

**University of Stirling**

# **Participation and Agency**

**The Experiences of Young People in a  
Scottish Secondary School**

**Andrea Priestley**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the classroom experiences of current secondary school students, in light of the present policy drive towards participation. Using an approach with ethnographic intent (participant observation, interviewing, shadowing and field notes) this research explores six students' experiences, in one secondary school in Scotland. Emerging themes from the literature, regarding participation and participatory approaches, suggest that these can be understood in different ways, ranging from economic instrumentalism to democratic renewal. This study took a fresh theoretical approach, employing an ecological, temporal-relational understanding of the achievement of agency. This understanding acknowledges a young person's awareness of, and capacity to engage with, a range of different possible actions, by means of a particular context at a particular time. This approach provided theoretical tools, with which to interpret aspects of these students' school experiences. The findings are detailed in terms of teacher-student relationships, the cultural realm, and young people's aspirations. Students' achievement of agency in the school setting is complex, but one major finding is that the quality and type of teacher-student relationship are significant in enabling these students to achieve agency. Peer relationships and ties beyond the school gates are also significant. The ecological understanding of agency provides a basis for educators to better understand the interdependence of the individual and the environment and to explore how participation might afford a wider range of possibilities for young people. This reflection on participation is important if we want

to shape educational ecologies to encourage practices which facilitate the achievement of agency by young people.



# 1 Introduction

What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered? (Fullan, 1991: 70)

For many years now I have been interested, both personally and professionally, in children's participation and children's rights. These are important and topical issues. There has been plethora of educational policies promoting these agendas in the last two decades. Yet, many would argue that there has been little change in the fundamental structures of schooling during this period. In particular, if we are to take Michael Fullan's (1991) question (above) seriously, we need to consider what difference this is making to young people today. In this introduction, I begin by foregrounding my location and identity as a researcher. I make more visible to the reader how my 'positionings impact on the research [I] do, when and how [I] do it' (Skeggs, 1997: 18). Following this is a short background section, after which I consider the research aims and the significance of this research. I then briefly discuss: 1] developments in educational policy and childhood, and 2] participation, the purposes of education and agency. In the final two sections, I consider the research questions and design, then provide a brief synopsis of the methodology.

## 1.1 My position as a researcher

Returning to school as a researcher, rather than as a teacher, was a challenge. After leaving university I worked for a year as a residential social worker. The young men,

with whom I worked, were sixteen to nineteen years old and had learning difficulties. Aged twenty one, I remember being struck not only by their vulnerability, but also by their lack of opportunities for any kind of independent activity. After a year, I concluded that I enjoyed working with young people, and so I turned to teaching. I taught physics for twelve years in a variety of locations in England, New Zealand and Scotland. I always enjoyed my work with young people, but I was constantly challenged by the culture of schooling and its move towards standardisation, accountability and an increasing focus on 'teaching to the test'. My shift into work with Save the Children gave me an insight into issue-based work and some of the developments around the rights agenda, for example rights-based programming. I followed this by taking a position as a Children's Rights Officer with a local authority. This variety of past and present experiences has continued to maintain my interest in children and young people and their lived experiences. It has given me situated knowledge across a range of fields. These experiences have helped shape the values that I bring to my work and my research. I fully recognise the effects that my idiosyncratic identity and professional location exert on my role as a researcher. I acknowledge that 'researchers are not invisible, neutral entities; rather they are part of the interactions they seek to study and influence those interactions' (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 663). Working with this knowledge requires reflection and reflexivity. The ethnographic interviews and other informal dialogue I had with the young people in the school allowed me to tease out some of my assumptions, and provided me with a way of noticing differently.

## 1.2 Background

Childhood is regarded differently in policy and in the research literature on the sociology of childhood, in comparison to twenty years ago. In its reframing, children and young people have come to be seen as active, competent shapers of their lives rather than passive receptacles to be filled (Prout and James, 1990). Combining the elements of rights for children and participation with the notion of children and young people to be active and competent actors in their own lives has implications for the ways in which we work with children and young people. Children and young people might expect to be worked with and expect that their participation in all aspects of their lives is welcomed rather than stifled. Taking this into account one might expect to see shifts in the schooling environment.

From personal experience, I have seen subtle shifts in schools. Pupil councils and cooperative learning techniques have become more commonplace in our schools. However, many such approaches seem to be superficial, and I found myself questioning what difference this makes to young people's lived school experience. A great deal seems to be said about participation, but then much seems to be lost in relation to its purpose. In this sense, I have found participation wanting; it often seems a sterile concept. For me, a key question is related to how participation might be reframed to provide more clarity as to its purpose in the educational project. This is the focus of my study. The thesis employs a theoretical framework - an ecological concept of the achievement of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, 2007, who draw heavily on Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) – in order to examine young people's participation in their schooling within a particular setting, a secondary school in

Scotland. This understanding of agency, which allows participation to be examined as a means to an end – the achievement of agency by young people – is discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

### **1.3 Research Aims**

The aim of this study is to explore, through the perspectives of six young people in one Scottish secondary school, their everyday experiences of school life and to understand the achievement of agency in this setting.

### **1.4 Significance of the Research**

This research shows that an ecological understanding of the achievement of agency can be used to interpret young people's experience in the empirical site of a school. This is useful as we can pose questions regarding the purpose of participatory approaches in education. Understanding agency this way, as I explore in Chapter Eleven, also allows us to question what it means to be an educator, rather than just simply a teacher, and the subsequent implications for the cultural, social and material structures of present day schooling environments.

Current educational policies and present day teaching methodologies such as Aifl<sup>1</sup> (SEED, 2004) anticipate that young people will actively participate in their school education. To this end, participation has become a buzz word of the classroom. This mirrors moves by development agencies working within developing countries, where participation became the new tyranny (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). The participatory approach in developmental work has attracted many criticisms including accusations

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<sup>1</sup> Assessment is For Learning (SEED, 2004)

that it entailed groupthink, coercive persuasion and participation used as a form of control (Cooke, 2001: 120). Participatory methods, however, had surfaced as a way of engaging with people and these ways of thinking spilled over into the education system, without acknowledgement that these tools of participation may actually limit dialogue and produce boundaries (Ibid.: 148).

Purposes of participation inevitably link with the purposes of education more broadly. Gert Biesta 's (2009) conceptualisation of the functions of education is highly pertinent here. Biesta suggests that there are three functions of education: qualification, socialisation (or enculturation) and subjectification. The first of these is arguably the major function of schooling today. Biesta's (2009) broader definition of qualification to include knowledge and skills is often reduced in schools to a narrow emphasis on accreditation. The second function, socialisation, whether explicit or found in the hidden curriculum of schools, 'inserts individuals into existing ways of doing and being and, through this, plays an important role in the continuation of culture and tradition' (Ibid.: 40). This second function has had increased attention paid to it within modern curricula, influenced by the emergence of the key competencies agenda (OECD, 2005). For example, Cate Watson (2010) has noted that Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004a) defines not just what pupils will learn but also what they will become. The third function, subjectification, is about the process of becoming or 'coming into presence' (Biesta, 2009), thus developing as a unique individual. It implies that people do not just fit into existing orders but know how to be independent of these. Subjectification is different to socialisation, and these two functions potentially act in tension with one another.

The focus of current policy agendas on qualification and socialisation leads to an under-emphasis on subjectification (Biesta, 2009). However, I would argue that schools, in fulfilling their educative roles, should meet these three purposes. Participatory approaches afford possibilities for a balanced approach to achieving the functions of education, but they need to be applied in a manner which counters the limitations mentioned above. Reframing participation in terms of an ecological understanding of the achievement of agency is one way of opening up the opportunities participation might offer – with participation being the means and the achievement of agency the end.

## **1.5 Developments in Educational Policy and Childhood**

I mentioned above the changing conceptions of childhood in academic literature and policy. I return to this issue in greater detail in subsequent chapters, especially Chapters Two and Three. However, I wish to foreground some of the issues here. Interestingly, Berry Mayall (2000) reminds us that education policies being played out today, which form part of the present-day landscape of children's lives, are formulated by those (adults) whose ideas are influenced by their prior experiences (ibid.) and yet they are superimposed in the context of the present. Education policies which are created by adults looking back at the past (what worked, what did not), whilst projecting into the future (where do we want our young people to be) and being rooted in the present (how can we make that possible today) help create the school experience.

Durkheim (1922) suggests that education is adults' influence on young people:

Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life (Ibid. cited in Mayall, 2000: 246).

It is apparent, from the quotation above, that children and young people in the 1920's were seen to be people-in-waiting, in the process of being formed into 'adults'. The start of the literature review (Chapter Three) explores how this notion of childhood began to shift in the late 80's away from the idea that children are not just passive receptacles towards a notion that they are active participants in their lives – not just people-in-waiting but people *now* (Prout & James, 1990). Yet education policy and practice continue to be shaped by former experiences of adult policy makers and practitioners.

## **1.6 Participation, the Purposes of Education and Agency**

In the subsequent sub-sections of Chapter Three, I explore the literature regarding children 's rights, participation, schools and schooling. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emerged in its final version in 1989, after ten years of deliberation. The three underpinning principles of this document are participation, protection and provision. Education policies emerging from the Scottish Government since the ratification of the UNCRC in 1991 reflect its principles, and consequently prominence has been given to the participation and engagement of young people in their education. The literature suggests, however, that relationships between adults and young people are imbued with power (White, 2002). School settings have historically been places where asymmetrical power relationships have existed, and been expected, between teachers and school students. The changing nature of the present-day educational climate, towards one

which actively promotes the participation of children and young people, opens up different possibilities. However, schools working in this different way are few and far between (Beane & Apple, 2007).

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) in its General Comment No. 12 described 'participation' as 'ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes' (Ibid.: 5). It is acknowledged by many researchers that what we mean by participation remains uncertain and ambiguous (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). The implication of this is that its theorisation is still contested (Ibid.). Models, such as, enlightenment, empowerment, citizenship, relationality (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010), deliberative democracy (Cockburn, 2007, 2010) and Thomas's (2007) proposed framework, have been, and still are, used to describe and theorise children's participation. I understand participation as described by the United Nations Committee (2009), but acknowledge that, in this understanding, we have a complex body of interrelated ideas which current theories continue to expose.

The contested theorisation of participation is further compounded through the use of a variety of different terms, such as participation, participatory approaches and participatory techniques, which need to be differentiated. The term 'participatory approaches', in this thesis, refers to overarching strategies or programmes which have an ethos of participation (understood as described by the United Nations Committee, 2009, above). In participatory development arenas this could be, for



example, participatory action research (PAR) (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). In educational arenas we might consider strategies such as Assessment for Learning (Black & William, 1998), Co-operative Learning (Kagan & Kagan, 2001) and Reggio Emilia (Tisdall, 2013). These approaches have sets of tools and techniques associated with them that can lend themselves to being participatory. Throughout the thesis, I have referred to these as participatory tools, methods and/or techniques.

Allan et al. (2005) highlight a good example of a primary school that actively promotes participation of children and young people through the adoption of a children's rights approach to education. In this primary school, the headteacher took the UNCRC very seriously and decided to base the school's ethos around its core principles. Allan et al.'s research into the workings of the school raised some useful questions about participation and children's rights. These questions considered: the link between responsibility and rights; participation based on (adults') notions of responsibility; how the rights agenda suited some young people more than others; who decides what is acceptable behaviour within a rights discourse<sup>2</sup>; and, relating to the latter point, whether this uncertainty leaves children more open to asymmetrical relationships and the exercise of power by adults.

This whole school approach to the adoption of the UNCRC and its principles is not widespread across Scotland, although many more schools are now engaging with UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award (see UNICEF, 2004 for details).

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<sup>2</sup> I use Purvis and Hunt 's (1993) definitions of discourse and ideology i.e. discourse as process and ideology as effect. Stoddart (2007) suggests, using this interpretation that, 'where discourse is mobilized to reinforce systems of social power it functions as ideology' and that, 'discourse is not necessarily ideological; however, ideology is discursive' (Ibid.: 193).

Participatory approaches provide a range of tools and techniques designed to enable children and young people to participate in their classrooms. However, frequently in my professional work with children and young people, their experiences of this 'new' educational climate seemed limited and/or negative. They often spoke of disliking group work, which they felt wasted time, and expressed a preference for didactic teaching as they felt that they learnt more. The young people's talk of loss and disappointment with this type of participative activity (group work), alongside the lessons learnt from the aforementioned participatory development arena, has led me to consider that perhaps participation as a concept was limiting, in the sense of purpose. I questioned whether my assumptions about participation were based on an emancipatory agenda; that being involved in decision-making somehow freed children and young people from being *done unto*.

I was drawn to the conclusion that participation *per se* could be interpreted as a sterile concept. However, Kesby (2007) suggests that participatory approaches need not be abandoned but instead understood in a context that ensures their purpose is clear. Clarity can come through an understanding of the purposes of education. Participatory approaches can be used as a means through which these purposes of education are met, but as Mick (2011) suggests (and I will go on to explore this), there is an underlying concept on which this is all based and which became the focus of this study, that of agency.

Agency turns out to be a very slippery concept. In Chapter Four I briefly outline sociological conceptions of agency before devoting the chapter to the ecological understanding of agency used in this study. I found that viewing agency as a

phenomenon to be achieved (Biesta & Tedder, 2006), to be most beneficial when trying to open up discussions about students' experiences of today's classrooms. In Biesta and Tedder's (2006, 2007) theorisation of agency [drawing heavily on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal-relational theory of agency] they suggest that agency is not a quality that resides in individuals; instead, 'the achievement of agency depends on the availability of economic, cultural and social resources within a particular ecology. In this sense we can say that the achievement of agency will always result in the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006: 137). This way of understanding agency enables questions to be raised about the context by means of which agency is achieved, whilst at the same time considering the personal capacity of individual students and acknowledging the temporal nature of these situations. The research questions addressed by this thesis were sharpened through my engagement with the literature. As highlighted in the literature review, the concern with participation as a form of control, the cultural constructs that form part of school and the different explanations of agency led me to ask questions based on this ecological understanding of the achievement of agency. This enables an interrogation of both the experience of the achievement of agency and the conditions which make this possible.

## **1.7 Research Questions and Design**

This study addresses the following three questions:

1. How is the achievement of agency experienced by young people as students in school?
2. How can we better understand young people 's achievement of agency?
3. What are the implications for schooling?

## **1.8 Methodology**

In Chapter Five, I explore the methodology in more detail. The research questions seek an understanding of young people's experiences in a particular context. In order to address these questions, an approach was taken which valued the participants in the research not as objects of the research, but as informants and collaborators (Sherman Heyl, 2001). It was important to give participants' accounts a high status (Hudson, 2002; Walford, 2008), whilst at the same time having an understanding of the particular context by means of which transactions occur. To this end, ethnographic approaches were employed in this research. Participant observation, in the form of 'shadowing' students, alongside less specific observation and ethnographic interviews generated data for the study.

## **1.9 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis has eleven chapters in total. The next chapter considers the policy context within which schools operate. The third chapter is the literature review which discusses the notions of childhood, participation, children's rights and schooling. Chapter Four introduces agency before expanding on the temporal-relational theory of agency I use in this study. The fifth chapter is my methodology and initially explores ethnography before detailing my research design and my conceptual tool kit for the analysis of the data. The sixth chapter starts to introduce the empirical

research. In this chapter I provide background information about the school and the six participants. Chapter Seven is the first of the data analysis chapters and focuses on the student-teacher relationships. Chapter Eight considers the cultural realm and agency, and Chapter Nine explores the aspirations of the young people in the study. Chapter Ten opens with a concluding cross-case analysis before summarising the key findings. The final chapter addresses the study as a whole: its purpose, its limitations and its implications for both policy and practice.

## **2 Policy Context**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore the current educational policy climate with a focus on the participation of children and young people in their education. After briefly setting the background, there is a discussion of the international agenda before I consider some of Scotland's own policies, which seek to promote the participation of children and young people in their education. This leads to a final commentary on what might be described as the competing priorities of the prescribed policies between discourses relating to social investment and democracy/rights imperatives for education policy.

This review of policy development sets the context of schooling in Scotland today, whilst equally serving as a reminder that national policy development does not take place in a vacuum. For example, current discourses in the United States and the United Kingdom view children as 'priceless' (Redmond, 2010: 474). This has resulted in the development of policies that have 'sought to quarantine childhood as a space regulated by affection and education, rather than work or profit' (Zelizer, cited in Redmond, 2010: 474). This changing emphasis brings tensions to the current policy climate as, on the one hand, it views children as 'objects of social investment' (Redmond, 2010: 475) and in need of protection. On the other hand, the policies promote possibilities that children and young people are to be considered as people, whose opinion is valued and whose participation is sought. The global pressures to

which nations are subjected, those set by the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009) and the European Commission, also impact on national educational policies.

## **2.2 The International Agenda**

In 1989 the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which details internationally agreed minimum standards for children up to 18 years, became part of the international policy climate. The first forty-two articles of the UNCRC are split into three broad principles: those of participation, protection and provision. This focus on the participation of children and young people is particularly noted in Article 12, which states:

1. Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
  
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law (UN, 1989).

The impact of this foregrounding of participation as a fundamental right of children and young people is evidenced in the social policies that many European signatories to the Convention have developed to incorporate the views of children and young people in decisions which affect them (Hulme et al., 2011). In 2009, the United

Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No. 12 regarding the implementation of article 12, acknowledged that since 1989 there had been much progress. However, it also recognised that entrenched attitudes, practices and the quality of those practices, alongside political and economic factors, continued to hinder the implementation of article 12. It called for 'a better understanding of what article 12 entails and how to fully implement it for every child' (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009: 6).

Educational policies, as a subset of wider social policies, have been subject to these same pressures. This trend to increase the participation of children and young people emerges in all aspects of education at a rhetorical policy level. These policies suggest broad changes from pedagogical approaches to forms of assessment, and into more formal school structures. Whether this is evidenced and experienced at the practice level is worthy of more discussion. This study's findings in relation to these points are found in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine.

Alongside the UN, other influential global policy makers include the OECD. Lingard and Rawolle (2009) suggest that the OECD is now a 'transnational policy actor in education, contributing to the emergent global education field' (Ibid.: 1). The OECD has developed international educational indicators, particularly the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The need for this type of international data collection is fuelled by the assumption that, in order to determine the competitiveness of a nation state, there is a need to compare the quality of national schooling systems (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009).



The OECD has also developed a set of Key Competencies, which it published in the 2005 report, *The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies* (OECD, 2005). The rationale for this report was based on a perceived need to explain what attributes individuals need for the demands of modern life. The core tenet of the developed framework is 'the ability of individuals to think for themselves as an expression of moral and intellectual maturity and to take responsibility for their learning and their actions' (Ibid.: 8).

Ball (2003: 215) notes that, in the global context, educational reform is spreading, producing standardisation despite the political, social and historical diversity of countries. Countries such as Scotland and New Zealand have, in the last ten years, developed new national curricula, and it is apparent how the key competencies espoused by the OECD (2005) above have helped shape these new policies (Sinnema, & Aitken, 2013). Remaining competitive on the international stage is important and is evidenced by Scotland's call to the OECD to comment on equity and quality in its present schooling system. In doing so, however, Scotland's long held traditional view about its schooling system was challenged.

The 2007 OECD review of Scotland's school system, entitled *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland* (OECD, 2007), was commissioned by the Scottish Executive, who 'wanted to benchmark Scotland against international standards' (Raffe, 2008: 22). One of the OECD review panel's findings suggested that Scotland has a 'narrow, conservative and socially exclusive ethos of schooling' (Ibid.: 22). This is in complete contrast to Scotland's own long held view regarding schooling, which has espoused the notion 'that access to academic curricula for all is a democratic and egalitarian

approach' (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009: 1). This review also suggested that 'authorities should aim for better student feedback on teaching quality' (Raffe, 2008: 23).

Transnational policy agendas promoting standardisation can challenge nations, as in Scotland's case above. They can also provide countries with knowledge of their competitiveness based on a set of performance measurements. These agendas have implications as to how national policy emerges and develops. Concepts such as participation and its purpose can be understood differently, as policy is shaped and mediated at all levels. The progress of student participation as a theme in the policy context in Scotland is explored below.

### **2.3 Scottish Policy Developments**

The United Kingdom ratified the UNCRC in 1991, becoming a signatory to the treaty. This means that there is an obligation to enforce the Convention. It is notable that the UK did not enshrine the UNCRC in statute, as it did in the case of the *European Convention on Human Rights* with the *Human Rights Act* (1998). The Scottish Government in 2012 held a consultation entitled: *A Scotland for Children: A Consultation on the Children and Young People Bill* and has most recently passed a new Act, *The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act* (2014). However, incorporating the UNCRC into Scots Law is not part of this new 2014 Act or was it part of a 2011 consultation on the *Rights of Children and Young People Bill* (2011) [which was subsequently dropped]. Incorporation of the UNCRC was called for by many with an interest in children's rights [see Scottish Government (2011), for more discussion regarding the 2011 Bill, and the Scottish Government (2014), *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act* regarding its progression, the considered amendments

and its final form]. In policies that have developed since the ratification of the UNCRC, we do see an emerging participation agenda. In the *Children (Scotland) Act 1995* (Scottish Executive, 1995), there are a number of sections, some for example are, 6 (1), 11 (7), 16 (2), 17 (4) and 95, tied to specific provisions, which refer to having regard to the views of the child. Whilst all children have this right it is dependent on age and maturity, for which the Act suggests a threshold of twelve years old (see Marshall et al, 2002, for a mapping and full discussion of the *Voice of the Child* under this Act).

The subsequent *Standards in Scotland 's Schools, etc. Act 2000* (Scottish Executive, 2000) section 2(1) placed a duty on the education authority to ensure that young people receive an education that enables children and young people to develop to their fullest potential. To support this duty section 2(2) states that due regard should be given to children's views.

[A]n education authority shall have due regard, so far as is reasonably practicable, to the views (if there is a wish to express them) of the child or young person in decisions that significantly affect that child or young person, taking account of the child or young person 's age and maturity (Ibid.).

Section 6 (1) of the *Standards in Scotland 's Schools, etc. Act 2000* (Scottish Executive, 2000) stated that children and young people should be consulted regarding the school development plan and section 6 (3) states that this plan should include how, and how much, children and young people will be consulted and involved in decisions regarding the day-to-day operating of the school (Ibid.). Further

policies continue to emphasise the notion of participation; *Better behaviour-better learning: a joint action plan* (Scottish Executive, 2001) is one such example, and *Education for Citizenship in Scotland: A Paper for Discussion and Development* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, LTS, 2002) another. The latter outlines the following overarching aim for *Education for Citizenship in Scottish schools*.

Young people should be enabled to develop capability for thoughtful and responsible participation in political, economic, social and cultural life...defined in terms of four aspects – knowledge and understanding, skills and competence, values and dispositions and creativity and enterprise (LTS, 2002: 3).

More recently, Scotland launched its new curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (Scottish Executive, 2004a). This curriculum identifies the development of four capacities as its goal for Scotland's children. The capacities (successful learners, responsible citizens, effective contributors and confident individuals) seem influenced by the key competencies promoted by the OECD (Biesta & Priestley, 2013). These capacities have come to underpin all new policies regarding young people in Scotland (see for example, *Getting it Right for every Child*, Scottish Executive, 2005). A main feature of this new curriculum framework is an emphasis on improved pupil participation. A publication in 2007 by Learning and Teaching Scotland and Save the Children explored this notion of participation in more depth (Save the Children & LTS, 2007). It suggested that participation is more than 'taking part' and goes beyond structures such as the school council to being a concept which

involves a shift in values, attitudes and experiences of all those within the school environment.

*Assessment is for Learning* (AifL) (SEED, 2004) was another flagship policy development in the Scottish educational arena, which in part promotes children and young people's involvement in the evaluation of learning and participation in planning. Strategies such as traffic lights, peer and self-assessment, think, pair, share, and two stars and a wish (Black et al., 2002) have become more commonplace in Scottish schools. These participatory tools are used as teaching techniques to enable children and young people to become more engaged in their learning. *Ambitious, Excellent Schools* (Scottish Executive, 2004b) has sought to promote children's wider achievements in and out of school hours, seeking to shift the focus from purely academic attainment to the recognition of other skills that children and young people develop through their education.

This policy drive for pupil participation has led to an increase in pedagogical approaches which promote participation. In addition to the AifL techniques identified above, teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) increasingly includes opportunities to access programmes such as Critical Skills and cooperative learning. There has also been a plethora of developments such as peer mediation, peer tutoring and classroom councils (Save the Children and LTS, 2007) which seek to involve children and young people in working together to solve problems and learn from each other. Pupil and student councils have become a common feature of schools and a cornerstone of modern participatory structures (Children in Scotland & University of Edinburgh, 2010).

School Inspections have, more recently, incorporated pupil participation in their criteria (Hulme et al., 2011). HMIE's (2006) *The Journey to Excellence* is a self-assessment document produced for schools. Eight out of the ten dimensions in this document identify pupil participation as a feature. Cross et al. (2009) mapped these eight dimensions promoted by *The Journey to Excellence* (HMIE, 2006) onto their Participation Development Cycle. This mapping of participation onto the improvement agenda set by the Scottish Government could, I would argue, inadvertently feed into the social investment model, discussed more fully below (Martin & Franklin, 2010). This model tends to view children as citizens of the future, and considers what their future economic contribution will be and what capacities and capabilities will bring this about. The soft skills that participation develops can feed into this model, bringing about economic instrumentalism rather than democracy and rights.

Reeves and Boreham (2006) suggest these self-assessment documents produced by HMIE bear the signs of the performativity discourse or 'educational operationalism'. Bottery (2000: 8) suggests that this discourse of economic globalisation has 'captured' education and reinterpreted it 'through its language and values'. The increased visibility of business language in the educational lexicon, for example, 'quality', 'competence' and 'target setting' (Bottery, 2000: 13) serves to reinforce the notion that much of schooling is driven by perceived economic necessity.

These developing opportunities in schools, which reflect the participatory push of both national and international policy drivers, raise the question of its purpose. Is participation promoting democracy and rights within schools or is it about social

investment based on economic capabilities? In other words, is participation simply a means to an end? Or is it an end in its own right, based on an ethical and moral imperative? This next section explores these questions in more detail.

#### **2.4 Participation as promoting democracy and rights or economic instrumentalism?**

Bell (2004: 3) has suggested that there is 'a certain naivety by proponents of participation regarding the complexity of power and power relations'. Do we need to then ask questions about the authenticity of motivations and behaviour regarding processes of participation (which could be obscuring managerialism, efficiency and target setting)? It is troubling that questions can be raised about the purpose of participation as to whether it is driven by economic instrumentalism or target setting, rather than values based on democracy and rights.

There has been much interest in the research community regarding participation and a number of studies have occurred globally (for example: Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Ruddock & Flutter, 2000; Cahill & Collard, 2003; Allan & l'Anson, 2004; Arnot et al., 2004; Kane & Maw, 2005; Raider-Roth, 2005). Questions from these studies have been raised about the compatibility of participatory approaches taking root in schooling systems known for their authoritarian nature (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, and see Chapter Three for more discussion). Participatory agendas promote school as a discursive space rather than one based on this type of authoritarian structure (Beane & Apple, 2007). Perhaps it is more realistic to suggest that participatory approaches will be 'tagged' on to what already exists rather than a starting point to develop practices. The emergence of pupil councils and pedagogical strategies mentioned

above possibly already indicate the direction of travel. This method of adoption, adding to what is already there because of prescribed policies, continues to undermine the participatory project based on rights and democracy. Participation can be used as a means of economic instrumentalism or it can be used instrumentally as a means to inculcate democratic values and enhance the achievement of agency by young people. Equally participation can be an end in its own right based on an ethical imperative (it is the right thing to do) or indeed simply as a tick box exercise (target setting). It is the underpinning meaning which people adopt regarding participation that surfaces its purpose in particular contexts.

The discussion above illustrates how the education policy landscape is changing. Policies appear to be giving permission for teachers and schools to act differently. That said, it is widely accepted that policies are mediated at a local level: what is prescribed (in policies) is different from what is described (by schools and teachers) and different again to what is then enacted (by teachers) and finally can differ greatly to what is received (in this case, by students) (Ball, 1994; Edwards et al., 2009). If it is the case that policy enactment differs from its original intended meaning perhaps, by opening up spaces to understand participation differently, teachers and others may come to know its educational purpose. I will argue that the ecological view of the achievement of agency by young people provides a mechanism for envisaging and creating a space where this might happen.

School and classroom experiences illustrate how teachers have made sense of the latest policy drives. In 2008 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its concluding observations of the UK country reports, suggested that,



'participation of children in all aspects of schooling is inadequate' (United Nations Committee, 2008: 15) and made a recommendation to 'strengthen children's participation in all matters of school, classroom and learning which affect them' (Ibid.: 16). Finding out what students experience in their day-to-day school life is important if we are to understand the impact policies may have on students (May, 2005). To help frame this study further the literature review considers childhood, children's rights, participation and schooling before reviewing the literature regarding agency in Chapter Four.

### **3 Literature Review**

In this review I explore participation against the backdrop of childhood, children's rights, and schooling. The literature reviewed is part of a wealth of information regarding these topics. The sample is broadly representative of themes in the wider literature, which I selected for relevance to my interest in participation, children and young people, and schooling. On interrogation of this literature, I found that there were issues regarding agency. This led me to explore agency in more depth, as discussed in Chapter Four, and served to reframe and refocus my study on one that considered an ecological theory of the achievement of agency. Reframing participation in terms of an ecological understanding of the achievement of agency is one way of opening up the opportunities participation might offer – with participation being the means and the achievement of agency the end.

#### **3.1 Childhood, Children 's Rights, Participation and Schooling: key discourses**

Pertinent to this study is the changing conceptualisation of childhood. These shifts frame how children, who were once missing from research, have now become both researched and researchers. Children's rights and the participation and voice agenda are part of the context of this reframing. As conceptualisations of childhood shift, schools and schooling also shift, and participation mechanisms in the form of teaching practices and structures, such as the pupil council, have emerged. However, if, as I suggested in the introduction, participation is much more than simply teaching

techniques and isolated structures, other ways of understanding this shift need to be explored.

The literature review is split into four sections. Firstly, I explore in some detail conceptions of childhood. This is followed by a section on children's rights because the UNCRC's underpinning principles of protection, provision and participation play a role in our understandings of childhood and of participation. In this section, I also consider some current dilemmas pertaining to children's rights. Section 3.4 addresses various aspects of the participation discourse, including literature pertaining to schools and schooling. The final section (3.5) concludes this chapter.

## **3.2 Childhood**

This section on childhood is divided into four sub-sections. Firstly, I consider the place of childhood in the life course and, secondly, how this relates to adulthood. I then turn to the generic conception of childhood, before finally considering the status of the child as being, becoming or both.

### **3.2.1 Childhood - a phase?**

Childhood, as a period, can be expressed in generational terms in the life course. It has, according to Qvortrup (2007: 397), 'permanency in any generational structure'. The obvious bodily differences of a person just born, compared with a pre-pubescent child or a young person in puberty, are illustrated by visible differences. Against this backdrop of the embodied visibility of a changing person, childhood as a social structure has emerged. Prout (2000: 1) suggests that 'social constructionist accounts of childhood and the body tend to exclude (or at least de-emphasize) the possibility

that social life has a material as well as a discursive (or representational) component'. A more middling approach is possible; this suggests the social construction of childhood, but adopts a perspective that the body is a constraint (Prout & James, 1990). Understandings of childhood over time and different spaces have changed and will continue to do so, but as a 'permanent structural segment' (Qvortrup, 2007: 396) it is quite possibly here to stay. This structural permanence seems to have arisen in response to a 'conceptual homelessness of childhood' (Ibid.: 396). Class, gender and ethnicity all seem to have been afforded a place (though predominately focussed on adults), whereas childhood was left wanting.

### **3.2.2 A non-adult thus a child?**

In its simplest form, the definition of a child could be one who is not an adult (Valentine, 2000). Jenks (1996) suggests that the child 'cannot be imagined except in relation to a conception of the adult' and that it is the 'known difference between these two social locations' (Ibid.: 3) that helps to construct our understandings of 'adult' and 'child' identities. Valentine (2000) describes the opposition in the identities of adults and children as: 'adults are sexual, responsible, competent, strong, decision-making agents; children are asexual, irresponsible, incompetent, vulnerable, human 'becomings' in need of protection' (Ibid.: 258). However, even in acknowledging this binary, the actual ascribed meanings of childhood and adulthood are not static. These understandings are temporally located and, whilst their parameters are of the same kind (political, economic, social, technological etc.), they are constantly changing (Qvortrup, 2007). Hockey and James suggest (2003) that:

[t]he experiences and identities of those individuals who occupy the space of 'childhood' – that is the children themselves – can be said to be, in part shaped by the politics and policies through which the conceptual category and social identity of 'child' is given material form in everyday life (Ibid.: 15).

Compartmentalising childhood has enabled an increase in the length of compulsory schooling and a reliance on the family to take on the social and financial responsibility for their children (Valentine, 2000).

This construction of children and young people, growing into adults defined by years, has historically had the effect of viewing those in the childhood phase as 'not quite there yet', as immature and as incompetent passive actors in their own lives. This view legitimately enables adults to control children (Simpson, 2000; Qvortrup, 1994) and has been reinforced across society. Research in education up to the mid-eighties was generally aimed at the adults, with researchers interpreting children and young people's reactions without engaging with them.

In the late 1980s and early nineties, a new sociology of childhood was mooted, suggesting that children are competent social actors in their own right (Prout & James, 1990), able to engage in the world, and constantly constructing and re-constructing their lives. Prout (2000) suggests that:

[C]hildren [are] both shapers and shaped by society, active rather than passive. Children can be constrained or enabled by circumstances. They can find ways of negotiating, extending possibilities, being creative (Ibid.: 7).

This view highlights the importance of agency. Attributing agency to children and young people suggests they can shape their own life-worlds:

Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just passive structures of their own social worlds (Ibid.: 8).

Understanding the active participation of children and young people in their own lives acknowledges that children, young people, like adults, can achieve agency. This represents a substantial shift from the position that only adults had this capacity. However, how agency is understood as a construct is important and will be discussed later in Chapter Four.

Humphries et al. (cited in Jones, 2008: 197) suggests that the twentieth century was the 'century of childhood'. The inception of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), child-centred education and specific (brightly coloured) places and spaces allocated to children (Jones, 2008) are part of childhood now. In Western societies, childhood has become subject to market-forces (I explore this in the next section). Its relevance to my project lies in the environment that children and young people experience in their everyday lives. This focus on childhood as a singularity (Qvortrup, 2008; James 2010) is part of the structural commonalities that children and young people experience in the present day.

### 3.2.3 Childhood – one size fits all?

Children and young people in Western societies have more recently found themselves located within 'narratives of individualisation, for example in relation to rights and entitlements and the commodification of childhood and youth' (Valentine, 2000: 258). An example of this 'commodification' has been linked to the Disney Corporation who, it is suggested, make profits 'as much by manipulating adult sensibilities and fantasies about childhood, as by entertaining children' (Lee, 2005: 8). If adults' views of childhood can be manipulated by Disney, how can we be sure that policies promulgated by decision-makers are not based on an idealised view of what it means to be a child in today's society?

Babies, toddlers, pre-fives, tweens, tween-agers, and teenagers are now commonly understood sub-sets of childhood and youth (James, 2010: 491). The notion of 'doing age' emphasises how age is 'done'. This is portrayed in interactions with others in various situations, with reference to cultural norms and discourses. At the institutional level, it defines age categories and life phases and, at the individual level, it is individuals who are acting 'doing age' (Närvänen & Näsman, 2007: 230).

The rise in the 'noticing' of these differently constructed stages provides a huge playing field for advertisers. Buckingham (2000) raises the concern that these different cultures that children and young people could inhabit, whilst 'doing age', are constructed and sold to them by adults. This draws attention to the issue of what *real* choice is available to children and young people, if differences have been shaped by adults through the media and through legislation, culture, custom and taboo. Take for example the adolescent phase, which, according to Mayall (2000: 244), is an

adult-constructed term. This has been made visible, predictable and homogenised (Raby, 2002), and can trap teenagers – any action being dismissed as part of a *phase they are going through*. It can also be applied differently to young people of differing social classes, gender and ethnicity (Närvänen & Näsman, 2007: 230), and can objectify young people, rather than uphold the discourses which promote them as competent social actors (Prout & James, 1990).

Kathleen Marshall, Scotland's first Children's Commissioner, called for a rethink on risk and children and young people, suggesting *Promoting Proportionate Protection* (SCCYP, 2009: 11). Proportionate protection highlighted that children were 'too protected' (Ibid.), and that children and young people should be allowed to play outside again. But even these outside play areas can be rendered safe by the spongy ground floor coating rather than the original grass or concrete settings (Jones, 2008: 198). Few would criticise using technology to minimise risk in play areas but, as Redman (2010) notes, children are not only being considered to be vulnerable, in terms of abuse and exploitation, but children are also 'repositories of risk who need to be monitored, in order to deter them from engaging in risky, antisocial, or illegal behaviour' (Ibid.: 475). In spite of these constant constraints, some researchers suggest (see for example, Raby, 2002; Kallio & Häkli, 2011) that young people are actively able to navigate these different discourses, and are thus able to achieve agency.

The review above suggests that childhood has extended into the adolescent phase. This extension carries with it attitudes regarding protection and risk. Moreover it begs the question about the possibilities of agency, especially because for so long



children have been regarded as ‘becomings’, rather than as people in their own right (Mayall, 2000: 244). The literature below illustrates how this concern with ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ has been problematized to provide a way forward.

### **3.2.4 Being, becoming: either/ both or none?**

This argument debates children and young people’s ability to be actively engaged in their lives and suggests that they are not just ‘adults–in–waiting’, ‘*becoming*’, but people in their own right, ‘*being*’ (James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2000; White, 2002; Uprichard, 2008 ). Constructing children as always ‘becoming’ but never actually as ‘being’ was a criticism laid at the historical view of childhood (James et al., 1998). Adulthood, in this view, signifies a state of ‘being’ in the world; a person capable of making decisions.

Uprichard (2008) differentiates the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ child.

..the being child is seen as a social actor in his or her own right, who is actively constructing his or her own ‘childhood’, and who has views and experiences about being a child; the ‘becoming’ child is seen as an ‘adult in the making’, who is lacking universal skills and features of the ‘adult’ they will become (Ibid.: 304).

