me that these selections were made for a number of reasons; for learning and development, for fun and new experience, or because the children had asked for them. As explored in chapter three, the Every Child Matters framework (DfES 2005a), the Playwork Principles (PPSG

2005), and the Early Years Foundations Stage (DCSF 2008a) overlap on a number of influential aims and objectives in relation to children's play and activity in after school settings. These were evident in Nita the Ferns manager's explicit goals for the children:

> It's a chance to have a play, have some fun. At least even for a few hours. And for them, at least they feel free. I mean you talk about the five outcomes, if you can achieve all five outcomes. Even for two hours, within our care. We make sure they… eat healthy. They are safe. They are achieving. They are enjoying it. We try to meet all those five outcomes. And it is very important for children. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

While children's choices were also encouraged, these frameworks provided structure and parameters to the choices of activities and how staff rationalised them in terms of their utility to the children (Russell 2008). From my observations, confirmed in conversations and interviews with staff, the planned activities often had a focus on both the intrinsic value of taking part in an activity – for example sports games and dance activities - and the value of making something and having an end product - such as making seasonal greetings cards or other arts and crafts objects.

Supervision

At both sites, a staff member was assigned to a room for the afternoon. A supernumerary staff member moved between the rooms, or completed other chores such as preparing or clearing away the snack dishes, and was available should any staff member require cover. From observation, cover was generally required when a staff member needed to tend to an accident, behaviour-related issue, or (at Dexters) toileting a special needs child.

Both sites strictly adhered to ensuring two staff supervised the children in the playgrounds. In addition to general interaction and supervision, this meant that if an accident occurred, one member of staff could attend to the accident while the other supervised the remaining children. At Dexters, due to the layout of the site and the number of staff members there, unless it rained, both indoors and

outdoors were staffed and open for play. The children moved freely between the two.

At Ferns, ensuring two playworkers supervised the children in the playground had different ramifications. Due to only having three staff, and the after school rooms and access to the playground being separate, children were unable to move freely between indoors and outdoors. Generally, to ensure staffing ratios, either all of the children were in the playground or indoors. There were a few exceptions to this, where one member of staff, often Nita the manager, stayed inside with some children, while the other two staff supervised the rest in the playground. Though this was not official procedure, it was the best means by which they could cater to the children's play wishes. Both from conversations with playworkers and from observations, being largely unable to keep both areas open simultaneously tended to punctuate the natural flow of some children's play. Children and staff recognised this as a restriction:

> … we're not allowed out cos of the rain or cos there's not enough staff. We just wanna play, what's gonna happen? (Luke, age 10, Ferns)

The site managers informed me that head office at the Early Years and Childcare Services unit determined the number of staff assigned to each site depending on how many children they catered for. The legal ratio was one staff member to every eight under eight year olds, and one staff member to every ten over eight year olds (Ofsted 2001). Despite the site layout requiring another staff member if children were to be able to move freely between inside and outside, Ferns had less than 24 children and therefore only three staff members.

At Dexters, delivery of the structure outlined on the planners and rotas rarely varied unless a staff member was either absent or was required to tend to an issue elsewhere on site. In this sense, though children moved frequently between activities and spaces, Dexters was quite rigid in its implementation of activities and staffing. At Ferns, the afternoons' activities and where they happened was more fluid. Accommodating the diverse desires of the different children appeared to require something of a juggling act. Towards the end of the fieldwork this

impression was reinforced in a conversation with Anisha who by that time had worked for some months at both sites. At Ferns she felt more involved because she could move from room to room, whereas at Dexters:

> If you are in the kitchen, you are in the kitchen all afternoon. If you are in the computer room, you are in the computer room all afternoon. (Dexters fieldnotes, summer term)

Being assigned to one area for the afternoon enabled a staff member to either be involved in the full process of a child's activity in that area, or the full process of various activities in that area. The more structured environment of Dexters, where staff generally stayed in one place for the afternoon, appeared to contribute to more engaged relationships between playworkers and children. While the more spontaneous environment of Ferns, with staff positions and activities changing more often, seemed to contribute to more supervisory interactions and relations between playworkers and children. This was not always the case, and particularly Anisha the agency playworker and Nita the manager sometimes sat with children, engaging in conversation and activity. Despite this, Nita referred a number of times to the frustration of wanting to devote more attention to the children, but being pulled in various directions by other requirements. As explored in the following chapters, these apparent contrasts between engaged and more supervisory relations between playworkers and children indicated different perspectives and approaches at the two settings.

Staff expressed desires to provide welcoming, comfortable, safe environments. These were reflected in much of what I observed in their practice. For example, in the arts and craft areas, staff often presented activities by laying the resources out, sometimes with an example they had prepared before hand. When the children arrived I often observed playworkers describing the activity. Throughout the activity some playworkers helped children who asked for help, at other times they took a more back-seat role, perhaps offering suggestions on occasion or simply leaving the children to their activity. As explored in chapters six and seven, some older children at both sites suggested that 'staff look after the little ones more because they need it more'. These factors suggested planning and

attention to making activities look inviting, ensuring the children understood, and then offering individually catered levels of support.

In interviews and informal conversations, a number of playworkers at Dexters told me that sometimes it was better to let children 'get on with it', to make mistakes, because that was how they got the most out of the activity and that it was important that children felt they could 'experiment' and 'make mistakes'. I observed similar patterns in physical activities. Equipment was sometimes set up before hand, the playworker then left the children to their activity or discussed the rules of the games with them, then either generally functioned as referee, or took a more removed role. This often constituted observing or supervising the children at play from the sidelines. As explored in the coming chapters, the degrees to which staff members stepped back and left the children to explore varied, with ramifications for the children's experiences.

In examples of creative, physical and other activities and play, I observed that the playworkers were often at the children's disposal, there to respond to their needs and desires. This was communicated through their practice, as they responded when asked, intervened on occasion if the children appeared to be having problems, saw to first aid requirements and so forth. This impression was further reinforced by playworkers repeatedly saying, in interviews and informal conversations throughout the fieldwork, that they were 'there for the children'.

Observations during the fieldwork year revealed a spectrum of how staff interacted with the children's activities; with structured activity at one end and unstructured play at the other. Examples of structured activities were those outlined on the rota, prepared and often facilitated by playworkers. Examples of unstructured play ranged widely from invented games on the outdoor climbing structures, to role-play in the home corners, construction games using various resources. Interactions and activities often morphed from one thing to another:

> From the playground, through the big windows that divide the art room from the outdoors, I see the art room is unpopulated. Ben [agency staff member] is knocking on the window from inside and waving his hand in

a 'come in' gesture. He opens the art room window that opens onto the playground. He's telling Rochelle [playworker] through the window that he wants children in there. The activity was play dough. Rochelle suggests he asks the children what they want to do instead. A few minutes later I look again and a group of girls are huddled around the tall art room table, colouring pictures. Ben is in the background putting the play dough onto another table. (Dexters fieldnotes, winter term)

When asked about this later, Rochelle said that although they provide activities for variety, they were always happy when a child had an alternative idea. She said that the children's experience was of primary importance so she always tried to gauge how she supported the child, dependent upon her knowledge of them, how they appeared to be getting on and what the child indicated they required. Other playworkers made this point also, though as the following chapters explore, not all enforced it in their practice. In response to a question about this, Steve, another Dexters playworker informed me that this was guided by the:

> play assumptions. Where the first assumption is about just letting the child play, letting them self-direct their play. But then the second assumption is when the playworker gets involved… gets invited into their play, and shares their knowledge and skills so that they can go back to the first assumption of continuing their play without the playworker being involved. (Steve Playworker, Dexters)

Behaviour

The Borough behaviour policy outlines that:

> Reasonable steps must be taken at all times to ensure a good, healthy and safe environment. A consistent and good working practice by practitioners will inevitably have a good effect upon children. ('Procedure for promoting positive behaviour', updated October 2009)

At both sites the children had also devised behaviour agreements themselves. Examples of the points outlined are as follows: 'Always listen to staff and respect them', 'always value other people's ideas and thoughts', 'everyone will always be treated equally', and 'Don't be scared to talk to staff about your personal needs'.

Playworkers challenged behaviour deemed unacceptable. For example, they limited children's noise levels particularly during snack times and stopped them from doing things that may be dangerous or expressing undesirable behaviour like swearing or being aggressive. At moments like these, these were no longer the children's places, with staff there to support and service them. Children were expected to behave in certain ways. Children who did not conform were challenged and reprimanded for transgressing, by children as well as staff, and sometimes there were discussions with their parents. Thus, in addition to the ideals playworkers regularly expressed about nurturing and responding to the individual children's needs, there was greater complexity to their agendas. While these complexities underpin the following three chapters, particularly chapter eight explores how the mode and rationale of these challenges varied.

Children appeared to be aware of the boundaries around behaviour and what was expected of them. This took a number of forms, including, for example, children asking if they could do things. Children contravening behaviour they knew to be acceptable, such as taking resources from another child, swearing or getting into fights, on occasion looked to me or the playworkers to see if they would be corrected. As discussed in the methodology chapter, this positioning caused some tensions for me during the fieldwork. The following chapter discusses the older children's impressions that the playworkers treated younger children differently; that what was considered unacceptable behaviour for the older children was often excused or appeared to some older children to be taken less seriously. Linked to this and other restrictions imposed by the staff, there were examples where some children felt that the behaviour expected of them was unfair. As the following three chapters explore, these frustrations indicated complex and sometimes contradictory agendas, perceptions and practices.

Changes to the After School Environments

This chapter has presented the sites with a necessary degree of synchronic stasis. This is not to suggest that these settings were unchanging. During the fieldwork there were various changes. In the 2008 spring term, for example, in accordance with national government agendas to encourage non-working parents back to work, the local authority shifted to prioritising after school provision for the children of full time working parents. There was a small increase in the daily fees for working parents, from £7.70 to £8.10. The more significant impact was an increase in the concessionary rates, from £2.30 to £5.50 (14/03/08). Maximum attendance of concessionary rate children was also reduced from five to two days per week. Consequently, particularly Ferns saw a drop in numbers of concessionary rate children and an increase in the attendance of children of working parents.

During the term, the numbers of children attending Ferns dropped from 23 to 11. According to the parents I spoke with and Nita the manager, parents had withdrawn their children because the fee increase was deemed neither fair nor affordable. These changes made meeting some parents' existing commitments difficult, for example studying and caring for dependents. Perhaps indicating that the provision was fairly priced in the past because of its generic play remit, some parents said that for the new price their children could attend swimming or dance lessons. Interestingly, at the same time as the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework outlined below, the full-fee children who filled the now vacant spaces were much younger than those they replaced. By contrast, the fee increase and change to attendance protocol had little impact at Dexters, where there were few concessionary rate children.

The big change for Dexters came when, during the fieldwork, the Borough informed the self contained after school sites that they would be closing and their provision moving into schools, to be run by schools. This was part of the Extended Services agenda (DfES 2005c; Ofsted 2005) and also linked to the local authority selling a number of buildings previously used for community purposes. These changes suggest that, despite national government requirements to increase after school provisions, in the case of the sites studied for this

research at this particular time, children's after school places were under threat; either through site closure or limited access for those parents who were unemployed, in training or education. These differences reflect some of the contrasting external issues impacting on the sites during the fieldwork.

Although yet to be fully implemented during the course of the fieldwork, there were also policy shifts that had direct implications for the sites. The implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, DCSF 2008a) framework was one of these. The framework is underpinned by instrumental ideas about play as valuable for younger children's learning of particular sorts of skills considered fundamental to future academic progress. Therefore, although this was not yet happening during the fieldwork, the framework would require staff to conduct observations of each child, to keep records of their progress and to ensure activities were provided to meet their specific learning requirements.

Generally, although the faces changed sometimes, particular issues arose or subsided, and as the seasons enabled or restricted the children's outdoor activity, there was a consistency about the order and the atmospheres at the sites. With the coming and going of the terms, levels of energy waxed and waned, for staff and children. The beginnings of the terms were characterised by what staff often referred to as a 'settling in' period as everyone got back into their daily patterns. As the terms came to a close, either for half term or the major holidays, everyone was often ready for the break.

Conclusion

The combination of order and chaos was striking at both sites: greeted, as visitors are, by displays of official policy documents next to behaviour agreements the children had devised; children's coats hanging on labelled pegs above mounds of bags and strewn school jumpers; brightly painted walls with displays of children's art next to timetables for computer use; and windowsills laden with half-finished Lego racing cars and stickle-brick buildings next to attendance registers and accident recording books. These were simultaneously ordered and

impromptu places. Environments for children, their creativity and energy, as well as the legally binding officialdom of policies and procedures, electronic entry systems, labelled resource drawers, signing in and out books, fire extinguishers and first aid boxes. These were the first indications of the complex interplay between regulation, control, and facilitation of children's play and activity in these settings.

Throughout the fieldwork, playworkers expressed interest, affection and concern for the children. Observations indicated numerous friendly and amicable interchanges, between staff themselves, and between staff and children - sharing jokes, teasing each other, playing together. Playworkers engaged with the children about their activities, interests, families, friends and holidays. They tended to injuries, and on occasions where a child appeared withdrawn, asked if they were all right and offered to involve them in activities. The children largely appeared relaxed and happy. Some said 'hello' on arrival, approached staff to tell them about things, to ask them to play with them or for help of some sort. Sometimes with a palpable affection in the air, staff and children shared smiles, laughter and occasional hugs.

There were also upsets, disagreements, strong words and tensions at times. Moments when children were not allowed to do things they wanted to, reprimanded for things they had done, even blamed for things they had not. There were times of frustration, boredom and feelings of injustice. To degrees, these were natural aspects of such social environments. But moments like these also indicated complexity in the relations between adults and children here. In these contexts, valuing children was seen as good and right. But despite describing, and often showing themselves to be 'there for the children', staff could assert their agendas in ways the children could not.

Amongst the more striking distinctions between the two provisions were the differences in the concentric layers of physical environments that Carspecken calls 'locale', 'sites' and 'settings' (1996: 34). The types of buildings, roads, cars, businesses, transport links, schools, and parks around Dexters, reflected a relative affluence, and around Ferns, a relative poverty. But it was not so

154

straightforward. While on one side of Dexters lay quiet clean streets, new cars and a well-kept park, ten minutes walk in various directions revealed second-hand clothing shops next to international chain stores, or a newly refurbished block of artists studios close to a tall run-down housing estate. Around the Ferns site, the poverty of the immediate area was juxtaposed by affluence and big business nearby. The environments, sites and social and cultural backgrounds of the children, parents and staff at both sites were mixed and multi faceted and fractured (James *et al.* 1998: 31).

That both sites were run by the same policies and guidelines, happening at the same time, within a few miles of each other, raised the question of the various influences generating the similarities and differences between the sites. These composite realities, facets and fractures, raised questions about how children, parents and playworkers perceived and used these spaces. They raised questions around childcare provision and the implementation of government agendas, policies and approaches engaged with children's play and desired outcomes in such environments, and the impact of space and relationships on experiences in these after school settings. This chapter has introduced the sites, the following chapter looks at the nuances, congruencies and tensions found between the perceptions and experiences of the playworkers, parents and children.

Chapter Six

Playwork in Two After School Provisions

'If I didn't go to play centre where would I go? Play in the streets?'
(Marco, age 9, Ferns)

Introduction

Drawing on observations and policies, the previous chapter introduced the order
and spontaneity characteristic at the two sites. This chapter investigates these
further. Chapter three outlined a playwork professional and ethical framework
grounded in advocacy of children's rights to 'freely chosen, personally directed
and intrinsically motivated' play (PPSG 2005). Within this framework, the
playing child is seen as engaged in responses to innate drives that satisfy and
enhance vital development (Hughes 1996; Sutton-Smith 1997). Particularly in
contemporary urban settings, where children's opportunities for such play are
restricted and their lives greatly controlled (Ball, Gill and Spiegal 2008), the
playworker's role is to provide contexts in which children can extend their play
as independently as possible:

> Because of the developmental importance of children's free play, and the
> satisfaction and pleasure they obtain from playing freely, playworkers
> aim for the minimum intervention in children's activity consistent with
> keeping them free from harm. (NPFA 2000: 16)

However, the discussion there also explored the perception that, beneath the
rhetoric that 'children come first' in policies influencing the provision of their
after school care, the State's concerns around its relationship with the family, the
future of the nation, reinforcing parental responsibilities, and increasing work
incentives, often take precedence over the interests of children (Daniel and Ivatts

156

1998: 6). An example of this could be the Every Child Matters framework (DfES 2005a). From this point of view, local authority-run after school provisions are contexts in which a number of objectives and value systems meet: those of parents, children, playworkers and government bodies (Petrie 1994: 181). This suggests particular tensions between childcare provisions for working parents, official policy on children's after school learning, and playwork approaches to children and their play (Cockburn 2005; Russell 2008). Amidst this plurality of agendas, it has been argued that complex and even contradictory agendas and approaches impact on how playworkers operate in these settings (Brown 2008; Moss and Petrie 2002).

Drawing on data from fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews and local authority policy documents, this chapter looks firstly at the views of parents, children and playworkers regarding the purposes of the provisions and the reasons children attended. This leads on to the presentation of opinions about the playworkers' priorities and responsibilities, and highlights some of the tensions within these. The chapter concludes with discussion of some factors influencing the meeting of playworkers' priorities and responsibilities.

The findings presented here begin to explore how these settings constituted a meeting point of requirements for children's freedom to play, and their control and surveillance; the facilitation of their exploration, choice and risk, within contexts of health and safety regulation and expectations of particular socialisation outcomes (Ansell and Smith 2008: 22). Thus the chapter introduces the key themes of control and facilitation to look at risk and safety; choices within these controlled environments; relationships between child- and adult-centred agendas and approaches; and relationships between viewing children's experiences as important in the immediate or as investments for their futures. These themes are developed throughout the remainder of the thesis in an examination of how playworkers facilitated, partially facilitated, or even hindered the processes and outcomes they and others said they sought.

The Purpose of the After School Provisions

The Borough guidelines stipulate the aims of the provisions as:

> To provide a friendly, calm, caring and secure environment for children and young people. To improve the understanding of parents/carers and the community of the importance of play in a child's educational development… To encourage a child's physical, mental and social development through play and to provide opportunities to experience challenging activities. ('Aims and Objectives of the Out of School Childcare Service', updated October 2009)

To begin to contextualise how and why the sites operated as they did, the following sections present parents, children, staff and the local authority views of the purposes and aims of the sites.

Parents

In the interviews, parents were asked why they used the provisions and what they considered most important there. Across both sites, many said they used the provisions out of necessity for after school childcare until they finished work. For some parents who worked and some who did not, they also used the provision: to enable them to carry out further studies either in addition to or in pursuit of full time work; or because the school or social services had referred their child to support issues at home or school. Their top priorities were that their children were safe, cared for and happy:

> The main aims of the play centre for us are a caring, supportive and safe environment for my daughter to play and learn in. (Karen, Mother, Dexters)

> That she's looked after and cared for I suppose being the first one. I mean that to be honest that's the only thing really that's important to me at the moment. (Chris, Father, Dexters)

> The most important things are the safety. She knows, she loves it as well.
> (Dora, Grandmother, Ferns)

In addition, parents saw the provisions as giving their children opportunities to do things they might not do otherwise; such as accessing varieties of activities, social interaction with mixed groups, and learning associated skills. These ranged from specific activity-based skills like using computers, baking or playing football to, broader social skills:

> Socialising with other children from different backgrounds. That's very important for me, that's partly why I sent him here, because the staff and the children are very diverse. I think that's good for him. (Amanda, Mother, Dexters)

> Cos of his autism we thought it would be quite good for him to socialise a bit with other kids… he loves it and cos he's an only child and he doesn't go out to play with other kids or anything, so its like a little opportunity for him … (Joy, Mother, Ferns)

> … just really so they can mix with other kids. Cos otherwise they're… we only live along the road but there's only one child her age who's around there so at least she can mix with kids here. (Tony, Father, Ferns)

As the quotations above demonstrate, in relation to what they considered important about the provisions, a number of parents raised the topic of learning. This is explored in depth in chapter seven. Although they generally agreed that their children did learn from their experiences there, opinions varied on what type of learning this entailed and whether or not this was a priority or expectation:

> What I don't want is for him to leave school and for him to then feel the pressure that you have to be learning all the time. At the same time I don't want him to feel, or me to feel, that he is not stimulated... So I think the play centre needs to offer a good balance of teaching but also play

time. And I find that Dexters does, you know, offer those services. Whether the children accept them or not…. (Stephanie, Mother, Dexters)

If they were made to sit down, you know, for two hours and made to do their homework or do something very rigid, I don't think he would enjoy it. So it gives him somewhere to go to play with his friends. Do some activities as well for a couple of hours. (Leslie-Ann, Mother, Dexters)

So I mean it would be good if they did something like that [homework] here but I mean that's not gonna happen. And I don't expect it to either. (Chris, Father, Dexters)

It's somewhere that he likes being, where he's happy and comfortable. Not so much about learning as they get that at school. Though I suppose he does learn things here. (Amanda, Mother, Dexters)

In the morning they're learning in school. Here they can play games, cook. They learn new skills, sometimes football skills, baking. Sometimes they go to the library. Its time for them to make new friends, to play with other children, maybe that are not in their class. (Pearl, Mother, Ferns)

If it was what I want, sometimes they have homework and when we get home sometimes there's not much time to do it. I would like him to do a bit at play centre. But for him, just playing is what he wants. (Asma, Mother, Ferns)

I want him to enjoy being here. You know it's not so much for homework assistance and that sort of thing, it's just for him…. Like what he's doing now you know he's learning lots of things that he would also do in school I'm sure, so the club just sort of continues that. And it's informal, it's not a rigid sort of set up…. It's not a school timetable sort of thing. They come today and yes I am sure they have activities that they do on a daily

basis but if you don't want to participate it's not the end of the world. (Elizabeth, Mother, Ferns)

These quotations indicate that parents wanted their children to have some time without adult expectations to be learning. There is a sense here that learning is important but is a formal adult agenda, and children need time to themselves too, away from doing what adults want them to do. In this context, it would seem that parents thought it was acceptable and even desirable for their children's wishes to take precedence over their own. As explored in chapter seven, this distinction between academic and other sorts of learning, and formal versus informal timetabling, linked to broader skills that playworkers also valued.

Despite appreciation of their children having time to themselves, some parents pointed out that they valued the regulation of the sites. This gave them confidence about their children's experiences there:

> They [playworkers] look after the children, to make them safe, they take care of them. So in my class [while studying] I'm concentrated on what I'm doing cos I know they are in a safe place and in safe hands. Cos if you have to find another person to look after the children, like some friends or something, it will never be the same. This is an official place. (Pearl, Mother, Ferns)

> The most important thing is that it's within the school and it's a very good club actually. It's got lots of good write-ups from Ofsted and things like that and he enjoys it a lot. (Elizabeth, Mother, Ferns)

As these comments highlight, parents prioritised their children's safety, play and enjoyment in these settings. That these were legitimate, regulated contexts was important to parents' trust that their children were safe and well looked after. Some thought learning at after school provision was important, others did not. Some thought doing some academic learning, such as school homework, would be a good idea, but considered this time their children's, to do with as they wished. Some thought the sort of learning that occurred in these settings was

161

about social and 'life' skills. Others thought that after school club was about their children having time to themselves to play with their friends and were glad there were no pressures to learn. The following chapter explores parents' perceptions of play and learning further.

Parents expected the choices their children had in their play and activities to be provided within regulated, safe environments. These expectations raised themes around the regulation of the children's behaviour and experiences, but also assignment of value to their freedom to play and make particular sorts of choices for themselves. This simultaneous requirement of supervision and safety alongside enabling the children's freedom to play and have some time to themselves remain thematic throughout the thesis.

Children

The reasons children gave for their attendance at after school club ranged from 'because it's fun' to 'my mum forces me to go. But I do like it when my friends come.' Some of the older children were aware of their parents' necessity to work or study and their attendance at after school provision being a result of that. As this child points out, also indicating the power of a school referral, some children at Ferns knew that their school had suggested they attend due to challenges at home or at school:

> Ms Brown [school head teacher] told my mum that I should start going then my mum said yes. (Jackie, age 10, Ferns)

Knowing that his parents had to be at work, and indicating the increasingly normalised absence of children playing in public, one child captured a sentiment present in many of the interviews:

> If I didn't go to play centre where would I go? Play in the streets? (Marco, age 9, Ferns)

Although they had often not chosen to attend but were present for reasons decided by the adults in their lives, the children largely enjoyed the after school

provisions. When asked about what after school club was for and what they did there, all of the children said they played and listed various games and activities ranging from general playing outside, to football, playing on scooters, computer games, doing art activities, playing with resources like Lego, reading or doing homework. This child described the variety of options available:

> In the art room you can make things, models and things. In the hall you can eat then after you can play games like dodge ball. Or you can go outside and go on the structures or the bikes…. (Dixie, age 9, Dexters)

Beyond the activities they listed enjoying, some of the children described the after school club in the following ways:

> …this is the best centre I ever been to. I like that you can do lots of things here. (Coco, age 10, Dexters)

> Dexters is a place to have fun. It's a place to do your favourite things. (Sam, age 9, Dexters)

> We don't go outside on the roads. (Mary, age 6, Dexters)

> It's better to come here than to go straight home. I like coming here. (Graham, age 10, Ferns)

This child was less positive. Describing his time at after school as:

> … a minute on the computer. I play football once a year cos we're not allowed out cos of the rain. I play a bit of table football. The rest of the time I get told off. (Luke, age 10, Ferns)

When asked if there was anything at after school club that they might like to change, responses largely related to; particular activities they did not want to do, like drawing or puzzles; food they did not enjoy; and interactions with other

children that they did not like, highlighting the social nature of experiences at the after school sites:

> Football. I do like it but just when the big children come they pass the ball in my face sometimes. (Samuel, age 7, Dexters)

As discussed below, there were degrees of friction between the experiences of older and younger children. Others made comments about things they would like to change related to the staff:

> … to wait. Like always when I come, every time I want to go into the computer room cos it's closed and I have to wait. (Marley, age 6, Dexters)

> I don't like it when staff force me to do puzzles. If we refuse she'll say to our parents that we've been bad. It would be really good if we could chose who is going to look after us. We are not allowed to speak to anyone over the gate even if it's our parents or they are play centre children but not at play centre that same day. (Mustafa, age 11, Ferns)

> You don't get to do what you want to do. (Jordan, age 9, Ferns)

> Adults. They annoy me except Hannah because she is very friendly and great. And Nita [manager] she'll say to our parents that we've been bad just because we don't want to do something. (Jackie, age 10, Ferns)

> Sometimes when people tease me and stuff. But I don't not like anything. The annoying people. We don't get to do whatever we want to do. Like playing stuff, doing whatever we want… (Isaac, age 7, Ferns)

Some of the older children at Ferns wished they could go to an after school provision that was more like Dexters or another of the local self-contained sites in the borough:

Compared to Chaplin's [another after school site nearby] we're nothing. There's nothing in the playground…There's more freedom there as well. You know where the big tree is, nobody watches there so you get a bit of freedom. Whereas here, everywhere, eyes peeking. The only place like that here we don't go to cos we're not allowed cos they can't see us. (Jamal, age 10, Ferns)

These quotations introduce some tensions for the children between their priorities around playing and having some freedom, and the challenges they felt they faced in playing as they wished. Chapters seven and eight explore these tensions as manifestations of playworkers' contradictory agendas and practices.

Playworkers

In the interviews, playworkers were asked what they considered the most important and main aims of the provisions. They described the sites as primarily for the provision of a service to parents in which their children were safe and happy. Staff recognised that many children did not attend out of their own initial choice. But they described wanting to provide contexts in which the children felt welcome, where they could participate in enjoyable and diverse activities, learn new things, and make and play with friends:

It's for the children to do what they want to do. Whether they are here cos they want to be or not is a different question… And hopefully you know developing with other children or participating in play that they might not get to do elsewhere. And it is freely chosen. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

Reflecting contemporary concerns about children's lives discussed in chapter three, explanations of what playworkers sought to provide were often set against a context of the children's lives in relation to playing outside, safety, television and computer use, and the possible social impacts of these:

Play centre for me is not just about children playing, but children learning, developing their skills. Communication skills, gross motor

skills, um… it's a safe environment. For me, especially nowadays, for parents or carers to know that their child is safe. You know, and also children, I don't like to see looking at a television, to me… you know, I like to see children mixing with other children or learning. (Lewis, Deputy Manager, Dexters)

… it's survival of the fittest isn't it. And you think, god it's awful hard, if children grow into this kind of society and they haven't got any skills to deal with it and talk to each other, or kind of negotiate and stuff like that… (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

Associated with these concerns and wishes, at both sites, but particularly at Ferns, the challenges of some of the children's backgrounds featured in staff accounts of their behaviour, such as strained family situations or difficulties they faced at school. Nita the Ferns manager, linked these to her view of the after school provision as a place of respite, for parents and children; where the children could relax and have fun, sometimes as a contrast to their home and school lives. For her, meeting the Every Child Matters outcomes meant giving the children those experiences - 'enjoying' themselves and 'achieving' in their play and activities, eating 'healthy' food at snack time, and 'making a contribution' by having a say in things like the picture displays on the walls, resource choices and snack menus - for the two hours that they spent at her centre:

… you know how sometimes they have centres only for the parents who work. But our children, most of them, lets say 75% were referred by school. Because of their family background. So I got used to that, that children do need play. They do need to be a child again. But some family background, children are the carer rather than parents are their carer. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

Another influential professional connected to Ferns pointed out the particular value of the safe, supportive and nurturing after school environment for the 'vulnerable' children attending. For this person, and for Nita the manager and

Noel the playworker, the fee increases in the spring term 2008 which prioritised places for the children of working parents failed to recognise the also important needs of non-working parents who could subsequently no longer afford for their children to attend.

