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Young children's participation as a living right: an  
ethnographic study of an early learning and  
childcare setting

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PhD Social Policy

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# Declaration Page

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where the thesis states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Parts of this work have been published in a sole-authored journal article:

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Cara Blaisdell

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# Abstract

My doctoral research has explored how young children's participation was put into practice—how it was 'lived' and negotiated—in the context of one early learning and childcare setting.

The concept of children's participation is rooted in large part in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which enshrines children's right to express their views and have those views taken into account. However, young children's participation rights are often overlooked. The more prominent discourse about young children has been one that focuses on early childhood as a preparatory period of life, in which adults must intervene and shape children's development. My research has therefore focused on child-adult relationships within the early childhood setting, looking at how young children and early childhood practitioners 'lived' children's participation and negotiated the tensions and challenges that arose for them.

To carry out the research, I used an ethnographic methodology to study one fieldwork site in depth. 'Castle Nursery' was an early learning and childcare setting in Scotland, where practitioners professed to work in participatory ways with young children. The long-term nature of ethnography allowed me to observe how children's participation was lived and negotiated at Castle Nursery over an eight-month period of fieldwork.

The research found that practitioners challenged adult-led, 'schoolified' practices by foregrounding young children's knowledge and contributions to the setting. Children's participation was embedded into play-based pedagogy at Castle Nursery, with practitioners organising time and space to allow young children a great deal of influence over their daily experiences. Rather than planning adult-led learning activities, practitioners instead cultivated a rich learning environment for children to explore, through free-flow play.

The thesis has also highlighted a variety of tensions and challenges that arose. Even at Castle Nursery, where practitioners were proud of the ways their work challenged conventional norms about young children, there were limits to how far practitioners



would take a participatory approach. The thesis has particularly highlighted the importance of reflective practices about the ethical dimensions of early childhood practice. Uncertainty seemed to be an inevitable and enduring feature of living young children's participation.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

This PhD thesis explores the concept of children's participation, and how that participation was lived and negotiated in the context of a formal early learning and childcare setting. It represents a major piece of research and reflection, born not only out of academic curiosity, but also from my own professional experiences in the early childhood field. Since 2000, I have worked on and off in early childhood settings, with early learning and childcare becoming my full-time career in 2003.

Because this research has focused on early learning and childcare, where I have over a decade of professional experiences to influence my thinking, I have incorporated a reflexive approach throughout the different stages of the project. For me, reflexivity served as a way to question the role of the self in the process of knowledge production (Rose 1997, Berger 2015). As Berger (2015) argues, reflexivity may be particularly useful when the researcher shares the experiences of study participants, as I did in the case of early childhood practitioners. Reflexivity involves:

...the constant movement between being in the phenomenon and stepping outside of it; in this sense, reflexivity may be conceptualized as occurring in the liminal space between the inside and outside perspectives.

(Enosh and Ben-Ari 2016: 579)

In keeping with a reflexive approach, I begin the introductory chapter of my thesis by reflecting on some key moments from my professional life, setting the stage for the rest of the thesis and establishing the motivations behind my research. I then move on to discuss my initial explorations of what children's participation might mean, identifying a key tension: the role of adults in participatory initiatives. The chapter closes with a definition of terms and outline of the thesis.

## **1.2 Reflecting on past approaches and relationships with young children**

In 2000, I was in my final year of university in a small town in rural western Massachusetts. Needing a part-time job, I decided to apply to a local preschool that rented out space on campus. My friends and I often saw the children outside playing when we were walking to class, and I applied for a job there because the children were cute and I thought it would be fun. Despite this rather cavalier beginning, my time at the campus preschool sparked what would become a deep love of working with young children. It was a setting that I once described as the ‘best place in the world’, because it was an environment of such warmth and kindness, both for children and staff.

A few years later, I had moved to New York City and was working in a very different early childhood setting. Like the campus preschool, this setting was privately run, as are most early childhood settings in the United States, where a market model dominates (Sosinsky 2012, Whitebook et al. 2014). This particular preschool was owned by a company which ran several schools in the city, and competed in the market of early childhood programmes that focused on ‘exmissions’—preparing children to successfully apply to prestigious private schools for kindergarten and beyond. Part of the exmission process was for children to take a standardised test that measured verbal and visual comprehension, processing, and reasoning skills (Hu and Spencer 2013, New York Times 2013). Within the exmissions market, preschools’ reputations depended on children achieving high scores on the test. Our work with children quickly became about test preparation. The corporate preschool was a highly structured environment that focused on teacher-directed, subject-based lessons in math, reading, and science, among others. Lessons were planned ahead of time, approved by my manager, and then carried out as written.

When I first began at the corporate preschool, I felt a sense of satisfaction that we were actively teaching children specific academic skills. Sometimes parents whose children had moved on would comment that they were repeating the same lessons in

primary school that we had done with them during preschool at age three. Again, at first, this gave me a sense of pride. However, toward the end of my time at the corporate preschool, I began to question what we defined as ‘success’. Time was pressured; the children were moved from activity to activity in half-hour blocks. Too much unstructured free play was considered a waste of time. Most teachers, including myself, often used standardised activities such as worksheets to teach particular skills. It was not unusual to see sixteen identical art projects hanging outside the classrooms. I felt harried and stressed; many of my interactions with the children were directive and controlling.

This corporate preschool could be understood as a ‘space for young children’. For example, it was designed with young children in mind, with adults making decisions about the best approach to foster children’s academic learning and development (Gallacher 2016). However, it did not feel much like a ‘young children’s space’—there was little scope for children’s active roles in influencing their daily experiences (Gallacher 2016). In my final year at the corporate preschool, I worked with two other teachers who shared my scepticism about the directive, skills-based approach. We tried to work in the margins of the approach for most of the year, incorporating non-standardised activities into our planning.

After leaving the corporate preschool, I worked in two other settings before coming to the University of Edinburgh in 2010 to undertake the MSc in Childhood Studies. The other settings were influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach and espoused very different ways of working with young children from the corporate preschool. Arts-based experiences were emphasised, with children seen as co-constructors of knowledge rather than recipients of adult expertise. However, my experiences in the corporate preschool have always stayed with me the most strongly, though I left there almost ten years ago. It was not until I began studying for the MSc in Childhood Studies that I learned about the concept of children’s participation. Children’s participation seemed to encompass many of the uncertainties I had felt over the years about my own early childhood practice. At the same time, the concept of children’s participation came with its own ambiguities and tensions, particularly about roles for adults.

### 1.3 Initial explorations of children's participation

Children's participation has become an increasingly popular initiative in research, policy, and practice. As the literature review chapter of this thesis will discuss, the concept is rooted in large part in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which the United States has not ratified. This goes some way toward explaining why I had never heard about the concept of children's participation. The United States is generally slow to ratify international human rights treaties (Gabel 2016) and has particularly resisted the UNCRC for a variety of reasons. For example, influential parental rights campaigns have claimed that the UNCRC allows governments to override the family (S.C. 2013, Volonakis 2013). There are also conflicts with American law: for example, children under the age of 18 can be imprisoned for life without parole, and corporal punishment is still legally allowed in schools in many American states (S.C. 2013). The United States signed the UNCRC in 1995 (UN OHCHR 2016), indicating a willingness to consider ratification (United Nations Treaty Collection 2016)—but has never moved forward with the process.

Children's participation, then, does not have the prominence in the United States that it does in many other countries. Globally, however, there has been a major growth of activity around children's participation in the past 25 years (Lansdown 2010). A generalised view of participation involves the recognition that children

are active in the process of shaping their lives, learning and future. They have their own view on their best interests, a growing capacity to make decisions, the right to speak and the right to be heard.

(Woodhead 2010: xx)

However, specific interpretations of what children's participation does and should mean in different contexts have been variable and contentious (Thomas and Percy-Smith 2010). As Woodhead (2010: xxi) argues, children's participation has been implemented in 'patchy' ways, with a great deal of variation between 'institutional settings, between different sectors of government, and especially between different political and cultural contexts'.

My initial interest in children's participation was focused on young children's 'right to speak and the right to be heard' (Woodhead 2010: xx). Given my professional background, I was particularly interested in how young children might speak and be heard about their lived experiences in early learning and childcare settings (e.g. Clark and Moss 2011). I explored these ideas in my dissertation research for the MSc in Childhood Studies, undertaking a small participatory project using child-led photography. This project is discussed in more detail later in the thesis. What is relevant for the introduction to the thesis is that the research uncovered some interesting tensions for me regarding the practices of children's participation. To name two of these: there was an issue with the formal, limited ways I had conceptualised participation; and I was not sure what my role should be in influencing children's actual ways of participating in the research. These themes regarding the role of adults in children's participation initiatives have gone on to form the starting point of this PhD research, which examines participation as a lived, negotiated practice in the context of child-adult relationships.

#### **1.4 Definition of terms**

This thesis does not use many acronyms or specialist terms. However, some discussion of terminology is useful at the outset; for example:

- The thesis largely uses the term 'children' instead of the more inclusive 'children and young people', as the research was conducted with children aged five and younger. However, at times, the longer phrase is used, if appropriate.
- 'Early childhood' refers to the period from birth to age eight, though in the Scottish context this has been extended to include pre-birth (The Scottish Government 2008).
- 'Early childhood education and care' broadly refers to 'government-regulated, non-parental early childhood education and care provided outside of the child's home' (Naumann et al. 2013: 2, OECD 2015). The term 'early learning and childcare' has recently been adopted in Scotland, to highlight children's active role in learning (The Scottish Government 2014). This

thesis uses both phrases, at different times. When discussing the general literature, the phrase ‘early childhood education and care’ is used. When discussing the Scottish context specifically, the thesis uses ‘early learning and childcare’.

- Making distinctions between ‘categories’ of young children is somewhat artificial, yet has been necessary in this thesis to describe the variations of children’s experiences. In the findings chapters, when it seemed necessary to approximately describe a child’s age, the words ‘baby’ or ‘infant’ have been used to describe children up to one year old, the word ‘toddler’ to describe children between one and two, and ‘older children’ to describe those who were aged two and above.
- This thesis uses the term ‘practitioner’ to encompass any adult professional working in the fieldwork setting. There were many different job titles at the setting; for example: practitioner, teacher, early years officer, pupil support assistant. As the methods chapter discusses, using the all-encompassing term ‘practitioner’ does erase some of the diversity at the setting. However, I have made this choice in order to protect the identities of the adult participants.

## **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

Following this introductory chapter, in Chapter Two I review the literature on children’s participation. The chapter provides a rights-based overview of participation, and identifies a key tension for the thesis: the role of adults in children’s participation initiatives. The chapter offers a platform for the study of children’s participation as a lived and negotiated practice, and discusses some key considerations that may inform how young children’s participation is lived: child-adult relationships, children’s agency, and the context of broader social trends. Particular, but not exclusive, attention is paid to the early childhood context in this chapter. The chapter concludes by presenting the research questions for this project.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the ethnographic methodology used to answer my research questions. The chapter makes an argument for why an ethnographic

approach was the most appropriate way to address the questions, and discusses the choice of fieldwork site. This section also discusses the limitations of the approach. The chapter then shifts into a reflexive discussion of how ethnographic knowledge was produced during the research project, including sampling within the setting, writing field notes, analysis of data, and ethnographic writing. Finally, the chapter turns to an examination of ethical issues, including informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and protection from harm.

Chapter Four then begins to present the findings of the research, in the first of three findings chapters. In Chapter Four, I first contextualise the research by offering a brief review of Scottish trends regarding children's rights and participation, as well as trends in the early childhood sector. The chapter then begins to examine how children's participation was lived through play-based practices at the nursery. The role of practitioners in facilitating this play is examined, particularly emphasising how time and spaces were organised. The chapter also begins to explore tensions in how children's participation was lived, looking at negotiations of care routines for the youngest children.

Chapter Five continues to look at children's play, now through a pedagogical lens. In this chapter, I look at how children's participation intersected with practitioners' approach to teaching and learning at the nursery. The chapter argues that practitioners fostered a 'pedagogy of relationships', describing children's relationships with each other and with non-human actors such as the physical environment, as well as the role for practitioners themselves. The chapter closes with a composite account of a day at the nursery's Forest School site. In this composite account the chapter unpacks the relationships and tensions of the nursery's pedagogical approach, focusing in particular on practitioners' own limitations regarding children's participation.

Chapter Six delves in more depth into the uncertainties of living children's participation. The chapter examines several interconnected arenas of challenge for practitioners. First, the chapter looks at how practitioners developed an 'ethical identity' that involved children's participation. The learning journey for practitioners



could be uncomfortable, and more experienced practitioners seemed to be relatively comfortable with discomfort. The chapter then looks at a shared sentiment amongst practitioners—their opposition to formal, ‘schoolified’ practices (e.g. Cohen et al 2003: 2). Opposition to schoolification of the early years was a value that bonded the practitioners together. However, they were still willing to subdue their own opinions for the sake of putting children’s views first. This was a delicate balance to negotiate. Finally, the chapter discusses a quality improvement inspection at Castle Nursery, which revealed practitioners’ fears about the consequences of working differently from the broader early childhood sector.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis, summarising how each research question has been addressed. The chapter then discusses implications and contributions to debates in the literature, as well as for policy, practice, and future research.