Viewing the child as a social actor in his or her own right replaces the idea that children are ‘objects of socialisation’ (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010: 1). Thus, due to the diverse contexts and cultures that children and young people inhabit, ‘childhood is not a universal given, but varies in its construction, interpretation and enactment’ (Ibid.). Opening childhood up to this debate – the possibility that children and young

people could be regarded as competent – compromised the view that only in adulthood could one be described as a rational, competent social being (Lee, 2001). Describing childhood as a natural state from which, after a passage of time, one emerged as a cultured (adult) being (Simpson, 2000: 63) seems no longer to quite fit. This does raise the question about our understandings of adulthood relative to that of childhood. If we learn from Francis's (2001) critique of constructed oppositions in participatory development, for example, local knowledge versus outsider knowledge, we understand that these constructed oppositions tend not to be productive. However, many of our framings in western society hinge on age: under a certain age is childhood, over is adulthood.

Western legal frameworks though do not seem certain at what age childhood ends and adulthood starts. Different ages are attributed to different legal capabilities. Thus to define adulthood simply by legislative opportunities can still be ambiguous. Equally, commentators (for example, Valentine, 2000; Bynner et al., 2002; Jones, 2002) are now suggesting that there has been a change in pathways to adulthood. The general pattern of school, job, leave home, get married and have children seems to have become less distinct. 'Partial transitions' (Valentine, 2000: 258) now seem more popular. Young people are choosing to have sex, drink and take drugs earlier, whilst still being accommodated in the family home and being comforted by financial and emotional security. Getting married comes much later. This could be argued to be lengthening the transition to adulthood, thus relinquishing the responsibilities of adulthood until a later date (Ibid.). This changing nature of the transition from childhood to adulthood compels us to look at and question the norms associated

with adulthood. The emergence of the category of 'kid-dult' (James, 2010: 491) provides an indication that the child/adult boundary is less certain (Ibid.). Do these changes offer re-framing of the adult/child binary? Valentine (2000) suggests that the blurring of delineation of the adult/child boundary offers a shift in the asymmetrical relationships between children and adults. In her eyes, these relationships, based on hierarchy and deference, should dissolve and be replaced by young people being able to negotiate their now more ambiguous connection between childhood and adulthood. Their positioning in adult and peer cultures thus becomes one of 'a relational and spatial process of engagement' (Ibid.: 265). However, Kjørholt (2002) has argued that critical analyses are still important because, although there may be a dissolving of hierarchy and deference as children and young people now appear to be viewed as social actors, this could merely conceal new forms for repression, due to current structural constraints and also a lack of real opportunity for 'meaningful' social engagement.

Ideological constructions may easily conceal structural deficits and the 'poverty' of the social and cultural environment in providing opportunities for social participation. An important challenge is to unpack the ideology in order to liberate children from being placed in positions that simply represent new forms of repression (Kjørholt, 2002: 257).

Kjørholt takes us back to the criticisms levelled against the participatory development agenda, particularly the possibility that participation itself can be used as a form of control. Opening up the idea that children and adults could both be described as 'being' brings forth other challenges. Unsurprisingly, once the playing

field appeared to be more level, recent literature has begun to question the stasis of 'being', suggesting that everyone is best described as always 'becoming'; constantly constructing and reconstructing themselves in their dynamic social contexts (Lee, 2001). Bakhtin (cited in Cruddas, 2007: 485) suggests that 'becoming is an ideological position, in which two discourses perform: authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses'. Uprichard (2008), whilst agreeing with the notion of 'becoming', considers that it is better to think of the child as both 'being' and 'becoming'. She bases her argument on the premise that childhood is a temporal event, suggesting that 'the key is to achieve a working balance between the temporal constructs of 'being' and 'becoming' without diminishing the humanity or the personhood of every human being, child or adult' (Ibid.: 309).

White (2002: 1097) similarly takes the approach that adults *and* children are both 'being' and 'becoming'. Considering a dynamic, fluid understanding of adulthood and childhood, rather than opposition of the two categories, enables a blurring of boundaries, leaving spaces for different relationships to thrive between people of different ages.

Whether these spaces for different relationships exist within schools today, for young people and adults, is questionable. The status of young people within the school environment has been described as 'subordinate' (Wyness, 2006: 144). Hendrick (1997: 46) suggests that, '[The school] threw aside the child's knowledge derived from parents, community, peer group and personal experience. Instead, it demanded a state of ignorance'. This state of ignorance takes us back to child-in-deficit: a person who lacks knowledge because of age; a person needing input from

'older' others; an adult-in-waiting; a 'becoming' rather than a 'being' (Wyness, 2006). Rather than this deficit view, can we see schools now as spaces which might encourage and embrace personal experience? If not, we appear to have either come full circle or have not moved at all. However, as the ideas put forward appear to have shifted the basis of the child/adult binary, we may now be able to find those spaces within the school context that illustrate this movement. If so, we need to be sure that these spaces, which although changed, do not continue to limit children as social participants (Kjørholt, 2002).

My reading of the literature above alerts us to the dynamic debates regarding childhood/adulthood and being/becoming. The idea of children and young people considered to be active participants in their lives is fundamental to this debate. Entangled in these developments in the sociology of childhood is the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Childhood researchers have considered the UNCRC in their studies. However, James (2010) would suggest that a dichotomy has arisen between researchers from the global south, who would suggest that UNCRC has done little to protect children from homelessness and statelessness, and those in the global north, whose studies could be seen as trivial in comparison. James (*Ibid.*: 486) reminds us that it may appear so because of the different contexts between the global south and global north, these 'structural concerns, especially if linked too closely with political agendas, could divert us away from the conceptual task of understanding childhood as a participatory social space'. The following discussion looks at some of the research

concerning children's rights and how the UNCRC impacts on the idea of achievement of agency by children and young people.

### **3.3 Children's Rights**

White (2002: 1095, italics in original) draws attention to the two main objectives of the UNCRC, those of '*inclusion*' and '*recognition*'. The former refers to challenging the 'unthinking assumptions of children's 'difference'' (Ibid.: 1095), and the latter ensures that children and young people are viewed on their own terms rather than as adults-in-miniature.

Article 12 of the UNCRC specifically expects that children and young people have a right to be involved and have their views taken seriously, although there is a caveat regarding age and maturity. This is interpreted by the UNCRC as placing responsibility on the adult to make decisions, whilst taking into account the child's opinion. Over time, as the child's capacities develop, the balance of this decision-making should shift from the adult to the developing young person. Who decides a child's capacity is a question raised by many researchers (for example, Närvänen & Näsman, 2007; Lansdown, 2010).

Adults in western society can tend to view the childhood state as one of 'innocence'. In order to maintain this state of innocence, children need protection (Lansdown, 2010), which is upheld in the Convention, but can lead to the thesis 'Thou [children and young people] shalt not be aware' (Lee, 2005: 8). Thus although the rights of protection may be upheld, the right to be involved in decisions can seem somewhat more compromised (Ibid.).

Further to this argument comes the principle of the 'best interests' of the child or young person. It seems in many cases that this is taken as the underlying philosophy or linchpin of the UNCRC. Lansdown (2010) criticises this viewpoint, suggesting that 'the best interests principle does not 'trump' other rights in the Convention and so should not be used to override the child's right to express views' (Ibid.: 19). Other researchers (Qvortrup, 1994; Näsman cited in Närvänen & Näsman, 2007; Kallio, 2007, 2011) explore this principle further, considering the temporal aspect of 'best interests' – now or in the future – and question 'whose definitions of a good childhood? '. This raises a subsidiary question; 'in whose interests is 'best interests? '. Is it that the 'best interests' principle is used as a cover for adults' interests?

Indeed, White (2002) raises the question of the ambiguity of the convention regarding children's agency. She suggests that other changes in law have emerged from political struggles by the group concerned (for example, slaves, women etc.), whereas in the case of children and young people, none of them participated in the development of the UNCRC (Ibid.). Whilst young people were included in the first (and only) *Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Children* in May 2002, they still do not drive the UNCRC; they are reliant on others (read adults). This reliance manifests itself in children being asked to be part of a session, rather than the other way around, and whilst I am sure, as was apparent in my research, that young people feel privileged to be asked and happy to be noticed, I would question whether this should always be the way.

Mayall (2000) suggests that children's rights are very important to the 'quality of childhood, but also problematic ' (Ibid.: 248). Linking the new sociology of

childhood's thesis that children are competent social actors, alongside their lived experience of a child living in a world controlled by adults, Mayall (Ibid.) sets out a way in which children and young people can enjoy their participation rights:

[F]or in order to honour children's participation rights we must establish the conditions in which they can be honoured. [...] The problem then lies in the control elements inherent in protection and provision. For if children are socially controlled, then their ability to participate may be limited (Mayall, 2000: 248).

The latter point is very pertinent. Kallio (2011: 4) suggests that the UNCRC 'sets out to support certain kinds of childhoods, [and] those lived worlds that do not fit the given conception are not identified as normal or desirable ones, but quite the contrary'. Childhoods that do not meet the desirable state are seen as deficient and in need of solutions. If the UNCRC discourse promotes a 'good' childhood, then what happens when children and young people who choose to inhabit undesirable childhoods seek to speak? Kallio (Ibid.) would argue that these voices are silenced.

Moreover, if we consider that childhoods are rated good or bad, then what of the participatory projects that seek, under Article 12 of the UNCRC, to hear the voices of children and young people? The selection of children to participate in specific projects with certain outcomes is one issue. Another is the concern over which children participate and thus whose voice is taken for *the* child's voice and whose voices does this conceal (Kallio, 2011)?



My reading of this literature, above, suggests that the rights agenda affords certain opportunities, but at the same time alerts us to some of the problems concerning participation. Overall, this raises questions of the control of the rights agenda. If adults construct, maintain and are gatekeepers for these rights, how can spaces be created which afford young people opportunities for democratic participation rather than as a covert mechanism of control? Alongside this, however, is a rather pessimistic observation or 'disturbing truth' made by Cleland and Sutherland (2009) that 'there is a body of evidence that parts of the adult community neither like nor respect children and young people very much' (Ibid.: 2/3). It is within this climate that participation is explored in more detail.

It is worthwhile restating here, as discussed in Chapter 1, that I have started with an understanding of participation as described by the United Nations Committee (2009) in its General Comment No. 12. This articulation describes 'participation' as continual processes rooted in, mutually respectful, intergenerational, informed dialogical interactions with a focus on transparency in the decision-making process (United Nations Committee, 2009). Thomas and Percy-Smith (2010), however, remind us that, the meaning of participation is ambiguous – a slippery term – but there is 'a growing awareness that it is most meaningful when it is rooted in children's everyday lives' (Ibid.: 86). However, everyday lives are subject to social and cultural practices, which continually shape and are shaped by the young people. This socialisation of children and young people, by means of which 'through obedience and correct behaviour they eventually find ways of becoming full members of society' (de Certeau cited in Kallio, 2007: 131), is thus part of the fabric of everyday

life. The debates concerning children's participation as a concept are explored below. Maintaining the link between this and the discourses surrounding childhood and children's rights, as discussed above, is important as it frames the context through which participation is understood.

### **3.4 Children's Participation**

The ratification of the UNCRC in 1989 began a tsunami of activity involving children and young people. Consultation became the name of the game, with stakeholders being the commonly used term. However, understanding participation solely in terms of consultation has been critiqued with some suggesting that consultation is a 'subsection of participation' (Thomas, 2007: 199). Evidence of the involvement of young people came in many forms, for example, student councils emerged on a much broader scale, and young people's committees, youth parliaments, children's consultations and citizenship became part of the educational agenda (LTS, 2002). Participatory approaches<sup>3</sup> became more widespread taking their learning perspective from development studies. Researchers became interested in views of children and young people and, with time, developed participatory research techniques for use with children (for example see Tisdall et al., 2009). Participation activities ballooned and have been located within a number of different research agendas, for example, empowerment (Alderson, 2000), citizenship (LTS, 2002), enlightenment and outcomes such as improved child/adult relations (Mannion, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1 these refer to overarching strategies or programmes which have an ethos of participation.

Thomas (2007) has suggested that these discourses of participation can be broadly grouped in two ways, either social or political. In the former are the relationships between adults and children, inclusivity and the social connections made through participation. In the latter the discourse 'speaks of power, and challenge, and change' (Ibid.: 206). Thomas' (2007) paper does not offer a definitive theory of participation but suggests what a theory of participation needs to address.

Accordingly, a theory of participation should:

- a) encompass all the sites where children's participation may or may not take place;
- b) be located in a broader context of inter-generational relations;
- c) understand the distinction between 'participation' meaning activity that children engage in conjointly with adults, and children and young people's autonomous activity;
- d) accommodate the new kinds of participatory practice with children and young people that have been developed (particularly in countries of the majority world);
- e) account for the demands for children and young people to have the same political rights as adults (Thomas, 2007: 215).

Cockburn (2005: 115), in considering children 's participation, suggested that 'attention must be paid to issues of engagement, co-construction and partnership in participation'. He also identified, at that time, the imperative that adult and

children's agendas need to be considered side-by-side even when they conflict. In further articles in 2007 and 2010, Cockburn suggests that deliberative democracy offers a way forward for children's participation, but notes 'there are ambiguities within the deliberative participatory structures in countries within the developed world, such as England, where enthusiasm for citizenship is weak, based on an undemocratic education system, a short-term consumerist notion of participation and an emphasis on partnership rather than expression and contestation of difference' (2010: 306). These theoretical debates have been emerging since 2006 (Thomas, 2012), but prior to this a number of models of participation had been developed and these are discussed below.

#### **3.4.1 Models of participation**

Hart's (1992) ladder of participation was an early tool designed to enable adults to reflect on the manner in which children participate. Hart warned against involving young people in activities which fell into the bottom three rungs of the ladder: tokenism, manipulation and decoration. This linear depiction of children's participation saw the highest rung associated with *children doing it all themselves*. Hart (1997) soon warned against seeing the ladder as a hierarchy, suggesting that the type of participation is dependent on the context. A further concern regarding the ladder of participation, as discussed by l'Anson (2013: 109), is its lack of inclusion of 'the phase of textual redaction in relation to children's participation'. The inclusion of children's voices into written texts, with an assumption that this represents the child's view, does not attend to the issue that the text is authored by

an adult: 'the point of view being presented is, therefore, the view of the author, not that of the child' (James, 2007: 265).

Harry Shier in 2001 offered a model that he suggested built on Hart 's (1992) participation ladder. His intention was that his model, 'serve[d] as an additional tool for practitioners, helping them explore different aspects of the participation process' (Ibid.: 109) and it was found that practitioners did find it useful in developing practice within their organisations (Thomas, 2007). Shier (2001) suggested that one of the benefits of Hart's ladder was that it had heightened practitioners' awareness of participation and what could be classified as 'non-participation' i.e. the bottom three rungs. Shier's (2001) model incorporates five levels of participation: '1) Children are listened to. 2) Children are supported in expressing their views. 3) Children's views are taken into account. 4) Children are involved in decision-making processes. 5) Children share power and responsibility for decision-making' (Ibid.: 110) with the '*transition from consultation to active participation*' (Ibid.: 113 italics in original) occurring between level 3 and 4. Shier (2001) also suggested that 'at the lower levels children can be said to be 'empowered' only in the weaker sense meaning 'strengthened' or 'supported', but not in the stronger sense meaning that those who hold power give up some of it in their favour' (Ibid.: 114). This statement indicates his understanding of power as something to be given away and differs from other understandings (for example Allen, 2003 and Kesby, 2007 which are explored in section 3.4.4).

Thomas (2012) suggests these models of participation above 'emerged directly from reflection on practice' (Ibid. 453), and tend to classify rather than explain. Laura

Lundy's (2007) model emerged from her desire to see the full potential of Article 12 enacted, as she sees it not as 'a pedagogical option but a legal right of children' (Tisdall, 2013: 123). For Lundy many of the concepts associated with Article 12 such as 'pupil voice, the voice of the child, the right to be heard and the right to participate' (Ibid.: 941) only partially address Article 12, with the implication that impact of Article 12 will be potentially diminished. Her premise is that this model can only be fully understood alongside other provisions of the UNCRC particularly: Articles 2, 3, 5, 13 and 19 (Lundy, 2007). The four interrelated aspects of her model are:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to.
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate (Ibid.: 933).

Lundy's model, and her explication of its various features, as Tisdall (2013) notes, 'corresponds closely with the later UNCRC Comment No. 12' (Ibid.: 123). It also, I would suggest, links both to the social and political discourses that Thomas (2007) notes regarding the theorisations of children's participation.

Lundy's model goes beyond understanding participation in the local domain. She asks us to consider who is listening, the audience, and indeed how are children's views acted upon, i.e. influence. Mannion (2010) suggests that Lundy's (2007) model of understanding participation thus '*spatialises* participation' (Ibid.: 334 italics in original). An implication of Lundy's (2007) suggestion, that to comply fully with

Article 12 the effects of participation should be broad, is that adults need to become collaborators in this process: i.e. as Mannion (2010) suggests 'she (Lundy) forces a more *relational* sense of children and adults collaborating for change' (Ibid.: 334, italics in original). Mannion (2010) himself theorises participation in both a spatial and relational manner and considers it an intergenerational practice. He suggests that 'what we call children and young people's participation is always unfolding as an intergenerational performance wherein identifications, spaces and power struggles are key' (Ibid.: 339).

For this study, this emergence of different understandings of participation, from practices which initially start to shift notions of children being *seen but not heard* to theorising founded on the premise of the relational and spatial, is helpful. It suggests the importance of adult-child relationship, of dialogue, of collaboration, of change which extends beyond the local and also importantly acknowledges that participation is not something done unto children, but something through which both adults and children are implicated: 'the creation of new dialogical intergenerational spaces of and for participation, through which new kinds of relationships, identifications and spaces for adults and children find expression' (Ibid.: 339).

However, concerns have emerged to suggest that children's participation can be driven by an adult/professional agenda (for example, Cockburn, 2007; Kallio, 2011; Reeves, 2013), where children's views are 'subsumed behind their 'real' needs of professionally defined academic achievement' (Cockburn, 2007: 448), and what is acceptable participation in adults' eyes (Kirby, 2002; May, 2005). Reeves (2013: 69)

draws attention to how possible critical and creative formative assessment practices are made acceptable or “made safe’ by simply inviting children to participate within restrictive margins’. This acceptability does not, as May (2005: 29) suggests, pay ‘equivalent regard (or acknowledgement) to how pupils potentially influence, and contribute to, their own participation’. For this study, acknowledging ‘the dialogical, intergenerational nature of spaces for and of participation’ (Mannion, 2010: 339), enables me to ask questions regarding the possibilities afforded by the relationships between adults and young people in school. Recognising that these connections, both for adults and young people, go beyond the immediate setting, and that these influences/tensions play out in the relationships that form between teachers and their students, is an important thread that this study draws upon to understand the data generated by the research.

#### **3.4.2 Participation in schools**

The term participation itself is widely interpreted (Madge et al., 2003: 3). Participatory approaches can include teaching methods (see for example, SEED, 2004) as much as structures, such as school councils, which are often said to promote student voice (see for example, LTS, 2002). However, research by Arnot et al. (2004) suggests that many adults thought the main goal of enabling students to participate was an increase in student attainment. The student voice agenda is another aspect of participation, which could be a potentially transformational development. However, it is also potentially a vehicle for upholding the performativity and control agendas, rather than democracy and rights (Fielding, 2001).



Are we witnessing the emergence of something genuinely new, exciting and emancipatory that builds on rich traditions of democratic renewal and transformation? ...Or are we presiding over the further entrenchment of existing assumptions and intentions using student or pupil voice as an additional mechanism of control? (Ibid.: 100).

Are we then in danger of losing sight of the social injustices and inequalities that are the current backdrops of our schooling system, in return for policies emphasising micro-level interventions (Bell, 2004: 3)? Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) concluded that the presence of a school council would not ensure student participation or signify different practices or affect attitudes in a positive manner (Taylor & Johnson, 2002). The NFER research did suggest that giving students a voice could assist in changing authority structures, relationships and pedagogical practices (Ibid.). However, making participation meaningful and sustainable involves a lasting change in attitudes and culture (McNeish & Newman, 2002; Sinclair, 2004).

The concept of 'voice' is rooted historically with marginalised populations, who were encouraged to speak out. This speaking was thought to have been a process of shifting entrenched power relations. The potential of voice in education was realised in the late 80s, led by Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (Cairns, 2009: 324). However, there was a lack of recognition regarding what children actually could say within an adult-led environment. This was criticised (see, for example, Cairns, 2009), and Cruddas (2007) expands on these critiques by suggesting that:

[t]he focus on voice is built on the common sense position that if one wants to know what children want, the simple and obvious solution is to ask them and they will 'give voice' to their views (Ibid.: 480).

Cruddas (Ibid.) furthers this argument by suggesting that there are some 'powerful assumptions' in this common sense position, which contribute to an absence of 'children's voice and power'. Thus, voice is 'predicated on maintaining the binary distinction between adult and child, teacher and pupil'.

In this way, the student voice movement within education seems to be struggling with criticisms similar to those targeted at the participatory development agenda, in that there is maintenance of existing power relations (Francis, 2001). It seems that there has been a certain degree of naivety when structures and ideals which aim to promote participation have been mooted. Prospective proponents of, for example, student councils have forgotten to account for the established power relationships so that these apparently enabling structures become just another mechanism of control. Bill Cooke suggests that:

Participatory approaches simplify the nature of power and therefore are in danger of encouraging a reassertion of power, social control and particular bodies of knowledge (Cooke, 2001: 141).

In terms of the student voice agenda, Holdsworth and Thompson (cited in Arnot & Reay, 2007) suggest what constitutes 'voice' depends on the discourses around the *ideal student*:

There is an ideal student in the text....who likes school, negotiates, resolves conflicts, manages their own learning and constructs knowledge. Students who have “a voice” are well behaved. Calling out, yelling or walking out...does not constitute “voice” (Ibid.: 321).

This *ideal student* discourse establishes the type of ‘voice’ that is acceptable and thus heard. Student behaviours that are contrary to the established discourses in schools are not accepted and legitimated as ‘voice’. That said, these ‘voices’ are then dealt with through control mechanisms, such as behaviour management systems, rather than participatory systems which seek to understand why such challenges are made (Simpson, 2000).

### **3.4.3 Participation, schools and schooling**

The school context, as we observe from the literature above, enables and constrains activities. This section expands briefly on some of the main themes within the research literature regarding this environment. Elliot Eisner’s (1997) axiom, about the socialisation of teachers starting at five, reminds us that, in present day western society, the majority of people will have experienced school. Whether they have received an education is a debatable point (Arendt, 1961). Wyness (2006) suggests that ‘education goes way beyond a modern Western concept of schooling’ (Ibid.: 141). However, the majority of children in western societies now experience ‘school’ as it has become a compulsory part of childhood.

This shift has led some commentators to talk of the ‘scholarization’ (Qvortrup, 1994: 12) of childhood. In industrialised countries, children, as a group of the population,

have been taken from the (paid) workforce and their time has instead been allocated to education at school in order to be productive in the future (Mayall, 2000). School work has replaced paid work as the pupil's job. The state is willing to invest in children and young people as they are seen as a future investment (James, 2010).

Compulsory schooling has certainly shaped our way of thinking about childhood. There is an expectation that at some predefined age children will attend school. The formal structures and culture of schooling have remained persistent through time. Tyack and Cuban (1995) call this legacy the 'grammar of schooling'. Its influence has 'a strong foundation in the social expectations of schooling held by both educators and the general public' (Ibid.: 134).

Compulsory schooling has enabled schools to become a 'normative reference point' for children and young people (Wyness, 2006: 154). They are labelled in the media by their schoolgirl/boy status, even when the story relates to events outside the boundary of the school. Schools are places where children and young people can be enculturated into the rules and routines, not only of the school, but also of society. Expectations can be raised and, due to the nature of the schooling environment, these can be enforced. Simpson (2000) describes a school as 'a locus of discipline, control, and power, some manifestations of which are more obvious and clear-cut than others' (Ibid.: 60). The workings of the school impose certain constraints on children and young people. An example of this is the timetable or, as Gordon describes it, the 'time-space path' (cited in Simpson, 2000: 60). The timetable is a constant temporal and spatial reminder of the control exerted over students (and

indeed teachers). How a student or teacher may act is determined by the timetable, dependent upon whether it is a formal (lesson) or informal (break) time.

Other structural forces are also apparent in schools. Uniforms, sets of rules and routines are regularly enforced through reminders on posters, in assemblies, and in letters sent to parents. These not only regulate the students, but also act on the teachers, helping to create the social and cultural map that represents schools. Simpson (2000) links much of what happens in school to embodiment. She suggests that schools regulate and control 'unruly bodies' (Ibid.: 61). This is made visible through the management of behaviour (in terms of, for example, no running, no shouting, no chewing gum, uniform etc.) in all areas of the school especially the classrooms, corridors and staircases (Ibid).

Classrooms, perhaps inevitably, can become sites of struggle for some students and teachers (Ibid.). Whether children and young people have the opportunity to play a 'formative role in adult-dominated contexts such as the classroom' (Wyness, 2006: 172) is questionable. A late student can be made by the teacher to, for example, sort out their appearance, to straighten a tie or get a tie. This consequence, seemingly unrelated to the behaviour, illustrates the play of power that is part of the context of school (Simpson, 2000; Cruddas, 2007). Alongside this overt curriculum of school is the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1992: 8) that can potentially lead to 'negative outcomes of schooling, not solely because of inept teachers, but of institutional qualities over which teachers have little control'. This is the untold discourse that encompasses schools and to which all present are subjected to (Jackson, 1992).

Wyness (2006) contends that, 'when turning to children's experiences in school, we encounter relatively clear and unambiguous lines of responsibility and authority that marginalise children's agency and powers of negotiation' (Ibid.: 141). This is an issue to consider when apparently dialogic, collaborative and student-centred ways of working are introduced into the schooling context, particularly when the purpose of such activities is to socialise. Gore (2002) suggests that 'putting students in circles, imploring students to have a voice, may be no less repressive than traditional forms of pedagogy'. This repression is based on the power relations that exist between teachers and students. How techniques are implemented and the effects of these are more important than whether they are used (Gore 2002). What we see in the literature is evidence that one particular implementation of participation is linked to the responsabilisation agenda (Davies, 2006).

#### **3.4.4 Participation and responsabilisation**

There has been substantial research that illustrates the benefits of participation and consultation for children and young people in terms of respect, self-worth, membership and agency (see Fielding & Ruddock, 2002 for a fuller description). However, as Närvänen and Näsman (2007) point out, often 'participation in the school system is seen as an opportunity that children deserve *if they take responsibility*' (Ibid.: 237). This involves linking opportunities to behaviour and uses participation as an incentive rather than as a right that young people have as citizens (Ibid.).

Davies (2006) tackles this notion of responsibility promoted in the political climate of today. She describes it as 'responsibilisation', and links it 'neo-liberal forms of

government (which) requires each individual to accept responsibility for self, but to shed any responsibility for others – except to participate in acts of surveillance and control’ (Davies et al., 2005 cited in Davies, 2006: 436). Such discourses are echoed in current Scottish curricular policy in one of the four capacities: the responsible citizen (Scottish, Executive, 2004a, see Biesta, 2013 for further discussion ).

Thus, this incentive-driven fostering of responsibility mentioned by Närvänen and Näsman (2007) seems to be predicated on an individualised, competitive environment where choices that appear are not about the system one is in – there is no choice there – but ‘[students’] power lies in their individual choices to become appropriate and successful within that (inevitable) system’ (Davies, 2006: 436).

The participation of students is also associated with respect (Cross et al., 2009). Scottish policy suggests ‘[I]f we all have a right to be treated with respect, then it follows that we have a clear obligation to treat all others with respect’ (LTS, 2002: 8). Cross et al. (2009) explore respect in a reciprocal fashion: mutual respect between teachers and students, rather than in more traditional definitions that equate respect with deference and subordination to authority (Roffery, 2006; Cross et al, 2009). Roffery (2006) suggests that ‘enforced respect is still a modus operandi, where those with undisputed authority see little reason to see someone else’s point of view if it is not in their interest to do so’ (Ibid.: 4). Relating this back to schools, we see respect as an expected response because of the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and students:

“You will respect me because I have the power here, not because I have earned respect in my relationship with you” (Ibid.: 4).

Roffery (2006) cautions that, if young people do not gain respect in schools because they do not achieve or act in socially acceptable ways, they can turn to other signs of respect (designer labels, not being messed with, being ‘hard’ and so on). This all suggests that participation, responsibility and respect are interconnected. As Gore (2002) suggests, it is the *how* and *why* of the implementation that makes a difference to the effects of participation. Narrow instrumental understandings of participation, respect and responsibility based on the asymmetrical power relationship between teacher and pupil seek to undermine potentially beneficial effects (such as democratic renewal and agency) of participation and participatory approaches (Gore, 2002).

Interpretations of ‘power’ are diverse. This study is predicated upon the view that power does not reside within someone, but those said to ‘hold’ power are simply ‘better positioned to successfully manipulate resources in order to produce effects among others’ (Kesby, 2007: 2815). Allen (2003) considers different modalities concerned with power. One such modality is associational power or ‘power with others’, which provides a different reading of power that opens up spaces where resistance, as the only response to power effects, can be challenged. This affords some hope to the power effects of participation (Kesby, 2007).

If we ask questions about the effects of participation and the language of participation, which could be obscuring managerialism, efficiency and target setting,



what do we find? Whose interests are served by encouraging students to speak up and participate? Davies et al. (2006: 40) draw our attention to the notion of 'positive passive participation'. This refers to students actively deciding not to speak up. This may be to enable others to have their say, or perhaps because they have nothing to say. Listening and facilitating the voice of others are not always valued actions in the discourses of participation (Davis et al., 2006: 40). In heeding the lessons brought from the participatory development arena, I think we need to look closely at the contexts of participation. This is important in the consideration of the achievement of agency. It reminds me that contexts are very important, and that questions about motivation and less obvious agendas need to be surfaced.

### **3.5 Concluding Comments**

Initially, when framing my study, I thought I would look at the experiences of young people of participation in their everyday schooling. However, both my pilot empirical work (reviewed in Chapter Five) and the literature above allowed me to reflect on my assumptions about the beneficial nature of participation. The changing perception of children, from passive recipients to active shapers of their environment, offers opportunities for children and young people to participate and achieve agency. The temporal, spatial and relational aspects drawn out by recent models of participation (Lundy, 2007; Mannion, 2007, 2010) implicate both adults and young people collaborating for change. However, the research outlined in this section regarding participation raises many questions about the authenticity of this participative turn. The critiques levelled at participatory approaches bring into focus the importance of power (Cooke, 2001, Morrow, 2005). So, instead of understanding

participation solely in terms of emancipation, a different meaning is alluded to, concerning participation as a form of instrumentalism based on control rather than democratic renewal (Fielding, 2001). New curricula can be proposed with far reaching aspirations (for example, Curriculum for Excellence, SEED, 2004) and with participation as an anticipated core feature, but the silences in policy and practice regarding many longstanding traditional practices, attitudes and material aspects, constrain these innovations, and open up spaces with unintended outcomes. In terms of children's and young people's participation, it can become part of the discourse of regulation (Reeves, 2013).

The literature review has illustrated that basing participation and voice on dominant childhood discourses can place constructs around what is allowed and what is heard. This could be seen as an antidote to children's rights; one that makes many adults feel more comfortable about rights for children and young people. Alongside rights come responsibilities, and what this 'responsibilisation' agenda does allow is the control of spaces for participation. Questioning who is allowed to participate is important as it can lead to an understanding which draws upon existing discourses pertaining to the *ideal student*.

The literature review has shown that the *ideal student* is a cultural construct, which is part of the environment by means of which students, teachers and parents act. The review has also foregrounded that schools are highly ordered places based on rules and routines. I discussed whether the asymmetrical power relations existing between students and teachers (children and adults) tend to result in resistance and noted that researchers have suggested that, at times, ideas such as 'authority with'

rather than 'authority over' may be the bedrock of these types of relationships. A further note of caution is introduced by Kjørholt (2002: 2) who suggests that 'children's participation is marked by the mixed motives of the adults involved and by the lack of lasting and sustained institutional practice '. The above ideas, regarding the possibility that adults have mixed motives and that institutions may lack capacity to sustain the changes made, inform the analysis of the data generated by this study and help problematise the context and the nature of relationships.

The literature and policy review help us understand that opportunities for participation, which emerge in the local school context, are framed by national discourses. These discourses are then mediated and recontextualised to accommodate local structural and cultural constraints so that the practices that are received by young people in schools can be quite different than those intended. Through the process of reviewing the literature, I moved my focus to thinking about how I could work with children and young people and ask them about their everyday experiences within the school environment. What was important to the young people? How did they experience certain classrooms? What decisions did they feel were theirs to make? Thus, whilst the young people could still discuss participation, it started from the experiences that young people drew attention to. This shift in focus left me considering the purpose of participation, its enactment and what possibilities this then afforded (Kesby, 2007). The concept of agency provided a platform from which to understand participation, giving participation back a sense of purpose based on democratic renewal, rather than narrow instrumentalism, in terms of control and target setting. The next section briefly introduces agency, and more

specifically literature on children 's agency, before discussing the theoretical concept of agency used in this study.

## 4 Understanding agency in the school context

### 4.1 Introduction

Consideration of the concept of children's agency is fairly novel but, 'once one has thought of it, it is as if it has always been there' (Prout 2000: 16). This notion of 'thereness', however, may lead to thinking about agency in an essentialist manner – something that resides within the individual (Prout, 2000; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). Prout would have us look at this issue differently and 'decentre agency, asking how it is that children sometimes exercise agency, that is bring about some effect in the relationships in which they are embedded, whilst on other occasions they do not. The observation that children can exercise agency should be the point of analytical embarkation not a terminus' (Ibid.: 16). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) discuss children's agency as if it has always been a considered concept. However, in their critique of participatory methods used with children, they caution us to be mindful of the 'ethical allure of 'empowerment', 'agency' or 'self-determination'' (Ibid.: 501). Indeed their move away from notions such as "participation', 'agency' and 'intention'' to an ontology based on "emergence', 'becoming'<sup>4</sup> and 'inexpertise'' (Ibid.: 511) for both children and adults alike, indicates how their understanding of agency is different to both that of Prout (2000) and to the ideas that agency resides within people. These contributions above are helpful to this study as they bring

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to see 'becoming' as 'something lacking, but rather in terms of *potential*' (Ibid.: 511, italics in original).

agency, and more specifically children's agency, into their discussions. However, it also begins to highlight the slipperiness in the interpretations of agency.

Understandings of agency are multiple and contested. Ahearn, in 2001, cautioned that 'scholars often fail to recognise that the particular ways, in which they conceive of agency, have implications for the understanding of personhood, causality, action and intention' (Ibid.: 112). More recently, specifically referring to children's agency, Tisdall and Punch (2012) also illustrated the complex and contested nature of agency, and argued for a 'more problematised and nuanced understanding of key concepts within childhood studies, such as agency' (Ibid.: 260).

This chapter opens up the discussion of agency. The literature review in the previous chapter discussed childhood, children's rights, schools and the many facets of participation. From my reading of the literature and policy reviews, participation can be interpreted and practised in ways which could be linked to both economic instrumentalism and democratic renewal. Linking participation to agency may provide a clear basis for the latter – a route by which participatory discourses might secure educative spaces within schools. My particular study located students' experiences in schools as the central point, and I wanted to understand how the participative turn had impacted on these experiences. The theoretical understanding of agency was key to this study, and as I was looking to understand the phenomenon of agency, rather than use agency to explain action, I ultimately looked to pragmatist thought.

Any framework chosen for analysis is open to criticism, but the possibilities afforded by particular ways of seeing also open up new lines of thought. This chapter is divided into five sections including the introduction. The next section briefly explores the question, what is agency? The third and fourth sections discuss pragmatist perspectives and the phenomenon of agency respectively. Lastly, in the concluding comments section, I consider the implications for this study.

## **4.2 What is Agency?**

Agency has been defined as 'free will' as critiqued by Ahearn (2001). Duranti 's (2004) perspective on agency suggests that agency is, 'the property of those entities that have some degree of control over their own behaviour' (Ibid.: 453). Such views potentially lead to understandings, which place agency within humans, enabling human actions which are unmediated by culture, language, discourses, environments and so forth. More nuanced definitions of agency, such as the 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001: 112) have emerged. However, such is the depth of debate concerning agency, that there are no surprises when researchers like Hitlin and Elder (2007) suggest that Ahearn's definition is 'an intentionally broad definition that is both helpful and misleading' (Ibid.: 172/3). Understanding agency as a capacity residing within people and separate from environmental influences is contentious (see, for example, Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Ahearn, 2001; Hitlin & Elder, 2007).

An enduring issue within sociology has been the structure/agency debate. This debate is less relevant to conceptions of agency that seek to understand the phenomenon rather than seeing agency as a variable in social action. Nevertheless, it

is useful to briefly describe this debate in order to help delineate the ecological view of agency from sociological conceptions.

#### **4.2.1 The structure/agency debate**

The relationship between agency and structure is a much contested site. Archer (2010) describes the tendency to privilege agency or structure as 'slippage' (ibid.: 225) and one that has gained in momentum.

Initially this meant that one element became dominant and the other subordinate: human agency had become pale and ghostly in mid-century functionalism, whilst structure betook an evanescent fragility in the re-flowering of phenomenology. Eventually certain schools of thought repressed the second element almost completely. On the one hand structuralist Marxism and normative functionalism virtually snuffed-out agency – the acting subject became increasingly lifeless whilst the structural or cultural components enjoyed a life of their own, self-propelling or self-maintaining. On the other hand interpretative sociology busily banished the structural to the realm of objectification and facticity – human agency became sovereign whilst social structure was reduced to supine plasticity because of its constructed nature (ibid.: 225).

Social determinism claims that social interactions and constructs determine human behaviour. Clegg (2005) suggests that, from this perspective, 'persons are conceived as no more than 'society's being', discursively formed and consequently having no real agency' (ibid.: 151). This highly structural view of agency can tend to emphasise



the social subjugation of the individual, rendering them 'as mere placeholders in social networks' (Mansfield cited in Billet, 2006: 60). Payne (2006) suggests that this view 'reduces the self and his or her or our lifeworld realities to a disembodied and decontextualised form of textualism, in which languages and discourses supposedly serve as a mirror in reading what it is to be a human being, doer and become' (Ibid.: 31). Does this view then lend credence to the questions posed by Fuchs (2001) that, in fact as mere placeholders, 'nothing is ever anyone's fault; no one can tell all that much about anything; fewer people actually care about anything you say or do than your vanity is willing to consider' (Ibid.: 30)?

On the other end of the continuum we arrive at highly individualised accounts of agency that emphasise 'rational man' (voluntarism). This account, Clegg (2005) suggests, 'reduces society to the individual and denies any emergent powers at the society or cultural level' (Ibid.: 151). Ahearn (2001) also warns against thinking of agency as simply 'free will', by highlighting the 'social nature of agency and the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions, beliefs and actions' (Ibid.: 114). Evans's (2002) three-dimensional depiction, using structure –agency, internal–external control and social reproduction–conversion as the axes, illustrates how some of the many different theories in this area privilege these different aspects to different degrees (see Evans, 2002 for a fuller explanation).