Nita contrasted the realities of the children and families using her centre, and therefore her immediate goals, with the Dexters context where she considered the families and their children to be dealing with different social and economic issues:

> Maybe when you go to Dexters, it's a bit more atmosphere, different set of kids, different backgrounds. Here, it's all different. That's why we have more concessionary rate. Because of their backgrounds. Maybe, is a different needs. I mean we talk about the special needs, I think all the children's needs are different… in the backgrounds… they are different needs. They want to do different things… maybe at Dexters … their needs would be different. Here, like I've explained, the background of the children, they want to come and play. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

While also concerned about the children's immediate experiences, Margaret the Dexters manager described the purpose of the after school provision with a focus on the children's futures and helping them to fulfil their potentials:

> … what children learn now… it shapes them for the rest of their lives… Obviously from home and family, is the centre of their learning how to become adults…. And then they are learning at school to equip them academically, whatever kind of leanings they have towards what they are going to do in the future. Then here, they learn lots of social skills and…. They do lots of things that they would do at school, but perhaps, cos this is a different setting, so they have to consider different things about how they are with people, you know how they are with their peers… what kind of tolerance they have… here it's a lot more geared to group activities, and things that they'll do and need help from other people like games and all that… They are learning to be individuals, but they are also

167

> learning how to interact with other individuals and do things
> cooperatively so to benefit everybody… (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

Safety and enjoyment were central to what playworkers, parents and children wanted. But some children felt over protected or that they were not able to play as they wished. When describing the purposes of the after school provisions, beyond being safe and fun places, playworkers contextualised their efforts against challenges in the children's lives more broadly, and in terms of skills they considered valuable for the children to develop. They listed challenges including changes in children's lives and play patterns generally, and the effects of economic strains and the impacts of local environments on the families they worked with specifically. In terms of how they saw the children benefiting from their after school time, like the parents, playworkers' views combined both the value of play for its immediate gratification and enjoyment, and how things learned at these times may contribute to the children more broadly in the present and future. For some children, particularly at Ferns, they seemed to be learning that playing in the streets was too dangerous, but also that play in the after school provision was restricted and that they were not trusted to play without constant supervision.

These concerns and contrasts between the sites raise a number of themes. Chapter seven explores participants' ideas about play and learning. Chapter eight develops this in connection to how playworker's perceptions of their jobs echoed their views of the challenges or opportunities facing the children.

Playworkers' Priorities and Responsibilities

As introduced above, parents, children and playworkers agreed that safety and enjoyment were top priorities at the after school provisions. Playworkers were central to attaining these goals. As two parents noted, playworkers were the links between the possibilities of the settings and their children's experiences. The following sections present how parents, children and playworkers viewed the professional priorities and responsibilities of playwork staff.

Parents

Parents at both sites expected playworkers to combine a variety of ways of being with the children:

> to be very playful, that's very important. (Desai, Mother, Dexters)

> keeping them stimulated so they don't get bored, finding new things for them to do and try and making sure they're safe. (Joy, Mother, Ferns)

> just keep them interested. From what I've seen and heard it's not sort of mundane every day sort of things. She does chop and change. (Tony, Father, Ferns)

> supporting my son's needs (Stephanie, Mother, Dexters)

> they are responsible for my son while he is here. (Asma, Mother, Ferns)

> A caring role enabling my daughter to feel confident in the play centre environment (Karen, Mother, Dexters)

Only one parent described wanting these qualities to be supported by playworkers' professional understanding of children, play processes and children's development through play:

> Playworkers need to support this learning, like when they see that some children don't know how to play, or play with other children, the playworker supports this process so that they can. Understanding this developmental need, and its crucial relation to play is key for playworkers. Play is how children 'speak'. No good knowing health and safety etcetera if they don't know how to play. Children need a secure base… It allows a child to feel a sense of safety to take risks, to get things wrong, knowing that this secure base is there to return to. Adults create

the environment for the child where those risks, experiments, learnings are made. (Desai, Mother, Dexters)

Through displaying these attributes, some parents described playworkers as the link that helped children feel comfortable and able to make the most of the after school clubs. One parent saw this ability of playworkers to make children feel comfortable as because:

their role is not so much authoritative. (Elizabeth, Mother, Ferns)

However, parents did expect playworkers to have an authoritative side, to supervise, keep safe and take care of their children. For one parent a playworker was to:

… act like a parent. Like 'don't do that or do that' for the two hours or so that they're here. They are children. Some of them behave, some of them don't. So they [playworkers] help them to behave. Sometimes children listen more to people who are not their parents. Outside of the home they're better. It's good when you have these kinds of staff who can tell you how they have been in the play centre. So if they've not been good I can tell them at home about being nice. They can think for themselves and I can ask them to be better the next day. To be nice to people. If staff didn't tell you, you wouldn't know. (Pearl, Mother, Ferns)

The parents I spoke with expressed trust in the playworkers, and a level of appreciation that working with so many children was a challenging endeavour. One parent put it this way:

It's chaos here. But I know it's organised chaos. They [playworkers] have a reason for doing things the way they do. (Leslie-Ann, Mother, Dexters)

As this parent points out, amidst the apparent chaos, aims and objectives underpinned the types of activity, play, structures and relationships. Parents trusted that the playworkers would address and resolve issues arising affecting

170

their children. This linked with the importance of parents feeling that their children were not only safe in terms of being contained and supervised, but that playworkers would ensure their fair treatment. Thus, parents expected playworkers to be fun, welcoming, playful and approachable, but also to be guides, safe-guarders and enforcers of appropriate behaviour.

Children

Children at both sites commonly saw playworkers as there to 'look after' them; to help and play with them; and to enforce right from wrong.

The Dexters children described playworkers as 'fun' and 'kind' people who kept children safe; helped with problems with other children or activities; and supported and kept children's behaviour within acceptable boundaries. One child described playworkers as 'like a parent'. The following quotations summarise their key points:

> Playworkers are kind, nice, stops people from having their arguments. Tells them off to not do what they're doing. Oh and they take care of the children, like the little ones. It's different what the playworkers do with the little children and the bigger children. Like teas, the little children go first. They look after them. (Charlie, age 11, Dexters)

> [They] help you. They make sure that you don't do bad stuff. They supervise you. When you've got something to do like a project, they help you with it. (Faizal, age 9, Dexters)

> Some I find really fun, they join in with the activities, and some are normal ones. (Hussein, age 10, Dexters)

> Playworkers keep an eye on you and if you have a problem, like anything, you can just go to them and tell them what's the matter and then they try to sort it out. (Cereese, age 10, Dexters)

171

They help you. They sort you out. And if you get injuries they put plasters on it and make sure it doesn't hurt anymore. They do everything. Like play football. Help us read books. Go on the computer with us. Find things for us if we have a hard time finding them. They colour in with us. And they're just nice to us and I'm glad. (Leona, age 10, Dexters)

The Ferns children similarly saw playworkers as there to help them, to keep children's behaviour in order and to give guidance:

Playworker are not teachers. But they do teach you about good and bad. (Jackie, age 10, Ferns)

They do activities. It's better to come here than to go straight home. I like coming here. (Graham, age 10, Ferns)

[Playworkers] take care of us. So the parents don't have to complain about the play centre, that it's not a good place. They let us play. They don't let us go out the gates, so we're safe. (Marco, age 9, Ferns)

The playworkers they're good. I mean that they're nice to you. They're not rude. To help you… in work… in stuff. All they do is protect you, help you [from] fire or anything, if it's dangerous. There's one strict person in here. We have rules… Not to talk over staff. Not to walk away when they're talking to you. And not to disrespect them, like some people do, but I don't. (Biko, age 8, Ferns)

These quotations demonstrate children's sense of contrast between playworkers and teachers; their sense of playworkers being there to help and to set boundaries around right and wrong; and thus their recognition that interactions at the after school settings had a moral and social dimension. They also show children' awareness of the varied and high expectations on playworkers: to be fun and nice, but also to protect, to resolve issues and to avoid the looming possibility of parental complaints.

I regularly observed children using playworkers to help them challenge children deemed to contravene the invisible behaviour lines between what was or was not acceptable. As this child described it:

> They help you. And sort things out. Like when arguments arise. They tell me what I could improve. And they sort everything out, like what happened sort of thing. (Sylvan, age 11, Dexters)

While the older Dexters children appeared confident that the adults were there to support them, the older children at Ferns said that help and support were not qualities all playworkers demonstrated. As the above quotations suggest, there were noticeable differences between perceptions of the older children at Dexters and Ferns:

> Jamal – I mean they say that we don't listen. We do listen. We don't do what they say. You can tell Nita [manager] what we think but it goes in one ear and out the other. You tell Noel [playworker], you say half a word and he just interrupts you. They think oh we're just kids it don't matter.
>
> Luke – They don't even let us speak. It's like if we get in trouble because of something and we're saying that it didn't happen like this, they wouldn't care. They would just say don't try and make excuses. And they always go for the little kids more respect. Like the little kids… can get away with stuff.
>
> Jamal – They just always believe them and not us.
>
> Luke – Yeah. They don't even care. (Jamal and Luke, age 10, Ferns)

Conversations with older children at Ferns revealed a frustration that some of the older children at Dexters also expressed on occasion. They felt the younger children were better catered for and treated more gently than the older children and that this was frustrating, even unfair at times:

> They [younger children] can get away scotch free. If they punch us and then you take their arm and move them around and then Nita [manager]

will say like 'oh why you doing that' and then she'll say 'you shouldn't have done that to the little kid' and then we have to go and sit down or help do something. (Jamal, age 10, Ferns)

Nita always sticks up for the little kids. (Mustafa, age 10, Ferns)

Jacob – and you know what they [playworkers] say, if someone punches you, tell them. And I did this quite a few times. Where a little kid punches me and I say 'Nita, she punched me' and she says 'oh forget about it'. I'm doing exactly what they want me to do then they just ignore it.
HS – if that's what you've been told, what would you want to happen to that child after you've told?
Jacob – well the same that happens to us. We have to sit down there for ten minutes which turns into half an hour. (Jacob, age 11, Ferns)

In their research with children in after school projects across Britain, Smith and Barker also found this frustration on the part of older children attending closed access after school provisions; both in terms of less stimulating provision for children their age and more gentle treatment of younger children (2004: 4). In these examples playworkers considered these older children old enough to know better than the younger children and therefore deserving of reprimand, penalty and the expectation that they set good examples; but staff also had to respect the children's parents views that they were not old enough to be allowed to be unsupervised. These differences in treatment indicate, at least in part, adult notions that younger children require more guidance and older children can manage greater autonomy (Petrie 1994: 39). These same children also complained about not being allowed sufficient independence. Their frustrations also highlight a moral ambiguity in perceptions of children in which they are expected to behave correctly but are also mistrusted (Alanen and Mayall 2001: 6). These children felt treated as 'just kids' whose views were subordinate as a result.

In summary, while attendance at after school provision was not always out of choice, for parents and children, this was a significant time. Safety and some free

time to play were top priorities. These enabled the children to benefit fro

enjoying themselves and socialising with other children. The findings also reveal

tensions within these however. Examples where children felt restricted by

playworkers suggested perhaps excessive pursuit of health and safety practices

and some ambiguities in the messages children received. The following section

explores the various aspects playworkers described as priorities and

responsibilities.

Playworkers

In the interviews, playworkers were asked to describe their job. The following

findings are divided according to the main categories they outlined: treating

children as individuals; children's behaviour; and supervision, intervention and

self-direction. These categories were part of the broader themes of control and

facilitation that emerged as inherent aspects of playworkers' jobs and these

contexts more broadly, to which the final sections of the chapter return.

Children as Individuals

The staff at both sites said one of their main purposes was to 'be there' for the

children. This involved facilitating activities or playing with them sometimes,

being approachable, caring and patient, and treating all the children fairly and as

individuals. They said they sought to keep the children safe and to ensure that

they felt safe by: implementing procedures such as health and safety regulations;

communicating clear boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour;

and providing attention and affection:

> … children are all different, they are all individuals. So you can't just
> have a kind of one-size fits all kind of attitude when you work with
> children. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

> … well, you see people develop differently at different ages. You may get
> some at four and play with the young kids at a certain age Hannah. And
> you get one who is probably a bit shy. (Noel, Playworker, Ferns)

… you can support them in their development but its self-directed from them. You don't push them. You let them progress at their own… their own level and their own time. (Steve, Playworker, Dexters)

… we are here for them really. Here to listen. And taking the time to talk with them about what's going on with them. You can see sometimes through their play that maybe something is not quite right. And you can sit down with them and if they want to off load. (Marie, Playworker, Dexters)

In line with the Borough's equal opportunities policy of providing 'appropriate, accessible, and effective services and facilities to all sections of the community without prejudice or bias' (Equal Opportunities Policy, updated October 2009), and the Early Years Foundation Stage principle of 'the unique child' (DCSF 2008a), a number of playworkers described a key part of their job as ensuring that any child could access any activity. This linked with agendas to help build the children's confidence through making them feel valued and recognised, and responding to each child's needs and interests. Playworkers often expressed these principles as inherent to children experiencing the after school provision as *their* place to play, learn and explore.

This required, for example, that playworkers maintained awareness of the different ages, stages and abilities of the various children taking part in activities at any one time: during a game of catch, a playworker who the children had asked to play with them, noting the different abilities of those involved, asked the children to show ways that the ball could be thrown so that everyone involved could catch it; or amongst the noise of excited group celebrations of winning a game, a playworker kneeling down, quietly helping a child on the sidelines to accept the emotions of losing or not feeling proud of their achievements.

In different ways, most of the playworkers described themselves as invested in the children's processes and promoted trying to 'understand where the children are coming from' (Noel, Playworker, Ferns) both individually and contextually**.** This understanding involved degrees of accepting and allowing children to feel

however they felt – for example, new children opting to play on their own or not wanting to eat when they first started attending – and allowing and encouraging them to shift their behaviour as and when they were ready, rather than pressuring them. Chapter eight explores how this contextualisation of the children's behaviour had implications for some differences between key aims and practices at the sites.

Contending with the group dynamics of the centres, response to children as individuals also required supporting them to understand about the different stages that other children may go through. For example, when an autistic boy at Ferns refused to sit with any girls and insisted on having his blue plastic cup and bowl each tea time, or when a child behaved in ways that were not in accordance with general expectations, particular staff talked to the affected children so that they might understand, accept and perhaps have some patience and support for the child. While playworkers often talked about the value of treating the children as individuals, they also saw supporting them to operate in the social contexts of the after school provisions as valuable and an important part of their jobs. Short staffing made this individual attention challenging at times.

In addition, connected to more general aims of children having opportunities to be responsible, playworkers encouraged the children to support each other. As explored in chapter seven, this was an approach that staff deemed useful for helping children to build their confidence. For example, older children looking after younger ones, guiding them in learning the after school club procedures, or sharing their skills:

> Pool games in the hall – Steve [playworker] tells girls around the pool table that Joshua [older boy] is really good at pool. Steve asks Joshua if he wants to give some pool tips. Joshua coaches two girls on how to hold the cue, where to look on the ball, tells them to take their time, Steve joins them briefly by the table as he covers Jackie [agency staff member] while she goes to the loo. Another older girl comes into the hall. She and the older boy give the girls some tips and help. They get instantly better. They both smile as they begin to pot shots…. One of the girls who had

just been given the pool tips shows Adina (really young, maybe 4 years old and new to the centre) how to play, helps her hold the cue, they play together.' (Dexters fieldnotes, spring term)

At times the children volunteered this kind of sharing interaction. At other times staff used this approach to encourage positive behaviour:

> Perhaps with the more challenging ones, giving them some responsibilities helps them to feel better about themselves and that they are worth something. Some of the ones on the escort who are more challenging, asking them to partner up with a littler one and look after them and make sure they are ok, that can really help them to feel responsible sometimes, they really feel good, feel better about themselves and they feel that you trust them as well. All that kind of thing is really important I think. (Marie, Playworker, Dexters)

> I gave the disruptive, attention-seeking children the role of chair and minute-taker. They took on responsibilities very well. After the first planning meeting attempt, Jamal and Luke who had been disruptive on the first attempt got very interested in it. They had leadership roles. You can really see another side of them when they are in that role, they do have ideas…. Give them responsibility, they react differently. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

This sharing of responsibility and roles between playworkers and children happened often during the fieldwork. The endeavour to encourage children to support each other was also sometimes used as a means of policing their behaviour:

> On escort to Dexters – Sylvan pulling leaves off trees, refused to hold Marie's [playworker] hand or walk next to her like he usually does. He appears upset. Marie asks if there is something wrong. He doesn't respond. Pretending to talk to herself she says 'oh it's such a shame that I can't be heard because I wanted to ask Sylvan if he would lead the line so

we get to the centre quickly so he could help me with dishing out the burgers we're having for tea… never mind, someone else will help me I'm sure.' Marie did a kind of shrugging action and walked towards the front of the escort line. Sylvan follows her and says to the two children closest to the front 'can you walk quicklier please'. (Dexters fieldnotes, summer term)

Supervising Children's Behaviour: Intervening or Being Invisible

A central aspect of playwork explored in chapter three is the value of low levels of adult intervention and children feeling free to play in their own ways. This featured in playworkers' accounts alongside the necessity of health and safety regulation. In the quotation below, Margaret the Dexters manager succinctly describes tensions between supervising the children but also not wanting to interrupt their play, and the value of playworkers' awareness and sensitivity:

> I think the playworker's role is really to facilitate the children and to recognise what needs to be done and what doesn't... When they are not needed, you know. I mean it's lovely to feel that children need you around here all the time. And there's a lot of stuff around safety of children and you know, health and safety issues, where everything has to be supervised and everything has to be safe… it's nice when you have workers and people who understand that you do sometimes need to be kind of invisible, and maybe just have children in the room that are doing their own thing, and just be there but they are not really aware that you are there. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

Margaret also described her aim of providing a place where children could try things without a necessary outcome and make mistakes:

> They can experiment with things and they can do stuff. It doesn't have to be right and wrong, play. Cos there doesn't have to be any end result. They can do lots of things in play that don't give any end result, but they could just say, they wanted to lie down on the floor and roll over ten times and that's their choice, that's what they wanted to do. And you

know, to us its not really achieving anything or they've not got anything to show for at the end of it. It's just something that's... chosen by them. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

The Ferns manager also described giving the children some freedom:

… giving them the opportunity to play and opportunity to develop themselves, their self esteem, their confidence and all those things… And give them the choices what they want to do. So give them the freedom. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

However, the scope for this 'experimentation', choice and 'freedom' was within limits. The rules and regulations defining the parameters of the children's behaviour, and the playworker's responsibilities in relation to these, were seen as ensuring risks and detrimental outcomes were avoided, controlled or cushioned:

All staff need to be clear and consistent about the management of unacceptable behaviour, including challenging discriminatory comments. Positive action should be taken to overcome unacceptable or disruptive behaviour, using firm, fair boundaries. (Promoting Positive Behaviour policy, updated October 2009)

In practice, like the quotation earlier about the children not being allowed to talk to friends or family through the perimeter fence, particular playworkers appeared to restrict children's behaviour in favour of maintaining perhaps excessive control over the after school environment. For example, I observed and children told me about playworkers not allowing them to go into certain parts of the after school sites' gardens due to them not being supervised; or playworkers, even those who spoke passionately about accepting and supporting the children, capping the noise levels of children's conversations at snack time. This clearly served to maintain certain kinds of social order, noise levels and supervision, which a couple of playworkers highlighted as important in case an accident should occur. This also appeared to contradict how some staff depicted their aspirations during our conversations.

Control of the children's playfulness struck me on occasion at both sites but particularly at Ferns, for example at tea time, in Noel's and Nita's approach to children who they considered to be 'misbehaving', i.e. talking loudly or being playful at the tea tables. Particularly the older children were told that they were setting a bad example, were repeatedly instructed to be quiet, and were at times punished by being moved to a different table. Examples like this, observed on an almost weekly basis, did not appear to support what Nita told me about enjoyment, play and valuing and responding to the children as individuals. Such practice, however, was in accordance with the wishes parents described, who wanted their children to behave well, to respect and obey the playworkers, and to be disciplined by them when necessary.

Playworkers' saw their responsibilities as fundamentally about caring for the children. This, some said, was shown by how they talked to the children, by their being approachable, by the levels of affection and understanding they showed, and the support they gave. Their descriptions revealed an expectation that they were to provide moral guidance to the children; a playworker who cared was both fair in their treatment of the children, and supportive of the children in discerning right from wrong. As this playworker described it:

> You want to teach them how to be nice to each other and good to each other and kind. (Marie, Playworker, Dexters)

When disputes arose between children, such as when a child felt mistreated by another, I often heard playworkers ask the 'offending' child if they would like someone to do that to them or if they thought it was 'right', 'nice' or 'fair' to behave like that. While helping the children to learn these values was promoted as positive, enforcing them also functioned as a means of controlling the children's play behaviour. Boundaries to desired and unacceptable behaviour were communicated through, for example, the children's behaviour agreements. I heard playworkers, and on occasion children, refer to this document for this purpose. In some examples this behaviour agreement was a source of pride and ownership for some children - 'we write the rules'.

Most of the playworkers said they aimed to provide a place in which children could make new friends and bond with each other. At times this meant staff trying to blend into the background so that children could explore each other and their play on their own terms, with minimal adult intervention. Margaret the Dexters manager also suggested that children benefited from feeling left alone sometimes, to play and interact with other children without adults. She said this enabled the children to feel some autonomy and self-direction so that they could learn about making their own choices in a supportive context. This required a kind of invisibility on the part of the staff. She and two of her staff linked this with children's rights to play without intervention from adults. This showed some impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1991) framework as well as the playwork principles in which advocacy of children's play in opposition to adult agendas is important (PPSG 2005).

This Dexters playworker expressed a similar sentiment that others also noted:

> The playworker's role is about being there but not being there… I mean that sounds silly but its being there if they want you. But not intervening in their play unless you have to. Like if there is an argument. Really you want them to sort it out themselves. So they learn how to, and it's better for them that way. But sometimes you have to intervene. And that is not always easy. Sometimes if things are kicking up, you have to go in. And there are issues with children who have a lot going on, and who are challenging, but you… and you would hope more and more that we can not have to intervene more and more. That we can instil in them the confidence to deal with things so that we have to step in less, to see that is good you know, over time. (Marie, Playworker, Dexters)

This was a common perspective presented by staff at Dexters. Although there was also a lot of interaction with children, their practice often reflected this. The approach the Ferns manager and playworker described, and the practice they showed differed. Both in their descriptions and their practice, they had a more

forthcoming mode of interaction with the children. Unlike at Dexters, for example, I rarely saw a dispute between children where they were left to resolve it themselves, with staff only intervening if they deemed a safety issue might ensue. At Ferns, both the manager and the playworker were quick to intervene in such situations. Their endeavours suggested desires for rapid diffusion of conflicts rather than perhaps helping the children to find routes to conflict resolution.

The idea that sometimes it was good to take a back seat in relation to the children, and sometimes it was good to be more proactive, linked to playworkers ideas about the importance of understanding children as individuals, with different needs, abilities and phases. Part of responding to children as individuals meant trying different approaches with different children at different times, to 'help them further their own progress' (Steve, Playworker, Dexters).

As explored in chapter three, the importance of low intervention approaches related not just to conflicts or problems but also to general playwork principles of giving the children space to play and be (Sturrock and Else 1998; PPSG 2005). As the Dexters manager described it:

> … sometimes you're automatic reaction is to say oh, you know, come on let's do this, let's do that. But sometimes those children need that kind of space to decide for themselves, do I really want to do this or… they might even come and open the door and just sort of look in and not want to do anything, to take some time to think about it… that's not about not encouraging somebody to take part, but just maybe not overwhelming them or making them feel like they have to. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

Responding to the children meant balancing awareness of desired behaviour, and responding to individuals sensitively:

> sometimes you have to try to look past what you first see, and you might want them to be behaving differently, but then behind that maybe there is

something they might want to talk about and feel listened to. (Marie, Playworker, Dexters)

In summary, as the descriptions above indicate, agendas and relationships in these settings were dynamic, multifaceted and at times, contradictory. In their descriptions of their roles, communication and support between playworkers and children factored highly. This quotation exemplifies a common sentiment:

[we're] here to listen. And taking the time to talk with them [children] about what's going on with them. You can see sometimes through their play that maybe something is not quite right. And you can sit down with them and if they want to off load… and yes we have all our procedures and I am not demeaning that in any way but I just feel that every day is an assessment of yourself and the children. (Marie, Playworker, Dexters)

This quotation describes the key skills of self-awareness, attention and understanding of children's play, and being approachable that parents, children and staff valued. The quotation also highlights that beyond the procedures in place, what playworkers did daily involved a complex blend of skills and requirements.

Interviews with playworkers, parents and children revealed similar perceptions of what playworkers were, or should be, like. A playworker was commonly seen as a carer, a friendly figure and a helper. Playworkers, parents and children, in different ways, described this role as someone there to be fun, to be a good role model and to share their skills for the children's benefit; as the safe-guarders of the after school environments so the children could safely enjoy and develop; and to maintain divisions between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Parents and children valued that playworkers were not teachers, but that they did provide guidance, as well as support with schoolwork if the children wished. The importance of children's choices stood out.

Most of the children, playworkers, and parents expressed a common interest in maintaining, encouraging or challenging certain sorts of behaviour. The

discussion above has begun to explore how, despite these commonalities, there were tensions within the various expectations of playworkers. Playworkers needed to maintain control of the after school settings, to ensure that the children were safe and behaved in ways their parents and social norms expected. As Russell (2008) suggests, play and behaviour tend to be considered acceptable when they fit with ideas about nice play and if children appear to be learning the right kinds of behaviour. But at the same time the playworkers wanted to treat the children as individuals. A number particularly the Dexter's team, felt that part of their job was to try not to intervene, to try to blend into the background, so that the children could feel they had some time to themselves, to explore, to experiment, to discover. Where children felt restricted by playworkers, their frustrations indicate these tensions between control and facilitation.

Against the backdrop of the above discussion, the following section focuses on some of the influences impacting on the playworkers.

Playwork – Opportunities, Challenges and Tensions in Practice

Much of what the staff said begged the questions, why did they say the things they did, and why did their practice not always appear to cohere with what they said? The following sections begin to investigate possible explanations by looking at factors playworkers identified such as staffing and teamwork; and more subtle issues, such as expectations and contradictions inherent in their professional identities.

Staffing
Playworkers and managers at both sites considered short-staffing an issue in terms of the impact it had on the quality of the experiences they were able to give the children. They attributed this short staffing to a lack of qualified, permanently employed playworkers. Both sites considered themselves to be running with what Nita the Ferns manager called a 'skeleton' team. This had a number of implications. Amongst them, staff members were not always able to devote the levels of attention to the children that they wished; certain areas were closed on

185

occasion, for an afternoon or period thereof. This was particularly an issue at Ferns in relation to their playground use, as described in chapter five.

Head office at the Early Years and Childcare Services unit of the Children's Services department determined the number of staff assigned to the sites. This depended on how many children they catered for and considerations of site layouts. At the time of the research, the legal ratio was one staff member to eight under eight year olds, and one staff member to ten over eight year olds (Ofsted 2001). Despite the fact that the site layout required four staff members if children were to move freely between inside and outside, Ferns had only three because it had fewer than 20 children each day.

Another of the impacts of a lack of qualified, permanently employed playworkers was that both sites regularly had temporary agency staff members covering these positions. Agency staff generally had little or no playwork experience and often displayed less child-centred understandings and approaches than those of the permanent staff. This has been found in other research also (Cole, Maegusuku-Hewett, Trew and Cole 2006). The following fieldnotes excerpt describes a characteristic interaction between one of the agency staff members and some children playing pool at Dexters:

> Michael [agency staff member]: 'write your names on the list and when it's your turn you can have your go', 'don't do that,' 'keep the balls on the tables', 'keep the noise down', 'if you continue like that I am not gonna let you play anymore', 'now since you have come in here you have been noisy and messing about and I am not sure that I should let you play on the pool table. What do you think? Do you think I should let you?' Damien [child] - 'yes'. Michael - 'well I am not sure, I don't think so.' (Dexters fieldnotes, winter term)

Or in this example, Anisha the agency staff member at Ferns described her view of the children:

Some kids just want play and fight only. And they are not interested in developing, so we have to make sure they do. (Anisha, agency staff member, Ferns)

Michael's communication and Anisha's attitude to the children resemble conventional adult/child ideas much more closely than the type the playwork staff described. Having said this, while the lack of qualified staff did appear to affect the children's experiences and the types of relationships staff had with them at times, at both sites there were more permanent staff than temporary ones. Therefore, this was only one of a number of factors influencing the children's experiences.

Teamwork

The significance of the rapport and communication between staff emerged from some conversations, but more significantly from observations of how differently the teams appeared in this respect. The core Dexters team, with the exception of the newly arrived deputy manager, knew each other well professionally and sometimes socially. As commented on by parents and staff, there was a consistency for them and the children because they had all worked at the site for some years.

Furthermore, they met each evening, sometimes past their employed time, to discuss the afternoon's events and how to deal with arising issues. These meetings revolved around feedback from staff about their areas that day and any positive or concerning matters. Positive matters included how children had behaved and activities they had engaged with. Matters of concern revolved around particular incidents. Most often matters of swearing or teasing. The team discussed why the child may have acted this way, how the matter had been addressed, and what else may need to happen. This sometimes included sending a letter home or speaking with the child's parent, ensuring that all staff were aware of the child's possible concerns or challenges, and that the team endeavoured to give the child a consistent message about appropriate behaviour.

Despite differences in opinion and examples of impatience between individuals at times, the Dexters team got along well. During the fieldwork year, even in moments of considerable tension impacting on them personally, professionally and as a team, they showed a consistent enthusiasm for their work and solidarity and support between them. As explored in chapters seven and eight, the communication amongst the Dexters team impacted on their work and the children's experiences.

At Ferns the core team consisted of Nita the manager and Noel one playworker. They had also worked together for some years but had a different professional rapport. They both knew what needed to be done and it appeared that further discussion rarely seemed necessary to them. They did not meet to discuss the afternoons. They met for supervision to discuss the playworker's performance once per term.

At both sites, in examples where staff only did what was minimally required of them, this was an issue particularly for managers and generated frustration. For example, when staff stuck too rigidly to their job descriptions; rarely offered new ideas for activities; did not use their initiative; demonstrated minimal notable enthusiasm or much communication with the children beyond behaviour instructions; or where arrival and departure times were stuck to by rote rather than showing occasional flexibility. The underpinning message seemed to be that demonstrating care for one's job and/or the children, equated to being enthusiastic and sometimes doing a little extra. This suggested different playworkers had different ideas about their jobs.

Professional Identities

In the interviews, staff presented a broadly consistent professional identity of themselves as carers, as educators, and as committed to children, their play and their learning. Much of how they described their jobs, therefore, was in line with the playwork literature and policies explored in chapter three.