# **Chapter 2 Literature review: young children's participation as a 'living right'**

## **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter establishes the key themes, tensions and gaps to which my research can contribute. Children's participation is a broad umbrella term, encompassing many different policies, practices, and research methodologies. A popular concept globally, children's participation is nevertheless often ill-defined—it is a 'variable construct', with a range of meanings assigned to the phrase (Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010: 357). This chapter does not attempt to find the 'correct' definition of children's participation. Instead, it reviews debates in the field, drawing from various literatures to identify key themes and tensions.

The chapter begins by providing a broad-brush, rights-based overview of children's participation. Here, the chapter introduces the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), focusing particularly on participation rights. This section makes links between participation rights and the 'new sociology of childhood', which has put forward a strong image of the child as competent social actor. The section identifies issues with overly formal and individualistic ways of understanding participation, and introduces a different formulation of rights as 'lived', negotiated and interpreted.

In doing so, the chapter identifies three important considerations for the study of children's participation as lived and negotiated: children's agency, child-adult relationships, and the broader social trends that affect children's lives. In the final sections of the chapter, these three considerations are examined in more depth, with a focus on relationships and interdependence throughout. The chapter concludes by 'translating' the key considerations into a broad aim and specific research questions for this project.

## 2.2 A rights-based overview of children's participation

### 2.2.1 *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: enshrining participation rights, and the 'implementation gap'*

At its core, the concept of children's participation is about children expressing their views, and having those views taken seriously (Lansdown 2010: 11). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009b: 5) have defined children's participation broadly 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.

Interest in children's participation has proliferated since the late 1980s/early 1990s, due in large part to the wide ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The Convention enshrines children's right to express their views—although the actual phrase 'children's participation' does not appear in the Convention's text (Sinclair 2004, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009). In regards to children's participation, Article 12 of the Convention is key, stating that:

1. States 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.

While Article 12 of the UNCRC is vital to the concept of children's participation, it is complemented and strengthened by other specific UNCRC articles. These include, for example:

- Article 13 on children's right to freedom of expression;
- Article 14 on freedom of thought, conscience and (to some extent) religion

- Article 15 on freedom of association;
- Article 17 on the right to information (including information about rights)

(Flekkoy and Kaufman 1997, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, CRIN 2015, Tisdall 2015).

This cluster of civil and political rights are often referred to as ‘participation rights’; rights that enshrine children’s rights to self-expression as full members of society (CRIN 2015). With these so-called ‘participation rights’, the UNCRC departs significantly from preceding children’s rights instruments, which focused mainly on protection and assuring ‘a certain degree of welfare’ to the child—for example, the right to education (Quennerstedt 2010: 627). For example, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) states that the child, ‘by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care’ (preamble). This view of childhood as being entitled to special measures of protection and assistance can also be found in other international human rights instruments that are not child-specific, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Article 25), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966, Article 24) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966, Article 10).

Children’s participation rights are only one part of the UNCRC. The Convention consists of 54 articles that enshrine civil, economic, social, and cultural rights for children (Hill and Tisdall 1997) as well as three Optional Protocols that set out: enhanced protections from involvement in armed conflict; protection from sale, child prostitution and child pornography; and establishing an international complaints procedure for reporting violations of children’s rights (OHCHR 2015). Children’s rights are often described in terms of the ‘3 P’s’: in addition to *participation* in their families and communities, these include *provision* of basic needs and *protection* against neglect and abuse (Alderson 2000: 440). The UNCRC, then, presents a multifaceted view of the child; one that is in keeping with previous children’s rights declarations in its emphasis on children’s particular vulnerabilities and needs, while also departing from that tradition with the inclusion of participation rights for children (Woodhead 2010). However, the UNCRC, and subsequent General

Comments from the Committee on the Rights of the Child (particularly General Comment No. 12 on the ‘right to be heard’), does present a strong view of children as subjects in their own right, rather than viewing children as solely ‘a concern or object of intervention’ (Freeman 2011: 383).

This view of children as subjects in their own right resonates with another key driver of interest in children’s participation—the emergence of the ‘new’ sociology of childhood, which put forward the concept of children as social actors (Sinclair 2004). The sociology of childhood—more broadly referred to as ‘childhood studies’—emerged in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, dovetailing with the adoption of the UNCRC (Mayall 2015). Researchers working in the childhood studies paradigm have proposed a shift away from dominant understandings of childhood (Tisdall and Punch 2012). While there were exceptions (e.g. Opie and Opie 1967), in academic study, childhood had mainly been framed as a period of ‘becoming adult’, both biologically and socially—that is, if it had been addressed at all. For example, as Hardman (2001: 504) notes, anthropologists had largely ignored the study of children in their own right, viewing them instead as passively assimilating into adult culture: ‘contributing nothing to social values or behaviour’. James and others (1998) argue that sociology had similarly ignored children’s own understandings and perspectives on their experiences, focusing instead on the processes by which children are ‘socialised’ into adult society (see also Corsaro 2014). Adulthood was seen as the goal toward which childhood was directed (Qvortrup 1994). In contrast to these dominant understandings, the new childhood studies perspective sought to study childhood as an important period in its own right, and highlighted children’s active participation in social life.

Building on debates that began in the 1970’s and 1980’s, which began to question the socialisation and developmental perspectives on childhood (Mayall 2012), James and Prout (1997) argued that a new paradigm was emerging for the study of childhood, and set out what they believed were the key features:

Childhood is understood as a social construction, distinct from biological immaturity.

Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender or ethnicity. Cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.

Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.

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 the passive subjects of social structures and processes.

Ethnography is a particularly useful method for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of data.

To proclaim a new paradigm of childhood study is to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

(James and Prout 1997: 8–9)

While these early tenets of the childhood studies paradigm did not specifically mention the UNCRC, or children's participation (other than in research), there are strong thematic links. For example, both the UNCRC and the central tenets of the childhood studies put forward normative views about children and childhood that challenged dominant understandings of children as incomplete pre-adults.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is counted among the ten core human rights instruments (OHCHR 2015), and has been the most rapidly and widely ratified human rights treaty (Child Rights International Network 2015). Ratification of the UNCRC creates obligations under international law for States Parties to 'take action to ensure the realisation of all rights in the Convention for all children in their jurisdiction' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2003, para. 1). At the time of writing, the Convention had been ratified by every State Party except for the United States (UN News Centre 2015b, 2015a). Verhellen (2015: 44) suggests that the Convention's wide ratification indicates that it provides a 'quasi-universal' definition of children's rights. Liefwaard and Doek (2015: 1) similarly note that the UNCRC has contributed to 'universalising children's rights globally and regionally'. However, wide ratification of the Convention, and participation in the monitoring process that comes with it, do not automatically ensure that children's rights are realised.

Freeman (1996: 4) argues that many governments ratified the Convention without giving much thought to how their own ‘laws and practices’ joined up with the rights enshrined within. He notes that there remains a ‘chasm between Convention and practice’ (Freeman 2000: 279), a sentiment echoed more recently by Hanson and Nieuwenhuys (2012) as well as by many others working in the field of children’s rights. The journey between ratification of the UNCRC and the actual realisation of children’s rights is not always straightforward or linear. This ‘implementation gap’, and how to close it, has become a main focus of children’s rights scholarship (Reynaert et al. 2015).

### *2.2.2 Gap in participation rights: working with a limited definition*

Tisdall (2015) notes that children’s participation rights have been particularly hard to implement. While there generally seems to be great enthusiasm for children’s participation initiatives—including from children and young people themselves—those initiatives do not always fulfil their aims (Davis and Hill 2006, Hinton et al. 2008, Graham and Fitzgerald 2010, Tisdall and Elsley 2012). In the UK, for example, it is now important for government and other organisations to ‘be seen’ to have consulted with children and young people (Tisdall 2012: 158). However, there has perhaps been a lack of critical reflection on whether rhetorical commitment to children’s participation matches up with the realities of their experiences. As Cairns (2006: 218) argues,

Participation is generally seen as a ‘good thing’, and different participation projects are uncritically accepted as making a positive contribution to the (undefined and assumed) purpose.

In the face of normative assumptions that participation is a ‘good thing’, the literature on children’s participation consistently describes tensions between participatory rhetoric and the reality of children’s lives. One aspect of this tension between rhetoric and reality is that participation has often been conceptualised in a limited way, as children ‘talking, thinking and deciding’ (Alderson 2008: 79).

A focus on decision-making can be seen in the wider participation literature. For example, UNICEF argues that children’s participation is a principle that:

recognizes the potential of children to *enrich decision-making processes*, to share perspectives and to participate as citizens and actors of change.

(UNICEF no date, emphasis added)

Hart (1992: 5), in his seminal work on children's participation, also emphasises the role of decision-making, defining participation as 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives'. Various activities designed to facilitate children's participation in decision-making have been developed, globally, at international, national and local levels (Tisdall et al. 2014).

These include, for example:

- children and young people being invited to speak on the 'international stage'-to the UN General Assembly, for example;
- the creation of national children's and youth parliaments;
- the establishment of pupil councils in local schools;
- one-off projects such as conferences or art exhibits;
- the development of methodological 'toolkits' to help facilitate engagement with children and young people

(Tisdall et al. 2014)

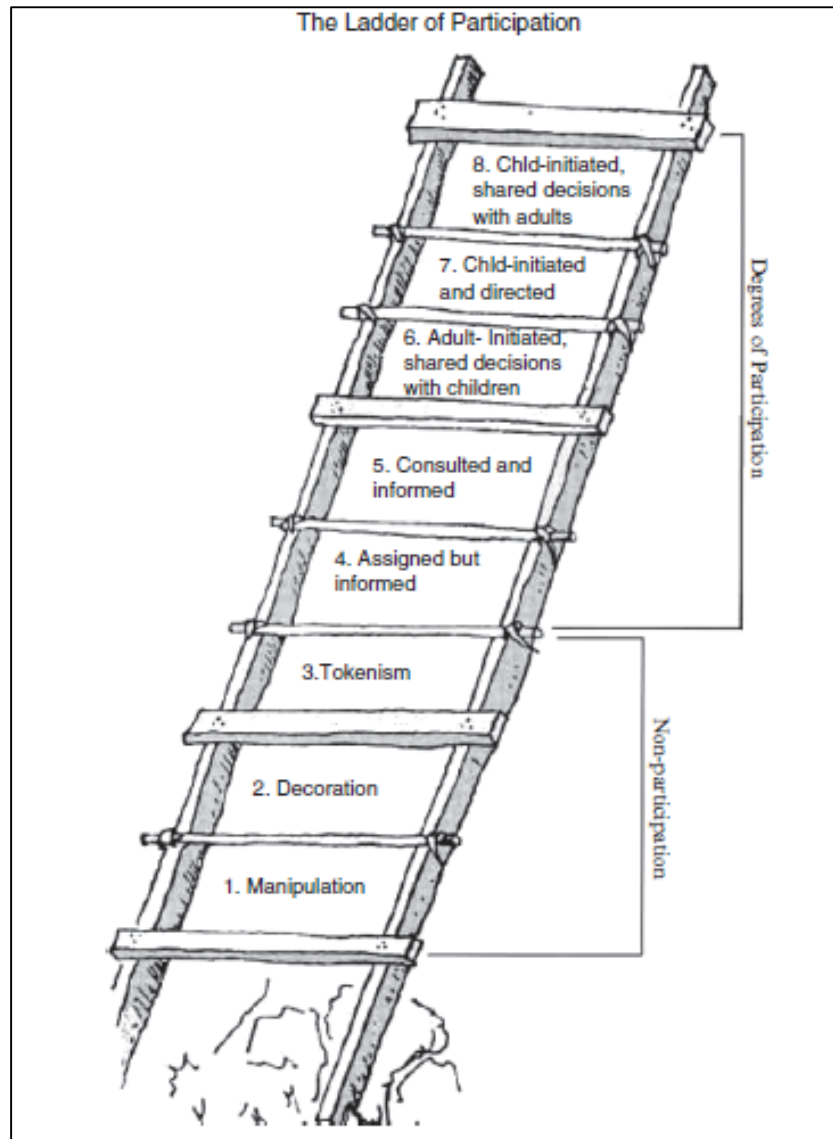
While there has been a great deal of emphasis on children's collective participation in decision-making, as in the above examples, the concept of children's participation also encompasses individual decision-making—for example, in family law (Taylor et al. 2007, Cleophas and Assim 2015, Tisdall 2015). However, the 'talking, thinking and deciding' model of participation has been critiqued for being too limited, excluding certain groups of children such as young children (Alderson 2008), children with mental health issues (Dadich 2010), and disabled children (Martin and Franklin 2010).