Other recent theorising of agency seeks to transcend these debates. For example, Giddens's (1979) theory of structuration, Archer's (2000) analytical dualism and the later work by Depelteau (2008) are examples of centrist approaches which seek to resolve this debate. Developments in the Children's Geography literature introduce

concepts such as ‘ambiguous agency’ (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012: 365) - agency exhibited by children and young people which challenges normative expectations of the behaviours and activities associated with childhood (Ibid.) – and ‘everyday agency’ (Payne, 2012: 400) - agency which highlights children’s agency that is part of their daily lives, but which is often seen as culturally and socially inappropriate. These latter developments illustrate the continuing interest in understanding the agency of children and young people. These concepts, as Bordonaro and Payne (2012) suggest, move ‘beyond current and popular debates about whether and how children and youth’s agency is acknowledged, to a discussion about what *kind* of agency is deemed appropriate for children and youth’ (Ibid.: 368, italics in original). However, whilst these concepts about *kinds* of agency seek to challenge commonly held views, they do not tease out *how* agency as a concept is theorised and so, for the purpose of this study, I now turn to a discussion of the pragmatist perspective of agency that underpins my study, and provides the theoretical basis through which the generated data is understood.

### **4.3 Pragmatist Perspectives**

This section initially gives a brief overview of pragmatism, before exploring a pragmatist understanding of agency.

#### **4.3.1 Pragmatism**

Pragmatists such as Dewey, Peirce and Mead have written across a broad range of topics, but a central tenet of their beliefs is that we are ‘active participants (practitioners) in our social worlds’ (Strauss cited in Elkjaer & Simpson, 2006).

Pragmatism, especially that espoused by Dewey, has formed the basis for a

methodology that dissolves the dualism between objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism suggests that the stuff in the world can be described in an objective manner; 'knowledge...completely of the world', whereas subjectivism proffers the notion that the stuff is human construction a product of the mind; 'knowledge...completely of the mind' (Biesta & Burbules, 2003: 11).

An alternative viewpoint (based on Dewey 's transactional realism) is to consider that knowledge is constructed, but that 'it is not a construction of the human mind, but a construction that is located in the organism-environment transaction itself' (ibid.: 11). Transactions differ from interactions. McGough (2005) explains that 'transaction puts the process first, as opposed to interaction that privileges an already existing subject' (ibid.: 101). Bernstein (cited in Elkjaer and Simpson, 2006) suggests that a 'transaction is a refinement of interaction' and that '[i]n a transaction the components themselves are subject to change' (ibid.: 9). Studying transactions, rather than interactions or indeed self-action, puts the process first. Self-action suggests that actions are internally motivated (ibid.), whereas interactions imply an 'existence of independent entities that interact' (Biesta & Burbules, 2003: 26). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) put forward a pragmatist theory of agency, which is described in more detail below.

#### **4.3.2 A temporal-relational theory of agency**

A pragmatist theory of agency was proposed by Emirbayer and Mische in 1998. This framework accounts for the temporal nature of agency, and firmly places action as occurring by means *of* the environment. It is also based on the premise that agency

is informed by the past and has a projective dimension, whilst taking into account the contingencies of the present context (collectively called the *chordal triad*).

[Agency is considered as] a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also orientated towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment) (Ibid.: 963).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) suggest three analytical dimensions, which comprise the temporal nature of agency and which they name the chordal triad. The chordal triad's three aspects are: the iterational dimension (past), the projective dimension (future) and the practical-evaluative dimension (present).

The *iterational dimension* refers to 'the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time' (Ibid.: 971). The *projective dimension* provides the space for 'imaginative generation of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future' (Ibid.: 971). The *practical-evaluative* dimension denotes the 'capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations' (Ibid.: 971). These three dimensions, the chordal triad, merge to

form the temporal phenomenon of agency, as suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). However, in this merging, there may be more or less of each dimension (though each dimension will always be present), depending on the situation: 'It is possible to speak of action that is more (or less) engaged with the past, more (or less) directed toward the future, and more (or less) responsive to the present' (ibid.: 972).

Biesta and Tedder's (2006) understanding of agency is substantially derived from the articulation of agency that Emirbayer and Mische (1998) developed. Their extension of this definition is to understand it in transactional terms and as something that is 'achieved in and through the engagement with a particular temporal-relational situation' (Biesta & Tedder 2006: 18). These authors' incorporation of the term *achieve[ment]* is important, as it clearly shifts any emphasis that agency is a capacity that resides within a person to one where it is viewed as a phenomenon:

[T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment. To think of agency as achievement makes it possible to understand why an individual can achieve agency in one situation but not in another. It also makes it possible to understand the fluctuations of agency over time, that is, in the individual's life course (Biesta & Tedder, 2007: 137).

This understanding of the variability in the achievement of agency implies that 'agency is not something people can have' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006: 19) but that it is 'something that is achieved in particular (transactional) situations [but is] not a

capacity of an individual' (Ibid.: 27). This transactional approach understands agency as a phenomenon people achieve and as a potential to act.

#### **4.4 Understanding the phenomenon of agency**

Understanding agency as a phenomenon, rather than as an explanatory variable of social action, enables a different perspective to be drawn on; one which provides distance from theories that seek to use agency rather than structure to explain social processes or vice versa (Ibid.). I was not looking for theories which explain society as a *means of accounting for social processes* (Dannefer, 2003). In such theorising, '[a]gency refers itself to an explanatory theory which proposes to understand and explain human action in terms of agentic causes' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006: 9). Instead, I was seeking to understand how agency is achieved, thus as a phenomenon to be 'described, understood and explained' (Ibid.: 9).

My study uses Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) situated temporal-relational consideration of agency, the chordal triad, and Biesta and Tedder's (2006) ecological<sup>5</sup> view (which draws substantially upon Emirbayer & Mische's (1998) theory of agency) but which also understands agency as a phenomenon to be achieved. Biesta and Tedder articulate their '*ecological understanding of agency*' as 'an understanding which always encompasses actor-in-transaction-with-context, actors acting by-means-of-an-environment rather than simply *in* an environment' (Ibid.: 18, italics in original). In this ecological understanding of agency we shift the understanding of agency from something individuals have to something individuals can achieve in

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<sup>5</sup> The main inspiration for the authors' ecological view was Dewey (personal correspondence, Biesta 2013).

transaction with environing 'factors'. Using the term ecological is important as it denotes the whole, whereas environment more narrowly comprises of the social structures, cultural realm and the material by means of which the individual transacts. In transactions, rather than interactions, we acknowledge that 'the back and forth between individual and environment is neither passive nor trite' (Boyles, 2012: 155) but that from an ecological perspective we understand the interdependency of individual and the environment. This 'relational' ecology (Lindeman, 1940) is important because if we take classrooms as environments where young people, with certain capacities, are in transaction with that environment (where to name but a few parts, teachers, cultural practices and the material come together), and we expect an educational encounter in which we are suggesting that the experience is worthwhile in an educational sense (Boyles, 2012). Seltzer-Kelly (2008: 299) importantly reminds us that 'each of the individual beings in every classroom ecosystem comes with prior adaptations and interests of its own, arrived at as a result of other pressures and experiences, and all of these individuals differences interact with each other and with the broader system of education'.

This understanding of agency accounts for the young people's past experiences (iterative) and future projections (projectivity), alongside their judgements about what is possible in the presenting situation (practical-evaluative), i.e. the chordal triad. This understanding of agency is about how young people 'critically shape their responses to problematic situations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006: 11) and so about the quality of engagement with the situation. This is not about considering that agency resides within the individual; it is something young people do, agency is achieved

and its achievement is entirely specific to the context at that time. This temporal aspect of agency is important, as it acknowledges the dynamic nature of events, and the always unique situations. This also accounts for the notion that at times agency may draw more or less from each of the dimensions of the chordal triad, whilst acknowledging that all three dimensions are always present. The ecological aspect draws attention to the physical and social environment by means of which the young person acts and how this interdependence is critical in making the achievement of agency a possibility: 'the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situation' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007: 137).

For this study, this understanding of agency enables me to foreground the uniqueness of young people in terms of the chordal triad of agency. This illustrates how experiences and dispositions rooted in the past, future aspirations and the resources available in the present environment at that particular time create a place where the achievement of agency is possible. In making this more visible it is possible to illustrate a young person's awareness of, and their capacity to engage with, a range of different possible actions, by means of that particular context, at that particular time. In this sense it is possible to suggest how the young person has achieved agency and the conditions by means of which this agency has been achieved. For this study, understanding agency in this way affords opportunities to make sense of young people's different accounts of, what might be considered, similar classroom experiences.



Working with young people in a school setting to understand the achievement of agency does not entail an interpretation that suggests I have ‘access to (their) private thought and feelings’ (Butt, 2004: 21), but instead means that, through observation and dialogue, I may come closer to understanding young people’s *lived experience* (ibid.). The achievement of agency is, thus inferred by understanding events, rather than by reading minds. We can see how social structures and the cultural realm (both explored in more detail below in sections 4.5.1 and 4.5.2) play a significant part in the formation, maintenance and transformation of young people’s lived experiences.

This way of understanding agency as achievement suggests that in the empirical situation we are always looking back, to interpret events past, to concur whether agency was or was not achieved (Biesta & Tedder, 2006: 19). In addition, the individual’s quality of engagement with a situation, is dependent on the range of possible responses which the individual is aware of and has the capacity to engage with. In this theorisation, and its use in the analysis, for agency to be achieved then, we need to be able to evidence that there had been possibilities for manoeuvrability for the individuals involved.

#### **4.4.1 Social structures**

For this study, working with this theorisation of agency, social structures and the cultural realm are part of the ecology that shapes agency. The practical-evaluative dimension of agency is constituted in social terms by social structures, the cultural realm and the material. Social structures and the cultural realm are discussed briefly below to illustrate how this study understands these two concepts.

Social structures in this study are understood in terms of a configuration of relationships and the emergent properties from these configurations of relationships (Elder-Vass, 2005). Taking this on an individual level, the particular network of relationships within which an individual is embedded at a particular time will have emergent properties. Power is one of these emergent properties from relationships, trust might be another, and this can be drawn on to enhance or constrain the achievement of agency.

On an organisational level, social structures are 'structured by a set of relationships' (Ibid.: 8) between people within the organisation. These structured relationships between people are also known as 'roles' (Ibid.: 8). Roles within organisations contain implicit rules:

Occupying a role means a) to be recognised as occupying it by other role incumbents and b) to perform the behaviours which define that role (Ibid.: 8).

Organisations are formed by those within them, as much as they act back on those within them (Ibid.). From this perspective the school as an educational organisation has properties that those who are part of them do not. Elder-Vass calls this relational emergence: 'the relation of being composed by those parts but also possessing properties they do not' (Elder-Vass, 2006: 5).

In terms of this study, the social structures that form the school are the many relationships that exist within it and those which are linked to it in other ways. Arguably the student, the teacher, the parent and the support staff form the main roles within a school. The 'roles' occupied by these are recognised through

structured relationships. From particular configurations of these relationships, power may emerge, which may be used to enhance or constrain the achievement of agency. These relationships, which young people experience in school, form part of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. The importance of this dimension on the achievement of agency will vary over space and time.

The 'roles' attributed to human actors do not exist in isolation, but are part of the context. They are part of 'figured worlds or cultural realm[s] of interpretation, in which a particular set of characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (Holland et al. cited in Bartlett, 2007: 55). Bartlett goes onto to define figured worlds as 'stable, shared, idealized realms involving identifiable character types and actions' (Ibid.: 55). Elder-Vass (2006) above suggests that 'roles' have certain behaviours attached which characterise that position. The cultural realm of interpretation accounts for the meanings that are attached to conceptual and material aspects (Bartlett, 2007) of a context. This is explored in more depth below as it links to the experiences of young people in school as they assume, for example the role of a pupil.

#### **4.4.2 The cultural realm**

The cultural realm is signified by *cultural artifacts* (Bartlett, 2007). These cultural artifacts comprise of a combination of symbolic constructs, such as words, stories and social practices that are connected to institutions (Bartlett, 2007; Elder-Vass, 2005). Labels associated with children and young people, such as 'good girls' and 'bad boys', are examples of idealised or conceptual aspects (Bartlett, 2007). The literature review highlighted that in the school setting the equivalent to the label of

good girl/boy might be the 'good student'. The school uniform is an example of a material aspect. It is not the uniform *per se* that is important but the meaning associated with it in particular contexts.

Understanding the link between the achievement of agency, and social structures, the cultural realm and the material is important. The example of the school rules can demonstrate the relationship between cultural artifacts, social structures and material aspects. School rules communicate to students (and teachers and parents) what are considered to be acceptable behaviours for students. These are certain ways of acting deemed appropriate within a particular school setting and are evoked by an idealised aspect, a cultural artifact (such as the label of the *good student*). Materially, the school rules are documented and visible throughout a school. Social structures, in the form of authoritarian relationships between teachers and students, enforce adherence to the school rules by students. The authoritarian structures maintain the school rules as much as the school rules maintain the authoritarian structures. The cultural realm, like social structures, is part of the here and now (along with the material). In terms of the achievement of agency, this forms very much part of the present; part of the practical-evaluative orientation to agency, which may vary over time and space.

#### **4.5 Concluding Comments**

This section initially summarises the findings from the 'Literature review' and this chapter. The second part showcases how the points raised in this chapter link to my overall study.

#### **4.5.1 Summary**

Chapter Three considers the key discourses concerned with childhood, children's rights, participation and schooling. The changing nature of childhood and its promotion of children as active participants in their own lives, rather than as passive retainers to be filled, opens up ideas of children's participation and agency. Alongside this, the children's rights agenda foregrounds the participation by children and young people as a key principle of the UNCRC. Global, national and local policies affecting children and young people have shifted to incorporate statements, which refer to the participation of children and young people. Education policies, and thus the schooling context, have been affected by this shift. But what is the impact on young people's experience of school? The discussion regarding participation highlights how participatory approaches, whether classroom based or school wide, can assume a technical aspect and become simply different ways of doing. These practices do not alter the underpinning values and attitudes of schooling and often leave in place the same features of control and asymmetrical relationships that have always existed. Some, for example Gore (2002), have suggested that indeed they increase the level of control, just in a more covert manner.

#### **4.5.2 Linking this back to my study**

Floden (2009) suggests that in a classroom setting, 'children's actions are affected by the classroom context and those actions simultaneously affect the context which in turn changes the effect on the child' (Ibid.: 491). In Dewey's (1938) eyes, this process forms experience, and changes in experience form learning. Learning is 'an accumulation of meanings, as a person experiences the consequences of particular

transactions' (Floden, 2009: 491). Achievement of agency, as we have seen above, is strongly linked to the context. If we take this a step further, Qvortrup (cited in Corsaro, 2005) suggests that, 'children's active engagement in their schooling (is) crucial to forces of social reproduction in modern society' (Ibid.: 232). If Wyness (2006) is to be believed in his contention that recent educational reforms do not promote the 'notion of children as social agents' (Ibid.: 161), then what kind of transactions are taking place in our schools?

In terms of this study, young people are embedded in relationships which form part of the practical –evaluative dimension of agency. The impact of the school and classroom context form part of the possibilities that schools will meet the three functions of education as espoused by Biesta (2009). Understanding how agency is achieved 'requires a focus upon the particular temporal-relational ecology of such achievements' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006: 19), and by providing such an analysis, this study could go some way to making sense of participation in the school setting.

Understanding agency as a phenomenon, and considering it in a temporal-relational manner and as something that is achieved in transactions in a particular context, does not reduce agency to something that resides within an individual. Instead, it asks us to consider the possibilities for manoeuvrability within transactions in particular situations. It is these potential possibilities, in the potential to 'critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 971), that leads to the achievement of agency by young people (see also Priestley et al., 2012). This understanding of agency is used in this study to offer a possible way to speak back to the purpose of participation. The next chapter outlines

the methodology for the study, describing the ethnographic approach undertaken in this study. This methodology was chosen because ethnography provides the opportunity to observe and be part of young people's experience of school in a way which provides a detailed understanding of the everyday (Davis et al., 2008).

## 5 Methodology

### 5.1 Introduction

In undertaking this study I have asked questions about young people's experiences in schools and how education policies prescribing participation have impacted on their daily lives. Through the literature review and pilot empirical work, the initial focus of the study changed to encompass understanding the achievement of agency by young people in their school setting, with the aim of addressing participation in terms of its purposes. I have chosen to take a pragmatist view, and with this the responsibility to understand and make a positive contribution to future practices (Keleman, 2007). Ethnographic work, with its link to the cultural and the everydayness of life, attracted me. A pragmatist ethnographer, according to Keleman, 'must show genuine interest in the future, in alternatives that may happen, and in perspectives that are not yet realised' (Ibid.: 379). However, I make no claims that my study is an ethnography, but rather that it is an approach with 'ethnographic intent' (Wolcott, 1987), where 'the purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behaviour' (Ibid.: 43).

This chapter initially considers why an ethnographic approach was chosen as a methodology for this study. It illustrates how ethnographic approaches have been used in education, and details some of the main aspects of these approaches: participants as informants, time in the field and the researcher's role. The ethnographic methods chosen for this study are then discussed. Following this is the section explaining the empirical research, which considers aspects of site and



participant selection, pilot phases and ethical considerations. The final section examines the process of data analysis and outlines the analytical tools used to understand the data with regards to the temporal aspect of agency.

## **5.2 Why Ethnography?**

Ethnography is defined as the ‘description of peoples or cultures’ (Denscombe, 2010: 79). Ethnography is about ‘understanding things from the point of view of those involved’ (Ibid.: 80). Gubrium & Holstein (2000) suggest that this type of ‘interpretive practice engages the *hows* and *whats* of social reality; it is centred on how people methodically construct their experiences and their worlds and in the configurations of meanings and institutional life that inform and shape their reality-constituting activity’ (Ibid.: 488). Tackling this research project through an entirely interpretivist-based approach has certain limitations. One such limitation, suggested by Crotty (1998: 60), is its uncritical nature towards cultural meaning. It must also be recognised, as Gubrium and Holstein (2000) suggest, that ‘people actively construct their worlds, but not completely on, or in their own terms’ (Ibid.: 488).

Biesta and Burbules (2003) link pragmatism and educational research. Zimmerman (2006) suggests that ‘in the pragmatist tradition, qualitative inquiry goes further than the analysis of discourses and biographical stories. Ideally it asks for the ethnographic moment and a ‘naturalistic’ approach to inquiry through the immersion in the life-worlds of transacting actors’ (Ibid.: 479). I wanted to find out more about young people’s understandings of their experiences in schools, and, in doing so, to treat this research like the process of schooling itself – a black box which measures only inputs and outputs (Walford, 2008: 6) – did not appeal to me. I

wanted to adopt an approach that valued the voices of participants, enabling them to bring their understandings of experiences that they had, and of observations that I made, to the research project. Roman and Apple (1990) suggest that the 'education system is implicated in processes that are connected to patterns and social relations of unequal power that permeate this society' (Ibid.: 43). Acknowledging the difference in power relations between the researcher and researched, especially in an adult-child relationship, is crucial. Here, a reading of power is much more in tune with 'a facilitating power with others' (Allen, 2003: 6) rather than of a 'power over' (Ibid.) and this signifies the shift needed to work alongside and with young people, in order to better understand their lived experiences. Thus, a dialogical approach, in which the researcher constantly checks proceedings with young people and adults and responds to their observations in a respectful manner, was a starting point. Alongside this, I needed a methodology that enabled me to be part of, and have experience of, their school life. Ethnographic approaches are useful, in that they present opportunities for the researcher and school community paths to merge throughout the research process (Wyness, 2006).

Initially, in the pilot phase, a number of visual methods attracted my attention: drawing, photo-elicitation and diaries. I soon came to the conclusion that these methods alone would not enable me to begin to understand the contexts within which students worked. I also realised that these methods could be encompassed in an overall process. Skeggs (cited in O'Toole, 2002) views ethnographic research as comprised of a number of different methods, rather than one, and as a 'theory of

the research process – an idea about how we should do research’ (Ibid.: 161). Therefore, this seemed the ideal approach for this study.

### **5.3 Ethnographic fieldwork in education**

A number of researchers have used ethnography in educational settings (for example, Hargreaves, 1967; Willis, 1977; Ball, 1981; Gordon et al., 2000; Youdell, 2006), as it can go beyond the responses found in interviews, to a more active awareness of the contexts that people populate.

My reading around the ethnographic process highlighted that respect for participants is a central part of this methodology (Smyth, 2006; Walford, 2008). Smyth (2006) also highlights other interesting points about ethnography that have assisted my decision-making around my methodology. Firstly, he noted that *interviews* are viewed as ‘purposeful conversations’ or ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1984: 84). Secondly, *data* is regarded as generated. Thirdly, the *research is located in the wider context* and it is not value-free, but subjective. Finally, the *dominant viewpoint* is surfaced.

Thus, although ethnography is utilised by researchers from different theoretical backgrounds, it can encompass all of the above. Gordon et al. (2001) suggest that postmodern approaches are problematic in education, as ‘it is difficult to remain dispassionate when studying schools’ (Ibid.: 197). I admit that I would find it difficult not to look at my study in the school setting in the hope of seeing some ‘emancipatory and democratizing social transformation’ (Roman & Apple, 1990: 42). By adopting an ethnographic approach, as my reading of the literature was leading

me, I was not confined to one particular methodological paradigm; this could emerge as the research process took shape.

It is generally agreed that ethnographic fieldwork is epitomised by the following aspects. Firstly, participants are seen as 'informants', not objects, and their accounts are given high status. Secondly, fieldwork is conducted for an extended period within the participants' setting. Thirdly, the researcher is the main research instrument and is involved in participant observation alongside other methods to generate data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Coffey, 1999; Skeggs, 2001; Walford, 2002, 2008). Using research literature, I explore my understandings of these characteristics below and how they relate to my study and how I, as the researcher, conduct myself within it. At times, my explanations may seem truncated, but this is because of the interconnectedness of these strands, and so more detail is unravelled as the sections continue. I start with explaining how the participants are viewed, as this is central to my understanding of the researched as a researcher.

### **5.3.1 Participants as 'informants'**

Ethnographic approaches value participants, not as objects of research (O'Toole, 2002), but as informants and as collaborators, even active in shaping the research design process (Sherman Heyl, 2001: 375). Giving high status to participants' accounts fitted with my stance to have their voices heard (Hudson, 2002; Walford, 2008). Raising awareness about students' understandings of their experiences within school is a political act (Walford, 2008). However, I realised that their accounts may differ from my own perceptions. In keeping with this thought, I tried to attend to the possibility that I may favour ideas congruent with my own. Being open-minded,

rather than empty headed, is key. Recognising one's own assumptions and reflecting on decisions made are essential in any research, and especially in ethnographic research (Walford, 2008). Brock (2002) advises, with reference to the question 'what is a good teacher?', to 'stop searching for evidence of your definition in every classroom, but to search for the teacher's own definition' (Ibid.: 152). Working with students is little different, and I recognised that even grasping a partial view of the student's job and their understanding of it, could offer a different way of making sense of the 'job' students do (Breidenstein, 2008), and thus their achievement of agency. Denzin (cited in Sherman Heyl, 2001) suggests that the researcher 'step(s) into the shoes of the person being studied' (Ibid.: 379). However, I have always found this notion uncomfortable. Elliot Liebow (cited in Sherman Heyl, 2001) addresses this conundrum by suggesting that it is not really possible to do this, but 'that it is reasonable and useful to try to do so' (Ibid.: 379). Understanding people in their own contexts can take time (Wolcott, 1987; Walford, 2008). The following section discusses the contentious concern about what constitutes enough time in the field, if a study is to be termed ethnography.

### **5.3.2 Time in the field**

Classic ethnographies (for example, Hargreaves, 1967; Willis, 1977; Ball, 1981) involved spending a prolonged period in the context being studied. However, the length of time a researcher needs to spend in the research context to deem it *ethnographic* is not set in stone. There seems to be some consensus that 'Blitzkrieg ethnography' (Rist cited in Walford, 2008: 10), in which the researcher spends two or three days in the field, does not class as a prolonged period of time. Getting to

know the context being studied seems crucial to ethnographic work. However, when a context seems familiar, as schools do to me due to my previous engagement with them as a student, teacher, parent, visiting NGO and external consultant, it seems more to do with making the familiar 'strange' (Delamont, 2008: 42).

It could be argued then that time in a context which is familiar could be shortened, as practices, structures and peoples' roles are already understood. It could equally be argued that the opposite is true, in that it takes time to unravel the preconceptions and experiences of the past, before being able to notice differently.

This study took a place in one secondary school in Scotland to maximise the time spent in a particular context. A single site approach, with different empirical methods, was used to provide a 'rich description' (Geertz cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2005: 33) of the lived experiences students' daily lives. I will provide more detail about the context and methods later in this chapter.

### **5.3.3 The researcher as the main research instrument**

The third aspect discussed pertains to the importance of researcher's role as the main research instrument. Clearly the time spent in the field, alongside the researcher's view that participants in the research are informants, feeds into how the researcher carries out this role.

Delamont (2002) suggests that the 'central method of ethnography is observation with the observer immersing him/her self in the new culture' (Ibid.: 8). Immersion in the field can imply an inductive method of research: one which enables the researcher to frame insights and theories from the generated data, and from which

more progressive focusing is possible as different possibilities emerge (Walford, 2008). In contrast to the inductive method, Lather (cited in Rowan & Apple, 1990: 61) suggests one of 'emancipatory theory building' where theory is used explicitly but in an open-ended fashion. This, they suggest, enables a reciprocal and dialogical approach to be taken with participants, which does not simply impose one's own theory. The distinctive nature of ethnographic work is captured by Youdell (2006: 60) who suggests that, 'the theoretical opportunities offered by ethnography are considered to be distinctive precisely because ethnographic data is generated in and concerned with context(s)'. Youdell (Ibid.: 60), citing Miller, goes on to note 'that theoretical developments derived from ethnographic study are able to "speak to issues of everyday life and practice"'. This was something that I hoped this study might do and one reason why my study adopted an ethnographic approach.

England (1994) suggests that field work is 'a dialogical process, in which the research situation is structured by both the researcher and the person being researched' (Ibid.: 247). This way of working creates opportunities for the research to be transformed by the opinions of the researched (Ibid.: 248). Our interpretations and understandings of the field are influenced by our own biographies, and indeed our presence in the field also affects the participants.

[T]he everyday lives of the researched are doubly mediated by our presence and their response to our presence (Ibid.: 248).

Well-structured research does not mitigate the assumptions we take to field work. Usher (1996) suggests that, 'research designs with good intentions are no guarantee

about good outcomes, and all we can do is to reflect endlessly on how our value commitments insert themselves into our work and how our own understandings need to be critically examined so that we understand our own tensions and contradictions' (Ibid.: 139). Reflexivity is important here, as is the acknowledgement that the account that I write is 'partial – an edited and abridged version, which owes something to the ethnographer (me) as well as the culture or events observed' (Denscombe, 2010: 86).

For me as researcher, immersion in the field enabled me to be part of the environment and to experience the day to day routines – the humdrum - of school life. Taking on the 'emic' or insider's view of reality is only ever partial (Ibid.). Seeing and experiencing is unintentionally filtered. Two researchers, Cahill and Collard (2003), note from their research that:

[..] she'd often notice something I failed to see, and vice versa. This was not a case of looking in different directions at the time. Rather, it was a case of looking through different cultural screens (Ibid.: 216).

Other research by Erickson (2007), about teachers watching classroom practice found that due to their own narratives of 'normal' practice teachers attended to what was perceived by them to be lacking, as much as to what they noticed as different. These two different examples highlight the subjective nature of observation and interpretation and it is easy to see how the texts of ethnographies may hold autobiographical elements (Riemer, 2012).



Etic perspectives consider 'the external, social scientific perspective on reality' (Fetterman cited in Riemer, 2012: 165). From this view, Riemer suggests that 'the ethnographer must remain open and non-judgmental about the actions and beliefs of the social group under study, while making these understandings and practices intelligible to outsiders' (Ibid.: 165). I am not convinced about the definite delineation between insider/outsider. I feel that in my particular ethnographic study, due to my biography, I was a partial insider and a partial outsider. I relied on the participants to draw me into their understanding and others elsewhere to challenge my sense-making.

What I do believe is that 'noticing' anything in the field is challenging and needs constant work. Deep-seated beliefs, assumptions, and our variable subjectivities need disrupting, and reflecting on, in order to see 'differently' (Peshkin, 1988). What we make of particular observations affords different possibilities for 'noticing' in the future (Mason, 2002).

Being a research instrument is no straightforward task. The constant reflecting and revising of actions and interpretations is challenging. Perhaps more challenging is the personal nature of fieldwork. Hiding behind a professional screen, leaving the personal at home, is not an option (England, 1994). Bringing the baggage of biography along may not only enhance, but could hinder insights in the field (Ibid.). However, the 'reciprocal research alliance' (Ibid.: 88) between the researcher and the participants offers a partial safety net in ethnographic work, as does the employment of a range of other methods.

The next set of sub-sections detail the range of ethnographic methods employed in this research. Walford (2008) reminds us that 'a study that relies on interviewing only cannot reasonably be thought of as ethnographic' (Walford, 2008: 9). This study included ethnographic interviewing, but also relied on other classic methods such as field notes and participant observation. I also chose a more structured method of participant observation, that of *shadowing* (Quinlan, 2008). I found the latter particularly suited in the school context, due to the timetabling constraints of each student.

By discussing this range of methods below, I illustrate how these methods enabled me to generate data pertinent to the research study. Each of these different aspects of data generation provided insights into the culture and lived experiences of the young people in this school.

#### **5.3.4 Participant observation**

Participant observation, like ethnography, has variations 'covering several combinations of participation and observation' (Gans, 1999: 540), but what makes it unique is that 'it allows researchers to observe what people do, while all the other empirical methods are limited to reporting what people say about what they do' (ibid.). This is an interesting distinction, setting observation apart from other aspects of my fieldwork such as interviewing. As Gans (1999) points out, the balance of participation and observation varies. This could be seen on a covert-overt continuum, with categories of 'complete participant', 'participant-as-observer', 'observer-as-participant' and 'complete observer' (Spradley, 1980; Burgess, 1984).

In my study, the students knew I was observing, so I was an observer-as-participant. At times, when for instance I accompanied a group of students on a walk around a lake, I was perhaps more participant-as-observer. On one occasion, a teacher suggested I assist her in the lesson. I declined, knowing this would change my position in the school from researcher to something else. To observe students' daily school life meant following their timetable. From this perspective, my observations became more structured and more akin to the shadowing method described in the next sub-section.

### **5.3.5 Shadowing**

Shadowing is said to be a form of observation that is more structured than participant observation (Quinlin, 2008: 1483). It offers the possibility, 'when used in an interpretive vein', to provide 'rich, thick descriptive data based on actions and explanations for those actions' (Ibid.: 1483). The students provided me with their timetables and I followed their day wherever possible. At times I was in classrooms with two or three of the research participants, at other times there was just a single participant. This variety provided insights into how these students interacted in these different classroom contexts.

The participant observation and the more specific shadowing, both of which I recorded in my field notes (see section 5.3.7), formed part of the basis for the interviews subsequently carried out with the students. Reflecting on the underpinning values of ethnographic interviewing in section 5.3.6, I illustrate why I chose this method and how it is in keeping with the purpose of the study: to understand better how young people achieve agency.

### **5.3.6 Ethnographic interviewing**

My ethnographic interviews adopted a semi-structured, conversational approach, giving the 'opportunity to develop reciprocal, dialogic relationships based on mutual trust, openness and engagement' (Bishop & Glynn, 1999: 109). This process treats subjects as active agents instead of objectifying them. The interviews were loosely based on observations made in the field, which I wanted to explore in more depth with students. That said, I think it is useful to take heed of Silverman (1989: 218), who warned that researchers must 'avoid treating the actor's point of view as an explanation', as it could be 'shaped by unreflective, conventionalised understandings'. However, their views form part of what Bishop and Glynn (1999: 124) term 'collaborative storying'. Negotiating meaning with the students about observations made in the field, through a series of interviews, can help build reciprocity (Lather, 1991). With this in mind, some of the students agreed to be interviewed formally more than once. Other students preferred more informal conversations, and so I explored some of my perceptions with them in this way. The students' biographical data was mainly generated in the formal interviews.

The formal interviews were voice-recorded. The students were always part of this process. They could activate the machine if they wanted, turn it off or listen to something they had just said, and at times they chose to do so. The more informal conversations were recorded in my fieldwork notes as soon as was feasible after the dialogue took place. The importance of fieldwork notes is explored below. I found them to be an invaluable tool in generating data and reflecting on the study.

### **5.3.7 Fieldwork notes/ diary/journal**

Part of the ethnographic toolkit is the notes made when in the field. Delamont (2008) suggests that good field notes carefully record what is happening, rather than judge the situation. She also suggests that, in recording, it is useful to sketch the room and note: wall displays, furniture and its place and condition, sounds and times (ibid.).

A journal also allows for the feelings of the researcher to be noted (Peshkin, 1988). This can help inform a more reflexive approach to the research practice. It has been suggested that reflexivity needs to occur in the realm of the 'personal' (Usher, 1996: 37). Surfacing assumptions and reflecting on personal values and biases are necessary in any research, but especially in ethnographic research (Denscombe, 2010). Subjectivity is an issue throughout the entire research process (Peshkin, 1988). Dealing with this, by attending to personal subjectivities as they surface by recording them, is one method which I found helpful. This type of record enables one to be aware of these feelings, whilst performing and then writing up the research.

My field notes were recorded in large A4 jotters. Following Delamont's (2008) advice, I drew pictures of the arrangements of the rooms and took notes of the time, the ambience and the materials displayed. I did, in places, record my thoughts on the lesson and how I was feeling at the time of recording.

Thus, a combination of participant observation, specific shadowing of students, interviewing and field notes provided me with a way of experiencing a student's

school day and making meaning of it with the students. Breidenstein (2008) suggests that, ‘the practices that shape a pupil are too deeply rooted and too implicit to be recognised by the participants themselves. They may however, be recognised by the observer’ (Ibid.: 1). This iterative cycle enabled me to explore their own ideas about their experiences alongside mine. This was an advantage of the single site approach, in that I could spend an extended time on site and thus constantly reflect and revise meanings (Stake, 2000). I would also argue that this dialogical method allowed me to discuss different understandings and meanings with students and gain a depth of understanding that would be missing if interviews were the sole source of information. The summary of methods is shown in table 1 below.

**Table 1: Summary of methods**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Observations</b>
Participant Observation	Observation of context: physical, material, temporal and social.  Different aspects the school which contribute to cultural norms, etc.
Shadowing students	Following a particular student’s timetable for that day. Observe and take field notes
Interviewing students	Semi-structured interviews finding out more about student’s biographies and exploring some of my observations with them in more depth.
Field notes	Record the physical, material, temporal and social aspects of the site. Record the transactions.

#### 5.4 Summary of the methodology

In this chapter thus far, I have discussed the choice of methodology underpinning my research. I do not claim 'ethnography'; perhaps, on reflection, 'ethnographic intent' (Wolcott, 1987) might be a more apt description. Wolcott (Ibid.) suggested that 'ethnography is **not** a field technique, the length of time in the field or simply good description created through gaining and maintaining rapport with subjects' (Ibid.: 37). He did suggest that the 'purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behaviour' (Ibid.: 43). I find this framing of research as *with ethnographic intent* helpful as it fits most closely with my research questions and my theoretical leanings regarding agency. Understanding the achievement of agency requires an understanding of the context through which agency is achieved. The cultural realm is an important part of this study, for which research with an ethnographic intent is a fitting methodology. The ethnographic methods explored above thus formed the research methods in the empirical phase of my study.

The final empirical phase of this study emerged from the three short pilots, previously carried out in three different secondary schools. The school, which hosted the final pilot phase, became the research site. The next section describes the empirical phase of this research. Initially it considers the pilot phases, followed by the selection of the final empirical site, and finally discusses the process of student selection and the time and purpose of work in the field.

## 5.5 The Empirical Research

### 5.5.1 Access and Site selection

Choosing a school where my presence as a researcher would be accepted and within which I would find young people willing to take part was problematic. My first two pilot phases in two different schools in Scotland were interesting and provided me with valuable insights into the types of approaches I might use. The results of the pilot phases are represented in *figure 1*. I did not perform my research in either of these two initial schools, due to changing timetables and the insecurity of teachers' jobs, which meant that the imposition of a researcher, on top of already demanding and stressful situations, was not helpful.

I visited the third school (school 3) on an invitation from a teacher associated with a University. The school was set in Scotland, in a socially disadvantaged area. It had a comprehensive intake, comprising of local students predominantly residing in social housing through to relatively more affluent students travelling in from more rural areas. The teacher, who invited me, was running a project that trained students to become peer tutors. Becoming a peer tutor invited students to participate in a manner different to that which they were accustomed. These students taught other students about Anne Frank<sup>6</sup> by being a tour guide. The students were chosen by the teachers and they tended to be the more academic students.

The school's comprehensive catchment meant it provided, at the time of the research, alternative curriculum opportunities to cater for the needs of the students.

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Frank (1929-1945), a Jewish victim of the Holocaust, who wrote a diary of her experiences, whilst she was in hiding with her family, in occupied Holland.



Programmes run by the Prince 's Trust (xl club)<sup>7</sup>, courses provided by the local college and in-school projects run by the local authority to enhance employment skills were featured in the curriculum.

I started my involvement with the school in the summer term of 2009. The students involved with the Anne Frank project were in S3<sup>8</sup>. These students formed the third part of my pilot phase.

This school, with its diverse range of students and its differing curricula opportunities, provided an interesting setting in which to base my research. Two of the students, who had participated in the Anne Frank project, volunteered to be part of the next stage of my study. The Head Teacher was happy to accommodate fourteen days more research in this final phase, provided I secured a disclosure from the local authority.

