

# **Young Children's Participation in a Sure Start Children's Centre**

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## Abstract

Between 2006 and 2010 New Labour launched a network of children's centres as one element in a programme of reform of services for children. Sure Start children's centres were set up as multi-agency settings for children under the age of five and their families. Concomitant with these developments a number of policies converged to give momentum to the notion of children's participation in matters that affect their lives. Political measures included *Every Child Matters* (DES, 2003) and section 3.5 of the Childcare Act (2006) which stated that local authorities must consider the views of children in relation to early childhood services. Consequently, there was and remains an imperative for children's centres to bring children's perspectives to bear upon their policies and practice, and to ensure that children participate in decisions regarding service design, delivery and evaluation (Sure Start, 2005).

Using a methodology that draws upon the traditions of ethnography and participatory action research, this thesis presents an analysis of how the notion of children's participation has been conceptualised, enacted and enhanced in a Phase One children's centre in the North of England across the following services: education and care; family support; child and family health; inclusion and therapy services. Fieldwork was conducted with children, parents and staff of Towersham Park Children's Centre over a twelve month period during 2008-2009 and involved a variety of observational and participatory methods. Previous research about Sure Start predominantly focuses on the effectiveness of programme delivery. However, there is very little research which explores children's participation across a range of children's centre services and includes the perspectives of those who often face barriers to participation, such as babies, preverbal and disabled children and those from ethnic minority and migrant groups. This study addresses these gaps.

Research findings suggest that, to understand what young children's participation means in a children's centre context, we need to pay attention to the different socio-spatial domains, cultural-ethical dilemmas and dominant discursive regimes within which participation is situated. Unmasking these domains, dilemmas and discourses enables practitioners to examine their effects of power in constraining and enhancing children's participation and to construct new ways of thinking and being with children. I conclude by arguing that children's participation is as much a micro-political and ethical process of embodied performance in space, as it is a cognitive, discursive activity of children expressing their views and making decisions. These findings have significant implications both for broadening current conceptualisations of participation to make them more inclusive of young, pre-verbal and disabled children and for informing early childhood multi-professional practice to make it more democratic.

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For Anne Yeats, my mother, and Dominique Brewer, my friend.

'... a little child shall lead them' (Isaiah 11: 6).

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Identifying the Research Focus and Questions**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore young children's participation in a Sure Start children's centre. Children's centres and their predecessors, Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), were a flagship development of the former New Labour Government. The establishment of 3,500 children's centres across every community in England between 2006 and 2010, coupled with an increasing focus in policy upon children's rights to express their views and to participate in decisions that affect them, were central goals of New Labour's drive to reduce social exclusion. One of the requirements for the development and running of children's centres under New Labour was that children should participate in the design, delivery and evaluation of children's centre services (DH, 2004a; Sure Start Unit, 2005; OFSTED, 2008). This commitment has remained under the new Coalition Government.

Children's centres are multi-agency services established with the aim of reducing social exclusion through early intervention in the lives of children under the age of five and their families. They deliver a range of services including family support, health services, integrated early education and childcare, access to information on employment and adult training. Previous research into SSLPs and children's centres focuses predominantly on the impact and effectiveness of programme delivery with little regard for the participation of children using these services. By contrast, this thesis explores what children's participation means and looks like in one particular children's centre in the North of England during the 2008-2009 period.

As a topic of theoretical and empirical inquiry, children's participation is a field 'in search of definition' (Thomas and Percy-Smith 2010, p. 1). This study explores what children's participation means to the children, parents and staff of a Phase One centre. It addresses three main research questions:

- What does children's participation mean in a children's centre context?
- How can children participate further?

- How is children's participation enhanced and constrained by social processes taking place in the children's centre?

These questions inform a cyclical process of inquiry that moves from exploration towards emancipation and explanation (Marshall and Rossman, 2006), and back again. I use the preposition '*towards*' to highlight the basic assumption that any study seeking to explain children's participation can only ever be provisional, partial and perspectival. Thus, whilst I do not claim to offer any definitive answers to the above research questions, this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by seeking to generate contextualised understandings of how young children's participation has been interpreted and enacted in the everyday lives of children attending one particular centre.

A number of scholars suggest that whilst the participation of older children in children's services in England has become increasingly commonplace, this is not yet the case for young children (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Kirby et al., 2003; McNeish and Newman, 2002; Clark et al., 2003; Clark et al., 2005; Pascal and Bertram, 2009; Lansdown, 2010). Indeed, there is very limited published research exploring young children's views and experiences of participation in children's centre services. Similarly, there is scarce research evidence that considers how practitioners working within this specific context, but from different disciplinary backgrounds, conceptualise and encourage children's participation. Of the small amount of research related to young children's participation that has been conducted in SSLPs and children's centres, most has occurred in the field of education and care, neglecting other services such as health, family support and therapeutic services (Winter, 2009). This research aims to address these gaps.

Several authors suggest that one of the reasons for a lack of participatory work with young children is that an emphasis upon their developmental needs, rather than their participatory rights, tends to predominate in much of the work in early years (Lansdown, 2006; Alderson 2001a; Clark et al., 2005). Our youngest children can remain 'silenced' and often excluded from the decisions which shape their lives with the assumption that they are 'too young' to express their views and that caregivers 'know best' and so can speak and act on children's behalf. Similarly, in research in the English speaking world, with a few notable exceptions such as research by Alison Clark, Peter Moss and Priscilla Alderson, participatory projects which seek to access and represent the views of children under five are still rare (Clark et al., 2005; Hogan, 2005; Waller, 2006;

Birbeck and Drummond, 2007; Berthelsen, 2009; Crivello et al., 2009). This may be due in part to the assumption that methodological issues of access and representation are more problematic in research with young children than with older children or adults (Maconochie, 2008). Consequently, most research has been conducted *on* children rather than *with* them and has been largely framed within positivist traditions and theories of developmental psychology and socialisation.

Furthermore, Clark et al.'s (2003) review of consultations and research with young children in England, Denmark and the Netherlands found there were only limited examples in the published literature where the views of young disabled children have been studied. Similarly, the authors found few documented accounts of studies that had focused on listening to young children from ethnic minority groups. Likewise, Pascal and Bertram (2009) argue that young children from migrant families are also unlikely to be heard in research. Since these perspectives deserve greater attention, this thesis focuses on the participation of children under five, including those with impairments and from ethnic minority and migrant groups, across a range of children's centres services.

Finally, this research seeks to make a contribution to knowledge through foregrounding the participation of children's centre practitioners in empirical research and theorising. Lansdown (2006) argues that those working with the youngest of children have, overall, been less proactive in the participation debates and theoretical discussions than practitioners working with older children, although clearly many early years practitioners do promote participatory practices with children. Through designing and conducting participatory action research projects with children and their parents, practitioners participating in this study have sought to address this disparity through their own practice, reflection and theorising.

## **1.2 Outline of the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework informing this research is influenced by the 'new social studies of childhood' (James and Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998) and its emerging poststructural critique (Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Walkerdine, 2009). From this position, childhood is understood to be socially constructed and is viewed as an important life phase in its own right. Children are seen as interdependent meaning-makers who co-

construct 'knowledge, identity and culture' with adults and with each other (Dahlberg et al., 1999 p. 48). Within this framework, children's rights to participate and the value of participation are emphasised. As Moss and Petrie (2002) argue, this conceptualisation of childhood and of children has implications both for the way we view services for children and for the way we carry out research. Children are no longer viewed as passive recipients of services or objects of research, but as active participants in children's services, in research and in society as a whole.

Taking inspiration from the work of scholars such as Foucault (1977; 1980a), Levinas (1989) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005), I explore the notion of 'young children's participation' primarily through an ethico-political lens. I consider issues of power, governmentality, democracy and ethics within the empirical context of an English children's centre.

### **1.3 Outline of the Thesis**

The thesis is organised in three parts. Part I reviews the literature pertaining to how the concepts of 'children's participation', 'children' and 'children's centres' have been constructed in theory, policy and practice. Part II outlines the methodological approach taken, borrowing from the traditions of ethnography and participatory action research. Part III presents an analysis and discussion of the situated domains, dilemmas and discourses of children's participation within the children's centre. It concludes by synthesising the findings to construct localised understandings of children's participation within the social, physical, cultural and discursive spaces of the children's centre. Finally, I outline the contribution to knowledge this thesis makes, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future lines of inquiry.

### **1.4 A Reflexive Introduction to the Research**

Throughout the thesis I incorporate reflexive accounts of my own experiences and reflections on childhood and participation. Reflexivity, as developed by feminist researchers and others, refers to 'the self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher' (England 1994, p. 82). Some researchers within the field of disability studies have claimed that reflexivity can address the imbalance of research relations (Barnes and Mercer, 1997; Davis et al.,

2000). Through recognising one's own values and assumptions, reflexivity has the potential to reduce the power relations between oneself and the researched (Stone and Priestley, 1996). Others, within the 'sociology of childhood' claim reflexivity is a process which can widen the scope of the researcher to hear the voice of the child (Davis, 1998). Davis (1998) argues that self-reflection on the part of the researcher leads to recognition of the potential for 'many different cultural voices' among the researched (p. 332). The constructions we make of others reflect our own history, as well as social and cultural location. Yet, as West and Carlson (2006) argue, this aspect is often absent from the accounts of research, under the banner of a spurious objectivism, while processes of interpretation are represented as largely disembodied, one-directional affairs, rather than an interdependent process of sense-making between researchers and participants. Reflexivity reminds us that meanings are made not found in social situations (Mauthner et al., 1998) and that the adult researcher, child participants, research methods and data are interdependent and interconnected (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

During the course of this research I have attempted to adopt a reflexive stance in order to make my subjectivity explicit. It is my contention that reflexivity needs to occur at several levels: an autobiographical description of the foundations of the research; discussion of my epistemological position; examination and critique of the theoretical resources that inform the methodology and research findings; critical interrogation of my role throughout the research process, including my relations to others; foregrounding the use of 'I' in the research text (Okely, 1992); seeking to resist the temptation to 'grasp' the Other (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005); acknowledging the theoretical, empirical and personal limitations and problems of the study; and a critical awareness of the workings of power operating between actors within the research context.

I start with an autobiographical description of the origins of the project and an excerpt from my research journal written on my first day as a doctoral student:

I need to begin by critically reflecting on why I am doing this PhD. Despite my participatory intentions to live, work and research with children and other adults, I need to be explicit in acknowledging that my primary motivation for the project is to achieve an academic qualification, and that the only person this will benefit is myself. This bothers me somewhat since I hold this ambition in tension with the desire I have to engage in work that can make a positive

difference in other people's lives, and is therefore not for selfish gains. It was this desire and belief, that education should be for social justice, which led to me becoming a teacher, and it is this same motivation that has led me into research. Thus the instrumental nature of conducting this research sits uneasily with my ethical aims.

In spite of this, I do still hope that this research will benefit the participants. This project could lead to an increased understanding and respect for young children and their perspectives; to more responsive and democratic services; to improvements in professional practice; and it could assist with accountability and inspection processes... So, perhaps what I'm aiming for is a 'win-win' situation, although it would be naive to presume that there won't be any 'losses' along the way, both for me and the children, parents and staff of the children's centre.

The other thing I should make explicit is that this research carries an element of political intent. I hope that, as part of the research, children's participation will be enhanced in some way. Whilst scholars such as Hammersley (1998) might question the credibility of this approach, I agree with Denzin and Lincoln (2000) who argue that the researcher is not:

..an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer standing outside and above the text ... Qualitative inquiry is properly conceptualised as a civic, participatory, collaborative project. This joins the researcher and the researched in an ongoing moral dialogue (p. 1049).

With this in mind, I should state at the outset that whilst I am the sole author of this thesis, I have sought to conceptualise the research endeavour as a civic and collaborative project with the participating children, parents and practitioners. It has been my aim for this work 'to contribute to a politicisation and democratisation of early childhood' (Dahlberg and Moss 2008, p. vii) through a commitment to increasing young children's opportunities to participate in services and decisions that affect their lives. To this extent the research design and resultant thesis is partial. It is my hope that this thesis makes some contribution in achieving a better understanding of some of the different ways in which young children's participation is understood and enacted.

# **Part I: Reviewing the Literature**



## 2. Conceptualising Children's Participation

### 2.1 Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years there has been increasing interest in understanding children's experiences and perspectives on their own lives (Clark et al., 2003; Skiveness and Strandbu, 2006; Woodhead, 2006). The discourse of participation has been central to this agenda. Sinclair (2004) argues that acceptance of children's participation has been stimulated by the convergence of ideas from three perspectives: the children's rights agenda, in particular Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); the consumer movement and the demand for 'user involvement'; and a new social science paradigm, which has increased our understanding of children as competent social actors (see Chapter 3).

A review of the literature suggests that the concept of 'participation' is problematic both in practice and in theory. Indeed, in the case of young children, the majority of participatory work has focused on children over eight years, with young children regarded as too innocent and/or immature to participate meaningfully in decisions about themselves or to contribute to our knowledge of the world (Lansdown, 2005; MacNaughton et al., 2008). The goal of this chapter is to consider the question 'What do we mean by children's participation?' in policy, practice and theory. It begins by providing some general definitions of participation and then examines the context of young children's participation in social policy and practice in England under the New Labour Government (1997-2010), highlighting the contribution of the UNCRC, *Every Child Matters* (DES, 2003a), the user involvement movement and social exclusion initiatives. Next, it presents the case for and against participation, followed by a theoretical discussion of different ways of understanding children's participation, drawing upon various typologies of participation as well as theories of democracy and power. It concludes with some reflections on the ambiguity of participation as well as a personal response to the issues raised.

## 2.2 Defining Children's Participation

There are considerable differences in the literature about what counts as 'participation' (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006; Lee, 1999). Many of these differences are presented as dichotomies. For example, Boyden and Ennew (1997) identify two definitions of participation: 'passive', in the sense that children are taking part and engaging in some sort of activity; and 'active', in the sense that children are empowered to express their views, influence decision-making and bring about change. Thomas (2007) points out that confusion between these two senses occasionally causes misunderstanding in policy and practice. Morrow (2005a) argues, however, that we need to look at both aspects of participation and see how constrained children are within their existing structures and settings, and how these constraints may affect willingness or capacity to participate, before attempts can be made to enhance their 'active' participation.

Distinctions are also drawn between 'participation' and 'consultation', in which consultation simply involves listening to children but not necessarily acting on their views, in contrast with participation as the direct involvement of children in decision-making and influencing change (Hill et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Lansdown, 2005; Thomas, 2010). As Thomas (2007) asserts, for some 'consultation' is a subcategory of participation, while for others it is a separate category. Furthermore, consultation tends to be treated as a one-off event, whereas participation is often viewed as an ongoing process (Shier, 2010a; West, 2004). Whilst these distinctions may be a useful starting point in alerting us to key differences in understanding participation, they often serve to reduce the concept into two main areas: being consulted and making decisions.

In contrast to this dichotomised understanding, the burgeoning range of literature about participation seems to indicate that the concept is multifaceted. Various typologies of participation explore the nature and extent of children's participation (see Section 2.5.1). Participation has also been described in relation to contrasting discourses and practices. These include understanding participation as:

- an ethic of listening to children (Rinaldi, 2001; 2005; Clark et al., 2005)
- democracy and the practice of active citizenship (Hart, 1992; Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006; Lister, 2007a; MacNaughton et al., 2008; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010)

- service user involvement (Crawford et al., 2003)
- community governance (Arnott, 2008; Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008; Tisdall and Liebel 2008)
- dialogue (Rhedding-Jones et al., 2008; Bae, 2009; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010a)
- a collaborative process of learning (Berthelsen et al., 2009)
- pupil voice (Ruddock and Flutter, 2000; Cremin and Slatter, 2004; Fielding, 2004; General Teaching Council, 2007)
- a relational and spatial process of adult-child interaction (Mannion 2007; 2010)
- identity, inclusion and belonging (Rinaldi, 2005; Booth et al., 2000; Bath, 2009a; Nutbrown and Clough, 2009)
- power (Kesby, 2005; Gallagher, 2008a).

Clearly, the concept of participation relates to a wide variety of agendas. Furthermore, children's participation varies in its construction, interpretation and enactment across different contexts and cultures. Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) conclude that the practice of participation draws upon a wide range of theoretical sources, yet still lacks its own distinctive theoretical framework. Before examining some theoretical resources that have informed children's participation, I first discuss the policy context that has influenced young children's participation in the UK.

### **2.3 Policy and Practice Context of Young Children's Participation**

As the participation agenda has gained momentum from the 1990s onwards, a series of legislative and policy measures have been introduced to ensure that children have a say when individual decisions are being taken about their lives and to provide children with opportunities for involvement in the design, delivery and evaluation of policies and services. This is reinforced by the UK Government's legal responsibilities to fulfil the requirements of the UNCRC (1989), the Children Act (1989), the Human Rights Act (1998), the SEN and Disability Act (2001), the Health and Social Care Act (2001), the Children Act (2004) and the Childcare Act (2006). Consequently, children's participation is now a legal imperative across all public sector domains. Much of the impetus for children's participation stems from the UNCRC, which created the

foundations upon which much participation practice, research and theory is now built (Woodhead, 2010).

### **2.3.1 The UNCRC**

The UNCRC has been described as guaranteeing three types of right for children: provision, protection and participation (Lansdown, 1994). The articles specifying children's participation rights refer to children's civil and political status. They encompass children's rights to expression, information, involvement in decisions, and association (UNCRC, 2009).

Article 12 of the Convention, the right to express a view, is particularly significant for children's participation for several reasons. It is a unique provision in a human rights treaty (UNICEF, 2008). Moreover, the right to respect for views (Article 12) is one of the four fundamental principles underpinning the Convention. Finally, it articulates for the first time the right of children to be heard and have their opinions taken into account, thus redefining their status as civil and political actors. Section 1 of Article 12 states:

State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

This is revolutionary in international law since it disaggregates the child's views, interests and feelings from their family and other sources of authority (Van Beuren, 1995). However, the article has been seen as problematic when applied to young children resulting in many countries failing to seek the views of children under the age of twelve (Brooker, 2008). This may be because Article 12 appears to leave open the question of whether a child is 'capable of forming his or her own views', and whether the 'age and maturity of the child' requires adults to listen to those views. Questions of age and maturity are linked to another key concept within the Convention, that of the 'evolving capacities of the child' (Article 5). Milne (2008) comments that these concepts offer proviso for the subjective exclusion of young children's rights or views from any parts of the Convention which adults consider justifiable.

Criticisms over the ambiguous wording of the participation articles (Fortin, 2008; Milne, 2008; Kjørholt, 2008), coupled with barriers to their implementation, led to publication

of General Comment 7 in 2005 and General Comment 12 in 2009 by the UN Committee. Traditional beliefs have constructed young children as 'undeveloped, lacking even the basic capacities for understanding, communication and making choices' (UNCRC 2005, p. 7), however, General Comment 7 asserts that:

Article 12 applies both to younger and to older children. As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views... they make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language (p. 7).

According to this, participatory rights begin at birth. As Lundy (2007) argues, children's participation rights are not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view; but are dependent only on their ability to express a view, mature or not. Clarification of this provision was published in General Comment 12 which specifies that children's views should be sought regardless of notions of age, maturity or capacity:

...State parties cannot begin with the assumption that a child is incapable of expressing her or his own views. On the contrary, states parties should presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove her or his capacity (p. 9).

The agenda for children's participation is explicitly outlined. State parties are obliged to ensure that implementation applies to children of every age, including children experiencing difficulties in making their view heard, such as children with impairments; minority and migrant children, and other children who do not speak the majority language. Consequently, children should be equipped to use any mode of communication necessary to facilitate the expression of their views (UNCRC, 2009).

Table 2.1 summarises the key ideas within General Comments 7 and 12 which signify what young children's participation means in practice. The list of requirements, while not necessarily comprehensive, indicates the multifaceted nature of participation. This is illustrated by reference to the associated theoretical concepts that underpin each participation requirement (see Sections 2.5.3 and Chapters 3, 4 and 5 for discussion of these concepts).

TABLE 2.1 *General Comments 7 and 12 of the UNCRC and Associated Theoretical Concepts*

	<b>Participation Requirement</b>	<b>Linked Theoretical Concept</b>
	The implementation of the right to be heard and to participate must...	
<b>Who?</b>	be inclusive of all children, including children experiencing difficulty in making their views heard  involve the exercise of the individual child's right to be heard as well as the right of groups of children to be heard	Inclusion Children, Childhood  Individualism, Collectivism
<b>When?</b>	occur from birth in ways appropriate to the child's capacities	Age Competence
<b>What?</b>	respect not only the child's views, but also have regard for his or her 'feelings' and agency  be practical and empowering	Voice, Emotion Agency  Power
<b>Where?</b>	be anchored in the child's daily life at home and in the community  involve the full range of early childhood services, policies, judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child  apply to research and consultations	Family Community  Children's Services and Spaces  Methodology
<b>How?</b>	recognise and enable children's different modes of communication through a variety of media  be child-centred and involve listening	Pedagogies of communication, child-centredness, and listening

Within the UNCRC, child participation is seen as pivotal to the conceptualisation of children's citizenship (Hart, 1992; Ben-Arieh and Boyer, 2005; Invernizzi and Williams, 2008). Lister (2006a) argues: 'Enabling children to participate both individually and collectively in decision-making and public debate... symbolises acceptance of children as members of the citizenship community' (p. 8). Indeed, Stasiulis (2002) argues that participation does not just accord children citizenship status but is also at the heart of children's citizenship practice. Despite issues that have been raised (for example Lister, 2007a; Alderson, 2008a; James et al., 2008; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010), the UNCRC has provided a framework for children's rights which fosters a vision of childhood whereby the child is considered a citizen from birth through the practice of participation.

In addition to the UNCRC, the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) (DES, 2003a) programme has also contributed to the participatory agenda, but to a lesser extent.

### **2.3.2 Every Child Matters**

ECM and the Children Act (2004), which gave ECM legislative force, sets out children's entitlements to stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. Within this agenda there is a general injunction that policies and services should be shaped by and responsive to the needs of children and should involve children and families in local and national decision-making (DES, 2003a; DCSF, 2007). This is exemplified in the 'Positive Contribution' outcome and associated aim that children should 'engage in decision-making and support the community and environment' (DES, 2003a). However, several authors argue that children's participation is underplayed within ECM, with the emphasis more focused on other agendas such as child protection, educational attainment, and regulating children's development, than children's participation rights and creating a culture of respect for children (Williams, F. 2004; Hudson, 2005; Mayall, 2006; Bath, 2009a; Martin and Franklin, 2010). Fortin (2006) asserts that whilst ECM may well have been congruent with much of the UNCRC, the discourse of children's rights was explicitly denied by Government ministers as the 2004 Children Act went through Parliament. Martin and Franklin (2010) suggest:

Evidence of this disregard for participation in decision-making can be seen in many ways, including, for example, children's participation only being referred to as a passing expectation within ECM; in the weakness of the powers accorded to the newly created post of the Children's Commissioner in the Children Act 2004; and in the Government's failure to place Article 12 of the UNCRC high on the agenda (p. 99).

In terms of implementation, Hudson (2005) contends that children's participation has been dealt with weakly compared with the complex restructuring that has taken place as a result of ECM, such as the creation of children's trusts, merging education and social care, and establishing integrated services such as children's centres and extended schools. He suggests that this is because there is low ambiguity in implementing structural changes compared with high ambiguity in implementing children's participation.

Ambiguity also occurs at a theoretical level, in terms of what participation means. Watson (2006) argues that the Children Act faces major challenges with confusion over language, with different sectors interpreting 'participation' in different ways. For example, in health and social care participation has tended to be about involving children in private decisions about their personal care or treatment, and more recently, consulting children about improving service quality. In education participation is used most often to refer to disabled children and their participation in a wide range of activities. Participation is also associated with widening the enrolment of young people in post-compulsory education and training. This illustrates the diverse expectations of participation activities and outcomes across and within sectors. It also presents a potential challenge for multi-agency services, such as children's centres, seeking to develop integrated systems and processes. Ambiguities in definition at policy level, difficulties in implementation and differences across sectors foster doubt that participatory work with children is central to the children's policy agenda. One of the aims of this study is to explore whether such differences in meaning and ambiguities in implementation exist within and across the different services of one children's centre.

In addition to the children's rights movement and the ECM agenda, another major influence upon the recent growth in children's participation work has come from the consumer movement and the demand for 'service user involvement'.

### **2.3.3 User Involvement**

In the last few years there has been increasing recognition that children, like adults, are consumers of products and services and as such should be enabled to exercise consumer choice and influence the nature and quality of the services they receive (Sinclair, 2004; Cook, 2004). Concepts such as 'consultation', 'consumer choice', and 'user involvement' have entered the lexicon of public policy and service delivery in an effort to increase 'customer satisfaction', strengthen the accountability of 'providers' to 'consumers', and improve 'service efficiency'. The centrality of user involvement in New Labour's modernisation agenda of public services (DETR, 1998; DH, 1998; DH, 2000a; DH, 2000b) is exemplified by the speech of Tony Blair, then prime minister:

We are proposing to put an entirely different dynamic in place to drive our public services; one where the service will be driven not by the government or



by the manager but by the user - the patient, the parent, the pupil and the law-abiding citizen (Tony Blair quoted in *The Guardian*, 24th June 2004).

Where children were once absent from this discourse, they now appear as users: expressing consumer views, exercising choice and influencing services.

This is given legal force through a number of legislative imperatives. The 2006 Childcare Act states:

Local authorities must ... have regard to available information about the views of young children where this information appears relevant to the development or delivery of integrated services. (Explanatory Notes to Childcare Act, 2006, Section 3, Paragraph 30)

Young children's views should now inform the development of local authority 'Children and Young People's Plans' and contribute to the strategic development of services. Within the children's centre agenda (Sure Start, 2005; DES, 2006), as well as health and social care legislation and guidance (DH, 2003a; General Social Care Council, 2005; DH, 2004a; DH, 2004b; DH, 2009), children are expected to participate as users in the design, delivery and evaluation of services alongside their parents/carers.

Beresford (2005) identifies two main strands to user participation: a consumerist/managerialist approach and a democratic one. He suggests the consumerist/managerialist approach is a top-down initiative, focused on the service system, concerned with service effectiveness, and promoting consultation and individual choice. Gray (1999) warns of the dangers of privileging individual choice over any common good since 'it tends to make relationships revocable and provisional... All relationships become consumer goods' (p. 37). Tritter and McCallum (2006) argue that this emphasis upon a consumerist model has been central to neo-liberal approaches to rationalising public services over the last two decades, facilitated by managerialism, regulation and marketization.

By contrast, Beresford (2005) suggests the democratic approach is concerned with citizenship rights and improving people's lives. Whereas there is no suggestion of redistribution of power in the consumerist approach to participation, this goal lies at the heart of the democratic approach. Ferguson (2008) summarises the key differences

between the two approaches, with the democratic approach more focused upon notions of collectivism, citizenship and empowerment.

Thomas (2007) argues that, if the primary purpose of participation is to strengthen democratic citizenship, this will have different consequences for how it is achieved than if the main objective is to improve decisions about the provision of public services. Reflecting on this, Percy-Smith (2008) suggests that in the UK we are in danger of orienting participation to local services rather than children's lives. Instead, he posits that we might reconsider children's participation in terms of the extent to which children feel and enact a sense of empowerment in their lives and communities. The agenda may be driven by children themselves, rather than solely in relation to the service.

### **2.3.4 Social Exclusion**

One other policy rationale for children's participation is to tackle the issue of social exclusion (Coad and Lewis, 2004; Hill et al., 2004). Some argue that participation is inextricably linked with social inclusion since children in low-income families should be afforded opportunities for full social participation in society, through access to normally expected consumption and social activities, as well as opportunities for participation in decision-making (Stevens et al., 1999; Hill et al., 2004). Consequently, New Labour's social inclusion measures included the commitment to listen to children and to involve them in decision-making (Cockburn, 2005a).

Social exclusion is a rather flexible concept (Lister, 2004). From taking up office, Labour associated the term with income poverty as well as the multidimensional problems of 'unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown' (ODPM 2004, p. 3). Tackling the social exclusion of children became a key policy priority under New Labour in order to 'break the cycle of disadvantage' and eradicate child poverty by 2020 (Blair, 1999; Sure Start, 2002; McNeish et al., 2002). Families living in areas of high social disadvantage were identified to be 'at risk' of social exclusion (Bagley et al., 2004). Consequently, central elements of Labour's strategy for addressing social exclusion included increasing the availability of childcare places to get parents, primarily mothers, into paid employment; providing part-time free nursery education for three and four year olds, to raise educational attainment; and developing early intervention multi-agency programmes

such as SSLPs and children's centres (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2002; Blair, 2002; *Every Child Matters* website, 2010).

Alongside strategies to increase labour market integration and educational attainment, children's involvement in public decision-making has been presented as another element in preventing their social exclusion (McNeish et al., 2002; Davis, 2007; Evans and Spicer, 2008). It is hoped that children's social inclusion in participatory projects will give them experience of communicating and collaborating with others, managing resources, and developing a sense of responsibility.

Some scholars argue that the problem with viewing children's participation in this way is that children are conceptualised as a resource and as redemptive agents, capable of tackling their own social exclusion (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Hartas, 2008). The emphasis is on the individual child and family to produce change. Thus, participation is treated as a low-cost, technical-rational solution to the complex issue of social exclusion; relieving society of its responsibilities to address the structural inequalities children face. Rose (1996) argues that this reflects a wider tendency to place the responsibility for governance and decision-making on individual capabilities, rather than on society. The rhetoric of 'individualization' leads to a culture of 'responsibilization' which compels children to become the makers of their own livelihoods (Rose, 1999). Bragg (2007a) suggests that the emphasis on children as individuals, entirely responsible for shaping their future through voice and choice, reinforces social inequalities and victimisation, because those who fail to become agents of change only have themselves to blame.

### **2.3.5 Growth of Children's Participation**

As a result of the influence of the UNCRC and subsequent policy legislation through the ECM programme, user involvement and the social inclusion agendas, there has been significant growth in participatory activity. This has occurred largely in the areas of 'consultation' with young people as service users, the development of 'structures' for consultation such as school councils and youth parliaments, the creation and appointment of participation workers in many local authorities, and an explosion of skills training and toolkits for participation (Oldfield and Fowler, 2004; Thomas, 2007; Tisdall et al., 2008). Despite the growth in participation, young children, children from black and ethnic minority families, migrant children and disabled children have received

far less attention (Mitchell, 2009; Pascal and Bertram, 2009). Indeed, most participatory activity involves children between the ages of twelve and sixteen; consists of consulting children for their views, rather than encompassing broader forms of civic participation; and focuses on service delivery, with less attention given to strategic development, or children's participation in their everyday community settings of home and neighbourhood (Kirby et al., 2003; Thomas, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2010).

Tisdall et al. (2008) argue that much of the growth and formal promotion of children's participation has a technocratic quality, in keeping with New Labour's modernisation agenda of standardisation and target-setting. This has resulted in the creation of participation standards and externally driven performance indicators against which organisations can judge themselves (see for example, Cutler, 2003; Badham and Wade, 2005; Save the Children, 2005; Lansdown, 2006). Whilst these measures may have had positive effects in stimulating change, they have been criticised for fostering a tokenistic, checklist approach (Fajerman et al., 2004). Shier, cited in Crowley and Skeels (2010, p. 184), argues that standardisation risks 'abandoning participatory practice to the ravages of consumerism'. Instead a more empowering perspective should be adopted which locates the young child as a public actor who may desire to act in many varied ways that do not necessarily conform to any standards. Standardisation also risks stamping out diversity and imposing one dominant view of participation. These debates, however, risk setting up an unhelpful dichotomy between more open, informal processes and more technical-rationalist approaches to participation. Standards may create a starting point, but any evaluation of children's participation also needs to take account of local ecologies of cultural practice. A number of writers suggest that the need to move beyond technical approaches that measure participation to enable discursive spaces where children and adults work through what participation means within the contexts of their everyday lives, and according to their own quality criteria (Cockburn, 2002; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). This, together with the reality that it is our youngest and most marginalised children who face barriers to participation, provides the rationale for this study.

Having reviewed the context of young children's participation in UK social policy and practice, I now turn to a consideration of the rationales and criticisms of children's participation.

## **2.4 The Case for Children's Participation**

### **2.4.1 Benefits of Participation**

Sinclair and Franklin (2000) and Lansdown (2005) outline a number of reasons that are typically given to advocate for children's participation:

1. to uphold children's rights
2. to fulfil legal responsibilities
3. to improve services
4. to improve decision-making
5. to enhance democratic processes
6. to promote children's protection
7. to enhance children's skills
8. to empower and enhance self-esteem

Tisdall et al. (2008) argue that the first two reasons appeal to the UNCRC and the gradual recognition of children's rights in UK law. The third and fourth reasons appeal to consumerism and service user involvement. Reason five addresses the decline in public engagement in formal politics with the aim of training children in democratic processes through the introduction of citizenship education and participatory activities. The last three reasons appeal to children's well-being and development. Children who are encouraged to express their views are less vulnerable to abuse and better able to contribute to their own protection. Further, children who are given opportunities to participate with others can acquire new skills, greater levels of competence and positive dispositions that will serve them well in adulthood. One other rationale is that children may see different issues to adults and see issues differently, and are therefore worth listening to as 'experts in their own lives' (Clark and Statham, 2005). This argument appeals to epistemological developments that have taken place in childhood studies over the last twenty years in which children are conceptualised as social actors and active participants (see Chapter 3).

Cleaver (2001) summarises two broad arguments for participation: those based on 'efficiency' and those based on 'equity and empowerment'. In terms of efficiency, participation is thought to produce better outcomes and ensure effectiveness, for example, in relation to policies, services, child protection and legal proceedings. In

terms of empowerment, participation is thought to enhance the capacity of individuals to improve or change their own lives. The efficiency discourse is primarily practical, technical and project-based, whereas the empowerment discourse as a process is assumed to have greater moral value. In the last few years, however, a more critical agenda has emerged, rooted in the unease felt by some in relation to the unquestioning acceptance that participation is an intrinsic social 'good'.

## **2.4.2 Problems and Critiques of Participation**

Prout (2000) argues that there are increasingly evident tensions inherent in both the pragmatism and principle of participation. Research highlights the following pragmatic concerns:

- lack of practitioners' confidence, knowledge and skills, time and resources to be able to support children's participation (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; McNeish and Newman, 2002; Alderson, 2008a; Mitchell, 2009)
- adult scepticism about children's capacity to participate (Matthews, 2001; Kirby and Bryson, 2002)
- disquiet about tokenism, consultation fatigue, lack of outcomes and changes (Hinton et al., 2008; Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008)
- concerns about representativeness and a failure to include certain groups of children, namely those who are already disadvantaged such as disabled children, ethnic minority groups and younger children (Thomas, 2007; Reynaert et al., 2009)
- a preoccupation with formal adult decision-making structures and top-down agendas, and a concomitant failure to recognise children's own agendas and autonomous action in everyday life (Badham, 2004; Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008)
- a bias towards verbal and written forms of participation that overlooks children's multimodal communicative practices (Rinaldi, 2005; Flewitt, 2005a)
- a failure to recognise children's right to silence and resistance to decision-making within the participatory process (Bragg, 2007a; Lewis, 2010)
- an objection that much participatory practice does not give any real power to children (Thomas, 2007; Alderson, 2008a).

A poststructural critique of participation has also been offered by a few writers who question the underpinning principles of the concept (Cleaver, 2001; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Clark et al., 2005; Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005; Gallagher, 2008a). Largely based on Foucauldian understandings of power and discourse, these scholars have sought to adopt a critical perspective of participation in order to uncover its hidden meanings and truth claims. At the heart of the critique is the assertion that, even though participation is presented as an alternative to dominating forms of power, participation is still a form of power with potentially dominating effects (Kesby, 2003). From a poststructural perspective, participation acts as a discourse and as a technology. As a 'dominant discursive regime', it serves a disciplinary or regulatory function. Officially sanctioned truths, such as 'children's participation', form 'regimes of truth' that govern the normal and desirable ways to think, act and feel (Foucault, 1980a). At the same time, there are omissions and oppressions in such 'truths' of participation. The participation discourse can exclude alternative ways of understanding and interpreting the world (Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005). As one truth accumulates official sanction, others become marginalised and/or silenced.

Cooke and Kothari (2001) use the word 'tyranny' to describe participatory processes which create illusions of empowerment, while simultaneously reinforcing norms and existing power hierarchies. Rather than providing a means to redress the power imbalance between adults and children, participatory approaches turn out to be forms of power. A number of critiques are contained within Cooke and Kothari's (2001) work. For example, the hegemonic position of participation can exclude other possibilities for research and action while making other forms of investigation appear unethical or invalid.

A second problem concerns the 'tyranny of techniques' (Cooke and Kothari 2001, p. 8). There is a danger that participatory methods are assumed to be neutral tools to reveal subjugated knowledges and access silenced voices, rather than value-laden techniques which create new forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. They condense the complexities of everyday life and provide linear and formalised explanations that claim to represent the authentic voice of the person listened to. This denies the interpretive element of communication and fails to recognise power relations (Clark et al., 2005). Children's participation is not unmediated, but guided, facilitated and supervised through specific techniques that delimit what can be said, thought and done (Bragg,

2007a). Participatory approaches can re-inscribe the very power relations they seek to overcome, if delivered as a 'technocratic cargo' searching for some objective reality (Kesby, 2005). This can lead to the 'tyranny of decision-making and control' (Cooke and Kothari 2001, p. 7), where participatory facilitators override existing legitimate decision-making processes. Drawing on a number of case studies, Hailey (2001) and Kesby (2005) posit that, while facilitators are usually regarded as benign moderators, the discourses and practices of participation actually constitute them as domineering agents who determine both *what* can be known and *how* it can be known.

A further problem concerns the 'tyranny of the group' (Cooke and Kothari 2001, p. 7) in which participatory projects are used to seek consensus, without recognising the existence of competing knowledges. This denies difference and the possibility of a plurality of voices (Cleaver, 2001; Hartas, 2008). Mouffe (2000) suggests that a desire for coherence and consensus fails to recognise the crucial role 'dissensus' and conflict play in a healthy democracy. The danger is that views are homogenised and dominant social norms are reconstituted through the legitimating frameworks of participatory knowledge. In this way, the production of participatory knowledge is inseparable from the exercise of power and the will to truth (Kothari, 2001).

Criticisms have also come from scholars working within the field of childhood studies. Cannella and Viruro (2004) argue that listening to children without taking account of power relations and their inequalities can just become another 'colonizing apparatus'. The language of participation merely provides an illusion of 'giving voice' to children, while keeping the agendas for participation firmly within the control of organisations and services (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cockburn 2005a). In this way, participation becomes a managerial tactic. Clark et al. (2005) suggest that participation can never be neutral since it can figure in projects for children's emancipation, as well as their regulation:

Listening becomes a surveillance and confessional technique for knowing and grasping otherness and managing conduct more effectively through governing the soul (Clark et al. 2005, p. 11).

One other critique of the participation discourse is that it constitutes the child as a particular sort of subject. Dahlberg (2003), Kjørholt (2005) and Vandembroeck (2006) suggest that this is the normative subject of consumerism and neo-liberalism:



autonomous, flexible, ready and able to participate as a consumer in the market, with a desire for self-realisation through choice. This discourse simply replaces one essentialist image of the child as vulnerable and dependent with another image of the autonomous, competent child, to be supported in the exercise of free-choice. It pays no attention to alternative, more hybridised ways of imagining childhood, and focuses on the individual child at the expense of a relational, interdependent perspective (see Chapter 3). It also implicates children in governing themselves. Children must come to see themselves as responsible for sharing their views, making decisions and taking action, as self-reflective, self-policing agents. This reveals participation to be a form of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1992) (discussed in Section 2.5.3).

In short, therefore, the main critiques of participation centre upon Foucauldian ideas that participation acts as a technology of government since it creates conditions for the disciplining and self-disciplining of participants. Thus, participation can become a form of social regulation and subjugation.

## **2.5 Ways of Understanding Children's Participation**

Thomas (2010) argues that attempts to theorise children's participation 'may be either endogenous, in that they are generated by reflection within the field, or exogenous, in that they import conceptual structures from elsewhere' (p. 12). In this section I begin by examining endogenous theories, focusing on typologies of participation and then drawing upon the work of authors who have applied exogenous theories of democracy and power to children's participation.

### **2.5.1 Typologies of Participation**

Much of the theoretical discussion about children's participation concerns different typologies or models of participation. Arnstein (1969) first developed a 'ladder of participation' in relation to citizen involvement in community development. Hart (1992; 1997) adapted this for children and a number of variations on this have since followed. Hart suggests an eight step ladder to understand the balance between children and adults in decision-making. The ladder depicts a climb from the non-participation rungs of 'manipulation', 'decoration' and 'tokenism', through the middle levels where children are 'assigned but informed' or 'consulted and informed,' to the highest rungs of 'adult-

initiated, shared decisions with children' or 'child-initiated and directed', with 'child-initiated decision-making with adults' at the top. Hart's (1992) caveat, that the ladder should be seen as a 'beginning typology for thinking about children's participation in projects' (p. 8), has been virtually forgotten because of its widespread use. Consequently, the ladder tends to dominate thinking and is criticised for acting as a straitjacket (Thomas, 2007). A number of authors have critiqued the ladder for being too linear (Kellett, 2005) and hierarchical (Treseder, 1997; Lardner, 2001) since it implicitly conveys a positive value judgement about higher rungs (Adams, 2008). Furthermore, implicit normative assumptions, which place forms of participation along an axis of 'good' to 'bad' repudiate the idea of non-participation as a legitimate option (Cornwall, 2008; Reid and Nikel, 2007).

In response to this perceived weakness, Treseder (1997) developed a non-hierarchical model that reconstitutes Hart's middle and upper rungs as a circle. The idea behind Treseder's typology is that different kinds of participatory activities and relationships are appropriate in different contexts and that practitioners should enable children to participate at a level that best reflects their situation rather than feeling they are failing when they work in ways that involve lesser degrees of engagement.

Other scholars have constructed taxonomies depicting a hierarchical continuum in which adults hand over power to children. Lansdown's (2001) typology differentiates between three types of participation, with ascending power for children: 'consultative processes', which involve adults obtaining information from children; 'participative initiatives', which enable children to be involved in the development of policies and services; and 'self-advocacy projects', in which children identify their own goals. Shier (2001) attempts to create 'pathways to participation' to help practitioners identify the necessary steps to share power, that is, 'to give some of it away' (p. 115), and thus increase children's level of participation. The model is based on five levels: children are listened to; children are supported in expressing their views; children's views are taken into account; children are involved in decision-making processes; and children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

These typologies are useful for several reasons: they provide compelling and simple frameworks for conceptualising children's participation that depict various levels and meanings of participation (Morrow, 2005a; Tisdall and Liebel, 2008; Percy-Smith and

Thomas, 2010); they remind us that participation is about power and control (Hinton 2006; Cornwall, 2008); they highlight different levels of children's empowerment (Sinclair, 2004); and they are useful as a reflective tool for challenging policy and practice, and advocating for change (Alderson, 2008a; Tisdall, 2010).

The typologies have also been critiqued. First, they rely upon simplified dichotomies of child versus adult power, marginalising the role of relationships (Hinton, 2006) and masking the complex nature of power (Gallagher, 2008a). Second, they are too concerned with adults bestowing participation opportunities on children (Franklin, 2002; John, 2003). Third, the typologies imply that adults will always be involved, thus underplaying the role of 'children's protagonism' or child-initiated participation (Hinton, 2006; Liebel, 2007; Malone and Hartung, 2010). Fourth, they tend to be used as a 'disciplinary technology' (Foucault, 1977) leading to prescriptive practices (Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005; Thomas, 2007). Fifth, they present unambiguous distinctions between degrees of participation that do not allow for the co-existence of multiple forms of participation within the same initiative, or for transformations from one form to another (Cornwall, 2008; Tisdall and Liebel, 2008). Sixth, they are not designed for very young children (Berthelsen, 2009) and therefore fail to take account of the different competencies of young children (Maconochie and McNeill, 2010), thus ignoring diversity amongst children and young people and presenting children as an undifferentiated group (Hinton, 2006; Tisdall and Liebel, 2008). Lastly, in their attempts to be universally applicable, the typologies fail to consider adequately children's participation in their different social, political, and historical contexts (Chawla, 2001; Moses, 2008; Tisdall and Liebel, 2008). More recently, these last two points have led both Hart (2008) and Shier (2010a; 2010b) to criticise their own models for their normativity and cultural bias, being conceived primarily from their experience in America and the UK with older children, and their current misuse as a comprehensive tool for understanding and evaluating participation.

Malone and Hartung (2010) conclude that, while current typologies have been significant in creating a field of study around children's participation, their focus is as a practical tool rather than a theoretical framework. Chawla (2001) contends that there can never be a 'one size fits all' model. Rather, our theorising of children's participation needs to capture the complexities of children's lives in relationship with others in different contexts. In order to do this, a few scholars (for example, Thomas, 2007;

Tisdall and Liebel, 2008) have proposed the use of alternative theoretical resources drawing on political theory to explore the possibilities of children's participation.

## **2.5.2 Theories of Democracy**

Tisdall and colleagues (2006) argue that there are limits to the current theorisation of participation due to the general isolation of the literature on children's participation from wider discussions about democracy. This has occurred even though Hart, amongst others, has sought to locate his ladder of participation within a democratic framework:

The term 'participation is used ... to refer generally to the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship (1992 p. 5).

Whilst there may be consensus that participation is fundamental to democracy and implicitly linked to the notion of citizenship (for example, Pateman, 1970; Parry 1972; Kymlicka and Norman, 1994; Stokes, 2002), participation can be interpreted differently within different democratic traditions.

### **Liberalism**

Within the liberal democratic model, a construction of participation is advocated which focuses on representative forms of democracy through electoral participation. Since children do not have the right to vote, they are excluded from this form of participation. Arnott (2008) observes that there is a tendency in the UK to place 'participation' within this liberal tradition. This occurs through mechanisms that confine citizen participation to periodic elections of representative bodies, and occasional participation in issue-specific referenda, or consultations. Crouch (2004) argues that this tends to produce relationships between individuals and the state that are minimal and largely passive, since it requires low involvement by citizens in politics and policy-making and only a small number of informed people to make decisions on behalf of the wider electorate. Kymlicka (2002) comments that this is often called 'passive' or 'private' citizenship because of its emphasis on passive entitlements, and the absence of any obligation to participate in public life.

Liberal conceptions of democracy, based on Marshall's (1950) post-war formulation of citizenship, are defined in terms of the possession of civil, political and social rights; and participation is understood in terms of voting. Within liberalism, and its more recent economic creed of neo-liberalism, people are more likely to talk about rights and liberties rather than collective responsibilities or participation (Delanty, 2000; Kymlicka, 2002). When 'participation' is discussed, the emphasis is on individual participation in the private sphere, whether in economic or family matters, rather than on political participation in the public sphere (Liebel, 2008). Where there is some crossover with the public sphere, a neo-liberal market model of participation is advanced through the valorisation of individual consumer choice, rather than more collective forms of choice and decision-making (Bentley, 2005; Power Inquiry, 2006; Moss, 2008).

The advantages of liberal, representative forms of democracy are that people are relatively free to pursue their private interests with minimal interference from the State so long as they conform to public standards of civil decency. Meanwhile public decisions can be made in an economical way by a small group of people on the basis of consent from large numbers of citizens (Kymlicka, 2002; Thomas, 2007). The disadvantage is that only a small, elite contingency of the citizenry are afforded the opportunities to participate in public debate and decision-making. This 'vote-centric' conception of democracy provides a mechanism for determining winners and losers, but no mechanism for developing a consensus, shaping public opinion or formulating a compromise (Kymlicka, 2002). Those people belonging to a marginalised minority group, who have little hope of winning a majority vote, are excluded from exercising any real power since there is little space for civic engagement beyond the narrow confines of the ballot box or official consultations. Thus the representational model has little relevance to the concerns and priorities of most citizens since it does not encourage involvement across the spectrum of people in society.

It is not difficult to make the links between this liberal view of participation and children's participation. Children are excluded from electoral participation on account of their age and therefore can be discriminated against (Roche, 1999). Since children have no political rights and only limited civil and social rights, Moosa-Mitha (2005) argues that Marshall's liberal conception of citizenship-as-rights is an 'adultist', normative standard by which children are measured and constructed as 'not-yet-citizens'. Cohen (2005) asserts that children form the largest group of unrepresented people in every

liberal democracy in the world and yet children are 'individuals with pressing political interests prior to reaching the age of majority' (p. 230). She argues that children's lack of an independent political voice means their interests often fail to be recognised.

Recent efforts to include children in non-binding consultations and to build structures that mimic adult representative democratic institutions, such as school and youth councils, have been built on the liberal tradition of participation. Various studies discuss children's views of the problematic nature of these councils which, if not conducted well, are tokenistic and do not lead to any significant change (Alderson, 2000a; Crimmens and West, 2004; Morrow, 2001; 2008; Cockburn 2005a; 2010). Cairns (2006) argues that these representative models have dubious democratic legitimacy. Whereas there is universal adult suffrage, there is no equivalent children's suffrage. Hence in many circumstances the infrastructure does not exist to ensure that everyone who is to be represented is enfranchised, and to allow for the represented to regularly express views to their representatives. Bae (2009) outlines the pitfalls of putting an emphasis on formal, representative procedures in early childhood settings, such as individual elections, taking part in meetings, or following the principle that the majority decides. She argues that such practices 'lead to a focus on techniques for individual choice ... with little allowance for difference and diversity' (pp. 295-296).

For the most part, and particularly in the case of young children, children's participation is therefore confined to informal, a-political 'safe' spaces of the family and school (Cockburn, 2005a) or as consumers in the marketplace (Sinclair, 2004; Cook, 2004). As Mayall (2001) has noted, children are placed inside the private sphere and 'protected' from the public sphere. Children are free to participate in the private sphere by pursuing their individual interests and consumer choices, with minimal interference from adults as long as they conform to accepted standards of behaviour. Meanwhile, larger, more collective decisions can be made by benign adults on children's behalf and for their good.

### **Republicanism**

In contrast to liberalism, republican theories emphasise the intrinsic value of active political participation and deliberation in the public sphere (Dunne, 2006). This notion of citizenship views freedom as the ability to participate with others in the joint practice

of self-governance in which citizens have parity of say in decision-making (Delanty, 2000; Dagger, 2002). Citizenship is realised through participation in citizenry obligations and an acknowledgement by others in society of ones' membership (Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

Broadly speaking, republicanism stresses the dominance of the public sphere and of the community, based on solidarity and equality of all citizens within it (Liebel, 2008). Thus, whereas liberalism conceives of citizenship largely in terms of individual rights, republicanism stresses responsibilities and conceives of citizenship in more relational terms (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Within republicanism, it is hoped that participation and public deliberation will make for good governance by producing better decisions; will be seen as more legitimate since everyone has a fair chance to make their views known; and will produce good citizens by encouraging mutual empathy (Kymlicka, 2002; Thomas, 2007). This model of citizenship is a more demanding and active view of citizenship than the minimal requirements of liberal citizenship.

The benefits of republicanism are that citizens are free to participate in the political and social institutions of society as equal members (Lister, 2007b). Moosa-Mitha (2005) argues, however, that within republicanism, participation is 'defined in a narrow sense through a normative stance where participation in only certain types of activities is considered to be citizenry' (p. 373). Historically, these activities included participation in the institutions of government, marriage, the military and the marketplace (Siim, 2000; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Such a definition of participation was underpinned by a male, heterosexual, adultist understanding of citizen participation. Consequently children, and others who did not fit these norms, were excluded from civic participation and denied citizenship status.

In contemporary society, Fraser (1999) argues that certain citizenry activities continue to be valued above others. Several commentators suggest paid work has become the primary citizenship responsibility in many countries, above other citizenship practices such as child-rearing or other caring work (Fraser, 1999; Kymlicka, 2002; Lister, 2001; 2008). Scholars from the field of childhood studies argue that children's citizenship practices often go unrecognised because they do not fit the contemporary normative template of citizenship responsibilities as economic self-reliance and political participation (Solberg, 1990; Cockburn, 1998; Invernizzi, 2008; Qvortrup, 1991; 2008).

Yet, children are capable of, and indeed do exercise citizenship responsibilities, since they make many social and economic contributions to the family, to their local communities and to the common good of society. For example, Qvortrup (1991; 2008) notes the importance of schooling to society as children are contributing to the societal division of labour. Mayall (2006) adds to this the 'people work' that children do across the private and public domains. For example, Lister (2005) identifies the heavy responsibility of children who take on the role of young carers. Ridge (2006) highlights the role many children play in sustaining work in lone parent families by assisting in chores at home. Smith et al. (2005) describe children's participation in the public sphere through volunteering and social action. Alderson (2008b) argues that even premature babies in neonatal units are capable of making an economic contribution to society by communicating their preferences about care routines which, if sensitively 'read' and responded to by adults, can enable the baby to leave the unit earlier and thus reduce costs.

Participation's normative stance within republicanism also traces back to the belief that only those citizens who possess certain 'virtues' owned the freedom to participate (Kymlicka, 2002; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). These civic virtues were defined as the ability to deliberate wisely and justly, independently and rationally, and to value the common good above the individual's private interest (Dunne, 2006). The history of citizenship over the last 150 years, however, is one in which women, black people, children and other marginalised groups have been excluded from deliberative forums on the basis of constructions that they exhibit emotional, dependent and irrational characteristics. Whilst many marginalised adults have struggled against these exclusions, today children continue to be excluded from many forms of deliberative participation through the use of a similar rationale, invariably in the name of their welfare (Cockburn, 1998; Roche, 1999; Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

Both liberal and republican democratic theories present an adultist, normative image of participation (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Participation is conceptualised either as a largely individual and passive pursuit through representative democracy and consumer choice or, in more active and collective terms, through deliberative democracy and paid work. In liberalism, the participative self is understood as an individuated, autonomous rights-bearer, participating primarily in the private sphere and with passive involvement in the public sphere. In republicanism, the participative self is equated with the responsible,



virtuous citizen, participating in the public realm. In both traditions, however, participation is considered to be the preserve of adult citizens since children are not assumed to possess the civic virtues and capacities necessary for full citizenship membership and practice. As a consequence, children's participation is mostly ignored in political theory. However, the UNCRC and new social studies of childhood have challenged conventional views of childhood and children's exclusion from citizenship and participatory practices (Invernizzi and Williams, 2008). Feminist and 'group-differentiated' theories of democracy have also challenged liberal and republican traditions for their failure to properly recognise and accommodate the social and cultural pluralism of modern societies. Whilst much of this literature does not discuss children *per se*, it does present many parallels between children and other marginalised groups such as women, disabled and black people.

### **Feminism**

Cockburn (1998) argues that feminist scholars have made a crucial contribution to re-evaluating participation and citizenship by problematising traditional democratic theories. Feminism has exposed how traditional democratic models, despite their claims to universalistic principles, are based upon a false universalism which has led to the 'othering' and exclusion of women on the basis of gender (Cockburn, 2005b; Lister, 2005; Young, 1997). The argument is summed up by Young:

The bourgeois world instituted a moral division of labour between reason and sentiment, identifying masculinity with reason and femininity with sentiment, desire and the needs of the body. Extolling a public realm of manly virtue and citizenship as independence, generality, and dispassionate reason entailed creating the private sphere of the family as the place to which emotion, sentiment, and bodily needs must be confined. The generality of the public thus depends on excluding women, who are responsible for attending to that private realm, and who lack the dispassionate rationality and independence required of good citizens (1997, p. 258).

Not only have feminists challenged the gendered nature of citizenship and participatory practice, they have also questioned the notion of an autonomous, independent individual, preferring instead to emphasise people's connectedness to others rather than their autonomy and separateness (Gilligan, 1982). The autonomy associated with participation does not require an illusory self-sufficiency; rather it is based upon the ability to make and act upon one's choices which is contingent upon human interdependence (Young, 1997; Lister, 2005).

Similarly, Moss and Petrie (2005) appeal to feminist arguments that suggest citizenship is realised through interconnectedness, in which everyone is dependent upon care. For example, those who undertake citizenship responsibilities of full-time employment are dependent upon those who assume domestic or caring responsibilities, and vice versa. Notions of interdependence and an 'ethic of care' (Sevenhuijsen, 1998) challenge characteristics such as independence and a paid-work ethic that are traditionally tied up with participation. Care should no longer be constructed as an obstacle to citizenship; rather it should be seen as an expression of citizenship (Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Lister, 2006b). As discussed earlier, this argument is pertinent to those children who take on the responsibility of caring for others. These feminist arguments about citizenship, care and human interdependence between men and women can also be applied to adults and children. Children are dependent upon adults, but adults are also dependent upon children in terms of children's role in constructing and reconstructing society (James and Prout, 1997) and in receiving and giving care (Lister, 2006b).

Feminist scholars have also called for a blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private, arguing that dichotomies can lead to discrimination. They suggest that there are multiple subject positions occupied by citizens within different spheres (Pateman, 1992; Stephens, 1995; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Lister, 2006b). Feminist critiques have revealed how women's lack of recognition has excluded them from 'full participation' in the community. Likewise, children have been largely confined to the private sphere and have been marginalised from full participation, not on the basis of their gender but on account of generational relations (Alanen, 2001). Moosa-Mitha (2005) suggests that the public-private dichotomy has resulted in marginalising children's interests and needs, has denied children a genuine public identity and has ignored the valuable contribution they make to society. Several commentators argue that, whereas women have increasingly become part of the public as well as private sphere, children continue to be hidden in the private sphere and excluded from many public spaces or are concentrated in adult controlled spaces (Cockburn, 1998; Prout, 2000; Wyness, et al., 2004; Cohen, 2005). Feminist theory, however, has broadened understandings of the 'political' to include multiple spheres of action such that children's participation in everyday situations, like the family, neighbourhood, children's centre and school, has public and political significance (Pateman, 1992; Stephens, 1995; Lister, 2006b). Cockburn (2005b; 2007) argues, therefore, that the onus should not be put on

children and other marginalised people to change to suit political spaces but that political spaces must change themselves to accommodate the everyday worlds of children and other often neglected adults.

A further critique that feminists such as Young (1998) have outlined, is that the modern world has artificially collapsed the public into a homogenous reified ideal such that participation in the public sphere requires an expectation that individuals will gel into a collectivity of shared identities. This is encapsulated in the modern ideal of universal citizenship which implies that participation transcends particularity and difference. Young points out, however, that this is problematic because it takes no account of group differences. Lister (2007b) observes that this critique has also been taken up by difference-centred theorists such as gay, black, postcolonial and disabled scholars.

### **Difference-Centred Theories**

Kymlicka (2002) observes that in contemporary times, previously excluded groups are no longer willing to be assimilated, marginalised or silenced from participation on account that they differ in race, culture, gender, ability, or sexual orientation from the dominant culture. They demand a more inclusive conception of democracy which recognises, rather than stigmatises, their identities, and which accommodates, rather than excludes, their differences. Calls to deepen democracy have thus involved a struggle for recognition of cultural differences and an acknowledgement of structural inequalities in order for marginalised groups to be able to belong to political communities and to participate as citizens (Fraser, 1998; Young, 2000).

Theorists such as Taylor (1995) and Honneth (2004) have proposed a 'politics of recognition' that is facilitated through dialogue with others. This dialogical relationship is said to be crucial for the development of an individual's identity and takes place through a process of mutual recognition (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Other political scientists, such as Fraser (2000) and Young (2000), have argued that recognition involves a politics that addresses social status so that the misrecognised person or group is positioned as a 'full member of society capable of participating on a par with the rest' (Fraser 2000, p. 4). They suggest that recognition requires greater attention to cultural pluralism and group-differentiated rights in order to address the status inequalities faced by subaltern groups (Young, 1998; Fraser, 1998; 1999). Although children, as a specific

group, do not feature in these scholars' accounts, Fitzgerald et al. (2010) suggest that a politics of recognition is an appropriate lens through which to conceptualise children's participation because 'it allows for a focus on identity (children's understanding of who they are) as well as on status (the ways in which they are able to fully participate in society)' (p. 297).

Based on a politics of recognition, a few scholars have proposed a number of strategies to address children's misrecognition. Strategies include: recognition and respect for what children hold in common with adults as well as for their differences (Neale, 2004; Lister, 2007a); acknowledgment of children's agency and presence in the different spheres and relationships in which they participate (Moosa-Mitha, 2005); the articulation of children's special 'cultural rights' that attend to their group differences in order to address oppression and disadvantage, such as those contained within the UNCRC (Bauböck, 2001); and the provision of mechanisms that facilitate children's participation as political and social actors (Lister, 2008).

These claims for recognition overlap with Fraser's (1999) notion of 'participatory parity'. Writing about adults, Fraser (1999) argues that inclusive citizenship requires 'social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact with one another as peers' (p. 37). She suggests that parity of participation requires the following two conditions: the distribution of material and legal resources so as to ensure participants' independence and 'voice'; and institutionalized patterns of cultural value which 'express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem' (p. 37). This is to counteract injustices faced by those in disadvantaged positions, for example due to poverty (Lister, 2004) or a disabling society (Shakespeare, 2005), who experience both socio-economic injustices of deprivation and cultural ones of withheld recognition (Lewis, 2009). Fraser (1998) asserts that the remedy for socio-economic injustice involves redistribution of resources and the remedy for cultural or symbolic injustice involves recognition and respect for distinctive perspectives. Thus Fraser (1998) contends that 'people who are subject to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution' (p. 435). In the case of children living in poverty, who find themselves at the bottom of economic *and* cultural hierarchies, the principle of participation parity, in which both redistribution and recognition is required, is extremely pertinent.

Young (2000) proposes a number of conditions necessary for structural and cultural change. She suggests that structural inequalities tend to be reinforced by the operation of formal democratic mechanisms, and that voting equality is only a minimal condition of political equality. Her argument is that representation and participation 'mutually require each other' (p. 124). Thus Young eschews the non-participatory/participatory divide through which liberal and republican models define themselves. She suggests that representation works when representatives don't just represent groups of citizens, but are actively connected with them through deliberative mechanisms. For Young, therefore, our understanding of democracy must become both 'voice-centred' and 'vote-centred' since representation is most inclusive when it encourages marginalised groups to express their perspectives. Thus structural and cultural change needs to come in two directions: a wider range of social groups need to have access to democratic institutions and processes; and those institutions and processes need to adapt in order to accommodate new groups with different perspectives and ways of expressing themselves. Although Young does not connect her argument with children, Thomas (2007) suggests that the relevance to children is readily apparent.

Young asserts that inclusive communication is essential if democracy is to be deepened and exclusion avoided. Exclusion can take place both externally and internally. External exclusion refers to 'how people are kept outside the process of discussion and decision-making' and internal exclusion refers to situations where:

Though formally included in a forum or process, people may find that their claims are not taken seriously and may believe that they are not treated with equal respect. The dominant mood may find their ideas or modes of expression silly or simple, and not worthy of consideration (Young 2000, p. 55).

Young's discussion of different mechanisms of exclusion are particularly apposite for young children, or children with impairments, who may find their modes of expression disregarded as stupid, humorous or irrelevant on the basis of an assumed lack of competence. Rather than using the term 'deliberative democracy', Young prefers to express her model of democratic participation as 'communicative democracy' to get away from the idea that democracy is equated with neutral, rational, verbal argument. Indeed, Young acknowledges other important modes of communication which she calls 'greeting', 'rhetoric' and 'narrative'. 'Greeting' involves recognising others as included in the discussion, especially those who differ in terms of opinion, interest or social

location. 'Rhetoric' refers to the variety of ways something can be said, including emotional tone, use of figures of speech, non-verbal and symbolic gestures. Finally, 'narrative' storytelling and situated knowledge should not be dismissed as 'mere anecdotes' since they are vital in enabling people to understand the experience of others and to develop a shared discourse. These concepts of greeting, rhetoric and narrative have obvious relevance to young children's participation.

Difference-centred theorists such as Young (1998; 2000) and Mouffe (1992a) also refute the false dichotomy of political participation as an expression of the common good, and participation as an expression of conflicts of interest. They claim that both consensus and conflict are positive tools and are necessary in the interests of the polity as a whole. Mouffe (1992a) suggests that a radical conception of a public common good needs to be adopted to acknowledge participation and civic activity. However, this common good must not be reified but should be seen as an ideal that will probably never be reached. For spaces to be democratic, the power relations that have dominated different people should be acknowledged, and differences should be articulated as equivocal relations, rather than as ranked hierarchies. Young (1998) posits that 'consensus and sharing may not always be the goal, but rather the recognition and appreciation of differences, in the context of confrontation with power' (p. 444). Reflecting on this, Cockburn (2007) suggests: 'For something truly pluralistic it is necessary for public forums to recognise and express differences and different group interests' (p. 450). He argues that public forums must provide the space to enable all groups, including children, to express their interests. A more sensitive public pluralism, in which children can engage, therefore recognises the value of an 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe, 2000) that does not believe it possible or even desirable to eradicate difference in a search for consensus.

Moosa-Mitha (2005) describes how anti-racist and black feminist theorists have also expanded the meaning of participation by challenging definitions of participation as outcomes-driven or externally situated. Participation may not result in making a difference that is material in nature. Overt and covert acts of resistance against oppression, such as an inward refusal to believe oneself to be inferior, are also understood as being participatory (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Liebel (2008) concurs, arguing that children's open and hidden forms of resistance may be understood as children expressing their 'citizenship from below' as opposed to 'top-down', outcomes-driven

participation initiatives. Moosa-Mitha (2005) suggests this alternative conceptualisation of participation recognises different ways of participating and affirms the right to participate differently in the social institutions and culture of the society.

To summarise, political theorists, who centre difference in their analysis, interrogate the hegemonic discourses and practices that include and exclude certain people from participating and belonging to political communities, on the basis of their difference. They challenge the normative binaries inherent within liberal and republican notions of participation and broaden the meaning of participation beyond the non-participatory/participatory, representative/deliberative, private/public, consensus/conflict divides. A politics of recognition (difference) and redistribution (equality) opens up one possible space for the inclusion of children and acknowledges their presence as participating subjects in the multiple spheres and relationships in which they interact.

These theorists make clear, however, that a politics of recognition and redistribution involves a struggle of some kind, since merely recognising children's rights to participate 'or proclaiming that they are capable participants, does not, in and of itself, create, effect or transform participation' (Fitzgerald et al. 2010, p. 301). Rather, the struggle for participation also encompasses a focus on the distribution and workings of power, since 'children's participation is imbued with power relations which simultaneously constrain and enable any emancipatory possibilities' (Fitzgerald et al. 2010, p. 301). Therefore, I now consider the notion of power as another way of understanding children's participation.

### **2.5.3 Theories of Power and Governmentality**

Hill et al. (2004) argue that 'almost all discourse about children's participation refers back at least implicitly to notions of power; less often, however, does that involve explicit identification... of what is meant by power and how power operates' (p. 89). An examination of what power is and how it operates is crucial for understanding children's participation, since any participation in consultation or decision-making processes involves power of some sort (Prout and Tisdall, 2006; Gallagher, 2008a).

Many advocates of participation argue that participatory approaches provide an alternative to dominating forms of government since they seek to redistribute power (Alderson 2001a; Grover 2004; Holt 2004; Kellett 2005). Participation claims to empower children and emancipate them from oppressive practices. This is based on a 'sovereign' view of power in which power is conceptualised as a commodity concentrated in the hands of a few. Foucault's work on power, however, recognises this sovereign model but conceptualises power as a form of action rather than as a commodity. These two views of power impact upon theorisations of children's participation.