Malone and Hartung (2010: 33) suggest that participation is usually approached in a top-down way, occurring only when 'named and operated by adults'. Top down approaches may be more accurately described as 'consultation' than 'participation' (Thomas 2007). There are particular concerns about the lack of impact of top-down



children's participation initiatives (Tisdall 2012). For example, policymakers may seek children's input, but are 'electorally irresponsible' to children and young people, most of whom cannot vote (Franklin 2002: 16). Adult professionals seeking children's input are ultimately responsible to the service or organisation that employs them, rather than to the children and young people who use the service (Alderson 2010). Percy-Smith (2010: 111) argues that children and young people are generally invited to give their views 'when it suits organisations and services, rather than when young people need to communicate needs, issues, ideas and concerns'.

In conjunction with the top-down, 'talking, thinking and deciding' model of children's participation, a great deal of attention has been paid to technical concerns—for example, through the creation of typologies that illustrate the 'ideal' role for adults and children during participation initiatives (Hinton 2008). A particularly influential typology has been Hart's Ladder of Participation (see Fig 2.1), which describes levels of children's participation, moving from 'manipulation, decoration and tokenism' on the bottom, up to 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' at the top (Hart 1992).



*Figure 2:1 Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992)*

The popularity of Hart's Ladder and other subsequent typologies (Treseder 1997, Shier 2001, Mannion 2003) can perhaps be attributed to their usefulness as tools to 'operationalise' commitments to children's participation (Tisdall et al. 2014: 12). As Hart himself notes (2008: 21), the ladder provided a 'schema to help bring a critical perspective to a subject that at that time altogether lacked one'. Typologies have also helped to 'highlight the lack of children's participation and to advocate for change' (Tisdall 2010: 318). However, these typologies may also contribute to an overly

technical perspective on children's participation, one obsessed with achieving 'purity' in participation initiatives (Mannion 2010). Hart's ladder, for example, has been critiqued for not putting 'children in charge' or 'children's decision-making without adults' on the top rung (Hart 2008: 24)—reflecting a belief that there is a 'correct' way of doing children's participation.

While not mentioning typologies specifically, Mannion (2007, 2010) is generally wary of 'technologies' of participation, noting the dangers of employing them uncritically. One of those dangers may be that children's participation is reduced to a series of tick-box components (Malone and Hartung 2010); a list of 'what works' with little reflection on the dynamic processes underpinning participation, particularly regarding relationships between adults and children (Hinton 2008). This concern resonates with Davis (2011), who suggests that children's participation is often thought of as a one-off project—employing 'limited, context-specific participatory mechanisms' that do not significantly challenge the underlying hierarchy of the social positions of children and adults (Davis and Hill 2006: 9).

Davis and Smith (2012: 59) have suggested that children's participation initiatives could become more meaningful if professionals are willing to engage with the 'politics of participation': the aims, outcomes, structures, and relationships of participation. There is a useful body of literature which has recently emerged from children's rights studies, which can support a critical examination of the 'politics of participation'. This body of literature is discussed in the next section.

### *2.2.3 Studying the politics of participation: rights as 'lived' and negotiated*

Hanson and Nieuwenhuys (2012) propose that children's rights could be understood as 'living rights' (see also Liebel 2012a). A 'living rights' perspective highlights the complexity of translating international legal standards into local practices (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012), looking at the way that children's rights norms are received on the ground, and how those norms may be questioned and challenged (Vandenhoele 2012: 80). There is a focus on the varied circumstances of children's lives, and how those circumstances contribute to the ways that children's rights are interpreted. Liebel (2012a: 14), for example, wonders how 'the claim for universality of

children's rights can involve cultural diversity', advocating for a 'culturally differentiated and localised dealing with children's rights'.

The recent emergence of a 'living rights' perspective from (mainly European) children's rights scholarship resonates with tensions that have been ongoing since the adoption of the UNCRC. International human rights treaties, generally, can be understood as part of a process of 'norm-creation' (Harris-Short 2003: 135), a process that can be provocative. In the case of children's rights, the drafting of the UNCRC was contentious from the very beginning, with issues raised by sociocultural specificity being a key area of tension (Detrick 1992). These tensions between global/local (or universal/contextualised) understandings of children's rights have continuously been discussed. For example, Pupavac (2001) claims that the UNCRC represents ever-greater regulation of the relationship between children, families, the state, and supra-national organisations such as the UN. She argues that a rights-based approach creates a 'new international ethical order' that opens the door for paternalistic intervention in 'pariah' nations (Pupavac 2001: 109). Harris-Short (2003: 177), while somewhat more tempered in her critique, notes that among 'state elites' there is an assumed direction of travel toward 'enlightenment' through the implementation of children's rights. Marginalised cultural ideas and practices may be further silenced if children's rights are only 'owned' by these state elites, with children's rights seeming irrelevant at grassroots level (Harris-Short 2003).

Proponents of 'living rights' argue that harnessing these types of controversies can lead to more nuanced understanding of how rights are practised at local level (Desmet et al. 2015, Reynaert et al. 2015). They suggest that the UNCRC could be recognised as a framework for socio-political interpretation, rather than a neutral instrument (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 30, Roose and Bouverne-De Bie 2007). Rights could therefore be understood as

an imperfect compromise negotiated at a certain moment in time and in specific contexts by individuals representing different local and organizational interests and possessing different kinds of knowledge, skills and power.

(Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012: 10)

A living rights approach would encourage researchers to unpack the multifaceted ways that children's rights are interpreted and understood by a variety of stakeholders: 'children, parents, adults, civil society, the government, etc' (Reynaert et al. 2015: 10). In doing so, proponents of living rights argue that multiple interpretations of rights can be highlighted. So can the contentious nature of interpreting children's rights—particularly given the wide variety of living situations that children experience around the world (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012, Liebel 2012a).

The emerging body of literature on children's rights as lived is fairly new, though as previously discussed, its underlying themes are not. Harris-Short (2003: 181), for example, has previously argued that international human rights law needs to be 'rebuilt from the bottom up', if it is to resonate with people at grassroots level. Clark and others (2005: 79), reflecting on women's rights, noted the importance of being open to 'new, previously excluded voices' in the ongoing project of defining human rights. While the specific living rights literature has not been subjected to substantial critique, Peleg (2014) points out a key tension. The role of children's rights as a normative minimum standard can become unclear in a framework that highlights the complexity and nuance of rights in practice. However, living rights researchers have dealt with this somewhat, noting that attention to local context does not mean that rights standards are disregarded in favour of local cultural practices that are harmful to children (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012). Instead, a living rights perspective advocates a 'thick understanding' of the local context of children's lives, which could help 'mobilise children's rights differently' (Desmet et al. 2015: 419).

Children's participation is not always 'named' in the living rights literature, but forms a golden thread through the analysis. For example, Abebe (2012) describes how children in rural Ethiopian communities take part in 'interdependent livelihood strategies', in which they are expected to contribute to the economic survival of their family group. He argues that children's experiences involve a complex interplay between rights, responsibilities, and relationships with family and community. Liebel (2012a) looks at the interactions between children living and working on the streets in India, and the NGO's set up to encourage these children to 'fight for their

rights'. He notes that children often had views on the 'living' of their rights that diverged from the views of NGO workers. For example, a child was beaten by a police officer, but chose not to report what had happened--despite being urged to by NGO workers. Liebel (2012a: 19) explains that the child did not make a report because he knew he would encounter the officer again and preferred not to antagonise him: '[the child] proved to have an extraordinary sense for the actual existing dependencies and power hierarchies and knew how to use them for his own good'.

These examples highlight a less formal interpretation of children's participation that goes beyond one-off consultations or projects. Here, children are understood as broadly 'taking part' in their various relationships and activities (Alderson 2008: 79). This broader view of participation resonates with previous critiques made within the children's participation literature, particularly regarding the limited scope of what is defined as 'participation'. For example, Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010: 357) argue that children's participation needs to be understood in the context of their 'whole lives'. This might include: understanding local constructions of childhood and children's role in family and community hierarchies (Twum-Danso 2010), unpacking the way children negotiate the barriers and difficulties created by poverty, violence, and abuse (Ray 2010) or creating participatory practices that include disabled children (Martin and Franklin 2010).

A broad definition of participation is also in keeping with the spirit of the UNCRC (Lundy 2007). Article 12 is a particularly powerful element of the Convention, as it not only articulates a specific right in itself, but is also one of four general principles of the Convention, along with the right to non-discrimination (Article 2), the right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and a primary consideration of the best interests of the child (Article 3) (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2003). These four general principles can be thought of as 'horizontal' elements, running through the entire Convention and therefore informing the implementation and interpretation of the full suite of rights (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, Verhellen 2015: 49).

Notably, the spirit of Article 12 as a general principle is not limited to the matters in which children have specific rights set out in the Convention; such limits were specifically rejected during the drafting process (McGoldrick 1991). Instead, the clause ‘all matters affecting the child’ is intended to be widely interpreted, ranging from judicial or administrative proceedings to matters of everyday life in family, community and society (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, para. 27). Taking a broader view of participation does not mean that formal interpretations need to be left behind altogether. As Farrar and other argue (2010), there is likely an interplay required between formal approaches, which may be more influential for senior decision makers and informal ones that may be more meaningful in the here-and-now for children and young people. By interpreting children’s participation broadly, a blend of formal and informal approaches can be incorporated in a way that acknowledges and highlights multifaceted understandings of participation (e.g. Davis 2011).

The example of children’s participation given above from Abebe (2012) and Liebel (2012a) underscore several key considerations for how participation is ‘lived’. First, the examples highlight the ways that children’s participation in society is shaped not only by their agency, but also by social relations which may constrain or enable that agency and participation. Second, the examples have a particular focus on child-adult relationships. In Liebel’s example, the child who does not report the assault finds himself in tension with NGO workers, who disagree with his decision. Third, various macro-level factors that influence children’s lifeworlds are also woven into the analysis. These three interrelated areas of concern are key for the study of children’s participation as a living right (Liebel 2012b, Desmet et al. 2015, Vanobbergen 2015).

#### ***2.2.4 Section conclusion and identification of key themes and tensions***

This section of the chapter has provided a rights-based overview of children’s participation. It has introduced the ‘participation rights’ for children that are enshrined in the UNCRC, and identified a key tension for this thesis: a gap between participatory rhetoric and reality. The section indicated that participation rights have

generally been interpreted in narrow ways as ‘talking, thinking and deciding’ and have often failed to disrupt underlying hierarchies between adults and children.

The section has also introduced one key area of contribution for this thesis: addressing the gap between rhetoric and reality through the study of how children’s participation rights are ‘lived’ and negotiated. This entails unpacking the aims, outcomes, structures, and relationships of participation (Davis and Smith 2012: 59). The living rights literature particularly highlights rights as an ‘imperfect compromise’ (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012: 10) and draws out the tensions and challenges of ‘living’ children’s participation.

Three key considerations for the study of children’s participation as ‘lived’ were identified: (1) child-adult relationships, (2) children’s agency, and (3) broader social trends. The next section looks at the first two considerations. In doing so, the section draws heavily on literature from the childhood studies field, where significant attention has been dedicated to these concerns.

### **2.3 Key considerations for the study of participation as a lived right**

#### *2.3.1 Child-adult relationships: contesting hierarchical social status*

The social categories of ‘child’ and ‘adult’ are created by a mixture of factors—for example, children’s visible biological immaturity, chronological age, social interpretations, and cultural norms and beliefs about what adulthood and childhood are—and should be (James and Prout 1997: 7, Lee and Motzkau 2011, Mayall 2015). As Alanen (2011) argues, the social categories of childhood and adulthood are interdependent—they require, create and exclude each other. Childhood, in Western contexts in particular, has been associated with dependency and future becoming, while adulthood has been associated with autonomy and a sense of ‘finished’ being (Arneil 2002, Castañeda 2002, Mayall 2015). As Lansdown (2006, 2010) argues, hierarchical beliefs about the higher status of adults, compared to children—based on adults supposedly knowing best—are a significant barrier to children’s participation. Children’s participation in social life is often overlooked because of ‘adultist’ norms that view childhood as ‘not-adult’, and therefore not a ‘real’ time in the lifecourse



(Moosa-Mitha 2005). In the UK context, Mayall (2002, 2006a, 2006b) claims that children are rarely seen as social contributors, indicating lower social status for children as a social group as compared to adults.

Hierarchical views about adults and children have been challenged by a multitude of researchers, who argue that children are ‘experts in their own lives’, and as such can offer important perspectives on the various issues that affect them (Brannen 2002, Clark and Statham 2005, Mason and Danby 2011, Yardley 2011). There has been a strong normative trend in childhood studies toward ‘emptying the ‘becoming’ category and putting children alongside adults in the ‘being’ category’ (Lee 2001: 139). Strong advocacy for children’s participation has, at times, involved sharply dichotomised thinking about adults and children. Mannion (2007: 413), for example, argues that there has often been a narrative of ‘adults-as-oppressors vs. children-as-resisters’ in the children’s participation literature. Alternatively, some literature has left adults out of the frame completely, demonstrating ‘how children have constructed their own spaces and practices as agents of their own destiny’ (Mannion 2007: 413). Both of these scenarios, Mannion claims, fail to examine the adult dimension of children’s participation in any depth.

