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## Boundedness, Belonging and Becoming: Primary School Children's Perspectives of Education and Learning in the South Wales Valleys

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Boundedness, belonging and becoming: primary school  
children's perspectives of education and learning in the  
South Wales valleys

Gavin Williams

BSc. (Hons), MEd

Doctorate in Education (EdD)

The Open University

May 2018

## Abstract

The impact of poverty and disadvantage on the attainment and outcomes of children is well documented. Less research evidence is available on the experiences of children living in deprived communities and their perceptions of its impact on learning and future life chances. Using a case study approach, this thesis investigates the experiences of children living in the Rhondda Valley, a post-industrial area in South Wales. Nineteen children (aged eleven) from three primary schools in the valley participated in the study using focus groups, individual interviews, photo-elicitation interviews and observation to explore their experiences and perceptions of growing up in the area and how it affected learning.

Drawing on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1984), it was found that the topography and geographically bounded nature of the valley significantly affected the children's experiences. It not only shaped the immediate formal and informal learning opportunities available but the history and culture of the area. Furthermore, the study revealed the children's awareness of the importance of formal education for their futures. Another key finding was the role of the family in instilling a feeling of belonging to the area, and supporting the children to access informal learning opportunities within and outside the boundaries of the valley. The influence of the landscape, school, and family was clear in the children's expressions of becoming. This aspirational habitus demonstrated agency and an ability to draw upon their

experiences and look beyond the valley boundaries, thus challenging governmental policy that is often written from a perspective of cultural deficit.

The research provides new insights into the learning experiences of children growing up in a deprived area. It has implications for policy development in identifying the importance of gaining children's views and for educational practice in highlighting the importance of the natural environment and local history for learning.

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents - two of whom sadly passed away during my studies - who, along with my parents, instilled in me a love of learning and of the place I grew up that ultimately led me to pursue this doctorate.

## Acknowledgements

My name appears on the title page but I have not completed the journey alone.

Throughout my studies the advice, guidance and direction provided by my principal supervisor, Dr Grace Clifton, has been invaluable. I also want to thank you for your patience, empathy and understanding of the struggles I faced as a part-time student. It is not an understatement to say that without your support, the study would not have been completed. I also thank Dr Alison Clark for all of your insightful feedback and encouragement, especially during the compilation of the thesis, and Dr Cindy Kerawalla for your constructive comments and honesty when it was needed most. I could not have asked for a better supervisory team. It has been a privilege to work with each of you.

I would like to thank my parents for all of your love and unwavering support in whatever I have chosen to do – undertaking this doctorate would not have been possible without the opportunities you have provided me. To my brother, Daniel, thank you for the many hours spent proofreading drafts. My sincere thanks go to my wife Victoria for your forbearance, understanding and support throughout the past five years. You will never know how much that has meant - I could not have done this without you. To Ioan, Isaac and Joseph, thank you for giving me perspective when the going got tough.

I am grateful to the head teachers and teachers for welcoming me into their schools and, most importantly, I thank all of the children who gave so generously of their time and experiences. Without your voices, this study could not have taken place. I hope my representations do your experiences justice.

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## Acronyms used in this thesis

FSM – Free School Meals

SES – Socio Economic Status

UK – United Kingdom

UNCRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

PDG – Pupil Deprivation Grant

FE – Further Education

HE – Higher Education

WP – Widening Participation

# Chapter 1: Introduction

"Gorau adnabod, d'adnabod dy hun." – "The best knowledge is to know yourself"

(Davies, 2016, p36)

In this chapter I outline the rationale for undertaking the research and my role – from both a personal and professional perspective – before providing a summary of the structure of the thesis.

## 1.1 The thesis in context: my role and the rationale

Social researchers are a part of the world they study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). It is essential therefore that the researcher has awareness of their impact on the research process and their role within it, and this is particularly relevant for me as the Welsh proverb above signifies.

The geographical area on which the research focuses is the one where I grew up and still live. The area – the upper Rhondda<sup>1</sup> – is a post-industrial former mining community in South Wales. The villages that comprise the area are some of the most disadvantaged in the whole of the United Kingdom (UK) (*Census*. Great Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the schools and villages and for all of the participants in the study in order to ensure anonymity. However, I have identified the geographical area of the study and used the name of the valley itself i.e. the upper Rhondda so that the views and experiences of the children could be situated within their particular social, cultural, and historical context. This is consistent with previous research (e.g. Evans, 2013) and is further discussed in Section 4.5.

Parliament. House of Commons, 2011) with high rates of unemployment and ill health and low levels of educational attainment.

The reasons for choosing the specific topic for the study are numerous. The attainment levels of those from deprived backgrounds are well documented (Bradshaw, 2002), as is the importance of parental involvement and engagement in their children's learning in helping to offset the effects of poverty (Harris and Goodall, 2008). In spite of the levels of deprivation in the upper Rhondda, the local secondary school - which I attended - has a successful history of students attending elite universities, particularly Oxford. As a sixth-form student, based on my predicted A-Level results and the grades I attained at GCSE level, I was encouraged to apply to Oxford University, and attended an Open Day with the intention of studying Spanish. However, I decided that applying was not for me and instead chose to attend another Russell Group institution closer to home, becoming the first person in my family to go to university. Some of my contemporaries at school who were in the same classes and received similar grades chose a different path and have since struggled to keep jobs in an area where employment prospects are generally low. The reasons underlying the choices and differences in direction made have always intrigued me, so exploring experiences and views and what is important to people, would enable me to learn more about the area - and also possibly myself - and how it shapes the experiences of those living there. Furthermore, through exploring children's perspectives it could allow for further insight into their experiences of growing up in the area so that more tailored

support could be provided to increase the likelihood of individuals realising their potential.

In addition to this, the roles I have undertaken in my working life to date - including previous roles in the voluntary sector working with children and young people, as well as my current employment as a Staff Tutor <sup>2</sup> in Education at The Open University - have focused on widening participation and supporting marginalised and vulnerable groups to have a voice. Professionally as well as personally, therefore, exploring individual perspectives and increasing access to - and opportunities in - education is of significant importance to me.

Between 2009 and 2012 I undertook a Master's degree in Education with the Open University, which involved work focusing on the influence of socio-economic status (SES) and disadvantage on educational attainment. Much of the research in the UK focuses on large-scale quantitative studies and predominantly concerns the system in England (Strand, 2011; Von Stumm et al., 2010; Coldron et al., 2009; Thompson, 2009) with less focus on Wales. Additionally the research indicates that poverty and disadvantage affect far more than attainment and shape children's experiences both within and outside of school. However, specific experiences differ and are influenced by the place in which a child grows up (Dickerson and Popli, 2018).

Place, as Massey (1995) contended, is constituted of both space and time and can be understood as the articulation of social relationships over time that are present

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<sup>2</sup> A Staff Tutor is an academic member of staff at the Open University responsible for the management of Associate Lecturers.

not only within a locale but that link it to the outside world. Halfacree (2006) supported this and argued that localities are more than simply physical places, they are enduring spaces inscribed by social processes. Understanding the social history and industrial heritage of an area is therefore important as it influences the social landscape and opportunities available in the present day, and thus, the experiences and attitudes of children to education and learning. However, there is limited research focusing on the impact of place on children's learning experiences.

As Wales became the first nation in the UK to ratify children's participation into law through the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011a) and education is a devolved area, it is pertinent to explore the role of place on the learning experiences of children in Wales. Doing so will serve to add to the discussion regarding the importance of place in shaping children's experiences, and expand the existing literature into another geographical area with high levels of poverty and disadvantage, the upper Rhondda Valley in South Wales.

## 1.2 Research aim and structure of the thesis

The overarching aim of my research is to explore the experiences of children living in a deprived area in the South Wales valleys and how their experience of place

affects their learning experiences and future life chances. This thesis documents the study and is structured into seven further chapters:

In Chapter two, I provide a review of the literature focusing on poverty and disadvantage. It is subdivided into five sections and the first three focus on: the issues in defining poverty and disadvantage; the lived experience of poverty; and the impact of poverty on attainment, aspiration and future life chances respectively. Based on the literature and examination of the research findings I then discuss the overarching theoretical framework, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice and his three interconnected concepts or "thinking tools", field, habitus and capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989, p50) and how they relate to my research. The analysis of the literature and identification of gaps allows me to justify the reasons for the research and the research questions in the final section of the chapter.

Chapter three situates the research in its local and national (i.e. Welsh) context. It discusses policy initiatives at a national level devised to mitigate the effects of poverty and disadvantage on individuals' day-to-day lives as well as their life chances. The focus of the chapter then shifts to the Rhondda Valley in order to provide an account of the place where the children live and to position the research within its local context.

Chapter four is presented in two parts. Part one focuses on the qualitative research methodology chosen, the case study approach, the specific case and associated



methods utilised in the study, before discussing the pilot stage of the research. Part two considers issues critical to the research process including reliability and validity, generalisability, reflexivity, ethical considerations and access, and data protection before focusing on the data analysis methods used in order to ensure transparency of the process.

Chapters five, six and seven present the key findings of my research arising from the thematic analysis of the data. Three key thematic areas are identified and the findings are discussed in relation to existing literature. I begin each of these chapters with Welsh proverbs, as I did in Section 1.1, in order to summarise and concisely reflect some of the key findings.

Chapter five is entitled 'Becoming' and is structured in two parts. Part one focuses on school and formal learning, exploring the children's attitudes towards school, the role of national tests before the transition to secondary school and the importance of learning for the future. Part two focuses on the children's aspirations for the future. In doing this, it demonstrates the inter-connected nature and importance of the role of the school, place and family. It considers the influence of local role models, geography and the school environment in shaping aspirations for the future.

Chapter six is entitled 'Belonging' and focuses on the influence of the family in developing cultural capital and shaping the habitus of the children. It considers the

support provided for formal education and links between the home and school but also the role of the family in providing a wider range of opportunities for the children both within and beyond the confines of the valley.

Chapter seven is entitled 'Boundedness' and discusses the influence of place on informal learning opportunities. Specifically it focuses on the importance of landscape and the natural environment in a geographically bounded area and how this can provide freedom and opportunity yet simultaneously be restrictive.

Chapter eight presents the conclusion and findings of my study in relation to the research questions. It then discusses the contribution of the findings to knowledge in the field and the implications for policy and practice. I then consider the limitations of the study and suggest areas for further research.

### 1.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an introduction to the thesis and identified the reasons for undertaking the study and my role, both personal and professional, in relation to it. This has enabled context and background information to be provided about how I came to undertake the research. An overview of the structure of my thesis was then provided.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

“Adfyd a ddaw â dysg yn ei law”- “Adversity comes with education in its hand”

(Davies, 2016, p5)

In this chapter, I review the existing literature focusing on poverty and disadvantage in order to provide justification for my research. The chapter is structured in five sections. First I discuss the issues in defining and measuring poverty and disadvantage, before focusing on the effect of poverty and disadvantage on lived experiences. The literature relating to the impact of poverty on academic attainment and aspirations is then reviewed before I discuss the theoretical framework used, Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1984), and how this relates to the study. The chapter concludes with a summary and discussion of gaps in the literature, thus providing the rationale for my study before identifying the research questions.

## 2.1 The issues in defining and measuring poverty and disadvantage

The effect of poverty and disadvantage on childhood development and future life chances is well documented (Bradshaw, 2002) and is evidenced in the aim of the UK government to end child poverty by 2020 (Child Poverty Act, 2010). More specifically, it is also reflected in governmental strategy and policy across the UK focusing on education providing a route out of poverty, through raising both aspiration and attainment (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). Education and specifically, educational attainment, has consistently been shown to predict future economic and social success (Cassen et al., 2009; Rees et al., 1996) and is positively related to higher perceived quality of life and future life outcomes (Ross & Van Willigen, 1997). However, the effects of poverty and disadvantage are multidimensional (Holmes and Kiernan, 2013) and impact upon a variety of different indicators, most notably children's health and development (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005). Therefore, there is no clear, straightforward link between poverty, disadvantage and attainment (Raffo, 2009), and this is reflected in the partial success rates of policy initiatives aiming to raise the attainment levels of children and young people (Wikeley et al., 2009). Historically too, patterns of lower achievement have been evident amongst children and young people attending schools in areas of disadvantage (David, 2010).

Despite the overwhelming evidence indicating the detrimental impact of poverty and disadvantage on lived experience and outcomes, difficulties emerge in defining and measuring poverty itself (European Anti-Poverty Network, 2013; Gorard,

2012a). The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) (2013) classifies poverty into two distinct types: 'absolute or extreme' and 'relative' poverty. An individual is said to be in absolute poverty when they lack the basic necessities for survival. It is linked to the nutritional requirements to sustain and undertake everyday life and its associated activities, a measure that allows international comparisons to be made (Chen and Ravallion, 2013). Relative poverty is concerned with the standard of living within a given country, and as such, a relative poverty line is defined as a percentage constant of the median income and resources of households within a given nation. Chen and Ravallion (2013) identify that this percentage differs between nations and that nations in the developed world typically have a higher percentage level, thus making international comparisons difficult.

In Britain, families defined as living in relative poverty are those with a household income of 60% or less of the median British income in that year (Department for Education, 2014). Statistics for England show that in 2013, 21% of working-age adults and 27% of children were living in households in relative poverty after housing costs had been taken into account (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014). This compares to 23% of adults living in relative poverty in Wales (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2013) and one in three children (Save the Children, 2013). More recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018) focusing on the years to 2013 – 2016 has identified a higher percentage of working-age adults and children living in poverty in Wales compared to the other nations of the UK.

However other governmental estimates produce lower percentage rates as they are based on 'before housing' costs –the official figure used by the UK Government (End Child Poverty, 2013). This measure has been widely criticised however as it does not take housing costs, which are often unavoidable and essential, into consideration (Child Poverty Action Group, 2013). This highlights some of the issues prevalent in analysing poverty-related data, as measurements differ, and the difficulties inherent in measuring poverty are often mirrored by the figures reported. For example in Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT), a unitary authority area in South Wales and the area on which this study is focused, an End Child Poverty report (2013) highlighted that 23% of children lived in relative poverty while Save the Children (2013), focusing on children and young people aged 0 – 19 years, identified a figure of 25%. The use of different ages and measures therefore make true comparisons especially difficult. Further, others have criticised the use of poverty measurements that focus on household income due to there being a wide range of other factors that can affect a child's development as well as the differences prevalent in intra-household income allocation (White et al., 2003). In focusing on this, White et al. (2003) propose child-specific poverty measurements that focus on the welfare of children and uniquely listen to children in identifying the things that are of most importance to them.

These difficulties also present potential issues when reviewing the literature available on poverty and its associated effects, as differing concepts and measurements of poverty are used (Gorard, 2012b). Gorard (2012b) stresses caution must be used, as measurements of social class, disadvantage and poverty

differ between studies, making generalisations and true comparisons difficult. The adoption of one single indicator of social status – which would perhaps remedy this – may be seen as unreliable and insufficient however as it would not effectively capture the complexities (Von Stumm et al, 2010; Korenman and Winship, 2000).

Gorard (2012a) in an analysis of Free School Meals (FSM) in England, discusses how FSM is used as an indicator of household income and disadvantage in social policy research. Further, Gorard (2012a) explains how FSM is used when analysing pupil and school-level performance as well as when focusing on the Pupil Premium – the additional funding provided to schools to reduce the attainment gap between those pupils eligible for FSM and their peers (Department for Education, 2017) - in deciding how much extra funding is allocated to schools. This is also the case in Wales with the Pupil Deprivation Grant where the composition of each school based on the ratio of children eligible for FSM compared to those not eligible determines the level of additional funding received from the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2014).

There are potential disadvantages of the use of FSM, such as it not distinguishing between those children who may be eligible for FSM but do not access it - perhaps due to frequently moving schools or other issues - but Gorard (2012a) suggests that it should be the preferred option when compared to other potential measures (such as indices of multiple deprivation for example). This has been supported in more recent research conducted by Ilie et al. (2017) who found a high correlation between FSM eligibility and other measures of socio-economic disadvantage but

caution that it does not identify all children who may be living in deprived households.

Hobbs and Vignoles (2009) also found that those children eligible for FSM tend to come from the lowest income households. However they caution that those eligible for FSM qualify for benefits and other tax credits and these can serve to increase the amount of household income available to families. It is important to note however that an increase in overall family income does not necessarily mean that the children in a household will benefit as intra-household allocation varies widely (White et al., 2003). In support of this, Horgan (2009) and Wikeley et al. (2009) identify that when focusing on poverty and its impact on school-age children, FSM is a good proxy of disadvantage and poverty as families in receipt of FSM are also in receipt of other state benefits and are often socially excluded. Wikeley et al. (2009) note that when making comparisons between the experiences of school-age children and young people that relative poverty is the key factor. Although they acknowledge that it is not an absolute indicator they suggest that children in receipt of FSM are from families receiving other forms of benefit and therefore experience financial difficulty and the other concomitant issues this brings. This lived experience of poverty is discussed in the next section.



## 2.2 The lived experience of poverty

The impact of poverty is multi-dimensional, and affects all areas of an individual's life including physical and mental health (Kantomaa et al., 2010), access to resources and housing and opportunities to access social activities, in addition to a child's education (Child Poverty Action Group, 2012). In a review of national longitudinal datasets to estimate the impact of family income on children's lives, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) found poverty affects all areas of a child's life, including: health and nutrition with parents who are poor less likely to be physically and emotionally healthy compared to those who are not poor which affects the home environment; emotional and behavioural outcomes; cognitive ability, with children living below the poverty threshold 1.3 times more likely to experience developmental delay and learning disabilities, as well as the range of learning experiences available at home. They also found that families who live in poverty are restricted in their choice of where to live. Therefore, they are more likely to live in areas with higher levels of social problems (such as high levels of ill health, high unemployment levels and crime) and less resources (such as play areas, health care facilities, parks and after school programmes) to support child development. Furthermore they found that living in areas with "high concentrations of poor people is associated with less provision of learning experiences in the homes of pre-schoolers" (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997, p66) which can cause developmental delay. Although this research focused on the United States and was conducted in the 1990s, it is frequently cited in the research literature and the findings have since been corroborated in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Ridge, 2011).

In a review of the qualitative literature focusing on the lives and experiences of low-income children in the UK, Ridge (2011) also found that poverty affects all areas of a child's life, including school, their social relationships, the home environment and access to leisure activities. It detrimentally affects access to material goods that were identified as important for the children while the lack of income also restricted the children's access to social activities, which was exacerbated by a lack of accessible and affordable out of school activities in their areas (Ridge, 2011).

Despite poverty and disadvantage affecting every aspect of a child's life, research has shown that supportive parenting at home and involvement in learning activities can significantly influence children's development and attainment (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003). Exploration of children's views has also identified the importance of family and parents for learning. For example, in case study research with four to seven year olds focusing on the social world of children's learning, Pollard (1996) identified the importance of family for children's learning and situated this within a triad of influence. This acknowledged the social context in which interactions occur between the child and their family, the child and their peers, as well as the child and their teachers in school. More recent research with young children in the UK has shown that regardless of socio-economic status parents engage in learning activities with their children and support learning at home (Hartas, 2011) and that those parents from low SES backgrounds participated equally frequently in learning with their children as parents from higher SES. However, Hartas (2011) also noted that mothers with lower qualifications engaged less frequently in learning activities with

their children and identified that the type of interaction and support provided is important. In addition, Reay (2005) identified the importance of focusing on the mothers' own educational experiences as they influence the support mothers can provide to their children.

Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) identified that about 50% of the effect of family income on cognitive ability can be mediated by the home environment (including learning experiences), suggesting that interventions focusing on parents and family may prove beneficial. In addition, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) identify that families are viewed by educationalists as central to the academic success of their children. This is evident in the UK where the role of the family in children's learning and negating the impact of poverty has been the focus of policy initiatives over the past twenty years (Wainwright and Marandet, 2017). Earlier research by the same authors (Wainwright and Marandet, 2013) has shown that the programmes designed to support parental involvement can be of benefit to the adults who take part - predominantly mothers - as well as the children as they help facilitate friendship and social networks and foster personal development. Exploring the role of parents and family in alleviating the deleterious effects of poverty on their children is important therefore. The relationship between poverty and attainment and aspirations is discussed in the next section.

### 2.3 The impact of poverty: attainment, aspirations and life chances

In addition to the impact poverty has on day-to-day lived experiences it can also detrimentally affect academic attainment and life chances. Raffo (2009) provides an overview of research focusing on the influence of poverty on educational attainment and argues that there is not a single causal linear relationship between the two. There are many extraneous factors which can impinge on an individual's academic attainment (West, 2007) and these include a combination of a multitude of factors - biological, familial and societal – which can all affect educational attainment and children and young people's experiences of school (Mensah & Kiernan, 2010; Jackson, 2009; Raffo, 2009; Rothan et al., 2009). As identified in Section 2.2, it is important to note that poverty affects all areas of an individual's life (Child Poverty Action Group, 2012), and this has been an area of contention not only within academia but for policy- and decision-makers at governmental level.

Within the study, Raffo (2009) analyses the priority educational policies attempting to break the link between poverty and educational achievement adopted by the New Labour government (between 1997 – 2008). This was achieved through a mapping framework developed by the author, presenting a conceptual synthesis of the research literature and policy development on poverty and educational attainment. Two broad approaches of policy are identified, functionalist and socially critical, along with three levels of analysis. The functionalist approach takes for granted the way education plays an important and beneficial role in society; the socially critical model meanwhile assumes that education is beneficial (as it provides

economic development, social cohesion and increased life-chances), although the model highlights both power and resource inequalities within society which influence individuals' opportunities to realise these benefits (Raffo, 2009).

The three main areas that Raffo categorises policy and research into are micro – those conducted at the level of the individual; meso – those conducted with a social focus (at the school or community level) and macro – those which consider wider social structure and global socio-economic developments (similar to those outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, 1979). With particular emphasis on England, Raffo (2009) concludes that too many interventions have utilised a functionalist approach that focus on the more accessible meso level. This suggests that further research is warranted, not only into macro-level based policy intervention but also qualitative enquiry which involves children and young people in decision making processes about developments which will affect their lives.

Of the few qualitative studies that have focused on children's perceptions and views in this area, Horgan (2009) conducted research in Northern Ireland to explore the experiences of primary school children. Utilising a group interview approach and Free School Meals (FSM) as an indicator of poverty, the experiences of children aged 5 – 11 were explored comparing children living in the most disadvantaged and most advantaged parts of Northern Ireland. For the children aged 5 – 8 a cartoon alien character asked the questions. In addition to the interviews, Horgan utilised photographs of three separate houses for the younger children, asking them what it would be like to live in a detached mansion, a semi-detached bungalow with a large

garden and a terraced house on a social housing estate. The 9 – 11 year old children were also presented with the photographs but were additionally given vignettes about children living in the three houses and asked about their daily lives.

Findings indicated that children in the advantaged schools viewed school as a more positive experience, while children from more disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to say that school was important for negative reasons (such as to avoid problems when they grew up). Furthermore, awareness of social difference generally began in the over-7 year olds with the idea emerging that the child living in the largest house would be smart because s/he is rich, potentially suggesting that children are aware of the restrictions placed on them in terms of access to resources in comparison to others.

Overall Horgan (2009) concludes that poverty influences every aspect of a child's experience of school and this is prevalent from the earliest years of primary education. The use of the photographs however could have led the children to give specific responses so an alternative method to source information from children in future is necessary to explore this claim further. Horgan also suggests that the receipt of FSM is a good proxy of disadvantage and poverty as they are only available to families in receipt of other benefits. This is also the case in Wales (Welsh Government, 2012).

More recently, research has been conducted in Wales focusing on the views of young people using young people themselves as researchers. Through a partnership

between the Participation Unit at Save the Children and the Big Learning Company, four young people aged 16 – 18 were trained to undertake research focusing on reducing the impact of poverty on the educational achievement of young people in Wales. The young people were members of the Young Welsh Researchers group at the Participation Unit. The research specifically focused on gaining the views of 178 young people aged 11 – 14 across Wales on the key issues that they believe affected their achievement. This was accomplished through an online questionnaire as well as three focus groups with 22 of the young people. The report generated, entitled “Small Voice, Big Story” (Young Welsh Researchers, 2013) identified six recommendations made by the young people which are directed at the Welsh Government to improve achievement. These were 1. A Safe Place to Learn, 2. Peer Support from other students, 3. Someone to talk to about home and school, 4. A special fund for children to access resources and activities and not be disadvantaged by poverty, 5. Community role models should be used to provide real-life careers advice and 6. Children and young people continue to have a voice and are able to tell their story.

In accordance with recommendation four made by the Young Welsh Researcher’s (2013), other studies have also noted that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer opportunities than their more affluent peers. Croll (2008) claims that young people from advantaged backgrounds tend to be over represented in advantaged occupations and those families from higher socio-economic backgrounds are able to access greater resources and opportunities

and thus see greater benefits in terms of educational outcomes than those from less advantaged backgrounds.

Research conducted by Wikeley et al. (2009) focused on access and participation with specific consideration of the reasons why - and how – children and young people engage in out of school learning activities/opportunities, comparing those from disadvantaged and affluent backgrounds in England. Individual in-depth interviews with children in the final year of primary school and the second year of secondary school were utilised to compare the quality of educational relationships that are established through participation in out-of-school activities. It was found that those from disadvantaged families (again those identified as being in receipt of FSM) participated in fewer out of school activities than those from families not in receipt of FSM. This therefore affected their ability to establish and sustain effective educational relationships that the authors posit can impede further learning and achievement. This is supported by other analyses and research (e.g. Coldron et al. 2009; Raffo 2009) including a study by Jackson (2009) in the USA that identified that the educational attainment of young people from poorer backgrounds is due to access and participation rather than reduced expectations.

This contrasts with the recent emphasis of policy in the UK, which presumes that the aspirations of children and young people and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds are too low and this leads to low levels of educational achievement (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011). St Clair and Benjamin (2011) set out to investigate this through a large scale empirical investigation which interviewed 490



12 and 13 year olds as well as 159 parents and 25 teachers in deprived areas across three cities in the UK; Glasgow, Nottingham and London. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2007) as the primary measure of poverty to identify the three schools, the study aimed to understand how individuals form aspirations from the resources available in four separate domains - place (reflecting the neighbourhood and local labour market), family, school and individual. Findings indicated that aspirations of the young people were high and not low as is often cited in policy. In fact, when compared to the current labour market in the UK the aspirations expressed by the young people were higher than the current labour market could fulfil. The authors discuss a performative model whereby aspirations are dynamic and arise from - and are embedded within - the social contexts in which they occur. Therefore young people may express aspirations that they feel they are expected to disclose. Further they present the idea that policy may have had some success in increasing aspirations, although this may solely be through children and young people conforming to a vocationally driven curriculum and realising they should express high aspirations. They describe that measuring the link between raised aspirations and better outcomes as well as investigating the social, material and cultural factors that affect aspirations remain far more complex.

Gorard (2012b) takes this issue further when examining and questioning the causal role of attitudes in educational attainment. Gorard reviewed and summarised 1,827 research articles that focused on the link between aspirations and educational attainment. Parameters were set to only include articles from the year 2000 onwards that were in English and that focused on children of a school age. Findings

from the review suggested that there is no clear evidence that interventions to improve attitudes and aspirations lead to improvements in educational outcomes/achievement. Further, Gorard (2012b) suggests that children's aspirations may currently be sufficient and that any further increases would be more than the UK labour market could accommodate – drawing on the findings of St Clair and Benjamin (2011). However, he claims that attainment is only one possible educational outcome and other wider benefits can be sought from increasing aspirations such as enhanced future engagement in education, wider participation in educational and community opportunities, and increased wellbeing and happiness. Both individual and social benefits may therefore be gained through such interventions. The author himself notes however that the review is indicative rather than definitive while the sample selected was predominantly focused on US-based studies. Importantly Gorard (2012b) also denotes the difficulties in untangling the often-interlinked notions of aspirations, attitudes and outcomes with each other as well as other SES factors, such as disadvantage and poverty.

In a comparative study of post-16 education choices and transitions in Wales, Evans (2013) recognised the importance and influence of place on educational choices and aspirations. Comparing the experiences of 16- 18 year olds living in the Rhondda Valleys and Newport in South Wales, two areas with high levels of deprivation, the study revealed the significance of place in shaping experiences, opportunities and aspirations to progress onto Higher Education (HE). Evans (2013) found a number of key factors influenced the decisions made by the young people. This included the more immediate concerns of availability of educational and employment

opportunities in each area for young people (termed *local opportunity structures*), but also the importance of the social and cultural history of each place in informing the aspirations and educational choices of the young people (Evans, 2013). The interconnectedness of place, history and culture is discussed further in the next section that situates the study within its conceptual framework.

#### 2.4 The importance of capital, habitus and field: a focus on Pierre Bourdieu

As identified in the discussion of the findings of Raffo (2009), Horgan (2009), Croll (2008) and Evans (2013) in Section 2.3, experiences do not occur in a vacuum and are shaped by interactions at home, with the family, and wider society, which in turn influence our own dispositions and behaviours. In explaining this, sociological and educational research has extensively utilised the work and theories of Pierre Bourdieu (Reay, 2005).

Bourdieu identifies three major and interconnected theoretical and “thinking tools” in his theory of practice; field, habitus and capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989, p50), which together offer an “epistemological and methodological approach to an historicised and particular understanding of social life” (Thomson, 2014a, p79). The relationship between these is summarised in the following formula:

$[(\text{habitus}) + (\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$

(Bourdieu, 1984, p101)

In identifying this theory of practice, Bourdieu noted the tension between structure and agency and the relational nature of his three interconnected 'thinking tools' (Knight, 2015), and this is why I was drawn to Bourdieu and how it has relevance for my study. Bourdieu's theory acknowledges that childhood does not occur in a vacuum and is subject to external influences such as the school environment, family, and place. Bourdieu's theory of practice (1984) therefore enabled me to understand and explain the children's experiences and the key influences on these.

Place has a significant impact on individuals, not only in terms of physical geography but also in shaping the social spaces in which they live. In order to investigate and understand practice (i.e. human behaviour and interactions), Bourdieu acknowledged the importance of understanding the social space in which human behaviour occurs. The social spaces that individuals occupy, or *fields* as defined by Bourdieu (1976), are structured spaces that produce knowledge and are subject to particular rules and boundaries, which can only be understood through investigation of their historical and current local and national context. Bourdieu (1977) argued that society is made up of a number of different and overlapping fields, including the field of education. He affirmed that the overall field of power is structured to support the production and reproduction of social and economic regimes and every other field, including education, plays a part in ensuring the status quo is maintained (Bourdieu, 1977). Fields therefore are occupied by both institutions (for example schools and universities) and individuals and are not

neutral or equitable spaces but consist of positions and hierarchies of power (Bourdieu, 1977).

Bourdieu (1976) drew parallels between human behaviour and a game of football, and wrote about 'le champ de jeu' (the field of the game), comparing his notion of field to that of a football field: a space with set rules that must be learnt; specific positions occupied by each individual; limits to what can be done according to that position; and the specific conditions of the field (Thomson, 2014a). This analogy is useful as it allows us to identify the competitive nature of fields as described by Bourdieu where players are always trying to "improve their position" and accumulate capital (Thomson, 2014a, p67). This creates inherent inequalities as those who possess particular forms of capital valued by the field – qualifications and knowledge of the system in the field of education for example - are advantaged from the outset. Social fields are not level playing fields therefore and individuals and institutions vie for the positions of power (Thomson, 2014a). For this study, consideration of place is essential as it provides insight into the social spaces in which the children are growing up and the social fields they occupy and how they interact with - and influence - the two other key thinking tools presented by Bourdieu; habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1976).

Habitus is defined as a 'system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organising principles of action' (Bourdieu, 1990, p13). These dispositions are rooted in an individual's lived history and so are based on the

family environment and community in which each individual grew – or is growing - up, including experiences of education. Bourdieu notes the importance of this shared history in shaping the experiences, dispositions and actions of individuals, so the environment in which one grew up along with their current circumstance shapes practice (Bourdieu, 1977). In extending the analogy of a football game, Bourdieu used the phrase ‘sens de jeu’ or ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990) to denote how individuals acquire a sense of the rules that determine their actions and dispositions.

Dumais (2006, p84) notes how these dispositions are based on social class and, with a focus on education, describes how they can serve to reproduce inequality between the classes, as those in privileged positions “act in ways to secure privilege for their children, while those who are poor see only a limited set of opportunities for their future.” They therefore have a greater ‘feel’ for the rules of the game. This illustrates the status and power hierarchies present within fields, not least within education, where those who possess a greater ‘feel for the game’ are in a more advantageous position. From this, we can postulate that individuals living in deprived areas, due to the lack of opportunities available, may only see a limited set of opportunities for their children, and this in turn may be manifest in the children’s own views of the world.

Capital has been identified as a form of amassed and “accumulated labor” and “the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world” (Bourdieu, 1997, p46), with Bourdieu explaining that capital is fundamental to the structure and

fabric of society and the opportunities available to those within. He explains that it is a “force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible” (Bourdieu, 199, p46). It therefore dictates one’s position within the social fields one occupies.