There were moral dimensions to how they presented themselves in terms of children's rights to be understood, valued and taught the skills they would need

for later life in a changing world (Lee 2001). In describing their understanding of children's learning and development, their approaches as professionals, and their sense of what children gained from their after school experiences, they validated their work. The Ferns manager repeatedly described this importance in terms consistent with national guidelines such as the Every Child Matters outcomes (DfES 2005a). Clearly providing a useful frame of reference, she referred specifically to the five outcomes and the ways in which she worked towards these. In the case of the Dexters staff, reference to policy was generally more implicit through discussion of the processes and outcomes explored above.

Thus staff presented themselves as 'good' professionals, drawing on their experiences, trainings, and policy and practice guidelines. During the interviews and over the course of the fieldwork some staff seemed concerned that they may be deemed unprofessional if they did not appear to tend to the children constantly. Part of this, in accordance with practice guidelines but in contrast to a playwork approach, was about showing oneself to be doing one's job properly by being seen to be interacting with the children. This is contrary, for example, to influential playwork theorist Hughes' argument that quality playwork is based on 'low intervention/high responsiveness', with a 'low playworker to child approach ratio' (1996: 51). Those who were aware of this were therefore keen to balance this kind of input because, as identified by Cole *et al.*:

> the drive towards efficient running of services, within an increasing culture of litigation, has culminated in a whole host of health and safety precautions that are perceived to hinder non-adult led play. (2006: 4)

At times two playworkers in particular, one at each site, appeared to interact with the children to assert that they were doing something, that they were making a difference or that they were in control. Their interactions often included intervening in children's play in ways that appeared both contradictory to how they had presented themselves in the interviews and restrictive or disjointing to the children's activity.

Rules, Regulations and Play

In the interviews, the permanent staff suggested tensions between child-centred approaches and requirements to control the children. For example Lewis, the Dexters deputy manager described tensions between endeavours to facilitate children's self-chosen play and learning, and following health and safety procedures:

> We are governed by legislation and council policies and procedures, so you have to be very careful how you talk to children, the choices you give….[…]… you try and leave them as much independence, and you know… like children climbing trees, I can't understand why they [senior management] don't let them do it, that's all part of it. Children used to climb on roofs. It's all gone… it's the legislation has changed over what they [children] can and can't do… I personally, don't know if anyone agrees but I just feel, children… it's like putting them in cotton wool. (Lewis, Deputy manager, Dexters)

This resistance does not suggest that staff advocated an environment without policies and procedures. During the course of the fieldwork playworkers revealed that they saw the combination of having a purposeful impact on children's experiences, as decision-maker and regulation enforcer, and the playwork approach of low intervention as a necessary aspect of their jobs. They described themselves as legally bound to ensure due care and attention, to ensure reasonable risk aversion, and answerable to senior management and parents should accidents occur. Most of them noted the necessity of rules and regulations but a number argued that some rules and regulations restricted the children's play, the choices they could make, experiences they could have, and therefore not only their fun but also their learning and development.

Playworkers' practices manifested endeavours to coordinate these conflictual agendas. To balance these, they behaved differently at different times. Sometimes asserting their authority and being directive, at other times encouraging or facilitating children by helping them, and sometimes trying to be 'invisible'.

Conclusion

That play and activity were occurring within supervised, closed access, paid-for settings meant that free play and regulation of behaviour were held in constant dynamic tension. Playworker's perceptions of their jobs as combinations of control of the children's behaviour and facilitation of their play highlighted inherent contradictions and challenges facing them and the children they worked with.

Parents valued the after school provisions as places where their children were safe, happy, and able to play with other children. For some, the after school provisions were places where children developed and learned. These views are in line with Barker *et al.*'s findings that many parents believe their children learn through their play and therefore value the indirect 'positive educational impact' of after school care (2003: 17).

Children saw after school provision as a place to play, to be with friends and to enjoy themselves. Some knew that their parents required them to attend due to work commitments, and that this sometimes meant being there despite not particularly wanting to. This resonates with other research findings in this area (Petrie *et al.* 2000: 197). That some of the children disliked aspects of their experiences yet still attended reflects this necessity, and perhaps also the limited options available to their parents.

Children were told by playworkers that after school provision was about their choices, for their playtime and enjoyment. Therefore they saw the provisions and the playworkers as there for them. In examples where children did not feel that their agendas were afforded the precedence they believed appropriate, they expressed frustration. Indeed, particularly the older children at Ferns expressed their feeling restricted in the 'construction and determination of their own social lives' while at after school club (James and Prout 1997: 30). The freedoms they wanted were not wild. They wanted to have fun, to be trusted a bit, and on occasion for the younger and older children to be treated more equally.

For the playworkers and some parents, in addition to playing, making friends and having some time to themselves, these were also contexts in which the children either got away from their everyday experiences, or potentially processed or learned to deal with their lives and experiences and prepared for their future.

Parents, children and staff saw a playworker's job as combining teaching, guiding, supervising and being fun in order to both protect and facilitate the children. In these contexts, for playworkers and some parents, facilitation implied knowing when not to intervene in the children's activity and trying to be as unobtrusive as possible; or it was about helping children when asked, then stepping back, what playworker Steve called 'returning to the first principle of playwork'. Most parents, staff and children saw intervening in the children's play and imposing much structure, for example enforcing formalised learning, as inappropriate in these settings.

The values implicit in the self-images playworkers presented during the interviews and throughout the fieldwork, and their descriptions of the various requirements expected of them – ranging from avoiding potential accidents, maintaining what was considered 'safe' or acceptable behaviour, completing other tasks not directly involving the children, and facilitating the children in their play and exploration – indicated a complex terrain. Being professional required being seen as active and involved, and protecting the children on behalf of their parents who paid for the service; but also supporting the children to grow in confidence and autonomy, making choices for themselves, and having new experiences that enabled them to learn and develop.

Despite staff allying themselves with the value of children's play and freedom to make choices, the maintenance of order, such as ensuring children did not run inside the buildings or that they treated each other in ways considered appropriate, took precedence over, and shaped, children's freedom to play, choose, experiment or express themselves. These combined expectations indicated fundamental ambiguities, perhaps even contradictions, inherent in

playworkers' jobs and the after school settings, and perhaps explained some of the frustrations staff and children articulated.

In the face of increased restrictions on children's play due to concerns about the threats of traffic and other people, the increased normalisation of children playing in supervised contexts, the concomitant implication that they are in need of constant supervision and are out of place otherwise (McKendrick 2009: 24), and the pressures of curriculum and commercial expectations, 'children's freedom to play, and children's sense of freedom, needs to be preserved' (NPFA 2000: 7). In the examples discussed here, this was not always achieved. This raises questions about the control and risk aversion sought in these contexts. Were the risks staff sought to avoid those of physical harm? Or, as Lee suggests, could it be that much of the preoccupation with protecting children from risks, is more linked to maintaining socially distributed states of dependency (2001: 24) and indeed, ensuring children behaved in the 'right' kinds of ways?

In this and the previous chapter, some fundamental tensions inherent in these settings have begun to surface. From these emerged the themes that run through the remainder of the thesis; requirements on playworkers to both control children according to adult agendas and to facilitate their play; to value children as individuals with choices, but also to protect them and ensure their behaviour conforms to expectations; and to value children's play as worthwhile in the 'here and now' (Petrie *et al.* 2000: 196), and also to approach play and playful activity as an important means through which children learn skills for their adult futures. The following chapter explores these themes in relation to perceptions and practices around play, learning and empowerment.

Chapter Seven

Play, Informal Learning and Empowerment in Two After School Provisions

'It's for playing, that's why it's called play centre.' (Luke, age 10, Ferns)

Introduction

This chapter presents playworkers' and parents' views on children's play, learning and empowerment and on how these concepts related to their ideas about playworkers' jobs and the after school provisions. For the purposes of discussion, these inter-related strands are presented consecutively. Drawing on the terms participants used in the interviews and during the fieldwork, the chapter categorises and presents the main concepts and ideas. Asking participants about play, learning and empowerment sought to penetrate deeper levels to the interactions occurring in these contexts. The chapter then looks at tensions within these ideas and their implementation.

Drawing on data from the interviews and fieldwork interactions, the chapter also presents children's descriptions of their priorities in these settings and explores some tensions they described between their own agendas and those of particular playworkers. These tensions, alongside those playworkers themselves identified, further develop the thesis' exploration of control and facilitation, relationships between child- and adult-centred agendas and approaches, and between viewing children's experiences as important in the immediate and/or as investments for their futures. Through analysis of what was said and done during the fieldwork, this and the following chapter argue that while participants considered play, learning and empowerment to constitute variously important processes and outcomes, delivering them was not simple.

Perceptions of Play

Parents and playworkers were asked their thoughts about play, whether they considered it important and if so, why.

Parents

All the parents interviewed said that play had some importance. Their reasons for this varied from its immediate enjoyment to its learning value:

> From what I see with my kid is when she's not working she's playing. If she's not sat down and doing something I've told er to do, she's playing. Whatever it is. Whether it be drawing, I mean art, it's still playing isn't it cos she enjoys doing it so. So it's all play isn't it really. So yeah when she's not doing something she's been told to do literally she's playing. (Chris, Father, Dexters)

> … children's play is important because when they play it builds their, it motivates them. Stimulates their development. If they play, they will know. Some of them play with their Nintendo. Some of them play with their craftwork. So it develops them. (Dora, Grandmother, Ferns)

> Playing helps to rid a child of excess energy and therefore they're more likely to sit and learn and vice versa - after a period of concentration it is good for a child to run and play…. It is an opportunity for a child to relax after working all day - just like us down the pub! (Karen, Mother, Dexters)

> If you watch the way they play, their little personal interests come out in things that they do. (Joy, Mother, Ferns)

> Children must and have to play. And I think that it is on a par with learning because it's their way of I guess letting off steam, or it's their way of having their thinking time. Or… it's their time to be, their time to think, to explore things or analyse things... (Stephanie, Mother, Dexters)

Here playing with other kids gives him the social skills that he wouldn't get, cos he's an only child, he wouldn't get that at home…. when he first started I think he was one of the only ones from his year group so he had no choice but to make friends with other kids from other schools. … it's nice to know, you know, that they can interact that way… (Leslie-Ann, Mother, Dexters)

For parents play was important because children chose and enjoyed it; because it allowed creativity, relaxation, stimulation, exploration, a break from study, analysis of experiences, learning new things and exploration of oneself and other children. Some parents drew a clear distinction between play and learning, while others saw a continuum, describing play as a vehicle for children's development. In their discussions of play, parents characterised children as 'beings' in the present, with experiences to process and energy to 'let off'. But they also described the children in their futurity, as 'becomings' in need of opportunities to develop various skills. Quite distinct from adults, parents described children as having natures and needs particular to them as part of the generic group children.

Children
When asked 'what do you do at after school club', all the children listed playing and activities they enjoyed:

Well, play and make stuff with Mustafa [child]. And play Play Station and play computer and play Lego. And that's it. (Isaac, age 8, Ferns)

I play with Lego. I play with the computers. I like the table football. (Princess, age 6, Ferns)

I think my favourite is the computer. And building things. (Graham, age 11, Ferns)

Usually I scream. I say 'stop' loudly when I'm angry. Sometimes I go in the computer room and art room. And most of the times I go on the bikes. (Samuel, age 7, Dexters)

At this play centre we have tea where there's things to eat. Then consists of the art room, the computer room, the hall if it's not too late, and outside. And outside we have lots of things to do and this is the best centre I ever been to. I like that you can do lots of things here. (Coco, age 10, Dexters)

The variety of activities the children listed was reflected in how they used the after school spaces:

Steve [playworker] and Michael [agency staff member] are playing cricket with Dayna, Coco and Adina. On the football pitch a group of boys are playing football. Leona, Cereese and Fatima are playing in and around the wooden climbing structures. Looks like they are role-playing something. They are wearing large pieces of colourful material draped around them like Saris. One has a pair of sunglasses on. As usual the reception door is open, leading into the building. Children regularly move between inside and outside - between computer room and football pitch, art room to climbing frame. The door between the hall and the playground is also open and much trafficked. Through the window into the art room I see a huddle of mostly girls making posters, poems, stories and pictures – the theme is anti bullying this week [linked to national curriculum]. The girls in Saris are in there now, colouring pens in hand. I wonder if they are still role-playing. Marley and Perry are playing with paper aeroplanes and Jenga blocks in the corner of the art room. The football coach has just arrived. Children rush through both doors onto the pitch. (Dexters fieldnotes, autumn term)

3.30pm - children arrive, put bags and coats in allotted places. Noisy and animated games of table football, children selecting amongst themselves who will play with whom and where on the table. Connect four game is being played on another table. Computers are on and being used. A couple of children are reading books. Noel [playworker] is overseeing table football – 'calm down' – he's helping keep score. Nita [manager],

197

Cherry-Ann, Jackie and I play a board game with coloured wooden balls. Marco joins us after we have started playing and taunts us saying 'that's easy, that's easy'. Then when it is his go, and he finds that it is not as easy at it looks, the girls start saying it to him 'it's easy, it's easy' teasingly. He mocks annoyance. Nita and I join in the taunt briefly. Lots of smiling. Then the others go off to do other things and Jackie and I play on for a little while at her request. Then she suggests playing something else. That natural termination of one activity for another when interest wanes. At the table football – Jordan, Emma, Mustafa, Biko, Jackie - banter about who is 'wicked' and who is 'rubbish'. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

Children prioritised play and favoured activities with friends. As discussed in chapters five and six, however, these occurred within the boundaries of what was allowed. If children contravened these, playworkers often intervened. Mostly, children appreciated, indeed relied on this structure. But, as discussed below, some children suggested frustrations with aspects of the adult/child relationships they experienced at after school club.

Playworkers

When asked if they considered play to be important, all of the playworkers interviewed said yes. Although their views on why varied:

I think play is probably one of the most important things that people do. Because they chose to do it, and … children's choices are kind of limited now because of different environments that they live in. So whatever opportunity they have...[…] And it might be only something you know as we would consider very basic, but because that's what they chose to do and wanted to do at that time, and they could do it. That's why it's very important to them. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

Play is very important. They [children] learn through play… If you give them and say read this read this… sometimes it won't even go in their mind. Like when we did about the recycling. I mean they're playing as

well as they're learning. And they bring these things to show me… and they were talking about the polar bears and recycling. (Manager, Manager, Ferns)

With all children it's just spontaneous really. Objects, materials, equipment, to their own accord. Some children enjoy playing by themselves... So it's when you … are creatively taking some risks along the way. And through some observations you see how some of the children have developed in terms of their play. They started off maybe just by themselves. And they gradually get to the stage where they are joining in with their peers.... Into playing with groups of children. Especially with our new children…. Where they will start off by themselves and just gradually… finding a friend. I would say that play is just freely chosen and creative. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

As these quotations highlight, playworkers' views had similarities with those of parents. These included seeing play as a means through which children learned, explored their volition and creativity, themselves and their surroundings. Like the parents, playwork staff also described children both as exploring, risks-taking beings in the present and as learners for the future. The playworkers, parents and children consistently described play as important and fundamental to the purpose of the provisions. Choice, explored further below, stood out for all three participant groups as key. The following section examines how both parents and playworkers saw the valuable outcomes of play as linked to the related learning that occurred.

Perceptions of Learning

In the interviews, parents and playworkers were asked whether they thought that children learned anything at after school provision and whether they saw any connection between play and learning. This question was often unnecessary as most parents and playworkers volunteered the connection themselves.

Parents

Parents presented a variety of opinions on whether children learned at after school club and through their play:

> When they play they learn… They don't realise they're learning while they're doing play activities… at the age they are I think that's the best way they can learn. (Leslie-Ann, Mother, Dexters)

> You can't have learning without play. You can't understand children without play. Play is the language of the child. (Desai, Mother, Dexters)

> That's why he's here. He gets to have fun and learn new things. Gain confidence. Get used to being around different people…. an ethos of learning through play. And it's like that here. (Amanda, Mother, Dexters)

> They are separate. Things like computers, some people think they learn by playing them, but I don't think so. (Asma, Mother, Ferns)

Parents drew a distinction between learning within the formal, structured environments of school and learning through play in these after school contexts more broadly:

> They try and say 'oh they're learning through play' but I don't necessarily think that's true. I think play is just play really isn't it and learning is learning…. I think actually they try and incorporate play with learning far too much… But what do I know. I'm not a teacher, it's just my opinion. But um things like learning times tables. I think sometimes you just gotta learn your times tables just by reciting em. Which is really boring. But I know mine. (Chris, Father, Dexters)

> It's play and it's learning. But a different kind of learning from school. Different kinds of skills... they learn how to be together. How to share things. Some of them start to go home alone so they learn to be

independent. Learning to be polite to each other… the staff teach them. (Pearl, Mother, Ferns)

Linked to this distinction from structured, academic learning, parents described play as a means of their children learning about themselves and others:

Play enables them to deal with situations, to deal with peer groups, to learn about and deal with their emotional responses. Play makes children resilient. Children who don't play and learn how to play effectively have severe problems later on. (Desai, Mother, Dexters)

They learn to sort of respect each other and clean up after they've painted or eaten. (Tony, Father, Ferns)

It [play] is vitally important for social role learning and an environment to consolidate experiences that they may have encountered elsewhere. (Karen, Mother, Dexters)

… being around other children, little things like learning about personal space and things like that. He'll get upset if someone is touching something he's playing with and he's had to learn how to behave in certain circumstances so I think that's been quite important for him. For instance if he's made a model or something and another child breaks it, he'll get very distressed. And he's now learned. He'll put it away in a safe place. You need to sort of protect yourself and know how to be and what's comfortable…. So he's learned little things like that which is good. (Joy, Mother, Ferns)

Parents shared the view that exposing the children to new experiences and mixing with different children enabled them to learn and gain skills that might help them in other aspects of their lives. For example, as many suggested, gaining confidence:

I do think he has benefited from coming here… you can take him somewhere and he's not…. You know he wouldn't stand next to me and kinda be shy cos he's used to being put in situations where he has to mix with whoever now... (Leslie-Ann, Mother, Dexters)

So parents saw the benefits of their children's play as framed within their current day to day experiences, such as play providing opportunities to gain confidence, process emotions and interact with others. I observed numerous examples of children playing in ways that exemplified some of the emotional processing and social learning that parents and playworkers described:

Adele and Adina - role-playing. Adele is waggling her finger at Adina. She appears to be telling Adina off. Adina's shoulders are hunched, her head hanging downwards, pretending to be upset and sad. I am convinced and have to look again. At the same moment Rochelle [playworker] notices. She continues stacking books but looks over at them a couple of times. Then she approaches and asks the girls what they are doing. Adele says they are playing a game, Rochelle asks Adina if she is enjoying and playing the game too. Adina comes out of character a little and says yes, then hangs her head again back into character. Adele tells Rochelle that she is the head teacher and Adina is a naughty student. (Dexters fieldnotes, spring term)

Many parents also described play as a means through which their children developed skills and attributes they considered valuable as they grew up; such as independence, sharing, respect and personal equilibrium. At its extreme, one parent suggested that without play, children can experience 'severe problems' in later life. Children's views were somewhat different.

Children

When asked about what they did at after school club, the children described activities they enjoyed, some of which are outlined above. Learning was not a category any child used to define their favoured experiences at after school club, although many of the things they described - sewing, cooking, playing football or

computer games, making things together - involved learning social or specific skills.

In terms of academic learning, homework was an activity some children felt was required of them:

> My mum says I have to do some homework before I go [home] cos it gets quickly late at home. (Biko, age 9, Ferns)

Drawing a similar distinction between school and after school club highlighted by a number of parents and staff, some children recognised that the after school club staff expected them to behave in certain ways:

> Playworkers are not teachers. But they do teach you about good and bad. (Jackie, age 10, Ferns)

Aware that staff often talked about the children learning while at after school club, one child commented with some exasperation:

> It's a play centre why are we learning? It's a play centre. It doesn't say play learning centre! (Luke, age 10, Ferns)

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, children's thoughts about play, learning and the role of adults here suggested their understandings of play as something that was theirs and fun; academic learning as something required of them, sometimes to the detriment of their playtime; and the role of adults as one of both supervision and guidance, which was sometimes a good thing and sometimes restrictive.

Playworkers
Throughout the fieldwork and interviews playworkers often asserted that, in settings like these, play and learning were inseparable, inevitable and provided vital opportunities:

Well they learn a lot of skills in play. They learn how to experiment with lots of different, you know, interaction with other children, it's all experimenting to see how this works out or that works out. Even with the skills and what they can do, whether or not they can get to the top of the climbing wall or… and you know, they can push themselves all the time and in things like physical play. And then they can develop all sorts of creative… children that you don't think… might not even bother drawing or painting or whatever, might have that ability, with a little bit more confidence… So they can really grow in confidence through their play. Cos as I said, you can do it over and over. They can do things over and over until that's the way they want it to be, without anybody saying oh what you doing that for, it's wrong, you know, this is the way to do it. And that's why I'm saying that sometimes you don't intervene, children should be allowed to do that kind of experimentation in every part of their play and not be expected to conform to... You know, if they want to throw the ball somewhere different to where it's supposed to go, then they can do that, to see what happens. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

… play centre is not just about play. And I have heard that from so many people. Like I said to you, walking down the street they are learning, coming to the play centre they are learning. And they are learning table manners, they are learning how, like we have a vegetarian girl here and the children ask her well why don't you eat meat. They are learning… I mean play, you got play, but even with play they are learning. So, you know play and learning do go hand in hand, at this… at any centre. (Lewis, Deputy manager, Dexters)

I mean they learn through play. Like I'm saying like computers, even games they're playing. Like sometimes they're doing projects like we were talking about, recycling we were talking about. And they all wanted to go on the computers. They're playing as well, they're enjoying the computer. And they wanted to find out where the landfill is, where all the rubbish goes, where they take all the rubbish and what they do afterwards. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

While there was much focus on individual children's development, the social aspect to their experiences in these settings was also considered important. Two playworkers at Dexters and the two centre managers suggested that being in these social environments enabled the children to develop their social skills:

> Well I think, they're basically here to learn their skills, and improving their skills. Communication skills to start with and I actually think that a lot of their manners improve. And some children help each other with homework. (Lewis, Deputy manager, Dexters)

> … developing their skills here helps them when they go out there in the wider world as well. To be able to express themselves in various forms. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

> [staff need to] step back. Cos it gives them [children], it allows them to build up their own relationships with other children, resolving their own conflicts. The only time you would step in when there's a conflict is obviously if it gets to the stage of swearing and fighting. But even if they are just shouting at each other, but they are trying to get their point across, I am going to step back and just watch. Ok and if they agree to disagree and just get on with it, that's fine. Cos it's another life experience. It's learning how to deal with conflict. (Steve Playworker, Dexters)

> If they could resolve their little arguments… if we can make some difference to that, teach them about a game, about playing with each other instead of competition, always competitiveness... cos they get it all the time, the imagery and everything they see… and it's a lot for a child you know. (Maria Playworker, Dexters)

As these comments indicate, while playwork staff considered play and learning to be very much connected, the ways they saw those connections varied. In summary of the findings presented in this chapter so far, parents and staff

described the children's play and the learning that accompanied it as multi-layered processes of interaction with themselves and others, with tasks, with objects and with environments. They considered the importance of play to cover a range of benefits: from providing opportunities for children to enjoy themselves and have fun, to expend physical, social and creative energy, to explore their interests, and to play with children from different age groups and backgrounds, and in the case of Dexters, from different schools.

For some parents, a child's learning was not hugely relevant in these settings. As explored in chapter six, what mattered was that they were safe, supervised and enjoying themselves. Other parents and all the playwork staff said that the children did learn at after school club and that this was important. Indeed, particularly explicit in the sentiments of the Dexters deputy manager, that play was not all that was going on, but that children were learning 'all the time' lent significance, even legitimacy, to the work staff did there.

A distinction was drawn in contrast to the formal approaches to learning taken in schools, associated with academic achievement. The learning some parents and all the playworkers described as occurring through play and activity at after school clubs encompassed more personal and interpersonal qualities. For example, parents and staff described how after school club discussions, activities and interactions enabled the children to: explore their boundaries, interests, emotions, and abilities; to share and develop their knowledge and skills with other children and adults; to generate relations and bond with each other; to have a sense of doing things together; to be part of a group; to help each other and be helped; to be leaders; and to have responsibilities towards other children who were perhaps younger or less familiar with the settings or activities. At both sites, a number of parents and playworkers said that the after school settings were good places for children to learn these things because of the focus on fun, flexibility and choice.

These findings suggest that parents and playwork staff saw the children's after school experiences as important for two key reasons: as a contribution to the children's present lives – ensuring they had chances to relax, to have fun, and to

feel good; and as investments for the future, learning the skills and attributes they valued and expected the children to benefit from as they grew up.

Despite this common terrain, there were differences between parents and staff, between the sites, and between the views of adults and children. The parents at Dexters gave often quite detailed accounts of the learning and social development they thought their children gained from their after school experiences. At Ferns, parents were largely less detailed in their responses and focussed more on concern for their children being safe, enjoying themselves and doing as they were told.

At least in part, this distinction was reflected in the different focus of the staff at the two sites. The Dexters staff described a detailed and broad sense of the development of the whole child's 'socialisation' (Maria, Playworker, Dexters). While at Ferns there was greater focus on the children's learning through play being about specific topics, like recycling; or having some time to just play and 'feel free' (Nita, Manager, Ferns).

There were also internal, site-specific, differences of opinion. Maria and Steve from Dexters, for example, both raised the question of children and conflict. Steve thought the children should be facilitated in contending with the harsh realities of life. Maria wanted to be able to protect the children for a while, to show them that there were many ways of behaving available to them. Petrie suggests that what underpins differences like these are quite distinct ideas about the child. One view is that

> children are robust, able to cope with horror, for their proper
> development. For the other group, the child is potentially at risk of
> emotional harm, and in need of adult protection... (Petrie 1994: 54)

This difference between Steve and Maria, and between the views of the parents and staff at the two sites more broadly, indicate that, as Petrie suggests, quite different ideas of about the children were indeed current in these settings. Chapter eight explores these issues.

For the children, after school club was about having fun, playing with friends, and doing and making things as they wanted to. This was similar at both sites. They differed, however, most striking amongst the older children. The older Dexters children seemed consistently happier there and said, with few exceptions, positive things about the centre and the staff. But the older children at Ferns did not appear so happy and they complained about being unfairly treated. Observations also indicated more harmonious relations between staff and older children at Dexters than at Ferns. These are explored further shortly. The following sections present what participants said about empowerment.

Perceptions of Children's Empowerment

In the interviews parents and playworkers were asked 'does the word empowerment mean anything to you in this context?' The following three sections outline responses to this question. Parents' and playworkers' views are divided into the key categories they outlined. Children's thoughts about the choices available to them are also presented.

Parents

> HS – Does the word empowerment mean anything to you in a setting like this?
> Tony – No. Why would you say that? (Tony, Father, Ferns)

Asking parents about empowerment was less fruitful than asking playworkers about it. It became apparent that this was more a professional than a general term. Those parents who did consider it relevant focused on empowerment of children, often speaking about their own children and only sometimes about children in general. Indicating some of their values in terms of what they wanted their children to gain from the after school provisions, they identified three related themes.

Choice and Independence

Parents at both sites described positively the responsibilities their children were able to take on at the after school provisions. They felt that making choices about what activities they wanted to do, where and with whom, were positive experiences that helped their children gain confidence and independence:

> … he gets to choose what he is going to do. It's his responsibility. Like in the computer room. If they want to play on the computer they have to go and put their name down for a turn. They can move around the whole centre however they want, that's good for him. (Amanda, Mother, Dexters)

> What I've noticed that Nita does do is she gives them the opportunity to make their own choices. Not 'today, this is what you do, tomorrow this is what you do blah blah…' I've noticed also in certain circumstances, she will give the opportunity to explain why you think you should be doing that activity instead of something else. So you know she will get them to think about what they want to do and the reason why they want to do it. Which I think is quite good. To empower the child to use their mind to say well I think this would be good for me because yesterday I did that and today it would be good to do something else… (Elizabeth, Mother, Ferns)

This appreciation of choice was framed by the implicit expectation that their children would have only certain types of choices and that playworkers were in charge, there to supervise and keep their children safe. Some parents recognised that their children missed out on the choice, independence and broad social benefits they had when they were young. Parents pointed out, during interviews and occasional conversations, that the after school provisions substituted aspects of these experiences within safe environments.

Against the backdrop of the provisions ensuring that their children knew and respected the rules and they were not, for example, permitted to leave the sites without an adult, parents valued the after school settings as contexts in which

their children could make choices and have some independence. This ensured that children were not given total independence or choice and were therefore not at risk from the threats of the outside world. Although the children were contained within the safe 'inside' of the after school club environments, they were also not allowed in the playground or the building without supervision 'for their safety' (Nita, Manager, Ferns). So outside was seen as potentially threatening from others, and inside was potentially threatening because of the harm children might cause to themselves or each other.

Confidence

Confidence came up often in what parents said they felt their children gained from after school club and in response to the question about empowerment. Some described empowerment as building children's sense of personal confidence or what one mother called 'inner' power. Two parents linked empowerment with self-awareness and thus considered it a very adult-oriented term. They offered alternative words they thought more useful, for example their children becoming more 'self-assured', 'confident', 'content' and 'happy'. Although the terms and concepts varied, their individualistic focus remained. For example, at Ferns a parent described her children's confidence as a question of self-expression:

> … making them aware that they can be free to say something and not be put down for it. (Elizabeth, Mother, Ferns)

Alongside this concern for the individual child's emotional state, another parent at Ferns linked development of the children's confidence with reciprocal relationship between adults and children:

> If the workers respect the children, the children will respect them. And the children will be happy. It's a two-way thing. (Dora, Grandmother, Ferns)

The discussion returns to this notion of a 'two-way' dynamic shortly.

Children

Parents and staff identified children's 'choice' as key to their after school experiences. This formed part of the broader emergent themes of control and facilitation as descriptive of the power relations in these settings. I did not ask children about empowerment specifically because I considered it an adult, even a specifically professional, construct and not one that would mean anything to them. Instead, the children were asked whether they felt they got to make choices at after school club.

At both sites, most children said they chose what they did there. This was with the exception of some older children who said they sometimes, 'unless you're bad like naughty', or never got to choose. Describing their choices, children at both settings most frequently listed combinations of physical, creative and computer play. The older Dexters children described being content. As well as speaking positively of the playworkers, they attributed this to the space they had to play in and the varieties of activities and mixtures of different children. The older children at Ferns identified the reverse; that their frustrations stemmed from aspects of how the playworkers treated them and from feeling restricted in the space and variety available to them.