The dichotomised nature of the children’s participation literature has been noted by other researchers. Tisdall (2008), for example, argues that theorisations of children’s participation have been too child-focused, not engaging critically with the wider context within which children’s participation takes place. Percy-Smith (2006: 173) similarly advocates for research that takes the wider context of children’s lives into account: the cultural politics of their neighbourhoods and communities, the influence of social norms and taken-for-granted assumptions on how children and young people are viewed, and ‘the complexity of how adults and young people participate together’. By keeping adults in the analytical frame, researchers can come to a more nuanced understanding of how children’s place in the world is conceptualised, and what implications that may hold for their participation (Mannion 2007). Wyness (2015) similarly urges researchers to avoid isolating the child in analyses of participation, instead advocating a relational approach that recognises the roles of both adults and children in participatory initiatives. A relational understanding of

participation could incorporate the interplay between child-adult interactions at local levels—in families and at school, for example—and how those are influenced by macro-level understandings of childhood and adulthood (e.g. Mayall 2002).

The very nature and utility of the child/adult binary has also been called into question in childhood studies. Some work in childhood studies, perhaps, has focused on establishing children as ‘beings’ without challenging the core argument about what it means to ‘be’:

By emphasizing children as ‘beings in their own right’, the new sociology of childhood risks endorsing the myth of the autonomous and independent person, as if it were possible to be human without belonging to a complex web of interdependencies.

(Prout 2005: 66–67)

Lee (2001) argues that the categories themselves need to be problematised—not only children’s status as becomings, but also the assumed status of adults as finished beings. In Lee’s (2001) view, the being/becoming divide is no longer a sufficient tool for the study of child-adult relationships. Prout (2005, 2011) has put forward a similar argument, claiming that the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood has been weakened by socio-economic trends. Adulthood can no longer be assumed to be a time of stability—instead it may be characterised by a requirement for flexibility, adaptation and change (Lee 2001, Prout 2011).

Critiques about rigid, dichotomous social categories are picked up by Leonard (2016), who argues that childhood studies cannot leave the child/adult dichotomy behind altogether. It remains a key way that society is understood and has direct implications for the life experiences of both adults and children. However, she recommends that the study of generational relations could focus on the interplay between understandings of adulthood and childhood—the blurring of boundaries and messiness of these categories (Leonard 2016). For Leonard (2016: 115), generation is an ‘ongoing, overarching framework impacting on many aspects of children’s everyday lives’. In terms of children’s participation, Leonard (2016) asks what adults’ role might be in facilitating participation—including how adults enable or constrain children’s expressions of agency.

### 2.3.2 *Unpacking agency: a relational theorisation*

While children's agency is not the same thing as children's participation, the two concepts are closely related; children are usually assumed to be exercising agency when they participate (Wyness 2015). The childhood studies field has devoted a great deal of attention to the concept of children as active social actors with agency, capable of:

...negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference—to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints.

(Mayall 2002: 21)

Childhood studies researchers have produced many accounts of children as competent social actors with agency, to the extent that this could be considered a core 'mantra' of childhood studies (Tisdall and Punch 2012). For example, Prout (2002: 69, 75) described a programme of research that explicitly studied children as social actors:

This [research] has contributed enormously to consolidating and disseminating the idea of children as social actors, such that it is becoming an indispensable feature of childhood studies within the social sciences internationally.

...studies within the Programme have demonstrated that children have valuable insights and perspectives to offer on many aspects of their lives.

As these quotes from Prout suggest, demonstrations of children's agency have been an important element of the childhood studies mission to reconstruct childhood in society, proving that children are not passive blank slates (James and Prout 1997, Oswell 2013). However, the way that children's agency has been dealt with in the childhood studies field has increasingly been critiqued.

In Prout's (2005: 64) view, agency has been treated by childhood studies as an 'essential characteristic' of humans that requires little explanation. He argues that agency has been frequently demonstrated, but rarely examined in any depth (Prout 2005, 2011). This particular critique—that agency needs to be problematised in childhood studies, rather than taken for granted—has been reiterated consistently for

some time (Lee 2001, Tisdall and Punch 2012, Oswell 2013, Wyness 2015). For example, Valentine (2011: 349) argues that childhood studies has not addressed the ‘intellectual history’ of agency as a theoretical and philosophical concept, relying instead on minimalist definitions of agency as ‘to act purposively’.

Valentine (2011) unpacks the philosophical origins of agency, tracing them back to Enlightenment-era liberal theory, which frames ‘moral agents’ as rational, with the capacity to make reasoned choices. In this philosophical tradition, the moral agent is:

...possessed of consistently ordered desires, beliefs that she is aware of as consistent, and seeking when she chooses to act to act in the light of these beliefs and desires. She is appropriately held responsible for those actions of hers which are uncoerced and knowing, that is which can truly be said to proceed from her own will.

(Archard 2005: 84)

Valentine (2011: 348) therefore argues that childhood studies has relied uncritically on theorisations of agency that are built on individualistic notions of ‘authentic choice or self-directed action’. Oswell (2013) similarly notes the individualistic nature of how agency has been conceptualised in childhood studies. He argues that debates in childhood studies have tended to reify the idea of an ‘individuated agency’ which is located in the ‘isolated human individual’ (Oswell 2013: 50). Alternatively, he calls for childhood studies to explore more relational understandings of agency. Burkitt (2015), for example, while not specifically writing about childhood, proposes a model of agency in which agents are understood as interdependent with each other and with the context in which they find themselves. In this understanding, agency emerges ‘as social relations unfold across time and space’ (Burkitt 2015).

Tisdall and Punch (2012: 256) have similarly argued that more research is needed on the ‘complexities and ambiguities’ of how children’s agency is negotiated in the contexts of their many relationships, including how they navigate the macro factors that influence their lifeworlds. For example, Robson and others (2007) suggest that children’s agency is ‘dynamic and constantly shifting’, and that agency may be ‘thicker or thinner’ at different times in the lifecourse, in different spaces, and in the

context of different relationships. Klocker (2007) builds on this idea, applying the concept of thick and thin agency to her research with child workers in Tanzania. Her work analyses children's expressions of agency as contextualised by economic and socio-cultural factors, particularly the pressure on rural girls to enter 'appalling employment situations' doing domestic work (Klocker 2007: 85). Despite these difficult circumstances, Klocker argues that the girls exercised agency as they 'actively negotiate the expectations and power relations that surround them' (85). Rather than barricading her research behind either a structural or agential perspective (Qvortrup 2011), Klocker (2007: 85) looks at how 'structures, contexts, and relationships can act as dynamic 'thinners' or 'thickeners' of individuals' agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices'.

While Klocker's treatment of children's agency as dynamically thickened or thinned by a variety of factors is compelling, critiques of her model have pointed out that agency is still theorised as an attribute held by an autonomous individual (Esser et al. 2016). In Klocker's model, agency may be affected by relationships, but is not theorised as being *produced* relationally. Critiques of Klocker's model also argue that the notion of 'thin' agency remains tied to the 'gold standard' of 'thick agency'—a normative goal of individual autonomy (Esser et al. 2016: 22). Bordonaro and Payne (2012: 369) push back on the notion that agency can be measured or quantified, and ask which 'types' of agency tend to be theorised as 'thin' or 'restricted'. They note that qualifiers tend to be applied when children's agency is somehow 'ambiguous'—when it does not conform to a Western ideal of what childhood should be like (Bordonaro and Payne 2012).

Esser (2016) offers an alternative view on agency: that agency could be understood as a social phenomenon that can only arise through relationships. That is to say, agency does not pre-exist, and it is not a possession of the individual—instead, agency 'comes about' in the context of various social interactions (Esser 2016: 61). Oswell (2013) similarly theorises children's agency as produced by shifting, dynamic networks of actors. Here, agency is understood:

...not as located within the individual child faced against social structure, but as itself distributed across a network of agents or actors, both human and non-human.

(Oswell 2013: 69)

The networks that children negotiate are heterogeneous and include not only humans, but also non-human actors such as spaces, materials and technologies (Esser 2016). Drawing specifically on the Foucauldian concept of the apparatus, Oswell (2013, 2016) argues that assemblages/networks create relationships not only of agency, but also of power, such as ‘discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions’ (Foucault 1980: 194). In this model, then, children’s agency is therefore not a given, not a ‘form of explanation of different kinds of social conduct’ (Oswell 2013: 271). Instead, agency is itself a ‘problem space’ that invites questions, investigation, and analysis (Oswell 2013).

Lee (2001: 130–131) similarly suggests that theorising agency as relational opens up the concept for study:

We can ask what a given person, whether adult or child, depends upon for their agency. So with this approach to agency, instead of asking whether children, like adults, possess agency or not, we can ask how agency is built or may be built for them by examining the extensions and supplements that are available to them.

One particular condition affecting how children’s agency is shaped is generational ordering (Esser et al. 2016). Leonard (2016: 9) refers to this as ‘inter-generagency’: the expression and practice of agency within hierarchical relationships between adults and children. Child-adult relationships have a particular potential to enable, and/or constrain the conditions for children’s agency and to shape the way that agency is enacted (Esser et al. 2016).

As the previous section of the chapter has discussed, there have been increasing calls for a relational understanding of how participation is lived in practice. Mannion (2007), for example, suggests that the tendency for children’s participation to be portrayed as children acting as ‘agents of their own destiny’ is too individualistic.

Putting forward a relational understanding of children's participation, Moosa-Mitha develops the idea of children's participation as a measure of their 'presence':

By presence, I mean the degree to which the voice, contribution and agency of the child is acknowledged in their many relationships. Presence, more than autonomy, acknowledges the self as relational and dialogical, thereby suggesting it is not enough to have a voice; it is equally important to also be heard in order for one to have a presence in society.

(Moosa-Mitha 2005: 381)

She argues that rather than attempting to 'prove' children's autonomy—their independence from relationships—as the foundation of their claims for civil and political rights, the argument could be reframed to highlight their participation *within* relationships (Moosa-Mitha 2005). From a relational perspective, not only children, but also adults, live their lives in a web of interdependent relationships—with other people, but also with artefacts, spaces, materials and technologies (Prout 2005, 2011, Lehmann and Sanders 2014). These relationships provide the 'opportunities, constraints and locations' in which agency is shaped and enacted (Leonard 2016: 150).

### ***2.3.3 Section conclusion and identification of key themes and tensions***

This section of the chapter has discussed two key considerations for the study of children's participation as 'lived': child-adult relationships and children's agency. The section has noted that the participation literature has tended to be dichotomised, with children seen as 'agents of their own destiny' and adults as 'oppressors'. A relational understanding of participation can help researchers bring the adult element into the analysis in a more nuanced way.

The section has also reviewed relational theorisations of agency. Rather than agency being understood as a quality held by each autonomous individual, relational theorisations see agency itself as a social phenomenon: arising, rather than possessed. The various relationships in which children are embedded can shape the conditions in which their agency arises, leading to different ways of expressing

agency. Coming full circle, child-adult relationships were identified as being particularly relevant in terms of shaping the conditions for children's agency.

The final section of this chapter addresses the third key consideration for the study of children's participation as 'lived': the influence of broader social trends. The section continues to discuss the interplay of agency and child-adult relationships in the study of children's participation, reviewing specific considerations that may arise for practitioners and children in early childhood education and care settings.

## **2.4 Young children's participation: the early childhood context**

### *2.4.1 Overview of participation rights in early childhood*

The child of the UNCRC is defined as every human being under the age of eighteen unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier (Article 1). This means that young children—defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as children under the age of eight years (2005)—are entitled to all of the rights enshrined in the UNCRC. States Parties are encouraged to recognise young children as 'social actors from the beginning of life' and to adopt a 'positive' agenda that fosters respect for the capabilities and views of the young child (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005, para. 2c). Children's Article 12 rights to express their views, and to have those views taken into account, should be implemented from the 'earliest stage' of life (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005, para. 14a). Implementation of young children's participation rights may be grounded in daily life at home and in the community, but also should be respected within legal proceedings, in early childhood education and care settings, and in the development of policies and services (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005, para. 14b).