Bourdieu (1986) identified a number of different forms of capital, including: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital can be measured by an individual’s wealth, property, or income, and is directly convertible into money. Cultural capital meanwhile underpins one’s position in the fields we occupy. It can exist in one of three forms: the objectified, embodied, and institutionalised state (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital in its objectified state refers to material goods and resources an individual has access to such as books, visits and engagement in cultural activities e.g. trips to museums and art galleries. Cultural capital in its embodied state is manifested in an individual’s abilities and tastes for specific interests/activities, and is physically displayed in things such as body language, dialect and accent reflective of an individual’s culture. Finally, cultural capital in its institutionalised state refers to the capital conferred by institutions such as educational qualifications. Bourdieu (1986) notes how the acquisition of cultural capital takes time and further explains how cultural capital is able to explain the unequal attainment levels between children and young people from different social classes, identifying that children from middle and upper class families acquire cultural capital from their parents and that “the precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset..... only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1997, p49). It can be inferred from this that

children who are born into families who have access to greater cultural capital such as a wider range of resources and more investment in their development are at an advantage and would tend to have greater levels of attainment, and thus heightened aspirations and increased life chances.

Social capital is seen as the range of supportive resources available to individuals from within their family and community and the other networks/groups of which they may be members (Israel et al., 2001; Bourdieu, 1997). Strengthening access to social capital through family and community links has been shown to be beneficial for children and young people's development (Israel et al., 2001) and doing this may serve to negate the effects of poverty and disadvantage. Taking part in community activities can therefore serve to enhance social capital and further embed individuals in the communities where they live. This embeddedness may at first glance appear to be an entirely positive outcome. However, embeddedness within a particular community (or indeed *field*) may serve to distance individuals from other communities (Lupton, 2003), and the cultural and social capital valued in one community with its particular cultural norms and practices may not be valued outside in other communities.

As Israel et al. (2001) have shown, increased access to social capital can positively influence development and possibly serve to negate the effects of living in an area with high levels of deprivation and poverty. Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and the resources available to families to support their children is also of particular interest as this can influence attainment and future life chances (Bourdieu, 1986).



However, it is important to recognise that, according to Bourdieu (1977), the role of the field of education is to support the maintenance of the existing social order. The field of education is required to produce qualified people to work in all fields of employment while re/producing “the kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions already possessed and valued by the social elites and managerial elites in each of the fields” (Thomson, 2014b, p90). This social elite, or dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1977), therefore determines the dispositions, skills and knowledge that are valued in the field of education, and it is this elite that possesses the necessary capital. As the production and reproduction of knowledge is subject to that which is valued by the social and managerial elites, it confers further advantage upon them. This adds legitimacy for their perceived power and dominance, thus making it seem ‘natural’.

In order to maintain and reproduce the power hierarchy, the cultural and social values of the dominant group - termed the ‘cultural arbitrary of the dominant’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000, p5) - need to be reproduced by the educational system. A segregated educational system, pedagogical practices and the reliance on discipline-specific knowledge and capital, setting and banding procedures within schools, and examination and assessment all enable this to be achieved and reflect and reproduce the interests of the dominant social group (Archer et al., 2018; Thomson, 2014b). Meanwhile, the dispositions of those who are not from the social elite, such as those from working class backgrounds, are subsequently devalued and not recognised - in Bourdieu’s (1977) terms they are dominated. This is further exacerbated by their initial position on the field (Bourdieu, 1977) - potentially due

to a misaligned habitus relative to the schooling system and a lack of accepted cultural and social capital - that serves to create, maintain and reproduce social inequality.

One of the main mechanisms through which the education system maintains social inequality, Bourdieu (1984) argues, is misrecognition. Misrecognition refers to a process where something “is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously ‘cognised’ within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it” and instead another reason is ascribed for its occurrence (James, 2015, p100). Thomson argues that individuals are not entirely unaware of the truth “but act as if they must conceal it from themselves” (Thomson, 2014b, p91), and it is this that allows for domination and thus inequalities to be maintained and reproduced (James, 2015).

The meritocratic narratives that prevail in education provide an example of misrecognition. That educational success is attributed to individual ability, merit and natural talent and failure to a lack of ability and diligence is taken as a field-specific doxa – a taken-for-granted truth (Thomson, 2014b). This however misrecognises the overall objective of the educational system to maintain the power hierarchy and thus social inequality. As Bourdieu affirms:

“Misrecognition of the social determinants of the educational career – and therefore of the social trajectory it helps to determine – gives the educational certificate the value of a natural right and makes the

educational system one of the fundamental agencies of the social order  
(Bourdieu, 1984, p387).”

The attribution of success to individual ability (and failure to a lack thereof) fails to recognise the structural inequalities present in education and the advantages conferred to those from the dominant groups, such as those from the middle and higher classes. James (2015) asserts that misrecognition is functional and not an unintended by-product. Its function enables the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order (such as a segregated schooling system, setting and banding, unequal distribution of resources etc.), further subjecting those from the working class to domination. This domination can be exacerbated by the areas in which working class people grow up and live as it can shape their dispositions towards education and learning. Place can act as a constraint, as individuals may need to be seen to conform to localised working-class values that may not necessarily value education and learning (Ingram, 2009).

Thomson (2014b) states that misrecognition is one of Bourdieu’s most underused theoretical tools and is used far less frequently in educational research than the more popular concepts of habitus, field and capital. James (2015) argues that the reason for this is the apparent tension between the over-riding pessimism of Bourdieu’s social theory that focuses on domination and power and the positive intentions of researchers and those working in education focused on effectuating positive change (James, 2015). James (2015, p109) affirms the use of Bourdieu’s theory “entails acknowledgement that people working in education may be

unwitting (or semi-witting) agents of inequality” and this may explain the light usage in some research and avoidance of the concept of misrecognition. However, while there is a tendency towards pessimism, Bourdieu’s conceptual tools allow for agency and Bourdieu (1990) acknowledged that those who are subject to domination – such as the working class – can recognise and be critical of social reproduction.

In this thesis I explore the influence of place on children’s perspectives of education and learning and their aspirations for the future. Misrecognition is a feature of the children’s accounts – and those of the teachers and head teachers – as they predominantly ascribe success to effort, but they also demonstrate agency and possess an awareness of social difference. They are aware and are critical of the privileges afforded to those from backgrounds that are more affluent as well as the additional barriers they may face in attaining their aspirations, but it does not deter them. This research reinforces the notion that despite its tendency towards pessimism, Bourdieu’s framework allows for agency and shows that children as young as eleven are aware and can be critical of social reproduction.

Foregrounding the views of the children allows for greater recognition of the challenges those from working-class backgrounds face but also the significant role of place in shaping attitudes to - and experiences of - education and learning.

## 2.5 Rationale for this research and the research questions

The review of the literature demonstrates that there is little evidence of research that has sought to explore children's experiences of poverty and disadvantage and how it affects their learning, particularly in Wales. There is an abundance of research that focuses on the link between disadvantage and educational attainment, as well as the attempts through policy intervention to improve attainment through increasing aspirations. The wide variety of methods utilised however make comparisons difficult while the numerous and varying concepts used when comparing outcomes, achievement and aspiration further exacerbates the situation. The research conducted can therefore be seen as quite fragmented, with some authors focusing on school experiences and others focusing on wider social contexts while the wide variety of methods utilised further compounds matters.

Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice and his three main conceptual tools of habitus, field and capital, provide a theoretical construct to frame the study and research questions by focusing on the children's experiences of growing up in the valley and the role of the historical and current sociocultural context on their learning and aspirations. It is essential therefore not to view a child and their experiences in isolation but to investigate and explore the wider context and relationships in which these experiences have been formed. Bourdieu therefore places emphasis on the importance of the wider social context including the opportunities and resources available to children that can affect their current experience and future life chances.

Gaining the children's views and listening to their experiences of the opportunities and support available to them, may also enable practical guidance to be offered to schools and policymakers to devise more effective support measures for children.

In summary, the review of the literature presented in this chapter has identified that there is little research that has sought to explore children's views of how disadvantage and poverty may shape their learning experiences (both in school and in their wider lives). The process of undertaking the review of the literature including research findings, Bourdieu's conceptual framework, and governmental policy enabled me to identify the lack of research focusing on children's views, particularly in Wales, a nation that has sought to enshrine the gathering of children and young people's views into law (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011a). The main reason for this study therefore is to explore children's experiences of growing up in a deprived area in South Wales and their perceptions of its impact on learning. The main research question to be explored is:

1. What are the learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?

In order to achieve this a series of sub-questions will be explored. These are outlined below:

- 1.1. What are the factors that influence the (formal and informal) learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?
- 1.2. How do the children perceive their educational experiences?
- 1.3. What resources and opportunities are available for children who live in the Rhondda Valleys to support learning? What influences access to these opportunities?

## Chapter 3: The Welsh Context

### Introduction

“Teg edrych tuag adref” - “It is pleasant to look towards home”

(Davies, 2016, p81)

As the work of Bourdieu (1984) attests, place can play a significant role in shaping our experiences. Understanding the context in which these experiences occur is of vital importance therefore. This chapter focuses on the specific context in which the study has taken place, beginning in Section 3.1 by exploring the policy context in Wales. Section 3.2 then focuses on the local context and offers an historical overview of the Rhondda and the role of the industrial heritage of the valley in shaping the children’s experiences today.



### 3.1 The Welsh context: policy

As previously identified in the review of the literature in Chapter 2, the relationship between poverty and aspirations, attainment and life outcomes has received much attention at governmental level.

Finlay et al. (2010) recognised an increased interest in public policy directed towards children and young people during the first decade of the twenty-first century that has continued since the time of the research, with the central focus of these policies being social and economic exclusion; this is particularly evident in Wales. In the past Wales has adopted similar strategies for education as Westminster, and also had to have any laws (known as Measures prior to 2011 and Acts since) concerning education or other areas of public life (e.g. health) passed in England prior to being launched in Wales. After the devolution referendum in April 2011 however, Wales gained devolved law making rights over education. Lumby (2011) emphasises the recent focus placed on the holistic child and their needs, so that schools have responsibility for the health and wellbeing of children and young people as well as their educational outcomes. Further, Vanderlinde and Van Braak (2010) note that the improvement of educational processes and outcomes for all should be the main focus of educational research with policy to support this.

Wales is the first nation in the UK to approve a Rights Measure based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). The Welsh Assembly Government in 2011 put into place a Rights of Children and Young People Measure

that makes participation and active engagement a legal right for children and young people (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011a). This makes a statutory obligation for organisations to consult with children and young people about the decisions that affect them. Further, the Welsh Government has identified seven core aims for children and young people in response to the UNCRC, with key aims noting that children and young people; are listened to, treated with respect; have a comprehensive range of education and learning opportunities, and are not disadvantaged by poverty (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003). At first glance, the governmental rhetoric makes it seem that children's rights to participation, education and equality are at the very top of the political agenda – in practice however, it is far more difficult to achieve.

This is further compounded by the levels of poverty experienced in Wales, which has higher levels of adults and children living in relative poverty after housing costs when compared to the rest of the UK. For example, 23% of adults live in poverty in Wales compared to 21% of adults in England (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014) and over 30% of children in Wales live in poverty (Save the Children, 2013) compared to 27% in England (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014).

The issue surrounding the effects of poverty therefore is perhaps more evident in Wales than any other country of the UK. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 15 year olds in 29 countries were identified as having significantly greater mean reading scores than those in Wales. Furthermore, 20

countries had significantly higher mean science scores while 35 countries had significantly higher mean mathematics scores (Bradshaw et al., 2010). This, coupled with the high level of economic deprivation experienced in the country (Egan, 2013) as well as a funding gap of £604 per pupil between England and Wales (Times Educational Supplement, 2011), signifies that the impact of poverty on life chances of children is a key concern for not only the Welsh Government but also its citizens and future prosperity as a nation.

In order to counteract the detrimental effects, numerous policies have been implemented both prior to and across the timeframe of compulsory education. First there is the Flying Start programme for 0-3 year olds (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007). This programme supports families in the most deprived communities of Wales, aiming to provide positive medium and long-term outcomes. For 3-7 year olds there is the Foundation Phase, based on the principle that early years' provision should provide an effective foundation for children's learning, predominantly focusing on experiential learning opportunities, aiming to develop the child holistically, not just equipping them for assessment (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

Wider initiatives have also been developed in order to tackle underachievement. A Child Poverty Strategy was implemented in Wales in 2015 (Welsh Government, 2015a) which reconfirms Wales's commitment to eradicating child poverty by 2020 and builds on earlier legislation such as the 2010 Children and Families (Wales)

Measure Part 1 which focuses on eradicating child poverty in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011b). It cited the most recent Households Below Average Income data which estimated 31 per cent of children in Wales – so approximately 200,000 children below the age of 18 - were living in poverty, for the three year period 2010/11 to 2012/13 (Welsh Government, 2015a).

More recently, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) (Welsh Government, 2015b) identified the need to reduce the deleterious effects of poverty with a key goal of ensuring a more equal Wales, where individuals are able to fulfil their potential regardless of their socioeconomic status and background. In addition the Welsh Government's national strategy for 2017 – 2021, *Prosperity for All*, (Welsh Government, 2017) sets out key targets to reduce regional inequality, build resilient communities and to support young people to make the most of their potential.

With a specific focus on education, a Tackling Poverty Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2012a) in addition to a Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) scheme introduced in 2011 (Welsh Government, 2012b) has been put into place by the Welsh Government in order to raise the attainment levels of pupils who experience poverty and disadvantage. The PDG scheme set aside an indicated £36.8 million pounds for 2013 – 2014 (Welsh Government, 2012b) for schools in deprived areas to enhance learning- and teaching- focused interventions as well as student-, family- and community-focused interventions. An evaluation of the scheme focusing

on activity during the second year of the programme in 2014/2015 (Pye et al., 2015) noted a change in the approach taken by the schools. Rather than designating funds to resources and data monitoring systems there was an increase in direct interventions for children and families, with a specific focus on increasing the number and skills of teaching assistants to work with pupils.

Egan (2013) considers the type of intervention programmes in place in Wales that focus on changing the attitudes, aspirations and behaviours of children and young people. As already noted, changing aspirations and attitudes does not necessarily lead to increased outcomes and achievement (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011) but may have other benefits both for the individual and community (Gorard, 2012b). Egan (2013) suggests that the focus of these programmes as well as policy in Wales should be wide-reaching and target not only school-based interventions but also family and community based interventions and approaches too. This may potentially indicate one benefit of the PDG, as moving beyond the school to focus on family and community initiatives has particular importance due to the significant role both play in shaping the lived experiences of children, while it is also important to ensure children have a voice in any processes that may affect them. Furthermore it will allow individual schools and clusters to identify the particular challenges they face due to the diverse range of social circumstances in the communities they serve and implement targeted programmes accordingly.

### 3.2 The local context: the Rhondda Valley

The Rhondda Valleys are situated in South East Wales, and along with the Cynon Valley and Taff Ely form the Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority area (one of 22 in Wales). The 2010 Census identified a total of 234,309 people living in the Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority area, with 69,576 residing in the Rhondda Valleys (*Census. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011*). The Rhondda comprises two separate valleys, the Rhondda Fawr (meaning big/large in Welsh) and Rhondda Fach (little/small in Welsh). However as Evans (2013) notes, locally and across Wales, both are collectively referred to as 'the Rhondda' or 'Rhondda Valley' which are the terms I will use henceforth.

The industrial and social history of the Rhondda Valley is important as it shapes the area the children grow up in today. The Rhondda has a rich industrial heritage and transformed from a rural landscape with a population of 951 in 1851 to a peak of 167,000 in 1924 (Davies, 1993). A newfound ability in the mid-1800s to mine the rich seams of coal deep beneath the surface initiated a rapid expansion in the coal mining industry of the Rhondda Valley that resulted in a population boom, as men seeking employment in the collieries migrated with their families to the Rhondda (Davies, 1993). As Davies (1993) explains, the international need for steam coal from the Rhondda is reflected in the rapid expansion of Cardiff and its port, with the production of coal from the area increasing from 2.1 million tons in 1874 to 5.5 million tons in 1884 and 9.5 million tons in 1913.

During this period the people of the Rhondda were almost entirely reliant on a single industry. For example, in 1901 70% of the male workforce were miners, with very little opportunity for employment for women (Davies, 1993).

The structure of housing in the Rhondda Valleys – as in the other valleys of the South Wales coalfield – is a product of the topography of the landscape and an enduring reminder of its coal mining past. Davies (1993) notes how the Rhondda was not sufficiently wide to accommodate a town due to the steep valley slopes. Instead a series of villages with long rows of terraced housing on the valley floor and lower valley slopes were built to accommodate the miners and their families, with no street “more than a few steps away from the open mountain” (Davies, 1993, p403). This is shown in Figures 1 and 2 while Figure 3 provides an indication of how steep the slopes are with an image of a waterfall (situated just above one of the villages).



Figure 1. View of the valley and the rows of terraced housing





Figure 2. A different view of the valley and the rows of terraced housing



Figure 3. A waterfall in the upper Rhondda

Lewis (1975) notes how the large influx of people into the Rhondda Valley looking for work in the mines in the 19th century resulted in over-crowding in the area, and this in turn helped to forge strong community bonds – a typical feature associated with predominantly industrial working class communities - along with a significant role of religious nonconformity (i.e. the chapel) and sport (e.g. rugby) (Davies, 1993). The shared experiences of work in the mines, the relative isolation of the valleys, and its geographic boundedness acted as a focal point around which other common interests developed, thus creating a strong identity of community (Gilbert, 1992).

Baggs (1995) discusses the significant role of the chapels and Miner's Institutes for the population of the South Wales coalfield during the mid-late nineteenth and early twentieth century. With an emphasis on self-development and education the chapels and institutes, along with their reading rooms and libraries, helped educate the working-class populations of the coalfield (Ross, 2005). The nonconformist Sunday Schools were especially important for the children of the coalfield as they provided educational opportunities alongside games, religious study and occasional outings (Ross, 2005). In 1743 the first non-conformist place of worship opened in the Rhondda (May, 2003). This number had increased to 71 by 1884 and by 1904 there were 151 chapels in the Rhondda Valley (in addition to ten churches), some of which could seat over 1000 people with a total capacity of 85,000 (May, 2003). The second largest non-conformist chapel in Wales was in the upper Rhondda and could seat 1450 people (May, 2003).

The Miner's Institutes, many of which housed libraries or reading rooms for the miners and their families, were funded by subscriptions from the miners' wages and contributions from the coal owners and local community (Baggs, 1995). Baggs (1995, p3) notes the complexities in identifying the exact number of institutes and libraries in the South Wales coalfield with estimates varying from "53 Workmen's and Miners' Institutes, and 56 Miners' Welfare Institutes" in 1934 to "253 libraries and reading rooms" in 1946 with 114 of those in the central district of the coalfield (encompassing all of the south Wales valleys including the Rhondda). Book stock sizes in the libraries ranged from six volumes to over 7000, demonstrating the prominent role the libraries played in the lives of the miners and their families. The

scale of use of the libraries in the Rhondda is reflected in the number of book loans issued; in 1928 for example the total number of book loans issued by four of the institutes in the upper Rhondda was just below 50,000 (Baggs, 1995).

The geology of the area presented some significant challenges for coal mining and accidents and deaths were more prevalent in the South Wales coalfield than other mining areas in Britain (Davies, 1993). This, alongside the Great Depression and a reduction in demand for steam coal from the Rhondda, had a considerable impact on mining in the coalfield. From a peak of 271,161 men employed in the mines of the coalfield in 1920, employment steadily declined to reach 128,774 in 1939 (Baggs, 1995) and coal production in the Rhondda in 1939 was one third of that in 1913 (Williams, 1991). The decline in coal productivity and subsequent employment levels of miners adversely affected the Miner's Institutes and libraries as many miners and their families left the coalfield to look for work elsewhere (Baggs, 1995). Migration out of the Rhondda Valley reduced the population by 36% between 1921 – 1951 (Williams, 1991). This deprived the institutes and libraries of subscription fees and by 1939 three had closed, one of which was in the upper Rhondda Valley, a pattern that continued during and after the Second World War. At the time of data collection for this study in 2015, many of the old institutes had been demolished in the area or had been repurposed for community use, including one in the upper Rhondda that is the base for an arts society and provides facilities such as a community gym and martial arts classes for children and adults.

Migration had a similar effect on the chapels. As a result of the population decline during the period between 1921 and 1951 it is estimated that the chapels in the Rhondda lost up to 70% of their membership (May, 2003). This decline in religiosity was shown in the most recent census when 45.7% of the population identified as having no religion (Census. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011). It was also apparent when walking around the upper Rhondda, as many of the chapels are either now closed or have been demolished and replaced by houses. In the upper Rhondda in 2018, there are seven places of worship (including two chapels), while in 1920 there were seven places of worship in just one of the villages.

The last mine in the Rhondda closed in 1990. The obliteration of the main industry of the area and the role of mining as a primary focal point for community cohesion was therefore lost (Parry, 2003) and its effects are still evident today. From both social and ethnic perspectives it is still a homogenous area: the population is predominantly working class and 98.1% of the population is white (Census. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011). Patterns of habitation also suggest that there is very little geographical mobility. Generations of families live in the area in close proximity to one another (as exemplified in the experiences of the children in this study).

Employment opportunities are scarce. The major employers in the area are large factories (where a number of the children's fathers were employed, as will be discussed further in Section 4.5). However the factories mainly employ men and

some have closed during the past 20 years. There are a number of local shops and two small supermarkets that also provide employment opportunities but for other types of employment there is a need to travel outside the area. While statistics for the Rhondda constituency are not available, Rhondda Cynon Taff has the highest rate of daily commuters to Cardiff for work of all local authority areas in Wales (almost 19,000) (StatsWales, 2018). Compared to the average in Wales, the latest Census data shows that of those employed a higher proportion of people in the Rhondda work in manufacturing (14.7% compared to 10.5%), skilled trade occupations (15% compared to 13.4%), construction work (11.5% to 8.2% in Wales) and caring, leisure and other service occupations (14.6% to 10.5%) (Census. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011). Furthermore, a lower percentage of the working population is employed in managerial (6.1% to 9.2%) and professional occupations (10.3% to 15.8%) compared to the average in Wales (Census. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011). Despite occupying a wider range of occupations than previous generations, these statistics provide evidence to suggest that the population is still overwhelmingly working class.

Additionally, results from the most recent Census show the Rhondda is one of the most deprived areas in England and Wales (Census. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011). 45.4% percent of households in the Rhondda constituency do not have an adult in employment – ranked the third highest in England and Wales – while 37.8% of those aged 16 or over have no qualifications - ranked 4th (Census. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2011). The levels of reported bad health are at 9.1%, highest in England and Wales, while 40.2% of

those aged between 16 and 74 are economically inactive which presents significant challenges for those living and growing up in the area.

## Chapter summary

In this chapter I have situated the study in its national and local context. First, the wider context in Wales was discussed to show that child poverty levels are the highest in each of the nations of the UK, along with identifying the specific policy initiatives and strategies aimed at eradicating child poverty and improving the attainment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study was then situated in its local context through consideration of the industrial heritage of the Rhondda and how this, alongside the geographical boundedness of the area, shaped the social landscape. The decline of the coal mining industry and its focal point for the community was then discussed to provide contextual and contemporary information about the area, which is now one of the most deprived in the UK. This information and history is important as it provides insight into the social environment where the children are growing up and how these factors may serve to shape their experiences.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter is separated into two related parts. In the first, I begin by discussing research paradigms and provide justification for an interpretivist qualitative methodology before focusing on children's rights and voice. I then discuss the specific case study approach to the research and why it was chosen, before providing detail about the specific case, and focusing on the methods used to collect data and how they link to the research questions. In the final section of part one I discuss the pilot stage of the research and its benefits.

Part two focuses on issues related to the data collection and analysis process. It begins by discussing issues central to the research process including reliability and validity; generalisability; reflexivity; ethical considerations and access; and issues related to data protection. The final section describes the data analysis process used for my study.



## Part One: Research methodology

“Rhaid cropian cyn cerdded” - “One must crawl before walking”

(Davies, 2016, p78)

Before undertaking the research I needed to identify an appropriate methodological stance and approach as well as the most suitable methods to enable exploration of the research questions. These considerations are discussed in this chapter. I begin by positioning the research within its wider context through the discussion of methodological stance to explore the children’s experiences before focusing on the specific methodological approach. I then discuss the case itself, provide justification for the methods utilised and map them to the research questions and outline the benefits of undertaking a pilot study.

#### 4.1 Research paradigms and reasoning

Burgess et al. (2006, p54) identify that a paradigm can be seen “as a set of beliefs with ultimates and first principles”. Therefore a paradigm provides a researcher with a framework through which they view and attempt to comprehend the world, the place of the individual in that world, and the relationships that exist within (Burgess et al., 2006). Cohen et al. (2000) describe one category by which individuals attempt to comprehend the world around them, as reasoning. They identify two main forms of reasoning, deductive and inductive (ibid.) Deductive reasoning concerns the testing of pre-existing theoretical viewpoints or concepts through the generation of hypotheses (Robson, 2011) while inductive reasoning begins with data collection, and the analysis of such data leads to the generation of theoretical inferences and ideas (Cohen et al., 2000).

The traditional deductive model of the natural sciences in its aim to provide objective scientific knowledge typically adopts quantitative research methodologies, which have been closely linked to positivism (Robson, 2011). Positivism as a paradigm is concerned with absolutes and assumed certainties (Burgess et al., 2006), whereby objective knowledge is gained from observation, experience and experimentation. However, one criticism of positivism is in its application to the study of human behaviour (Cohen et al., 2000). Human behaviour is complex and the behaviours and actions of individuals are subjective and a result of interaction with others and interpretation of the reality in which they live

(Robson, 2011). Therefore positivism with its focus on uniformity and generalisation does not adequately take into account the subjective experiences, interactions and interpretations of individuals and how this influences their behaviour and actions. Therefore in outlining the methodology of my research, positivism would be unsuitable due to the need to study complex human behaviour and the children's own views.

Another contrasting and more suitable paradigm for my research is interpretivism, which posits that there are no absolutes but that all phenomena are subject to interpretation, thus placing the central focus on the individual (Burgess et al., 2006). Interpretivism as outlined by Shwandt (2007) therefore focuses on social situations and lived experience of the individual and how they interpret the world around them. A key focus of interpretivism lies in attempting to understand the interpretations of individuals and how these influence meaning and actions. As these interpretations can be multi-faceted and complex (and differ between individuals), researchers tend to adopt methodological approaches that allow them to gain insight to the subjective experiences of the individuals studied, such as interviews and observations in order to provide 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973, p214).

Positioning therefore plays a vital role in research, while Robson (2011) suggests that the questions a researcher is interested in exploring influence the selection of the methodological approach taken. My research focuses on exploring children's

experiences and their voice so aligning it to an interpretivist paradigm (Robson, 2011) was the most suitable means of investigation. Robson (2011) suggests that this approach emphasises the world of experience as it is lived and that it is defined by humans attributing meaning to their experiences and their lives (Burgess et al., 2006). This is supported by Bourdieu's theory of practice (1984), as discussed in Section 2.4, as it recognises the importance of external influences and experiences and how they interact to shape a child's world.

Positioning the study within this paradigm enabled me to explore the complex social world in which the children live and how this affects their learning experiences and views and ultimately their perceptions of their life chances. The rights of children to provide their views on the things that affect them are discussed in the next section.

## 4.2 Children's rights and voice

Aligning this research within an interpretivist paradigm (Robson, 2011) enabled the experiences of the children to be explored. This was essential, as the key aim of the study was to explore children's experiences of growing up in the upper Rhondda and how they perceive those experiences affecting their learning and future life chances. Further considerations were needed, as a rights-based approach that promoted the voice of the child was required to ensure the study fulfilled its aim. This section outlines some key ethical considerations in relation to children's rights and voice.

It was not until the publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 and its subsequent adoption by national governments that the rights of children to participate and be consulted about the issues that affect them was formally recognised. Kellett (2014) discusses the key influence of the UNCRC (1989) on the study of childhood and cites the work of James and Prout (1997) in identifying the agency of children and young people and their value as members of society. This has been increasingly recognised in the intervening years since the inception of the UNCRC, evidenced in the wide variety of research focusing on children's rights (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt, 2014). As discussed in Section 3.1, Wales was the first nation in the UK to ratify a law based on the UNCRC, which established a statutory obligation for organisations to consult with children and young people about the decisions that affect them. Two articles of the UNCRC in particular focus on the rights of the child to be heard and consulted about the issues that may affect them. Article 12 asserts that States Parties should assure that a child who is capable of expressing his/her views has the right to do so about all issues affecting them, while Article 13 states that the child shall have the right to freedom of expression (UNCRC, 1989).

In recent years the increased recognition of children's rights and children as competent social actors has resulted in a wide range of research focusing on promoting the voice of children and young people, so their views can be explored (Bucknall, 2014). However Bucknall (2014) notes some potential challenges as children's opportunities to provide consent to participate in research are typically mediated by adults. Due consideration therefore needs to be given to this potential

power imbalance with a focus on the process of consent (which will be discussed in Section 4.11). Furthermore James (2007, p261) describes how “listening to the voices of children has become a powerful and pervasive mantra for activists and policy makers worldwide” and discusses the need to scrutinise processes and methods for listening to children and acting upon their views in order to avoid tokenism. Identifying relevant and appropriate methods to ensure the children could effectively share their experiences and views was a key ethical consideration therefore. An example of this concerns the decision to utilise photo-elicitation as a creative method to enable the children to lead an aspect of the research process (which is explored further in Section 4.6.4, while ethical considerations and access are discussed further in Section 4.11).

Other considerations also need to be made when undertaking research with a focus on children’s views. Spyrou (2011) notes how researchers should critically reflect on the use of children’s voice due to issues of representativeness. First, as Komulainen (2007) notes, voice is a social construction and thus is shaped by the social, cultural and historical environment where a child lives and has grown up. Second there are power imbalances present throughout the research process, and particularly during the data analysis and report writing stages, where the adult researcher typically chooses the data (e.g. quotes) to utilise in the final report. The adult researcher therefore is the vehicle through which the children’s views are represented (Bucknall, 2014; Spyrou, 2011). Claims to the authenticity of voice can therefore be raised (Spyrou, 2011) so it is important for researchers to critically reflect on their role, especially during the data analysis process and the choices made in selecting data to be utilised when presenting the findings (James, 2007). These were all key considerations for me, as they are for

other researchers seeking to promote children's voice, as the data chosen is influenced by the research questions and literature as well as the researcher's knowledge of the field (Bucknall, 2014).

The discussion of the research methodology and decisions in the first part of this chapter, and the discussion of the thematic analysis process in the second, aims to provide a transparent account of the considerations and decisions made in seeking to represent the voices of the children who took part in this study. In order to effectively explore the children's experiences however a suitable methodological approach was required which would allow me to investigate children's views and experiences. This methodological approach, case study research, is discussed in the next section.

### 4.3 What is case study research?

In order to explore the children's experiences and provide an answer to the overarching research question 'What are the learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?' a suitable research design and method was required. As outlined in Section 4.1, the research was to take place within an interpretivist paradigm but it was also important to choose a suitable approach to find answers to the research questions.

Yin (2014) contends that one key approach to investigating complex social phenomena involves case study research. Case study research can be defined as an

“empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2014, p16). Yin (2014) describes that the choice of case study research is particularly advantageous when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being asked about contemporary events over which the researcher has no direct control.

Furthermore, Flyvbjerg (2011) describes some key features of case study research, identifying that it is intensive and comprises detailed, rich descriptions with a level of completeness and depth. He further stresses the importance of focus on context and environmental factors.

Flyvbjerg (2011) also notes a key misunderstanding of case study research; that it is of little scientific value as it has a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived ideas and notions. Contrary to this, Flyvbjerg (2011) describes how case study research contains more of a bias toward falsification of preconceived ideas rather than verification, as the requirement for researchers to place and immerse themselves into the environment and situation being studied in order to understand the viewpoints and behaviour of the participants, enables them to make discoveries which challenge any pre-existing ideas, beliefs and judgements.

Burgess et al. (2006) describe how case study research can provide insights not easily obtained by other approaches and as such require in-depth study of situations and particular circumstances. Further Cohen et al. (2000) note several



distinguishing features of a case study, including a concern with a rich description of events relevant to a case; a focus on individual actors or groups of actors seeking to understand their perceptions; it blends a description of events with the analysis of them as well as the need to provide a 'thick description' of participants' lived experiences. As a result, it is vital that case studies employ multiple methods of data collection (Yin, 2014; Robson, 2011). It is also evident that a predominantly qualitative approach is the most important following the interpretive tradition of research in order to explore the situation from the participants' perspectives (Cohen et al., 2000).

Yin (2014) recognises three categories of case study: exploratory, explanatory and descriptive. However, Stake (2005) argues that the boundaries between each type are not always clear and as such a researcher may employ a number of different approaches in order to focus in sufficient depth on a given phenomenon. Thomas (2011) also supports this when identifying that depending on the overall objectives some case studies may describe, explore, and explain.