Themes of control and facilitation, risk and safety, did indeed come up in these conversations:

> We don't get to do whatever we want to do. Like playing stuff, doing whatever we want. (Isaac, age 8, Ferns)

> Luke - The staff say they look after us cos our parents are working but all they want is get us in trouble for their fun.
> HS - how could it be better?
> Luke - If the staff were more sporty and stuff. Like staff at other play centres they're fun and that, but here they're just doing their job.... Better if they were more jokey and joining with stuff. Younger staff. Not staff who are all 40. Staff who play with you and have fun. (Luke, age 10, Ferns)

In a conversation about how they felt about their choices and the staff, these two boys said this:

> Jamal – We hardly had any power to say anything. We couldn't question anything that was going on. No.
> Luke – I mean they say that we don't listen. We do listen. We don't do what they say. You can tell [staff member] what we think but it goes in one ear and out the other. You tell [staff member], you say half a word and they just interrupt you. They think oh we're just kids it don't matter.
> Jamal – They don't even let us speak. It's like if we get in trouble because of something and we're saying that it didn't happen like this, they wouldn't care. They would just say don't try and make excuses. And they always go for the little kids more respect. Like the little kids have, the little kids can get away with stuff.
> Luke– They just always believe them and not us.
> Jamal – Yeah. (Luke and Jamal, aged 10, Ferns)

Their objections raised questions about what kinds of choices they wanted. Set against my observations, the restrictions they found frustrating and unreasonable – such as being regularly told to be quiet, not to play and made to sit for extended periods at teatime – appeared justified. Indeed, on an occasion when the manager told me off at teatime for talking when I was not supposed to, I felt this embarrassing and belittling experience.

These older children knew that these restrictions were not about set rules – such as not going out of the gate, which they saw the logic for and, as far as I know, did not challenge. What they objected to were choices that staff made that seemed unnecessary, like the ways in which teatime was dealt with. They equated these moments with the staff being no fun, not caring, and the children's experiences being secondary to those of the staff. They did not mind being told to set good examples – to show respect, to be fair and behave in the 'right' kinds of ways. What upset them was when staff did not follow the same principles in how they treated the children.

Playworkers

In response to the question about empowerment, all of the Dexters playworkers and the manager described the concept as very relevant in their professional context. At Ferns, although giving less detail, the manager considered empowerment important and described what it meant to her. For Anisha the agency staff member and Noel the permanent playworker there, empowerment did not mean anything. Prompted by me saying things like 'others have suggested it means …' they expanded on their ideas about, for example, children's choices. The following sections explore the key categories of 'confidence and self-esteem' staff equated with empowerment and the processes of provision of 'choices' and 'exposure to new experiences' they described as the means towards these. Playworkers' underpinning ideas about childhood as essentially a preparation for adult futures begin to surface here. These are explored in depth in chapter eight.

Confidence and Self-Esteem

Throughout the fieldwork, playworkers talked about building the children's confidence and self-esteem as central to their professional hopes and motivations. In the interviews, confidence and self-esteem were also central to their descriptions of empowerment:

> It makes a difference for me, giving them the opportunity to play and opportunity to develop themselves, their self-esteem, their confidence and all those things… (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

> If we could teach children more and more to empowerment… you know what I mean, let them feel a sense of self and confidence, I think if we can achieve that more and more, then we are doing a good job. (Maria, Playworker, Dexters)

> … you see about the confidence. You see with that, with that encouragement, cos some of them are shy, some are gradually building into that… But it takes a while. Sometimes it may be … maybe might

sort of help them to get certain things, to try to give them a bit of confidence. (Noel, Playworker, Ferns)

The managers at both sites and some of the playworkers identified play and the after school environments as spaces in which children could take valuable self-determined risks, be creative, and challenge themselves to know, explore and push their boundaries. These risks, trying of new things, behaviours, techniques, and being able to not have clear outcomes, to not be measured (unlike in school), gave the children the opportunity to play as a means of building their confidence and resilience. As Margaret, the Dexters manager described it:

> You need that nurture kind of thing, that opportunity, as a child, to be kind of… to develop into this kind of adult who can have knock backs and not have things going right. You know, cos otherwise, you'd be at work and stuff'd go wrong and you'd be out the door, go home, shut the door and not come back in. Wouldn't you? Cos you'd be scared of getting things wrong all the time. So that's it, it teaches you to cope with life as well. You know, when you've got that opportunity. And it doesn't necessarily… I mean you don't have to have a play centre to have that in. Some children cope quite well without sort of this environment. We didn't have it, sure you didn't have it as a child. But we had other things to replace it. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

Although some lessons may not always be comfortable or enjoyable, playworkers at Dexters described the learning facilitated through play and supported by playwork approaches as helpful for children's resilience for the futures:

> Even if it's a negative experience, they are able to learn how to deal with … failure is one thing. Everyone says that oh children shouldn't be competitive, shouldn't learn about failure. But in life, life is competition and the quicker they learn to deal with the positive and negative effects of experiences, they learn to deal with it better, for both now and in later life. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

A number of staff described letting the children deal with their emotions by giving them space when they were upset, listening to them if they desired, and trying to let them deal with conflict situations themselves. They considered these empowering processes because they allowed the children to learn about themselves and how to deal with challenging situations. As this playworker described it:

> Steve - It's another life experience. It's learning how to deal with conflict.
> HS – And the point being that they have sorted it out themselves?
> Steve – Rather than me stepping in, exactly. And therefore, they can think 'ah right, I sorted that out myself. That's how you deal with a situation like that'. Cos otherwise if they keep expecting you to jump in they are never going to learn how to resolve the conflict themselves. (Steve, Playworker, Dexters)

The playworker at Ferns had a different perspective and informed the children of it:

> … you need to speak to an adult if you are being bullied. So that they can sort it out and it can stop. (Noel, Playworker, Ferns)

These differences are explored in chapter eight.

The managers and playworkers described their endeavours to support the children's confidence and self-esteem through a number of means. Amongst these was showing children they were valued as individuals, as this playworker endeavoured to do when introducing the Christmas party:

> Rochelle - I would just like to explain to everyone what this party is for. For some of you it may be a Christmas party, for some of you it may be an end of term, end of the year party. We are here to respect everybody and we want everybody here to have a good time. So if there is anything here that you do not want to be involved in or you do not want to do,

please tell us and we will support you in that. We are here to respect everybody, all religions and backgrounds, so there is no need to do anything that you may not want to do. If you would like to speak to a member of staff about anything just let us know. (Dexters fieldnotes, winter term)

That staff considered the children's confidence and self-esteem as so central to their endeavours suggested that the children's activity was important in the present partly, at least, as a route to developing these. It also pointed towards what Lester and Russell (2008) call 'instrumental' notions of play, as routes to learning for each individual child's future. As returned to in chapter eight, this also suggests that staff thought the children they worked with, or perhaps the state of childhood itself, required support to develop in confidence and self-esteem.

Choice

As a means of building the children's confidence, self-esteem and skills the Dexters staff and the Ferns manager listed choice as a key aspect of empowerment. During the interviews and fieldwork they repeatedly emphasised their commitment to giving the children some control and facilitating those choices, particularly in relation to their play and activities:

> You are empowering the children to make choices. I think they do it here, like the children's council, that's empowering the children. Listening to the children. Letting children make choices. Because at the end of the day, they may be children but they do think. They know what they like, they know what they want. (Lewis, Deputy manager, Dexters)

> It's about the children being able to make their own choices in life and obviously in this context as well. (Steve, Playworker, Dexters)

> …. empowerment to me is making a child feel in control. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

… and give them the choices what they want to do. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

Implicit in a number of interviews and conversations with parents and playworkers was their feeling that in current society, with children's choices often perceived as limited, it was valuable that they could be listened to and make choices, even when those choices were made within the narrow after school provision confines. The managers and Dexters playworkers gave examples of these choices. They varied from children selecting activities, materials, and with whom and where they wanted to play; to more potentially challenging choices such as being left to resolve their own issues or conflicts without adult intervention. A number of staff identified the after school contexts as spaces in which some of the pressures and lack of choices experienced in their day to day lives could be lifted. These are explored in chapter eight.

The children's council comprised a group of volunteer children elected by the other children at their centre to represent their views to management, senior management and other officials. This was listed as a key vehicle for empowering children's involvement in after school club decision-making at Dexters:

> The children's council is mainly for the children to have a voice of what they would like to have at their centre. Cos it is their centre. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

> The centre is for the children and what they want. That's why the children's council is very important. Children having their say. (Maria, Playworker, Dexters)

All of the staff there noted the lasting positive impacts of involvement in the children's council on children's confidence and their ongoing desires to be involved:

> I can still see how the process of having that children's council has had a good effect on the children. They still want to be in it. They want to know

when it is going to be happening again. And I have seen a lot of them
gain confidence as well. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

During the course of the fieldwork, Ferns did not have a children's council and
this did not come up in conversations.

Playworkers said they valued children having opportunities to make choices and
decisions. Thus giving them practice at asserting their rights to be heard and
heeded. Playworkers saw their role as central to this process. In their
descriptions, listening to children, staff supporting them to make choices, and
those choices coming to fruition, equalled empowering the children. Having had
chances to make choices, children could learn about choice making, build their
confidence to be able to chose, and gain such skills useful for later life. So the
immediate processes of children making choices were also valued for their
potential to benefit the children 'now and in the future' (Margaret, Manager,
Dexters).

Margaret, the Dexters manager and a number of her staff suggested that in order
for the children to learn these skills, playworkers needed the sensitivity and
confidence in the children to step back themselves and let these processes
happen. This links with the discussion in chapter six about playworkers'
perceptions of their interactions as based around respecting the children as
individuals, encouraging them to express themselves, and being able to be
quietly in the background or simply 'there' to support the children. So
playworkers saw empowerment, in terms of choice-making and having a voice,
as contingent upon staff supporting children to make those choices. Therefore,
empowerment involved the playworkers behaving in ways that facilitated the
children. This is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Opportunities and New Experiences
In our discussions about empowerment, staff from both sites described using
various activities to help build the children's confidence and skills by exposing
them to different environments and experiences. These ranged from gardening
activities in which the children could learn about nature, to trips to different

locations so that the children could find out about their local environments. Three playworkers linked this exposure to new environments and experiences with empowerment as they saw them as opportunities for the children to learn about dealing with new things:

> … that's another case where they know that there's a local secondary school which is once again within the community and they get to access their gym, things like that… And just doing the dance sessions over at the school, the children are enjoying it. We get feedback. I asked them how did they find it. Some of them were a bit nervous, different thoughts and feelings did come out, but I think it was important for them to have that. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

Noel, the Ferns playworker described the value of exposure to new experiences as follows:

> They are looking at something probably they would never… so they are learning about something new. There's certain places I've gone to, and I would never have known about certain things. It's taken me somewhere else. It's something different. So sometimes, it might be on the computer, there might be a competition for art or something you say to them, go for it, give it a go. And it might encourage you to get to something else. Cos they've done that with… that show. And that gave them a lot of confidence. And from there we have been encouraging them… The one thing you gotta be a bit diplomatic about… the standard. You know what I mean. Cos you don't want to shatter any one's … anyone's sort of um confidence, you know what I mean. (Noel, Playworker, Ferns)

In this quotation Noel describes exposing the children to new opportunities and encouraging them, thus giving children a chance to show their capabilities, and to help build their confidence and sense of achievement. But he also tempers this encouragement with sensitivity to not expecting the children to produce high quality work, but to encourage them at whatever level. He indicates here and in other excerpts the importance of taking into consideration the children's broader

219

living contexts. He argues that while it is important to expose the children to new opportunities, it is also important to appreciate the predominant lack of choices generally in these children's lives. Thus, as he says, the children need new experiences and encouragement free from high expectations to build their confidence. Connections between perceptions of the children's backgrounds and playworkers expectations and practices are explored in chapter eight.

To summarise the findings so far: play and learning were amongst the key aims that playworkers said they sought to provide for the children. These encompassed children's development of personal and social skills: ranging from dealing with emotions, new experiences, conflict and competition; to achieving goals, making choices, expressing oneself, playing with, listening to and empathising with others and building feelings of self-esteem and confidence. Most playworkers described these as empowering and linked the empowering outcomes they sought to the empowering processes they described facilitating.

For parents empowerment was a much less significant concept, particularly at Ferns. Children's self-confidence, independence and choices were important. Framing their priorities most often in terms of the children's developments, both the playworkers and parents reflected the transferable skills deemed vital to the future lives of today's children (Lee 2001: 25).

Playworkers' ideals expounded when sitting and talking proved sometimes hard to deliver, however, when dealing with the challenges of daily playwork. As presented above, staff described play, learning and empowerment as essentially about children experiencing particular types of control in relation to themselves and their environments. This required playworkers letting this happen. Key aspects of playworkers' ideas about children's experiences in these settings therefore depended on particular sorts of relations between themselves and the children. As the findings on the views of the older children above suggest, adult/child relations in these contexts sometimes generated tensions. The following findings explore these issues.

Play, Informal Learning and Empowerment - Opportunities, Challenges and Tensions in Practice

> Through our work we seek to empower all those who use our service and by valuing their opinions ensure that they are aware of the choices they can make in any given situation and responding to their rights to be involved in decisions about their future. This principle will always be exercised within the framework of protecting children from harm. (Safeguarding children procedure, updated October 2009)

In line with the Borough's aims, staff at both sites identified structural and practical elements that facilitated their desired processes, such as the central focus on play and enjoyment in these settings. But, as introduced in chapter six, they also described structural and practical restrictions that limited some of the outcomes they said they wanted. empowering the children by the means staff outlined was, as the Ferns manager described it, 'within boundaries'. The environments were structured by policies and parental expectations that limited how much playworkers felt they could empower the children:

> … we are governed by legislation and council policies and procedures, so you have to be very careful how you talk to children, the choices you give. Like computers, what you find acceptable, and with council policies and procedures, a parent might not. You are governed by that a lot more. It's hard… see I believe in free play as well and a lot of them don't. So where do you draw that line? (Lewis, Deputy manager, Dexters)

The following findings here and in the next chapter look beyond the restrictions staff identified to explore how underpinning ideas about the children shaped their practices and the restrictions they imposed.

Empowerment as Facilitation

To enable the children to experience the component categories above, which most considered being about empowering the children, playwork staff saw their job as a matter of facilitation. As discussed, this involved stepping in to support

children, stepping back to give them space, or perhaps offering skills and ideas. Parents and staff described the flexible, informal after school environments as good for offering children this kind of adult/child relationship. The fieldwork revealed opportunities, but also limitations in the relations between staff and children that went beyond the implementation of policy.

For example, the Dexters staff regularly displayed a willingness to listen, discuss and explain, in the interests of the child's experience. An approach this playworker describes:

> At first I had reacted to her behaviour, but when I thought about it, I tried to look past the behaviour and see if there was something bothering her that was making her behave like that. (Maria, Playworker, Dexters)

But in the practice of particular staff, at particular moments, observations indicated practices that appeared to contradict this, impacting on the children's experiences:

> 3.30pm in the playground - Football game in full swing. xx [playworker] in his usual position next to the pitch – xx says 'no holding', 'hand ball', 'don't push'. I see Arianne [new girl] approach him, xx tips his head slightly towards her. Looks like she is saying something to him. He says something to her then looks back to the game, 'I saw that, do it again and you'll be off'. Arianne approaches me. She says that someone hit her in her eye. She held my hand and leaned into me a little. I looked around, xx [playworker] was the only staff in the playground, so I asked if she had spoken to him about it. She said she spoke to him but he didn't want to listen. Marco [boy] heard her say this and interjected that xx [playworker] is always like that, 'anytime I go to him he says "oh, you always have a problem"… but Nita [manager] listens.' I asked him if he told Nita that he felt this way about xx, he said no because he would get himself in trouble. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

As well as promoting listening to children, staff described empowerment as linked to facilitating children's choices. While this sounded very positive, on closer inspection, the types of choices available were limited:

> … give them the choices of even simple things like if they want to paint, give them choices of different colours or if they want to play games, that's what we do, ok, if you want to chose that game, ok put that one back, you can have something different. So give them the freedom… and same time within the boundaries as well. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

Equating these sorts of choices with giving the children 'freedom', as the Ferns manager did, indicated a limited sense of what 'freedom' for these children might mean. As explored in the following chapter, perhaps, as she suggested, given their backgrounds, this was indeed a kind of 'freedom' and worthwhile choice. But even these kinds of choices were structured by the adult's control, permission, and way of doing things – 'ok put that one back, you can have something different'.

Some of the children's responses indicated what it was like to be on the receiving end of these limitations and mixed message:

> Yeah you get to chose what you like to do, but you don't get to chose what you want to do. So you're allowed to chose a mini snooker table, but you don't get to chose what you want to do, like I wanna go outside, I wanna go home, I wanna go on the computer now. (Marco, age 9, Ferns)

Furthermore, interactions in which staff restricted children's playful activity – 'don't do that', 'play properly' – as opposed to providing opportunities for controlled risk and enjoyment in the children's play proved excessive and frustrating for some:

> At Dexters once I went all the way round the play centre on the wheely chair and I didn't get told off once. But here if you move the chair a little bit they just start telling you off. (Luke, age 10, Ferns)

This feeling of being unfairly treated seemed to be exacerbated because of the rhetoric about children's choices being important. In an extreme example, it struck both the staff and myself as curious that at Ferns, both the manager and one of the playworkers described some reluctance on the part of particular children to be involved in devising the weekly activity planners.

> It's interesting, the thing about empower, cos sometimes you just don't want to control them. But you try to give them the power, the choices, and the thing is they don't want it. They say we don't want to do anything, we don't want to chose, we want to be bored. (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

This was arresting in part because it suggested that while the children were told they mattered as individuals and had the right to make choices, staff equated making proper use of their time and choices with doing something. Indeed, doing something that the staff considered appropriate. The staff response to this moment of resistance suggested that staff equated the children's participation in the planning in the ways they defined with it being good to join in, making use of their time rather than just hanging around. Whereas choosing not to participate was beyond what staff saw as viable or comprehensible.

In subsequent conversations these children said they were instructed at particular times to make choices about resources or to be involved with planning activities. But those choices often did not happen. This was compounded by their ongoing feelings that despite being told this was 'their' centre, their choices generally were restricted and their voices were not heeded. So they felt unfairly treated. Thus, when presented at particular adult-determined times with what appeared to them to be superficial choices, which might not happen, against a background of frustration about their voices not being heard, they rejected this seemingly contradictory gesture and asserted themselves by resisting.

The power to question and control certain procedures were beyond the realms of possible influence for the playworkers as well as the children. Some playworkers noted feeling restricted in how much they could help the children to 'feel in

control… able to question things that are happening that affect them' (Margaret, Manager, Dexters). Thus, although staff focused their responses largely on empowerment of the children, a number also connected their discussion about empowerment, confidence and control with themselves.

Staff (dis)empowerment

Some playworkers at Dexters and the Ferns manager raised the question of their own empowerment. For them this related to self-reflection and confidence in their professional skills, team support and feeling degrees of control in their environments:

> … as an individual, being able to stand out and have a voice, whether its mainly for the children having a voice or if we are talking in terms of the adults and having an understanding of our own development as well…. Especially in terms of developing yourself as a playworker. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

Mirroring some of the children's frustrations, some playworkers disliked not being in control of aspects of their own work environment and the impact of this on their ability to empower the children:

> I think the thing with this kind of environment is you always feel that you never quite do enough… cos I'd love to see the children really more involved in… influencing people that make decisions that affect them. You know, like when we've got our children's council going… but it's difficult to have a follow on from that. Where does it go from here, where do we take them from there? You know, and then things influence how much you can do, you know with staff wise and stuff like that... (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

> Here is restricted because of the outside access, so we have to go with them, we can't leave them there…. here they don't have that choice. Because its corridor, they have to run through corridor and we have to watch them for their safety. So… even the double doors and we have the

toilet there and the little ones when they go out we have to watch them. So it's little bit more restricted… And they have to follow the school rules sometimes. Not running in the corridors, no running up and down… (Nita, Manager, Ferns)

When you see cuts coming all the time you say to yourself, where is the quality service? And staff unfortunately are only able to do what the resources allow them to do… (Lewis, Deputy manager, Dexters)

The practice of two playworkers in particular gave me the impression on occasion that a lack of confidence in their own skills and a sense of having little power to change things they were not happy about manifested in complaining about the 'problems' in the play service and the local area. Relationships between playworkers' views of their localities and their expectations for the children are explored in the following chapter. Some of the practice observed appeared to reflect these frustrations and efforts to feel in control:

Teatime - The room is now noisy and the children appear fidgety. Again I have the impression that some of the behaviour issues that arise at tea time, with staff trying to stop children from doing and saying certain things like undesirable language, swinging on chairs, teasing each other, playing and being 'silly', keeping the noise level down etc. occurs because teatime takes longer than it needs to and the children get bored and frustrated. Staff focus is often on getting the children quiet while sitting here before they are allowed to go off and play. This generally takes at least ten or fifteen minutes. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

Tile painting activity – standing beside the table looking at what the children are doing, xx [playworker] raises voice slightly - 'I'm not being funny…. Don't do that. No disrespect… I am not being funny yeah but …. No mixing of the colours. Here's how it's gonna work, one paint brush for each colour. And you just have to wait for the colour you want to be free. Wait for the person…. You need to know what you are gonna do, you can't not know what you are gonna paint cos you're gonna get it

wrong and you can't take the paint off. So you need to know. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

Conclusion

This chapter has presented findings on the close relationship between play and learning, and themes emerging from discussions about empowerment in these two settings. The central tenets of autonomy, choice and self-direction - outlined as key to playwork theory and practice in chapter three - proved important to the parents, staff and children participating in this research. The after school play and learning experiences most parents and playworkers sought enabled the children to enjoy and explore, make choices and be listened to.

Parents and playworkers said these processes gave the children vital opportunities to gain in confidence, independence and self-esteem. Some parents and most of the playwork staff perceived these processes and outcomes as empowering. The staff described empowering the children as central to their goals. Bonel and Lindon define empowerment in playwork contexts as 'conferring power to an individual through an enabling or facilitating process' (2000: 280). Some of the staff participating in this research recognised that empowering the children required them to relinquish certain control. In accordance with the playwork principle that

> [f]or playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas (principle 4, PPSG 2005)

some saw relations between playworkers and children as a deviation from those more common between adults and children.

However, there were tensions. The relation between the empowerer and empoweree was necessarily predicated on an unequal power distribution. Therefore, the children could not exercise their choices without playworkers

allowing them to. In some examples, this tension reflected real limitations on how much freedom playworkers were able to afford the children. In other examples, their practice indicated that their skills in facilitating these varied. At Dexters, for the most part, staff appeared to interact with the children in accordance with the goals they described, and they endeavoured to be reflexive and consistent in their individual and team approaches. Here the children most consistently described their experiences positively. At Ferns, where staff practiced more controlling methods, often deviating from the goals they outlined in the interviews, this contributed to feelings of frustration and injustice amongst the older children.

The findings presented here indicate that parents, playworkers and children cared about children's decision-making powers, skills and confidence. In practice, complex, multi-faceted provisions, attitudes and expectations, and perceived and real limitations were integral to play, learning and empowerment. The children, like the staff, were enmeshed in structures that, while apparently promoting these ideals, legitimated particular sorts of agency, within prescribed confines. Indeed, despite the rhetoric, in some examples, playworkers appeared to reinforce the social inequalities children already faced. The findings presented here resonate with Freeman's argument that:

> The empowerment of children is not then a question, or simply a question, of redistribution of power. Putting children on to decision-making committees – school boards or community homes – only scratches the surface and does little to undermine entrenched processes of domination. (1997: 75)

Playworkers advocated child-centred approaches in which staff control could be somewhat relinquished in the interests of facilitating children's self-direction and development. In practice, external limitations such as site layout, staffing restrictions and health and safety policies, shaped their practices and impacted on the relationships and opportunities available. In addition, internal limitations such as their own skills and attitudes shaped their practices and expectations.

228

The moral stance most parents and playworkers described advocated for children's rights to be valued and listened to; to experience agency and responsibility; and to grow into adults able to live competently and happily. The findings suggest that children's after school experiences were seen as important both in the immediate term and as investments for the future. These ideas, and their connections with children's empowerment agendas, intertwine with current questions about how we conceive of and institutionalise children and childhoods in services provided for them. The analysis therefore led to an investigation of the complex layers of social construction around children and childhood underpinning views and practices in these settings. Thus the following chapter examines constructions of the children and childhood in these settings and the effects of these on playworkers' goals and practices. This further develops this thesis' engagement with contemporary notions of children and childhood underpinning provisions for children, and their implications for children's play, learning and empowerment in these settings.

Chapter Eight

Children and Childhoods

'What's the difference between a child and an adult? It's only the age.'
(Lewis, Deputy manager, Dexters)

Introduction

The previous chapters have explored how playwork staff at both sites made impassioned connections between their jobs and their contribution to the current and future lives of the children they worked with. Those chapters also explored ways in which staff controlled and channelled the children's behaviour. Intimately intertwined with their descriptions and practices were their opinions about the children they worked with, and about childhood more broadly. To explore these issues, this chapter builds on the preceding three findings chapters, and the discussions introduced in chapter two about social constructions of children and childhood, and in chapter three about how children are currently understood and provided for in State after school provisions. The previous findings chapters explored literal readings of the concepts and categories participants provided alongside some observations of their interactions during the fieldwork year. This chapter draws on a synthesis of findings from the semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and fieldwork observations to explore more implicit beliefs about the children in these settings.

Chapter two discussed childhood as a shifting social construction, a matter of culture (James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Qvortrup *et al.* 1994) and children as social agents, both affected by and impacting on society (James and Prout 1997: 8). From this perspective, that meaning is constituted by discourses current in particular socio-historic contexts, it was argued that social constructions of what a child is and what childhood should be, dictate how children are treated - from

national provision, to professional and familial levels (Moss and Petrie 2002). But dynamic and diverse constructions of different children, in different places, by different parties, at different times, show that childhood, like other social constructions, is not only contingent but 'inherently problematic' (Petrie *et al.* 2000: 3). Bourdieu's thinking is useful here to understanding the relationships between social constructions and social actors implementing those ideas. His concept of *habitus* defines a set of dispositions which generate practices and perceptions. Constituted in and through the historical and social conditions of their production, these dispositions exist in relations between social actors and in their interactions with their environments. Social actors' ways of speaking and behaving are expressions of these dispositions. In this research the demographic locales surrounding the sites became important as they influenced the interpretations and implementation of policy and practice.

Building on critiques of notions of childhood seen solely as a preparatory life stage, chapter three explored the inherent tensions between instrumental ideas about play and playwork approaches to child-led play experiences. The chapter described playwork as a professional discipline designed to support children 'to find their own place in the world' (Brown 2003: 1) by helping to 'remove barriers' to their 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' play behaviour (PPSG 2005). It was suggested there that amongst the key barriers to children's play are the often subtle but powerful influences of developmental and socialisation agendas. This chapter explores the social constructions and subtle agendas that indeed became evident in the two after school settings during the course of the research and how they were expressed in playworkers' practice.

Far from chronological age being the key factor distinguishing adults and children, the chapter identifies the divergent ways in which the children were construed, most notably distinct between the sites, and looks at the influences these constructions had on playworker's practices and their expectations of the after school provisions. Thus the chapter investigates the possibility that the opportunities, challenges and tensions explored in the previous findings chapters stemmed from the convergence of a complex, ambiguous and in some cases

231

contradictory 'patchwork quilt' (Hill and Tisdall 1997: 247) of mixed messages and agendas informing constructions of children and childhood in these settings (Petrie 1994; 2000).

The first section looks at the centrality or marginality of children's experiences as control versus facilitation grappled for precedence in adult versus child agendas. The chapter then explores how views of their local environments impacted on the possibilities and aims in the after school provisions. This provides the foundation for exploration of differing constructions of the children, their childhoods and their futures. The chapter thus locates ambivalent and opposing practices and attitudes which were current in both settings but with greater or lesser dominance. This discussion leads on to chapter nine where these perspectives and practices are further located within broader debates and analytical frameworks (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 211; Carspecken 1996).

Control, Facilitation and Adult- versus Child-centred Approaches

As explored in the previous chapters, with few exceptions, in the interviews and our more informal conversations, parents, children and playworkers described the primacy of the children enjoying their after school club experiences as 'free' play time, away from school and home. Therefore parents, staff and children alike considered it appropriate and beneficial for children to choose their activities and for the children's agendas to have primacy, with playworkers there to facilitate this. Facilitation, which the playworkers strongly connected with empowerment, essentially meant listening, responding to the children's choices, and helping them to develop their confidence, self-esteem and other desirable capacities. As explored in chapter six, for playworkers at both sites and some parents, this showed that the children's experiences and views were valued. Prioritising children's experiences and child-led activity resonates with playwork priorities of safeguarding children's play against adult requirements and the playworkers' key role in removing barriers to this process (Brown 2003).

The previous chapters have also explored the various ways in which parents, children and playworkers described tensions between facilitation and control in these settings. In interviews and informal conversations, a number of children, parents and staff described controlling the children - through adults deciding their activities or ensuring they did some homework - as less appropriate; even though some parents liked the idea of their children doing some homework there. When playworkers discussed controlling the children's behaviour, this was in relation to policy procedures they were obliged to enforce; restrictions like stopping children from climbing trees or engaging in rough and tumble play. Over the course of the fieldwork, staff at both sites described imposing restrictions on the children's play as negative and a demotion of their rights to choose.

But controlling the children – in terms of keeping them safe and ensuring they behaved themselves - was integral to the playworker's jobs, which playworkers, parents and children expected. In addition, as seen in chapter seven, only certain kinds of facilitation were considered desirable – giving children opportunities to play and have fun, to plan the activities, to choose topics for debate and create their own site-specific behaviour agreements, for example. These were determined by policy and procedural limitations around what choices children could have. These guidelines indicated particular constructions of the children and the future lives adults envisioned for them.

Therefore, in practice, combining control of the children's behaviour and facilitation of their play revealed inherent contradictions and challenges facing the playworkers and the children. In part, this reflected tensions identified in chapter three between outcome-orientated policy guidelines and playwork approaches; a dynamic that stems essentially from disagreement about the precedence of children's or adult's agendas in these settings.