### **A 'Sovereign' View of Power**

A 'sovereign' view of power is one in which power emanates from the top of a social hierarchy downwards and is used to control and subordinate people and recreate ideologies that maintain relations of dominance (Maguire, 1987). Power is conceived as a commodity inherent within powerful subjects and a force that is imposed by one set of subjects, such as the ruling class, on others (Healy, 2005). It is polarised between those who have it, such as adults, and those who lack it, such as children. Thus it is seen as negative or repressive. In this sense power is a zero-sum game through which power can only be gained by taking it from another (Hill et al., 2004). This view of power has underpinned discussions about children's participation such as how power differentials can be reduced and how the child might be 'empowered' and 'given a voice'. Indeed, a sovereign view of power is embedded within the participation typologies discussed above. The typologies classify children's participation according to who has power: adults, children or both. For example, in Hart's (1992) taxonomy 'shared power' between adults and children is typically conceptualised as a 'high point' for participation. In Shier's (2001) model, full participation necessitates adults 'giving away' some of their power. Despite the variations in the typologies, however, the essence is the same: power is understood as something which adults possess but can transfer to children, should they so choose.

Participation typologies are useful analytical resources in looking at children's participation based on a conception of power as something exercised over others. At the simplest level, it is obvious that sovereign power is an issue when we consider children and their participation: adults are physically stronger, and have more knowledge about



certain areas of life, and children are economically and politically dependent on adults. The sovereign view of power, however, takes no account of the social agency of children, who are not simply acted upon (Moss and Petrie, 2002), nor the multiple points of resistance and confrontation at which children are able to exercise power over adults (Gallagher, 2008b). Mayall (2000) and Christensen (2004) argue, therefore, that discussions of power need to start with recognising rather than ignoring children's subordinate position, but then move beyond this sovereign view, in which one group has power and another has none, to a more sophisticated and complex understanding. Christensen (2004) suggests that power is far more diverse and pervasive. She proposes that we move away from seeing power as residing in people and social positions towards viewing power as embedded in social processes and discourses. The idea of power being exercised, rather than possessed, and dispersed rather than fixed, has its origins in Foucault's conceptualisation of power.

### **A Foucauldian View of Power**

A Foucauldian view of power does not dispute the power differentials in participatory activity with children as *effects* of power, but challenges the established understanding of how these effects are produced. According to Foucault (1976a; 1977), power is not concentrated in certain areas of the social structure, nor is it a commodity to be held, seized, divided or distributed by individuals. It exists only through actions and is a ubiquitous force, acting everywhere as a feature of all social relations. Thus power is not inherent within powerful individuals, groups or institutions but is dispersed throughout complex networks of discourses (certain ways of speaking and writing), technologies (certain practices, instruments and techniques) and relationships. Power is not a 'thing' but is 'relations', fluid and open to constant change and influence:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation (Foucault, 1980a p. 98).

Gallagher (2008a) argues that, if we apply a Foucauldian understanding of power to children's participation, we shift our focus on *who* possesses power to a consideration of *how* power is exercised through networks of relations, under what conditions and with what effects. Since all of these factors are subject to change we need to recognise that

participation is dynamic and that 'no instance of children's participation will be quite the same as the other' (p. 398). Thus, a Foucauldian perspective helps to acknowledge the existence of multiple shifting relations of power in participatory activity: between practitioners and young children, researchers and participants, children of different ages and genders, and so forth (Gallagher, 2008b).

Foucault's understanding of power as circulating through networks leads him to suggest that power should be analysed from the bottom up, from the local to the structural, rather than the other way round (Foucault, 1980a). He argues that a focus on macro processes of power is not particularly useful for understanding the micro politics of power in local contexts. Rather than seeing power relations as merely an effect of macro structures, such as capitalism or paternalism, power also animates many more everyday small-scale practices. Powers exercised at a large scale depend upon powers exercised at smaller scales, whilst powers exercised at smaller scales may be influenced or made possible by larger scale strategies of power. Gallagher (2008a) asserts that the implication of this for understanding children's participation is that we should consider how small-scale, everyday practices of participation are nested within larger organisational strategies, and how these strategies fit within still larger national and international frameworks.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and *Power/Knowledge* (1980a), Foucault focuses on the totalising nature of power as domination. He explores the way in which disciplinary mechanisms of knowledge and power shape the 'subject', using increasingly sophisticated technologies of surveillance to create, classify and control anomalies in the social body (Rabinow, 1984), and to construct individuals as 'docile bodies'. He uses the concepts of 'biopower' and 'normalisation' to describe 'the increasing ordering in all realms, cataloguing individuals according to their normality/abnormality under the guise of improving the welfare of the individual' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, p. xxii) and in the best interests of the subject. Disciplinary power has the ability to shape both the population as a whole and individual subjectivity through claims to knowledge and truth and by the application of a range of techniques or disciplines such as surveillance, normalisation, exclusion, classification and regulation (Gore, 1998). Thus, disciplinary power is an objectivising force (Foucault, 1982). To illustrate this Foucault uses the metaphor of the 'panopticon' which renders individuals within society totally visible while concealing the disciplinary mechanism. Applying Foucault's ideas to

participation, as a discourse and technology, participation can be viewed as another panopticon: a means to govern children more effectively without them necessarily realising it. This occurs not through coercion or direct force, but through techniques of 'listening' and bringing children ever more constantly under surveillance. It also occurs through 'normalising' certain desired forms of participation and thus defining what is deficient in terms of participation.

Gallagher (2008a) argues that Foucault is widely understood by childhood researchers to have theorised power as a form of social control with dangerous effects. He suggests, however, that Foucault's later work on 'governmentality' offers a more ambivalent conception of power: dangerous and full of promise, a means of control and a means of resistance. In contrast to the view that power is inherently negative or repressive, Foucault conceived power as inherently productive (of actions, effects and subjects), even when at its most oppressive (Ransom, 1997; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Healy, 2005; Kesby, 2005). He argues that people submit to power because they gain something from their submission:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse (Foucault 1980b, p. 119).

Thus power governs not simply by refusal but also by permission: by telling people what they must be (such as 'participants'); by enabling and conditioning the possibilities for their action (for example, inciting people to participate as self-governing agents); and by constituting a 'mentality' or 'regime of truth' (in this case, participation) by which they may understand and conduct their lives.

Governmentality theory, as outlined by Foucault, is based on an analysis of power as social production, rather than social control. It describes the process through which individuals come to govern themselves, or as Foucault (1982) put it, governmentality is 'the conduct of conduct'. In the context of globalisation, the increasing complexity of today's society, and the rise of liberal democracies, it is no longer possible for the state to govern without the cooperation of other actors (Taylor, 2007). Therefore, effective government depends not upon crushing the agency of subjects, but rather in cultivating this agency in particular ways so that the self is complicit in disciplining the self

(Foucault, 1992). The subject is thus redefined, for example as an autonomous learner or as a participating child. Central to this argument is the idea that the exercise of power requires the compliance of willing subjects. For Foucault, power is most effective where it is 'normalised': where self-expectation and self-governance generate compliant subjects who, by their own thoughts, words and actions, actively reproduce dominant discourses, such as 'participation', without being forced to do so (Kesby, 2003).

Gallagher (2006; 2008a) argues that the concept of governmentality contains an important ambiguity. Modern governmental power attempts to produce subjects who will be so effective at regulating their own conduct that they will ultimately have no need of any external supervising power. This insidious form of power could be seen as a dangerous form of domination. On the other hand, the ability to regulate and conduct oneself could be considered as the very basis of autonomy and freedom. This ambiguity helps to explain how:

... human beings are enlisted into wider patterns of normative control, often acting as their own overseers, while believing themselves to be free of power, making their own choices, pursuing their own interests, assessing arguments rationally and coming to their own conclusions (Lukes 2005, p. 106).

McNay (1994) argues that the development of Foucault's ideas of governmentality changes power from the 'objectivising' force of disciplinary power to a 'subjectivising' force. Hence, power does not simply dominate the individual and turn him/her into an object, it also creates him/her as a particular subject. Modern power, therefore, is simultaneously totalising and individualising (Foucault, 1982). Gallagher (2008a) transposes these ideas to children's participation:

The rise of children's participation might be seen as emerging from the recognition that the effective government of children depends upon securing their complicity in the process. Equally, this can be seen as a tacit admission of the dependence of governmental organisations (the state, the school, the police etc) upon the agency of children. Only if the agents which make up these organisations are willing to comply with their aims can the organisations - as nothing more than the sum total of all the power relations between their subjects - achieve those aims (p. 402).

This has two important implications. Firstly, the power of social institutions and the power of individuals are mutually interdependent (Hinton, 2006). Gallagher (2006) argues that this sheds light on the structure-agency debate within social science, suggesting that the power of structures depends on the agencies of all individuals

involved and vice versa: 'Understood in this way, the power of agents and the power of structures appear not as mutually exclusive opposites, but rather as entirely co-dependent' (p. 164). Participation is thus the frontier on which the wills of individuals and the wills of institutions directly confront one another, and are forced to acknowledge their mutual dependence (Gallagher, 2006). Secondly, in participatory processes the child is both subject to government but is also activated as a subject with agency, and therefore neither wholly subjected nor entirely self-defining and self-regulating (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006). As Prout (2000) argues, control and self-realisation, far from being opposed, are in fact intimately connected, albeit through relations of conflict and struggle. Thus, participation has the potential for both subordination and subject-formation (Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005).

Participation also has the potential for both compliance and insubordination. There are choices between having voice within participatory structures and processes, and exercising countervailing power through resistance or confrontation (Taylor, 2007). This opens up possibilities for understanding children's participation, for example by examining how power is being exercised through tactics of compliance, coaxing, persuasion, refusal, persistence or evasion (Gallagher, 2008a). The implication of this for understanding children's participation, in the context of a children's centre, is to consider how children exercise power to comply with or resist the power exercised over them by practitioners.

Cooke and Kothari's (2001) poststructural critique of participation, in which even emancipatory discourses are systems of power with the capacity to dominate, has led them to view participation and participatory techniques as essentially tyrannical. Therefore, they urge people to seek empowerment through acts of resistance to participation. Kesby (2005), however, is more optimistic, arguing that while Foucault's analysis is helpful in understanding that participation is a form of power with potentially dominating effects, there are other discourses that are more dangerous. Participation may not be the most oppressive form of government. Rather, it might be utilised as a technology to outmanoeuvre more domineering forms of power. Since power is ubiquitous and cannot be avoided, 'there is no escaping the necessity to deploy less dominating forms of power (like participation) in order to destabilise more dominating arrangements' (Kesby 2005, p. 2037) (like those framing adult-child relations such as developmentalism, socialisation or behaviourism). Participatory power can be a mode

of governance that facilitates resistance and transformation. Gaventa and Cornwall (2006) also take an optimistic view, pointing to the positive aspects through which power enables action and participation. Power may not be a zero-sum game in which, for children to acquire power, adults needs to concede some of it: 'Rather power may have a synergistic element, such that action by some enables more action by others' (Gaventa and Cornwall 2006, p. 74). Prout and Tisdall (2006) agree, arguing that 'If power, in at least some contexts of children's participation, is not a zero-sum game, then children's relationships with adults might open the way to mutually beneficial outcomes in which both increase their power' (p. 244-245).

Rather than seeking to wish away the power differentials, which is impossible, we need to be critically aware of how they operate through discourses, practices and relationships, including our own part in these relations. To do this, Sevenhuijsen (1998) argues that we should work with:

...a multi-faceted understanding of power, which can capture both its restraining and enabling, creative and generative dimensions, and which can also differentiate between power and domination. Such an understanding should make sure that power is recognisable and manageable, and that unfair differences in treatment or arbitrariness cannot take hold of public decision-making (p. 66).

From a Foucauldian perspective, if we conceptualise participation as a form of power, then participation has the potential to enable decision-making as well as to constrain it, to listen to certain voices whilst excluding others, and to construct new forms of knowledge whilst obscuring other ways of knowing. Gallagher (2008a) suggests that this ambiguous understanding of power is particularly useful for understanding children's participation since it helps to overcome much of the polarised thinking inherent within prevailing narratives about participation, where it is considered inherently good or essentially tyrannical; empowering or ineffectual; involves consensus or conflict, self-realisation or control. Despite the claims that participation empowers and emancipates children from dominant regimes of power, in the light of Foucault's perspective of governmentality, it is not clear that children's participation is always liberating, that it guarantees freedom or that it reduces government. Governmentality theory reveals participation as a form of governing power, not because it controls or suppresses the individual's freedom, but because it offers and defines a

specific possibility for the subject to put her freedom into practice, that is to govern herself (Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005). In summary, a Foucauldian understanding of power uncovers children's participation as ambiguous: both dangerous and full of promise; oppressive and productive; both a means of control and a means of self-realisation and resistance (Clark et al., 2005; Kesby, 2005; Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005; Gallagher 2006; 2008a; 2008b).

During this section I have considered a variety of ways of conceptualising the field of children's participation, drawing upon typologies and exogenous concepts from political theory. Children have seldom featured in political scientists' analyses of participation as it relates to democracy, power and governmentality (Arnott, 2008). Thomas (2007) suggests that applying political theory to children's participation helps us to consider participation in terms of power, difference, challenge, and change. These conceptual resources offer us rich theoretical devices to explore some of the myriad forms of children's participation. They also help us to understand the ambiguity inherent within the construct. One final way of understanding children's participation foregrounds the different spatial and relational contexts of children's lives and their ethical and political implications.

#### **2.5.4 Relational and Spatial Notions of Participation**

In the UK, children's participation tends to be defined rather narrowly as 'voice', 'consultation' or 'listening' to children (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). This is unsurprising given the emphasis on ascertaining children's views in the UNCRC, and other subsequent legislation (see Section 2.3). It also reflects a particular neo-liberal understanding of rights linked to market-oriented consumer discourses which emphasise choice, personalisation and individualism (Clark et al., 2005; Moss, 2008; Lewis, 2010; Mason and Bolzan, 2010). In majority world countries, however, participation often has a wider meaning of 'active contribution to the family and community' (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Mason and Bolzan, 2010). This understanding of participation encompasses feeling part of a community and having a sense of belonging (Clark et al., 2005; Rinaldi, 2005) and occurs primarily within a context of responsibility to family and community, rather than individual rights (Mason and Bolzan, 2010). It is less individualistic and more relational.

A few authors suggest that it is time to move beyond, although not entirely reject, current westernised discourses of 'listening' and 'children's participation' in order to open up participation as a relational and dialogical process (Percy-Smith, 2006; Mannion, 2007; 2010; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010a and b). Graham and Fitzgerald (2010b) argue that when participation is framed as a dialogical encounter adults and children clarify together what is happening and consider new possibilities. This has a 'far broader focus than just listening to children's voices since its potentiality is *change*' (p. 450 emphasis in original). Morrow (2008) wonders whether 'children's participation' has become too child-focused. She suggests that:

... we are in danger of abstracting children's participation as an end in itself and thus losing sight of the way in which children and adults are interconnected, and the ways in which adult structures and institutions constrain children (p. 122).

Others concur, suggesting a shift in attention from children *per se* to children in relation to others (Prout and Tisdall, 2006; Schiller and Einarsdottir, 2009).

This leads Percy-Smith (2006) and Mannion (2007; 2010) to reframe children's participation as adult-child relations and as collaborative intergenerational spaces. Percy-Smith (2006) argues that more collaborative approaches mean more actions are possible, through joint problem-solving between people of all ages. This is evocative of Young's (2000) version of democracy 'as a means of collective problem-solving which depends for its legitimacy and wisdom on the expression and criticism of the diverse opinions of all the members of the society' (p. 6). For Percy-Smith, participation is not just a means of individuals voicing their views, but needs to be seen as a collective process of intergenerational inquiry, learning and dialogue. Fitzgerald et al. (2010) characterise this as a turn from the monological to the dialogical. Drawing upon Habermas' (1987) theory of system and lifeworld and the traditions of action research (Kemmis, 2001), Percy-Smith (2006; 2007) proposes the idea of conceptualising participation as 'communicative action spaces'. These spaces are created through a process of learning, reflection, dialogue and action in response to issues, whoever identifies or initiates them. Learning and action need to happen at the level of the individual (in terms of Freire's notion of critical consciousness), the interpersonal (in terms of exploring and negotiating solutions in dialogue with others) and the systemic (in terms of the whole service, organisation or 'field').



Mannion (2007; 2010) also reconfigures participation to emphasise the spatial as well as the relational and dialogical. Children construct their own childhood spaces and yet they are also marginalised by adult-imposed structures and spatialities. Drawing on Moss and Petrie's (2002) notion of 'children's spaces' (discussed further in Chapter 4), Mannion suggests that spaces are material, in the form of the physical environment and the objects therein, as well as discursive, in terms of spaces wherein children and adults together contest understandings, practices and knowledges. Spaces are not just a background or container for participation and action, instead 'spaces are part of the action, and very consequential in the forms of behaviour they afford and the emergence of the identities that inhabit them' (2010, p. 333). Mannion suggests, therefore, that we need to reframe participation research as the study of and in the *spaces* of child-adult *relations*.

Finally, whilst not rejecting current minority world rights-based discourses of 'listening', Clark et al. (2005) endeavour to go beyond them in order to open up participation as part of an ethical and democratic practice. They propose conceptualising participation not simply as rights, or as a tactic or programme to be applied from time to time, but as a way of life, a culture, a continuous process and relationship, an ethic. In this way, participation moves beyond entitlements and the right to 'have a say' to a wider concept of 'active citizenship' (Woodhead, 2010). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Clark et al. (2005) suggest, therefore, that the participation discourse is understood less as rights and rules and more as an ethic of openness and respect for the other, characterised by interpersonal notions of care, interdependence and solidarity. They propose we look beyond universal rights discourses, in which listening and participation can be interpreted as technical practice, method or tool, and instead view participation as an ethic that permeates all practice and relationships. Thus participation can move beyond the technical and managerial to the ethical and political.

Rather than simply understanding participation as a process of improving communication and enabling people to better articulate preferences and choices, participation can be seen as part of a practice of 'minor politics'. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) describe 'minor politics' as a creative process arising from contestation between people engaged in collective critical thinking and action around small everyday, local concerns. When participation is seen as part of a practice of minor politics, it becomes a

means of: 'being governed less by dominant discourses and through governmentality; resisting processes of subjectification; and confronting injustice' (p. 141). Hence, participation can open up a new terrain where difference is welcomed, common values, assumptions and practices are open to question, and alternative possibilities are imagined and enacted.

## **2.6 A Reflexive Response**

My review of the participation literature suggests that the concept and practice of children's participation is complex and ambiguous, problematic and yet full of possibilities. Before addressing the empirical research question, 'What does children's participation mean in a children's centre context?' I have considered what the concept means in UK policy and practice, and in theory. It now seems appropriate to reflect on 'What does children's participation mean to me?' Snapshots of my own early childhood experiences provide some insight into why, despite all its problems and risks, I consider children's participation to be of the utmost importance.

My early years took place during the 1970s in the south of England. This was long before the UNCRC and the idea that children might be afforded the right to have a say in all decisions affecting them, and considered capable of exercising citizenship rights and responsibilities. As the eldest of three children, and growing up in a lone-parent family on social security benefits, I had a keen sense of responsibility, fairness and injustice. My earliest memory is as a toddler, fetching nappies for my twin sisters. From an early age, I assumed various domestic and caring responsibilities at home whilst my mother, who was suffering from depression, struggled to look after us. At the age of four I was given the choice of deciding if I wanted to remain living at home or live with my father. At the age of five I can remember explaining rather nervously to the head teacher of my infant school that it was unfair that the girls were not allowed to play football with the boys, and should not be forced to participate in country dancing if the boys weren't. As a result, the school changed its curriculum policy. At the age of six I wrote to the civic mayor explaining that the local park was unsafe for children and making suggestions for how it might be improved. My letter was acknowledged, but nothing changed and no explanation was given. At the age of seven, I became acutely aware of the urgent need for adults to listen to children when my friend, Dominique Brewer, was murdered by her mother. I'd made friends with Dominique because no one

wanted to play with her since she was withdrawn and 'different'. I remember wondering why no one had listened to her cries of unhappiness and done something about it before it was too late. At the age of eight I joined a group of children called 'Changemakers' who were buying and selling fair trade teabags to raise money for children experiencing poverty in other countries.

Taken together, these experiences highlight a number of ways in which I 'participated' in the private and public sphere as a young child. Although I would not have described myself as a participant or citizen, I certainly had some understanding that my opinions and actions mattered. I think that the main reason for this was that my mother encouraged me to participate in family decisions and to talk about and act upon the issues that bothered me in our school, neighbourhood and world, even if it meant approaching adults in authority. Her attitude and assistance enabled me to realise that I could participate in shaping not just the direction of my own life, but also the local services and wider community to which I belonged. As I look back, I realise that I was engaged in a 'minor politics' of recognition and redistribution, but this was not as an independent individual. Rather, my participation was interdependent upon other adults and children being prepared, or not, as the case may be, to engage in a dialogical encounter that opened up possibilities for change and action.

It is experiences such as these that have been foundational in helping me to appreciate that the views, experiences and citizenship practices of our youngest children should not be left unrecognised on account of their age or their assumed lack of competency. Alongside this ambition, I share with Clark et al. (2005) a certain ambivalence towards the project of 'children's participation'. Having read poststructural critiques of participation that draw upon Foucault's analysis of power, I have come to appreciate that there are risks in carrying out this type of research. For example, there are risks of tokenism and of seeking children's participation to satisfy adult instrumental agendas, including my own. This research, and my presence in the children's centre, has potentially dominating effects. Whilst I may want to pursue emancipatory practices, and appreciate the positive, if inevitably constrained, potential of child-adult participation, I am fearful of perpetuating processes of normalisation and subjectification that govern children, parents and practitioners. The only way I can see of plotting a way through this is to adopt a critical and reflexive perspective of my own thoughts, behaviours and

actions, and to remember that I deny the value of participation when I treat it simply as a task to be achieved rather than as an ongoing ethical encounter.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

During this chapter I have examined children's participation in UK policy and practice and explored different conceptions of participation in social and political theory. I have discussed the contested nature of children's participation, and suggested that its discourses and practices are inherently ambiguous. Consequently, we may need to resist clear distinctions (for example, between consultation/participation, private/public, representative/deliberative, individual/collective, method/ethic) and binary thinking (liberating/oppressive, consensus/conflict, self-realisation/control) that prevails in much participation discourse. Instead, we might adopt more hybridised understandings. I have also suggested that the participation discourse means different things in different contexts. Any research on children's participation, therefore, needs to be contextualised: spatially, temporally and relationally.

I have argued that children's participation can be attached to different agendas and deployed in a number of ways. For example, it can be understood as part of an essentially neo-liberal project of 'voice', 'choice' and 'user involvement'; as a framework for children's rights; as part of a Foucauldian furtherance of 'governmentality'; as a vehicle for tackling social exclusion; as a form of democratic engagement and active citizenship; and as a mixture of all or some of these. Viewed as an ethical and political concept, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue participation can move beyond particular liberal and contractual ideas of individual rights, views and decisions, to be understood as an ongoing dialogical encounter and a vehicle for social engagement and transformation.

Research evidence suggests that young children, specifically those under the age of eight, have faced particular barriers to participation in social and research processes and that this may be due, in part, to the way they have been conceptualised (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Kirby et al., 2003; McNeish and Newman, 2002; Clark et al., 2003; Clark et al., 2005; Pascal and Bertram, 2009; Lansdown, 2010). Having explored some of the various conceptualisations of 'participation', in the next chapter I consider some of the

different ways young children have been conceptualised and the bearing this has upon their participation.

## **3. Conceptualising Children**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The way we conceptualise children is inextricably linked to our understanding of children's participation. Constructions of childhood differ widely and can have a profound impact upon adult attitudes to the participation of children (Morrow, 1999; Shemmings, 2000; Prout, 2001). Sinclair (2004) argues that acceptance of children's participation has been stimulated by a new social science paradigm which has increased our understanding of children as social actors, competent to be able to communicate their perspectives and to participate in decision-making. In this chapter I explore this new sociological approach to the study of children and contrast it with other theoretical frameworks of researching childhood. I consider some of the underlying assumptions made about young children and the implications these have for children's participation in social and research processes in general, and for my methodological approach in particular.

### **3.2 Representations of Childhood**

Goldson (1997) argues that there is no precise definition of 'child' or 'childhood' since there are great variations in the way children and childhood have been and continue to be represented across different theoretical disciplines and discourses. The social significance of these terms changes depending on the context in which they are created or applied. Indeed, ideas of children and childhood are products of particular times, places and cultures. In this section I explore how children have been categorised and constructed, and consider a number of different representations or images of the child contained within contemporary discourse and recent early years policy in England. Following this I examine some of the underlying theoretical approaches that give rise to these representations of children and childhood.

#### **3.2.1 Categorisations of Childhood**

On the one hand, the term 'child' may seem like a natural and unproblematic category, referring to the early years of the life-course and often used, in a legal context, to

describe a person under the age of eighteen. It is part of a cluster of age categories - 'infant', 'child', 'teenager' and 'adult' - arrayed in a line of cumulative growth and aging (Thorne, 2009). On the other hand, age-based definitions of particular life phases and Western distinctions between 'babies', 'toddlers', 'preschoolers', and so forth are not universal. In some societies age is not recorded and childhood is not defined by age. Rather, it is a process of negotiation between family, peers and the wider community in the context of life events and rites of passage (Hinton, 2006). James and James (2008) argue that in industrialized nations such as England, the concept of age as a classificatory marker of identity has been used to separate children out as a special group in society and to restrict the kinds of activities and social spaces to which they have access. The tendency for contemporary Western societies to draw distinctions between childhood and adulthood and to categorise human development into a number of discrete stages suggests that our image or understanding of the child is socially constructed. This idea was first posited by Ariès and has since been taken up by scholars from a variety of disciplines.

### **3.2.2 Childhood as a Social Construction**

Drawing on a range of medieval artefacts, including paintings and diaries, Ariès' (1962) contends that the idea of childhood as a separate state to adulthood is a modern one. He argues that, from the fifteenth century, children began to appear as children instead of being depicted as miniature adults, reflecting their gradual removal from everyday adult society. Following the emergence of popular and then compulsory schooling in the late nineteenth century in Europe, the specific category of 'childhood' was constructed.

In spite of several criticisms, for example a tendency towards essentialism (Archard, 2004) and Euro-centrism (Kinney, 1995), Ariès' work has had enormous influence on the study of childhood. It has challenged the assumption that childhood is merely a universal biological stage in the life course. Rather, childhood is understood as a historically and socially constructed notion. From this perspective, childhood is neither fixed nor universal. It is 'mobile and shifting' (Walkerline, 2009) and formed through diverse discourses and practices (Cunningham, 1991; Hendrick, 1997a; Heywood, 2001). Therefore, it is impossible to speak of 'childhood' as though it is always and everywhere the same. Instead we need to speak of multiple 'childhoods', recognising their diversity across time, space, culture and discourse (Jenks, 1996a). Thus, like the

concept of 'participation', childhood varies in its construction, interpretation and enactment across different cultures and contexts (Thomas and Percy-Smith, 2010).

### **3.2.3 Images of the Child**

James and Prout (1997), Cannella (1997) and Dahlberg et al. (2007) identify a number of commonly held constructions or images of the young child. Images include: the child as nature, following biologically determined universal stages of development (discussed later in Section 3.3.1); the child as knowledge and culture reproducer, a *tabula rasa* needing to be filled with knowledge and made ready to learn (Section 3.3.2); and the child as social actor and co-constructor of knowledge (Section 3.3.3). Other commonly held images, contained within contemporary discourse and in recent early years policy include:

- the child as innocent, and in need of protection, seen for example, in the discourse of the child 'at risk' from a 'toxic' childhood: vulnerable to a growing range of dangers such as abuse, pollution, traffic, abduction, or through exposure to electronic technologies such as television and the internet (Abbs et al., 2006; Palmer, 2006);
- the child as evil, seen for example, in the discourse of 'toddler taming' and others associated with childrearing (Green, 2006; Murphy, 2007); and in the 'moral underclass discourse' of UK social policy (Levitas, 2005) in which children are depicted as undermining the moral fabric of society through drugs, gangs, graffiti and violence (Matthews and Limb, 1999; Stainton-Rogers, 2001);
- the child as human capital or social investment, an economically productive future citizen-worker who will act as redemptive agent for society's ills, seen for example, in the New Labour Government's Childcare Strategy (DfEE, 1998; HM Treasury et al., 2004) and Sure Start programme (Prout, 2000; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Lister, 2003; 2006a; Lewis, 2006; Woodhead, 2006);
- the child as rights-bearer and as 'citizen now', inherent in the UNCRC (Roche, 1999; Stasiulis, 2002; Doek, 2008; Woodhead, 2006; MacNaughton et al., 2008)
- the child as consumer, seen in the current discourse of user involvement (Aitken, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Cook, 2004);
- and the autonomous, participating child, embedded in neo-liberalism (Dahlberg, 2003; Kjørholt, 2005; Vandenbroeck, 2006; Olsson, 2009).



Over time, constructions of childhood have undergone significant shifts and yet some have co-existed (Hendrick, 1997b). For example, in contemporary discourses, children are positioned as both cherished and demonised (Jenks, 1996a; Kennedy, 2000; Wyness, 2006); as autonomous and yet as objects of protection (Jans, 2004; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006). Shanahan (2007) suggests that these competing assertions reveal a profound ambivalence towards childhood in contemporary society.

Drawing on Foucault, Moss and Petrie (2002) argue that constructions of children and childhood are constituted through power relations and dominant discursive regimes. Different discourses and disciplines construct particular images and versions of childhood (Moss and Petrie, 2002). These constructions are productive of policy, as well as professional and research practice. Hence, our work with children is the product of who we think the child is (Dahlberg et al., 2007). In the next section I discuss the different theoretical approaches of psychology and sociology and the way these disciplines have constructed and researched children.

### **3.3 Theoretical Approaches to Childhood**

#### **3.3.1 Developmental Psychology**

The image of the child as nature, following an inevitable process of biological maturation and development, unless the child has some 'abnormality', derives from the disciplines of biology, medicine and developmental psychology (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Beginning with the writings of Darwin and the Child Study Movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the concept of childhood was imbued with notions of biological universality (Prout, 2005). 'The child' was seen as a product of nature, rather than culture, and was therefore assigned to the realm of scientific research.

Proponents of the child study movement argued that scientific methods should be used to study children's natural development systematically, and that this knowledge should be used to inform educational and childrearing practices (Hall, 1911; Prout, 2005). Developmental psychology, emerging as a sub-discipline of this movement, was philosophically committed to science, truth and objectivity, achieved through a

positivist epistemology (Burman, 1994a). Through psychology, 'objective truths' about human mental functioning could be determined (Kincheloe, 1991). Research was conducted on or about children, as part of a process to measure and evaluate the individual child's progress towards full personhood (Mayall, 2000; Wyness, 2006).

Observational approaches to researching children's behaviour in relatively naturalistic contexts, such as those used by Darwin, Isaacs and in Piaget's early work, were superseded by more formal, experimental approaches to the study of childhood (Athey, 2007). Consequently, over the last century, developmental psychology, founded upon the scientific method, became established as the dominant approach to researching children (Woodhead, 2009). A mass of psychological research has been conducted in which children have been removed from their everyday situations and subjected to clinical interviews, tests and observations, often under laboratory conditions, in order to identify, measure and regulate the factors that impede the process of growing up (Smith and Cowie, 2003). Quantifiable tests are administered so that individual children can be categorised against 'norms' and appropriate experiences prescribed. Fawcett (2000) identifies that nearly 95% of this research originates from male psychologists in North America and Europe. Several authors argue that this has promoted a male, Western developmental view of the child that has failed to take account of the diversity of global childhoods and has been used to categorize all children throughout the world (Dahlberg, 1985; Hart, 1997; Penn, 2005; Walkerdine, 2009). Mayall (1996) describes this approach as 'both individualist and universalist: individualist in its focus on the child set apart from social context; and universalist in aiming to uncover truths applying to all children' (p. 43), regardless of class, gender or ethnicity. Thus childhood is individualised, decontextualised, essentialised and normalised (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Indeed, since the 1970s socio-cultural psychologists, critical psychologists and some scholars working from a social constructionist epistemology have critiqued this hegemonic approach to researching children.

### **Critiques of Developmental Psychology**

The abstraction of the individual child from everyday environments, such as the home or nursery, has been criticised by many socio-cultural psychologists who stress the importance of social and temporal contexts for child development and for the practice of research (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987; Donaldson, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tudge et al.,

1996; Dunn, 1998; Hogan, 2005). They assert that children appear less competent when asked to apply their skills in an experimental setting than when observed in everyday life and that research in laboratories cannot alone represent the everyday experiences of children in their real-world contexts. As Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998) argue, competence is an intrinsically contextual matter. It cannot be separated from the structural contexts within which it is enacted. Therefore, there should be a commitment to conduct research that is 'ecologically valid' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and an awareness of the role of qualitative methods and non-experimental approaches (Jessor, 1996; Coll and Magnusson, 1999).

Developmental psychology has also been criticised for the way it has constructed a picture of the 'normal' child. The construction of the 'normal' child implies that some children, such as those with impairments, are 'abnormal' which leads to practices that oppress (Walkerdine, 1993; Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2003; Dahlberg et al. 2007) and pathologize children (Billington, 1996; Davis et al., 2000). Rose (1989) argues that this is because the process of constructing normality is used as a device to enable 'those in charge to define, classify and treat those who do not seem to fit in' (p. 37). Foucault (1977) refers to this as dividing practices: methods of manipulation that combine the mediation of science and the practice of exclusion. By classifying children and thereby dividing them, these practices distribute, manipulate and control children.

Developmental theories, such as Piaget's (1932) constructivist theory of cognitive development, have advanced a model of childhood where the child is positioned along a linear pathway to maturity by connecting their chronological age with a clearly defined stage of development. This linear pathway, often thought of as a series of developmental milestones (Moss and Petrie, 2002), has been critiqued for two main reasons. Firstly, whilst Piaget had a deep respect for children's thinking, the implied hierarchical continuum, with infant sensory-motor intelligence at the lowest end and adult formal operative intelligence at the higher end, implies a lower valuation of child thought. This invokes a simple/complex dichotomy where the child is viewed as a less complicated organism than the adult (James and Prout, 1997) and therefore incomplete and inferior (Thomas, 2002). Children are conceptualised as transitional objects, as 'human becomings', vulnerable and dependent, unlike adults who are fully constituted 'human beings' in their own right (Qvortrup, 1994). Thus children are positioned as ontologically different from adults. This has an epistemological effect because young

children's differences to adults may be judged as inadequacies rather than as alternative ways of knowing (Silin, 1995).

Secondly, the whole basis of developmental psychology, with its focus upon linear progress, the revelation of a knowable and ordered world, and an understanding of the individual child developing to become an autonomous, stable subject, irrespective of context, has been critiqued (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Burman; 2008). From a social constructionist perspective, children and adults are active participants in constructing themselves and the world (Berger and Luckman, 1996). Children's development is incoherent and discontinuous, rather than orderly and predictable. The child is regarded as contingent and unknowable, developing through 'rhizomatic' patterns (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983; 1988) such as gender, cognition, class and ethnicity (MacNaughton, 2005). The scientific method of developmentalism is problematized by a methodological approach concerned with situated meaning-making rather than essentialist truth-finding (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Many of the criticisms of developmental psychology highlight its failure to adequately describe children's active participation in their social worlds. The emphasis has been on the individual child as a discrete abstract entity, rather than seeking to understand children's social and subjective experiences or perspectives (Corsaro, 1997; Wyness, 2006). According to Mayall (2003), developmental psychology has reinforced ideas of children as non-participants in society and childhood as preparation for adulthood. Turning to sociological perspectives, socialisation theory too has reinforced ideas of children as 'not-yet social' and viewed childhood as primarily a preparation for adult life.

### **3.3.2 Socialisation Theory**

Although not a homogenous concept, socialisation theory refers to the process of preparing children to become members of the society in which they live (Parsons, 1951; Elkin, 1960; Durkheim, 1961). Normative socialisation models derive from Locke's image of the child as *tabula rasa* or 'blank slate'. Locke argued that children were merely a product of their environment and therefore were capable of being shaped by their experiences in that environment. By providing the right education, a child could be moulded to become a responsible adult and an economically productive worker. Thus, the child is depicted as an adult-in-the-making, with specific educational needs that

adults should take seriously to enable children to develop into mature responsible citizens.

Socialisation theories focus on the ways children learn by internalizing the surrounding adult culture and the role positive and negative stimuli play in that process (Freeman and Mathison, 2009). Children are conceptualised as reproducers of adult culture and knowledge, and in need of being made social (Thorne, 1987; Lee, 1998; Prout, 1999; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Dahlberg et al., 2007). The role of adults is to instil in children the capacity to become independent beings. To that end, parents are the main socialising agency, but other agencies, such as teachers, may play a role too, or in cases of failed socialisation, the state. The primary focus is on what children are to become rather than what they presently are.

Like developmentalism, socialisation theories have a marked tendency to focus on developing universal theories, not on understanding children themselves (Freeman and Mathison, 2009). Children are researched insofar as they relate to the adult world, that is, as objects of socialisation within the family and other institutions, rather than being studied in their own right (Thorne, 1987; James and Prout, 1997; Alanen, 2004).

### **Sociological and Feminist Critiques**

Over the last three decades many sociologists have critiqued this approach. Firstly, they argue that children have been disregarded as legitimate empirical objects of sociological study (Qvortrup, 1987; Jenks, 1996a; Corsaro, 1997; James and Prout, 1997; Adler and Adler, 1998; James et al., 1998; Prout, 2005). Feminist authors too have criticised the invisibility of children in research (Hardman, 1973; Smith, 1987). They have argued for a sociological approach that accords children conceptual autonomy (Thorne, 1987; Oakley, 1994). In this way, children become the direct focus for methodological analysis, rather than being seen through the viewpoints of adults, professions and institutions.

Secondly, a social constructionist perspective assumes that children are not simply passive recipients, but they play an active role in their own socialisation process (Adler and Adler, 1998). Matthews (2007) argues that the image of the child as blank slate is often applied to babies. She contends that whilst we cannot deny the extreme

dependence of human infants relative to other primates, there is increasing evidence that babies are not blank slates. Drawing on Pinker's (2002) and Gopnik et al.'s (2001) research, she argues that babies use their brains to act on the world from the moment they enter it. The traditional socialisation framework is therefore inadequate because 'it fails to recognise children's competence to interpret the social world and act on it' (p. 327). Rather, socialisation could be viewed as an interactive process whereby children simultaneously act on their environment whilst also being shaped by it (Freeman and Mathison, 2009). Therefore, it becomes necessary to explore children's perspectives of their environments.

### **3.3.3 Sociology of Childhood**

Building upon this critique, a new research paradigm took hold, initially called the 'new sociology of childhood' (James and Prout 1997, p. 8), in which childhood is viewed as a distinct social phenomenon, with cultural meanings and structural significance (James et al., 1998). Children are conceptualised 'as social actors and as participants in the everyday social world, contributing to its events and thereby also to its reproduction and transformation' (Alanen 2004, p. 4). From this perspective, children are not passively constructed into childhoods; they help constitute their own reality (Shanahan, 2007).

The 'new sociology' stems from various theoretical perspectives. Firstly, it draws upon symbolic interactionism and the work of Dreitzel (1973) and Denzin (1977), who argue that developmentalism and socialization render children as passive, and that there is nothing intrinsic or natural to being a child. Secondly, it is informed by social constructionism and the idea that there is no single universal phenomenon of 'childhood' but rather a plurality of childhoods. These 'childhoods' should be understood as social phenomena, constantly constructed and reconstructed within the realms of 'discourse' (James et al., 1998). Thirdly, the 'new sociology' combines elements of functionalist sociology, which sees childhood as a permanent feature of social structure, with an emphasis upon children's agency (Qvortrup et al., 1994). Finally, it draws upon feminist studies to assert that children are a 'minority group' (Oakley, 1994; Mayall, 1994; 2002), subject to marginalisation and exclusion 'from full participation in the life of their society' (Qvortrup et al. 1994, p. 347). Feminist research methodologies based on 'standpoint epistemology' (Smith, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1993), have therefore informed some of this new sociological research. For example, Alanen's research on

'generational order' emphasises a commitment 'to consciously producing social scientific knowledge from a children's standpoint' (2004, p. 11). Thus, the 'new sociology' is dedicated 'to children's interests and purposes' (James et al. 1998, p. 31). It aims to confer on children 'a sense of present value' (Christensen and Prout 2005, p. 42), promoting their status as persons with rights, as moral interpreters and commentators on the worlds they engage with, and as decision-making participants (Mayall, 2002; Greene and Hogan, 2005).

### **Children as Social Actors and Co-constructors**

Children's agency is a key element in the 'new sociology of childhood'. Children are conceptualised as active in the determination of their lives and society around them (James and Prout, 1997). They are competent actors who construct their own cultures (Corsaro, 1997; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Pollard, 2000) and, like adults, have the capacity (likewise constrained) to shape their own experience (Greene and Hogan, 2005). As discussed earlier, this view is supported by empirical evidence from socio-cultural psychology in which it is argued that children's competence arises through a combination of experience, cultural context and relationships (Smith, 2002; 2007a).

The conceptualisation of children as social actors with agency has spawned a mass of research studies opening up new types of knowledge about children across a variety of disciplines, such that the 'new sociology' has been renamed the 'new social studies of childhood' (James et al., 1998). Jenks (2004) suggests that this has been 'an important move in the politics of knowledge and children are more empowered as a result of it' (p. 7). This is because, unlike the 'dominant framework' of developmental psychology and socialisation (James and Prout, 1997), it rests upon an epistemological position that understands knowledge and culture as co-constructed with children, rather than simply reproduced by children (Moss and Petrie, 2002; Wyness, 2006; Dahlberg et al., 2007).

The young child is understood as a complex, unique and agentic subject, rather than an object that can be reduced to measurable and separate categories. The child is not an innocent, to be sheltered and kept separate from the world, but rather she 'embodies that world, is acted upon by that world - but also acts on it and makes meaning of it' (Dahlberg et al. 2007, p. 51). In contrast with images of the child as reproducer, as innocent/wicked, or as nature, all of which produce a passive or 'poor child', Dahlberg

and colleagues (2007) propose that this construction produces a 'rich child', engaging actively with the world.

### **Methodological Approaches of the 'New Social Studies'**

This epistemological break with traditional images and approaches to the study of childhood has methodological implications (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Children are constructed as *participants* in research, rather than as *objects* of research (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). Research is conducted *with* children, rather than *on* children.

The concept of 'voice', like 'agency', is another key component in the sociology of childhood. Moss (2001a) argues that if we choose to understand young children as social actors, as 'experts in their own lives' and as co-researchers, we can no longer talk *about* children, we have to talk *with* children and listen to them. Indeed, their views, everyday experiences and knowledges should be researched directly and first-hand (James and Prout, 1997; Prout and James, 2000). This demands a methodological approach that shows and enables children's competencies alongside methods in which children's voices can be heard independently of the perspectives of adults (Alderson, 2004; Kellett and Ding, 2004). Morrow and Richards (1996) assert that respect for children's competencies 'needs to become a methodological technique in itself' (p. 100). According to James and Prout (1997), ethnography and participant observation are particularly useful methods since 'they allow children a more direct voice and participation in the production of data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research' (p. 9). Ethnographic approaches enable children's competencies and voices to be respected because children control what they do, when and with whom (Tudge and Hogan, 2005).

Although ethnographic methods seek to convey children's voices and perspectives, they remain problematic. The issue of 'allowing children a voice', even when researchers include direct quotations from children, is problematic because it is still adult researchers who select and analyse the data and construct the meanings of children's experiences. In this sense, children's voices are textually mediated (James and James, 2008). This highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity as well as acknowledgement that the research account can only convey a partisan understanding.



Participation is another key component of the new sociological framework since children are recognised as having their own ontological status, knowledges, competencies and rights (Nyland, 2009). Consequently, another approach adopted by researchers, working within this theoretical framework, has been the use of participatory methodologies, which borrow from Freireian pedagogy, participatory rural appraisal (for example, Chambers, 1997) and participatory action research (for example, Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). Instead of being positioned passively in research, children can actively participate in research on their own terms. This could take the form of children working with each other and/or with adults to generate research questions and data, as well as analysing and representing their position. A participatory approach therefore aims to facilitate a process of knowledge construction, as opposed to knowledge 'gathering' by a professional researcher, through a merging of academic (etic) and local (emic) knowledge (Veale, 2005).

### **Critique of the 'New Social Studies'**

Some scholars argue that, although the 'social studies of childhood' have revealed new aspects of children's lives, the limits of their project are increasingly apparent (Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Connolly, 2005; Wyness, 2006; Walkerdine, 2009). They suggest that the new paradigm, like the dominant framework before it, is built upon a set of modernistic dichotomies. Prout (2005) claims that it has simply sought to replace nature with culture, the material with the discursive and structure with agency. He suggests that these oppositional dichotomies fail to produce a satisfactory framework for understanding contemporary childhood. Moreover, Woodyer (2008) contends that the new framework has created a strong defence against biological reductionism, however, at the cost of expelling the body and materiality. Indeed, children's bodies are an absent presence within accounts of children's lives. She argues:

There is a failure to appreciate the role of embodiment in the processes through which children participate in social life (Woodyer 2008, p. 349).

Children and adults are both social and biological and therefore researchers need to handle the hybridity of childhood and reconceptualise children as a multiplicity of 'nature-cultures' (Prout, 2005; Wyness, 2006).

Childhood research also needs to be sceptical of the *a priori* distinction between children and adults, and delimit the split between 'beings' and 'becomings' (Kjørholt, 2005). Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) notion of assemblages, Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1993), and wider contexts of late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992), a few authors have begun to question the notion of adulthood as a state of completed 'human being' (Lee 2001; 2005, Prout, 2005; Walkerdine, 2009). They suggest that both adults and children should be seen as a multiplicity of beings-becomings. We all share common existential worth as individual human beings who carry out socially significant activities, and yet as human becomings, adults and children alike are all incomplete, dependent on others, and subject to ontological ambiguity (Giddens, 1991).

The 'new social studies' has also been critiqued for treating 'voice' and 'agency' in an essentialist way, that is, as a given but previously overlooked attribute of children (Lee, 1998; 2001; Prout, 2001). Whilst the reconceptualisation of children as competent agents has been useful in refocusing how we consider children, and opened up many fruitful lines of empirical inquiry, Lee (1998; 2001) suggests that many contemporary scholars have failed to recognise the existence of dependencies and immaturity within children's agentic action. One outcome of adopting an essentialist notion of agency has been that children who have dependencies, such as those with impairments or the very young, have largely been excluded from research within the 'new social studies' (Roberts, 2000; Davis et al., 2000). Clearly there is a need for research studies, like this one, to rectify this imbalance. In contrast with notions of agency as the essential possession of individuals, Lee (2001) proposes that we reconceptualise agency as the emergent property of networks of dependency. This is a more contextual, distributed and relational view of agency that stresses the importance of interdependency (Mannion, 2007; 2010). It also helps us to understand how it is that sometimes children exercise agency whilst on other occasions they do not (Prout, 2001). Similarly, based on her empirical work with young children with communication difficulties, Komulainen (2007) argues that 'voice' is not an individual property or essence awaiting discovery, rather, it is the emergent property of processes of social interaction and negotiation.

To summarise, in the present period, many of the boundaries between categories once thought mutually exclusive are blurring (Derrida, 1976; 1978). Children and adults are both becomings and beings, dependent and autonomous, participants and non-

participants, and are continually shifting and moving between these positions (Lee, 1998; 2001; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006). Replacing traditional images of the child as an immature and passive object of development and socialisation, with new images as a competent and active participant, simply reproduces a subject who is equally essentialist and stable. Researchers therefore need to resist dichotomous constructions of childhood, which minimise the hybridity of childhood (and of adulthood), tolerate this ambiguity (Lee, 1999; 2001; Kjørholt, 2005; Prout, 2005) and see it as a site for future research.

### **3.4 A Methodological Response**

Since Lee's (2001) and Prout's (2001; 2005) challenge to the conceptual opposition of childhood and adulthood, and their critique of essentialised understandings of voice and agency, I have come to appreciate that rather than seeing adults, children, or myself as fixed, unambiguous entities, it is more helpful to recognise that we are all mutually dependent and emergent. Different disciplinary and epistemological perspectives have demanded that 'in order to study children we must decide for ourselves what they are, active or passive, being or becoming' (Lee 1998, p. 464). My theoretical perspective, however, informed by the poststructural critique of the 'social studies of childhood', is that it is necessary to suspend such a dichotomous decision because children, like adults, are both active and passive, dependent and independent, social and biological.

Lincoln and Denzin (1994) argue that social science is in a crisis of representation, with researchers asking: 'How do we create a social science that includes the Other?' (p. 577). My response to this question is to link cultural representations of childhood, that is, the ways children have been conceptualised and construct themselves, with political notions of representation (Prout, 2003). This second sense of representation suggests that children might be involved in processes of decision-making, and/or research. I therefore seek to include the Other - children, parents and practitioners - in the research process through a methodology that is participatory in its approach. Thus, I choose to adopt an ontology that acknowledges children and adults as beings-becomings, an epistemology based on intersubjective understandings between actors of diverse competencies, ages and experiences, and a methodology where adults and children form participatory relationships as interdependent meaning-makers and co-constructors.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Constructions of childhood have a profound impact upon adult attitudes to the participation of children. Prout (2001) argues, 'for children's voice to be really heard, even when the institutional arrangements create a notional space for it, requires change in the way children are seen' (p. 194). This chapter has examined different conceptualisations of children across different academic disciplines and epistemological positions, and in my own methodological thinking. Attention has been paid to developmental psychology and socialisation theory as twin pillars in the 'dominant framework' for researching childhood. This dominant framework has tended to present young children as passive, weak, dependent and too innocent or immature to participate meaningfully in discussions, research or decisions that affect them (MacNaughton et al., 2007a).

The sociology of childhood has played an important role in challenging this discourse. Researchers have found that young children have definite views on a variety of subjects, that they know the world in different (not inferior) ways to adults, and that they are capable of participating in decisions on important topics (for example, Alderson, 2000a; Mayall, 2002; Clark and Moss, 2005; Lansdown, 2005; MacNaughton et al., 2007b). In challenging the dominant framework, however, the sociology of childhood has replaced one orthodoxy (the scientific approach) with another (the social approach). This chapter has evaluated some of the strengths and limitations of this theoretical paradigm. I have discussed possibilities for moving beyond dualisms and conceptualising children (and adults) as active-passive participants, thus reflecting the ambiguity and hybridity of childhood. The chapter concludes with my decision to view children as co-constructors of research and social processes and as interdependent meaning-makers with adults and each other. Consequently, this conceptualisation informs my choice to adopt a methodology that is participatory in its approach (as outlined in Chapter 5).

## **4. Conceptualising Sure Start Children's Centres**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Some scholars, working within the fields of children's geographies (Aitken, 2001; Gallagher, 2006; Mannion 2007; 2010) and childhood studies (James et al., 1998; Moss and Petrie, 2002; James and James, 2008; Wyness, 2009), have suggested that our understanding of participation is not just contextualised by our view of young children, but is also contextualised by the spaces they inhabit. In this chapter I consider how the institutional space of the Sure Start children's centre has been conceptualised in policy and theory. Cohen et al. (2004) argue that if we, as adults, require childhood to be institutionalised, then we need to ask political and ethical questions about both the opportunities and the risks this affords. This chapter, therefore, has three main objectives: to provide an overview of the origins of Sure Start children's centres as conceptualised under New Labour; to review the policy requirements and current research evidence regarding young children's participation in children's centres; and to explore political and ethical questions about the purposes of children's centres, considering alternative ways for conceptualising these spaces and young children's participation within them.

### **4.2 Sure Start Origins and Purpose**

Sure Start was conceptualised as a central element in New Labour's long term strategy to eradicate child poverty and to address social exclusion (HM Treasury, 1998; DfEE, 2000; Sure Start, 2002). Announced in July 1998, as part of Labour's first Comprehensive Spending Review, it was conceived as a multi-agency early intervention programme to improve the health, educational and social outcomes of young children and their families living in areas of significant disadvantage (HM Treasury, 1998). 250 SSLPs were established, covering the 10% most deprived electoral wards in England (DETR, 2000). In 2000 it was announced that SSLPs would be doubled to cover the 20% most deprived areas (Melhuish and Hall, 2007). Eventually 524 SSLPs were rolled out across England in six waves between 1999 and 2003, each serving between 400 and 800

children and their families. In autumn 2001 Towersham<sup>1</sup> Sure Start, the empirical focus for this thesis, was established as a fourth wave programme.

SSLPs were initially charged with four key objectives: improving social and emotional development; improving health; improving children's ability to learn; and strengthening families and communities. SSLPs were expected to provide a range of core services including: family support and outreach; support for good quality play experiences; child and family healthcare; and specialised services for children with special needs (Melhuish et al., 2010a). SSLPs could also provide additional services in response to local need or parental requests: for example, advice on housing or welfare benefits (Lewis, 2011a).

Sure Start represented a new way of configuring provision for young children and their families (Katz and Valentine, 2009). The intention was to transform the way services were delivered by ensuring integrated planning and delivery of services. Thus SSLPs were governed by partnerships of statutory agencies, including health, social services and education, private and voluntary groups, parents and local community members (Glass 1999; Melhuish et al., 2010a). Local people, including parents, could participate in determining the content and management of their SSLP in the light of their perceptions of what their local area needed, albeit within the centrally defined targets set by the Sure Start Unit (Glass, 2005; Williams, 2005).

Despite an original ten year commitment, in 2002 the Labour Government announced its intentions to rework the current SSLPs to establish a network of Sure Start children's centres (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2002). The Ten-year Strategy for Childcare (HM Treasury et al., 2004), and subsequent 2006 Childcare Act brought a policy shift from the targeting of disadvantaged communities, characteristic of SSLPs, to a promise of universal provision, with a children's centre in every community by 2010. 3,500 children's centres were rolled out in three phases between 2006 and 2010, with priority given to setting up 'high intensity' models in the 30% most disadvantaged areas (Pugh and Duffy, 2006). By 2006 most SSLPs were functioning as children's centres, including Towersham Park Children's Centre, a phase one, 'high intensity' centre, which opened in a new, stand-alone building during the summer of 2006.

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1 Towersham is a pseudonym.

While many elements of the children's centre offer looked similar to that of SSLPs, the emphasis in terms of the programmes' reach, content and governance was rather different (Lewis, 2011a). Sure Start moved from an area-based initiative targeted at the most deprived areas to a universal service reaching every neighbourhood in the country. This was to be achieved through a strategy of 'progressive universalism' (Balls 2005; 2007), a modified form of universalism that starts with the most disadvantaged communities. Thus, although phase 3 children's centres were rolled out to the 70% more advantaged areas, here they were mainly required to provide support and information services only.

In terms of programme content, the Labour government increasingly adopted a social investment perspective, according a new importance to outreach to the most disadvantaged parents, enhancing the employability of parents through links to Jobcentre Plus, and providing formal childcare and early years education in children's centres (Glass, 2005; Lewis, 2011b; Melhuish et al., 2010b). Children's centres serving the most disadvantaged areas were required to focus more strongly on educational outcomes for children. This was indicative of a more prescriptive approach being taken to children's centre provision in general (Glass, 2005), in which centres were monitored by central government, even more closely than SSLPs, using targets, self-evaluations and OFSTED inspections (Katz and Valentine, 2009).

As a result of *Every Child Matters* (DES, 2003a), Sure Start governance also underwent radical change, with children's centres being brought under local authority control. For some, the transfer to local authority control was seen as a politically inspired move to ensure that children's centres became embedded within the welfare state by statute, making them difficult for any future government to eradicate (Melhuish et al., 2010a). For others, this move was seen as undermining the community participation aspect of Sure Start and the subsequent autonomy SSLPs enjoyed (Glass, 2005). Since funding per child was considerably less than with SSLPs, and was no longer ring-fenced, fewer resources were available to focus on participation, community development and parenting support (Glass, 2005; Katz and Valentine, 2009). However, whilst parents and local stakeholders were given less of a formal role in the governance of children's centres, the change from SSLPs to children's centres was also accompanied by a new rhetoric that young children and their parents should be given opportunities to

participate in the design, delivery and evaluation of children's centre services (Sure Start, 2005; DES, 2006).

This study focuses on children's participation in children's centre services under New Labour. However, since then, children's centres have undergone further transformation under the Coalition Government:

We will take Sure Start back to its original purpose of early intervention, increase its focus on the neediest families, and better involve organisations with a track record of supporting families. We will investigate ways of ensuring that providers are paid in part by the results they achieve. We will refocus funding from Sure Start peripatetic outreach services, and from the Department of Health budget, to pay for 4,200 extra Sure Start health visitors (HM Government 2010, p. 19).

Commenting on these changes, Lister and Bennett (2010) argue that the Coalition's commitment to retain Sure Start is welcome, as is the reorientation towards its original focus on early intervention, 'as Sure Start has increasingly become an adjunct to employment policies' (p. 100). However, they caution that the increase in focus on the neediest families restricts access to disadvantaged families. Therefore, children's centres may become stigmatised and less attractive to the very families they are aimed at. Moreover, there is an apparent contradiction between the aspiration to reach out to disadvantaged families and the decision to divert the outreach budget. Paradoxically, an increase in the number of health visitors is to be achieved through cutting Sure Start outreach services. Indeed, at the time of writing, many local authorities across the country have cut funding for many children's centres services and more than 400 centres have closed as a result of the economic recession (Butler, 2013). More locally, staff at Towersham have been given notice of redundancy as a result of Felldon<sup>2</sup> City Council's plans to reorganise the current 36 centres into 17 children's centre 'areas' and thereby save £3.5 million. Given the current political and economic climate, it is unclear what the future holds for children's centres in general and Towersham in particular.

Having provided an overview of children's centre development in general, the rest of this chapter looks more specifically at children's participation within children's centre services.

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2 Felldon is a pseudonym.



### **4.3 Young Children's Participation in Children's Centres**

According to legislation (the Children Act, 2004; the Childcare Act, 2006) and national guidance (Sure Start, 2005; DES, 2006; OFSTED, 2008; DCSF, 2010) children's centre practitioners are required to ensure that young children participate in the development of children's centre services. Some authors suggest, however, that laws and national guidelines give no guarantee that children's voices will be heard and respected in everyday life. They are simply political statements (Rhedding-Jones et al., 2008; Rolfe, 2008). Clark et al. (2005) contend that awareness of the importance of children's participation is patchy among practitioners involved in early years services. 'Some professions are only just beginning to take such ideas on board; while there is more familiarity with the idea, there are still many gaps between rhetoric and practice' (p. 7). In the following subsections, I review the policy requirements and current research evidence regarding young children's participation in Sure Start children's centres.

#### **4.3.1 Policy Requirements**

Alongside Sure Start guidance and the general ECM injunction to listen to children and to engage them in decision-making, children's centres must self-evaluate how they listen and take action based on the views of the children accessing their services (OFSTED, 2008; DCSF, 2010). Young children's views should be actively sought and should influence decision-making. Winter (2009) argues, however, that this requirement confines children's involvement to giving consumer-type views about service development, with professionals deciding how relevant the children's views are to informing and influencing the services.

In addition, participation requirements apply across all service areas: health, social care, and education. For health and social care practitioners working in children's centres, the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services* (NSF) (DH, 2004a) and other related publications (DH, 2003a; 2003b) outline professional standards of care, including the duty to promote the active participation of children alongside that of their parents/carers. Standard 3 of the NSF (DH, 2004a) sets out a vision of professionals 'communicating directly with children, listening to them and attempting to see the world through their eyes', with 'the views of children, young people and families being valued and taken into account in the planning, delivery and

evaluation of services' (p. 87). Standard 8, the standard pertinent to disabled children, states 'Professionals should ensure that disabled children, especially children with high communication needs are not excluded from the decision-making process' (p. 29). However, some scholars suggest that whilst these policies might appeal to ideals of empowerment for children, they are also couched in consumerist terms of individual choice and enhanced responsiveness to needs (Beresford, 2005; Tritter and McCallum, 2006; Bochel et al., 2008). Lewis (2009) cautions that meaningful participation cannot be achieved solely through a consumerist approach since it 'fails to engage with imbalances of power and divergences of interest between users and providers of services' (p. 258).

Similarly, for children's centre nursery practitioners, the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DES, 2007) sets the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to 5 years. It states that 'all children are citizens and have rights and entitlements' and 'all children have an equal right to be listened to and valued in the setting' as part of a commitment to 'inclusive practice'. The framework also states that listening to children is fundamental for enabling 'positive relationships' and 'supporting learning'. Individual children's needs and interests should inform planning and there should be opportunities for 'decision-making' in children's 'learning and development' (DES, 2007). Moss (2007) and Bath (2009a) argue, however, that despite its great length and level of prescription, the EYFS does not make any explicit reference to democracy or creating opportunities for children's participation and democratic practice as an underpinning principle. Rather, the emphasis upon 'listening to children' within the EYFS is primarily about practitioners supporting individual children's learning and development towards a series of predetermined 'early learning goals'. This is in contrast to the early childhood curricula of the Nordic countries, or the approach taken by the Italian pre-schools of Reggio Emilia in which democracy is explicitly recognised as a fundamental value (Broström, 2006; Moss, 2007; 2010). Moss (2007) suggests that the absence of democracy in the EYFS reflects the priority given to technical practice in national policy surrounding the education and care of young children.

### **4.3.2 Reviewing the Current Evidence**

Whilst there has been a considerable literature on Sure Start, much of it emanating from the national and local evaluations of the programme, there is a paucity of literature on

children's centres in general (Lewis et al., 2011), and on children's participation in particular. Within the existing literature, there are only a handful of studies that pertain to the consultation and participation of young children in children's centres (discussed below). This is not to say that these are the only examples of young children being consulted about children's centre services, or participating in decision-making. There may well be other instances of individual children's centres engaging in consultation and participatory work with young children. Indeed, Young Children's Voices Network has reported how participation training has been piloted in some children's centres (Gill, 2008). However, in general, participatory activity remains under-researched, unreported and un-theorised.

Of the research literature that currently exists, there are a small number of case studies of consultations with children in SSLPs (Clark et al., 2003; McAuliffe, 2003; Carpenter et al., 2003a; 2003b; 2005; Watson et al., 2004; Sure Start Southey/Shirecliffe, 2004; Dahl and Aubrey, 2005; Lancaster, 2006). These studies tend to be incorporated into SSLP local evaluation reports as part of a broader focus on consulting stakeholders about a particular issue, event or opportunity. This reflects Kirby's et al.'s (2003) review of participation activity with older children in England, which found that much activity is one-off, or isolated, rather than embedded within agencies. The SSLP consultations fall into two main categories: consulting children to inform the design of new facilities; and consulting children as users about their satisfaction with play and learning opportunities. Children's views of other Sure Start services are largely absent from this literature. As Winter (2009) notes, of the small amount of research related to young children's participation, most of the activity has occurred in the field of education and care, neglecting other services such as health, family support and specialist therapeutic services.

In respect of children's centres, some research has been conducted with young children to inform the review of newly built children's centre spaces (Clark, 2007); to plan children's centre activities (Sure Start Armstrong, 2005; Masrani and Howarth, 2009), and to develop profile books as a way of listening to children (Driscoll and Rudge, 2005). These studies are outlined in Appendix 1. In addition, Davies and Artaraz (2009) have interviewed a number of early years professionals, including children's centre practitioners and managers from different professional backgrounds, to generate understanding of factors that influence whether or not practitioners consult with young

children. They found that, within the settings involved in their study, the idea of consulting with children was relatively new. The majority of practitioners conceptualised consultation as offering individual children limited choices within the boundaries of children's perceived abilities, rather than trying to elicit children's views and perspectives. Many practitioners made little use of innovative methods of consultation in their work with children, and, where consultation did occur, it tended to be at the service delivery level only. Therefore, current practice was not yet meeting children's centre policy requirements. This echoes Shier's (2001), Clark et al.'s (2003) and Kirby et al.'s (2003) general finding that almost all participatory work with children in England tends to focus on service delivery, with less attention given to policy or strategic development, including service-level planning and evaluation.

All the SSLP and children's centre case studies tend to be descriptive rather than explanatory and therefore do not feed into broader theoretical discussions about the nature of young children's participation. They contain little discussion concerning issues of power, citizenship, democracy or difference, that is, the political and ethical nature of participation. This may be due to the preponderance of a focus upon consultation rather than participation in these studies. Examples are provided of consulting individual children and affording them opportunities to make choices as consumers, with little discussion of participation as a process that involves collective, as well as individual, decision-making. The Sure Start studies also tend to portray children's views as homogenous, mysteriously avoiding differences of perspective between children, or between children and other Sure Start stakeholders. Furthermore, the reviewed literature contains no evidence specifically related to the participation of disabled children or those from ethnic minorities. These omissions provide a focus for this research.

In their review of childcare policy, Ball and Vincent (2005) note the remarkable absence of parental voice in the rapid expansion of childcare and Sure Start services. To this observation, we might add that, with the exception of the few studies reviewed above, young children's voices too have been remarkably absent in the research and development of SSLPs and children's centres. An emphasis on the politics of distribution and redistribution, that is, the concern with access to Sure Start services, although welcome, is insufficient without a concomitant emphasis upon a politics of recognition - enabling children, parents and others to participate in decision-making about the purpose, content and form of early childhood institutions such as children's

centres (Moss and Petrie, 2002; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Ball and Vincent, 2005). This requires a public debate about the care of our youngest children, asking political and ethical questions such as, 'What is our image or understanding of the children's centre?' and 'How might we imagine this space and children's participation within it?'

#### **4.4 Young Children's Participation in Children's Spaces**

Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue that the purposes of early childhood institutions are not self-evident, but can be seen as:

... the social construction of a community of human agents, originating through our active interaction with other people and with society ... and constituted by dominant discourses in our society [embodying] thoughts, conceptions and ethics which prevail at a given moment in a given society (p. 62).

As discussed earlier, Sure Start children's centres have been conceptualised in policy as a technology for addressing social exclusion and poverty. The role of children's centres is to tackle an array of social ills such as lack of educational aspiration and attainment; unemployment, poor health, crime and so forth, through a range of integrated services focused on improving child outcomes and encouraging parents into work. Expenditure on Sure Start services is viewed as an investment that will produce future citizen-workers and law-abiding adults (Lister, 2003; 2006a; Lewis, 2006; Piper, 2008). Lister (2007a) argues that the dangers of this policy approach are that children are constructed in instrumentalist terms as profitable investments, thus undervaluing their present well-being and current citizenship practices.

Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that the predominant understanding of public provisions for children in England is as 'children's services'. They see the idea of children's services as an 'instrumental and atomising notion, in which provisions are technologies for acting upon children, [...], to produce specific predetermined and adult-defined outcomes' (p. 9). Moss (2006) suggests that children's services operate as sites for technologies of government; firstly to produce a flexible workforce and secondly to bring order out of social disorder. He uses metaphors of 'factory' and 'business' to suggest that children's services are often understood as either a place for technical practice, to produce standardised and predetermined child outcomes, or as a commodity, competing in a

market against other providers (Moss, 2007). As such, children's services are characterised by instrumentality and the totalising tendencies of modernity.

Moss and Petrie (2002) argue instead that children's services, such as children's centres, can be reconceptualised as 'children's spaces'. Children's spaces are:

... provided through public agency, places for civic life rather than commercial transactions, where children meet one another, and adults. They foreground the present, rather than the future: they are part of life, not just preparation for it. They are spaces for children's own agendas, although not precluding adult agendas, where children are understood as fellow citizens with rights, participating members of the social groups in which they find themselves, agents of their own lives, but also interdependent with others, co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture, children who exist in the society on the basis of who they are, rather than who they will become (p. 106).