Article 12 contains clauses that specify that the child must be 'capable of forming his or her own view' and that those views should be given 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. These clauses may seem like limitations on Article 12's applicability to young children (Krappmann 2010). However, States Parties are discouraged from creating age limits that would restrict young children's Article 12 rights (Krappmann 2010). In fact, the UN Committee on the Rights of the



Child (2009b, para. 20) have stated that it is the responsibility of States Parties to ‘presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views [...] it is not up to the child to first prove her or his capacity’. Similarly, the Committee (2009a, paras 29–30) claims that age alone should not be used as a metric to determine the weight given to children’s views. It is instead the responsibility of parents, professionals, and other ‘responsible authorities’ to create opportunities for young children to express their views. This means adapting to the child’s ‘interests, levels of understanding and preferred ways of communicating’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005, para. 14c) and ensuring that children have access to the information they need, in appropriate formats (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, para. 82).

In recent years there has indeed been a wave of activity regarding children’s participation in the early childhood context. For example, MacNaughton and others (2008) conceptualise young children as ‘active citizens’, compiling practical examples of how policymakers and educators might go about consulting young children about decisions that affect them, in accordance with the UNCRC. Lansdown (2005a, 2005b) has also focused on young children’s participation rights, as has Alderson (Alderson et al. 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012). The literature on young children’s participation has developed its own specific terminology and debates (Tisdall 2016). For example, the term ‘listening to children’ is often used, rather than ‘children’s participation’ (Clark et al. 2003, Clark and Statham 2005, Clark et al. 2005, Clark 2007, Clark and Moss 2011). The phrase ‘listening to children’ is certainly not exclusive to the early childhood context (e.g. Ridge 2003, Wagner 2004), nor is the term ‘participation’ never used in relation to young children (Alderson 2010, Theobald et al. 2011, Dunphy 2012, Ghirotto and Mazzoni 2014). However, Moss and others (2005) do argue that there is a distinction between the terms ‘listening’ and ‘participation’.

Moss and others identify the terminology of ‘participation’ as closely linked to the children’s rights movement. While they acknowledge the power of rights discourses, in terms of repositioning children as ‘active subjects rather than passive dependants’ (Moss et al. 2005: 4), they also note that participation rights have largely been

interpreted as children's involvement in decision making. In order to contest what they see as a limited and individualistic model of participation, Moss and others prefer to develop the concept of listening, which is about an 'ethic of relating to others' (Moss et al. 2005: 9). Here they draw on Rinaldi's (2001) 'pedagogy of listening', in which listening to young children is conceptualised as a relational practice:

Understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue [...] It is here that our sensitivity to listening is highlighted; starting from this sensitivity, we form and communicate our representations of the world based not only on our response to events (self-construction) but also on that which we learn about the world from our communicative exchange with others.

(Rinaldi 2001: 80)

'Listening to children', for Moss and others (2005: 9), is therefore about 'being part of a community and having a sense of belonging'. They also tie their preference for the term 'listening' to a critique of rights theory, arguing that a 'narrow, rights-based participation discourse' can be too tightly bound to ideals of 'autonomy' and 'self-realisation' (Moss et al. 2005: 11). In separate writing, Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 31) state that rights can easily become a 'technical' practice, a tick box list of prescriptive dos and don'ts. Their critique resonates with the broader children's participation literature, where concerns have been raised that participation is implemented in overly formal, individualistic, and top-down ways.

A relational perspective on participation may be particularly fruitful for the study of young children's participation. The way that childhood is constructed and understood has a particular bearing on how children's participation is constrained or enabled (Tisdall 2015). Despite significant activity regarding young children's participation—or, 'listening to children'—the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005, para. 14) acknowledged in their *General Comment on implementing child rights in early childhood* that young children's participation rights are often 'overlooked, or rejected as inappropriate on the grounds of age and immaturity'. Rather than view early childhood as a preparatory stage, to take young children's participation rights seriously means to acknowledge them as 'experts in their own

lives, skilful communicators, active agents, and meaning makers’ (Lansdown 2005a: 1). This view of young children as valued contributors to family, community and society can be quite challenging to hidden ideas and assumptions about young children’s lack of competence and need for protection (Alderson 2008).

Alderson (2008: 142) reflects on some of the ‘deeply held feelings’ that may lead to this neglect of young children’s participation rights. Among others, she lists:

- Confidence in adults’ superior knowledge and good sense;
- Mistrust and a sense that young children cannot understand much, or give reliable accounts, or think sensibly;
- Deep concern about children’s vulnerability;
- Anxiety that children are volatile, self-centred, and a potential danger to themselves and others

(Alderson 2008: 141)

Alderson (2008: 141) also suggests some of the feelings that may lead to adults being in favour of consulting with young children, including: trust in young children’s ability to think creatively, enjoyment and excitement in working cooperatively with young children, and confidence that participation is vital and rewarding. She argues that rather than being a clear-cut issue, people tend to have mixed feelings about young children’s participation rights—the balance of which may affect how young children are treated in various circumstances.

#### *2.4.2 Mainstream discourse on early childhood: a focus on development*

As the opening section of this chapter discussed, children’s participation rights have been difficult to implement. One reason for this difficulty is that children’s participation is challenging to dominant views of children as developing, vulnerable, and dependent—not yet adults, and therefore not full members of society (Tisdall 2015). If this is true for children and young people’s participation generally, it is particularly so for young children, who may be viewed as ‘pre-social’ (Alderson et

al. 2005: 33) and ‘too innocent and/or immature to participate meaningfully’ (MacNaughton et al. 2007: 164).

Attention to young children’s rights—particularly, their participation rights—has perhaps taken a back seat to the promotion of their development (Lansdown 2005a). While public discussions and beliefs about early childhood are multi-stranded and complex (Dahlberg et al. 2007), there is one strand which has come to dominate public discussion: the idea of early childhood experiences as the ‘path to the whole person’ (Alderson 2008: 114). For example, the flagship Scottish policy *The Early Years Framework* reflects this idea, stating:

It is during our very earliest years and even pre-birth that a large part of the pattern for our future adult life is set.

(The Scottish Government 2008: 1)

Building on this viewpoint that the early years provide a blueprint for adulthood, the need to provide children with a ‘strong start in life’ (Zero to Three 2015: no pagination) has become a key part of the mainstream discourse on early childhood. These discussions often particularly focus on young children who are ‘disadvantaged’, ‘vulnerable’, or ‘at risk’ of negative life experiences (Heckman 2006, Moss 2006: 182). For example, in 2011 the UK government commissioned an influential review into early intervention and its role in breaking ‘the cycle of deprivation and dysfunction’ (Allen 2011: ix):

A child who is rounded, capable and sociable has a great chance in life. Those denied these qualities have a bad start and few of them recover. During their lifetimes they can impose heavy penalties on themselves and generate major costs, financial and social, for their families, local communities and the national economy.

(Allen 2011: 3)

In Scotland, a similar review into the importance of children’s early years echoed this framing of early childhood as potentially a period of risk, noting that a weak ‘foundation’ in the early years increases the chances of ‘later difficulties’ (Deacon 2011: 9). Both reports argue that public spending and multi-sector efforts should be

directed toward early investment in children and families in order to improve children's early childhood experiences.

There have been many strands to this discussion of early intervention, and diverse intervention programmes have been created that are targeted toward a variety of outcomes—for example, improving family relationships, supporting children's mental health, or promoting literacy (see Early Intervention Foundation n.d. for illustrative examples in the UK). One key strand of these efforts has been a drive toward increasing access to, and improving the quality of, early childhood education and care services (OECD 2001). Formal early childhood education and care services are increasingly seen as a 'silver bullet' to remedy various social issues (Dalli and White 2016). For example, the OECD makes wide-ranging claims about the benefits of ECEC:

A growing body of research recognises that ECEC brings a wide range of benefits, including social and economic benefits; better child well-being and learning outcomes; more equitable outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; higher female labour market participation and gender equality; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for society at large.

(OECD 2015)

Morabito and others (2013) propose that the focus on ECEC (and early intervention more generally) is part of a general shift in social policy trends toward attempts to equalise life opportunities. They point out that ECEC is increasingly presented as 'the greatest of equalisers'—a chance to build more inclusive societies (e.g. Bokova 2010), and ameliorate the 'inherited circumstances' that are associated with inequality in life experiences (Morabito et al. 2013: 452).

There are strong links in this argument to human capital theory, an area of inquiry that 'suggests that individuals and society derive economic benefits from investments in people', particularly from investments in education (Sweetland 1996: 341). Heckman has been particularly influential (Heckman 2006, 2008, Elango et al. 2015, The University of Chicago 2016), arguing that investment in early childhood brings greater returns than investment during other periods of life (Penn

2010). He argues that this is particularly true for interventions made in the first three years of life (Heckman 2008). The human capital argument for investment in early childhood education and care has been extensively reviewed and debated, without clear resolution to whether investment in ECEC produces the promised equalising effects (Cleveland 2006, Penn et al. 2006, WAVE Trust 2013, White et al. 2015, Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center 2015). Despite this ‘incomplete and sometimes inconclusive’ evidence base, global policy trends continue to move in the direction of increased investment in ECEC (White et al. 2015: 537).

The ways that young children are positioned in this discourse are relevant to the fulfilment of their participation rights. As Wastell and White (2012: 409) state, the way that brain science is used in public policy discussions creates an understanding of the infant brain as a ‘uniquely fragile object, a medical emergency waiting to happen’. Early childhood is framed as a general ‘critical’ or ‘sensitive’ period for the development of brain structure (Sylva 1997, Fox and Rutter 2010, Lake and Chan 2015), despite the fact that the evidence regarding the nature of ‘sensitive’ periods is far from settled (Bruer 1999, Rutter 2002, Bruer 2011). Bruer (2011), for example, asserts that ‘experience-expectant’ development—in which early experiences do affect the physical structures of the brain—is only present in limited kinds of learning and development, rather than for all learning and development in the early childhood period as a whole. Rutter (2002) echoes this:

There has been a misleading extrapolation [...] to the entirely different notion that higher quality psychosocial experiences in the first 2 or 3 years of life will have a much greater effect than similar experiences later on, because the early experiences bring about a lasting change in brain structure.

[...] it is not the case that neuronal growth stops in early life or that plasticity is lost after the infancy years.

[...] It should be added that although it is obvious that the workings of the mind must be based on the functioning of the brain, remarkably little is known about structure-function links.

(Rutter 2002: 13)

It is here—the links between brain structure and the functioning of the mind—that the research is particularly contested. It is commonplace to hear claims that

experiences in the early years cause the brain to develop certain neural pathways and ‘prune’ others—a message that implies that these patterns are difficult to change. However, Bruer (2011) argues that there is little reliable evidence that psychosocial experiences in the early years affect the actual structures of the brain in irreversible ways. Much of the research into ‘sensitive periods’ has been with rodents, or non-human primates (Fox and Rutter 2010), which may not directly translate to human development (Shanks et al. 2009). Rutter (2002) notes that in human studies there is significant evidence of life-long brain plasticity and ability to learn new and complex information and skills. Despite these uncertainties in the study of human brain development, policymakers and practitioners are urged to accept the crucial, deterministic nature of the early childhood period as fact, and ‘move on’—there is no need to ‘spend time discussing “the evidence”, rather our focus is on what we can do to act on it’ (Deacon 2011: 9). Thus the complexity of human brain development is ‘muted’ in much of the early childhood literature in favour of a more simplistic understanding that is easier to digest, as it promises ‘simple roadmaps to certain destinations’ (MacNaughton 2004: 100).

#### *2.4.3 Play, pedagogy and power: early childhood practice*

The exhortation to accept the early childhood period as one of (potential) risk resonates with, and reinforces, several ways that young children are commonly framed in public discussion: the child as incomplete adult, the child as innocent and vulnerable, and the child as a redemptive agent (Moss and Petrie 2002: 58). All three framings share a strong focus on young children’s development—their status as human becomings. In contrast, as previous sections of this chapter have discussed, work in the realm of children’s participation tends to frame children very differently, as human beings—competent social actors who exercise agency. As Lansdown (2005a) notes, however, developmental and rights-based perspectives do not need to be mutually exclusive. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009b), for example, has argued that young children’s participation can be a ‘tool to stimulate’ their development. In this vein, Rogoff (2003, 2014, 2015) has thoroughly documented the ways that young children’s development is influenced by the

patterns of their participation in family and community. Woodhead (2005: 92) goes further, arguing that young children's participation rights provoke a consideration of children's role in shaping their own development, challenging the 'conventional authority relationships' between children and the adults who care for them.

Woodhead (2005) suggests that the balance that is struck between participation and protection is likely to be influenced by adults' views on child development. For example, if adults are focused on ensuring 'normal' development, they may focus more on what they think children need, rather than children's competencies (Woodhead 2005). As this section has argued, in terms of the mainstream public discourse about early childhood, a developmental perspective that focuses on early intervention has been dominant. What, then, does this mean for children's participation in the context of ECEC settings? One facet of child-adult relationships in the ECEC context will always be child-adult/professional relationships, and Moss and others (2000) argue that discourses about children are productive of practice. In the ECEC context, external norms such as regulatory frameworks, curricula and professional training interact with practitioners' internal or implicit norms to create a complex and shifting understanding of what is 'normal and desirable in the playroom' (Stephen 2012: 235).