The degrees to which playworkers prioritised the children's experiences in their practice varied. The previous two chapters have explored some of the contributors to this, such as space and staffing restrictions, professional identities and requirements, and the implementation of rules and regulations; and some of

the more nuanced impacts these had on how staff felt about their own positions, and their relations with the children. But there were even more fundamental and often contrasting ideas shaping playworker/child relationships. Before moving on to these, the discussion below looks at dynamic tensions between control as prioritising adult requirements and facilitation as an exercise in fore-fronting the children's experiences.

In practice, playworkers' different approaches to the centrality of the children's experiences between the sites were reflected, for example, in how they characteristically addressed challenging behaviour. As explored in chapter six, the boundaries around acceptable behaviour at the sites were similar. As outlined by the local authority:

> where direct or indirect discrimination occurs within our service, it is both morally and legally unacceptable, and is in direct contradiction of our constitutional commitment. It will not be tolerated. ('Terms of reference Equality Statement', updated November 2009)

But how staff in the two settings enforced those boundaries was quite different. The following two fieldnote excerpts describe two incidents in which staff members were reiterating behaviour boundaries. The excerpts reveal how the assertion of adult control, while present in both instances, was more overt at Ferns:

> Teatime, Nita, manager – 'All key stage one kids are sitting quietly. It's you older ones that are setting bad example. And that's what I'm trying to explain. What you older ones did to Arianne, instead of explaining, you're pushing and shouting at her. And three of you older ones, and one little one. That's bullying. Yes that's called bullying.' Children say, pointing to Arianne – 'look, she's laughing herself too'. Nita – 'she wasn't laughing before, she was scared by you and now I am waiting for someone to apologise to her.' Noel [playworker] – (children get little quieter) 'Jamal, if you saw someone doing something, bullying someone and you saw it, would you tell a teacher? Jamal, wouldn't you tell a

234

teacher?' No answer. Nita – 'Mustafa and Marco were really shouting at her. I'm waiting for an apology.' Amongst children, banging of plates and general chatter. Noel (focussed on Jackie who is near him) asks her if she did something negative wouldn't she apologise? 'As if you accidentally hurt someone wouldn't you apologise?' Jackie said something I didn't hear. Room is getting noisy again, younger children are quiet. Mustafa – shouts across the room 'sorry'. Nita – 'thank you, but it's only sorry if you mean it.' Mustafa - 'I never done nothing. I'm just saying sorry for no reason anyway.' (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

Tea room – Margaret is addressing all the children about some undesirable behaviour in football coaching session yesterday - 'Some children had been telling other children that they were 'useless' and 'rubbish' at football. That is not what we are here for. That is not nice and should not be happening. I'm very disappointed that this has happened. The football coach comes here to support everyone to get better at the football skills. No one is expected to be Rooney [famous football player]. It is for everyone, and nobody should be making anyone feel bad about themselves. If it happens again, the coach will not be coming back. We are using Dexters money to pay this coach to come because you wanted it, and it is not right that this is how it is being used. It's not nice.' (Dexters fieldnotes, winter term)

In both examples the site manager addresses the children together and a correct way of behaving is reiterated. At Ferns the children in question are identified, their behaviour reprimanded for bullying and not setting a good example, and an apology demanded. The child who has apparently been mistreated is also identified. Her response to this is ambiguous as her smiling/laughing could be an uncomfortable reaction to being publicly discussed. Noel twice insists that children should speak to an adult if they have a problem. He focuses his question on a particular child. This child, by chance or otherwise, is one of the older boys frequently reprimanded for his treatment of other children. Noel's insistence that adults are the ones who should be reported to when children mistreat each other receives no response. On the basis of numerous conversations with Jamal during

the fieldwork, it seems safe to say that he is not in agreement or appreciation of this situation, but does not chose to or perhaps feel able to say so. Then a child makes an apology to appease the situation because it is being demanded. His following comment is perhaps even geared towards highlighting or undermining Nita's self-defeating demand.

In the Dexters example, by contrast, Margaret addresses the children as a collective. Behaviour is reprimanded rather than individual children. As in the previous example, the implication is that children should make each other feel good about themselves and should include everyone whatever their skill level and be 'nice'. Like the Ferns example, there is a threat. But here the threat is the removal of an activity for everyone, rather than specific children sitting out. At Ferns the threat labels specified children's behaviour as 'bullying', which everyone knows is bad. In interviews and conversations, both managers described treating the children as individuals, but here this idea takes on a different quality. Nita treats them as individuals as a kind of naming and shaming technique; while Margaret addresses the group of individuals as a collective and appeals to their shared interests and responsibilities to be kinder to each other.

Both these examples demonstrate staff endeavours to control particular children's behaviour. Their different approaches indicate greater or lesser focus on the child's experience in the interaction; whether the children felt individually pointed out and belittled or not. Many other such occasions arose during the fieldwork in which challenges to children's behaviour and maintenance of particular sorts of order were at issue. At Dexters it was common to hear staff approach with an opening - 'let's talk about why…' – and appealing to children's sense of 'being nice' to others. This is an approach Petrie *et al.* have called 'democratic' (2000: 83) because the rights of others are acknowledged, explanations sought for unacceptable behaviour and alternatives agreed. This still constitutes control of the children, supporting their developing morality, through enforcement of particular ideas of 'right' and 'wrong'.

At Ferns, instructive communications were more common - 'stop that', 'be quiet', 'don't do that'. Also the equation 'if you x, then I will y' was more

frequent there. For example, 'if you talk when I want you to be quiet, then you will lose out on some of your play time'. Petrie *et al.* call this approach 'punitive' as it involves a degree of threat to the individual child (2000: 83). Ongoing observations revealed overlaps with these 'democratic' and 'punitive' approaches at both sites, as seen in the quotations above.

At Ferns Nita was often affectionate and engaged with the children, trying to help them have fun; while I regularly observed Noel operating more as an overseer or supervisor:

> Playground - Nita is doing skipping, holding the rope, with the girls and a couple of boys. The children are singing skipping songs. One child skips until they catch their foot on the rope, then it's the next person's turn. There is giggling… Noel moves between the gate and the middle of the playground, watching the older boys and one girl play football. As he oversees the football game he makes comments – 'don't push', 'if you do that you're gonna sit out', 'I always have to tell you to stop that', 'you see how you lot always like to push it, no disrespect but you can't go on like that', 'remember the rules'. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

> Teatime - Nita is sitting with children. Mostly the children do the talking, sometimes she interjects. Noel is leaning up against the kitchen sink, seemingly observing the room's inhabitants. Then he sits between two tables, one of which has Nita and some children, and the other that is still laid out for the tile-painting activity and has no children at it. He does not speak to anyone other than to tell children to 'behave'… (Ferns fieldnotes, winter term)

Noel's paternalistic, authoritarian tone and words reflect his prioritising of an agenda in which children follow rules and obey adult instructions, even during their play. This highlighted a lack of clear boundaries between the zones of children's play and adult regulation. Going against the playwork principle of removing barriers to children's play, adult agendas could interrupt Ferns children's play at any point. Unlike at Dexters where the after school club was

physically separate from school, the Ferns children were physically still at school, school rules still applied, the head teacher was referred to as an authority figure on occasion, and the staff often behaved more like teachers than playworkers. Play was something happening in the insecure gaps between adult agendas.

At Ferns there was a focus on immediate control. Endeavours to control the after school environments according to staff desires for order rather than employing the more facilitational, playwork approach defined in chapter three meant they sometimes perhaps missed opportunities to develop the children's social skills, confidence and self-esteem. Children at both sites displayed challenging or needy behaviour at times. For example six-year-old John; he was new at Ferns and keen to make friends with the older boys. But his efforts to get their attention involved starting fights with them. Nita described her sympathy for him being new and wanting to be popular with the older boys, but his behaviour was judged as wrong, he was told off and his behaviour reported to his parent.

A playwork approach that brings an understanding of play theory would define John's actions as inappropriate 'plays cues' (Sturrock and Else 1998), by which the player tries to instigate social play. A playwork approach would have focussed on supporting the child to learn more appropriate play cues that could generate desired outcomes. Lack of such understanding, instead of reading his behaviour, contextualising his efforts this way and supporting John to learn, staff reprimanded him in an endeavour to make him stop hitting. Had such an approach been employed, his behaviour might have led to change rather than being suppressed.

Prioritising adult agendas of control and risk avoidance thus suppressed children's agency in more or less overt ways. This sense of the power of agency versus broader structures shifted, however, when staff were dealing with situations of conflict. At Dexters, family and school issues were discussed. At Ferns, although there was contextualisation of their behaviour against the backdrop of the rest if their lives, children deemed to be misbehaving were often treated as deliberately naughty or 'playing up'.

As seen in previous chapters, children old enough to articulate their sense of cause and effect said they were frustrated by the suppression of their own agendas and found it unfair and counter to how playworkers framed right and wrong, which was supposed to be about listening to and respecting others. This indicates that these children recognised their own agency and the contradictory messages they received from playworkers. Some children's frustrations – at Ferns in particular and possibly more generally in their lives – appeared to increase their deviation from imposed restrictions; in their own descriptions this was a reaction to not feeling listened to and respected.

In focusing on immediate control, longer term goals were potentially hindered; certain behaviours were suppressed rather than facilitated as a means of learning. The need for such control and intervention, and the contrast in how these were dealt with at the two sites, betrayed the influence of various factors, but also arguably differences in the playworkers' more fundamental concepts about the children. Particularly at Ferns, ideas about the children's lives and the local environment impacted on staff experiences and practices.

Perceptions of the Local Environments, Risk and After School Provision

Carspecken defines environment as comprised of 'social sites', 'settings', 'locales' and 'social systems' (1996: 35). He defines 'social sites' as the immediate locations of interactive routines between people that are geographically and temporally delimited. 'Settings' signify the shared understandings and boundaries of expected behaviour within a social site. 'Locale' refers to the wider areas surrounding the research sites and 'social systems' are the larger conditions such as economic and political systems that do not 'originate on one site but rather shape activities throughout a large number of sites comprising society (1996: 36).

These concentric circles of 'social site' and 'setting' describe the tangible aspects, in this case the school or after school site building, their available play

spaces, resources and staffing; and the less tangible and implicit aspects such as attitudes, rules and regulations. These have been examined in the previous three chapters. This section presents findings on perceptions of the children's broader lives and 'locales', as risky and threatening or places to explore. This leads to observations of how these perceptions impacted on, or indeed articulated the subtext of playworker's expectations of and for the children, and therefore shaped their practice.

Ferns

Un-elicited, the Ferns staff regularly described the immediate outside world as a place of threat and adversity. I was struck by the frequency with which similar accounts featured in our conversations throughout the fieldwork year:

> Nita, Manager – Round here, you know, there's so many problems. Parents tell me they're depressed, some are on medications, family problems with family members going into prison. Not enough money. It's all the time it's pressure. I feel bad for them. Still bringing up younger ones too, and have older children that they are having problems with. It's the area I think really. What else can they do? (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

Staff and parents pointed out local challenges, sometimes as insurmountable, sometimes as inevitable. Noel, a local himself, talked about young people he knew in the prison nearby:

> Noel, Playworker – And there was that youngster who got shot just after coming out of the prison there. Maybe he'd cut some kind of deal to get out early. Then after he came out people caught up with him. They were ready for him. It's like that round here. Living on the edge. Bad things happen like normal. (Ferns fieldnotes, autumn term)

Reports about the area were not just a question of negative perceptions but reflected real events. The harsh realities parents were contending with permeated day to day concerns:

240

Princess vomited. Children in the tea room with her rushed calling Nita. Nita ushered the children into the other room and pulled the door almost closed. She and Noel are in the tearoom preparing tea and cleaning up vomit. Princess was put to lie down on the sofa. Nita said she's been trying to get in touch with her mother. She doesn't usually attend on a Friday but her mother had to go to court. Towards the end of the afternoon Nita got in touch with her. When her mother arrived she looked as if she had been crying. Nita took her out into the hall for some privacy (the office here is just a sectioned off part of the main room and affords no privacy). Nita offered her a seat. Nita told me later that she was concerned by how upset Princess' mother looked. She said she had been at court, had popped home to drop some things off. When she got home she had been burgled. Things had been taken. So she was here to collect the children, 'get them sorted and then deal with that'. (Ferns fieldnotes, autumn term)

With two exceptions, the notion of the children's immediate home environments being physically dangerous rarely arose from conversations with staff, parents or children. The concerns staff did raise related to children missing out on levels of care due to parents being stressed, depressed or otherwise preoccupied. These reflections of staff opinions about individual childhoods, in contrast to what they thought they should be, are explored below.

Nita explicitly and Noel more subtly both described an overwhelming, intractable influence of their surroundings, and the challenges the children faced. This served to compound their questioning of their own capacities as they tried to support the children with the issues they faced. Nita recounted an episode in which local boys outside the school gates had been shouting insults at two boys inside the playground:

The other day they [Jamal and Mustafa] were calling names outside the playground. And I said to them 'why are you doing that?' And they said, 'oh those children called us names'. It was three boys. And they were

really annoying those boys are. And they called them… and you know Jamal, he won't take anything. So then I spoke to Jamal and he said, 'oh they were calling us names', because they were all black so they were calling them really bad names. I said 'look, there's no point. They're outside. I know you are hurt…' They were outside, three, I would say white boys. And they were walking up and down and they were start calling these names… racist names. … and they were saying 'I'll beat you.' And I said 'look, I can understand you are angry, I'd be angry. But they're outside ok. More you pay attention, more they will do.' Because they were getting angry and really reacting to it. And they were saying more and more. I said 'if you ignore, if they call, ignore.' So it's difficult for them as well to understand. So they did, we had a chat, explanation. But um they did understood. I said 'next time if they're passing, ignore it. If the worst, we're here.'… But then at the same time Mustafa got little bit frightened as well. Then his mother rang and said 'oh he can come, I'm waiting round the corner can you send him out'. He said 'no tell my mum to come here to pick me up'… because of those boys. Then I had chat with him, I did explain, 'listen next time ignore them. I know it's very difficult, you're still young. If it's come worst, then we are here. Tell us, we'll deal with it. Don't deal with it yourself. If you keep quiet…' because they were calling them back…they did made it worse. So that's why they were keep coming back again and again. And we were watching, we were there. I think Noel [playworker] was there. Then I went, I saw them. So I said 'no I'll deal with it.' I went, then they walk away… But sometimes in this situation… I mean in myself I don't know how to handle it, those boys. And they were really, you could see they were really street boys. And they wanted to pick on you or something. (Nita, Manager Ferns)

This event raises a number of issues, particularly fear of the local antagonism and racism that was part of the children's lives. It shows how vulnerable the 'safe' space inside the after school club was to intrusion from the threatening world outside, showing the artificial dividing line between inside and outside the after school club.

When Nita says it is 'difficult' does she mean it is difficult for the children to understand her telling them to ignore the provocation or that it is difficult for *her* to be in that situation and deal with the emotions of it? Nita's explanation of her responses raises the question of whether she is helping the children to deal with it by encouraging them to ignore the situation, or perhaps hindering them by suggesting that adults are needed to deal with it. She says that the boys found this abuse hard to deal with because they were 'still young'. The implication is that it is easier for an adult to handle. But clearly, although she knew this was the sort of situation the children needed to develop ways of dealing with, she did not really know how to support them. Indeed, she says that she was intimidated herself by the name-calling boys; the idea of them as 'really street boys' who 'wanted to pick on you' implies her own fear of a kind of uncontrolled, unpredictable and unruly threat.

This interaction is an example of the adversity children, staff and parents had to face at Ferns. During the interviews and the fieldwork more generally participants were not asked their views about their lives or local area. For parents and children, both topics arose on occasion. In the interviews with parents, when they talked about themselves more personally, they presented themselves as getting on with their lives and in some cases studying to improve their employment options; often describing aspirations and endeavours to improve their situations through further training. Their concerns about their children did come up on occasion:

> It's hard for parents cos there's so many bad things happening. (Pearl, Mother, Ferns)

Parents' negative views on the area and the challenges in their lives emerged more often in spontaneous conversations than in the interviews. This was perhaps partly because I had impromptu conversations with parents that I did not also interview formally. There were descriptions of their older children having problems with employment and illegal activity, being 'led astray by their friends'

as one parent described it; and some personal stories about suffering from depression.

Children also indicated on occasion that they felt the pressures of their locality. Like Mustafa, the boy involved in the racist name-calling incidence above, who was afraid to leave the confines of the adult supervised territory alone. Safety 'outside' was a concern for other children too:

> Teatime - I sit at one of the tables next to Marco. He starts a conversation about what one should do if chased by someone down the street. He suggests ideas. This is not the first time he has raised this kind of safety topic with me. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

> They [playworkers] don't let us go out the gates, so we're safe. (Isaac, age 7)

Ideas about the local environments affected staff perceptions of the children themselves. Notions of the outside as a place of inevitable pressure and adversity at Ferns were reflected in staff descriptions of the children:

> Nita, Manager – 'Children in this area, sometimes it's not their fault, getting in trouble, you know, it's the area, it's the parents. So sometimes you don't want to tell parents what the kids they have been doing, cos you know, it's just more to tell them, what are they gonna do? (Ferns fieldnotes, autumn term)

> Noel, Playworker – 'Everyone, all the young men round here want to have status symbols, for themselves and their kids to be wearing designer labels, to be driving big cars, they're not earners, not people who want to work for their money, they want it all quick and easy… you can see the patterns, the younger ones here, growing in this environment, you kinda know where they're heading don't you. (Ferns Fieldnotes, winter term)

There is something depersonalised, even resigned about these views and an attitude towards the children's futures as something obvious and inevitable. On one level, their descriptions indicate sensitivity to the children's contexts; all the more poignant for Noel as he grew up locally. This sensitivity extended to his descriptions of how he catered to the children's hardships by, for example, not expecting too much of them. This was a sympathy that Nita also showed in her frequent hugging or teasing affection with the children. But also Nita and Noel both describe the children as products, even victims of their circumstances.

Over time Noel's descriptions suggested an underpinning notion of the older boys particularly, as errant and in need of control, evident in his controlling practice. Perhaps his view of the local circumstances justified his containment and restriction of the children, who were pitied at times or their behaviour explained as a result of their backgrounds. Noel's endeavours to control the environment 'inside' reflected his apprehensions about the environment 'outside'. But his behaviour was contradictory, both controlling and disconnected, authoritarian and indifferent. Though sounding sensitive, therefore, when Noel described the importance of understanding the area, building the young people's confidence and the counter productive pressure of expecting them to perform to too high standards, I had the impression he was also talking about himself and the pressures he felt. At Ferns, then, the atmosphere was one of managing the limited space, staff resources and the challenging behaviour of some of the children.

Margaret the Dexters manager was supervising at Ferns one day during the research period as Nita was unwell. She said that after years of working with children all over the Borough she had realised that

> [in] different catchment areas, parents are vocal in different ways, having different expectations for their kids.... Kids are different at different sites. (Ferns fieldnotes, spring term)

The distinctions playworkers drew between the childhoods occurring in and around their settings, did articulate actual material differences, as described in

245

chapter five. Judging by how frequently such topics arose during conversations throughout the fieldwork, the immediate social and economic concerns that impacted on the staff, parents and children at Ferns were of far less concern at Dexters.

Dexters

At Dexters, the after school provision was also sometimes depicted as a place of respite from the outside world:

> You know there is a lot of conflict in the world and children are being brought into it… But when they come here they know that they can be safe. Even if at home there is conflict, when they come here it's like a cocoon, they know that they are not going to be hit, they are not going to be treated in any kind of horrible way, you know. But they are going to be listened to and treated with loving care… even if it's not happening at home, here they will see something else. (Maria, Playworker, Dexters)

But the Dexters staff also described children's right to feel connected to their locality and for others to know about the centre. Here the outside world was also a place to explore and a source of occasional generosity:

> for the children to have an understanding that around their surrounding community isn't just their schools or even maybe their homes. There's going to be other organisations, other places which they can access as young people, with the supervision of their parents obviously. Even if its local parks and things, they may use out of the play project, there's other organisations that they can go to, like the local library, the local area as well… And having others acknowledge the centre being here as well. Cos we mainly find that our visitors are mainly parents and carers and children who are interested in using the site. Or um you know local visitors coming to the site as well, volunteers like yourself and agency workers. So yeah it's just mainly for the children to have an understanding of what's in their surroundings…. (Rochelle, Playworker, Dexters)

Rochelle said she hoped to make Christmas cards for the local community and thought that perhaps the children might want to get involved. 'It's part of them [children] getting to know their local area more, knowing what's around them. Knowing that they are part of the area'. (Dexters fieldnotes, winter term)

Margaret, Manager – 'we do have quite a good connection with the local community really. People bring in things. The material lady who has a shop and brings in material, the lady across the road at the community centre which is voluntary so they have to do fund raising all the time, so people donate stuff and she brings in things she can't get rid of. There is the blind lady who brings in all the Braille paper and Braille magazines. The lady who brings in junk for junk modelling like boxes and stuff.' (Dexters fieldnotes, winter term)

Here, perceptions of the local environment as a place to know filtered through to endeavours to strengthen inside/outside connections, to support the children to explore locally, and to make the environment around them a welcoming, known place.

The Dexters parents did not talk about their views of the local environment though informally they sometimes talked about their lives and the challenges of bringing up their children and working full time. But there was not the sense of environmental adversity and the impact of poverty on the children's lives felt at Ferns, nor did the children talk about such threats or concerns.

In conclusion to this section, perceptions of the local environment and its impact on the children's lives was clearly a factor in the playworkers' ideas about the purposes and possibilities of the after school provisions and their own practices. In their descriptions, the staff at Ferns focussed on the children's immediate experiences. In their practice, the children's immediate experiences were regularly overshadowed by staff endeavours to control and maintain order, however. This endeavour to control the children suggested a lack of control they

experienced themselves and saw in their local environment. There also seemed to be a lack of trust in the children's capacities.

This contrasted with some of the Dexters ideals where, as well as valuing the children's immediate experiences, staff there also looked to the children's futures. In relation to the children's play, they often took a low intervention role; conflicts were more often left to the children to resolve, playworkers were more likely to observe the children's activity than intervene. This suggested a trust in the children's abilities to learn to resolve situations, and respect for their right to explore their own and the behaviour of others. This also reflected a notion which informed their practice, that children's play was a domain in which children should lead the way.

Thus, in their different ways, staff ideas about the environment impacted on their ideas about the aims of the after school clubs, their playwork practices, and the choices they provided. But their descriptions also revealed something more fundamental.

Children as Agents or Victims, 'Beings' or 'Becomings'

While there was general agreement that the children deserved and needed attention, support and encouragement, playworkers' descriptions and my observations of their practices indicated contradictory ideas about the children they worked with. The findings have shown how playworkers regarded children as incomplete adult 'becomings' (Qvortrup *et al.* 1994), their childhoods a time of learning how to become adults and learning right from wrong. For which they needed supervision, instruction and safeguarding both from external harms and from the harms they might inflict on themselves or each other. In some instances the harsh realities of life they were having to deal with at such young ages were seen as anathema to what childhood should be like.

Staff also recognised the children as child 'beings'; as agents and individuals with rights and personal interests. Combinations of these ideas shaped

relationships between playworkers and the children, and impacted on the children's experiences. An intangible sense of responsibility, combined with optimism or resignation pervaded the atmospheres at the two sites and reflected these different perspectives in relation to the children and their lives. These attitudes to the children as 'beings' and 'becomings' were present at both sites but the balance of which took precedence differed.

The Ferns manager and the Dexters staff described children as individuals with rights, deserving of respect and involvement in decisions affecting their lives. These ideas reflected notions promoted through the playwork principles (PPSG 2005) and UNCRC frameworks about children's rights to play, to gather and form their own opinions, and to be consulted (Article 31, UNICEF 1991). As seen previously, both playworkers and parents said that children had views and experiences that should be recognised and respected. They also acknowledged that children were inexperienced in life and it was adults' responsibility to provide them with safe, nurturing environments, relationships and experiences.

At Dexters, the staff's constructions of the children as child 'beings' and adult 'becomings', indicated confidence that they could positively contribute to the children, and their trust that the children could and would progress. Informing children about their rights and supporting them in representing their own and the views of their peers to senior management and local councillors were framed by a broad set of principles and practices aimed at treating the children as individuals.

This construction of children as agents and beings, full of potential, capable, worthy of their rights and responsibility dominated in the approach at Dexters. Staff seemed generally relaxed and there was often a playfulness between children and staff, a sense of possibility, even a sense of adults and children being on the same side. But the focus in the types of activities going on and their ways of interacting with the children were purposeful; and the end of day meetings were seen as important to supporting children having difficulties. This quotation captures a sentiment present in a number of the interviews there:

> when you sit down and really think about it, it just does bring home to
> you… what a difference you can make and how important it is to keep
> hold of stuff that you feel are important to children. You know, and to not
> lose that. You know, cos we can all moan and groan about how
> everything gets cut and you know. But I mean we can still do an awful
> lot. (Margaret, Manager, Dexters)

At Ferns, staff notions of the children as victims of their circumstances were reflected in their often inadvertent reinforcement of these relations through their practice seen above.

As seen above, notions of the children as victims or agents, as products of their environments versus individuals with rights and views, linked to staff treating them as needing regulation, supervision and restriction (control/adult-led agendas) or as people who could be trusted to find their own solutions (facilitation/child-led). This is not to say that staff at Dexters did not restrict the children. Rather, their broad approach to the children did not rely on the overt daily assertion of adult control evident at Ferns. At Dexters, while still assertive, these relations were more implicit, as exemplified in the contrasting approaches to challenging undesirable behaviour discussed above.

Ideas about the children as 'beings' and 'becomings' were also internally faceted as playworkers revealed belief that the children's capacities changed with age while still children. This was reflected in expecting older children to set examples for the younger children, treating the older and younger children differently at times, and the recognition that the older children sometimes needed different sorts of stimulation and activity.

Another factor seems relevant here. Despite conventional constructions of adults as complete and children as small people who need to learn and develop, during the course of the fieldwork most of the staff at Dexters, and Nita the Ferns manager, did not present themselves as infallible, as complete 'beings'. To me, and in some instances to their colleagues and the children, they were able to question their authority, with varying degrees of self-reflection and awareness of

their own development and achievements, mistakes and insecurities. Staff who questioned themselves more tended to be less assertive of their power over the children. Giving children the impression that they should get things right and that they make mistakes because they are children, reflects a particular, false image of adulthood, that actually adults knew was not true. Thus staff notions of children and childhood reflected notions about themselves as adults. As Hughes suggests:

> …human controlled interaction assumes an omnipotence of human judgement. That human beings either never make errors, or if they do, they learn from them and never make them again. We all know that the reverse is true. Human beings are always making mistakes in every aspect of life and rarely learn from any of them. (1996: 11)

Furthermore, expecting the children to get things right and the tensions this generated echo research findings that in contexts where children feel their activity is over-determined by adults and goal orientated, the feeling of lack of control and the gap between themselves and the meeting of those goals can be counterproductive:

> the prescription of detailed learning goals linked to formal teaching can place children in a position where they experience prolonged feelings of inadequacy which can impact negatively on their self-esteem and motivation to learn. (Dahlberg 2009: 231)

It was poignant to note the degrees to which playworkers, as adults, felt frustrated, insecure or lacked confidence in their ability to deliver some of their professional ideals. Nita, for example, was self-conscious about my presence at times. She asked what I would write, what I thought and if I had any suggestions for improvements. She said felt she could do better. She knew, for example, that the older children needed more variety and that both she and Noel, contrary to her sense of what they should be doing, said 'don't' too often. The apparent gap between herself and Noel seemed to lock them into doing things the same ways.

By contrast, at Dexters, I only felt this self-consciousness about my presence with one agency staff member, and on one occasion with one of the playworkers. The rest of the time my presence was regarded as a resource and an opportunity for an outside view. That I was asked a number of times at Ferns to cover areas when short staffing required it and never at Dexters, exemplified and compounded my impression that Dexters was a site in control, with procedures stuck to, its various areas staffed, and team communication updated daily. While at Ferns I had the impression they were holding things together more tentatively.

In general, playworkers' views of the children as 'beings' or 'becomings' in the present indicated playworkers' different views about what childhood could or should be. The children at their after school provisions influenced their anticipation of the children's futures. In the interviews and other conversations with playworkers and parents, contrasting ideas about the past, present and future framed perceptions and practices relating to the children, childhood, the local areas and the purposes of the after school provisions. There were reflections on how society had changed in terms of the reduced freedom of children to play unsupervised, and the current sense of threat to children's well being if left without adult supervision. As explored above, the present was also seen as sometimes challenging to the children due to issues at home, school or locally. Alternatively, the present was depicted as in some ways better for children. Ideas about listening to children's views and treating them as if they had something to offer linked to what some playworkers and parents saw as generational and/or cultural shifts in ideas about what was good for children as improvements on the past.

The actual experiences of the children at these settings contrasted with playworkers' broader sense of childhood as an idealised life stage during which children should not have to contend with the anxieties and challenges that they in fact faced. Nita the Ferns manager, and some of the Dexters staff, thought that childhood should be about children being spared the incumbent pressures of adults' daily lives; that they should be free from these and able to have fun at least for a while in the afternoons:

every child should have a right to have a childhood… and sort of be away from some of the conflict that's going on in the world and maybe at home. (Maria, Playworker, Dexters)

As we have seen, many of the staff described a desire to protect the children, enabling them to experience some control over, or freedom from, their lives. The implication being that childhood should be happy and free from adult concerns. With some of the children's childhoods not like that, staff drew a distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' the after school clubs, and sought to make things a little more like they thought childhood should be there.

With a higher proportion of the children's lives reported as challenging, the Ferns staff talked especially about the children's immediate needs. Curiously, despite this they dictated much of those experiences, seemingly needing to control the children. At Dexters staff framed their priorities against a backdrop of the children acquiring for the future through experiences now. Here their practice was more facilitating of immediate experience as dictated by the children, shaped by notions of the children as able agents. These endeavours reflected perceptions of societal changes and their impact on children, but also notions of childhood as a transitional phase, a preparation for the future.

The participants shared similar views about the goals of the after school provisions, about playworkers' jobs, play, learning and empowerment and the tensions identified within these. Despite the variations and discrepancies discussed in this chapter, the development of confidence, self-esteem, and practical and social skills featured predominantly. Childhood was the phase in which to learn and prepare for adult futures.