Children's spaces are public spaces where children and adults participate together in a variety of projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance for the common good (Moss and Petrie, 2002). They conceptualise children's spaces not just in terms of 'physical space' (a setting for children) but also as 'social space' (a domain of social practices and relationships); as 'cultural space' (where values, rights and cultures are created); and as 'discursive space' (for exchanging different views and experiences). A discursive space involves deliberation and critical thinking, where children and adults can speak and be heard. The idea of children's spaces fundamentally changes the conceived relationships between adults and children, professionals and service users. Professionals are facilitators rather than technicians and both children and adults are co-constructors of new knowledge, new practices and aspirations. Services become like workshops: spaces to experiment and to research. Hill et al. (2004) argue that participative relationships therefore are fundamental to the idea of children's spaces.

The notion of children's spaces presupposes an understanding of children as social agents with rights to express views and to participate in decision-making. Alongside this understanding, Moss and Petrie (2002) advocate that children's spaces should be environments for collectivities of children. They are spaces for children to spend time together and to form a social group, sometimes with adult workers present and sometimes without. Within children's spaces, therefore, there is a need for children to have opportunities for privacy, away from the adult gaze. Commenting upon this, Waller (2006) suggests that rather than thinking about engaging children's views simply

to influence planning and design (like many of the Sure Start case studies described above do), 'we need to rethink children's participation in terms of 'spaces for childhood' within which children can exercise their agency to participate in their own decisions, actions and meaning-making, which may or may not involve engagement with adults' (p. 93). This idea of spaces for childhood is similar to the notion of 'popular spaces' used by scholars interested in governance theory and community development. 'Popular spaces' are often informal spaces owned or created by citizens themselves, as opposed to 'invited spaces' in which people are invited to participate in more formal governance structures (Cornwall, 2004). A number of scholars suggest we need to work from the bottom up in the popular spaces that children themselves create, rather than relying on consultations or structures created especially for participation which are often decontextualised from everyday life. We need to encourage these alternative, popular spaces for participation as well as widen the array of adult-invited spaces for children's participation (Taylor, 2007; Cornwall, 2008; Taylor and Percy Smith, 2008; Shier, 2010a).

Moss (2007; 2008) suggests that it is possible to conceive of early childhood institutions such as the children's centre as spaces in which democratic engagement takes place between citizens, young and old. We can choose to conceptualise the children's centre as a space, first and foremost, in which the citizenship status of even the youngest of children is recognised and respected and in which children's citizenship practices are actively encouraged. Democratic participation in the early childhood institution is:

... an important criterion of citizenship: it is a means by which children and adults can participate with others in shaping decisions affecting themselves, groups of which they are members and the wider society. It is also a means of resisting power and its will to govern, and the forms of oppression and injustice that arise from the unrestrained exercise of power. Last but not least, democracy creates the possibility for diversity to flourish. By so doing, it offers the best environment for the production of new thinking and new practice (Moss 2007, p. 7).

Moss' democratic framework for young children's services challenges the traditional view of early education and care as depoliticised, being 'displaced to the private realm – becoming matters for domestic deliberation or consumer choice' (Hay 2007, p. 85). Rather, Moss (2007) conceptualises the early childhood institution as 'a public forum in civil society or as a place of encounter and dialogue between citizens, from which many

possibilities can emerge, some expected, others not, and most productive when relationships are governed by democratic practice' (p. 12).

Moss reminds us that conceptualising the early childhood institution as a public space in which young children can participate in minor politics is a choice that we make. There is nothing inevitable about it (Moss, 2007). Consequently, we need to be intentional about making a space for young children's participation. He suggests that this involves adults and children engaging interdependently in at least four types of activity. First, it involves decision-making about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery. This is not decision-making in a neo-liberal sense, that is, as the individual choice-making of a consumer, rather this is a democratic process of collective decision-making. Second, making a space for children's participation involves evaluation of pedagogical work through participatory methods to enable the perspectives of young children to be made visible and hence their inclusion in participatory politics. Here Moss makes the distinction between evaluation for the purposes of fitting predetermined 'quality' indicators, and evaluation as a democratic language of interdependent meaning-making. This calls for careful pedagogical documentation (Rinaldi, 2005) of what is going on in the here and now and reflection on this documentation with children, parents, practitioners and local communities to discuss its multiple meanings. Third, creating spaces for children's participation involves listening to others and engaging in dialogue that allows 'positive dissensus' and contests dominant discourses. Such dissensus prevents us closing ourselves into 'circles of certainty' (Freire, 1972). It represents a way of participating that is open-ended (avoiding closure), open-minded (welcoming the unexpected) and open-hearted (valuing difference) (Moss, 2010). Fourth, it involves being prepared to act upon what has been heard so as to 'open up for change'.

Finally, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that early childhood institutions, like children's centres, can be conceptualised as sites not only for the practice of minor politics but also as 'loci of ethical practices', rather than simply as sites for the transmission of scientific knowledge and technologies. Increasing institutionalisation brings new risks and therefore new responsibilities for those involved. One of these responsibilities is to think and act ethically towards those we relate to in the children's centre. This is about re-personalising ethics, facing and making choices, rather than simply following universal codes or rules. Drawing on Bauman's (1993) postmodern



ethics, Tronto (1993) and Sevenhuijsen's (1998) feminist writing on an ethics of care, and Levinas's (1989) ethics of an encounter, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that engaging ethically places responsibility on each of us to make contextualised judgements and not to fall back on blanket moral codes, calculative thinking, or the tendency to grasp otherness. 'It involves an ethical relationship of openness to the Other, trying to listen to the Other from his or her own position and experiences and not treating the other as the same' (p. 100).

Notwithstanding the increasing demands of central government control and public funding cuts, it is possible for children's centres to become sites for ethical engagement and democratic participation. After all, they are meeting spaces for young and old alike that foreground notions of care, responsibility and pedagogy, and they have their origins in localism and experimentalism. As Brown and Duguid (2000) argue, 'It is people, in their communities, organisations and institutions, who ultimately decide what it all means and why it matters' (p. 14). When children, parents, staff and others are given the space to attend to questions such as these, children's centre services can broaden their focus from technical and managerial matters to consider ethical and political concerns too.

## **4.5 A Critical Response**

In Section 4.3.2, I outlined several areas where there are gaps in the research literature that relate specifically to young children's participation in a children's centre context. These include the need to conduct research that:

- focuses on children's participation across different children's centre services and not just education and care
- includes the voices and perspectives of our youngest children, those with impairments and from ethnic minority and migrant families
- examines potential differences of perspective between participating children, and between children and adults, and thus resists the temptation to homogenize participants' views
- examines opportunities for collective decision-making alongside individual decision-making

- considers whether children's participation takes place at a strategic decision-making level, including service-level planning and evaluation, and not just at a service delivery level
- explores how children's centre practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds conceptualise and encourage young children's participation and whether this moves beyond the idea of one-off consultations
- creates a space for those working with our youngest of children to contribute to current participation debates and theoretical discussions

These empirical and theoretical omissions, together with my personal and methodological reasons (described in Sections 1.4, 2.6, 3.4 and Chapter 5), underpin my rationale for this research. A final rationale has come as a result of my critical and social constructionist leanings and from reading work by educational researchers such as Biesta (2007), MacNaughton (2005), Moss (1999) and colleagues (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Moss and Haydon, 2008) that provokes me to conduct research that is different from, but complements, the current enthusiasm for a particular kind of 'evidence-based' research. Evidence-based policy, practice and research help us to examine 'what works' questions such as those that address effectiveness, impact or outcome measures. However, if this is the only type of research conducted there is a danger that Sure Start is reduced to a technical enterprise and children's centres are rendered as measurable and 'knowable'. This is in tension with conceptualisations of Sure Start as a moral, political and ethical practice and with notions of children, adults and children's centres as continuous becomings (as well as discrete beings and actualities). There is, therefore, a role for research that focuses on processes, meaning-making and questions of a more critical nature.

Consequently, this project is not asking technical or instrumental questions such as 'What works or what doesn't in Sure Start services?' Others have sought to address such questions (for example, Weinberger et al., 2005; Melhuish, 2006; Belsky et al., 2007; Schneider et al., 2007; Anning and Ball, 2008; Melhuish et al., 2008; 2010a; 2010b) and continue to do so<sup>3</sup>. Neither is it asking the question 'What's right or what's wrong with

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3 For example, Sylva and colleagues from the University of Oxford and the National Centre for Social Research are currently conducting the 2009-2015 'Evaluation of Children's Centres in England', commissioned by the DfE.

children's participation in children's centres?' Rather, I am seeking to address more exploratory and emancipatory questions:

- What does children's participation mean in a children's centre context?
- How can children participate further?
- How is children's participation enhanced and constrained by social processes taking place in the children's centre?

Moss (1999) suggests that we are constantly being offered solutions before we have asked critical questions about childhood and the purposes of early childhood services. Critical research and thinking with young children and adults enables us to explore questions and possibilities, rather than givens and necessities (Moss and Petrie, 2002). It helps us to trouble a commonsense acceptance of institutions, such as children's centres and the policies that surround them, and to problematise the discourses they are situated within. Woodhead (2008) argues that 'engaging with young children's perspectives on their own unique experiences of early childhood is arguably the most crucial starting point for policy and practice' (p. 26). A focus on what works therefore must be accompanied by 'questions of what it should work *for* and who should have a say in determining the latter' (Biesta 2007, p. 5). Moss (2008) contends:

We perhaps need rather fewer studies of the effectiveness of this or that technical programme, and rather more studies on how and why certain communities or individual centres have managed to become local cultural projects, capable of developing an approach that is participatory, experimental and researching (p. 29).

This articulates my reasons for wanting to undertake critical, participatory research with the children, parents and practitioners of Towersham Park Children's Centre.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

I began this chapter by examining the origins and agendas of Sure Start children's centres as conceptualised in Labour policy. Children's centres have been constructed as a technology to prepare children for school; to raise educational attainment; to integrate parents and ultimately children into the labour market; to improve health; to modify parental and child behaviour through 'positive parenting' programmes and outreach initiatives; and to reduce the risks of child poverty, abuse and crime. In order to achieve

these ambitious goals, children's centres have been monitored against measurable outcomes, with pre-specified targets set for each objective. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Frost and Parton (2009) suggest that there is danger in conceptualising Sure Start purely as a technology to deliver predetermined targets. An uncritical focus on 'what works' can allow innovative and imaginative cultural projects such as children's centres to become technical and measurable enterprises. It risks producing a rather narrow and instrumental conceptualisation of these institutions. Moreover, it can encourage forms of practice that may not necessarily be ethically desirable.

Frost and Parton (2009) suggest that there is a key contradiction between the centralised, prescriptive targets set by Government and the original Sure Start ethos of local governance and participation. With the move from SSLPs to children's centres, parental and community participation has largely dropped off the children's centre agenda (Glass, 2005; Pemberton and Mason, 2008; Lewis 2011a; Lister and Bennett, 2010). Furthermore, in spite of requirements for children to participate in the development of children's centre services, Davies and Artaraz (2009) suggest that current practice in the centres they researched is not yet meeting these requirements. As I argue in my review of the existing literature, there is little research evidence that children's participation is occurring in more than a handful of children's centres, is happening beyond the level of one-off consultations, or that it is informing strategic decision-making. Furthermore, the perspectives of young children, disabled children and those from migrant families are remarkably absent. This lack of evidence supports the rationale for further research into young children's participation in children's centres.

Finally, this chapter has explored political and ethical questions about the purposes of children's centres and considered alternative ways for conceptualising these spaces and children's participation within them. Instead of conceptualising children's centres simply as disciplinary mechanisms and as services for the efficient production of predetermined outcomes, they can also be conceptualised as spaces for children's culture and relationships; for the practice of ethics; and for the conduct of minor politics. Moss and colleagues' idea of early childhood institutions as political and ethical spaces (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Moss 2007; 2008) helps us to understand young children's participation in children's centres, not just as a prescription to be followed but as a provocation to democratic debate.

# **Part II: Methodology**

## **5. Researching Young Children's Participation**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In his essay on philosophy's contribution to social science, Hammersley (2006) draws a distinction between 'methodology-as-technique' and 'methodology-as-philosophy'. Methodology-as-technique concentrates on the deployment of specific research methods, whereas methodology-as-philosophy focuses on the role of philosophical assumptions in research. Throughout this research, I have been keen to eschew this binary by engaging in both processes in an effort to justify inquiry from both a philosophical and empirical point of view. In order to satisfy the requirements of different institutional review boards, including university research and ethics committees, the local NHS Research Ethics Committee (REC) and Health and Social Care Consortium (HSCC), I have spent considerable time justifying the inquiry from an empirical point of view. This entailed completing a myriad of research protocols and ethical applications outlining the different methods I proposed to utilise (Maconochie Site File, 2008-2010), and defending the study to a panel of 'experts'. However, instead of 'bracketing off philosophical issues from the practice of social research' (Uprichard 2006, p. 1202), this chapter provides an opportunity to justify my methodology and methods more broadly, considering issues of ontology, epistemology and axiology.

At the outset, I address key dimensions of the study including contextual information about Towersham and its children's centre. Next, I consider the philosophical foundations of the research by arguing for a paradigmatic position that fuses a critical and participatory approach to inquiry with poststructural insights. I articulate the qualitative research strategy I have employed with the participants to address the central research questions and other subsidiary questions: namely ethnographic participatory action research. This is followed by discussion and critique of the participatory methods employed by the participants, including myself, and my role as researcher. Next, I reflect on matters of axiology by considering the ethical processes involved in the study. This includes both 'ethics-as-code' and 'ethics-as-relation'. Finally, I present my approach to analysis, dissemination and criteria for evaluating the findings.

## **5.2 Towersham and its Children's Centre**

Towersham is located on the eastern border of a northern English city, in this thesis named as 'Felldon'. It is bordered by large areas of industrial land and an out-of-town shopping centre. Towersham expanded rapidly towards the end of the 19th century as a centre for coal, iron and metal manufacturing. Migrants, mainly from Pakistan, settled in Towersham during the 1960s to work in local manufacturing industries. Much of this employment declined in the following decades. A motorway runs through the suburb, separating it geographically from the rest of the city. These factors have contributed to Towersham being 'one of the poorest and most isolated areas of the city' (Towersham Park Management Plan 2009, p. 126). According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (DETR 2000), Towersham is amongst the 20% most deprived communities in the country (Felldon Neighbourhood Information System (FNIS) Data, 2008). Particular issues include: poor health, low educational attainment, high unemployment and poor housing (FNIS, 2008).

In the 2001 Census (ONS, 2001), Towersham was made up of two main ethnic groups: White British and Asian Pakistani. There have always been small numbers of other ethnic groups in the community, but since 2002 Towersham has seen the arrival of a sizeable minority of asylum seekers and refugees. Furthermore, since Slovakia joined the European Union in 2004, Towersham has seen a steady increase in the arrival of migrant workers and their families. The majority of these families come from the Roma minority (NHS Felldon, 2009). Towersham has a younger population than Felldon as a whole and 28% of children aged 0-4 live in households receiving income support, compared with the citywide rates of 19% (Health Informatics Service, 2004).

Towersham contains a small number of community organisations including the Towersham Parents' Consortium (TPC). TPC was established in 1999 with the aim of providing childcare, training and health opportunities in the Towersham area in response to a number of community consultations and having secured Single Regeneration Budget funding. In 2001 TPC bid to become a fourth wave SSLP. In Autumn 2001, Towersham Sure Start was established with TPC as the lead agency. The capital funding provided as part of the national Sure Start arrangements was then used to develop a purpose-built children's centre in the middle of the local park, thus bringing together this initiative with a City Council project to regenerate the only open space for

Towersham residents (Towersham Park Management Plan, 2009). Hence, in the summer of 2006, Towersham Park Children's Centre (TPCC) was opened as a stand-alone, Phase One children's centre, run in partnership by TPC, Felldon City Council and Felldon Primary Care Trust.

TPCC comprises a 60 place nursery for children from 6 months to 4 years; an outdoor play space; a community café; a large activity room; a prayer room; clinic and office space for a community midwife and health visiting team, a family support team, a community development and parental involvement worker, community police officers, and staff from 'Activity Felldon' and 'Felldon Parks and Countryside Service'. A number of external agencies also deliver services from the building, including Jobcentre Plus, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, and the Children's Information Service.

During the period of empirical fieldwork (September 2008 - July 2009), the population of children aged 0-4 years in Towersham was 883 (Felldon Children and Young People's Directorate, 2008-9). Towersham had the highest percentage (91.5%) of black and minority ethnic (BME) children of all children's centre areas in the city (Felldon CYPD 2008-9) and a higher than average number of children with additional needs (TPCC OFSTED Self Evaluation Form, 2009). The total number of children attending the nursery either on a full-time, sessional or crèche basis was 125 (Towersham Nursery SEN Headcount, 2009). Of these, 89 children were from BME groups, 24 children were identified as needing 'Early Years Action'<sup>4</sup>, seven children were on 'Early Years Action Plus'<sup>5</sup> and two children, plus one pending, had a statement of special educational needs<sup>6</sup> (Towersham Nursery SEN Headcount, 2009).

There were empirical, ethical and pragmatic reasons for the research taking place at TPCC. Given that there is a paucity of research regarding young children's participation in general, and across different children's centre services in particular, and few studies that focus on the participation of young disabled children and those from ethnic minority groups, it was important for the research to take place in a children's centre

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4 Early Years Action is additional support provided by a setting when a child is identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN).

5 Early Years Action Plus involves seeking support from specialists outside the setting.

6 This is a formal multi-agency assessment of a child's Special Educational Needs carried out by the local authority under section 323 of the Education Act 1996.



that could match these empirical interests. Another prerequisite was that the children's centre staff needed to be sympathetic to the participatory ethos of the project and willing to consider how the children's centre could become more responsive to children's views. Finally, I wanted the research to take place in a Phase One children's centre for two reasons: firstly, to ensure the participation of young children from one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England; and secondly, only Phase One children's centres were sufficiently established, compared with the emerging Phase Two and Three centres, which were in the early stages of development during the 2008-2009 period.

Since the research focus was children's participation, only services that work directly with children were included. This comprised four areas: education and care; family support; child and family health services; and inclusion and therapy services for disabled children. The intention was to carry out an in-depth qualitative study of children's participation across these four services with practitioners, parents and children. I sought to make the research as collaborative and participatory as possible, whilst remaining cognisant of the poststructuralist critique of participation (see Section 2.4.2) and the need to be poststructurally reflexive (MacNaughton, 2005). This desire reflects my epistemological stance.

### **5.3 Fusing Epistemological Paradigms**

My paradigmatic position fuses a critical and participatory approach to inquiry with poststructural insights. At first glance this might seem problematic since many texts on qualitative research chart the boundaries and incompatibility between different epistemological positions. Distinctions are frequently drawn between the major paradigms of positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and postmodern approaches, and these are often presented in tables outlining their respective ontological, epistemological and methodological bases (see for example, Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 2009). Heron and Reason (1997) add the participatory paradigm to this four-fold typology. Key features of the participatory paradigm include: a focus upon a political agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, their institutions, and the researcher herself; practical and collaborative action inquiry conducted 'with' rather than 'on' others; and a participative, subjective-objective reality (Creswell, 2007; Guba and Lincoln, 2008). This paradigm focuses on the needs of groups and individuals who may be marginalized in society. It aims to be emancipatory in that it helps people to unshackle

themselves from the constraints of unjust structures that limit self-determination (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998).

In this sense, the participatory paradigm has much in common with critical research and pedagogy (Freire, 1972), emancipatory disability research (Oliver, 1992; 1997; Stone and Priestley, 1996; Barnes and Mercer, 1997) and feminist emancipatory research (Lather, 1986; Maguire, 1987). Consequently, Guba and Lincoln (2008) contend that, although Heron and Reason have elaborated a distinct approach they call the participatory paradigm, 'careful reading of their proposal reveals a form of inquiry that is post-postpositive, postmodern and criticalist in orientation' (p. 264). Indeed, Guba and Lincoln (2008) observe that this reflects a recent shift in epistemological thinking in which, for increasing numbers of social scientists, the boundaries between the paradigms are shifting and blurring. For example, Lather (1991) seeks to reconcile poststructural insights with the aims of feminism, critical research and pedagogy.

It is these intersections and overlapping perspectives that influence my approach to this research project, in the sense that I conceptualise my epistemological and methodological stance to be that of the *bricoleur* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). In fusing critical and participatory approaches to inquiry with poststructural insights I am not advocating an 'anything goes' approach to methodology. Rather, this is an intentional strategy to gather ideas from a number of positions in order to theorise and challenge social, structural, cultural, discursive and material injustice as it pertains to young children's participation. Indeed, Skrtic (1995) argues that such an anti-foundational position, where no one epistemological position is held over the other, is liberating.

However, the blending of critical perspectives with postmodern approaches is not without its controversies and contradictions (Guba and Lincoln, 2008). Both perspectives are sceptical of the pursuit of 'truth', positivism and its methods, asserting that knowledge is socially constructed and situated. Likewise, in each worldview there is a direct link between knowledge and power (Kilgore, 2001; MacNaughton and Smith 2001; MacNaughton, 2005). However, the paradigms diverge in two important ways. These differences centre upon problems associated with the modernist goal of emancipation, and those associated with relativism and the paralysing aspects of postmodernity (Lather, 1991).

Kilgore (2001) argues that the primary difference between the two worldviews is that critical theorists assume that rationality is a means to better knowledge, whereas postmodernists see knowledge as tentative, fragmented, multifaceted and not necessarily rational. Critical theorists tend to hold a sovereign view of power and a modernist belief, linked to the Enlightenment, that true knowledge can emancipate an individual or group from the oppressive force of power. This is achieved through a system of education and/or interventions that encourage critical reflection and consciousness-raising (Freire, 1972). Critical social theory methodologies, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) claim to deal with the issues of emancipation and offer a self-reflective movement towards personal autonomy and knowledge (Heslop, 1997). This belief system fits with a position that, as researchers and practitioners, we can help the oppressed achieve empowerment and self-direction. However, from a postmodern perspective, rather than knowledge providing us with the power to do things, knowledge is the effect of power. Knowledge is the power to define others; thereby it may cease to be a liberation and become instead a mode of domination (Foucault, 1977). The issue of power, from a Foucauldian perspective, enables us to look closely at our efforts to change, to empower and emancipate, and to realise that we contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intentions (Apple, 1991). Poststructuralism does not ignore the view that, as researchers and practitioners, we have much to give in the form of our knowledge, education and experiences to change situations and help people, but it does enable us to think about how we contribute to the control and surveillance of people we are seeking to assist (Healy, 2005; Wendt and Seymour, 2010).

Meanwhile, poststructuralism has been criticised by some critical and feminist theorists for its relativism (Malacrida, 2003; Rogowski, 2010). The charge is that, in its focus upon a decentred subject, who is only constituted through discourse, poststructuralism ignores structural inequities and oppression (Malacrida, 2003; Rogowski, 2010). In this respect, Orford (2008) suggests that poststructural research, with its foregrounding of discourse and text, can distance us from the spatial and material dimensions of life that marginalised people are struggling to tell us about. However, feminists such as Lather (1991) and Fraser (1998) argue that, by taking up poststructural notions of a subject constituted through discourse, we are offered new ways of understanding oppression and therefore of conducting emancipatory research. For example, a poststructural awareness of these subjectivities and dominating discourses can draw attention to the

ways in which particular regimes of truth are seen as legitimate and are sanctioned to limit, constrain and marginalize children's participation.

Lather (1991) observes that another criticism made of postmodernity is its lack of attention to questions of action and its impotence in the face of ongoing social problems. She cites Caputo (1987) who summarises the issue: 'We are faced with the problem of not only what we can know but also of what we are to do' (p. 236). However, some scholars, including those working in the field of early childhood, such as MacNaughton (2005), Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Cannella and Bloch (2006), refute the critique that poststructural methodologies simply deconstruct knowledge and regimes of truth without generating new possibilities for action. Cannella and Bloch (2006) suggest that 'acts of deconstruction and critique are themselves actions, forms of activism that can change perspectives and even the world' (p. 16). This idea is taken from Foucault (1983) who encourages us to critique practice, theory and discourse, not as good or bad but as potentially dangerous, in order to develop a form of critical activism:

If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger. (p. 231)

As MacNaughton (2005) explains, Foucault argues that we can choose the truths we privilege and that the possibility of choice implies the possibility of disrupting a regime of truth and its inequitable intents. In this way it becomes possible for critical social theory and poststructuralism to work together to develop emancipatory research: by combining a critical 'responsibility to act' with a poststructural 'responsibility to otherness' (White, 1988).

So what might a responsibility to action and to otherness look like from a critical postmodern perspective? McCabe and Holmes (2009) suggest this starts with the individual and group raising social consciousness about an issue and then involves a process of identifying dominant ideologies and the set of truths by which they judge their behaviours and those of others. Secondly, it requires applying 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) (the way in which people govern their own conduct to produce new ways of being) to create a new self and new modes of acting. They suggest that reflexivity on the part of the researcher and of the participants is one such technology

that can serve this activism and encourage people to undertake actions to improve their situation. This kind of critical reflexivity can occur through journal-keeping or during the interview process. In the field of early childhood, Dahlberg et al. (2007) add that pedagogical documentation is another such technology that can function as a tool for opening up a critical and reflective practice. Finally, a responsibility to otherness involves an openness to difference, dissonance and ambiguity.

## **5.4 Strategies of Inquiry**

In line with much research conducted by researchers identifying with the 'new social studies of childhood', the methodological strategies of inquiry I chose to use borrow from the traditions of critical ethnography (Lather, 1991; Thomas, 1993; Carspecken 1986; Foley and Valenzuela, 2008), the ethnographic study of children (Corsaro, 1985; James, 2001; Brooker, 2002; Connolly, 2004), participatory action research (PAR) (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) and participatory research with children (Clark and Moss, 2001; 2005; Clark, 2004; Christensen and James, 2008). Given that the substantive topic of inquiry was participation, my methodological approach sought to reflect the subject matter. In this way, subject and method were tied together (Thomas, 2002; Bath, 2009a).

I initially conceived of the research in two distinct phases. Firstly, I planned a six month phase (end of August 2008 - mid February 2009) in each of the four service areas, using ethnographic methods, primarily as a means of exploring what children's participation means to different stakeholders and of accessing and representing children's perspectives (Warming, 2011). This was to be followed by a six month PAR phase (mid February 2009 - July 2009) with practitioners and children (Clark, 2010a; Langhout and Thomas, 2010), using techniques from the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), primarily as a means of enhancing children's participation in each service area. However, whilst I broadly retained a commitment to my original proposal, within a few days of beginning fieldwork it became apparent that my conceptualisation of these two phases needed to be more fluid. Ethnographic approaches permeated every stage of the fieldwork, and some elements of participatory action began the moment initial ideas for the project were shared with participants. Thus, the research design could not be broken into neat hermetic stages (Brewer, 2000). As Freire (1972) insists, praxis cannot be

divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action, but occurs in an endless cycle.

Facing similar circumstances in her research into participation with reception class children, Bath (2009b) argues that the inter-relationship of ethnography and action research makes the case for 'ethnographic action research' possible. However, she also points out that these strategies of inquiry might be theoretically opposed, according to the epistemological stance of the researcher. For example, in 'positivist' and 'humanist' modes of ethnography, the role of the ethnographer is to observe and to represent the culture of the Other, taking as impartial a position as possible (Brewer, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). This would seem incompatible with the political and action oriented elements of action research. Likewise, in 'first person' forms of action research (Bradbury and Reason, 2003), the research is conducted by an insider practitioner, rather than an outside observer (Kemmis, 1993; Whitehead, 2000; McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). On the other hand, feminist and critical forms of ethnography (Lather, 1991; Thomas, 1993; Carspecken 1986; Foley and Valenzuela, 2008) and participatory forms of action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) involve a collaborative production of knowledge that blurs the insider-outsider dichotomy and have the goal of challenging inequalities and changing existing social structures (Thomas, 1993; Cook, 2005; Naidoo, 2008). Each strategy lends itself to participatory approaches and multiple methods, increasingly used in inquiry focused on children (O'Kane, 2008; Murray, 2011). Both approaches aim to go beyond describing 'what is' to question with participants 'why this is' and 'what can be done about it' (Cook, 2005; Naidoo, 2008). In this way, it becomes feasible that these approaches can be combined in a single project (Lather, 1986; Tacchi et al., 2003; Cook, 2005; Bath, 2009b).

## **5.5 Contexts of Inquiry**

Many aspects of the research design, such as the methods, the specific contexts of inquiry and the subsidiary research questions of the PAR projects in the four service areas, were intentionally organic, given the open-ended and participatory nature of ethnographic action research. This was because I wanted to avoid pre-fixed observational categories and sought to invite the participants to define their own aims, research questions and preferred research methods with me. Indeed, I conceived of the research process as a co-production, contributed to by adults and children. This meant I

had little *a priori* idea of what we were going to do, who was going to be involved, and what their level of involvement would be. That is not to say that I entered the field as a *tabula rasa* or theoretical innocent. By contrast, I had read around the topic of children's participation and had some knowledge and experience of various methods common to ethnographic fieldwork, PAR and participatory methods with children. I had also discussed the project with all of the key 'gatekeepers', including the Project Manager, each of the service leads and practitioners. However, the emergent nature of the design was problematic when applying for NHS ethical approval, since a predetermined research protocol outlining the specific service activities and research methods was required. As other researchers have noted, formal ethical review boards cannot easily accommodate the fluid and evolving research designs, contexts and methods that are typical of ethnography and PAR (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007; Lincoln, 2008; Christians, 2008).

Practitioners decided upon the particular activities they would like the research to focus on within each service area. These included:

- the children's centre nursery comprising 'Room 1' (3 months - 2 years), 'Room 2' (2 - 3 years) and 'Room 3' (3 - 5 years)
- a family support parent-toddler group for children under the age of five
- a health visitors' clinic for mothers, babies under the age of one and their older siblings
- individualised specialist support and therapy for children with impairments.

Most of the fieldwork took place on TPCC premises. I also accompanied children on neighbourhood outings, therapy appointments and 'Care Pathway' meetings at Felldon Child Development Centre. The healthcare and family support staff decided they did not want me to accompany them on home visits since these were seen to be more sensitive contexts than the children's centre. This meant that only those who attended centre-based activities could participate in the study. As others have noted, concerning children's participation in research, a discourse of protectionism influenced the context of inquiry and therefore who could be invited to participate in the research (Valentine, 1999; Powell and Smith, 2009). This was somewhat ironic given that children's centre outreach services are intended to reduce the risk of exclusion (DES, 2006).

### 5.5.1 The Participants

Seventeen practitioners, six parents, and twenty children participated in the research. This included ten girls and ten boys of different ages (from four months to four years); abilities (including preverbal children, non-English speaking children, children with English as an additional language, children with communication impairments, children with learning difficulties and non-disabled children); and ethnic backgrounds (including children of Pakistani, White British, Black African, Roma Slovak, White and Black Caribbean and Malaysian ethnic origins). The sample was broadly purposeful in that I wanted it to reflect the diversity of those who attended TPCC and participants had to be fairly regular members of a group activity in at least one of the four service areas. Parents who attended bi-generational group activities with their children were invited to participate in the research with their children, and one parent of a disabled child also took part. Table 5.1 shows the roles of the practitioners and managers who decided to participate in the research.

*Table 5.1 Practitioner Participants*

<b>Education and Care</b>	<b>Family Support</b>	<b>Child and Family Health Services</b>	<b>Inclusion and Therapy Services</b>
Project Manager (PM)	Family Support Manager (FSM)	Health Visitors (HV) x2	Physiotherapist
Childcare Manager	Family Support Worker (FSW)	Community Midwife	SEN Outreach Worker
Early Years Professional (EYP)		Health Support Workers (HSW) x2	SENCO
Children's Centre Teacher			Felldon Early Years Inclusion Assistant
Nursery Practitioners (NP) x2			

#### **Self as Participant in the Research Process**

I too was a participant in both phases of the research. I began by taking an ethnographic stance as participant-observer (Brewer, 2000). The purpose of this was to explore what



children's participation looked like in each service context. Unlike Mandell's (1991) 'least adult' role (p. 40), I cannot claim I took a complete participant-observer role with the children, given differences in my age, size and status. Rather, as an adult, I could only ever have a semi-participatory role in the children's and adults' lives (James, 2001). My aim was to join the children in their play and conversations, not through pretending to be a child, but by being an 'unusual type of adult' (Christensen 2004, p. 174) in the setting. Similarly, as a PhD student I did not take on the role and responsibilities concomitant with that of being a practitioner. However, like a volunteer, I was happy to assist parents and practitioners with small tasks as required. Thus, I engaged in the everyday activities of children and adults in the setting, while maintaining sufficient separation to be able to observe and take notes (Papatheodorou and Luff, 2011). This approach proved to be useful throughout the duration of the study, but particularly in the early days of 'entering the field' (Malinowski, 1922; Berg, 2009) since it enabled me to build rapport with children, parents and staff. This was also important since, during the gatekeeping process, several members of the nursery staff had informed me that as a result of their involvement in a previous research study conducted by university researchers at TPCC, they were wary of people doing research *on* them, rather than *with* them. Although my approach went some way in alleviating practitioners' fears about their practice being scrutinized and criticised, I quickly became aware that my role as participant-observer was contributing to processes of surveillance. For this reason, and in discussion with the Programme Manager, I decided to share all of my notes and memos with the members of staff or parents involved in each observation. Similarly, I showed my note book and read out snippets of data to children who were interested in what I was writing about them. Although this was a time-consuming process, I felt this helped to improve both the ethical and methodological rigour of the project, since staff, parents and children were engaged in interpretation, clarification and reflection upon the data with me. Further reasons for this decision, and the process of how this occurred, are given in Section 5.6.1. In a similar vein, participants shared all of their observational notes, photographs and other data with me.

There were a few occasions in which my role changed from participant-observer to 'participant-as-observer' (Adler and Adler, 1987). This occurred, for example, during physiotherapy and during one 'free play' session with Haniya, a young disabled child. There were two reasons for this. A 'participant-as-observer' role seemed appropriate during episodes in which staff were engaged in physiotherapy exercises with Haniya,

since any further level of involvement on my part would have seemed intrusive. My second reason for the temporary shift in role was that after I had been at the setting for three months and participants had become more familiar with my presence, I was curious to observe the embodied perspectives of the non-verbal children as they related to each other, the staff and the environment, without being involved in the action myself. The data generated during this episode is recorded in Section 6.5.3 and was subsequently discussed with practitioners. Whilst I am aware that this was a risky strategy since the observation raised some sensitive issues around Haniya's care and inclusion, the data this generated helped us to realise that children's participation and citizenship practices occur not just in the intergenerational domain of adult-child relations, but also in the domain of peer-to-peer relationships.

Transcripts of semi-structured interviews and conversations with parents and staff were also shared with participants as a means of conducting member checks and of producing meta-data. Near the end of Phase One, I asked practitioners which areas they would like to focus on to inform the PAR element of the next phase of the project. We met in teams across the four service areas to analyse participants' responses and to decide upon the subsequent research foci and questions. During the PAR, my aim was to take the role of facilitator (Hart, 1992), acting as an advisor or catalyst to the other participant-researchers to enable them to shape the direction of their projects. This is not to suggest I took a seemingly passive or neutral role. Rather, I was both part of the data and part of the action, inasmuch as my role included becoming part of the culture and of the changing culture of the children's centre (Frankham and Howes, 2009). However, my intention throughout was to take a democratic stance rather than to impose my views on the other practitioner-researchers, since this would have been antithetical to the participatory ethos of the research. Each team constructed a variety of possible research questions which were then refined or rejected through a collaborative process of dialogue until participants were happy with them. Once the practitioners had agreed the research questions I occasionally offered suggestions, along with other participants, about some of the methods we might use. The research foci and questions are outlined in Section 5.5.2.

Undoubtedly there were asymmetries in knowledge and power between me and some of the other participants. For example, my status as a white, educated professional woman and PhD student placed me in a perceived position of importance and therefore risked

creating a relation of dependence. As Gregory (2000) argues, such dependence may be 'a force against the realisation of people's own initiatives and, consequently, could be anti-participatory' (p. 182). On the other hand, I was acutely aware, particularly in the first few months of the project, of my status as an 'outsider' and my dependence upon the children, parents and staff to allow me access to their lives and expertise, and to maintain their consent to work with me as co-researchers. In reality, therefore, both my participation in the research and that of the other participants moved between shifting positions of dependence and independence, competence and incompetence, in that power/knowledge circulated between us at different times.

### **5.5.2 The PAR Projects**

An overview of the aims, research questions, and methods for each of the PAR projects as defined by the practitioners is set out in Appendices 2-6. In the Nursery, practitioners identified two main research questions to explore: 'What are children's views of nursery?' and 'How can we make our practice with children more participatory?' This project culminated in staff reviewing current policies and procedures and writing a reflective account (Appendix 7) and 'Children's Participation Charter' (Appendix 8).

Practitioners in both the family support service and health visiting service decided they wanted to include children's perspectives alongside parental views in evaluating one of their bi-generational group activities, since this was something they had never done before. This reflects Davies and Artaraz's (2009) finding that the idea of consulting with young children in children's centres is relatively new and the general finding that almost all participatory work with children in England tends to focus on service delivery, with less attention given to service-level planning and evaluation (Shier, 2001; Clark et al., 2003; Kirby et al., 2003).

The primary research questions identified by the Family Support Worker (FSW), who was setting up a new healthy cooking and eating group for children and parents, were: 'What are children's and parents' views of 'Big Cook Little Cook'?' and 'How can I use these views to develop the group further?'. The findings of the PAR project were presented in an internal evaluation report (Appendix 9) written by me and the FSW for the family support and children's centre management teams. This was used to secure resources and inform planning for the next cohort of 'Big Cook Little Cook'.

Similarly, in the parent-child clinic the health visitors and support staff sought to evaluate children's and parents' perspectives of the clinic by agreeing the following research question: 'What is it like for me as a child/parent to be at this group?' This led to a further question: 'How can we enhance children's participation in the group?' The main findings of the research were published in a co-authored, peer-reviewed journal article (Maconochie and McNeill, 2010).

Finally, as a result of the ethnographic interviews, the Inclusion Team realised that disabled children's views were not included in children's multi-professional review meetings. The primary research questions became: 'What are children's views of our provision?' and 'How can we enable children to represent their views within review meetings so that we might respond to children's wishes and support their choices?' This led to the co-construction of 'visual review books' by children, staff and parents which were read and discussed by practitioners and parents during review meetings. Examples of visual review books are contained in Appendix 10.

## **5.6 Methods of Inquiry**

Apart from participant observation and interviews, subsequent ethnographic and participatory methods were chosen with participants so that they could reflect the particularities of the persons involved and were appropriate to the cultural context and research questions.

### **5.6.1 Ethnographic Methods**

Ethnographic research takes place in the natural settings of people's everyday lives and involves direct observation, primarily participant observation, over an extended period of time. It aims to offer an in-depth understanding of the way people live and work and the culture in which they do so by providing 'thick' description (Geertz, 1993) and by paying particular attention to the motives, emotions and perspectives of those studied. It is concerned with understanding 'the social meanings and activities of people in a given field' (Brewer 2000, p. 11). My aim was to understand the social meanings and associated actions people attach to the concept of 'children's participation' in a children's centre context. However, in common with a postmodern critique (Brewer, 2000), I do

not claim to offer 'thick' description, since all types of description, ethnographic or not, are selective.

According to proponents of the 'new social studies', ethnographic methods allow children a 'more direct voice in the production of data' (James and Prout 1997, p. 8) than many other methods because children control what they do, when and with whom (Tudge and Hogan, 2005). Furthermore, an ethnographic framework is particularly useful for research with young children and children with impairments who may not use verbal modes of communication (Flewitt, 2005a; 2006). Traditionally babies, children who communicate in non-verbal ways, and children with communication difficulties have been excluded from participation in research (Davis and Watson, 2000; 2001; Corker and Davis, 2001; Alderson, 2008a). By focusing on the range of strategies children use to express meaning, including talk, body movement, gesture and gaze, observational methods provide a means of challenging language-biased approaches to research by 'supporting multimodal expressions of meaning rather than "pathologizing"... silence' (Flewitt 2006, p. 46). Warming (2005) argues therefore that ethnography can be a powerful method for listening to what Malaguzzi (1993) has referred to as 'the hundred languages of children'.

### **Participant Observation**

In common with James (1996) and Warming (2008), I approached children's perspectives as something which could be observed through my own positioned participation and reflexive engagement; not in the sense of a correspondence theory of truth, but as a social construction and re-presentation of how it *might be* to the children. This involved a process of co-construction between me, the other adult participants and the children, in which the focus became meaning-making rather than truth-finding (Dahlberg et al., 1999) and where no one perspective, including mine, could claim exclusive privilege (Angrosino, 2008). In my and others' attempts to understand children's views and decisions, we looked for what the children were engaged in, what they enjoyed, what they resisted and what made them sad, irritated, silent, content and so forth.

Rather naively what I, and later the other adult co-researchers, hadn't anticipated was that observing children inevitably involved observing adults, since opportunities for

children's participation often took place within the context of adult-child relations. This meant practitioners and their actions were prominent in my field notes. This was something that I felt uneasy about since I had initially described the project to practitioners as primarily involving observations of children. After a few weeks, I felt I had to make this explicit to practitioners and renegotiate their consent. As part of this process, I shared my notes with individual staff and asked them for their comments and permission to continue, adding that if they wished to withdraw at this point I would destroy any data related to them. To my surprise, all of the practitioners said they were happy to continue and some asked for copies of the data for their own records. This also prompted further questions about the project, leading to impromptu discussions about the topic of children's participation.

Apart from the ethical implications that arose as a result of this realisation, there were two other important outcomes which subsequently helped to shape my theoretical understanding and methodological approach. In terms of theory, this enabled me to appreciate the importance of contextualising young children's participation within, what some scholars refer to as, 'intergenerational relations' (for example, Alanen and Mayall, 2001). In terms of methodology, this led to a progressive focusing of observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995,) which became increasingly dialogical. In the early stages, observations were by broad sweep, however, over the course of the fieldwork I began to search for, and discuss with practitioners, dilemmas and problems facing children and their participation. As Angrosino (2008) argues, in this way observation became a context for interaction and action among those involved in the research collaboration. Likewise, interviews provided a similar context for interaction, collaboration and action.

## **Interviews**

Another method I employed included research conversations with different levels of formality from semi-structured interviews (Burman, 1994b; May, 2001) with practitioners, to informal conversations with adults and children alike. Pole and Morrison (2003) argue that ethnographic interviews provide rich sources of in-depth data that can lead to critical insights about participants' understandings. Heyl (2001) argues that the difference between ethnographic interviewing and other types of interview lies in both the time factor - duration and frequency of contact - and the

participatory quality of the emerging relationships. Ethnographic approaches enable researchers to establish respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees in order for there to be a 'genuine exchange of views' and for participants 'to shape, according to their worldviews, the questions being asked and possibly even the focus of the research study' (Heyl 2001, p. 369). For this reason, unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviews are the favoured method for ethnographic research (Brewer, 2000) as the interview is conceived of as a conversation.

Kvale (1996) notes the etymology of the Latin word *conversation* as 'wandering together with'. This was how I conceived of the interviews and informal conversations I had with the children, parents and practitioners at TPCC. Instead of seeking to uncover immutable truths and facts as a lone researcher, we were journeying together to learn something important about young children's participation, whilst acknowledging that our perspectives are provisional and situation-bounded, but nonetheless empirically grounded in the 'truths' of our experiences. This meant that I attempted to democratise the interview process through seeking to include participants, not just in shaping the direction of the conversations, but also in the interpretation process (Burman, 1994b; Heyl, 2001). This involved follow-up questions and further conversations as well as the sharing of interview transcripts, or in the case of children, through the making and sharing of pedagogical documentation (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Here I discussed my initial interpretations and asked for clarification. Another way I sought to democratise the interview process was by eschewing positivist ideas of detachment and role distance and instead adopting a feminist ethic of egalitarianism with participants (Oakley 1981; Smith, 1987). This meant I tried to do away with the traditional hierarchical situation in interviewing (Fontana and Frey, 2008) by answering questions, expressing feelings and sharing stories from my own life, just as the other participants did.

### **Observational Methods**

Observational methods of a short-term nature were also embedded in all four PAR projects. In the child and family health service, staff and parents conducted unstructured participant observations of children participating in six sessions of the parent-child health clinic. This method was chosen by the health visiting team for several reasons. Firstly, participant observation is a useful approach in participatory research with young children because the researcher seeks to join in with the activities as a familiar person,

whilst observing and recording the interactions of participants and interpreting actions and the contexts in which they occur (Warming, 2005). Consequently, parental and staff interactions with children could continue whilst the participating adults conducted the research. This minimised disruptions to the clinic and afforded researchers the opportunity to be simultaneously members and non-members of the group, and to participate, while also reflecting critically on what they observed (Brewer, 2000). Secondly, practitioners were keen to keep the observations open-ended and unstructured to enable children to demonstrate their preferences and competencies. Several scholars (Mauthner, 1997; Carr, 2000; Brooker, 2001) argue that the advantage of participant observation is that 'part of the agency can be shared with the child' and this reduces the power of the adult researcher (Clark et al. 2003, p. 30). Thirdly, this method was perceived to be non-threatening for practitioner- and parent-researchers, including those with English as an additional language, or with basic levels of literacy. This was because the Health Visitors suggested that the observational accounts should take the form of a practitioner/parent-researcher providing a running commentary of what the child was doing, with a peer or me acting in a supportive role as scribe. For example, one Urdu-speaking parent conducted an observation in her primary language with the health support worker acting as scribe and then as translator.

In spite of these advantages, Brewer (2000) highlights some of the limitations of this method: 'Participant observation can only be a partial portrait of a way of life compiled from selective records and is thus highly autobiographical' (p. 62). Indeed, as we have written elsewhere (Maconochie and MacNeill, 2010), subjectivity was an issue in this study. Children's voices and perspectives were filtered, interpreted and textually mediated (James and James, 2008), first through the perspective of the adult researcher and second through that of the scribe and/or translator. Indeed, postmodern understandings of observation suggest that all observational accounts are a social construction, containing possible contradictions and provisional 'truths' (MacNaughton, 2005). Therefore, we should remain cautious in our claims to be able to access children's perspectives. Given these reasons, Brewer (2000) adds that participant observation should not stand alone as a research method and Connolly (1997) highlights the need for researchers to be critically reflexive of the influence they bear on the research process.



In the second project the family support worker decided to orally record her observations immediately after four parent-toddler group sessions. This formed the basis of a series of unstructured interviews (Brewer, 2000) which were audio-recorded. Her reason for using this method was based on her preference for aural/oral ways of learning: '*See I do things more practical and verbal rather than written because that's the way I learn... [If] you ask me to do it on paper, no.*' Fielding (1993) argues that while audio-recording observations speeds things up compared to writing, it has the disadvantage of leading to a less reflective approach: 'Being slower, writing often leads to a better yield of analytic themes' (p. 162). We attempted to circumvent this problem by listening back to prior recordings together to make further reflections and take new actions.

Finally, the inclusion team also decided to conduct short, participant observations of disabled children's views and responses to their nursery and therapy provisions over a six week period.

#### *Narrative Observations*

In addition to the method described above, healthcare practitioners exercised their 'sociological imagination' (Wright Mills, 1970) to write short narratives of what they observed, as if in the voice of one of the children. Jarvis and Trodd (2008) argue that employing our imaginative capacities can be a useful methodological tool for seeing others, ourselves and our working practices differently. Thus, this method is well-suited to the aims of PAR. The main impetus for this method came from policy guidelines for NHS practitioners, primarily Standard 3 of the NSF (DH, 2004a). This sets out a vision of professionals 'attempting to see the world through children's eyes' (p. 87). In some ways the approach was similar to postmodern ethnographic practices in which observational data is reworked into fictional form (for example, Clough, 2002). Hence, writing became a method of inquiry in which the narratives deliberately blurred the solid demarcations between 'fact' and 'fiction', 'truth' and 'imagination' (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2008). The narratives were constructed to develop insights into the children's feelings and possible ways of thinking (Harris, 2000) and as a way of 'making the familiar strange'. They were then discussed in team meetings in which practitioners looked for resonance or dissonance with their own perspectives of the clinic. Following this, actions were taken in an attempt to improve children's experiences of the group.

### *Peer Observations*

Finally, in the education and childcare service, practitioners were interested to explore how they could make their practice with children more participatory. Over a three month period two practitioners decided to conduct peer observations once a week of one another's practice with children and then reflect on the data together. Peer observation is an increasingly common method used in educational institutions as a means of accounting for and improving teaching and learning (Bennett and Barp, 2008). However, it is often used as a top-down 'disciplinary technology' (Foucault, 1977) by senior staff to measure the performance of more junior practitioners, rather than as a method for collaborative professional development (Byrne et al., 2010). Having recently been subjected to 'peer' observations, in which staff were videoed communicating with children and then critiqued by a trainer from the local authority, the participating practitioners decided that they wanted their peer observations to operate differently. Their aim was to establish a non-judgemental ethos in which, as partner colleagues, they could share ideas and develop their thinking in an atmosphere of collaboration. Based on Shier's (2001) model of participation, practitioners decided to write 'snapshot' observations of incidents where they observed one another listening to a child, or supporting a child to express a view or become involved in decision-making, alongside missed opportunities. These were then discussed in a series of lunchtime meetings to analyse practices that promoted children's participation and processes that constrained it. Self and mutually agreed areas of practice to develop were then identified, policies were reviewed and action taken. Practitioners invited me to join them in these discussions.

### **5.6.2 Participatory Methods**

James (2001) and others (James et al., 1998; Christensen and James, 2008) argue that participatory techniques have particular value and pertinence for ethnographic research with children for several reasons. First, they permit a view of children as competent interpreters of the world since they involve children as 'co-researchers' in data generation. Thus research is done *with* children rather than *on* or *about* them. In this sense, participatory methods appear to be more democratic and ethical than the objectifying methods of traditional psychological social research since they have the potential to disrupt the frequently asymmetrical power relations between adults and children (Alderson, 2001a; Christensen, 2004; Grover, 2004). Second, they encompass a combination of verbal, visual and kinaesthetic techniques to elicit children's thoughts

about a particular research question. This provides researchers with a highly focused body of data around a discrete topic. Third, they encourage children and adults to be reflexive about the outcomes of the data production process in which they are involved. For these reasons, participatory methods are considered to have an epistemological advantage over more traditional approaches since they access and valorise children's previously neglected knowledges (Kesby 2000; Cahill, 2004; Grover, 2004).

On the other hand, some poststructural scholars note that in much research with children, participatory methods have been used as if they were a 'fool-proof' technology for ethical and epistemological validity (Thomson, 2007; Kesby, 2007; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) argue that participatory methods which claim to 'empower' children imply that children are not capable of participating in research through their own agency. Advocates of participatory research therefore risk perpetuating 'the very model of children they purport to oppose' (p. 503). Rather, they suggest that children exercise agency when and how they choose, regardless of the methods a researcher uses. Gallagher (2008b) observes that rather than needing to be 'given' power by participatory techniques, children may exercise power by resisting, redirecting or subverting those very techniques. For example, on several occasions during this research project, children appropriated my notepad, camera, audio-recorder and persona doll for their own ends, rather than my research agenda. A further criticism Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) make is that encouraging children to participate in creating knowledge about themselves may involve children in processes that aim to regulate them. Participatory methods may therefore become a form of governmentality and colonisation of childhood by adults. Thus participatory techniques, rather than being seen as a way of redressing power imbalances in the research encounter, may actually constitute forms of power. Consequently they conclude that participatory techniques are neither inherently better nor worse than any other research method.

### **The Mosaic Approach**

Perhaps the most well-known participatory approach to accessing young children's views is the 'Mosaic Approach' (Clark and Moss, 2001; 2005; Clark et al., 2005; Clark, 2010b). This approach 'plays to children's strengths rather than to adults' (Clark et al. 2005, p. 47) by encouraging children to communicate their views through a combination of participatory methods alongside traditional ethnographic research tools

of observation and interviewing. Participants in all four service areas employed a number of participatory methods from the Mosaic Approach as part of their PAR projects. This involved a range of multi-sensory methods including drawings, the use of cameras, audio recordings, child-led tours, and book-making as well as the use of vignettes with persona dolls. Unlike traditional consultation methods, which rely solely on verbal and written competence and 'provide limited access to the emotional and symbolic aspects of children's experiences and media-related modes of expression' (Bragg 2007b, p. 36), multi-sensory methods shift the balance away from the written or spoken word (Clark et al., 2003) and potentially allow a wider range of children to participate in research (Davis et al., 2000).

Ware (2004) argues that methods which attempt to ascertain the views of young children and children with learning difficulties are often inferential and it is important that the limitations of such methods are acknowledged. It is also prudent to recognise that children are not a homogenous group and their preferences for different methods vary as do their competencies (Punch, 2002). This has led many researchers to use a combination of participatory methods: firstly, because it is difficult for any single method to capture fully the richness of human experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) and secondly, the use of multi-methods reflects a desire to recognise the different 'voices' or languages of children (Clark et al., 2003).

## **Drawings**

Drawings have been used to ascertain young children's views and gain insights into their experiences, since it is a popular medium that many children are familiar with (Mauthner, 1997; Punch, 2002; Christensen, 2004). However, Barker and Weller (2003) argue that drawings may be popular with some children and inappropriate with others. Further, individuals' perceptions of their ability to draw may limit what they depict (Backett and Alexander, 1991). The use of drawings needs to be considered carefully as it is easy to misinterpret such information (Thomas and Silk, 1990; Lange-Kuttner and Edelstein, 1995). Consequently, Barker and Weller (2003) argue that it is necessary to discuss the drawing with the child to ensure that the drawing comes closer to representing the child's meaning and interpretation, rather than that of the researcher. This is what happened in our research. In the nursery, the teacher asked a group of three and four year olds to draw pictures of why they come to the children's centre and then

asked them to tell her about their pictures. The teacher recorded the children's comments which were placed in a book alongside the drawings. The book then became another tool for prompting further discussion with the children.

### **Photography**

Photography is another visual method which yields data requiring further discussion and interpretation with the participating child. In all four PAR projects children, including those with speech and language delay, were given cameras and asked to take photographs of what they enjoyed, disliked or considered to be important about the activities and services they were attending. For those children who were unable to use a camera, parents and practitioners endeavoured to take photos from the child's position.

Kaplan et al. (2007) argue that photographs can stimulate conversations in the data generation and analysis stages and have the potential to engage children and parents in a meaningful way, not just as subjects of research, but as co-researchers. Like drawings, cameras enable children to control how they represent themselves and provide an emic perspective (Booth and Booth, 2003; Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006). Visual methods elicit a range of views and uncover a plurality of meanings that challenge literal and simplistic approaches to ascertaining children's perspectives. Kaplan et al. (2007) highlight the fluidity between a photograph's potential for realism and expressionism and argue that this inherent duality raises questions about slippery concepts such as 'perspective' and 'voice', which arguably, remain more hidden in other forms of data. Bragg (2007b) argues that photographs may give access to unconscious aspects of responses, providing valuable data. However, this might also be seen as intrusive and thus ethically dubious. For example, to the surprise of some parents, this generated several photographs of toilets, washbasins and hand dryers, but since none of the photographs contained images of children using these facilities they were not considered to be problematic.

Other potential difficulties arising from photography include ethical issues concerning confidentiality, consent and ownership of the data. Prosser (1992) argues that the researcher needs to establish guidelines about how images are to be used at the time and afterwards. In our case, adults explained to the children that the original photographs

would remain their property but asked children if they could keep copies to use for their future work which they might put in books and reports to show to others.

### **Child-led Tours**

Other multi-sensory methods used included guided tours. This method has been adapted from PRA as a means to enable non-literate communities to articulate their local knowledge of an area and contribute to environmental planning. In child-led tours young children take the researcher on a guided walk of their environment (Hart, 1997; Clark and Moss, 2001). They can control the direction of the tour but also how the experience is recorded, through taking photographs, making maps and audio recordings. Clark (2004) argues that the physicality and mobility of this technique means that it lends itself to being used by young children.

This method was used by children with practitioners from the nursery and inclusion service, sometimes initiated by an adult and sometimes by a child. For example, a nursery practitioner invited a two-year old boy to take her on a tour of the children's centre and asked him to take photographs of everything he liked. On the other hand, a four-year old girl initiated her own tour in which she interviewed and audio-recorded a few children, and every adult she came across in the centre to find out 'Why do you come here?' A friend accompanied the tour, taking photographs of all the respondents.

Finally, child-led tours occurred serendipitously with one child diagnosed with global developmental delay. This child had just begun cruise-walking, in which she was supported by an adult standing behind her, holding her hands. Although the SEN outreach worker had not conceived of using child-led tours, she realised that whilst the child could not tell her where she would like to go, the physical connection of holding hands meant that both parties could use their bodies as a research tool in which the adult could be led by the child to the areas of provision that interested her the most. This required that the practitioner respond sensitively to the child's movements, pauses, muscular tensions, bodily gestures and vocalisations. It included recognising periods of involvement as well as signs of physical tiredness or waning interest. Whilst the practitioner was aware that the knowledge gained from this approach was inferential and non-representational, in terms of producing direct verbal or visual data, it opened up the possibility of exploring haptic forms of knowledge (Crang, 2003). Through the

kinaesthetic experience of touch the researcher used her body to try to understand the child's embodied performances. In this way we equated children's perspectives with embodied action rather than (heard) voice, and conceptualised this method primarily as performance rather than as representation (Woodyer, 2008).

### **Vignettes and Persona Dolls**

One of the nursery practitioners (NP) decided she would like to explore children's views of what happens at nursery through the use of vignettes combined with a persona doll (Taus, 1987; Derman-Sparks, 1989). Vignettes are short stories or scenarios, usually about imaginary characters in problematic situations. The practitioner introduced 'Raquina', the persona doll, to a small group of four-year olds, explaining that she was new to the nursery and wanted to find out what happens, and what she is and isn't allowed to do. Dickens et al. (2004) argue that some children are more comfortable expressing their views this way, rather than in response to direct questioning. Indeed, this method was particularly successful in eliciting the views of Uzma, a shy child, both during small group times and afterwards. For example, on one occasion Uzma decided to take Raquina everywhere she went over the course of a day, explaining where to go and what she could do. The practitioner took photos and recorded snippets of Uzma's comments which became an annotated photo-diary. However, this method also provoked resistance from Ciaran who objected to talking to a doll.

- NP: Raquina wonders if there is anything she needs to bring with her to nursery?*
- Ciaran: That's a robot. She's not real.*
- Uzma: She's sad now.*
- NP: She's sad someone called her a robot. What could we do to make her happy?*
- Uzma: I'll play with her. I'm her friend.*
- Ciaran: I'm not her friend.*

These contrasting responses to the doll underline the importance of using different methods with different children according to their preferences (Clark and Moss, 2001; Punch, 2002; Crivello et al, 2009). Ciaran's comment about the artificiality of the method also highlights a common criticism of the use of projective techniques such as this. Indeed, Barter and Renold (2000) argue that there is a theoretical limitation in the use of vignettes because of the distance between the vignette and social reality. This is problematic if the aim of the research is to map some aspect of social reality within a

positivist paradigm. If, on the other hand, the aim is to co-construct meanings and interpretations, vignettes can provide a useful tool, amongst others, to explore children's perspectives.

### **Book-making**

In all four services adults and children were also involved in making books, as a way of collating and reflecting upon some of the data that had been generated during the PAR projects. Inspiration for making the books came from the pedagogical documentation (Rinaldi, 2005) of the preschools of Reggio Emilia. Dahlberg et al. (2007) argue pedagogical documentation is a technology that can function as a tool for making children's perspectives visible and for opening up a critical and reflective practice. The books contained snippets of observation notes, photographs, pictorial symbols, transcriptions of children's words, parental comments, drawings and staff responses. Books varied in length (from 1-24 pages long), in style (from scrapbooks to books made with ICT applications), and in genre (photo-books, a diary, a portfolio of drawings and visual review books). As the children and adults co-constructed their books, this became a method for participants to reflect on the data to discuss its multiple meanings. However, there were variations in the levels of participation during the book-making. In a few cases children were not directly involved in making the books; the book comprised photographs and observations taken by a parent or practitioner of what they considered to be the child's perspective. Some books were made by children collaborating with their parents, practitioners or me, and some books were made by the children themselves with minimal support from an adult. Indeed as some scholars suggest, no method is inherently 'participatory'; it depends on how a method is used (Thomson, 2007; Crivello et al. 2009).

Finally, as well as being a springboard for discussion, the books also helped participants to decide on what needed to change as part of the action element of PAR. This reflects the last two stages of the Mosaic Approach: in stage one the children and adults gather data; in stage two the data is pieced together by adults and children for dialogue, reflection and interpretation; and in stage three participants decide on areas of continuity and change (Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark, 2010b). Indeed, since documentation can lead to a respectful exchange of ideas which can inform practice (Clark, 2010b),



Dahlberg et al. (2007) argue it is an important technology in promoting participatory practice in early childhood institutions.

## **5.7 Ethical Considerations**

Thomas and O'Kane (1998) suggest that participatory techniques within an ethnographic frame overcome many of the ethical problems of working with children by giving them control over the research process and by using methods which are in tune with their ways of seeing the world. However, a fundamental dilemma concerns how far ethical considerations in research with children are different from or the same as those that apply to adults. Some researchers are suspicious of 'child-centred' ethics, arguing that there are dangers of emphasising differences between adults and children as if they were separate kinds of species requiring different ethical standards (Alderson and Goodey, 1996; Christensen and Prout, 2002). However, these authors and others acknowledge that there are certain differences that cannot be ignored (Mayall, 2000; Christensen, 2004; Hill, 2005; Morrow, 2005b), which are mainly concerned with children's social location as subordinate to adults (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Harden et al., 2000). Consequently, researchers need to consider children's potential vulnerability to exploitation, the differential power relationships between adults and children, and the role of gatekeepers (Morrow, 2005b). On the other hand, the similarities between adults and children are such that ethical issues of participatory research apply equally well to both groups (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Christensen, 2004). For example, adults and children have the same rights to participation, to being informed about the nature and purpose of the research, to protection and to confidentiality.

### **5.7.1 Informed Consent/Assent**

Traditionally in research with children, researchers have only sought the consent of parents and other adult gatekeepers because children, especially young children, have been viewed as not mature enough to make informed decisions (Harden et al., 2000; Neill, 2005). However, since the Gillick ruling (*Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority*, 1985) and UNCRC (1989), children's consent to research has been taken increasingly seriously, as many professional codes of ethics now make clear (BSA, 2002; BERA, 2004; DH, 2005; ESRC, 2010). In addition to gaining the informed

consent of parents/carers, I and the other adult researchers, saw it as our responsibility to provide information in appropriate ways that enabled children to understand what their participation might involve (Edwards and Alldred, 1999; David et al., 2001; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Alderson and Morrow, 2004). I devised a 'Big Book' (Appendix 11) to discuss the research with children. Copies of the book were left on the bookshelves for children to re-read with practitioners in my absence and to take home to discuss with parents.

Cocks (2006) suggests that the common understanding of informed consent, which relies on presentation of information by the researcher, followed by understanding and response by the participant, has inadvertently served to exclude particular children from the research agenda. This would certainly have been the case had I relied on using the Big Book with all the children. In the case of young children and those with impairments, who were not able to give verbal or written consent or to demonstrate adult-centric notions of competence, I sought the ongoing assent of participants, as a means of finding a more inclusive method of gaining consent. Ford et al. (2007) define assent as 'agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract' (p. 20). Gaining and maintaining children's assent required me and other adult researchers to remain vigilant to the children's responses at all times. This meant being sensitive to children's communicative practices, displays of emotion and lines of interest and recognising that children's assent is negotiated in situated contexts and therefore best regarded as provisional (Flewitt, 2005b). Thus, for example, if a child indicated any signs of distress or disinterest during the research, data generation was paused and resumed at a more appropriate time if the child was willing, or stopped altogether.

Incidents of children withdrawing their initial consent/assent occurred on several occasions. For example, during a small group discussion, Mohammed had happily agreed to take part in a research conversation, but, when we wanted to record his responses on the whiteboard alongside those of other children, the following conversation unfolded:

*Teacher: Can I write down some of the things you've just told us you like doing when you come here?*

*Mohammed: No.*

*Elly: Do you want to take a photo of those things instead?*

*Mohammed: No.*

Mohammed's refusals raised important ethical issues for us about the right of children to be in control of their research data and their right to refuse participation, even when initial consent has been given (MacNaughton et al., 2007c).

Cocks (2006) argues that the process of seeking children's provisional assent is only possible when the adult researcher operates reflexively throughout the research process. This was vividly illustrated by the SEN Outreach Worker, as described in her presentation to Felldon Annual SENCO conference:

*Near the beginning of the project, for those children who were unable to use a camera, we decided to take photos that would capture when they were happy, excited or sad, as a way of sharing information with the professionals involved in the review process so that they could begin to recognise the child's emotional signs and respond accordingly. During observations one of the children would often cry when she was left in her standing frame and so I took a photo of her expression. However, I immediately felt uncomfortable about this because it felt like an intrusion. If I was upset I wouldn't want someone taking a photo of me. So I deleted the image and instead took a photo of the object that represented her unhappiness.*

As Christensen and Prout (2002) suggest, this highlights the responsibility of the researcher to develop a constant sensitive and reflexive approach in her practice.

### **5.7.2 Beneficence, Non-Maleficence, Protection and Confidentiality**

Researchers in general, and those who work with children, have a responsibility to protect all people participating in research from harm, addressing issues of beneficence, non-maleficence and confidentiality (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001; Neill, 2005). In my NHS REC form (Maconochie Site File, 2008-2010) I articulated that the benefits of the research were that children's voices and perspectives, including children with impairments and other difficulties, who have traditionally been excluded from participation in service development, would be listened to, with the possibility that this might result in increasing their participation in the decision-making processes of the children's centre. However, Alderson and Morrow (2004) argue that the benefits of children's involvement must be weighed against potential risks. Given children's structural vulnerability, I was keen to eschew the possibility of coercion. Whilst I recognise the social agency of children as people who are capable of exercising power/resistance within the research process, there were dangers that children might feel they had to participate because of the power differentials between adult researchers

and the children. Alderson (2000b) argues that, with the culture of surveillance and compliance in an institutional space such as an early years setting, children are rarely given true choices about participating. We wanted to avoid this. Consequently, wherever possible we explained to parents and children their rights to decline to participate, and that children were free to change their minds, for a few minutes, for a whole session or forever. An important principle we developed was to use simple phrases and hand signals to rehearse with children how they might refuse to answer a question or participate in a research activity. We also tried to be respectful of children's desire for private spaces away from the adult gaze, and only entered these upon invitation.

Alderson and Morrow (2004) argue that children have the same rights to confidentiality that adults have. However, several writers discuss the dilemma between confidentiality and the need to protect children (Alderson 1995; Mahon et al., 1996; Boyden and Ennew 1997; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). Although this project did not intend to ascertain children's views about sensitive topics, there was a risk that children may unexpectedly disclose areas of concern. In the event of a disclosure I planned to discuss with the child that confidentiality could not be guaranteed under these circumstances and then follow TPCC's safeguarding procedures. Fortunately, this situation did not arise. We also needed to preserve confidentiality in the management of data. The use of visual data in participatory research, such as photographs and drawings, has provoked a range of ethical concerns about the difficulties of data sharing and anonymisation (Levin, 1995; Renold et al., 2006). As Hill (2005) suggests, we created opportunities for children to conduct member checks where they could select, remove or clarify data, for example during the making of the photo-books. All copies were anonymised, as were all other data records generated with adults. All participants and the children's centre were given pseudonyms. Some group activities were also given pseudonyms in order to preserve the anonymity of the children's centre since they are peculiar to TPCC, whereas other activities (such as 'Big Cook Little Cook') have retained their original name since they are commonly used in many Sure Start services.