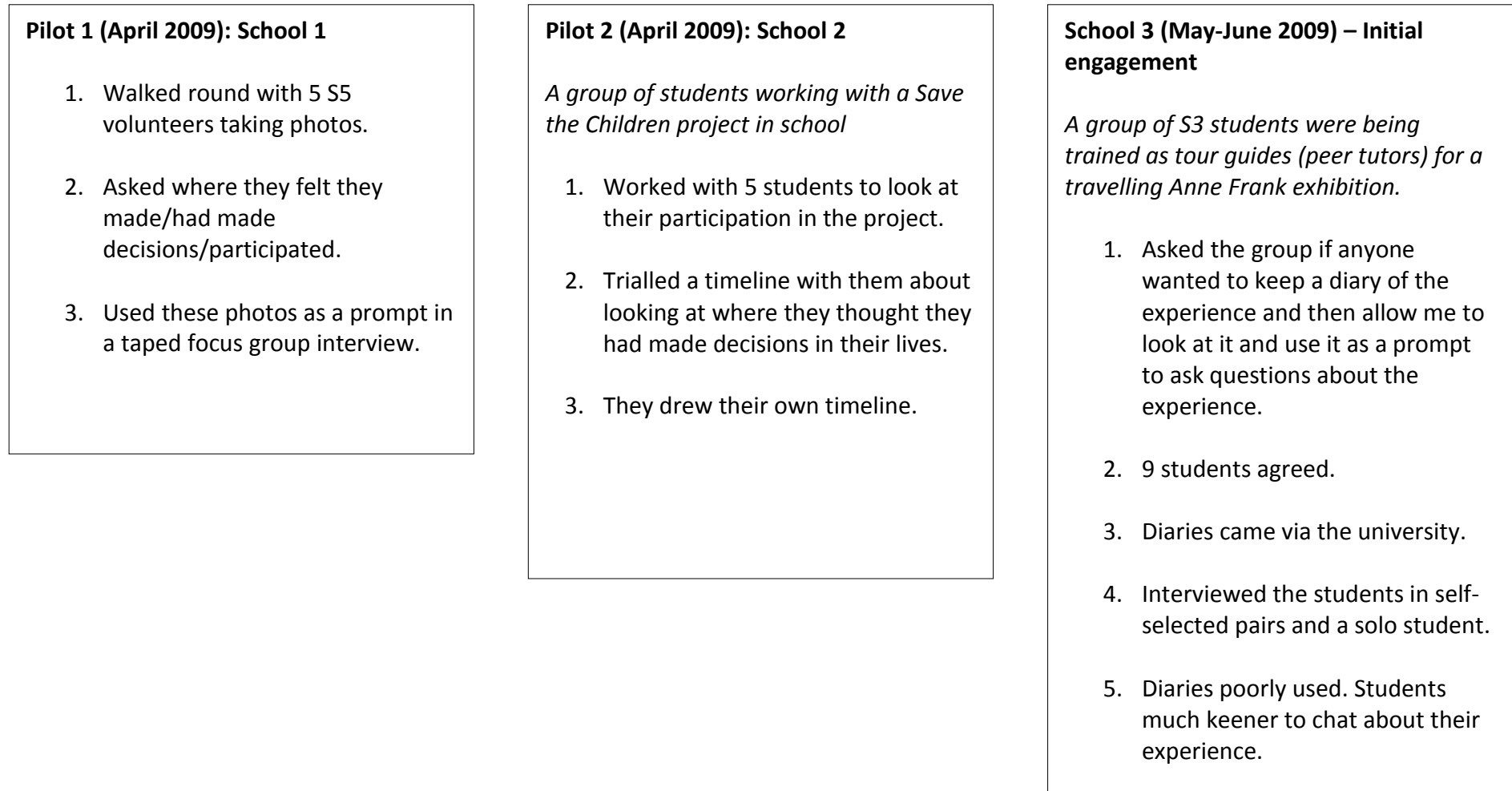
Figure 1 briefly illustrates the three pilot phases. Following this is a reflection on the learning I took from these pilot phases and how these reflections led me to the main part of my study.

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<sup>7</sup> Prince's Trust xl clubs are a national programme. The structure is set up to provide a personal development programme for young people aged 13-19 at risk of underachievement or exclusion from school. The aim is to enable young people to make decisions and be supported to develop their own projects which are accessible and relevant. The club hopes to provide both skills and personal confidence for the young people taking part. The ethos that the clubs are based on is one of informality and inclusiveness. Existing school staff members provide support in the role of an Advisor to the young people taking part. Clubs are expected to run in a more informal manner by staff within the school who is termed an Advisor (Prince 's Trust, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> S3 represents the third year at secondary school. S1-S4 is the compulsory secondary phase. The students in S3 are between 14 and 15 years olds.

**Figure 1: Pilot Phases**



### 5.5.2 Brief conclusions from pilot phases detailed in Figure 1

The young people found it difficult to articulate where they had participated in school. This realisation led me to conclude that 'participation' *per se* was not an easy concept for young people to articulate. Students found it easier to describe specific instances of 'participation', but these seemed quite superficial and, without having an understanding of the context, it was problematic for me to ask meaningful questions. It became apparent that it was the underlying purpose of participation, and what that enabled, that interested me. However, to research this, I needed to understand more about students' lived experiences in school.

In the pilot phases in schools 1 and 2, I interviewed two teachers and conducted two focus group interviews with young people. In the pilot phase of school 3, I recorded five interviews of approximately thirty minutes each, and had three out of nine diaries returned to me.

These pilot phases of empirical research formed an iterative cycle with my reading of the research literature. My initial trials confirmed my growing suspicion that I needed a different way of conceptualising the purpose of participation and what participatory approaches might afford. Working with the literature and this early empirical work, the concept of agency became the focus of the study. More specifically, this involved understanding how students achieve agency in the school context. This, I felt, offered opportunities to speak back to participation and give it back some meaning. I considered that the empirical research needed to explore the humdrum of school life – the day-to-day realities of being a student in a secondary school – to try and understand where, when and how students achieve agency.

The next section describes the main phase of the empirical work, explaining the student sample, the teachers who were inevitably part of the study, the contact information and the ethical considerations involved in this type of study.

### **5.5.3 Main phase of empirical work**

The main phase of the empirical work was carried out in the autumn term of 2009 and spring term of 2010. The complete student sample of six was identified by the end of the autumn term. All of these students volunteered to be part of the study. Resources limited this piece of research to one site. I aimed to follow Silverman's advice (2000: 100) in writing 'a lot about a little', whilst acknowledging that questions which rose from this setting could offer others different ways of understanding, and different possibilities for their own settings. Using one site and a small number of case studies in that site allows for depth, but not particularly breadth, and this was tension that I accepted (Flyvbjerg, 2004).

### **5.5.4 Student selection**

The nine students, who initially participated in the pilot phase of the study, were young people who had been trained as peer tutors for the Anne Frank exhibition. These students were all taking History at Standard grade<sup>9</sup> and had been selected by their teachers to train as peer tutors. Having interviewed these young people, I realised that, in order to understand their achievement of agency in the school setting, I would benefit from experiencing their school day with them. This type of involvement is time-intensive, but it provides an opportunity to build up a relationship with students and thus generate rich, thick data. The sample size of students for this type of study was therefore kept small.

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<sup>9</sup> Standard Grade qualification taken by students in Scotland in S3 or S4: At levels 3, 4 or 5 on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

Working with too big a sample size would not generate this type of data in the access time available. Other similar studies (for example, Kane & Maw, 2005; McIntyre et al., 2005) worked successfully with five or six students, and so I followed their lead.

At this point, having considered the sample size, I turned my attention to the young people who might wish to be participants. Two of the young people, Karen and Russell from the pilot phase, were keen to continue to be participants and volunteered to be shadowed and interviewed again. These two students were in many of the same classes and at the same attainment level (credit)<sup>10</sup>. To observe a greater variety of classroom experiences and mirror more closely the heterogeneity in the student population, I wanted to work with a more diverse range of young people (Cohen et al., 2000). The sampling technique of 'snowballing' (Ibid.: 102) and the process of 'purposive sampling' (Ibid.: 103) enabled four more students to volunteer to be participants.

The example of 'snowballing' occurred when I was shadowing Karen and I met and spoke with other students in her classes. Many of these students were curious about my presence. One student, Janet, expressed an interest in the study and volunteered to take part. Janet had a slightly different timetable to Karen and Russell.

I used the 'purposive sampling' technique in the choice of the final three students. The school ran an alternative curriculum provision and, as part of this, there was a Prince's Trust xl group. In the staffroom, during my pilot phase, and the continuation of the research into the autumn term, I met a number of different teachers. One of these teachers worked with the young people in the S4 cohort of the xl group. This group had just received their bronze

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<sup>10</sup> Standard Grade Credit level taken by students in Scotland in S3 or S4: At level 5 on the SCQF

award from the Prince's Trust. I took up an invitation to visit the group during one of their sessions to explain the research in case any of the young people were interested in volunteering. Three young people, Leanne, Tracey and Rachel from this Prince 's Trust xl group, volunteered to be part of the study.

These final six young people allowed me to shadow them for at least a day. It must be noted that, when I was shadowing one young person, it would not be uncommon for me to see one or more of the others. This tended to be more compartmentalised than it sounds in that, if I was shadowing a student from the xl group, I would generally only see other young people from the xl group, and vice versa. My sampling procedure enabled me to experience a wide range of classes in a number of different subjects. The students were all in S4 and aged between 15 and 16 by the end of the empirical period of the research. However, what it did not produce was an even split by gender. There were five girls and one boy. There was no selection of gender; I simply asked for volunteers and these were the young people who were interested and returned their consent forms.

#### **5.5.5 Time in the field**

In this final phase of the empirical work, I spent fourteen days shadowing, interviewing and observing students. I conducted a total of twelve recorded interviews lasting from ten minutes through to fifty minutes. All of the students took part in at least one recorded interview. These were done either in pairs or alone depending on the students' wishes. Other conversations, which were more informal, were recorded in my notebook at an appropriate juncture. The interviews with students in the latter stages of the research lasted longer. There were four formal interviews with teachers in this set. Table 2 details the contact information regarding the six students who participated in the main part of the

research. It illustrates briefly: how initial contact was made, when and the reason for it; how many times the students were shadowed (split into full and part days); and how many taped formal interviews; and whether these were undertaken in pairs or solo.

**Table 2: Contact information**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Initial Contact: Date and reason</b>	<b>Shadowing</b>	<b>Taped formal Interviews</b>
Russell	June 2009: Anne Frank tour guide	Full <sup>1</sup> x 2 day Part <sup>2</sup> day x 2	Individual x 3 Paired (with Karen) x 1
Karen	June 2009: Anne Frank tour guide	Full x 1 day Part day x 2	Individual x 1 Paired (with Russell) x 1
Janet	October 2009: In same maths class as Russell and Karen	Full x 1 day Part day x 2	Individual x 1
Leanne	December 2010: Prince 's Trust xl group	Full x 3 Part day x 2	Paired (with Rachel) x 1
Rachel	December 2010: Prince 's Trust xl group	Full x 1 Part day x 2	Paired (with Karen) x 1
Tracey	December 2010: Prince 's Trust xl group	Full x 1 Part day x 3	Individual x 1

**Note:** Full<sup>1</sup> – full school day Part<sup>2</sup> – a morning or afternoon

The management team of the school was very accommodating regarding my presence, which enabled me to work flexibly, depending on the situation arising. Variations occurred

due to trips, tests and absent students or teachers. In the case of formal tests and absent teachers, my presence as a researcher was not welcomed. I did accompany students on a trip to the local park, was invited to attend final drama performances for exams, and was welcomed at a workshop run by students from another school for the XI club. This flexible way of working enabled me to see different aspects of school life that were part of the students' day.

### **5.5.6 The Fieldwork**

The research method of participant observation anticipates that the researcher is not bound by a specific hypothesis or pre-existing theoretical framing (Gillham, 2008; Denscombe, 2010). My initial observations in school were 'holistic' (Denscombe, 2010: 208) as I tried to get a feeling for this particular school. I took note of the physical layout of the buildings, the place, movements and activities of the teachers and students, the interactions and the noticeboard displays. From this, and speaking with students and staff, my observations became more focussed. The peer tutoring activity that some students participated in led me to observe the types of pedagogical methods that teachers employed in their lesson.

In dialogue with the students, we agreed which days they would like to be shadowed. The students had no objections to any day, but did inform me of activities, which were different, which they thought I might like to observe. The students gave me a copy of their timetable and I met them at the start of their day and accompanied them to their different lessons. In shadowing the students I was able to compare and contrast different physical layouts (including wall displays, technology, and teacher and student places), different classroom activities and the different ways in which the teacher interacted with the students. I often wrote field notes during my observations in the school. At times I wrote these in the



classroom. These written observations acted as a reminder regarding the flow of the lesson. I would record: the subject and time of day, the number of students, the physical layout of the classroom, students' and teacher's positions and interactions, and the type and length of activity undertaken and instructions given. I would also record if people entered or left the room. I kept these notes factual in that they were a record of what I had observed. I did not record names of any students that had not agreed to be part of the research. I was quite prepared to show the students the notes I took in their lesson, however none of the students asked, or even commented on my note taking.

At times it was difficult to make notes. This was due to various factors, for example, lack of space, classroom activities, teacher disposition, and so forth. In these cases I tried to take notes as soon as was practical. I was able to access either a staff base or the staff room to do this. In the evening following my observations I would make more detailed notes.

The ethnographic interviewing enabled me to ask students questions based on this shared experience of the classroom and school life. I initially asked the students about the lessons I had observed, inquiring about those particular lessons, whether they liked that subject, was that how it was usually taught and about choices within it (for example, where they sat and with whom). This often led into a discussion about subjects they liked and why, future orientations and aspirations, and pedagogical strategies they experienced. The comparison with primary school emerged from these discussions, as did their feelings about this school as a place and space. I attended career lessons with some of these students so discussions about, past and present work experience, and general hopes and dreams for the future emerged from our discussions. The students referred to their lives beyond the physical school to explain and expand their discussions.

### **5.5.7 Teacher involvement**

The teachers who form part of this study were not selected, but were part of the students' timetables. I spoke with many of these teachers informally during class time and outwith. I recorded four formal interviews with a range of teachers because aspects of their practice interested me at the time. However, I have not used these in the final part of this study. I have described incidents in certain lessons, not to implicate participants (see Sikes, 2012, for further discussion), but to assist in our understanding of the achievement of agency. All participants' identities remain anonymous (through use of pseudonyms), as does the school.

I spoke with each teacher before entering the classroom, to ensure that they had no objections to my presence. All the teachers were very welcoming, though at times I struggled to get out my notebook for fear of putting them off. Sometimes, when in one part of the classroom, I would be invited to look around at other aspects and talk with other teachers.

There were many teachers in the staffroom at break who, over my free cup of coffee, chatted to me and allowed me to be part of their conversations.

## **5.6 Ethical Considerations**

In undertaking this research, I adopted the principles of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2011). Working within a school context required a number of procedures to be followed in order to fulfil these: informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, child protection, potential dissemination of research and recognition of participants' contribution. The issue of informed consent is difficult. However, I sought to involve the students in the research process and thus work was done prior to the

commencement of the study to illuminate the research more fully and enable students to provide as fully informed consent as possible. Students were provided with a written letter explaining the research. This was signed by them and their parents. The research was also explained face-to-face in a meeting with the students. The teachers in the school also had access to my research information, were asked for consent, and were the final arbiters as to my presence in their classrooms. Conversations with teachers outside the classroom have not been reported in this research, although they clearly informed my developing understanding of the context. I have, on occasion, reproduced a few words that teachers spoke in the classroom to the class as a whole. This is to illustrate a point pertinent to the context and thus to the question of achievement of agency by students in school. Shadowing as a research method meant exposure to many students who had not agreed to participate in this research. In order to respect their anonymity I did not record any of their names or use any data that could potentially cause the students harm or lead them to be identified. That said, there are instances in this study where I talk, in general, about other students' behaviours in order that the environment can be more fully understood.

In order to work in the school, I was made aware of, and followed, the school's child protection guidelines. I completed an enhanced disclosure form before I began any work with students. I made the students aware that anything that they said to me was confidential unless I felt there were concerns regarding harm to themselves or others. That said, I realise the importance of involving young people in the child protection process, of listening, being non-judgemental and informing them of the next steps. I am aware that the child protection process can be disempowering for some students, but in order to secure access to the school I needed to conform to these processes. There are many grey areas

concerning child protection and so I made myself aware of the support offered in school if a young person became upset, for example when talking about bullying. No child protection concerns arose during my research. In previous discussions with the school, my supervisor at the university and in line with best practice, if this issue had arisen I would have discussed it with the appropriate person at school and at the university and followed their advice. If I had had to take such action I would have informed the young person that I was going to seek advice following their comments and feedback to them as appropriate.

I had considered the possibility of having concerns about, or observing behaviour, which could be potentially problematic. Prior discussions, with university tutors and the school, had led me to the course of action in which I would not interfere unless I thought there was an immediate risk of serious harm. That said there were no issues which fell near this category when I was observing.

My research enabled me to enter many different classrooms and allowed me to talk to a number of different people. I did not discuss these conversations, or my observations with others in the school or surrounding community. I did not use the names of students, teachers or the name or location of the school in any of my subsequent notes and discussions. In this way I kept conversations and observations confidential. In writing up the study I have tried to ensure that anonymity has been upheld regarding the school and thus those within it. I believe that when undertaking research debates about ethical issues should be central to the research process and not just a matter (although these are important issues) of consent, anonymity and confidentiality. There is an increasing literature on ethical practice with children and young people (for example, Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Underlying my thoughts about ethics are the ethical principles explored by Beauchamp and

Walters (cited in Greig & Taylor, 1999: 146) of autonomy, beneficence and justice, which provide a basis for our behaviour in all aspects of our professional and personal lives. Students participating in the research were asked each time for their consent when I shadowed them. When I wanted to record an interview, I did it at a time and in a place which they found comfortable. In one instance, a student wanted to stay in class and watch the film, and so we rescheduled the interview. The students were also asked if they wanted to be interviewed in pairs. Working in this fashion enabled me to constantly check out if the students still wanted to participate, or indeed if they wished to withdraw. It also enabled me to gauge how the students were feeling, for example, considering their emotions in case I needed to reconsider my presence, questions and so forth. I always asked each teacher for their consent to my presence. No teachers refused me entry, though several told me they were 'not doing very much'.

During the course of the research I adopted Denscombe's (2010) ethical ideas which suggest that, '(1) any use of the material should ensure that no one suffers as a result and (2) any use of the material should avoid disclosing the identities of those involved' (Ibid. : 209). Thus the participants and the school in this study remain anonymous and I have reflected on the information written to try and uphold these principles. In a practical sense, the brief biographies in Chapter Six have been truncated to preserve anonymity and the information regarding the school purposely remains generic.

Janesick (1998) suggests that, 'participants in the study want their voices to be heard and do not want to be abandoned after the research project' (Ibid.: 62). The nature of this research project was one in which repeated contact was built in, and the completion of this thesis provides a form of recognition for their invaluable contribution to this research.

## **5.7 Process of analysis**

This final section of the chapter explores the process of analysis of the generated data. It provides an overview of how the data was themed and a discussion regarding the tools used for the analysis.

Two of the questions posed at the start of this study were directly linked to the empirical data generated. The two questions are:

1. How is the achievement of agency experienced by young people as students in schools?
2. How can we better understand young people's achievement of agency?

To address these questions, three lines of analysis, which were generated by the review of agency in Chapter Four, are explored:

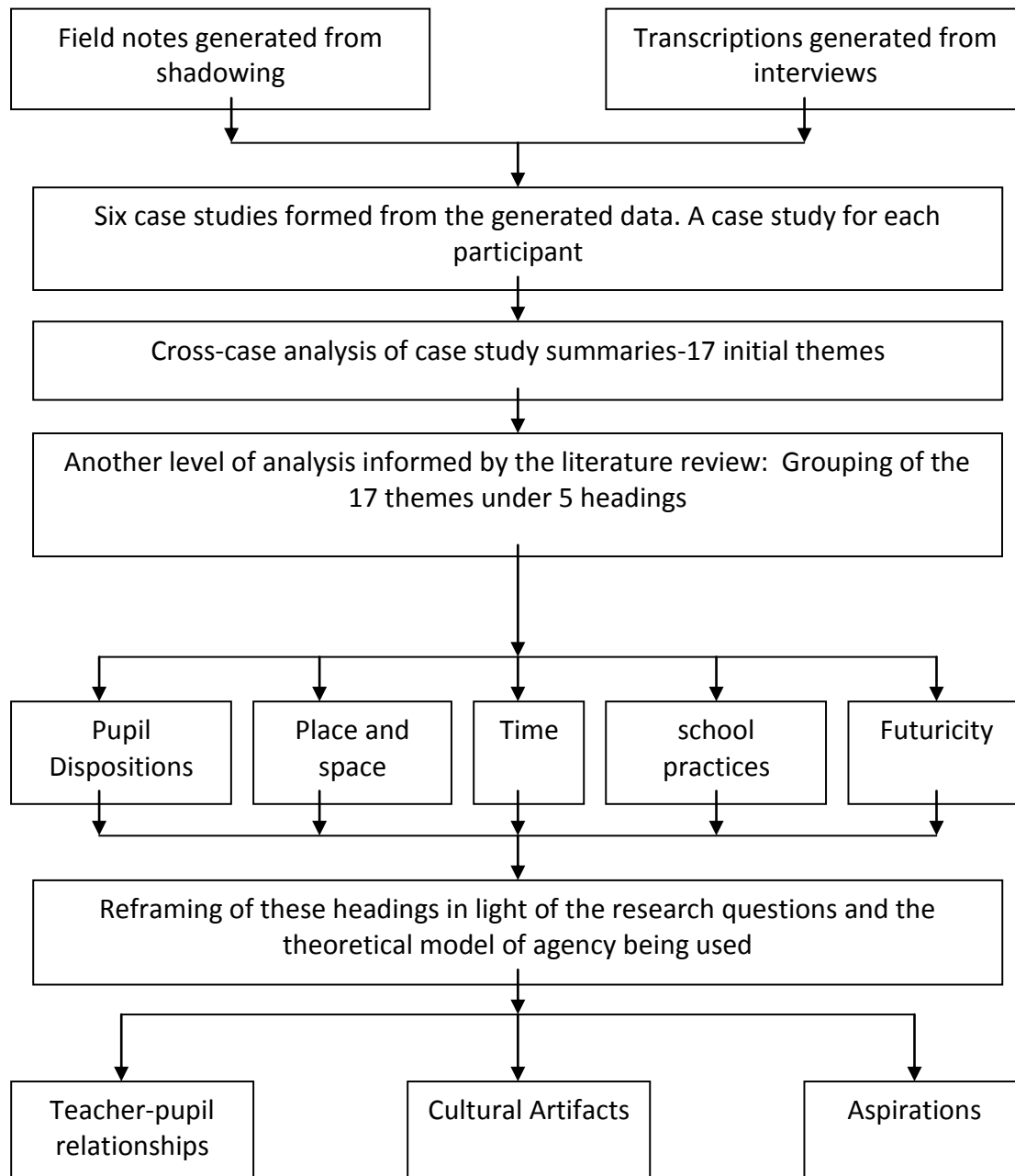
1. Analysis of the context – social structures (relationships) and the cultural realm[s] of interpretation (social practices, ideologies, material artifacts)
2. Analysis of the individual – agency conditioned by the possibilities of the present (the practical-evaluative), taking into account past experiences (the iterational) and future orientations (the projective).
3. Recognition of the temporal condition of agency

### **5.7.1 Analysis of generated data**

The analysis of the generated data took the following form and, although the description below sounds linear, the process was iterative at all stages.

Firstly, six case study summaries of approximately 6,000 words were generated, one for each of the student participants in the study. This data came from field notes and taped interviews. Secondly, different levels of interpretation took place. I used coding as a tool to analyse the data. It is recognised that 'any level of coding is analysis' (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 54). I initially used simple coding or 'descriptive' coding (Ibid.: 55). By reading one case study, certain codes emerged. Subsequent readings of the other case studies either, provided more data for the initial codes, or provided more codes and a re-examination of the initial ones (Ibid.). The cross-case analysis of all six of the case study summaries provided seventeen emerging codes: teacher/pupil roles; teacher/pupil relationships; recognition from teachers is highly valued; behaviour; uniform; participation in lessons; physical set up of rooms; time – control of students/ timetable/ leave lessons etc.; bullying; exceptional opportunities (Anne Frank, Award ceremony, school trips); geographical constraints on future choices; family background; friends; aspirations; curricula choices beyond S4; work experience; and thoughts on school. An iterative process of engagement with the research literature and re-reading of the data led me to map the codes (Ibid.: 71). This map allowed me to thematically group these codes under five headings. These headings were: Pupil Dispositions; Place and Space; Time; 'Routinisation of school practices' (Gordon et al., 1999: 694); and Futuricity. At this point, I began to consider the theoretical framework of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the chordal triad, alongside the generated data, to help make further sense of it. This process ran iteratively. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Analysis of data**



### **5.7.2 Tool for analysis: The chordal triad (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998)**

The chordal triad consists of three dimensions: the iterational, the projective and the practical-evaluative. Below, I give a more detailed explanation of each of these dimensions, following on from the description of the pragmatist view of agency in Chapter Four. This reminder is timely as, with these explanations in mind, I recomposed the five headings into



three final themes that enabled me to analyse the generated data in terms of achievement of agency. These final three themes are explored after an explanation of the chordal triad.

*The iterational dimension* refers to past experiences. It is the '*schematization of social experience*' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 975). In transactions, these past experiences will be selected and drawn upon. An individual's history will limit the patterns formed. However, an important part of iterational dimension is the ability for actors to be able to choose from a number of different options: '*manoeuvre among repertoires*' (Ibid.: 980). Past experiences provide a basis for the prediction of future social relationships: '*expectation maintenance*' (Ibid.: 980). Similarity of experiences – '*categorical location*' and typical patterns of experience; '*recognition of types*' (Ibid.: 980) – also form part of the iterational dimension. Much of the generated data reflected the iterational; routines and dispositions were particularly prominent here.

*The projective dimension* is what sets humans apart from material artifacts, in being able to achieve agency. The projective dimension allows for the re-composition of past experience. The agentic aspect here lies in the processes that shape future trajectories:

The locus of agency lies in the hypothesisation of experience, as actors attempt to reconfigure received schemas by generating alternative responses to problematic situations they confront in their lives (Ibid.: 984).

The projective dimension is underpinned by three main features: *narrative construction*, *symbolic re-composition* and *hypothetical resolution* (Ibid.: 990). In short, this is the consideration of different possibilities, inserting one's self into these, to see what the possible outcomes could be, whilst still upholding identified moral, ethical and practical

concerns. The projective dimension holds a key position in the mediation 'between the iterational and practical-evaluative dimensions of agency' (Ibid.: 984). This dimension was found in the data regarding futuricity, or aspirations, as I came to call it.

The final dimension, *the practical-evaluative*, is where transactions occur. The practical-evaluative dimension has three main features: '*problematization, decision and execution*', and two secondary aspects: '*characterisation and deliberation*' (Ibid.: 997). In empirical research we might see agency in terms of '*temporal strategies* (holding back, putting off), *resistance, subversion or contention* (getting round the rules), *local action and political decision-making*' (Ibid.: 1000). Two of the final themes, teacher-pupil relationships and cultural artifacts, illustrate the extent of the influence of this dimension on the achievement of agency for students in schools.

The above explains a little more about the internal structures of each of the identified analytical dimensions of the chordal triad, which merge to form the phenomenon of agency. Understanding agency in this way enables a view that is relational but also temporal. It accounts for invention and creativity, as much as for maintaining the status quo. It links individuals relationally, understands action by means of the environment (transactions), whilst taking cognisance of individuals' past histories, possible envisioned future trajectories and how actions are enabled or constrained by the confines of the present:

[A]ctors alter or shift their agentic orientations, by dialogically reconstructing the internal composition of their chordal triad, they may increase or decrease their capacity for invention, choice and transformative impact in relation to situational contexts within which they act (Ibid.: 1003).

### 5.7.3 Final three themes

In light of the tool for analysis and the generated data, I finally reorganised the data into three different themes: teacher-pupil relationships, cultural artifacts and aspirations (as shown in Figure 2). The first two themes illustrate present orientations whilst the latter connects to future orientations. I felt that my final three emergent themes respected the generated data, whilst also enabling me to have something to say about my posed research questions, in light of the theoretical framework employed.

That said, I was mindful about the limitations of the study. The interpretive paradigm, which I am working in, is guided by a 'set of beliefs and feelings about the world, and how it should be understood and studied' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 19). This brings with it limitations and, as Denzin and Lincoln go on to suggest, 'there is no single interpretive truth. [...] there are multiple interpretive communities, each with its own criteria for evaluating an interpretation' (Ibid.: 23). Using a pragmatist understanding of agency as a phenomenon, and agency-as-achievement in a contextualist, temporal-relational manner, enabled me to organise the generated data in such a way that I can analyse and interpret the findings from this study to address the research questions. This analysis is a different way of asking questions of and understanding the data than that which, for example, the sociomaterialist Sørensen might apply. I return to this latter thread in the final chapter, arguing that although this is one way of seeing, it affords different possibilities for understanding participation, ones that should not be easily dismissed.

Contextualising the research and the participants is an important feature of ethnographic research and is explored in the content of the next chapter.

## 6 The Context and participants

### 6.1 Introduction

This short chapter provides an overview of the school, which was the context for the study, and the six participants. The focus of the study was to look at the achievement of agency by young people within a school setting. Ball et al. (2000) remind us that, 'the lives of these young people are shaped in the relationships between a set of structural and material limits and possibilities and various individual factors' (Ibid.: 280). Thus, in this chapter, I firstly describe the context in which this study took place and then provide a brief biography of each of the six participants. I describe the school in general terms, considering the type of location, size and other aspects of its profile. This information was taken from self-reports, government reports and statistics referring to schools in Scotland. The bibliographic aspects of the six young people came through in the formal, taped interviews and in the observations I made in the school. These biographies have been kept brief to ensure the anonymity of the students involved. I include them to provide an insight into the students' unique past histories and their present living situations. The temporal-relational framework, used in this study to understand agency, considers both past histories and future expectations based on the contingencies of the present. The iterational dimension is important in considering the ability of actors to be able to 'manoeuvre among repertoires' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980). These biographies provide an important insight into the relational aspect of agency. The young people are inextricably linked to social and cultural networks that exist outside of the physical boundaries of school. These shape both the students' past histories and their future trajectories, as much as the situatedness of their

present physical place, the school, and the influence of its social and cultural networks.

## 6.2 The school

The secondary school in which this research took place was a non-denominational school in Scotland. At the time of the study, the school roll was between 500 - 1000 students, covering the six years of the secondary phase. The school served students from the local and surrounding area. Some students walked to school, whilst others took public transport. The information about the school from its website stated its commitment to the highest quality of education enabling students to be able to make an effective contribution to society in present and future situations. Emphasis was placed on good partnerships, with parents, local primary schools, colleges and employers.

The semi-rural location of the school, on the edge of a large green area, enabled easy access to outdoor activities. The housing stock surrounding the school tended to be social housing rather than privately owned. The areas served by the school were marked by high unemployment and income deprivation (Scottish Government, 2009a). The town, in which the school was located, was run down with a number of businesses boarded up.

In line with its high level of deprivation, the entitlement of young people to free school meals was well above the average. The school's latest inspection report commended the school on its leadership, rates of achievement of young people at risk of exclusion, and its level of support for young people with additional needs. The inspection report noted that teaching was good in some places, whilst in others it was not challenging enough. The report highlighted the passivity of students in some subjects, suggesting that more opportunities for collaborative working should be made available. It also suggested that there were some

structures in place for students to participate, such as a pupil council. The report suggested that staff morale was high. It concluded that staff development was needed, to continue to raise standards in teaching and learning.

### **6.2.1 The school at the time of my research**

The school was very welcoming of my research. The reception staff came to know me over the nine months that they saw me, and I was soon filling in my own visitor's card and finding my way to the staff room and staff base. The reception area had a number of different display boards and cabinets, illustrating the school's achievements. The four Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004a) capacities were depicted through photographs of school students.

During lesson time, the school was generally quiet with very few students out in the corridors or working in different spaces other than the classroom. The staff room was also empty during these times, but filled up at break, when coffee and other refreshments were served. These were paid for by members of staff, but coffee or tea for visitors, including me, was free. Staff in the staffroom tended to sit in certain groups, generally subject-based. The location of these groups was always the same during my period of observation. On one occasion, a group of young people brought round fair-trade chocolate and had fair-trade tea and coffee on sale to raise awareness. On another occasion, books were displayed for staff to buy.

Lunchtimes tended to see staff stay in their bases, whilst students ate in the lunch hall or went off site. Students were not allowed in the corridors during break or lunchtime. Teachers were on duty in the areas where students congregated, alongside some prefects on

dinner duty. Football was played by boys around the school.

The start of the school day was signified by a bell, as was the end of all periods. The day was split into six teaching periods, with a short registration period at the start of the day. Periods lasted approximately 55 minutes. Classes lined up outside the rooms, until the teacher allowed them entry. Some of the staircases were designated one way, to alleviate congestion at busy changeover times. The staircases were generally tidy until after break or lunch, when various wrappers, etc. became strewn about them.

During my time at the school the atmosphere was generally calm. There was loud chatter and excitement at certain times of the day, but at others a quiet, purposeful environment ensued. Students were helpful and welcoming, often acknowledging my presence in corridors, even when they were not the students I was working with directly. I did not witness any fights and rarely came across teachers shouting at students in corridors. Some of the classrooms were brightly decorated whilst others were drabber. The staff bases were somewhat cramped, with many staff choosing to work in their classrooms.

### **6.2.2 The classrooms**

The classrooms, observed in different departments, tended to be filled with tables and chairs arranged in rows. The students sat in pairs. The teacher's desk was at the front, identifiable by the books and computer situated on it. There was a projector in every room, with a whiteboard for projection. Classrooms differed in their room displays, but all had a clock (not always working), and generally some reference to three important items deemed necessary for school: Tie, Pen and Diary.

### 6.3 The six participants

This section contains brief biographies of the six young people who volunteered their time for this study. I am greatly indebted to them as, without their cooperation, this rich data would never have been generated. All their names have been changed.

Karen, Russell and Janet, the first three students described, tended to be in the Credit/Intermediate 2 classes and attended some of the same classes. The latter three students, Leanne, Rachel and Tracey, were friends, shared many of the same classes and were all in the xl club. They were generally taking Access 3<sup>11</sup> or Intermediate 1 qualifications, though Rachel was in an English set destined to take either a general (level 4) or credit (level 5) standard grade.

The six short biographies below are different, though notable was that none of these students' parents had attended university. The young people shared aspects of their lives in my discussions with them as I sought to make sense, with them, of my observations of life in school, and so to understand their experiences. The brief details below, regarding each student, are important as they assist in our understanding regarding how agency can be achieved by individuals. Some aspects of these biographies enable us to understand better when and why certain students achieve agency, or equally do not.

#### 6.3.1 Karen

Karen was a quietly spoken, polite girl who had been chosen to be a tour guide on the Anne Frank exhibition at school. Following on from this experience, she had volunteered to participate in the research. This seemed somewhat out of character, as in class she was a

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<sup>11</sup> Access 3 is a level 3 course on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications framework (see [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk) for more information). There are no external exams at the end of this course.



very unassuming student, who kept her head down and diligently got on with any work set. She rarely asked questions in class but, because of her involvement in the Anne Frank project, she felt that she was now able to “speak up in class more” (Karen, interview, 2010).

Karen used public transport to get to school. Her family ran their own business. Karen had a horse, which she cared for and rode. Her evenings were taken up with other various planned activities and so she organised herself to complete her homework immediately after school.

### **6.3.2 Russell**

Russell was one of the initial students to sign up to participate in the research. He was always keen to get out of classes and seemed to enjoy chatting about his school life. He had been chosen at the end of S3 to be trained as a peer tutor for the travelling Anne Frank exhibition.

Russell, based on his results in his recent exams, expected to get top grades in most of his school subjects at the end of S4. Russell, as a well-liked and respected student by teachers, had recently been asked to be part of a new initiative in school. The programme, Unicef’s *Rights Respecting Schools Award*<sup>12</sup>, was in its infancy in this school. Russell stated that he was very keen to be part of this new programme.

Russell described the place he lived in as “nice” (Russell, interview, 2010). This was, he suggested, because it was small enough to know everyone so it felt like home. His parents were in local employment in non-professional roles.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘The Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) recognises achievement in putting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) at the heart of a school’s planning, policies, practice and ethos’ (Unicef, 2004).

### 6.3.3 Janet

Janet volunteered for the research, whilst I was shadowing Karen. Janet was a quiet, conscientious student who stated that she enjoyed most of her lessons. I did not observe her asking for help or answering any questions posed by teachers. Janet did not like practical lessons or group work, but did find dialogue a useful way of checking for understanding.

Janet used public transport to travel to and from school. Her family were employed in non-professional jobs. Janet had not always lived locally and so had attended different schools. She had found this challenging at times; “quite hard [..].Scary when you don't know anyone” (Janet, interview, 2010). She did not describe this in terms of uncertainty about written work or different teachers, but in terms of “trying to find friends, not everyone accepts you” (Ibid.).

Janet had a part-time job at a local shop, where she was very friendly with another part-time worker, a student at a local college studying an Interior Design course.

### 6.3.4 Leanne

Leanne was in the Prince 's Trust xl group with Rachael and Tracey and also shared other lessons, such as maths. Leanne was always in school, when I observed, and although she might have in the past had poor attendance, this was not the case during her fourth year. In fact, she informed me proudly that her attendance was almost a 100%.

Leanne was a quiet student in most of her classes. She tended to sit alone and get on with the work set. She was more animated in classes where she was in the company of friends. She found much of school uninteresting, but did like the social aspect. She suggested she

would have appreciated learning more about personal relationships in school; how to act and what to expect. This coincided with her desire to feel herself grow in confidence generally.

Leanne used public transport to attend school. Some of Leanne's family were employed in the leisure industry.

### 6.3.5 Rachel

Rachel was part of the Prince 's trust xl group. When I met the group, she was keen to be part of the study. I made a number of attempts to shadow her, but found that her attendance was somewhat erratic. When I chatted about school with Rachel, she said her attendance for the fourth year was over 75%; better than previous years, but still low enough to merit a behaviour slip for attendance.

Rachel enjoyed the social side of secondary school. In classes where she had friends she appeared more at ease compared to her quieter demeanour when she was separated from her friendship group. Rachel found much of the lesson content at school uninteresting. She had attended the local primary school and had preferred this experience to her current secondary placement. The lack of constant movement between classrooms was, in Rachel's eyes, a positive aspect of primary school.

Rachel was able to walk to school. Her family had had employment locally, and were currently seeking work. Rachel liked the arts outside school, and she devoted some of her leisure time to this.

### **6.3.6 Tracey**

Tracey was generally quiet and often isolated in classes, in which none of her friends studied. In classes where she obviously had friends, she appeared more comfortable and chatty. However, she tried with all her work and was a very helpful student always willing to perform the small tasks which teachers often ask of students. Tracey had struggled to attend school in the first three years of secondary school, but that issue had become resolved and she was no longer on a behaviour card.

When I interviewed Tracey it was apparent that she spoke a lot about interests other than school, such as her family pets and different films. However, her actions implied that she did find aspects of school stimulating. On two occasions when I was going to interview her, she had wanted to stay in or return to her class after a specified period, as there were activities happening that she found interesting.