Pedagogical orientations are therefore important to the study of young children's participation in ECEC contexts. The definition of the term pedagogy is contested and ambiguous (Murray 2015). However, broadly, pedagogy refers to a philosophy of learning that takes a holistic view of the learner—interweaving social, physical and intellectual development (Cohen et al. 2004). Pedagogy, then, is related to the planning of curriculum and classroom activities, but goes beyond these. It articulates a broader view of learning and teaching, taking values and principles into account (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2005).

In early childhood settings, play-based pedagogies dominate, but how these pedagogies translate into learning and teaching practices can vary widely (Murray 2015). Though there is rhetorical agreement that play is 'essentially a good thing and that it promotes learning' (Wood and Attfield 1996: 1), there are tensions regarding



how play is put into practice (DeVries et al. 2002, Wood 2010). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013: 5) have defined play as

...any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end.

Despite the above recommendation that play should be ‘initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves’, practitioners may focus primarily on ‘playful’ experiences that they themselves have planned, or that they can influence with a predetermined outcome in mind (Adams 2005). For example, Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) found that most of the activities available during kindergarten children’s supposed ‘free play’ time were actually organised around predetermined goals, such as creating a Mother’s Day card:

What was then understood as children’s freedom was their choice among already structured activities. The teacher explained that children had to finish an assignment at a table before they went to play and that she found ways to encourage children, who would only choose free play, to be involved in an assignment with specific goals.

(Loizou and Avgitidou 2014, p.1897)

Ambiguity around the purpose, definition and usefulness of play in early learning and childcare environments perhaps reflects deeper tensions about the role of adults in shaping children’s early learning and development (Wood 2010). With increased pressure on practitioners to work within standardised parameters, and in ways that are quantifiably measurable (Jung and Jin 2014), children’s play that does not clearly link with some form of adult-determined learning outcome may become a low priority, low-status activity in educational environments; dismissed as ‘just’ playing (Else 2009: 8) or seen as peripheral to learning (DeVries et al. 2002).

Pedagogy, therefore, has strong relevance for how children’s participation is lived in early childhood settings. As the example from Loizou and Avgitidou illustrates, within children’s ‘playful’ learning, adults may still be framed as the experts who intervene in children’s learning and development (Farquhar and White 2014). There

is particular scope in ECEC contexts to examine the interplay between young children's agency and their potential 'location as subordinates' (Wyness 2015: 171), within play-based pedagogies. Moss argues that in the mainstream ECEC discourse, professionals are cast as technicians responsible for guiding children's development (Moss 2006). The ECEC environment potentially becomes 'a laboratory, where development could be watched, monitored and set along the right path' as children are 'subtly regulated into normality' (Walkerdine 1986: 18).

Within a play-based pedagogy, relationships and power come into play. Power is a contested concept, but Allen (2014) suggests that there are two broad ways that power has been understood—as an exercise of power-over another, and as power-to do something. Gallagher (2005) suggests that childhood studies has tended to focus on adults' power-over children, creating a gloomy picture of how power operates in child-adult relationships. In some formulations, power is framed as a commodity: adults are presumed to possess power, and children to lack power (Gallagher 2008b). This theorisation of power can be seen in the early childhood literature: Tesar (2014) for example, describes the 'ruthless' power that structures the early childhood setting, governing children into compliance. Here, power is somewhat depersonalised; it exists as a system of control 'that has permeated the whole [early childhood setting]' (Tesar 2014: 365). Teachers and children are agents of the system, both 'victims and supporters' of the operations of power in the setting (Tesar 2014). The framing provided by Tesar suggests that power is somehow held in abstraction by an institution and exercised over its subjects (both teachers and children).

This abstract view of power is contested by Gallagher (2005, 2008a, 2008b), who argues that power operates in more complex and distributed ways. Here, Gallagher (2005: 242) specifically discusses the ways that power is negotiated in a primary school setting, contesting 'dystopian' framings of adult and institutional domination over children. Drawing on Foucault, he describes power as being enacted, through diverse techniques and in diverse circumstances:

The power that a teacher exercises over her pupils is not the same as the power that those pupils exercise to resist the teacher's demands. Both of these kinds of power are likely to differ from the power exercised by that teacher's manager. And a parent might exercise power in a way that is different again, while a school inspector would exercise power in another way altogether.

(Gallagher 2008a: 398)

In his analysis, Gallagher foregrounds the ambiguities of power within child-adult relationships. Leonard (2016) notes that there does seem to be an enduring, asymmetrical, balance of power between adults as a social group and children as a social group. This manifests itself in the way resources are distributed, particularly for young children (Leonard 2016). For example, early childhood settings tend to be organised by adults, with particular aims or agendas (Gallacher 2016). However, this does not mean that there is a simple binary relationship between two monolithic groups: adults as powerful rulers and children as powerless ruled.

As Dahlberg and others (2007) argue, dominant discourses about early childhood can be challenged, and space made for alternative ways of thinking about and working with young children. This creates an opportunity to problematise, rather than take for granted the way power is exercised and negotiated in child-adult relationships, particularly in the early years. Specifically, attention can be paid to how negotiations facilitate or limit children's 'power-to'—closely linked to agency (Haugaard and Clegg 2009)—and therefore their opportunities for participation.

#### *2.4.4 Section conclusion and identification of key themes and tensions*

This closing section of the chapter has discussed the third key consideration for the study of young children's participation as 'lived': the influence of broader social trends in early childhood education and care. The section noted that young children's participation rights have been particularly difficult to implement, in large part because the dominant discourse on early childhood focuses on their development and incompleteness. There is a particular tendency for early childhood to be framed as a 'critical period' where children's development must be closely shaped and monitored. Pedagogical choices will therefore influence how children's participation is 'lived'. Play-based pedagogy dominates in early childhood education and care, but

children's participation can still be constrained within a play-based framework. Negotiations of agency and power-to, as well as power-over, within child-adult relationships are closely linked to children's opportunities for participation.

## **2.5 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has examined the concept of children's participation, both generally and in the early childhood context. It has proceeded from a rights-based perspective, noting the inclusion of participation rights for children in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). While participation has been a popular initiative in research, policy, and practice, there have been critiques regarding how well participatory rhetoric translates into reality for children and young people. In particular, participation is often interpreted quite narrowly and in adult-controlled ways; a technical practice in which the purposes, methods and outcomes of participation are not critically examined. The chapter discussed the 'living rights' as a useful platform for the study of children's participation as a lived, negotiated practice. This literature foregrounds the ambiguous nature of interpreting rights, and highlights the multifaceted and sometimes contentious nature of that interpretation.

The chapter particularly focused on theorisations of participation as embedded in interdependent relationships. Child-adult relationships were highlighted as particularly relevant, as well as children's enactments of agency within those relationships. Agency was theorised as a relational phenomenon, not held by each individual person, but instead produced and enacted in the context of shifting interactions. The ways that agency is enacted by children may be shaped by social hierarchies, particularly children's subordinate position to adults. The literature urges researchers to treat agency itself as a 'problem space' and look at the 'how' of agency and the conditions that shape it.

The chapter closed with a discussion of young children's participation rights. Young children are entitled to the same participation rights as their older counterparts, and there has been a good deal of activity regarding young children's participation, particularly in early learning and childcare settings. However, the more prominent public discourse about young children has been one that focuses on early childhood

as a period of potential risk. This discourse is not automatically incommensurate with a children's participation perspective, but the two 'lenses' do have different policy and practice implications. The chapter suggested that opportunities for young children's participation in early learning and childcare settings will depend on the interplay between children's agency, child-adult relationships—including negotiations of power—and the mainstream discourse on early childhood.

## **2.6 Broad aim and research questions**

Proceeding from the review of the literature and identification of key themes and tensions, the broad aim of this research was therefore:

To explore how children's participation was 'lived' and negotiated in an early childhood education and care setting, with a focus on child-practitioner relationships.

The exploration is shaped by the following specific research questions:

**Question 1:** How are approaches to children's participation at the setting situated within broader policy and practice trends, particularly trends toward play-based pedagogy?

**Question 2:** How do practitioners create opportunities and constraints that shape how children's agency is enacted at the setting?

**Question 3:** How does children's participation intersect with pedagogy and power at the setting?

**Question 4:** What tensions and challenges arose in the course of living children's participation at the setting?

The next chapter discusses the methodological approach taken in order to answer these research questions.

# Chapter 3 Methodology: The why and how of ethnography

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the ethnographic methodology adopted for this piece of research. It presents a reflexive account that interrogates my positioning and choices as a researcher. By doing so, the chapter is as transparent as possible about the ways that my ‘personal, political and intellectual autobiography’ played a role in shaping the research design, data collection, analysis and writing up (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 121).

The opening section of the chapter introduces ethnography and makes an argument for why ethnography was the most appropriate approach to answering my research questions. Ethnography allowed thick description of how participation was lived, the inclusion of young children, and long-term access to a rich participatory fieldwork setting. The section also touches on limitations of the research design.

The chapter then shifts into a reflexive account of how ethnographic knowledge was produced. In this section, the chapter looks at how I sampled within the fieldwork setting, how ethnographic field notes were produced, and how ethnographic data was analysed. This section particularly highlights the importance of relationships in shaping the production of ethnographic data.

Finally, the chapter discusses research ethics, taking a relational view that highlights responsibility, listening, reflection, and respect (Lahman et al. 2010). This section includes reflections on informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, protection from harm, and feeding back to participants. Once again, the chapter takes a reflexive stance, looking particularly at my relationships with both children and adults during the research process.

## 3.2 Answering the research questions: why an ethnographic methodology?

### 3.2.1 *A thick description of how participation was lived*

The overarching aim of this research project was to explore how children's participation was 'lived' and negotiated in an early childhood education and care setting, with a focus on child-adult relationships. A lived perspective on children's rights encourages researchers to seek a 'thick understanding' of children's lives and experiences (Desmet et al. 2015: 419). Ethnography was therefore the most suitable methodology for answering my research questions, as an ethnographic approach allowed me to 'get right inside' the setting (Mason 2002: 55) and observe first-hand how children's participation was lived and negotiated.

Ethnography involves the study of the social world through some combination of observing and participating in the everyday life of the group being studied (Emerson et al. 2011). In an ethnographic approach, the researcher generally spends a significant period of time in the field. During that time, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 4) suggest, the researcher uses 'the ordinary modes of making sense of the social world that we all use in our mundane lives, in a manner that is attuned to the specific purposes of producing research knowledge'. Ethnography is not a specific research method, but instead is a broad 'style' of research that is oriented toward understanding the 'social meanings and activities' of people in the fieldwork setting, and involves building 'intimate familiarity' with the setting in question (Brewer 2000: 11). While some form of participant observation is an essential element, an ethnographic approach can include other specific methods, such as interviews and documentary analysis (Pole and Morrison 2003).

Hammersley and Atkinson suggest that a useful way of defining ethnography is to describe what the ethnographer typically *does*:

- People's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher;

- Participant observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main sources of data, though other sources can be incorporated;
- The production of data tends to be relatively unstructured;
- The focus is usually small-scale (often a single setting or group of people) to facilitate in-depth study;
- Ethnography produces qualitative data—interpretation of the meanings, functions and consequences of human actions and institutional practices.

(paraphrased from Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3)

The long-term nature of ethnography made it particularly useful for answering my research questions. Spending a significant period of time in the field can lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied—creating Geertz’s (1973: 10) ‘thick description’ of the multiple, inter-related happenings and meanings about which the researcher seeks to learn. For example, over the course of my fieldwork (which lasted about eight months) I was able to observe how practices at the setting evolved or changed with time and/or seasons (Murchison 2010).

### *3.2.2 Inclusive of young children’s experiences*

Another reason for choosing ethnography was that I believed it offered an inclusive approach to incorporating young children’s perspectives and experiences into my research. As the literature review chapter of this thesis discussed, children’s rights research since the adoption of the UNCRC has generally been ‘preoccupied with highlighting the childhood image of the competent child’ (Reynaert et al. 2009: 520), and some researchers have adopted explicitly rights-based or ‘rights-respecting’ approaches. For example, Beazley and others (2009: 370) argue that while the UNCRC does not specifically mention research, its articles can be interpreted to mean that children have the ‘right to be properly researched’. Part of this right to be properly researched is that children’s own perspectives and opinions must be integral (Beazley et al. 2009: 370). However, even in early childhood research, children under two years old are often overlooked (White 2016).



The inclusion of children's own perspectives has long been a concern in the childhood studies field. Researchers in childhood studies have consistently debated how to allow children 'a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data' (James and Prout 1997: 8). The commitment to including children's perspectives in social research was a direct challenge to the dominant ways that childhood had traditionally been studied. Children were seen as unreliable informants, with adult observations and reports given higher value, and children's own knowledge being excluded (Punch 2002, Hogan 2005). Often, adult caretakers spoke for children (Christensen and James 2008). Therefore, while children were frequently the objects of study, their own voices and understandings were rarely included in social research (James and Prout 1997).