Thus far I have discussed issues I was required to address when adhering to the ethical codes and guidelines of my university faculty, the HSCC and NHS REC. In the next section I consider broader matters of axiology in which I locate a codified approach to ethics within a relational approach (Banks, 2006; Moss, 2008).

### 5.7.3 'Ethics as Code' and 'Ethics as Relation'

Christensen and Prout (2002) suggest that researchers seeking to address the ethical dilemmas inherent in research with children have approached the issue in two ways. A pragmatic approach seeks a solution in individualised regulations and codes of research ethics, often encapsulated by Kantian and utilitarian principles which emphasise abstract moral principles, impartiality and rationality (Gilligan, 1982). This has been critiqued on the basis that regulations will never be perfectly coherent, they cannot be applied to every possible case and they may even conflict (Banks, 2006). For example, there may be conflicts between the rights of a child and the rights of a parent. Within a Kantian framework which emphasises respect for the individual person as a self-determining agent, it is difficult to decide whose right to self-determination has priority. Moss and colleagues argue, therefore, that sole reliance on ethical codes is futile in an era of continuous uncertainty, where there are no universal foundations and where human reality is messy and ambiguous (Moss and Petrie 2002; Dahlberg and Moss 2005). Moreover, most codes place a disproportionate emphasis on particular ethical moments in the research process, such as gaining consent, rather than emphasising ethics as an ongoing relational practice (Lindsay 2000; Christensen and Prout 2002).

Christensen and Prout (2002) argue that codes should be rooted in a 'value-oriented strategy that anchors particular tactics in a broader set of aims' (Christensen and Prout 2002, p. 493). The strategic orientation they suggest is that of 'ethical symmetry' in which the 'rights, feelings and interests of children should be given as much consideration as those of adults' (p. 492-493). Other researchers have suggested value-oriented strategies that are relationship-based rather than principle-based (Garber et al., 2000; Banks, 2006). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) draw upon three relational approaches as a basis for acting ethically in our work and research with young children. These include Bauman's 'postmodern ethics', the feminist 'ethics of care' and Levinas' 'ethics of an encounter'.

Bauman's (1993) 'value-oriented strategy' is 'to take responsibility for the Other'. He suggests that a universalistic approach to ethics is problematic because it divests the individual of responsibility and can become yet another method of control (Bauman 1995). Ethics is reduced to a prescriptive code of conduct designed by experts. It becomes a technical practice which divests the individual of responsibility. Instead

Bauman advocates re-personalising ethics and assuming responsibility which involves facing and making choices in ambiguous and uncertain circumstances. However, this re-personalising of ethics does not mean that we cannot construct shared positions, but these must be built through negotiation, not imposed by experts. This type of ethics enables individuals and groups to think critically and responsibly. Taking responsibility means not reducing the Other to the Same and not treating the Other as if they were reducible to some generalized characteristic (Bauman 1993). For example, if children, including disabled children and those from ethnic minorities, have been positioned as Other (Jenks, 1982), then Bauman's challenge to take responsibility for the Other involves not seeing children as if they are the same as each other, or reducing them to being essentially vulnerable or immature.

Tronto (1993) and Sevenhuijsen (1998) propose a feminist 'ethics of care' which is concerned with situated responsibilities and relationships and not simply abstract rules and rights. In other words, caring should be the foundation for ethical decision-making. An ethics of care emphasises the relational, stressing the importance of people in connection with each other and rejecting notions of the separate, autonomous individual (Sevenhuijsen, 2000; Williams, 2003). Therefore, 'interpersonal responsibility' (Mieth 1997, p. 93) and 'an interdependent sense of self' (Wood 1994, p. 108) undergirds an ethics of care. Christians (2008) argues that for the researcher this demands a stance that is 'democratic, reciprocal and reciprocating, rather than objective and objectifying' (p. 543). It calls for collaborative, caring relationships between researchers and participants (de Laine, 2000). This is commensurate with a PAR approach, since PAR involves a connectedness between the researcher and community members and an ethical commitment to dialogue, relationships and inclusive methods (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Pain et al., 2007; Manzo and Brightbill, 2007).

The value-oriented strategy Levinas (1989) describes is 'the ethics of an encounter'. This addresses the issue of how we relate to the Other. It is based on a respect for the alterity and unknowability of the Other. It does not seek to totalise or grasp the Other. It speaks of an Other, such as a parent or child, whom the researcher cannot represent and classify. Rather, as Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue, it is built on welcoming and receiving the Other, and an openness to the difference of the Other. This is an 'ethics of proximity' based on a pre-rational face-to-face encounter where ethics arises in response to the call of the other person (Banks, 2006). In the 'I-You' relation, practitioner-

researchers let themselves be moved and influenced by the 'face of the other' (Rhedding-Jones et al., 2008). In our research, the remarks of one of the health visitors (HV2) illustrates how the observation of babies can be an opportunity for screening and classification or for the ethics of an encounter:

*HV2: I was observing baby lying on the mat as his mother was undressing him... But then I thought, 'Should I always automatically talk to baby?' because a lot of the mums in this community tend not to interact with their babies and so we tend to automatically engage with babies. But this made me think, 'Am I cuing in to baby? Am I overtaking?'*

*Elly: Are you saying that your thinking changed in any way?*

*HV2: Yes. Because we are doing this research I actually stopped to think about my interaction with baby and about whether I had the baby's attention or not. I suppose it's easy for us as adults to get the attention of babies but I thought about letting these babies initiate and use their attention as a cue to interact and when their attention has gone to stop and not interfere with what baby wants to do next.*

In this instance, an ethics of an encounter involved responding to the call of the Other when the baby turned his face or gaze towards the health visitor, rather than 'overtaking' the baby by forcing him to interact with her. Rethinking taken-for-granted assumptions and practices is an ethical attitude that enables us to open up for the Other and to embrace new possibilities for children's participation (MacNaughton and Smith, 2001; Dahlberg, 2003).

To summarise, whilst ethical codes and procedures are an essential point from which to begin, it is in the situated, relational encounters of the research site that meanings are constructed and ethical decisions are made. Hedges (2002) argues that it is becoming obvious to researchers in early childhood settings that the guidance provided by a code of ethics or by an institution in the form of an ethics committee, though helpful, might not be enough. For those who wish to conduct participatory research with children, ethical codes and frameworks therefore need to be grounded in a relational approach which emphasises situated dialogue, a commitment to continual reflexivity, responsibility for others, caring relationships and a respect for otherness.

## 5.8 Analysis, Evaluation and Dissemination

### 5.8.1 Analytical Approach and Methods

Analysis needs to be an iterative process within ethnographic PAR since the methodology is premised on cycles of collaborative reflection and action (Brewer, 2000; Pole and Morrison, 2003; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005; Cahill, 2007). Consequently analysis was part of the research design, data generation, reading and writing, team discussions, action taken, further data generation and so forth. It also took place in more formal, discrete sessions with children and parents as we discussed and interpreted the pedagogical documentation, and with practitioners as we sought to make meaning of the data generated at the end of each phase of the project. Beyond that, the process of writing this thesis and other research outputs and the presentation of findings has provided other forums for analysis and meaning-making (Pole and Morrison, 2003; Richardson and St. Pierre, 2008; Gibson and Brown, 2009). Thus analysis has occurred in the process and in the products of the research.

As in Cahill et al.'s (2004) participatory research, there were different levels of participation in analysis during the project. This ranged from times when I was involved in analysis on my own (for example in deconstructing some of the dominant discourses that framed young children's participation - see Chapter 8), and when one of the nursery practitioners conducted analysis on her own (for example in constructing a '*Top Ten Tips*' of participatory practice with children - see Appendix 7) to times when analysis was more participatory. Participatory analysis occurred primarily during the PAR phase when some of the co-researchers engaged in data analysis and report writing with me (Maconochie and McNeill, 2010; Appendix 9). For those participants who did not want to or were unable to participate in the more formal stages of analysis, portions of the data, including my understandings of the data generated during both phases of the research, were offered back to participants for further reflection and interpretation (Clark and Moss, 2001; Coad and Evans, 2008). During the PAR, in common with participatory, feminist and emancipatory researchers (Hart, 1992; Beresford, 2005; Lather, 1991; Stone and Priestley, 1996; Barnes and Mercer, 1997), I did not want to position myself as an analytical expert but rather tried to support practitioners and children to explore their ideas and thereby co-construct understandings. At the same time, I offered my skills and knowledge to participants, often in the form of making



suggestions about analytical strategies we might use or asking questions as a 'critical friend', but I aimed to do this in a democratic rather than imposing way (Hart, 1992). Like other elements of the research, this process relied on interdependency.

The metaphor of *bricolage* characterises the multi-faceted range of analytic methods we used. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that the analysis was conducted on an emergent basis with a variety of participants with different skills and interests and across several services. For some time the lack of a single, identifiable analytic method caused me some anxiety. I had read about Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), Miles and Huberman's (1994) ethnographic approach to analysis, and computer-assisted analysis (Bazeley and Richards, 2000; Richards, 2005). However, whilst these methods and tools contained useful principles and techniques, I found them to be too prescriptive and technical for a participatory methodology, and too concerned with causality and predictions than with multiplicities and meaning-making. However, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that there is no right way of doing qualitative analysis and suggest using a number of different methods. This helped me to realise that an eclectic approach to analysis was justifiable, given the multi-faceted nature of participation and the diversity of participants, but was also congruent with my methodological strategies and use of multiple methods. The different analytical tools used are discussed below.

## **Coding**

First level coding (de Wet and Erasmus, 2005), or what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as 'open coding', was undertaken by participants and me in which labels were attached to the data. Many of the codes generated remained close to the original data, including empirical codes and *in vivo* codes. These codes were then used to identify themes, events and actions related to children's participation and based on the research questions.

I, and to a lesser extent the EYP and HV2, were also involved in 'higher-order coding' (Punch, 2009) in which we generated more abstract constructs by looking for patterns of association in themes within cases (each service) (Morse and Richards, 2002; Richards, 2005). I repeated this across cases, identifying commonalities and differences. I also drew upon the research literature in order to develop more abstract codes. Blumer (1954) refers to these as 'sensitizing concepts'. Concepts such as 'power', 'citizenship', and

'space', helped me to gain greater analytical purchase upon the data. This involved moving from coding to interpretation, and was based on a process of 'abductive reasoning' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) in which theory can illuminate data, and data can generate theory. Hence conceptualisations were informed by an inductive as well as deductive process.

An example of first level coding conducted by the EYP in discussion with me and subsequent higher-order coding undertaken by me at a later stage is included in Appendix 12.

### **Narratives and Stories**

In order to counterbalance the fragmentation and loss of focus on particularities that inevitably occurs as a result of coding, (Riessman, 1993; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Bryman, 2008; Gibson and Brown, 2009) another analytical tool employed was to search for and unpack the stories and narratives contained within the observational and interview data in order to provide mini case studies of children's participation. We analysed stories by examining their content, structure and function. In terms of content and structure, we used Labov's (1982) narrative units as described by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) and summarised below:

*Table 5.2 Labov's Narrative Units*

<b>Structure</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Description</b>
Abstract	What was this about?	This is optional. Typically the abstract illustrates the narrative by summarising the point of the story
Orientation	Who? What? When? Where?	Establishes the situation, time, people involved
Complication	Then what happened?	The major accounts of the events that are central to the story
Evaluation	So what?	Highlights the point of the narrative
Result	What finally happened?	Describes the outcome of the events or the resolution of the problems
Coda	[Finish narrative]	This is optional. The coda marks the end of the narrative and often returns the discourse to the present

We also thought about the functional qualities of the narratives by looking at their purpose, and the social action implied in the text. This helped us to categorise success stories of when children's participation was enhanced and moral tales of when children's participation was constrained. It also enabled us to identify ambiguities in the data by identifying situations when participation was simultaneously enhanced and constrained. Finally, for stories in which children's participation was constrained, we added a 'What if...?' question to Labov's narrative units, which is where we experimented with taking action.

An example of narrative analysis using Labov's narrative units is contained in Appendix 13. This process of analysis was a collaborative endeavour between the Room 2 Nursery practitioners and me, in which I explained Labov's analytic framework to the staff and together we applied it to a story of a young child engaged in water play. Identification and analysis of the 'abstract' of this narrative, and others across the data set, helped us to appreciate that children's participation is fraught with dilemmas. Consequently, I returned to the methodological literature in order to find a suitable method of analysing these dilemmas, which I subsequently discussed with the practitioner-researchers.

### **Dilemmas**

Codes identified in the interview data indicated conflicting perspectives between children, parents and staff, and contradictions between different policies, discourses and practices which seemed to cause dilemmas for practitioners as they described and sought to enact children's participation. It seemed appropriate therefore to use 'Dilemma Analysis' (Winter, 1982) as a way of drawing out certain parts of the data as particularly significant. We also distinguished between ethical tensions and ethical dilemmas. Tensions are complex problems that are ultimately resolvable by a course of action. Dilemmas also require a course of action; however, the dilemma is unsolvable since the situation presents a choice between equally problematic or undesirable alternatives. The dilemmas became springboards for further discussion in which talk, rather than practice, became the action, since practitioners had to postpone their answers and instead preserve their questions. Here, action primarily demanded an ethical and reflexive

response rather than technical solution. As Talanquer et al. (2007) suggest, analysing dilemmas forces people to reconstruct their images of self as practitioner.

An example of how dilemma analysis occurred in practice is contained in Appendix 14 in which practitioner-researchers and I identified paired statements drawn from individual extracts of data that highlighted different sides of the dilemma. The SENCO suggested that a simple way to identify these paired statements was to draw up a table with two columns labelled '*On the one hand...*' and '*On the other hand...*' and then cut and paste the data from our observational notes, interview transcripts and analysis meetings into the relevant columns. This simple but effective method was subsequently used by me and practitioner-researchers from the other service areas. Later on, I used these tables which were co-constructed inductively from the data, to also engage in a process of abductive reasoning in which, on my own, I drew upon theory to illuminate and inform my discussion of the data. For example, Minnow's (1990) and Norwich's (2008) 'dilemma of difference' was a useful theoretical resource in thinking through conflicting responses to the 'water play' story (Section 7.2.2).

### **Forms of Speech**

During the process of coding we also examined aspects of language, such as participants' use of metaphors and 'contrastive rhetoric', to analyse how participants organise and express their experiences. Metaphors are a figurative use of language whose essence is understanding one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Attention to metaphors can reveal the shared knowledge and culture, specific values and situated realities of the social actor or group (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Ely et al., 1997). The search for, and recognition of, metaphors in the data helped us to gain analytic purchase on how people conceive of their work and their relationships with children. Together we identified a number of metaphors practitioners used to describe their practice and then searched for dictionary definitions of the metaphors to reflect more deeply upon the cultural values and practices taking place. For example, the EYP described a child's repetitive play behaviour as an example of '*Teletubbies Syndrome*' which simultaneously enhanced the child's participation and yet constrained his development (described in Section 7.2.2).

'Contrastive rhetoric' is an interactional strategy speakers use to legitimate their practice or values by means of comparison of what goes on elsewhere or what has been done in

the past (Hargreaves, 1981). The contrasts are drawn so that the hearer can surmise which situation is preferred. Analysing examples of contrastive rhetoric was another device we used as a consciousness-raising device to understand which cultural values were being privileged and which were being 'othered' in relation to children's participation (for example see Section 8.3.2).

## **Deconstruction**

Finally, deconstruction is a method I employed to pull apart the meanings of texts. Cultural theorists such as Finley (2008) define 'texts' in their broadest terms as all actions in the world that convey meaning and can be 'read' as if they were a book, such as speech, writing, images, symbols, rituals, routines and bodies. Deconstruction refers to the practice of challenging the taken-for-grantedness of truths, such as ideologies, practices and texts that are normally unquestioned. I attempted this by identifying and deconstructing dominant discourses in the data in order to question taken-for-granted practices and their effects. I also looked for omissions in the texts to consider which voices were being silenced and to consider alternative ways to speak, act and listen. The following extract from my journal illustrates how I 'read' and deconstructed a wall display in the children's centre (Appendix 15):

*We put up a display in the entrance hall at the end of Phase 1 as a way of feeding back to parents. This was based on what practitioners had told me in response to the questions: 'What does the phrase 'children's participation' mean to you?' and 'What would you like to do in the future to encourage children's participation?'. The statements in speech bubbles were a summarised version of responses. However, what struck me after we had put up the display was that, without realising it, the graphics we had chosen as a backdrop to the findings neatly portrayed and reinforced one of the dominant discourses I was identifying in other data sources, namely an 'ethics of individualism' (Walkerdine, 1992). This was seen in:*

*a) The individualised notion of children's participation – two individuals are depicted as generic stick people, one child and one adult, rather than a group of children or a group of children and adults. There is nothing in here to reflect diversity, nor the collective dimension of participation.*

*b) The notion that children's participation takes place primarily within the relational domain of the child-practitioner relationship, ignoring other domains for participation, for example the peer group domain*

*c) The unidirectional nature of children's participation i.e. it is the adult (with hand cupped to ear) who is listening to the child rather than participation being a two-way or multi-directional process.*

MacNaughton (1998; 2005) offers a number of tactics researchers can use to deconstruct texts. Those I employed in the analysis include:

- identifying how people are categorised - for example, in Section 8.6.2 children are constructed as '*service users*' and parents as '*paying customers*' reflecting a neoliberal managerial discourse of consumerism;
- identifying the social practices through which meaning is given to categories - for example, identifying the social practices through which participants gave meaning to the notion of 'participation' such as '*child-led learning*' (Section 8.3.2), and '*tuning in to children*' (Section 8.5);
- analysing binaries and looking for the implicit/explicit 'other' in texts - for example problematising the concept and practice of '*positive parenting*' and its correlative binary of '*negative parenting*' (Section 8.4.1);
- becoming aware of the emotional investments we make in particular categories, and practices - for example becoming critically aware of, and problematising our sense of what is 'normal, right and best practice' about the pedagogical practice of '*free choice*' (Section 8.3.1); and reconsidering our understanding of what is 'abnormal, wrong and bad practice' concerning some children's preferences for '*gun play*' (Section 7.2.1);
- recognising the institutional basis for such categories and practices, by exploring the professional training practitioners have received and the policy and curriculum documents practitioners are expected to work to - for example, the practice of '*tuning in to children*' has its basis in the '*Solihull Approach*' which is underpinned by psychoanalytic theory and the discourse of attachment (Section 8.5.1);
- identifying the discourses which are formed by our categories, practices, binaries, emotional investments and institutional training;
- and evaluating the social and political consequences of these discourses - for example, evaluating how participation has been constituted and constrained through the dominant discourses in operation.

As de Sousa Santos (1995) and MacNaughton and Smith (2001) argue, deconstruction necessitates changing our views of self and of others. In so doing, acts of deconstruction are themselves forms of action (Cannella and Bloch, 2006). Indeed, Rhedding-Jones et al. (2008) argue that, although much published writing about deconstruction is difficult

to read, the practices of deconstruction are quite simple: 'Just look at what is happening and what is not, and try to open things up so that change is possible' (p. 47). This is what we have sought to do at TPCC through an analytical cycle of deconstruction, action and reconstruction.

### **5.8.2 Evaluative Criteria**

Two main criticisms of critical ethnography and PAR are that they are non-generalizable and distinctly partisan in orientation, thereby disrupting the traditional scientific canons of generalizability and neutrality (Cohen et al., 2007; Stringer, 2007). I address these issues below and outline the criteria for evaluating the findings of this study.

#### **Generalizability and 'Relatability'**

Connolly (1998) observes that ethnographers are caught in a 'no win' situation where they are condemned if they fail to develop generalizations, and criticised if they attempt to offer recommendations beyond the specific context in which the research takes place. Traditional ethnographers and contemporary realists, such as Hammersley (1992), argue that ethnographers should be able to generalise to wider populations from findings about particular situations. However, critical and poststructural ethnographers disagree that this is possible since all forms of knowledge are situated, perspectival and cannot be free from power (Keith, 1993; Connolly, 1998). Secondly, they contest that generalization is a desirable goal since it suggests a failure to understand the rationale and scope of the ethnographic enterprise (Pole and Morrison, 2003). For some extreme postmodernists, there is no need to generalise or to apply any criteria to evaluate ethnographic data since there is no objective or knowable 'real' world that can be described (Brewer, 2000). This is the crisis of legitimation.

My view lies somewhere between the realists and the extreme postmodernists. Even though TPCC cannot claim to be 'representative' of other children's centres and therefore the findings from this project may not be generalizable, they are still capable of offering empirical relevance and acting as a sensitising resource for researchers and practitioners in similar settings (Connolly, 1998; Pole and Morrison, 2003). As Bassey (1990) and Wellington (2006) assert, people can learn important lessons from particular

cases and relate to them. Thus they propose the criterion of 'reliability' as a far more appropriate notion than generalizability.

### **Neutrality and Political Praxis**

Another criticism of ethnographic PAR is that it lacks rigour since its partisan nature undermines the credibility and neutrality of the research (Hammersley, 1998). Furthermore, those who conduct partisan research are more likely to be biased than other researchers. Hammersley (1995, 1998) suggests that ethnographic research which deliberately engages the political character of knowledge is antithetical to good scholarly practice. Hence a stark binary is set up between research and political activity. However, Blair (1998) questions the notion of neutrality in social research analyses, suggesting that what often passes for neutrality hides taken-for-granted partisan notions of what constitutes 'good' research. She argues that 'neutral' social research is partisan because it 'ignores the possibility of diverse systems of knowledge production and multiple interpretations of social phenomena' (p. 20). Moreover, Blair counters Hammersley's criticism of bias by arguing that making one's politics explicit is no more likely to introduce bias into one's analysis than declaring that one does *not* have a value position. Indeed, Clough and Nutbrown (2002) argue that *all* social research is persuasive, purposive, positional and political and these are the very reasons why it is conducted. Thus, Troyna (1995) contends that scholarly research and political activity can be pursued in tandem without having to sacrifice rigour.

Rather than pursue the myth of neutrality and distance, or conversely face the logical implication of postmodern relativism, which ends in an abandonment of any criteria, Lather (1991) proposes the introduction of political praxis to assess the value of research. She advances the notion of 'catalytic validity' to suggest that research should energize participants towards knowing reality to transform it. Thus, it should generate action for change. In this study catalytic validation has been an important criterion given the critical, participatory and action-oriented nature of the methodology.

Other criteria I have employed to address issues of rigour are listed below:

- **Credibility:** the extent to which the participants in the research recognise the analysis as trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I have previously discussed how this was achieved through prolonged engagement in the field and involving



participants in the analysis. It also occurred through exposure of research reports to criticism from the TPCC staff, managers and management committee, the NHS REC and journal peer review processes. Finally, by taking data and interpretations back to the participants I have attempted to establish 'face validity' (Lather, 1991).

- **Dependability:** achieved through the creation of an audit trail, in which the researcher documents the methods used and reflects on their effectiveness and limitations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). (Discussed in Section 5.6.)
- **Authenticity:** the representation of a range of different realities and voices to reflect the postmodern belief in multiple constructed realities (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This is interwoven into my discussion of observational methods (5.6.1), accounts of narrative and dilemma analysis (5.8.1) and different forms of representation (5.8.3).
- **Triangulation:** a technique for providing multiple perspectives on a problem, with discrepancies between data sources being themselves 'findings' (Lather, 1991). I have addressed this by drawing upon multiple data sources, methods and theoretical schemes to access participants' diverse perspectives.
- **Reflexivity:** describes how the researcher's subjectivity has been both a producer and a product of the text (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2008). I have done this by making my positionality (5.5.1) and epistemology (5.3) explicit and through making my subjectivity transparent during the process of fieldwork (recorded in my journal) and in the writing of this thesis (recorded in the penultimate section of each of the preceding chapters).
- **Relational Praxis:** an ethic of caring and responsibility for the Other. This extends the notion of accountability beyond ethical review boards and the academy to the participants and communities with which researchers work (Bradbury and Reason, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Relational praxis has informed the process of this research as well as acting as a criterion of quality. This is addressed in Section 5.7.3.

### 5.8.3 Dissemination and Re-Presentations

The processes of writing and dissemination themselves are participatory action research since they involve planning, acting, observing and reviewing (Christensen and Atweh, 1998). In this study, writing has occurred as a method of inquiry, in both data

generation and analysis (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2008) and also at the reporting stage. Writing and dissemination have also occurred as both an individual pursuit and as a collaborative endeavour, at different times and for different audiences. In addition to academic journals, books and theses, PAR emphasises the production of different 'research outputs' such as community reports, presentations and exhibitions (Pain et al., 2007; Adams, 2008). Table 5.3 displays the authorship and outputs of this project.

*Table 5.3 Research Outputs*

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Participant Authorship</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Nursery Practitioner's Reflective Account</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Co-Authorship between Participants</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Amendments to Nursery induction policies</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Children's Participation Charter</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Visual Review Books</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PhD Student Authorship</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">NHS REC Final Study Report</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Thesis</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Co-Authorship between PhD Student and Participants</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Wall Display</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Maconochie and McNeill (2010)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BCLC Evaluation Report</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>SENCO Conference Presentation: 'Young Children's Participation in their Reviews'</i></p>

I view these research products as contributions to ongoing conversations about children's participation rather than as final analyses of 'the truth' (Lather, 1993). No research account of young children's perspectives and participation can ever claim to be the true and definitive account because we do not have direct access to another's experience, nor can it simply be detached from the researcher's own value base and assumptions (Connolly, 1997). As Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue, foregrounding meaning-making, rather than seeking to directly capture the child's or practitioner's 'true' voice, acknowledges values such as interpretation, contextuality, subjectivity, uncertainty and provisionality. Warming (2005) argues that we should replace an illusionary ambition of representation with endeavours of 'reflexive re-presentations' that acknowledge the perspectival and constructed character of the presented and that seek to uncover our position within the research account. She appeals to Richardson's

(2000) metaphor of the crystal as multi-faceted, complex, partial and changing to suggest that our re-presentations of children's perspectives and their participation could present 'multiple realities' on the same subject. Our different research products, including this thesis, are examples of this.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described the design and implementation of an ethnographic participatory action research study which aimed to explore what young children's participation means in a children's centre context and how children's participation can be further developed in four different service areas. I have presented my rationale for conducting the research with children, parents and staff of Towersham Park Children's Centre and included contextual information about the centre, its local community and the four PAR projects. I have outlined my epistemological position, which fuses a critical and participatory approach to inquiry with poststructural insights. The chapter provides a critical appraisal of the ethnographic and participatory methods used with participants. I have also outlined the different analytic methods employed and the different research products we have generated in order to engage in a process of reflexive meaning-making about young children's participation. This has involved attention to issues of ethics and rigour as an ongoing, situated and relational process. It has also meant that we have given up claims to textual and researcher authority and instead become reflexively aware of the partial re-presentations created as a result.

# **Part III: Findings and Discussion**

## **6. Domains of Children's Participation**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 2, I argued that children's participation means different things in different contexts and, whilst typologies of participation are a useful starting point for conceptualising the field, they fail to take account of children's participation in their different socio-spatial contexts. This chapter makes a contribution to knowledge by addressing this omission through seeking to locate the notion of young children's participation within the socio-spatial context of an English children's centre. My aim is to present narrative stories, vignettes and reflections on what participation (and non-participation) means and looks like in the different domains or spaces of TPCC. In so doing, I draw on ethnographic field notes, including actions taken as a result of PAR, and conversations with staff, parents and children. Taking inspiration from Foucault's (1980a) emphasis on the micro-relations of power and the idea that participation should be analysed from the bottom up (Gallagher, 2008a), this chapter focuses on the micro-political processes: the small, everyday interactions, practices and spaces of young children's participation. In Chapter 7, I consider the dilemmas that arose in practitioners' and my thinking as we met together to discuss and analyse some of these stories and processes. Following this, in Chapter 8, I move from a narrative mode to a more thematic mode of writing and analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Charmaz and Mitchell, 1996) to consider how these micro-political processes and dilemmas are nested within wider dominant discourses and larger organisational strategies.

This chapter draws upon, and gives a new empirical focus to, Moss and Petrie's (2002) illuminating conceptualisation of 'children's spaces', as discussed in Chapter 4. I present two main arguments. Firstly, I suggest that children's participation does not occur in isolated, individual acts but through social and spatial interactions. Indeed, children's participation is structured in space, time and relationships, in which all three are closely interwoven. Practice and theory, therefore, need to take account of the physical, temporal and relational domains of children's participation. Secondly, with this in mind, I suggest that we broaden our understanding of children's participation from participation as 'listening and decision-making' to encompass participation as 'embodied performance in space'.

## 6.2 Spatial Domains of Children's Participation

*I can play outside with Mohammed, but after lunch I can't play on the computer (Ciaran).*

It is the start of the morning nursery session and only a handful of children have arrived in Room 3. I join four-year-old Ciaran who is kneeling in the construction corner, stacking blocks on top of each other. We start to talk about what he is building.

'This is nursery. Here are the shutters. Nursery is closed', he tells me.

'Oh, so nursery is closed. When nursery is open what can you choose to do here?' I ask.

'I can play outside with Mohammed, but after lunch I can't play on the computer'.

In this brief interaction, Ciaran tells me that he participates by choosing where to play ('*outside*') and who to play with ('*Mohammed*'), as well as informing me of occasions ('*after lunch*') when he can't choose what he does. Given the 'free choice' ethos of the nursery, I wonder why Ciaran '*can't play on the computer*' after lunch. Later that day I ask one of the nursery practitioners who explains: 'He sometimes asks about going on the computer in the wraparound room after lunchtime, but we can't let him because there is no adult on duty in there to watch the children. All the Room 3 children have to go outside so the staff can set up for the afternoon session.' From these two accounts, it seems that particular places, times and professional practices are all implicated in enhancing and restricting children's participation. In other words, young children's participation is enabled and constrained by the physical, temporal and relational spaces of the children's centre.

Foucault (1984) argues that space is fundamental in any exercise of power. In this example, the physical layout of the Room 3 nursery space, with its 'free flow' access to the outdoor play area, enabled Ciaran to exercise power in deciding where he wanted to play. Here, space was an extension into which Ciaran could flow and extend himself (Leavitt, 1994): a space in which he could participate with his friend. On the other hand, the daily routine of setting up the room after lunch meant that adults exercised power over Ciaran's body in time and space through confining his, and the other children's movements, to the outdoor area, thereby restricting his participation. Unlike the wraparound room, where there was no one to '*watch the children*', the confinement of all Room 3 children to the outdoor area allowed for the exercise of power in the form of child containment and surveillance by a small number of adults. This created the time

for the other adults to arrange the indoor environment without the involvement of children. Thus, the routine of '*setting up for the afternoon session*' had both temporal and spatial implications for young children's participation.

Below I focus on the role space plays in the shaping of young children's participation at Towersham Park Children's Centre (TPCC). Massey (1993) and Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that the metaphor of 'space' can be used to signify a variety of different domains: physical and material, temporal and transitional, social and relational, aesthetic and cultural, emotional and ethical, discursive and political. Such spaces are interwoven and mutually constitutive. Following Foucault's (1980a) focus on the 'local and specific' in his analysis of power, I consider the 'small things' of children's participation and non-participation: the micro activities, interactions, structures and objects of everyday life in the children's centre. I begin by looking at two examples of physical space, the nursery outdoor fence and mother-baby health clinic, and then consider the importance of particular material objects from a disabled child's perspective. Then I consider some temporal spaces of participation, including different routines and transitions. Finally, I conclude with examples of different relational domains of young children's participation, focusing particularly on children's participation in proto-conversations and symbolic gestures, breastfeeding and caring practices. These everyday micro-processes, and the relationships of power they are nested in, are often missed or taken-for-granted since they are seen as commonplace and mundane, and yet these small, local concerns carry political significance for children and their participation.

## **6.3 Physical/Material Spaces**

### **6.3.1 The Outdoor Area: Enclosure and Children's Space**

TPCC nursery has a large outdoor play area that is divided in two by a metal railing fence. One side is for the three and four-year-olds to access from Room 3, and the other for the children under three to access from Room 2. Amina, one of the older children from Room 3, is standing on top of large wooden blocks that have been arranged like a wall, holding on to the fence that separates her side from mine. She looks over and initiates a conversation with me.

'Why have we got a fence?'

'I don't know. What do you think?' I reply.

'I can't go in there.' Amina points towards my side of the yard. 'I don't want to have the fence there,' she continues.

'Why not?' I ask.

Amina smiles but does not answer.

'Where would you go?' I ask.

'I'd go with you,' she replies. Amina climbs down from the wall and runs off.

Amina's blunt question brings me up short. Up till this point I haven't seen the fence. Of course, I've noticed it. Indeed, several times I've unlocked the gate of the fence in order to get across to the other side, but until now I haven't *seen* it in the way Amina sees it. To me, the fence and gate have just been 'part of the furniture', figuratively and literally. To Amina, the fence signifies a barrier to a space she wants to enter and she clearly expresses her opinion that she doesn't want it to be there. Amina's capacity to participate in decisions about her use of the outdoor space is restricted by this obstacle. It prevents her physical and relational access to other places, objects and people.

Over the coming days, as I continue with participant observation, it seems to me that other children make their views apparent by contesting this barrier too, but in non-verbal ways. Jerome, a four-year-old boy with speech and language impairments, points to the babies' side of the yard and taps at the legs of one of the practitioners, indicating he would like to go through. This goes unnoticed by the practitioner. Rosa, who is eighteen months old and preverbal, presses her face up against the railings and spends a sustained period of time silently observing the children on the other side. Ludek, a child who has recently arrived from Slovakia and who does not speak any English, passes small objects through the rails, and larger objects such as the 'Billy Bo' over the top of the fence, to children on the Room 2 side to play with. Two-year-old Dillon tries to untie the scarf that has been placed around the gate to keep it locked, but is unsuccessful and gives up. On the other hand, the fence and gate do not appear to feature in other children's actions. Perhaps they go unnoticed, or perhaps this is indicative of the children's acceptance of the social order. Indeed, the zoning of space into different areas is something with which the children are familiar, both in the indoor environment of the nursery and in the overall layout of the children's centre.



I ask two of the staff to tell me about the fence. 'The children don't like it. I think the babies and toddlers should be able to mix with the older children' says the nursery practitioner.

'On the other hand', replies the EYP, 'I can see that it's good for the young children to have an enclosed area where the big children aren't going to scoot into them.'

'But Otis likes being with the older ones and he's one of the youngest ones in our room. And Dillon looks through the rails sometimes and asks if he can go through. It's nice to have a space for different ages to mix', the nursery practitioner adds.

'Yes I think we need to open the gate a bit more so the children can flow between', the EYP concludes.

The outdoor play area and the fence are far more than a passive backdrop to children's play and their participation. They are imbued with different layers of meaning and are active in shaping what is possible. For Amina, the fence represents a place of personal exclusion which she is prepared to challenge. For the EYP, the fence produces an '*enclosed area*' in which '*young children*' are kept safe from scooters and '*big children*'. For the NP, the fence disallows '*a space for different ages to mix*'. And for me, the fence, which was once a taken-for-granted architectural feature in the outdoor environment, is now a place of contestation and power relations. During our conversation, I'm struck by the two different ways the outdoor play area is conceptualised by staff: as an *enclosed area* and as a *space for different ages*. This reminds me of Foucault's discussion of 'enclosure' and Moss and Petrie's notion of 'children's spaces'.

For Foucault (1977), 'discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space' (p. 141). It is this space, which is created in institutions such as prisons, asylums and schools, which provides an 'enclosure'. Institutions, such as children's centres, become spaces and 'architectures' in which power operates. They are enclosures. In these enclosures, children's bodies are the subject of discipline, not in the form of physical force or violence, but through controlling the actions and positions of children's bodies. Within the enclosure, individuals are distributed through partitioning space into different and visible 'cells'. At TPCC, discipline operates through children's enclosure in the protected space of the nursery and through the arrangement of walls, fences and furniture which partition that space into separate cells. The construction of the fence partitions the outdoor space into two separate cells. One of the power effects of this distribution is that children's participation in decisions about their bodily movements

and interactions with the environment and with others is constrained. In spite of this, some of the children exercise agency in contesting the fence through the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies. They attempt to participate through communicating their perspectives. Furthermore, as in the case of Ludek, children contribute to the production of space through the rearrangement of play equipment. However, in order for the children's perspectives to effect change in professional practice, there needs to be recognition by adults that the power effects of the existing structural arrangements need to be disrupted.

Such a disruption could create the possibility of '*a space for different ages to mix*', or as Moss and Petrie (2002) call it, a 'children's space'. Broadening children's physical access to the social world, or in this case the whole of the outdoor area, is one important component of children's space. However, the notion of children's space is much broader than this. It incorporates a social dimension in which children are afforded the opportunity to participate in relationships not just with peers of a similar age, but with siblings, with children of other ages and with adults. 'Children's space' also refers to a discursive domain: a space when children and adults can exchange different views and experiences. Amina's conversation with me, and subsequent observations and research conversations create the possibility for a new discursive space to be opened up. The EYP concludes that one way to open up a children's space and thereby increase children's participation, is to '*open the gate a bit more*'. The gate now represents a physical structure of in-between-ness, disrupting the fixed boundary of the fence and creating a more fluid use of space, where '*children can flow between*'. Likewise our conversations and reflections become a discursive space of in-between-ness as the children's perspectives challenge our adult thinking and practices.

The scarf, that once kept the sliding bolt of the gate locked, is removed by the EYP. From this point onwards, the decision to close/open the gate is no longer a static rule but becomes a dynamic decision depending on each individual situation. Sometimes the decision is initiated by children, sometimes by practitioners, sometimes for extended periods of time, sometimes for short episodes. The action element of PAR has begun, resulting in children's participation in a new physical space. In this way the fence and gate are used less as a material and disciplinary enclosure and more as a children's space: a social environment with many possibilities, some initiated by adults and some by children.

So what can we learn about children's participation in response to Amina's original question about the fence, and our subsequent thinking and actions? Firstly, children's participation is always already regulated by the physical space or 'enclosure' in which it occurs. Thus children's participation and resistance is connected to real struggles in physical places. Secondly, for children's participation to be meaningful and to effect change, transformation requires material as well as discursive spaces in which to develop.

### **6.3.2 Mother and Baby Group: Children's Agency and Positioning**

The 'Well Mums Well Babies' (WMWB) group, run by Towersham Health Visiting Team, takes place for two hours a week in the community room of the children's centre. According to Jill, the HV who established WMWB, the group is a universal service primarily for families with babies under the age of one and their older siblings. It aims to reduce the isolation of postnatal mothers, provide a drop-in clinic, share healthcare advice and offer a safe space for children to play.

The room is set out in the same way each week. In the centre, there is a circular configuration of chairs set around a large 'baby mat' made out of blankets where mothers place their babies. It occurs to me that here, we see in a material way how the baby is presupposed to take central stage. A baby gym, rattles, board books and other 'age appropriate' brightly coloured plastic toys are placed on the mat to stimulate babies' exploration. The majority of parents sit on the chairs around the mat, talking to each other or to one of the health support workers, and offering toys to their babies from time to time. Corners of the room are set out for different purposes. Baby weighing scales are set out on a table in the clinic corner. One of the HVs positions herself here and is available to talk to mothers on a one-to-one basis as she weighs their babies, records information in the child's 'red book', sets up appointments for home visits and writes prescriptions. Another corner has information leaflets and is usually used as a space for small groups of mothers to listen to a fifteen minute talk provided by the other HV or by an allied healthcare professional. The third corner has soft play mats with toys for older siblings, such as jigsaws, a few books, paper and crayons. The final corner is used as a place for parents to park their buggies.

During an interview, I ask Jill to explain how she and the team enable children's participation at WMWB. Jill replies:

*Through the environment. We try to set the environment up which will make the babies be able to have some choice in what they are doing. So there are mats which are comfortable for babies to lay on with a variety of toys so they can hopefully indicate what they're interested in if they're in a position to do so. We provide special horseshoe cushions which keep babies in a more upright position which gives them more access to choose. We provide a toddler corner with slightly older toys that children can choose to access. This is minimal because we aren't a toddler group. Our focus is more on the babies and mums. But we don't turn them away, we like to encourage inclusion so therefore if they have older children they are included but we're not aiming to fully meet their needs as much as a toddler group would.*

Jill's response suggests that children's participation is enabled through setting up a physical environment in which babies are able to choose from '*a variety of toys*'. The use of material resources, such as '*special horseshoe cushions*' place young babies '*in a position*' to '*have some choice*' and to '*indicate what they're interested in*'. The implication here is that certain physical objects can make babies more agentic and thus enhance their participation. Jill's comments help me to reflect upon the way we conceptualise babies and the notion of agency. Babies, like adults, are not simply passive recipients of health services but can be active in deciding what they '*choose to access*'. Furthermore, children's agency is socio-spatial. Babies are enabled to participate through the assistance of adults and the horseshoe cushions. Thus agency is not an individual attribute but is something that is dependent upon relationships with others and with the environment and the cultural artefacts therein. Agency is a product of relational and spatial networks. This means that young children's participation can be scaffolded as new networks, including human and non-human resources (such as the cushions, or for example, high and low-tech communication devices), are added to them.

On the other hand, children's participation is also constrained on account of the physical environment. Like the nursery fence, the room layout at WMWB leads to the distribution of individuals in space and disciplinary practices that shape the conduct of both children and adults. Jill states that a toddler corner is provided for older siblings to participate. This is intentionally set up as a smaller space with '*minimal*' toys, away from social interactions that take place between adults and children in the central hub of the baby mat and in the clinic corner. Jill's reason for this socio-spatial practice is that '*we are not a toddler group*' since the '*focus is more on the babies and mums*'. Indeed,

not only does the partitioning of physical space reinforce this message, but so too does the name of the group: *Well Mums Well Babies*. Even within an environment where 'we like to encourage inclusion', spatial segregation, according to age, can lead to practices in which older siblings are othered. Thus, in the physical layout of the room, children's material positioning (babies in central area surrounded by adults; siblings side-lined to one corner) reflects their cultural positioning. As Mannion (2007) suggests, this has clear implications for children's participation since spatial practices are so central in deciding which children's voices get heard.

This material and cultural positioning becomes apparent during the process of PAR as we meet together as a team to discuss our data. For example, in observing one of the mothers send her toddler away from the baby area, practitioners realise that their spatial practices are materialised in parents' and their own social practices, sometimes to the detriment of children's participation. However, our participant observations, and the photographs that participating parents and some of the older children have taken, also suggest that these children are not simply passive recipients of the socio-spatial structures, but are active participants in repositioning their own bodies and material resources within the environment. They resist attempts to confine their arenas of action and interaction to the toddler corner, by physically positioning themselves and other objects on the central mat and surrounding chairs. Three-year-old Natalie's photograph (Plate 6.1) of things she likes at WMWB, is indicative of this.

*Plate 6.1      Repositioning Favourite Toys*



In order to take this photo, Natalie collects the 'pop-up' toy and 'Panda' book that are lying on the mat in the toddler corner and carefully places them on the chair next to her mum and baby brother in the central area, as if to raise their status. In our team meeting the following week as we reflect on the data and attempt to see the group 'through the child's eyes' (DH, 2004a p. 87), Faye, one of the health visitors, comments:

*I know why we ended up with that toddler corner because it was a way of keeping the babies safe, but to be honest, a lot of the time the toddlers are in the middle anyway and the fact that some of them are moving toys here makes me think that in a way the middle has higher status for the children because that's where the adults are.*

Indeed, all of the siblings' photos are of people and activities taking place in the central baby area. The information area, clinic and toddler corner are notably absent. As we discuss elsewhere (Maconochie and McNeill, 2010), from this we conclude that power relations are structurally embedded within the physical organisation of the room, and that part of our role as practitioner-researchers, seeking to encourage more responsive, democratic services, is to work to overcome these structural barriers in order to increase the older children's participation. Consequently we experiment with changing the original layout of the room. This comprises joining the baby mat to the toddler area in a loose figure of eight configuration in the centre of the room, with adult chairs around the perimeter, so that the toddlers are no longer spatially and socially marginalised.

To summarise thus far, in examining the nursery fence and health clinic, I suggest that the organisation of physical space in the children's centre and the material resources therein shape children's participation, influencing the conduct of both children and adults within the setting. Spatial practices of distribution can act as techniques of government, leading to children's marginalisation and thereby constraining their participation. Nevertheless, like adults, children are not passive recipients of spatial practices; rather they play an active role in the creation of the environment. Thus children's participation is enhanced when adults recognise both of these elements and take steps to respond accordingly. This involves a process of using children's perspectives to reconsider current spatial and cultural practices; experimenting with alternative practices; acknowledging children's agentic actions; and creating opportunities for children's participation to be scaffolded through the assistance of other people, material resources and a physical environment that promotes their decision-

making. In short, if children's participation is to be enhanced, one of the conditions it requires is a material space conducive to its performance.

Having suggested that children's participation is shaped by the physical environment, I conclude this section by looking at the importance of certain material objects within the physical environment, from the perspective of Haniya, a two-year-old child with cerebral palsy. In so doing, I suggest that Haniya's participation is performed through her engagement with everyday materials.

### **6.3.3 A Basketful of Treasures: Material Matters**

Haniya and her mother, Nasrin, arrive at nursery, ready in time to meet the physiotherapist. Nasrin sits Haniya on the ground. She scans the different toys in the room and fetches a scarf and an electronic ball that lights up and plays sounds as you move it. Nasrin rolls the ball to her daughter. Haniya bends over, placing her face next to the ball. She watches the lights closely until they stop flashing. Nasrin fastens gaiters around Haniya's legs. For several moments Haniya repeatedly rubs her thumb back and forth against the Velcro fastenings. Then she picks up the silky scarf. She scrunches it, lets it go, strokes it with her fingers and then rubs her thumb against it several times. Nasrin picks up the material and throws it above Haniya's head. Haniya looks up, to track its flight. It floats and lands on Haniya's face. Haniya smiles and bounces up and down, vocalising 'ahh, ahh, ahh' in rhythm to her movements. Nasrin laughs. Nasrin repeats this activity several times. Both parties seem to be enjoying the experience. Haniya lies down on her side and rocks gently. 'Are you going to get up Haniya?' asks Nasrin. Nasrin sits Haniya up. Haniya tries to pull her new spectacles off her face. 'No Haniya', says Nasrin gently and firmly, as she moves Haniya's hand away from the spectacles. Haniya tries again to take off her specs and Nasrin intervenes. Haniya lets out a few whimpering noises as though she is protesting but then leaves the glasses alone. Shelley, the physiotherapist arrives: 'Hello Haniya. Oh, you've got glasses. We're going to do three exercises today.'

In this short episode it seems to me that certain material objects are of particular importance and enjoyment to Haniya: the flashing lights, the fluffy Velcro fastenings, the silky texture of the scarf. Haniya looks, touches, rubs, strokes, scrunches, drops and tracks these objects of interest. The joy of experiencing the flashing lights and floating

material is expressed in her body movements and gestures: she leans forward to watch more closely, she smiles, she makes noises, and she bounces up and down. Of the plethora of toys and objects in the room, Nasrin seems to know which materials matter to Haniya. She carefully scans the room to select those objects that she thinks will appeal to her daughter, and Haniya responds with pleasure. Other objects and technologies carry significance too: for example, the new spectacles. They have negative associations for Haniya. Perhaps they are a source of discomfort or irritation. On the other hand, Nasrin wants Haniya to keep the glasses on because they will help her see better, which may increase her quality of life.

Reflecting on this observation I note in a memo that, 'If children's participation involves ascertaining children's perspectives of matters that affect them, then this has to include recognition of the everyday material objects that affect and matter to them.' In young children's ever widening circle of physical space (carer's arms, floor, home, children's centre, park, neighbourhood) material things are fundamental to their everyday experiences and perspectives. Therefore, for practitioner-researchers interested in children's perspectives, this means that there is much to learn from the things that matter to children, as well as the things they discard. This includes the little things, the ordinary, everyday, taken-for-granted objects that mean something to children. As Latour (2002) argues, 'Consider things, and you will have humans. Consider humans and you are by that very act interested in things' (p. 20).

Of course, we cannot presume to know just what Haniya's perspectives of these objects are and what they *mean* to her, because, even if we could talk to her about them there would always be slippage between what she communicates and how we interpret and represent those meanings. However, we might infer that these objects have particular value for Haniya. They are imbued with emotions and meanings, not in disembodied, cognitive ways, but in practical and haptic relations within and between bodies, both human (between Haniya and Nasrin and/or other carers and children) and non-human (between Haniya, material things and her surrounding environment).

Since children's participation is practiced through their relations with everyday objects and other bodies, this requires that practitioners and researchers pay close attention to the importance of these materialities in children's everyday lives. During the PAR phase of research, the Inclusion Team seek to do this. Instead of conducting structured



observations to assess children's developmental progress, which is part of their normal practice, they decide to conduct unstructured observations and take photographs of those things that seem to really matter to the children. In Haniya's case, they focus on the material objects which she appears to derive pleasure from and which she repeatedly engages with. This comprises a collection of different objects that afford Haniya different visual and tactile sensory experiences, including the tangle of lights from the fibre optic spray, the feel of the EYP's shaved head and the NP's pony tail, corrugated card, the dangling CDs, jingle bells attached to a Velcro strap and differently textured fabrics. Practitioners record these in Haniya's visual review book (see Appendix 10) as a way of representing her perspectives to the multi-professional team that work with her. Other action they take is to develop a 'treasure basket' of toys and objects that reflects Haniya's material preferences and is solely hers to use.

This sensibility to matters that concern Haniya also opens up practitioners to question their observational and assessment practices. In our team meeting to evaluate the PAR process, the SENCO reflects:

*This is different - broader than your assessing to do their 'IEPs' and 'Ann Locke' sheets. This is talking to them and observing them and using methods in order to find out their views rather than to judge them against developmental goals. It's the difference between 'observing to assess' - to work out what a child can and can't do - and 'observing to listen' - trying to understand what's important to that child and how we might respond.*

In this way, practitioners shift the observational gaze from the child to themselves and from developmental norms to democratic processes. Much in the way that Dahlberg and Moss (2005) outline, the pedagogical focus changes from documentation as a device for better governing the child, to documentation as a means of unmasking the dominant discourses which exercise power on and through us. Thus for Haniya, attention shifts from focusing solely on her physical and cognitive future 'development' to considering her everyday material experiences in the here and now.

In order to sum up, I wish to briefly situate these 'findings' within broader political arguments. If, as I have argued, children's participation involves ascertaining children's perspectives of matters that affect them, this has to include recognition of the everyday material objects that are important to them, followed by incorporation of these materials into our provisions and practices with children. However small or seemingly ordinary,

certain material artefacts matter profoundly to children and therefore carry political significance. I suggest, therefore, that attention to the importance of these materialities in children's everyday lives is part of the practice of 'minor politics' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) (see Section 2.5.4) or what Fraser (1998) refers to as a 'politics of recognition and redistribution' (see Section 2.5.2). In other words, for practitioner-researchers seeking to enhance children's participation, this involves cultural recognition of children's material preferences as well as resource distribution that takes these preferences into account.

## **6.4 Temporal Spaces**

*Now I'm thinking about it I don't think she has that many choices because when I look at her day it's all set out for her. She gets up, goes to toddler group and I choose what she eats for her lunch and what clothes she wears (Parent).*

This comment was made by Zeenat's mother, Shabnam, in response to a question I asked her, near the beginning of the 'Big Cook Little Cook' (BCLC) PAR project, about what opportunities her daughter has for making decisions. Shabnam's remarks highlight one aspect of the temporal domain of children's participation, namely, opportunities for decision-making within everyday routines such as getting up, dressing, eating and going out. In this section I consider children's participation in some of the timetables and routines of the children's centre. Then I examine children's participation in transitions at TPCC as another dimension of the temporal environment. This includes the daily transition from home to nursery, as well as children's transition to a new room and to school.

### **6.4.1 Routines and Resistances**

Within a few weeks of starting ethnographic fieldwork at TPCC, I realise that routine and structure characterise all of the activities that take place with children at TPCC. Parent-toddler groups, health clinics, therapeutic interventions and nursery sessions are all organised around predictable routines and schedules. Some of these are explicit, such as the daily timetables (for example Figure 6.1), menus, sleep and nappy time charts and weekly plans displayed on the nursery walls. Other schedules are more tacit but nevertheless follow a fairly predictable sequence of events (for example Figures 6.2 and 6.3). As the children's centre teacher explains:

*Routines are important. They help children develop a sense of order; like for Ludek, who has just arrived from Slovakia, the routines help him to settle in.*

The daily and weekly routines at TPCC help me too: providing 'a sense of order', safety and security. I know what is happening and what will happen next and this helps me to feel I can belong. The strange is becoming familiar. At the same time, I need to be wary of this familiarity. I don't want the temporal rhythms and repetitions of life at TPCC to prevent me from seeing what is going on. Consequently, I begin to focus my observations on these everyday routines in order to make them strange. Indeed, for all of us involved in PAR, critical reflection upon children's participation in everyday routines becomes a major preoccupation in our thinking, and, more often than not, causes us to raise more questions than answers<sup>7</sup>.

In the nursery, the daily schedule provides a general framework for children's activity, as seen in the Room 3 timetable:

*Figure 6.1 Room 3 Timetable*

8.00	Breakfast in Wraparound Room
8.30	Morning session starts: free play with free flow to the outdoors
9.30	Rolling snack available during free play until 10.30am
11.00	Small group time
11.30	Tidy-up & whole group singing/story Morning session ends, some children leave, others wash hands
11.45	Lunchtime & outdoor play
12.45	Afternoon session starts: free play with free flow to the outdoors
1.00	Small group time
1.30	Rolling snack available during free play until 2.30pm
3.30	Tidy-up & whole group singing/story
3.45	Afternoon session ends, some children leave
3.45	Wraparound care: TV & free play
4.30	Evening Tea
6.00	TPCC closes

<sup>7</sup> These questions are presented as 'dilemmas' and provide the analytical focus of Chapter 7.

Thus the nursery day is divided into various activities, including meal and snack times, free play, tidying-up, hand washing, group time, outdoor play and so forth. According to Foucault (1977), discipline operates not just through the art of distribution, which is concerned with space, but also through the control of activity, which is concerned with time. Inherited from monastic communities, the timetable serves a disciplinary function in that it orders people's sense of time by structuring their activities, leaving no period of time ungoverned and open to disorder. On the one hand, the Room 3 timetable can be seen as a technology for constraining children's participation since their use of time and control of activities is already organised by adults. The timetable, curriculum and age structuring of the different nursery rooms act as disciplinary technologies, regulating children's lives in the temporal and spatial domain. Yet, within this temporal ordering, there are certain freedoms which enable children to participate. For example, during '*free play*' children can decide how long they spend on different activities; during '*free flow*' children are free to choose when they want to go out; and during '*rolling snack*' children can decide when they eat. Indeed, according to Foucault (1987), since power is a network of relations, for power to operate, paradoxically there must be some degree of freedom. This means that children are still able to participate: firstly, through the freedoms afforded to them by staff; and secondly, through children's resistances to the timetabled repetitions and routines conditioning their lives.

The Room 2 toddlers' timetable is similar to Room 3, but does not include small group time. According to the NP this is 'because our children are younger and we are not trying to get them ready for school like in Room 3'. Hence 'group time' is conceptualised as a time to prepare children for compulsory schooling, helping them to develop sufficient cognitive and linguistic skills to fulfil future school requirements. Thus a future-oriented perspective, seen in the temporal notion of 'school readiness', is embedded in the very purpose of group time. There is a danger that the futurity of this perspective can obscure the importance of children's lives in the here and now (Dahlberg et al., 2007). In Foucauldian terms, group time could be seen as a temporal technique for the production of docile, useful bodies. Children are expected to stop what they are doing and sit down quietly with a practitioner in a small group of similar-aged children for fifteen minutes in order to participate in prescribed activities such as language and counting games, singing and listening to stories. During an interview, the children's centre teacher begins to problematise this temporal practice:

*Group time is a time when they don't choose. That's when they have to sit down... It is usually children with behavioural needs who find that difficult.... The reasons are you want them to listen and sing songs which they should have experience of, but you could do that at any time. It could be more of a social occasion when the children set the agenda; when we listen to them. That's how we all could learn.*

This line of thinking sparks a PAR project in which the teacher and some Room 3 practitioners decide to use group time as one forum, as well as other informal occasions, to explore children's views of nursery. There is still an element of staff '*setting the agenda*' here. However, reconceptualising group time not simply as a technology for encouraging individual children's future development, but also as a time for staff to '*listen*' and '*learn*' from the children, opens up group time as a new temporal space for children's participation.

Staff also begin to treat the routine of group time more flexibly for those children who seem to find it difficult, based on the observations of Leanne, the SEN outreach worker: "Jerome finds it very difficult in group situations. Some days you don't have no problems and he'll sit and do singing, but on days when he were really upset they were still making him go in to the group. So I said to the staff, 'Let's ask him what he would like to do and then if I, or the floating member of staff are there, we'll go off and do it with him.' So that's what we've done and I think it works better for him."

Whilst group time is a routine and technology unique to Room 3, different technologies are applied to the children in Rooms 1 and 2. For example, Room 2 practitioners record individual children's daily routines, such as everything they have eaten and the main activities they've engaged with, on a 'daily care sheet' which is given to their parent/carer at the end of the session. Room 1 staff also record timings of children's naps and nappy changes on the care sheets. Practitioners seem to spend a lot of time completing these records each day. I ask Sue, the childcare manager, to explain their purpose:

*The care sheets help us to share information with parents about their child's day, and there is also a box for us to find out from parents about their children's lives at home. They also provide evidence for OFSTED of children's participation in daily routines, like what they've chosen to eat or do.*

Sue's comments implicitly suggest to me the simultaneously participatory as well as panoptic (see Section 2.5.3) purpose of the 'care sheet'. The daily care sheet is not

simply a neutral method for recording children's participation and encouraging communication between staff, parents and children. It also serves another function since the temporal rhythms of children's diet, activity, sleep and even bodily excretions are brought under the disciplinary gaze, much in the way that prisoners experience in penal institutions (Foucault, 1977). Similarly, the daily care sheet acts as a managerial technique and disciplinary technology for staff who are subject to the critical gaze of OFSTED.

Other activities taking place in the children's centre also follow a temporal schedule. Figures 6.2 and 6.3 outline the sequence of activities parents and children engage in during the 'Big Cook Little Cook' group run by the family support worker (FSW), and during physiotherapy sessions attended by Haniya, her mother, the SEN outreach worker and physiotherapist.

*Figure 6.2 BCLC Schedule*

- Arrive, greetings
- Watch/sing along to the BCLC TV show 'welcome song'
- Wash hands
- Sit down at table
- Prepare food
- Eat food
- Tidy-up
- Wash hands
- Do colouring activity
- Choose sticker
- Say goodbye

*Figure 6.3 Physiotherapy Schedule*

- Arrive, greetings
- Child plays with toy whilst Therapist instructs carers about the purpose and implementation of the exercise/position
- Exercise 1; child given object of interest to distract her. Exercise continues until child's protests are sustained
- Exercise 1 with different stimulus until child's protests are sustained
- Exercise 1 with third stimulus in different location of the room until child's protests are sustained.
- Child placed in comfortable position. Adults talk whilst child rests.
- Repeat cycle with Exercises 2 and 3.
- Therapist updates records and makes next appointment. Says goodbye.

Daily physiotherapy at TPCC, following the exercise pattern outlined in Figure 6.3, is also conducted by Haniya's keyworker and usually takes place during the morning nursery session whilst the other Room 1 children have been taken outside to play. Thus Haniya is subject to temporal segregation from her peers and spatial exclusion from participation in outdoor play during daily physiotherapy routines. Nespor et al. (2009) suggest that temporal practices that organise disabled children's lives to special schedules are antithetical to inclusive, participatory practice since they position disabled children as 'other'.

Temporal control of children's activity and bodily actions characterises both the BCLC and physiotherapy routines, imposing what Foucault (1977) refers to as 'a relation of docility-utility' (p. 25). Given that these sessions are very much 'practitioner-led', unlike the mainly 'child-led' free play ethos of the nursery and WMWB, it might seem that there is little scope for children's participation. However, although adults regulate children's time and bodies during these structured sessions, perhaps in a more visible way than in free play sessions, children are not simply passive recipients of these structures. In both visible and invisible pedagogies (Bernstein, 1975) children are active in resisting temporal structures and routines. As Foucault (1977) posits, power is not completely controlling. This means that there is always resistance where there is power. Indeed, power involves resistance. The following vignettes during BCLC, physiotherapy and lunchtime illustrate this.

*BCLC*

Zeenat is afforded a number of opportunities to participate during BCLC. For example, she can choose the ingredients she wants to put in her fruit kebab; she decides how big she wants to chop the ingredients; and chooses which sticker she would like to wear. Zeenat also participates by challenging adult agendas. Thus, at times she complies with, but also subverts, the structure and activities of the planned session. For example, in spite of Shabnam's protests, Zeenat eats some of the ingredients before the food has been prepared, but then chooses not to eat the kebab once it has been prepared. She ignores the FSW's instructions that 'only mummies can use the peeler', attempts to peel the skin off an apple, becomes frustrated and then has the peeler removed. Finally, she uses the food as an extension of play (rolling grapes across the table) rather than for its

intended purposes. Some of the other children also resist some of the planned activities and timings, for example, showing no interest in colouring and tidying-up, or asking to go home before the session has finished. Children's participation is thus practiced differently at different times: they make decisions in response to, as well as in reaction against, adult-initiated activities and prescriptions.

After several BCLC sessions the FSW and I meet to review our data and to plan subsequent changes to practice. As we report elsewhere (see Appendix 9), the children's participation in, as well as resistances to, certain regular activities challenge our practices and thinking. For example, the FSW decides to discard activities that the children are consistently disinterested in such as colouring, and to rethink the use of certain cooking utensils that place children in a position of dependency rather than inter-/in-dependency. Parental practices are challenged too. Our interviews with parents suggest that the participatory opportunities afforded children during BCLC cause some of them to change their 'normal' home routines. For example, Shabnam comments that BCLC has encouraged her to rethink Zeenat's participation in food preparation at home:

*She's ... actually doing things with food, other than 'Mummy comes and puts food in front of me and I've got to eat it': normal routine. ...Now I'm doing it with her rather than for her. It may take half an hour to make any snacks, or sandwiches or anything because she is preparing the food with me rather than me doing it for her, but at least she has done some of it herself and she is eating more than she was.*

Finally, the children's resistances, particularly the episode with the vegetable peeler, challenge and broaden my understanding of the notion of participation. Zeenat's act of resistance, seen in her refusal to believe herself incapable of using this utensil, could be understood as a micro-political act: an act of 'citizenship from below' (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Liebel, 2008). Children's acts of resistance might therefore be seen as acts of participation, much in the way that political protests are expressions of adult citizenship practices.

#### *Physiotherapy*

Sandra, the physio, is demonstrating some new exercises that Haniya needs to learn, to Nizran, Haniya's mother, and Jo, her keyworker. Sandra explains, 'We're going to do three new exercises: 'four point kneeling', 'high kneeling' and 'standing up', which you need to do with her each day'... After finishing the first two exercises, Sandra places



Haniya in a sitting position. Haniya stops making moaning noises, suggesting that she is more comfortable in this position.

Sandra to Haniya: Time out. Are you happy now?

Sandra to Jo: Give her two minutes rest.

Haniya lies down for a while and then sits up to look at a musical ball that Sandra is rolling ball back and forth.

Sandra to Haniya: Are you ready for the next exercise now?

Sandra places gaiters on Haniya's legs and Haniya watches quietly.

Sandra to Haniya: Good girl.

Sandra to Jo: She needs to be stood at a surface, or at a wall, or against you. She needs holding and standing because she can't participate with her legs with the gaiters on.

Jo to Sandra: About five minutes?

Sandra to Jo: Yes. Little and often.

Sandra places Haniya in a standing position so that Haniya's back is against Sandra's chest. She places an arm across Haniya's chest to support her. Haniya cries. Jo tries to distract her with a toy but Haniya drops her head and continues to cry.

Sandra (singing): Haniya standing tall, Haniya standing tall, one, two, three, four, five, Haniya standing tall.

Haniya throws her head to the side, as if in distress. She is crying loudly now. She throws herself back against Sandra and moans.

Sandra picks up Haniya. Her cries subside. Sandra carries Haniya over to the wall.

Sandra to Jo and Nizran: I'll just show you the 'standing against the wall' position.

Haniya bends her body over to the side so that Sandra is unable to stand her against the wall.

Sandra to Haniya: You're not having any of it today.

Sandra to Jo: If she doesn't want to do it she won't.

Sandra to Haniya: OK poppet, you're telling me quite clearly that its time to stop.

Time penetrates Haniya's body 'and with it all the meticulous controls of power' (Foucault 1977, p. 151). This is seen in the structured schedule of the therapeutic session (Figure 6.3), which includes a cyclical, anatomo-chronological pattern of exercise ('*About five minutes*', '*Little and often*') and rest ('*Time out*', '*Give her two minutes*') and the expectation that these exercises will be performed as part of Haniya's daily routine at home and nursery. Power also circulates through physical manipulation

of Haniya's body, and through the use of toys as technologies of distraction/coercion. Foucault specifically discusses exercise as a temporal and physical form of discipline. In order for discipline to achieve its goal of producing useful and docile bodies, the body must be 'manipulated, shaped, trained [until it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces' (Foucault 1977, p. 136). Here the disciplinary practice of physiotherapy functions ambivalently: in one sense imposing limits and constraints on Haniya's body and her participation (*'she can't participate with her legs with the gaiters on'*); and in another sense increasing her bodily capacities which, in turn, enable her to participate through bodily resistances (*'dropping her head', 'crying loudly', 'throwing herself back', 'bending'*). The manipulation of Haniya's body places her in a passive position, and yet Haniya is also active in resisting the exercise routines, through moaning, crying and changing her body posture.

As I reflect on the above episode it occurs to me that whether children like Haniya are seen as participants, exercising agency through practices of resistance depends on the reflexive capacities of the people interacting with them, in this case the physiotherapist. Sandra 'reads' Haniya's resistances as an indication that Haniya wants the exercises to stop (*'OK poppet, you're telling me quite clearly that its time to stop'*). Her reflexive interpretation of Haniya's body language also seems to suggest that Haniya participates by shaping the temporal domain of her life (*'You're not having any of it today'; 'you're telling me... its time to stop'*). As Davis and Watson (2006) argue 'For resistance to be read as meaningful, cultural exchange has to occur between the participants in a social setting' (p. 165). If this does not happen, young and disabled children's participatory behaviours can be seen as lacking meaning, and can therefore be ignored by the adults caring for them.

During the PAR process, Haniya's keyworker, SENCO, and SEN outreach worker, undertake to reflexively 'read' Haniya's resistances as examples of things she dislikes about children's centre practices and provisions, and to respond accordingly. As a result of observations, photographs and reflections which are gathered together in Haniya's visual review book, they endeavour to end Haniya's temporal exclusion from outdoor play by taking her physiotherapy outdoors, and by making the following commitment: 'During physio we will listen to your signs of discomfort and stop when you are tired' (Appendix 10).

### *Lunchtime*

Lunch is late. The Room 2 toddlers have been strapped into their low-high chairs and are sitting at their tables. The Room 3 children arrive and sit on wooden chairs at different tables to the younger children. Dillon picks up his cutlery and begins to bang it on the table. This is followed by Otis. Soon many of the other children are joining in. Squeals and laughter fill the room as the improvisation reaches a crescendo. I have observed this happen on other occasions, but not for such a sustained period of time, or by so many children.