Tracey's family was also locally based. Members were employed in different non-professional roles. Tracey was an aunt, which had, she said prompted her mum to discuss children with her: "Yeah, my mum wants me to wait (to have children) until I'm in my thirties. She wants me to do something with my life" (Tracey, interview, 2010).

## **6.4 Concluding Comments**

These six short biographies briefly introduce the participants of this research. The diversity of family backgrounds ensures that each student has different previous experiences. The description of the school setting at the start of this chapter gave a framing of the context, of which the students are a part. Here, we see how the school is sited in an area that is considered to be deprived with high rates of unemployment, and its associated poverty.

An important part of the context by means of which the students achieve agency lies in their social relationships. Chapter Seven focuses on student-teacher relationships and how these shape the achievement of agency.

## **7 Student-Teacher relationships**

### **7.1 Introduction**

My initial reading of the data suggested to me that young people's ideas about school and the educational project can differ from that of teachers. Other research, for example by Christensen & James (2001) has suggested similarly. As I will show in the following chapters, the tight control experienced by young people in schools – from the 'spatial disciplining of the timetable' (Holloway & Valentine, 2000: 772) to the more immediate control exerted by rules and routines, and the material control exemplified by the uniform – suggests an institution where young people have little possibility to achieve agency (Gordon et al., 1999). However, the case studies indicate that, although all these young people are caught up in this system, the way they act differs, and, as I will demonstrate, so do their possibilities for the achievement of agency.

In this chapter, I will show that teacher-student relationships are pivotal in helping form and shape the achievement of agency by students. I have worked with the data generated from the six case studies. This chapter, after an initial discussion, is divided into four sub-headings: maintaining classroom routines – enabling the teacher to teach; peer relationships and agency; agency and alternative educational experiences; and concluding comments. The first three sub-headings are split further to signpost what is being discussed. These smaller bytes of data are initially described and then further examined using the agency constructs.

Relationships between students and teachers play an important part in school life. The students in this study highlighted aspects of such relationships that are important to them as young people, moving from their compulsory schooling years into the more voluntary stage of the system. Relationships, as social structures, help shape the achievement of agency.

In this chapter, I explore how students enact their roles within the classroom by performing behaviours that are associated with pupil identities. The teacher performs behaviours associated with perceived teacher identities. The structured relationship between the teacher and the student has implicit rules. These roles need to be recognised by others to be occupied (Elder-Vass, 2006). Associated with these roles are the different possibilities to mobilise power. In the case of the teacher's role, individuals can draw on resources, such as those which impose sanctions on students. This is not a reciprocal arrangement. Thus, relationships between teachers and students are generally recognised to be asymmetrical in nature (Wyness, 2006; Gordon et al., 1999). This asymmetrical positioning of teachers relative to students impacts on the behaviour and decisions of both students and teachers (Portante, 2011). This is not to say that students lack any capacity to mobilise resources (see section 7.3 for an empirical example). Student behaviour can directly or indirectly alter the quality of the relationship between teachers and students and this can impact both positively and negatively on the achievement of agency by students (and indeed by teachers) (again see section 7.3). These different teacher-student relationships form different contexts for action and shape the emergence of power and the possibilities of achievement of agency by students.

## **7.2 Maintaining classroom routines: enabling the teacher to teach...**

Under this sub-heading, I initially draw out some general observations made by the students about teacher dispositions. I will show that teachers' ways of being and acting help shape the achievement of agency by the students. Pupils' own dispositions also mediate how they experience teacher dispositions and relationships with teachers, providing strong iterational and projective orientations to pupil agency. I then examine two specific examples from a foreign language lesson and a work skills session. These specific examples illustrate how different configurations of the student-teacher relationship impact on the achievement of agency. They also illustrate the notion of a professional pupil (Gordon et al., 1999). The last part under this sub-section explores in some depth an example from a maths classroom. This example starkly illuminates the asymmetrical relationship between this teacher and the students, and thus is analysed according to the impact of this type of relationship on the achievement of agency by young people.

### **7.2.1 Teacher dispositions**

In our interviews I asked the students what their views were generally about the teaching staff in their school. There were a lot of positive comments regarding the moods and personal characteristics of the teachers. For example, Tracey and Karen liked the jovial nature of the social subject teachers, and Russell thought that, in general, the teachers were helpful:

Teachers are really good, very enthusiastic apart from one or two notable exceptions. [Using their] free time to help you and taking your things away to mark (Russell, interview, 2010).



Janet appreciated teachers who were able to “have a laugh”, but who also get “serious” and “strict” when necessary. She spoke highly of a particular teacher’s willingness to help:

When stuck, she’ll be there like a shot (Janet, 2010, interview).

On the less positive side was Rachel’s and Janet’s similar description of two different teachers as “crabby”. Teachers’ dispositions, in terms of their manner in the classroom, led Janet and Karen to talk about “uptight” teachers. Both Janet and Karen found that the atmosphere created by teachers who shouted was not conducive to working effectively or feeling comfortable:

If teacher uptight you ken just go away and leave us alone. Laid back teacher you can have a laugh but get the work done. Uptight teacher if you not got all work done they’ll go “Oh god, why haven’t you got that done?” If you’re late they’ll send you out of the class – total shout and bawl at you for 10/15 minutes- you would rather just say sorry [for being late] (Janet, interview, 2010).

Really uptight [teacher] – shouting just gets your pupils crabby. Be too hard just get your pupils crabby. People do get crabby- accumulates over the day. [Students]- are more grumpy in afternoon (Karen, interview, 2010).

Inconsistent teacher dispositions impact on the teacher-student relationship. Russell’s observation below also highlights how students are often cautious about what they will experience in a certain classroom:

Teachers are a stubborn bunch. They don't really compromise and you just got to hope for the best. You just go in and hope you get them in a good mood and you don't get too much homework (Russell, interview, 2010).

Teacher behaviour is not monitored in the same manner as student behaviour. Students can be recipients of *behaviour* cards. These cards monitor their attendance and behaviour at each and every lesson. Teachers complete the card at the end of the lesson, sometimes in dialogue with students, sometimes not. These behaviour cards are part of the teacher's resources reinforcing the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and students. There is therefore a strong practical-evaluative orientation to the achievement of agency by students in the classroom. The practical aspect results from the ability of the teacher to impose sanctions. The evaluative aspect lies in the judgements by the students about whether it is likely or unlikely that this will happen. Thus responses to teachers shouting and other teacher behaviours are partially shaped by their judgements of the situation. Karen (above) mentions one student response to teachers shouting, that of crabbiness, but other responses are exemplified in, for example, section 7.3.

Karen, above, acknowledged that she found teachers' shouting problematic, but she still felt that teachers needed to be "uptight" in the classroom to maintain a working atmosphere:

Need to be uptight in class if they're too soft they would nae be able to handle it - if the class were noisy and if they [teachers] were too soft they [students] would sit back and watch it. Most of my classes are well behaved [..][Subject] teacher is quite funny; when she needs to be strict she'll come down on you (Karen, interview, 2010).

Russell's comment, below, illustrates what 'well behaved' looks like in his eyes. This exemplifies the role he thinks students should take in the classroom. He thought that responsibility fell to him, as pupil, to be responsive to the work teachers do. He also suggested that he thought many students fell short of this expectation:

Be respectful and try and look like you're taking it in and appreciate what they [teachers] are saying as they are providing us with valuable information. A lot of folk [students] are not like that. They think they [teachers] just teach you and you do nothing. I think that we have to give them something back for what they do for us (Russell, interview, 2010).

Russell, Janet and Karen, in their comments above, exemplify the different positionings of the teacher and student. Karen and Russell indicate how they have accepted the 'socialised' and 'rationalised' (Nespor, 1997: 127) role of a pupil. Nespor (Ibid.) understands these latter two terms as forms of self-control: *socialisation* as holding back natural functions (burping, farting etc.); and *rationalisation* as hiding emotions and feelings (silence, talking quietly). Russell's comments above identify one aspect of the role of a pupil, that of respect for the teacher, and he illustrates how this should be acted out. Russell suggests you need to *be seen* to be quiet, attentive and appreciative. Russell criticises his fellow students who, in his eyes, do not always act the pupil role as he understands it. These examples of teacher performances, in terms of being helpful, funny or bad-tempered, exert an effect on students' behaviour providing a strong practical-evaluative dimension to agency. Students' evaluative judgements of these teacher performances help shape their response and so can both restrict or enhance their achievement of agency.

Nespor (1997, citing Bourdieu) suggested 'one of the most powerful ways for social orders to shape the dispositions of their members is to "embody" principles of social practice by emphasising the "seemingly most insignificant details of *dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners*"' [italics in original] (Ibid.: 127). Bourdieu (cited in Nespor, 1997: 127/8) suggests phrases which appear trivial, such as 'stand up straight', are the trick to socialisation:

The whole trick of pedagogic reason lies precisely in the way it extorts the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant: in obtaining the respect for form and forms of respect which constitute the most visible and at the same time the best-hidden (because most "natural") manifestations of submission to the established order... The concessions of *politeness* always contain *political* concessions (Ibid.).

In the example above, we see the concession of politeness exhibited by Russell to be one that upholds the asymmetrical relationship between teacher and pupil, where you "try and look like you're taking it in"; that is listening and being quiet. This suggests that Russell, and arguably other socialised and rationalised students, are doing what is expected of them by the teaching profession and other adults in society, in that they are quiet and thus learning. Research has shown that a teacher's success is often judged according to (a lack of) noise and movement coming from a classroom, rather than what the students are learning (Simpson, 2000; Nespor, 1997). My data support this conclusion. Karen is explicit in her views about noisy classes and how she sees this as a failure on the teacher's part, because they are "too soft". This reinforces the identified role of the teacher by the students, as the students help to maintain the asymmetrical relationship in their expectation that the teacher will be "strict". The students, here, appear to uphold the notion that noisy classes mean a low work rate. Russell's comment, above, is also interesting because, although he

suggests that students recognise the importance placed on quiet, controlled behaviour, he acknowledges that this is arguably often prioritised over learning.

However, in Russell's observations, there is something to suggest that students perceive control by teachers not solely in terms of 'authority over', but more in line with 'authority among' (Allen, 2003). Russell suggests that students need to work at letting the teacher teach and be responsive to their offerings. Allen (2003: 7) suggests that, although teachers may claim authority, it is 'lent' or 'conceded' by students, 'only so long as recognition' of their official (teacher) standing lasts. Both in their own way, Russell's and Karen's comments recognise that the behaviour of students can provide an environment conducive for teachers to teach in – for example, "appreciate [what they are doing for you]" and "[classes are] well behaved". Their comments illustrate that these students recognise these adults as teachers, with the inherent possibilities to mobilise resources to control behaviours – for example, "when she needs to be strict she'll come down on you" and "[t]hey don't really compromise and you just got to hope for the best".

The evidence, in this section, suggests that, whilst the asymmetrical nature of the student-teacher relationship is upheld and promoted by students, teacher dispositions do matter. Relationships constructed with teachers perceived as "laid back" appear to promote independence through "get[ting] the work done". This achievement of agency, which is rooted in the nature of relationships, has a strong practical-evaluative orientation. In being "laid back" we open up the possibilities for different responses by students: "having a laugh", doing the work. In being too "uptight", Janet suggests that students reject engagement with teachers, worry about getting work done and about being reprimanded rather than being able to apologise for mistakes. In the latter example, the teacher-student

relationship is built solely on fear of punishment. This appears to limit their ‘manoeuvre among repertoires’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980), in turn constraining the possibility of the achievement of agency. The possibility of acting differently is always dependent on the student’s past history and future projections, as well as on the presenting conditions, such as the type of student-teacher relationship and, for example, the strength of relationships with other students (see section 7.3 for more on this).

The discussion above begins to illustrate how teacher-student relationships shape the opportunities for the achievement of agency by students. The first example below, regarding the foreign language classroom, provides an insight into the often hidden actions by students, which enable classroom encounters to become possible learning experiences. It is worth noting again that teacher’s claim on authority is in part due to student actions (Allen, 2003), as it also reminds us that the durability of this teacher status can lie in the behaviours of the young people who they are meant to be teaching. In certain cases, such as the one explored below, the students support the teacher’s effort to teach.

### **7.2.2 An example from a foreign language classroom**

The following extract from my case study notes regarding a foreign language class is noteworthy, as it was on this occasion I noticed how much work was involved in being a student. My observations suggest these students were enabling the teacher to teach. I first ‘noticed’ this when I was shadowing Russell, Janet and Karen in their foreign language lesson. It was a top set, which in one lesson initially had some students at the back playing with a soft football. The teacher allowed me to observe and suggested that I could assist her in teaching the lesson (I declined).

The students were all seated at the start of the lesson and were quiet when asked. The teacher apologised for not having marked their folios. On a number of occasions she told the students what they could not do (in terms of the language they were learning) and criticised the Standard Grade exam course (which they were studying) for this situation. She took verb derivations as an example of the students' incompetence. None of the students commented. A student taking Higher came in to the class to help. She was the only one in her year taking the subject. None of the fourth year cohort anticipated taking this subject to the next level [..]. The students seemed in tune with the lesson and when the teacher asked students to repeat some words after her the majority of them joined in. The students seemed well drilled in this type of event. The lesson was entirely teacher-led. The teacher set some written work a few minutes before the end of the lesson (Case study notes<sup>1</sup>).

I asked Russell, Janet and Karen about this subject. None of them particularly liked the subject. They found the teacher's irritable mood and style of teaching challenging, though Russell also thought you should try to learn. Karen suggested that: "Our class is a top class, so more mature" (Karen, interview, 2010). Karen commented that the teacher constantly talked after she had set work, which was a challenge for the students.

Karen's further observations about the "teacher's funny way of teaching" and the link to the maturity of the class, suggest that students perceive the control by adults, not solely in terms of 'authority over', but more in line with 'authority among' (Allen, 2003). The students accepted the interruptions by the teacher, whilst they tried to work as a part of this lesson's normal routine. Karen's point about the maturity of the class is important, as this evidence suggests that this set of students had acquired the *politeness* (Bourdieu, cited in Nespoulet,

1997: 128) mentioned above, and thus student roles (and as a consequence teacher roles) were identifiable in their actions.

The case study note<sup>i</sup> extract, describes the lack of response from all of the students in the class when the teacher was talking about their deficits as students. This [apparent] lack of action can be seen as acceptance of the teacher's dominant voice, in that it is similar to findings by Mick (2011), who showed in her research that children, through their different actions, construct the teacher's voice as dominant. This evidence suggests that the emergent power from the relationship between the teacher and students in this case was not reciprocal; the students did not resist, but conceded, the imposition of the teacher's authority.

Russell and Karen shared values about education, on which their actions within the classroom were based. Karen thought that education was important and not to be abused, and so her behaviour within the classroom was one traditionally associated with a 'well-behaved' pupil (c.f. Arnot & Reay, 2007).

I've always been well-behaved. If you've got an education, you take it, you don't abuse it (Karen, interview, 2010).

These attitudes, articulated by Karen and Russell, may go some way to explaining their engagement in their language lessons, with which both expressed dissatisfaction. These two students valued their school experience in different ways. Russell's consideration of the effort the teachers put in to their lessons (as evidenced in this chapter) and Karen's more global awareness of education issues outside Scotland led them to act in similar ways in their school classrooms. The actions of their peers (from my observations) were also



comparable. Thus this collective action in the language classroom, of the maintenance of pupil-teacher roles, went unchallenged. There is an iterational dimension to this agency; the 'schematization of social experience' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 979), providing 'expectation maintenance', which 'gives actors more or less reliable knowledge of social relationships, allows them to predict what will happen in the future' (ibid.: 980/1). In the example of the language lesson, Karen, Russell and Janet appeared to recognise the pattern of the lesson and play an active part in the maintenance of this pattern. This suggests that they, as students, are not passive within the classroom environment, but active participants in classroom life. The students had some, if limited, 'manoeuvre among repertoires' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980). Karen and Russell's choice to engage with the lesson could be seen to be based on their own values and attitudes towards school ("you don't abuse it" and "appreciate what they [teachers] are saying as they are providing us with valuable information") and the presenting context.

The achievement of agency in this explanation would be based on the maintenance of the status quo; the students assisting in granting permission to this teacher to enact her role, rather than acting differently. However, if we follow Bourdieu's (cited in Nesper, 1997) train of thought we might consider what *political* concessions have already been made by these students in order to achieve agency in these situations. This will be drawn out further in Chapter Eight.

The example in this section considered the three students, whose future lay almost definitely in the education system and more precisely, within the school. The next example is an aspect of Leanne's timetable. The work skills programme was exclusively for young people whose futures were not expected to be within education. It highlights how adults

external to the school can sometimes try and take a teacher-like role, whilst purporting to be smoothing the transitions between school and work environments. This role confusion, I will argue below, compromises the possible relationships that can build between the young people and other adults.

### **7.2.3 An example from an in-school work skills programme**

Russell, Janet and Karen saw their proximal future as sustained attendance in the school for another two years. Subsequently, they all considered they would continue in education in pursuit of a professional qualification. Leanne, by contrast, was in her last term at school. She had been recently informed through a written list that she could not stay at school. She accounted for this decision in two ways. Firstly, the reduction in teacher numbers at her school and, secondly, her grades being “down”. This large loss of teachers meant that certain subjects were not being offered and other subjects could only offer limited numbers of student places. It appeared to Leanne that, if you were not attaining, then you were asked to leave.

Nine teachers leaving – so have to go to college ‘cos my grades are down – if I get my grades up might get to stay on. Want to do Hospitality (Leanne, interview, 2010).

The school acknowledged Leanne’s imminent departure by offering her a place on a ten week course in-school work skills programme. This course was designed and delivered by facilitators external to the school. The sessions were held in a classroom and the group of four students sat in rows. Leanne sat next to another student, whereas the other two students were in a row of their own. The facilitator introduced the students to me, without student permission. I found this situation awkward, but I did not challenge the facilitator.

None of the students objected either. The facilitators were at the front of the room by the whiteboard and projector. The ten week course was set out so that, in the final week, the students went on a work experience placement of their choice. The course was worksheet-based and covered health and safety, skills and employers' expectations. The students were allowed to use the first names of the facilitators in these sessions. The facilitator explained why they used this practice: "We use first names because you're going to be young adults and it makes it more like the work place".

These work skills sessions operated along similar lines to other lessons I observed in the school, apart from the requirement that the students addressed the facilitators using their first names. The evidence from the session, I observed, seemed to suggest that the facilitator's view of the students was that of adults-in-waiting (James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2000; White, 2002; Uprichard, 2008). He said on a number of occasions the phrase "when you're going to *be* young adults". His view of the students, as 'objects of socialisation', (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010: 1) came across in his comment, "I think I can move you on from school pupils to young adults". These comments illustrate something of the nature of the relationships between the students and this particular facilitator. First name terms *were expected* in this classroom. The students knew this and any judgements they made were shaped by this particular expectation. The use of first names was allowed, solely in order to model the workplace environment and thus, was a technique to be practised. This slight change in the context could potentially have changed the ways of possible doings, shifted the patterns of authority within this space and opened up possibilities for the achievement of agency, but I did not observe these to be happening. There was perhaps cause for concern here then, because as the facilitators themselves pointed out, this was meant to be

a work skills programme, preparing students for the world of paid employment, not placing them in a situation which continued their role as pupils and doing more 'pupil work' (Breidenstein, 2008).

My concerns were not mirrored in Leanne's reaction to the course. She enjoyed it.

It's fun. You get to do an extra work experience. He banterers all the time. It's funny (Leanne, interview, 2010).

I also observed the facilitator bantering. At one stage during the session, one of the four students was bantering with the facilitator, when s/he was asked to leave the room. The bantering could be seen to open up other spaces, where these young people could engage in different types of relationship with the facilitator. This student's bantering offered opportunities for him/her to use a temporal strategy; putting off doing the assigned task. As a temporal strategy this enabled the student to briefly achieve agency. It ended, however, not in negotiation, but in an assertion of the asymmetrical nature of the facilitator-student (adult-child) relationship, from which coercive power emerged, diminishing the possibilities for agency. Instead, the student was asked to leave the room. The student complied. The judgement the student had made in response to the context, whilst initially allowing her/him different possibilities for manoeuvrability, was closed down through an assertion of power.

The evidence, above, shows how the facilitators used some of the same discipline strategies and similar forms of teaching practices, and maintained the same physical layout of the classroom as many of the teachers I observed. The facilitators upheld a teacher-like identity and retained the asymmetry between adults and young people in schools. Leanne's

enthusiasm for the programme was not based on the quality of the relationship with the facilitator, or the learning experience, but more pragmatically on her desire to have the opportunity of a second work experience placement:

Taught me nothing but at least getting out of school for a week. I'm working on a Friday - not even at school on Friday (Leanne, interview, 2010).

Leanne was clearly pleased to be “getting out of school for a week” and she was keen to have more work experience as she had felt that her initial placement in S3 had not been successful. Her acknowledgement and desire to attend a second work placement indicated a shift in the projective orientation to agency and something I comment further on in Chapters Eight and Nine. At the start of this example, I drew attention to how *adults external to the school can sometimes try and take a teacher-like role, whilst purporting to be smoothing the transitions between school and work environments*. Having reviewed this evidence, the role confusion that adults entering a school can hold, I suggest, can compromise the possible, different relationships that could build between young people and other adults. In that, I refer here to the different practices adopted: those of using first names and choosing a work placement of your choice (not limited by a list as was the case in S3 – see Russell and Janet in Chapter Nine for more discussion on this).

In the examples thus far, I have talked a little about pupil work and the role of the pupil. The following section explores the role of the professional pupil (Gordon et al., 1999) more deeply. This leads into a discussion about how agency may or may not be achieved in this role.

#### **7.2.4 'A professional pupil' (Gordon et al., 1999)**

These everyday examples from the life of students in schools illustrate how, even in very different contexts, we see the relationships between students and teachers help form and shape the achievement of agency by students. Agency may take on different forms, for example, compliance, putting off and resistance (seen in examples below) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 1000).

Lapadat's (2003) research identifies neatly what was found in many of the classrooms I visited during my research:

They (the teachers) portray the 'status quo' as a transmission approach to education, including a rapid pace of instruction, a focus on the 'right answer', isolation and drilling of skills, an initiate-respond-evaluate (IRE) discourse pattern, socialisation of students to the school norms, teacher direction, content emphasis, pre-packaged curricular materials and testing of students' retention of factual information (Lapadat, 2003: 3).

The work skills facilitator was not a teacher by training, but, as the evidence shows, he assumed a role similar to that described above. Wyness (2006) made the observations that teachers think that children need 'input' from older others in order to change their state from becoming to being, and this was something the work skills course facilitator appeared to uphold. The young people on the work skills course did not challenge his comments, which placed them as adults-in-waiting and 'objects of socialisation' (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010:1).

In these cases the actions of these adults mimic historical views of teachers' identities, whereas Gardner (1998: 35) suggests:

(T)he classical site of the teacher's daily work, the classroom, despite many changes in design, layout and capacity, would at every stage of its development be immediately familiar to any teacher since 1876 (Ibid.).

I might also suggest it would be familiar to any school student. Student compliance is a vital feature of these contexts and what is notable is that they, the students, recognise this (Mick, 2011). The evidence from the two previous examples shows that all these students comply by ceding authority to the teacher or adult in the room. Some examples later suggest that where student-student relationships are stronger, a shift in the teacher-student balance can be enabled, making different actions possible.

What was noticeable from the examples was that Karen, Janet, Leanne and Russell all seemed to do work to access aspects of these lessons that they valued, whether it was new knowledge, skills or simply opportunities. All the students in these acts are claiming identities as students and thus are constantly working to achieve these. As Hitlin and Elder (2007: 180) suggest, we do not 'passively enact claimed identities, but it takes work to achieve these' and this 'effort defines us as agents'.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 981) suggest this is an iterational orientation to agency where 'different formative experiences, such as those influenced by gender, race, ethnicity or class background, deeply shape the web of cognitive, affective and bodily schemas through which actors come to know how to act in particular social worlds'. This suggests that Karen, Janet, Russell and Leanne recognise their role as pupil and are able to implement this in the

situated transactions within this classroom. Whilst Janet's, Karen's and Russell's aspirations lay within the education system, and Leanne's future is differently imagined (see Chapter Nine: Aspirations, for more in-depth discussion), all students feel that they have goals in mind, whether it be attainment focussed or more practical. This suggests that, at this particular time, they also have a strong projective orientation to their agency. In the present context of these classrooms, the students' actions illustrate how characterisation (based on past histories) and deliberation (locating possible future actions) are brought to bear on the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. In this case, the achievement of agency in this transaction is found in enacting the pupil role, doing 'pupil work' (Breidenstein, 2008) or being a 'professional pupil' (Gordon et al., 1999; Yamashita & Davies, 2010).

The above data illustrate the work done by students to maintain familiar routines and enact expected pupil identities in different situations, for example, compliance, on-task behaviour, classroom positioning, and silence.

The following extract of data illustrates in some depth the asymmetrical power relations between students and teachers in terms of compliance and silence on the students' part. It also adds support to Cross et al.'s (2009) suggestion that young people in the classroom can be treated in a more child-like manner when compared to their lives outside of school (ibid.). This scenario is just one particular example of classroom life that I observed, but it is the implications regarding the possible achievement of agency by students that make it noteworthy.



### 7.2.5 “Just sit quietly”: an example from a maths lesson

When I started the participant observation of these students in February 2010, I found that Tracey, Leanne and Rachel’s maths course had drawn to a close. The group had completed their entire Access 3 course (a non-exam course) and an Intermediate 1 module, which as the teacher pointed out, ‘at least they [students] get something on their certificate’. Only choosing to do one Intermediate module left the teacher with a number of lessons before the end of term. The teacher suggested that basic financial education might have been beneficial, but there were no resources available in the school.

The teacher used maths versions of *Who wants to be a millionaire?* and *Family Fortunes* as teaching strategies. For these games the students sat in rows of seats behind desks, whilst the teacher was always found at the front, controlling the technology and occupying the space between the door and the class. The students spent each period on Friday playing games, though this was dependent on their behaviour in the week leading up to the Friday lesson. This seemed similar to the practice in Primary schools of Golden Time on a Friday afternoon. I observed little negotiation with students about the general nature of any of the lessons or about their behaviour within them.

One Friday lesson I observed the students were sorting out past Standard Grade exam papers. This was an imposed punishment by the teacher because of unacceptable behaviour in the week. The students approach to the task set was not one of resentment, but one with a sense of purpose. They organised themselves into a line and worked as a team to complete the task. All the students participated without prompting and there were no reprimands.

This was an unintended outcome of what the teacher thought was a consequence for poor behaviour. This was a practical cooperative activity that enabled all the students to engage successfully and purposefully. The students organised themselves to form a very efficient production line. The students had problematised the current situation, decided on a course of action and carried it out. This task had first been characterised and possible ways of executing the task had been considered. This cooperative activity, though unplanned, provided a context within which these students could achieve agency. The nature of the activity was teacher-led but the manner in which it was carried out was not prescribed, and it was this lack of prescription that enabled these students to draw on their own past experiences and apply these to the presenting context. The teacher-student relationship had shifted slightly, and the students were able to consider how they might organise themselves. The achievement of agency can be defined by the nature of the task, the manner in which it is set and the capacity of individuals to act in different ways. In this example, I did not observe the teacher building on the learning from the task in terms of developing, for example, future capacity to work with others. This could have been due to the teacher's narrow characterisation of the designated purpose of the task as a punishment.

In another observed maths class the students had been placed in groups to play *Family Fortunes*. Unexpectedly, the programme froze a few minutes before the end of the period. In response, the teacher told the students to 'just sit quietly'. However, the noise level rose in the class beyond the expectations of this teacher. The status of these young people became more apparent at that point, as one of subordinate to the adult (Wyness, 2006). The consequence given by the teacher was to get all the students in the room to put their

heads on their hands on the table and sit in silence for the remainder of the lesson. The teacher acknowledged to an incoming colleague that she was treating the pupils in a child-like fashion, because they were “behaving like children”.

The practice employed by this maths teacher to deal with young people of fifteen and sixteen was, as the teacher acknowledged, demeaning. These actions could be seen to contravene Article 28 of the UNCRC which states that school discipline ‘protects the dignity of children and young people [...] so no hitting or humiliation’ (CRAE, 2011). The teacher’s response modelled to students that control of someone else’s body and voice, through the use of power, is acceptable. Simpson (2000) suggests that students’ bodies form a central aspect of control by teachers within the school environment:

[The] centrality of the body and bodily discourses to the power relations played out with schools (Ibid.: 60).

The failure of the technology, upon which this teacher was reliant for the lesson, provided an unfilled, uncertain space. The unwanted [in the teacher’s eyes] student behaviours that emerged from this situation meant that students, who were ‘collaborators’ in the lesson, became ‘invaders’ (Holland et al., 2007: 228) and ones to be controlled.

The students, I observed, accepted the teacher’s behaviour and were generally compliant. They did not question the purpose or aim of the lessons or the control techniques imposed on them. Instead, they generally accepted the routines and the punishments given. Agency has a strong iterational orientation here. The habits and routines shaped by prior experiences, surface and inform the judgements made in the presenting context. The

possibilities of the present and pupils' judgements about teacher power, understood by past experience, means that agency is not achieved in this example.

This performance of the teacher's identity was not passively enacted, but actively sought through the imposition of actions and movements. The compliance of the students illustrates their ability to recognise the situation and engage in a habitual capitulation to the wishes of the teacher and the institutional power of the school, to which the teacher is networked (Portante, 2011). My observations of students' reactions led me to believe that, from past patterns of experience, Tracey, Rachel and Karen, considered that further punishment would be a consequence for non-compliance. This situation was largely about the practical-evaluative dimension: the subordinate positioning of the students in relation to the teacher, and the teacher's recourse to coercive power. One of the students' possible actions could have been noise. However, Rachel, Karen and Tracey's embodied response was that of quiet compliance. Other students, whose response took the form of resistance through emitting noise, received further reprimand and were kept back at the end of the lesson by the teacher. This reinforces the past experiences and histories of the students regarding this teacher's behaviour and punishments.

The following section explores how, at certain times, relationships between students can be more powerful in shaping actions than teacher-student relationships. The strength in peer relationships is illustrated through Janet's description regarding the induction of new teachers by students.

### 7.3 Peer relationships and agency

Janet's maths class had been taught by a number of different teachers in the previous two years. She suggested that it 'takes some getting used to the (new) teacher' (Janet, interview, 2010). During this induction period, Janet observed that students have a strategy to test out the new teacher. This testing, according to Janet, is performed with the permission of the whole class:

[Students are] always acting up. Want to test new teachers. See if they laugh, how strict he is...Whole class tends to gang up on them. Every class always does it. I feel so sorry for the people [teacher] ... oh my god it's begun! Start acting up to see how he reacts and it'll gradually get worse and worse and worse until red for shouting. Test it through individuals at first usually the folk [students] who are the troublemakers they always volunteer to do it – nobody really says you just need to look at them and they ken....(Janet, interview, 2010).

Janet recalled an incident where someone threw a rubber and it hit the substitute teacher on the back of the head. No one owned up, so all the class were detained at lunchtime and still no one came forward. The reason Janet gave for this was one of loyalty and the consequences of your action if you name the person responsible:

We donnea [do not] grass [tell] on each other. If you grass you're a wuss. If you clipe [tell] on someone, the rest of the class gangs up on you (Janet, interview, 2010).

Janet describes how the *testing* of new teachers is expected by students and, arguably, by teachers. In this induction period, actions taken are condoned by the class. These are *considered* acts of resistance by students. Janet's explanation of the collective action by the

students, as in the example above – not to “grass” on the person who threw the rubber– is indicative of the emergent power from peer relationships. This accepted form of collective student action enables the young people to make judgements in the practical-evaluative, which mitigate the coercive power available to the teacher. In these situations, where there is no established teacher-student relationship, we can see a different shaping in the achievement of agency. In the uncertainty about new teachers’ behaviours, peer-to-peer relationships have more influence and, as Janet indicates, students who “grass” are labelled as a “wuss”, and will expect retribution from the whole class as they “gang[s] up on you”. The effects of the power of these peer relationships are thus visible in the actions of the students.

Agency orientated towards the iterational is shaped by the past experiences of young people informing on their individual peer perpetrators, alongside the possibility of punishment by a teacher. The strength of the peer relationships overrides the teacher-student relationships in this instance, and so alongside possible compliance, students also consider other available actions. Agency in this example, as was the case in the examples earlier in this chapter, is strongly orientated towards the practical-evaluative. The judgement of risk is informed by a cultural norm, which Janet names as “grassing” or “clipping ”. Here, students do not disclose the name(s) of the perpetrator(s) due to strong bonds of loyalty between peers. To disclose would be structurally very difficult and would act counter to this cultural norm. As Janet suggests above, students would find themselves ostracised by peers if they reveal the names of their peer perpetrators. These evaluations of risk by the young people suggest that the agency that is achieved is strongly orientated

towards the practical-evaluative, although it is informed by iterational (in the sense that students have seen it happen before).

Personal teacher dispositions are constantly scrutinized by students (as we saw in the first part of this chapter) and even initially 'tested out' as Janet explained, above. The emergent power from peer relationships in this example is related to the unknown disposition of the incoming teacher. This challenges the asymmetry of the teacher-student relationship. The teacher-student relationship is modified in this instance by the ways in which the students draw on power emerging from their own, much longer standing, peer relationships.

The following section considers two alternative educational opportunities offered in this school and how these impact on the achievement of agency.

#### **7.4 Agency and alternative educational experiences**

In this section, I explore some opportunities the young people experienced, which were different to the class-based mainstream subjects. These opportunities were not common for these students, and the students reflected on them positively. These different experiences were not chosen by the students themselves, but offered to them by the school. There may have been other opportunities, but these students mentioned two in particular: peer tutoring and the xl Club. The first was a short term involvement in a project, which ran at the end of S3 in school time. The latter was a timetabled curriculum option which ran for two school years during S3-S4. The selection of students for these experiences varied. Being chosen as a peer tutor on the Anne Frank exhibition was based on being a good, motivated student studying History, whereas the basis for being chosen for the xl club was disengagement, poor attendance and so forth. However, what is noticeable from this

following data is that these two experiences shared common ground, in that they both allowed different teacher-pupil relationships to develop, than those in the more typical classroom. It is how these different relationships are enacted that has relevance for this study, as these relationships are an important aspect in the shaping and achievement of agency. Initially, I explore the xl club before considering the peer tutoring.

#### **7.4.1 xl: the 'only class you get to have fun in'**

The Prince's Trust xl club in this school ran instead of a more traditional subject. Students were chosen for the 'club'. Leanne, Tracey and Rachel were three out of a total of ten participants in their cohort. Generally, when I observed, there was a core of seven students, three of whom were Leanne, Tracey and Rachel. All the young people in the xl group had in the past been excluded, or excluded themselves, from school. Students were offered a place in the club at the start of the S3 timetable if teachers thought they would be able to benefit from the programme. This group had been very successful and completed bronze awards, whilst also winning an Award for their project. The young people in the group were actively encouraged to participate in the planning and design of projects. Different departments within the school supported these projects, although this was based on the relationships between teachers rather than any formal agreements.

Many of the classes took place in the drama studio. Students sat around the edges of the room on tables. The teacher would pull the students together in random circles made from chairs or, if needed, tables would be drawn into the floor space in an *ad hoc* manner. The students never sat in rows. Written folio work was kept to a minimum and more hands-on and discursive work was the norm. Noise levels were not controlled by the teacher, except when a discussion took place.



The classical classroom layout and traditional teacher and student practices were not as visible in this space (Gardner, 1998). In this suite of rooms, there were desks with computers on them, shared by both students and teachers. The physical structure of the room did not allow for places that were distinctly teacher or student (Sørensen, 2007). Projects were not confined to a classroom, but took place in different environments, which Rachel stated she particularly liked. A local park area provided the site of their Award winning project. This working environment was quite different to the other classrooms and classes, in which I observed these students.

All three young people stated that they enjoyed the group. Tracey's particular enjoyment arose from her being able to complete tasks within the allotted time, leaving space for her to make her own decisions about what she could do next:

I like the xl - I got to do whatever I wanted to do 'cos I finished everything and everybody else had nea (Tracey, interview, 2010).

Tracey found that she could understand the tasks set and deliver the appropriate work with ease, as exemplified in her quotation above. Although there were tasks set, I observed Tracey, Rachel and Leanne all being able to complete them. Often, these tasks had been discussed and designed by the students. However, the amount of involvement by students was interpreted differently by teachers and students. The teacher commented that the students made all the decisions, whereas this exchange with Tracey would suggest something slightly different. This extract pertained to one aspect of their project, the building of the totem pole:

*Tracey:* We never actually done anything apart from our hands and strip the wood off the bark

*AP:* Who did?

*Tracey:* The adults they always carved it for us. There was a carving tool and I slit top of my finger off. Had to have it sewed back on. Had a massive bandage on it – my finger was puffy – was puffy. Not sore. I lost a ton of blood, tons of blood.

*AP:* Whose idea was the totem pole?

*Tracey:* The teachers

(Tracey, interview, 2010).

In the lessons I observed, there was a lot of discussion between the students and the teacher, with the teacher often making suggestions. This level of discussion was different from that which I had been observing in other subject areas.

Rachel liked the xl club, stating it was the “only class you get to have fun in”. Much of the work was undertaken in small discrete friendship groups. Rachel and Leanne both suggested that they felt more comfortable and worked better in a smaller group. Both girls found large group exercises and talking in front of a group of peers frightening. Leanne stated in an interview that she wanted to leave school with more confidence. However, based on prior experiences, with the example she gave of speaking tests in English and French, she still found speaking out in a group situation difficult:

In first and second year you had to do speaking tests...oh god I was nea wanting to do them [...] [Small groups] better 'cos big group frightening (Leanne, interview, 2010).

The observations and comments, above, indicate that the structure of the xl club was less formal than other school-based lessons. The fluidity of the physical layout, the different places in which lessons took place and the more discursive, less textbook-driven lessons, all helped form an environment that differed from many of these students' other lessons. The example in section 7.2.5 illustrates this most starkly. The xl teacher's attitude and actions enabled a more permissive relationship between him/her and the students. This extended, as I observed, to affording all students choices about their level of participation in each of these classes. A particular example of this was visible when an xl group from a school in an urban area visited. This group had developed a range of activities to research young people's lifestyles dependent on their home locations. These activities were mainly discussion-based. The starting point for the session was performed by placing the chairs in a circle and inviting all the students to take a seat in it. Rachel and Tracey joined in, however Leanne decided at this point not to participate. Instead, she sat in a chair outside the circle and produced some work from another class. No one questioned this. Leanne was able to take that decision and it was respected. I did not observe this type of action, by this student, in any other lesson. Leanne, as I observed in all other classes, made no move to stand out and act differently (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). However, in this context, Leanne felt able to make a move that differed from her usual habit of conformity. Rachel and Tracey participated in all the activities and voluntarily shared some of their likes and dislikes in the group discussions.