Yin (2014) also distinguishes between single- and multiple-case study designs, acknowledging that a multiple case design may be preferable as the results will be more powerful than those from a single case, and as such may increase the potential for generalisations to be made (as even with two cases there is the possibility of direct replication). Two distinct forms of single-case study are also identified by Yin (2014), holistic and embedded or - as termed by Thomas (2011) -

nested. Holistic case studies focus on a single entity globally where there are no subunits to be analysed (Yin, 2014). However criticism suggests that this approach can result in data that is unclear and abstract (Yin, 2014). An embedded or nested case study, involves units of analysis at more than one level (Thomas, 2011). Yin (2014) notes how an embedded design can allow for greater insight into a case as well as significant opportunity for data collection and analysis. However, it is vital to ensure that the focus of the research is not placed wholly on the subunits and rather that the overall focus on the case itself is maintained (Yin, 2014).

Case study research is not without criticism. An often-cited criticism is in its inability to provide generalisations from the individual case (Yin, 2014). However, Arksey and Knight (1999) discuss how the particular can illuminate the general, so case studies can potentially provide insight beyond the specific case. Cohen et al. (2000, p184) citing Nisbet and Watt's work provide a summary of strengths and weaknesses of the case study approach, and cite the potential for observer and researcher bias. Cohen et al. (2000) also identify that case study research is not easily open to cross-checking i.e. it is extremely difficult for the research to be replicated (as can be achieved with quantitative methods). This therefore can result in bias and selectivity on behalf of the researcher. Yin (2014) however counters this and suggests that although case studies are context specific, generalisations to theoretical positions can be made and this is important. Further and in order to reduce potential bias, triangulation using a variety of different sources of evidence is essential and this can improve the accuracy of any findings/conclusions (Yin, 2014).

#### 4.4 Why case study research

A case study approach was appropriate for my study as the aim was to explore children's experiences of growing up in a particular location - the Rhondda Valley - at a specific time. Adopting a case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration so that a rich description of the children's experiences could be provided (Yin, 2014).

Furthermore, the importance of environmental factors within case study research, as outlined by Flyvbjerg (2011), enabled me to explore the importance of context such as the topography of the landscape and the historical impact of mining in the Rhondda on the children's experiences.

Adopting a case study approach also allowed me to immerse myself in the environment (Flyvbjerg, 2011) and to provide insights not easily obtained by other methodological approaches (Burgess et al., 2006). As previously identified, I grew up and continue to live in the area and that enabled me to already have an insight of life there, but by immersing myself in the world of the children at school I was able to provide rich descriptions of their experiences.

There was a potential tension when focusing on my main research question. Yin (2014) describes that the choice of case study research is particularly advantageous when 'how' or 'why' questions are being asked. Even though my main research question focused on 'what' ('are the learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?') I was interested in an in-depth exploration of the factors affecting the

children and their experiences growing up in the area, so utilising a case study approach to achieve this was wholly appropriate.

Once I had decided upon a case study approach further decisions regarding the particular type of case study were required. Despite Yin (2014) suggesting multiple case design may be preferable, Thomas (2011) notes that the case study allows for an in-depth, unique analysis of a particular setting, so focusing on a single case allowed me to explore the children's views in-depth, thus allowing for a more detailed exploration of their reality and experiences - a recognised strength of case study approaches (Cohen et al., 2004).

An embedded/nested design (Thomas, 2011) was also chosen as it was more appropriate for my study rather than a holistic design as there was a need to focus on a number of different levels. These included: (primarily) the views of the children; the views of significant others such as teachers/head teachers; the wider context in which the children live; the opportunities available to them; and any challenges present as each of these would provide a depth of insight and aid to situate the children's views in a specific time and context. The embedded design was also appropriate as I chose to explore children's views across three different schools that serve as the units of analysis. This choice of an embedded approach therefore enabled in-depth data collection and analysis (Thomas, 2011).

The aims of case studies also informed my choice of approach. Thomas (2011) argues that depending on the overall objectives some case studies may describe, explore, and explain. This was the method utilised with my research, as it describes and explores children's views and the context in which these have been formed as well as explaining these views in relation to theoretical constructs and concepts. It is also important to identify that my particular case study focuses on a specific geographical area, so I explore children's views and describe and explain them in the context of the communities and social environments in which they have been formed at a particular point in time, as each of these factors will influence the views and experiences of the children.

#### 4.5 The case

The focus of this research is a single embedded case study (Yin, 2014) of the views of nineteen children aged eleven in their final year of primary education in the upper Rhondda. The area comprises ten villages and is characterised by the rows of terraced housing described in Section 3.2. One main road passes through the area and links it to the lower Rhondda as well as mountain passes that link the area to other valleys. The distance from the village at the top of the Rhondda Valley to the village at the lower end of the upper Rhondda is 4.5 miles.

The upper Rhondda is considered a particularly deprived area reflected in the upper Rhondda Communities First Cluster area, a programme set up to support Wales'

most deprived communities in support of the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty Action plan (Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council, 2013). There are five primary schools and one junior school in the area providing English language education for children aged from 3 – 11 with those eligible for Free School Meals in each school ranging from 22% to 47%. Each of the schools is a feeder to the local English language Secondary school, Maintown Comprehensive.

I had initially focused on and thought about attempting to gain views from children in each of the English Language primary/junior schools in the area, although after undertaking the pilot study (further detail of which is provided Section 4.7) I found this would place significant time demands that would not be realistic. Focusing on each of the schools would have detrimentally affected the time available to spend in each school, and thus would not have enabled me to explore the experiences of the children in any great depth. This would be counter to the aim of qualitative case study research to provide rich descriptions of lived experience (Yin, 2014) as I outlined in Section 4.3. Undertaking a case study approach allowed me to explore the views of a sample of the children and the context in which they have developed their views, experiences and opinions.

I therefore had to make a decision about the schools I would focus on. To do this, I focused on three factors. First, I investigated the ratio of children eligible for free schools meals in each of the schools in the area. Then I focused on schools that provided education to children living in more than just one village in order to

increase the potential that children living across the upper Rhondda could take part in the study. Finally I focused on the spread of schools within the upper Rhondda. Doing this enabled me to identify three schools: the school with the highest ratio of FSM-non FSM pupils, one at the lower end of this scale and one in the middle, while one school was situated at the top end of the valley, one in the middle and one towards the lower end of the upper Rhondda (again to ensure views from children across the area could be sought).

Pseudonyms have been used for the schools and villages and for all of the participants in the study in order to ensure anonymity. However, I have identified an area of the valley and used the name of the valley itself i.e. the upper Rhondda. This is a similar approach to that in research conducted by Evans (2013) who also anonymised the name of the schools, the villages and the participants but identified the locations of the Rhondda and Newport. I felt this was important so that the views of the children living in the valley would be provided along with contextual information to frame the children's experiences. As the Rhondda comprises two valleys, the use of the term upper Rhondda in my study enabled me to provide details of the experiences of the children living there but importantly lacked specific details of location in order to ensure a sufficient level of anonymity to protect the identities of the participants.

The three schools identified were Mountain View Primary that serves the villages of Mountain View and Hightown, Riverside Primary that provides education to those

living in the villages of Riverside and Hillside and Cwm Rhondda Primary that predominantly provides education for children living in the village of Cwm Rhondda but also Hillside. At the time of data collection from April – July 2015 the schools provided full-time English-medium education to over 600 children living in the upper Rhondda area aged from 3 to 11 years of age, with the proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals ranging from 22% to 47%. All of the children who participated in the study had grown up in the area and had attended school there. As identified in Section 1.1 the particular area is familiar to me, as it is where I have grown up and continue to live with my family. It is also the area where my children now attend school. Furthermore I attended one of the schools included in the study - Mountain View Primary - as a child, and was taught by the head teacher at the time of this study, Mrs Rhys.

The findings presented in Chapters 5 – 8 are based on the data collected from the nineteen children (10 girls and 9 boys) who participated in the study. These included seven children from Riverside Primary school (of whom three were eligible for FSM), six from Cwm Rhondda Primary and six from Mountain View Primary (where three and four of the children were in receipt of FSM respectively). All of the children were 11 years of age at the time of data collection (April – July 2015). This is shown in Table 1.



Table 1. The children who participated in the study

	Participants in the study from each Primary School (FSM indicates eligibility for Free School Meals)		
Number	Riverside	Mountain View	Cwm Rhondda
1	Ethan	Kate (FSM)	Ioan (FSM)
2	Daniel	Zac (FSM)	Joseph
3	Jess	Chris	Rhys
4	Victoria (FSM)	Lisa (FSM)	Gwen
5	Fiona (FSM)	Darcey	Olivia (FSM)
6	Tom (FSM)	Elizabeth (FSM)	Manon (FSM)
7	James		

Predominantly, the children in the study came from working-class homes. Manual labour (both skilled and unskilled) was a common feature of paternal employment. For example, four of the children's fathers were employed locally in one of the factories in the upper Rhondda (two of whom had recently lost jobs and were employed on casual contracts through an agency) while another, who was unemployed at the time of the study, had recently worked there. The precarious nature of some employment in the area was apparent as a number of children described parents (predominantly fathers) who either had been recently

unemployed due to a redundancy situation or had changed roles. Four of the children's mothers stayed at home to provide care for siblings, another three worked as teaching assistants in local schools and a further two as nursery assistants. Only three of the children (Daniel, James and Rhys) had parents with experience of HE. In each of these instances, either one or both parents were employed as a teacher. In contrast to their peers, Daniel, James and Rhys might be described as coming from middle-class homes because of parental employment and experience of HE and the benefits this may present in the accrual of social, cultural and economic capital (Savage et al., 2013). The occupational status of the children's parents along with parental experience of HE is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Parental occupation and experience of higher education

Child	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation	Experience of higher education
Chris	Plumber (Step-father)	Teaching assistant	No
Darcey	Engineer in a factory	Housewife	No
Elizabeth	Factory worker (casual)	Shop assistant	No
Kate	Unknown (doesn't live with father)	Receptionist (part-time)	No
Lisa	Labourer on a building site	Cleaner (part-time)	No
Zac	Unknown (doesn't live with father)	Fast food outlet	No
Victoria	Undertaking odd jobs (previous factory worker)	Nursery assistant (part-time)	No
Tom	Works on building sites	Housewife	No
Jess	Surveyor	Nurse	No
Fiona	Sport Development (Fiona lives with her mother)	Nursing Assistant	No
Ethan	Fast food outlet manager	Housewife	No
Daniel	Further Education Teacher	Teacher (Primary)	Yes (both)
James	Teacher (Secondary)	Teacher (Primary)	Yes (both)
Olivia	Unemployed, previously a factory worker	Administrator (part-time)	No
Manon	Unknown (doesn't live with father)	Nursery assistant (part-time)	No
Joseph	Postman	Teaching assistant (part-time)	No
Ioan	Factory worker (casual)	Housewife	No
Gwen	Policeman	Teaching assistant	No
Rhys	Factory worker	Teacher (Primary)	Yes (mother)

The next section focuses on the specific methods utilised in order to answer the research questions.

#### 4.6 Methods used: mapping the research questions

This section discusses the methods utilised in my study. In order to answer the main research question it was important to utilise suitable research methods. The overarching research question and sub-questions devised after an extensive review of the literature - as provided in Chapter 2 - along with the aim of exploring children's views, informed the choice of methods to be utilised. The main research question, as outlined at the end of Chapter 2, was:

What are the learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?

The methods employed to collect data were a focus group with the children in each school, an individual one-to-one interview with each child, a photo-elicitation interview with each child based on photographs they took of the things that influenced their learning both inside and out of school, in addition to documentary and archival evidence. I also used observation and Field Notes/a Research Diary to record my thoughts and development of the study (Appendix 1 shows the data collection grid, identifying the key to collected data including the dates when it was collected).

In order to answer the main research question a series of sub-questions were devised. Table 3 maps each sub-question alongside the specific research methods employed which assisted in addressing the main research question.

Table 3. The Research Design

Research Question	Research Design
1.1 What are the factors that influence the (formal and informal) learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?	Documentary search – relevant to each school and area in which it resides to provide contextual information Literature review Classroom observation of the children Field notes Research Diary
1.2 How do the children perceive their educational experiences?	Focus Group interview Individual interview with each child Observations of the children and Field notes arising from this Photo elicitation interview Research Diary
1.3 What resources and opportunities are available for children who live in the Rhondda Valleys to support learning? What influences access to these opportunities?	Documentary search at each school and in each locality to identify opportunities and resources available Interview with each child Photograph-based interviews with each child Focus group interview – one in each school

#### 4.6.1 Interviews

Interviews are a form of qualitative inquiry that enable individuals to express their opinions and views of how they see the world and therefore allow for identification of their interpretations (Cohen et al., 2000). Yin (2014) considers interviews one of the most important sources of case study evidence. Interviews can range from being highly structured and rigid to fluid and unstructured - which is identified as the preferred type for case study interviews (Yin, 2014). This resonated with the aim of this study to enable children to express their opinions and experiences so that their voice 'could be heard' (Robinson and Taylor, 2007). The research incorporated three forms of interview and these are discussed in Sections 4.6.2, 4.6.3 and 4.6.4.

Each interview was video recorded and then transcribed and was complemented by documentary evidence sourced about the upper Rhondda Valley and each of the schools (both current documentary evidence as well as archival) so that the social, political, environmental and historical context could be documented – another important aspect of case study research as the context in which it takes place is essential (Yin, 2014). The benefits of video recording in comparison to audio alone have been noted elsewhere e.g. the ability to capture visual and non-verbal aspects of the interview process (Cohen et al., 2000), while Edwards and Westgate (1994) note the increased time needed when attempting to analyse transcripts with only auditory cues for assistance. The latter predominantly informed my choice of using

video over audio recording alone, as I felt that utilising a video camera to record interviews, although potentially intrusive, would assist with the transcription.

#### 4.6.2 Focus-group interviews

One focus group session was held in each school. These focused on the children's experiences of living and growing up in the area, their opinions of it and the opportunities available to them as well as the children's experiences of school. This allowed for the views of the participants to emerge and their agenda to predominate (Cohen et al., 2000). Horgan (2009) also notes how group interviews allow children to take control of the discussion and lead it in a direction that they choose. This point resonated with me as I wanted the children's voices to predominate. It is important to think about the type of focus group interview undertaken and the questions posed. One key aspect of the focus-group interviews in my research was to identify some initial themes prior to the session (such as those identified in Appendix 2) but then to allow the children to discuss these openly and lead the discussion. Kvale (1996) suggests thematising is a vital stage of planning interviews, so identifying key themes to be discussed was essential, while utilising open rather than closed questions enabled the children to put forward their views and opinions. Appendix 2 outlines some of the initial themes I identified, based on the review of the literature in Chapter 2, to discuss with the children. Morgan (1988) notes that although the researcher provides the topic, the key aim of focus groups interviews is that interviewees interact with one another rather than the researcher and this allows for the interviewees' agenda to predominate. It

was important however to also note the potential effect on reliability as when asked questions it has been identified that children will say anything rather than nothing at all (Lewis, 1992). Utilising a variety of methods to triangulate data was therefore important. Morgan (1988) also defines the ideal number for a focus group as being between four and 12, with less perhaps for focus groups involving children, as well as the need to over-recruit by 20% to account for potential drop-outs. This was taken into account when focusing on the number of children to participate in the study. I initially planned for 21 children to participate (7 from each school) but two dropped out prior to the study taking place so in total 19 children participated (as discussed in Section 4.5).

Furthermore, when undertaking group interviews caution needs to be taken as one individual's agenda can sometimes dominate and it is also important to ensure that the discussion is open-ended but on-point (Cohen et al., 2000). Bucknall (2014) argues that even though focus groups are used to promote the voices of children – as is the case in this study – they can sometimes have the opposite effect, as some children may choose to remain silent rather than contradict the views of others in the group. Individual interviews were also held with each child in order to alleviate some of these issues as greater exploration on an individual, one-to-one basis could take place and thus the children could provide their own views. The purpose of the focus groups was twofold. First, they enabled me to gather initial data on the children's views which were taken into account when formulating the individual interview schedules (Cohen et al., 2000), allowing me to explore some of the issues



raised in greater depth. Second, the focus groups served to set the children at ease prior to the individual interview.

As outlined in Section 4.6.1 I decided to video record the interviews. This proved to be a prudent choice particularly for the focus groups when a number of children were talking simultaneously, as they proved quite difficult to transcribe, so the video recording aided this process as I was able to see who was talking and thus assign the comments to the correct participant on the transcript.

#### 4.6.3 Individual interviews

One individual interview was held with each child to explore their views in greater depth. Sufficient time was allowed between the first focus group in each school and each individual interview (as is indicated in the dates outlined in Appendix 1). This was essential as time was required for me to transcribe the focus group interview and to begin to analyse any key themes emerging. This also allowed me to identify the areas to focus on and explore further with each child in the individual interview. Thematising (Kvale, 1996) was therefore a central feature prior to the individual interviews too. This thematising after the focus group interview and prior to the individual interview is demonstrated for one of the children (Chris) in Appendix 3. Some of the potential themes explored focused on information about the child and their background, their experiences and views of school, their experiences of the area in which they live, the activities they accessed and those available to them outside of school as well as their hopes for the future. The interviews varied for

each child depending on what they discussed as well as the depth of information provided in the focus group interview. The individual interview also served to provide each child with an opportunity to discuss the things important to them on an individual basis in order to enhance the depth of information received from the focus group interviews. In addition, an interview was held with the child's teacher in each school as well as each head teacher to gain further insight into the role of formal education on the children's lives and the specific challenges faced.

All of the interviews were semi-structured (Cohen et al., 2000) as I initially identified the themes to be covered. However the set format and order for each interview was not fixed and was predominantly determined by the individual interviewee, thus allowing for the fluidity identified by Yin (2014). In order to do this, I followed the sample interview schedule for semi- and un-structured interviews provided by Robson (2011) which shows one should incorporate introductory comments; a list of topic headings to be explored and some key questions to be asked; a range of prompts as well as closing comments. This he suggests is an appropriate format to use when researchers are closely involved with the research process, so it was the format I used in order to allow participants to provide in-depth responses while ensuring that topics relevant to the research questions were covered.

#### 4.6.4 Photo-elicitation interviews

First defined in the 1960s, photo-elicitation has been described as a collaborative approach of using photographs and images to gain understandings of the social life of research participants (Harper, 2016). Thomson (2008) describes how children are experts of their lives and thus best placed to provide insight into their experiences. Furthermore, Thomson (2008) contends that visual research methods - including photo elicitation - can help meet the rights of children to provide their views on the things that are important to them (as identified in the UNCRC, 1989) and allow them to share their experiences of their lives.

Richard and Lahman (2015) discuss how participant-generated photographs in photo-elicitation research grew in popularity in the latter part of the twentieth century as they offered a means to empower participants to provide insight and their interpretations of lived experiences. It has also been suggested that photo-elicitation can provide greater depth of understanding of lived experiences as it may enable access to aspects of identity that may otherwise have remained hidden (Croghan et al., 2008). The use of such visual methods provides opportunities for children to not only collaborate but lead the research process (Clark and Moss, 2011) and is evident in diverse areas within educational research ranging from specific exploration of the educational experiences of the army child (Clifton, 2007) to more general identity-based research in schools and after-school clubs (Cooper, 2017).

Based on this, I decided to utilise photo-elicitation in my study as the children could lead an aspect of the research that would potentially enable me to gain greater insight into their lived experiences.

In addition to the individual and focus group interviews therefore, each child was given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of the things that are important to their learning growing up in the Rhondda Valley. These photographs were then used during an individual photo-elicitation interview where the children discussed each of the photographs they had taken. This method enabled the children to take charge of and lead an aspect of the data collection process (Thomson, 2008) to identify what is important for their learning – termed as a form of digital ethnography (Basit, 2013).

The photographs are not included in this thesis due to concerns raised by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Open University. The concerns raised focused on the issue of consent: the children may have provided consent for inclusion of their photographs but if they took photos of others, consent may not have been granted by all parties. Therefore after each photo-elicitation interview had taken place and each individual child had discussed the photographs they had taken, the child retained ownership of the photographs. I have included some of my own photographs however to provide some contextual information – as was seen in Chapter 3 of the Rhondda Valley itself – as well as an image from Mountain

View Primary in Chapter 5 of the work undertaken by one of the children to describe her aspirations.

Basit (2013) notes how the use of visual media for interviews is used sparingly in educational research and while it can prove of use in that children themselves can lead the discussion based on the photographs they take, there are some important considerations. These include the guidance provided to children and their parents as well as using this form as an additional method to support the other interviews rather than a single, central source of data for the study (Robson, 2011). Rather than solely using verbal means of expressing their views and experiences, photography however has been shown to offer new suggestions of what is meaningful to children in certain situations (Cook and Hess, 2007), so using this method in addition to the interviews allowed for other experiences and meanings to be expressed by the children.

In addition, a recent study by Cooper (2017) has identified that while photo-elicitation can enable children to collaborate within research and to share information about their lives and identity, caution must be heeded as power dynamics are still evident in the research process and children's experiences can potentially be lost in translation. Using photo-elicitation alongside the other methods was important therefore in order to gain as much understanding about the children and their lives as was possible.

The guidance provided to the children was essential to the process (as is discussed further in Section 4.7). Each child was given a disposable camera for a week. They were asked to take photographs of the things they believed affected their learning. In order to assist this, they were told to imagine that they had to explain about their life and town to someone who was new to the area to show them the things that influence their learning. The children were asked to take photographs to reflect different times of the day in order to include school and home life, as well as photographs to reflect their hobbies and interests and any activities they undertake both inside and outside of school (including at weekends). This was to ensure the children had clear advice to focus on wider learning opportunities, not just school. They were informed that this could include photographs of any landmarks or distinctive features (buildings or the geography and landscape for example) which would facilitate an explanation to someone new to the area to show them the range of things that the children think affect their learning. The subsequent interview with each child then focused on a discussion of each photograph and their reasons for taking it, allowing each child to elaborate and provide their own interpretation and perspective of the photographs they had taken (Cook and Hess, 2007).

#### 4.6.5 Observation

An often-cited criticism of interviews is that they are the participants' interpretation of a given event and can be subject to reactivity where the interviewee provides information that they think the interviewer wants to hear (Yin, 2014). The three types of interviews reduced this potentially, as they allowed me to explore the

children's views on three separate occasions and over a period of a number of weeks.

Utilising observation techniques while the children were at school provided me with primary (Cohen et al., 2000) and contextual (Yin, 2014) data, and increased insight into the context in which the children learn in school. Furthermore it allowed me to observe the actions and behaviours of the children within the classroom setting and to compare this to what the children said during the interviews. Patton (1990) describes how observational data enables a researcher to enter and more fully understand the situation that is being described, so utilising this as an additional method increased my understandings of the children's experiences of formal education and how it shapes their views.

Cohen et al. (2000) identify that the type of observation undertaken ranges on a scale from highly structured, which allows for the quantification of behaviour with researchers tending to adopt a 'pure observer' role (Robson, 2011), to unstructured which allows the researcher freedom in what information is recorded. At the opposite end of the continuum to the pure observer role is the complete participant where researchers become fully immersed as a member of a group and often conceal their identity as an observer (Robson, 2011). When deciding upon observation as a method for the study, I had to decide what type of observation would be undertaken. My role as an observer also had to be negotiated with the classroom teachers as I did not want to disrupt the lessons being taught.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) note that the majority of research in the field involving observation falls somewhere between the two poles of complete participant or complete observer. Furthermore, for research in classrooms a participant as observer role has been considered more appropriate (Burgess, 1984).

After consideration, and through discussions with the teachers, I decided to take this approach incorporating aspects of participation and observation. Although it has been noted that this form of observation can initially influence the behaviours displayed (Robson, 2011), others have identified that observing over a period of time while participating in the group can serve to reduce the effects of reactivity (Cohen et al., 2000). By undertaking the role of participant as observer therefore the teachers and children became aware of my role and presence. I sat with the children and took notes in the classroom while the children were able to ask me questions and I would help out if needed. This enabled the children to become familiar with me, as I spent between seven and nine hours in each classroom, and potentially served to reduce reactivity as they became familiar with my presence.

Adler and Adler (1994) have suggested that there is no definitive rule concerning how much observation needs to be undertaken and rather it is more appropriate to stop when 'theoretical saturation' has occurred. In accordance with this, I initially did not set any specific guidelines as to the amount of observation, but I was aware of the importance of ensuring sufficient time was spent on observation in each school to reduce the potential effects of reactivity and to increase the reliability of the data generated (Cohen et al., 2000). In total I spent 24 hours observing lessons across the three schools (9 in Riverside, 8 in Mountain View, and 7 in Cwm



Rhondda). The observations were recorded according to the nine dimensions of descriptive observation outlined by Spradley (1980): space, actors, activities, objects, acts, events, time, goals, and feelings. This framework was utilised as it enabled me to record actions and behaviours as they occurred in field notes that allowed for a more flexible approach. After each observation session I would type up these notes which were complemented by my reflections in the research diary.

#### 4.6.6 Documents, archival records and field notes/research diary

In addition to the interviews, I also focused on documentary evidence about each school – such as reports from Estyn (the inspectorate of education and training in Wales) - the local area and the opportunities available to children, as well as archival records so that I could gain greater understanding of the importance of culture and the history of the local area, and contextual information to help situate the views of the children. Yin (2014) claims that the collection of documentary evidence and archival records can augment and corroborate evidence from other sources as well as providing a researcher with greater insight into the case and subunits. However, bias can inevitably be inherent in these secondary data sources so it is important that the researcher analyses such documents critically (Yin, 2014). In conjunction with this I also kept Field Notes/a Research Diary to contextualise the data I obtained from the documents such as Estyn reports as well as the data from each of the interviews. Keeping this research diary enabled me to document and continuously assess my role in the research, including how I was shaping the

research and the effects it was having on me. The aim of this was to assist in minimising any potential bias on my behalf (Cohen et al., 2000).

#### 4.7 The pilot stage of the research

A pilot study was designed prior to undertaking the full research study. This pilot study focused on one primary school, Cwm Rhondda Primary, and enabled me to trial two of the methods: a focus group and photo-elicitation interviews. Four children initially expressed interest in the study and completed consent forms, although one child was ill on the day of the focus group. This immediately placed into context Morgan's (1988) suggestion to over-recruit by 20% to ensure contingency plans are in place for dropout. This informed my approach to the main study.

Furthermore, the company responsible for processing the disposable cameras lost one sample of photographs, and one of the children forgot to bring their photographs to school on the day I attended to undertake the interviews. This also informed my approach to planning the main study to allow sufficient time to account for similar issues should they arise.

The focus group enabled me to trial the approach of thematising areas prior to the session (as outlined in 4.6.2) while the photo-elicitation interviews were used for

me to become more familiar with a creative method to allow the children to lead the discussions and provide information about the things that influence their learning.

The pilot confirmed the use of focus groups and photo-elicitation methods as useful tools to enable children to express their views and to answer the research questions posed. It also provided the opportunity to refine the approach for the main study. First, it informed the need to provide greater advice and guidance for the children prior to them using the disposable camera to take photographs. Some of the photographs taken in the pilot study were of similar things, such as numerous photographs of school for example. This informed the need for more specific advice for the children to take photographs of a range of things that related to their learning, not just formal learning in school. As described in Section 4.6.4 more detailed guidance was provided in the main study as the children were asked to imagine that they had to explain about their life and the learning experiences they have to someone who is new to the area.

In addition, through undertaking the pilot I identified that adding in another means of investigation, observation, would further aid the research process as it would allow me to observe the children in school and enable me to attain a greater understanding of their lived experiences of school. Further it would allow me to compare what the children said in the interviews to what I observed in the

classroom environment, and this would serve to strengthen the validity of the findings.

## Part Two: Data collection and analysis

In this part of the chapter I consider reliability and validity, generalisability and reflexivity and discuss how each relates to my research. I then focus on ethical considerations and access, including data protection. The final part of this chapter focuses on the data analysis process aiming to provide a transparent account of how I analysed the data obtained.

### 4.8 Reliability and validity

In order for research to be reliable it must “demonstrate that if it were to be carried out on a similar group of respondents in a similar context...then similar results would be found” (Cohen et al., 2000, p117). A key facet of reliability therefore is replicability. This however presents a challenge for qualitative research as the naturalistic settings in which it takes place are specific and unique, meaning exact replicability cannot be achieved.

This holds true for this research as it is focused on a specific setting in the South Wales valleys. Furthermore, my own experiences of the area and pre-existing knowledge (as outlined in Section 1.1), mean it would not be possible for another researcher to exactly replicate the study.

Even though exact replicability may not be possible, reliability is still something qualitative researchers strive to attain (Robson, 2002). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest that accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage in data collection are two of the key elements of reliability in qualitative research. Robson (2002) extends this, identifying the need for a clear audit trail and full record of the research activities undertaken as part of the study (including raw data such as transcripts, field notes and research diary as well as details about how the data has been analysed) to be made available so that what has been done is transparent to others. The aim of this is not to achieve uniformity, as the data set could be interpreted differently by different researchers, but to allow others to view what has been done. Space has limited my ability to include the raw transcripts in this thesis but I have provided a range of appendices to show my decision making processes at each stage (beginning in appendix 2 with the initial themes to be covered in the focus group interviews, the line-by-line coding of a transcript in Appendix 9 as well as the extracts from NVivo in Appendices 11 and 12 in addition to the information sheets and consent forms sent to participants).

Providing a detailed account of the research and its context also assists when focusing on its validity – defined as how well the data “represent the phenomena for which they stand” (Punch, 2005, p253). Cohen et al. (2000) identify internal and external validity, whereby internal validity is characterised by the findings accurately describing the phenomena studied and the data selected being representative of the whole sample. Discussions with supervisors along with the

completion of progress reports and the feedback obtained served to ensure any threats to internal validity were minimised and this was supplemented by checking transcripts of interviews with participants after they had taken place (and prior to data analysis). These transcript checks were undertaken for the focus group interviews prior to the start of the subsequent individual interview with each child, for the individual interview prior to beginning each photo elicitation interview and each photo elicitation transcript was checked on an observation visit with each individual child.

In addition, providing a clear audit trail is essential to ensure the reliability of research findings. The use of NVIVO to store and code data aided this process as I am able to provide examples of how the data was coded and themes generated (this will be discussed further in Section 4.13).

This study has utilised a number of different methods to collect data in order to provide a rich contextual account. Termed methodological/data triangulation (Cohen et al., 2000), this is another means to reduce threats to validity. In this study, a focus group interview, individual interviews with each child along with classroom observation have been undertaken. Documentary evidence has also been obtained about each school as well as the national context.

Utilising triangulation may also serve to reduce any potential bias. This is of particular importance due to me growing up and still living in the area. Burgess

(1984, p24) outlines the importance of this, identifying that for researchers familiar with an environment it is essential to try and adopt an “artificial naiveté” so that situations and views are not overlooked because at first sight they appear familiar. The utilisation of a variety of methods of data collection therefore in this study aimed to reduce any potential researcher bias on my part where I could have influenced data collection – and subsequent analysis and findings – due to familiarity with the area. The process of checking transcripts with the children to ensure my transcription and interpretations were accurate was also important in this regard.

However, it is important to note that the use of triangulation does not necessarily reduce bias or increase the validity of research (Fielding and Fielding, 1986). This highlights the importance of the iterative process of discussing the research with my supervisors, continued reading and adopting a reflexive approach to the study to ensure continual reflection on how I have influenced the research (this is discussed further in Section 4.10).

External validity refers to the extent to which the research results can be generalised to the wider population (Cohen et al., 2000) and this will be considered in the next section.



## 4.9 Generalisability

As previously discussed, an often-cited criticism of case study research is its inability to provide generalisations from the individual case (Yin, 2014). Cohen et al. (2000) also identify that case study research is not easily open to cross-checking i.e. it is difficult for the research to be replicated (as outlined in the previous discussion of reliability and validity). This therefore can result in bias and selectivity on behalf of the researcher. As outlined above, I sought to discuss and obtain feedback at all stages of the process from supervisors, with colleagues, and through reading in order to reduce this potential threat to validity. Yin (2014) however counters this and suggests that even though case studies are context specific, generalisations to theoretical positions can be made. Furthermore, Arksey and Knight (1999) discuss how the particular can illuminate the general, so while this study focused on a specific time and place it may potentially provide insight into the lived experiences of children in post-industrial deprived areas and how this influences their learning and future life chances. Further and in order to reduce potential bias, triangulation – as identified in Section 4.8 - using a variety of different sources of evidence is essential and this can also improve the accuracy of any findings/conclusions (Yin, 2014).

Undertaking a case study approach has enabled me to explore the experiences of the children and the context in which they have developed. I am aware of the issues highlighted with generalisation from case study research (Yin, 2014) but I would

counter this position and suggest that the themes that emerge from the data can be utilised to inform policy and practice, and the findings may potentially have applicability to other similar areas with high levels of deprivation. So despite being context specific and related to the specific time and place where they were formed, the themes generated from the children's experiences can be linked to previous studies in other geographical areas (such as the research undertaken by Horgan, 2009), allowing for theoretical comparisons to be made, while also informing policymakers of the experiences and views of children growing up in post-industrial South Wales.