"They're getting restless," a practitioner remarks. She calls out to the children "Let's see who has crossed their arms and is waiting for their dinner?" The noise subsides as some children comply. Another staff member suggests, "Shall we sing some songs? Why don't we sing 'Five Little Ducks'? Put your cutlery down." The group sing a variety of songs, requiring hand and arm movements to correspond with the lyrics.

Eventually the food arrives. Melody finishes before others have eaten their pudding. Still strapped into her low-high chair, she scrapes her chair back from the table. Other waiting children do the same and are told to move back to the table until everybody has finished pudding. These children comply, but Melody stands up, with chair still attached, and waddles to the door to open it. "This strapping in isn't working is it?" the EYP comments. He unstraps Melody and accompanies her outside.

In this episode different children participate in different ways. For example, some accept adult-imposed temporal routines: they abide by the practitioners' instructions to wait at the table for the food to arrive and for everybody to finish pudding. This involves compliance with the adults' desire to control children's activity through power tactics of strapping children in and exhorting them to cross their arms and sing action songs. Foucault (1977) refers to this as the 'temporal elaboration of the act' (p. 152). Time infuses the body as acts are broken down into elements, body parts are positioned, and given directions through a collective and obligatory rhythm, much in the way that soldiers are taught to march, or school children are given handwriting instruction. In this way the songs serve a disciplinary function. Children's use of time is controlled via the movements of bodies engaged in the task of singing and making appropriate actions. Thus the individual bodies are controlled via the activity, where the temporal elaboration of the act and the correlation of body and gesture take primacy. The moment

these children's bodies are engaged in movement the disruption of the banging cutlery and perceived restlessness stops.

Others participate by making their views known through bodily practices that resist temporal routines. A few children resist the temporal constraints of having to wait for everybody to finish eating through scraping their chairs away from the table. Melody takes this one stage further by attempting to leave the room, in spite of the physical constraints of the chair. Corsaro (2003) argues that while acceptance and compliance with the adult world is important to children, their participation in social life is advanced by their active resistance to certain adult rules, particularly those rules that restrict their behaviour. The EYP is aware of this and responds to Melody's power tactics by unstrapping her and accommodating her desire to be outside.

Finally, some of the children participate by constructing their own peer routines. Corsaro (1985) suggests that peer culture is created when children construct and share a set of common activities or routines, artefacts and attitudes. Banging the cutlery on the table before the food arrives each day is one such example of children participating by producing and reproducing their own lunchtime routines. This peer routine usually stops as lunch is served. However, on this occasion the unplanned delay provides an opportunity for children's peer culture to be extended. For the practitioners, as the banging routine is taken up by more children, it moves from being accepted as an enjoyable, daily activity of a few children, to becoming a noisy and possibly subversive activity that the group need to be diverted from. Hence singing becomes the behaviour-modifying technology for curbing this peer routine and re-imposing order on children's time as they wait for the food to arrive.

From observing this mealtime it seems that children participate not only through accepting as well as resisting adult-imposed temporal routines, but they also participate by actively constructing their own peer routines. Timetables and routines shape children's participation, but children also participate in shaping the routines and temporal patterns of their lives.

## 6.4.2 Transitions and Transgressions

Transitions are another temporal aspect of children's lives at the children's centre. Transition is a process that happens over time and has been described as encompassing horizontal and vertical transitions (Kagan and Neuman, 1998). Horizontal transitions occur between different spheres of the child's life within the same time frame, for example, the daily movement between home and the children's centre or between baby clinic and nursery. Vertical transitions occur as children move from one age grouping to another over time, for example moving up to a new room at nursery or going to school.

### Vertical Transition at TPCC

At Towersham nursery children are encouraged to participate in temporal processes through communicating their views and making decisions about the transitions they are involved in. For example, staff support children's participation by respecting their views and feelings about who and how they are cared for when they make the initial transition to nursery:

*When a baby is new to nursery you have to learn from them how they like to be handled, put to sleep, given a bottle. If a baby doesn't like it you can tell, but you've got to be tuned in. It's about the adult recognising and actually valuing what that child is telling you, even though it's not in words (NP).*

*We've done quite a bit on permissions...when a child is new to the nursery we try not to allocate a keyworker straight away ...we try to start relationships with them and then see where their preferences lie, so that there is some permission from the child to build relationships and make choices of who they get on better with. Eventually one of the staff will say, 'They come to me', so that staff member will key work that child after that (Sue - Childcare Manager).*

*Indirectly Kamal has chosen me as his keyworker. I became his keyworker when we noticed he wanted to come to me after his sleep time and when he started to call me 'Buda'. I think he is referring to 'Putu' which means kid, friend, sweetheart (EYP).*

These comments suggest that staff at TPCC view babies and young children as competent to be able to express preferences about their care routines and to make decisions about who their key person should be when they first join nursery. This has similarities with Alderson et al.'s (2005) research in neonatal units, in which young babies were observed communicating distinct preferences for certain types of care, by certain types of people during the first few days and weeks of life. Sue's notion of

children giving 'permission' to adults implies that children have authority and decision-making power in building relationships with adults. This contrasts with traditional images of young children as passive recipients of adult care. Furthermore, eighteen-month Kamal's use of 'Buda' as a term of endearment suggests that care is a two-way process, with both parties contributing to the caring relationship.

Staff here have an active image of the child. Children are seen as agents (actively giving permissions) and as participants (expressing preferences, influencing decision-making) in the transition to nursery. Thus, the settling-in period is determined by the child's own timescales, as Sue explains:

*And we arrange a series of settling-in visits when mum or dad stay with them, and then leave for a short period of time and return. The time period for how long these settling-in visits goes on for is very much judged by what the child is communicating to us, until the child feels OK with being left. So there's permissions there. That's how they participate.*

However, Sue bemoans the fact that children's participation in determining the timeframe for making the vertical transition to a new room at nursery is more difficult given the prescriptions the setting is required to follow:

*The other thing about participation is that children should not be pushed to move rooms at a certain age: because you're three you've got to be in Room 3. Or just because you're two you can't go in Room 3. We've had some two-year-olds who chronologically might not be ready but they are ready in their behaviour and how they present so they're given those opportunities... So it's having that sort of flexibility I think, which is what we're pushed away from all the time, you know on ratios and staffing levels and numbers... because you've got to stick to EYFS framework, and what's most cost-effective, rather than what's best for the child.*

Here Sue contests the idea that a child's biological age should determine the timing of his/her transition to a new room, suggesting instead that children should actively participate in the timings of their transition experiences. The idea that transition should be based on biological age has its roots in developmental psychology, particularly stage-based theories of child development. Vogler et al. (2008) argue that the implication of seeing child development as a universal, linear sequence of age-approximate stages is that these stages become reference points for deciding the particular timing for transitions.

Sue also contests the idea that economic factors related to the cost of staff/child ratios should determine children's transitions. Instead Sue suggests that a child's *'behaviour and how they present'* (for example asking to go next door to play, banging on the door, pulling on the handle, running in at every opportunity), should be read as an indication that they want to move rooms, rather than age or cost being the most important structuring factors for determining when a child is ready. This is a relational view of transition based on *'what's best for the child'* rather than a structural view, as outlined in the EYFS. Where possible, Sue is prepared to transgress the statutory guidelines in the children's best interests *'through having that sort of flexibility'*. For example, even though Dillon is three and should be moving into Room 3, he communicates through word and gesture that he doesn't want to move yet, and so Sue allows him to stay with his friends in Room 2 until they can make the move together, even though this decision costs the nursery money because there is a higher staff/child ratio in Room 2.

In both types of vertical transition (settling into nursery for the first time and moving into a new room), children are assumed to have agency in shaping the temporal processes that affect them. Thus vertical transition is not something done to children but with them. They are afforded the opportunity to participate in determining the timeframe for settling-in visits prior to formal enrolment as well as for moving up to a new room; and the selection of a key person is not made for them, but by them. However, it is not the individual child as agent, but rather the child's agency and participation is enacted in relation with the adults caring for them. Hence transition is collectively produced, and if it is to be a positive experience for the child, family and practitioners, then this requires the active participation of children and adults working together.

### **Horizontal Transition at TPCC**

The daily transition between home and children's centre is also a time when children participate through expressing their views and taking action. In the case of twenty-month Lela, this occurs through power tactics of resistance as well as compliance, as the EYP recounts:

*We've got a child at the moment who'll come in and she'll have a bit of a fight with mum: 'I don't want to stop here but you're bringing me here so I've not got much choice'. In early days she just used to sit in her pram and cry. Now she'll*

*just sit silently inside the door with her coat on all afternoon. She'll sit and watch us and we'll watch her through the mirror. She'll sit and play on her own with the objects around her but she'll stop if we come near. When its snack time we'll bring her a plate of food and she'll look at you as if to say, 'Well I'm taking it off you but I don't really want it anyway'. She'll wait till we've gone then she'll look in mirror to make sure we're not looking at her and then she'll eat it. She'll stay in a little area between the door and construction, in that little patch. It looks like we're ignoring her but that's her preferred way of being at nursery. Cos when Rosa's dad tried, when he came to pick Rosa up, he said 'Oh hello' and Rosa's mum remarked, 'Oh she's always in this corner isn't she?' and they like tried to coax her. But we said, 'We know it looks cruel but that's what she likes to do, that's how she chooses to spend her time.'*

As the EYP and I analyse this story to look for how Lela is participating, we are struck by the different power tactics she employs in her objection to being taken to nursery. These include: resistance (*'she'll have a fight with mum... keep her coat on all afternoon... stop if we come near... stay in that little patch'*); partial acceptance (*'she'll sit and play on her own with the objects around her'*, she'll take the food reluctantly); silence (*'she'll just sit silently inside the door'*); and evasion (*'she'll wait till we've gone then she'll look in mirror to make sure we're not looking at her and then she'll eat it'*). In the temporal process of the daily transition to nursery Lela is both subject to government (*'you're bringing me here so I've not got much choice'*) but is also activated as a subject with agency, (resisting the attempts of adults to coax her away from the door and to engage with other people, places and things). As Masschelein and Quaghebeur (2005) argue, participation has the potential for both subordination and subject-formation.

Kovařík (1994) uses the metaphors of 'stage' and 'script' to describe the spatial and temporal structuring of children's lives. The 'stage' refers to the physical structuring of the environment, while the 'script' is the agenda for how children are supposed to spend their time within that stage. Lela transgresses the stage on which she is expected to perform by choosing to remain seated in one small patch near the door rather than moving freely around the room like her peers, and by refusing to engage with other actors within it (other children, staff, parents and material objects). Furthermore, Lela's 'script' transgresses adult ideas of how she ought to be spending her time, and yet her power tactics of resistance, partial acceptance, silence and evasion, are acts of participation, as the EYP explains to Rosa's parents: *'that's her preferred way of being at nursery ... that's how she chooses to spend her time'*.



## Vertical Transition to School

It is group time in Room 3. One of the nursery practitioners has gathered a small group of four-year-old children into a side room with the purpose of eliciting a conversation with them around a scenario in which Raqina, the persona doll, has witnessed some kicking at nursery. The impetus for the scenario is based on an actual incident of pushing that occurred last week. However, the NP's agenda is quickly subverted by that of the children who seem more concerned with discussing their forthcoming transition to school:

- NP: Raqina has come to play today.*  
*Uzma: She's my friend.*  
*Ciaran: I've been to my new school.*  
*NP: How exciting, did you play there?*  
*Ciaran: No, my mum said I don't have to.*  
*Kyle: I'm going to a new school too.*  
*NP: All of you are going to school in September.*  
*Mohammed: I'm going. I'm going to big school. [To Kyle] You're not going.*  
*Kyle: I am.*  
*NP: Look who's come to nursery today. Who's this?*  
*Mohammed: Raqila.*  
*NP: Raqina. Hello Raqina. How are you? [listens to doll speaking] She said something made her sad at nursery. When she went outside last week she saw some boys kicking another boy.*  
*Mohammed: Who? Raqila?*  
*NP: They didn't kick her, but she saw another little boy getting kicked. How do you think he felt?*

*[No reply - long pause]*

- Amina: When I go to big school Kyle is going to my school.*  
*Kyle: No. That isn't her school. It's my school. It isn't [hers].*  
*NP: If someone kicked you at your school what would you do?*  
*Kyle: Nobody will kick me. Nobody will kick me at big school.*  
*Mohammed: I came to my school and if somebody kicked me I'd tell them. I'd tell my school. I take Lightning McQueen<sup>8</sup> to my school.*  
*NP: So you're going to take Lightning McQueen to your new school. I hope nobody's going to fight. I hope we'll all be friends. Shall we sing "We're all friends?"*

*[Group hold hands and everyone sings.]*

At first the NP came away from this episode disappointed, feeling that she had been unsuccessful in provoking a conversation with the children that enabled them to reflect

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8 A toy race car from the animated film *Cars*.

upon a past incident of fighting. However, on another level, she could see that the group time with the persona doll provided a forum for children to talk about the transition to school: a future event that clearly mattered to the children in the here and now. This becomes apparent firstly as Ciaran ignores Raqina and instead initiates the topic of school, secondly, as the group chooses not to respond to the NP's question about the boy being kicked, and lastly, as Amina resumes the conversation about school. In spite of the NP's initial agenda for the conversation, the children participate by directing and redirecting the content of the talk and shifting the temporal focus from the past to the future.

In so doing, the children participate in what Corsaro and Molinari (2005) refer to as a 'priming event'. Just as Ciaran's visit to school is an important priming event to prepare him for the transition to school, this child-directed conversation about school becomes another priming event, but one that is constructed by the children themselves. In this we see the children collectively preparing for their transition. This involves wrestling with issues of identity, as indicated by the preponderance of 'I' and 'my' in the children's use of language. However, this sense of identity is constructed in relation to others. Thus, the conversation about the anticipated transition to school focuses on relationships: who is going and who isn't (*'I'm going to big school. You're not going'*); who will be with them (*'When I go to big school Kyle is going to my school'*); who the school belongs to and who it doesn't (*'That isn't her school. It's my school'*); how other children will behave towards them at school (*'Nobody will kick me at big school'*); how they will cope if somebody hurts them at school (*'I'd tell them'*); and the existing people and transitional objects that will provide continuity in a time of change (*'Kyle is going to my school'; 'I take Lightning McQueen to my school'*).

Thus, the process of transition causes children to participate in two ways. First, children participate through collectively trying to make sense of the impending transition, by dealing with it in the here and now through the construction of a conversation that acts as a priming event. Children's participation in this conversation enables them to actively contribute to the forthcoming experience of change. Second, children participate through constructing a sense of identity and belonging in relation to others, both of which are vital components of participation and citizenship (Nutbrown and Clough, 2009). As the NP and I come to recognise, a flexible use of group time, which is responsive to the children's conversation topics, opens up a space for children to

develop a connected sense of identity and to engage with others about the temporal issues that matter to them.

Therefore, if we are to understand what young children's participation means and how it is enhanced and constrained then we need to pay attention to the temporal domains and practices that govern young children's lives. This involves analysing the ways adults control children's activity through temporal technologies such as timetables, routines and transitions. Our analysis suggests that children participate in decision-making through the temporal freedoms afforded to them by staff, such as the freedom to decide when they eat snack, how long they play outside or engage with a particular activity, and when they transition to a new room. However, children also participate by resisting the routines and transition arrangements that structure their time at the children's centre. For this reason, conceptualisation of young children's participation needs to incorporate notions of compliance and resistance. Children participate through accepting as well as resisting adult-imposed temporal processes. This occurs through power tactics such as physical struggle, refusal, compliance, partial acceptance, verbal negotiation, manipulation, silence and evasion.

Time shapes children's participation, but children also participate in shaping the temporal patterns of their lives. For example, children participate by actively constructing their own peer routines and priming events. Young and disabled children are also capable of communicating preferences about their transition arrangements and the duration of their therapeutic routines. However, if children's participation in temporal processes is to be enhanced then these acts or performances, together with children's acts of resistance, need to be reflexively 'read' by the adults caring for them. It also requires children's centre practitioners to be flexible in the process of managing children's daily routines, activities and transition experiences.

Reflexivity and flexibility characterises the final section of the chapter which highlights the importance of the relational domain for supporting young children's participation. Of course, I have already alluded to the relational space of young children's participation in my discussion of data related to physical and temporal spaces of participation. Indeed, all three spaces are interwoven and mutually constitutive. However, in the final section I focus in greater detail on some specific relational

domains of children's participation in the children's centre, and pay particular attention to the embodied performance of children's participation in relation with others.

## 6.5 Relational Spaces

*The reason we are assisting families ultimately is so that the child-parent relationship is enhanced. What I've been looking at with the team is how we can promote parent-child interaction ... getting the parent involved with the child: communicating with them, being attuned to them and giving them some limited choices. And that's all part of children's participation (FSM).*

According to Geraldine, the Family Support Manager, the ultimate focus of her service is the '*child-parent relationship*' and therefore this is the primary relational space in which children's participation should be encouraged. Within this relational space children's participation can be enhanced through staff promoting the importance of social practices such as parents '*interacting*', '*getting involved*', '*communicating*', '*being attuned*' and offering '*limited choices*' to their child. In this section I explore the relational domain of children's participation. This comprises the social relationships in which participation takes place, as well as the social and embodied practices that enable young children's participation. At TPCC children's participation is enacted within a variety of social relationships including those of the practitioner-parent-child, mother-child, practitioner-child, and child-child. Indeed as Cahill (1996) suggests, for participation to take place a relationship must exist since, at its simplest, participation entails involvement, sharing decisions and interacting with others.

### 6.5.1 (M)others Interacting

*All the staff interact with the mums and babes and model interaction, and I encourage all the mums who participate in WMWB to be very vocal and chatty, lots of eye contact with babies so hopefully that gives the babies opportunity to reciprocate (HV1).*

This comment was made by Jill (HV1) in response to a question I asked her about how she encourages children's participation at WMWB. In common with the family support service, Jill's reply suggests that in the healthcare service participation occurs in the relational space of mothers interacting with their babies and is promoted in the practitioner-mother-baby domain. Participation occurs through social practices in which staff '*encourage*' mothers to initiate interaction with children through '*eye contact*', '*chat*'

and play, thus inviting babies *'to respond'*. The spatial arrangement of chairs around the baby mat is designed to support this type of social interaction. The physical positioning of babies on the weighing scales with mother and HV gazing down on them provides another powerful opportunity for mothers to interact with babies and for staff to *'model'* adult-baby interactions to parents. Thus the socio-spatial design of the central area and clinic corner supports and produces social spaces for communication between mother-baby and practitioner-baby dyads, as well as between mother-baby-practitioner. However, in a Foucauldian sense (1976b; 1977), these spaces are also productive of disciplinary techniques of power including surveillance (*'our focus is...the babies and mums'*) and procedures for training or coercing bodies (*'all the staff...model interaction'*). Thus social and spatial practices support communication with children, inviting their response and participation, but at the same time contribute to the policing and othering of mothers and children.

During the PAR process Faye (HV2) becomes aware of the double-bind of support and surveillance that occurs through social processes of observing children and encouraging parents to initiate interaction with their infants. She seeks to make an ethical response (see Section 5.7.3) by problematising her previously held views that adults should always initiate interaction, and by turning the observational gaze away from mother and baby towards her own professional practice.

*I was observing baby lying on the mat as his mother was undressing him before being placed on the scales. This is a time when we... take a developmental and screening role. But then I thought, 'Should I always automatically talk to baby?' because a lot of the mums in this community tend not to interact with their babies and so we tend to automatically engage with babies. But this research made me think, 'Am I cuing in to baby? Am I overtaking?' ...I suppose it's easy for us as adults to get the attention of babies but I thought about letting these babies initiate and use their attention as a cue to interact and when their attention has gone to stop and not interfere with what baby wants to do next.*

In rethinking and changing her practice, Faye embraces new possibilities for understanding participation. Young children's participation is enabled not just through creating a social space in which adults initiate interaction with babies and invite their response, but also as adults recognise that participation is a reciprocal process in which babies too are active in initiating interaction and inviting a response. Faye's thoughts about *'letting these babies initiate'* suggests that she sees babies as agentic and capable

of having an influence but this is dependent on her reflexively responding to their bodily 'cues'. As Hart (1992) suggests, it could be argued that participation in society starts from the moment a baby is born and discovers the extent to which he/she is able to influence other people and events by cries or bodily movements. However, the extent of each baby's influence varies according to the cultural attitudes and responses of the parents and practitioners caring for them.

Seeing babies as agentic, capable of expressing their wishes and influencing decisions through their bodies, is also prominent in Kelly's account of her breastfeeding relationship with her daughter.

### **6.5.2 Embodying Participation**

'How long have you been breastfeeding her?' I ask Kelly, as she feeds her daughter during WMWB.

'Four months, ever since she were born. I decided to breastfeed her cos midwife and all books tell you "breast is best" and I'd done it with first child. With first one I got a bit stressed cos I thought, "Am I doing it right? What if I've not fed him enough?" but with this one she lets me know when she wants feeding and stops when she's had enough and then falls asleep.'

My ears prick up as I listen to Kelly's last comment. I probe a little further, 'How do you know when she wants feeding?'

'When she starts snuffling or sucking her fist, or rooting or crying. So I just follow her and let her decide when she's had enough. Sometimes it's a bit annoying because she'll want feeding just as we're about to go out or have dinner. I can't tell you how many cold dinners I've had!'

We laugh.

'I remember that with my daughter. And why are you less stressed with this baby?' I ask. 'Cos you're less stressed with second babe anyway, but also it's not all up to me.'

'What do you mean?'

'We've learnt to do it together, like I've learnt to read her hunger signs and she's learnt how to latch on properly so it's a lot easier than first time'.

Kelly's account of breastfeeding describes the cultural practice of feeding 'on demand' (Illingworth and Stone, 1952). This is a baby-led process in which mum '*just follows*'

her baby's bodily cues. This approach contrasts with 'structured feeding' in which the adult decides the timing of feeds. As Keenan and Stapleton (2009) argue, feeding 'on demand' invokes the baby as agentic and as self-regulating. Indeed, in this excerpt Kelly attributes agency to her baby: '*she lets me know when she wants feeding and stops when she's had enough*'. Thus the baby is constructed as a participant and not just as a recipient in the breastfeeding relationship. Although Kelly made the initial decision to breastfeed, the baby also exercises power through influencing the feeding routine. She expresses when she wants to be fed through multi-modal methods of communication such as '*snuffling, sucking her fists, rooting and crying*'; and she '*decides when she's had enough*'. In this way her participation is embodied, in the sense that her views and decisions are expressed through her body and produced within social interactions with her mother.

An embodied conceptualisation of participation challenges the Cartesian<sup>9</sup> dualistic separation of mind and body so prominent in Western philosophy. It questions prevailing conceptions of participation which value verbal, cognitive and rational forms of thinking and decision-making above corporeal experience. As political theorist Iris Marion Young (2000) suggests, in order to deepen democracy we need to move beyond ideas that participation should be solely equated with verbal, rational argument and action to acknowledge other important modes of communication such as emotional tone, non-verbal and symbolic gestures. Although Young is not referring to children in her argument, but to other subaltern groups, it is not hard to see how this applies to young and disabled children. Indeed, as Alderson (2001b) argues, respecting young children's rights to participate depends on accepting that all human beings are bodies as well as minds. As I reflect on this, it occurs to me that children's bodies are almost entirely absent within research accounts and theories of children's participation. This may be due in part to the Cartesian legacy, but also because, in an effort to highlight childhood as a distinct social phenomenon with cultural meanings, much of the participation research conducted by scholars hailing from the 'new social studies of childhood', has tended to emphasise the social and cultural at the expense of the biological and material (Prout, 2005). Studying young children in their relational domains helps to throw light on the important role of inter-corporeality in participation. Indeed, a closer appreciation of the

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9 Cartesian dualism arises from Descartes' (1634) maxim: 'I think, therefore I am'.

somatic details of children's and adults' lives gives us a richer insight into how participation is embodied in practice.

My conversation with Kelly also helps me to understand how her and her baby's participation in breastfeeding is a reciprocal process in which both partners share responsibility: *'it's not all up to me ... we've learnt to do it together'*. The baby has had to adjust herself to the mother's body in order *'to latch on properly'*, but Kelly has had to adjust herself to her baby's body by *'reading her hunger signs'*. Thus, in order to participate both parties have to be responsive to one another's bodily cues. Furthermore, Kelly has decided to breastfeed her daughter, but her daughter controls how much milk Kelly's body produces. Consequently you cannot separate baby's participation from her mother's participation since they are interdependent.

Kelly's account of breastfeeding her daughter enables me to draw two suppositions about young children's participation. Firstly, if we are to have a more inclusive theory of participation that embraces young, preverbal and disabled children, participation needs to be framed to incorporate embodied action as well as voice. Secondly, we need to appreciate that embodied action does not occur in individual children's isolated performances, but through reciprocal, interdependent relationships.

Kelly's story illustrates the embodied and reciprocal nature of children's participation in the relational domain of the mother-baby relationship. A similar dynamic occurs in the relational domain of the practitioner-toddler relationship between Jo, one of the nursery practitioners, and eighteen-month-old Kamal.

*Bodily Gesture*

Kamal walks over to the corner of Room 1. He presses his face against the window of the fire escape doors and looks at a man walking his dog in the park. He watches them for quite some time. Jo approaches Kamal and stands behind him. Kamal turns around and reaches his arms up towards her, indicating he wants her to pick him up. She responds accordingly. Kamal points to the dog outside. They look out together. He taps the window several times with the palm of his hand.

'Do you want to go out Kamal?' she asks.

He nods.



'We might be able to go to the park later if we have enough staff.'

In this episode, Kamal's views are performed in the social interaction he has with Jo through a variety of bodily gestures including 'reaching', 'pointing', 'tapping' and 'nodding'. In the arm-reaching action Kamal communicates that he wants Jo to do something for him, that is, to pick him up. Similarly, tapping on the window is suggestive of wanting to go outside to the park. Jo intimates Kamal's desires from his facial expressions and these small gestures. The gestures signal an intention to influence the other person. In this sense, they could be seen as micro-political acts of embodied participation.

The participatory space created during this encounter occurs as both parties approach one another through bodily actions: Jo through standing behind Kamal and sharing in the experience of looking outside, and Kamal through reaching up for Jo. It would seem that physical and relational proximity is important for Kamal to communicate his intentions and for Jo to be able to 'read' Kamal's gestural signs and thus enable his participation; just as was the case with Shelley as she reflexively responded to Haniya's bodily resistances during physiotherapy. Such close, receptive attention to one another's bodily gestures accords with Dahlberg and Moss' (2005) affirmation of an 'ethics of care' and a 'pedagogy of listening and relationships'. They outline that pedagogy can be understood as 'a relation, a network of obligation' that requires 'infinite attention to the other' (p. 1). This is an ethics of proximity based on a pre-rational encounter, where participation emerges in response to the embodied call of the other person. As Brooker (2008) argues, genuine 'ethics of care' requires practitioners to take their cue from children: to watch and wait and respond to their gestures, utterances and preferences, rather than to 'know what they need' (p. 107).

Kamal also uses a 'declarative gesture' (Cochet and Vauclair, 2010) in the form of finger pointing, to direct Jo's attention outside, so that she too can share in the object of his interest. Unlike the imperative gestures of 'arm reaching' and 'tapping' in which Kamal seeks to achieve his own goals, his declarative pointing is dialogic in that it requires an audience and is for someone else's benefit. Finger pointing invites Jo into a conversation about something that is too far away to touch. This could be seen as a means by which Kamal participates since he initiates dialogue with Jo by communicating his views and

interests in a bodily way, in order that she might also share in the enjoyment of watching the dog. Throughout this episode Jo interprets and responds to Kamal's gestures. In so doing, she sees them as meaningful, communicative signals and therefore treats Kamal as an intentional agent. Similarly, Kamal's declarative pointing demonstrates that he also understands Jo to be an attentional and intentional agent. Their participatory relationship is characterised by mutual recognition and dialogue.

This vignette accords with more recent efforts to move beyond one-way, monological understandings of 'participation' in which the practitioner listens to the child's 'voice'. While this may be a useful starting point, a more relational approach embraces participation as a dialogical, intergenerational space (Percy-Smith, 2006; Mannion, 2007; 2010; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010a). The dialogical interaction between Kamal and Jo illustrates the interdependence and reciprocity in relationships that can occur between adults and children. Mannion (2010) argues that this interdependence and reciprocity should challenge us to reconfigure traditional ways of thinking about, and working within, adult-child relationships.

Thus far I have presented a number of stories of relational practices occurring in the children's centre that illustrate very young children's participation. These include the proto-conversations that occur between baby and health visitor, the breastfeeding relationship between mother and daughter, and the proto-symbolic activity of pointing and gesture between toddler and nursery practitioner. Each example reveals the embodied, intersubjective and dialogical nature of participation. They show that, although young children are dependent on adult carers to meet their needs, they are not without influence in this power relationship. Indeed the influence children exert through gestures, cries and other embodied performances could be seen as micro-political acts. However, all of these micro-political acts of participation are dependent on responsive caregiving, coupled with an assumption of reciprocity on the part of children. Thus, it is in the context of responsive and reciprocal relationships that children's participation takes place.

In the final vignette, we see an example of participation that is characterised by responsive and reciprocal care between two children. This occurs during a nursery session when, rather atypically, the Room 1 practitioners are engaged in a prolonged

personal conversation whilst they attend to domestic duties, rather than engaged in play with the few children in the room.

### 6.5.3 Encountering Care

Haniya has been at nursery for half an hour with little interaction with other people or toys. She has been placed in the middle of the room and is unable to reach any of the resources that are situated around the perimeter, since she is not yet mobile. As a consequence, Haniya spends her time alternating between sucking her thumb, making quiet whimpering noises, staring at the ground between her legs or into the middle distance, playing with the Velcro on her gaiters, rolling onto her side and sitting up. I get the impression that she is bored. On one occasion a practitioner calls to Haniya from across the room but then resumes her conversation with the adults. Haniya does not register the greeting, perhaps because she can't hear it. On another occasion a practitioner rolls a ball in her direction, but it stops short of Haniya and therefore she does not see it. Whenever adults and children walk past her, Haniya looks up at them, or reaches out, but this goes unnoticed.

After thirty minutes a practitioner asks where Haniya's treasure basket is. A reply is given, but then the practitioner explains that Haniya will need her 'Nomeq' table in order to use the basket. The practitioner leaves the room to search for the table. Another ten minutes pass.

In the meantime Kamal is playing in the area just behind Haniya. He is playing with a small plastic horse and a rainmaker. Haniya turns her head to listen to the rainmaker. She smiles at Kamal. Kamal walks over to her. 'Haniya, Haniya, Haniya' he chants tenderly in her ear. Then he strokes the horse gently across the back of her head and sits down next to her. 'Haniya, Haniya, Haniya' he repeats, as he passes the rainmaker to her. Haniya rubs her thumb back and forth against the rubber bands around the rainmaker. Haniya pauses for a moment to look at Kamal. Then Kamal walks away and Haniya returns her attention to the rainmaker.

During this time, the practitioners take a custodial and functional role in caring for the children: all the children are safe and seemingly occupied whilst the adults fold laundry, prepare snack, change nappies and mop up paint. Perhaps, because Haniya is relatively quiet and they are busy talking, they are unaware of her whimpers and bodily cues that seem to indicate a lack of stimulation and boredom. Haniya's participation is restricted

to 'passive participation' (Boyden and Ennew, 1992), in the sense that she is physically present in the room and taking part in some sort of activity (*'sucking her thumb', 'playing with the Velcro', 'rolling onto her side'*). However, unlike the other children, Haniya is unable to participate in a more active way, such as being able to decide what she plays with, on account of the disabling environment she finds herself in (*'she ... is unable to reach any of the resources that are situated around the perimeter'*). On a few occasions, practitioners momentarily acknowledge Haniya by calling across the room, by rolling a ball in her direction and by searching for her treasure basket and table. However, it is impossible for Haniya to respond, given the physical remoteness of these actions.

Haniya tries to affect her experience of nursery through *'whimpering', 'looking up'* and *'reaching out'*. However, the lack of awareness of this by the staff, and their focus on the functional rather than more responsive and relational aspects of care, constrains Haniya's ability to participate in influencing the situation. In spite of her seeming desire to engage with others (*'whenever adults and children walk past her Haniya looks up'*), her embodied views go unrecognised until Kamal arrives. Haniya's attention is grabbed by his physical proximity and the sound of the rainmaker. She initiates interaction by *'turning her head'* and *'smiling'*. Kamal reciprocates by *'walking over to her', 'whispering her name tenderly', 'stroking her head', 'sitting next to her', 'repeating'* her name and *'passing the rainmaker to her'*. Thus, Kamal's actions exhibit aspects of both emotional and functional care. His care for Haniya is sensitive (he speaks *'tenderly'* and acts *'gently'*), emotionally supportive (he sits next to her, he calls her name) as well as practical (he gives her a toy to play with). This contrasts with the custodial approach to care demonstrated here by the staff.

To me, this vignette illustrates the political and ethical dimensions of participation as it occurs in the interpersonal space of child-child relations. In caring for Haniya, we might argue that Kamal is participating politically, since, as some feminist and childhood scholars have argued, care should be seen as an expression of citizenship (Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Lister, 2006b; Invernizzi, 2008; Qvortrup, 1991; 2008). Children's caregiving practices often go unrecognised as expressions of lived citizenship (Solberg, 1990; Cockburn, 1998) and yet, in this instance, Kamal is exercising citizenship responsibilities by making a contribution to the children's centre community through caring for another child. We might also argue that, in listening and caring for Haniya,

Kamal takes ethical responsibility for her participation. Indeed, drawing on Tronto, Sevenhuijsen and Levinas, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) link participation, not just to political ideas of citizenship and decision-making, but also to ethical ideas of care and encounter. An ethic of care and of encounter is 'built on welcoming and hospitality of the Other' and 'trying to listen to the Other from his or her own position and experience' (Moss 2005, p.12). It is characterised by a non-instrumental relationship founded on an openness and responsibility to the Other. Levinas (1989) argues that openness to the social world leads one to respect the call of the Other's face. Unlike the closed conversations and remote actions of the practitioners, Kamal's interaction with Haniya is characterised by openness and proximity. This means he is able to listen to the tacit soliciting of care that is the call of the Other. Thus he responds to the call of Haniya's face through embodied acts of recognition and care. In this Haniya becomes an active participant, able to initiate interaction and influence action, rather than simply a custodial object. Moreover this is a reciprocal relationship of care and recognition: Haniya welcomes Kamal with a smile and '*pauses for a moment*' to look Kamal in the face before he ends the 'dialogue' and walks away.

Based on this vignette, and the others above, I would suggest that participation need not be essentially rational or verbal, but is always intersubjective and intercorporeal, evoked when encountering the face of another. It occurs in relational spaces, characterised by an ethic of care, proximity and openness to the call of the other. However, young children's participation can be constrained by the unresponsiveness of adults and their focus on the functional rather than the dialogical in care relationships. Consequently, if children's participation is to be enhanced, then adults must move beyond the functional-custodial towards the relational-ethical. This means that caring relationships should not only provide for and protect children but should also take responsibility for the 'call of the other'. Hence, they must also allow for the participation of children. Children can only ever become active participants if the relationships that precede their speaking and embodied actions are taken seriously. Thus, it is in the context of responsive, caring relationships, characterised more by dialogue than functional-technical relations, that children's participation is most likely to take place.

Finally, this vignette shows us that adults must also not overlook the participation and citizenship practice that occurs between children. As Corsaro (2003) argues, children participate both in the intergenerational domain of adult-child relations as well as the in

the peer domain of child-child relations, and yet it is this latter domain that is often overlooked in ethnographic studies of early childhood education and care. As we came to realise, near the end of the process of conducting ethnographic PAR, children's participation with each other was largely missing from our data and analysis, as the EYP concludes:

*EYP: Sometimes I think we just interpret it [children's participation] as us helping children to participate. I suppose participation by children with children could be a whole different research project that you'd look in to.*

*Elly: What would you do for that?*

*EYP: I'd look at how do they listen to each other, how do they respond to each other, how do they make decisions together; and what are the children themselves doing to support one another's participation?*

This realisation was useful for the EYP in considering what the next cycle of PAR might be and helpful for reminding us that young children's participation is not simply about adult-child relations; it also encompasses the child-child domain.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

During this chapter I have critically examined different physical, temporal and relational domains of children's participation in a children's centre, in order to consider what participation means and looks like in this particular socio-spatial context. I have suggested that if we are to gain a greater understanding of how young children's participation is enhanced and/or constrained then we need to pay attention to the 'small things': the micro-political processes and the often taken-for-granted activities, structures, objects, routines and interactions of everyday life in the children's centre.

I have argued that within the physical enclosure of the children's centre, children's participation is constrained through the arrangement of fences, furniture and objects and the distribution of children into separate areas within that space. Nevertheless, I have shown how children are not simply passive recipients of spatial practices but participate in creating and recreating their physical environment. A sensibility towards children's perspectives of space and their material preferences can enable practitioners to enhance children's participation by working with them to experiment with alternative spatial arrangements and the redistribution of material resources.

Secondly, I have suggested that, just as physical partitions and objects constitute a spatial apparatus for the enhancement and/or constraint of children's participation, so timetables, routines and transitions also constitute temporal apparatus for supporting and limiting children's participation. Children participate in decision-making through the temporal freedoms afforded to them by adults, such as the freedom to decide how long they engage in a particular activity and when they transition to a new field of activity. However, children also participate by resisting adult-imposed routines and transition arrangements that structure their time, as well as by actively constructing their own peer routines and priming events. Consequently, if children's participation in temporal processes is to be enhanced, then their temporal acts and resistances need to be reflexively read and responded to by the adults caring for them.

Thirdly, I have argued that young children's participation at TPCC occurs in different relational domains, including those of the practitioner-parent-child, mother-child, practitioner-child and child-child. Within these different relational domains, I have shown how young and disabled children's participation is enacted through different interactional processes, including proto-conversations, breastfeeding practices, symbolic gestures, and in the giving and receiving of care. Young children influence and are influenced by their interpersonal surroundings. It is the interdependent and reciprocal quality of relationships between adults and children and between children and their peers that creates spaces for participation. This challenges traditional, hierarchical ways of thinking about adult-child relationships and demands that adults reflexively reflect on the roles they, and children, take in order to support children's participation and respond ethically to the 'call of the other'. It goes beyond conventional roles of protecting, controlling and providing for children, towards more reciprocal and dialogic relations between adults and children. Furthermore, rather than expecting children to operate as independent, rational, disembodied agents, we need to recognise that young children (and adults) participate in embodied, spatially located performances in relation with others.

Underpinning this chapter is the idea that an understanding of the different physical, temporal and relational domains of children's participation helps us broaden decontextualised notions of participation as 'listening and decision-making' to encompass ideas of participation as context-specific 'performance in space'. Furthermore, if we are to have a more inclusive theory of participation that embraces

young, preverbal and disabled children, participation needs to be framed to incorporate embodied performances (including bodily gestures, acts of resistance and silence), as well as voice. We also need to appreciate that children's participation does not occur in individual children's isolated performances, but through reciprocal, interdependent relationships. Indeed, children do not participate as independent agents, but in relationship with other people and things in the different spaces they inhabit.

Having examined the physical, temporal and relational spaces of young children's participation in the children's centre, I now consider the cultural and ethical domains of children's participation by examining some of the dilemmas that our research threw up for the children's centre staff.



## **7. Dilemmas of Children's Participation**

### **7.1 Introduction**

My aim in this chapter is to consider the dilemmas and tensions that emerged in practitioners' and my thinking as we met together to discuss and analyse our data, including some of the vignettes presented in Chapter 6. These dilemmas often gave rise to more questions than answers in our minds about how children's participation is enhanced and constrained. Whilst rather unsettling in terms of defying neat analysis, the dilemmas prevented us from closing ourselves into 'circles of certainty' (Freire, 1972) and from providing a 'pollyanna'<sup>10</sup> account of participation.

During the chapter, I examine a number of participation dilemmas that arose in our deliberations of children's play, routines, health, safety and inclusion in the children's centre. In the course of the discussion that flows from each dilemma, I draw upon a number of ethical and political theories and concepts pertaining to children's participation. These include debates around issues of cultural value and morality, consensus and dissensus, sameness and difference, rights and responsibilities, justice and care, citizenship and democracy, inclusion and exclusion. I conclude by arguing that the dilemmas reveal the uncertainty, messiness and complexity of children's participation at TPCC. Rather than seeing these dilemmas as something to be denied or occulted, we need to welcome the potential for positive dissensus they generate, and use them as a further opportunity to participate in democratic dialogue and situated ethics.

### **7.2 Children's Play**

Play, like other forms of communication, is a medium through which young children can participate by expressing preferences and making choices. Yet children's preferences for certain types of play can conflict with cultural norms of what is considered to be educationally, morally and developmentally acceptable in an early childhood setting. In this section I discuss conflicting cultural values between children

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<sup>10</sup> Excessive optimism - based on the heroine of Porter's (1913) novel 'Pollyanna'

and adults with respect to children's participation in gun play and repetitive play behaviours.

### 7.2.1 Gun Play: Weapon for Learning or Oppression?

Ciaran is in the construction corner. He fixes stickle bricks into a gun shape. Nada, his keyworker, is sitting in the area with Ciaran and a few other boys. I am sitting a little distance away from the group but within earshot.

'What have you made?' Nada asks in a disapproving tone.

'It's what I like to do', Ciaran replies.

He presents his construction to Mohammed.

'Do you want one of these?' he asks.

Mohammed looks. Nada raises an eyebrow.

'It's magic glasses' Ciaran adds.

'No' states Mohammed.

Ciaran looks at his construction and announces, 'I like this. I can do this for magic powers'. He places the horizontal strip of the gun construction against his eyes. 'I can see. So the power comes out from these two powers.'

Ciaran points to both ends of the construction [*marked orange*]. Nada smiles and nods.

Ciaran leaves the area, holding the construction above his head. He glances furtively at Nada who has her back to him. Then he holds the construction as if it were a gun again. He runs over to the creative area making shooting noises.

Nada addresses me. 'You know what they normally like doing?'

She holds up her fingers to make the sign of a gun.

'Because I sat over here with them they didn't really talk about it.'

The issue of gun play is a controversial one at TPCC. For Ciaran, gun play is an enjoyable activity that he chooses to participate in at nursery. He states very clearly, '*It's what I like to do*', and indeed, he frequently constructs and plays with guns with a small group of male friends who often take the role of different superheroes. However, in spite of Ciaran's expressed views and sustained interest in guns, Nada tacitly discourages this type of play through power tactics of questioning, physical positioning to ensure surveillance, voice intonation, and raising an eyebrow. It seems clear to all the participants (Ciaran and Nada) and observer-participants (Mohammed, me and the other boys) that gun play is a taboo, since at no point does anyone explicitly refer to the gun



by name. This is brought home to me all the more in Nada's concluding commentary when she prefers to use hand symbols rather than words to explain the situation.

Other practitioners are more overt in their disapproval of the weapons fashioned by the boys. For example, on several occasions the boys have been told '*We don't make guns*' and the offending articles have been dismantled or removed. Later, when I have enquired as to the reasons for this approach, the arguments given include: '*guns can encourage boys to be loud and aggressive*'; '*gun play glorifies war*' and '*we don't want to encourage fighting and macho games*'. Preventing or redirecting gun play creates a practice dilemma for these practitioners since it conflicts with the nursery's general commitment to following children's interests and allowing them free choice to participate in decisions about their play. Here, a discourse of pacifism ('*we don't want to encourage fighting*', '*gun play glorifies war*') and of feminism ('*guns can encourage boys to be loud and aggressive*', '*we don't want to encourage ... macho games*'), conflict with a discourse of child-centredness and free choice.

Notwithstanding this tension, these practitioners' decide to override children's participation in favour of protecting the children from the perceived risks of gun play. However, whether tacitly discouraged, or overtly banned, the prevention of gun play is largely ineffectual since often the children get round the rules in creative ways. For example, Ciaran achieves this through exercising power tactics of his own. He temporarily changes the play 'script' from guns to '*magic glasses*', then resists the panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1977) by leaving the construction area and reverting to gun play once he is sure Nada can no longer see him. Thus we could surmise that Ciaran's choice to participate in gun play is hindered by Nada's presence and his prior knowledge that she does not approve of it. This is an example of participation being hindered by cultural values. However, on the other hand, the strategies Ciaran employs indicate that he can adeptly resist adult authority, and that although his gun play is constrained, he has successfully negotiated a legitimate symbolic space where superhero play can still take place.

In contrast to the views of the nursery practitioners above, some of the senior staff, such as the children's centre teacher and project manager (PM), do not appear to object to the boys' interest in guns. Indeed, in accord with some early childhood researcher-practitioners (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1990; Holland, 2000; Jones, 2001; Watson,

2005), these staff members have changed their approach from zero tolerance to accept that guns and superhero play can support children's physical and imaginative development. This disparity of views between different members of staff and between some staff and children is summed up well by the PM as we meet to discuss some of the dilemmas arising in our data:

*Gun play is an interesting dilemma... On the one hand children are exercising their right to freedom of expression by choosing what they play with and how they play. On the other hand, playing with guns goes against the values of some of the staff and what they think is appropriate for young children at nursery. I've shifted completely on that from being a person that said 'My children will never have a gun' to accepting that children know the difference between fantasy and reality and for some boys that is a central part of their play, being physical and boisterous, and guns are a part of that.*

In common with the PM, several researchers argue that play is an integral part of children's rights to participation and self-expression (Jans, 2004; Smith, 2007a; Bae, 2009; 2010). However, a dilemma ensues when children's interests and self-expression, for example to participate in gun play, conflict with other interests and cultural values that question the desirability of such types of play. As Dunphy and Farrell (2011) argue, decisions about what is educationally and morally desirable require value judgements. Whose views should be listened to? Whose interests should be honoured? Which values should take precedence? How can practitioners meet children's interests and at the same time implement a curriculum that is culturally 'appropriate for... nursery'? These are not simple or normative questions that can be easily addressed with quick-fix technical solutions and universal policies. Rather, they are complex questions that require political and ethical deliberation (Moss, 2007).

In the following comment, made by the children's centre teacher, she appears caught between the desire to promote political and ethical dialogue around the issue of gun play and the pragmatic need to find a solution:

*Actually that is something I want to talk about with the team because some people do say, 'We don't make guns' and I think we should have a discussion about our different views and beliefs around this and perhaps some kind of policy. We should also think about bringing the children and parents into that too. But to be honest, the problem we may come up against is that everyone may have different opinions so we may not get a very clear way forward.*

The gun play dilemma creates an opportunity for democratic engagement in which different members of the children's centre community, including children, parents, staff and others, could participate. However, in spite of the teacher's good intentions, this kind of democratic deliberation about gun play goes no further during my time at TPCC. One possible reason for this may reside in her fears about the possibility for dissensus that such deliberation could cause: '*everyone may have different opinions so we may not get a very clear way forward*'. For the children's centre teacher, lack of consensus is a '*problem*' that may prevent progress. Thus, she is faced with the uncomfortable position of wanting democratic dialogue between different stakeholders with '*different views and beliefs*' and yet wanting to arrive at a '*clear*' solution to the dilemma.

Several difference-centred political theorists (Mouffe, 1992a; 2000; 2005; Young, 1998; 2000) and childhood scholars (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Cockburn, 2007; Vandebroek, 2009) question the need to eliminate conflict and suggest instead that pluralistic forms of democracy use conflict and dissensus as a tool for social and political thinking. Indeed, both consensus *and* dissensus can be positive tools in achieving the common good. Disagreements and 'antagonisms' (Mouffe, 2005) between adults and between adults and children on how to organise our lives together are the essence of democracy. They make us accountable to the other as we reflect upon actions and decisions taken, challenge what is taken for granted, acknowledge rather than deny differences of perspective, and recognise that the positions we take are provisional and tentative (Vandebroek, 2009). Holland (2000) argues that the child's voice has been largely silenced in the gun play debate. Instead of uncritically silencing Ciaran's views about gun play through preventing this type of play, we might have something to learn from him and from those who have different perspectives. As Vandebroek et al. (2010) argue, the issue at stake is not to solve the dilemma, which may not be possible or even desirable, but rather to continually re-examine what the issue might be, in participatory ways with all those involved.

### **7.2.2 Water Play: Sameness or Difference?**

Daniel, the EYP, and I are analysing some of the observations he has carried out with his colleague Lynn. In the process Daniel reflects upon a recurring situation with 33 month Hafiz:

'Children's participation does cause us dilemmas.... Such as with Hafiz, because we want him to participate by allowing him to follow his play interests, but if we were to follow his, well like Lynn was saying, he likes playing in water, but because of his suspected autism if he had his way he'd probably be in that bathroom from the moment he walked in to the moment mum and dad came. But that's his thing. That's what he wants to do.'

'What's his thing?' I ask. 'What does he want to do?'

'He wants to play with the water and the taps. We're not quite sure, maybe it's the hot tap he enjoys, whether there's some sort of sensation from the hot tap that interests him, maybe it's a duller sensation than other children or we would feel. But the problem is that he gets completely covered in water. He'll start just hands and then he'll move to his face and then his hair. Mum and Dad aren't particularly keen. They don't let him pour water over himself at home and you can understand why because floor gets soaked and you have to change his clothes. But there again, he's enjoying and learning and making sense of the world around him, so does it really matter if he gets wet?'

'Um' I muse.

'I know not everyone sees the value of children following their interests and letting them do things over and over again', David continues. 'Some people say we shouldn't let children like Hafiz participate in repetitive behaviour because it stops them from leading a normal life. But I mean all young children practice things over and over again. You know, it's the Teletubbies<sup>11</sup> Syndrome: 'Again! Again!' So it's a dilemma between what we allow him to pursue as his interests and knowing when to try and move him on. I don't know really. It's hard because it all comes down to different opinions about what is good for their overall development.'

Daniel's account of Hafiz's interest in water play indicates a number of competing values and beliefs about children's participation and children's development. On the one hand, TPCC staff want Hafiz to participate in decisions about his play '*by allowing him to follow his play interests*' because they believe self-initiated experiences are '*good for their overall development*' and because they '*see the value of ... letting children do things over and over again*'. It seems that for Hafiz the sensory experience of covering his hands, face and hair with water is a source of enjoyment and pleasure, and may signal a desire to increase sensory stimulation, given that, according to Daniel, he

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11 Teletubbies is a children's TV programme in which the main characters do things again and again.

appears to exhibit hyposensitivity to hot water. Daniel suggests, therefore, that water play is a way of Hafiz '*enjoying and learning and making sense of the world around him*'. Thus it would seem that Hafiz's participation serves to enhance his development.

On the other hand, Hafiz's sustained interest and participation in water play can lead to '*repetitive behaviour*' which '*some people say*' could harm his overall development since it prevents him '*from leading a normal life*'. Of course notions of what is '*normal*' and of '*repetitive behaviour*' are social constructions. Indeed, what counts as '*repetitive behaviour*' is culturally relative and so too are responses to it. Daniel's comments suggest that he is aware of three different responses to Hafiz's repetitive play and this causes a dilemma for those caring for him. First there are those who '*can see the value*' of repetitive play and who see it as something common to all young children ('*it's the Teletubbies Syndrome*'). Then there are those who '*aren't particularly keen*' on account of the inconvenience it may cause ('*the floor gets soaked and you have to change his clothes*'). Finally there are those who perceive such behaviour to be abnormal and therefore advise intervention ('*we shouldn't let children like Hafiz participate in repetitive behaviour because it stops them from leading a normal life*').

Thus, Daniel and his colleagues are faced with a series of competing views surrounding Hafiz's participation. Should Hafiz's decisions to participate in water play be discouraged or accepted? Is repetitive behaviour abnormal or common to all? Is it a source of inconvenience and detrimental to a child's learning and development or a source of enjoyment and an integral part of the learning process? Might we view such behaviour as a pathological problem requiring intervention ('*moving him on*') or a quality to be valued and respected ('*that's his thing, that's what he wants to do*')? Faced with these conflicting views, the EYP concludes '*I don't know really.... because it all comes down to different opinions*'.

Daniel attributes Hafiz's repetitive play to '*his suspected autism*', which immediately constructs Hafiz as different from others. Daniel's uncertainty ('*I don't know really*') about how to respond to Hafiz's difference could be summed up by what some scholars have called 'the dilemma of difference' (Minow, 1990; Norwich, 2008). For the staff at TPCC the 'dilemma of difference' is whether to recognise and respond to Hafiz's difference, or to not recognise and respond to his difference. Either way, there are negative implications of following the course of action. Thus, if the practitioners

recognise and accommodate his repetitive behaviour, in the same way they do with other children, Hafiz's play interests and participation rights will be respected but the amount of time spent in the bathroom may mean he is excluded from the full range of play experiences available. This could have long-term negative effects for his overall development. Alternatively, if the practitioners treat Hafiz differently to the other children by seeking to stop his repetitive behaviour, then they may broaden his play experiences and opportunities for educational development but override his participation rights and thereby devalue forms of play that are meaningful and enjoyable to Hafiz in the present.

As Norwich (2008) argues, dilemmas do not have definitive solutions. 'Their resolution involves some balancing, perhaps some compromise and therefore some giving up or loss of valued principles or outcomes' (p. 3). Consequently we need to accept some inescapability of conflict and the fact that there may be hard choices and no easy solutions. This makes the need for democratic engagement, which encompasses the participation of all relevant parties, all the more pressing.

## **7.3 Children's Routines**

The dilemmas in this section concern children's participation in different temporal routines at TPCC, including sleep time, tidying-up and daily physiotherapy. Each of these routines relate to notions of children's rights as they pertain to children's participation, specifically regarding the mobilisation of rights (parents versus children), types of obligations (rights versus responsibilities) and types of rights (participation versus protection).

### **7.3.1 Sleep Time: Parents' or Children's Rights?**

According to Daniel and Lynn, sleep routines for the toddlers can provide an opportunity for children's participation but can also be a bone of contention for children, parents and staff at TPCC:

'Rosa will ask if she wants a sleep', Daniel explains. 'She'll moan a bit and say, "My tired. My want my doh doh" so we'll know she wants her dummy. It's nice to see that. It's nice that she knows she can choose if and when she has a sleep. It's nice to be able to let her participate that way rather than have a fight like "You've got to go to sleep



now", which it can be with some parents. They'll say: "Put them down at half past twelve" whether the child wants to or not. I mean if a child decides he's not having a sleep, he's not going to sleep and he'll be back playing.'

'I'd like it to be that we had a couple of those adapted dog baskets that they have at Pen Green'<sup>12</sup>, Lynn ponders. 'Then the ethos of our room could be that if the children want a sleep the baskets are there for them to decide to just crawl in and go to sleep when they want to...

That's another thing as well, about their sleeps, their length of sleeps', Lynn continues. 'There are parents that want them to have half an hour only but sometimes you can't wake them up because the children want longer. And there are parents who don't want their children to sleep at all. I've been asked by Dillon and Melody's parents to keep them awake but you can tell by their bodies that they want to have a sleep in the afternoon. Melody will actually fall asleep on her feet, believe it or not, and yesterday Dillon fell asleep instantly when he were having a cuddle, so we let them both sleep. We have a general policy of working in partnership with parents and following parents' care routines, but in these particular cases we didn't feel it were in the children's best interests to keep them awake. But then you feel guilty. Whose views do you respect? You feel guilty trying to keep the children awake because it seems cruel, but you feel guilty letting them sleep because that goes against the parents' wishes. It's a tricky one because we are accountable to the parent but we also have a responsibility to the child.' 'So what do you do in those cases?' I ask them both.

'I spoke to Dillon's mum and apologised, but like I've given the reasons for why. You don't want to upset parents. You don't want to break your relationship. You want to listen to them, but I suppose we're trying to get them to understand from the child's point of view as well' Lynn replies.

'For me, it's been doing this research with you that's actually made me think about it, whereas before we've just gone like "Oh parents," Daniel replies. 'You know, before this we haven't actually ever sat down and talked about this with parents. Part of us working in partnership with parents is about respecting what they say but also saying what you think, but not like telling them, but like suggesting. There's staff participation, you need to have a say, there's parent participation, they need to have a say, and there's children's participation, they need to have a say. And it might be there are times when everyone's opinion is different'.

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12 Pen Green is a children's centre in Corby, UK.

'So what can you do when everyone's opinion is different?' I ask.

'Take a gentle approach', Daniel suggests. 'Approach each other with respect. It's all about respectful negotiation with these things.'

'It's about having time and space to actually talk about these issues and come to a decision together' Lynn adds.

'Yeah and not being afraid to raise these differences', Daniel concludes.

The Room 2 staff view children as competent to be able to make decisions about their sleeping arrangements and care routines. From Daniel's point of view *'It's nice to ... let [children] participate'* by being able to *'choose if and when they have a sleep'* and Lynn expresses that she would like to enhance children's participation further by purchasing some sleep baskets for children to *'decide to just crawl in and go to sleep when they want to'*. In this way children are afforded the freedom to participate by determining the timeframe of when and for how long they sleep.

This form of participatory practice is unproblematic until the child's temporal rhythms conflict with their parents' temporal prescriptions (*'You've got to go to sleep now'; 'Put them down at half past twelve'; 'half an hour only'; 'keep them awake... in the afternoon'*). Problems arise as children resist these temporal prescriptions (*'if a child decides he's not having a sleep, he's not going to sleep and he'll be back playing'; 'there are parents who don't want their children to sleep... but... Melody will actually fall asleep on her feet'*) and as children exceed them (*'There are parents that want them to have half an hour only but sometimes you can't wake them up because the children want longer'*). This presents a practice dilemma for staff who are faced with a decision between the desire to work in *'partnership with parents'* through strict adherence to parents' clock-based routines, and the desire *'to let children participate'* by responding flexibly to their unpredictable rhythms. Herein lies a tension between what Lefebvre (2004) refers to as *'linear'* time and *'circular'* time. While linear time represents a quantitative temporal ordering of life around a clock-based logic, circular time represents the qualitative process of natural and biological time, which includes the rhythms of seasons, night and day and living bodies. For these children, there are times when the circular rhythms of their bodies clash with parental attempts to arrange childcare practices according to more linear temporal patterns.

The central dilemma surrounding the toddlers' sleep routines is summed up in Lynn's rhetorical question, '*Whose views do you respect?*' For Lynn there is a conflict between the participation rights of the child and those of his/her parent. This conflict provokes strong emotions. Lynn is caught in a no-win situation in which she feels '*guilty*' if she respects the children's rights and thereby overrides the parents' rights, and equally guilty when the converse holds true. Rights are linked to the Kantian notion of respect for individual persons (Banks, 2006). However, within a Kantian framework, with its individualised ethic of rights, when one person's rights conflict with another's, it is difficult to decide whose rights have priority, hence Lynn's dilemma.

For the staff, the dilemma is also located in the tension between the universal ('*we have a general policy of working in partnership with parents and following parents' care routines*') and the particular ('*in these particular cases we didn't feel it were in the children's best interests to keep them awake*'). In Dillon and Melody's case, faced with the moral dilemma of whether abstract policies or contextualised relationships should guide their actions, the practitioners choose the latter. To me, their attentiveness and responsiveness to these children exhibits continuities with a feminist 'ethic of care' (Gilligan 1982; Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 1998) and other situated approaches to ethics (Bauman, 1993; Levinas, 1989) which stress the importance of care, responsibility and relationships between people. This contrasts with what Gilligan (1982) refers to as an 'ethic of justice and rights' which emphasises abstract moral principles, impartiality and rationality. Although mindful of their general duty to follow parents' instructions and TPCC policies, the practitioners feel that on this particular occasion their immediate '*responsibility to the child*' must take precedence over their '*accountability*' to parents and the overall organisation. In applying an ethic of care, Daniel and Lynn act on the basis of the specific context that presents itself. Indeed, in the particularity of the face-to-face encounter with Melody and Dillon, where verbal and non-verbal communications can be heard and felt, then situated ethics rather than universal principles and rules come into play.

Melton (2008) suggests that, from an ethic of care perspective, which has a relational rather than individualised understanding of rights, practitioners need not and indeed should not choose between parents' and children's rights, since, in relationships of caring and dependency, our interests become intermingled. The perspectives of *all* the people who are part of the children's centre community are worthy of notice. Thus

Melton suggests that the protection of relationships is of mutual importance, and recognition of one set of interests should not imply that others are thereby ignored. Indeed Lynn and Daniel are keen not to '*break their relationship*' with parents and state that they want to listen to both the parents and the children and facilitate an environment of '*respectful negotiation*' between staff, parents and children so that everyone can '*have a say*'.

According to Daniel and Lynn, an environment of '*respectful negotiation*' is about '*approaching each other with respect*', '*not being afraid to raise... differences*' and '*having time and space to actually talk about these issues and come to a decision together*'. Lynn's use of the word '*space*' reminds me of Moss and Petrie's (2002) reconceptualisation of children's services as '*children's spaces*'. These scholars suggest that the children's centre is not simply a social and physical space for the delivery of early childhood services but could also be seen as a space for cultural and discursive deliberation between young and old, where values and rights are discussed and different views and experiences exchanged. Indeed, critical reflection and dialogue upon dilemmas, such as those surrounding children's sleep routines, can create the possibility for new discursive spaces to be opened up and may take us a step nearer to creating children's centres that are more participatory in the way they operate.

### **7.3.2 Tidying-Up: Rights or Responsibilities?**

*Wendy (NP): Would you like to tidy up now?*

*Natalie: No I don't like to tidy up. I like to play.*

*Wendy: OK. I'm going to help Britney tidy the home corner.*

Like sleep time, children's participation in tidying-up is a political and ethical issue which reveals conflicting values and cultural practices amongst children and adults. There are children, like Natalie and Mohammed, who actively dislike tidying-up and will indicate so, both in words and in actions. Resistance strategies include pretending not to hear the call to tidy-away, hiding behind furniture, leaving the area they are playing in and wandering around the room, and informing adults that they have a problem that means they cannot assist, such as 'I'm so tired', 'My leg hurts'. This is similar to the strategies children used in Corsaro's (2003) ethnographic research. On several occasions, when directly asked to participate in tidying-up, I observe Mohammed shake his head, or openly proclaim that he doesn't want to. I note in a

memo: 'The fact that some children feel confident enough to openly contest the call to tidy up could be interpreted in two ways: as an expression of 'citizenship from below' (Liebel, 2008), inasmuch as they are exercising their right to self-expression; or as an individual act of self-interest at the expense of the well-being of the whole group'. Indeed, children's (non-)participation in tidying-up at TPCC is a quietly contentious issue because it raises political and moral questions about children's rights and responsibilities, and highlights tensions between individual and group interests.

In contrast to Natalie and Mohammed, there are a few children, like Jerome, who seem to actively enjoy tidying-up and are keen to take responsibility for clearing away at any opportunity, not just during tidy-up time:

*During snack time one of the children spills some milk on the table. Unprompted, four-year-old Jerome fetches a cloth and wipes it up. Another child accidentally tips his chair over as he leaves the table. Jerome picks the chair up and returns it to its original place. Once all the children have finished eating, he stacks the cups and plates into a pile and then places them on the trolley. Next he picks up tangerine pith that has fallen on the floor and places it in the bin. Finally he wheels the trolley to the kitchen.*

On this and many other occasions, Jerome volunteers to clear up the mess made by others. In political terms, he participates through exercising citizenship responsibilities that are oriented towards the collective well-being of the group. Like Jerome, Amina places a high value on tidying-up and associates it with ideas of solidarity, friendship and helping others, as the following conversation illustrates:

*Amina: Elly can you be my friend?  
Elly: Yes I can. What do I need to do to be your friend?  
Amina: Be nice. Be tidy. Be kind.  
Elly: How can I be nice?  
Amina: Sit down next to me.  
Elly: OK. How can I be tidy?  
Amina: Pick up paper. Pick up stuff.  
Elly: Now?  
Amina: No, when it's tidy-up time.  
Elly: And how can I be kind?  
Amina: Help everybody and help me.*

Although ostensibly this is a conversation about friendship, to me it is also a conversation about citizenship practices. Participation in tidying-up is tied to social responsibility ('*Be tidy*'; '*Pick up paper. Pick up stuff*') and civic morality ('*Be kind*'; '*Help everybody and help me*'). Our discussion reminds me of civic virtues I was told

about during infant school assemblies: good citizens are people who are kind, pick up litter and help other people.

From these examples, it is evident that the Room 3 children have different attitudes to the cultural practice of tidying-up: some participate enthusiastically, others appear nonchalant, and some actively dislike it. Practitioners too have different attitudes to children's participation in tidying-up. Their responses to the children's different tidying-up behaviours are inconsistent and herein lies a tension. The practitioners appear to exhibit competing values that are implicitly underpinned by different goals of early childhood education and care, and different theories of citizenship and participation. This results in conflicting approaches to practice. For example, after the conversation with Natalie, Wendy explains why she let Natalie continue to play rather than tidy up:

*We don't force the children to tidy up, although we do try to encourage it. I like to give children a choice, like Natalie's got the right to decide whether she tidies or not. She wanted to play so I left her to it.*

Wendy constructs Natalie as a participant through exercising her '*right to decide*' whether or not she participates in tidying-up. This is consistent with the overall child-centred ethos of 'free choice' that operates in the nursery, insomuch as Wendy's question '*Would you like to tidy up now?*' gives Natalie a choice to accept or decline the invitation to get involved. For Wendy, Natalie's right to play, coupled with her right to choose not to tidy up prevails over adult desires to provide an ordered, tidy environment. Sue, the childcare manager holds a similar view about respecting individual children's rights not to participate in tidying-up, particularly if it interrupts a child's play and learning:

*If it was a case of somebody saying 'Right we need to tidy up' and a child was saying 'Can I just finish this?' I would hope that the adult would allow the child to finish.*

Implicit in these practitioners' thinking is the idea that childhood is primarily a time to play and therefore tidying-up, although encouraged, is primarily the adult's responsibility. For these practitioners a rights-based rather than a responsibility-based discourse underpins their approach to children's participation in tidying-up.

However, other staff have a different attitude to the issue of tidying-up, emphasising children's responsibilities to the overall group more than their individual rights.

Individual children may have the right to participate in play and to make decisions, but when it comes to tidy-up time everyone, staff and children, is expected to participate by taking responsibility for clearing away the toys and materials used during the session. Children are offered choices about tidying-up, but the choices they are afforded are not about whether they participate, but how they participate, as Cheryl, the children's centre teacher explains:

*Cheryl: If there is something that you want a child to do, you know like tidy up, you might give them a choice and say 'Which ones do you want to tidy up?' so you're not sort of saying 'Tidy those up' you're saying 'Which ones are you going to tidy? I'll tidy those, which ones do you want to tidy?' That kind of thing I do quite a lot ... so they're always being responsible for what they're doing really.*

*Elly: Why do you want them to tidy up?*

*Cheryl: Because it teaches them responsibility. They can make a positive contribution to the nursery, so they are participating that way, and ultimately they will become better citizens and things like that.*

*Elly: How does it help them become better citizens?*

*Cheryl: Well they are looking after the environment, taking responsibility, cooperating with others, that kind of thing.*

According to Cheryl, tidying-up enables children to participate and to '*become better citizens*' by making '*a positive contribution*' through '*looking after the environment, taking responsibility, [and] cooperating with others*'. This is consistent with one of the five *Every Child Matters* (DES, 2003a) outcomes which states that children's services should ensure that children engage in decision-making and '*make a positive contribution*' to the community and environment.