The more permissive teacher-student relationship (as described above), which had built up over the two years in the club, helped shape the presenting context, and my observations led me to believe that Leanne had room for manoeuvre. She had the opportunity to act differently and 'critically shape [her] responsiveness to [this] problematic situation' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 971). In this instance, it could be that Leanne evaluated the risk of attending the session, in the knowledge that she could choose her degree of participation. The degree of participation could be active, in that it could be in the form of a visible act (sitting outside the group), rather than more passive, seen often as silence (sitting in the expected pupil position but not wanting to). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) suggest this sort of agency is part of the iterational dimension based on 'expectation maintenance' or 'schematization', giving 'actors more or less reliable knowledge of social relationships, which allows them to predict what will happen in the future' (Ibid.: 980/981). Leanne's achievement of agency was shaped by the context, allowing her the potential to act differently and was a result of both social and material relationships. The teacher-student and student-student relationships afforded by the xl club and the arrangement of the material environment enabled Leanne to have 'manoeuvres among repertoires' (Ibid.: 980). The supportive teacher-student relationship provided Leanne with the judgement that different levels of engagement would be accepted without reprimand or other consequences. I suggest that the achievement of agency by Leanne was strongly orientated towards the practical-evaluative, but was informed by the iterational dimension (in terms of past experiences regarding expected participation levels and their variability). Leanne's approach allowed her to listen to the discussions of her peers and not feel excluded from the discussion or the session. It also enabled Leanne to grow in her confidence around

larger groups, by being in a place where she felt comfortable and not out of her personal depth.

Leanne's experiences, in the particular example above, illustrate the influence that more positive relationships between students and their teachers can have on the student's embodied identity and their achievement of agency. I take this further in the next section by looking at the experiences of Russell and Karen, who were chosen to be a tour guide on a visiting Anne Frank exhibition.

#### **7.4.2 Being noticed and being told: 'I like being praised' (Russell, interview, 2010).**

Russell spoke extensively about the importance he attributed to being noticed by staff in school. He felt that generally there was "not much reward for working hard ", a characteristic he associated with himself. Thus, when he felt he was being positively recognised, he commented on it. At the end of their third year Russell and Karen were chosen to be tour guides on the visiting Anne Frank exhibition. This opportunity had an impact on both students, though this was experienced and manifested itself differently.

Russell noted that it was "nice to be chosen". He went on to comment on this recognition by staff and linked it to the work he put into his school life:

Good to know staff are recognising the effort you were putting in at school (Russell, interview, 2010).

Karen's experience of being chosen was different. She said "I just love History". This passion was fuelled further by her involvement in the Anne Frank exhibition. Karen's experience of

learning and teaching others about the Holocaust had left her even more curious about the period, which she had further researched following her engagement with the exhibition:

Researched history ever since the doing the Holocaust. I'm really focused. Once we did the Anne Frank exhibition I got the 'Diary' [Anne Frank 's] and went on to the internet to find out about the Holocaust. I like watching films like; The Boy in Striped Pyjamas, The Pianist and Schindler's list. The Pianist is the best. The Boy in Striped Pyjamas makes you cry (Karen, interview, 2010).

Karen had really appreciated being asked to be a tour guide. She felt that she had been acknowledged by the department and was trusted by them. Karen had initially felt apprehensive about assuming a teaching role to her peer group. The experience had turned out to be less frightening and more enjoyable than she thought it might be. By the end of one tour she found herself wanting to repeat the experience:

Relieved that you had finished but wanted to do it [tour guiding] again (Karen, interview, 2010).

The experience in some sense had proved life-changing for Karen. She felt she had become more vocal in class and it had enabled her to think about teaching as a career. Her certificate had sealed her feelings of achievement:

Helped me going towards teaching – really enjoyed feeling as if you've got something there. Got certificate at the end of it, makes you realise what you have done (Karen, interview, 2010).

Prior to this experience Karen had wanted to work with horses. Karen's selection and subsequent enjoyment and success at being a tour guide had broadened her aspirations. She perceived the role of the tour guide to be similar to that of a teacher. She suggested it gave her a sense of empathy with the role of a teacher. Her course choices and her choice of university had shifted from those based around horses to those based in teaching: 'I want to stay at my home town. I want to stay and teach in my home town as a job' (Karen, interview, 2010).

The evidence here shows that both students, based on their selection of being a tour guide, perceived that the teachers trusted them as individuals and valued their skills. These trusting relationships between teachers and students appear quite different to the ones enacted in the examples in section 7.2 where the teacher maintained control of many aspects of a student's movement, including the spaces which the students might occupy. Students, here, were trained to teach other students, but although the actual act of tour guiding was part of the experience, it was the act of recognition by teachers and the feelings of trust implied that these students foregrounded. In terms of student-teacher relationships, these different types of relationships, based more on trust and recognition of value, seem, as we see from the example of Karen, to offer the possibility of enhancing the achievement of agency by students. In Karen's case, it was in terms of future career choices. Here we are talking more about aspirations and the broadening of the projective dimension of the chordal triad, and this is discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine. In Russell's case, he felt his positive relationships with teachers contributed to him being able to challenge the senior management team about his limited fifth year options. From the perspective of achievement of agency, this gave Russell opportunities for manoeuvre. This

deliberation is an aspect of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. Russell's achievement of agency in this situation was having an understanding of his possible options and being able to 'critically shape [his] own responsiveness to problematic situations' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 971).

## **7.5 Concluding Comments**

In this chapter, I have discussed the data pertaining mainly to teacher-student, but also student-student relationships. I drew on this data to understand how the asymmetrical relationships between teachers and students frame the achievement of agency by students (the practical-evaluative). The data has shown that these relationships become habitual (iterational dimension) and can impact on the formation of aspirations (projective dimension). We have seen that how student-teacher relationships are shaped can enhance or reduce the achievement of agency and how, at times, students are able to bring to bear their experience and aspirations to mitigate the influence on agency of the teacher-student relationship. Thus experiences can hinder (habitual compliance) or enhance (successful resistance in the past, facilitative and/or trusting relationships) the achievement of agency and aspirations (for example, wanting to be a good student, to achieve) can contribute to *considered* compliance (which would be the achievement of agency). Overall, what the examples illustrate is that, if agency is achieved, it is largely orientated towards the practical-evaluative, albeit always influenced by the iterational and projective dimensions.

The next chapter unpacks further the discourses that surround the cultural artifacts such as that of 'being a good student'. This idea of 'ideal pupil' is drawn into these discussions, as the cultural context is important when engaging with concepts such as agency; in order to understand better how the cultural realm helps shape the achievement of agency.



## **8 The Cultural Realm and Agency: what does it mean to be an ideal pupil?**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I focus on the cultural realm; particularly the notion of the ideal student. While I fully acknowledge that it is both social structures and cultural artifacts that constitute the context for agency and social action, it is useful to spend time reflecting on some of these issues separately and acknowledge how they shape the contexts. The chapter, after an initial general discussion, is divided into three sub-headings. The first explores the uniform, the second pertains to attendance and the final section presents the concluding comments.

In 1980, Peter Woods suggested that a child's initial lesson at school 'is how to become a pupil, in general terms, as distinct from a certain mother's child' (Woods, 1980: 12). Cultural contexts construct what it is to be a *good* or *bad* pupil, and the early years of schooling help induct children with this understanding. However, simplistic notions of good and bad do not tell the whole story and Woods (Ibid.) goes on to suggest that pupils can be identified by 'sub-roles':

Eventually, however, other sub-roles come into play as the pupils become categorised into good or poor academically, well or badly behaved, proficient in certain subjects rather than others and so on. These are fairly well defined types, of which there are fairly clear expectations, and pupils, having signalled the

appropriateness of their allocation to them, further learn to respond to these expectations (Ibid.: 12).

In much more recent research, Cremin et al. (2011) employed a different typology to describe these different pupil types namely: the ideal pupil, the vulnerable pupil and the challenging pupil. The ideal pupil is described as a 'good citizen, good learner and conformist'. The vulnerable pupil as a 'victim, needy and with a deficient home life', whilst the challenging pupil is 'problematic but remediable, non-conformist and disruptive' (Ibid.: 593). Ideal [good] pupils are conformist in that they adhere to the rules and regulations of the school. Reflecting on the historical wearing of the school uniform, Kuhn (cited in Spencer, 2007: 240) suggested that the wearing of a uniform serves 'to subordinate yourself to the organisation [school] and its rules'. Referring to the 'old school tie', Spencer (2007: 236) suggests that the 'tie eloquently writes past and power', and its adoption in the uniform of both genders was, 'a marker of belonging and an integral part of the compulsory school uniform'. Dussel (2005: 193) discusses how the uniform is a sign that 'bodies have become docile'. These research findings indicate that it is not the clothes that make up the uniform *per se*, but the meanings imbued in these material artifacts. In this chapter, I will show that those students fulfilling the expectations of the *ideal [conformist] student* experience a different route through school than those who fall into the other categories.

The evidence in this chapter also helps us to acknowledge that the achievement of agency is not solely beholden to one type of role, for example, the *ideal student*. Indeed, we may question whether 'ideal pupils' are exercising high degrees of agency, or whether they are simply 'swimming with the tide' (Blair-Loy, cited in Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 1009), and therefore locking into place discourses, just or otherwise, which serve to assist them in the

short term in their own lives. I will show in this chapter that agency can be achieved when students adopt roles at odds with the socially accepted ideal pupil role, for example, when students 'opt out' or 'subvert'. The examples will illustrate that the consequences for these types of actions are different to the ones reaped by maintaining an ideal pupil status. I will also consider what the implications are on the achievement of agency, and when it is achieved in frames other than those of the ideal student.

Studenthood is temporal and dynamic. Students can 'reconstruct their agentic orientations and thereby alter their own structuring relationships to the contexts of action' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 1009). A different construction of their agentic orientations implies different possibilities for action in a similar context, due to the shift in time. This could alter their responses to expectations and challenge their allocated sub-role. Some of the examples in this chapter explore this shift in detail and consider the impact of such a shift.

Cultural artifacts can have a material aspect (Bartlett, 2007) and so material objects found in schools can be imbued with meanings. For example, the physical arrangement of the classroom contains a mutual understanding between teachers and pupils as to their appropriate places (Sørensen, 2007). I start this chapter with a section that discusses the uniform. Three of the young people, Russell, Karen and Janet, made reference to it either in written text or in their conversations about school expectations. The empirical evidence highlights its importance in the school, as the majority of students wore the uniform and wrote about it in English essays (displayed on notice boards), and also because of the visual reminders in most of the classrooms I visited in this school. Alongside the uniform, and especially the tie, attendance rates were discussed by the students. It is worth noting that

Karen, Russell and Janet discussed the uniform, whilst Leanne, Rachel and Tracey spoke about attendance.

## **8.2 Uniform: Remember ties equal safety**

Students at this school were expected to wear the prescribed uniform. The students I worked with all wore the uniform: black trousers/skirts, white shirts and ties. In many of the rooms I visited, there was a sign on the wall reminding students about the three most important material artifacts necessary for classroom life: pen, diary and tie. The importance of the uniform was noted, not only through its visibility in the clothes that the students wore and the signs in the classroom, but also in its reinforcement in lessons, whether by the teachers or through student work.

Janet's English class had all written a piece for their S4 exam folio entitled; *The insider's guide to [] school*. Janet was happy for me to read her final piece and printed out a copy for me to keep. The purpose of Janet's piece was to inform new students about the school and its expectations. She described uniform 'as the most important thing you cannot forget' (Janet, essay, 2010). Janet's explanation of the importance placed on uniform was framed around student safety. The Headteacher had used an example of a fight to illustrate this. Some young people, external to the school, had entered the school grounds and a fight had ensued between the school students and the intruders. The Headteacher suggested that it was due to the uniform that he could identify the different origins of the young people: student or intruder:

[The head knew who the] unwelcome guests were and dealt with them separately, but if it wasn't for the school uniform he might have grabbed the wrong people (Janet, interview 2010).

Karen also echoed the notion that one purpose of the uniform was safety, alongside being an indicator of belonging (a similar finding to Spencer, 2007, above):

[The uniform] it shows your place shows where you belong. The tie, I think is necessary. If you got run over and no one knows who you are...then people would be able to recognise which school you went to (Karen, interview, 2010).

For these two students the tie symbolises safety and belonging. Dussel (2005: 193) suggests that schools are using uniforms, 'as part of the measure that schools have to take in order to create a more protected, disciplined and safer environment for children'.

The constant visual reminder of the tie's importance to the school was displayed in every classroom and was followed up by verbal reprimands and uniform slips (formal warnings) if students did not adhere to the policy. In one of Janet's classes, in which I was observing, a student who arrived late and not wearing a tie was immediately challenged by the teacher:

Teacher: Do you have a tie?

Student nods

Teacher: Put it round your neck tightly

Student complies (Field notes, 2010).

Janet wrote in her essay that there were always consequences for not wearing a tie. Russell's view on the school uniform was that, whilst he might prefer to attend school in "normal clothes", he did not find the uniform uncomfortable and he wore it without making a fuss. Russell appeared to be a very tidy young man. The uniform he wore was recognisable to the school. His tie was fastened near his shirt's top button and his shirt was tucked in. Thus, whilst he suggested he only tolerated it, he did not go out of his way to change it in any way:

I tolerate the uniform. I don't like it. It's not uncomfortable; doesn't make me feel bad. I wouldn't have a problem wearing normal clothes to school. I don't have a problem wearing uniform unless you had to wear it after school. That would be bad. You've got to be individual. I think it's the idea – makes you uniform. Don't get people coming in with people who can afford and folk that can't (Russell, interview, 2010)

The school uniform provided a first year essay topic for Russell and his classmates. He suggested that most people, when in school, say that they do not like school uniform. The reason for this, Russell implied, was due to peer pressure; that in fact to admit you might like it would not look good to your classmates:

Way back in first year we had to write a discursive essay on uniforms. We discussed all the reasons. Generally folk don't like wearing it and would not wear it. People don't mind when in a classroom environment 'cos everybody else is [...] Everybody thinks that if you say you want to wear uniform everybody else will hear (Russell, interview, 2010).

However, as the conversation continued, Russell's opinion on the uniform seemed to morph and become one of liking it, as it allowed one to be identified with a certain school. He likened this to football teams, whilst recognising that the violence often associated with supporters of different teams could not be condoned:

I think uniform looks good. You can be identified by the colours you wear. I would wear my rangers top in school, but not allowed. Not fights in school about football. Everyone knows who supports who, and there is friendly banter between the two (Celtic and Rangers). I don't buy into sectarian thing. Bad on both sides not just one side; few people on both sides (Russell, interview, 2010).

The tie, as part of the uniform, is the material aspect that signifies the cultural realm and it has become normalised in this school. Janet and Karen spoke of the purpose of the uniform in terms of safety and belonging. Russell drew on the argument regarding evening out inequalities in student background. This contrasts with historical research by Spencer (2007: 238), which suggested that the school uniform did not even out inequalities, but was in fact 'a site where identities of class and gender become played out'. The power of discourse is visible here as, on the one hand, Russell drew on one argument, whereas research would suggest otherwise. Russell's identification of peer pressure, as a reason why uniforms are apparently disliked, is notable; as he goes on to talk about football colours and the uniforms worn in this context being more than acceptable, and being likable.

The examples, in this section, indicate that the uniform, and especially the tie, is important in this school. This evidence illustrates that teachers used the tie to develop conformity and to assist in the socialisation of the students. The emergent power from the teacher-pupil

relationship enabled the teacher to mobilise the discourses that surround uniforms to control the student's actions (telling a student to put their tie on, for example), and this arguably constrains agency. However, these three students did not disagree with the uniform. They saw benefits in it providing safety and identity, and actively sought to wear it. Are these students exerting a high degree of agency, in choosing this action, or are they simply 'swimming with the tide'? Perhaps, after eleven years of compulsory schooling and the consequent socialisation of these young people, we should not be surprised that these students embrace the uniform and all that it stands for. These powerful discourses that are internalised by students, and to a large extent which they adopt unquestioningly, place limits on the achievement of agency.

The uniform is ideological and symbolic, in that it reinforces asymmetrical power relations within the school. Dussel (cited in Spencer, 2007: 236) suggests that 'school uniforms are signs and signifying practices that carry meanings of identity and difference, and that enact the disciplining of the body by a power that subjects and subjectifies'. As a cultural artifact, it is part of an ideology, and to change or remove this material aspect could impact on the enactment of this ideology. However students understand and make sense of the uniform, it is still used as a form of control by teachers, as seen in this section's example. In a sense, the power lies in the idea of the tie, rather than in the piece of cloth that is the material tie.

The tie, as a material aspect, thus forms part of the cultural realm that signifies this notion of the ideal pupil, in the sense of conforming. If the tie, and indeed the remainder of the uniform, is not worn, then punishments are received. Punishments are not part of the world of the ideal pupil. In terms of agency, we see Russell debating the merits of uniform and suggesting that he would be quite happy to wear "normal clothes", and that if in fact he



had to wear a uniform after school, this would be an infringement, yet he still chooses to abide by school rules. The eleven years of socialisation during these students' school years, has led to these students not challenging the wearing of uniform, and this is reinforced by punishments if there is a uniform infringement. This is a good example of emergent power from social structures reinforcing cultural artifacts and acting together to limit the achievement of agency. It seems, as Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 981) suggest, that the choices made by these young people 'reflect a deeper stratum of culturally and social-psychologically rooted dispositions, thereby contributing to the reproduction of social structures'. In terms of the iterational dimension, this habitual compliance towards the wearing of uniform is unchallenged. In the practical-evaluative dimension, there seems little evidence of any 'manoeuvre among repertoires' (Ibid.: 980) when it concerns school uniform. The uniform is one of the assumed material aspects of this particular cultural realm and the subsequent understandings of the ideal pupil. Here, the practice of wearing a uniform is reinforced and held in place by these students. The benign acceptance of the correctly worn uniform reinforces the asymmetrical relationships between pupil and teachers, providing an example of cultural artifacts reinforcing and even legitimating social structures – again with the effect of limiting students' achievement of agency. It visually represents these asymmetrical relationships between teachers and the young people in school. Pupils soon learn to self-regulate with regards to the uniform and, with that self-regulation, other explanations are offered as to why they wear it without question and, in the majority of cases, willingly.

I would suggest, then, that this agency has an iterational orientation concerning the uniform. Whilst Russell may question the uniform on one level, he is happy to justify his

continuing action to wear it by comparing it to football strips. Karen and Janet do not question the uniform, but uphold its wear in the belief that it makes them safer and gives them a sense of belonging. In terms of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, these young people have perhaps gone further than simply 'swimming with the tide' and have problematised and characterised the wearing of the uniform in light of previous experiences deciding that, at least for the moment, they will continue to uphold the rules and wear the uniform. This leads us to question whether the agency that is achieved is simply one of compliance, as different possibilities have been considered. It seems that these students appear to wear the uniform in a more *considered* acceptance (compliance) rather than a *coerced* acceptance (compliance). This *considered* acceptance (compliance) upholds the authoritarian relationships that are signified by the uniform and feed back into the maintenance of the cultural artifact of the ideal pupil. This *considered compliance* might then be considered as agency, as there are not only possibilities to do differently, but also that the young people seem to have 'critically shaped their response to [a] problematic situation(s)' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 971). *Coerced compliance* on the other hand suggests no other possibilities, and would suggest that there is no achievement of agency.

Students are expected to attend school regularly in a timely fashion. The school timetable is predicated on the notion that the whereabouts of any student in a school can be known at any time (Simpson, 2000). This next section looks at the issue of attendance as described by Leanne, Rachel and Tracey.

### **8.3 Attendance**

Children and young people are required by law to receive a full-time education up to the age of sixteen in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 1995). Parents of children and young people

found to be missing from school can be subject to a court action, if the local authority wishes to pursue it further. This school uses behaviour cards to monitor the attendance and behaviour of its students. Leanne, Tracey and Rachel all talked about attendance in terms of percentages, which measured their physical presence in school. Up to the end of S4, students' attendance was closely monitored, as the students describe below. However, post-S4, the work done to ensure student attendance in this school visibly changed. One student with a poor attendance record, whom I saw frequently in classes, felt that the school did not want him beyond S4 and had told him to go to college. Looking across Leanne, Rachel and Tracey's experience of attendance enables us to consider how, where and when agency may be achieved, but how this is always temporary and fluid, dependent as much on agentic orientations as on other contextual factors.

Leanne, who was consistently present in the school when I was there, talked about her attendance. In S4, Leanne proudly noted her attendance rate was nearly a 100%. However, in the first three years of secondary school she had had poor attendance. Leanne had not truanted at primary school, although she was aware of some children who had. It was in her first year at secondary school that Leanne's attendance slipped dramatically, rising back to 50% in her third year. Leanne's parents had been very unhappy about her missing school. They used consequences such as grounding in an attempt to get Leanne to go back to school:

AP: What did your parents think?

Leanne: ..oooh they go mental. They ground you.

AP: Does it make a difference?

Leanne: Does and it doesnea..

(Leanne, interview, 2010).

Leanne was indifferent as to whether grounding made a difference to her. Instead, she seemed to have arrived at a point at the beginning of fourth year, where she began to question the act of truancy and what benefits it brought or did not:

No point in skiving 'cos if you always get caught and you want to get good grades in exams and everything (Leanne, interview, 2010).

Although Leanne now attended school regularly, getting up at 7am each morning to get the bus to school, she stated that she still preferred her primary school experience. The largeness of the secondary school, compared to that of the primary, and the constant movement between classes still frustrated her.

Leanne had spent her first three years at secondary school on a behaviour card. Tracey and Rachel were also on behaviour cards at that time for lack of attendance. Leanne remembered that Rachel had the same 50% attendance rate as herself in the third year. She also recalled how, with Rachel, they did not attend the fifteen-minute registration period at the start of the day, because they could not see the point in it:

Leanne: Me and Rachel never used to go to reggie at all.

Rachel: Boring what 's the point going to class for 15 mins. Didn't have anyone else to talk to. Didn't know anybody.

Leanne: Just sit there in reg. and wait until teacher does reg. Listen to bulletin.

AP: You go now though?

Leanne: Aye. Just sit and talk to my pals.

(Leanne and Rachel, interview, 2010)

This constant presence of a behaviour card had consequences for Leanne, in terms of her school choices. In S1 to S3 she was not allowed to go on the annual school trips and her options post-S4 were the local college or employment, not the school.

Rachel shared some of the same lessons as Tracey and Leanne. I made a number of attempts to shadow Rachel, but found that her attendance was somewhat erratic. When I chatted about school with Rachel, she said her attendance for the fourth year was over 75%, better than the 50% of the third year, but still low enough to merit a behaviour card for attendance. Rachel had, like Leanne, preferred the primary school experience. She thought it was not possible to truant there - "you can't skive at primary school". She recalled familiar aspects of primary school, such as getting milk after break and the teachers sitting down reading stories to the class. The lack of constant movement between classrooms was, in Rachel's eyes, a positive aspect of her primary experience, especially when compared with her secondary school experience:

[..] better than High School as didn't have to move about classes – tiring. I like walking but not in circle – gets boring. Double periods – boring (Rachel, interview, 2010).

Rachel expressed a general dislike for school. She found it tiring, especially the early rising:

[School is] tiring – you have to get up early in the morning and you're tired when you get home – up at 7.30 (Rachel, interview, 2010).

She attributed her poor attendance record to mixing with other students, who also missed school:

I used to hang about with Mary [student at the same school] she's the skiving type [...] get into the wrong crowd (Rachel, interview, 2010).

Rachel was a quiet girl in many of the classes I observed. She appeared more talkative when in classes with her close friendship group. Rachel lived just across from the school and was able to walk in and out. She liked this in some ways, as she found that, if she was ill, she could walk home and get her mother to call and say where she had gone. On the downside, however, because her attendance was being monitored, it also meant that the guidance teacher could call home and find out where Rachel was. This irritated Rachel as, at times, she saw it as unjust:

[The guidance teacher] she'll phone my dad and tell him I'm not at school when I am at school. He'll tell her that I am at school. If I go home 'cos I'm not well –she'll phone my dad and if I'm in school and not well she'll phone my dad. But Mary [another student] is never in school and she doesn't phone her (Rachel, interview, 2010).

Rachel was hoping to stay at school for the fifth year and unlike Tracey and Leanne had been encouraged to apply: "I'm getting to stay on at school". Rachel's opinion of school was low and she found much of the lesson content tedious. In the first to third year, Rachel

chose to meet up with friends who were also not at school, rather than to attend. She found school constrained her actions: “Aye, can’t go anywhere”. In her fourth year, Rachel had started to take on a different outlook regarding her actions, which she stated would “[...]get you no job”. Her attitude to what work might be like, mirrored her thoughts about school - “boring”.

In Tracey’s first year of secondary school, she had been on a behaviour card for truanting. This was not the case when I observed, and Tracey was present in the majority of classes. Tracey was generally very quiet in the classes I observed, apart from xl. She suggested that she got on with the work and preferred that, especially if she was not with her friends. Tracey pictured school as a place that asked lots of boring questions and where you had lots of tests. Tracey’s future in school was full of uncertainty and, whilst in her early secondary years she had chosen places other than school, it seemed now that school was rejecting her:

I’m getting kicked out of school anyway not because I done something bad but because nine teachers are leaving.... If I can ’t get any of the courses I wanted, then Miss [teacher] is going to send me straight to college (Tracey, interview, 2010).

These three students had, in the early years of secondary school, chosen not to attend on a full-time basis. This was not a choice made by adults, but by the young people themselves. Wyness (2006: 154) suggests that truancy is an issue for teachers as young people are no longer under their control; they are ‘out of position’. Wyness (Ibid.) goes on to comment that, ‘schooling is a normative reference point – not just a physical, geographical space, but a place for enculturation’. This enculturation encompasses expectations, rules and

structures. Truancy then becomes a concern, as young people who see truancy as an option are perhaps 'less likely to conform to the idea of a social apprenticeship' (Ibid.: 154).

The timetable, which is a firm foundation upon which schools function (Simpson, 2000), is imposed on both students and teachers and it has the effect of allowing people to be accounted for in time and place. However, if a student is not in school, this mechanism of control becomes defunct. The lack of presence within a school opens up different possibilities for the socialisation of young people, ones that are not so directly controlled by teachers (Wyness, 2006). The asymmetrical teacher-student relationships that dominate much of schooling are challenged when students are not present within the school. The evidence, in this section, suggests that what seems important to these students are their social interactions with their friends. These strong peer-to-peer relationships, as we saw in section 7.3, mitigate these teacher-student relationships, to the extent that students draw on power emerging from their peer relationships. In the cases, in this section, it is not possible to ascertain whether their friends did not attend school and so these students followed, or whether because these students struggled with the purpose of school, they chose to not to attend and others followed. We do hear that both Rachel and Leanne were challenged by the transition between primary and secondary school. They both cite the largeness of the secondary school and the constant shift between classes as problematic factors. Tracey talks about secondary school in terms of the constant testing, and Rachel in terms of boredom. Both Rachel and Leanne (see previous chapter) talked about group presentations and how they found this experience frightening, so much so that they avoided it by whatever means possible. Whether these factors combined eroded their personal self-confidence and self-esteem is open to question. But what is illuminating, in this mix where



these young people are constantly faced with situations they find challenging, is that they seek options that are beyond those open to ideal students: they see non-attendance at school as a possibility. This opening up of the possibilities to deliberate enables the achievement of agency. This agency is orientated towards the practical-evaluative dimension, in the sense that there is a judgement that school is 'boring', too challenging and so forth, and that the risk of consequences is often mitigated by the strong peer relationships, which override the fear of punishments dealt by adults. This agency is also shaped by the iterational dimension, the habitual knowledge of routines and expectations. By 'getting round the rules of constraining space' (de Certeau cited in Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 1000), these young people experience the achievement of agency in terms of their resistance to normative expectations.

Non-attendance at school was most prevalent for these three young people in S1 and S2. It had already started to alter by S3, and by S4, for all but one of these students, their attendance was very good. Thus, despite their lack of presence for their 'social apprenticeship' (Wyness, 2006) in the early part of secondary school, they were drawn back in. The reasons they gave were related to their possible limiting of future opportunities. This change in attitude reflects a shift in the projective orientation of agency. In S1 and S2, these students were influenced heavily by their peer relationships. However, as we hear from them in S4, they have identified a shift in their thinking concerning their future regarding attainment and employment.

### **8.3.1 The consequences of non-attendance**

Agency may be achieved for these students, through their recognition that they had room for different manoeuvres regarding attendance. However, the students did experience

consequences and when at school, not only did the timetable control their movement, but extra devices were also employed. The presence of a personal attendance card controlled more than just their movement; it also recorded behaviour in each and every lesson attended. Attendance concerns also ensured that other systems were mobilised. These young people were attached to the Learning Support department. They were excluded from the opportunity to go on the annual school trips:

Three years on behaviour slip for skiving (truancy); puts you on a behaviour slip if you skive. [...] S1-S3 they ran (school) trips but didn't get to go on any of them 'cos I was on my behaviour slip (Leanne, interview, 2010).

Whilst the ownership of a behaviour slip, in Leanne's case, had the consequence of being prohibited from school trips to various attractions, Rachel had found her way onto two out of the three school trips. What was a common out-of-school experience in these early secondary years, for these students, were the visits to a prison. Rachel described the experience as 'scary'. The purpose of the trip, it seemed, was to be made aware of some of the issues surrounding drug misuse:

Got to talk to two people about drugs. [...] Boys I met, two of them, one 29 one 28, been in trouble with police since 16 and in prison. Thought prison was OK. One was getting out July this year and one next. Had mum and dads but no one of their own. [...] Been on this trip three years running (Leanne, interview, 2010).

The prison visits were open to only a select few students, those on behaviour slips. For Rachel and Leanne, the trip was not only disturbing, but also they felt that criminality was "not worth it". Noteworthy though, was their attendance on the trip. These students, who

had a very poor record of turning up for the general school activities, were keen to attend when there were different opportunities on offer.

In terms of agency, there appears to be a shift in the *agentic orientations* (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 1003) of these three students. The evidence suggests that, in S4, these students started to have a more projective orientation to their agency than previously. Their acknowledgement of the importance for themselves, of getting good grades in exams and gaining employment, has had the impact of transforming the attendance rate of these three students. It seems dubious whether the control mechanisms of the past, the behaviour cards and other ensuing punishments, made any difference, but rather it is this shift in the composition of the chordal triad, as they begin to think beyond the school gates. Rachel, Tracey and Leanne had all experienced some form of work experience outside of school. This brief engagement, alongside their uncertainty about their future in school, placed them between old ways of acting within school and new possibilities outside of the school gates. The projective dimension of agency is important here:

The locus of agency lies in the *hypothesization* of experience, as actors attempt to reconfigure received schemas by generating alternative possible responses to problematic situations they confront in their lives (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 984).

Rachel's comment, that non-attendance "get[s] you no job", is perhaps indicative of a shift in thinking. Projecting forward and realising that time in school can and does come to an end provided, in these students' cases, an impetus to start acting differently. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 984) suggest that 'projectivity is a critical mediating juncture between iterational and practical-evaluative aspects of agency. It involves the first step toward

reflectivity'. It could be suggested that these students began to reflect on their actions, in light of what could be in the future, resulting in a different behaviour: that of attendance at school. Shifting 'agentic orientations' changes young people's ability to have a 'transformative impact in relation to the situational contexts within which they act' (Ibid.: 1003). Attendance at school, whilst in S4, was actively encouraged by the school and rewarded by the removal of behaviour slips. Beyond S4, however, there is a change in the situational context, and the locus of control regarding attendance at school shifts. Rather than school attendance being a legal requirement, it becomes voluntary, and so schools can alter their outlook, retaining more choice in which students are allowed to remain, and which students are not welcomed back. The students' agentic orientations may stay the same at the end of S4 but it will be within a context where the school door, once always open [due to compulsory attendance], may now close to them.

Conforming is part of the identity of an *ideal pupil* (Cremlin et al., 2011), and attendance at school is part of this conformity. Without this, the social apprenticeship that the school offers is considered to be at risk (Wyness, 2006). Students are well trained in providing evidence for any days taken off. Written evidence is required for all eventualities: days off due to sickness are considered to be legitimate, whereas family holidays are not condoned. For the majority of school students, attendance at school is unquestioned. Russell, Janet and Karen were part of this population.

#### **8.4 Concluding Comments**

Both uniform and attendance can be seen as forms of the bodily control of students (Simpson, 2000; Dussel, 2005; Wyness, 2006; Spencer, 2007). The evidence above illustrates aspects of the ideal pupil discourse and how it infiltrates all aspects of school life: materially

through the uniform, and behaviour cards, and structurally through relationships. Different material and conceptual aspects form part of this discourse. In this chapter, I have looked at how both the tie and attendance are used to visibly control students. We can see how agency is still achieved in different places and how this agency can shift, depending on personal recomposition of the chordal triad, and how time can alter the situational contexts.

Russell, Janet and Karen fit the 'notion of the ideal pupil' through conformity, and so secure a certain future within the school. Tracey, Leanne and Rachel are different. Despite their shifting agentic orientations, ones which appear to return them to role of the conforming pupil, their opportunities for places within the school remain dubious.

Considering how the cultural realm shapes the achievement of agency is complex territory, as suggested by Biesta and Tedder's (2007: 137) statement that, 'achievement of agency will always result in the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations'. In terms of the uniform, I suggested the idea of *considered compliance*. I showed, in section 8.2, that Russell, Karen and Janet had all deliberated over the uniform. We could argue that agency may have been achieved, as the opportunities to act differently were considered. However, the notion of the 'ideal student', alongside Dussel's (2005: 193) argument that 'uniforms work as diluting individuality, positioning individuals on a disciplinary grid', suggests a positioning of students that is highly constrained. Thus, I could equally argue that achievement of agency in this particular ecology is contestable. When compliance is overtly coerced, as we see above in the form of punishment, this would not, I argue, promote the achievement of agency.

In terms of attendance and the achievement of agency, it could be argued that Rachel, Tracey and Leanne see possibilities of acting differently and shape their response to what would appear to be a problematic situation: that of attendance at school. This achievement of agency is very much orientated towards the practical-evaluative and shaped by the iterational. Over time, the evidence shows that there is a re-composition of the agentic orientations for these students, and the projective orientation becomes stronger. This strengthening sees a change in behaviour and a re-engagement with the school environment. However, what is then noticeable, is that in S4 these young people's ability to make decisions about staying on in school is compromised by their earlier actions, and routes open to other young people are closed to them.

This raises the question about whether earlier compliance in school, which could be regarded as a space where any agency that is achieved is bounded, enhances the achievement of agency in the longer term. Early resistance in the form of truancy, which may be regarded as achievement of agency, has the consequence of closing down the possibility of the achievement of agency in the longer term. Thus, whilst orientations may change over time, so does the context by means of which people act, and so agency that may have been achieved in the past can be closed down. In terms of the ideology of the ideal student, students' lack of engagement with its main tenets has, as a possible consequence, a more bounded future context that could impact on their achievement of agency.

Cultural artifacts, as I have shown above, play an important role in the context of schooling. In the final data analysis chapter, I consider in more depth the projective dimension of agency. I look at these young people's aspirations: how they are shaped by prior

experiences and how they are enabled and/or constrained by the school context. This allows one to ask the question about what is possible, and what could be made possible, through the school context, regarding potential personal future trajectories for these young people.

## 9 Aspirations

### 9.1 Introduction

In this final empirical data chapter, I explore the aspirations of the six young people in this study. After an initial discussion, this chapter is divided into seven sub-headings. Each young person is considered separately, before the concluding comments. I consider Karen initially, as this reflects the same order in which I described the students in Chapter Six.

Recent Scottish Government publications illustrate a concern that, 'there is a strong association between under-achievement and unemployment' (Scottish Government, 2007). They have registered this concern by defining what an expected (positive) destination of a school leaver is, and by collecting nationwide data regarding all school leavers' destinations. The National Indicator reflects that:

The successful transition of all school leavers into positive and sustained destinations is of great importance to both the individual and wider society. The learning provided and accessed during a pupil's school career provides the bedrock for enabling future opportunities to be realised through a combination of the skills, aptitude and personal qualities which enable individuals to lead positive and productive adult lives (Scottish Government, 2007).

Here, the Scottish Government places responsibility for the future employability of its young people firmly in the hands of schools. However, the future aspirations of children and young people are not simply provided by the schooling environment. Nespor's (1997)



ethnography, entitled *Tangled up in School*, explores how school is an intersection, acknowledging that practices begin and end beyond the school boundary:

Instead of treating the school as a container filled with teacher cultures, student subgroups, classroom instruction and administrative micro politics, I look at one school ... as an intersection of social space, a knot in a web of practices that stretch into complex systems beginning and ending outside the school (Ibid.: xiii).

Coburn and Russell (2008: 205) also make reference, in relation to their work with teachers, to the fluidity of boundaries: teachers are 'embedded in a network of relations that span multiple subgroups and include individuals inside and outside school boundaries'. Networks of relations impinge on students, regardless of place and time, as much as they do on teachers. This chapter explores agency as orientated to the future, with recognition that such agency is shaped by past experiences, and based on the contingencies of the present. Thus, if we consider school as an 'intersection of social space' (Nespor, 1997: xiii), the complexity of threads for each student is diverse and vast. We may ask then, what is possible in the physical location of school, which helps shapes the future aspirations of students?

This chapter draws on the data that emerged from the students about their future aspirations. Whilst the school physically provided the location, I look at the data through the partial student biographies that they each shared in their interviews. Aspirations emerge from past experiences, the iterational dimension, and are tempered by day-to-day routines. Relationships, which influence these past experiences, can come from many spaces. Most commonly suggested ties include those with family, peers and teachers, though one student

refers to her horse as a dominant actor helping to shape her decision-making. The breadth of possible aspirations for individuals is different because they are shaped by their unique networks. Factors which could limit students' aspirations include the knowledge that actors in their networks are able to access, and also the congruence of that knowledge to both themselves and the young people (Coburn & Russell, 2008). Looking individually at each of these students, as I do in this chapter, illustrates how these ties, both within and outside of the school, help shape future aspirations. In their consideration of agency, Hitlin and Elder (2007) highlight how the projective dimension of agency gets folded into the possible alternative trajectories in the practical-evaluative dimension:

This extended temporal horizon complicates the nature of agency, as our reflexive capacities extend to incorporate distal goals and our beliefs about our ability to reach such goals gets folded into such agentic action (Ibid.: 182).

This statement reminds us of how the importance of considering future imaginings such as these, to a lesser or greater extent, affect the present.