In contrast, researchers in childhood studies have produced a large body of work that engages directly with the 'voices' of children (James 2007, Moran-Ellis 2010, Tisdall and Punch 2012). This commitment has reached near-paradigmatic status in the childhood studies field (Wyness 2015). However, there have been methodological debates in the field about *how* children's voices can be included. Punch (2002), for example, asks whether research with children requires different methods from research with adults. As she notes, 'innovative' methods such as drawing or photography have become popular in research with children, in part because of the assumptions that: children enjoy these activities, children are competent at these activities, and children lack the attention span to participate in more 'traditional' methods such as interviews. The idea that research with children automatically requires different methods has been widely critiqued, however (e.g. Thomson 2007). As Punch (2002: 338) argues:

... it is misleading to talk about 'child' and 'adult' research methods, since the suitability of particular methods depends as much on the research context as on the research subject's stage in the life course. The choice of methods not only depends on the age, competence, experience, preference and social status of the research subjects but also on the cultural environment and the physical setting, as well as the research questions and the competencies of the researcher.

Christensen and James (2008: 2) agree with this view, arguing that there is ‘nothing particular or indeed peculiar to children that makes the use of any technique imperative’. Qvortrup (2008: 67) similarly argues against any ‘prioritizing of methodologies’ in the study of childhood and children’s lives, noting that the use of a variety of methods can contribute to a rich body of knowledge.

My belief that ethnography would be an inclusive methodology for young children’s participation was based, in part, on past experience. In 2011, I conducted a small piece of research for my MSc Childhood Studies dissertation. During that project, I used child-led photography to investigate what young children thought was important at their nursery. My research was based on the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss 2011), a multi-method approach to involving young children in research about their own lives and experiences in early childhood settings. The Mosaic Approach enables children to take part in research through mainly task-based methods such as mapping and child-led tours. Children are framed as ‘experts in their own lives’ who can impart valuable knowledge (Clark and Moss 2011: 7). Task-based methods are intended to bypass the need for verbal expression of voice, instead enabling children to express ‘voice’ through visual means (i.e. photography).

For my dissertation research, I planned to replicate one particular element of the Mosaic Approach, asking older children to visit the baby room of an early childhood setting and use photography to research what the babies and toddlers were experiencing (Clark and Moss 2011: 25). Older children were thought to provide perspectives that were closer to those of the babies and toddlers than adults’ perspectives would be (Clark and Moss 2011: 25). However, as the MSc Childhood Studies research progressed, I began thinking about what my requirements were for children to participate in the research. Very few of the children took clear photographs that I could objectively analyse. I also realised that in order to stick to my research plan, I would have to be directive with the children and keep them on task. I had concerns about what it meant for my ‘participatory’ research plan if children had to not only follow my agenda, but also be willing and able to take ‘adult-like’ photographs. A further concern was that by tying participation to a

specific task, I had excluded babies and young toddlers except as the objects of study.

My concerns about so-called ‘participatory’ methods resonated with critiques in the literature. For example, Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) argue that the claims made about participatory methods do not always stand up to scrutiny. They highlight issues very similar to what I encountered in my MSc Childhood Studies research: that claims about children’s participation can mask adult control of the research, and that participation can be defined very narrowly, excluding children who cannot, or do not, participate ‘appropriately’ (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008: 507). Therefore, for my PhD research I was keen to find a methodology that was more inclusive for very young children.

Ethnography involves the researcher participating in and observing daily life. Therefore, inclusion is not tied to children’s verbal communication or to their performance of a task. During my MSc research, for example, informal interactions with the youngest children were far more instructive regarding their experiences at the nursery. As the children and I came to know each other, we relaxed around each other and I was able to be in their playroom without overly disturbing what was going on. In this case, participant observation, rather than photography, was a method that blended with very young children’s own ‘cultures of communication’ (Christensen 2004: 170). This gave me a deeper insight into young children’s experiences at the nursery than I would have gained through photographs.

As well as being a good fit for learning about how children’s participation was negotiated in day-to-day life, ethnography offered great potential for engaging with young children’s varied ways of communicating (e.g. Komulainen 2007). Crucially, the long-term nature of ethnography created potential for me to build closer relationships with participants than might have been possible with more short-term methods. As relationships develop, the researcher attempts to learn about ‘insiders’ views of their lives’ and what participants consider meaningful and important (Rossman and Rallis 2003: 95, Sluka 2007, Emerson et al. 2011). Agar (1996: 139) suggests that it is only with time that the ethnographer can ‘find people to talk with’,

gradually broadening his or her social circle. During my eight-month fieldwork, I was able to engage with multiple, sometimes contrasting perspectives from different participants (Davis et al. 2008), with a resulting depth of understanding. This included learning about the youngest children's verbal and non-verbal ways of expressing 'voice'.

However, research methods are not technologies that can be uncritically applied. Instead, methods are a way of relating to the world that produce contingent, partial understandings (Coleman and Ringrose 2013). Just because young children were not automatically excluded from my research design does not mean that everyone was included. No researcher has a total view of a social setting (e.g. Haraway 1988). My relationships with specific children and practitioners influenced the production of data in ways that were sometimes hard to perceive until later in the research process.

### *3.2.3 A rich, participatory fieldwork setting: Castle Nursery*

The fieldwork site that I chose for this research was 'Castle Nursery', an urban, local authority-run early learning and childcare centre in Scotland. Ethnographic studies generally focus on 'one or a small number' of settings, to facilitate the researcher's in-depth learning (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 31). The setting, then, must be well-matched to the research problem being investigated. Reflecting on the process of choosing a fieldwork site, Rossman and Rallis (2003: 136) contend that there are two 'waves' that must take place: first, the identification of the setting and/or population where the research will take place and, second, the strategy for sampling within that setting and/or population. This section looks at the first 'wave' of sampling.

For Rossman and Rallis, the ideal research setting is one where:

- Entry is possible
- There is a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, structures of interest, or all of these
- You are likely to be able to build strong relations with the participants
- Ethical and political considerations are not overwhelming, at least initially

For my research, I had several broad criteria of my own regarding the setting:

1. The fieldwork site was a formal early childhood education and care setting of some sort,
2. Practitioners expressed some level of interest in young children's participation, and
3. Very young children under three years old were at the setting.

These criteria were derived in part from the key tensions and debates identified in the literature review chapter of this thesis. The last requirement was particularly included in the criteria because many early childhood settings in Scotland do not cater for children under three. For example, school nurseries tend to accommodate only children who are eligible for state-funded ECEC; at the time my fieldwork took place, eligibility began at age three. I was keen to include very young children in my research; this would help me explore how participation was negotiated if children did not fit easily into the 'talking, thinking, and deciding' model (Alderson 2008). Castle Nursery met all of my criteria. It was a formal education and care setting, open from 8:00-5:45, Monday to Friday. The nursery was licensed to take children from birth to age eight, therefore accommodating the age range I was seeking. During my fieldwork the youngest child was around six months old, and the oldest was close to six years old.

Castle Nursery was also a rich environment in terms of how children's participation was lived and negotiated. I was familiar with Castle Nursery because it was also the fieldwork setting for my MSc Childhood Studies research. In 2011 I spent six weeks at the nursery, visiting for nearly a full day, every day, during this period. This short but intense bout of fieldwork piqued my interest in the practitioners' approaches to working with young children. I knew that children's participation was a key value at the nursery, and was familiar with some of the ways that participation was negotiated in practice. The nursery had received awards for recognising and supporting young children to express their views. At Castle Nursery, children's participation

challenged the status quo of traditional child-adult relationships, making the nursery a fruitful setting for my research.

However, before choosing Castle Nursery as my fieldwork site, I did explore other options. I spoke to friends and colleagues involved in the early childhood sector, who suggested several alternate sites—one private nursery, a different local authority-run nursery, and one Child and Family Centre<sup>1</sup>. One possibility was to go to Castle Nursery, but also to incorporate an alternate setting as a comparison site, as they each provided a different context in which children's participation would be taking place. Practitioners at all three alternate sites professed a commitment to children's participation, giving different descriptions of what participation might look like. All three descriptions shared a general conceptualization of children's participation as fairly formal—inviting children to vote on their favourite book, for example, or allowing children to choose between three or four adult-determined activities during free play time. As the findings chapters of this thesis will discuss, these conceptualisations were different to how the practitioners at Castle Nursery worked, and therefore the alternate sites could have provided an opportunity to reflect on the nuances of what children's participation means in different settings.

However, there were significant barriers to including a comparison site. While I was welcomed into each setting, and practitioners generously met with me to talk about their work (in the process, teaching me quite a bit about the early childhood sector), for various reasons, none were particularly open to a long-term research project. In order to conduct my research at any of them, I would have had to employ short-term methods, which—as discussed previously in the chapter—I did not think were suitable for this project. A second issue with using a comparison site was that none of the alternative sites accommodated babies and toddlers.

The nature of ethnography has evolved in recent decades, expanding beyond the traditional model—an intensive study of a single site (Marcus 1995). For example,

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<sup>1</sup> Child and Family Centres specifically offer services for children and families with complex life circumstances, such as issues with housing, substance misuse, and ill mental health.

Hannerz (2003: 212) argues that multi-site ethnographies can engage with diverse arenas:

interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, but also doing field work by telephone and email, collecting data eclectically in many different ways from a disparate array of sources, attending carefully to popular culture, and reading newspapers and official documents.

However, Hannerz also makes a particular argument regarding breadth and relationships. He notes that many traditionally minded ethnographers might be concerned about sacrificing depth of participant relationships for the sake of breadth in a multi-site approach (Hannerz 2003). Ensuring that my research had enough depth was, in fact, a key consideration for my decision about including a comparison site. After much consideration, I decided that while incorporating a comparison site would have been a fruitful research design under different circumstances, it was not necessary for my study. Castle Nursery on its own provided a rich environment for study.

Accessing Castle Nursery was straightforward. I approached the head of centre, who was receptive to my coming in to do the research there, and for me to conduct an extended period of fieldwork. As Castle Nursery is local authority-run, the next step was for me to provide an updated criminal history check, and apply for permission from the local authority's Children and Families Department. Once the check had come through and permission from the local authority had been granted, I submitted my research proposal for the University's formal ethical review, and began my fieldwork in late October 2013.

#### *3.2.4 Limitations of an ethnographic approach*

Research involves making choices that enhance some possibilities while limiting others (Coleman and Ringrose 2013). Therefore, this research—like any other—can only offer a situated, partial view of the phenomenon at hand (Haraway 1988). This is particularly the case for qualitative research, which tends to be small-scale with a focus on depth of understanding. Therefore, quantitative logic regarding generalizability is not applicable (Punch 1998). The findings of this research are very

specific to the context in which it was carried out, although a ‘wider resonance’ can perhaps still be developed, regarding lessons, insights, and possibilities for other settings (Mason 2002: 196).

The characteristics of the fieldwork setting shape single-site ethnographies such as this one. Of particular relevance in the early learning and childcare context is diversity. At Castle Nursery, there was not a great deal of diversity in terms of social categories such as class, race, ethnicity, or disability/ability. For example, while I did not collect formal demographic information about the children and families, practitioners at the nursery told me that most families were well-off financially. During my fieldwork, I was only aware of two children enrolled at the nursery who had identified additional support needs. The majority of children at the nursery were White Scottish or English, with some children from other White European backgrounds (Polish, Spanish, and French). Cultural diversity was therefore at play at Castle Nursery, with children speaking multiple languages and parenting practices sometimes varying from what practitioners saw as ‘the norm’. Children’s intersectional identities—their ‘multiple and shifting positions in terms of gender, social class, race, ethnicity, age, religion, sexuality, disability/ability, and more’ (Kustatscher et al. 2015: no pagination)—may affect their experiences of participation. Beyond age, however, my research did not engage in a significant way with the diversity that was present at the nursery—a limitation of this project.

Another limitation of this study relates to the debates that framed the opening sections of this chapter. For example, in childhood studies it has become a key principle that children’s own knowledge and perspectives should be integral to research that is being carried out about their lives. As this chapter has described, during my fieldwork I felt very engaged with and connected to the children at the nursery. However, at no point did I specifically or directly seek out children’s own views on their participation at the nursery. Instead, I relied on my own observations and interpretations of their experiences. I have tried to make this clear in the findings chapter of the thesis—I do not claim to represent objectively the children’s perspectives or to speak for them. However, the balance of whose voices are included in the thesis regarding the specific issue of children’s participation is tipped



firmly to the side of practitioners. As the findings chapters discuss, there are different ways to conceptualise voice that go beyond the verbal. However, I do consider this a limitation of the thesis, and I address this again in the Conclusion chapter when I discuss implications for future research.