There is a tension here between different staff values. Some practitioners, like Wendy, do not require children to participate in tidying-up, although they do encourage it. In contrast, other practitioners, like Cheryl, do require children to participate, albeit through a politics of persuasion rather than coercion ("*So you're not sort of saying 'Tidy those up' you're saying 'Which ones are you going to tidy?'*"). There is also a tension between two goals of early childhood education: first, enabling children to exercise '*free choice*' and so develop their individuality; and second, expecting children to '*make a positive contribution*' to the community and so develop solidarity.

These conflicting goals and values serve to highlight the political debate between liberal conceptions of democracy on one side versus republican conceptions of democracy on the other (see Section 2.5.2). Liberalism is often called 'passive' or 'private' citizenship because of its emphasis on passive entitlements, and the absence of any obligation to participate in public life (Kymlicka, 2002). By contrast, republicanism is associated with 'active' citizenship which is realised through participation in citizenry obligations and an acknowledgement by others in society of ones' membership (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Thus, whereas liberalism conceives of citizenship largely in terms of individual rights and privileges, republicanism stresses collective responsibilities and conceives of citizenship in more relational terms (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Tidying-up at TPCC is the locus of an ongoing debate between passive/active versions of citizenship and thin/thick notions of participation. Different democratic ideals are operating here and this means that the children are getting a mixed response from practitioners: between affording children the opportunity to pursue their private interests or to pursue the common good.

Mouffe (1992b) suggests that important insights can be gained from both liberal and republican conceptions of democracy. However, in a pluralistic society both conceptions are also problematic: the pursuit of private interests can lead to selfish behaviour, and the notion of a single substantive 'common good' is a fiction. She contends that the problem is not to replace one tradition with the other but to draw on both and to try to combine their strengths. Mouffe concludes that we need to respect individuality and acknowledge [the child's] differing subject positions, as well as enter into an ethico-political dialogue about commonality and differing conceptions of the good.

From a practice perspective, this could mean adults and children not simply quietly living with the tension between individuality and solidarity, nor seeking to eradicate different viewpoints, but being unafraid to explore together the messy complexities of tidy-up time through ongoing processes of ethico-political negotiation.

### **7.3.3 Daily Physiotherapy: Participation or Protection?**

Having finished the first stage of PAR in which the inclusion staff and I have carried out a number of participant observations, Janet (SENCO), Leanne (SEN Outreach Worker) and I meet together to reflect on our findings thus far and to discuss what



action we might take in response. However, our desire to come up with a course of action to enhance disabled children's participation is interrupted by the following ethical predicament. Indeed, as Dahlberg and Moss (2005) assert, critical reflection upon children's perspectives can 'place a stutter' (p. 160) in the fluency of adult agendas and narratives.

'Haniya hates doing her physio, she absolutely dreads it,' asserts Leanne 'but you know it's the right thing to do because it's going to help her in the future.'

'It's a dilemma that one in't it?' reflects Janet. 'Because if we're saying we're going to listen to the child's views and we're going to act on them, and she's saying "I don't want to do this" through her cries and moans then....'

Leanne interrupts Janet: 'But we know it's beneficial for her and that she should do them. If she doesn't do them then she won't be able to move around and access things and therefore she'll have less choices when she's older.'

'I'm not saying I've got any answers' Janet replies. 'I'm just saying it's an interesting dilemma because actually the adults are making the decision for her at that point because they think it's worth it in the long run. They're deciding they need to press through with these exercises rather than go with her expressions of discomfort because they want her to be able to participate later on'.

'So at that moment her future participation is more important than her current participation?' I suggest.

'Yeah exactly' Janet agrees. 'I mean if we were in hospital and we had to do some physio exercises or whatever, we might say, "I'm going to do this physio because it's going to help me in the long run", but when they've got that nature of impairment at that age they don't have a sense of knowing in the future perhaps, but she does know how it's affecting her now in the present. So we can't ignore that.'

'We know it makes her cry and if we didn't have to do it then we wouldn't do it.' Leanne explains. 'I just think we're acting upon the expert's advice on what they're saying we've got to do. And we do it because we're hoping in the future that it's going to make a real difference to her life.'

Haniya's '*hate*' and '*dread*' of physiotherapy perceived from her '*cries and moans*' causes us to wrestle with the ethical predicament between her right to participate and her rights to healthcare provision and protection. The practitioners are caught between wanting to respect her views and their duty to provide services that will '*make a real difference to*

*her life*' and to protect her from choices that will not be *'beneficial for her... when she's older'*. In the children's rights literature this is often presented as a debate between participation and paternalism - the philosophy at the root of protection (Freeman, 2007; Franklin 2002; Fortin, 2008; James et al., 2008; Kjørholt, 2008). Dworkin (1972) describes paternalistic acts as those which restrict our actions and are imposed on us, by others, for our best interests. In this sense physiotherapy could be understood as a paternalistic act. The tension between participation and paternalism is problematic for the staff. Should they take an approach that promotes Haniya's current participation and self-determination or should they take a paternalistic approach that promotes her future welfare?

Although both practitioners are in agreement about the ethical difficulties of Haniya's participation in physiotherapy, there is a subtle but distinct difference in how they see the situation. For Leanne, Haniya's physiotherapy is an ethical problem that involves a difficult moral decision, but it is clear what the decision should be: *'Haniya hates doing her physio ... but you know it's the right thing to do because it's going to help her in the future'*. However, for Janet, Haniya's participation in physiotherapy is an ethical dilemma that involves a conflict of moral values and it is not clear what the solution should be: *'I'm not saying I've got any answers. I'm just saying it's an interesting dilemma'*. This difference in perspective may be due to the fact that, as SEN Outreach Worker, Leanne, alongside Haniya's parents, Physiotherapist and Keyworker, is directly involved in administering Haniya's treatment and therefore takes a more pragmatic stance. Whereas as SENCO, Janet has a managerial role in coordinating Haniya's care plan and therefore can take a more critical stance.

I construe from Leanne and Janet's comments that a temporal dichotomy arises when Haniya participates in physiotherapy. This is seen in my question: *'[Is] her future participation ... more important than her current participation?'* In other words, which timeframe for participation should have precedence: Haniya's current *'expressions of discomfort'* or her future autonomy *'to move around and access things'* and make *'choices'*? Some scholars justify the latter option on the grounds that a child's participation and autonomy should be restricted only when her preferred course of action denies her the right to an *'open future'* (Feinberg, 1980) or interferes with her developmental interests (Eekelaar, 1986). This is the argument Leanne makes and to which Janet refers: *'the adults are making the decision for her at that point because they*

*think it's worth it in the long run*'. Consequently in order to protect Haniya's future autonomy and to keep a range of '*choices*' open to her when '*she is older*', it is reasonable for her to undergo physiotherapy in spite of her present discomfort.

As Janet explains, the argument centres on perceptions of children's capacity and the limits of their capacity to decide for themselves: '*when they've got that nature of impairment at that age they don't have a sense of knowing in the future perhaps, but she does know how it's affecting her now in the present*'. Issues around the competence of children, especially young disabled children, pose challenges to the adults caring for them. Recent thinking arising from childhood studies, sociocultural psychology and the UNCRC accounts for children as competent participants in their social worlds. However, this conflicts with traditional and sometimes prevailing psychological and sociological views of children as pre-competent and therefore in need of protection. Janet's comment about Haniya's '*sense of knowing*' recognises both these perspectives, hence her dilemma.

Freeman (2007) argues that it is necessary to keep both perspectives in mind if we are to promote children's rights. He posits that too often the argument has been dichotomised: children are either incompetent or competent; they therefore require protection or liberation, nurturance or self-determination. He argues that it is not a question of whether protectionists or liberationists are right 'for they are both correct in emphasising part of what needs to be recognised, and both wrong in failing to address the claims of the other side' (1997, p. 41). He concludes that we need to take both participation and protection seriously. Merely imposing treatment on children by itself is not always '*worth it in the long run*', if it hasn't been accompanied by seeking to understand and accommodate children's views, wishes and feelings. We need to adopt policies and practices which both protect children and their right to participate.

Later on, in an interview with Shelley, the physiotherapist, in which we discuss this dilemma, Shelley adds that treatment is not always worth it in the short term either:

*...the majority of the time it's hard work for these children ... you know they can't turn round and say 'I need a rest'... so therefore their way of doing that is to perhaps cry ... From experience to just work through that you don't achieve what you want to achieve anyway. You know, because you are pushing them through something that is too exhausting and really it's not about the quantity of the tolerance of their therapy it's about the quality of the movement they*

*produce. So by them crying or making a noise they are obviously trying to communicate with you ... and if you're just ignored that makes you feel a bit worthless and that you are just being put through different positions for the sake of it.*

From Shelley's perspective, it is not a case of either/or, rather children's participation always needs to be an integral part of the habilitation and protection process. She continues:

*Whereas if you communicate with them and say 'I'm listening to you, I know you need a break, let's do this little bit and then you can have a cuddle with mummy' from experience they'll work through it and then they'll have their time out ... It's making them feel part of it again, part of the participation process.*

Discussions with children's centre practitioners reveal that the tension between participation and protection is not just confined to Haniya's care and treatment, but is common across all four services in relation to different aspects of children's health and safety:

*Where we can give children choices we ought to... We've become a very safe society but it can mean we restrict children's lives... How do you balance those choices against risk? (FSM)*

*The other day Dillon were climbing up something and Lynn [NP] said 'Can you get down please because that's not safe?' and he said 'No, you get down'... Now you're moderating between letting them participate and take risks and not. Some risks have got to be taken, but with others his safety has to be put first. So it's quite complex. (SEN Outreach Worker)*

*Children's views are sought in things like selection of snack. They're involved in going shopping in choosing what they eat. They can choose what they want to eat at lunchtime. So they participate that way... But, as in Rosa's case, what do you do when a child only wants to eat carrot sticks? Or in Jerome's case how do you give him free choice when his condition means he would keep on eating? (Teacher)*

In troubling over these tensions, practitioners place a 'stutter' in the narrative of technical practice and in the discourse of participation. The staff are faced with the ethical responsibility of attending to the ongoing conflict between children's right to participate and the right to have their health and physical needs protected. As Janet suggests, there may be no easy 'answers'. We need to be aware that children's capacities to make decisions may not be fully developed, but we also 'can't ignore' children's

current competences and perspectives. Rather, we have a responsibility to reflect deeply on children's perspectives and what this might mean in relation to the provision and protection we afford children.

## **7.4 Children's Inclusion**

In the final section I discuss dilemmas related to children's access to people and to services at the children's centre. In this sense, the dilemmas presented here deal broadly with issues of inclusion and exclusion. I begin by examining children's participation in sibling relationships and then discuss the conflict between professionals seeking to engage 'hard to reach' families and Roma children and their parents resisting such participation.

### **7.4.1 Sibling Relationships: To Be or Not to Be (With)?**

*Every time the door is open Dean tries to escape into Room 3 because Britney is in there. He just wants to be with his sister at the moment but we try and keep him in, because when he is in there he just follows her around and she's not got her freedom to do what she wants. She just wants some time to herself. She's got him all the time at home and they share a bedroom. They argue quite a lot as well. So we try and get him to engage with the children in our room who are more his age. So we have to make sure we lock the doors. I know it sounds awful; it does doesn't it? But we're just trying to get him to stay (Lynn - NP).*

Lynn's rhetorical question (*I know it sounds awful ... doesn't it?*) indicates that she is conflicted about the ethical response she and her colleagues have made in relation to Dean's relational access to his sister. Whilst Lynn recognises that Dean '*just wants to be with his sister at the moment*' she also acknowledges that Britney '*just wants some time to herself*' and the '*freedom to do what she wants*'. In philosophical terms, you could argue that both children wish to pursue their own conceptions of the good life. However, this is problematic because, according to Lynn, the siblings hold competing conceptions: Dean wishes to pursue a relationship with his sister whilst he is at nursery, whereas Britney wishes to spend time at nursery without him. The dilemma here centres upon each child's right to decide with whom they wish to associate whilst they are at TPCC.

The right to freedom of association is a participation right, as enshrined in Article 15 of the UNCRC. This right aims to ensure social inclusion among different children by

enabling them to play, socialise and learn from one another (Davey and Lundy, 2011). Dean's agentic, though thwarted, attempts '*to escape into Room 3*' and to '*follow*' his sister are a bodily expression of a desire to play, learn and be with his older sister. At any opportunity ('*Every time the door is open*') he contests the physical segregation from his sister. However, since the arrangement of rooms is based on a temporal logic, which means children are segregated according to age, it seems justifiable for staff to constrain Dean's participation by '*locking the doors*' and '*getting him to engage with children... his age*' rather than to protect his associational right to be with his older sibling. Lynn states that this action is '*awful*' though necessary.

This may not be the only justification for staff actions. Dean's right to association conflicts with Britney's right to non-association. Adults and children may have the right to decide with whom they wish to associate, but associational freedom also means that the State, or in this case, SSCC practitioners, cannot force children into relationships they do not desire. It is therefore justifiable for practitioners to respect Britney's participation if she '*wants some time to herself*'. Indeed, at nursery Britney is not obligated to spend time with her sibling, although it is possible for her to see Dean during lunchtime if she so wishes, since this is a time when the Room 2 and 3 children eat together, albeit at separate tables. However, at home there is an inescapable sense of obligation for the children in relation to both time and space: '*She's got him all the time at home and they share a bedroom*'. Lynn implies that Britney has no choice about this at home and therefore conflicts between the siblings are quite frequent ('*they argue quite a lot*') because Dean wants time and Britney wants space.

At nursery, Dean's associational right also conflicts with Britney's '*freedom to do what she wants*'. In other words, Dean's relational interests clash with Britney's self-interests. This poses an ethical problem for the staff, but one that is resolved, albeit insufficiently, through taking an approach that is consistent with a minimal outworking of liberal theory. According to liberal theory the protection of individual rights is necessary to ensure that each person is free to live according to her life plan. Consequently, liberal theorists take as their highest priority the protection of individual liberty (Kymlicka, 2002). This means that individual autonomy is privileged over social relationships and community. According to this liberal view, Britney must have '*freedom*' to act in an autonomous manner and to pursue her own personal interests, so long as she does not harm others or break the law/rules. This freedom and autonomy should be protected

above the communal way of life. Therefore Dean should not interfere with Britney's self interests. However, this is a minimal interpretation of liberal theory, in that it ignores one of the most basic requirements of liberal citizenship, which is the moral obligation of civility or decency (Kymlicka, 2002). According to Kymlicka, civility is a virtue that even the most minimal citizen must learn since it applies not only to political activity, but also to our actions in everyday life. Civility refers to the way we treat people in face-to-face encounters. Taking a more maximal perspective of liberal citizenship, TPCC practitioners would provide socialising structures that would enable Britney to participate responsibly in face-to-face encounters with her brother, rather than acting purely in a self-interested way.

As time goes on, and as Dean persists in his desire to be with his sister, the practitioners take a more maximal and flexible approach that enables Dean to socialise with his sister. During outdoor play, they occasionally open the gate to allow him to play on the other side of the fence with his sister, and, during indoor play, when staff ratios permit, a member of staff periodically accompanies him into Room 3. Britney appears to respond well to these encounters and Dean's participation is enhanced. Thus, Dean has more time to be with Britney as a result of staff allowing him to transgress spatial boundaries.

However, the situation changes when Dean turns three and transitions into Room 3. This means that he is with his sister for every nursery session. This coincides with the participatory action research that the inclusion team conduct with Britney in preparation for her forthcoming multi-professional review meeting. Britney's photographs, accompanying discussion and book-making with Janet (SENCO) reveal that she dislikes having her brother in Room 3 all the time (see Appendix 10). Hence the ethical problem resumes, but in a new context. The previous solutions practitioners devised no longer suffice. Consequently they are forced to rethink their ethical response:

*Leanne: When Janet said 'What don't you like?' Britney took a photo of Dean... I'm not saying she doesn't like him: she loves him; she gives him cuddles... but she wants her time away from him. Because he's only very young and just moved into her room he finds it very hard...*

*Elly: So what action have you decided to take?*

*Leanne: Well the staff response is 'We will give you one extra session for time on your own without your brother'. In fact we've started to do it already.*

*Elly: How's that being funded then?*

*Leanne: It's not [whispers]. Yeah, Janet's being naughty. She just said, 'We're listening to what Britney's telling us'. And I think Mum is due around then with another child, so she'll have four children under the age of four. So having that time to herself will be really important to Britney. But, Dean wouldn't cope, if he had all his sessions without her. He would be lost without her.*

*Elly: So you've recognised what she wants and what he wants. How do you balance that?*

*Leanne: ...We'll have sessions together and times as separate. So that's how we are going to do it so that we are listening to both of them. But I mean it might not work, we might have to rethink. So then we'll have to start the action research cycle all over again.*

Thus, Britney gets space away from Dean as a result of staff being prepared to transgress the usual fee structure so that she can have *'one extra ...session on her own'*. Indeed, the process of accommodating both Dean and Britney's participation *'so that [staff] are listening to both of them'* involves a politics of 'recognition and redistribution' (Fraser, 1998). The challenge for staff is to recognise and respect the children's conflicting perspectives and to navigate the ethical tensions by redistributing resources and steering a path around the structural constraints. In order for this to happen, Leanne suggests that staff need to be prepared to *'rethink'* their approach on an ongoing basis, to experiment (*'I mean it might not work'*) and *'to start the action research cycle all over again'*. In this way, practitioners address the ethical predicament of Britney and Dean's rights to association by grounding their responses in processes of ongoing communication and meaning-making, rather than in abstract or enduring foundations (Minow, 1987).

### **7.4.2 Roma Children: Self-Exclusion or Social Inclusion?**

When Susie (PM) and I meet to discuss some of the participation dilemmas arising in the data, she reflects upon a dilemma that has recently occurred to her:

'I think there are some political and social issues that come up when we think about the dilemmas, for example, the approach to parenting and engaging hard-to-reach families in particular. There's obviously a government agenda and it makes you think about the state being involved in those personal decisions about how to raise children. Sometimes it is for the good... but I think it can be quite dangerous. I mean I'm thinking about working with the Roma families just at the minute. I'm starting to question myself whether we're doing the right thing by constantly pushing this agenda of nursery



education for these children, when if education isn't valued by that community and they are happy to keep their children with them, then why am I continuing to press them to send their children to nursery? Other than the idea that ultimately you know that they are among the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups across Europe and that you know that early education and language skills are going to give them a better chance at life later on... But I also have been questioning what right have I to try and impose a different set of values.'

'That's interesting,' I comment. 'Because Jill, the health visitor, said something similar - that through doing this research it has really made her think about choices that she offers children. She said, "Sometimes I think I'm going against offering children choices with some of the Roma families because we're saying 'You come to us. Come to our nursery. It will be really good,'" but she's saying it's their choice to not go.'

'Yes' Susie agrees, 'because that's a really interesting one in terms of children's participation where the children are clearly saying "We don't want to go to nursery" and the parents are listening. Then we're saying, "Don't listen to your children. Listen to us". Where does that leave us? I don't know. They have a very different cultural approach where it is the children's voices that are heard above anything else. They can't bear to see if a child is upset. If a child is upset then we mustn't do it. Culturally that's very different to us, where we sort of put children through things for their long-term good as we perceive it. Oh I'm getting all confused now.'

'I know. I know. What do you do with that?' I ask.

'Well I think you try and make it as fair as possible. We're taking that to the next degree, we're going to Slovakia to see what projects have worked. But also I'm thinking the only way we can challenge this is by opening up our practice more to their views and not assuming we know, finding out from them what their needs are, to try and change our mindset really. And perhaps giving some investment back, sort of trying to get somebody from the Romani community to come and work with us. Because talking to individual families, they do value education, they want the best for their children, but how do you negotiate that in an unfair world?'

'Yes, it's complex' I remark.

'It's very complex' Susie replies.

The dilemma Susie raises in this conversation is that of conflicting agendas concerning the participation and social inclusion of Roma children and their families in children's centre services and their self-exclusion from participation as a result of social, economic

political and cultural injustice. She suggests that the '*government agenda*' of '*engaging hard to reach families*' and '*constantly pushing ... nursery education*' is at odds with some of the Roma children's and parents' cultural '*values*' and '*choices*' to not participate in services.

This '*government agenda*' is part of a wider strategy to tackle issues of 'social exclusion', a term associated not just with poverty, but also with unemployment, poor skills, low levels of education, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown (ODPM, 2004). Roma children and their families are perceived to be particularly at risk of social exclusion and are 'the group most at risk in the education system' (DES, 2003b; Cemlyn and Clark, 2005). Children's centres are seen as crucial to combating social exclusion through advancing child development and improving the lives of poor parents (Sure Start website, 2002; Every Child Matters website, 2010).

Susie is well-aware that quality early childhood education and care is an important determinant for a child's chances for the rest of their lives: '*early education and language skills are going to give them a better chance at life*'. Thus participation in children's centre services is seen as a key element in the strategy for addressing social exclusion. This includes social participation, in the form of including young children and their parents in nursery education, healthcare and family support, as well as political participation, in the form of including them in decision-making about service development (Stevens et al., 1999; Sure Start, 2002; Hill et al., 2004; Every Child Matters website, 2010). However, a dilemma ensues when these two forms of participation clash. We may well want Roma children and families to exercise their entitlement to participate in children's centre services and to have a say in how those services are run, however, what happens when their political participation means that they do not want to participate socially?

Both Susie (PM) and Jill (HV1), and their teams, have spent considerable time and effort seeking to reach and engage with the Roma families who have recently moved to Towersham from Eastern Slovakia. Their aim has been to help these families, many of whom experience poverty, poor health and over-crowded housing, access the health, social and educational opportunities available through the children's centre and in the wider community. However, their engagement with the perspectives of Roma children and parents has caused Susie to reflect critically upon the current government agenda:

*'Sometimes it is for the good... but I think it can be quite dangerous'*. The participation and inclusion agenda may well provide new social and educational opportunities for children and their families but it also involves risks, since, as Foucault (1983) suggests, though not everything is bad, 'everything is dangerous'. For example, Susie's reflection, *'it makes you think about the state being involved in those personal decisions about how to raise children'*, suggests that she is aware that state control and surveillance is embedded within inclusive policy initiatives. Indeed, for some Romani parents, inclusion in mainstream education is seen as a means of controlling their own, and their children's lives (Lee and Warren, 1991; Cemlyn, 2008; O'Hanlon, 2010). Furthermore, Roma families may not always want to simply accept the predicted benefits of inclusion assured by the dominant culture, which are related to the educational requirements of a knowledge economy (Reagan, 2005; O'Hanlon, 2010). Susie's reflexive engagement with these alternative perspectives causes her to question *'what right have I to try and impose a different set of values.'*

Susie has endeavoured to research some of the social and cultural reasons for why, on the one hand *'education isn't valued'* by the Slovak Roma community, and yet, on the other hand, why, *'individual families... do value education'*. She suggests that this contradiction is due to the fact that these families live in an *'unfair world'*. Indeed, as an ethnic minority group, Roma people in Eastern Slovakia tend to face considerable disadvantage and discrimination by the majority population. For example, Roma children are often excluded from early childhood services on account of cost, distance, unavailability of services, a failure to provide bilingual education and a lack of culturally appropriate curricula and resources (European Social Observatory and UNICEF, 2010). Furthermore, where preschools are provided, Roma children are often segregated into special schools or classes because of a widespread belief by public authorities that they are not capable of succeeding in mainstream education (Ghent and Tankersley, 2009). There is also a general unwillingness from non-Roma parents for their children to mix with Roma children (Hartley, 2008; Poradňa Pre Občianske a L'udské Práva, 2008). Thus, reasons for families choosing not to participate in TPCC may be far more *'complex'* than parents simply *'not valuing education'*. On the contrary, Susie argues that these parents *'want the best for their children, but how do you negotiate that in an unfair world?'*

According to Jill and Susie, Roma children, as well as their parents, are active in deciding that they do not want to participate in nursery: *'the children are clearly saying "We don't want to go to nursery" and the parents are listening.'* This poses an ethical predicament for Jill and Susie since they want to encourage children to participate in decision-making and for services to be responsive to children's views. However, at the same time, in pursuing the social inclusion agenda, staff are excluding children since the message they are conveying to parents is *'Don't listen to your children. Listen to us'*.

This predicament confounds and unsettles Susie's thinking: *'Where does that leave us? I don't know... I'm getting all confused now.'* Indeed the predicaments and dilemmas cause her to question previously held assumptions and cultural values: *'I'm starting to question myself whether we're doing the right thing'; 'They have a very different cultural approach where it is the children's voices that are heard above anything else'.* For these Roma parents, their child's current psycho-social well-being takes priority over educational aspirations; hence, *'if a child is upset then we mustn't do it'*. This stands in stark contrast to a value system in which the futurity of childhood takes precedence over children's present-day views and feelings: *'Culturally that's very different to us, where we sort of put children through things for their long-term good as we perceive it.'*

Susie suggests that the way to address these conflicting values and agendas so that Roma families do not face further exclusion is by *'opening up our practice more to their views'*. This reminds me of Moss' (2007) proposition that one way of making early childhood services more democratic is to 'open up for change' (p. 13). This can occur by developing a critical approach to what exists and 'envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action' (p. 13). Susie seeks to do this in a number of ways: firstly, by *'going to Slovakia to see what projects have worked'* in terms of providing inclusive services for young Roma children and their families. This is taking the notion of outreach *'to the next degree'*, since Susie is seeking to experience firsthand what life is like for Slovak Roma families. Secondly, opening up practice means *'not assuming we know, finding out from them what their needs are, to try and change our mindset'*. This reminds me of Levinas' (1989) 'ethics of an encounter' which is based on respect for the alterity of the Other. An ethics of encounter does not seek to totalise or grasp the Other, rather it is built on an openness to the difference of the Other (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Rather than *'assuming we know'* what Roma children and parents need or want, Susie suggests that needs should be participatively defined (*'finding out from them what their needs*

are'). Opening up practice also involves TPCC staff trying to '*change our mindset*' to appreciate how people other than the cultural and ethnic majority might understand issues (MacNaughton, 2006). Indeed, minority groups such as Roma people will never feel included until they are able to participate in the design and implementation of services. Finally, opening up practice so that minority groups feel included involves economic redistribution as well as cultural recognition (Fraser, 1998): '*giving some investment back... trying to get somebody from the Romani community to come and work with us.*'

To sum up then, Susie suggests that practitioners can challenge exclusion by opening up their practice to the thinking of others, by valuing difference and diversity of perspective, by working with and not simply for families, and by enabling children and parents to participate in determining what their needs are in relation to the social inclusion agenda. However, Susie's concluding question implies that, although these steps may be critical in going some way to address the social exclusion of Roma children and their parents, they may not be entirely sufficient in a world that is unfair. The social inclusion of Roma people in society may be far more complex and involve a far broader range of measures than merely enabling children and their parents to participate in their local children's centre.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

During this chapter, I have highlighted some of the key tensions and dilemmas facing practitioners wishing to facilitate the participation of young children in TPCC. The participation dilemmas include cultural dilemmas (conflicting cultural values regarding different types of play), temporal dilemmas (conflicting understandings of children's rights as they arise in temporal routines such as sleeping, tidying-up and daily physiotherapy) and relational dilemmas (conflicting agendas for accommodating the interests of siblings and the social inclusion of Roma children). I have argued that, far from children's participation being a matter of technical practice, the dilemmas reveal that young children's participation can be complex, messy and risky and therefore its enhancement and constraint is a matter of ethico-political practice. For example, addressing issues of inclusion, as they relate to Roma children's social and political participation in children's centre services, is a complex business; asking questions about children's participation in tidying-up, as it relates to their rights and responsibilities is a

messy business; and discussing children's health and safety as it relates to participation and protection is a risky business. As Moss (2007) argues, democracy is risky. People come to the democratic process with different interests, perspectives and power and therefore conflict is likely. If we take children's participation seriously, we risk disrupting our previously held assumptions and cultural values; we 'place a stutter' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) in the fluency of our adult agendas and narratives; and we are forced to accept that there may be no easy solutions to the dilemmas and conflicts we face in our encounters with children (Norwich, 2008).

The fact that there are no definitive solutions to dilemmas should not lead to hyper-pessimism about the usefulness of participation. On the contrary, I have argued that the dilemmas can become agonistic spaces (Mouffe, 2005) for democratic practice between young and old. Rather than seeing dilemmas as problems to be denied or solved, we need to welcome the potential for positive dissensus they generate. Dilemmas and conflicts can be used as positive tools for social and ethical thinking; a way of bringing politics into the children's centre (Moss, 2007). They create uncertainty, but they also create opportunities for welcoming difference, valuing diversity and respecting alternative ways of thinking and relating to others. This can occur if we are prepared to open up our practice to ongoing processes of respectful negotiation, situated ethics and critical reflexivity.

Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) argue that 'children's participation cannot be understood in isolation from the social, cultural and political contexts in which it occurs' (p. 357). In this, and the previous chapter, I have sought to understand what young children's participation means, and explored the conditions that enable and/or constrain it, by examining the socio-spatial contexts and cultural-ethical dilemmas of participatory practice in a children's centre. In the penultimate chapter I continue this quest by considering the wider discursive context which frames professionals' understandings of the notion of participation and how this influences their practice with young children.

## **8. Discourses of Children's Participation**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In the previous two chapters I concentrated on the micro-political and ethical processes of children's participation at TPCC. In this chapter my focus shifts to the larger picture: that is, the wider political and pedagogical discourses which frame the conceptualisation and enactment of children's participation in a children's centre context. Thus, I move from a narrative mode to a more thematic mode of writing and analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Charmaz and Mitchell, 1996). My aim is to deconstruct the different dominant discourses and associated practices in operation at TPCC by analysing how practitioners from different professional backgrounds and services understand and apply the concept of 'participation' to their work with young children.

Using MacNaughton's (2005) tactics of deconstruction and analysing participants' use of metaphor (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) and contrastive rhetoric (Hargreaves, 1981), I discuss a number of dominant discourses that shaped children's participation at TPCC. These include the discourses of developmentalism and child-centredness; protectionism and risk; attachment and attunement; managerialism and user involvement. During the fieldwork, as I met with the practitioners to analyse the language they were using and the discourses they were drawing upon to conceptualise and enact children's participation, we began to make some critical reflections, based on our data and on the literature, about the difficulties and constraints of enabling young children's participation. These critical reflections are also included in the chapter.

In presenting a cross-case analysis, in the sense of what participation meant across different services, this chapter makes an original contribution to our knowledge and understanding of children's participation in an integrated setting such as a children's centre. I conclude with three main arguments. The first is that participation has 'polyvalent' qualities (Foucault, 1978) as evidenced in the identification of different dominant discourses across the four services, each of which is attached to different social and political agendas. This makes it difficult for practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds to share a common perspective and achieve integrated ways of working around children's participation and thus hinders the development of a coherent

strategy for children's participation across the whole children's centre. Next, I suggest that these dominant discourses become taken-for-granted truths about children's participation and thus can serve to exclude practitioners from imagining alternative ways of viewing their participatory practice with children. Finally, having highlighted the discursive differences, I argue that, across all four service areas, children's participation is characterised far more by a 'thin' ideology of individualism and neoliberal consumerism than by 'thicker' understandings of participation that embrace notions of being, belonging and democracy.

## **8.2 Dominant Discourses of Participation**

For Foucault (1972), discourse is a way of understanding, or body of ideas about a particular phenomenon, produced through language and social interaction, that structures our thoughts and actions. As such, discourses are 'socially organised frameworks of meaning embodying particular values and practices that stipulate rules and domains of what can be said and done, by whom and when' (Ryan et al. 2001, p. 51). Discourses carry particular effects of power. They constitute both subjectivity and power relations (Ball, 1990) and they legitimise as well as proscribe certain ways of operating in the world (Sumsion, 2005; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006). Discourses do not simply construct ideas but also material realities (Healy, 2005). Thus, they signify normal and desirable ways to think, act and feel about young children in early childhood institutions, making some actions possible, whilst precluding others (Dahlberg et al., 1999; MacNaughton, 2005). MacNaughton (2000) argues that discourses are historically and culturally specific and that at any one time there is a limited array of often competing discourses in circulation, with some discourses becoming more powerful than others.

In this study, the meaning of 'children's participation' was situated within a field of dominant discourses, shaped by the different philosophies of practice of the four service areas in the children's centre. Thus, children's participation had 'polyvalent qualities'<sup>13</sup> (Foucault, 1978), in which the discourse of participation differentially combined with other discourses in various ways, achieving different effects. As Kjørholt (2007) argues,

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13 The notion of 'polyvalence' derives from chemistry. It describes an element's ability to differentially combine with other elements. Foucault (1978) adapts this term to describe how the same discourse can be used in various ways that achieve quite different effects.



the terms 'children' and 'participation' are floating signifiers which different discourses fight to cover with meaning. Although there was some overlap in the discourses that practitioners from different services drew upon to make sense of children's participation, for the purposes of analysis, these are abstracted into the discourses of developmentalism, protectionism, attachment and managerialism.

### **8.3 Developmentalism and Child-Centredness**

Developmentalism was one of the dominant discourses framing children's participation, seen particularly, though not exclusively, within the education and childcare service. This was enmeshed within a pedagogy of child-centredness. Here children's participation was largely associated with giving children freedom to make individual choices and participate in decisions about their play and learning, summed up in the notions of 'free choice', 'child-led learning' and 'listening to children's needs and interests'.

#### **8.3.1 Participation as Free Choice**

In the nursery, children's participation was often seen as synonymous with the notion of giving children '*free choice*' of play activity as this practitioner suggests:

*I think it [children's participation] is about free choice ... really it's like a toddler's paradise, because they can come and do what they want basically. They can choose if they want to paint, they can paint. If they want to go outside and run around, they can just go outside.... They can do, within reason, what they want, as long as it's safe... It's about listening to what they want and helping them to learn and develop, but through what they want (NP1).*

Burman (1994a) argues that the concept of 'free choice' is one of several key tenets that characterise a 'child-centred' approach to education which is built on developmental principles, borrowed from Piagetian theory, mixed with the Romantic ideas of Rousseau and Froebel and the maturationist theories of Gesell. Such an approach assumes that the individual child's growth and development is a naturally unfolding process that should be allowed full expression through a richly resourced environment that is centred upon the child's interests and needs (MacNaughton, 2003). Within this approach children should be allowed to develop autonomy and independence by having freedom to choose activities. The NP characterises such freedom as a '*toddler's paradise*' in which each

child is able to *'do what they want'*. The metaphor of paradise suggests a place of extreme beauty or bliss, in isolation from the tainted everyday reality of the world. The implication is that, given the idyllic child-centred environment of *'free choice'*, children will be able to *'learn and develop'* naturally by making decisions about their own play and learning. Thus, free choice enables young children to flourish as agents and participants in their own development by pursuing their own private interests to *'paint'*, *'run'* or *'go outside'*. In many ways, this accords with a liberal model of democracy in which society is composed of rational, freely-choosing, isolated individuals, participating primarily in the private sphere (Burman, 1994a).

Free choice was seen as an essential method of enabling children to *'practise making decisions'* and to *'participate in planning'* through access to constantly available resources:

*They choose what they want for their own reasons, and the main reasons are that they are practising making decisions ...The workshop style resources and the continuous provision allow for the children to be choosing and if they're choosing then they're participating in planning. And it's things like not interrupting them as well, and having rolling snack time and free flow (Childcare Manager).*

A resource-rich environment and a continuous mode of delivery were seen as key technologies for encouraging children's participation through *'continuous provision'*, *'rolling snack'* and *'free flow'*. *'Continuous provision'* consisted of practitioner-selected toys and open-ended *'workshop style'* resources, organised into different areas of learning, such as the construction area or home corner, that were always available for children to access independently. This was supplemented with *'enhanced provision'* of resources to match the interests and developmental needs of individual children. Here practitioners *'enhanced'* the provision using what they knew about *'what each child likes'*. According to the EYP, this unrestricted access to resources and enhanced individualised provision afforded children different levels of freedom:

*Continuous provision is a starting point for children's participation. This is like 'freedom one', the first level of freedom, and then enhancing our provision to what we think each child likes is 'more freedom' (EYP).*

*'Rolling snack'*, in which the children came to the snack table when they chose to and whilst play continued, provided another pedagogical practice that facilitated making choices and gave time for children to pursue their learning without *'interrupting them'*.

Finally, 'free flow' was seen as enhancing participation by enabling children to regulate their own movements between different pedagogical areas, particularly between the indoor and outdoor spaces:

*A free flow environment underpins everything we do. Children are free to make their own choices and decisions. They can literally vote with their feet. For example they can choose to be outside. They decide where they play, how long they play for and who with (Children's Centre Teacher).*

The teacher's use of the political metaphor of 'voting' suggests that a free flow environment enables children to register an opinion by their actions: by going to the play areas of their choice without adults controlling their use of space. The PM contrasts this free flow approach with being 'herded and carpeted' - a spatial metaphor for describing adult control of children's movements:

*When we introduced free flow there was a fear from a lot of the practitioners that children just wouldn't participate in other areas because they were allowed to go outside all the time, but that has not proved to be the case at all... But if we existed in the old way we'd probably say they need more circle time, they need to be sitting down more, we need to make them sit down more. We were talking about this earlier. One practitioner referred to lack of confidence leads to herding and carpeting because you don't trust children to make their own decisions about when they access things so you spend all your time moving them around, controlling their movements and not giving them that trust to be independent learners and active learners. I think that to me is what children's participation has reinforced (PM).*

'Herding' has connotations of driving animals together in a group in order to control their behaviour. 'Carpeting' refers to pedagogical practices in which the whole group is seated in the carpeted area of a classroom for instruction, socialisation or disciplinary purposes. Both of these practices are eschewed on the basis that they are antithetical to participation. The PM suggests that free flow is productive of actions and subjectivities. It encourages children to participate through '*controlling their own movements*' without adult interference, and thereby produces children as '*independent ... active learners*'.

### *Critical Reflections*

In the nursery free choice was seen as a key mechanism for enhancing young children's participation. However, as practitioners began to discuss the interview data, some of their and my reflections on this discourse became more critical and highlighted practices that constrained participation. Indeed, as critics of child-centred education have argued, 'free choice' acts as a discursive practice that carries power effects, some of which can

be more constraining than enabling for young children's participation (Burman, 1994a; Ryan, 2005; Wood, 2007; Langford, 2010). For example, in the following conversation, the PM reflects upon the power struggles that occur when one child's 'free choice' inhibits another's:

*PM: One observation I made involved an argument between one child who really wanted the wooden train set which meant another child couldn't have it. There was quite a lot of snatching and moaning going on between the two children. It got me thinking about children's free choice. If someone else has got the toy before them, the others don't really have free choice, even though we say they do. I suppose, in an ideal world, free choice would mean we'd have a train set for everyone, but that's not realistic.*

As this manager implies, free choice is an ideal, an illusion. Children's free choice is constrained by other people, objects and monetary resources. The manager raises the question of whether free choice is 'realistic' but we could also ask whether it is always desirable, as my response to her suggested:

*Elly: That's interesting because in some other countries they deliberately have less resources because they want to foster cooperation, negotiation. So, for example, instead of having ten pairs of scissors they'll have one or two.*

*PM: Yes because ...going to Denmark sort of brought that home to me where children are much more reliant on each other to negotiate play between them. There were resources, but they were certainly a third of what we would have ... I think in our culture we are very much focused on giving individual choice and having plenty of it and it's a different way of looking at life. It's an interesting idea: that idea about children turning much more to each other, rather than expecting to have individual resources...Yes, we do individualise children here and collective bargaining is not really part of the philosophy.*

As this conversation unfolded, together we engaged in a process of critical consciousness (see Section 2.5.4), in which we were able to compare ideas of participation as collectivism ('children turning to each other', 'negotiation', 'collective bargaining') with the culture of individualism ('children expecting individual resources', 'giving individual choice') that was prevalent in the 'free choice' ethos of Towersham nursery. This is similar to Moss' (2008) argument that constructing participation simply as the individual child's freedom to make choices ignores the collective and social dimension of decision-making.

A similar process of critical reflection occurred with the NP as we talked about 'continuous provision':

*Elly: How is it decided which toys and resources are used in the continuous provision?*

*NP: We get together as a team, look through the catalogues, choose some that are within our budget and then check it with Sue [Childcare Manager]. But do you know, now you've asked me that question, I'm thinking these are choices we've made based on what we think the children need or like, rather than finding out from them what they'd like.*

As the NP reflects, the participating child is simply acting out socially approved choices made by practitioners, based on prevailing cultural norms of what they '*think children need or like*'. A developmental discourse of what children '*need*' and an assumption that practitioners know what children '*like*' can constrain children's participation and '*finding out from them*' directly. This reflection subsequently propelled the NP into taking action with the children to involve them in deciding which new resources should be purchased. This consisted of asking a group of two-year-olds to look through the catalogues with her to decide on which new toys should be purchased; making observations and recording children's comments of the books they looked at during a visit by a sales representative and using these to place an order; and asking two children to accompany her on a trip to the shopping centre to choose a new toy buggy to replace the broken one.

Staff also reflected that 'free flow' was problematic for certain children. Free flow was promoted as an inclusive means of participation through encouraging children to self-regulate their movements, and yet in practice, certain groups of children were excluded from this. For example, free flow access to the outdoors was not possible from the baby room. As a result of our research, this led to the nursery taking action by securing funding to develop a dedicated outdoor play space for babies. Furthermore, for children in the toddler and pre-school rooms, free-flow access only applied to those children who were mobile and strong enough to push open the doors. Children with mobility difficulties were excluded from being able to exercise this type of choice. Consequently these children were reliant on an adult deciding to take them outside. Even if children were mobile, free flow access could be problematic for particular children, such as one boy with Autistic Spectrum Disorder:

*Some children find it hard to make those decisions about where to play...I wonder if the space, which is big, is a hindrance? Would a smaller environment give him more capacity to make decisions? (NP2)*

For these very young and disabled children, a free flow policy did not enhance their participation since their opportunities for decision-making were constrained by the structures and physical spaces of the children's centre.

Participation in free choice was also problematic for other groups of children:

*PM: Sometimes it can feel quite chaotic and you can worry that some children are on the margins and maybe not accessing things because ... they are not very confident, especially if they are new or are children with EAL<sup>14</sup>.*

*Elly: How does EAL have an impact?*

*PM: Well for children who have EAL or speech and language difficulties they might not choose to access certain activities like the books or the dressing up and role-play provision. But when I actually talk to staff I think they are very aware of children's individual needs.*

Bernstein (1975) argues that child-centred pedagogy, in which children are encouraged to choose from a rich array of materials and to speak freely, tends to favour those from highly verbal, white, middle-class homes. The skills needed for children to participate as independent, self-regulating decision-makers may be assumed and therefore not taught to children from other social backgrounds (Bernstein, 1975; Brooker, 2002; Silin, 2005; Vandebroek and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). Thus, even though practitioners are 'very aware of individual needs' and all children are afforded equal rights to free choice, not everyone starts with or is given the means to experience this universal right.

A pedagogy of child-centredness could also hinder the participation of children from ethnic backgrounds where this was not consistent with cultural practices in their homes and communities:

*We've noticed with people from the Caribbean about parents wanting their children to be disciplined and to be sat learning, and they're really not happy with the choice and the basic 'just play'. There's a pressure to have a much more formal approach... The philosophy is not the same as ours. Things like people saying, 'The children shouldn't be allowed to go out to play because it's raining', or 'I think what we need here is lots more group time with children' (PM).*

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14 English as an Additional Language

This finding is similar to Brooker's (2002) study of Bangladeshi heritage children starting school in the UK, who found it difficult to accommodate to the ethos of free choice since their families prepared them for a formal, transmissive style of education. Children whose family habitus (Bourdieu, 1992) is incongruent with these Anglo-specific practices therefore may experience disadvantage in participation.

I too began to reflect more critically on the discourse and associated practices of free choice that, as an early years practitioner, I had previously considered to be 'good practice' for all children. Thus, whilst some children could be enabled to participate through free choice, others could be simultaneously excluded on account of their gender, as the following excerpt from my field notes illustrates:

Kyle and Ciaran are outside. They have been building a house out of milk crates arranged in a rectangle with carpet squares in the middle. Kyle makes himself into a door by stretching out his arms to block the space between two walls of crates. Amina knocks on the crate Kyle is touching: 'Can I come in?' she asks.

'No, you're not a boy', Kyle replies.

Amina comes up to me: 'Can we play there? I really want to.' She takes me by the hand and leads me to the house. The boys look at me sheepishly, as if they are expecting me to intervene. I say nothing.

Amina tugs at my hand and asks, 'Please. Please. Can we play there?'

'I don't know. Why don't you ask?' I suggest.

Amina knocks again and asks a second time. Both boys emphatically reply 'no'.

Turning to me, Amina repeats 'Please'.

I try knocking on the door, but Kyle keeps his arms outstretched and shakes his head. Amina wanders away for a few seconds but keeps her focus on the house. Mohammed approaches the house and is granted entry by Kyle opening out his arms. After seeing this, Amina tries to enter the house from the other side. Kyle cries and shouts 'No'. Ciaran sees Kyle crying and chases Amina out of the house. He gently punches her and then runs away. Amina shelters behind the legs of an adult on the other side of the yard.

In this episode, Kyle and Ciaran's free choice about who could play in the house was biased in favour of boys (granting access to Mohammed) and against Amina on account of her gender. The house of crates signified a play space that became a political and

negotiated terrain in which each of us acted out different discourses, identities and power dynamics. Thus, the boys' participation was characterised by verbal, non-verbal and physical techniques of power, drawing on the dominant discourse of 'masculinism' that positions females as less powerful than males. This resulted in discriminatory play and dominating power effects, of which I was also a part. In an effort to be participatory and non-authoritarian, I was acting out the dominant discourse of child-centred practice by choosing to take a largely passive, non-interventionist adult role in the play and by failing to challenge the sexist discourse in operation and the physical strategies of power Ciaran was using to exclude Amina. As Gallagher (2008b) suggests, perhaps it was the participatory ethos of respecting the children's agency that prevented me from trying to curb the boys' domination. In response to the boys' techniques of domination, Amina employed several agentic tactics of resistance. Firstly by seeking my assistance, and secondly by attempting to breach the walls of the house. However, ultimately she was constrained by the power effects of the dominant discourse of free choice and child-centredness that validated boys practicing sexism over girls (Walkerdine, 1990; Ryan, 2005).

Burman (2008) argues that the construct of free choice is premised on liberal principles of citizenship and participation that celebrate individual freedom, choice and egalitarianism. However, as the examples above demonstrate, a 'free choice' approach can constrain some children's participation on account of social differences, including class, (dis)ability, ethnicity and gender. In other words, 'existing social inequalities structure [children's] differential access to choice' (Burman 2008, p.282). One conclusion we drew from this was that practitioners and researchers must not be blind to group differences by treating all children the same and thereby perpetuating the inequality of their starting positions, as the PM states:

*What this is making me think is that with free choice you can't treat everybody the same. Not everyone is able to make a 'free' choice so we have to help them. And we also have to set up the environment so that it's possible. That's why I'm applying for funding for an outdoor area for babies.*

Whilst free choice can afford children many opportunities to make decisions about their play and learning, we need to challenge the assumption that free choice enables *all* children to participate, and instead look for ways that will afford children opportunities for decision-making that will accommodate their different circumstances. This involves



recognising and scaffolding children's varied cultural ways of exercising choice (a politics of recognition) as well as taking action to improve the structural inequalities that constrain children's participation (a politics of redistribution).

To summarise, participation through free choice and a child-centred pedagogy is both emancipatory and oppressive. It allows children to be agents in their social worlds, to make decisions, to exercise self-reliance, resistance, autonomy and non-conformity of thought. Yet participation, as child-centred pedagogy, can also act as a discursive practice that produces inequitable power effects, such as marginalisation, exclusion and domination. Hence, a discourse of 'child-centredness' produces particular power effects that can be both enabling and constraining for young children's participation.

### 8.3.2 Participation as Child-Led Learning

Another tenet of a child-centred approach to children's participation was that of 'child-led learning'. Allowing children to self-direct their own learning, as opposed to adult-directed teaching, was seen as one means of relinquishing adult power and control. This is seen in the following example of contrastive rhetoric:

*EYP: I think the children like having the power to do what they want to do and not being directed so much as they might be in other places.*

*Elly: What do you mean by having power?*

*EYP: Not being told what to do, or how to do certain things.*

*Elly: So it's different here to other places?*

*EYP: Yeah.*

*Elly: How would you describe the approach here?*

*EYP: Where the children are allowed to, as much as they can, lead their own learning, rather than making them sit down and do certain things.*

*[Interview interrupted]*

*Elly: Right so you were talking about the approach you have here as opposed to other places perhaps?*

*EYP: Yeah, maybe like table top activities and 'this is what we've got out today because this is what we say you're doing'. You know it's the 'old school' approach, [whereas] everything here is based around continuous provision.*

A number of binaries are implied in the above extract, including: *child-led/adult-led*; *child power/teacher power*; *continuous provision/table-top activities*. As Derrida (1976) argues, the significance of dualisms is that there is a hierarchy of value, so that one part

of the pair is always privileged over the 'other'. In this context, in order to participate, children need to have freedom from adult 'power' in order to '*lead their own learning*'. This contrasts with the EYP's description of an '*old school approach*' in which the adult transmits knowledge to children and maintains power and control by directing children's learning through structured, sedentary activities.

The EYP conceptualises power in the '*old school approach*' as a negative force held by practitioners, which is used to constrain children's actions. However, in a child-led environment, the teacher hands over power to children and adopts an '*encouraging*' rather than '*directive*' and interventionist role, as the Childcare Manager explains:

*We try to encourage them, but we try not to lead them. There's no need to be directive. You shouldn't be hearing the staff voice you should be hearing the children's voice.*

Thus, children are more able to participate and express their '*voice*' since they '*have the power*' to become determiners of their own actions and learning.

### *Critical Reflections*

As these nursery practitioners suggest, and as the seventh rung on Hart's (1992) ladder of participation depicts, a 'child-led' approach, in which children initiate and direct their own actions, is a useful means for encouraging children's participation. However, as we analysed our Phase 1 interview data, the EYP and I began to reflect that this approach may not be sufficient on its own in terms of enhancing children's participation and learning. The EYP noted that he was faced with the tension between non-interference and yet being responsible for scaffolding children's learning and participation:

*One of the codes I've analysed from our team meeting is that children's participation is about being child-led, going with the child, but then I'm going against other stuff cos there's a dilemma between staff steering children's learning and children steering their own learning and making their own decisions.... EPPE<sup>15</sup> report says that good settings have a balance of adult-initiated and child-initiated so that's what I'm supposed to do as EYP, but here I'm saying that children's participation is about going with the child, but is that right?*

In raising this critical question, the EYP is re-examining his earlier dichotomy between child-led and adult-led approaches, and beginning to consider a more hybridised

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15 Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (Sylva et al., 1999)

understanding that achieves '*a balance of adult-initiated and child-initiated*' approaches. Thus children's participation occurs not just when decisions are initiated and directed solely by children, but also when decisions are shared with adults, be they adult-initiated or child-initiated (Hart, 1992). Similarly, sole reliance on a child-led approach to learning disregards adults and children as co-constructors of knowledge and culture (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Wood, 2007; Langford, 2010). As a consequence, during the PAR phase of the research, the EYP and NP sought to involve children in decision-making and learning that was both child-initiated and adult-initiated.

### **8.3.3 Participation as Listening to Children's Needs and Interests**

Finally, a third tenet of children's participation in the nursery involved '*listening to children*'. This was primarily understood in developmental terms as meeting individual children's '*needs and interests*' rather than as a socio-political endeavour. This discourse was given material reality through careful observation against the EYFS age-related statements and developmental goals, as well as curriculum planning starting from the child's perspective:

*We listen to children's views through observations. We observe the children and we pick out things that they've enjoyed doing... and we try to put that into our planning or if it's something that we've already got out we adapt it to their needs. We aim to plan to reflect their needs and interests. And what they like doing we'll try and extend. In this way, all the activities are child-centred and age and stage appropriate to meet children's needs (EYP).*

Within this discourse of 'needs and interests', children were seen as having fundamental needs which the practitioner should accommodate through '*adapting*' activities so that they were developmentally '*age and stage appropriate*'. Similarly, practitioners should '*observe*' and then '*extend*' children's interests through enhancing the resources and activities on offer. Participation, in the sense of listening to and responding to children's needs and interests, was seen as crucial to enabling children's development:

*If you listen to children, that's how they develop and learn. If you listen well then you can talk back to them and extend their learning (Teacher).*

Another way the developmental discourse shaped professional understandings of participation was that '*listening to children*' was sometimes linked to children's age. All of the staff consulted children about certain activities such as choice of food but some did not consult children on other activities such as curriculum planning, even though

children's centre guidance emphasises that children should participate in planning and evaluation (Sure Start, 2005). As the NP explained, this was on account of their age and assumed lack of competency:

*NP: We do plan according to what the children like, what they want to play with, but because they are so young we don't actually say 'What do you want out today?'*

*Elly: Why is that?*

*NP: It's cos they're younger. It's the perception that ...they are at that age where even though you do plan to reflect what they're in to, it's the idea that they're more than babies but they are not big children. That sounds really mean, don't it? But you know, we don't do it and we should. I don't want to say it, but it's kind of like their views aren't valued because of how old they are.*

Within the discourse of developmentalism, there is a danger that age is privileged and that young children are constructed and classified as '*more than babies*' but less than '*big children*'. Thus, '*their views aren't valued because of how old they are*'. This '*perception*' can restrict the kinds of socio-political spaces in which young children are invited to participate. As Woodhead (2008) comments, a child's age can be viewed as a yardstick against which to decide the appropriateness of inviting participation. By contrast, a socio-cultural approach to participation does not assume a straightforward relationship between children's age and their capacity to participate. It therefore asks what support a child requires in order to participate effectively and what skills adults need to be able to '*scaffold*' children's competencies (Smith, 2002; Woodhead, 2008). This realisation led the NP to critically reflect upon and change her practice during the PAR phase of research so that children were consulted as well as '*helped*' to participate in planning:

*I mean just because they are two or three doesn't mean we can't ask them at the beginning of sessions 'What would you like out?'* And for the children who don't know or don't speak, we have helped them to decide by showing them pictures or rebus symbols, or the actual resources.

### *Critical Reflections*

In addition to the NP's critical reflection above and the subsequent action taken, the process of carrying out PAR meant that the EYP began to look more critically at framing children's participation within a developmental discourse, with its focus on children's needs, ages and stages of development, and to consider an alternative '*rights*' discourse:

*We talk a lot about looking at what children need and following their interests but less perhaps do we use the language of children's rights, that children have a right to have a say... Since doing this research it's made me think it's right to involve children, it's important they have rights. They have a right to be listened to. That's what Mosaic Approach has helped me realise. That, and reading about UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

Thus, 'doing this research' enabled the EYP to listen to children not just as subjects with 'needs' but also as subjects with 'rights'.

## **8.4 Protectionism and Risk**

Children's participation across all four children's centre services, but particularly in the family support and health services, was framed by a discourse of protectionism. Two polarised alternatives characterised practitioners' constructions of children's participation, reflecting ambivalence in thinking and practice. Participation was seen as both integral to children's protection and welfare and as conflicting with children's protection and safety. Thus, children could contribute to their own care and protection *through* participation but should also be protected *from* participation.

### **8.4.1 Protection through Participation**

'Protection through participation' encompassed notions of listening to children, being child-centred, and working with families, firstly to promote children's participation in care and safety decisions, and secondly in empathising with the child's perspective through positive parenting strategies.

#### **Participation as Listening to Protect**

Health visitors and the family support team constructed young children's participation as '*listening to the child's voice*'. In the education and childcare service, listening was seen primarily as a means of encouraging children's development, whereas in health and social care listening was presented primarily as a mechanism for protecting children:

*To me 'children's participation' means listening to the child's voice, trying to ascertain what their views are, their wishes and feelings... When you are looking at issues of child protection and safeguarding the child, listening has to be the primary consideration (FSM).*

*We've got to listen and try and see things from their perspective if we're going to protect them. Let them participate; don't just automatically listen to the parents (HV2).*

The rationale is that children who are encouraged to express their 'views, wishes and feelings' are less vulnerable to abuse and better able to contribute towards their own protection (Lansdown, 2005). Consequently, practitioners have 'got to listen' to children and 'see things from their perspective'. Indeed, recent research into child protection assessments highlights that insufficient attention has been given to listening to what children say, how they look and how they behave (Munro, 2005; Rose and Barnes, 2008; Glaser, 2009; Broadhurst et al., 2010).

### *Critical Reflections*

In spite of a rhetoric in which the staff aimed to 'let [children] participate' in their own protection by expressing their 'views, wishes and feelings', these practitioners also highlighted some constraining factors for enabling children's participation. The first factor concerned the question of how you listen to pre-verbal children:

*Now the challenge is... how do we listen, how do we involve participation of children when they are very young, especially if they are pre-language? It's very very hard indeed. I think you have to be honest about it and say what we are doing is we're observing: look at their non-verbal; how they are playing; where there's forms of resistance; and any warning signs of harm (FSM).*

A second difficulty highlighted by the FSM and HV concerned the challenge of listening to children when staff may not have regular contact with children, partly as a result of the fluid nature of attendance at groups, and because they have no statutory powers to see children during home visits.

*The groups that we run, I suppose it becomes a lot easier in nursery because you have a contained environment where children are for a long period of time ... but it becomes a bit more complex when you're running groups like parent and toddler groups where you can do those deep observations or conversations (FSM).*

*Our access to the children is all via the parents, how much access the parents want us to have. Even the very basics, if a child is upstairs and we visit the house we have no right to go upstairs and see the child although we can ask (HV2).*

Thus, even though these staff had a desire to listen to children and to foster a culture in which children can express their views and feelings about their care and protection, this

was not always possible given the structural constraints associated with the remit of their professional roles.

### **Participation as Being Child-Centred: The Paramourncy Principle**

Within the health and family support services, children's participation was also associated with the need '*to be child-centred.*' Unlike in the nursery where '*being child-centred*' was associated with a particular pedagogical approach, here the notion was enmeshed within a discourse of child paramourncy:

*If we are going to listen to children and encourage their participation we need to be child-centred. Being child-centred is around taking the child as the most important person. You know it's all about focusing on the needs of the child. The child is paramount (FSM).*

*... the child protection training we get constantly reiterates that we need to be child-centred and focus on the child and their perspectives... [It] points out... before you start empathising with the parents, you should look at the safety and well-being of the child and use the framework to assess everything about the child, and you put second the needs and feelings of the parents. It just does the complete Copernican revolution of swapping round what I think the natural focus is for a lot of adults (HV2).*

According to the HV, '*the need to be child-centred*' is like a '*Copernican revolution*'. Her use of this metaphor refers to the paradigm shift, first suggested by Copernicus, that the sun is the centre of the solar system, not the earth. By implication the child is the centre of the service, not the parent, and therefore '*their perspectives*', '*safety and well-being*' should have primacy. Practice should revolve around the child and their participation. This contests the '*natural focus*' for practitioners of providing adult-centric services. Thus children are protected as professionals '*focus on the child and their perspectives*' '*before [they] start empathising with the parents*'. In this way, as the FSM describes it, using language taken directly from the 1989 Children Act, '*the child is paramount*'.

For health and social care staff a child-centred approach also involved placing the '*child at the centre*' of record-keeping processes and enabling children to participate in assessments.

*My background is in children's social work so I'm very aware of having the importance of the child at the centre of everything... So if we have a case work*

*file, the file is actually in the child's name and not in the parent's name... it's kind of a mental thing about keeping the child at the forefront (FSM).*

*The sort of documentation we use is lending much more to the child expressing their views and what is it the child is wanting. If you look at a CAF<sup>16</sup> form... they are much more child-centred (HV1).*

Drawing on the discourse of the Children Act 1989 and 2004, these practitioners understood that children's involvement in care assessments was an important part of promoting children's participation and safeguarding their welfare. Ascertaining '*their views and what is it the child is wanting*' ensured assessments were '*much more child-centred*'.

### *Critical Reflections*

Although retaining a commitment to the principle of paramountcy, the FSM reflected that there was a tension between a '*child-centred*' discourse and the discourse and practice of '*working in partnership with parents*'. She implied that it was not always helpful to privilege one over the other:

*Certainly the needs of the parent and the needs of the child can sometimes be different, but even though we aim to be child-centred, we still have to work in partnership with parents. The parent has their own needs and issues that they need help to deal with so that they can respond much better to the children's needs... That's the reason we're assisting them. The reason we're assisting them is ultimately so that the child-parent relationship is enhanced. It's about keeping that focus, but also that balance of attention to the different needs of the child and the family (FSM).*

By '*keeping that focus*' on the child, '*but also that balance of attention to the different needs of the child and the family*' it should become possible to conceptualise children's participation and protection neither as child-centred, nor as parent-centred, but as relationship-centred practice in which '*the child-parent relationship is enhanced*'.

### **Promoting Children's Participation in Care and Safety Decisions**

Another key tenet of children's participation involved working with parents to promote children's participation in making choices and decisions about their own care and safety.

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16 The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is an assessment and referral tool used by practitioners working with children with additional needs.



Family support staff aimed to help parents appreciate the importance of offering choices to young children as part of their daily care routines.

*One way we encourage participation is we promote choice, you know ask parents to promote choice in the home ... One of the things we'll say to parents, is that children have very little say, very little power in terms of what they wear, or where they go, or what they eat or how they do things. So limited choices are good for children. So we're promoting that rather than 'no choice' or 'everything choice' (FSM).*

*Where we can give children choices we ought to, because it's part of their development. You know as parents you're constantly making little risk assessments in your head. Should they climb up that ladder onto the slide? When do I first let them go to the corner shop? ... But there are certain choices that we can offer children that are risk-free, for example, 'Do you want weetabix or cornflakes?' Where we can, we ought to be starting with those kinds of choices with under fives (FSM).*

In these quotations, children's participation in decisions about their care is enacted through the mechanism of offering children choices about food, clothes, play and outings. However, choice is constructed not within the romantic discourse of 'free choice' as a means of enhancing children's development, as it was in the education and childcare service, but is associated primarily with a protectionist discourse of risk which, if not attended to, may impair children's development. Thus children's participation is enacted when the child is offered '*limited*' and '*risk-free*' choices.

According to the FSW, promoting children's participation with parents also entailed enabling children to participate in decisions about managing their safety. Encouraging parents to help children participate in personal risk assessment could contribute to children's protection and safety within the home environment:

*You can perhaps use some books to maybe talk about family and about keeping safe, what might be dangerous, what might be good. You might talk about in the house if oven is hot you might go, 'Hot, hot, hot' or with knives you could explain, 'That's sharp you could cut yourself'. With those basic kinds of things you can talk to parents about helping a two-, three-, four-year-old make decisions about their safety, depending on their age and understanding. But also part of your job is to see are the parents able to assess risk? Do they put things in place to ensure that children are safe? (FSW)*

Involving children in '*decisions about their safety*' is proposed here as one way forward in safeguarding children from '*things that might be dangerous*', alongside the measures parents should take '*to ensure that children are safe*'. With appropriate adult assistance

the FSW suggests that young children, '*depending on their age and understanding*', can participate in '*assessing risk*'.

### *Critical Reflections*

In reflecting upon and comparing the data co-constructed with the FSM and the FSW, it seems to me that these two members of staff may have different perspectives about young children's competency to manage risk and to make decisions about their care and safety. On the one hand, according to the FSM, parents should assist young children's participation by offering them '*risk-free choices*'. This might be due to an assumption that '*under fives*' may not be sufficiently competent to be able to assess the risk attached to other choices. On the other hand, according to the FSW, with the assistance of parents, even '*two-, three-, four-year-olds*' may be competent enough to participate in assessing hazards and risks in the home. In either case, as the FSW states, whether children are afforded the opportunity to participate in decision-making or not often comes down to adult perceptions of individual children's levels of competency based on their '*age and understanding*', as well as the extent to which adults are able to '*help*' or scaffold children's decisions.

A reading of Foucauldian theory helps us to see that there are regulatory effects of restricting children's participation to risk-free choices. The FSM does not refer to this critique in our analysis meeting to discuss this theme of parents promoting choice to children. However, she does make the following critical reflection:

*We've become a very safe society but it can mean we restrict children's lives. I understand why and we need to acknowledge we live in a different world these days... but some risky activities provide opportunities for children to learn new skills so we shouldn't just restrict children's participation to risk-free choices. It comes down to discussing with parents risks that might be acceptable and risks that aren't, and weighing it up. So I think it's a fine balance isn't it? (FSM)*

The language the FSM uses concerning ideas that '*we've become a very safe society*' and '*weighing up*' '*risks that might be acceptable and risks that aren't*' taps into what Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) refer to as the risk discourse of Western late modernity. This discourse carries certain power effects which have both positive and negative consequences for children's participation. In her, and the FSW's account, children's participation is framed by a discourse of risk and risk management: choice should be promoted but children should be protected from making decisions that involve taking

risks; and children should participate in assessing and minimising risk. While elements of this can mean we enable children's participation, at the same time, *'it can mean we restrict children's lives'*. However, in making this critical reflection, the FSM also frames children's participation within an emerging discourse of opportunity. This is seen in her acknowledgement that *'some risky activities provide opportunities for children to learn new skills'*. Indeed, various authors have questioned the assumption that all risk is inevitably dangerous and therefore children should be protected from it (Furedi, 2001; Heath and Wolf, 2004; Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2007). Heath and Wolf (2004) argue that the decision-making involved in taking risks affords children opportunities for being creative and developing autonomy. Therefore, the FSM modifies her earlier ideas by concluding that *'we shouldn't just restrict children's participation to risk-free choices'*.

### **Promoting the Child's Perspective through Participatory Parenting**

Finally, protection *through* participation encompassed promoting a participatory style of parenting which included parents empathising with their child's perspective and offering him/her conditional choices. The key technology for achieving this was through the advancement of 'positive parenting' strategies.

*I think for a lot of parents when you are under a lot of stress for various reasons, domestic violence, substance misuse, debt... those things can take over for parents and they lose sight of how the child is in all this and how the child might be feeling... Positive parenting skills can help with this and talking to the parent about how the child might perceive some of the things they've said, or that the child has observed, and how you put that safety back in for them (FSM).*

The aim of parenting interventions, such as the Webster-Stratton (2005) programme and Solihull Approach (Douglas, 1999), used by health and social care practitioners at TPCC, was to promote positive parent-child relations. Empathising with the child's perspective and promoting child involvement in behaviour management strategies were key components of these interventions.

*We talk [to parents] about instead of focusing on yourself and how it makes you feel when your child is behaving in a certain way, try and focus instead on the fact that they're trying to communicate something to you (HV2).*

*I think in attempting to teach parenting skills we're trying to promote more child involvement. Like instead of saying to a parent 'Try a star chart with him'*

*the approach could be 'Go and talk to him. Would he like a star chart? Or would he like some other way of showing he's been a good boy?'* (HV1).

The promotion of young children's participation with a particular style of parenting that was neither authoritarian nor permissive, but more '*positive*', was also vital, as the following example of contrastive rhetoric illustrates:

*In terms of young children's participation I hope that when we do the positive parenting stuff we're promoting to parents neither 'You're having weetabix' nor 'What do you want for breakfast?' because neither is good. In the first case you're not giving them any power or choice, but the other gives them too much scope for negotiation. We're trying to build in phrases like 'Do you want this, or do you want this?' and 'When you do this, then you can have this or do this'* (FSM).

A '*positive*' style of parenting contrasts with an authoritarian approach which does not give children '*any power or choice*'. It also contrasts with a permissive style which '*gives them too much scope for negotiation*'. Rather, a '*positive*' style of parenting, sometimes referred to as '*democratic*' or '*authoritative*' (Baumrind, 1968; 1991; Maccoby and Martin, 1983), is one in which parents try to establish a climate of children's self-realisation without losing control. One way the family support team sought to foster this was through promoting the use of conditional choice in parents' relationships with their children ('*Do you want this, or do you want this?'*; '*When you do this, then you can have this*'). In this way it was hoped that the child-parent relationship would be protected, as children were afforded some degree of participation in their interactions with parents.