#### 4.10 Reflexivity

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) describe the inevitability of the process of analysis relying on the researcher's existing ideas and knowledge-base. I therefore needed to be aware of my pre-existing knowledge during the analysis of the data, so the use of reflexivity in order to examine my role on the process was important (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). It is also important to note that it is not just the analysis of the data that may be affected by the researcher. The choice of topic, the area in which the study is situated, along with the development of the research questions have all been influenced by my prior experiences.

Reflexivity therefore - that is being aware of how the researcher becomes a part of the research and thus influences it (and is influenced by it) (Hammersley and

Atkinson, 1995) - was a central consideration for this study. I needed to be aware of the ways in which I affected the research process and results obtained, and the way they were analysed. In order to reflect on how I may have been influencing the research and participants, I kept a research diary. Doing this also enabled me to reflect on how the research influenced me. The importance of taking a reflexive approach is illustrated in the following excerpt from my Research Diary:

‘It is important to ensure that any questions regarding the closure of facilities remain open so I do not impose my own views of facility closures in the area on the children. This is especially important as the closures affect me and my family as well as the children. Need to ensure that I do not lead the children into answers based on my experiences’ (Research Diary entry 25/4/2015).

The diary entries enabled me to document and continually reflect how I was shaping the research and how it was challenging any pre-conceived ideas or notions that can assist in minimising any potential bias (Cohen et al., 2000).

While reflexivity is a critical consideration for my study, my existing knowledge of the area could also prove advantageous. The impact of the researcher on the research process is not limited to individuals who are undertaking action-research or live in the area they study. As Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) identify, because qualitative methods and interviews in particular are interpersonal and there is a

power imbalance, total neutrality between the interviewer and interviewee is impossible to achieve. My pre-existing knowledge of the area therefore ensured that I was extra vigilant about my role, and my pre-existing knowledge and contacts also proved valuable in gaining access and in sharing experiences with the children, so this may have allowed for me to gain a greater depth of insight than may have been possible for a researcher who was from outside of the area.

#### 4.11 Ethical considerations and access

Every effort was made for ethical considerations to underpin decisions throughout the research process. The ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (2011) were consulted and followed to ensure that the study is ethically sound, while pseudonyms are used throughout the process, including individual names and the names of the schools and towns (Delamont, 2002) to protect the identities of all involved in the research. Furthermore, after the submission of a detailed proposal, approval was provided for the study by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Open University (on 30th January 2014).

Prior to initiation of the study, valid informed consent was obtained from all to take part. Initial access to each school was obtained through contact made with the head teacher and subsequent discussion with each head teacher along with the Year 6 teacher in each school. The Year 6 teacher then discussed the study with their pupils and information sheets and consent forms were distributed to the children in

each class to take home to their parents/family (which children were asked to return by the following week). All of the information sheets and consent forms are shown in appendices 4,5,6,7 and 8. When drafting these documents it was also important for me to ensure the information for the children was clear, appropriate and tailored to their age and competence, as outlined by Alderson (2004).

Discussions with my supervisor helped shape the forms to ensure they were appropriate, and this was also helped by my 10 years' experience working in the third sector writing consent and information forms for children and their families.

When adopting this approach I was aware of the impact this may have on the potential participants, due to issues of power. Masson (2004) for example argues that the nature of the school environment means that children are rarely entirely free to decide whether to participate in research, as they may be encouraged to do so by gatekeepers such as the head teacher or teacher.

Furthermore a key aspect of rights based research with children that promotes their voice is to ensure they are well informed throughout the process (Alderson, 2004). Alderson (2004) describes the importance of embedding ethical considerations throughout the research process, so that it is central to all of the decisions made, including how to gain access; sampling; methodological choice; initial and ongoing consent; and the reporting and dissemination of data.

Providing participants with information about the research ensured they were fully informed prior to commencement. By fully informing the gatekeeper, children and their parents/carers they were able to decide if they would find it appropriate to be involved in the research. Children and their families were also informed that they could withdraw at any time during the study should they so wish.

A key aim of the study was to promote children's voice, so ethical considerations were also required for the choice of methods to be employed. The use of photo-elicitation enabled the children to lead an aspect of the research. I also included individual interviews with each child in addition to the focus group in each school as I was aware of Bucknall's (2014) assertion that focus groups can have an unintended consequence of silencing the voice of some children as they do not want to contradict the views of others. By including an individual interview I ensured each child was able to express their views and share their experiences, thus potentially mitigating the issues raised by Bucknall (2014).

Further, safeguarding measurements were also considered as the study involved working closely with minors e.g. children, who are potentially vulnerable. I had an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check that was available for inspection by the staff in each school, as well as children and their families (and although informed of this, the option was not pursued).

A specific example of my approach to ensure the children were fully informed and that consent was provided throughout the process occurred in Cwm Rhondda Primary with Rhys. Rhys initially agreed to take part in the study, consent forms were completed and he undertook the focus group interview. However, when I next visited the school to undertake the individual interviews and provide the children with the disposable cameras, Rhys informed me he no longer wanted to participate. I spoke with Rhys to confirm I would delete the information he had provided and that it would not be used as part of the project. Later that afternoon upon returning home, I received a telephone call from the school. Mr Edwards, Rhys's teacher, was calling to say that Rhys had changed his mind and would now like to continue with the study. The following excerpt from my research diary provides my thoughts and reflections:

It has been an interesting day as Rhys first decided he no longer wanted to participate and later today changed his mind. I spoke with Mr Edwards and will visit early tomorrow morning in order to provide Rhys with the disposable camera (so he has it at the same time as the other children) and I will speak with Rhys tomorrow to find a suitable time to undertake the individual interview. Thankfully I received the phone call before I had deleted the information Rhys had provided as part of the focus group. However it does show the importance of ensuring consent is asked for prior to all stages of the process as the children have the right to change their minds and withdraw. This has reinforced the need for me to always check with

the children to ensure they agree and are aware of the process.

(Research Diary entry, 17/6/2015)

This excerpt shows how I focused on ethical considerations during the process of data collection and how I attempted to minimise the issues outlined by Masson (2004) of children not being entirely free to choose to participate. It also demonstrates my approach to embedding ethical considerations throughout the process (Alderson, 2004).

All data accrued as part of this study was stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Further all documentation was anonymised and stored securely to protect the identities of those involved and the information they provided. I transcribed all of the information from the interviews onto a laptop that had password protection and this was also the case for all other evidence stored electronically as part of the project. Once transcribed all video recordings were destroyed. Further, any hard-copy forms with personal data were securely stored in a locked cabinet and all participants were informed that the data will be destroyed upon completion of my Doctoral studies.



#### 4.12 The data analysis process: thematic analysis

In this section I describe the data analysis process used in the study. I begin by outlining my approach to the analysis of the data before considering the software used to assist this process. I then discuss the data analysis process used for the data arising from the interviews, documentary evidence, observation and field notes before discussing the analysis of the photographs taken by the children.

Two distinct approaches to thematic analysis have been identified; inductive and deductive (Robson, 2011; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). Inductive - or data-driven - thematic analysis has been identified as a 'bottom up' approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p83) where the codes and themes emerge from the researcher's interaction with the data, rather than from the researcher's pre-existing knowledge of the literature. Deductive analysis, on the other hand, is a 'top down' approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p83) where theory informs the identification of themes.

As my study focuses on children's experiences and their voice it is important that a holistic focus was taken to ensure that all data was analysed rather than a specific area of the data obtained. This would tend to require an inductive approach to analysis. In reality however, data is not coded or analysed in an "epistemological vacuum" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p84) so my prior knowledge of the area through the process of compiling the literature review and identifying the research questions influenced the thematising of the data obtained. Furthermore, my knowledge of the

area in which the research is situated also influenced this. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) describe the inevitability of the process of analysis relying on a researcher's existing ideas and knowledge-base. A researcher therefore needs to be aware of their role on the research process, so as identified in Section 4.10, the use of reflexivity in order to examine my role on the process was important (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). As I already possessed existing knowledge from conducting the literature review and devising the research questions, the project incorporated a mixture of inductive and deductive thematic analysis therefore.

#### 4.13 Use of NVivo coding software

In order to assist with the coding and analysis of the data I used the NVivo programme. Gibbs (2007) recognises the importance of coding data in qualitative research maintaining that coding enables a researcher to define what the data is about. Qualitative research typically involves the generation of vast amounts of data, with one common deficiency identified of human-analysts being data overload (Robson, 2011). Due to this, utilising NVivo allowed me to have a single point of access to the large quantities of information generated by the research methods utilised. Furthermore it enabled me to organise the data. Silverman (2006) emphasises the importance of focusing on non-coded information and to ensure it is not ignored as it may present competing and contrasting theories to those already identified. The use of colour coding in NVivo enabled me to identify the non-coded information and to focus on this too in order to ensure the non-coded information did not contradict the information I had coded. The iterative process of

revisiting and returning to the information and codes identified also allowed me to focus on and identify information that had not been coded.

It is also important to recognise the limitations of such software, as Gibbs (2002) highlights the potential disadvantages of using coding software such as NVivo due to over-reliance and researchers expecting the software to do the thinking for them. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2011, p71) describe this further when explaining that “the researcher is the main tool for analysis” and that the software does not analyse the data for the researcher. Rather the software is used to assist data analysis. I was distinctly aware of this and used NVivo as a tool to organise the research rather than as a means of analysis. Indeed it would not be possible for the software used to replicate the actual iterative process of analysis to identify codes and themes. The process by which these codes and themes were generated is outlined in the following sections.

#### **4.14 Analysing the data**

The data analysis process undertaken for this study followed the six stage process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This six stage process includes: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing the themes identified; naming and defining the themes and producing the final report.

#### 4.14.1 Familiarisation with the data

The data analysis process incorporated a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis as outlined in Section 4.12. My existing knowledge of the literature and the specific research questions informed the initial themes to be discussed during the focus group interviews (an example of which is provided in appendix 2).

Focusing on these themes enabled me to develop initial questions and prompts to explore during each of the focus group interviews. The prompts were utilised to encourage discussion but the direction that the interviews took was dependent upon the areas the children considered important to talk about. As identified in Section 4.6.2 this process of thematising is seen as a vital stage of planning interviews (Kvale, 1996).

#### 4.14.2 Generating initial codes

Each interview was transcribed within 5 days of it taking place and then transferred into the NVivo programme for initial code generation. Doing this enabled me to become familiar with the data set and also allowed initial data from the focus groups on the children's views to be taken into account when formulating the individual interview schedules (Cohen et al., 2000), thus allowing exploration of some of the issues raised in greater depth.

In order to do this, the approach suggested by Gibbs (2007) resonated with me, that of taking a line-by-line approach when coding the data. This involved going through each transcript line by line and identifying the initial codes to describe the data (this is demonstrated in appendix 9 from the Focus Group at Cwm Rhondda primary school). It is important to note that this was not an entirely inductive process however as I was already familiar with the data and some of the areas discussed having undertaken the initial thematising prior to the focus group interview. The initial thematising also helped when developing codes to describe the dataset therefore. The process of line-by-line coding allowed for the generation of initial codes from each focus group transcript and to ensure that sufficient focus was placed on each transcript when coding the data (to aid with avoiding glossing over any of the rich data obtained).

An identified advantage of this line-by-line approach is to ensure that the researcher becomes immersed in the data and is able to reflect the participant's views of the world rather than merely accepting their views - a distinct problem identified by Gibbs (2007, p52), described as 'going native'. This would have presented a particular problem for me as I grew up and still live in the area (so the importance of taking a reflexive approach through the use of a Research Diary was essential, as I outlined in Section 4.10).

#### 4.14.3 Searching for themes

Once a detailed list of initial codes had been generated from the focus group data I returned to the initial areas covered in the literature review (such as experiences of school and formal education as well as wider learning experiences for example). This enabled me to focus on the codes and how they could be initially grouped in order to assist with the process of searching for themes. Focusing on the codes and potential themes in this way also enabled me to compile information provided by each of the children to inform the areas for further exploration in each individual interview. The reason for doing this was to inform and direct the focus of the subsequent individual interview so that the general themes identified and the specific detail provided by the individual about what was important to them could be explored further. An example of this for one of the children (Chris, Mountain View primary school) is available in appendices 3 and 10. Appendix 10 shows how some of the information provided by Chris in the focus group interview was coded. Appendix 3 identifies some of the responses provided by Chris for further exploration grouped by theme.

#### 4.14.4 Reviewing and defining the themes

The process of familiarisation with the data, transcription and generating initial codes line-by-line was then repeated for all of the other interviews, observation data, field notes and research diary. Once complete I had a detailed list of codes along with the themes already generated as part of the initial analysis of the focus

group interviews. I kept returning to the data and revisited each of the codes generated. This allowed the research to focus on links between the codes and the themes under which they were grouped. I also focused on individual reports for each code in order to look at the detailed coded data from all of the data sources. An example of one of these is provided in appendix 11. In addition I used mind maps as a means of visually representing the data and the links between the codes and themes. Doing this has been shown to be a clear way of representing themes and their links (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and was a method I employed to assist this process as I felt better equipped to visualise the links between the data in this way.

This iterative process (Robson, 2011) of returning to the data enabled me to review the themes identified (the fourth stage of the process identified by Braun and Clarke, 2006) and assisted in defining each of the key themes (stage five of Braun and Clarke's process) outlined in Chapters 5 – 8.

In NVivo the process of linking codes into overarching themes is referred to as the creation of 'nodes' into 'trees'. In appendix 12 I identify how each of the nodes coded links into its overarching tree (providing an example of how the codes and overarching thematic areas were generated). The final process then involved me using the mind maps to define all of the final overarching themes. A specific example of this from the data is the description by the children that teachers make the lessons fun. This fed in to the children's description of school as fun, which moved into their attitudes to school that ultimately fed into the thematic area of

formal education. The next section considers the analysis of the photographs taken by the children.

#### 4.14.5 Analysis of visual/photograph-based data

Pink (2001) in providing guidance for the analysis of images, describes the importance for researchers to explore how people describe and define the visual content they have produced. This is one of the key advantages of photo-elicitation research as it allows participants to provide their understandings and interpretations (Thomson, 2008) and through this potentially offer greater depth of insight for the researcher (Croghan et al., 2008).

This is particularly important for images that researchers are unable to take home, as is the case for this study where the children kept the photographs they had taken. Pink (2001) discusses the importance of understanding the photographs in connection with the representations and meanings conferred on them by the participants themselves, and cautions against researchers attributing their own interpretations. This too is identified by Cooper (2017) who describes the potential for explanations and meaning to be lost in translation. The use of interviews for the children to discuss the photographs they had taken assisted with this as the children were asked to describe the photographs, their meanings and the decisions for taking them. The importance of sequence is also identified by Pink (2001), so the photographs were discussed in the order they were taken by the children, with the subsequent discussion and transcript from each forming the data to be analysed



(with the six stage process by Braun and Clarke, 2006 outlined in Sections 4.14.1 to 4.14.4, being followed).

## Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a detailed account of the research methodology underpinning the study, the specific methods utilised and important issues related to data collection and analysis. It began in Part one by discussing and justifying the interpretivist paradigm underpinning the qualitative methodology before focusing on children's rights and voice and the case study approach utilised. It then mapped the research questions to the methods utilised and discussed the specific methods of individual interviews, focus group interviews, photo- elicitation interviews, observation and field notes, documentary evidence and a research diary and how their use had been informed by a pilot stage of the study. In Part two I first considered a number of issues central to the research process including reliability and validity, generalisability, reflexivity and ethical considerations and access. I then discussed thematic analysis and the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in order to provide a transparent account of the process followed when I analysed the data.

## Chapter 5

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the data and a discussion of each is presented in Chapters 5 – 7. Chapter 5 is called ‘Becoming’ and focuses on the role of formal education for the children and their experiences of school as well as their aspirations for the future. Chapter 6 is entitled ‘Belonging’ and focuses on the role of the family and family support. Chapter 7 discusses the importance of place and how the boundedness of the valley shapes the informal learning opportunities available for the children. The discussion provided in each of the chapters draws on Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of practice to conceptualise, position, and explain the findings. Throughout these chapters a key is used to denote the source(s) of the information I use and this is outlined further in Appendix 1.

## Theme 1: Becoming and beyond: formal education and aspirations

### Part One: Becoming: the role of formal education

“Gorau arf, arf dysg” – “Learning is the best tool”

(Davies, 2016, p36)

“Gwell dysg na golud” – “Better educated than wealthy”

(Davies, 2016, p43)

The importance of education and learning was a central feature of the children’s accounts of their experiences and is explored and explained in this chapter. The chapter is structured into two related parts. It begins by focusing on formal education and discusses the children’s attitudes to school, the importance of learning and gaining knowledge, the significant role of national tests the children undertake prior to the transition to secondary school and the importance of learning for the future. The second part of the chapter describes the children’s aspirations and demonstrates their agency in imagining their own futures.

## 5.1 Attitudes to school

Research focusing on the experiences of children from working class and deprived backgrounds has identified predominantly negative experiences (e.g. Reay, 2017). This was not found in my study as 16 of the 19 children interviewed expressed positive views and identified that school, for them, was fun. The reasons provided for this varied, from the importance of lessons being entertaining and fun to being able to see their friends.

The importance of making learning fun, and the role of the teacher in this, was of importance to the children. Fiona focused on the role of the teachers and “how they try and make the lessons fun” (F1), a view supported by Rhys who spoke about lessons being fun “because the teachers like to keep things entertaining” (CRFG). Tom developed this point further when describing how he liked school “because even though we are doing work the work is fun. Sir makes it fun for us too” (T1). Work itself may have been perceived as a potential negative by Tom but the incorporation of fun appeared to positively influence his attitude to it. Fiona (F1) elaborated on the points she raised to describe a specific example of how her teacher “makes lessons fun. Sometimes say we are working on Henry VIII, he’ll put a character on the screen and do a voiceover with his voice but he changes it for us to think it’s the person on the screen.”

Victoria in her individual interview focused on specific lessons and the opportunities they provide:

Victoria: Sometimes school can be fun too though.

GW: Tell me why...

Victoria: We get to make things and I like that. Like in art, that's my favourite subject because we make things. (V1)

Joseph also commented on how specific projects undertaken in class could be "fun" (Jo1). This reflects the importance of the teacher in supporting learning and engaging children in the lessons. Doing this appeared to place the children at ease, which in turn helped shape their positive attitudes to school. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p127) have described this sense of feeling at ease in certain social fields as being like a "fish in water", which occurs when there is congruence between an individual's habitus and their awareness of the rules of the social space they occupy. The views expressed by the children suggest therefore that they were aware of the 'rules of the game' in school and what was required of them - thus they expressed a 'feel for the game' as described by Bourdieu (1990) - and this matched with their positive dispositions towards school and education (what could perhaps be termed an educational habitus).

For others school was fun because it gave them the opportunity to socialise and spend time with their friends. This view was expressed by ten of the children such as James who stated “It’s fun because I get to see my friends, especially for those who I wouldn’t see outside of school” (Ja1). Darcey meanwhile focused on how this element of fun allows the children to further develop their relationships with friends, stating “you get to know your friends more so that’s good.” (MVFG). The concept of friendship was important for the children. The role of the school in friendship was present in all of the children’s interviews, with the children choosing to take photographs of their friends to discuss in the photo elicitation interviews. The importance of friendship was also raised in the focus group and individual interviews such as when Rhys described “Well I think you wouldn’t make proper friends if you didn’t come to school.” (R1) in response to a question asking why go to school.

School therefore was an important site for the children to develop their social networks and connections locally. Establishing these social networks has been shown to be important for the development of social capital (Knight, 2015). In an exploration of young people’s experiences of travelling outside their local area to attend secondary school and local connections, Knight (2015) identified a disconnect between the young people’s experiences in school and their social lives, which influenced the accumulation of social capital. In contrast, the short distances the children needed to travel to school in my study enabled them to develop extensive social networks which not only encouraged attachment and a sense of belonging to the area (Knight, 2015) but also served to enhance their social and

cultural capital within the 'field' of their community. The school was an important site for the development of these social networks therefore which enabled the development of social capital. Further exploration of this and the development of social and cultural capital through engagement with out-of-school activities is provided in Chapter 7.

The views expressed by the children support similar findings reported by Horgan (2009) where children in primary school recognised the positive impact on their learning of teachers trying to make the lessons fun. However in Horgan's (2009) study children in the later stages of primary school tended to provide far more examples of school and lessons being boring, which is explored next.

Horgan's (2009) findings were partially supported in this study as eight of the children interviewed focused on specific aspects of school being 'boring'. A number of reasons were provided for this, including the amount of work. Fiona in her individual interview (F1) described how it can be boring as "there's times when all you have to do is work and be quiet and nobody likes that", Ethan (E1) commented how "every day we have to do work" while Olivia focused on the volume of work "sometimes there's lots of work so school can be boring" (O1).

Victoria focused on the different ability levels in the class and its effect on her learning, describing how lessons could become boring, "sometimes in class we have

to go over and do things we have done before because some people don't understand it, so it gets boring then (V1)".

This was an interesting finding supported by observation as Victoria could be seen becoming unsettled and talking to others when she had completed work (Observation, 16.5.15), while the interview with Mr Jones (Victoria's Year 6 teacher) identified "differentiation as possibly one of the most difficult things" due to the need to provide engaging sessions for all of the children, particularly when he had no support from other staff during morning sessions. Mr Jones also commented that "the important thing is not to leave out the group in the middle because they are not typically targeted in policy" highlighting the pressures on teachers to support each and every child. Yet the potential paradoxical nature of this may be that some become bored in the process as exemplified by Victoria's comment (especially as Victoria was identified as a child who achieved the required standard in tests but neither struggled nor excelled).

This finding is important as it shows Victoria's overall disposition towards school (i.e. her educational habitus) was positive but it was influenced by others in her class with different attitudes. This offers insight into potential differences in capital and habitus among children living in deprived areas and also shows the difficulties those children who want to learn may face in school.



The accumulation of cultural capital begins from birth and is the product of the time and effort invested by close family members (Bourdieu, 1986). This accumulated cultural capital is then absorbed into the habitus and is informed by - and reflects that of - close family members (e.g. parents) and the culture of an area. This is evident in Brooker's (2015) exploration of cultural capital in the preschool years that claimed cultural capital gained in the home can be transposed into other institutions such as school to confer advantages for individual children. It therefore informs dispositions and attitude towards school and a child's position within the social field of education. In focusing on this, Brooker (2015) describes cultural capital as the most potent form in terms of its effectiveness in producing positive educational outcomes. Despite living in an area of social deprivation, the children's responses here clearly demonstrate a positive attitude toward school that adds further support to this notion of an educational habitus. However it is important to focus on this within the wider context of the children's learning in the classroom as it can be influenced by the dispositions of others, as is shown in the example provided by Victoria. The children's dispositions and reasons for going to school are discussed in the next section.

## 5.2 Why go to school: To learn and amass knowledge

When asked the question 'why go to school?' every single one of the children had a clear idea of its importance for education, learning and the future. Friendship networks were also important to the children and it became apparent that school was seen by the children as an essential factor in making and maintaining close bonds with friends.

All of the 19 children described how school was important for learning. Sixteen of the children took photographs of their school while three commented they had specifically chosen to take the photographs because of the importance of learning to them. Elizabeth (E2) in her photo-elicitation interview commented that she wanted to show "where people, and where I, learn" having taken a photograph of her classroom and Jess (J2) commented that she took a photo of school because "we get to learn things".

The importance of learning as an end in itself was a feature of the discussions with almost half of the children. When asked what the best thing about school was, Gwen replied "learning new things" (G1). Similarly Joseph described how he likes "finding out how things work" (Jo1), Chris commented how he "enjoys learning in general" (C1) as well as in specific subject areas such as "learning about history", while Ethan described the best thing about school for him being "all the facts the teachers have, which they can teach you" (E1).

When focusing on their own individual thoughts and attitudes the children expressed how they viewed learning as a central feature of school. This was juxtaposed against some of the children in their classes however, who were described as disruptive. Ethan discussed this:

Ethan (E1): Some of the children don't want to learn and that affects the rest of us. Mr Jones tells them off then though because otherwise if they are not listening then the rest of us can't learn.

Fiona (RFG), when discussing the area in general, highlighted how she felt some people "don't care about education, they don't care about anything" and when discussing school how "they don't care about the future" while James identified that "some of the kids in our class don't even try, not because they are dull or anything, they just don't...." Tom and Jess (T1 and J1 respectively) both discussed how the effects of other children not listening in class can be exacerbated if there is another teacher covering, or if the children are in a lesson they do not particularly like. This was apparent to the researcher during observations of the children's lessons as noted from the following schedule: Maths session 15.6.15, 'the class appears noticeably more boisterous compared to the project-based lesson last week, more chatter and less interest. It is disrupting a number of pupils'.

Overall, from the data it was evident that the children enjoyed learning new things that demonstrated the importance of school in developing and enhancing their knowledge that would be of benefit to them in the present. In addition to this, the children had clear views on how education and learning would be important for their future.

Even though the value the children placed on learning and education differs from the educational experiences of children and young people from deprived areas in other research (e.g. Reay, 2017), it is perhaps not surprising. Burke (2016) describes how family and the education system are two of the most influential forces in the formation of a child's habitus. As outlined in Chapter 3, Davies (1993) discusses the role of religious nonconformity and Sunday school in the South Wales valleys with its emphasis on education and learning. Despite the decline of influence of nonconformity and the chapel in the area during the twentieth century, it is not inconceivable that the emphasis on education and learning has been instilled within the people residing there, which has been passed down through the generations and is evident in the educational habitus expressed by the children in my study.

### 5.3 Testing and its importance for the children

The importance of learning and achievement for the pupils was perhaps most prevalent when they were describing the national tests they had to undertake prior to the transition to secondary school (which are issued across Wales at the end of Key Stage 2). The tests were spoken about by each of the 19 children in the study and the importance of the tests to their transition to the comprehensive school was conveyed. The discussion of the tests also identified the lack of choice of secondary school for the children as there was only one English language secondary school that served the upper valley, Maintown Comprehensive.

Being able to demonstrate their acquired knowledge and understanding in the tests undertaken had immediate importance for all of the children. Fiona described how “we have to do well in those tests as otherwise it could damage our future” (RFG).

James explained this further:

James (Ja1): Yeah so school is really important, because when you think of it you have to begin to focus in primary school because if you don't work hard here and flunk your exams you will go into south band in the Comp. That will then impact on the exams you sit in the Comp because they'll be really easy ones and you won't be able to get the highest grades. So you've got to keep on working hard to ensure you get into north band.

Fiona (MVFG) provided further clarification about north and south band in the Comprehensive school and what these meant for the children, explaining “north band is good and south band is not so good. So the low band is for those slow workers and children who are not very good or don’t try, so results in the tests tell what band you will be in”.

This finding is interesting as the children expressed a ‘feel for the game’ as described by Bourdieu (1990) as they were aware of the importance of the tests and how they had to “do well” (F1). This further supports the notion of the children possessing an educational habitus (as discussed in Section 5.2), as they communicated a clear understanding of the value of education - and the importance of performing well in the national tests - for their futures.

The importance of performing well in the tests became starkly apparent when the children described their attitudes towards them and the effect they had. Rhys (R1) explained how “they are important so there was a little bit of pressure” and how at the beginning of one of the tests “I was shaking a bit too, my hands were at the start. But then when I got into it I calmed down a bit”. Jess (J1) commented that “Preparing for the tests was hard too because I was thinking all night about them” while Gwen (G1) stated “Well I sometimes panic when I have tests so that is something that could stop me from getting a good grade. I tend to put a lot of pressure on myself so I then panic.” This theme of pressure was echoed by five of

the other children, including Fiona (F1) “Well it’s just pressure, you just have to sit there and do them...”

For Kate (K1) there was a sense of pressure to ensure she performed as well as her friends in the tests so they would be placed in the same band in Comprehensive school “because you want to do well so you end up in classes and bands in the comp with your friends.”

This anxiety about performance in national tests has also been shown in research with children from working class backgrounds in England (Reay, 2017). Reay (2017) focused on the excessive testing of children and argued that it can influence their identities. Some of the children Reay interviewed focused on the long-term implications of both poor and good performance in the tests, something that is supported by the findings in this study. So despite possessing an educational habitus - or perhaps even because of it and the value the children placed on education - the tests the children faced presented significant anxiety for them. (This apprehension for some of the children was also evident in their explanations of the importance of learning for the future, which is considered further in Section 5.4.)

The significance of the testing was also expressed by the teachers with Mr Jones (the Year 6 teacher at Riverside) stating “there’s undue pressure on the children and it is a one-off test so it examines their performance on that given day.” Mrs Jones (Year 6 Teacher, Mountain View primary) in her interview elaborated further hinting

at the potential limitations of such tests “And of course some of the children are very good orally but cannot convey their understanding as well on paper. So as a teacher we know the child is capable but when they are assessed on paper you can only see that, not the rounded child.” Mrs Jones also questioned the use of the tests and whether they were of more benefit for benchmarking of schools than the children “if I’m honest I think the testing is mostly for the Welsh Government so they can single out schools who are underperforming rather for any specific benefit for the children.” Even though the potential benefit could be questioned, the effect the testing had on the children was profound, so for them the testing carried significant importance.

The effects of testing have also been outlined in recent research. In an exploration of the social and emotional dimensions of school life, Wyness and Lang (2016) recognise the impact of the bounded nature of schooling due to the focus on tests and exams. In my study, this boundedness was identified not only in terms of formal schooling but also in relation to the geographical landscape of the valley and how this shapes the children’s informal learning experiences as will be discussed in Chapter 7.



## 5.4 Looking forward: importance of learning for the future

The importance of learning for the future was a theme identified by all 19 children taking part in the study. A sub-theme from the data was the importance of learning and education to avoid negative outcomes but equally prevalent was the importance of learning to achieve positive outcomes. These are outlined in the sections below.

These findings support previous research that has identified that poverty and disadvantage affects experiences of learning and school (Ridge, 2011; Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). This has shown that children from more advantaged backgrounds tend to view school as an altogether more positive experience, while children from more disadvantaged backgrounds tend to acknowledge the importance of school for negative reasons - such as to avoid problems when they grow up (Horgan, 2009).

### 5.4.1 To avoid negative outcomes

Eleven of the nineteen children interviewed focused on the importance of learning to avoid negative outcomes. Fiona described how the children could end up without a job and on “benefits” if they did not learn in school (RFG) while Tom commented how life could be “really bad” (T1). Chris focused on the skills required to undertake a job stating “if people don’t go to school they won’t be able to do their jobs properly” (C1) while others focused on the status of the job they could achieve with

loan, Darcey and Lisa in their respective individual interviews all commenting that if they don't learn they will not be able to "get a good job". Rhys took this further by describing what he perceived as good and bad jobs, suggesting if he didn't have school to learn he would probably end up in a "manual labour job or a factory so it [learning] is very important" (R1). The importance of learning to avoid these negative outcomes was summarised by Ethan in the Riverside Focus Group interview:

Ethan: Well if you didn't go to school you wouldn't have the knowledge. If you don't have the knowledge you won't have a good job. If you don't have a good job, you won't succeed in life.... Well you could succeed in life but it would certainly be harder to live. That's why I think going to school is really important.

The notion of it being "harder to live" if the children didn't do well in school and have a good job was shared by Daniel who noted if the children didn't do well "it will impact on our whole family, and we'll end up with a terrible life" (RFG). This forward looking trajectory was apparent throughout the interviews and the children were acutely aware of the importance of learning in school for their futures.

These extracts display the importance of avoiding negative outcomes for the children, thus lending partial support to Horgan's previous finding with children in Northern Ireland (2009). However it is important not to view these examples in

isolation as a theme of the importance of learning to achieve positive outcomes was also prevalent from the data – indeed we will see that this was expressed by some of the same children who identified the importance of avoiding negative outcomes as shown here.

#### 5.4.2 To achieve positive outcomes

When asked, ‘Why go to School?’, Gwen’s views appeared to epitomise the views held by others when she replied “Because you have to learn new things everyday and you have to learn stuff to be able to do what you want in the future and to get the dreams you want” (G1).

The dreams and positive outcomes described were very much an individual choice and reflected how each child defined success or failure. What each child wanted ranged from a “good job” (E1) and “good money” (J1), to a nice house and nice car (M1) and holidays (V1) to the less easily quantifiable, such as a “better future” (O1) and a “successful life” (D1). Regardless of the specific aims of each individual child, it can be seen that the children viewed learning and education as a means of self-improvement and an avenue through which they would be able to achieve their goals.

As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, Burke (2016) has identified the school as one of the key influences on the formation of habitus. It also plays an important

role in helping the children to accumulate cultural capital that would be of importance for them to realise the positive outcomes outlined in this section. The role of the school in enabling children to develop cultural capital and its importance for their future was identified by Mrs Rhys, the head teacher of Mountain View Primary:

GW: So when you consider where the school is situated, does it present any challenges for the children's learning?

Mrs Rhys: Well when you consider the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, the village is high on that list. So for us as a school it is important we provide all of our pupils with experiences that enrich their lives. So cultural opportunities. For example each term we have a live performance for the pupils. A production company comes in to do that and it is important we provide those opportunities to enrich the children's experiences beyond the curriculum. So they provide classical literature performances, pantomimes, things that are suitable for all the age groups... There are also other opportunities like the project where we have taken [eight] children to Vienna. We visited a partner school there. Some of the children hadn't flown before or been to a big city. We were based right in the middle of the city and the streets were crowded, so it provided the children with an alternative experience to what it is like here. For some of

the children it may be life changing as it will broaden their horizons and aspirations because they could go to places like that themselves.