With greater or lesser degrees of optimism and scepticism, playworkers at both sites expressed concern for the children's futures and hope that what the children gained from after school club would support them in the present and in their development for the future. As explored in chapter seven, playworkers and parents connected what the children engaged in now with the skills and attributes they considered the children likely to benefit from as they grew up: for example,

dealing with competition and failure, developing their confidence, and being accustomed to different sorts of social environments. Indicating their instrumental, future-focussed aims, the broad thread that held playworkers and many parents various goals together was a desire that, in addition to enjoying themselves, the children grew, developed, learned and overtly or by implication, were 'empowered' during their after school time.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how chronological age was far from the key factor distinguishing adults from children in these settings. What people said and did constituted an interaction with and reflection of meanings generated in their particular socio-cultural contexts, which varied even within the Borough (Bourdieu 1992). The findings indicate an important relationship between playworkers' perceptions of the children, the local environment, and their practices as playworkers. Furthermore, between the two sites, different notions of their environment - as either a threat to be protected from or a place to discover and feel part of – articulated different notions of the children as, put too simply, vulnerable victims or social agents.

The ways in which playworkers controlled or facilitated the children were tied in with their social constructions of the children. These views were generated out of a matrix of intersecting influences; those of policy, the views of the people comprising their particular locality, and playwork approaches. The different notions of the children's environments were a means through which playworkers articulated their perceptions not only of the children's current realities and necessities, but notions of their possible or likely futures. These impacted on how playworkers interacted with the children, and also linked with the level of confidence, trust and skills staff had, as individuals and as teams, to allow children to direct their own play activities and to deal with issues.

The Ferns staff quite consistently constructed the children as vulnerable and victims. They described the children as products of the social structures of their

environment, disadvantaged by their circumstantial lack of choices, lack of childhood fun and poor prospects for the future. Their understandings and conduct with the children resonated with James *et al.*'s 'social structural' model (1998: 28) as they saw the children's present and future lives as subject to the complex institutional arrangements and constraints of the overall social structures within which they were located. Descriptions of the power of external forces shaping the children's day to day experiences tended to undermine connection to the children's individual characters, needs, interests and agency. Where this approach to the children was strongest, in the character of Noel the playworker, engagement with the individuality of the children, reflected in his descriptions and his practice, was minimal. He and Nita the manager said they tried to contend with the difficulties the children faced by giving them somewhere to play and have fun, as a temporary antidote to their lives. Despite this, the lack of circumstantial choices they described were often reinforced; maintaining particular sorts of 'punitive' order often took precedence over children's play desires.

While the sometimes negative and powerful impacts of the children's lives did feature at Dexters, staff there also constructed and interacted with the children as social agents, as individuals with rights, prime for learning and developing. This was reflected in their practice with the children and their views of the local environment as a place for the children to know and be known, a place they had a right to be part of and would be as they grew up. The more 'democratic' Dexters playworkers described and interacted with the children both as child 'beings' and as adult 'becomings'.

Approaches to the children at Dexters resonated with James *et al.*'s (1998: 29) ideas about the 'tribal' child. As part of a larger concern with the agency of children and their social, political and economic status, the idea of the 'tribal' child enabled a moral reassessment of these power relations between children and adults. Playworkers at Dexters valued the children's worlds and the meanings generated there. They did not depict or interact with the children solely as inhabiting transitory spaces whose function was the lead-up to adulthood. Rather, attitudes to the children's futures were intertwined with appreciation of

their present experiences. Indeed, instead of imagining the children as yet-to-be socially inculcated, childhoods here were recognised as real locations, as having and deserving degrees of autonomy.

For particular staff at both sites, this sense of the 'tribal' child overlapped with what James *et al.* have called the 'minority child', as they voiced concerns for the children's subordinate positions in relation to adults in their lives generally (1998: 31). This indicates their recognition of children as a generally disempowered social group (Mayall 2002). This concern was particularly keen when that subordination involved mistreatment and subjection to what they saw as adult difficulties from which children, and the ideal of childhood, should be shielded. Their efforts to re-balance these relations 'inside' the settings, although they varied in character, were always still implicated within these structures of intergenerational power (James 2009: 43).

This distinction if so precisely drawn between the sites is, of course, an oversimplification. For some playworkers these different ways of interacting with the children conflated and were reflected in their practices. For other playworkers, while they were able to articulate play, informal learning and empowerment ideals, which they linked to children's self-direction, choice-making and self-exploration, in much of their practice, they placed themselves in the position of authority and safe-guarder in ways that contradicted these and the playwork principles. While this was also part of their job, it limited the opportunities for child-led activity they enthusiastically advocated in the interviews. Both approaches occurred within the structures of policy and guideline concerns to control risks, challenge undesirable behaviour, and generate instrumental outcomes.

Controlling children is commonly connected with ensuring desirable socialisation and maintaining social order (James and James 2004). At both sites adults were positioned as wiser by nature of age and experience and children as 'becomings'. Notions of children and childhood, and practices in relation to the children, reflect both well-established and newer discourses. These include the responsibility of the state to safeguard children, upon whom the well-being of the

nation's future rests, while simultaneously protecting the broader social order from the threats posed by children and young people, but also treating children as rights bearers whom society is responsible to provide for and preserve. This chapter has presented findings indicating that amidst these and other changes, as Lee (2001) argues, the distinction between adults and children, and the clarity of the taken for granted categories of child and childhood, have become blurred in new ways and indeed mean different things in different contexts (Petrie *et al.* 2000).

Following presentation of the participants' concepts and my observations in chapters six and seven, chapter eight has begun to re-assess those concepts and observations and to re-examine what the important issues appeared to be in these settings. That parallel constructions of children as victims or agents intertwined to frame and influence practices and experiences across the sites reflects larger debates and experiences 'marked by both a sustained assault on children and a concern for children' (James *et al.* 1998: 3). Against this backdrop, these contexts represent structured responses to broader concerns about childhood in contemporary British society. The pragmatic circumstances and contradictions explored here require reconsideration of the discussions presented in chapters two and three. Chapter nine explores these.

Chapter Nine

Play, Informal Learning and Empowerment – In whose interests?

'Understanding tensions such as these takes us, therefore, to the very core of the cultural politics of childhood.' (James and James 2004: 6)

Introduction

This thesis began as an investigation into play, learning and empowerment in two State provided after school clubs in a London borough. An ethnographic approach was employed to explore these concepts and environments. Such observational research generates a wealth of unanticipated data. As this chapter explores, this has contributed to and furthered the original research aims.

The research found that as play and activity were occurring in supervised, closed access, paid-for settings, free play and regulation of behaviour were held in constant dynamic tension. Playworkers', parents' and children's views of playworkers' jobs as combinations of control and facilitation highlighted inherent contradictions and challenges in these contexts. Despite fashionable contemporary rhetoric around children's rights to play, analyses of the findings from interviews, fieldnotes and policy and procedure documents suggest that rather than sites of creative social action or agency these settings were geared towards responses to a larger picture of society's needs and the support of social coherence (Jenks 1982: 13; Moss and Petrie 2002). But there were also important differences between the sites.

As the ethnographic fieldwork, literature reviews and data analyses progressed, understanding the social constructions of children and childhoods operative in the settings emerged as useful to responding to the initial research focus and to explaining some of the differences between the settings. Exploring these, and the

challenges and contradictions participants identified, raised various issues that range from the practical and material to the discursive and theoretical, tracing a line to 'the very core of the cultural politics of childhood' (James and James 2004: 6).

This chapter revisits the original research questions and evolving interests. It assesses the methods used and identifies some further considerations whose full exploration have been beyond the scope of the current study. The chapter develops an interpretation of the themes emergent from the analysis to discuss the key findings and implications of the study; and connects the research participants' perspectives and actions with broader social processes and discourses (Alanen and Mayall 2001: 4; Carspecken 1996).

Initial Research Questions and Developments

The initial research questions asked what relationships between empowerment, play and informal learning were occurring in the after school clubs; how playworkers, parents and children in these contexts perceived these concepts and relationships; and how current policies and professional viewpoints relating to them underpinned activities in these two settings. To address these, the interviews and fieldwork conversations explored views of these concepts and environments; the participant observation enabled participation in and observation of the activities, interactions and practices of the children and playworkers; and policy and procedure documents provided information on official viewpoints and agendas.

The intention was not to measure, define or operationalise particular notions of these concepts but to examine their meanings in these settings; to participate in, and observe actions over time, and to use these concepts as an entry point through which to discern the ideas and values that informed quotidian playwork practices and their impacts on the children (Corsaro and Molinaro 2000). Indeed, chapters two and three demonstrated that play, informal learning and empowerment are not straight forward or un-contentious concepts.

During the participant observation, semi structured interviews and exploration of the policy guidelines, it became evident that play and learning were pertinent and seen as very connected in these settings. Empowerment, however, was relevant or meaningful mainly only to staff. These three concepts and questions proved useful initial parameters through which to engage with themes participants themselves evoked (Hammersley 1998: 16). A focus on play, learning and empowerment, both in terms of what these concepts meant to participants and the ways in which playworkers interacted with children in relation to them, facilitated exploration of contextual 'values, goals, organisation and practice' (Petrie 1994: 7). Part of what this revealed was that empowerment was largely a professional term articulating intersecting values and goals, with complex implications on the ground. This realisation is reflected in the change of order of the words from the beginning of the thesis, with empowerment moving from first to last in the list - play, informal learning and empowerment. These changes and the focus on values and goals also revealed complex meanings attached to children and their childhoods in these settings.

Influenced by debates emergent from the new social studies of childhood, thinking about childhood as a social construct enabled exploration of how the different participant groups construed children and childhood and how these meanings shaped their practices and expectations. Drawing from the three groups – playworkers, parents and children - was a way of shaping the ethnography; as was looking beyond their perspectives to investigate relationships between their different opinions and interests. Exploring the views of children was an endeavour to recognise and represent them as active in the construction of meaning in these settings (Alldred 2000: 150). The juxtaposition of these various perspectives proved fruitful and formative to the understandings explored. Furthermore, the differences between the site locations allowed for investigation of how policies and procedures, needs and requirements were being implemented and responded to differently in the same Borough. These contrasts further enabled enquiry into physical space being not just a question of location, but also socially constructed in ways that provide for different types of relationship with

explicit and implicit codes of behaviour and expectation (Barker and Weller 2003: 209).

Assessment of the Methodology

As explored in chapter four, this ethnographic research espouses the position that there is no direct unmediated knowledge of the world. According to this approach, meaning is generated through language (Saussure 1972) and discourses (Foucault 1980). Language and meaning are constituted within culture and simultaneously constitutive of culture (Marcus and Fischer 1986); truth is ever in process, and culturally and temporally dependent (Derrida 1968; Kuhn 1970). Meaning resides in the 'arbitrary closures' through which we make sense of ourselves and the social world around us (Hall 1997).

Words and actions both interact with and reflect the meanings generated in particular socio-cultural contexts. Thus people can be understood as creative beings and social actors constrained but not determined by social structures (Carspecken 1996). Constituted through a dynamic interaction between culturally and historically located discourses and individual responses, the meanings people attribute to their lives can be understood as an expression of personal, social, cultural and historical phenomena (Silverman 2001).

From this position, this research has sought to generate understandings and to recognise them as 'partial, specific and local' (Watson 2000: 67) while also offering some broader contextualisation. Within these, I sought to understand some of the patterns of relationship (Hammersley 1998: 11) of interpretation and meaning construction in the two after school settings. Close attention to what participants said and did over time, and triangulation of interview, observational and documentary data sought to scrutinise, connect and understand those interpretations and constructions and the plausibility of the analyses, and to locate them usefully in their broader social, historical and political contexts.

With the broad guidance of James *et al.*'s transitional models introduced in chapter two, this research has made efforts to balance the systemic insights of the 'social construction' model through contextualising my findings within the broader social, economic and political contexts discussed in this chapter, without failing to recognise the nuance of lived experience. I have also, to greater or lesser degrees of satisfaction (as discussed below), sought to understand children's own insights, influenced by the 'minority' model, without secluding their experiences to another 'world'. One of the strengths of ethnography is that it enables localised and particular data generation which can then be broadened out with more generalised relevance. Although in this study I have not sought to broaden my findings out to the degrees that the 'socially structured' model, like the work of Qvortrup, does.

To do this the fieldwork data was generated over the three terms of the academic year 2007 to 2008. As discussed in chapter four, the research design broadly corresponded to Carspecken's (1996) five stage critical ethnography approach. Term one involved the first familiarisation stage of the participant observation; influenced by Geertz (1973), Carspecken describes this as building the thick description of the primary record. This was followed by stage two – preliminary reconstructive analysis – which involved re-reading of the fieldnotes and exploring some early responses to them during the Christmas holiday. At this time I began to draft chapter five, in which the reader is introduced to the sites. Term two, like Carspecken's stage three, intended to engage in dialogical data generation and involved more purposeful participant observation on the basis of the preliminary coding of the fieldnotes. At the end of this term and during term three, in addition to participant observation I conducted the interviews. After the fieldwork was complete I began the analysis and writing proper. It was during these later stages that I really began to explore the patterns of relationships, interpretations and meaning constructions I set out to understand.

The small scale, ethnographic nature of this project has enabled close attention to particular policy frameworks and what people said and did in two after school provisions in the same Borough over the course of an academic year. An inductive approach has endeavoured to develop thematic frameworks during

rather than prior to the research (Carspecken 1996; Mason 2002; Woods 1996). This approach provided multifaceted responses to the research questions and raised further issues. Conducting the fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, analysis and writing up were not without their limitations and challenges however.

The initial first term wide net approach to the participant observation proved useful to familiarisation in the settings and, while filtered through my evolving interests, provided some space for what was relevant to the participants to surface. But, particularly in the early stages, I did not know what to look at and what to describe in the fieldnotes. Although this is characteristic of how I chose to use this method at this stage and was anticipated, in practice at times it was unclear and time consuming. Struck by the impossibility of noting everything, I made notes while still at the sites, immediately after leaving or a bit of both. Writing in as precise detail as I could, as soon after the event as possible, I tried to minimise the influence of my interpretations. In an effort to separate the two, I explored my responses in a research diary. In term two I honed my attentions in more focussed participant observation. Ultimately, this effort to describe in detail despite not being quite sure what I was doing and remaining open to the unexpected did contribute to revealing unanticipated patterns.

In the interests of rigour, for my future research, it may be useful to conduct participant observation alongside another researcher, perhaps with a different professional background, to compare our experiences and interpretations. I might also plan to split the fieldwork in two. This would enable time away from the 'field' in which to reflect and relieve fieldwork overload and fatigue. In practice, though not part of the research design, on occasion I did withdraw for these reasons.

During the primary research playworkers operated as key informants. Our lengthy semi-structured interviews and conversations throughout the fieldwork produced the most in-depth participant accounts. Our amicable professional acquaintance for some years before the research inevitably contributed to this. Also, as a playworker, staff described me as an 'insider', as someone who would

understand. It is also inevitable that they wanted to represent their professional selves and therefore made time to talk with me. In our interviews and conversations, as with the parents and children, I did little of the talking; I asked what perhaps appeared to be naïve questions and sometimes returned to points for further clarification as a means of encouraging greater explanatory depth (Kvale 1996; Walcott 1994). Some of the playworkers found this a bit odd because, on the basis of our former professional relationship, they thought I knew the answers to some of the questions I asked. After reasserting that I wanted to know what they thought, they generally continued in greater depth.

With few exceptions, my interviews and interactions with parents were briefer than those with playworkers. Parents generally arrived, collected their children, tended to any matters arising and left in some haste. As I was sensitive to this, our impromptu conversations were shaped by what they brought up and infrequently by my more pointed questions. Though they knew I was conducting research, unlike with the staff, much probing during these informal chats seemed to stilt the conversation and therefore did not seem comfortable. On reflection, the spontaneous nature of our interactions proved useful, giving insights into their views and concerns.

Conducting the interviews after some months of fieldwork meant that the interviewees and I had mostly already established a relationship. They knew I had been volunteering at the sites for some time and we could discuss their children individually or return to points we had already broached. With our confidentiality agreements clear, I consider these as strengths as they gave depth and breadth to our interactions. But some of the interviews, particularly the early ones or those with parents with whom I felt less at ease, were sometimes more formulaic than exploratory. I found it hard at times to move the conversations with some parents and children beyond quite short answers. Despite this, sometimes as a result of my greater comfort or confidence and sometimes as a result of interviewees making time to talk, the interviews developed in their fluidity and detail over time.

While it is compelling to think that the participants speak for themselves in this thesis, many things impacted on this. Often due to circumstances beyond my control, such as participants' availability or willingness to talk, the quality of the data collected were not uniform across the groups. Although I made detailed notes during or straight after my visits and transcribed the interviews soon after conducting them, I did not analyse them until the fieldwork was complete. The gaps in the data therefore became apparent only after the fieldwork was finished and I developed a better idea of what the analysis required. For example, I was interested in the playworkers jobs as a point of convergence and intersection of many agendas and values and also spent the most time with them. In hindsight it would have been useful and interesting to talk in greater depth with more children and parents. On reflection, therefore, perhaps conducting the interviews earlier in the fieldwork would enable more initial analysis and gaps in the data could have been filled by going back to the participants.

It is also necessary to point out that those participants who were more articulate, had more to say or gave more time are 'heard' more here (Back 2004). In addition, despite my ideals of exploring the children's views thoroughly, some generational bias in my attitude to their capabilities to express themselves may have featured in the data collection. My playwork philosophy told me I did not want to interfere with their play time, but perhaps this masked a failure to find ways into their worlds. As a result, there is perhaps an over representation, for example, of children who were particularly willing or were talking to me because they wanted to complain. I have tried to counter balance this by showing that those same and other children had a variety of experiences and by also representing the views of those who said less.

It has been argued that practitioner research, conducted from an 'insider' viewpoint, can generate very different relations between researcher and researched, enabling unique opportunities for understanding and development (Brettell 1993). My backgrounds in playwork and growing up in the Borough meant that while some familiarity with the settings helped, there was an intrinsic connection between what I was investigating and being influenced by those contexts. Indeed, the research focus evolved in large part out of my professional

interests and belief in the positive contribution playwork can make; values that are inevitably present throughout the thesis. Despite inductive endeavours which gave rise to the key themes, the study occurred and was filtered through my developing perspectives (Silverman 2005; Mason 2002).

During the fieldwork, analysis and writing of the chapters, becoming more aware of my views and value judgements allowed me to reflect on and discuss them, and to focus instead on the relationships between what participants said and did within the particular policy and practice guidelines. Throughout the fieldwork this was pertinent as my position required balancing positive, trusting relationships with participants while sustaining enough distance to allow for observation and data recording. I found this challenging, especially since I already had professional relationships with many of the staff and at times I observed practices that as a playworker I felt critical of.

My research diary and ongoing reading provided space to assess these responses and rejuvenate adequate 'bringing home [of] the strategy of defamiliarisation' (Hastrup 1993: 148) and 'distanciation' (Jackson 1987). As the research progressed, I saw my values and views as a professional and researcher evolve more clearly and critically. Ultimately being a researcher and a professional in these settings proved valuable as the combination of privileged access as an 'insider' and my analytic 'distanciation' as a researcher meant that my views became an amalgamation of these perspectives. In addition, ongoing discussion of the fieldwork, analysis and writing stages, plus having informed readers read early drafts, have been very useful to questioning and clarifying my responses and interpretations.

The initial research focus, methodology and research questions have generated particular sorts of data. This has determined the analysis and therefore the argument it has been possible to formulate. In line with the ontological and epistemological positions outlined in the methodology chapter, the themes discussed in the four findings chapters emerged deductively and inductively from the evolving research focus, the influence of the literature and what people said and did over time. This was a circular, ongoing and testing process (Mason 2002:

154). The fieldwork, analysis and writing up of the thesis required making sense of, exploring and explaining what I observed, sensed, was told, and what I thought as a playworker, individual and PhD researcher. This process resembled what Walcott (1994: 349) describes as 'successive approximations' through which the processes of writing, returning to the data and analysis and further reflection enabled accounts to become increasingly complex and better contextualised.

In terms of the consistent and accurate analysis of the data, rigorous efforts have been made from a number of angles to ensure the descriptive and interpretive statements made are solidly grounded in the evidence. The data have been read, coded and categorised according to different requirements of the evolving research focus. For example, to answer the research questions, to examine emergent themes and to scrutinise broader underpinning values and agendas. In addition to discussion of the analysis approach in chapter four, throughout the findings chapters supporting evidence has been provided for the reader to assess the sources of claims made. This is at times lengthy and in some places minimal analysis is given to allow the voices of participants to take precedence and to balance other areas where analysis is provided in depth. Where alternative interpretations or conflictual or ambiguous views emerged, these have also been offered.

In the interests of reliability and validity, the playwork staff were given copies of their interview transcripts. The intention was to assess whether the transcripts accurately captured their views, but none returned comments. Other participants were given the same offer but did not wish to read their transcripts. The future presentation to the playworkers of a summary report of the findings, and the opportunity to discuss these, also aims to further hone the analytical accounts. Clearly, however, agreement with accounts confirms concurrence and similar interpretation rather than intrinsic validity, truth or accuracy (Hammersley 1998: 60). Comparison of data from the interview transcripts, fieldnotes and relevant documents intended to limit inaccuracy, make more rounded assessments of my interpretive claims and 'significantly enhance the quality of the findings' (Fetterman 1998: 103).

I have organised and presented the analysis with progressive levels of interpretation. This has been an endeavour to make an argument that moves beyond ethnography as description to use the data to interpret complex childhood terrains. The first three findings chapters are organised to respond quite directly to the initial research questions – locating basic patterns, perspectives and practices. By contrast, this and the previous chapter offer higher levels of inference. This organisation of the chapters, written with a degree of chronology, reflects my initial entry to the sites as described in chapter five, through to my more developed thinking in chapter eight and the following discussion here. As Fetterman suggests, establishing preliminary patterns made other, more meaningful patterns apparent (*ibid.*: 97).

Notwithstanding this, the analyses offered are provisional and tentative (O'Reilly 2005). These interpretations are necessarily predicated on the particular social and historical contexts in which the research was conducted, the research questions and the influence of the literature on my perspectives at this time. Particularly in a Borough and city as diverse as London, there are many other factors that impact on the research territory which are beyond the scope of this study – such as ethnicity, social class, religion, culture, migration, professional and economic status, and female labour participation. As suggested in the following chapter, the interpretations offered here could be usefully developed through comparative study and use of more cross cultural perspectives (Olwig and Gullov 2003; Wells 2009; Wyness 2000). In light of these strengths and limitations, consistent with this thesis' effort to contribute to understandings of a 'social world we are continuously in the process of constructing' (Wolcott 1994: 368), the following sections present key findings and some discussion.

Key Findings and Discussion

Two After School Provisions

Dexters after school provision operated in its own self-contained building. Between 25 and 45 children from three different schools attended daily. The staff

team consisted of four permanent staff, increased to five during the fieldwork. Ferns after school provision operated in two schoolrooms in a large primary school. Between 10 and 20 children from that school attended daily. The team consisted of two permanent staff and one agency staff member.

The sites functioned in broadly similar ways as safe environments in which children were supervised and contained while their parents were elsewhere. Both sites gave the children a healthy snack and provided access to physical and creative play, computers, board and construction games, art materials, and indoor and outdoor play spaces. A key physical difference between them that impacted on the children's experiences was that Ferns was in two rooms in a primary school, was much smaller than Dexters' dedicated site and access to outdoor play was restricted.

At Dexters the team met each evening to discuss their teamwork approaches, events of the day and individual children, in line with endeavours to facilitate children's play within the policy boundaries observed at both sites. At Ferns the staff did not meet to discuss their approaches with the children other than once per term for supervision meetings.

Despite their similarities, and being run by the same local authority with the same rules and regulations, findings from the semi-structured interviews, fieldwork conversations and observations indicated practical and conceptual ambiguities, tensions, contradictions and differences in approaches and service delivery in the two provisions.

Perceptions of After School Provision and Playworkers
Playworker's perceptions of their jobs echoed their views of the difficulties or opportunities facing the children. When describing the purposes of the after school provisions, beyond being safe and fun places, playworkers contextualised their efforts against challenges in the children's lives more broadly, and in terms of skills they considered valuable for the children to develop. They listed challenges including changes in children's lives and play patterns generally, and the effects of economic strains and the impacts of local environments on the

families they worked with specifically. In terms of how they saw the children benefiting from their after school time, like the parents, playworkers' views combined both the value of play for its immediate gratification and enjoyment, and how things learned at these times may contribute to the children more broadly in the present and the future.

The children saw playworkers as 'fun' and 'kind' people who kept them safe, helped with problems or accidents, and supported and kept children's behaviour within acceptable boundaries. At the same time, some children noted wanting to be left alone sometimes, to play and interact with other children without adults. Some playworkers recognised and appreciated this and tried to be there without being there.

The children's sense of the playworkers being there to help and to set boundaries around right and wrong showed their recognition that interactions at the after school settings had a moral and social dimension. While the older Dexters children appeared confident that the adults were there to support them, the older children at Ferns felt that help and support were not qualities all playworkers demonstrated. Conversations with older children at Ferns revealed a frustration that some of the older children at Dexters also expressed on occasion. They felt the younger children were better catered for and treated more gently than the older children and that this was frustrating, even unfair at times. Playworkers considered these older children old enough to know better than the younger children and therefore deserving of reprimand, penalty and the expectation that they set good examples; but staff also had to respect the children's parents views that they were not old enough to be allowed to be unsupervised. These differences in treatment indicate, at least in part, adult notions that younger children require more guidance and older children can manage greater autonomy (Petrie 1994: 39). These same children also complained about not being allowed sufficient independence. Their frustrations also highlight a moral ambiguity in perceptions of children in which they are expected to behave correctly but are also mistrusted (Alanen and Mayall 2001: 6). These children felt treated as 'just kids' whose views were subordinated as a result.

Children saw after school provision as a place to play, to be with friends and to enjoy themselves. Some knew that their parents required them to attend due to work commitments, and that this sometimes meant being there despite not particularly wanting to. This resonates with other research findings in this area (Petrie *et al.* 2000: 197). That some of the children disliked aspects of their experiences yet still attended reflects this necessity, and perhaps also the limited options available to their parents.

Children were told by playworkers that after school provision was about their choices, for their playtime and enjoyment. Therefore they saw the provisions and the playworkers as there for them. In examples where children did not feel that their agendas were afforded the precedence they believed appropriate, they expressed frustration. Some children felt over protected or that they were not able to play as they wished. Indeed, particularly the older children at Ferns expressed feeling restricted in the 'construction and determination of their own social lives' while at after school club (James and Prout 1997: 30). Examples where children felt restricted by playworkers suggested excessive pursuit of health and safety practices, but also ambiguities and contradictions in the messages children received. The freedoms they wanted were not wild. They wanted to have fun, to be trusted, and on occasion for the younger and older children to be treated more equally. For some children, particularly at Ferns, what they seemed to be learning was that playing in the streets was too dangerous, but also that play in the after school provision was restricted and that they were not trusted to play without constant supervision.

While attendance at after school provision was not always out of choice, for parents and children this was a significant time. Safety and some free time to play were top priorities. Parents expected playworkers to be fun, welcoming, playful and approachable, but also to be guides, safe-guarders and enforcers of appropriate behaviour. They considered these parameters to enable the children to benefit from enjoying themselves and socialising with other children. The findings also revealed tensions within these expectations however.

In line with the Borough's equal opportunities policy and the Early Years Foundation Stage principle of 'the unique child' (DCSF 2008a), a number of playworkers described a key part of their job as ensuring that any child could access any activity. This linked with agendas to help build the children's confidence through making them feel valued and recognised, and responding to each child's needs and interests. Playworkers often expressed these principles as inherent to children experiencing the after school provision as *their* place to play, learn and explore.

But there were tensions between supervising the children and reluctance to interrupt their play and providing a place where children could try things without a necessary outcome and make mistakes, though the scope for this was within limits. The rules and regulations defining the parameters of the children's behaviour, and the playworker's responsibilities in relation to these, were seen as ensuring that risks and detrimental outcomes were avoided, controlled or cushioned. In practice, particular playworkers appeared to restrict children's behaviour in favour of maintaining perhaps excessive control over the after school environment.

Play, Informal Learning and Empowerment
Play, learning and empowerment derived much of their meaning from larger social discourses about children and childhoods current in these settings. Playworkers' and parents' ideas about these concepts reflected: policy and guideline perspectives on the purposes and aims of the after school provisions for the children of working parents; and local knowledge and experience expressed through dominant ideas about children's needs and childhood ideals. For some, ideas about child-led play and children's rights were also informed by these perspectives. These were largely couched in developmental views of childhood as a transient state during which particular skills and capacities are acquired (Qvortrup *et al.* 2009).

Playworkers and parents commonly identified key personal as well as social criteria in their conceptions of what the after school contexts provided for the children; such as building confidence, dealing with emotions and interacting with

different children. Play was valued as a range of activities children chose and enjoyed individually and together. Parents and playworkers also appreciated the various types of learning play enabled. The play and activities available to the children in the after school provisions were prescribed, however, by policy and practice guidelines designed to ensure their safety and to support their learning and development. Prioritising particular sorts of outcomes meant that children's play and learning, while described as valuable, were highly controlled, even in the most apparently 'democratic' interactions (Petrie *et al*. 2000: 83).

Children's priorities centred on their play and social enjoyment. Although they did not reference learning specifically, they listed many activities and enthusiasms that involved the learning of skills that parents and playworkers had described. Parents and children valued that playworkers were not teachers, but that they did provide guidance, as well as support with schoolwork if the children wished. While play and learning were important to parents, the concept of empowerment was much less so. Many at both sites, however, did consider important factors that playworkers described as empowering; such as involving children in choice-making, helping to develop their confidence, and expanding their social opportunities with other children. Empowerment was a more meaningful concept for the parents interviewed at Dexters, which they linked to their children's confidence and choice-making.

By contrast, the playworkers and the managers said empowering the children was central to their endeavours, the thread that connected the play and learning experiences they provided. They largely described play, informal learning and empowerment as generated by the interconnected processes of children's self-directed, and playworker-facilitated, activities. With few exceptions, staff believed that through play children learn, and what and how they learn empowers them. They described their relations with the children as important in this process.

They also described valuing the child's experience as central in the play environment and promoted empowering the children by respecting them, listening to their views and facilitating their choices and self-direction. Their

descriptions of empowerment outlined more equitable power relations between staff and children in which staff facilitated children's choices and encouraged them to question, thus helping to develop their confidence. Some described such relations as beneficial alternatives to more common adult/child relations.