### *Critical Reflections*

Practitioners did not make any critical reflections about their role in promoting a participatory style of parenting through the use of '*positive parenting*' strategies. Perhaps this was because the concept and practice of '*positive parenting*' (and its correlative binary of '*negative parenting*') acted as an unquestionable '*regime of truth*' or dominant discourse, governing how practitioners should think and behave (Foucault, 1980a). However, the FSM did touch on the notion of '*power*' in her discussion of the use of conditional choice with children. In her view, neither of the following two options was '*good*': giving children too much power or not giving them any power. Rather, children should be afforded some power through the mechanism of conditional choice.

However, if we were to reflect more critically on how power operates under circumstances of conditional choice, then we might see that this technology could be interpreted not only as a mechanism for the enhancement of children's participation but also for its constraint. Conditional choice affords children some degree of decision-making power, but also acts as a disciplinary means for controlling children, not through repression, but through creating a sphere of freedom in which children exercise a form of autonomy that is heavily regulated. Whether this is 'good' or bad, 'positive' or negative, or a hybrid of the two, is a matter of ethical debate.

### **8.4.2 Protection from Participation**

Within the protectionist discourse, professionals' constructions of participation were also framed in terms of the need to protect children *from* participation, particularly children who were considered to be the most vulnerable and in need of targeted support. This encompassed safeguarding children from the responsibility of protecting themselves from harm and from burdensome information. For children in general, it also encompassed protection from participating in unhealthy lifestyles and risky behaviours through regulating and encouraging parents to regulate children's choice of food and play activities.

#### **Protection from Participating in Child Protection**

Although, as argued above, young children in general could potentially participate in their own care and safety, the same practitioners felt that particularly vulnerable children should be safeguarded from the responsibility of protecting themselves from harm. A child's age, understanding and the level of risk determined whether practitioners felt young children could participate in their own protection or not.

*You know, under fives are so, so vulnerable ... We can teach nine, ten year olds, but how do we protect babies, toddlers? I mean look at the child deaths, the majority of them occur when children are very little for that very reason. Because it's very hard for them to protect themselves, and should they have the weight of that responsibility? No, of course not. It's not up to children to have to protect themselves, is it?... Expecting children to protect themselves in a way is almost laying blame on the children for what is happening to them. That would be a concern of mine that actually children aren't responsible and they shouldn't be. They should be nurtured, they should be protected, they should be looked after (FSW).*

This practitioner spoke of the desire to relieve children of the '*responsibility*' of protecting themselves. This applied particularly to babies, who are more at risk of suffering abuse and being killed than any other children (Cuthbert et al., 2011), and to disabled children, who are more at risk of abuse than their non-disabled peers (Spencer et al., 2005; Stalker and McArthur, 2010). For the FSW, an expectation that these particularly '*vulnerable*' children could participate in their own protection was deemed tantamount to '*laying blame*' on them for the abuse. Thus, under these circumstances, the nurturance and protectionist discourse should override children's participation: '*They should be nurtured, they should be protected*'.

### *Critical Reflections*

Some scholars argue that a nurturance orientation and a participatory orientation need not be pitted against one another, even in child protection cases (Franklin, 2002; Lee, 2005; Lansdown, 2006). Indeed, as Pinkney (2005) discusses, feminist discourse emphasises that children's protection is not a one way process, with adults as agents and children as recipients. Children should also have agency in the process. Adults need to take responsibility for children's protection by nurturing them, observing and listening to their perspectives, and empowering them to contribute to their own protection in accordance with their '*evolving capacities*' (Lansdown, 2006; UNCRC, 1989). Just as acknowledging young children's vulnerability is not an alternative to recognising their agency, respecting children's competencies is not an alternative to protecting their vulnerabilities (Woodhead, 2006). In this regard, Albon's (2011) construction of the child as '*competent but vulnerable*' provides a useful theoretical resource in reconciling the tension between young children's participation and protection.

### **Protection from Information**

According to the UNCRC (1989), the right to receive and impart information is seen as a prerequisite for realising the participation of children. Children's expression (Article 13) and active involvement in matters and decisions that affect them (Article 12) requires information sharing and dialogue between children and adults (Article 17). In practice, however, TPCC practitioners felt that young children should be protected from being given information about family assessments and safeguarding interventions, unless the child directly requested information, since this could potentially lead to further harm or confusion for the child.

*I wouldn't explain to a four-year-old that their family were being assessed. That would be inappropriate because how would they understand that? How would them knowing that help them or support them in any way? My concern would be I could worry them or confuse them.... I'm not going to give them information. If the child is asking me questions then I would provide that information. I would also expect the parent to be talking to the kids about why we were involved and stuff like that. But the pace of this stuff is always dictated by the child, it's not dictated by the worker, because you make an assumption then, that actually this is in this child's best interests, and it may not be (FSM).*

Here, the FSM refers to the ambiguous principle of the '*child's best interests*' as enshrined in Article 3 of the UNCRC. This principle highlights the potential dilemma whereby consideration of a child's interest trumps their right to information about matters that affect them. The '*best interests*' concept is inevitably subject to adult interpretation. Thus, practitioners make decisions about balancing a child's right to information and subsequent involvement in decision-making processes, with concern for their welfare. Here, the FSM '*makes an assumption*' that the right to information '*may not be*' in a '*child's best interests*', unless the child '*is asking me questions*'. Stasiulis argues therefore, that '*the participation of children will always occur in dialogue that is fundamentally asymmetrical given the dependency of children, the duties and responsibilities of adults*' (2002, p. 516).

### **Protection from Participating in Risky Behaviours**

Finally, a discourse of protectionism meant that children were protected and prevented from choosing to participate in behaviours that were considered to be risky and unhealthy. This occurred either directly through specific interventions aimed at children, or indirectly through programmes aimed at educating their parents. Practitioners appealed to the risk discourse in terms of the dangers of children taking risks, particularly in relation to physical play and unhealthy eating choices.

*Elly: Are there occasions when children are limited from making decisions?*

*HVI: Yeah like when there is severe behaviour issues, and safety issues and health or developmental issues... The main times are when it's a safety risk to another child, or themselves, or to the environment. Or when it is a health risk, like if a child is only choosing to eat certain foods. That could lead to obesity or being malnourished if they are not getting a balanced diet.*

*Elly: So what would you do?*

*HVI: We'd work with the family on food management and help mum and child come up with a diet plan.*

Children are prevented from participating in decision-making if they display '*behaviour issues*' in terms of posing '*a safety risk to another child, themselves or to the environment*', or '*when it is a health risk*'. Here, the risk and protection discourse frames not only young children's participation, but also produces them as particular subjects. Young children are constructed as 'at risk' of health-inhibiting behaviours such as '*obesity*', or '*malnutrition*' as a result of participating in unhealthy food choices, but also as 'risky' because of their participation in practices that threaten their own or others' '*safety*'. Under these circumstances, the fact that children's participation is constrained is justifiable, given that young children are in need of protection if they are to grow into healthy, socially responsible adults. Furthermore, a paternalistic approach is warranted in order to socialize children and their mothers into appropriate behaviours: '*We'd work with the family on food management and help mum and child come up with a diet plan*'. This is not entirely paternalistic, in that the HV and her team would '*work with the family... to come up with a plan*', rather than do it for them, suggesting that a participatory approach should be utilised in the effort to '*help mum and child*' modify their behaviour.

### *Critical Reflections*

In Foucauldian terms, the participatory approach of '*working with*' families involves helping them to participate in regulating their own behaviour through processes of governmentality. Children are being urged to conduct a number of operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being (Foucault, 1988) in order to become healthy, responsible agentic subjects who will choose wisely from the range of options available to them. In the case of young children, presumed incapable of making decisions about their health or safety, parents, particularly mothers, are urged to change their own and their children's behaviours. Managing the child's body through regulatory as well as participatory techniques of '*behaviour*' or '*food management*', with all the implications of disciplinary power that this suggests (Foucault, 1977), becomes a key feature of children's centre practitioners' concern with improving child outcomes and reducing childhood risks. Thus, young children are protected and prevented from participation whilst at the same time being urged to participate in regulating their own behaviour through processes of governmentality.

During this section I have argued that children's centre practitioners frame children's participation within a protectionist discourse in which children should either be



protected through participation or protected from participation. This reflects a deep ambivalence in thinking and practice and explains why practitioners can simultaneously work to enhance and constrain children's participation. Indeed children's participation has become established against a background of competing discourses encapsulated in liberationist/protectionist debates (Franklin, 1995; Jenkins, 1995; Fox-Harding, 1996). Handley (2005) argues that the extremes of both positions should be challenged and that children's rights to participation should be balanced against their rights to protection. However, Melton (2008) suggests that children's participation and protection, far from being opposed, are in fact intimately connected. Therefore they should not be pitted against one another, or balanced, but should be integrated, since both autonomy and protection are important elements of treating children with care and respect.

## **8.5 Attachment and Attunement**

A third discourse that professionals across all four services drew upon to conceptualise children's participation was attachment. This was seen through an emphasis upon sensitive attunement to children's emotions and communications. Parents, particularly mothers, who could mobilise their child's participation, by tuning in to his/her emotions, were seen as providing the necessary conditions to enable secure attachment. Similarly, practitioners, particularly keyworkers, who were attuned to children's communicative cues, could help to foster secure language development. Although the affective and communicative are entwined, nursery practitioners tended to focus more on communicative aspects of children's development, whereas health and family support staff tended to emphasise children's emotional development.

### **8.5.1 Participation as Tuning in to Emotions**

Health and social care professionals drew heavily upon psychoanalytical discourse in their description of their work in promoting children's participation, using notions such as '*attachment*', '*being attuned*' and '*bonding*':

*What I've been looking at with the team is how we can promote parent-child interaction... getting the parent involved with the child: communicating with them, being attuned to them... And that's all part of children's participation. How does the parent respond to the child, were they responsive, were they able to interpret what the child was wanting, what the child needed, were they engaged with the child, what was the attachment like, did the bonding seem to*

*be appropriate, the eye contact? What is the quality of interaction between mother and child... emotional warmth? All that stuff we're looking at (FSM).*

Initially, this framing of participation within the discourse of attachment was rather surprising to me, since no other study pertaining to children's participation has identified such an association. However, as staff talked about their work, and as I became more familiar with SSCC practice guidance (DES and DH, 2006) and NSF occupational standards (DH, 2004a), it was evident that the original SSLPs and subsequent children's centres were explicitly informed by attachment theory. Therefore, perhaps it was likely that children's participation would be situated within this dominant discourse, given that our research was being conducted in the specific context of a children's centre.

According to the FSM, children's participation encompassed '*getting the parent involved with the child: communicating with them, being attuned to them*'. The FSM appealed to a number of metaphors in the extract above. The musical metaphor of '*attunement*' is suggestive of the mother adjusting herself to the correct frequency of her child's emotions so that they interact harmoniously. '*Attachment*' and '*bonding*' imply two objects or people coming together and being joined securely. '*Emotional warmth*' likens parental responsiveness to physical heat, in which the '*quality of interaction*' is 'warm' as opposed to 'cool' or 'cold'. Together, these elements form the basis for a child's secure emotional attachment and are '*all part of children's participation*'.

'*Promoting parent-child interaction*', specifically '*between mother and child*', was also evident in the discourse the health visiting team drew upon in their description of children's participation:

*HVI: You have to sit back and watch from the outside, to see the participation of the child. I can see the situations where 'Oh you didn't pick up on that cue Mum, you missed that', you know that sort of thing. You miss the cues the children are giving for, to try and express their desires and emotions.*

*Elly: Could you tell me what you see as the benefits of picking up on children's cues?*

*HVI: Well, boundless probably. I mean tuning in is really going to give them the most positive interaction for their emotional development.*

In this conversation the mother-child dyad in particular is presented as ideal for young children's '*emotional development*'. Health visitors are able '*to see the participation of the child*' by observing whether '*Mum*' '*picks up on*' or '*misses*' her child's '*cues*'. '*Tuning*

*in'* to children's '*desires and emotions*' forms the basis for '*positive interaction*' in the mother-child relationship. Indeed, the language the HV uses here accords with the discourse of early attachment theorists: attentive mothers who attune to their child's emotions have securely attached children (Bowlby, 1953; 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978).

The HV's use of the word '*cue*' suggests that the young child is agentic, participating in the relationship by sending a signal to Mum to do something. This was also evident in Faye's description of an observation she carried out:

*I was observing Arron. He's about five months old. Mum wasn't cued into what he was looking for. She wanted him to just settle down but he wanted to do other things. So initially Mum wasn't quite cued into his behaviour, um, but once Jill [HV1] had modelled that, baby-sat, right down, eye-to-eye interacting, Mum was right in there. He had been using his voice to get Mum's attention initially, but once he had Mum's attention, there appeared to be quite a lot of reciprocity between the two of them. So part of our role in promoting children's participation is trying to model and encourage parents to respond to the children's cues (HV2).*

According to Faye, Arron participated through employing a number of agentic cues including: '*looking for*' objects, '*wanting to do other things*' rather than '*settle down*', and '*using his voice to get Mum's attention*'. The implication was that five month Arron was not passive in the mother-infant attachment process, but played an active role. Once Jill had modelled to Mum how to '*cue into his behaviour*', through getting down to Arron's level ('*baby-sat, right down*') and '*eye-to-eye interacting*', Mum was also able to participate ('*Mum was right in there*'). As a consequence '*there appeared to be quite a lot of reciprocity between the two of them*': as Arron affected Mum, Mum affected Arron.

Faye's use of the word '*reciprocity*' was a term she and her colleagues, as well as the FSM, used to describe this two-way process of social interaction and emotional exchange. The discourse of reciprocity is borrowed from the Solihull Approach (Douglas, 1999), a psychotherapeutic parenting model, which underpinned the practice of both the HV and FS teams at TPCC:

*It's based around attunement and attachment issues and recognising that sometimes in families when things aren't going well it's just because you need to tweak that relationship. ... It sees the relationship between the parent and child, it describes it as a dance of reciprocity, and sometimes the steps get out of sync (FSM).*

The metaphor of a '*dance of reciprocity*' suggests a co-ordinated exchange between parent and child in which both parties respond to one another's moves or '*steps*'. If the '*steps get out of sync*', the baby is likely to show signs of distress, indicating the need for re-attunement. According to Faye, low levels of responsiveness or high levels of intrusiveness can lead to asynchrony in the dance:

*You tend to find that parents either don't interact with their babies or that they over-stimulate them (HV2).*

This metaphorical 'dance of reciprocity' derives from psychoanalytic discourse, particularly Stern's work on 'affect attunement' (1985), Brazelton et al.'s (1974) concept of 'reciprocity' and Trevarthen's (1980) theory of intersubjectivity. Each of these theories holds in common the idea that both mother and baby are active participants in the initiation, regulation and termination of social interaction. Through reciprocal attunement and adjustment, a common basis for intersubjectivity is created (Trevarthen and Aitken, 2001). In drawing upon psychoanalytic discourse, which describes '*the relationship between parent and child... as a dance of reciprocity*', the FSM suggests that emotional attunement is a two-sided process in which both the child and parent participate. Thus, children's participation is enabled when the parent's and child's '*steps*' or affective states are synchronised, but constrained when the parent is insensitive to her baby's emotional cues.

### *Critical Reflections*

Both the FS and HV staff teams understood that part of their role at TPCC was to '*promote*' children's participation to parents. This involved observing the '*quality of interaction between mother and child*' and '*watching from the outside*' as well as '*trying to model and encourage parents*' to be responsive to their child's cues. In this way, practitioners hoped that children's participation would be enhanced. However, there was an element of disciplinary gaze and surveillance here too, which Faye (HV2) alluded to in an early draft of a paper we co-authored, discussing the findings of the WMWB PAR project (Maconochie and McNeill, 2010):

*Our desire to seek children's perspectives and to promote their participation with parents has led to more responsive and equitable practices, albeit at the risk of increasing the 'Big Brother' gaze at times.*

Thus, whilst helping parents to be responsive to their child's cues can enhance children's participation, it also risks "*increasing the 'Big Brother' gaze*". This metaphorical reference to Orwell's novel '*Nineteen Eighty-Four*' implies that young children and their parents are never far from the HV's gaze or the FSW's ear. Indeed, one of the critiques of attachment theory has been the way it has been inextricably linked to the regulation of parents, particularly mothers (Eyer, 1992; Burman, 1994a; Kanieski, 2007). The attachment discourse forms a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980a) that governs and regulates the behaviour of mothers and those who work with them. For example, attachment theory promotes a model of good parenting and correct mothering, as evident in the following comment:

*I suppose the evidence of a good enough parent is to be able to accurately interpret what the child is trying to communicate... whether the parent is responsive to that in a responsible way (FSW).*

To prevent insecure attachment, a '*good enough parent*' must be '*responsive*' to their child and act '*in a responsible way*' to monitor their own and their child's behaviour.

A further critique of the attachment discourse is that the focus on the mother-child dyad has led to a rather narrow and individualistic approach to parenting (Burman, 1994a; Penn, 1997; Browne, 2004), which downplays the attachments children make with other adults and children (Rutter, 1972; Leavitt, 1994). Indeed, research on infant attachment in more collective societies suggests that emotional security does not simply occur within the parent-child dyad, but occurs within an infant's 'attachment ensemble', that is, a group of adults and children with whom the child forms reciprocal relationships (Woodson and da Costa, 1989; Penn, 1997; Simms, 2008). Consequently, we must be careful that the value we place on promoting children's participation in the mother-child relationship does not obscure the importance of children's participation within other relationships.

### **8.5.2 Participation as Tuning in to Communications**

Closely related to the idea of adults tuning in to children's affective states in order to promote children's participation and secure attachment, was the idea that adults should also attune to children's communicative cues in order to encourage their participation and learning. Like the sensitive mother who is emotionally available for her child, a

sensitive keyworker who was physically and emotionally available could help to foster a child's participation and early language development:

*EYP: Children's participation is... giving children a voice, a voice to do what they want, not do it in the way that you want them to.*

*Elly: Can you think of an example of that?*

*EYP: I remember there were a little boy, he were really quiet, withdrawn, he were there and he were fine, but he was really quiet. He just wanted to, for you to just be there, to sit next to, and then all of a sudden this voice came and he were a new little boy.*

*Elly: What do you think made the difference there?*

*EYP: Time and patience and him feeling secure enough with me, and to know that he wouldn't be forced to speak: 'Come on why aren't you talking?' Just leaving him to initiate and then responding. He brought this wooden frog. It were a musical instrument. So we had this big music session with this frog and he were smiling. And then he said 'I'm doing it, I'm doing it'. Yeah I don't see him much now... but I know how vocal he is now.*

In this story, it seems as though children's participation 'gives children a [metaphorical] voice' 'to do what they want', and a literal voice to communicate. According to the EYP, key mechanisms for promoting this boy's participation and communication included 'time and patience', 'not being forced to speak', and responsive caregiving which led to secure attachments ('Him feeling secure enough with me'). Secure attachment with a keyworker who would 'just be there', and who let the child 'initiate' and 'then responded' to those initiations, facilitated the boy's participation and language development ('I know how vocal he is now'). Thus, feelings of security and emotional attachment played an important role in the development of the boy's communicative skills ('all of a sudden this voice came and he were a new little boy'). Indeed, a number of scholars suggest that language development appears to be stimulated in the context of a secure attachment relationship (Van IJzendoorn et al., 1995; Gauvain, 2004; Day, 2007). Furthermore, trusting relationships, in which adults are responsive to children's diverse modes of communication, make a huge difference to the quality of children's participation (Emilson and Folkesson, 2007; Bae, 2009; Thomas, 2010).

Nursery staff drew considerably on the attunement discourse in their description of how they encouraged children's participation:

*We try to encourage them, but we try not to, do you know, not to lead them in their play or be too directive in conversations... How can I put it? Like we try*

*and use their interests, knowing what the child likes. Let them take the lead. We have to be really tuned in (NP).*

*You've got to tune in to what they are saying and doing. Make suggestions and provocations rather than ask children lots of questions (EYP).*

*There are still some children who probably, for whatever reason don't necessarily approach an adult and have that sustained shared thinking between them and us. We probably need to tune into those children more because that will help us to ascertain their views and encourage their participation (Teacher).*

Encouraging children's participation involved being '*really tuned in*' to what the child was talking about or communicating during play and in conversations. Practitioners aimed to tune in to children's '*interests*' and intentions (*'what they are saying and doing'*) and '*let them take the lead*'. In so doing, they sought to foster episodes of joint attention, or what the teacher referred to as '*sustained shared thinking*' (Sylva et al., 1999; DES, 2007), thereby providing opportunities to enhance children's communication and participation. Practitioners also were concerned to not '*be too directive in conversations*' by '*asking children lots of questions*'. This was based on an idea that being too directive might constrain the young child's ability to participate in the conversation. Instead, the practitioner should set up the environment to provoke initiations from the child: '*Make suggestions and provocations rather than ask children lots of questions*'.

Much of this discourse was derived from principles underpinning the EYFS (DES, 2007). For example, Practice Card 2.3 states that 'Effective practitioners... tune in to, rather than talk at, children, taking their lead and direction from what the children say or do'. This discourse was also derived from principles underpinning the Hanen Approach (Weitzman, 1994), a language intervention programme adopted at TPCC in response to the large intake of children with EAL and SEN. The Hanen Approach is influenced by social interactionist and socio-cultural theories of language acquisition. Language development is thought to occur in the context of interaction between the developing child and a responsive adult, who models language usage and scaffolds the child's attempts to master language (Poll, 2011). The PM described how the Hanen Approach was effective not only for encouraging children's language development but also their participation:

*Our big focus in the nursery is on interactions with children and communication which does mean you find out children's views. We have a*

*commitment to the Hanen Project and one of the central aims of that is allowing the children to start the interactions and to follow children's leads in interactions which again should facilitate finding out children's views and allowing them some more meaningful participation in what goes on.*

In contrast to structured language programmes, and adult-directed conversations, the Hanen Approach encourages the adult to adopt a number of child-oriented strategies:

*What you have to do is sit quietly with the child, Observe-Wait-Listen. Not jump in and ask them questions like 'Where's your train off to?' cos straight away you can see those children become disengaged in what they're doing because that's not what they're doing. You've come in and taken over. That's what we do all the time isn't it? But if you could work that way, that Hanen way, obviously it's very high staff ratios, very skilled one-to-one work, child and keyworker, then you could increase children's participation (CC Manager).*

Child-oriented techniques include face-to-face body posture ('*sit quietly with the child*') and '*Observe-Wait-Listen*' or '*OWLing*'. *OWLing* involves observing, waiting and listening to the individual child in order to tune in to his/her communicative gestures, words and sounds, and what he/she is interested in. This creates the opportunity for children '*to start the interactions*' and for practitioners to '*follow children's leads*' by joining in with their play and by adding simplified language that highlights and expands on the child's utterances.

The Childcare Manager states that the Hanen Approach is '*very skilled one-to-one work*' between '*child and keyworker*' which can '*increase children's participation*'. Indeed, the discourse and practice of the '*Hanen way*' fits neatly with the child-centred discourse, in that it uses child-led strategies to enhance children's participation and learning. It also fits within the attachment and attunement discourse in that it places a strong emphasis on the individual keyworker forming a close and responsive relationship with the child and '*tuning in*' to his/her cues, thereby mirroring the mother-child dyad.

Across all four services, '*tuning in*' functioned as an important technology in combining the discourses of attachment and attunement with those of participation and development. '*Tuning in*' was important for children's participation because it produced the means by which the keyworker or therapist could come to '*know the child*' and plan for his/her further development:

*Because I work with little ones we have to be really tuned in to children's communications and what they are in to... So we really observe them... and*



*... speak to parents, and when we're interacting with children, know when to do things and what to do. I don't know whether I can explain that, but you just know, don't you? When you're with them as long as we are with them, you get to know what they want, what they're trying to say or communicate, what they can do, what they enjoy, what's going on in their heads, so you try to provide for that (EYP).*

By 'really tuning in', observing and talking to parents, the EYP could know all about the child: 'what they want', 'what they're communicating', 'what they enjoy' and 'what's going on in their heads'. This meant, therefore, that the practitioner could 'know when to do things and what to do'. Indeed, tuning in and knowing the child well helped the staff to listen to the child, enhance their participation and support their further development:

*The way I see staff taking children's participation into account is by getting to know the children... Everything in practice stems from knowing the child. If you've got to know them and you've observed them and know what they're capable of then you should be able to support them to take the next step (PM).*

This was the case in other services too:

*Elly: How do you try as a team of physios to make your service responsive to children?*

*Physio: A lot of it is about tuning in to children and appreciating what level they are at... It's working with the child or working with the parents, finding out what really motivates them and using that as your tool to achieve what you want to achieve within the session.*

Thus, 'tuning in', 'working with the child', and 'finding out what really motivates them' not only fostered children's participation but also enhanced their emotional, cognitive, linguistic and physical development.

### *Critical Reflections*

One of the effects of conceptualising children's participation within the dominant discourse of attachment and attunement is that participation is situated primarily within the mother-child dyad or is reproduced in the keyworker-child dyad. Singer (1993) argues that in the UK there is a strong adherence to 'attachment pedagogy'. This pedagogy is based on the belief that consistent maternal care is necessary to ensure secure development, and secure emotional attachment is vital for learning and language development. One of the consequences of this is that the importance of learning, communicating and participating in a one-to-one relationship with an adult has led to a lack of attention being paid to the way children participate, communicate and learn from

one another. As described in Section 6.5.3, the EYP and I came to realise this near the end of the PAR process. None of the nursery staff talked about children tuning in to one another's emotional and verbal cues, for example during play and other joint involvement episodes. None of the observations detailed children's participation in child-child relationships or in the child-peer group domain. Even the wall display (Appendix 15) we put up at the end of Phase 1 pictorially reflected this focus on the adult-child dyad. Close, responsive relationships are vital for enabling children's communication and participation. However, one of the dangers of the attachment discourse is that an exclusive focus on the key person-child dyad can constrain children's opportunities for interaction and participation with their peers (Penn, 1997; Dahlberg et al., 1999).

A further danger of a 'pedagogy of attachment' is that attunement is instrumentalized. 'Tuning in' to children's communicative signals and *'finding out what really motivates them'* can become, in the words of the physiotherapist, *'a tool to achieve what you want to achieve'*. Strategies such as OWLing can be employed simply as a matter of technique, rather than as a matter of mutual engagement. This is rather different from the idea of attunement as reciprocity, or of participation as a 'pedagogy of listening' (Rinaldi, 2005; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), both of which are founded upon non-instrumental relationships and are concerned with attending to children's concerns and interests, rather than organisationally-focused goals.

'Tuning in' to children's cues and following their leads can also be a way of 'knowing the child', even to the extent that the caregiver can put himself/herself into the mind of the child (*'you get to know... what's going on in their heads'*). Foucault (1977) suggests that power is the desire to know. This can be both positive and negative. Practitioners' desire to know the child can be productive because, in the words of the PM, it *'should facilitate finding out children's views and allow them some more meaningful participation in what goes on'*. However, the will to know through the discourse of attunement is also productive of practices that can render the individual child as knowable and therefore more governable. The danger of this is that 'tuning in' and 'knowing the child' can act as technologies of normalisation, determining how the child should be (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Secondly, since it is the individual keyworker who knows and plans for the individual child, this means that it is the individual keyworker's values that drive how the child is seen and what is planned for the child. MacNaughton

(2003) argues that these values may be conservative and work against progressive social change.

Poststructuralist theory would critique the notion that the practitioner is able to know the child. The idea that a practitioner could know the mind or essence of an individual is a fiction created through 'truth games' that express the politics of knowledge of the time and place (MacNaughton, 2005). Reflecting upon her ability to tune into Jerome's communicative cues, the SEN outreach worker concluded that, even with reading his gestures, following his lead, listening to his non-verbal utterances and using his communication book, it was impossible to fully know what he was communicating:

*Sometimes I do feel we have to like put words in to his head and he has to answer yes or no. Sometimes I don't think it's fair because we're probably on the wrong track. Even though I'm tuned in to him... we don't always know.*

If we wish to enhance young children's participation, we may well need to develop our abilities to become attuned to children's communications. However, Levinas' (1989) 'ethics of encounter' reminds us that this should not be at the expense of seeking to totalise or grasp the Other. Rather, our attempts to attune to young children should be based on a respect for the alterity and unknowability of the Other. Attuning respectfully to children requires us to recognise the impossibility of conclusively knowing their experiences, and appreciating that the interpretations we make can only ever be provisional and partial.

## **8.6 Managerialism and User Involvement**

Managerialism was a fourth discourse prevalent in practitioners' constructions of children's participation, particularly in relation to notions of user involvement. This was seen through an emphasis upon performativity and consumerism.

### **8.6.1 Participation as Performativity**

Managers, in particular, and practitioners from across all four services emphasised the importance of user participation as one of a number of performance targets they were required to meet. In an effort to improve service productivity, efficiency and accountability, both to the individual service user and to central government,

professionals spoke of the need to demonstrate how they were 'listening' and 'responding to users':

*I think this whole agenda at the moment is around services responding to users and multi-agency working. It's about how we can be more efficient, how we can avoid duplication of service, how we can provide services that are relevant and getting to the heart of what the issues are... We are working towards different targets: The National 'Children's Centre Guidance' ... the 'Schedule of Requirements' .... the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes and the 'Child Health Promotion Plan'... As part of all that we have to show how we are listening to the people who use our services (FSM).*

Without necessarily realising it, the FSM was drawing heavily upon a managerialist discourse in her description of user participation: 'We are working towards different targets'; 'we have to show how we are listening to the people who use our service'; 'It's about how we can be more efficient... how we can provide services that are relevant'. Indeed in recent years, as part of a neoliberal agenda, attempts to modernise welfare services have emphasised the importance of user participation and a managerial approach to service administration and delivery (Clark and Newman, 1997; Meagher and Parton, 2004; Langan, 2010). The aim has been to transform the passive recipient of services into a discriminating 'user' and 'consumer', whilst at the same time to manage and regulate the power of bureau-professionals who run those services (Clark and Newman, 1997). This is to be achieved through an array of managerial techniques including nationally and locally imposed targets, audit systems and inspection regimes in an effort to optimise the performance of public services.

The discourse healthcare practitioners used to describe this was that of 'user involvement', which should no longer be confined to adults but also applied to children:

*If we are looking at service delivery, children's participation is like user involvement: how to go about offering services that are relevant to people... User involvement is when you've got more say in what you select, what you want, and what you choose to be your path of care. Normally that would automatically go to being the adult but I suppose in a way it's looking at it being the same for a child (HV1).*

Two approaches to user involvement are evident in the HV's comment. The first was a managerialist or technical-rational approach which constructed user involvement as a means of improving services, making them more 'relevant' and effective at performing their allotted function. The second approach was a consumerist discourse which

constructed users as customers of services '*selecting*' their own care pathway (discussed in Section 8.6.2).

Education and childcare practitioners also drew upon a managerialist discourse in their framing of children's participation. At the beginning of the research several practitioners often referred to '*doing participation*' and '*conducting consultations*' with children in order to secure funding, provide evidence for the OFSTED Self-Evaluation Form and satisfy children's centre requirements.

*Well children's centres are required to listen to children's views about the planning, delivery and evaluation of their services so an inspector will be looking for how we do that. So if it's there up front in our welcome packs and policies then it's ticked off* (EYP).

The EYP's comment that '*an inspector will be looking for how we do*' participation suggests that, within a managerial discourse, participation becomes a performative process (Ball, 2004): a mode of regulation and technical measure in which practitioners are expected 'to do' participation with children and parents and provide evidence of it '*in our welcome packs and policies*'. This can help to ensure that '*children's views*' are listened to, and that they are provided with the opportunity to participate in '*the planning, delivery and evaluation of... services*'.

### *Critical Reflections*

As the PAR projects progressed, some of the staff began to reflect critically on the effects of managerialism:

*Listening needs to become part of how you do things rather than what you do. I mean the ECM consultations we've been asked to do for the Felldon Children and Young People's Plan ... it just seems a bit tokenistic. It's to tick a box for an adult rather than to listen to the child* (SENCO).

As the SENCO implies, one of the dangers of framing participation within a performative, managerial discourse is that participation is limited to something you do, a 'tick box' exercise, that can '*seem a bit tokenistic*'. By contrast, she suggests that '*listening needs to become part of how you do things*'. In other words, listening needs to be conceptualised as a relational practice, a way of being with children, rather than something '*you do*' to satisfy an adult agenda and '*tick a box*'.

Similarly, Meagher and Parton (2004) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that one of the effects of the managerialist discourse is that it can lead practitioners to take a more instrumental and impersonal approach to their work. This can threaten the caring, democratic-transformative dimensions of education, health and family support work. Participation and interaction with children can become little more than labour in the service of efficiency and performativity. Indeed, the managerialist discourse encourages practitioners to adopt an instrumental attitude to children's views and to conceptualise participation as a technical practice to be applied from time to time as part of the management task. However, these scholars suggest that an ethics of care (Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 1998) can counterbalance the instrumental rationality of managerialism. Within this alternative discourse, participation is seen as an ethic, a continuous process and relationship, characterised by interpersonal notions of care, interdependence and emotional engagement. In other words, practitioners can resist the hegemonic influence of managerialism by constructing children's participation not just as a rational-technical project but as an ongoing caring-ethical process. At Towersham, this was reflected in the changing emphasis practitioners placed upon 'doing' participation' to 'being' participatory that occurred through the process of PAR.

*I think participation is a work in progress. Rather than coming up with a definition of actions, something you do, it's more of a concept, a way of being. That's why our action research question has been about 'How can we make our practice with children more participatory?'* (EYP)

Managers and practitioners made other critical reflections about the effects of managerialism and performativity. On the one hand, a climate of managerialism enhanced children's participation since regulatory and inspection processes required staff to ascertain children's views of services and to demonstrate the subsequent action taken. On the other hand, staff spoke of participation becoming ever more constrained in a climate of increased managerialism with its centrally determined agendas:

*Well the children's centre core offer... is very prescriptive and we don't have a choice in how that's delivered, in terms of the core offer of health, home visiting, training, advice. We had more say as a community in the past but since it's moved to the council it's become a lot more centralised... In the initial phases, in developing the original services and the building, we did consult with children and with parents but at the moment I can't see how that can happen when the actual decisions about how services are being delivered are being taken out of the community* (PM).

According to the PM, one of the effects of managerialism is that '*centralised*' control and a '*prescriptive*' core offer have served to constrain the participation of children, parents and other community members in '*developing*' and '*making decisions about... services*'.

Furthermore, staff often felt there were too many competing agendas and managerial tasks to be able to take the time necessary to listen to children's views and encourage their participation in decision-making:

*I think it's very hard to have meaningful participation, to have children at the forefront of your mind in decision-making. Often there are such competing pressures ... We have huge constraints on staff time, you know the pressure on us at the moment is to cut back on staff... so I suppose it's the financial pressure leading to pressure on time. We seem to have a constantly changing agenda in terms of what we're trying to do with children (PM).*

*Sometimes children don't get listened to and seen enough because you've got so many families that you're busy with that you don't give them enough time... But it's not just that side of things. It's all your written stuff that you've got to do: all the monitoring for 'Children In Need', writing MPAs<sup>17</sup>, IEPs<sup>18</sup>, observations, review meetings and I'm only here four days so it soon goes fast (SEN Outreach Worker).*

These excerpts illustrate what happens to participation under managerial conditions. Managerialism carries within it the promise that user participation and better management will improve services for children (Pinkney, 2011) and yet, according to these professionals, managerialism constrains children's participation for two reasons. Firstly, the move towards centrally determined targets and programmes not only contradicts the original Sure Start ethos of community participation in service design and development, but also means that children's and parents' participation is enacted within 'top-down', instrumental agendas. Whilst there is a place for 'top-down' approaches to participation, a problem arises if the only outcomes of interest in participatory activity are those that are predefined (Moss, 2006). Secondly, as other research shows, managerial processes, coupled with the challenges of squeezed budgets and staffing pressures, take practitioners, and particularly managers, away from time spent with children (Ungerson, 2005; Fattore and Mason, 2005; Lefevre, 2010; Pinkney, 2011; Cottle, 2011). This is significant since time and building trusting relationships are

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17 Multi-Professional Assessment

18 Individual Education Plan

vital factors in enabling children's participation (McNeish and Newman, 2002; Archard and Skivenes, 2009).

### **8.6.2 Participation as Consumerism**

A discourse of user involvement, which drew upon a consumerist model of participation (Beresford, 2005), also operated in practitioners' interviews and team discussions. In some ways this was unsurprising, given that the children's centre nursery operated on a mixed economy of government-funded and fee-paying places. Children's participation was also framed within a consumerist discourse in the health, family support and inclusion services. This too was unsurprising, given that the statutory guidance that health and social care practitioners have to work to (DH, 2004a; DH, 2008) emphasises the transformation of services from being welfare-focused into customer-focused organisations, run by professional managers. This discourse was evident in practice, through the use of consultations and charters, and in some of the language practitioners used to construct parents and children.

#### **Consultations and Charters**

One way the consumerist discourse was evident was the manner in which user involvement was often equated with consulting individual children about their favourite toys and foods. For example, during the time I was at the children's centre, the local authority participation officer worked with practitioners to conduct a survey with children which included questions such as: '*What do you like to play with outside/inside?*' and '*What do you like to eat/drink?*' Similarly, nursery and healthcare staff asked children to take photos of their favourite toys. The TPCC chef conducted a survey asking children about their favourite foods and used this as a basis for planning her lunchtime menus. The PM also made funds available for small groups of three- and four-year-old children to occasionally visit the local greengrocery with a member of staff to select and pay for the fruit and vegetables they wanted to eat during snack time. In each of these initiatives children's participation was enhanced as their consumer preferences were catered for.

Another way the managerial/consumerist model of user participation was evident was in the customer charters and complaints procedures issued by Felldon City Council and



displayed on the walls of TPCC (Appendix 16). This documentation was primarily aimed at parents as consumers of services. However, once we began the PAR phase of research, the Childcare Manager was keen that the EYP and NP should work together to draw up a participation charter for children based on their findings (Appendix 8), outlining what children could expect from the nursery staff. In so doing, it was hoped that these charters would enhance children's and parents' consumer rights by guaranteeing a commitment on the part of staff to '*listen to*', '*respond*', and '*work in partnership*' with them.

### *Critical Reflections*

Consulting children and catering for their individual preferences was one way to enhance their participation as consumers. LeVine (2003) argues, however, that an emphasis upon ascertaining children's favourite commodities, such as food or toys, overvalues individuality in children, which in turn is a reflection of the consumerism deeply embedded in the everyday upbringing of children in rich countries. The expression of consumer preferences from infancy onwards is viewed 'as essential aspects of a child's growing individuality - and a prized quality of an independent person' (LeVine 2003, p. 95). This contrasts with an interdependent ontology of personhood and a more social or collective understanding of user participation. Moss (2001b) suggests that, whilst the discourse and practice of managerialism/consumerism produces subjects fit to participate in the advanced liberal state, with its economic creed of neo-liberalism, it displaces children's participation as an issue of social and political significance.

Indeed, at the same time children were being consulted about their favourite toys and food, issues of more social and collective significance were under consideration by Towersham parents and local residents. A major consultation was taking place concerning the regeneration of the local neighbourhood and a series of events were held at TPCC for local residents to participate in shaping the plans. It was striking to me that, whilst Felldon City Council worked with practitioners to consult children about their individual consumer preferences, they missed an opportunity to ascertain children's views about the social issues of their local area. Thus, unlike the consultation with the adult residents of Towersham, the consultation with the children produced a form of listening which generated knowledge of the individual child's interests, but did not lead to children's participation in social change.

Beresford (2005) contrasts a managerial/consumerist model of user involvement with a democratic model. In the consultations with children, the individual children as consumers were asked for their one-off input, but ultimately it was managers who decided whether to make changes. By contrast, in the consultation with adults, a more democratic model was employed in which people were encouraged to collaborate with professionals to co-construct plans for their local neighbourhood and to make their own suggestions towards change.

During the PAR phase of research with the children, some of the TPCC practitioners began to adopt a 'coexistence model' (Evers, 2006) in which both the consumerist and democratic approach were evident in their practice and language. Thus, children were seen as consumers and as co-producers, both in the development of services and the wider community:

*I understand the importance of consulting children about what they like and what that does partly in influencing the service and how they are designed, but now I'm also sort of aware of what it does for children's participation in society in its widest sense (FSM).*

*Children have the right to contribute to what happens at nursery but they also contribute to the family and to the wider community, by being part of the family here at Towersham Park (Childcare Manager).*

*We will try to ... treat you as partners in your own care and learning and as fellow citizens... by recognising your unique contribution to the children's centre and to the wider community (Children's Participation Charter).*

In this way, practitioners began to reconstruct the user involvement discourse to include an emphasis not just on participation for effective services and a consumerist society, but also a focus on participation for the purposes of human communities and a civil society (Percy-Smith, 2008).

### **Customers and Users**

Consumerism was also reflected in some of the language Towersham practitioners used to construct children and their parents:

*EYP: We've got to cater for what children want because at end of day they are the people who use the service. It's our duty in't it? Like when*

- Dillon wanted Barney that afternoon. He was going 'I want Barney, I want Barney'. He didn't just want Barney book he wanted Barney on DVD.*
- NP: But according to his parents we're not allowed to let him watch DVDs.*
- EYP: Well although Mum says he can't watch TV here, Sue [the Manager] has given us the other argument that they need chill out time.*
- NP: The way Mum's looking at it is that she's not paying for him to come here to watch TV, which I understand. But he's not sitting in front of the TV all day but he might like five or ten minutes in the evening.*
- EYP: It's not easy. Who knows best? She's the paying customer but what about Dillon's participation? And what about Sue's argument? We've not passed that argument on to Mum yet. So it goes back to us to do that respectful negotiation between all of them.*

In this extract, two-year-old Dillon was constructed as a service user ('*they are the people who use the service*'), expressing preferences for particular goods ('*he wanted Barney on DVD*') that the practitioner had a '*duty*' to provide ('*We've got to cater for what children want*'). Furthermore, Dillon's parents, specifically his Mum, were conceptualised as '*the paying customer*', purchasing childcare services with the concomitant consumer rights to determine how those services should be delivered ('*according to his parents we're not allowed to let him watch DVDs*'). Thus Dillon was constructed as a service user and his parents as customers. These labels operated discursively, constructing both the relationship and attendant subjectivities of people participating in the relationships.

As the conversation unfolded a problem arose for these practitioners as Mum's consumer rights as '*paying customer*' conflicted with '*Dillon's participation*' as service user. Cowden and Singh (2007) argue that in the managerial/consumerist discourse of public services, professionals are constantly being reminded that '*user knows best*'. Gone are the days when users should simply be told what to do by professionals. The dilemma that arose for these practitioners, however, was '*who knows best?*' Was it the child as service user, the parent as paying customer, the manager as childcare professional, or should these practitioners exercise their own professional judgement?

### *Critical Reflections*

One of the power effects of managerialism is that it can create unhelpful binaries between child and parent participation, between service users and professionals, and between practitioners and their managers. Through the process of carrying out PAR, the

practitioners in this conversation concluded that neither the user perspectives of child or parent, nor professionals' perspectives should be privileged or subjugated, but should be situated in a process of '*respectful negotiation*' through ongoing critical dialogue between all parties. Practitioners admitted that this type of 'ethico-politics' discussion (Rose, 1999) or '*respectful negotiation*' between staff, parents and children was rather unsettling, since it produced shifting ideas about practice rather than a secure basis for action. It moved them from a position of certainty ('user knows best') to uncertainty ('who knows best?'), thus challenging the technical-rational discourse of managerialism. Drawing upon Rose, (1999) Dahlberg et al. (1999) describe this as 'introducing a stutter' into the narrative of managerialism. This uncertainty meant that the seemingly mundane issue of a child wanting to watch television became an opportunity for staff, parents and children to engage in the 'practice of minor politics' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) in which there were no fixed, one-size-fits-all solutions. Furthermore, engaging in the micropolitics of young children's participation shifted the focus from the individual to the situational.

To summarise, during this section I have suggested that, within the managerial discourse, children's participation is primarily constructed as performativity and consumerism. This can lead to practice which views participation as a task to be achieved in the desire to produce efficient and cost-effective services. On one level, these managerial tactics provide a useful starting point in enhancing children's participation, since children's involvement as service users and consumers is now officially part of the children's centre agenda. However, at a practice level, user involvement is yet another policy initiative which places demands on a workforce which is already stretched due to the imperatives of managerialism and the pressures of resource constraints. Furthermore, whilst few would disagree that user involvement is a 'good thing', there is a danger that the discourse of managerialism produces practices that manipulate children's perspectives to fit in with 'top-down' agendas, whilst at the same time regulating and controlling the children's workforce. A second danger is that it produces practices that merely consult children about their individual consumer preferences, thereby denying them opportunities to participate in democratic dialogue about issues of wider social and political significance.

In spite of this, and through a commitment to PAR, I have also described how some practitioners at TPCC have contested the official discourse of managerialism by seeking

to move beyond the constraints of a consumerist and rational-technical focus, to also embrace the more caring, relational and political dimensions of participatory practice with children. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) describe it, this has involved a process of opening up to the 'ethics of care' and the practice of 'minor politics'. Indeed, if children's participation is to be enhanced, then managerial processes need to support, rather than detract attention away from, ongoing relationship-building and dialogue between practitioners, children, parents and the wider community.

## **8.7 Opening Up the Dominant Discourses**

The four service areas drew on each of the four dominant discourses at different times and to greater or lesser extents. The nursery and inclusion services drew most heavily upon developmentalism, particularly in their focus upon a pedagogy of child-centredness and attachment. The health and family support services drew most heavily upon the attachment and protectionist discourses, particularly in their focus upon promoting children's participation to parents. The specific discourse of 'user involvement', as it pertained to children's participation, was used by healthcare professionals only. Finally, the consumerist/managerialist discourse was evident across all four services, but tended to be taken up at particular times, for example when a consultation or service evaluation was being conducted, or when staff were being asked to contribute to the children's centre self-evaluation form.

The fact that the discourse of 'children's participation' differentially combined with these four dominant discourses, would seem to suggest that participation took on 'polyvalent' qualities (Foucault, 1978) in the children's centre. This meant that the term was used in variable ways and as a consequence was enacted in a variety of different practices. These different understandings and performances of participation made it difficult for practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds to share a common perspective and achieve integrated ways of working around children's participation at TPCC, since the meaning of the term kept changing according to who was using it and which discourse they were drawing upon at that particular time. However, there were some overarching commonalities between the four discourses. I would suggest that these commonalities are based on 'an ethics of individualism and instrumentalism' and 'a politics of government and governmentality'.

### **8.7.1 An Ethics of Individualism and Instrumentalism**

In all four discourses the dominating tendency was to focus on the individual child or the individual adult-child dyad. This is illustrative of, what Burman (1994a) refers to as, the 'western ideology of individualism' (p. 182). For example, in the child-centred discourse, children are given freedom to make individual choices from the 'continuous provision', to pursue their own private interests, and to participate in decisions about their own play and learning. In the protectionist discourse, the intention is that the individual child should protect himself through participating in his own care, self-assessing risk, and expressing his views, wishes and feelings. In the attachment discourse, individual mothers are encouraged to tune in to their child in order to enhance their child's participation. This focus on the mother-child dyad produces an individualistic approach to parenting. Similarly, an individualised notion of attachment is at the core of the key person approach. Finally, in the managerialist discourse, individual children are consulted about their favourite commodities and where possible their individual preferences are catered for.

An individualistic conceptualisation of children's participation, which is consistent with liberal principles of citizenship, celebrates individual freedom and the child's right to express views and preferences, make choices for themselves and determine the shape of their lives. However, Taylor (1991) suggests that there is also a dark side to individualism. Individualism involves a centring on the self and a concomitant dismissal of wider concerns that transcend the self. We focus on ourselves and our individual rights, and become less concerned with the social and our rights-in-relation with others (Taylor, 1991). Furthermore, within individualism, difference (such as disability, ethnicity and gender) is invisible because children are understood to be both individually different and worthy of the same 'equal' treatment. Lastly, an individualistic approach to participation tends to obscure the fact that children are part of wider society, and that they participate, learn and develop in relationships with each other and not just within the adult-child dyad.

Each of these discourses also has instrumental undertones. Bae (2010) suggests this is unsurprising considering how neoliberalism and managerialism tend to govern discourses regarding early years services. The underpinning assumption of all four discourses is implicitly consumerist, in that children's development, protection and

attachment is intrinsically tied up with the development of neoliberal market economies. Children who express preferences, make choices, have their needs met and develop independence will become more competitive and successful individuals, better able to participate in the future economy of their countries as entrepreneurs and consumers (Burman, 2008; Penn, 2009; Hartley, 2009). The participatory ethos embedded in recent legislation and children's centre guidance, which is played out in different discursive fields, is not necessarily reflective of a concern with social justice and democracy, but, rather arises from an 'ethics of individualism' (Walkerdine, 1992) and a managerial concern with efficiency and productivity. This can mean that participatory practice is child-centred rather than relationship-centred, a task to be achieved rather than an ongoing relational process, and focused more on individual choice than collective decision-making (Moss, 2008). Consequently, without critical reflection upon the political effects of these dominant discourses, children's participation is in danger of being co-opted within current truth regimes of neoliberalism, individualism and consumerism.

### **8.7.2 A Politics of Government and Governmentality**

As participation is absorbed into these four dominant discourses, it is also in danger of being co-opted into processes of government and governmentality, creating conditions for the disciplining and self-disciplining of children, parents and practitioners. For example, participation as child-centred pedagogy is based on egalitarian principles of treating all children the same, regardless of social differences such as age, (dis)ability, ethnicity and gender. This can lead to normalising practices in which all children are expected to participate by exercising free choice and leading their own learning, in spite of social inequalities that structure children's differential access to choice and learning.

Within the protectionist discourse, encouraging parents to adopt participatory styles of parenting through positive parenting strategies can create a means of normalising certain desired forms of participation. For example, the idea of offering children 'risk-free' and 'conditional choices' acts as a disciplinary means for controlling children, not through repression, but through creating a sphere of freedom in which children exercise a form of autonomy that is heavily regulated. Similarly, the participatory process of working with children and their parents to draw up diet and behaviour management

plans is a means of invoking them to participate in regulating their own behaviour through processes of governmentality.

'Listening' and 'tuning in' to the child, albeit behind benign masks of child-centredness, protectionism, consultation and attachment, can be used as a means of 'knowing' and governing the child more effectively. Indeed, the attachment and attunement discourse can be used to bring children and their mothers ever more constantly under surveillance.

Finally, within the managerial discourse, an emphasis upon improving service efficiency and accountability, through consulting children and parents as consumers and users, sets up conditions for monitoring and regulating the children's workforce. Managerialism also risks producing practices that manipulate children's perspectives to fit in with 'top-down' agendas at the expense of children's own agendas.

Thus, what each of these four discursive regimes of participation hold in common is that they are all based on a curious combination of individualisation techniques and totalisation procedures (Foucault, 1982). In spite of this, children, parents and practitioners are not entirely powerless in the face of these dominant discourses, and, as I have argued in this and in previous chapters, are active in resisting their disciplinary effects. Discourses describe, enable and produce the possibility of certain behaviours and actions. However, discourses can also become taken-for-granted truths, excluding practitioners from imagining alternative ways of viewing their participatory practice with children. Nevertheless, opening up these discourses and exposing them to critical reflection can help practitioners and researchers to interrogate their usefulness, as well as their limitations, in enhancing children's participation.

## **8.8 Opening Up to New Discourses**

Dahlberg et al. (2007) suggest that we can never entirely escape discourse but that, through processes of critical thinking and the practice of minor politics, we can open ourselves up to new understandings and alternative discourses. Through critical reflection (described in this chapter) and the minor political practice of PAR (described in Chapters 6 and 7), I have described how practitioners and managers opened themselves up to new ways of thinking and alternative practices in order to enhance children's participation. As we met to evaluate the project, for the EYP and the CC



Manager in particular, this led them to consider that children's participation might be located not simply within an individualised and implicitly consumerist discourse of child-centredness, but that children's participation in the children's centre might be conceptualised as a form of collective democracy between citizens, young and old alike:

*I think it's [participation] to do with, more than anything, about negotiation... and about children being seen as citizens, as valued members of society. Respected and respectable member of society... Learning to be and realising that their actions do have an affect on other people.... It's about democracy, a democratic way of working which is different from a way of working where one person, or group of people, tells everyone else what to do... It's about a mindset, an approach and a culture; trying to bring democracy in. It's about a way of thinking but it also impinges on your actions (EYP).*

*I think hopefully a lot of what happens to encourage children's participation is democratic in a way. But just putting that name on it, that label of 'democracy', opens up a new dimension to our practice (CC Manager).*

By 'naming' children's participation as 'negotiation' and 'democracy' it becomes possible to think of children as 'citizens', 'as valued members of society', and as having an 'affect on other people'. As the CC Manager states, broadening the discursive base of professionals' understanding of 'children's participation' to include democracy and citizenship 'opens up a new dimension to our practice'. By naming these things, it becomes possible for adults to think, discuss and work differently with children.

For the EYP, opening up to the alternative discourse of democracy not only involved reconceptualising the notion of children's participation, but it also encompassed reconceptualising his constructions of children:

*Rather than children being empty vessels to fill, this project has made me think about them as full vessels to spill. Instead of them being born like sucking up sponges, they are also leaking sponges. Yes they are receiving, but they are also contributing (EYP).*

This idea of children as 'contributors', and not simply 'recipients', was further reflected in the 'Children's Participation Charter' (Appendix 8) that the EYP and NP drew up as part of the PAR process. Here, the practitioners conceptualised children as participating members not just of TPCC, but of the wider community, reflecting a new commitment to recognising children's connectedness alongside their individual 'uniqueness'. Children were also constructed as 'partners' and 'fellow citizens':

*Our goal is to recognise your right to participate and belong at TPCC and in the wider community. We will try to... treat you as partners in your care and learning and as fellow citizens by recognising your unique contribution to the children's centre and the wider community (Children's Participation Charter).*

Finally, opening up to an alternative discourse of participation encompassed reconceptualising the children's centre so that it was not simply a place for children and parents to receive Sure Start services, but a non-instrumental space for democratic participation, 'being and belonging':

*EYP: I see a children's centre as being a place for children, but children as part of a family, a community, rather than just children and parents receiving Sure Start services because they live in a deprived area. And everybody with different needs, wants and views listening to each other, participating and democratically deciding together what happens. So the children's centre is a bringing together of all those views and different ages and perspectives.*

*Elly: For what purpose?*

*EYP: To be, I suppose really. I mean it doesn't have to be for a purpose other than that... It's about being and belonging.*

## **8.9 Conclusion**

During this chapter, in attempting to understand what children's participation means in a children's centre context, I have sought to make visible the prevailing discourses that shape its conceptualisation and enactment. The four discourses of developmentalism, protectionism, attachment and managerialism were identified, revealing participation to be a polyvalent discourse, in the sense of having many values and meanings. Each of these dominant discourses carried particular effects of power, making some actions possible whilst precluding others. Whilst each of these discourses celebrated the child's right to express views, make choices and determine the shape of his/her life, I suggested that each of these discursive regimes was underpinned by an ethics of individualism and instrumentalism and a politics of government and governmentality. This meant that there was a danger that children's participation could be co-opted as a neoliberal and managerial tactic, and as a disciplinary mechanism of power. In spite of this, I described how, through a process of critical reflection, practitioners and I endeavoured to open up these discourses, and the constructions and practices they produced, in order to examine their discursive effects in constraining and enhancing children's participation. Finally, I documented how, through the process of PAR, two children's centre professionals opened up a new discursive space in which participation was reframed as democracy,

children were reconceptualised as citizens, and the children's centre was reconstructed as a democratic space of being and belonging for citizens young and old alike.

## **9. Conclusion**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins by summarising the main findings from the study, advanced in the three empirical chapters. I also discuss some of the limitations of the study and provide suggestions for further research. Following this, I outline the contribution to knowledge this thesis makes. Finally, the thesis ends with some reflexive concluding. I intentionally choose to call these 'concludings' to reflect the idea that the knowledge co-constructed with the children, parents and staff of TPCC and my reflexive readings and re-presentations of the data are both partial and provisional, and therefore open to further reflection and discussion.

### **9.2 Summary of Findings**

In Chapter 2 I argued that children's participation means different things, in different contexts. Whilst typologies of participation are a useful starting point for conceptualising the field, they fail to take account of children's participation in their different socio-spatial contexts. Consequently, a primary goal of this research was to understand what young children's participation means and looks like in the multidisciplinary context of an English children's centre.

Given that children's participation cannot be understood in isolation from the social, cultural and political contexts in which it occurs, I examined what young children's participation means and looks like across the socio-spatial domains of four different children's centre services. This included children's participation in education and childcare, health, family support and inclusion services. Next, I considered the cultural-ethical contexts of children's participation in the children's centre by examining the dilemmas of participatory practice with young children. Finally, I considered the politico-discursive contexts which frame professionals' understandings of the notion of participation. By analysing the domains, dilemmas and discourses of children's participation, I considered what participation means from the bottom-up: that is from everyday, micro-interactions to wider dominant discursive regimes.

A second goal of the research was to gain a greater understanding of how young children's participation is enhanced and/or constrained by social processes taking place in the children's centre. I argued that the different physical, temporal, relational, cultural and discursive domains of the children's centre played a role in both enhancing and constraining children's participation.

Taken together, these research aims formed the basis for a collaborative research endeavour with children, parents and practitioners of Towersham Park Children's Centre, in which we sought to co-construct localised understandings of young children's participation, as well as to engage in the practice of 'minor politics' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) by conducting a number of PAR projects to enhance children's participation. A summary of the findings is presented below. I should restate that, given my epistemological position as outlined in Chapter 5, my aim has been to present these findings not as a final analysis of the truth, or as definitive claims to knowledge, but rather to offer a considered account of what seemed to be taking place at the time.

In summary, children's participation in the context of a Sure Start Children's Centre is an ambiguous and polyvalent construct. Its discourses and practices are inherently ambiguous, in the sense that participation is both dangerous and emancipatory, both a means of control and a means of self-realisation. The development of children's centres across every community in the country has been accompanied by policy directives that young children should be seen as participants and given opportunities, like their parents and other community members, to participate in children's centre service development. Yet, children's centres reflect a wider public policy discourse that combines children's rights to have a say in matters affecting them and to participate in decision-making on the one hand, with control and protection on the other. Indeed, as 'enclosures' (Foucault, 1977) children's centres are sites of surveillance and regulation, as well as possible spaces for the democratic engagement of children and adults. I have argued that children's participation is also polyvalent, in the sense of having many different values and meanings. It differentially combines with other discourses in various ways, achieving various effects. This means that the term is enacted in a variety of different practices and domains in the children's centre.

In Chapter 6, I argued that children's participation does not occur in individual children's isolated performances, but through social and spatial interactions. Indeed

children's participation is structured in space, time and relationships. Therefore, our conceptualisation and enactment of young children's participation needs to take account of the physical, temporal and relational domains of children's participation in the children's centre.

Physical space, and the material objects therein, play a role in the shaping of young children's participation. For example, children's participation is constrained through the arrangement of fences, furniture and objects and the distribution of children into separate areas within the children's centre. This means that children's participation in decisions about their bodily movement and interactions with the environment and with other people is restricted. The organisation of space and spatial practices of distribution can act as technologies of government (Foucault, 1977), leading to children's marginalisation, as was the case, for example, with the toddlers in the WMWB health clinic. Nevertheless, I argued that children are not simply passive recipients of spatial practices but participate in creating and recreating their physical environment. For example, they participate through communicating their perspectives of space in verbal and bodily ways, as was the case with Amina and Dillon in contesting the fence and locked gate which partitioned the outdoor play area. Children also participate in the production of space through the repositioning of their own bodies in space, and through the rearrangement of play equipment, resources and furniture, as was the case in nursery, at WMWB and at BCLC.

I also suggested that certain material objects within the physical environment matter a great deal to children and their participation. If, as the UNCRC suggests, children's participation involves ascertaining children's perspectives of matters that affect them, then this has to include recognition of the everyday material objects that affect and matter to them. Furthermore, certain material objects can make children more agentic and thus enhance their participation. For example, babies can be enabled to participate in choosing toys with the assistance of horseshoe cushions, and children with language difficulties can be enabled to participate with the use of high- and low-tech communication devices. Consequently, children's agency and participation is not an individual attribute, but is a product of the relational and material networks available to them. I concluded that if young children's participation is to be enhanced, one of the conditions it requires is a material and discursive space conducive to its performance. This involves adults using children's perspectives to reconsider current spatial practices;

experimenting with alternative practices; and creating opportunities for children's participation to be scaffolded through the assistance of other people, material resources and a physical environment that promotes their decision-making.

Next, I argued that the temporal domain shapes children's participation through technologies such as timetables, routines and transitions, but children also participate in shaping the temporal patterns of their lives at the children's centre. Children participate in decision-making through the temporal freedoms afforded to them by adults, such as the freedom to decide how long they engage in a particular activity and when they transition to a new field of activity. However, children also participate in resisting adult-imposed routines and transition arrangements that structure their time. Furthermore, drawing on the work of Corsaro (1985) and Corsaro and Molinari (2005), I argued that children participate in the temporal domain by actively constructing their own peer routines and priming events. These findings have two implications for conceptualising and enhancing children's participation. Firstly, conceptualisation of young children's participation needs to incorporate notions of resistance as well as compliance. Secondly, if children's participation in temporal processes is to be enhanced, then children's peer routines, priming events and temporal acts of resistance need to be reflexively 'read' and responded to by the adults caring for them.

Young children's participation also occurs in different relational domains of the children's centre, including those of the practitioner-parent-child, mother-child, practitioner-child and child-child. I argued that it is this last domain that is often overlooked in research studies and theoretical literature pertaining to children's participation.

Within these different relational domains, children's participation is enacted, not just in the verbal articulation of views and in cognitive processes of decision-making, but also through micro-political acts of embodied participation. I suggested that, if we are to have a more inclusive theory of participation that embraces very young, preverbal and disabled children, participation needs to be framed to incorporate embodied performances (such as bodily gestures and proto-conversations) as well as voice. Rather than expecting children to participate as independent, rational, disembodied agents, we need to recognise that young children (and adults) participate in embodied, spatially located performances in relation with others. I also suggested, with reference to a

mother and baby's breastfeeding relationship, the giving and receiving of care between a toddler and young disabled child, and the gestural exchanges of a toddler and keyworker, that it is the interdependent and reciprocal quality of relationships that creates spaces for participation.

An understanding of these different domains of children's participation helps us broaden decontextualised notions of participation as 'children being listened to' and 'children participating in decision-making' to encompass ideas of participation as 'embodied performance in space'.

In Chapter 7, I argued that an examination of the dilemmas and problems of young children's participation in a children's centre reveals that young children's participation can be complex, messy and risky, and therefore its enhancement and constraint is not simply a matter of technique, but a matter of, what Dahlberg and Moss (2005) refer to as, ethico-political practice. I gave examples of how young children's perspectives, and their rights to participate in children's centre services, can conflict with parents', practitioners' and other children's cultural values, rights and responsibilities. Drawing on Mouffe (2005), I argued that participation dilemmas can create agonistic spaces where we have the opportunity to engage in critical reflection and dialogue, where values and rights are discussed and different views and experiences are exchanged. Thus the dilemmas can open up a space for further participatory practice in the children's centre, if participants are prepared to engage in ongoing processes of respectful negotiation, situated ethics and critical reflexivity.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I argued that children's participation is attached to different political agendas and dominant discourses that shape the way it is conceptualised and enacted. Children's centre professionals framed the notion of children's participation within the discourses of developmentalism and child-centredness, protectionism and risk, attachment and attunement, and managerialism and user involvement. Each of these discourses produced conditions that both enabled and constrained children's participation.

The discourse of developmentalism and child-centredness afforded children the opportunity to be participants in the children's centre, to make decisions and to exercise self-determination through technologies such as 'free choice' and 'child-led learning'.



Yet, on occasions, a 'free choice' approach could constrain some children's participation on account of social differences, including class, (dis)ability, ethnicity and gender. Thus, participation as child-centred pedagogy also acted as a discursive practice that produced inequitable power effects including marginalisation and exclusion.

Within the protectionist discourse, children's participation was enhanced through a strategy of 'protection through participation'. This comprised listening to the child's views, wishes and feelings in order to protect them from harm and abuse, and ensuring that the child's perspective was paramount. It also encompassed children participating in their own care and protection through contributing to record-keeping and assessments and by making 'limited', 'risk-free' and 'conditional' choices about their health and basic care routines. Finally, the protectionist discourse meant that practitioners saw it as their responsibility to promote children's participation with parents through 'positive parenting' techniques. At the same time, children's participation was constrained through a strategy of 'protection from participation'. This encompassed safeguarding vulnerable children from burdensome information and from the responsibility of participating in their own protection. For children in general, it also encompassed protection from participating in unhealthy lifestyles and risky behaviours through regulating, and encouraging parents to regulate, children's choice of food and play activities.

The attachment discourse produced practices that placed a strong emphasis on the individual mother or keyworker forming a close and responsive relationship with the child and 'tuning' in to his/her emotional and communicative cues as a means of enhancing the child's participation. The discourse of attunement and reciprocity constructed children as active participants in social interactions with their caregivers, contributing to and influencing the relationship. Children's participation was enhanced as practitioners 'modelled' and 'encouraged' parents to be responsive to their child's cues, and as keyworkers employed a number of child-oriented strategies that enabled children to take the lead in interactions and conversations. However, the high value placed on promoting children's participation in the mother-child or keyworker-child dyad could obscure the importance of children's participation within other relationships. Furthermore, the discourse of attunement was productive of practices that could render the individual child (and mother) as knowable and therefore more governable.

Finally, children's participation was framed within a discourse of managerialism and user involvement. This afforded children the opportunity to participate as users and consumers of children's centre services, expressing individual preferences for particular types of food, activities and toys. Managerialism helped to ensure that children's views were sought, usually through one-off consultations, and where budgets allowed, their consumer preferences were catered for. On the other hand, the discourse of managerialism, with its emphasis upon performance targets, inspection regimes and self-evaluation forms, meant that children's participation was often conceptualised as a task to be achieved, rather than as an ongoing relational practice. Furthermore, an emphasis upon performativity and organisationally-focused goals could constrain children's participation by denying them the opportunity to participate in democratic dialogue about issues that might be of concern to them.

I argued that the fact that participation has polyvalent qualities can make it difficult for practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds to share a common perspective and to achieve integrated ways of working around children's participation. Secondly, I suggested that, whilst each of these discourses celebrated the child's right to express views and make choices, each of these discursive regimes was underpinned by an ethics of individualism and instrumentalism, and a politics of government and governmentality. This meant that there was a danger that children's participation could be co-opted as a neoliberal and managerial tactic, and as a disciplinary mechanism of power. I concluded that, through processes of critical reflection and the minor political practice of PAR, it is possible for children's centre practitioners to resist such tactics by opening themselves up to alternative discourses. For some of the staff at TPCC, this involved reframing participation as democracy, reconceptualising children as citizens and reconstructing the children's centre as a democratic space of being and belonging.