This excerpt reveals the importance of schools in supporting children to access opportunities that may not otherwise be available to them and to accumulate cultural capital that may be of use beyond the immediate confines of the valley and may help inform their future aspirations.

## Part Two: Beyond: aspirations for the future

This section explores the children's aspirations. It focuses on their intentions to undertake further learning and their desired future occupations. In doing so it provides an insight into the children's understandings and value they attach to - as well as their knowledge of what is required to undertake - particular roles. It also considers the influence of known local role models as well as the role of the geographical and social landscape of the valley and the employment opportunities available. In discussing each of these areas, the chapter reflects the importance of school, the family and the local community where they grow up and how the children are able to use these experiences to help inform their decision making, thus metaphorically breaking the boundaries and demonstrating that the children are not passive recipients but are active agents in imagining their own futures.

## 5.5 Further learning and employment

This section focuses on the children's aspirations for the future. Specifically it considers their intentions to move into Further (FE) and Higher Education (HE) and how this is linked to their desired future occupation(s). Aspirations can be defined as "complex understandings of the future pathways available to people, influenced by individual experiences and those of the family, which emerge within particular social, economic and cultural circumstances" (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011, p112). All of the children who participated in the study had thought about their future and, as identified in Chapter 5, Section 5.4, were aware of the importance of learning for it. This was apparent through discussions that took place exploring what the children intended to do when they finished school and their focus on further and higher education. The intentions of each child to move onto FE or HE are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. The children's intentions for further learning

<b>Child</b>	<b>Intentions to undertake further learning (FE or HE)</b>
Ethan	University
Daniel	University
Jess	Further learning generally
Victoria	University
Fiona	Further learning generally
Tom	University
James	University
Kate	Further learning generally
Zac	University
Chris	University
Lisa	University
Darcey	University
Elizabeth	FE
Ioan	University
Joseph	University
Rhys	University
Gwen	Spoke of doing well in school
Olivia	University
Manon	University

As Table 4 shows fourteen of the nineteen children aspired to go to university. One child focused on FE, another three discussed the importance of further learning in general and one child (Gwen) identified the importance of doing well in school. This further reinforces the value placed on education and learning by the children. There were three main reasons cited by the children for going to university: to learn more;



to get a better job and to earn more money. The latter two were identified in a discussion at the Cwm Rhondda Focus Group (CRFG):

Manon: Yeah but I want to go to university.

GW: Why?

Manon: To get a better job.

Joseph: Yeah it will help you get a better job and then more money.

Rhys: Because if you don't you could end up doing a manual labour job.

This supports previous research that has identified aspirations are not low (Gorard, 2012b ; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011), and while it is still true that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to enter HE – with those from advantaged backgrounds in Wales being 2.6 times more likely to enter HE than those from disadvantaged backgrounds (University and Colleges Admission Service, 2016) - this finding shows that children as young as eleven living in areas considered disadvantaged aspire to go to university. However, research in England has shown that the proportion of pupils expecting to apply to university falls from age 14 onwards and a much lower proportion of students by age 21 actually apply to university than those who stated they intended to do so at age 14 (Anders and Micklewright, 2015). Furthermore, a recent study focusing on the changes in expectations of applying to university between ages 14 and 17 in England (Anders, 2017) found there is a greater prevalence of downgraded expectations during this

period for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, measured in the change of being likely to apply to being unlikely to apply. Anders (2017) suggests that more could be done to maintain the educational expectations of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is supported by Thiele et al. (2017) who identify the importance of Widening Participation (WP) programmes to support access to elite universities for young people from low SES backgrounds and stress the role of early advice, guidance and support. The findings of my study add to this discussion as they show children at age eleven have clear aspirations to attend university.

The aspirations outlined by the children were grounded in an awareness of what they needed to do in order to be accepted into a university and the potential benefits it could bring for them. Ethan (E1) commented he would have to “study for my tests really hard and pass them. Then I’ll have to go on to university” and how “I want to go to university because that will enable me to do the job I want.” It was apparent that the children had a clear understanding of the importance of university and how it could benefit them and ten of them only focused on these positive aspects of the process of studying in order to progress on to HE. However, it is important to note how the other three children articulated this and focused on the potential barriers in getting to university, acknowledging how the journey may not be straightforward. Olivia spoke about this in her individual interview (O1):

Olivia: Yeah. I'll need to get the qualifications to go first though and that could be the main thing to let you down so I'll have to work really, really hard.

As discussed in section 5.3, Gwen (G1) focused on the grades she received at school and how the pressure she put on herself caused panic, which could present a barrier. Moreover, a lengthy discussion with Tom (T1) focused on his perceptions of the challenges the children may face in comparison to children who attend private schools:

GW: So what will you have to do to get the job you want?

Tom: Do your GCSEs and go to college or university. I don't know anyone really who has been to university, to do that you need to do well.

A lot of people from good schools will go to university.

GW: What do you mean by good schools?

Tom: Well you can get a private school where you get taught more because the teachers have a better degree, and the teachers would maybe have been trained more. So if a not-very-good teacher went there they wouldn't get a job there.

GW: What does that mean for the children who go there?

Tom: Well they'll be taught more and better so they'll get a better degree and then they'll get a better job. That means they'll have more money and a better life.

GW: So how does that compare to here?

Tom: Well you'll still have a good life but you'll have more experience in a private school. So here we need to work harder I think. The harder you work the better job you'll have and the more money you'll get.

GW: So what do you think of pupils in this school having to work harder than those who go to a private school?

Tom: Well it's not really fair. If you pay for school then you can buy better things and the private school can buy better things like more science equipment but we only pay for school trips so the school can't really afford much.

GW: But what about people who can't afford to go to private schools?

Tom: Well if they work hard then they can still get a good job but if they don't then they won't get a very good job. There are more challenges I think here though because if we don't have the type of equipment we need then we can't do the things and learn about them.

Tom identified some key challenges for him and the other children. First, that he didn't know anyone in his family who had gone to university (as noted in his individual interview "My father works but my mam stays at home with us. My

father works as a builder, he goes to different places to work”). Despite not being imbued with cultural capital from parents or family members who had attended university, Tom demonstrated agency in aspiring to attend university (which also reflected the value placed on education and learning). The discussion again highlighted the children’s awareness of social differences, such as the schools lacking equipment in comparison to private schools, the qualifications of the teachers, as well as how children who attend private schools have a better education which translates into a better job and a ‘better life’. Tom did possess a positive outlook however, identifying that working hard could serve to negate some of these challenges.

This notion of working hard in order to overcome barriers and to achieve their aspirations was a notable feature of all the accounts provided by the children, for example James (Ja1) who mentioned he will “definitely work hard in school” in order to first go to university and then achieve his desired occupation becoming a lawyer. This reinforced the notion of the children possessing an educational habitus as outlined in the first part of this chapter, as well as an awareness of what was required in order to progress to university study and beyond.

A recent study conducted by Tan (2017) focusing on parental expectations for their children’s education and future working life, with a particular emphasis on mathematics education, concluded that parental expectations alongside knowledge of the education system and the requirements for future jobs may constitute

cultural capital which can positively influence attainment. As discussed previously the children were imbued with an educational habitus from their families, and this could provide an explanation for the high aspirations expressed by the children and have a positive influence on their future trajectory into further learning and employment. The role of the family is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6. The imagined future occupations of the children also reflected high aspirations and these are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. The children's desired occupation(s)

<b>Child</b>	<b>Desired Future Occupation(s)</b>
Ethan	Doctor or Scientist
Daniel	Scientist
Jess	Photographer or a Teacher
Victoria	Teacher
Fiona	In sports or a Teacher
Tom	A businessman
James	Lawyer
Kate	Hairdresser or Beautician
Zac	Engineering
Chris	History Teacher
Lisa	In Health Services A nurse, midwife, paramedic, doctor or surgeon.
Darcey	Beautician
Elizabeth	A Traffic Officer or PE Teacher
Ioan	Scientist
Joseph	A Vet or a Chef
Rhys	Lawyer or to work in Law
Gwen	Actress or a Teacher
Olivia	Teacher
Manon	A Vet or Policewoman

All of the children cited further learning as important for them to attain their chosen profession(s). The reasons for wanting to pursue the chosen occupations ranged from following their interests, to financial reasons, as well as the influence of known role models, and that will be explored in Section 5.6.

## 5.6 Habitus and agency: the influence of known role models

The support provided and influence of known role models was a theme identified by the children when discussing their aspirations. This influence operated on a number of different levels. First there was the support provided by parents and family for the aspirations of the children. Second, the importance of family practices and occupations was evident when children expressed their aspirations for the future.

The role of parental and family support for learning (which will be discussed further in Chapter 6) was evident in encouraging the children's aspirations for the future.

Kate (K1) commented how "my mother says I can be whatever I want to be and she'll always be behind me whatever I want to do" while Gwen stated "because as long as I do the best I can they say they'll always be proud of me." This support was also apparent in a practical form, as Manon described (M1):

Manon: Yeah go to university. University, I think, is better than college so I'm going to go to university to study and that will help me then.

My mother has made a bank account for me and my brother and she puts money in to save for me and my brother to go to university.

GW: ok so what does your mother say about that?



Manon: Well I know she never went to university and she said she made a mistake by not going. So she says to us to make the most of our opportunities to go and study because she wishes she did now. She loves the job that she has but I think she wants a better one.

This not only shows Manon's aspirations of going to university but also her mother's. This idea of going to university by-proxy for another family member from the previous generation has been noted in other research conducted in Wales (Baker and Brown, 2008) identifying once again the value placed on education in the Rhondda (this educational habitus) and parents and family wanting their children to pursue opportunities that perhaps were not available to them.

In addition to this support, family occupations and practices also had a direct influence on the aspirations expressed by some of the children. Two of the children spoke about how they aspired to occupations undertaken by their parents. Tom spoke about how he wanted to be like his father in his individual interview (T1):

Tom: Well I'd like to be like my dad because he gets a lot of respect from people because he does good jobs for them. In a lot of jobs people don't respect you so I want one like my dad where they do. Maybe I'd like to have a job as a businessman because they get lots of money.

Fiona too spoke of her father's influence (F1):

Fiona: Well I want to do something with sports. My father is saying stuff about me maybe taking over from him managing the [sports] pitch and things, or I could play or coach sports or become a PE Teacher.

Other children discussed how members from their wider family network had inspired them with their path into further education and employment. Figure 4 shows a photograph I took of a display at Mountain View primary of Lisa's account of her future and demonstrates this.

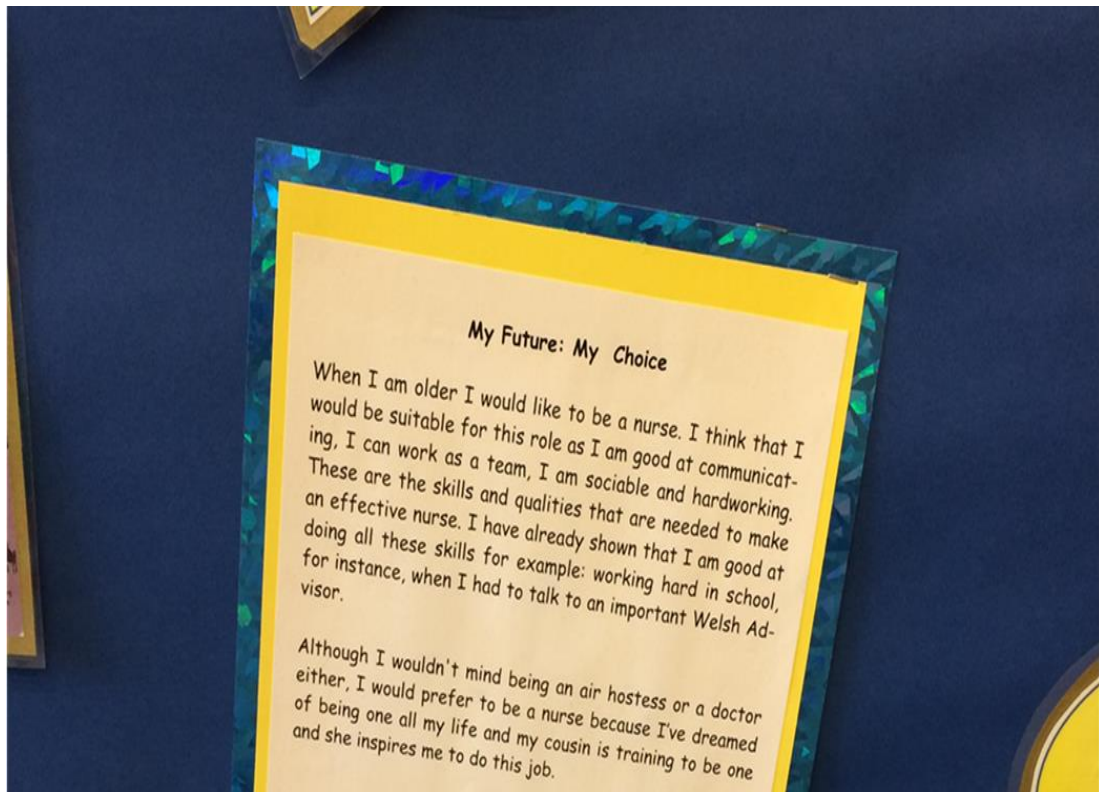


Figure 4. Lisa's aspirations and the influence of known role models

Lisa elaborated on this in her individual interview (L1) "My cousin has just finished training as a nurse and she's just passed so she's starting a job in September. So I want to do something like that". Being able to talk to others about specific occupations was also identified in this discussion as Lisa described (L1) "My friend's mother is a nurse too so I've got lots of people to ask about it."

These findings of the importance of known role models add to one of the recommendations made by the young people interviewed in the Young Welsh Researcher's project (2013), which identified the need for local role models to provide real-life careers advice to those in secondary school. My study

demonstrates its importance for primary school aged children too as role models from the locality are able to broaden the children's experiences and show them the range of opportunities available.

The role of the family in shaping the habitus and dispositions towards future learning and employment has been recognised (e.g. Burke, 2016; Ball et al., 2002) and is supported by the findings above, in demonstrating the children using their family experiences to shape their own aspirations. Bowers-Brown (2016) in a study of the aspirations of 11 – 18 year old girls in England identified that the social capital networks of the children was a crucial factor in the forming of their aspirations and what they deemed possible. This is supported by the findings presented here as the children used their networks to inform their aspirations. However, this finding could present a barrier for some children as they may not have extensive social capital networks upon which to draw. The role of the school in providing opportunities for children to accumulate and enhance social and cultural capital (as outlined in part 1 of this chapter) is therefore essential.

However as Reay (2004) notes, while habitus - and its constituent dispositions - is the product of the opportunities and constraints framing our experiences in shaping how we see the world, it does allow for individual agency. This agency is observed in the discussion with Chris (C1):

Chris: Yeah I want to become a teacher I think but I'll have to go to Sixth form to study it and then to university but I'm not sure which one I want to go to. My sister studied English so I want to do something different. I may actually go to a London university so I can visit the museums there.

Despite having an immediate family member who had attended university Chris explicitly acknowledged how he would like to study something different. His account also shows how he was able to draw upon his experiences - of visiting museums and his interest in this - to inform his choice. Jess (J1) also noted how she "did want to be a nurse like my mum" but had changed stance and now wanted to become a photographer because taking photographs was something she enjoyed. Elizabeth (E1) also identified how her experiences on a family holiday to America had informed her decision to aspire to become a Traffic Officer with the police. These examples also reflected individual agency and how the children were able to draw upon their range of experiences to inform their imagined futures rather than solely replicating family practices.

This finding supports the assertion by Pimlott-Wilson (2011, p115) that "whilst children inculcate family practices into the habitus, their aspirations for their own future are not simply a carbon copy of what has occurred before". The social environment and experiences children encounter as well as formal education in school can influence the habitus therefore, and act to either replicate and further instil dispositions or act to transform them (Reay, 2004). The availability of local role

models available to show the children what individuals from their community can achieve may serve to influence their aspirations and broaden their understandings of the opportunities available. This importance of local role models was identified in the discussion with Mr Jones, the year 6 teacher at Riverside:

Mr Jones: Having been through the school system here and to the comp where 99% of the children here will be going, to have that experience yourself is important. Times have obviously changed there but I can always relate to the things they are going through. We have been through similar things and have similar experience, and it's the same with my wife (Mrs Jones the Year 6 Teacher in Mountain View), we both live locally which I think is important for the children as it shows them they can do it.

This was further supported in the discussion with Mrs Rhys, the head teacher at Mountain View:

Mrs Rhys: It's also about having those examples available, well people like yourself, who have come to this school and have gone on to achieve fantastic things. Just like our year 6 teacher, she studied at Oxford and now she's teaching the children. So it allows the children to think I can do that and there's no reason why I can't. So it's having that can do attitude.

It is clear from Sections 5.5 and 5.6 that the children had high aspirations. Despite this, the children recognised that some of their chosen occupations would not be supported by the labour market locally and this presented a possible dilemma. This is discussed further in Section 5.7.

### 5.7 Breaking the boundedness

The children discussed the closure of a number of community facilities in the area. In addition to its impact on learning and the accumulation of capital (as is discussed further in Section 7.3), the closure of facilities detrimentally affected the labour market and opportunity structures available for those living in the area. Chris focused on this in his individual interview:

Chris: Well the bank has been closed, the library has been closed. There are not many shops left now either. There are not many factories left here either. Most people now have to work outside the Rhondda, like in Cardiff, so they have to travel for work.

GW: So what does that mean for people here?

Chris: It's bad I think, there are not many jobs and people have to go elsewhere for work so not many people would want to really come here to live. I like it here though so I don't really want to move.

What he described could be seen while walking through the villages as there were a number of empty shops lining the high streets. While the children aspired to predominantly professional roles they identified that not all of these would be available within the valley itself. This finding adds to those of St Clair and Benjamin (2011) which identified that contrary to the positioning of much governmental policy, the aspirations of children and young people from deprived backgrounds are not low, but are often higher than the local labour market can fulfil. Zac (Z1) focused on this when talking about job availability in the area “Well the Rhondda is a really small place and there are not many businesses. There are small community shops but not big ones” while Kate (K1) spoke about how “people have to look out of the valley or further down the valley for the jobs if they aren’t available here” and how “lots of people live here but travel far to work like to Cardiff.”

The need to travel beyond the confines of the upper valley (and further afield) in order to pursue their aspirations was expressed by the children who identified imagined future occupations in the law, health services (e.g. as a doctor or nurse) and the sciences. The children who expressed aspirations to become teachers or to work in service-focused roles such as hair and beauty identified that they could access jobs locally within the Rhondda. The children also noted the need to travel outside of the Rhondda to pursue HE, as Ethan explained (E1):

Ethan: First there’s no university I could study science in. The nearest large hospital in Llantrisant [a town just outside the Rhondda Valley and approximately 12 miles from the upper Rhondda]. There’s another one



closer but it's not very big. So first of all I'd probably have to move away to go to university to get that type of job.

The narrative of getting out to get on is a common feature of agency presented by children living in disadvantaged communities with high levels of poverty (Redmond, 2009). However, the findings in this study show that the need to travel further afield in order to achieve what they aspired presented a significant dilemma for the children. This of course could be attributed to the age of the children but it is important to look beyond that at the reasons they provide. When asked if he could pursue his aspirations of becoming a scientist in the area Ioan (I1) responded "Well not in this area but you could near Pontypridd or Cardiff maybe because there aren't any laboratories up here. I like living in a village like the one I do though because a city wouldn't be as nice and it would be too loud I think." Chris (C1) also stated that "It would be very difficult to move to a city I think" as "I like it here...so I don't really want to move" while Daniel (D1) also spoke about how he was unsure of where he would attend university stating "I don't know if I would want to move away to a bigger place like Cardiff from here, because I don't know what it would be like".

Each of the children felt a sense of belonging and this affinity for the area was expressed by all of nineteen children interviewed. So, despite possessing high aspirations the need to potentially move away from the area to achieve them clearly presented a dilemma for the children.

This dilemma of wanting to pursue and achieve their imagined futures and the conflict of not wanting to leave home is interesting as it can be related to a previous study with young people living in Wales (Hinton, 2011). Hinton (2011) focused on the HE aspirations of young people aged between 18 – 22 years and found that the young people aspired to study at university but preferred to do so at Welsh Higher Education Institutions. Studying within Wales enabled the young people to attain a level of responsibility and independence away from the family home while still retaining features of home that were available at university. Hinton (2011) further notes how heritage, culture, landscape and the Welsh language, all played an important role in this decision making process. The findings can also be compared to another study undertaken in the Rhondda. Evans (2013) found approximately half of the young people in her study in the Rhondda expressed a desire to leave the area and this was ascribed to low employment prospects. This study was undertaken with 16-18 year olds however so the age difference could explain the difference in the findings, as it could be argued young people aged between 16 - 18 are more independent and possess more knowledge of the opportunities available to them which informs their decisions. Nevertheless, this study has shown the level of social awareness the children possess in addition to knowledge of employment prospects locally and its future implications for them.

## Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the role of school and learning for the children's lives. It showed the importance of school for the children and their perceptions of how learning and the results in national tests at the end of primary school could determine their short- and long-term futures. The second part of the chapter focused on the aspirations of the children. It identified that the children had high aspirations for further learning and employment. The children's imagined futures were influenced by local role models and shaped by the children's experiences both in and beyond school and the boundaries of the valley itself. Finally, the chapter considered the potential conflict that arose due to the lack of opportunities locally and how the need to potentially move beyond the boundaries of the valley to achieve their aspirations presented a dilemma for the children.

## Chapter 6

### Theme 2: Belonging and beyond: cultural capital, habitus and the role of the family

#### Introduction

“A fo ben, bid bont” - “Let them who lead also be a bridge”

(Davies, 2016, p2)

This chapter explores the role of parents and family to the development of children’s cultural capital. Overall the children described a sense of belonging within the area and this can be attributed to the family unit. The support the children received from the family could be described as a ‘bridging effect’, as is expressed in the proverb above. This operates on a number of levels. First there are the links with the school and support for formal learning. This is discussed in Section 6.1 which focuses on the role of the family in providing help and support with school work and preparation for the national tests the children undertake before the transition to secondary school (as acknowledged by the children in the discussion of formal education in Section 5.3). This bridging effect was also apparent in the support provided to the children to access opportunities to enrich their experiences both within and outside the confines of the valley itself, and I consider this in Section 6.2. Finally, a bridging effect was evident to the past where family members

engaged in activities with the children focused on creating a link to the culture and history of the area, and this is discussed in Section 6.3.

## 6.1 Supporting formal learning: the family and school

This section begins by focusing on the direct support available from family members to assist with the children's schoolwork. It then focuses on the type of support provided before considering the resources accessed by the family to aid learning.

Each of the nineteen children who participated in the study discussed the support available from family members for schoolwork. This support was predominantly provided by those living with the children, most commonly parents and siblings. Ioan described how he would ask his mother or father for help if he was stuck (I1) while Manon mentioned she could also ask her older brother for support as he had just finished secondary school (M1). Being able to ask for help from parents and/or siblings was a common theme identified by all the children. This access to help at home was especially important for the children during the period prior to the national tests the children undertook during the summer term as shown by Lisa (L1):

Lisa: The days before the test my mother would give me some questions to help me prepare. We had a bit of homework to prepare for it especially when we had half term – we had three big booklets for that!

When asked to take photographs of the things that affect their learning, all of the children took photographs of their home and members of their family. Upon further investigation and discussion during the photo-elicitation interviews, the importance of the home and family for learning was made clear. All of the children identified the positive influence of the support offered, while fourteen of the children directly described how this support from parents specifically helped them to learn, as the following excerpt from the individual interview with Zac shows (Z1):

Zac: I think your parents can help you learn too.

GW: Could you explain that a little further?

Zac: yeah well they make you do your homework and read

Kate (K1) described how homework created links between the parents and the school as it enabled her teacher to keep her parents informed of the work they were undertaking in class:

Kate: Yeah I can ask for help and Miss also says homework allows our parents to know what we are doing in class so they have a better idea too. I

think that's one of the main reasons we have homework. I can ask my mother or my brother can help too because he has done his GCSEs.

The importance of learning for the children's future was again evident (as outlined in Section 5.4), with Elizabeth discussing how support from parents was significant in helping the transition to secondary school (E2) "my parents help out of school. They listen to me read and last night I did spelling. That's really good because it will help me and I won't struggle then when I go up the comp."

Rhys (R1) also identified the support provided to him by his mother and her involvement in encouraging him to read at home but provided a slightly different narrative to the other children, as is shown below:

Rhys: I love English because I really enjoy reading. I read a lot at home. I've read loads like Roald Dahl, Harry Potter, Sherlock Holmes.

GW: So how did you get into that?

Rhys: Well because my mother, I think she got me into reading when I was younger – say about 3 or 4 – because she's always wanted me to do my best in school.

GW: Ok so your parents support you a lot with work at home?

Rhys: Well I don't really like to ask them for help with homework and things.

GW: Why?

Rhys: Well because I get embarrassed. Because I'm portrayed as the clever one then I can't ask for help because I'm expected to know it.

His mother's desire for him to succeed and do well was clearly apparent but Rhys's account was slightly different to the other children. Where the other children were happy to ask for support when it was needed, he appeared averse to doing so and it caused him embarrassment as he felt the expectations placed on him because he was "the clever one" prevented him from asking for help, although he did identify that help and support was available should it be required.

This finding is also interesting as it shows the support Rhys's mother was able and willing to provide, which would have been framed by her own educational experiences (Reay, 2005). The findings discussed here signify the importance of the family for the development of cultural capital for children in the final year of primary education and how this was used by the children and shaped their orientations i.e. habitus towards school. This extends the findings of Brooker (2015) discussed in Chapter 5, who recognised the importance of the family on the development of cultural capital for children in the pre-school years, and shows how this continues to be of importance throughout childrens' primary school lives. These findings also add credibility and support to the notion of the children possessing an educational habitus, which has been influenced by the parents and family (Burke, 2016).



Overall these findings also support those from previous research with younger children in the UK which has shown that regardless of socio-economic status parents engage in learning activities with their children and support learning at home (Hartas, 2011), and that those parents from low SES backgrounds participated equally frequently in learning with their children as parents with a higher SES. However, Hartas (2011) also noted that mothers with lower qualifications engaged less frequently in learning activities with their children and identified that the type of interaction and support provided is important. Tom and Fiona commented on the approach to supporting homework taken by their parents. Daniel (D1) described how his mother “often helps if I can’t get something with my homework. First, she’ll hint things rather than show me how to do it but then she’ll help me out” while the following section of transcript provides an example of a similar approach by Fiona’s mother:

GW: Do you have any help with your homework?

Fiona: Yeah my mother helps me but only if I’m desperate. She doesn’t give me the answers, she just asks me questions to help me to think it through. If I can’t get the answer then she will tell me it, but then she will sit down with me and show me how to work it out, especially for maths, so I then know how to work it out next time. (F1)

GW: Is that helpful for you?

Fiona: Very helpful because otherwise I'm going to get stuck, so it's important that my mother helps me out if I am ever stuck or unsure.

GW: So what does that do then?

Fiona: Well it helps me to learn.

This provides an insight into the approach some parents took in supporting their children, guiding and scaffolding and enabling the children to solve the problems themselves, while also revealing Fiona's perceptions of its benefits. Research with children as young as five has identified the positive influence parenting can have for those who experience poverty and disadvantage, suggesting it can act as a mediator to redress the deleterious effects and positively influence achievement (Kiernan and Mensah, 2011). This of course could be seen as inculcating cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and imbuing the children with an educational habitus.

While this study did not directly focus on attainment levels it does identify the children's favourable views of the importance of parental guidance and support for schoolwork. Furthermore it supports findings from case study research with four to seven year old children that focused on the social world of children's learning and identified the importance of family, peer relationships and relationships with teachers (Pollard, 1996). The discussion here extends that of Pollard (1996) and reflects the importance of the role of the family in instilling this educational habitus that further helps the children acquire a sense of the rules of the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

In addition to support from the immediate family, the wider family network was involved in assisting the children's learning. This was often linked to personal interests or personal histories but intergenerational learning was a strong feature identified by the children. For example, Gwen (G1) commented "I like Geography too because we had some homework and I did it with my grandfather. We researched lots of places and that was really good" while Olivia (O1) said that "my mother and father will help me with my homework and my grandad too". In her photo-elicitation interview Victoria (V2) also commented on the importance of the wider family network when discussing a photograph she had taken "That's my family at my grandfather's house. I like going to his house because he loves reading. I go there after school." As well as undertaking activities with grandparents, learning about their lives was also important for the children, as Chris described in his individual interview (C1):

Chris: Because my grandparents were in World War 2, I like to learn lots about it. I read about it in the house because my mother has bought me loads of books.

As is evidenced in the above quotation, in addition to providing direct support for - and encouraging - learning, parents and family also invested in resources to help with the children's education. Tom (T1) for example described how "We have homework every week too. At home my brother can help me as he has some key

stage books that my parents bought.” One of the children, Darcey, discussed how her parents paid for a private tutor. The employment of a private tutor wasn’t a common theme raised by the children but it is an interesting one and it demonstrates another way in which the families provided resources to support learning. A year prior, Darcey had moved from another school in the upper Rhondda to Mountain View and her parents had identified a need to pay privately for a tutor to help Darcey prepare for secondary school:

Darcey: I have a tutor at home too and she helps me with my work. Well I go to her house and she helps me with maths and English to get ready for Comp.

GW: Ok, so the tutor comes to your home?

Darcey: No I go to her house. I started in Year 5 and she’s helping me with things. She gives me homework too and I go once every week. My mother and father pay for it for me. She lives quite close to me so it’s not far to go.

GW: So what do you think of having a tutor?

Darcey: Well sometimes I want to go out with my friends, but sometimes it can be fun too. It helps me with my work though and helps me to learn things. (D1)

This excerpt reveals the resources Darcey's parents were willing to invest in helping her succeed in school. So in addition to time spent helping the children the parents were also willing to invest money and resources, offering an example of parents providing children with access to cultural capital in its objectified state (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) notes how this acquisition of cultural capital can give children an advantage in education and Darcey was aware of the benefits for her when she described how "it helps me with my work though and helps me to learn things" (D1). However, despite recognising the potential advantages a tension is evident between the support being of benefit to Darcey in helping her to learn and its detrimental impact on her free time. So while enhancing access to and the accumulation of cultural capital has clear benefits, this finding reflects the importance of exploring children's views.

Furthermore, the support provided by parents demonstrates the value placed on formal education. Despite living in a deprived area, the finding that parents supported the children's learning is not surprising as it confirms earlier autobiographical research conducted in rural parts of Wales focusing on the narratives of Welsh adults from disadvantaged backgrounds who were successful at university (Baker and Brown, 2008). The findings highlight the influence of religious nonconformity in Wales and the emphasis and significance it placed on learning, along with the role of the family and early childhood experiences as being central to the adults' success at university and beyond. In addition to rural areas, religious nonconformity played a significant role in the industrialised South Wales valleys during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Davies, 1993). As identified

in Chapter 5, nonconformity - and in particular the dual educational and religious purpose of Sunday School for families – in conjunction with the influence of the Miners’ Libraries set up in the area to support learning in the wider community (Baggs, 1995) would have placed significant emphasis on education and learning for the people of the South Wales valleys. Despite its decline throughout the twentieth century, the findings in this study could suggest an enduring influence of nonconformity and the Miners’ Libraries on the people of the area, which has engendered an educational habitus where education and learning has significant value. This is evident in the children’s views of formal education (in Chapter 5) and in the support provided by family members discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, Baker and Brown (2008) identify an aspirational habitus forming from this culture. This emphasis on learning and providing a range of opportunities for the children is explored in Section 6.2.

## 6.2 Access to informal learning: family support within and beyond the boundaries

Access to informal learning opportunities outside of the school environment has been shown to positively affect children as it enhances the accumulation of cultural capital (Kisida et al., 2014). This section will focus on support provided by the family for children to access informal learning opportunities. It will focus first on the influence of the family for children’s engagement in activities before discussing family support provided to access opportunities within and then beyond the boundedness of the valley.

Parents encouraged engagement in learning activities both in the home, as identified by Darcey (D1) “I like English though because I like reading and my parents say it is important to read. They read to me and my sister at home”, and the wider community. This parental engagement in supporting learning activities at home has been shown to positively influence development and achievement in school. In a meta-analysis of 37 studies published between 2000 and 2013, Castro et al. (2015) found that children who received support from parents to develop positive reading habits at home had higher academic attainment. The support provided by Darcey’s parents here, and echoed by the other children, reinforces the emphasis placed on learning and education by those living in the upper Rhondda, as discussed in Section 6.1. It also further supports my earlier discussion of individuals in the area possessing an educational habitus that is imbued upon the children and corroborates Burke’s (2016) assertion that the family unit is one of the most influential forces in the formation of a child’s habitus.