## **9.2 Karen**

Karen, who had been to an equestrian centre for her work experience, had changed her mind regarding her dream of being a riding instructor, which she had held since the age of twelve. She attributed this to two particular reasons. Firstly, she was more aware of the poor financial rewards working as a riding instructor, and secondly the experience of being a tutor on the Anne Frank exhibition had led her to consider that she might enjoy teaching. Primary teaching, she explained, would allow her to stay near her home and horse, whilst still providing her with something she thought would be enjoyable:

Got a horse – don't want to leave it behind [...] I did help out at the pony club as I thought about being riding instructor and then a vet and now back to a teacher..[I wanted to be a] riding instructor since about 12 then last year a vet but wouldn't be able as couldn't put an animal to sleep so like working with children so teacher....[...] I want to stay at my home town. I want to stay and teach in my home town as a job. I hope to stay in my home town to study and get the train into university. I would like to teach primary (Karen, interview, 2010).

Karen's ambition to teach meant she would need to attend university. None of her family had attended higher education institutions. Karen viewed university simply as a place, where you needed to go to become a teacher. She did not express any broader expectations regarding attendance at university. Karen did see going into the teaching profession as something of a challenge though, because it was different to the experience of her immediate family:

None of my family has been teachers. It 's something different. Teaching will be a challenge. None of my family has been to university. Mum has perhaps been to college [...]. Mum's quite bright and she helps me with homework, but my gran can't help (Karen, interview, 2010).

Karen's leisure activities revolved around local community activities. Alongside these friends and family ties, Karen also owned a horse. This addition to her network of relations shifted what she saw as her potential for flexibility of movement. It constrained her to more local wanderings, if she wanted to be frequently in touch with it. Her projective solution to this tie, as we heard above, was to stay at home, travel more locally and teach locally. Emirbayer

and Mische (1998: 990) consider this sort of 'hypothetical resolution' to be part of a dominant tone in the internal structure of projectivity. Karen's response to the dilemma of a career, which held more financial gain than her original aspirations, found her deliberating possibilities that would allow her both the opportunity for further study and employment, which she thought she would enjoy, whilst still enabling her to stay close to those things most precious to her in both the short and longer term. Place, in her original career choice of a riding instructor, was not a consideration and it only became important, when her aspirations began to change. Karen's proposed solution makes visible the tie-strengths (Coburn and Russell, 2008) of her local network. Her family, whilst lacking knowledge of Higher Education, were able to provide accommodation, support and access to her horse, without Karen having to curb her aspiration to become a primary teacher.

Karen's response to her present problematic situation enables her to experience the achievement of agency, by reforming her goals. Karen's future selection of Higher courses were now based on her distal aim of Primary teaching. Hitlin and Elder (2007: 182) describe this as a 'situated form of agency'. Here, we see judgements about, type of work experience and choice of further study, which seem 'more directed towards the future' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 971). Karen appears to be 'exercising of action with long-term implications' (Hitlin & Elder, 2007: 182).

### **9.3 Russell**

Russell had little idea about his long-term future. He had not gone on a work placement in the third year, as the type of work experience organised by the school was limited in choice. Russell did try and organise his own, but this fell through:

Unfortunate circumstances meant I didn't do work experience. I was going to go to my dad's work to work in the computer-processing department – not to work with my dad (Russell, interview, 2010).

Russell wanted a placement that he was interested in, as he felt it helped with his motivation. Russell differed in his view about work experience to the female students in this study. He saw no point in work experience that was not linked to his possible future aspirations, though these were not yet fully formed. Russell's attitude regarding work spilled into his views regarding part time work:

Not got a job at moment and have no intention of getting one at the moment. Not desperate for money. Just quite happy to sit and save money. Exchange for an easy life. When I have to do it I'll do it. But when I don't I no wanting (Russell, interview, 2010).

Russell's mother supported her son's decision. However, his father felt that part-time work would be beneficial for his son. Russell's clear focus was, however, on school and his attainment. He felt pressure from the homework set, and the time needed to complete this:

See how much homework we get and revision we have to do. There's no time for anything (Russell, interview, 2010).

The Higher subjects he was expecting to take in the fifth year comprised English, Maths, Administration, Accounts and History. He had chosen these subjects through a mixture of personal preference and timetabling constraints, due to the size of the school:

Wanted to do Business Management instead of Accounts, but same column as History so couldn't take it - school too small (Russell, interview, 2010).

Going elsewhere to study a subject was not an option for Russell. Outwardly, he suggested it was because he thought his "teacher would be jealous if I went somewhere else to take the subject" (Russell, interview, 2010). However, from my observations and Russell 's comments, it may have been that he did not have the confidence to attend a different school. Russell felt that his school had "generally a nice atmosphere", but he had been called names on a number of occasions:

Get called swot, teacher's pet. More boys to boys, rather than girls to girls. Very much more boys to boys. You're successful they're not.. well.....not as successful. There are a lot of people in the school who get it (Russell, interview, 2010).

I asked if this was dealt with in school. Russell suggested he had experienced this type of name-calling in the presence of some teachers, and that these teachers had not challenged it, and at times laughed with the name-caller. I followed by asking how he felt about that, if it bothered him:

No it doesn't really bother me. I don't really care what people think of me. Call me a swot and tell me I do too much revision. I tell them I haven't, but they don't really believe me. They can believe what they want. Goes between them asking for answers, and then criticising me for getting it right. I don't give them the answers (Russell, interview, 2010).

Russell's comments indicate the discomfort he experienced in dealing with this bullying. This may be partly the reason for his reticence, regarding studying a subject in a nearby school, though he did not explicitly state this. However, the importance placed on the subject teacher was notable, perhaps revealing a lack of self-confidence:

I didn't pick subjects purely based on teachers, but if I had to pick between two, it came into the decision-making process – whether I get on with the teachers (Russell, interview, 2010).

Russell's relationship with the teacher formed part of his network of ties and informed and influenced his decision-making, as we see above, in his future subject choices. Russell's, at times, unpleasant experience in the classroom at the hands of his peers and those teachers who condoned their actions, may be partly accountable for this, although, again, he did not explicitly state this.

Russell's goals were much more proximal rather than distal. He talked about his exams at school and then a progression on to a university not too far from home:

Like some place relatively close. [City] would be alright 'cos there 's a railway station right out the back of the house. We're in quite a good area for universities. I won't go to England, wouldn't want to be that far away from mum and dad (Russell, interview, 2010).

The tie-strength (Coburn and Russell, 2008) between Russell and his parents is made visible in his statement above. Russell recognised that he did not have a particular path and this concerned him in terms of motivation:

I need to have something to try and aspire to (Russell, interview, 2010).

Unlike Karen, the achievement of agency in Russell's situation lies in the 'temporal strategies' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 1000) found in the practical-evaluative dimension. The evidence, in this section, shows that Russell's judgement about work experience is focussed on its pointlessness if it was not leading towards a future, potential career interest. Russell sought to control his own placement by organising one based on personal, familial ties. However, when this fell through, Russell opted for the safety of the school boundary. This evidence illustrates the temporal improvisation of 'putting off', and is Russell's way of dealing with work and work experience. It is located in his characterisation of the situation in light of the past experiences; he states: no need for a job at the moment. In Russell's case here, the chordal triad is still very much orientated towards the practical-evaluative dimension, if heavily influenced by the iterational. Russell's uncertainty about his future constrains his possible future imaginings, and so he is firmly rooted still in the proximal goal of school, although he sees himself going on to Higher Education.

Russell may have a limited projective orientation to his agency, but he has already reconciled the possibility of a move away from his parents as he discusses the proximity of a train line and the possibility of daily travel from his home to university. Similar to Karen, his 'hypothetical resolution' (Ibid.: 990) of this possible conflict is easily managed.

In contrast to Karen, Russell's goals are much less defined. He does still exercise 'action with long-term implications' (Hitlin & Elder, 2007: 182), in terms of his aspiration to go to university, and this, in turn, helped him shape his present engagement with school. However, his subject choices were not framed by a possible future work career, but by his



likes and the teachers who taught the subjects. Whether this is liberating or limiting is debatable. Russell imposed no restrictions on his choices, apart from his relationships with teachers. We saw in Chapter Seven that many of the relationships Russell had with teachers were based on trust. In this sense, Russell's actions were 'engaged with the past' but 'more responsive to the present' than 'directed to the future' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 972).

#### **9.4 Janet**

Janet had spent much of her younger life moving between different locations and had experienced a number of different schools. She did not seem dissatisfied by this. However, she now wanted to settle in one area.

Constantly moving had left Janet always worried about new friendships, or the potential lack of them. From her research, Lahelma (2002) noted that young people thought friends were vital. Janet's school friends were not local to her, but she did have a very close friendship with another young woman, with whom she worked with part-time in a local shop. Janet's future aspirations were closely aligned to that of her older friend, who was in the second year of an Interior Design course at the local college. Janet aspired to follow the same trajectory. This enabled her to continue to live at home, whilst she studied at a local college to do the interior design course:

I want an education. I already ken what I want to do when I leave school – an interior designer. Need Highers. Do a HNC/HND at college then go to uni for a diploma, actually degree first then diploma. As an interior designer you design kitchens/plan spaces for the inside of houses. I find myself creating wee spaces. I like doing drawing boards (Janet, interview, 2010).

This aspiration fitted with her favourite subjects at school, which were Art, Graphic Communication and Craft Design and Technology. These all came under the technology department and were physically located together. Janet described her best days at school as those when she was in the “techy department”.

Interior design may have been Janet’s long-term aim, but her choice for work experience in S3 did not reflect this. The only choice left on the school’s list was food preparation. Janet did not speak about trying to arrange her own work experience. Her work placement was obviously not related to interior design, but Janet found the experience “fun most of the time”. She described the staff as “laid back and friendly” and very helpful, and thought it all quite different to school.

Janet had mapped out her future through school and college. She noted that, in choosing her S5 courses, she felt that the final decision about the level of qualification was up to her, but she would follow the advice from the teacher rather than challenge it:

The teacher will sit down and have a meeting with us. Ask us how we feel about it and they will give us their advice and then we’ll have our input into it. The teacher may advise me to do Intermediate 2, but in the end down to me to choose. Better to go with the teacher ‘cos they know best. Then we make a decision from there on (Janet, interview, 2010).

The choices Janet proposed to make in school, and beyond, were tightly knitted to her personal relationships. These relationships were not all based in school. Janet’s distal goals were closely aligned to that which she knew, and which held for her, a degree of certainty. Janet’s imagined future, as an Interior Designer, mirrored that of her close friend. Gordon et

al. (2008) suggested that, girls particularly, look to their friends for support, and that their peer relationships tend to provide one powerful set of resources, for girls to draw on. The evidence, in this section, would suggest that this is what Janet is drawing on here. This is another example of tie-strength (Coburn & Russell, 2008). The trust, emerging from this strong peer relationship, is so strong that Janet is willing to base her future projections on it.

The evidence illustrates that Janet's relationships have helped shape the projective dimension of the chordal triad. Janet's friend, external to the physical school, is part of her unique context. The friend is a tie that is part of Janet's past and present. Janet enjoys the subjects, the teachers and the atmosphere of the technology department. Here, the teacher-student relationship is one which Janet values and finds supportive. Janet's knowledge of her friend's trajectory, the congruence in her attitudes towards the skills needed to be an Interior Designer, and the skills promoted in the technology department, allow her to consider the same future path as her friend. In some ways this friendship is liberating, as Janet is able to conceive of a career that is outside that of her familiar context. It has thus helped increase her 'manoeuvre among repertoires' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980).

This example begins to illustrate how these persisting social and material networks can influence agency (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). These networks cross borders in the sense described above. Janet brings into the school her strong social ties that exist outside of the school gates, and these influence not only her future visioning, but also more immediately her subject choices. Janet's achievement of agency has a strong projective orientation, but it is rooted in the practical-evaluative dimension, whilst being influenced by the iterational. She sees her future self as an interior designer, and can begin to make this happen, as she is

able to choose the necessary subjects at school. Her strong personal peer friendship is an important part of the temporal context. It is something that has endured the passage of time (part of the iterational), and which continues to be important to her, offering her support to take this particular trajectory. It also satisfies her desire to stay in the same area, rather than cope with the uncertainties associated with moving somewhere different, something which she has extensive experience of, and which she wants to avoid. At these points of transitions, where she can make choices about whether to stay at school, or move to college, or work, and about which courses would suit her needs, she is beginning to challenge her identity as a school pupil. She begins to imagine herself differently, based on her aspiration to become an interior designer: “[A]s an interior designer, you design kitchens/plan spaces for the inside of houses. I find myself creating wee spaces”. She is making choices, which lead down this particular path, taking into account both temporal factors and sequencing (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). She is aware of the process, in which she must engage, if she is going to be able claim interior design as her part of her known identity, and sets herself on that course.

## **9.5 Leanne**

Leanne, as we saw in Chapter Eight, had a more contentious relationship with secondary school than the students above and was expecting to leave school at the end of the fourth year. When I observed, Leanne was always present, well-mannered and quiet in her lessons. Leanne wanted to leave school feeling more confident. Her comment, about her ideal school, perhaps illustrates her lack of self-confidence, as she was keen that teachers would always be on hand, to offer support when needed:

[I would have the] whole school in one classroom; all teachers in one classroom, then you would get help when you needed it (Leanne, interview, 2010).

Leanne spoke about her older siblings who worked in the leisure industry. Leanne attributed their careers to their membership of a swimming club during their formal schooling. They had all participated in the club, and whilst her siblings went on to compete, Leanne left the club:

Mum put me in a swimming club. They [siblings] in a swimming club and I wanted to go, but I didn't like it (Leanne, interview, 2010).

Leanne's future already looked different to her siblings. She had to imagine herself in roles that were different to her siblings. She had chosen a local nursery for her third year work placement. This had not worked out for Leanne:

[I] kept getting rows for everything in nursery and they weren't nice. Didn't have a good experience in nursery. Put off working with kids so am trying hospitality (Leanne, interview, 2010).

Leanne, after this initial negative placement, was keen to participate in more work opportunities and so she accepted the place on the ten-week course described in Chapter Seven. Hospitality was one of the courses Leanne had chosen in her third and fourth year. It was one of the courses offered by the local college, making it a viable, local, and longer-term option. Leanne also suggested that this was one of the subjects she liked at school.

Leanne's past history of non-attendance at school was part of her identity and was a feature of her formative years in secondary school. Leanne felt that many of the adults in the school

community treated her poorly. Although Leanne may have experienced the achievement of agency as a non-attender, she had now turned away from this particular identity, wanting to refocus her attention on a different way of acting. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 984) suggest that 'projectivity is a critical mediating juncture between iterational and practical evaluative aspects of agency. It involve(s) the first step toward reflectivity'. In Leanne's situation, she spoke of how she had come to think that non-attendance was not a fruitful activity and that it was having an impact on her attaining good grades. This strengthening of the projective orientation had shaped her practical–evaluative engagement to a greater extent and she had begun to consider how the purpose of her action - non-attendance at school - had implications for her personally, other than those consequences dealt by the school (behaviour cards etc.) and by her parents (grounding), in terms of her goals for her future. The influence of thinking differently about school, different to that which maintained the non-attending behaviour in the past, meant that alternative possible future trajectories were opened up. However, as remaining at school was not an option, only courses at a local college were considered.

In none of my dealings with Leanne did she mention looking for paid employment. Instead, Leanne had taken the opportunity of a second work placement, to try and visualise herself within the hospitality sector, after the childcare possibility was closed down by a poor work experience. My observations led me to believe that neither Leanne nor the school appeared to have a plethora of ideas about her possible future.

The evidence presented here illustrates how Leanne's 'manoeuvre among repertoires' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980) seemed constrained. Her previous actions had closed the door on the school as a source of continuing support. Leanne's projective capability

appeared limited suggesting both a limited understanding of other trajectories and that her social networks at school and beyond were neither extensive nor diverse. Leanne's need to think about her immediate future required her to make judgements about possibilities, but these were based on limited aspirational thought. The college courses, for which she was able to apply, were bound to what was available locally. Leanne's shift in thinking, regarding her attendance at school, had not provided her with the security of a place at school post-S4. Instead, Leanne's achievement of agency is constrained; there was no possibility to stay at school, and college's courses were limited by Leanne's capacity and motivation to tackle them. Leanne expressed no distal goals, and even the proximal ones appeared fragile.

## **9.6 Rachel**

Rachel did not have a clear vision as to her future. Her past, and even present, history of non-attendance suggested that she struggled with school as a place. Her attendance was over 75% in her fourth year, much better than the 50% of the third year. However, unlike Leanne, she had been offered a place at school for the following year.

Rachel's timetable from her second year onwards had included elements of more vocational study. She had attended a college course in hairdressing from her second year, and had also participated in a course called Lifestyle and Consumer Choice, which Rachel translated to me as "Childcare". Neither hairdressing nor childcare appealed to Rachel, and instead, for her work experience, she had chosen to go to a local stable, although this was not an activity she generally participated in. She had not enjoyed the experience. She thought the stable owner had not valued the work she had done. Many of the other students did not stay for the whole week. One student was unfortunate enough to have been kicked by a horse:

Man never appreciated me ....wasnea good. Man was crabby. Other girls just went for day then went away. Other student got kicked by a horse.....not a great time (Rachel, interview, 2010).

Rachel had not wanted to do any more work experience following this poor experience. Rachel did not explicitly state why, but it was perhaps due to her opportunity to stay at school, in S5, if she wished. Rachel, rather than having to choose the more vocational courses offered at college, was able to stick with traditional subjects. Rachel was hoping to do Drama, Biology, History, Maths and English in the fifth year but was not sure of the level of qualifications she would be taking. Her qualification levels in S4 ranged from Access 3 to Intermediate 1<sup>13</sup>. Rachel wanted to remain at school into the sixth year, and expressed an interest in taking drama further. This interest in the performing arts fitted with Rachel's enjoyment of music and dance as leisure activities.

Rachel 's parents were seeking employment, and this caused her a certain amount of embarrassment:

They're both unem...[can't say it] on the dole and it's really embarrassing. ...My dad was a [...] and wants to do that again, but he can't get a job. Really difficult. My mum wants to go into [...] but she can't, 'cos she's got to look after us (Rachel, interview, 2010).

Rachel's familial and other relationship did not appear to feature as strong influences in shaping her projective orientation. She was embarrassed about her parents'

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<sup>13</sup> In S4 students often take qualifications ranging from (easiest) Access 3, Intermediate 1, Standard Grade, and Intermediate 2. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework provides more information available online @ [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk).



unemployment, yet she expressed no strong feelings about obtaining employment, and none of her present actions appeared to contribute to this. Rachel's experience of childcare and hairdressing, through her formal curriculum between S2 and S4, and her recent work experience with horses, led her to dismiss these as possible future trajectories. This closing down of possible futures did not appear to be the foundation for generating other opportunities, and Rachel was not, at this point, actively seeking alternatives.

The teacher-student relationships experienced by Rachel appeared to be very mixed. In some instances, the asymmetrical relationships seemed very apparent, as in the case of the guidance teacher, whom Rachel stated, constantly monitored her movements. This particular relationship, as described by Rachel, did not seem to be built on trust. However, her description of her experiences in the xl club suggest that her relationship with this teacher was more supportive. However, Rachel often made comments about school [and work] being "boring", and rarely commented on what was good. This evidence illustrates that Rachel's aspirations appeared limited at that time, constrained by aspects of her present and past. In its ability to provide Rachel with a place for S5, school seems to provide a holding space for Rachel, in which the projective orientation of agency has the possibility to be shaped further in tandem with the school.

## **9.7 Tracey**

Tracey was very clear that she wanted to work with children. She was part of a large family, and had a number of nieces and nephews. Her siblings were either unemployed or working in unskilled or semi-skilled work. Tracey stated that her mother was keen for her to get a good job, before starting a family.

Tracey was pleased with the work placement choices available from the school and, following her interests, she chose a placement in a nursery. Tracey enjoyed the placement, although it was quite eventful. There was an incident, where the nursery felt that Tracey had not followed the safety procedures set out in the nursery, and so she was reprimanded. Tracey did go to the staff room for some time out but then returned, "I wasna gonna walk out". To Tracey's delight, for the last three days of the week-long work experience, the head of the nursery allowed her to leave at 2pm rather than the designated 3pm. It enabled Tracey to catch an earlier bus. This was interpreted by Tracey very positively, as it signified an earlier homecoming, and the prospect of being able to go to bed:

Meant I could get home earlier and get changed into ma jammies and go to bed  
(Tracey, interview, 2010).

The young people's different experience of their work placements says something about their achievement of agency within these situations. Hitlin and Elder (2007: 182) suggest 'people who perceive more agency are more likely to persevere in the face of problems'. If we look to Tracey and Leanne's descriptions of their nursery settings, both seem to have been on the end of disagreements about practice, but Tracey felt differently about the experience than Leanne. Tracey's history suggests she is at ease with younger children as her siblings have children of their own and they come to visit frequently. She explains that she thought she had enough practical knowledge about how to care for young children already:

'cos all you do is look after them and make sure they don't do anything they are not supposed to do (Tracey, interview, 2010).

Equally, when talking about the health and safety aspects of childcare, Tracey thought she had sufficient knowledge of risks and their management:

I already ken health and safety, don 't let them touch knives or scissors (Tracey, interview, 2010).

Tracey's ambition to work with children persisted after the placement. In a discussion in school, she had mentioned that she had been keen on doing an Animal Care course at a certain college. Tracey had stated that her mother, however, had not wanted her to travel to the more distant college, so Tracey had decided on childcare instead. The local college ran a one-year, fulltime Childcare course.

Tracey was also quite keen to stay at school and she had chosen her subjects in advance: Computing, Maths, English, Drama and Practical Craft Skills. However, she thought that if any of these subject teachers were leaving she would not be allowed to stay on:

I'm getting kicked out of school anyway, not because I done something bad, but because nine teachers are leaving... If I can't get any of the courses I wanted then Miss (teacher) is going to send me straight to college (Tracey, interview, 2010).

Tracey's relationship with her mother and her wider family, are significant in helping her form her aspirations. Moreover, the strength of her tie (Coburn & Russell, 2008) with her mother is illustrated above, through Tracey's closure of the possibility Animal Care as a future career. This strong mother-daughter relationship appears to both enable and constrain possibilities. Her mother was keen for Tracey to get a "good job", but was less keen on supporting travel to colleges that were more distant. Tracey talks little about her

relationships with her teachers, other than to describe what they allow her to do, and to suggest that they are “sending her to college”. She does not pose the question, “Why me?”, but accepts and rationalises the decision made, as we saw in the evidence above. The asymmetry of the relationships with adults, described here, appear to limit Tracey’s aspirations. This suggests that she lacks the self-confidence to think differently about her future, relying much more on accepting the decisions of her teachers and her mother.

There would seem no doubt that the loss of so many teachers, in one school, at one time, provides a limiting factor regarding the opportunities available within school. Tracey seemed torn between a course at college, and what appeared to be her preferred option - a place at school. We might have expected Tracey to be set on a college course in childcare, as this was directed towards her stated long term goal of becoming a childcare assistant, and yet she seemed unsure. She appeared drawn to staying on at school, even though the courses she may be allowed to do were not part of any of her stated future imaginings. Her ‘manoeuvre among repertoires’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980) seems limited, and thus constrains these imaginings further. However, that Tracey is keen to stay at school into S5, in spite of her history of non-attendance, suggests that she has come to terms with school as a place, and now sees what engaging with it might offer. Her compliance in her relationships with her teachers, as mentioned above, perhaps disables her from challenging the decision regarding her imminent move to the local college to further her education. This lack of capacity shapes her future, and agency is not achieved in this situation for Tracey.

The notable asymmetry in Tracey’s adult-young person relationships, which Tracey appears to find supportive, do not provide her, however, with a context in which agency is achieved. Her limited projective orientation is not made more expansive by the school in these latter

stages of her schooling career. Arguably, it is constrained by the uncertainty of her future place and the uncertainty of the types of relationships she will encounter in the college. Tracey's, at times, difficult nursery placement had not led to work by the school to assist Tracey in understanding what the issues were, and how she might see and do things differently in the future. Tracey's choice of a childcare career still stood firm.

## **9.8 Concluding Comments**

In this chapter, I have discussed the aspirations of the six young people in this study. These aspirations vary. A key conclusion from the evidence, presented in this chapter, might be that the ability to form strong and expansive aspirations (i.e. agency with a strong projective orientation) is ultimately dependent on the quality of relations and the types and experiences that young people undergo at school, home etc. A corollary, then, is that significant people (for example, the teacher) should consider how the schooling experience needs to be framed so that there is the potential for forming aspirations, and that experiences that inhibit projective agency should be avoided where possible. If one of the purposes of education is that of subjectification (Biesta, 2009), careful consideration should be taken regarding this latter point. The following chapter initially draws the findings together through a cross-case analysis before a short summary of the four key findings from the empirical research.

## **10 Summary of the findings from the study**

### **10.1 Introduction**

This chapter draws together the findings from the study. Initially I look across the three chapters and consider the findings from the perspective of the dimension of the chordal triad, towards which the agency achieved at a particular time and situation, is more orientated. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) suggest that, 'it is possible to speak of action that is more (or less) engaged with the past, more (or less) directed toward the future, and more (or less) responsive to the present' (Ibid.: 972), indicating that changes in the composition of the chordal triad can allow for different possible courses of action. Understanding when agency is orientated more towards a certain dimension of the triad is helpful, if we seek to enhance the conditions in which the achievement of agency is made possible. Thus, I start by discussing the iterational dimension, followed by the projective before finally considering the practical-evaluative dimension. I then summarise the key findings from the study to bring it to a point where its implications and contributions to the field of education can be discussed.

#### **10.1.1 The iterational dimension**

The habits, patterns and routines that are part of students' daily lives form the iterational dimension of agency. In Chapter Eight, we saw how Russell, Janet and Karen, through their dialogue and general demeanour, displayed the attributes of 'rationalised and socialised' (Bourdieu, cited in Nespor, 1997) students. The classroom examples in Chapter Seven showed how these students accommodated and complied with the teacher (facilitator),

although, at times, the teacher (facilitator) dispositions could be challenging. The patterns and habits displayed by these students form what Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 975) term the 'schematization of social experience'. They re-enact known routines and patterns of behaviour expected of pupils, which emerge from their past histories. They do *pupil work* (Breidenstein, 2008), as they have come to know it over their eleven years of practice.

My research has highlighted the importance of relationships that exist in the classroom and beyond. These are iterational, in that past relationships help condition present dispositions and behaviours. The examples of Karen and Leanne, in 7.4.2 and 7.4.1 respectively, illustrated that, in their relationships with certain teachers, they were able to consider different possible positionings. In these situations, they appeared to have opportunities for 'manoeuvres among repertoires' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 980). Karen described that the feelings of trust that had emerged from these relationships enabled her to act differently, and whilst Leanne did not actually voice this, I suggest that she also experienced a feeling of trust, and this enabled her to have the confidence to consider different possibilities (sitting outside the circle rather than in it). In 7.3 and 9.4, I illustrated the effects of Janet's strong peer relationships, whether within (7.3) or external to (9.4) the school. The examples provide an insight into the possibilities that can be realised through strong peer relationships. At times, as we saw in Janet's description in Chapter Seven, students can do a type of cost/benefit analysis on a certain situation, with the weighting, in this case, influenced by the strength of the known peer relationships, forged through similar past experiences. So, whilst I acknowledge that relationships form the conditions of the present and are social structures that afford resources, the historical nature of relationships – how they have been enacted in the past – help comprise this 'schematization of social

experiences' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 975), and so form part of the iterational orientation of agency.

Chapter Eight discussed the habitual wearing of uniform as part of the routine of schooling in this school. All six students complied and wore the uniform. Karen, Janet and Russell, the findings showed, all reflected on the uniform and wore it willingly, though as Karen noted, in section 8.2, there were consequences if one's uniform was found wanting. Dussel (2005: 193) suggests the uniform makes visible that students 'bodies have become docile', and though these three young people had deliberated over the uniform and its purpose, because of the implicit understanding by students of the consequences of divergence from the rules, I suggested a term of *considered compliance*.

In 8.3, three students, early in their secondary school careers, had formed patterns that included non-attendance at school. These actions carried consequences all of which affect the individual. One such consequence, as Youdell (2003: 19) suggests, is that these habits and patterns can trap young people in identities 'which seem almost impossible to escape'. A very real outcome for Leanne and Tracey (who were non-attenders), partly due to these actions, was the uncertainty regarding their future in the school.

The characteristic of compliance or conformity is part of the cultural construct of the 'ideal pupil' (Cremlin et al., 2011: 593). These students, in terms of the uniform, demeanour and – for Russell, Janet and Karen – attendance, had become 'socialised' (Bourdieu, cited by Nespor, 1997). Their actions were more 'engaged with the past' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 972) and constituted *pupil work* (Breidenstein, 2008).



The above findings, which relate to the iterational dimension of agency, suggest that many of the witnessed patterns and habits concur with the notion of *pupil work* (Breidenstein, 2008). The empirical findings from Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine have shown that relationships, practices and material aspects are shaped by and shape the cultural realm. Idealised concepts, such as the *ideal pupil*, constantly inform transactions and if, like Biesta and Tedder (2007: 137), we ‘acknowledge that achievement of agency depends on the availability of economic, cultural and social resources within a particular ecology’, it is possible to see how we might acknowledge the achievement of agency, as I have, in many of the situations described in this study. However, further interrogation may be necessary to understand whether that is *desirable for young people* to experience in school, and whether this leads to a degree of expansiveness that might be positive for the young people.

### **10.1.2 The projective dimension**

Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 984) suggest that ‘projectivity is a critical mediating juncture between iterational and practical-evaluative aspects of agency’. My study highlights how three students, Leanne, Tracey and Rachel, had begun to re-evaluate their actions regarding attendance in light of the possible futures that they imagined for themselves. They had started to project beyond schooling into the world of employment, and so in S4 their attendance had improved because school now became a place from which opportunities may arise. The context had altered for these students; and we see how the relative weighting of each dimension of agency might change over time. In this example, we see a greater projective orientation to their agency, mitigating the effects of the strong peer relationships and providing a challenge to their existing dispositions towards school. I suggest that these young people re-composed their understandings of school in light of

future expectations and this subtle shift enabled these young people to see school differently. This different visioning enabled them to have 'room for manoeuvre'.

In the cases of Leanne, Tracey and Rachel, their aspirations generally seem more limited than those of Russell, Janet and Karen. Leanne and Tracey faced the prospect of a possible college place and, though Rachel had a place at school beyond S4, her articulation of school seemed one bound by boredom and insignificance. These three students, as Chapter Eight explored, had been heavily regulated throughout their school life through the use of behaviour cards and a limiting of opportunities, thus their breadth of experiences through school had been narrowed. Chapter Nine found that these young people's external social networks did not appear extensive, and neither did their personal interests. What young people bring to any situation is limited by their social, material and cultural resources and this, in turn, constrains their possible imaginings. A strength of this understanding of agency is that the relational effects of the past and the future are kept in mind when considering what is possible in the present.

Perhaps the personal aspirations of students reveal more about the subjectification (Biesta, 2009) function of education. Aspirations are part of the projective dimension of agency that is 'more directed towards the future' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 971). As we saw in Chapter Nine, students' ties, and the strength of those ties (Coburn & Russell, 2008), to family, friends and other important factors (a horse in one example) appears to be a crucial mediating factor in forming aspirations. Karen's experience of being a tour guide, explored initially in 7.4.2 and further in 9.2, found that school can also, at times, play a key role in enabling students to think differently and form more expansive aspirations.

We must then ask some questions here. What role can school play in broadening our young people's experiences, and thus increasing their capacity to project to the future? What role does school play regarding the subjectification function of education? How do we work with young people to help them understand themselves in a way that allows them to think differently, in a way that enables them to have a 'transformative impact in relation to the situational contexts within which they act' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 1003)? I will return to these questions in the final chapter.

### **10.1.3 The practical-evaluative dimension**

My research has highlighted how the practical-evaluative dimension of agency is subject to enabling and constraining aspects of both social structures and the cultural realm. The practical possibilities afforded by these, and the evaluative judgements made about such possibilities, both enable and limit the achievement of agency. Such judgements and practical possibilities are of course mediated to some extent by the experience that people bring to situations and their ability to form projections to the future. Chapter Eight found that cultural artifacts – both those with material aspects, such as the uniform, and those which are discursive, such as the ideal student – shape what is possible within a school setting. This manner of socialisation provides students with boundaries, as to what is expected and what is possible. This is the 'practical' part of the 'practical-evaluative'. The judgements of risk and so forth, that students make, form the 'evaluative'.

In terms of social structures and what they might afford, Karen and Janet, in Chapter Seven, highlighted how they appreciated an atmosphere conducive to working. This working environment they described did not include shouting and bad-temperedness by teachers, but did include an aspect of orderliness – something that was seen as the teacher's

responsibility to help build. In the example given in section 7.2.5, we saw a relationship in which the teacher punished her students, in a way that she associated with younger children. This externalising of the power (Roffery, 2006) available to the teacher did not build supportive relationships, but led to resistance by some students. In a similar manner, as described by Karen in Chapter Seven, shouting at students did not lead to feelings of calm and belonging, but to grumpiness and disagreement.

If we look at the examples in which there appeared to be positive relationships, from which trust had emerged (as in the xl club and in the peer tutoring), we can see opportunities arising for discussion, difference and other possibilities. In the example of xl, as we saw in section 7.4.1, both social and material structures played a part in shifting the emphasis in the teaching environment away from teacher control towards a more discursive, fluid environment. This visibly different classroom environment was, from my observations, indicative that there was a change in the nature of the asymmetrical teacher-student relationship. If we take the example, in section 7.4.1, of Leanne's voluntary attendance at a session, and her subsequent final actions, this suggested that she had some leeway in this lesson to legitimately make different choices to her peers.

Section 7.4.2 highlighted the impact on Karen and Russell of being given the opportunity to take part in the peer-tutoring project. This example, where the teachers acknowledged the strengths of the young people, shifted the basis of these student-teacher relationships. The students in this study made choices based on these relationships. As we saw in Chapter Nine, Russell made his subject choices based on teacher relationships and Karen reformed her aspirations based on her perceptions of why the teachers chose her to be a peer tutor and then her actual experience of being a peer tutor.

These positive relationships enabled these students to enjoy a greater range of possibilities when making judgements about the present context. This opportunity to ‘critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 971) and to have different possibilities for action is the basis for the achievement of agency.

However, it is timely to recall, as Gore (2002) suggests, that simply adopting different strategies, such as discursive approaches and the different physical layouts discussed in this study, will not on their own overcome the asymmetrical nature of the teacher-student relationship. Whilst this may not be a goal of these approaches, these strategies can work towards facilitating more enabling relationships between teachers and students. It is *how* these participatory techniques are used, and the *effects* of them, rather than simply their use, which is significant in this respect (Ibid.). The work-skills programme example, in section 7.2.3, where first names were used for all, did little in my observations to change the asymmetry in the adult-young person relationship in this classroom. In terms, then, of the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, though there was an audible change, the relationship did not become more enabling and it did not offer up possibilities for ‘manoeuvre among repertoires’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 980). Thus, the way in which this practice was enacted, did little to open up different possibilities and so constrained the achievement of agency.

My research shows that although peer relationships are another important factor in schools, these relationships can span across the physical boundaries of the school site and can have a number of different outcomes. As my research showed in 9.4, for Janet, although she enjoyed good relationships with teachers, her future choices were not only shaped by teachers, but also strongly linked to a close friend, who had no links with this school.

Nespor (1997) reminds us how important these ties are beyond the physical school boundary and Gordon et al. (2008) acknowledge the strength girls draw from peer relationships and how this can afford both opportunities and barriers. In the example of Janet's aspirations, these were shaped by the conditions of the present. Her strong peer relationship guided her judgements about what was possible, providing her with ideas about a certain future which would satisfy both her desire to stay locally and her creative tendencies. In this case, agency, although in terms of aspirations orientated towards the projective, also shows a strong orientation towards the practical-evaluative. For Janet, this answers questions regarding what is possible within her present environment, whilst still encompassing ideas which take her beyond the present day. These sets of ideas, in Janet's case, are strongly influenced by her close friend, who is already engaged on this particular trajectory.

We see then that strong peer relationships, as shown by Janet above, can have certain effects, in this case on aspirations, but the evidence in section 7.3 found that peer relationships can have other effects. Janet's explanations, in 7.3, highlighted how these peer relationships can, in some situations, mitigate the asymmetrical student-teacher relationship. Students wilfully expose a new teacher's lack of knowledge regarding routines and rules. This shift in the context, alongside strong peer support in terms of silence regarding perpetrators, enables students to make judgements regarding possible behaviours. Here we see an opening up of possibilities, the potential to act, based on the strength of peer support.

In 8.3, Rachel specifically spoke of peer relationships being part of the reason that she chose not to attend school in the first three years of secondary school. Leanne and Tracey joined

Rachel in identifying the lack of relevance of the curriculum, their difficulty in engaging with subject matter, the expectations of staff and the treatment they received from some staff and other students as problem areas. Maguire (2009: 33) suggests that 'those young people, who find school less rewarding, less enjoyable and a place that speaks to them and others of their personal shortcomings, become compelled to produce an alternative identity that sustains their feelings of self-worth'. These three students turned away from the socialised, 'ideal student' label and sought a different identity. In their early secondary phase the strength of their peer relationships mitigated expectations that arose from teachers, parents and other students regarding appropriate attendance at school. We could regard this temporal strategy in terms of '*putting off*' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 1000) *schooling* and suggest that it was made possible by their strong peer relationships and their feelings of self-worth that was a result of their actions. The achievement of agency here had a strong practical-evaluative orientation, in that these students made judgements that enabled them to find other possible trajectories for action, rather than the prescribed one. These young people achieved agency as they had possibilities for manoeuvrability, but, as we see over time, this agency diminishes as the environment, by which this agency was achieved, transforms. This transformation in the environment for these students at this particular time in their lives highlights the temporal nature of agency. These students were reaching the end of the compulsory schooling period in Scotland, and this factor enables schools, just as it allows students, to make choices regarding the suitability of school, as a place, for their future. This subtle shift in the environment impacts on the students' achievement of agency. Whereas in S1-S4 choosing to not attend could be seen as achievement of agency by some students, as the context of schooling shifts from compulsory to voluntary for students, at the same time it opens up possibilities for schools

to manoeuvre differently. Young people's options can then be closed down, rather than broadened, thus constraining their achievement of agency. Leanne and Tracey were experiencing a closing down of opportunities, as remaining at school became closed to them. Russell, Janet and Karen, on the other hand, who had no issues with attendance, experienced no narrowing of possibilities other than those imposed by timetabling constraints.