Chapter two noted that unlike other contexts in which empowerment terminology has been and is used – amongst feminists and civil rights activists for example – ideas about empowering children have not been instigated from within the social group. Instead, adults advocate children's empowerment in different contexts in different ways. This raises questions about how the concept is used and, linked with play and learning agendas in after school provisions, what these definitions indicate about the sorts of experiences adults intend for children; and furthermore, what these say about notions of what children and childhoods are and should be.

The research found strong connections between playworkers' attitudes to children's play, learning and empowerment, and their descriptions of their own priorities and responsibilities. But many influences impacted on their values and objectives, and how successful they were, or felt they could be, in delivering the objectives they and guiding policies outlined. There were the impacts, at Ferns, of the after school provision taking place on school premises and the requirement to abide by school regulations, even during play. There were also the tensions generated by space restrictions, staffing levels, teamwork, skills and competencies. Personal views and experiences, media stories, professional discourses and policy frameworks all impacted on views and practices in relation to the children and staff/child relationships. With similarities and differences between the sites, all of these factors influenced the degrees to which staff appeared to prioritise adult or child agendas.

In this time of social change, in which stable employment is no longer guaranteed for most people, focus on the learning of transferable social and personal skills such as working with others, contending with competition, and building self-confidence and self-esteem, link to governmental concerns about social cohesion and the employability and citizenship responsibilities of

tomorrow's adults (Lee 2001). The research found these concerns reflected in the provisions. Play and behaviour were approved of and promoted as self-directed and empowering when they were seen to reflect or stimulate instrumental objectives or socially acceptable behaviour (Lester and Russell 2008: 2).

Informal learning and empowerment through play and playwork in these settings were considered desirable to the extent that they conformed to, and occurred within, the limitations of policy objectives and definitions, and parental approval. This suggests that when play, informal learning and empowerment are linked to outcomes, those outcomes are necessarily determined by the values of the institutions defining them. Therefore, though masquerading as mechanisms for each child's individual development and fulfilment, play, informal learning and empowerment were imbued with strategic endeavours to steer children's experiences in the direction of becoming the 'right' sorts of future citizens. The value and purpose of empowering children appeared geared towards ensuring they grew into adults with 'improved capacity to participate' (Kearns 2006: 1), well integrated into society as self-reliant, good and happy citizens; thus addressing and combating a number of social concerns.

Children and Childhoods

Despite sincere and overt commitment to the interests of children, the after school provision pressures, tensions, challenges and contradictions (both internal and external) were such that playworkers often found it difficult to deliver a coherent practice consistent with the ideals they described. Key to this difficulty were underlying and ambiguous ideas about children and their best interests. The ways in which staff facilitated and controlled the children, protected and supported them, said much about the convergence of complex agendas in these contexts.

Control versus Facilitation, Perceptions of the Environment and Risk

Since the early days of junk playgrounds, the importance of children's choice, risk, self-direction and flexibility have long been recognised (Allen 1968; Brown 2003; Cranwell 2003; Nicholson 1971). It is no surprise, with these formative influences, that choice and the playworker serving as facilitator continue to have

an important place in playworkers' principles. Furthermore, since the early 1990s, with the growing impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children's rights have been connected with their opportunities to make choices and to play.

This focus on the value of children's rights and choices is couched, however, in 'unprecedented' contemporary levels of intervention and control of children's lives (Petrie and Moss 2002). Relationships between children and their social environments have become a focus of academic and social policy debates about children and their childhoods (Cook 2009). The world outside the home is depicted as a place of danger, where children need protection and supervision (Beck 2006; Gill 2007). Simultaneously, the world inside the home and other contexts in which children find themselves have also been recognised as potentially abusive, even lethal (Laming 2009). These trends contribute to children and their play being increasingly confined to supervised and regulated contexts (Lester and Russell 2008). In these after school contexts, children mostly attended at their parents' behest. While there, their choices were largely limited to which activities or playmates to play with. Adults dictated the patterns of the afternoons. The children ate their snacks at a certain time; they were not to go out of the gates or be unsupervised; they were not to fight, swear or bully each other.

These are of course not negatives. Perhaps, being largely unable to play outdoors unsupervised, time in these settings provided children with their right to play and socialise with other children. These settings did give children degrees of autonomy. However, this was subject to how staff treated them. Parents', playworkers' and children's focus on children's agency in these settings suggested that children's usual experience was one of limited control over decisions affecting them. Indeed, some of the adult/child relations observed at the sites stood out as more similar to authoritarian relations than to playwork ideals.

Ideas about children's choices and self-direction connected to concerns and regulations geared towards avoiding risk. Playworkers' accounts of their

priorities and responsibilities ranked maintenance of the children's safety, avoidance of risk, and ensuring the children behaved appropriately most highly. This focus was reflected in their job descriptions; a common theme being the importance of policy regulations and minimal emphasis on underlying playwork approaches and concerns (Conway 2008). That these playworkers did not have to hold specific playwork qualifications, and playwork training at the levels required (NVQ two and three) teaches very little, if any, playwork theory, suggests that concerns for the regulation of children's experiences take precedence. This overshadows the principles of child-led play protected from adult agendas that underpin playwork theory and practice, to which risk and experimentation are fundamental.

Concerns to avoid risk relegated children's own experiences, play agendas and risk-managing capabilities. Research indicates that children want, indeed may need to take risks. Some argue this is an evolutionary imperative (Hughes 2001). Neuroscience evidence suggests that children seek out uncertainty in their play as a vital means of cognitive development. Therefore such play may be more fundamental to brain development than to direct acquisition of 'skills' through play (Burghardt 2005; Lester and Russell 2008). Experiencing the emotions available through play behaviour the brain develops physically in ways that it may not otherwise. Thus, whether for brain development, purely for the benefits of enjoyment, or as a means of acquiring particular experiences and skills, play is of great value. If children are over-protected, in addition to missing the multi-layered social, physical and creative opportunities play provides, it has been argued that they may suffer consequences later in life (Chilton 2003: 115).

Taking risks is vital and playworkers need to allow children to take risks, to play in their own ways (Hughes 1996; Gill 2007). While its importance in children's play is increasingly recognised (Gill 2007; Play England 2009) and the playworkers participating in this study recognised its necessity, they also described health and safety regulations as sometimes excessively restrictive of the children's play. This echoes other research findings in which playworkers commonly cited health and safety policies as hindering child led play (Cole, Maegusuku-Hewett, Trew and Cole 2006).

In his autobiographical account of his life and works, eminent play theorist Sutton-Smith reveals that when he published his first book in New Zealand in the 1950s, his mother was upset at the inclusion of the rude tales, jokes and pranks that he and other children engaged in through their play. Her complaint stemmed from not understanding why he would behave in such ways when 'you and your brother were such nice boys!' (2008: 121). Sutton-Smith ponders the possibility that his life's work of pursuing the meaning and function of play was to show his mother that those apparently offensive or deviant activities did not suggest that he and his brother were not 'nice boys', but that they were children doing what children should be doing - exploring through their play in ways that vitally enhance human development (*ibid.*: 121).

To take further this equation of children doing apparently deviant things with being themselves deviant, in Gill's *No Fear: growing up in a risk averse society* he argues that the:

> activities and experiences that previous generations enjoyed without a second thought have been labelled as troubling and dangerous, while the adults who still permit them are branded as irresponsible … society appears to have become unable to cope with any adverse outcomes whatsoever… [such judgements] fit a pattern of growing adult intervention to minimise risk at the expense of childhood experiences. Adult anxieties typically focus on children's vulnerability, but they can also portray children as villains, again recasting normal childhood experiences as something more sinister. (2007: 10-11)

These examples capture an over sensitivity to, even demonising of children's activities that many specialists deem normal and healthy, given their occurrence within play experiences. Such '… moral panics affect adult regulation of children's play when it is seen as offending, morally corrupt or harmful' (Miere 2008: 10) because of fears of what such behaviour may imply in terms of the child's psyche. This in itself is perhaps part of the risk that was feared within these after school settings. Indeed, playworkers in this current study noted that

showing oneself to be a responsible, professional adult in these settings required control of children's play and behaviour.

Although there are of course limits to how much children can be left to their own devices, playwork evolved out of a desire to provide environments in which children could play without some of the restrictive adult impacts characteristic of particularly urban childhoods. Having designated 'play' spaces, however, can carry the implication that children are in their correct location there and out of place otherwise (Olwig and Gullov 2003). Thus this allocation of play space can also constitute a 'subtle "informal institutional" control over children's use of space' and involvement in neighbourhood activities (McKendrick 2009: 246).

To locate these issues more broadly, concerns about controlling children and avoiding risk are contextualised by high levels of social fear of those posing threats - paedophiles, murderers, child murderers. In Britain where there is considerable suspicion and fear of deviance of these sorts, worries about children are couched in these terms. In Mediterranean countries by contrast, research suggests that where such fears are less prevalent and therefore there are fewer surface apprehensions about public playgrounds and public space in general, constructions of children and their play are not framed so prominently by these same concerns (Miere 2008).

Despite the currency of ideas about facilitating children's choices, anything beyond rudimentary agency was incompatible in these contexts. The specificity of the types of choices available was a component of control, and the competition between children's experiences and agendas and those of adults reflected limited trust in the children's processes or agency. Thus the declared promotion of children's choices, with choice masquerading as facilitation of agency, masked the restricted options pervading these settings (for children and adults) and the requirement of passive acceptance. The viewpoints and tensions highlighted by the outspoken older children at Ferns indicate, however, the mistake of seeing

> children as passive recipients of pre-constituted and unquestionable
> knowledge transmitted by teachers [or in this case playworkers] with a

279

privileged voice of authority and a privileged relation to the meaning of knowledge. (Dahlberg 2009: 230)

While the differences between the sites reflected their physical and social contexts and practicalities, they also reflected differing perceptions of the children and their childhoods, with significant ramifications for staff views of what was required of them. Tensions between control and facilitation revealed different conceptions of the children: as incomplete persons or adult 'becomings'; or as rights bearers, individuals or 'beings'; but also as agents or victims of their experiences. These ideas about the children and how they could participate in society and be active in their own lives shaped staff views, suggesting an underpinning requirement of the right sorts of control or facilitation for children to become particular kinds of adults.

Agents or Victims, 'Beings' and 'Becomings'
While some parents and staff, and certainly the children, saw the value of play in immediate gratification; ideas of play, learning and empowerment in these settings often framed them as valuable because of their contributions to children's futures. These instrumental ideas reflect notions of the children as 'beings' – as rights bearers and individuals now – and as 'becomings' – incomplete persons and learners being trained for adult futures.

These distinctions were reflected in the reified differences between children and adults manifest in playworker's practices. Perceptions of children as 'beings' and agents saw the value of risk and advocated its facilitation; while more overtly instrumental ideas about the children's experiences, and the role of staff in relation to these, conveyed underlying ideas of children as human 'becomings' and products of their experiences, and the natural authority of adults over children as a social responsibility (James and James 2004).

The goal of a particular socialisation was evident in these contexts; the desire for the children to be or to become individuals who were confident, knew right from wrong, thought well of themselves and others, and handled their emotions responsibly. The guidance playworkers provided and the social opportunities the

after school provisions generated were seen as contributing to these. These individualistic perspectives are linked to contemporary ideas about society, social inclusion, academic achievement and being morally upstanding. This reflects ways in which British society has shifted over recent decades away from post war ideas about collectivity, towards notions of individualism and a devaluing of 'community' (Newman 2001).

Alongside these quite individualistic perceptions of helping the children to develop in desirable ways there was also attention to the importance of children interacting and playing against a backdrop of limited opportunities for this elsewhere (Gill 2007). On a few occasions, ideas about the children as 'beings' and 'becomings', agents and victims, were contextualised by concerns about children's isolation because they rarely played with other children outside of school time. The after school provisions served as a substitute. This sensitivity to the value of children playing together is clear in Sutton-Smith's argument that solitary play is not as good for equipping children to contend with complex societies as more interactive play (2008: 104-109).

The research found a close relationship between the material and social environments, attitudes to those environments, expectations and practices with the children and the children's responses, particularly noticeable in the older children. At Dexters, where the environment, building and locale were perceived as places of opportunity, choice and possibility; playworkers and parents were more likely to see and treat the children as having and deserving opportunities and choices. Playworkers' practice was more child-led and thus resonated more closely with the playwork principles.

At Ferns, where playworkers saw the environment, building and locale as inadequate, restrictive, even threatening; they perceived and in ways treated the children as victims, with likely life courses dictated by the negative effects of their impoverished environment. Here playworkers' professional practice was more adult-led and therefore, despite overt aspirations, showed little resonance with playwork principles. As a consequence, the children's apparently impoverished experiences outside the after school provision were often reiterated

inside. Staff concerns with control in an environment that they themselves experienced as overbearing compromised the children's opportunities and control of their play.

The power of the social structure to determine lives was reflected in the development from child to adult state, which at Ferns had intimations of life continuing to be oppressive; with the children seen as victims of their impoverished circumstances. At Dexters, the shift from childhood to adulthood was redolent of arming the children for challenging but creatable lives; with the children seen as agents in the creation of their futures. These contrasts between the sites, and related degrees to which staff tried to control or facilitate the children, indicate staff members' differing expectations of the children's long-term choices and life prospects. Playworkers at both sites endeavoured to balance their hopes and expectations for the children with what they considered to be realistic assessments of the choices available to them.

Thus the research found that participants saw the children's possibilities and likely life courses as intertwined with and sometimes determined by the material and social realities of their environments – families, schools and local communities (Cook 2001; McKendrick 2009). In this way, the study revealed that meanings and practices in these settings were to a considerable degree constituted within their localised cultures.

Conclusion

In response to the title question of 'in whose interests?' on the ground experiences of the considerable national and international pressure for those working with children to be seen as 'child-friendly', to support their rights, and to appear to work towards their best interests have been evinced here. However, amidst these principles, other agendas and practicalities are being worked through. The values of play, informal learning and empowering children and young people have become ways to talk about, generate and sustain particular models of citizenship (Lister 2005). They have come to imply conformity to

these, with strategic interventions in children's experiences valued for assisting them to grow into socially responsible adults. As explored, this is quite different from playwork understandings of the value of play and the meaning of empowering children.

Far from being fixed concepts whose meanings are consistent over time and context, ideas about play, learning, empowerment, children and childhood refer to fundamentally dynamic social processes that this thesis has explored and whose operations it has demonstrated. The findings presented here suggest the utility of examining these largely taken for granted constructs.

Perhaps one of the key questions in examining these contrasting notions is how they potentially re-define adult/child relationships in these settings. Is the adult the one in control, knowing better, teaching children to become adults like them? Or is it the responsibility of adults to support children in finding their own ways? Is the dynamic tension between these approaches necessary and valuable to the ebb and flow of social continuity and change (James and James 2004)? Perhaps more importantly, questions are raised about whose interests are really served by the ways in which children and childhood are currently conceptualised and provided for in these settings specifically, and in Britain more broadly.

Despite their rhetoric, structures of social, economic and political decision-making are simultaneously eroding, limiting and controlling children's rights and freedoms (Bascombe 2008; Stein 1997). Arguably, it is no accident that the rise of the term empowerment in relation to children appears synonymously with times of increasing awareness of complex losses of human choice, voice, individual and collective power (Beck 2006; Gill 2007). The ideas of children and childhoods in these two after school settings exemplified on the ground experiences of James *et al.*'s assertion that we are faced with an 'era marked by both a sustained assault on children and a concern for children' (1998: 3).

It would be simplistic to suggest that ostensibly clear objectives and tensions created a dichotomous relationship in practice. Tensions generated out of seemingly incommensurable notions of a child and childhood underpinned them.

Playworkers and parents adhered to and conflated these tensions and differing notions. Playworkers and the after school settings manifested the contradictory notions and practices they did despite 'newer' ideas about children's rights because more well established constructions of children and childhoods discussed in chapter two remain redolent in these settings.

Clearly, this is a situation in which children and childhoods receive and provide mixed messages. On one hand, a child is encouraged to exercise their moral and legal rights; to express themselves and be respected; to make choices and, to certain degrees, to govern their own conduct. But they are also chastised and distrusted, routinely subject to control by various forms of surveillance and monitoring in public and in private. Children indeed occupy a morally ambivalent location (Alanen and Mayall 2001; Wyness 2000).

Dominant childhood discourses provide the contexts in which play, learning and empowerment are rationalised (Freeman 1997; Russell 2008). While children's play, learning and empowerment were broadly advocated across the two sites, their definitions and desired outcomes were often located within narrow prescriptions linked to the sorts of future adults considered desirable for these children to grow into. This thesis has investigated tensions within these terms and concepts by exploring the notions and practices relating to children and their childhoods in two after school settings.

Against the backdrop of the proven immediate and formative significance of children's play, however, these narrowly prescribed definitions and practices require re-examination. It is necessary to challenge tendencies to mask broader social agendas under the remit of the value of children's freely chosen play and to ask about play's true values. This may be particularly important as the types of play children beneficially engage in may not conform to the commodified confines within which acceptable forms of play are currently defined (Sutton-Smith 2008). In accordance with evidence of the diversities, facets and fractures (Jenks *et al.* 1998: 31) inherent both in individual children's childhoods and childhood as a social category (Qvortrup 2009; Wyness 2000), this re-evaluation would also demand recognition of the narrowly defined notions of what

childhood is and should be that impact so significantly in these settings and more broadly.

Chapter Ten

Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

This thesis, *Children's empowerment, play and informal learning in two after school provisions*, has investigated the values and agendas underpinning endeavours to ensure that the time children spend in State provided after school settings is both secure and worthwhile. The views of playworkers, parents and children have been probed. The thesis has explored playwork and policy approaches and shown that they often presuppose different fundamental principles about children and their playtime. It has examined some of the discernible complexities and contradictions inherent in these ideas and the possibilities for operationalising them. An ethnographic examination has proved useful for unearthing these. Through this approach the thesis has explored ideas about children and childhoods which negotiate and synthesise historical, cultural and political conjunctions and discourses in new and complex ways.

This research found that core ambivalences manifest in these settings were linked to the contemporary trajectories through which children are simultaneously gaining and losing rights (Moss and Petrie 2002; Beck 2006) because these rights and processes only become manifest through adults' historically and socially determined views of what is desirable, and their resultant provisions for children. The research found the relationships between how playworkers described their values and professional responsibilities and priorities, and how they carried out their day to day practices, to be multi-layered and complex. How the different participants spoke and acted demonstrated intricate webs of agendas, values and expectations (Petrie 1994; 2000). It has been argued that these contradictions emerge out of 'a series of discourses that are both of modernity *and* informed by earlier traditions of thought' (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998: 9). This brief

concluding chapter summarises the thesis, its contributions and suggests further areas for developments.

Initial Research Questions, Methods and Developments

This research began as an exploration of ideas about empowerment, play and informal learning in two local authority after school provisions in a London borough. The initial research questions asked what relationships between empowerment, play and informal learning were occurring in these settings; how playworkers, parents and children perceived these; and how current policies and professional viewpoints relating to these concepts underpinned activities in the two settings. Between October 2007 and July 2008 this study employed an ethnographic fieldwork approach and semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis to explore these issues. Participant observation was conducted at the two after school provisions twice weekly throughout the academic year.

The selection of two sites with similar Ofsted ratings, run by the same local authority yet located in quite different catchment areas and types of building enabled exploration of the research questions in similar yet distinct institutional contexts. While the research did not originally aim to compare and contrast the sites, as the study and analysis evolved it became clear that there were more differences between them than just their locations and settings. That the scope of the study was limited to two environments in which children did not necessarily choose to be, were not free to come and go as they wished, and where their attendance was paid for, proved pertinent to the original research questions and the evolution of the project's focus.

Four playwork staff, two managers, one deputy manager, one agency staff member, 12 parents and 34 children were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews with playworkers and parents asked similar questions relating to the role of the after school projects and playwork staff, and their views about empowerment, play and learning in these contexts. The semi-structured interview

questions with the children asked about their experiences of the after school clubs and their thoughts about playworkers (see Appendix six). Ideas about empowerment, play and informal learning proved important in these settings, although the concept of empowerment was largely important only for the staff. Relevant policy documents were studied for information on the official agendas and values informing the settings. As the research progressed, underpinning social constructions of children and childhood also emerged as relevant. The project evolved to include an investigation of these and their impacts on the settings.

Consistent with an ethnographic approach, throughout the fieldwork and analysis I endeavoured to maintain or return periodically to a holistic perspective to anchor the fieldnotes and transcripts within the meaningful characteristics of the complexity, nuance and dynamism of real life. This endeavour is exemplified through the contextualisation of tightly focussed data analyses within some of the broader organisational processes, agendas and discourses impacting on the settings. Through deductive and inductive analyses, shaped by the theoretical framework discussed in chapter four, and thinking about children and childhood as dynamic social constructions as examined in chapter two, I have explored the concepts used by participants to understand what these said about them, but also located their views and practices within broader analytic frameworks.

The small scale, ethnographic nature of this project has provided strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. These have been examined in chapters four and nine.

Thesis Structure and Summary

This thesis has explored ideas about empowerment, play and informal learning, and children and their childhoods, as intimately interlinked with complex contemporary social, political and economic issues. The first half of the thesis outlined the conceptual parameters for the study. Defining these imposed the constraints on this research. The concepts, questions and methods outlined in

those early chapters have been used to examine these settings. Other conceptual parameters, research questions, and/or methodological approaches would reveal further areas of worthwhile focus or ways of looking at what was occurring.

Following the introduction, chapter two began with an exploration of dominant social constructions of the child and childhood as a distinct and preparatory life stage, as they have evolved in Britain particularly since the social changes of the late 19th century. The chapter introduced the new social studies of childhood and some possible ways of understanding contemporary social constructions of children and childhood. Against this backdrop, children's rights and empowerment were discussed. The chapter raised questions about earlier empowerment struggles and their differences and parallels with contemporary uses of the term in relation to children.

Chapter three began with an exploration of themes originating in the early junk playgrounds. These provide the foundations for playwork practice and theory development and remain central to contemporary playwork principles and approaches; such as children controlling their play (Hughes 1996), the importance of rich play environments (Brown 2003) and adult avoidance of interference in children's play (Sturrock and Else 1998). The eight nationally recognised playwork principles outlining the profession's key underpinnings were discussed (PPSG 2005). Taking a broader view of State provisions, the chapter explored after school settings as services for working parents and expectations of what such contexts provide for children. The chapter also explored arguments that contradictions and ambiguities characterise relations between the ideas of the child and childhood embedded in playwork theory and principles and those of the social policies and 'dominant frameworks' impacting on after school settings (Russell 2007).

The methodology discussion in chapter four explored the utility of an ethnographic approach to a study of this sort. It addressed epistemological questions, explained the research design and examined its application.

The second half of the thesis, findings chapters five to eight and the discussion chapter nine, explored concentric layers of meaning, from the close up description of the sites in chapter five to the location of the findings within broader social systems and analytic frameworks in chapter nine.

The analyses presented in the findings chapters were constituted through a triangulation of data sources; a synthesis of material from transcribed semi-structured interviews and reactive or impromptu conversations with playworkers, parents and children over the course of the fieldwork, and from my primary observations and documentary information and analysis. Further to systematic categorisation and cross sectional analysis, the chapters link the data from interview transcripts with my fieldnote observations to identify similarities and disparities in what participants said, what they did and what they said about what they did over time. Participants' views were analysed and presented in the chapters according to their status as parents, children and staff and which site they were from to explore how the different user groups perceived the provisions. This is not to imply homogeneity within these groups, and these differences have been explored.

Chapter six examined staff, parents' and children's perceptions of the purposes and priorities of the after school provisions and playworkers' jobs. Their views revealed dynamic tensions between facilitation and control. On one hand giving children time to themselves away from some of the other structures imposed on them, such as the pressures of school and academic life, the competitiveness around them generally, the stresses of family life, or simply because everyone needs to 'play a little sometimes'. On the other hand, the need to contain and supervise the children. Reasons given for this necessity varied; for example, because leaving them at home or to play in the streets seemed dangerous or irresponsible, because ensuring some structure and purpose to their afternoons helped give them better chances for the future, or because giving them something else to do or keeping them away from their homes for a little while might give some much needed respite and new opportunities.

Chapter seven presented what play, learning and empowerment meant for the staff, parents and children in these contexts. Playworkers largely considered play, informal learning and empowerment to be intimately interwoven processes of children's self-directed and playworker-facilitated activity. While play and learning were important to parents, notions of empowerment were much less so. Many parents, however, did consider important the factors playworkers described as empowering; such as involving children in certain sorts of choices and building their self-esteem. Thus, playworkers and parents commonly identified key social and personal criteria in their conceptions of play, learning and empowerment in these after school contexts. For all but one of the playworkers, empowerment was an important concept that encapsulated fundamental objectives they aimed to provide for the children they worked with. The research found a strong link, in theory, between requirements to empower children, and playworker's understandings of their roles. In practice, these relationships proved complex.

Ideas about empowerment became popular during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly for the Civil Rights and feminist movements, and for decolonisation and anti-imperialism struggles in the Third World. In the context of the historical denial of rights that each of these movements addressed, empowerment referred to personal, social and political processes through which disenfranchised groups sought to address the psychological, social and political effects of institutionalised inequalities, and to have a say in changing their immediate and structural surroundings. Thus, empowerment was conceived as a structural, collective and individual issue linked with ideas about participation, education and collaborative learning, self-esteem, self-determination, critical social and political consciousness, and social and political change. Claims were made for the human right to meet one's own needs and to live in contexts that allowed the choices and autonomy necessary for individuals and groups to do so. For these radical movements, change for individuals and groups was canvassed and demanded on the basis of moral pressure that all people had rights and needs and deserved the autonomy to meet them.

Unlike those earlier empowerment struggles, ideas about children's empowerment have not been instigated from within the social group of children. As a result, empowerment in the after school settings was considered desirable to the extent that it conformed to, and occurred within, the limitations of policy objectives and definitions and parental approval. Though masquerading as mechanisms for each child's individual development and fulfilment, play, informal learning and empowerment were imbued with strategic endeavours to steer children's experiences in the direction of becoming the 'right' sorts of future citizens. The value and purpose of empowering children appeared geared towards ensuring they grew into adults with 'improved capacity to participate' (Kearns 2006: 1), well integrated into society as self-reliant, good and happy citizens; thus addressing and combating a number of social concerns.

Building on the discussions introduced in chapters two and three about social constructions of children and tensions between playwork and policy approaches to them, chapters eight and nine drew on a synthesis of the findings to explore more implicit ideas and discourses in these settings. Locating ambivalent and opposing practices and attitudes current in both settings in chapter eight led on to chapter nine where these perspectives and practices were further located within broader debates about contemporary British society to ask, in whose interests are things as they are?

The findings revealed both practical and conceptual tensions and ambiguities convergent in these contexts. Practical tensions were generated by play and playwork occurring in these particular environments, regulated by specific procedural and outcome orientations. Playworkers were required to provide a professional service, ensure control and supervision through which children were kept safe, procedures were observed, order was maintained and particular developmental experiences were encouraged. But playworkers were also there to facilitate the children's freedom to play and experiment. Issues such as the layout of the premises and staffing capacities impacted on both of these and meant that play and behaviour were often restricted.

These practicalities stemmed from conceptual ambivalences permeating the two provisions. Both the restrictions and the possibilities felt by playworkers and children emerged from differing notions of the children and their childhoods. Tensions between control and facilitation exemplified those between older and newer notions of the child as a solely dependent part of a family or as a rights bearer themselves, and accompanying shifts in ideas about what children are and how they should be able to participate in society and be active in their own lives.

This study has sought to interrogate the chosen territory to locate some key issues and raise questions that open rather than close this enquiry. The limited scope of the study and the particular perspectives of the literature chosen to help interpretation have unearthed various viewpoints on what was significant in these contexts. The outcomes of this work therefore constitute a location of a number of pertinent convergent factors and processes.

Exploring the evolving literature and honing my focus and interpretations have been essential to engaging with the intellectual and substantive terrains explored here. While the authors most influential to this process at this time have provided particular insights, the terrain is complex and usefully developed by other focuses and approaches beyond the scope of the current study. For example those of more cross cultural perspectives. With this in mind, and with full acknowledgement of the utility of interdisciplinary perspectives for the broader endeavours beyond the scope of writing a PhD thesis, it is intended that this work contributes to those for whom these are areas of academic, professional and personal interest.

Contributions and Further Directions

Focussing on empowerment, play and informal learning, this research has looked at playwork in its immediate environment and broader socio-cultural contexts. Close ethnographic examination of two local authority after school settings in London has lead to an exploration of the impacts of social constructions of the child and childhoods on playworkers' views and practices in these locations.

This research provides evidence and contributes to understanding how the inter-relationships between different perceptions of the child and childhood, and their impacts on the resources and opportunities provided for children, construct the diversities of experiences found at these after school sites. These experiences, as reflections of particular views, values and agendas are important both in their specificities, and beyond these after school provisions as they highlight and raise questions about contemporary relations between society, the government and children.

In conclusion, this section reviews the ways in which the research fits with and contributes to existing knowledge and some directions for further research to which it points.

Children and Childhood

With a focus on empowerment, play and learning, this thesis has begun to explore some of the relationships between 'shifting' (Freeman 1997) ideas about children and childhoods and their interface with broad national agendas and discourses about the type of society Britain is and should be. It has drawn from the insightful works of particularly James, Jenks, Prout, Mayall, Petrie and Qvortrup to generate a contribution to understandings of children's lives, and of provisions for them as reflections of particular ideas about this society at this historical juncture. Thus this research contributes to the study of the pluralities of childhoods.

One of the key aspects of the new social studies of childhood has been the location of the child at the centre of the research endeavour. A number of the theorists informing this current study argue for the importance of appreciating children as active in the construction of their childhoods and the equally vital importance of including them in our efforts to understand the impact of adults on their experiences. This study has found examples in which children expressed feeling free and comfortable, and also feeling restricted and frustrated at the after school provisions. Amidst local, national and international rhetoric about listening to the voices of children, this endeavour can usefully and credibly be

moved forward in our practices in the interests of understanding and improving their experiences.

The differences found at the two sites show that despite commonalities such as the structural exclusion of children from society in terms of political engagement and lack of control over many aspects of their lives, it is important to recognise childhood both as a structured social category and childhoods as sites of fractured and facetted experiences (Goddard *et al.* 2005; James and James 2004; Qvortrup *et al.* 2009). This thesis has explored children as a socially and politically located group and childhoods as dynamic and context-specific sets of experience. The research has indeed shown that much important and useful information is lost if childhood is reified at the expense of recognition and scrutiny of its internal fractures and diversities. Against the backdrop of concerns for child-centered approaches, early intervention and broad social cohesion, this research fits with and aims to contribute to this important area of ongoing investigation.