In addition to support for activities in the home, twelve of the children discussed parental influence in their initial engagement in activities. For example, Jess discussed a photo she had taken in the photo-elicitation interview (J2) “That’s a photo of me in Karate. My mother said to give it a go and I did so I’ve been going ever since. I go for an hour each time.” A further six children spoke of the influence of grandparents in introducing them to specific activities. Gwen - in the individual interview (G1) and photo elicitation interview (G2) - spoke about an activity she engaged in with her grandmother:

Gwen: “This is down my nan’s and I’m cutting a cake. That other one shows a flan. We make cakes and bake together like we talked about before.”

GW: So what did you think about doing that?

Gwen: Yeah I learn more things so I like it.

This shows how the children were aware that they were learning while undertaking such activities and the enjoyment gained, particularly in the case of Gwen, informed their future aspirations as she described she would possibly like to be a chef (alongside other things) resulting from her experiences with her grandmother. This provides further evidence of the importance of known role models (as discussed in Section 5.6).

The influence of grandparents in introducing the children to activities in the local community was apparent too. For example, Manon (M1) acknowledged her grandfather’s role in her choosing to attend drama classes (CRFG) “Yeah my grandfather is in it too and he’s like 60! It was because of my grandfather that I got involved in it. He asked me if I would like to go and I went along. It was when I was six I think. I went along and met a couple of friends and then I kept going!” while learning about the lives of their grandparents also sparked further interests (as discussed in Section 6.1 when Chris spoke about his enthusiasm for learning about World War 2 after becoming aware of his grandparents’ involvement). Introducing



children to activities in the community and increasing their social networks could serve to increase their social capital, as demonstrated in Manon's account, and as Israel et al. (2001) have shown, this can positively affect development.

In addition to introducing the children to activities and encouraging an interest, parental and family support – most commonly in providing transport - was also required for the children to access opportunities. This was apparent for activities further down the valley as well as beyond its boundaries. The need to access activities beyond the immediacy of the upper Rhondda had been exacerbated by the closure of community facilities (as will be further discussed in Section 7.3). This in turn had increased reliance on family support, as Lisa (L1) told me:

Lisa: "I learned to swim in the pool that was knocked down and now I have to travel further if I want to go to swim. That's really disappointing because I have to go in a car now with my mother or father where I could walk."

Eight other children spoke about how they would rely on the parents of their friends as well as their own in order to access activities. This was illustrated in the interview with Olivia (O1):

Olivia: I go to Karate but not the one in the local centre. I go to the one in Dumfriestown.

GW: So how far is that away?

Olivia: About five to ten minutes in the car.

GW: How do you get there then?

Olivia: My mother takes us one week and then my friends' mother takes us the next week. They do it every other week.

This reliance on parents and family for transport to activities could be seen as a form of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as the parents are investing in their children's development by providing access to activities outside of the area while the children are reliant upon the resource of the use of a car. This reliance however did sometimes present barriers for the children, particularly for activities that were outside the confines of the valley. This was discussed by Rhys (R1):

GW: So how does that affect you?

Rhys: Well sometimes it means I'm unable to go. Because my mother works, sometimes she doesn't come home in enough time for us to drive to the sessions, so it being far away really doesn't help.

This clearly presented a barrier to accessing activities and while the children in this study had access to regular transport and parents were able to provide this means of support, it may not be the case for all those living in the area. This may therefore present a significant barrier to the range of activities and opportunities some

children can engage in – and thus their potential to accumulate social and cultural capital - with the closure of facilities in the immediate area presenting an increased challenge (and this will be explored further in Section 7.3).

The finding that parents provided resources and supported access to these activities is not consistent with previous research that has shown parental support and access to resources and opportunities is often low for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Wikeley et al., 2009; Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). In contrast, the parents in this study supported access to a wide range of activities both in and outside the confines of the valley that served to broaden the horizons of the children. Support from parents and family was apparent for all the children in the study, and no distinct difference was evident when comparing individual experiences between those children eligible for FSM and those who were not.

When discussing access to opportunities outside of the valley the children focused on a wide range of activities, ranging from those relating to their hobbies to family holidays and cultural activities. In the photo-elicitation interview, Elizabeth (E2) spoke about a photograph she had taken of an 80,000-seat venue used to host sport and musical events in Cardiff.

Elizabeth: That's the Millennium stadium in Cardiff. I went with my family to see One Direction. My uncle bought me tickets to go and see them, I'm

not really fussed on them but I wanted to take a photo to show you the type of things I do sometimes. I went to see Rihanna there last year too.

Tom (T1) divulged that “in the summer I’m going to Harry Potter World and Spain too” and how “we often go on trips to places” while Victoria (V1) spoke about “going to Greece soon for two weeks” and how she had been to “Crete, Spain and other places”. Jess also spoke about holidays in her individual interview and said:

Jess: Every year we go to Devon and all of the family goes.

GW: What do you think of that holiday?

J: I like it because we can go to the pool or go to the beach. We stay in houses there and there are lots of things to do.

These trips enabled the children to access opportunities not available within the valley itself and to broaden their range of experiences, thus potentially serving to further increase their access to forms of social and cultural capital. The children were then able to draw upon their experiences, as exemplified by Elizabeth – and discussed in Section 5.6 - who used her experiences on a family holiday to America to inform her aspirations of wanting to become a Traffic Officer.

However ten of the children also focused on the cost of such trips. Ethan (E1) commented “they are really exciting because it’s not something you can always do

so it's different. Trips can also be expensive so we can't go on them all the time" while Zac (Z1) compared his experiences favourably to others when saying his mother "is always booking things for us to do. It's really good because not every parent in the world would do that so we are really lucky." This again demonstrates the social awareness of the children at age eleven and how they were aware of social difference (as identified in Horgan's study in 2009 with children in Northern Ireland). Social difference amongst the children in this study was far less apparent however, especially when focusing on support from parents and access to resources and opportunities. The children's experiences of support were positive and predominantly homogenous across the group despite their individual differences. Zac for example came from a single-parent home and his mother worked in a fast food outlet in one of the villages. In the quote above, he discusses the level of support provided by his mother so he could go on trips and recognised the importance of such support. This also diverges from previous findings (e.g. Wikeley et al., 2009) that indicate access to opportunities and parental support is low for those from working-class backgrounds.

One of the most commonly cited activities the children engaged in with family members outside the confines of the valley was museum visits. Twelve of the children who participated in the study spoke about going to museums. This was prevalent in the focus group discussions at each of the three schools and was followed up in the individual interviews with each child. I explored this further with Elizabeth (E1):

GW: Where have you been?

Elizabeth: To the museum in Cardiff. I went there with my mother, and we've been other places too.

GW: What do you think of those trips?

Elizabeth: They are good.

GW: Why is that?

Elizabeth: Well because you are learning something new all the time.

This theme of learning new things from the trips was evident. Chris (C1) commented that parents "take you on trips to places like museums and shows so you can learn about different things" and Victoria also spoke about learning when discussing her visits to the museum (V1), along with the reliance on family because of the need to travel to access these opportunities:

GW: OK thanks. So tell me about when you go to the museum...

Victoria: I go with my family at the weekends and in school holidays. I like looking at things like the Dinosaur bones there and to learn about history. Normally in the summer holidays my family takes me on trips to places like the museum or Folly Farm to see the animals.

GW: Do all of your family members go?

Victoria: Yeah, we've got to travel to get to those places though.

James (Ja1) also focused on learning when describing a visit to another museum as well as spending time with his family:

James: Yeah I also do things with my family too.

GW: I remember you mentioning something in the focus group...

James: Yeah like we went to a war museum. Because I was watching Zulu the film at home my mother took me to the Welsh Borderers Museum so I could learn more about it. I really liked it there, you could try on the clothes soldiers wore. I was going to buy a fake Victoria Cross too.

GW: So why do you think you go on those trips?

James: To learn and to spend time with my family too. My dad is going to take me to the Imperial War Museum too.

This finding is important as research has shown that children's exposure to cultural institutions such as museums can motivate them to acquire new cultural capital (Kisida et al., 2014), while it also shows the value placed on such trips by the children. Visits to these cultural institutions and enabling the children to access a wider range of enriching experiences that are not available in the valley where they live may positively affect their learning and development as identified in the excerpts in this section.

Furthermore the support provided by the family offers an alternative narrative to that of the typical policy discourse of a 'culture of poverty' that is present in both the United States and the UK (Ivinson et al., 2018; Buras, 2014). As Gorski (2012) explains, this discourse begins from a perspective of cultural deficit that suggests children from deprived areas lack the requisite habitus (evidenced in their dispositions towards education) and capital (through access to resources and support) required to perform well in education. As Ivinson et al. (2018, p141) identify, the key challenge for researchers is to help policy makers understand the lived experiences of children and young people so that it can "get us out of the narrow deficit discourses that blame families and teachers for low educational achievement." The families in my study provided wide-ranging support for the children and this was true of all families irrespective of whether a child was or was not eligible for FSM. This extensive support imbued the children with an educational habitus, so these experiences contrast with typical policy discourse and provide new insights into the lived experiences of those growing up in disadvantaged areas.

In addition to providing access to learning opportunities outside the valley, family members also supported the children in - and stressed the importance of - learning about the culture and history of the valley itself. That is explored next.



### 6.3 Links to the past: a collective history

As well as supporting formal learning and enabling the children to access informal learning opportunities within and outside the valley, the family provided a focal source for the children to learn about the history of the upper Rhondda. The natural environment and freedom this provided for the children (as will be explored in Section 7.1) afforded them the opportunity to spend time with family and to learn about the area and its industrial heritage. Jess demonstrated this in a photograph taken while out walking with her father and explained more in the photo-elicitation interview (J2):

Jess: If you can see over there (points to the picture)?

GW: Yeah

Jess: Well my granddad used to work there. There used to be a coalmine there but it's closed now. I think this other photo shows something from the old colliery too and I often go walking there with my family.

Jess explained that she learned about her grandfather's role as a coalminer, and parents or grandparents sharing information about the area and its coalmining past was spoken about by twelve children. This extract from the photo-elicitation interview with Darcey (D2) provides an example:

Darcey: My father told me about this next one so I wanted to take a photo of it. Can you see the lines on the mountain?

GW: Yeah.

Darcey: Well that's where they used to drag the coal in the carts, they were called drams. It has left marks so we can see it and my father told me all about it.

In his individual interview, Zac (Z1) spoke of learning about the history of the area with his family and how it had prompted him to undertake further research in the local library:

Zac: But then if people do come here they can realise how much history there is here.

GW: Ok...

Zac: Yeah because not long ago I was talking about the history here with my family and I went to the library and I found out lots about what it used to be like around here with the coalmines and the mountains, like we have one of the few table-top mountains in the world and there's a Roman settlement on the other mountain, so there's lots of history.

This focus on the history of the area identified its importance for the people living there and how the families wanted the children to be aware of their history and

culture. This evidences the influential role of the family in shaping habitus (Burke, 2016) and provides another example of the emphasis placed on learning and education in the valley.

Learning about the heritage of the area was also emphasised by the schools, and that complemented the role of the family. Ioan (I2) took a photograph of a feature in the school yard and explained more about it during the photo-elicitation interview:

Ioan: The next photo shows the wheel we have in the yard. It's from when the mines were around here. It's to remember the miners.

GW: Ok so do you learn about that?

Ioan: Yeah we do.

Learning in the outdoors and encouraging exploration is a prominent feature of the Foundation Phase in Wales (education provided to those aged between 5 – 7) and individual schools also focus on it for the later primary years. This is supported by research focusing on education in the outdoor environment and how it can positively influence attainment (e.g. Quibell et al., 2017).

The focus wasn't solely on mining in the area however and the schools also forged community links through their activities. Manon (M1) talked about a bomb that had landed on the area during the Second World War, which she had learnt about at school and her "grandfather told me about it too because it killed a lot of people

here in the village". Furthermore, the school held a memorial concert each year, attended by the children and the wider community, to remember those who died in the bombing. Joseph (Jo2) talked about this in a little more depth when discussing the photographs he had taken (along with how it helps him to learn another activity):

Joseph: This next photo is of our class rehearsing for our play on the war, the memorial concert.

GW: Ok tell me a bit more...

Joseph: Well the other two photos are linked to it. We all dressed up, and it helps me learn drama. I like that. We always do Christmas plays and only those in year 6 do the memorial service. People from the village come in to watch. I get a little nervous but I enjoy it.

GW: Ok it sounds really interesting...

Manon's (M2) account of another of her photographs supported this:

GW: So what about the next photo?

Manon: It's when we were doing the play for the war...

GW: Ok so tell me about that...

Manon: Well we held a memorial service where all family members of the people who were in the war who live locally came in. Some people came all the way from England to see it. I was the journalist on stage so I had a role

to do. There's a sign in the background look, it says we will remember. So it was put up for the service in the hall downstairs.

While this memorial service was specific to Cwm Rhondda Primary, each of the schools created links with families and the wider community. Fiona (F2) talked about the community links established at Riverside Primary when discussing a photograph she had taken, "it shows where we used to grow flowers and things for the community. It was an unused area but now the community grows things there like plants and things and it looks nice."

The links established at Mountain View Primary were a subject raised in the Focus Group Interview (MVFG), when the children discussed their involvement in a competition run by a newly created charity established to reopen a closed railway tunnel through one of the mountains as a bike path:

Elizabeth: Some people did art work for the Tunnel Project, it was like a logo for the Rhondda Tunnel Society.

Kate: And you could win a mountain bike if you won the competition. The signs will then be used for the logo.

Zac: We sometimes do competitions like that.

GW: With community groups you mean?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Creating these social networks and links with the community can aid the development of social capital and attachment to a place (Knight, 2015) and serve to further embed the young people in their communities (which will be explored further in Section 7.2). The importance of creating such links and learning about the history of the area was a strong feature of the discussions with the Head teachers of each school, as Mr Thomas of Cwm Rhondda Primary, explained:

Mr Thomas: Last week we were in Cardiff receiving an award as part of the National Heritage project. That is something I strongly believe in, the children learning about their own heritage in this locality.

The Head Teacher of Riverside, Mrs Rowlands, also spoke of the importance of learning about the history of the area and how the children should be proud of where they come from:

Mrs Rowlands: There's also the history in terms of coal production and the impact that had around the world. So it's children being proud of living and coming from the upper Rhondda. It's not about getting the children out of the valley, it's about the children being proud of coming from the Rhondda Valley.

This notion of 'getting out 'in order to 'get on' is a common feature of research with people from working class backgrounds living in deprived areas (e.g. Lawler, 1999; Redmond, 2009). However, Mrs Rowlands presents a different narrative here. She suggests it is important to ensure people are proud of where they come from rather than them thinking they have to move out to get on. Mrs Rhys, the Head Teacher of Mountain View Primary, who discussed her own experiences and personal history, took this further, as is shown below:

Mrs Rhys: Well I'll take you back to my own personal experience there which I think is relevant here. I was a child in the 60s. My parents divorced when I was two so I grew up in a one-parent family and I didn't have an affluent background. I had supportive family but I went on through education. It is about valuing education, I think . It's not about being in an area of deprivation, it is about valuing education and the value you place on education. I was fortunate enough I grew up in a supportive family who valued education. We weren't affluent by any means but I had supportive people around me and my family valued education and that helped me get on and I've succeeded. So when we talk about those children who come from poor backgrounds it's so important to have that value placed on education. It's down to teachers as well. I can remember teachers who had high expectations of us as pupils and that is what is important here in this school, so it's really important to have high expectations as they are

barriers that can be overcome. Poverty is not an excuse. It can definitely be overcome and there are examples of that.

This highlights the importance of a supportive family in embedding a value on education as has been evident in the discussion of the findings in this chapter. The excerpt shows how the development of cultural capital can influence the habitus (Bourdieu, 1976) and, in turn, how this educational habitus can help to overcome the barriers associated with living in an area of high social deprivation. The influence of place will be discussed in the next chapter.

### Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the influence of the family for the children's learning. The support the family provided for formal education and school work reflects an educational habitus that has been influenced by the history and culture of the area which is imbued upon the children. This is complemented by the significant role family members had in educating the children about the industrial heritage and past of the Rhondda that served to foster attachment to the area. The family also played a central role in providing access to informal learning opportunities. This enabled the children to access opportunities not available within the boundedness of the valley itself, and thus enhanced the potential for the children to accumulate cultural capital that would be of benefit beyond the social field where they live.



## Chapter 7

### Theme 3: Boundedness and beyond: the importance of place

“Teg edrych tuag adref” - “It is pleasant to look towards home”

(Davies, 2016, p81)

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses the importance of place for the children. It begins in Section 7.1. by focusing on the geographical landscape and topography in shaping the experiences of those living in the valley, before considering the role and importance of the natural environment in providing informal learning opportunities for the children. Section 7.2 then considers the availability of - and engagement in - activities in the community, and beyond, and the influence this has on embedding the children in their communities and the accumulation of capital, before Section 7.3 focuses on the closure of community facilities.

## 7.1 Learning and freedom in the field: the importance of geography and the natural landscape in a bounded place

When asked about their experiences of growing up and living in the upper Rhondda all 19 children initially provided positive responses. Every child focused on the topography and landscape and how this influenced their lives and lived experiences. The photo-elicitation interviews provided the opportunity for the children to identify what was important to their learning and all 19 took photographs of the landscape and housing in the upper Rhondda, including their own, as is shown in the extract from the photo-elicitation interview with Kate (Mountain View Primary) below:

GW: So what is this next one?

Kate: That's a photo of my street and my house. I wanted to show my house and show my community.

GW: So is your house similar to others in the upper Rhondda?

Kate: Yeah terraced houses, there are loads of those in the Rhondda (K2).

Manon also identified the prevalence of terraced housing in the Rhondda, a fact reflected in 18 of the 19 children living in a terraced house:

Manon: That's my house. I've always lived there. It's a normal terraced house. There are one or two big ones on their own but most are terraced (M2).

The structure of housing in the Rhondda Valleys – as in the other valleys of the South Wales coalfield – as outlined in Chapter 3, Section 3.2, is a product of the topography of the landscape and an enduring reminder of its coal mining past. The steep mountain slopes on each side of the valley meant that housing was constricted to the lower slopes and the valley floor, resulting in long rows of terraced housing built in close proximity to one another.

This close proximity, along with the shared experiences of work in the mines and the relative isolation of the valleys, helped to create a strong identity of community (Gilbert, 1992). This is interesting as even though the role of mining as a primary focal point for community cohesion was lost with the closure of the collieries (Parry, 2003), the (predominantly) homogenous type of housing ensures that people within the community still live in close proximity in very similar dwellings. This close proximity still plays an important role in the social landscape of the valley, as Tom explains:

Tom: You get to know a lot of people here because they are really friendly. A lot of people stand out on their doorsteps and say hello. Because they live in terraced housing the houses are linked so people are quite close to one another so they get to know each other (T1)

The cohesiveness of the community was framed as resulting from the close proximity of the houses and the role this played in helping its inhabitants develop relationships.

Tom also described the area as “quite a friendly environment because of the way it is built” (RFG). Rhys elaborated further describing the area as a “tight-knit community” where “everyone will know each other” and “it’s not like living in a big city” (R1). This favourable comparison with other areas was also evident in discussions with the children in Cwm Rhondda Primary as is shown below:

Joseph: Yeah I think people on the outside think it is a good thing though.

Olivia: Yeah it would be different than if you were living in Cardiff.

Joseph: Yeah and people will always stop to have a conversation with you.

Rhys: Whereas somewhere like Cardiff people just walk past you, so it’s friendlier here I think (CRFG)

Living in a tight-knit community (as described above by Rhys) also provided the children with a perceived level of freedom. This is important to identify as the geographical structure and topography of the valley and its relative isolation from other areas is not only important in shaping the field (Bourdieu, 1977) and social spaces the children occupy, such as the strong identity of community and shared common interests, but also in shaping the cultural and historical context of the area. Bourdieu (1977) notes the importance of this history in determining the experiences, dispositions and actions of individuals - termed habitus as outlined in

Section 2.4 - so the environment has a significant influence on their behaviour, choices and actions. The geography of the landscape therefore offered the children this sense of freedom to explore. When asked what she thought of living in the area Gwen replied “Well I like it because it’s not really busy so we can have a lot of freedom” (G1). Similarly Fiona commented that “it’s fun and it’s good because you can be allowed out to play. If you lived somewhere like where it’s busy, in London for example, you couldn’t go out because it is too busy” (F1). Daniel also compared the upper Rhondda favourably to a city environment, explaining the benefits and importance of knowing adults in the area:

Daniel: I also like it round here because you know everybody. If I was living in somewhere like London then it would be full of strangers and you’d never be allowed to go out anywhere because it’s dangerous. Around here you can trust people because you know them and if something were to happen then you’d know people to go and tell straight away (RFG).

Being known and knowing others clearly provided a sense of freedom for Daniel.

Fiona also offered insight into support from the wider community and how this was of benefit to her, with specific reference to her interests in sport:

Fiona: The good thing around here is that if you play sports, when you walk around the town people will come up to you and congratulate you and they’ll come and watch you play and cheer you on. Some people look like they wouldn’t play sport themselves or they wouldn’t be interested in it

but it doesn't matter because they cheer you on when you are playing and they offer us support (F1).

The influence of the local community on the children and their experiences was clear. Other identified benefits were the close proximity to family as described by Manon "I can see my family all the time because they all live here, quite close to me" (M1) and Jess "Yeah I have lots of cousins who live quite close to me. My grandparents live quite close too so we all spend quite a lot of time together as a family" (J1), and Gwen "I also like it because I live really close to the school, only across the road and all my family too live close by" (G1).

This is consistent with previous recent research conducted in the Rhondda with 16-18 year olds that found that extended family often lived within close proximity to the young people, while all of the young people interviewed had at least one parent born locally with many of the grandparents also having been born in the Rhondda (Evans, 2013). That was also the case in this study, as 18 of the 19 children interviewed had parents and grandparents who were born in the area. The close proximity of family was exemplified by Rhys "I spend a lot of time with my grandparents though because they live right next door to us" (R1) and Chris who described the benefits of living in close proximity for him "That's my family at my grandfather's house. I like going to his house because he loves reading. I go there after school" (C1).

This is important to recognise as even though the role of mining as a primary focal point for community cohesion had been lost with the closure of the mines as Parry (2003) notes, many of the people still lived in the area and had memories of this past. So even though this primary focal point for community cohesion had been lost, the collective memory and shared history of those in the area would still bear influence on the children growing up there. It was also apparent that the children felt the community was still close-knit as is evidenced through their descriptions of support from the local community and the proximity of the houses and their family and friends.

Daniel commented on the benefits of living close to his network of friends “It’s also good for my friends who I know in school and the ones I play football and things with” (D1) while Ethan provided a reason for the importance of this not only in the present but the future:

Ethan: I also have a lot of friends here too and that helps.

GW: So why does that help?

Ethan: Well having friends is important especially as you grow up in life. If you are going to get on in life you are going to need friends (E1)

This excerpt indicates the importance of networks for the children and, as identified in Section 2.4, these networks are important for the accumulation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

The children's understandings of their local community and opinions of it, in addition to it being the location of their school and home life, is important as it provides insight into their lived experiences of the *field* in which they are growing up (Bourdieu, 1976) and how it serves to shape their experiences and dispositions i.e. how it creates habitus. From Ethan's comment above, the importance of the field and the opportunities it provides for the children's future lives is also evident. The opportunities available to the children shape their experiences and their ability to accumulate social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and the findings related to this will be outlined in the next section.

The children also focused on the landscape and topography of the valley in terms of the informal learning experiences and opportunities it offered. All of the children interviewed identified the importance of the natural environment and how the close proximity of their homes to open spaces – a feature of the valleys identified by Davies (1993) - and the mountains enabled them to undertake regular activities with friends and family. Knowing people in the area also supported this perceived level of freedom. Joseph discussed how “we can be up the mountain in two minutes so it is right on my doorstep. That's one of the best things I like about living around here” (Jo1), while Lisa used her camera to depict an area important to her, commenting: “Yeah that's the bridge on the mountain and the waterfall. I wanted to take that because it's really close to the houses and I go there with my family. The waterfall carries water right the way down to the river and we can walk along” (L2).



Others described the area as “beautiful” (G1) and “full of nature” (C1), while Darcey focused on how the area may be appealing to others:

Darcey: I think people who don't live here may like it here because of the mountains and the waterfalls and nature we have here. Some people may visit because of that. I always see people walking their dogs on the mountain and the park (D01).

The children spoke of the “walks you can do here with the mountains, or you can go on your bike” (Chris, MVFG) again highlighting the importance of “freedom” (G2) to explore. The opportunity to simply explore and spend time with family and friends in the natural environment was evidently important for the children but doing so also presented informal learning opportunities. Seven of the children spoke about how they undertook specific activities such as building ‘dens’ (temporary shelters) on the mountain or dams in the local rivers with family and friends. Daniel elaborated on his experiences and explained how spending time with his father walking in the mountains surrounding the village aided learning:

Daniel: I like it because of the fresh air, it's better than being stuck in the house. It's like you are free...It's also good because I can learn about the animals that live up on the mountain like how they react to things like when I go up there with my family. (D1)

This finding is interesting as it shows the children's experiences of living in what is identified as one of the most deprived areas of the UK is different from how it is portrayed in research and policy. It is apparent that the children enjoy the opportunity to explore and learn in the natural environment that gives them a sense of freedom. It also provides insight into the actual experiences of people living in these areas that is not typically provided in the statistics often used to portray the negative aspects of living in post-industrial areas, such as the high levels of ill-health and unemployment.

The importance of the natural environment was also expressed in a discussion with Mrs Rhys - Head Teacher from Mountain View Primary who grew up in the upper Rhondda - who expressed how it can often be taken for granted by those living in the area:

Mrs Rhys: There's a wonderful view from the school, the scenery and the feeling of being in a wide open space... We've been involved in European projects for many years and sometimes you only appreciate it when you have those visitors here and their reaction to it. We see it every day, and so do the people in the community, and you only realise when other people say about it, the area and the views. I think you have to have that sense of being proud of where you come from and who you are. I think that is central. (HNV)

In his individual interview Zac discussed how walking in the area prompted him to undertake further research about the upper Rhondda and its history “I went to the Library and I found out lots about what it used to be like around here” (Z1). Waite (2013) in an analysis of place-based learning in three schools in the South-West of England describes how engagement in activities in the local environment can aid knowledge and skill acquisition. Although the focus is on school-based programmes, as opposed to the informal activities with family and friends identified by the children here, it still has relevance in demonstrating how engagement in activities in the natural environment may be of benefit to the children.

## 7.2 The accumulation of capital: engagement in out-of-school activities and informal learning

This section begins by focusing on access to out-of-school activities before considering the specific activities the children took part in and their importance for learning. All of the children accessed out-of-school activities in the community. The individual interviews identified a wide range of activities. These included sports such as football (Ioan, Fiona, Daniel, Tom, and James), karate (Olivia, Zac and Ethan), swimming (Rhys and Victoria), and gymnastics (Manon, Olivia and Gwen) to dance classes (Lisa, Kate, Darcey, and Jess), a local theatre group (Manon and Olivia) and local generic youth club provision (Joseph, Chris and Elizabeth). Some of the children were engaged in more than one community-based activity during the week, while some activities required participation on a number of different

occasions throughout the week. The majority of the activities were accessible in the upper Rhondda, although participation in some required the children to travel further afield.

The children's access to, and participation in, the wide variety of activities in their community may be of particular benefit to them. Social capital is seen as the range of supportive resources available to individuals from within their family and community and the other groups of which they may be members (Bourdieu, 1997; Israel et al., 2001). Strengthening access to social capital through family and community links has been shown to be beneficial for children and young people's development (Israel et al., 2001) and doing this may serve to negate the effects of poverty and disadvantage.

The finding that children took part in such a wide variety of out-of-school activities is interesting, as it does not fully support previous research (Wikeley et al., 2009; Bullock et al., 2010). Wikeley et al. (2009) in a study of educational relationships and poverty with children in Years 6 and 9, found that nearly half (11 out of 25) of those interviewed from more deprived backgrounds – by measure of those in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) – did not take part in organised out-of-school activities compared to less than a quarter of those from more affluent backgrounds (6 out of 30). A number of reasons were cited for this lack of participation, including the cost of activities; access issues; limited knowledge of how to access, as well as the children's confidence levels (Wikeley et al., 2009).

The findings by Wikeley at al. (2009) are in contrast however to the views provided by the children in the upper Rhondda. There were no distinct differences in participation in out-of-school activities between those children eligible for FSM and those who were not. All of the children accessed some form of out-of-school provision. This could be partially due to the influence of the geography of the area, with its steep-sided valley slopes and rows of predominantly terraced housing, manifest in only one main road providing access to the area. In practical terms this difficulty of access means that activities, opportunities and facilities have historically been made available in each village through the impetus of people in the community for those living there. Furthermore, because of the geographical boundedness and relative isolation of the upper part of the Rhondda Valley the choice of which school to attend is generally restricted and the children, in all but two cases, attended the school in their local village (and in those two cases the children attended the schools in the neighbouring village less than a mile away). Each school therefore plays a significant role in the local community. This role was evidenced in each school, as community activities for the children (and adults) were advertised on posters and notice boards as well as through letters sent home to parents (FN, 5.6.2015) which would increase awareness and knowledge of local opportunities. The close proximity of such activities in the area – ordinarily in the village the children live - would reduce the reliance on parents, family members or the parents of friends for transport and the extra cost this could incur. The close proximity was illustrated by Manon when she described, “All my friends are here and my school is in the same village where I live. Everything here is close to me” (M2). This close proximity of resources to the population due to the geography of

the area could serve to explain the differences in the children's experiences in this study compared to working-class children elsewhere, such as those in the study of Wikeley et al. (2009).

Furthermore, the development of social networks that is influential for the development of social capital through taking part in these activities can serve to not only enhance social capital but also further embed the young people in their communities. However, embeddedness within a particular community or field (Bourdieu, 1977) may serve to distance individuals from other communities (Lupton, 2003), especially in an area such as the upper Rhondda Valley with its particular cultural norms, practices and geographical isolation. The particular cultural and social norms within the field influence the opportunities available to children and young people that shape not only their immediate experiences but also their future expectations and aspirations (Gorard, 2005). Engagement in activities outside of the particular environment where they live, and to experience other social spaces and fields, may prove of benefit for the children therefore.

Even though the majority of activities were undertaken in the local community, the children did rely on parents to access activities not available in the immediate vicinity, which shares some similarities with the findings of Wikeley et al. (2009). In contrast to the findings of Wikeley et al. (2009) however no differences – due to FSM eligibility or class - were evident in the experiences of the children in the study. For example, in her individual interview Olivia – one of the children eligible for FSM - commented:

Olivia: I go to Karate...in Dumfriestown.

GW: So how far is that away?

Olivia: About five to ten minutes in the car.

GW: How do you get there then?

Olivia: My mother takes us one week and then my friend's mother takes us the next week. They do it every other week. (O1)

Rhys also swam for a club outside of the valley (R1) while James, Daniel and Fiona played football for another team in addition to the local side (Ja1,D1, F1). James identified the potential benefits of taking part in activities with others outside the 'field' (Bourdieu, 1976), when asked about why he takes part in sports activities:

GW: So why do you take part in those sports?

James: Well mainly it's social.

GW: What do you mean by that?

James: Because I'm with my friends and I'm with people from other schools. (Ja1)

Wider social interaction and the friendships gained from taking part in out of school activities was identified by 14 of the children, which is similar to the findings of Wikeley et al. (2009) who identify social interaction as one of the main reasons for children and young people taking part in out-of-school activities. This would of course broaden the experiences of the children who could increase their social

networks through participating in activities outside of their typical environment in the upper Rhondda, which in turn could further enhance their accumulation of capital.

The children not only perceived engagement in out-of-school activities as opportunities for social interaction but as opportunities to learn. The learning outcomes from engaging in activities can be classified into several categories. First, learning of the specific skills required for an activity, such as those described by Olivia (O1), “ I like sports because you can learn things like new skills and it helps with catching and kicking”, and Victoria:

Victoria: That’s me doing CPR in lifesaving. I wanted to show me taking part in that activity and what we learn there. It helps me so if anything happens in the water I can learn how to help people. (V2)

The specific skills you could learn in the activities (such as those required to perform CPR) were described by ten of the children. Secondly, others focused on the soft skills – defined by Schulz (2008, p148) as “personal qualities and interpersonal skills” that enable us to interact effectively with others, such as self-confidence and communication skills - that could be developed from taking part in out-of-school activities, as acknowledged by Gwen:

Gwen: The next one is when I was in my acting group. That’s showing us preparing for one of our shows. It’s one of my favourite activities and



things I do. We learn lots like how to sing and things. It can help confidence too. It's definitely helped me. (G2)

Manon also commented on how drama and acting can “help with your confidence” and how it has helped her “have more patience too I think because I know to wait and sit on the stage so it helps with that too” (M1). Chris also recognised the importance of these soft-skills for the future when he described how taking part in sports can aid “Teamwork. Although that is only used in school when you are working in groups. It is important for when you want to get a job though” (C1).