Subjectification, or becoming someone (Biesta, 2009), is an on-going process and, as White and Wyn (cited in Maguire, 2009: 32) argue, 'identities are mediated through the experiences that young people have in school, the nature of their family relationships, their work places and in all areas of their life'. The evidence, shown here, by the experiences of Leanne, Rachel and Tracey illustrates how their experiences of school, alongside the strength of their peer relationships, can impact on their becoming. Positive peer relationships provide certain possibilities, as we have seen in the examples above, whereas Russell, as explained in 9.3, experienced negative peer relationships in terms of bullying. Russell went into little depth on this issue, apart from to mention the names he was called, and playing down the work he did for school, in order to fit in. Maguire (2009: 31) suggests that, 'young people become trapped in particular versions of identity', which 'may not be of their own choosing', and this seems to be something that has happened to Russell. He has been labelled a "swot", and yet this is not how he identifies himself. This type of peer relationship experienced by Russell is not enabling, but works to constrain what he judges possible, and thus any agency orientated towards the practical-evaluative could be limited through these types of relationships.



Recognising that young people are connected to networks beyond the school gates and that the strength of these can both open up and close down possibilities (Nespor, 1997) is, as my research suggests, important. Chapter Nine reports that, to different degrees, all these six students made judgements about their futures shaped by the proximity to family, friends and animals. Janet 's aspirations suggest that, agency at times can be orientated more towards the practical-evaluative even when we appear to be considering the projective orientation. One last important point regarding the practical-evaluative is that this moment 's practical-evaluative becomes the future iterational. Considering this makes it possible to understand how shifts in the social structures and the cultural realm today may make a difference to future achievement of agency. This illustrates how having an understanding of the composition of the ch ordal triad is an important factor to consider if one is looking to the conditions which may enable the achievement of agency. In other words, it becomes possible to imagine a school system that is geared to enabling young people to achieve increasing amounts of agency as they mature; that is school s that are genuinely educative.

The commentary above reveals there are challenges if students are to achieve agency in the school setting. We are always looking to the boundaries that encompass schooling, from the rules and routines and the asymmetrical power relations situated in schools, to the societal pressures that exist through the networks intersecting the school site. The evidence also suggests the possibilities that changes to contexts, however small these may be, can have on the achievement of agency. This can be due to temporal factors, for example, getting older, to relational factors, such as a different teacher, to material factors such as physical arrangements. The final part of this chapter draws out four key findings from this study from which the last chapter builds on to discuss the conclusions and implications.

## 10.2 Key Findings

I conclude this penultimate chapter with a summary of the key findings from the study. The following four key findings are based on the empirical evidence analysed and discussed above.

- The first key finding for these students is that trusting student-teacher relationships, made visible through the practices of the teachers, are important in providing young people with a wider repertoire of future possibilities for action (for example in levels of engagement in activities or future employment choices). This research suggests that trusting relationships contribute to the capacity of the individual (in terms of enhancing the future iterational dimension of agency for these individuals), as well as offering affordances within the present environment by means of which students achieve agency. A shift in the nature of the teacher-student relationships has the potential to increase the achievement of agency by students, but can equally diminish this potential, dependent upon how and why these practices are enacted.
- A second key finding from this study is that, for these students, peer relationships provide additional relational resources upon which students draw when achieving agency (particularly when ties are strong). The affordances offered by such ties ranged widely in this study, agency for example being shaped by: actions within the classroom between co-present peers; agency outside school, influenced by within-school peers; and influences in school, derived from relationships with peers outside of school. As above (finding 1), peer relationships contribute to the capacity of the individual (in terms of enhancing the future iterational dimension of agency for these individuals), as well as offering affordances within the present environment by means of which students achieve agency.

- A third key finding from this study is that cultural artifacts play an important role in the context of schooling. These students understood and played out their roles as (ideal) pupils, as dictated by cultural norms (for example wearing uniform, attendance, upholding the teacher's role). Where students transgressed, control mechanisms were implemented. There is a temporal dimension to students' achievement of agency, in relation to cultural artifacts, in that students who chose to transgress rules and conventions (achieving agency in a particular way at a particular time) subsequently found their agency to be limited as a consequence of their earlier transgressions. In these cases, the iterational and practical-evaluative dimensions of their agency are therefore closely related to the past and present existence of cultural artifacts and their operation within the school.
- A fourth key finding from this study is that relationships are important in enabling students to develop a strong projective orientation to their agency. In part, this is shaped by family ties, which are necessarily shaped by family experiences and expectations (and so potentially more limiting in the economically disadvantaged community this school was situated in). Other ties (teachers, peers etc.) are crucial in helping students to form strong and eclectic aspirations for the future. The agency these students might achieve is further shaped by the availability of social, cultural and material resources. The school, by providing access to opportunities that allow students to think and experience different roles, is useful in enabling young people to build more expansive aspirations which broaden, and go beyond, their local knowledge.

The final chapter draws the study to a close considering the purpose of the study and its implications.



## **11 Conclusions and Implications**

### **11.1 Introduction**

This final chapter discusses the conclusions and implications of this study. In doing so it initially considers the study as a whole reflecting on its purpose and its limitations before turning to the research questions. Section 11.3 considers the implications of the study regarding the ecology of schooling and student agency. Section 11.4 discusses the implications of the findings for current policy and practice, before the final section draws the thesis to a close.

### **11.2 The Purpose of the Study**

My starting point for this study was to pose the question regarding the purpose of participation and the development of participatory approaches within schools. My interest in the UNCRC, the changing national policy climate and the shift in teaching practices and structures to promote participation led me to ask what difference these ways of working make to the lived experience of young people in schools. This promotion of the participation agenda, within both national and trans-national policies, marks the importance given to its implementation. However, the effects of these policies that promote participation may be questioned. There are suggestions that, rather than promote democracy and rights, these ways of working could be manipulated to uphold rather more instrumental tendencies such as the social investment model (Martin & Franklin, 2010), which bases its values on economic efficiencies.

### **11.2.1 Participation and its link to agency**

If we problematize how participation is mobilised in practice, I would argue that the changing of classroom practices by using different techniques does not ensure that the student's experience of school is improved or that the educative aspect is any different. The asymmetrical power relations that exist between teachers and students are not addressed by simply changing a technique (Gore, 2002), nor are the benefits from school guaranteed to improve through the adoption of different approaches. This calls into question the understanding of participation in the school environment and so its purpose. I questioned whether participation *per se* is a sterile concept, or whether it affords possibilities, as long as its purpose is clear (Kesby, 2007). The ecological understanding of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006) provides a basis for educators to better understand the interdependence of the individual and the environment and to explore how participation might afford a wider range of possibilities for young people. This reflection on participation is important if we want to shape educational ecologies which encourage practices to facilitate the achievement of agency by young people.

### **11.2.2 Limitations of the study**

This section acknowledges the limitations of the study considering some of the practical aspects, the methodology and the approaches undertaken.

I initially acknowledge that the study was limited in time. Thus, what I actually observed was limited, as was what the young people talked about. Although I did take my observations back to the students, and had conversations with them to explore meanings, I did not specifically ask about how they perceived their experience of the achievement of agency, as

I have defined it. Does this detract from the study? Most certainly it is a limiting aspect, but it provides food for reflection in further research.

Another constraint concerned the final choice of research methodology – a study with *ethnographic intent*. This methodology has certain implications for the generation and reading of the data. Time in the field, number and type of participants, a single site and myself as the research instrument can be seen as both limiting factors, but also enabling features.

The time in the field was not as lengthy as has been the case with many classic ethnographies and this could be seen as a limitation. I acknowledge that, for young people, different episodes of their lives produce different ways of thinking. Whilst I began my engagement at the end of S3, the study was mainly conducted in the spring term of S4. The data reflect this, for example because of work experience and the proximity of exams which has an effect on how they viewed school, and thus there are limitations in my analysis of the lived experience of students. The time in field also limited me to working on the school site. Nesper (1997) took his observations into the surrounding community and I can see how such an approach might enrich this study by providing more in-depth biographies of the participants and their lives outside the physical boundaries of the school. Instead, I relied on what the young people talked about in their interviews in order to understand their lives, but I recognise that this is only a partial account, which could with more time have perhaps been made fuller.

I limited the number of participants to six. The imbalance in gender reflects the willingness of young people to participate. This imbalance is no doubt reflected in the data generated,

and other studies would need to be completed to address this. Limiting the number to six enabled a more in-depth study, but makes generalisations problematic. However, my intentions were never to produce generalisable findings, but merely to prompt questions for reflection. The study allowed for cross case analysis, but only in as far as these young people experienced or talked about certain aspects. I have also mainly focused on the young people in my study. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, May (2005) called for more contextualised research based in classrooms to 'generate more discussions that consider the topic from the standpoint of the students as participators within the classroom and contributors to proceedings therein' (Ibid.: 32). Thus, whilst I recognise the interconnectedness of all the participants, I have chosen to foreground the voices and experiences of the young people. I have spoken about their achievement of agency, and not that of the teachers within the room. Other studies have, however, examined teacher agency using a similar theoretical framing (see, for example: Priestley, Edwards et al., 2012, Priestley et al., 2012).

This study took place in a single site. However, it has raised a series of questions that arise from considering participation in relation to agency more generally. In this sense, what matters is not the number of sites that these questions came from, but that this form of questioning can be performed elsewhere. This type of pragmatist framing of agency enables others to take this tool and to examine elsewhere the effects and affordances of school contexts on the achievement of agency by students.

In all this research, I was a participant observer and that comes with its inherent difficulties. My way of noticing and understanding, what I noticed and what I talked about is always limited by my assumptions and ways of being. By talking to the students about what I observed and asking them how they understood these observations, I was able to



understand better their different meanings. Equally, by talking to teachers in the field, others outside of the research field and using the research literature to prompt different ways of understanding, I tried counterbalance and broaden what I noticed and how I interpreted it.

The pragmatist understanding of agency allowed me to read the data in a certain way. Other theoretical framings of agency might have led me, for example, to focus more on the implications of the material, and privilege the individual less. However, all methodologies are subject to critique, and the strength of this ethnographically intentional approach lay particularly in terms of its potential for teasing out meaning. This methodology gave insights that I might have missed or interpreted differently if utilising methods with other foci. In the following section I identify some of these insights in relation to the research questions, before exploring their implications.

### **11.2.3 The research questions**

The questions this study set out to address were:

1. How is the achievement of agency experienced by young people as students in school?
2. How can we better understand young people's achievement of agency?
3. What are the implications for schooling?

The ecological approach to understanding agency, as a heuristic framework to explore the first question, generated data that enabled me to analyse how, and where, young people achieved agency. In the introduction to the study, I questioned whether the growth in participation and participatory approaches had had an effect on the lived experiences of

young people in schools today. I re-framed this and instead asked about the effect of the lived schooling experience and agency: 'how is the achievement of agency experienced by young people?' The four key findings, in section 10.2, summarise the aspects this study found that shaped the achievement of agency by these young people in this setting. From my observations in this school, I saw few participatory techniques and structures in use with these particular students. Thus, although there may be a plethora of information regarding this topic, my research suggests that these practices had made little impact on the lives of these particular students. The research did highlight, however, that agency can be achieved in all manner of different situations. The study also suggests that at times, and in particular contexts, agency is not achieved.

My first key finding implies that adults in the schooling environment seeking to enable the achievement of agency need to pay particular attention to the manner in which they build and sustain relationships with young people. This relationship can be made visible by room layout as much as by manner and dispositions. In schools, the achievement of agency by students is often orientated towards the practical-evaluative: what is possible and the benefits or risks associated with different actions. Relationships between students and teachers form one important aspect in this shaping of possibilities.

This aspect above forms part of a complex situation always connected to other structural, cultural and material considerations. Finding two highlights the importance of peers in shaping the achievement of agency and how these influences can stretch beyond the physical classroom. Finding three showed the importance of the cultural realm in the achievement of agency and implies if we want to enable students to achieve agency that is

not akin to *considered compliance* we need to reflect more deeply on many of the deep-seated, taken-for-granted practices which epitomise present day schools.

Finding four draws our attention to how the projective dimension of agency is shaped by the availability of relational resources to young people, and by other factors for example poverty, social and cultural capital. This implies that the teacher can be a key adult in young people's aspirational lives, affording school the opportunity to be a place where possibilities are opened up. It also implies that schools need to remain a real possible option for all young people.

In consideration of the second question, this study has worked with the theorisation of agency by Biesta and Tedder, (2006, 2007 - who draw heavily on Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and used their ecological understanding of the achievement of agency in this empirical study. Working with the assumption that children and young people are not passive receptacles, but active shapers of their environments suggests that they are able to achieve agency in a similar way to people beyond the age of eighteen. The study has demonstrated that this model can be used to collect empirical data and that the analysis of the empirical data can be informative. This model does not suggest that agency is a capacity that resides within individuals. Instead, it suggests that agency is a phenomenon to be achieved. This ecological understanding of the achievement of agency emphasises the interconnectedness of the environment and the individual. It acknowledges a young person's awareness of, and capacity to engage with, a range of different possible actions, by means of a particular context, at that particular time. It offers an understanding that by increasing the range of possible considered responses, and the young person's capacity to engage, increases the quality of engagement, and so enhances the agency achieved. Thinking about the

achievement of agency as a purpose for participation, both in terms of the present and future possibilities, provides different openings for adults and young people alike when considering why we might choose certain participatory techniques and structures.

The empirical work, informed by this theory of agency, enabled a critical engagement with relationships (findings one and two), the cultural realm (finding 3) and personal aspirations (finding 4). This engagement, and the subsequent findings, shows how and where, in an empirical sense, agency can be achieved. Finding three, for example, illustrates that reflecting on how cultural artifacts produce, are reproduced and at times are transformed is useful in problematising current ideologies and discourses about education. This is because in this ecological understanding of agency the individual is not separated from the environment and only achieves agency by means of the environment. Using the achievement of agency to unpick and understand the constraints and enabling features of these discourses in the school ecology provides us with a way to question whether the present schooling system reflects our notion of the purposes of education in the twenty first century.

The final question regarding the implications for schooling is discussed in more detail below in section 11.3, which discusses the ecology of schooling and student agency, and 11.4 where the implications for both policy and practice are drawn out.

### **11.3 Implications: The ecology of schooling and student agency**

This study works with theory and empirical data, offering a way of framing young people 's lives in ways that interrupt how adults might conceive of them. This ecological understanding of the achievement of agency by young people challenges adults' practices

and opens up spaces, affording, in practical terms, a series of questions to be addressed for young people. This ecological interpretation allows more holistic judgements to be contemplated, leading to possible changes in the self-esteem, self-worth and confidence of young people. It enables the possibility of reflection by adults in order to consider their tendency to make judgements, which limit young people rather than enable difference. If we take seriously this way of understanding the achievement of agency by young people, we are less likely to underestimate young people's capacities, and less likely to adopt reductionist accounts, viewing young people as things, passive objects, and incapable. Understanding agency in this way encourages practitioners to be attentive regarding future intentions; responsibility towards the person who is to come, rather than working with a person already categorised.

#### **11.3.1 The model of understanding agency**

The study has used this ecological model of the achievement of agency in the empirical site of the school. It has shown empirically how it is possible to understand, with the implication that these could be increased, the repertoires of manoeuvre that young people imagine, without reducing this complex terrain to simplistic synoptic judgements. It highlights the capacities young people bring to situations and the aspirations they are able to bring to bear on their positionings in society. Moreover, it provides a way of enabling adults to develop ways of shaping the school environment, with the aim of helping young people to realise steps towards different becomings.

#### **11.3.2 The cultural realm**

The cultural discourses that surround school and schooling assign roles to both teachers and students, as much as these roles are taken up and shaped by those who fill them. This

recursive relationship in the performance of roles provides a space where agency may be achieved. In terms of the idealised pupil role, my evidence suggests that, in the end, all these students attempted to take up this identity and, with it, recognised the identity of the adults as teachers and thus bearers of the ability to mobilise power emerging from their relationships. Finding three, in section 10.2, shows how the achievement of agency is temporal, and how if it violates school norms, in this case the ideology of the *ideal student*, it can be limited at a later time. Kallio (2008) urges us to recognise children as ‘tactical agents on their own scales’ (Ibid.: 295). Her implications would suggest that acts, such as non-attendance, are inherently political, not because power has been given to young people, but in terms of ‘recognising their existing politics’ (Ibid.: 295). This then entails that, ‘their politics must be confronted *with them* in everyday life’ (Ibid.: 295). Here, participation and agency are inextricably intertwined and, in terms of children and young people, need to be ‘understood as components of a childhood narrative’ (Ibid.: 295). Thus, it is helpful to acknowledge that experiences, opportunities and identities are different for people of different ages (Oswell, 2012).

The implications of key finding three are that if it is possible to recognise what the political concessions are, in terms of the culturally dictated ‘pupil work’ (Breidenstein, 2008), and what the politics of children and young people are (Kallio, 2008). This may help in developing an understanding that broadens our response to actions, outside those dictated by the culturally imposed ‘ideal pupil’. Moreover, recognition of the politics of children and young people could shift the relationships between adults and young people, enabling different types of relationships to build which support a variety of possibilities, and which thus open up opportunities for the achievement of agency.

### **11.3.3 Agency and participation**

Key findings one, two and four highlight the importance of relationships in and outside of the school gates. Intergenerational understandings of participation (Mannion, 2007) have foregrounded the importance of such ties. The temporal nature of agency implies that the becomings experienced by young people are linked to the becomings experienced by another generation. This dynamic understanding helps us make sense of how the achievement of agency can vary and how it provides adults with a framework from which they can recognise the complex relational networks that exist.

Children's participation rights can be rejected and a common reason 'is that children may make decisions or perform actions that harm their immediate or long term interests because they lack the rational or emotional capacities to act in their own best interests' (Bleazby, 2011: 5, see also James et al., 2008). Bleazby (2011) however argues, that it is the inalienable right for children to participate in social inquiry, '[children's] capacity to inquire develops through practice – that is, through engaging in communal inquiry with others and internalising the thinking moves, values and behaviours that characterise communal inquiry' (ibid.: 5). The key findings imply that rich experiences will help shape young people's achievement of agency. Participation understood in terms of dialogue, collaboration, mutual respect and reciprocity, and enacted in this way helps develop these experiences and increases awareness of, and capacity to engage with a broad range possible responses. This has the possibility of being broadened through different educational experiences. These issues go beyond the scope of this study and require further research to do them justice.

#### 11.3.4 Agency and education

The functions of education, articulated by Biesta (2009) as qualification, socialisation and subjectification, are strongly linked to the achievement of agency. Perhaps most importantly, it is in the process of becoming, subjectification, that agency is crucial. However, the ideal pupil discourse is held in place by asymmetrical power relationships and dominant ideologies, which can socialise in ways that militate against the achievement of agency. Key finding four implies schools have a role in helping build expansive aspirations, which can lead to a strong projective dimension in the chordal triad. This broadening of horizons provides experiences and other ways of thinking, which feed the process of becoming, and arguably this is a major role for schools. Enabling all students to see, imagine and understand different possibilities, whilst recognising their own present constraints, is part of becoming. The students in this study highlighted how limited they were by the knowledge of the local, and how the school did little to really expand this. Conceiving education in a different manner could create spaces where there are other possibilities. These could be known as transitional spaces, an idea taken from Winnicott by Aitken and Herman (1997):

[t]ransitional spaces are theorized as the spaces out of and from which culture arises. As with play (an object), in culture there is something to make use of (a tradition), but the child/adult also has the capacity to bring something of her inner self to the tradition (Ibid.: 63).



### 11.3.5 Adults as educators rather than (simply) teachers

Key findings one and four implicate the teacher as a key shaper in the achievement of agency by young people in school. 'Transitional spaces' (Aitken & Herman, 1997: 63), as suggested above, foreground the interconnectedness of the environment and the individual, and provide a space where teachers can now become educators. These more educative roles relocate the professional, as the role of teacher moves beyond that of simply teacher, to the role of educator (Arendt, 1961). Arendt sees educators as accepting responsibility for the world, appearing to the young as representatives of the world:

In education, this responsibility for the world takes the form of authority. The authority of the educator and the qualifications of the teacher are not the same thing. [...] A teacher's qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct the world about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for the world (1961: 189).

In this view, therefore, the task of education is to 'teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living' (Ibid.: 195). Biesta (2006) brings this responsibility, which differentiates the teacher and educator, into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by suggesting that, 'it requires an educational system that is focussed not on outcomes and league tables, but that allows teachers to spend time and effort on finding the delicate balance between child and the curriculum so that there are indeed real chances for children and students to undertake something new "something unforeseen by us" (Arendt)' (Ibid.: 139). This understanding of the achievement of agency provides a tool for teachers to become educators and to look beyond the targets, (re)connecting with the potential that they offer young people (for

example, recognition of the possibilities that the student-educator relationship might afford).

### **11.3.6 Education, agency and young people**

Offering this different way of understanding agency in a much more complex ecological manner enables us to reflect on young people's school experience holistically. It alerts us to understand that to make spaces educational, we need to ask how, for example, participation is understood and enacted and so how it might contribute to the achievement of agency. This ecological understanding of the achievement of agency affords us the opportunities to challenge those structural and cultural barriers that still exist in the schooling system, which serve to constrain possibilities for agency. It asks us to question, for example, the teacher-student relationship, the discipline and reward systems, the uniform, the structure of the day and the rules and routines, all of which habitually constitute school life. It allows us to ask whether these enable or constrain an educative environment. This study has given some insight into the diversity of these students' lives, and given some illustration of the uniqueness of the chordal triad of agency.

Adults as educators, rather than simply teachers, need to raise questions about the environment these young people experience at school in order to understand whether it is one which is educative. Does it allow every young person to develop a substantial range of repertoires of manoeuvre? Does it provide the young people with expansive horizons of opportunity? Does it promote the three functions of education as suggested by Biesta (2009)? If not, then as adults do we need to raise questions regarding our own achievement of agency in the current schooling climate? Arguably, without an environment in schools that affords the possibility of being an educator rather than simply a teacher, we are

constantly constraining our young people regardless of the practices used. My study suggests that creating educational spaces, where young people are enabled to both acquire skills and knowledge and also 'be democratic persons.[..] where children and students can act' (Biesta, 2006: 138), is still a work-in-progress. However, this ecological way of understanding the achievement of agency enables questions to be raised about how we might progress this educational project.

#### **11.3.7 Who might the educator become?**

The manner in which this study raises questions of agency and purpose in education enables us to ask what the educator might be in relation to young people. Understanding the achievement of agency in this way enables participation to become part of the means of becoming an educator, going beyond (simply) a teacher. This understanding of agency provides a tool for adults to explore the complex nature of participation. It provides a way of unpicking the interconnectedness of a situation without losing sight of the whole. It affords opportunities to do things differently to enhance possibilities for manoeuvrability for young people. This could allow institutions to grow towards becoming educational rather than the slippage that leads to (simply) schooling.

The implications for schools, discussed above, make informed general comments which have emerged from the findings. Below I consider more explicitly implications for current policy and practice.

#### **11.4 Implications for policy and practice**

This discussion below explicitly considers the implications of the insights from the key findings for educational policy in Scotland (especially the flagship Curriculum for Excellence,

CfE) and practice in Scottish schools. In the ensuing discussion, I recognise that policy is contextualised and recontextualised (Bernstein, 1996) in multiple contexts, encompassing often conflicting discourses about what should happen in schools, as well as curricular practices (the lived or enacted curriculum). Therefore, in undertaking the following analysis, I do not attempt to divide the discussion into separate policy and practice sections; instead, I consider these implications through the identification of a number of themes, discussed across the macro (for example the development of high level policy by the Scottish government), meso (for example the further iteration of national policy as guidance by Education Scotland and local authorities) and micro (for example the operationalisation of policy into practice by teachers) levels of the school system (Thijs & van den Akker, 2009). The findings from this study can inform both policy and practices as it has shown that the achievement of agency by young people is important in education, and if we want to understand how we might enable young people to form expansive aspirations. This inevitably involves consideration of how policy might be formulated to explicitly develop constructive educational ecologies, and how school practices might actively seek to facilitate young people's achievement of agency.

Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004) is an aspirational policy which describes how Scotland will meet the needs of a changing society. It conveys a vision which is supported by specific values, purposes (the four capacities) and principles. Thus, its stated purpose is to enable 'children and young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective learners' (Scottish Government, 2004: 12). It also suggests that children and young people experience, for example, 'greater choice and opportunity ... to help them realise their individual talents and to help close the opportunity

gap by better engaging those who currently switch off from formal education too young' (Scottish Executive. 2004: 7). This curriculum describes not only what is to be taught, but also how it should be taught. It refers to, the wide range of approaches that teachers can and should draw on to support what is taught. In terms of relationships, it states that:

[R]espectful and constructive relationships are the starting point for successful learning. Schools and other educational settings can foster respect, responsibility and tolerance by living out their values, practising them within their own communities. By having high aspirations for each child, schools are able to support children in developing confidence and ambition (Ibid.: 13).

This policy document seems very permissive in that it appears to be opening up different possibilities for young people in schools. Reeves (2013), commenting on CfE, cautions that this 'new curriculum requires a repositioning of the respective roles of teachers and pupils and of their relationships to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment if young people are to become actively and critically engaged in learning' (Ibid.: 69). The discussion below draws on the empirical findings of this study, such as the importance of relationships (key findings one, two and four) and current school control mechanisms (key finding three), to indicate how policy could contribute to enabling all young people develop expansive aspirations. Policy at a national, macro level should be able to give a steer to the meso and micro levels of engagement, thus its importance should not be downplayed. In practice, policy is contextualised at the macro level, and then recontextualised at each successive level, and within different contexts (Thijs & van der Akker, 2009). Policy intentions can become undermined or subverted by this recontextualisation process. It is not therefore sufficient to consider whether policy aspirations have particular aspirational intentions (for example, the

development of student agency); we also need to consider how the development of practice maintains these aspirations and is fit for purpose, so therefore we also need to consider how policy frames and supports the development of practice. Put differently, if the purpose is the development of the achievement of agency by students, then practices need to be fit for purpose, and policy should focus on not only identifying purposes, but also processes for enabling teachers to develop fit for purpose practices (Priestley, 2010). These processes need to enable teachers to make sense of these purposes in their own context, perhaps interrupting or affirming long-held teacher beliefs. In this way, practices can build from dialogically informed sense-making, diminishing the need for systems built on accountability agendas, which have been documented to create performative cultures, often characterised by fabrication and perverse incentives rather than by professionally informed practices (Keddie, 2013).

#### **11.4.1 Relationships**

Findings one, two and four suggest that relationships are important in enabling young people to flourish. These relationships not only encompass those physically on the school site, such as ties between teachers and students, students themselves and other adults; they also comprise the network of relationships within which students are embedded beyond the school gate (Nespor, 1997). These relationships can encourage young people to develop contradicting priorities, sometimes emerging as school non-attendance. Policies and practices are therefore needed that understand and work with these tensions to such an extent that all young people are enabled to feel comfortable, and that they belong, in the school site.

The finding that young people place a high value on positive recognition by teachers and others is important, as this suggests that policies need to continue to stress the importance of constructive relationships and continue to build a range of different opportunities which can help foster these relationships. Experiences, such as the short-term peer tutoring project and the more long-term xl club fostered these constructive relationships. The feelings of trust that emerged from the act of being noticed in a positive manner suggest that such schemes potentially enhance relationships between teachers and students. Additionally, the students' positive experiences, in the different environments explored in this study, suggest that policies need to continue to encourage and promote different curricular opportunities for all, rather than just a select few.

#### **11.4.2 Attendance**

In the policy guidance *Building the Curriculum 3* it is suggested that learning can be organised in a flexible manner and so '[C]lasses do not need to be based on age cohorts. This is intended to make personalisation and choice easier rather than to allow streaming' (Scottish Government, 2010: 6). This mainstreaming of vertical age integration differs greatly from the current, generally accepted, system based on year groups. This policy provides a platform for young people to remain at school in the senior phase studying in a variety of different ways. It suggests that young people can access college and other spaces, with schools brokering these opportunities for young people. It also suggests that, in the senior phase, young people should have the opportunity to 'obtain qualifications as well as [to] continue to develop the four capacities' (Scottish Government, 2008: 11).

However, although this policy appears very permissive in that it enables schools to have an open door approach for all young people, my empirical findings reflect the tension within

current schooling policies regarding attendance and performance. The young people, who became disengaged with school in their early secondary career but re-engaged in S4, began to build relationships with both adults and their peers in school at this later stage. However, they invariably found that, because of a drop in teacher numbers and an underlying drive for schools to report on their performance, they had no place in school beyond S4. Scotland's view 'that access to academic curricula for all is a democratic and egalitarian approach' (Lingard & Rawolle, 2009: 1), is challenged by this evidence rather upholding the OECD review panel's findings, which suggested that Scotland has a 'narrow, conservative and socially exclusive ethos of schooling' (Ibid.: 22).

This appears to be an example of the competing tensions faced by schools today: a need to report on performance whilst trying to adopt new policy initiatives which, on the surface, provide opportunities for the adoption of different practices, but in reality make no concessions if the possible outcome is a drop in the performance data. Actively encouraging these young people to stay on *at school* rather than making another, potentially detrimental, transition may have enabled them to build on their, relatively new, positive, constructive relationships. An explicit *right to stay* policy could have benefitted these young people. In the longer term, it offers them a sense of identity: a sense of their own identity being claimed rather than rejected; an opportunity to have different possible trajectories to consider; and an opportunity to achieve agency rooted in expansive trajectories, rather than narrow, stilted, parameters.

The young people in this study highlighted the challenges they experienced when expected to make a transition from one environment to another. None of these young people actively sought another learning environment, suggesting a need to remain longer at school and



arguably a lack of confidence to try somewhere new. Confidence was something Leanne specifically suggested she wanted to gain from school, and of course this is an explicit, stated purpose of Curriculum for Excellence. For these young people in this study, a policy that encouraged all young people to stay at school regardless of level of attainment and previous history would enhance their achievement of agency as it opens up possibilities rather than constraining them as we saw in the empirical findings.

These types of practices require a shift in attitudes within the schooling community towards non-attendance, leading to approaches which are not led by punishments and consequences. A young person's trajectory, where learning has been disrupted, is challenging for all concerned, especially the children and young people. Policies need to reflect this and provide opportunities for young people to return to school at any stage. In this sense we might need to ask whether there needs to be a renewed emphasis placed on encouraging vertical age integration, especially in the senior phase (S4 onwards). One might also propose a shift away from policies that inhibit schools in offering these opportunities to young people, who may not contribute positively to the school's attainment statistics. Replacing this might be a recognition that staying at school, may in the longer term, be beneficial to the young person who is then able to access opportunities for which they feel more prepared. Here, we see then that policy development could enhance the achievement of agency, by creating an environment which is flexible and accessible to all. This requires a shift in the performative environment that schools operate in. It requires a reversal in what Michael Apple referred to as the 'subtle shift in emphasis ... from student needs to student performance, and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school' (Apple 2001: 413).

### 11.4.3 A control economy?

Finding three highlighted the effects of some practices that exist in our schools today, but which receive little or no attention in the policy documents. The tie was an essential part of students' life. If this item was forgotten, or other aspects of the uniform were incorrect, disciplinary measures were enforced. The uniform is not mandated through legislation. In the report '*Better Behaviour Better Learning*' (SEED, 2001), a dress code is mentioned: 'schools should consult with pupils, teachers, parents/carers in order to agree a dress code for children and young people. Local authorities should support schools in the implementation of the agreed dress code' (Ibid.: 30).

The significance of the uniform or dress code lies not in the clothing as physical artifacts *per se*, but rather in the cultural meanings associated with specific pieces of cloth, in specific colours and styles, and the ensuing mechanisms of control that schools exert to ensure obedience to these uniform rules. Young people become 'objects of socialisation' (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010: 1) through this aforementioned practice and others documented in the findings. Biesta's (2009) functions of education, which acknowledge that socialisation is part of education's role, also suggest that subjectification is equally important. This process of becoming is arguably not nurtured by the stringent control mechanisms applied in schools. Moreover, this culture of control, enabled by the power differences between teachers and students, due to the teachers' ability to mobilise control mechanisms not available to students, seeks to continually undermine the students' opportunities to explore themselves and their emerging identities.

Policies which enable an environment where subjectification might flourish could start with the dress code debate. Recently, a young person (Scarabello, 2012) raised a petition

regarding school uniform, exhorting the Scottish Government to produce mandatory guidelines to stop the practice of uncomfortable, traditional uniforms. Instead, it was suggested that a dress code be introduced. This was still slightly prescriptive, but it offered a degree of personalisation for students and also allowed the gender stereotypes typified by the traditional school uniform to be negated. The uniform, and the meanings associated with it, of protection, belonging and discipline, emerged through my findings. What my findings implied was the uncritical nature of the debate regarding uniform that is an acceptance that it provides young people with protection and a sense of belonging. The use of the uniform as a control mechanism was not discussed by students except in the sense of the punishment received if it was incorrectly worn. The Purposes of the Curriculum for Excellence state that young people should be able to learn independently and 'develop informed, ethical views of complex subjects' (Scottish Government, 2009b: iii). The overarching policy through which some of these practices could become more flexible is in place. An increase in the flexibility of some of these unquestioned practices might shift the nature of the current schooling environment and create spaces for different relationships to emerge between adults and young people. These spaces could be much more dialogical, if some of these aspects for control are diminished, and so arguably more educative, providing opportunities for the process of becoming. An increase in flexibility over some of these long-held traditions also provides more possibilities for manoeuvrability for students, thus increasing the possibility of achievement of agency.

#### **11.4.4 Teaching Methods**

In my observations and discussions with the young people it appeared that the teaching methods employed by many teachers were fairly traditional. The policy drivers through

Curriculum for Excellence suggest that young people should have, '[t]he opportunity to engage in active learning, interdisciplinary tasks and to experience learning in practical contexts' (Scottish Government, 2009b: 2). However, if we take a slightly different approach and we tease out the functions of education, we could find teaching methods that are fit for purpose, rather than a simple adoption of methods that are prescribed by policy, and which can become performative. Participatory approaches, if implemented through prescription, can become another method of control and a vehicle for economic instrumentalism, as explored in Chapter 2. Participatory approaches, if fit for purpose, can offer opportunities for teachers and young people to build up relationships built on trust rather than control. Key finding one showed that trusting relationships enabled these students to consider different ways of acting (i.e. increasing their awareness and capacity to engage with a range of choices and leading to the achievement of agency). Policy, then, needs to address this, by framing the adoption of teaching practices in a flexible fashion; one that builds on the teacher's professional judgement, relying on teachers' informed understandings about the functions of education. Currently, Curriculum for Excellence is weak in this respect (Humes, 2013). For example, the construct of active learning is weakly defined (Drew and Mackie, 2011), and where particular pedagogical practices are articulated, they are explicitly tied to particular outcomes: For example (Education Scotland, 2013):

By investigating floating and sinking of objects in water, I can apply my understanding of buoyancy to solve a practical challenge (Science Experiences and Outcomes, 2-08b).

Through researching, I can identify possible causes of a past conflict and report on the impact it has had on the lives of people at that time (Social Studies Experiences and Outcomes, 3-06b).

Policy can do more, by articulating processes for developing pedagogy that is fit for purpose, to ensure that teaching methods do not become an end in themselves – a box to be ticked – but are part of an environment which is educative.

#### **11.4.5 Expansive aspirations**

My empirical findings showed the difference in the aspirations of these students. Finding four implies that the school environment can provide a potential place where young people can develop their aspirations alongside their ties beyond the physical school gate. I have mentioned above how policy could contribute to the foregrounding of trusting, intergenerational relationships, through shifts in the control culture of schools, the adoption of teaching methods which are fit for purpose, and underpinning this, an understanding of the functions of education.

Biesta (2009) suggests that a good education will always ensure a suitable balance of three functions (qualification, socialisation and subjectification); an over-focus on one function, will impact on the other two. Therefore, when considering what a good education is, we need to be explicit as to how we are seeking to address each function as there are tensions between, most notably, the subjectification function and the other two. Schools are places which socialise children and young people, and whilst this is an accepted part of education, the subjectification function is equally important to address (Ibid.).

Whilst the acknowledgement of the functions of education is important Biesta (2009) suggests we need to move beyond these and discuss education's aims and purposes. In doing this we can ask about 'the "quality" of subjectification – or kinds of subjectivity – that are made possible as a result of particular educational arrangements and configurations'(Ibid.: 40). My research suggests that policies which contribute to practices based on intergenerational, dialogical, trusting relationships, and policies which promote practices leading to the building of more expansive horizons for all young people in school, could contribute to the kinds of subjectivity made possible. In terms of agency, the projective dimension is critical in enabling other possibilities to be considered by people, and it is critical in the formation of future trajectories and imagining future selves: '*kinds of subjectivity*'.

The permissive nature of Curriculum for Excellence, based on an understanding of its four interdependent purposes, could create an environment where this might be made possible for students. If schools can begin to create such an environment this may enable more young people to see beyond that which they immediately know and the constraints that that can have on their aspirations. Promoting more expansive aspirations provides an environment where the achievement of agency is possible.

### **11.5 Final thoughts**

Kallio (2008: 15) suggests that '[p]articipation and agency cannot be contemplated merely on general policy levels'. Instead, we need to consider how to take children and young people seriously in everyday practices, increasing levels of dialogue and negotiation, in order to provide more and different opportunities for their achievement of agency. Participatory approaches may afford opportunities for different relationships to build

between adults and young people but, equally, attention needs to be paid to how these are implemented and consideration needs to be given to the impact. Shifts in relationships alter the practical-evaluative orientation to agency and enable young people to consider what is possible and the risks associated with this. Knowledge of rules and routines has its roots in the iterational dimension of agency. What is part of today's practical-evaluative becomes tomorrow's iterational, so the temporal nature of agency is very important. We can see here the possibilities for opportunities today becoming part of the rules and routines of tomorrow. This constant dynamic nature prompts schools to have a role in enhancing the possibilities for the achievement of agency. This can range from enabling children and young people to build expansive aspirations through different experiences, helping shape the projective orientation to agency, to more local experiences in the classroom, where different ways of doing offer the potential to act differently.

Opening up and realising transitional spaces (Aitken & Herman, 1997) offers possibilities, for both young people and adults alike, to author different cultural scripts, providing platforms for changing environments. This is about changing the practical-evaluative, to afford possibilities for expanding the iterational and projective agentic orientation of young people. Participatory approaches can be part of the environment that affords opportunities for these transitional spaces. My research suggests that creating spaces in which both social structures and the cultural realm are problematised, might increase achievement of agency by children and young people, by increasing their awareness of, and capacity to engage with, a range of different possible imaginings. If we are to consider democratic education as a goal, then we need to ask: *'what kind of schools do we need so that children and students can act?'*, and of our educational practices we should ask: *'how much action is actually*

*possible in our schools?* (Biesta, 2006: 138). My research would suggest that we still have a long way to go if our education system is to be described as democratic. However, working with this ecological theory of agency as achievement, teachers, as educators, can help shape an environment where all young people have the potential to act.



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