In relation to their play, chapter three suggested that due to the instrumental ideas about play current across many of the policies impacting on these after school provisions, questions are raised about the restrictions and requirements being put on play and the impact of these on children. The findings from this research suggest that, subject to greater or lesser degrees of restriction, the children were learning that only certain sorts of play and behavior were acceptable. This is a direct impact of play occurring in such regulated contexts and has ramifications for the sorts of developmental experiences children are being allowed to have. Further investigation is called for.

Playworkers

In addition to contributing to the growing data on the views of children and their parents on the out of school services they access, this thesis also aims to contribute to knowledge and understanding of some of the complex issues playworkers contend with in their day to day work. Others have argued that the playwork profession needs to develop its data gathering, evaluation and use of that evidence to inform and support the valuable work it does (Jeffrey 2008).

This body of knowledge is growing and this study aims to contribute to that endeavour.

Although a reflective approach is intended to be central to playwork practice (PPSG 2005), this research has shown that this does not always happen in real world settings. In the case of the current research, for workers to gain and sustain trust in themselves and the impacts they had, critical professional self reflection was important to informing their judgements and practices. In instances where they were reflective and used their team for support in this, their practice more closely resembled both the ideals they described and those of the playwork principles. Were they to develop this, their goals and attainments could grow further. Further research into team relations in such settings and support of professional awareness of the impacts of reified ideas about the child and childhood could provide important contributions. Such endeavours are particularly pertinent as the competing pressures identified in this research must be understood and the balances and imbalances regularly reviewed.

In addition, in demonstrating the impact of attitudes to children and their childhoods as well as environmental factors on playwork practice, this study suggests that further research investigating the influence of contextual constructions of the child, childhood and their play could usefully be combined with analysis of the impact of playworkers' own childhood play experiences on the types of play and playwork relations they understand and seek to support.

Replication of this study on a broader scale in different locations across the country, in open and closed access playwork settings, with staff qualified in playwork and other approaches to working with children at play, would also prove useful to further examining and broadening the conclusions drawn in this thesis.

Scrutiny of the impacts of different cultural perspectives on these settings has been beyond the scope of what was possible in this current study. These, however, are important. Given the diverse and multicultural contexts in which playwork often occurs and the globally interconnected world in which we all

live, assessment of existing and evolving cross cultural perspectives on children and childhood, and their play and learning, in dialogue with those discussed here would provide productive and necessary developments. This would fruitfully be accompanied by further investigation of parents' views of their own and their children's childhoods, and how these ideas influence or might contribute to the work that playworkers carry out in various play contexts.

After School Provisions

In relation to play and environments, a body of research exists that explores relations between play and culture (Casey 2002; Huzinga 1971; Opies 1977, Sutton Smith 1997; 2008); play and therapy (Axline 1964, Hughes 2003); play and the need for play rangers to keep play environments safe (Learner 2008) and play and some of the impacts of social changes (Gill 2007). While some analyses of children's out of school experiences take a social constructionist perspective (Moss and Petrie 2002), little exists that endeavours to contextually understand how playworkers' notions of the child and childhood inform and shape their work. This research fits into and contributes to this mosaic of knowledge.

The social constructions of the child and childhood in the playwork settings where this research was conducted were characterised by a convergence of ideas about the child as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (child with rights), Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum and Extended Schools agenda (child as a directed learner through play), playwork theory (child as self-directed learner through play) and the child and childhood in dominant and local discourse (vulnerable, unpredictable, potentially errant, 'becoming' adult). The intersection of these prescriptions and their impacts in these after school settings revealed these as contested constructions for the staff and the children in different ways in the two settings.

Furthermore, the findings presented reveal a fundamental relationship between playworkers' perceptions of the children, the local economic and social environments and their expectations and practices as playworkers. Thus, empowerment, play and informal learning, as processes and outcomes, as requirements and playwork ideals, had different meanings and were implemented

297

differently in the two after school contexts. The distinctions and relations between children and playworkers at the two sites showed themselves to be context specific and inconsistent (Wyness 2000; Lee 2001). Questions are raised about whose notions of these concepts hold most weight in these settings and how clear it is or should be to staff that different, even antagonistic, ideas compete for precedence in these settings and beyond.

Through the application of ideas about social constructions of the child and childhood, the research found that while childhood is rooted in biological realities, it is not uniform, even within these institutionally similar contexts (Goddard *et al.* 2005; Qvortrup *et al.* 2009). Two key points have emerged. Firstly, the child and childhood are 'relational' concepts (Aries 1962) or 'conceptions' (Wyness *ibid.*) fluid in their meanings yet of constant social significance. Secondly, these social constructions can only be adequately understood within their social, economic and political contexts (Hendrick 1997a).

This thesis has shown that given their social and historical contexts, it is no surprise that conflicting agendas met amidst the colourful walls, messy paint pots and stickle-brick cars of these sites. Government departments have long had vested interests in such settings, amongst them concerns about protecting children, the employment of women and prevention of juvenile crime. Rather than universal provisions, after school play and care have become increasingly targeted at children considered to be 'at risk' or 'in need' (Petrie 1994; Jeffs and Smith 2005). These varied agendas have brought a range of views of the child into the frame.

Constructions of the child and childhood operative in these settings continue to reflect and sustain these ideas. Current discourses compound the view that children are both at risk and in need (Gill 2007). Furthermore, as discussed in chapter three, current provision of after school care, by supporting increased adult employment, is also intended to combat what is now described as social exclusion (Young 1999). In recent years, ideas about children as consumers and citizens have also gained currency. As payment is made for these provisions,

children and their parents are quite literally customers. Although some of the government rhetoric and policies have changed and continue to change, the settings studied here emerge from this chequered history with a spectrum of inconsistent requirements and approaches to the child.

On practical levels, these after school settings constituted socially and politically important locations because they enabled working and some non-working parents to know that their children were safe and looked after; and they gave children reliable spaces in which to play and provided social contexts they may not have experienced otherwise. But, as contexts in which various ideas, values and agendas converged, they also generated ambiguous or contradictory messages and practices. Despite ever more uniform and far reaching policies and regulations, incoherencies continue (Petrie 2009) and were reflected in these settings. This thesis has examined some of the discernible complexities and contradictions inherent in these ideas and attempts to implement them, and their impacts on the children. Further work is needed.

Policy

This study began with questions about the types of experiences and outcomes after school provisions aimed to provide for children. This evolved with questions about why particular experiences and outcomes were intended and what these said about what children are considered to need and benefit from at this particular time. It became clear that such questions stem from how children are conceptualised and what purposes their childhoods are considered to serve.

This thesis has looked at how children and their childhoods are intricately intertwined and historically located within social, political and economic systems. Ideas about their empowerment, play and learning are no exception. These very structures of social, economic and political decision-making play significant roles in how childhood is socially constructed and what kinds of experiences and agency are sought and made possible, for whom, and in what ways. These are shaped by particular models of society and the types of adults it is deemed desirable for children to become. The social constructions observed throughout this research therefore reflected particular themes about society

currently debated more broadly, amongst them the moral responsibilities of adults towards children and what it means to be a good citizen (Lee 2001; Newman 2001).

Amidst much debate about children's rights, chapter two introduced the idea that a genuinely child-centred empowerment endeavour would require a reassessment of existing power structures and discourses. This would involve critically evaluating whether current agendas aimed at improving conditions for children are challenging or in fact reinforcing the social inequalities they face. Such an analysis would question what empowerment means as a goal for today's children and young people, and would scrutinise commitment to their gaining in social and political power. It would raise questions about where, how and to what degrees individual and collective agency are recognised and encouraged or whether only certain sorts of agency, and therefore empowerment, are supported and to what ends. A similar point can be made about the types of play and learning children are encouraged to engage in. This thesis aims to contribute to this discussion.

In light of the contrasts between playwork principles of free play and the more strategic, outcome orientated agendas of policy guidelines, how after school provisions are run by schools and extended services (DfES 2005c) will also have implications for notions of the child, childhood and children's play in years to come. Furthermore, at this particular time of national government change, the shifts are likely to be seismic and it is very hard to predict the implications for children and their childhoods. At such a point of centrally directed social change, greater clarity about the aims of education at all levels is particularly critical.

It has been argued elsewhere that those who shape and make policy should glean insights from qualitative research into the real impacts of those policies on the institutions and people they seek to influence. This would involve policy-makers looking beyond strategies for desired measurable outcomes to the realities of policy execution and the variables shaping their implementation. In the interests of ongoing well-grounded understanding and improvement, evidence, policy and

practice would ideally be mutually informing. This research aims to contribute to narrowing these gaps.

To conclude, childhood is constantly changing, and changing in diverse contexts where notional starting points are also different. To understand these requires that we look at ourselves, as professionals and individuals, to scrutinise the complexities of how our participation is predicated by our histories. This endeavour requires a holistic approach to understand different disciplinary vantage points on the issues of childhood, children, our current times and the futures that collectively concern and engage us. To critically explore such themes, far from morally neutral, is to engage with fundamental questions about society, value systems, politics and economics. In this engagement rest pressing concerns and human and scholarly compulsions and responsibilities. Perhaps as our knowledge about the lives of children, along with our understandings of the infinitely interconnected nature of all social life, develop and expand, we can use that knowledge to enhance our theory and practice.

Clearly, paternalistic control over children's use of space and time serves the interests of some of the children, some of the time. The arguments presented here do not suggest otherwise. Whether for the intrinsic value and right of enjoyment, or for more essential developmental functions, however, children also need and have a right to play that they control. Where the boundaries between paternalistic control and children's control of their play are blurred, even falsely presented as free from these constraints, concerns arise about the present and future ramifications. This thesis contributes to understandings of the impacts of such relationships and the balances and imbalances that occur.

In the beginning and in the end, this thesis engages with and seeks to contribute to specific and larger endeavours to understand, enhance, extend and enrich children's fundamental need and right to play.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Middlesex University Ethics Approval Form

Middlesex University School Health and Social Sciences
Social Sciences Academic Group
Application for research ethics approval

The purpose of this form is to help staff and students in the Social Sciences Academic Group in their pursuit of ethical research methodologies and procedures.

For staff members, the Social Sciences Academic Group Ethics Subcommittee (SSAGES) will review all proposals/forms. Ethics approval will normally be obtained from SSAGES before seeking any external ethics approval required. However, if ethics approval has already been obtained from a recognised research ethics committee external to Middlesex University, this will be taken into account. No fieldwork should begin until all necessary ethics approvals have been obtained.

For research students (B.Phil, M.Phil/PhD), the ethics form is submitted with other documents required for registration and is then passed to the Social Sciences Academic Group Ethics Subcommittee (SSAGES) for review. Ethics approval should be obtained from SSAGES before seeking any external ethics approval required. No fieldwork should begin until such approval has been obtained and ratified by the Research Degrees Committee. Any proposed change to the methodology approved by SSAGES must be discussed with your supervisors and may necessitate a fresh application for ethics approval.

Please complete the form giving as much detail as possible. If a question is not applicable, please indicate by marking N/A. Research students should discuss and complete the form with their supervisors.

Taught Masters and Undergraduate students should discuss and complete this form (or the version in your dissertation / proposition module handbook) with your supervisor(s). Ethics applications are usually dealt with at programme level. **Your signed ethics form must be submitted bound into one copy of your work.**

You must submit with this application:
a) A summary of the methodology to be used in the research
b) Draft of any interview schedule or questionnaire you propose to use or outline of the topics to be covered
c) Any information sheets and/or consent forms for participants.

1. Personal details

a) Name of principal investigator: Hannah Henry Smith

b) Address: 16 Fallsbrook Road, London SW16 6DT

c) Phone Number: 07976 505 346

d) Email address: hs495@mdx.ac.uk

e) Name(s) of staff and/or other collaborators (if applicable): N/A

f) For students only: Student number: M00058710

2a. For research students:

a) Year of study: First

b) Mode of study: Full-time

c) Names of supervisors: Dr. L. Bell

d) Date of enrolment: November 2005

e) Date of registration: 11th December 2006

f) Date of transfer from MPhil to PhD: To be agreed

2b. For taught masters (PG) and undergraduate (UG) students: N/A

a) Programme

b) Module number

c) Module submission date   (dd/mm/yy)

d) Module leader (PG) or Tutor (UG)

e) Name(s) of supervisor(s)

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3.   Details of proposed study:

a) Title of study:

Children's 'empowerment': play and informal education in out of school clubs in a west London borough

b) Please give a brief description of the nature of the study (50-100 words), including details of data collection procedures:

This research aims to:
- Ethnographically explore children's activity and learning in out-of-school clubs in one west London borough in order to discern notions of children's 'empowerment'
- Explore policies on out of school play and informal education for primary school-aged children and how they are being implemented in two case studies run by a local authority in one west London borough
- To problematise contemporary approaches to policy requirements to 'empower' children

This research will generate case studies of two local authority out-of-school projects in one west London borough. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation over a 12-month period will address the research questions by enabling participants to articulate their views and experiences, and by observing individual and collective processes over time. Furthermore, this research will use play as a tool to look at the subject of play work, play settings and the experiences of those involved. Data collection techniques will include games and activities designed and implemented

alongside play workers to enable children of different ages, stages and abilities to explore and express their views in child-friendly ways.

c) Will primary data be collected?   Yes

---

4. Details of the participants in the study:

a) From what population will your participants be drawn?

Play Workers, parents and children attending out-of-school provisions

b) How many participants will be involved in your study? Please provide an estimate.

Up to 100

c) Are children aged 18 or under to be involved?   Yes

If yes, what ages will your participants be?

Adults and children aged between 5-12 years old

Please note: If you are conducting research with children (under the age of 18) or vulnerable adults you __must__ undergo a police check. This takes 6 or more weeks.

---

5. Access and consent:

a) Briefly describe how access will be gained to the participants.

Access will be gained through signed senior management of out of school provisions, signed staff team consent, signed parent/carer consent, verbal children's consent.

b) Will informed consent be sought from any gatekeepers? (e.g. in care homes: prisons; schools)   Yes

If so, what gatekeepers?

Out of school provisions' Senior management, education department senior management and out of school centre management

Will you obtain written consent from the gatekeepers?   Yes

c) Will informed consent be obtained directly from all participants   Yes

If yes, will you obtain written consent?   Yes

d) Will payment or an incentive be offered to participants? No

If yes, please state amount of payment or type of incentive N/A

e) Length of session for an individual participant (if more than one session, please give number and nature of sessions and amount of time for each):

Interviews will last no longer than one hour

f) In what locations will data gathering take place? Out of School clubs in west London

g) Will you inform your participants of their right to withdraw from the research?   Yes

h) Will you guarantee confidentiality of information to your participants?   Yes

i) Will you guarantee anonymity to your participants?   Yes

---

6. Safety and legal issues

a) Will you be alone with a participant?   Yes

b) Will you be alone with a group of participants?   Yes

c) What safety issues does your methodology raise for you and for your participants?

In the interests of my own and the children's safety, research will not be conducted with individual children, but with groups of children; when with children, the researcher will always accompanied by a play worker/management.

d) What legal issues does your methodology raise for you and for your participants?

None

---

7. Codes of ethics

a) Have you read and understood at least one of the following:

The British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice? (available at www.britsoc.org.uk)

The Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology by the British Society of Criminology? (available at http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/bsc/council/CODEETH.HTM)

The Political Studies Association ethics guidelines (available at: www.psa.ac.uk)

The Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (available at: `
http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethics.htm)   YES

Another set of ethics guidelines appropriate to your research topic (Please specify)

b) Are there any ethical issues which concern you about this particular piece of research?   Yes
If yes, please specify and explain how you intend to deal with each issue:

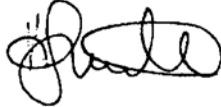Although I am qualified to play management level and hold a current police check (and have done for the past six years), it is good practice not to be left alone with a child. Therefore during the research this would be an important part of the agreement with all involved.
It is also always a possibility when working with children that they may disclose something that would need to be reported to play management. This would also be

an important aspect of the agreement with all involved. In addition to ethical guidelines, the researcher's conduct would be governed by the policies and procedures set out by the establishment within which the research is taking place.

I believe the information given above to be true. The methodology outlined above will be the methodology used in my research. I will notify my supervisor(s) (students) Chair of the Social Sciences Academic Group Ethics Subcommittee (staff) of any proposed changes to this methodology.

Signature of Investigator: _(signature)_   Date: 14.12.06

Signature of Supervisor(s): L . A Bell   Date: 14.12.06

Please note: Student applications must be approved by ALL supervisors and ALL supervisors must sign the application form.
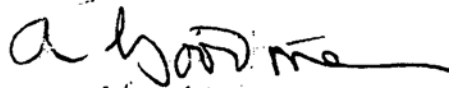
Undergraduate and postgraduate students being supervised across subject areas (e.g. CRM and PSY) MUST obtain the agreement of BOTH supervisors.

Staff / Research students / other student applications referred to Social Sciences Academic Group Ethics Subcommittee (SSAGES)

Passed by Social Sciences Academic Group Ethics Subcommittee

Name of 1st SSAGES representative (please print):

Signature: _(signature)_   Date: 14.12.06

Name of 2nd SSAGES representative (please print):

Signature: Date:

Appendix 2 - Research Proposal Form for Borough

Title of Research Study(this must be the title you use when making contact with service users/participants):
Play and informal education in out of school clubs in a London borough

Background:
This research is an investigation into approaches to play in these settings in relation to children's broad educational and personal/social development. This research asks, therefore, what is the interaction between notions of play and informal education in these contexts.

Proposed Start Date: May 2007	
Estimated Completion Date: April 2008	

Lead Researcher/ Project Leader	
Name: Hannah H. Smith	Tel: 07976 505 346
Organisation: Middlesex University	Fax:
Job Title: PhD Researcher	Email: h.smith@mdx.ac.uk
Address: 16 Fallsbrook Road, London SW16 6DT	
Please give indication of lead researcher's experience and/or relevant qualifications: NVQ 3 in Play Management MSc in Social Science Research Methods	

Internal Research Sponsor (e.g. This will usually be a Service Manager/Line manager/Supervisor who has agreed to the research project)	
Name:	Tel:
Organisation:	Fax:
Job Title:	Email:
Address:	

Research Commissioner/Funder (Organisation funding or responsible for commissioning this research)	
Contact Person: Dr Linda Bell	**Tel**:020 8411 5476
Organisation: Middlesex University	**Fax**:
Job Title: Principal Lecturer and M Phil/PhD Director of Studies	**Email: L.Bell@mdx.ac.uk**
Address: Middlesex University, Archway campus, Highgate Hill, London N19 3UA	

Methodology and Techniques

Please describe the recruitment process (how participants are going to be selected and approached):
Agreed choice of after school club locations; agreement made with senior management, site management, staff

What research methods will you use in collecting your data? E.g. Telephone survey, interview, questionnaire, case file audit, focus group, internet survey, video/audio interviews etc.
On-site observation of staff/children interactions, interviews with staff and parents/carers, and children's participation activities

Exactly what participant/user information is required?

Are the participants known to the researcher?
It is intended that they will be, yes

If Yes, in what capacity?
The researcher intends to conduct weekly observations over a one-year period, during which time it is intended that the researcher will establish relations with the participants. During this time, it is also intended that the researcher will conduct interviews with staff and parents/carers and activities with children as a child-friendly method of finding out their opinions.

How will you select your sample and what is your proposed sample size?
Two sites to participate in the research over a one year period.

Will participants receive payment for participating?   No

If yes, please provide details:

Where will the research be conducted?
At two agreed after school sites.

Will participants be clearly and fully informed of the purpose of the research?   Yes

How are you planning to analyse/interrogate research data?
Data will be analysed by the researcher.

Who will be Involved

Please provide details of the participants who will be involved (e.g. Children in need, Adults with Disabilities, older people, Voluntary sector organisations):
Site management, staff, parents/carers and children – participation in the research is voluntary and will involve being observed, participating in interviews and children being involved in activities which aim to find out some of their opinions about after school club.

Will stakeholders be involved in all stages of the study? (i.e. Research that is carried out with or by people who use services, rather than research that simply gathers information from participants) Please give details

What geographical areas will be covered as part of your research?(e.g. Name of area, wards, borough wide, super output areas, LAP areas):
To be agreed

Ethics

How will you obtain explicit informed consent from your target group?(e.g. Signed consent form) Signed consent will be sought from participating staff and parents. Verbal consent will be sought from children in the presence of a parent/carer.

Is there any potential risk of harm to participants or yourself? No	
If so (a) what are the risks and (b) What do you intend to do to reduce them?	
Where appropriate, will information be made available to participants in alternative formats?(Braille, audio tape, video tape, other languages). If this is appropriate and useful to enable inclusivity.	
Will participants be informed of your complaints procedures? Yes If No please explain why	
Where applicable, have all research staff been CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checked? If yes, please attach evidence. Yes	
How will the study comply with equal opportunities regulation/policy (Race, Gender, Disability, Age, Faith, Sexual orientation)? Yes	
Does the project involve four or more local authorities? No	
If so, has the study received ADSS approval (Association of Directors of Social Services)? Yes ☐ No ☐ (provide details if Yes)	
Has the research received approval from other bodies e.g. Doh, dfes, University, College etc? Yes If yes, please attach the evidence : Middlesex university registration panel	
Has the research been subjected to any peer review/approval? Yes If yes, please give details below: As above and Middlesex university research degrees committee	
In the event of a compensation claim resulting from the research, are you insured?(give details below): All research approved by Middlesex university is insured by the university	
Storage/Confidentiality	
Will information gathered be made anonymous or pseudonymous? Yes How will the information be stored (locked cabinets, password protected files, encrypted recordings)? Locked off-site storage	
What are the arrangements for protecting the confidentiality of information about the participants (Encrypted files, password protected computers, anonymised, shredding)? Anonymised data entry techniques	
Have they researcher(s) signed a confidentiality agreement? (please attach a copy)	
Please describe how and where information will be held by the Researchers: Data will be kept off site in locked storage; anonymising data entry practices upheld	
Will the data be used for any purposes other than the study? No	
Once the project is completed, when and how will the original service user information, and any derived information not necessary for publication be destroyed? Shredded	
How would you ensure compliance with the data protection legislation (See guidance)?	
Who will own the data and reports? The researcher	

Dissemination and Feedback

In what form will your findings be presented (i.e. Reports, audio tape, video tape, journal article, book)? Summary report presented to local authority and research participants PhD thesis submitted to Middlesex university Publication through articles or similar also possible
Will you feedback findings to participants and stakeholders in appropriate formats (give details e.g. Braille, audio tape, video tape, other languages).   Yes
Are you intending to publish your findings?(Reports intended for publication must be approved by the panel prior to publication) If the research produces information desirable to publishers, this would be considered.
Where will the research be published and what information will the published research include? Any published findings would be fully anonymous unless otherwise agreed by implicated parties.
Overall, how will the data be used to inform and improve services? It is hoped that the research process and final summary report will support the department's development of its services through being more informed about its users and the experiences and opinions of its staff.

Supporting Documents

Please provide copies of the following documents (where appropriate) and any other accompanying information for panel approval.			
Consent Form	☐	Approvals from other approving bodies	☐
Questionnaires/Surveys	☐	ADSS Approval / Application	☐
Interview Questions	☐	Researcher's confidentiality agreement	☐
Topic list	☐	Previous research	☐
Participant Information sheet	☐	Research Timetable	☐
CRB Checks	☐	Profile of lead researcher	☐
Please provide any other relevant information and documents (specify below):			

Appendix 3 – Borough research approval letter

Borough information removed for purpose of anonymity

Dr L Bell
Principal Lecturer & M Phil/ PhD director of Studies   30.5.07
Middlesex University School of Health and Social Sciences,
Holborn Union Building F Block,
10 Highgate Hill
London N19 5NF

Dear Dr Bell

Re: request for Hannah Smith to undertake research with XX Play Service for her PhD.

I am writing to confirm the approval arrangements, for the research placement that Hannah has requested to undertake within the play service.

I understand that Hannah is researching play and informal education in out of school clubs in a London Borough, this is for her academic benefit, with possible publications for producing the research to the academic community, this will be anonymous and follow the Universities confidentiality procedures.

We have agreed that the arrangement can be terminated by either party at any stage throughout the period of the research, that the role will be voluntary and supernumerary to the staffing at the project. We have agreed to the following proposal:-

Hannah will attend two play projects to undertake her research, which will include observations, conducting interviews and may be sound recorded all with written consent of the parent/carers and participation in activities, over a period of one year.

Prior to the research Hannah will meet with the project staff to explain the research and how she will be working with them, the children and the parents/carers.

Information will be provided to parents/carers and staff outlining the project providing information about the researcher, University, the expected process and outcomes of the research.

Hannah must have a current CRB before undertaking work in the projects and a volunteers induction and agreement will be undertaken by the project managers at the start of the research project.

Permission forms will be given to obtain consent from parents/carers to take part in the research through short opinion gathering activities and interviews involving, children, Parents and staff.

All interviews and information will remain anonymous and confidential with the researcher and her supervisor. Statistical information will be shared in relation to the service for example, fees concessions and attendance.

Yours sincerely
XX Borough information removed for purpose of anonymity

XX Borough information removed for purpose of anonymity

Appendix 4 – Information sheet for participants

After-School Research Project 2007

XX [Borough information removed for purpose of anonymity] are supporting an independent yearlong project researching after-school settings. The Economic and Social Research Council (E.S.R.C.) are funding the research, which has been approved by Middlesex University. Hannah is a former member of the XX Play team and is carrying out the project.

Q. What is the research about?
A. The research is interested in staff, parents/carers, and children's experiences of after school clubs.

Q. Why is this research being done?
A. This independent project is being done as an additional way for staff and users to have their say. This is not an evaluation. It is intended that projects like this one can positively effect how decisions about after school clubs are made nationally and locally.

Q. What will the research involve?
A. For the coming year Hannah will be on site one or two afternoons per week to join in with activities and for informal conversations with staff, parents/carers, and children about what you think about your after school club.

Q. What will be the outcome?
A. The two main outcomes will be a long essay for Middlesex University/E.S.R.C. and a report for those involved in the project and XX Play Department. Key findings will also be made available to policy makers and other professionals working in this field.

Q. What would participation involve for myself or the child/ren?
A. In terms of **staff** participation, this will include involving Hannah in the after school club schedule, and talking from time to time about topics related to your work such as why you chose to be a play worker and what you see as the purpose of your role. For **children**, participation would include talking about after school club, perhaps using their investigation skills to interview other children about their views, and joining in with activities aimed at finding out children's opinions and experiences at after school club. As a **parent/carer**, participation would involve consenting to your children taking part, and if you would like to, talking with Hannah at your convenience about your opinions and feelings about, for example, why you use the after school club, and what you feel your child/ren gain from their time here.

Q. What if I don't want myself or my child/ren involved?
A. This is fine. Participation is completely voluntary.

Q. What about confidentiality?
A. All information collected during the project is confidential. Any information used in the final essay and report will be fully anonymous.

If you would like to discuss anything with me, I will be on-site on Mondays and Thursdays. Or if you would like to email me on **h.smith@mdx.ac.uk**

Appendix 5 – Participant consent form

Dear Parents and Carers,

Re. After School Club Research Project – putting your views across

I would be very grateful to any parents/carers willing to talk to me about why you use the centre and what you want your child/ren to get from their time here. I am particularly interested in your thoughts about play and learning at after school club.

I am doing this independent research for my university course at Middlesex University, with permission from XX [information removed for purpose of anonymity] Council. I have been volunteering at two sites in the borough, getting involved with the daily activities and talking with staff, children and parents about After School club.

At the end of the project I will write a short report for staff, parents/carers and children at the participating sites. Any comments included in this final report will be anonymous.

Would you be interested to put your views across, by phone or in person? I can call you at a convenient time, or we could meet at the After School club, or I am happy to come to wherever might suit you best. If you would like to talk with me or have any questions, please return the information below to a member of staff and I will call you as soon as I receive it.

Many thanks, Hannah

Re. After School Club Research Project – putting your views across

To confirm that your information will be kept confidential, it is a requirement from my university that I ask for signed consent for interviews.

I agree to be interviewed. I have been informed about the research project. I understand that I can withdraw at any time, and that what I say will be kept confidential.

I agree to be tape recorded   Yes   No

I understand that any comments, if reported, will be anonymous.

Signed   Phone Number

Name

Appendix 6 – Semi-structured interview schedule

Interview Questions [Staff and Parents]

- Thank you
- Although you have given your consent, it is standard procedure to say that you don't have to answer any questions if you don't want to.
- Confidentiality
- Tape just for me
- Final report, anonymous quotes consent
- If you do not want me to directly use anything you have said, just let me know.
- Questions before we start?

Questions:

1. [Parents/carers] Why you use the play centre, main aims and most important things about play centre? [Playwork staff] What do you consider to be the main aims and most important things about play centre?

2. How would you describe a playworker's role?

3. Do you think children's play is important? Why?

4. Do you think there is any connection between play and learning?

5. Does "empowerment" mean anything to you? Do you see any link between

empowerment and play centre?

Interview Questions [Children]

1. What you do at play centre?

2. What are your favourite things to do here?

3. Do you get to choose what you to here?

4. Is there anything that you do not like so much and why?

5. What do playworkers do?

Appendix 7 – Further information on staff qualifications and backgrounds

Ferns Staff Team

Name	Age	Relevant qualifications	Nationality/background	Years working with children
Nita	60s	Childcare and Education NVQ Level 3	Indian, lived in Ferns area for over 30 years	30+
Noel	40s	Playwork NVQ Level 2	Black British, grew up in Ferns area	15+
Anisha	40s	N/A	Sri Lankan, lived in England for 20+ years	N/A

Dexters Staff Team

Name	Age	Relevant qualifications	Nationality/background	Years working with children
Margaret	50s	Playwork Management NVQ Level 3	Irish, lived and worked in borough for 40 years	30+
Lewis	40s	Playwork Management NVQ Level 3	White British	20
Marie	60s	Playwork NVQ Level 2	Trinidadian, lived and worked in Dexters area	30+
Steve	30s	Playwork NVQ Level 2	British Singaporean, grew up in Dexters area	10
Rochelle	20s	Children, Care, Learning and Development NVQ Level 3	Black British, grew up in the Dexters area, attended Dexters as a child	7

As the table shows, the staff team at Dexters was more mixed, particularly in terms of age range, than the Ferns team.