A recent study conducted by Chanfreau et al. (2016), based on an analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), has identified a positive association between participation in formal out-of-school activities - particularly in sport and physical activity - and social, emotional and behavioural outcomes and attainment levels at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2). However, for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, a positive association was only found for participation in after school club activities (Chanfreau et al., 2016). The benefits of participation described by the children in this study offers further insight into the findings of Chanfreau et al. (2016) as it provides potential reasons for how participation in these activities can aid social, emotional and behavioural outcomes and suggests that activities in the community can offer these benefits too.

Accessing community based, out-of-school activities also provided the opportunity for the children to benefit from experiences beyond the boundary of the valley, as is

outlined below in an excerpt from the Mountain View focus group when discussing activities available at the local youth centre:

Elizabeth: You can go on trips to London.

GW: What was the trip to London for?

Elizabeth: Well we went to see an art gallery, and the London Eye.

Kate: It was to help us learn more about paintings and who paints them, the artists and what art is (MVFG).

Zac discussed how karate had provided the opportunity to visit different countries including Holland with his family to take part in tournaments and how “it gives lots of opportunities not just to take part but to learn about the history of it” (Z1). This is also supported in the literature as participation and engagement in out-of-school activities has been shown to be beneficial for children (Wikeley et al., 2009) due to the relationships they develop with adults, which in turn can inform their attitudes to education and learning (Bullock et al., 2010). Providing the opportunity for the children to experience places and activities outside of their usual field (Bourdieu, 1976) - such as those described by Zac, Elizabeth and Kate - would help in enhancing social and cultural capital, enabling them to look beyond the boundedness of the valley which in turn may influence their aspirations and future life chances (as discussed in Chapter 5). Having these opportunities to engage in activities beyond the field was important as the children described a reduction in the availability of opportunities locally due to the closure of community facilities. This is explored in the next section.

### 7.3 Accumulating capital: the detrimental impact of the closure of community facilities

The importance of having out-of-school facilities and opportunities for the children growing up in the upper Rhondda became evident when they discussed the closure of local community facilities. The closure of facilities was spoken about by all 19 children and six chose to take photographs of the closed facilities.

Even though the children engaged in a wide range of out-of-school activities, they also focused on the impact the closure of local facilities had on them and others living in the area. A number of different facilities had been closed in recent years, as identified by the children. Kate spoke about a local bank that had closed (K1), Chris about local factories (C1), Tom focused on the closure of a takeaway in his town (T1) and some of the other children about how local pubs had closed down and been boarded up in the community. Predominantly however, the children spoke about the closure of local leisure facilities and a library.

The children described the closure of local outdoor swimming pools in two of the main parks in the area that used to open each summer. Joseph explained “some of the parks have outdoor swimming pools that open in the summer and they have all been closed” (Jo1), while the closure and demolition of a local indoor swimming pool was also a key point of conversation with Kate and Lisa deciding to illustrate this in their photographs, commenting “The swimming pool used to be opposite it

but look now it's just dirt" (K2) and "That is the old swimming pool in Mountain View. It's now been knocked down. We talked about things being closed down so I wanted to show that because it affects us" (L2), respectively.

The closure of the library was more acutely felt by the children living in Mountain View, evidenced by all of the children in the school discussing its closure. Prior to its closure there had been two libraries in the upper Rhondda, one in Mountain View and the other in Riverside but with the closure of the Mountain View library, the facilities and services available there had been incorporated into the Riverside library building, thus explaining why the closure had greater significance for those residing in Mountain View.

The children also demonstrated wider social awareness in ascribing their reasons for the closure. The following excerpt from the Mountain View Focus group provides the children's thoughts of the reasons for the closures:

Elizabeth: They have been shutting a lot of things around here.

Kate and Lisa: (nod in agreement)

GW: So can you explain who 'they' are?

Zac: Yeah, David Cameron.

Chris: The council make the decisions.

Elizabeth: Yeah it's the council.

Chris: Yeah they closed the library too.

GW: So the local library and the swimming pool have been closed?

Chris: Yeah the indoor swimming pool was closed about two years ago and the library closed in May.

Kate: They demolished the indoor swimming pool.

GW: So why were they closed?

Chris: I think it was because they weren't earning the council enough money. (MVFG)

The awareness of the reasons for the closures supports the findings of Horgan (2009) in displaying the social awareness of primary school age children. Even though the children did have access to opportunities it appeared that the needs of the local authority to make cost-savings due to a budget deficit was having a direct detrimental impact on the children.

The effects the closures had on the children can be classified into two distinct categories. First, the closures had practical consequences for the children, meaning they had to travel a longer distance to undertake activities they could previously access in their own village. Elizabeth described how "we used to go to the places and now we can't" (E1) and Kate explained how "we've got to go further down the valley if we want to do those things" (K1). This placed greater reliance on parents and family as Rhys made clear:

Rhys: I think though that the closure of the swimming pool in Mountain View was really bad. If they had kept it open I would have been really happy because sometimes to go swimming now I have to travel up to an

hour to my club. It's outside the Rhondda and sometimes I have to travel to either Swansea or Cardiff to swim. (R1)

However, as discussed in Section 6.2 this presented barriers, as Rhys's mother worked so she could not always take him to the swimming lessons further afield. There was a general feeling that the closure of these facilities restricted their freedom, as Manon explained:

Manon: Like we said last week though there are some things that I used to like to do too that we can't now because they are being closed... Yeah so like the swimming pools. With my brother he's allowed to go to Riverside but not down to the sports centre, so he can't go on his own now. My mother works until 4:30 so it's hard for us to go especially in the summer. When the one in the local park was open we could go there but it's closed after 4:30 p.m. Now if I want to go swimming I've got to go to the sports centre which is further away. (M1)

This links to some of the barriers to participation in out-of-school activities cited by Bullock et al. (2010). The children had expressed reliance on their parents for some activities (as discussed in Chapter 6), so even though all of the children took part in out-of-school activities at the time of interviewing, it was evident that the closure of facilities in the locality placed added strain onto families to provide greater support

and transport for the children to travel further distances. This of course has time and cost implications for access to, and engagement in, out-of-school activities.

Second, the closures limited the opportunities to learn. This was evident in Darcey's interview where she discussed the importance of the local library for her education "Well you can read more and it helps you to understand, learn and study. If you go to the library more often it is easier for your study because you are doing things like reading more". (D1). Ioan also identified the direct consequences for him as he was unable to visit the library as much as he had previously, explaining "my mother doesn't drive so we walk quite a lot" and how he "used to go to the library close to my home but the council closed it down" and how it makes him "quite sad because I liked going to the library so there's less things to do" (I1). Lisa focused on potential long-term consequences: "It's enjoyable because at the moment there are different things we can do but with everything closing that is going to change I think" (L1), while Chris took a photograph of the closed library and said:

Chris: It's closed down now, so that's the outside. I go to the other one now but not as often because I have to ask someone to take me and it's further away. I can't just go there like I used to go to this one.

GW: Ok so what do you think of that?

Chris: Well it's not good because I can't go there as much. (C2)

The closure of the library compelled Chris to write a letter to Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council outlining his opposition to the closures, which was

subsequently published in the newspaper for the area (Fn, Chris, 4.6.2015). As well as being concerned for himself, further exploration showed Chris's awareness and apprehension of the closure for the community:

GW: So you mentioned last time you wrote a letter about the library being closed...

Chris: Yeah I wrote a letter to the council about the closure saying it will impact on people's education.

GW: Why is that?

Chris: Because lots of people go there to read and learn. People now have to go further to get to a library and if they haven't got a computer at home they won't be able to do things. (C1).

Zac also discussed the importance of the library for others, identifying that:

Zac: Well for the older people like my gran who used to go there, what can they do now during the day? People will just end up watching more TV and drinking tea. For children too, people say 'oh education is not that good for the people in the Rhondda' but how is it going to be good if they keep closing things like libraries?

GW: What do you mean by that?

Zac: Well people's reading and their spelling will be impacted by it. History – how are people going to find out about that? People may have a computer in their house but they have to pay for that so they won't have



somewhere to go where they can get it for free. Then, for some people they may only have certain times to use computers, like say for 30 minutes and once that time is up they can't use it anymore. (Z1)

This also demonstrated his understanding of the importance of community facilities in reducing barriers to access such as cost and time, again highlighting awareness of social difference (Horgan, 2009), as well as the importance of community facilities for specific groups within the community. This focus on specific groups was another feature of the discussion with 10 of the children, indicating that even though there were a range of activities they could take part in there appeared to be less activities for teenagers, with Kate commenting all they “do now is they hang around on the street talking or they go to the park. There's not much else really” (K1). This supports the findings of previous research in Penygraig - in the lower Rhondda Fawr - by Skelton (2000) focusing on teenage girls and public space, which identified the use of public space by teenage girls in the valley as well as a local youth centre.

The children's opinions of this may also have reflected their awareness of the closure of the E3+ programme - that up until early 2015 had provided a variety of extra-curricular activities for children in the local secondary school - and the impending closure of youth clubs in the area due to council budget constrictions (Fn, discussion with Year 6 Teacher Riverside Primary, 5.6.2015), thus further influencing the sense of 'nothing to do and nowhere to go' for teenagers as outlined by Skelton fifteen years prior.

The children also identified the effect of facility closures on jobs in the area. This was raised in each of the focus groups held. Chris commented how “the bank has been closed, the library has been closed. There are not many shops left now either. There are not many factories left here either. Most people now have to work outside the Rhondda, like in Cardiff, so they have to travel for work” (C1), while Elizabeth identified the loss of jobs “because everything is closing down” (E1) and Darcey described that “it can be bad for older people I think because there are not many jobs (D1)”. The children therefore were aware of the significance of this not only for the adults in the area but for their future too.

## Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the importance of place on the children’s informal learning opportunities. It identified the boundedness of the valley and how this determined the opportunities available to the children within. Despite being a bounded place, the natural landscape provided the children with a sense of freedom to explore and learn in the mountains. This was a result of the influence of the topography of the landscape on housing in the area with the long rows of terraced housing built in close proximity to each other creating a strong sense of community. The children’s access to informal learning activities and their influence for the development of capital was then discussed before considering the children’s views of the closure of community facilities.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

### Introduction

This chapter aims to draw conclusions from the research findings and is structured in five sections. Section 8.1 provides a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions first outlined in Chapter 2. Section 8.2 focuses on the contribution of the findings to knowledge in the field while in Section 8.3 I focus on the implications of the research findings for policy and practice. I then consider the implications for myself in Section 8.3, before I discuss the limitations of my study and provide recommendations for further research in Section 8.4. The final section offers a conclusion summarising the thesis.

## 8.1 Answering the research questions

The review of the literature as outlined in Chapter 2 and subsequent identification of gaps led to the development of the main research question:

1. What are the learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?

In order to help answer this, three sub-questions were identified:

1.1 What are the factors that influence the (formal and informal) learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys?

1.2 How do the children perceive their educational experiences?

1.3 What resources and opportunities are available for children who live in the Rhondda Valleys to support learning? What influences access to these opportunities?

These questions are answered in relation to the findings in the following section.

The learning experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valleys are varied and predominantly positive. The findings related to sub-question 1.1 identified that the learning experiences are shaped by the children's experiences in school, the opportunities available to them in the local community as well as the support provided by their family. Each of these areas are influenced by the landscape and bounded nature of the valley. The importance of school, family and the community and the links between each is shown in Figure 5.

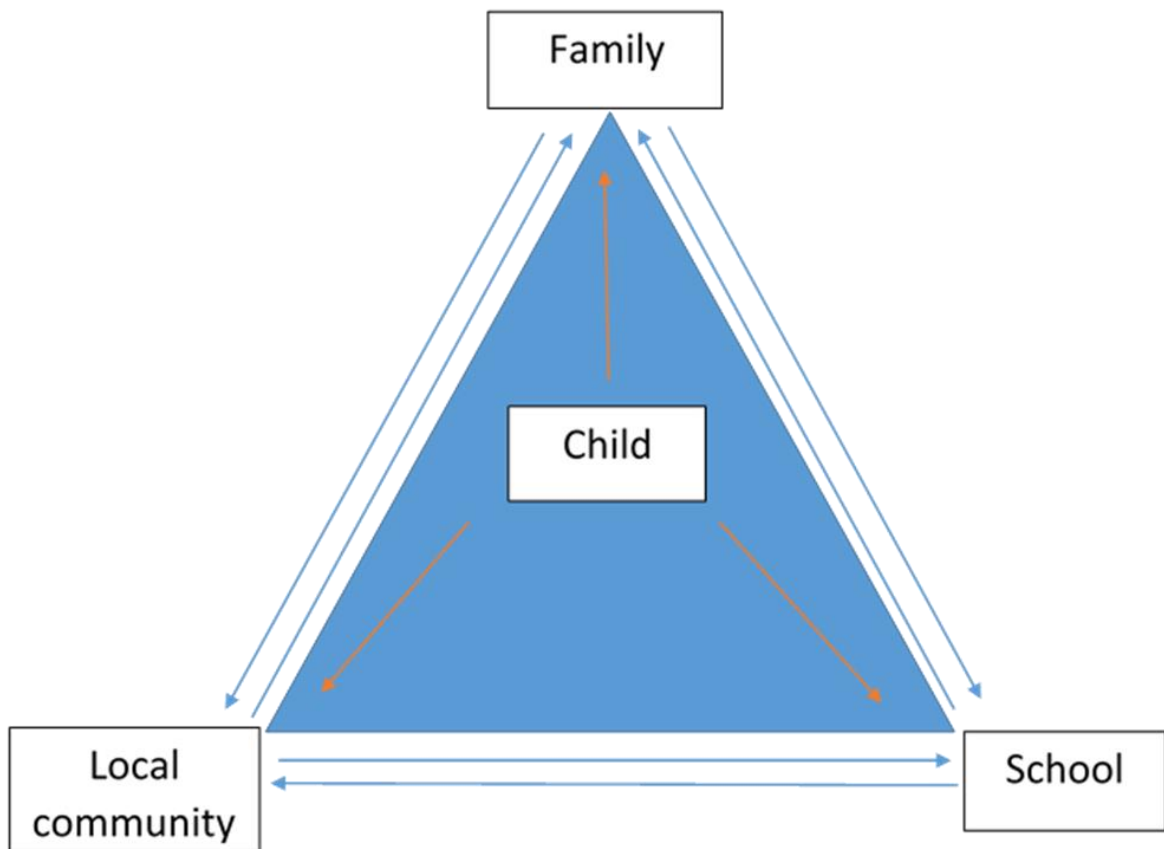


Figure 5. The relationship between the key thematic areas

This is similar - and links - to Pollard's (1996) triad of influence that acknowledged the social context in which interactions occur between the child and their family, the child and their peers as well as the child and their teachers in school. This study developed Pollard's (1996) findings further and identified the importance of the local community, and the overarching influence of the physical environment and the boundedness of the valley itself. This is shown in Figure 6.

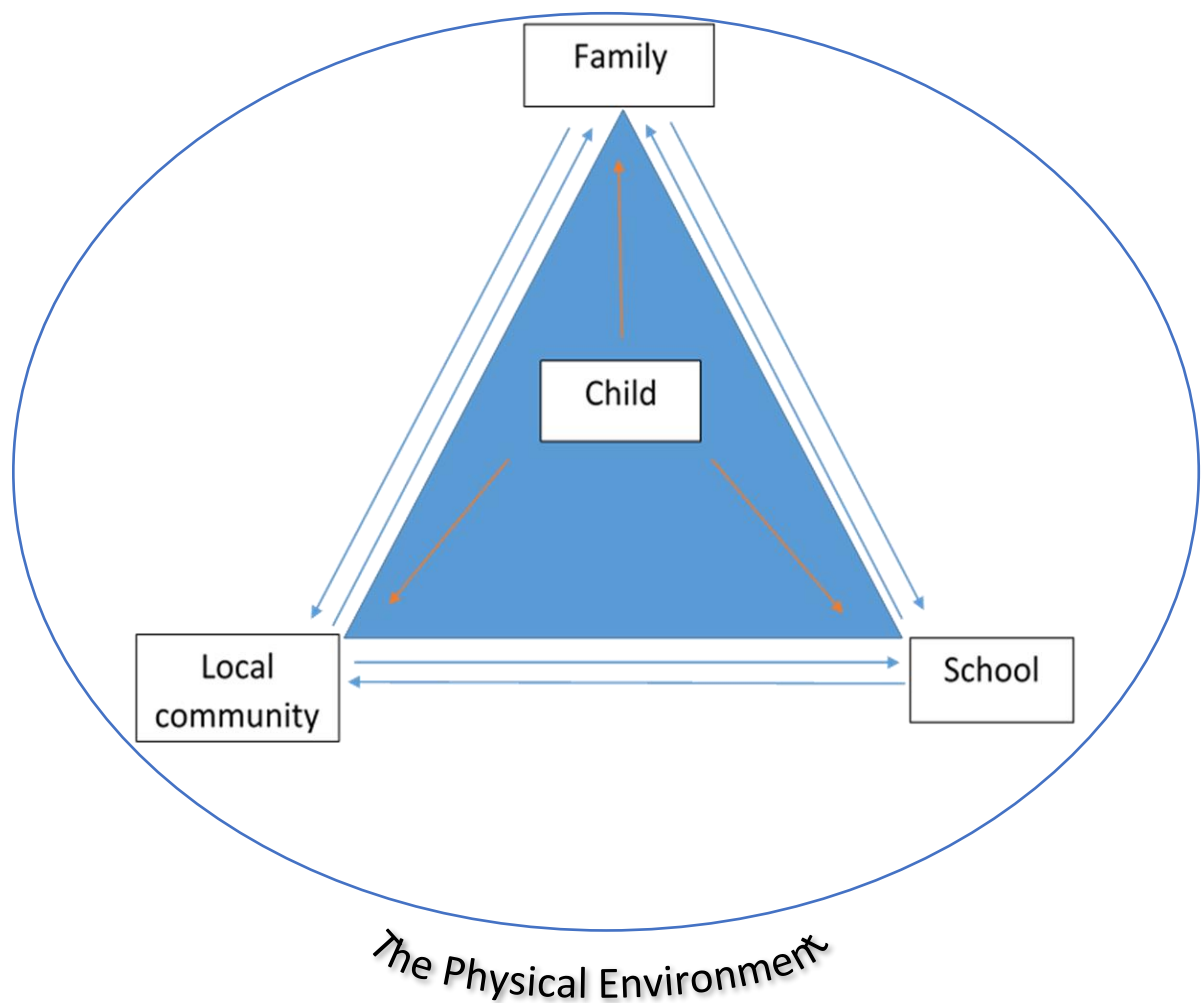


Figure 6. The overarching influence of the physical environment

The findings related to sub-question 1.2 are covered in Chapter 5 and identify that the formal learning experiences are shaped by the school environment. At age eleven this is influenced by the end of primary school tests before the transition to secondary school, and the pressure this places on the children. As the findings have shown, the children are aware of the significance of the tests for their future in the short-, medium-, and long-term. Their formal learning experiences at school were predominantly positive – and this finding is different to earlier research in other areas that has shown that children from low SES backgrounds tend to dislike school when compared to children from more affluent backgrounds (Horgan, 2009). The children also described the importance of school and formal learning for them to attain positive outcomes as adults, but also in order to avoid negative outcomes. They were therefore aware of the importance of school and educational qualifications for their future in terms of the occupations they could undertake (and the salaries they could earn).

The resources and opportunities available for children who live in the Rhondda Valleys to support learning and access to them (research question 1.3) were influenced by the landscape of the valley and the children's families. The role of the natural environment is significant in shaping what is, and is not, available to the children in the immediate area and presented an apparent dichotomy: it provided a sense of freedom but was also restrictive for the children. The children described how the surrounding mountains and countryside offered rich opportunities to learn about the history and culture of the area and how this gave them a sense of

freedom to explore and learn by themselves and with their family. However the children offered an insight into how the bounded slopes of the valley also served to limit the opportunities available to them locally. They described the densely packed linear rows of terraced housing on the lower valley slopes and floor, and ascribed the lack of a wider variety of facilities in the area to the lack of space caused by this. The isolation of the upper Rhondda was particularly evident when the children described the closure of local facilities including a library and the consequences for their learning. Further, they described the need to go beyond the boundaries of the valley in order to access a wider range of learning experiences such as visits to museums and other cultural activities and their reliance upon trips with the school or family to access such opportunities.

The children relied extensively upon the support of family members to access informal learning opportunities both within and outside the confines of the valley. The activities accessed within the valley ranged from predominantly sport or leisure-based organised activities to less organised walks in the surrounding mountainside, and visiting the sites of the old collieries with their friends or family members to learn about the history and culture of the area. Activities outside the valley included trips to museums and other cultural activities in larger cities such as Cardiff and London, as well as holidays. This supportive role of the family could be described as a 'bridging effect', creating links to the past through undertaking activities with the children in the natural environment connected to the heritage of the area (such as visiting the old colliery sites), as well as enabling the children to access opportunities in the immediate confines of the valley and a wider variety of



activities beyond. Supporting access to opportunities within the valley will enhance the children's social networks and further embed them in the community, which has been shown to have positively affect children's development (Israel et al., 2001). Furthermore, providing access to opportunities beyond the relative isolation of the valley is important as it could serve to increase social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which in turn may shape the children's future expectations and aspirations (Gorard, 2005).

A 'bridging effect' was also evident between the family and school. Formal learning experiences were supported by the immediate and wider family in providing help and assistance for school work and also encouraging learning activities at home. This may provide insight into the importance placed on education in the area - evidencing an educational habitus - and could potentially help explain the differences found in this study when comparing the children's experiences of school to Horgan's (2009) research in Northern Ireland.

The family unit therefore has importance in placing value on formal education and learning. In a seminal volume exploring the history of Wales, Davies (1993) – as discussed in Section 3.2 - identified the role of religious nonconformity and the chapel in everyday life in the South Wales valleys during the early parts of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on education and learning. The role of the chapel in Wales in helping imbue an aspirational habitus has been identified in autobiographical research with Welsh adults in exploring how they perceived their

experiences as children and young people influenced their journeys to higher education and beyond (Baker and Brown, 2008). Even though the influence of the chapel in Welsh communities had declined by the middle of the twentieth century (Baker and Brown, 2008), and has continued to decline (as evidenced by only one child describing the role of religion in their lives in this study), it is possible that the emphasis placed on learning has remained and been passed through the generations. This could provide an explanation for the educational habitus evidenced in the children's description of the importance of school.

The importance of school, the family and the community along with the opportunities provided to the children was evident when they described their aspirations for the future. The children were able to look beyond what was available locally and draw upon their wide range of experiences when expressing what they hoped to achieve in the future. This demonstrated the importance of the range of experiences provided to the children. The findings corroborate previous research that has shown children from low SES backgrounds do not necessarily suffer from a lack of aspiration (Gorard, 2012b). Furthermore, it offers greater insight into the findings of Pimlott-Wilson (2011, p115) that "whilst children inculcate family practices into the habitus, their aspirations for their own future are not simply a carbon copy of what has occurred before" in identifying the important role and connected relationship between formal and informal learning opportunities provided by the school, family and within and beyond the local community. Known local role models also influenced what the children hoped to become. This suggests that broadening the children's experiences through using local role models to show

what can be achieved may serve to further increase aspirations. The children also recognised that the local labour market in the valley could not support all of their aspirations. This presented a dilemma: while the children recognised the need to go beyond the boundaries of the valley to access further learning and their desired occupations, they were unsure if they wanted to move out of the valley as they felt a sense of affinity and belonging to the area. This raises a question about the emphasis of social mobility from the children's perspectives and whether individuals really do need to 'get out to get on'.

## 8.2 Contribution of the findings to knowledge in the field

This study builds on existing research in several ways. First, it offers insight into the lived experiences of children living in a deprived area in the South Wales valleys and how they perceive it affects their learning. This expands the existing literature into a new geographical area and demonstrates the importance of school, family and the local community for children's learning and development. It offers new insights into the findings of Horgan (2009) in identifying the positive attitude towards school and the value placed on formal education and it displays the level of social awareness children possess at the age of eleven in recognising the importance of education for their futures.

Furthermore, it signifies the importance of geography and place and how this can offer freedom yet simultaneously be restrictive for children's learning experiences.

The research provides insights into the detrimental impact of the closure of community facilities for children's learning, as well as the positive influence of the family and school in negating this through providing access to a wider range of opportunities beyond the scope of the immediate community.

The findings support previous research (e.g. Gorard, 2012b) identifying that children living in deprived areas do not lack aspiration. Moreover it shows that children's aspirations are not merely reflections of parental practices and roles (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011) but are reflective of the influence of the school and the opportunities – both within and beyond their immediate community – and experiences they have had and how they are able to use them to inform their decisions about imagined futures. This shows the children are active agents in imagining their own futures.

The unique contribution of this thesis demonstrates the importance of place in shaping children's attitudes to education and learning. The predominantly positive experiences of education and learning alongside the support received from parents and family is in contrast to previous research with working-class children and young people from other areas (e.g. Reay, 2017; Wikeley et al., 2009). The findings from my study reveal the limitations of using social class as a sole explanatory factor of children's educational experiences and perceived future life chances and signify the importance of place as a lens to focus on lived experiences, including the role of heritage, geographical landscape, local opportunities and familial support. The inter-relation of each of these factors along with the overarching significance of

place (i.e. the physical environment) was outlined in the triangular model in Figure 6 (Section 8.1, p221). The findings reflect the enduring influence of social relations in the area, how they have been shaped by the geographical landscape and how, in turn, they have influenced the children's orientations towards education and learning. This provides support for Massey's (1995) notion of place - that it is constituted of both space and time and can be understood by the articulations of social relationships over time. The findings also support Halfacree's (2006) three-fold model/architecture of space, that asserts space plays an active role in shaping experiences and is defined by people's lives (at an individual and social level i.e. the culture), representations of the area (e.g. how it is perceived more widely) and the locality itself (along with the opportunities and resources available). Halfacree's (2006) model and the interaction of the three facets of space helps us to understand the importance of the upper Rhondda, i.e. the area in which the children are growing up, in shaping the children's experiences, attitudes towards education and their future aspirations. It too may help explain the differences evident in the findings of this study compared to those with working-class children and young people in other environments (e.g. Wikeley et al., 2009). This study adds to the existing research literature as it illustrates the central importance of place in shaping children's experiences of and attitudes towards education and learning.

This links to the contributions of the findings to the theoretical framework, Bourdieu's theory of practice and his three main linked conceptual tools, habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu, 1984). On a practical level support for Bourdieu's theory is evident as the findings have demonstrated the linked importance of family, the

school and community for the children's lives and learning, thus emphasising the importance of acquired dispositions (*habitus*), the access to capital (e.g. in the access to social networks and resources and opportunities in the community) and field (the local community itself, as well as the other fields the children occupy e.g. school).

In Chapter 2 I cited Dumais (2006, p84) who notes how these dispositions are based on social class and, with a focus on education, describes how they can serve to reproduce inequality between the classes, as those in privileged positions "act in ways to secure privilege for their children, while those who are poor see only a limited set of opportunities for their future." Based on this I postulated that individuals living in deprived areas, due to the lack of opportunities available, may only see a limited set of opportunities for their children, and this in turn may be manifest in the children's own views of the world. This was not supported by the findings. The findings show that even in an area considered deprived, the children are imbued with an educational *habitus* that is reflected in the significance placed on learning. Furthermore, even though the boundedness of the valley limits the opportunities available within the area – both in terms of the current activities available to the children and their awareness of the relatively narrow range of job opportunities – the school and families of the children placed considerable emphasis on providing access to opportunities outside of the area (which had considerable value for the children). This assists in the accumulation of social and cultural capital and strengthening access to these forms of capital has been shown

to be beneficial for children and young people's development (Israel et al., 2001).

This research reinforces these findings.

In addition, the children used these experiences and they helped form the basis for their aspirations. This aspirational habitus (as termed by Baker and Brown, 2008) demonstrates agency, so the findings go beyond Bourdieu and support those of previous research (e.g. Reay, 2004) that has identified children are not simply passive entities and that habitus is not simply a series of "acquired dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1990, p13), but rather children can use the experiences they have gained in order to actively construct their imagined futures.

### 8.3 Implications of the findings for policy and practice

In this section I outline the implications of the findings of my study for policy and practice.

#### **Implications for policy**

The rationale for this research was to explore children's experiences of growing up in a deprived area and how this affected their learning. The findings as presented in Chapters 5 – 7 identify four key implications for policy makers in Wales.

1) The findings outlined in Chapter 7 (Theme 3: Boundedness and informal learning opportunities: the importance of place) identify that the children's experiences of living in what is identified as one of the most deprived areas of the UK is different from how it is portrayed in research and policy. It is apparent that the children enjoy the opportunity to explore and learn in the natural environment that gives them a sense of freedom. The findings also provide insight into the actual experiences of people living in these areas that is not typically available in the statistics often used to portray the negative aspects of living in post-industrial communities, such as the high levels of ill-health and unemployment. This reflects the need for policy makers and researchers to **engage with and listen to the views of people living in these areas when devising policy interventions.**

2) The findings in Chapter 6 (Theme 2: Belonging and beyond: cultural capital, habitus and the role of the family) identify the wide-ranging support provided by the children's families to aid their learning (within and outside of school, and within and beyond the valley boundaries). This contrasts with the typical policy discourse of a culture of poverty which begins from a position of cultural deficit (Iverson et al., 2018; Buras, 2014; Gorski, 2012) and assumes that children from deprived backgrounds lack the requisite dispositions (i.e. habitus) and resources (i.e. capital) to perform well in education. This is clearly not the case for the children who participated in my study. Iverson et al. (2018) identify a key role of research in providing policymakers with knowledge about the effects of poverty on children in



schools. This study provides some insights for policymakers based on the experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valley in South Wales and identifies **policymakers should consider these findings to support policy development as it should reflect the experiences of individuals growing up in deprived communities that in this instance challenge the typical position of cultural deficit.**

- 3) The positive experiences of children growing up in the area did not support the findings of previous research (e.g. Wikeley et al., 2009). These differences highlight the lack of uniformity of experience of children living in disadvantaged communities, identifying that the experiences of children in one area cannot be easily and simply compared to another. This has implications for policy development and implementation, as it signifies the importance of the particular social, historical and cultural context of an area – in this case the Rhondda Valley - as well as listening to the voices of those who experience day-to-day life there rather than attempting to reduce and simplify the lived experience of poverty and deprivation through devising one overarching policy to cover the whole of Wales. Therefore, in addition to engaging and listening to the views of children and adults living in these areas policy should focus on **localised targeted approaches to tackling the issues presented by poverty and disadvantage.**

4) Children who live in deprived areas with high levels of poverty do not necessarily suffer from a poverty of aspiration. Education and learning were highly valued by the children and their families. This identifies the need to consult and engage with people living in such areas when focusing on the closure of community facilities such as libraries because of the significant detrimental impact this can have. In addition, the high levels of aspiration cannot be met by the local labour market in deprived communities such as the Rhondda. In order to meet their aspirations children and young people potentially need to move out of the area or travel to work elsewhere. Scrutinising this from a perspective of social mobility, it could be argued that it represents success. However it presents a considerable challenge for communities in deprived areas such as those in the Rhondda, as migration out of the valley could serve to further entrench some of the issues already described in this study (the closure of community facilities, shops etc.) which in turn would further restrict labour market opportunities and so on. This has **implications for policy focusing on social mobility including the support provided to communities where focus should be placed on encouraging individuals to give back to the communities they have benefited from** (such as encouraging those individuals who have left the area for HE study to return wherever possible with their increased knowledge and skill-base – and capital - which could be of use to the communities).

Each of the four recommendations has relevance for the targets outlined in the national strategy for Wales, *Prosperity for All*, (Welsh Government, 2017) - particularly those to build resilient communities and to support young people to

make the most of their potential - so policymakers could focus on the findings to gain further insight into the experiences of children growing up in a deprived area.

### **Implications for practice**

In addition to the implications for policy-makers, the research findings also have implications for educational practice. I discuss four recommendations below; three for practice in schools before considering an implication for the links between universities and primary schools in Wales.

1) As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, the children identified the significant role of the natural environment in the valley for them. Not only did it provide them with a sense of freedom but it offered numerous opportunities to learn. **Schools in the area should capitalise on this and further enhance the work undertaken in the natural landscape surrounding the schools to enable the children to learn about the history and culture of the area.** This could assist with the fourth policy implication, as the children would become further embedded in the community, perhaps making them more likely to return to the area after university study.

2) Chapter 6 identified the importance of family support for learning and the role of parents and grandparents in educating the children about the history and culture of the area. **This has potential implications for intergenerational learning opportunities so schools in the area should enhance existing community links and**

**work with parents and families to further provide opportunities for the children to learn about the history and culture of the area.**

3) The importance of known local role models for the children was discussed in Chapter 5. **Schools in the area should capitalise on this and focus on creating greater links with the local community to identify individuals who could act as role models for the children and show them what can be achieved.** Information sharing days could be held where individuals from the community who have been to university or undertake specific jobs could talk about their roles, to further educate the children and broaden their knowledge of the potential opportunities available to them.