In these alternative conceptualisations, participation is no longer premised upon managerial, instrumental ideas of listening to children and involving them in individual, consumerist choice-making, but is folded into broader ethico-political principles of democracy and lived citizenship. Children are constructed as active citizens, invested with agency and decision-making capacities. They are respected as valued members of the citizenry (or in this case, the children's centre) not just by virtue of their membership in the community, but also through their active participation in it. Indeed, children's participation is connected with notions of agency and democracy. Thus, children

exercise agency to participate in decisions, actions and meaning-making. However, although the terms are interrelated, children's agency and participation are not necessarily synonymous. Agency can be understood as children being active in a psycho-social sense. In other words, children (and adults) act upon the world. They are active in the determination of their lives and society around them. Indeed, in this thesis I have argued that participation encompasses recognition of young children's agentic capacities in relation with other people, places and things. Yet, participation differs from agency in that it also carries a political element, in the sense of children negotiating with others, making decisions and/or influencing their situation. Hence, young children's participation is both procedural (in that it encompasses children's agentic action and embodied performance in space) and substantive (in that children participate in decision-making, citizenship practices, minor politics and democracy).

In the words of the Childcare Manager at Towersham, locating children's participation within the wider project of democracy '*opens up a new dimension to our practice*'. The children's centre becomes a space in which the citizenship status of even the youngest of children is recognised and in which children's minor political practices are actively encouraged. Participatory democracy becomes a mode of living, a way of being with children, a relational rather than a technical practice. It involves listening to young children, reflexively 'reading' their resistances, responding to their embodied performances, participating in collective decision-making and action over small everyday issues as well as larger matters of concern, valuing diversity and dissensus, and engaging in agonistic dialogue through a process of respectful negotiation between young and old alike.

### **9.3 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research**

As with any research project, there were limitations with the study. This included methodological, ethical and theoretical limitations.

In terms of methodology, given the small-scale, qualitative and critical intent of the project, this research could be critiqued for being non-generalisable, subjective and partisan. In Sections 5.8.2 and 5.8.3 I justified how I have countered these criticisms through foregrounding the alternative evaluative criteria of 'relatability' (Wellington,

2006), 'meaning-making' (Dahlberg et al., 1999) and 'political praxis' (Lather, 1991). Secondly, in terms of methodology, I wanted to engage the participation of an occupational therapist and speech and language therapist, in order to broaden the representation of participants from inclusion and therapy services. However, given the heavy demand of case loads and the fact that they were covering several children's centres, these practitioners declined participation. Ascertaining the perspectives of professionals from these services could form the basis for future research into children's participation. A further difficulty occurred during the ethnographic phase of the fieldwork, in that two participants from the family support team were redeployed to other children's centres. As a result, I was unable to spend a proportional amount of time with the family support team, as I did with the other services. Finally, I had hoped that this research would lead to participatory action research projects, not just within different services, but also between services, to reflect the ideals of integrated children's centre provision. However, in practice this did not happen because, in spite of good intentions, several services were facing significant challenges, including cuts in funding and major service restructuring. Therefore, staff were unable to commit the necessary time to such an endeavour. So, whilst this study had a multi-agency focus, it was limited by a lack of focus on children's participation in relation to collaborative, inter-agency working. This too could provide an avenue for future research.

As outlined in Section 5.5, gate-keeping procedures prevented me from inviting the participation of children and parents accessing health and family support outreach work. This meant that only those who attended centre-based activities could participate in the study. Furthermore, although not prevented from doing so, I was dissuaded by the NHS Research Ethics Committee from gaining the participation of looked after children. I had already spent four months gaining ethical approval from health, social care and university bodies, and could not afford to spend the extra time required to pursue this. Both of these ethical issues meant that particularly vulnerable children were excluded from research participation (which is often the case in research with children). However, we did conduct the research with children who are typically excluded from research, namely: children from ethnic minority and migrant families, disabled children and young babies.

The theoretical limitations of this research are that I have focused mainly on children's participation from a political stance. That is, I have primarily looked at the issue of

participation through the theoretical lenses of power, governmentality, and democracy. I also intended to examine the topic from a social theory perspective, looking at issues of social capital and habitus, but decided to narrow my focus for pragmatic reasons. Consequently, another possible line of future inquiry would be to apply a social, as well as political, lens to the data.

As discussed in Section 6.5.3 and suggested by the EYP, another line of empirical inquiry would be to conduct further research into young children's participation, not just in the intergenerational domain of child-adult relationships, but also in the peer domain of child-child relationships, because it is this domain that is often overlooked in research studies and theoretical literature pertaining to children's participation. Finally, a further suggestion for research would be to examine the impact of the Coalition Government's policy reforms of children's centres, and the effect this is having upon young children's participation in these particular settings.

## **9.4 Contribution to Knowledge**

This thesis makes a substantive contribution to knowledge by seeking to locate the notion of young children's participation within the socio-spatial context of an English children's centre. Whilst the participation of older children and young people in children's services in England has become more commonplace, this is not yet the case for younger children, particularly children aged four and under (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Kirby et al., 2003; McNeish and Newman, 2002; Clark et al., 2003; Clark et al., 2005; Pascal and Bertram, 2009; Lansdown, 2010). Davies and Artaraz (2009) have considered factors influencing consultation with children in children's centres, but have not explored what the wider issue of participation means and looks like from the perspectives of children, parents and practitioners. Indeed, with the exception of work by Priscilla Alderson, Alison Clark, Peter Moss and co-authors, there is little theorising about what young children's participation means in general. Furthermore, there is no research about how participation is understood and enacted in the specific context of a Sure Start Children's Centre, or how this notion is understood across different children's centre services.

Given these gaps in the literature, I have endeavoured to make a contribution to knowledge by conducting research that:

- focuses on children's participation across different children's centre services, and not just education and care. As Winter (2009) notes, of the small amount of research related to young children's participation, most of the activity has occurred in the field of education and care, neglecting other services such as health, family support, inclusion and therapeutic services. Consequently, this thesis makes an original contribution to our knowledge and understanding of children's participation in an integrated setting;
- includes the voices and perspectives of our youngest children, including those with impairments and from ethnic minority and migrant families, since these children in particular, are remarkably absent from previous research studies;
- examines differences of perspective between participating children, and between children and adults, thus resisting the temptation to homogenize participants' views;
- explores how children's centre practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds conceptualise and encourage young children's participation; and
- creates a space for those working with our youngest children to contribute to current participation debates and theoretical discussions.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that there is very little research that considers the participation of very young children in Sure Start services, given the growing demands of 'managerialism' and the concomitant importance attached to 'technical research' and 'evidence-based practice' (Biesta, 2007; Moss and Urban, 2010). Indeed, as I have argued in Chapter 4, there is an ever expanding body of government-sponsored technical research that examines the effectiveness of Sure Start services (for example, research projects associated with the 'National Evaluation of Sure Start' and the ongoing 'Evaluation of Children's Centres in England') but rather fewer studies that consider issues of a more critical nature. Primarily these evidence-based studies are looking at impact and 'what works?' in SSCC programme delivery, but with very little regard for the participation of children using these services. As Hammersley (1997) argues, an exclusive focus on 'effectiveness' leads to an overemphasis on those outcomes which can be measured, at the expense of other social and educational processes and goals. Indeed, a number of scholars suggest that the current hegemony of the evidence-based paradigm, with its bias toward quantitative and experimental methods, threatens to undermine the qualitative, ethical and practice-based elements of social research (Parton,

2000; 2004; Humphries, 2003; Lewis, 2004; Butler and Drakeford, 2005; Biesta, 2007; Urban, 2008; Moss and Urban, 2010; Vandebroek, Roets and Roose, 2012). Furthermore it can exclude plurality of knowledge and voice. For this reason, Biesta (2007) argues that evidence-based research suffers from a 'democratic deficit'. In order to counteract this democratic deficit, it is therefore vitally important that we conduct research that doesn't just measure the impact of Sure Start services but also includes the perspectives, and invites the participation, of the very people who use and work in these services.

Given prevailing attitudes that young children are too immature to participate, it is also unsurprising that there is very little research that includes the perspectives of those who face the largest barriers to participation such as babies, preverbal and disabled children and those from ethnic minority and migrant groups. Indeed, babies, preverbal and young disabled children are still mainly missing from childhood studies in general, and from the participation literature in particular. Existing discrimination may have also contributed to the fact that children from Roma families continue to be an under-researched group in general and are entirely absent from the participation literature. However, in this thesis I have argued that it is imperative that we address these omissions if the research literature around children's participation is to be more inclusive of those who are the most marginalised. Thus, this study problematizes what is currently understood by children's participation, by examining a range of domains previously neglected in the research literature, such as age, ethnicity, disability and space. In terms of age, the originality of this study is that I have focused particularly on the participation of babies and the under threes by presenting numerous examples of very young children initiating and terminating proto-conversations, choosing their key person, expressing preferences about their care routines, making decisions about breastfeeding, taking action to overcome exclusion, resisting adult-imposed decisions, and exercising citizenship responsibilities of caring for their environment and for other young children. I have also examined some of the cultural-ethical dilemmas facing the social inclusion and participation of Roma children. Consequently, this thesis makes an important contribution to knowledge by focusing on the participation and lived citizenship practices of the youngest and most marginalised in our society.

In terms of ethnicity and disability, this research has problematized professional practices that are typically considered to be participatory and 'child-centred' in

orientation and yet, on further reflection, contribute to the exclusion of certain groups of children. For example, the pedagogical practice of creating a 'free choice' environment for children enabled the majority of children to make decisions about what they did, but was problematic for children whose home cultural practices and family habitus were incongruent with Anglo-specific styles of education. Similarly, a 'free flow' policy enabled some children to make decisions about where they played, but was problematic for children with mobility difficulties and for one child with ASD who could feel overwhelmed by large spaces and too much choice.

As argued in Section 9.2, in terms of space, I have argued that the current participation literature often fails to take account of the socio-spatial domains of children's participation. In this research, I have examined a variety of different physical, temporal and relational spaces in which children's participation is enacted, enhanced and constrained. Above all else, this research has helped us to consider that children's participation is as much a micro-political and ethical process of embodied performance in space, as it is a cognitive, discursive activity. Herein lies a further contribution to knowledge, since the current research literature tends to associate children's participation with 'voice' and the verbal articulation of views, and tends to privilege an individualist, rationalist model of decision-making. By contrast, this study focuses on children's bodies in relation with others and considers the importance of embodiment in conceptualising participation. As Prout (2005) suggests, childhood studies ignores children's bodies, since its theoretical foundation, of social constructionism, implies that bodies and material matters do not really exist. Similarly, bodies are mainly missing from the participation literature since 'voice' is the predominant concept that is drawn upon. However, in this study I have argued for the importance of generating haptic knowledge and recognising children's embodied performances in social interaction with other people, places and things. Thus, my conceptualisation of participation as 'embodied performance in space' is a more inclusive notion than the concept of 'voice' and helps us to appreciate how babies, young and disabled children do actually influence their surroundings, initiate communication and action, express preferences, make decisions and act on the world from the moment they are born.

This thesis does not produce a universal theory of participation, but I hope that this study can make a small contribution to the ongoing theorisation of the construct, particularly in relation to young children, their embodied performances, and the minor



ethico-political spaces of everyday democracy. Neither has this study sought to produce 'evidence-based' research in the scientific/positivist sense of the term. However, it has produced research that is based on empirical evidence located in everyday practice. I have drawn on Bassey's (1990) and Wellington's (2006) notion of 'relatability' to suggest that this research has relevance to practitioners and managers working with babies, young and disabled children in other educational, health and social care contexts. Although the specific context of TPCC can never be replicated, some of the learning that has gone on at Towersham, in terms of working in a way that recognises and respects young children's citizenship practices and actively seeks to enhance their participation, could have resonance with professionals elsewhere and contribute to producing better practice. This learning includes the idea that:

- children's participation applies from birth, and should not be restricted to only those who are verbally articulate. This requires that professionals reflexively read and facilitate children's multimodal communicative practices and respond accordingly;
- children's participation can be enhanced through providing a physical, temporal, and relational environment that is conducive to its performance. In other words, in order to enhance children's participation, adults need to create the space and time to develop participatory relationships with children;
- young children can be treated as partners in their care and learning, and not simply as recipients of services;
- children's participation may cause cultural and ethical dilemmas for adults working with children. However, rather, than seeing these dilemmas as situations to be avoided, they can be used as opportunities to engage in further deliberation and participatory practice with those involved;
- children's participation is of limited value if it is only seen as a technical and managerial exercise (for example, to satisfy an inspection regime) rather than as an ethical and political practice; and
- a neoliberal, consumerist way of seeking children's views (for example through 'consumer choice', 'pupil voice' and 'user involvement') is not the only way of conceiving children's participation. Rather, children's participation can be seen as a means of making services for children more democratic.

In this way, children's centres, and other services for children, can be understood not simply as places where interventions are applied in order to achieve better child outcomes, but as spaces where children, through their embodied performances, can engage in democratic dialogue and decision-making with other members of society.

## **9.5 Reflexive Concludings**

Taking a critical and poststructural perspective, I cannot make any claims to neutrality or objectivity in this study. Indeed, it has been my aim for this work 'to contribute to a politicisation and democratisation of early childhood' (Dahlberg and Moss 2008, p. vii) through a commitment to increasing young children's opportunities to participate in children's centre services and decisions that affect their lives. At the same time, I am cognisant that the very process of conducting the research with the children, parents and practitioners of TPCC has had both emancipatory and disciplinary effects, in that awareness of children's rights to participate has increased, but so too have processes of surveillance and government. Furthermore, in submitting this thesis for PhD examination, I have used children's participation for my own instrumental ends, that is, to gain a personal qualification. However, as Foucault reminds us, although we cannot fully escape the negative effects of power, power can be productive and positive. Through processes of critical reflexivity and, what the nursery staff called, 'respectful negotiation', I have tried to treat the research with the children, parents and staff as an ongoing ethical encounter, and not simply as a task to be achieved. Furthermore, as I have struggled to write this thesis, I have taken encouragement from the idea that our research isn't finished until it is out there for others to read, contest and use. In so doing, I have taken up the ethical responsibility to share our research findings further afield, and to participate in academic and professional communities where people learn from each other.

In the process of seeking to understand and enhance children's participation, our aim as researcher-practitioners at TPCC has been to open up our theorising and practice to ongoing debate and change, which I invite you, as reader, to participate in too. In this way, the findings and subsequent discussion might possibly become more participatory.

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## Appendix 1 Children's Centre Participatory Projects and Consultations

Research Project/ SSCC	Purpose of Research and Methods Used	Findings
<i>Living Spaces</i> project (Clark, 2007)	Case study of children aged three and four who participated in the post-occupancy review process of a recently completed children's centre. The review also brought together nursery school and Sure Start practitioners from different professional groups as well as parents to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of the physical environment. Mosaic Approach methods were employed. Insights gained were used to facilitate changes to the children's centre and to inform plans for new buildings.	Children showed how their feelings about the children's centre were linked to their own sense of identity. Children drew attention to personal markers, that is, details in the space that made reference to them. The children's images highlighted issues of scale and perspective. There were many photographs of the sky, rooftops, ceilings, corridors and doors taken from the child's height and perspective, reflecting 'perhaps how much of their day they spend looking up' (p. 33) or encountering obstacles. The study also revealed that the outdoor play space afforded few opportunities for private spaces, natural spaces and creative spaces.
<i>Walking with Children</i> project (Sure Start Armstrong, 2005)	Research project to ascertain what life is like for young children in the Armstrong area of Newcastle. Research findings were used to inform the types of services that were needed. Children aged between two and four took part in a series of sensory walks in which their perspectives about the local area were recorded using dictaphones and cameras.	Amongst the most important things to children were social interaction with other children and adult,; and open green areas as favourite play spaces, rather than parks. Other issues raised by the children included their concerns about traffic, road safety and litter.
<i>Hertsmere Children's Centre Consultation</i> (Masrani and Howarth, 2009)	Consultation to inform the services children's centres in the Hertsmere area should include as part of their offer. Mosaic Approach methods were employed alongside completing diaries with parents.	Children gained most enjoyment from interaction with families and friends, outdoor spaces, physical play and creative activities. As a result the authors recommended that children's centres should offer opportunities to encourage the involvement of fathers, grandparents and other family members; physical play opportunities particularly using outdoor space; and creative activities such as cooking, music and dancing.
<i>Profile Books</i> Fortune Park Children's Centre (Clark et al., 2003; Driscoll and Rudge, 2005)	'Profile books' were developed as an approach to listening to children and families. The books represent individual children's 'lives lived rather than knowledge gained or care received' at home, at the children's centre and within the family (Driscoll and Rudge 2005, p. 92). They include photographs, drawings and transcripts of children's written and oral language.	Profile books are used by children, parents and practitioners on an ongoing basis as a means to continuously reflect on children's experiences and to develop children's centre practices and structures. They have helped to embed a culture of listening to children in everyday practice and have been an important stimulus for exploration of children's participation in the decision-making processes of the centre (Clark et al., 2003).

## Appendix 2 Nursery PAR Project (3-5s Room)

Research Aims	Research Context
To explore children's views of Nursery	Young Children's Room
Research Questions	Research Methods
Why do you come here?	<p>Staff interviewing children during small group time using a box of props and pictures</p> <p>Staff reading a story about children attending a nursery and using this as a prompt for unstructured interviews</p> <p>Talking to children informally whilst 'on the move'</p> <p>Children interviewing adults and other children</p> <p>Children drawing pictures and book-making</p>
What happens at nursery?	<p>Persona doll in the character of a newcomer during small group time. Raqina wonders....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happens at nursery?</li> <li>• What does she need to know?</li> <li>• Where can she go?</li> <li>• What can she do?</li> <li>• What is she allowed to do?</li> <li>• What mustn't she do?</li> </ul> <p>Persona doll vignettes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raqina is excited at nursery today. I wonder why...?</li> <li>• Raqina is unhappy today. I wonder what's happened?</li> </ul> <p>Annotated photo diary "Raqina's Day at Nursery"</p>
What do you like about coming here?	<p>Children given cameras to take photographs of things they like at nursery</p> <p>Discussion of children's photographs</p> <p>Child-led tours of places children like in the nursery</p> <p>Making photo-books</p>
What don't you like about coming here?	<p>Same as above</p> <p>Staff observing children at different times of the day (e.g. arriving, leaving, lunchtimes, tidying-up time, group time, free choice, trips, indoors/outdoors) paying particular attention to examples of distress, conflict, resistance (silent and vocal), and low levels of involvement</p>

## Appendix 3      Nursery PAR Project (Toddler Room)

Research Aims	Research Context
To make our practice with children more participatory	Toddler Room
Research Questions	Research Methods
What do we mean by children's participation?	Team discussion of Phase 1 individual interviews
What do others mean by children's participation?	Team discussion of literature (Shier, 2001; Clark and Moss, 2001; Mortimer, 2007; NCB leaflets)
How do we currently encourage children's participation?	Peer observations and team discussions of our own and others' practice
Why is it like that? What factors encourage children's participation?	Analysis of peer observations and transcripts of discussions
How do we currently hinder children's participation?	Peer observations of missed opportunities for participation and team discussions
Why is it like that? What factors hinder children's participation?	Analysis of peer observations and transcripts of discussions
How can we make our practice with children more participatory?	Addressed through seeking children's views of our provision using methods taken from the Mosaic Approach  Addressed through taking actions in response to what we have researched and culminating in writing a reflective account and 'Children's Participation Charter'

## Appendix 4 Family Support PAR Project

Research Aims	Research Context
To evaluate a new family support group incorporating children's perspectives alongside parental views	'Big Cook Little Cook' (BCLC) - a healthy cooking and eating group for parents and young children
Research Questions	Research Methods
What are children's views of BCLC?	<p>Orally recorded observations immediately following each session to ascertain children's interests, likes and dislikes about food and the group</p> <p>Family Support Worker to offer children choices during the sessions and to record children's responses</p> <p>Informal conversations with children about their preferences during the sessions</p> <p>Children and parents taking photographs of food and cooking activities during BCLC and at home</p> <p>Using photographs as a tool for further discussion</p> <p>Children and parents making annotated photo-books</p>
<p>What are parents' views of BCLC?</p> <p>What are parent's views of children's participation at BCLC?</p>	<p>Informal conversations with parents about children's views of the group during each session</p> <p>Semi-structured interviews with individual parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do you bring your child to BCLC?</li> <li>• What does your child get out of BCLC?</li> <li>• What do you get out of BCLC?</li> <li>• What, if anything, does your child enjoy at BCLC?</li> <li>• What, if anything, does your child dislike at BCLC?</li> <li>• What cooking/food-related activities interest your child?</li> <li>• How could we make this group better for your child?</li> <li>• What could we do to make the environment better for your child?</li> <li>• What resources could we get for this group?</li> <li>• Anything to add?</li> </ul>
How can we use the children's and parents' views to develop BCLC further?	<p>Team meetings after each session to reflect on observations and discussions and to consider any action that staff might take for future sessions in response to what has been learnt from the children and parents (see below)</p> <p>Team to analyse observations, photographs comments, interview data and transcripts of team meetings to use as evidence to inform evaluation and subsequent planning</p>
What role does the practitioner play in encouraging children's participation?	<p>After each session family support worker to critically reflect on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did I listen to children during the session?</li> <li>• How did I respond to the children during the session?</li> <li>• How did I involve children in making decisions/choices?</li> <li>• How did I give children some control of what happens?</li> <li>• What action will I take in the future to develop my own practice based on what I have learnt?</li> </ul>

## Appendix 5 Health Visitors' PAR Project

Research Aims	Research Context
To evaluate the clinic, incorporating children's perspectives and to take action based on our findings	Weekly drop-in health clinic and play session for parents, babies and their older siblings
Research Questions	Research Methods
What is it like for me as a child to be at this group?	<p>Participant observations 'through the eyes' of a newborn, a baby, and an older sibling of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children's involvement with others</li> <li>• children's involvement at the weighing scales</li> <li>• children's involvement in the baby area</li> <li>• children's involvement in the toddler area</li> <li>• children's involvement during the presentation/talk</li> <li>• children's involvement during snack time</li> </ul> <p>Informal conversations with children about their preferences during the group</p> <p>Children given cameras to take photographs of things they enjoy at the group</p> <p>Parents taking photographs 'from the child's perspective' of things their babies enjoy</p> <p>Discussion with parents and children of photographs. Comments recorded on a post-it note and attached to the relevant photograph</p> <p>Parents and children making books using photographs, observation notes, post-its, children's art made during previous sessions, and any further comments</p>
What is it like for me as a parent to be at this group?	<p>Focus groups with parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long have you been coming to the group?</li> <li>• Why do you come to the group?</li> <li>• How does your child benefit from attending the group?</li> <li>• What do you enjoy? Your children enjoy?</li> <li>• What are the hardest things about coming to the group? For you? For your children?</li> <li>• How could we make this group better? For you? For your children?</li> <li>• How can we improve the resources and environment of the group? For you? For the children?</li> <li>• How useful have you found the talks and activities? E.g. baby massage, reflexology, baby resuscitation, oral hygiene, road safety?</li> </ul>
How can we enhance children's participation in the group?	<p>Practitioner team meetings after each session to discuss and analyse data generated, to consider action to be taken and to review action already taken. Meetings to include discussion of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dilemmas and conflicts of interest between children and between adults and children</li> <li>• professional attitudes</li> <li>• working practices</li> <li>• service provision</li> <li>• the research process</li> </ul>

## Appendix 6 Inclusion Team PAR Project

Research Aims	Research Context
To ascertain and include children's views and perspectives in review meetings alongside the views of parents and professionals	Disabled children's participation at nursery, at home, at Felldon Child Development Centre, and during physiotherapy and 'Every Child a Talker' (ECAT) speech and language sessions.
Research Questions	Research Methods
What are children's views of our services?	<p>Staff and parents to conduct participant observations from the child's perspective of the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What I like (at nursery, home, physio, ECAT)</li> <li>• What I dislike</li> <li>• What I am good at</li> <li>• I need help with</li> </ul> <p>Use of communication book with Rebus symbols to ascertain child's views of the above topics</p> <p>Child-led tours of the nursery and the multisensory physiotherapy room</p> <p>Children given cameras to take photographs</p> <p>Parents and practitioners taking photographs from the child's perspective</p> <p>Discussion of photographs with children and adults</p> <p>Staff, parents and children making 'visual review books'</p>
How can we respond to children's views and support their choices?	Staff to discuss and to reflect on the data generated and to add 'staff response' comments to the visual review books indicating the action they will take as a result.
How can we enable children to represent their views in their review meetings with parents and professionals?	<p>The child's book to be taken to the review meeting by either the child themselves, or the child's keyworker, and shared with everyone to ensure the child's views are taken into account by the professionals working with him or her.</p> <p>Comments from parents and practitioners to be added to the books during the review meeting</p>



## **Appendix 7      Nursery Practitioner's Reflective Account**

### **Children's Participation in Nursery**

Toddler Room TPCC Nursery - July 2009

Within this account I will reflect, as part of a team, on how we encourage children to participate and how we can make our practice with children more participatory. Through action research we examined how we give the children in our care a voice and how we enable them to participate and make a positive contribution to their own care, the make-up of the environment and the activities with which they play and learn (DfES, 2005). We looked at how we currently hinder children's participation and highlighted areas for change in order to allow the children in our care to participate more.

Having gained gatekeeper's consent from the nursery manager (Roberts-Holmes, 2005), we decided to carry out a small scale action research project with the Early Years Professional, our University Researcher and a number of children. I suggested that the Early Years Professional and myself as Nursery Practitioner observe one another with the children and then hold team meetings along with the University Researcher to discuss our peer observations. The aim of our peer observations was to discover how we currently encourage children's participation and to also point out any missed opportunities for participation.

I considered my research and drew up a proposal with my colleagues. We decided an action research project would be most appropriate as it would enable us to research, reflect, revise and plan for future improvements (Roberts-Holmes, 2007). It would also develop our knowledge and enable us to implement change in our setting (Roberts-Holmes 2007). Before carrying out the research we considered the ethical issues involved. We gained consent from the children and parents by informing them all of the aim and methods of our research. We explained how their child's opinions and views would be used to implement change within the setting (Clark and Moss, 2001). We acknowledged that the children and their parents had the right to withdraw at any time as Article 36 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states 'Children should be protected from any activities that could harm their development' (UNICEF, 1991). We explained our intentions and how we hoped our findings and recommendations would help further develop the children's learning and enable their views and opinions to be heard within the setting (DfES, 2005) in the future.

I used a pictorial letter as a tool to gain the children's own informed consent. I read the letter to the children whilst they looked at the pictures, while their parents were present. All the children gave their informed consent through either words, smiles or gestures. I felt the pictures gave the children a greater understanding of their role (Roberts-Holmes, 2005) and gave them a stronger voice (Clark and Moss, 2001). I assured the children and their parents that if they looked unhappy at any stage I would terminate the research. I maintained confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process and we kept the data and findings in a locked filing cabinet (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). I went through a similar process with all staff members so as to keep them informed and up-to-date. We consulted the staff team, asked for their opinions as I am aware that change can bring fear and make staff feel uncertain about what they are supposed to do, lowering staff moral. Consulting them and asking their views will keep them informed and help them feel part of the process, supporting them at all times (Rodd 2006).

In our first focus team meeting we discussed Shier's (2001) Model of Children's Participation. There are five levels of participation according to Shier's (2001) model:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children's views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making process.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

(Shier, 2001)

The principle of the child's right to participate in decision-making is stated in article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, December 1991. It states we should allow all children, who are capable of forming his or her own opinions and views, the right to express these views and opinions in all matters which affect them (UNICEF, 1991). We decided to use Shier's (2001) Model of Children's Participation to evaluate how we encourage children to participate and how we can make our practice with children more participatory. By listening to and respecting young children's views we as adults are demonstrating that their opinions are valued leading to a positive effect on their self-confidence (Clark, 2008). Listening to young children is not a new concept, but one that now has legal backing under the *Childcare Act 2006*, which places a duty on Local Authorities to '*have regard to the views of young children in the design, development and delivery of early childhood services*'. A culture of listening also benefits practitioners by supporting them in reflective practice as well as giving parents confidence that their children are being listened to (Williams, 2009).

At the close of our first team discussion we decided the Early Years Professional and I would write post-it note observations when possible, each time a participation opportunity arose in response to a child expressing a view, or when we initiated a participation opportunity with a child or a group of children. We referred to this as the 'observe' part of the action research cycle (Robert-Holmes, 2005). At the next team meeting we discussed and analysed these observations. We reflected upon the observational data in relation to Shier's (2001) model of participation and considered possible action. We decided that we needed to carry out further peer observations of missed opportunities for children's participation to bring back to the next focus group. During the third group discussion we discussed the 'Babywatch' approach outlined in Hannah Mortimer's (2007) book as well as discussing further observations we had carried out on one another. During the fourth focus group discussion we reflected once again on our observations and planned to make improvements in our practice.

During our fifth team meeting we discussed the progress of our action research, the methods we have used so far and the other potential methods. We decided to focus on the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) and encourage the children to use the camera to take photos of the things they like. This gave them a voice (DfES, 2005) and allowed them to explore their own interests in greater depth. I used the photos taken to create a picture book for the children to share with their family and friends (Clark and Moss, 2001) of the things they like. I recorded children's comments as they were using the camera and when they were looking at the printed photos. We revisited our original research question and discussed triangulation. Our methods of triangulation were observations of individual children and peer observations of one another's practice, focus group meetings and mosaic methods with the children. This was specifically camera work and discussion around the question: 'What do you like?' Based upon the Babywatch approach (Mortimer, 2007) and our discussions of the data, I decided to create a 'Top Ten Tips' for how we can make our practice with children more participatory:

1. Involve children in setting up what they want to use/play with at the beginning of each day and in deciding which new resources should be purchased.
2. Think about what we say to the children before we say it. Observe - Wait - and Listen before you intervene to try to understand the child's perspective.
3. Respectfully negotiate with parents and children when their views conflict, for example conflicts focused around sleep patterns. Encourage an ethos of respectful negotiation between children, parents and staff.
4. Role-play scenarios for children to help them negotiate with each other.

5. Consider buying custom-made “dog baskets” as a means of changing the ‘sleep ethos’ of our room so that children have more choice about when they go to sleep rather than this being imposed on them.
6. Change the wording on our introductory leaflet to parents so that we can express our desire to listen to parents about their child’s routine as well as listening to children’s views about their own care.
7. Introduce a ‘Children’s Participation Charter’ and ‘Children as Partners’ policy to coincide with our ‘Parents as Partners’ policy.
8. Use more ‘exciting bags’ & small group work for children to express their views and preferences.
9. Explore children’s interests in greater depth, using the Mosaic Approach to listening to children.
10. Broaden our understanding of children to see them as partners in their care and learning and as fellow researchers with us.

Through our action research the children were able to voice their own views and opinions and we were able to tune into their thoughts and feelings (Clark, 2008). This research brought about changes to our practice and to the way we understand children. It also informed changes to our existing provision and enabled the children to make a ‘Positive Contribution’ (ECM, 2003) to their own care, the make-up of the environment and the activities with which they play and learn (DfES, 2005).

## Appendix 8 Children's Participation Charter

### Children's Participation Charter

*Our goal is to recognise your right to participate in this children's centre. We will try to:*

#### **Listen actively to you**

... by recognising the many different 'languages' you use to communicate including observing your body language and listening to your words on an ongoing basis

#### **Respond to you**

... by using the Observe-Wait-Listen approach  
... by talking, signing and interacting with you respectfully

#### **Support you to express your views**

... by asking you questions about specific issues but also about our everyday lives together  
... by using creative methods such as those in the Mosaic Approach (giving you cameras, looking at your drawings, going on child-led tours and using persona dolls in group time)  
... by respecting your right not to participate and recognising that you might not always want to give us your views

#### **Take action based on your views**

... by basing our planning on your interests and the things you like to do  
... by including your perspectives when we evaluate our services and by making the necessary changes wherever possible based on what we find out from you and your parents  
... by feeding back to you, to your parents and to other staff when appropriate  
... by talking to the manager if you tell us of any serious harm to you or another person

#### **Respect your right to make decisions**

... by supporting you to choose from a selection of different activities (through continuous provision)  
... by giving you individual choices about your daily activities such as sleeping, eating, playing and at specific times such as transitions  
... by giving you choices about who you want to be with including your key person  
... by supporting you to make decisions with others and to come to an agreement together (such as your parents, other children and staff)

#### **Treat you as partners in your care and learning and as fellow citizens**

...by recognising your unique contribution to the children's centre and to the wider community

## Appendix 9 Big Cook Little Cook Evaluation Report

### Children's Participation in 'Big Cook Little Cook'

NHS REC Project Ref 08/H1310/27

20th July 2009

#### 1. Introduction

##### *The Purpose of Big Cook Little Cook (BCLC)*

In order to enhance children's participation in the Family Support Service staff decided to start by focusing on one particular activity for families through conducting a small-scale action research project facilitated by a university researcher. In response to the *Every Child Matters* 'Be Healthy' outcome a new group for parents and children was set up by one of the Family Support Workers with the aim of encouraging healthy eating and ultimately reducing childhood obesity. The group was run on a four-week cycle with the objectives of:

- encouraging children to explore new tastes and foods
- increasing children's knowledge of different foods
- involving children in handling, preparing and eating food with their parents
- giving ideas to parents and seeking parents' ideas for inexpensive healthy snacks and meals

The project took place during the second round of running the group.

#### 2. The Methodology

##### *2.1 The Purpose of the Action Research Project*

In line with *Every Child Matters* 2005, the National Service Framework 2005, and *Sure Start Planning Guidance* 2005 the Family Support Manager and Family Support Worker decided that the aim of the action research project should be to carry out an evaluation of Big Cook Little Cook (BCLC) incorporating children's perspectives alongside parental views. Action Research is research which involves the active participation of a group of people (in this case staff, parents, children and university researcher) in examining current practice with the aim of taking action to change or develop practice. It involves a cycle of Observe - Plan - Take Action - Evaluate.

##### *2.2 The Research Questions*

- What are the children's perspectives of the 'Big Cook Little Cook' group?
- What are the parent's views of children's participation in 'Big Cook Little Cook'?
- How can we use the children's and parents views to develop the group further?
- What role does the practitioner play in encouraging children's participation?

##### *2.3 The Participants*

Three mothers and three children aged two years participated in the research, alongside the Family Support Worker (FSW) and university researcher (UR).

##### *2.4 Ethical Considerations*

Prior to the commencement of the study the UR sought ethical approval from the local NHS Research Ethics Committee and Health and Social Care Consortium. Permission to conduct the study was also granted from the Children's Centre Management Committee. The FSW sought the informed consent of the parents of the participating children. Care was taken by both the FSW and UR to remain responsive to the children's assent to participate. The FSW also gave her informed consent to participate in the UR's doctoral research.

## *2.5 The Methods*

- Participant Observation

The FSW and UR observed the children during the session each week as a way of ascertaining the children's interests, likes and dislikes about food and about the group. They sought to find out what the children thought about food and about the group by listening to the children through documenting their reactions and reflecting together and with the children's parents on the information gathered.

- Conversations with Families

The FSW and UR informally asked children and parents for their views and comments during the sessions. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with parents after the last BCLC session.

- Photographs

Staff, parents and children took photographs during the sessions and families were given disposable cameras for use at home concerning children's views of food, mealtimes and cooking activities. Staff, children and parents used these photos as a tool for further discussion and reflection.

- Making Books

Parents and children made books using the observations and photographs of their time at Big Cook Little Cook. Parents added their comments about their children's views of food and of the group, and their own comments of the group.

- Team Meetings

The FSW and UR met after each session to reflect on the observations and other data and to consider any action that might be taken for future sessions in response to what was learnt from the children and parents, and to reflect upon their own professional practice

## *2.6 Data Analysis*

The FSW and UR analysed all observations, photographs, comments and transcripts of team meetings and used this as evidence to inform the evaluation of the group and their own participatory practice. The data was mapped onto a grid under three sections: a) the children's perspectives; b) the parents' perspectives; c) the practitioner role. These sections were then subdivided into:

- a) children's interests and disinterests during the group, action taken and future action
- b) parental views of children's participation, action taken and future action
- c) listening to children, responding to children, involving children in making decisions/choices, giving children control, future action in participatory practice with children

The data was then organised under key themes pertaining to the three sections described above. These themes are presented below.

### 3. Key Findings

#### 3.1 CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES OF FOOD PRACTICES AT BCLC:

##### *Handling and Preparing Food*

- the process of handling the food appeared to be more important to the children than producing or eating the final product e.g. one child enjoyed spreading different sandwich fillings on several pieces of bread but was not interested in turning these into sandwiches. On another occasion, a two year old boy seemed to particularly enjoy the technical aspect of attaching fruit onto a straw rather than eating the fruit kebab itself:

*B: I like it. I put the [ba]nana on myself.*

- the most involved episodes occurred when time was given to less structured/directed activities with the food:

*You've got times when it's more structured and the mums are saying 'Do it this way, do it that way' but actually I thought the times when the children were most involved were when the mums stopped saying 'Oh not that way' and when they just left them to get on and explore in their own way'(FSW's discussion with UR)*

- The children explored handling the food and utensils in imaginative ways alongside more prescribed intentions. In this way the children were able to set their own agenda for culinary learning. For example, following one observation, staff recorded one child's interest in a cherry tomato:

*Z seems to prefer to use the food and the objects in a different way to the way the adults use them, and is prepared to resist their encouragements to use the objects for their intended function, rather she sees them as objects to explore in her own way. Thus, the cherry tomato is repeatedly used as a ball to put in her mouth and take out again, rather than as something to eat; and the shape cutters are not for cutting out pieces of bread but are for fitting inside each other. (UR observation notes)*

- Some children seemed to enjoy the sensory experience of touching and feeling the food which one parent described as 'getting messy' whilst another child did not enjoy getting her hands 'dirty' whilst handling the food.

*G: Dirty, mummy. [G looks uncomfortable and holds out her hands towards her mother]*

- Reflecting on an observation and subsequent discussion with a parent the FSW realised that one of the children became disinterested in mixing different ingredients together as a result of being prevented from using a piece of equipment due to health and safety concerns. The child's parent commented:

*When it came to grating the cheese, because she couldn't have the grater herself, she didn't want to participate in putting the cheese into the bowl... the grater was something she wasn't allowed to do so she lost interest.... so in the future try to avoid having resources that she's not allowed to use.*

- The children's body language indicated that they appreciated times of being 'independent of' and 'interdependent with' their carers in preparing food. On the other hand the children tended to be disinterested in activities when they were positioned as dependent upon an adult performing the task for them, for example opening packets of food, grating cheese or peeling an onion.



As a result of the above findings concerning children's perspectives of handling food the following changes to practice were planned for the next time the group was run:

- continue to allow for unstructured periods and undirected tasks for children to explore and experiment with food without a predetermined outcome in mind alongside more structured activities during each session and explain the importance of this to parents
- recognise that the sensory experience of touching and handling food is enjoyable for some children but not for others. Address this situation by having washing facilities or disposable wipes available in the room for those children who would like them
- avoid bringing resources that the children may want to use but are not allowed to, such as a cheese grater
- do not assume that young children are incompetent or dependent. Plan for tasks and activities that encourage children's independence and interdependence. For example, allow children to peel fruit and vegetables either on their own or with someone else rather than doing this for them.

### **Eating Food**

- The children seemed to enjoy having a choice of food to eat within boundaries of healthy options. The FSW explained

*You [as a practitioner] can make the decisions about which fruit or vegetables or whatever [to bring] but you're giving them a choice from those things...It's like you're kind of giving them their own power over what they eat, giving them some control.*

- Children were able to express that they had clear preferences for particular items but this was not in response to direct questioning, rather the adults were able to ascertain the children's preferences as a result of careful observation. The FSW used this knowledge alongside parent responses, to inform her future planning for subsequent session. Occasionally children's preferences differed from their parent's original perceptions of their child's views. For example one girl kept indicating that she wanted to eat tomatoes even though her mother commented that she wouldn't normally eat them at home.

- The size of the food was important to the children and could determine whether a child chose to eat something or not. For example, a series of observations suggested that one particular child did not want to eat fruit and vegetables that had been cut up into small pieces; rather she preferred to eat a whole onion and a big slice of melon. Reflecting upon this the FSW commented:

*I mean it's made me think that the size is as important to her as the actual food... So in terms of evaluating, it's definitely worth finding out from the children and the mums how they prefer food, because some prefer it smaller, chopped up, some prefer it with skin on and some prefer the whole piece.*

- All the children tended to eat more of the food they had selected themselves rather than the ready-prepared food the adults offered to them

- The children seemed to prefer eating the food as separate items rather than in combination. Thus, for example, one child wanted to eat individual strawberries rather than the fruit salad and another child enjoyed eating the tortilla bread and different fillings but was not interested in consuming the finished tortilla wrap.

As a result of these findings the following action points were drawn up:

- recognise that children's food preferences may be different from parental perceptions and therefore it is important to find out children's views from them directly rather than just relying on ascertaining their views by proxy
- offer a selection of the same food items but in different sizes and shapes to reflect children's preferences

### Other Food-related Activities

- The FSW had planned a number of food-related activities for the children to engage with. Observations revealed that the children's responses to the different activities varied according to the nature of the activity and each individual child's interests. For example, none of the children appeared to enjoy colouring in pictures or matching the cards of a food bingo game. However, all children appeared to be interested in looking at the bingo cards and plastic models of different foods and naming them.
- Children's responses to watching snippets of songs taken from the "*Big Cook Little Cook*" television programme varied. For example, one child appeared to be disinterested in watching the DVD each time it was played, whereas another child clearly enjoyed watching the DVD each week as the following observation notes suggest:
 

*C puts her beaker down and then points to the space where the TV usually is and says 'Big Cook. I want Cook.' FSW replies 'Someone else has been using the TV today. Shall we go and find it?' C nods and stands up to follow FSW.*
- All the observational field notes suggested that the children enjoyed being praised and rewarded with stickers by the FSW. The children particularly enjoyed being able to choose which sticker they would like
- The children were encouraged to serve others by helping to tidy up, and by passing plates and other items to others. The children participated in tidying up when it was modelled to them by the adults as they sang the 'tidy-up song' rather than when they were asked to directly.

As a result of these findings the following changes to activities were planned:

- be flexible about the use of the TV according to the interests of those who are attending
- replace the food bingo game with bigger, brighter photographs of different foods for children to identify
- do not use colouring-in activities in subsequent sessions
- in addition to stickers, consider other ways of enabling children to make further choices

### 3.2 PARENT PERSPECTIVES OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION AS A RESULT OF BCLC

#### *Developing Children's Participation in Food Practices at BCLC*

Parents commented that BCLC provided children with the opportunity to develop some autonomy and control :

*She's taking control of it, the food, with what she wants to do: how is she going to make a mess, what is she going to put on? .... She's taking control of it; that's what she likes. She's taking control of what she does and what she wants to eat.*

*She's experimenting and playing with foods, actually doing things with food, other than 'Mummy comes and puts food in front of me and I've got to eat it'; normal routine. But now it's 'This is what I've done. I've made this shape and that shape.*

#### *Developing Children's Participation in Food Practices at Home*

All parents who attended the group also said that BCLC had made them reconsider meal times at home. Instead of making all the decisions for children about what they were going to eat, and by preparing the food and serving it to children, parents reported that on occasions their children were now involved in selecting food items, preparing food and serving it with their mothers at home. Thus parents reported that BCLC provided a place for parents to think differently about the roles they and their children perform:

*To be honest I don't think I would ever have let her at home to spread the jams or anything like on it [the sandwiches]. I'd say 'I'll do it for you sweetheart. You eat.... I'd never thought about it to be honest, because I think that's mummy's job: to make food and present to them... [whereas] here they do the stuff....*

*Now I'm doing it with her rather than for her. It may take half an hour to make any snacks, or sandwiches or anything because she is preparing the food with me rather than me doing it for her, but at least she has done some of it herself and she is eating more than she was.*

### 3.3 THE PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE: WAYS OF ENHANCING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

#### *Attitudes that enhanced children's participation:*

- When children were assumed to be competent and opportunities were created for children to work independently and interdependently with others
- When children's views were sought directly alongside seeking their views by proxy

#### *Methods that enhanced children's participation:*

- Careful listening, observation, giving families cameras, making books and reflecting together. This became a means of evaluating the group and informing future planning based on children's interests:

*Even though I might have a plan of things, they might get changed each week based on the feedback I get from the little ones.*

- Modelling giving children choice and control and promoting this with parents:  
*It's interesting to observe if the parents have taken control of the activity or if they've let the children keep control of what they're doing themselves. So part of it is helping the parents to let the children have some control. That's' what I'm looking for.*

**Actions that enhanced children's participation:**

- When they were offered a choice of task, food, or resource  
*Although we provided the choice, it's like their control, even though they're only tiny. Yeah, I think, them being able to choose what they want to do. So which shape shall we have? Spreading and chopping. Whether they made little patterns with it or not....If they've got a choice of what they do they are more likely to enjoy it and keep going because it's what they've asked for... It's like you're kind of giving them their own power, giving them some control.*
- When the practitioner listened and responded to child initiations e.g. to sing a nursery rhyme, to fetch the TV.  
*Listening and responding is like evaluating all the way through.*
- When the practitioner gave children reasons for not responding:  
*Sometimes if you've got a group of children you can hear them in the back but you're actually doing something. You've got to kind of pipe your ear up and say 'I can hear you and I'll just be with you in two minutes. I'll just finish this off' kind of thing. So there are times when you've kind of got a really busy group you've got to let them know that you can hear them.*

The following action points were drawn up in response to these findings:

- Avoid activities and tasks that position children as dependent, rather seek to create opportunities for independence and interdependence
- Direct questioning is not always successful in ascertaining children's views. Provocations, suggestions and creative methods may elicit better responses
- Continue to use photos and book-making to evaluate the group and introduce the use of post-it stickers for parent and child comments. Use this evaluation evidence from parents and children a) to improve the group and b) to publicise the group
- Continue to have debrief meetings after each session with a colleague to compare and discuss observations

#### **4. Conclusion**

As a result of the action research project the perspectives of children, parents and practitioners were actively sought and the data was used as evidence to evaluate and inform future practice and provision. Reflecting on the end of the project the FSW concluded:

*This research has brought to my attention a greater awareness of how I listen to, respond and offer children choices and how I can make my practice more participatory. I am being more intentional rather than just relying on automatic listening and responding.*

# My Visual Review Book



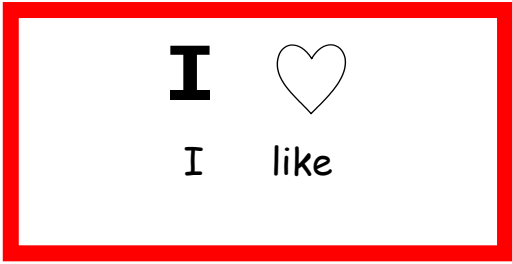
Name: Haniya

Age: 2 years 9 months

May 2009



At Nursery



dangling objects

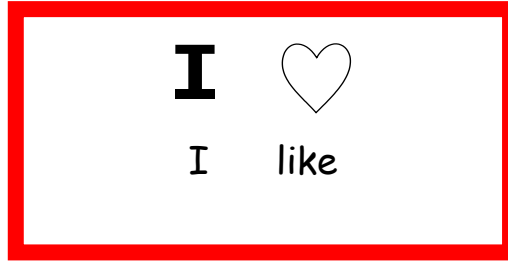


shiny objects





At Nursery



textured materials


feeling hair



oats, sand,  
soil, paint

**Staff response:** We will give you plenty of tactile, sensory experiences and objects to play with

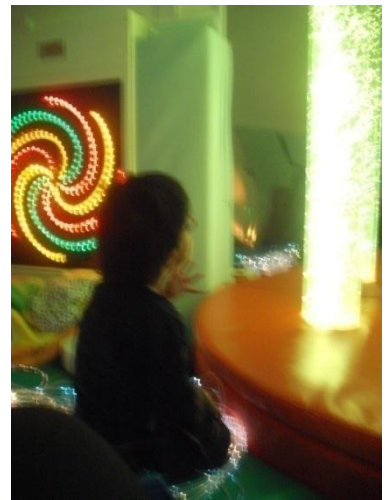


**I**   
I like



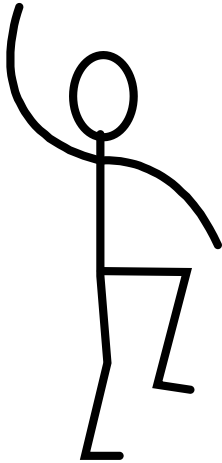
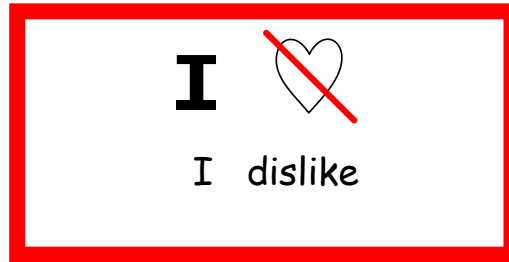
the lights

the bubbles



the buttons





doing new physio  
exercises



getting into the  
standing frame

**Staff Response:** We will listen to your signs of discomfort and stop when you are tired



At Nursery

**I**



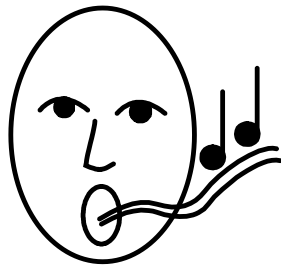
I am good at



sitting



getting around  
by shuffling

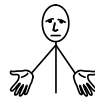


humming to  
"Twinkle Twinkle" &  
"Wheels on the bus"



At Nursery

**I**



I need help with



feeding



drinking

**Staff response:** We will introduce new foods and textures slowly until you get used to them. We will offer you drinks in a Doidy cup as this will suit you better than other cups.

# Comments

## **Practitioner Comments**

Our aim in devising this book was to work together as an Inclusion Team to find out Haniya's views of the services she accesses at our children's centre. We realised that up until now whilst professionals and parents were asked to express their views at children's Review Meetings and Care Pathways Meetings, the children's views were often not represented at these meetings. This book is our attempt to listen to what Haniya communicates about her life at the children's centre, to respect her wishes and to support her choices. This is why we have included some 'Staff Response' statements.

The photographs and comments are based on several observations and discussions carried out by different members of staff at the children's centre over a period of six weeks. In the future if she is able, Haniya may like to take her own photographs to go in her book, and if she wants to, we will invite her to show her book to the adults attending the review meetings. Haniya may also like to include additional sections that represent her life at home or whilst she is attending other services.

We have begun the Review Meeting today by reading this book together as a way of putting Haniya's views first.

## **Parent Comments**

This book is really good. It will definitely help staff to find out about Haniya when she moves into Room 3 next term and when she starts school next year. In fact I think we will take this book with us when we look around potential new schools to show them. My main concern about her transition to Room 3 is that the bigger children might trample on her.

My mind often goes blank when I come to meetings like this, but this book helps you to talk about Haniya. It's also good because it focuses on the positives: things she likes and is good at but it also tells staff what she doesn't like.

She learnt to hum 'Wheels on the Bus' when we went to Pakistan during March and April. I'm always singing to her. I've noticed that she is making quite a lot of different sounds now. What did she say the other day? She waved 'bye bye' in the right context. I get really happy and excited when she does new things; you know, with her being delayed. Since we went to Pakistan she has started to eat nearly everything we eat. She's using her tongue now when she is feeding; she moves her tongue and is sucking on to the juice. I think she's beginning to show first signs of chewing, so she's getting there with her eating. She's been gaining weight recently too.

# My Visual Review Book



*Photo taken by member of staff*

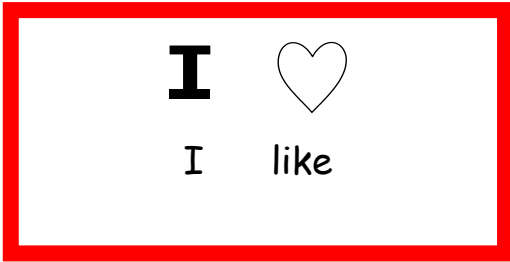
Name: Britney

Age: 4 years 0 months

May 2009



At Nursery



jigsaws



the rabbits



Tracy

(name of member of staff)




the parachute

**Staff response:** We will observe your interests and base our planning on the things you like



At Home

**I**   
I like



**Dean** (name of brother)

**Mum**



**Lisa** (name of sister)



*Photo taken by Mum*

**Dancing**

(Mum's additional comment:  
Dancing and jumping on the  
bed to music by a German  
band called Scooter)



At Nursery

**I**



I dislike



# Dean

(Staff interpretation: when my brother follows me sometimes)

**Staff Response:** We will give you one extra morning session for time on your own without your brother





At Home

**I**



I dislike



Dean pushing me



I do it

(Mum's interpretation: Mum helping me to get dressed)

*Photo taken by Mum*



That's mine

(Mum's interpretation: sharing toys with her brother and sister sometimes)

*Photo taken by Mum*



At Nursery

**I**



I am good at



*Photo taken by member of staff*

climbing



*Photo taken by member of staff*

climbing to the top



taking photos



my photo of  
the rabbits



At Home

**I**



I am good at



*Photo taken by Mum*

getting dressed



At Nursery

**I**



I need help with



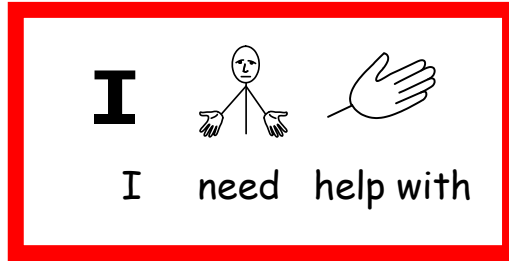
*Photo taken by member of staff*

talking

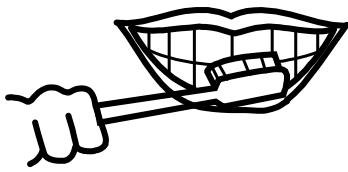
**Staff response:** We will invite you to the "Let's Talk" group to give you opportunities to talk, sing and play games



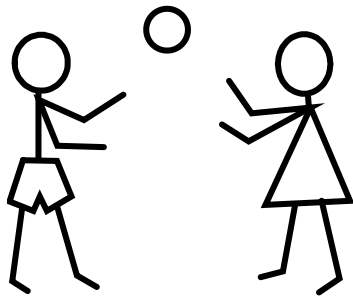
At Home



I need help with



brushing teeth



playing

# Comments

## **Practitioner Comments**

Our aim in devising this book was to work together as an Inclusion Team with Britney to find out her views of the services she accesses at our children's centre. We realised that up until now whilst professionals and parents were asked to express their views at children's Review Meetings and Care Pathways Meetings, the children's views were often not represented at these meetings. This book is our attempt to listen to what Britney communicates about her life at the children's centre, to respect her wishes and to support her choices. This is why we have included some 'Staff Response' statements.

We asked Britney to point to Widgeit symbols and to take photographs of things she likes, dislikes, is good at and needs help with whilst she is at nursery and when she is at home. Then we talked to Britney about her photos and recorded her comments. Additional photos and comments were made by Britney's mum and by the SENCO and SEN Outreach worker at the children's centre.

We have begun the Review Meeting today by reading this book together as a way of putting Britney's views first.

## **Parent Comments**

(These are included next to the appropriate photographs.)

# Your Children's Centre



Finding out what you  
think about it

# This is your Children's Centre



**Children do lots of things here....**

**Children learn lots of things here ...**



# This is Elly



**She goes to university to learn  
lots of things too.**

# Elly wants to find out:

**What do you like doing when you come here?**



**Is there anything you would like to be different?**

# How will we do this?



**...by looking carefully at the things you do and the places you go in the children's centre**

**...by asking  
you questions  
and listening  
to the things  
you say**



**... by giving you a camera and  
talking to you about your photos**



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**... by  
singing  
songs and  
playing  
games**



**... by using toys and puppets**



**... by asking you to take us on a  
tour of the places you like to go**



**... by making  
art, maps  
and books**



**... by taking photos**



**... and by talking to the people who look after you**



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# What will happen next?

**Elly will tell you what everybody said and did by showing you a book**



**Elly will also tell your parents and the staff. She will write everything down to tell people at university too.**

# Who is taking part?

**Different children will be taking part.**



**You can choose if you want to take part or if you don't want to.**

**You can ask your parents, or  
the staff, or Elly if you have  
any questions.**



**If you are happy to take part  
you can sign your name.**

## Appendix 12 Example of Coding

### Transcript of Analysis Meeting with Early Years Professional 20/01/09

#### Developing Initial Codes - Context of Meeting

After I interviewed the EYP just before Christmas I asked him if he would be interested in meeting me to look through the transcript of the interview and to have a go at analysing the data with me. I gave the EYP a copy of his transcript a week before this meeting and asked him to look through it and check he was happy with the contents and then pick out any themes from the interview that describe children's participation in the nursery.

The EYP met me in the community café during his half an hour lunch break as this is the only time he has away from the children. The EYP had read through his copy of the transcript before we met but apologised for not doing any prior coding since he had not had any time. I said that was fine and we could have a go at doing it now if he was happy to. We agreed that he would read through a page or so of text adding his own codes in the margins and then we would discuss what he had come up with.

The codes the EYP constructed are listed below in regular font bullet points. He wrote these codes against sections of text on his copy of the transcript. Italics denote the participant's further reflections upon the codes i.e. meta-data.

The highlighted comments in the margin are my reflections and higher order codes that I added after our meeting. These codes eventually helped to inform my analysis of the different social practices and discourses practitioners were drawing upon to conceptualise participation.

#### Participant Codes and Comments

- It's about freedom:

EYP: *letting the children do what they want to do rather than us telling them what to do*

**Comment [HM1]:** Participation as freedom. Drawing on liberal notions of democracy here

- Adults taking the lead from children
- Children leading their own learning
- Reflecting children's interests in our provision

EYP: *Continuous provision as a starting point for children's participation. This is like 'freedom one' [the first level of freedom] and then tailoring our enhanced provision to what we think the children like is 'more freedom'*

**Comment [HM2]:** Freedom as a mode of delivery of provision - seen in the social practices of 'continuous provision', 'enhanced provision' and 'free choice'. (Drawing on a discourse of developmentalism here)

- It's about asking children directly for their views

EYP: "Sometimes we ask the older children in Room 3 what they would like or what they think about something. We could ask children in Room 2 as well, but we don't. We should.

Elly: Why is that?

EYP: *It's cos they're younger. It's the perception that they're toddlers, that they are at that age where even though you do plan to reflect what they're in to, it's the idea that they're more than babies but they are not big Room 3 children. That sounds really mean don't it? But you know, we don't do it and we should. I don't want to say it, but it's kind of like their views aren't valued because of how old they are. But there again that's only one part of participation. We're still observing children. It's not that that's ever been discussed, but I think that may be just the way it is. I might be wrong.*

**Comment [HM3]:** Participation informed by developmental discourse and constructions of childhood which constrain our actions as adults and our beliefs about children's competency to participate

- Not interrupting children with our adult routines:

EYP: *...such as sleep time and lunch time but this raises a dilemma between our routines and the children's, and also between the wishes of some parents and their children - can we disregard what the child wants if it conflicts with what the parent wants?*

*Can we get over this dilemma as a nursery? Should we say "No. We're not listening to the parents because we're listening to the children" I've never thought about that before actually. What would a parent say if we said 'We're really into following children's views. If they don't want to go to sleep we're not going to put them to sleep'?*

**Comment [HM4]:** This is an organisational dilemma of participation I had observed in the nursery, but EYP comes to the same conclusion himself.

**Comment [HM5]:** Evidence of critical reflection (Has Phase 2 already started here? i.e. thinking differently about practice is part of action research) - relate to Freire's notion of 'praxis' and the idea that praxis cannot be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action, but occurs in an endless cycle.

- Children displaying high levels of involvement, persistence, focus.

EYP: *Participation is being involved, and there are different degrees to which a child is involved. The greater the level of involvement, the greater the child's participation is.*

**Comment [HM6]:** Further dilemma between parental views and children's views

- Observation is a tool to record children's participation

EYP: *As practitioners when we observe children we've got that child development, 'six areas of learning' at the back of your mind. Even though probably we shouldn't think like this we're thinking we've got to do their development records to prove they are developing and learning as evidence for OFSTED, if nothing else.*

**Comment [HM7]:** Equates children's participation with Ferre Leavers 'Involvement scale'. The institutional basis for this 'involvement' discourse has come as a result of his EYPS training.

Elly: *Could there be times when that lens that you are using to observe children, might get in the way of observing other things?*

EYP: Yes because when you're doing their 'development matters' statements you're looking for ones you've read a lot, but you might be missing something else. They can be quite limiting, what you observe might not match to anything on the statements. Also different people see different things. I suppose observation can be a tool for participation but it can also get in the way of it. Yes ... And because when you're observing you're not interacting with the child, you're missing a chance to interact. You've put this invisible barrier up: I'm doing an observation on you, and you should be doing what you're doing and not interact with me because that will spoil what I'm writing. But children's participation is tied up with staff interacting with children. Probably the most valuable part of children's participation is when staff are interacting, which is when you're not observing.

**Comment [HM8]:** Observation from a developmental gaze can help adults respond to children's views but can also constrain children's participation.

I suppose you could say to another adult 'Could you observe me in this interaction?' But then you'd feel daft because somebody's written about you. And yet we feel it's OK to observe the children and write about them. I wonder what it feels like for the child?.

**Comment [HM9]:** Non-participant observation hinders opportunities for children's participation (method constrains participation)

**Comment [HM10]:** Participation as adult-child interaction. Seen to be more valuable than other codes EYP identifies such as participation as a mode of delivery (i.e. continuous and enhanced provision)?

**Comment [HM11]:** Participation as relational. A relationship must exist. This is an attribute of participation, without which the concept cannot be said to occur. EYP discussing the relational domain of children's participation here.

- Going with the children

..but then I'm going against other stuff cos there's a dilemma between staff steering children's learning and children steering their own learning.... um... EPPE report says that good settings have a balance of adult-initiated and child-initiated so that's what I'm supposed to do as EYP but here I'm saying that children's participation is about going with the child, but is that right?

**Comment [HM12]:** Dilemma between child-initiated and adult-initiated. Does this conflict with children's participation?

- Children experimenting, exploring and returning to build on what they've done before: developing and learning.
- Challenging old school attitudes

....about what we let children do, or about what children are capable of doing.

**Comment [HM13]:** contrastive rhetoric: 'old school' versus 'our approach'

- Also indirectly influencing parent attitudes, promoting children's participation in children's lives outside the nursery
- Giving children a voice

...not ignoring what they say and do and above all letting them talk, maybe communicate is a better word.

**Comment [HM14]:** recognising children's multimodal communicative practices as a form of participation

- Making provocations instead of formal consultations

EYP: ...suggestions rather than coming out with a formal list of questions to consult children with but instead making a provocation, something that's related but not too directive.

*Elly: Why?*

*EYP: Because then it comes from the child and not from you expecting that you're going to get something from a child and because you do that's what you look for and probably that's what you get.*

- It's about creating an environment where children don't feel as though they can't express their views

**Comment [HM15]:** a cultural-ethical space for participation - developing a culture of participation

### **EYP's Reflections on our Meeting**

*Elly: How have you felt about doing this analysis of your interview with me?*

*EYP: Doing it together has been great. Doing it... well unless you're asked about children's participation you don't stand back and think about 'How do we do it?' What's good about what we do and what's not so good and how could we do it better in the future?' Even though you want to be a reflective practitioner, but when do we ever really get time to think? It's time isn't it? Going through this transcript has made me think about what I've said and what I do and helped me to reflect further.*

## Appendix 13 Example of Narrative Analysis

### Labov's Narrative Units

Structure	Question	Description
Abstract	What was this about?	This is optional. Typically the abstract illustrates the narrative by summarising the point of the story
Orientation	Who? What? When? Where?	Establishes the situation, time, people involved
Complication	Then what happened?	The major accounts of the events that are central to the story
Evaluation	So what?	Highlights the point of the narrative
Result	What finally happened?	Describes the outcome of the events or the resolution of the problems
Coda	[Finish narrative]	This is optional. The coda marks the end of the narrative and often returns the discourse to the present

### Water Play

EYP: Children's participation does cause us dilemmas....such as with Hafiz, because we want him to participate by allowing him to follow his play interests, but if we were to follow his, well like Lynn was saying, he likes playing in water, but because of his suspected autism if he had his way he'd probably be in that bathroom from the moment he walked in to the moment mum and dad came. But that's his thing. That's what he wants to do.

I: What's his thing? What does he want to do?

EYP: He wants to play with the water and the taps. We're not quite sure, maybe it's the hot tap he enjoys, whether there's some sort of sensation from the hot tap that interests him, maybe it's a duller sensation than other children or we would feel. But the problem is that he gets completely covered in water. He'll start just hands and then he'll move to his face and then his hair. Mum and Dad aren't particularly keen. They don't let him pour water over himself at home and you can understand why because floor gets



soaked and you have to change his clothes. But there again, he's enjoying and learning and making sense of the world around him, so does it really matter if he gets wet?

I: Um.

EYP: I know not everyone sees the value of children following their interests and letting them do things over and over again. Some people say we shouldn't let children like Hafiz participate in repetitive behaviour because it stops them from leading a normal life. But I mean all young children practice things over and over again. You know, it's the Teletubbies Syndrome: 'Again! Again!' So it's a dilemma between what we allow him to pursue as his interests and knowing when to try and move him on. I don't know really. It's hard because it all comes down to different opinions about what is good for their overall development.

**The abstract** - *children's participation does cause us dilemmas* - this theme becomes a major, organising theme in the thesis and a major preoccupation in our thinking and discussions - consequently, a whole chapter is devoted to dilemmas

**The orientation** - *wanting him to participate by allowing him to follow his play interests* - we began to realise this was located in the developmental discourse of child-centredness - and this became one of the codes we identified across the data set

**The complication** - allow sustained water-play because it enhances his participation and development or prevent sustained water-play because it hinders his future participation and development?

**The evaluation** - there are competing cultural values, views and beliefs about the participation of young disabled children. Should adults respect his participation rights, or override them in favour of his protection and development?

**The result and coda** - *So it's a dilemma between what we allow him to pursue as his interests and knowing when to try and move him on* - non-interference or intervention required? The EYP does not provide a resolution to the dilemma, other than summarising that '*it all comes down to different opinions*'.

## Appendix 14 Example of Dilemma Analysis

### Water Play

On the one hand ...	On the other hand ...	Discourses & Binaries
staff want Hafiz to participate <i>by allowing him to follow his play interests. This is a good for his overall development</i>	Hafiz's sustained participation in water play can lead to <i>repetitive behaviour</i> and stops him <i>from leading a normal life</i> . This could harm his overall development.	Normal/abnormal Developmentalism
<i>he's enjoying and learning and making sense of the world around him</i>	<i>the problem is that he gets completely covered in water</i>	Developmentalism Protectionism
we should <i>allow him to pursue his interests</i>	we should <i>try and move him on</i>	Child-led/Adult-led Non-interference/ intervention
<i>all young children practice things over and over again</i>  Hafiz is the same as other children therefore we should treat him the same	<i>we shouldn't let children like Hafiz participate in repetitive behaviour</i>  Hafiz is different <i>because of his suspected autism</i> therefore we should treat him differently	Sameness/Difference

# Appendix 15 Wall Display



## Appendix 16 Children's Centre Customer Charter

### CHILDREN'S CENTRE CUSTOMER CHARTER

We will provide a welcoming, secure, happy and stimulating environment to enable all children to learn and develop attitudes, skills and abilities.

We will encourage all children to become confident as both independent and co-operative learners and enable them to develop to their full potential.

We will work in partnership with parents, carers, other agencies and the wider community for the benefit of our children and their families.

We will ensure a smooth transition for all children from home to nursery and provide a firm foundation for future lifelong learning.

We will embrace and value the diversity within our Centre and the wider community, so that everyone feels welcome.