4) As the findings in Chapter 5 identify, even at age eleven children from backgrounds traditionally considered deprived still aspire to attend university. This suggests that **widening participation programmes should be focused more intensively at an earlier age to ensure the high levels of aspirations are maintained.** This would possibly help offset the lower proportion of students applying to university by age 21 than stated they would do so at age 14 (Anders and Micklewright, 2015) and the downgraded expectations of applying to university from 14 – 17 displayed by those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Anders, 2017). To do this, greater links between universities and primary schools are required. Furthermore it requires universities and schools to provide sufficient information, advice and guidance about HE and what university study entails.

## 8.4 Implications for myself

I now return to the proverb I used in the introduction:

"Gorau adnabod, d'adnabod dy hun." – "The best knowledge is to know yourself"

(Davies, 2016, p36)

The process of undertaking the research has not only enabled me to find out more about the subject and children's views of growing up in the area, but has enabled me to find out more about myself. This is true on both a personal and professional level. In this section I outline the implications for me, first on a professional level as an academic at the Open University, and second, on a personal level as someone who grew up in the area and who has chosen to continue to live there with my wife and children. Finally I reflect in greater depth on my role in the research process.

- 1) The research has implications for my own role as a Staff Tutor for Education in Wales at the Open University. The findings clearly indicate that children as young as eleven aspire to go to university and suggest that widening participation programmes should be focused more intensively at an earlier age. This has clear implications for a university that is focused on providing education to non-traditional learners. There is an opportunity within my role therefore to establish

greater links with primary schools across the country in order to further educate children about university study and its associated benefits.

- 2) From a personal perspective, the findings show I may have a role in further enhancing the links with the primary schools in the Rhondda where I live which could be of benefit to the children. A key finding identified the importance of local role models who have grown up in the area and progressed to pursue professional roles to show the children what is possible and what they can achieve. To further illustrate I return to the discussion about role models with Mrs Rhys, the Head Teacher at Mountain View Primary and my teacher when I attended the school over twenty years ago: "It's also about having those examples available, well people like yourself, who have come to this school and have gone on to achieve fantastic things". I may therefore be able to pass on my experience and knowledge of the path I have taken to working in the HE sector to provide an example for children growing up in the area.

Reflexivity, as outlined in Section 4.1, was a key consideration for me throughout the study. As identified in the introduction to the thesis I am a researcher who comes from the community where this study took place. I continue to live there and my views have been shaped by my own trajectory from school into study and now employment in Higher Education. Undoubtedly, these experiences and views shaped the approach to the data I have collected, the research questions formulated and the subsequent analysis and discussion of the findings. As I discussed in the introduction in Chapter 1

on page 12, the reasons why some of my contemporaries at school took a different direction despite obtaining similar grades has always intrigued me, and this shaped the questions I posed in this study, as I wanted to focus on educational and learning experiences. My background has of course also shaped my view of what young people from the area can achieve (and some of the barriers that are faced).

Hammersley (1992) contends that this insider perspective can allow for added richness and depth of qualitative enquiry - that I would argue has been achieved here - but cautions that insider researchers need to see phenomenon in their wider context and attain an intellectual distance. This notion of intellectual distance has been apparent throughout the entire research process to ensure I maintained a focus on the wider context.

The children's orientations towards education and learning in the study were predominantly positive and all had high aspirations. However, as Hammersley asserts (see above), it is important to view these experiences in their wider context both in terms of the labour market and restricted future employment opportunities (particularly in the local area). The research literature overwhelmingly shows that those from working-class (and particularly underprivileged) backgrounds face greater challenges in becoming socially mobile. In order to attain the high aspirations expressed, the children in my study will have to negotiate and overcome structural barriers at a societal level. These challenges invalidate any notions of meritocracy, as there is not an equivalent starting point for children from working-class backgrounds

with their more affluent peers (Reay, 2017). However the children in the study were aware of this, as evidenced in the discussion with Tom (in Section 5.5, on pages 146 – 148), and an awareness of the challenges they may face can prove beneficial.

Achieving their aspirations is not impossible and there are a number of local people who the children can use as role models who have done this and have chosen to remain in the area (including myself). As Atherton (2017) notes however the current model of social mobility focuses on individual success in predominantly economic terms at, potentially, the expense of others. In order for one person to become socially mobile another must be left behind, and this can lead to the need to be seen to ‘get out to get on’ as was evident in some of the findings in this study. However the children identified that they did not want to leave the area and this of course raises the possibility of an alternative narrative of social mobility where ‘getting on’ does not always mean ‘getting out’ and not returning (as discussed in Section 8.3, policy implication 4). This would support Atherton’s (2017) position and his argument for a more holistic theory of social mobility that focuses on well-being as well as economic outcomes and would prove beneficial for underprivileged areas like the upper Rhondda in order to avoid outward migration that would further exacerbate existing issues.

My own position on meritocratic narratives that arise in debates about social mobility and education has been shaped by my own experiences. As discussed in the introduction in Chapter 1, I come from a working-class background, was the first person in my family to go to university and have chosen to remain in the area where I



grew up to raise my own family. It could be argued that I provide an example of the alternative narrative identified in the previous paragraph that one does not always have to get out and stay out to get on. Indeed, my own trajectory to study and subsequent employment as an academic in HE has informed my view that hard work and effort can, to a certain extent, negate any disadvantages faced by those from working-class backgrounds and enable children and young people to achieve their aspirations.

However, that viewpoint does not deny the challenges faced by those from working-class backgrounds. My position on meritocratic narratives of education and social mobility has also been shaped by my own education, including this study. The findings from this study - that the children valued education and had high aspirations yet were aware of the advantages conferred upon children who have a private education - have further reinforced my understanding of the challenges faced by those from working-class backgrounds and shown me that children as young as eleven recognise that education is not a level playing field. Situating the findings within the overarching theoretical framework has also reinforced my position that the notion that the education system is meritocratic is a fallacy. There is no equal starting point for children and the competitive nature of the school system that focuses on individual success through attainment in examinations ensures that those in positions that are more dominant will strive to retain the status quo. In my opinion, the political prominence of the role of education in creating social mobility further reinforces this individualism.

Hard work and effort alone may not be enough to overcome the challenges therefore. Rather I think that those from working-class backgrounds can be equipped with knowledge of the challenges they face and, as the findings indicate, this can include information, advice and guidance from local role models to show that aspirations can be achieved. This, potentially, would allow for a more holistic and community-wide focus on social mobility rather than the existing focus on individual success at the expense of others.

### 8.5 Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

In this section I focus on the limitations of my study and make recommendations for future research. As I identified in Chapter 4, an often-cited criticism of case study research is the difficulty to generalise the findings to other settings (Yin, 2014) as they are situated in a specific time and place. However, as Arksey and Knight (1999) identify, the particular can illuminate the general, so while this study provided a detailed account of the experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valley it may also potentially provide insight into the lived experiences of children in other post-industrial deprived areas. In order to gain further understanding and to enable a body of work to be established, future qualitative research could explore the experiences of children living in post-industrial deprived areas elsewhere in the UK such as the North East of England for example. This would provide a comparison with my study and allow for a greater understanding of the influence of living in these areas for children's learning.

The methods utilised were appropriate as they enabled me to answer the research questions identified. Upon reflection after the completion of the study however, I would look to change the order in which I used the methods. I feel that allowing the children to take photographs first followed by the photo-elicitation interview would have enabled the research to have been more child-focused and directed and may have offered greater understandings of the children's views of the world they are growing up in. In addition, any future research could incorporate the views of the parents on the impact on children's learning of growing up in the area. The reason I chose not to include this in my study was because I wanted to gain the children's perspective and for this to dominate. Obtaining the views of parents may offer further insight however, with a particular emphasis on parental expectations and aspirations for their children.

Finally the study provides the potential for longitudinal research focusing on the children's experiences and how they may change over time. This would also allow for further comparisons to be made with other research undertaken in the Rhondda by Evans (2013) and more widely in Wales by the Young Welsh Researchers (2013). Forms of longitudinal research with children from other deprived areas may also prove beneficial to understanding any changes in views over time and what influences these changes as the children grow up.

## 8.6 Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valley, a post-industrial former mining community in South Wales. Specifically it has explored the children's perceptions of the impact of growing up in the area on their learning experiences and aspirations for the future. Despite living in an area with high levels of poverty and disadvantage, the children did not express a poverty of experience or aspiration. They described a wide variety of learning opportunities both within and outside of school. Their learning opportunities outside of school were bounded by the geographical nature of the valley and topography of the landscape that simultaneously provided freedom but was restrictive for the children. The role of family and parents was important in bridging links to the past, in instilling a sense of belonging to the area, and in providing opportunities for the children beyond the valley boundaries. The children utilised this wide range of experiences when imagining their future lives, demonstrating agency in expressing a high level of aspiration to attend university and gain professional jobs. The lack of facilities and labour market opportunities locally presents a challenge however both for the children - as this may necessitate moving out of the valley - as well as policy makers when focusing on the regeneration of deprived communities.

In conclusion, the research has provided insight into the lived experiences of children growing up in the Rhondda Valley and how this affects their perceived future life chances. Through the children's accounts of belonging, becoming, and

boundedness it has made an original contribution to research that can inform policy development and practice in Wales.

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## Appendix 1: The key to collected data (and dates of collection)

<b>Key to Collected Data (dates in brackets)</b>					
<b>Individual Interviews</b>	<b>Photo Elicitation interviews</b>	<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>Interviews with Teachers</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>Field Notes</b>
Et1 – Ethan (30.4.2015)	Et2 – Ethan (20.5.2015)	RFG – Riverside Focus Group (23.4.2015)	HCR – Head Teacher, Cwm Rhondda (10.7.2015)	Ob – Observation notes collected at the schools	Fn – field notes collected while at the schools.
D1 – Daniel (30.4.2015)	D2 – Daniel (20.5.2015)	MVFG – Mountain View Focus Group (6.5.2015)	TCR – Year 6 Teacher Cwm Rhondda (14.7.2015)	Riverside observation sessions  (9 hours in total observing a variety of subjects – from 5.5.2015 – 25.6.2015)	
J1 – Jess (30.4.2015)	J2 – Jess (20.5.2015)	CRFG – Cwm Rhondda Focus Group (9.6.2015)	HMT – Head Teacher, Mountain View (24.6.2017)	Mountain View observation sessions ( 8 hours observation in total from	

				6.5.2015 – 9.7.2015)	
V1 – Victoria (30.4.2015)	V2 – Victoria (19.5.2015)		TMV – Year 6 Teacher, Mountain View (24.6.2017)	Cwm Rhondda observation sessions  (7 hours total from 10.6.2015 to 22.7.2015)	
F1 –Fiona (5.5.2015)	F2 –Fiona (19.5.2015)		HR – Head Teacher, Riverside (25.6.2017)		
Ja1 – James (5.5.2015)	Ja2 – James (19.5.2015)		TR – Year 6 Teacher, Riverside (24.6.2017)		
T1 – Tom (5.5.2015)	T2 – Tom (19.5.2015)				
K1 – Kate (14.5.2015)	K2 – Kate (10.6.2015)				
Z1 – Zac (15.5.2015)	Z2 – Zac				
C1 – Chris (14.5.2015)	C2 – Chris (10.6.2015)				
L1 – Lisa (14.5.2015)	L2 – Lisa (10.6.2015)				
D1- Darcey (14.5.2015)	D2 – Darcey (10.6.2015)				

E1 – Elizabeth (14.5.2015)	E2 – Elizabeth (10.6.2015)				
I1- Ioan (17.6.2015)	I2 – Ioan (2.7.2015)				
Jo1 – Joseph (17.6.2015)	Jo2 – Joseph (2.7.2015)				
R1 – Rhys (18.6.2015)	R2 –Rhys (3.7.2015)				
G1 – Gwen (17.6.2015)	G2 –Gwen (2.7.2015)				
O1- Olivia (17.6.2015)	O2 –Olivia (3.7.2015)				
M1 – Manon (17.6.2015)	M2 – Manon (2.7.2015)				

## Appendix 2: Initial themes and prompts to cover in the focus groups

Note: The areas outlined below provided prompts to be considered during the focus groups. They were used as starting points for the discussions after which the children were able to provide their insights and lead the discussion in the directions they chose. The subsequent individual interviews with each child then further explored the themes generated from the focus group.

- Children's experiences of living and growing up in the upper Rhondda Valley
  - Tell me what it is like growing up/living here.....
  - What do you think of living here.... (explore potential positives and negatives)
- Children's experiences of education and school
  - Tell me about school
  - Favourite subjects
  - What do you think of school?
- The opportunities available to the children both in and out of school
  - Tell me about your interests....
  - What activities can/do you take part in outside of school?
- The children's aspirations for the future
  - What do you want to be when you grow up?
  - Explore reasons



**Appendix 3: Themes emerging from the focus group at Mountain View  
primary linked to Chris' responses**

Topic/Theme	Chris
<p>Upper Rhondda</p> <p>Positive aspects</p> <p>Negative aspects</p>	<p>Lives in Mountain View</p> <p>Positives: The environment – able to go for a walk up into the mountains. Close-knit. People are friendly.</p> <p>Negatives of area: health.</p> <p>Closing down facilities</p> <p>Not many jobs in the area</p>
<p>School</p> <p>Importance of</p> <p>Trips</p>	<p>Enjoys history</p> <p>Need to work hard. Important for a good job. School can be hard sometimes.</p> <p>Took part in overseas trip to Vienna with school.</p>
<p>Engagement in activities and support for these</p> <p>Community action</p>	<p>After-school clubs. Sports</p> <p>In the community: Parents take on trips to aid learning</p> <p>Wrote a letter to local councillor and council opposing cuts.</p>

## Appendix 4: Children's information sheet

School children's experiences of growing up in the upper Rhondda Valley.

### **Are you in Year 6?**

### **Would you like to take part in a research study and give your views about living in the upper Rhondda and the things that affect you?**

The research study wants to look at your experiences, opinions and views of living in the upper Rhondda Valley and the things that you like to do. There is very little information that has looked at children's views so I would like to explore and ask you questions about this so I can find out more about what you think of living in the upper Rhondda Valley.

I hope to do this in a number of ways, mainly by asking you questions about what you think. If you decide that you want to take part then a number of things will happen. You can take part:

- in two focus groups where I can ask you and your friends questions about what you think of living in the upper Rhondda, about school and the things you like to do and what you would like to do.
- in interviews where we can talk a one to one basis about what you think of living in the upper Rhondda.
- by taking photographs of the things that you like and are important to you so we can have a chat about these.

All of these sessions will take place during school time. I will video record each of the sessions and write up the information that I will put into a report. Your name or photographs will not be used in any of this. Once I have written up the interviews from the video recordings then I will delete and destroy each video so I will not keep any of the videos from the groups or interviews. I will write up each interview within two weeks of you taking part and then delete the video.

The two focus group sessions will give you an opportunity to chat with your friends about what you think of living in the upper Rhondda as well as what you think of school. You can then take part in three one to one interviews. The first will be where you can tell me things about you, such as where you live, what you like to do, how long you have lived in the upper Rhondda as well as if you have any brother or sisters for example. In the second interview we will chat about school, what you think about

it and what you like about it. In the third interview we will chat about what things you like do outside of school (your hobbies) and things you might like to do.

I will also give you a disposable camera to take photographs of the things you like and are important to you. When you have taken the photographs, we can then have a chat about these and why the things are important to you. When we have chatted about the photographs you can keep them and I will not use any photographs of you in my study.

As part of the research I will also take part in and observe some of your lessons where I will make notes so I can place into context the things you tell me in the interviews.

You have been invited to take part as you are currently in year 6 and I would like to hear what you think.

If you would like to take part then you will be given this sheet and a sheet to take home to your parents/carers. If you want to take part I will then ask you and your parents/carers to sign a form. After agreeing to take part, you can drop out at any time without giving a reason and this will have no affect on you at all and you don't have to answer the questions I have if you change your mind to take part. You could say yes now and then change your mind, and nothing will happen because of this as it is up to you if you want to take part. If you decide to drop-out then all of the information and answers you have given me will be deleted and destroyed. This will be possible up until I begin to write up and explore all of the information I have from your answers, which will be in February 2015.

If you have any questions about my study, you can ask me now or later or you can ask others too such as your teacher or the head teacher. I have also put the details here of someone independent who you can contact if you have any problems or want some support during the study. Their details are: Dr Martin Rhys, 02920 471019.

Thank you

Gavin Williams

## Appendix 5: Information sheet for parents/carers

### **School children's experiences of growing up in the upper Rhondda Valley**

You and your child are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

I am undertaking this research as part of my Doctoral studies with the Open University. The study aims to explore children's experiences and views of how living in the upper Rhondda Valley impacts upon them and their life chances. I therefore propose to focus on children's views and experiences of living in the upper Rhondda.

There has been very little research that has focused on exploring children's views of where they live and what impacts upon them. This is particularly true in Wales. I hope that by gathering this information children have an increased voice and that their opinions are considered when decisions about their lives are made, both locally and more widely. Further through gathering the views of children about what they think of the area and what opportunities there are so more tailored and effective support can be devised.

The study will involve two focus groups with children in year 6 in each of three primary schools in the upper Rhondda Valley; three individual interviews with each child; classroom observation where I will participate in and observe some of your child's lessons as well as giving children the opportunity to take photographs of aspects of their lives they feel are important and discussions of this. The research will also involve interviews with significant others such as teachers at the school. I will video record each of these for data collection purposes and will transcribe the data to be included as part of my research. Once I have transcribed each then the video recording of that session will be destroyed. I will transcribe each interview and focus group within two weeks of it being undertaken.

The first focus group session will focus on children's experiences of living in the area, what they think of it and what opportunities there are available to them while the second group will focus on children's experiences of education and school. These will then be followed by the three one-to-one interviews. The first interview will focus on me getting to know each child and so will concentrate on themes such as where each child lives, how long they have lived in the area, whether they have any siblings who attend the school for example, and their interests (and hobbies for example). The second will focus on each child's experiences and views of school while the third will

focus on their experiences of the area in which they live, what they do out of school as well as what they hope for the future.

These will then be followed by the individual photograph-based interviews. I will provide each child with a disposable camera to take photographs of the things that are important to them, both inside and out of school. The photographs taken by the children will not be used in the write up of the study. Rather I will utilise the data from the discussion of the photographs in each interview rather than the photographs themselves. I will check with you once the photographs from your child have been developed that you are happy for these to be included in the discussions. You and your child will maintain ownership of these, where I will solely use the photographs for the basis of discussion. Each of these methods will be complemented by lesson observation where I will participate in and observe some of your child's lessons. This will allow me to gain a deeper understanding and more in-depth information - in addition to the interviews - of the children's lives and what impacts on them.

You and your child have been invited to participate as your child is currently in year 6 of one of the chosen schools (.....). It is up to you to decide whether or not to agree to take part or let your child take part. If you decide that you would like to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you and your child are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If you and your child agree to take part in the study, your child will take part in the interviews, photograph discussion sessions and focus groups during school time while you will be asked to take part in an interview about the opportunities available to and accessed by your child as well as your experiences of living in the upper Rhondda Valley.

All information collected as part of the study will be completely anonymised and confidential and kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and Freedom of Information Act. Further, you can also choose to request to have any data that is collected destroyed. The data will be stored securely in electronic form and will not be forwarded on to any third parties and will be destroyed after completion of my studies in October 2016.

If you would like to take part then please could you complete the consent form attached and send it to me at the address highlighted. If at any point during the study you or your child wishes to withdraw then you are free to do so without giving a reason, with no adverse consequences with all data up to this point being destroyed. This will be possible up until the point of data analysis. The results of the study will be written up as part of my Doctoral thesis and I can also provide you with a copy of this upon completion should you wish to see it as well as the key findings.

The research undertaken as part of this study will be carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association. If you would like any further detail please contact me on the details below.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for reading this information sheet and look forward to hearing from you, should you wish to take part. . If you have any queries or questions please do not hesitate to contact me. Alternatively my supervisor, Dr Grace Clifton, can be contacted at the Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA or via telephone on 01908 858864. There is also an independent contact person, Dr Martin Rhys, who can provide advice and support should there be any issues as part of the research process. Martin is a Staff Tutor in Education at the Open University in Wales and his contact details are 02920 471019.

Many thanks for your consideration,

Gavin Williams

[g.williams@open.ac.uk](mailto:g.williams@open.ac.uk)

## Appendix 6: Example letter to gatekeeper

Gavin Williams,  
g.williams@open.ac.uk

address details

10 December 2013.

Dear Mr/Mrs.....,

I write to enquire about a research project I am undertaking as part of my Doctoral studies with the Open University. I enquire whether it would be possible to undertake part of my research project at your school with students in Year six. I outline below the rationale for my study, its intended focus as well as the potential implications of the research.

The focus of my doctorate is on children's experiences and views of living in the upper Rhondda Valley and how this affects them. Very little research has focused on children's views of where they live and their voice in particular, especially in Wales. Therefore my Doctoral studies are focused on a case study of the upper Rhondda and a cluster of Primary/Junior Schools to acquire and explore the views of children in year six of what affects them and how they think living in the area impacts upon their lives.

My reasoning for choosing this area is threefold: first, on a professional level I work with disadvantaged young people as a National Young Person's Lead for a Mental Health organisation as well as an Associate Lecturer on two separate degree programmes in Youth Studies and Sport, Health and Fitness with the Open University – therefore I have a professional interest in children and young person's voice and how children and young people can be supported to maximise their potential not only from a health standpoint but generally in their lives. Second, I was born and live in this area and also have two children of my own, so I have a personal and vested interest in how we can listen to children and young people's views and use this to support them to reach their potential. Finally, this is an extension of Masters level study I have undertaken and is an area I would like to explore further to find practical ways of how we can better support children and young people who live in the area.

In order to do this, I propose to hold two focus groups with children, three individual interviews with each child as well as a form of digital ethnography where children take photographs of the things that are important to them so I can gain insight into what activities they take part in and what is available to the children locally as well as their views of the things that impact upon them. This will be complemented by lesson observation where I will be able to record contextual data of what the children do and take part in to support the information provided via the interviews. Additionally, I would also look to research general information about the school, its history and details of the current successes and challenges faced. Therefore with your agreement I would also like to seek the views of teachers as well as yourself through interviews.

I aim to begin the research in October 2014. The research has been granted ethical approval via the Open University Ethics Committee and will be carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association. All data will be anonymised and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act and will be written up as part of my doctoral thesis. Within my analysis and write-up of the findings I intend to focus on methods that can be utilised to improve support for children and will share these with each school so I hope there will also be benefits for each school involved in the research. If you have any queries or questions please do not hesitate to contact me. Alternatively my supervisor, Dr Grace Clifton, can be contacted at the Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA or via telephone on 01908 858864. In addition, there is also a contact person who is independent of the research process who can be contacted in the event that any issues arise during the study – Dr Martin Rhys, Staff Tutor in Education at The Open University in Wales, Cardiff, CF10 1AP, 02920 471019.

Many thanks for considering my query and if you would like any further detail then I am happy to come and meet with you at your convenience to discuss. I can also then provide the specific academic focus and details of the study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Gavin Williams



## Appendix 7: Children's consent form

### School children's experiences of growing up in the upper Rhondda Valley.

		Yes		No
I agree that I have read and understand the information about the study	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am aware that I can ask questions about the study at any time if I am unsure	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
I will talk to the researcher about my experiences	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know that I can leave at any time without reason and I do not have to answer questions if I do not want to	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree that the study can be video recorded and that my name and picture will not be used.	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree that I have seen the information sheet and have had the chance to ask questions.	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree that the answers I give may be stored securely on a computer and that my name and picture will not be used.	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to take part.	✓	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name: .....

Date .....

## Appendix 8: Parent/Carer consent form

### Parent Consent Form

#### **School children's experiences of growing up in the upper Rhondda Valley.**

If you are willing for you and your child to take part in this research project please tick the box, complete the details below and return the signed form. At any time during the research you are free to withdraw and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered from you and your child, up to the point at which data are aggregated for analysis. This will be in February 2015.

The results of this research constitutes personal data under the Data Protection Act. They will be kept secure and not released to any third party. The data gathered will be destroyed upon completion of my Doctoral studies in October 2016, although anonymised information from this will form part of the write up for my final thesis and may be retained for the purposes of a written report.

I am willing for myself and my child to take part in this research, and I give my permission for the data collected to be used in an anonymous form in any written reports, presentations and published papers relating to this study.

Signing this form indicates that you understand the purpose of the research, as explained in the covering letter, and accept the conditions for handling the data you provide.

Please tell me the best way to contact you to arrange to discuss this further and to arrange the interview with you. Could you please include full details e.g., full telephone number and/or email address:

**Name:**.....

Telephone Number and/or email: .....

(please print)

**Signed:** .....

**Date:** .....

**Please return completed form to: Gavin Williams, [g.williams@open.ac.uk](mailto:g.williams@open.ac.uk)**

## Appendix 9: Example of initial line-by-line coding of focus group at Cwm Rhondda primary school

R: I think it's run by the council but I'm not sure.

J: there are other things I like around here too. Like the mountains where I can go and walk the dog with my dad sometimes.

I: I do that as well with my family, the mountain is right by my house.

G: Yeah and me.

R: I think that's one of the really good things about living around here.

J: Yeah it's really pretty...

M: and some people come here on holidays just to see the mountains and the views.

R: Yeah but not as many people as would go the big cities like London or Cardiff or somewhere.

I: I don't know I think it seems here like one of those places where people wouldn't want to come..

GW: Why is that loan?

I: The weather isn't great...

J: And there's not really that much to do around here compared to other places.

R: The things is if people wanted to come and stay here in a cottage or something there's nothing like that here. Everyone lives in Terraced houses,.

GW: Ok thanks. So does anyone have anything to add about good things of growing up around here?

I: McDonalds (laughs), but that's a bit further down the valley.

G: Yeah it's about 15 minutes away near Asda.

Coding Density

- Negative
- Attitudes to growing up in the area
- Local community
- Need to travel for wider Val
- The natural environment
- Opportunities and activities

## Appendix 10: Example of initial coding of focus group at Mountain View primary school: A focus on Chris

K: and they go and see Santa when it is closer to Christmas time.

G: Ok thanks. So you've mentioned that some of these trips can help your learning – what other things can help your learning, do you think?

Z: Playing sports like rugby and football I think because you can learn new skills and how to keep fit and healthy.

C: Teamwork. Although that is only used in school when you are working in groups. It is important for when you want to get a job though.

Z: I think your parents can help you learn too.

G: Could you explain that a little further?

Z: yeah well they make you do your homework and read.

C: They take you on trips to places like museums and shows so you can learn about different things. I've been to an air show with the Red arrows

Z: I went to a similar thing, it was like a gun show too.



## Appendix 11: Extract from NVivo showing all the data coded as School/Attitudes/Boring

<Internals\\Interviews\\Cwm Rhondda\\Individual Interview with Olivia Cwm Rhondda Primary Transcript> - § 1 reference coded [1.26% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.26% Coverage

GW: So what else do you think?

O: Sometimes there's lots of work so school can be boring.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Mountain View\\Individual Interview with Chris Mountain View Transcript> - § 2 references coded [3.35% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.80% Coverage

GW: So overall what do you think of school?

C: It's good but can be boring too. It's good because you can learn things but can be boring because there can be not a lot to do. In the yard there's a timetable for what classes can play football. We can do it on a lunchtime but on break time it is the other classes. That can cause arguments I think!

Reference 2 - 0.55% Coverage

We can sometimes be banned from using the ball so it is boring then.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Mountain View\\Individual Interview with Elizabeth Mountain ViewTranscript> - § 1 reference coded [1.29% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.29% Coverage

GW: So what do you think of school?

E: Sometimes it can be boring because we only have PE and Art once a week.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Mountain View\\Individual Interview with Lisa Mountain ViewTranscript> - § 1 reference coded [0.67% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.67% Coverage

Maths is annoying though because after a while it gets boring.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Mountain View\\Mountain View Focus Group interview transcript>  
- § 1 reference coded [0.69% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.69% Coverage

Z: I'd prefer to stay home, I think it is more fun at home because you need to work hard in school and at home you can do nothing if you want.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Riverside\\Individual Interview with Fiona transcript> - § 1 reference coded [0.83% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.83% Coverage

So what do you think of school?

F: Well it can be fun but it can also be boring. There's times when all you have to do is work and be quiet and nobody likes that.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Riverside\\Individual Interview with Victoria transcript> - § 1  
reference coded [2.42% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.42% Coverage

G: Ok. So tell me what you think about school?

V: Well sometimes it is a little bit boring.

G: Tell me why...

V: Sometimes in class we have to go over and do things we have done before because some people don't understand it, so it gets boring then.

<Internals\\Interviews\\Riverside\\Riverside Primary Focus Group Transcript> - § 1  
reference coded [1.29% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.29% Coverage

What do you all think of school?

F: Well it can be boring because it is like school, because we can do lots of activities and the teachers can sometimes be strict.

V: Yeah some lessons can be quite boring.

T: Yeah like comprehension which we are missing now. Thank you so much for that  
(laughs)!

G: (laughs), so you are all happy with that then?

All: Yes!



## Appendix 12: Outline of nodes and trees from NVivo

Name	Sources	References
<b>Formal Education/School</b>	39	468
Activities and opportunities	32	151
After school clubs	30	74
Educational	12	18
Music and Dance	9	10
Sports	26	39
To support parents	2	2
Cost	13	17
In-school	14	16
Programmes to support learning	12	13
Trips and events	20	44
Social	17	19
To support learning	15	25
Attitudes to school	19	48
Boring	8	9
Fun	18	25
spend time with friends	9	9
teachers make it fun	8	10
Tough	8	10
Children's voice	12	21

Ideas for improvement	2	2
Influencing change	1	1
Opposing local closures	2	2
Prefects and responsibility	4	4
School Councils	7	11
Comparison to private schools	2	5
Unfair	1	1
Impact of other pupils on learning	5	6
Disruptive	3	4
Supportive	2	2
Links with parents	11	38
Activities	1	1
Engagement through social media	2	2
Family Liaison Officer role	4	5
Friends of the School	1	1
Importance of supportive parents	1	1
Lack of engagement	4	9
Confidence issues	2	3
Parent evenings	2	4
Providing examples	2	2
Supporting parents	4	5
Links with the local community	12	19
For involvement in community development	3	3
Teaching children about their heritage	2	3

To provide activities	7	10
Teacher support for learning	15	20
Tests	22	93
Attitudes to	8	14
Negative	3	4
Positive	1	1
Pressure	8	8
Scared	1	1
Importance for the future	14	30
Banding in Comprehensive	11	14
Impact on long-term future	6	9
Need to prioritise	6	7
Increase in work for	14	19
Support to prepare for	17	29
Family	11	14
Teachers	12	14
Why go to school	27	67
Important for the future	20	25
Need to work hard	2	2
No choice	2	2
See friends	8	9
To learn	24	29
<b>Aspirations/Future life chances</b>	30	156
Aspirations	23	77

Jobs	20	28
Acting	1	1
Footballer	2	2
Professional	17	20
Reasons	2	2
Money	2	2
Service Industries	3	3
Need for further study and learning	14	24
College	4	4
Importance of university study	11	20
For a better job	1	1
For more money	3	3
To avoid bad jobs	1	1
Skills required to achieve	17	25
General Knowledge	2	2
Grades achieved in school	15	16
Self confidence	1	1
Soft skills	5	5
Work hard	1	1
Availability of jobs locally	15	25
Emergency services	3	3
Factories	1	1
Lack of jobs	6	8
Shops	8	9

Teacher	3	3
Influence of family and vicarious experiences	14	18
Mobility	15	21
Need to travel elsewhere to meet aspirations	15	16
Wanting to stay in the upper Rhondda	3	5
Role of school in increasing aspirations	5	15
Children have low aspirations	1	2
Having high expectations of the children	2	3
Links with Comprehensive	1	1
Poverty not a barrier	1	1
The importance of history and culture	1	3
The importance of valuing education	2	2
<b>Family</b>	39	151
Activities with the family	32	62
Importance as role models	7	11
Involvement in supporting learning	22	58
Encouraging and supporting learning activities at home	13	19
Providing opportunities to learn	13	15
Rewards and Punishment	2	2
Supporting homework	15	22
Support to access community activities	14	20
<b>Local community/The valley boundaries</b>	42	474
Attitudes to growing up in the area	38	253
Negative	27	145

Crime	2	2
Facilities closing down	20	51
Health	10	26
Alcohol	8	13
Drugs	5	6
Smoking	4	6
Lack of jobs	7	10
Lack of space	2	2
Litter	8	9
Need to travel for wider variety of activities	16	29
People are poor	4	5
Rough	7	11
Positive	32	108
Close-knit community	31	95
Awareness of history and culture	4	6
Community action	2	2
Family and friends live locally	17	22
Freedom	6	7
Friendship	14	26
Live close to the school	5	5
People are friendly and know one another	8	15
Terraced housing	7	7
Comparison to other areas	5	8
Picturesque	1	2

Ideas for improvement	7	8
Opportunities and activities	40	213
Benefits of	17	32
Help to learn	14	19
Make new friends	5	6
Trips	5	7
Culture	6	8
Fun	3	4
Importance for learning	6	9
Music and Dance	13	16
Spending time with and making friends	3	4
Sports and Leisure	27	52
The impact of cost	2	2
The natural environment	35	66
Youth clubs	8	14