In closing, there were also limitations to ethnography itself as a method. While I was confident that ethnography was the right approach, with participant observation as my main method of data collection, I did not supplement it with other methods—such as interviews, or participatory methods. This meant that my discussions with practitioners were limited to short conversations, snatched in the few minutes here or there when they were not busy working with children. After the first few months of my fieldwork, I did give consideration to incorporating formal interviews into my research design, so that I could speak to practitioners in more depth. However, personal issues arose for several practitioners and there were long-term absences, meaning the nursery was under-staffed for most of my fieldwork. Practitioners were stretched and many people mentioned to me how strained they felt by the situation. As Farrell (2005) notes, social research is often intrusive, and the researcher needs to respect the spaces that she is invited into. Because practitioners at Castle Nursery were under so much pressure, I did not feel comfortable imposing more demands on them by trying to arrange times for formal interviews. Therefore, I was not able to speak in-depth to as many practitioners as I would have liked to about their experiences of working in participatory ways.

### *3.2.5 Section conclusion*

This section of the chapter has presented my rationale for using an ethnographic methodology. The section has argued that ethnography was the most appropriate methodology for my research because it involves an extended period of fieldwork, allowing for ‘thick description’ of the setting. Ethnography is potentially inclusive of young children’s different ways of communicating, as participation is not tied to the performance of specific tasks or to children’s verbal communication. Finally, ethnography allowed me to explore in-depth the rich fieldwork setting at Castle Nursery. The section has also touched on some of the limitations of my ethnographic

approach, particularly regarding the specificity of ethnography, the lack of engagement with diversity and participation, and limitations on how fully children and practitioners participated in the research.

The next section begins to look at the ‘how’ of ethnography, giving a reflexive account of ethnography-in-practice. The section discusses how ethnographic knowledge was produced in this research project.

### **3.3 The production of ethnographic knowledge: shaped by relationships**

#### **3.3.1 *Sampling within the setting***

Rossmann and Rallis’s (2003) second ‘wave’ of decision-making is the strategy for sampling within the setting. In ethnographic research, sampling means deciding ‘where to observe and when, who to talk to and what to ask, as well as what to record and how’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 35). Three commonly cited elements of ethnographic sampling are:

Time: how activities, practices, beliefs and attitudes vary over time; learning about routine and irregular events at the setting;

People: meeting ‘key informants’; engaging with the heterogeneity of the people at the site to hear different viewpoints;

Context: observing and participating in various contexts within the setting to avoid narrow understandings

(Brewer 2000, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007)

Ethnographic sampling tends to be an informal, iterative process that takes place as the researcher gets to know the setting and the participants (Agar 1996). Therefore, ethnographic researchers may broadly identify some of the sampling parameters they will use, but it is important to be flexible and open to the circumstances of the fieldwork setting (Wax 1971). For my research, in terms of *time*, my fieldwork lasted from late October 2013 to the end of June 2014—a period of about eight months.

During this time, I visited Castle Nursery three to four mornings per week. In terms of *people*, I wanted to engage with practitioners and children at the setting, in keeping with my research aim of exploring child-adult relationships.

In terms of *contexts*, the relationships between practitioners and children were a key element of my sampling frame. Again, my prior knowledge of Castle Nursery played a role in my sampling decisions. Because of my MSc research, I knew that the children at Castle Nursery were organised into two age-based groups: the ‘infant and toddler’ group and the ‘preschool group’. As the findings chapters of this thesis will discuss, the children in these groups often mixed together and there was fluidity between their two playroom spaces. Therefore, I did not choose to focus on one group or the other, but instead tried to be fluid myself, engaging with children and practitioners from both groups. As I have discussed earlier in the chapter, it was important to me to include the youngest children at the nursery—the babies and toddlers.

While I decided against incorporating a comparison site into the analysis, I did visit two physical sites for my research at Castle Nursery. Castle Nursery had a well-established Forest School programme, held at Wild Wood. Named by the children, Wild Wood was a woodland site located about twenty minutes’ drive from Castle Nursery. At the time of my fieldwork, the nursery had been using the site for about two years. Three mornings per week, a small group of children and practitioners would travel there by minibus, staying until mid-afternoon. Over the course of my fieldwork, I went along to the Forest School site on a regular basis. This was an excellent opportunity to see how the participatory ethos of Castle Nursery ‘travelled’ to an alternative context.

### **3.3.2 *Creating field notes***

Writing field notes is a central research activity in ethnography, and Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that ethnographers need to tailor their note-taking approaches to the characteristics of the setting. Generally, I was able to write overtly—in fact, I specifically tried to be as open as possible about writing field notes, to help remind participants of my role as a researcher. It did not seem

problematic at the setting for me to establish a ‘note-taker role’ (Emerson et al. 2011: 37)—my note-taking became something people were used to and expected fairly quickly. I tended to make brief jottings in the notebooks whenever I could (Emerson et al. 2011). Sometimes I would write about the nursery in real time, though this generally only happened if I was observing something from afar. More typically, I would snatch a moment here or there to write about something that had recently happened while it was still fresh in my memory. At the end of each session, I typed up these jottings into full field notes.

In order to capture patterns and variations at the nursery, I tried to split my time evenly between the two age-based groups of children and practitioners, alternating when I went to each group so that I could observe them at different times of the day. Deciding what to concentrate on in my observations and field notes was an intuitive and emergent process. I began, as Emerson and others (2011) suggest, by noting my initial impressions of the setting—who was present, what the classrooms looked like, the sounds and smells that I noticed during my visits. Because Castle Nursery was not a completely new environment for me, I re-read my MSc field notes to remind myself of my original first impressions of the nursery (Emerson et al. 2011). I began to notice the routines and rituals that were repeated each day, as well as the diversity of activity that took place within the framework of routines.

Perhaps most significant for my note-taking, throughout fieldwork, was to follow my intuition about events or situations that were surprising, or ran counter to my expectations (Emerson et al. 2011). In the early days of fieldwork, these notable events were usually surprising because they were so different from what I had personally experienced in my own practice as a preschool teacher. However, as time went on and I became more familiar with the practices at the nursery, I began to notice events that were surprising based on what I had previously observed. That is to say, I was able to notice variations within the general patterns of everyday life. I also produced different types of field notes during my time at the nursery. Most of my notes were in-depth observations of specific interactions that I watched or participated in. However, for some of my notes, I also experimented with time-sampling. I set the alarm on my watch to go off every ten minutes, at which point I

would try to write down as much as I could about what was going on in the space around me. These notes did not have as much depth as my other style of observation, but they were very helpful for capturing the ‘feel’ of being at the nursery—the dynamic nature of everyday life.

My field notes were also a key vehicle for reflexivity during my field work. I was particularly interested in developing a reflexive approach in this research project because of one element of my own autobiography: my professional training and experience as a preschool teacher. While it was my experiences as a practitioner that sparked my interest in children’s participation and spurred me on to conduct PhD research in the area, I was aware that my professional experience had been framed within very specific conceptualizations of adult-child relations. As discussed in the literature review of this thesis, the early childhood field is dominated by a view of the young child being helped along by expert professionals toward positive outcomes in his or her development, and this view underpinned my training and much of my early work with young children. I hoped that incorporating a reflexive approach into my research would help me to identify and unpick some of these assumptions. As Davis (1998) argues, reflexivity can help the researcher become aware of how their academic orientations fit (or conflict) with their non-academic life experiences.

Ethnography has particularly been subjected to a reflexive gaze, as the ‘crisis of representation’ of the mid-1980’s sparked reflection on ethnographic writing (Atkinson et al. 1999). In particular, the status of ‘truths’ in ethnographic accounts was challenged during this time (Clifford 1986)—specifically, the authoritative style with which the ethnographer spoke for his or her subjects (Clifford 1986, James et al. 1997). Critiques of this style highlighted a key tension in ethnography: while ethnographers built close, prolonged relationships with participants, he or she was meant to maintain a detached, intellectual stance in the written product (Tedlock 2000). There was a tension, then, between the subjective daily experience of the ethnographer and the ‘objective’, ‘scientific’ professional text that was eventually produced—a text which presented a neutral discourse about the topic of study, without acknowledging the ways that understanding was filtered through the researcher’s own values, perceptions and interpretations (Pratt 1986).

In response to this tension, the crisis of representation sparked ethnographic work that centred, rather than marginalised the constructed nature of the ethnographer's accounts and understandings (Clifford 1986). Ethnographies were produced that highlighted 'multiple layers, multiple truths, and multiple voices' (Hertz 1996: 3). The reflexive turn created space for 'ethnographic dialogue' (Tedlock 2000: 465)—reflections on the research process, acknowledgment of varied and dissenting viewpoints, and exploring the author's place in the ethnographic text (Hertz 1996: 3, James et al. 1997). Ethnographic dialogue in turn created more transparency about the 'partial truths' of qualitative research (Clifford 1986) and contested the idea that ethnographers somehow had a total view of their subjects, the 'god trick' of seeing 'everything from nowhere' (Haraway 1988: 581).

While reflexive examination in qualitative research is now widely accepted (Punch 2012), it is not always clear just *how* researchers put reflexivity into practice (Finlay 2002). While designing my research, I was frustrated by how little concrete advice I could find on how researchers were actually doing reflexivity. Over the course of my fieldwork, I gradually created my own system of reflexive writing, based on the literature as well as experimentation. Fundamental to this system were: finding a definition of reflexivity that was useful in everyday research life, and incorporating reflexive writing into my field notes, data analysis, and writing up. For these practical purposes, the definition of reflexivity that I found most useful was from Tisdall and others (2009: 229):

The thoughtful reflection of a researcher upon the impact of her or his research on the participants, their social world, on the researcher her- or him-self, and on the knowledge produced.

This definition was particularly helpful during fieldwork because of its straightforward language and inclusion of the 'here and now' impacts of the research. However, the definition is also applicable to the post-fieldwork stages of the PhD, particularly the analysis of data and writing of the thesis.

I also found Finlay's (2002) typology helpful. Finlay identifies five broad ways that qualitative researchers have approached reflexivity. Three of these were particularly relevant to my purposes:

- Reflexivity as *introspection*: in which the researcher probes his or her own personal experiences and meanings, potentially yielding insights that lead to a more generalised interpretation.
- Reflexivity as *intersubjective reflection*: in which the researcher focuses on how unconscious processes, such as emotional responses, structure the relationships between researcher and participants.
- Reflexivity as *social critique*: in which the researcher foregrounds tensions around power, voice and silence between researcher and participants.

During fieldwork, I recorded my reflexive writing into my field notes, following advice from Emerson et al. (2011: 79-85) regarding commentary in ethnographic note-taking. They suggest that the researcher record brief ‘asides’ in brackets wherever necessary in field notes, as well as deeper focused commentaries at the end of each set of notes. As my approach developed over time, my reflexive writing began to move fluidly between Finlay’s (2002) three ‘types’. For example, recording my immediate feelings about certain situations and comparing them to my own experiences (introspection) often led to a deeper examination of the dynamics between myself and participants (intersubjective reflection), and subsequently informed my interpretations of what I was observing between adults and children at the nursery (social critique). My reflexive journey was also supported by a class on reflexivity in qualitative research, by conversations during supervision meetings, and by informal discussions with participants at the nursery and with colleagues.

### ***3.3.3 Negotiating relationships during the research process***

My note-taking was not a detached process of observation and recording. Instead, it was shaped by my relationships in the fieldwork setting (Coleman and Ringrose 2013). Attention to relationships is in keeping with a reflexive approach to social research. Increasingly, attention is also being paid to how relationships, emotions and personality affect the research process (Bondi 2005, Moser 2008, Punch 2012). For example, there has been a particular focus on how the researcher is positioned

compared to participants in terms of social categories such as race, class, or gender (Moser 2008).

One core element of debates about involving children in social research has been the appropriate role of the researcher, in terms of child-adult relationships. For example, Mandell (1988) advocated a ‘least-adult’ role, in which the researcher acts as children do in order to fit into their worlds:

My role as least-adult included undertaking a responsive, interactive, fully involved participant observer role with the children in as least an adult manner as possible. This entailed neither directing nor correcting children’s actions. While my size dictated that I could never physically pass for a child, I endeavoured to put aside ordinary forms of adult status and interaction—authority, verbal competency, cognitive, and social mastery—in order to follow their ways closely.

(Mandell 1988: 436)

From my brief experience of doing research for my MSc, I remembered that it was difficult for me to let go of my practitioner identity, particularly the responsibilities it entailed. For example, it was difficult for me not to step in and manage certain situations between children. Going into the PhD research, I contemplated how I might approach this issue, but Mandell’s solution seemed unrealistic. Like Mandell, I did not want to direct nor correct children’s actions, or exercise authority over them during fieldwork. However, the degree to which Mandell tried to dissolve her ‘adulthood’ seemed idealistic.

While some researchers have since replicated Mandell’s approach (Warming 2005), other childhood studies researchers have discussed a more nuanced, fluid approach to child-adult relationships in the research context. Christensen, for example, argues that her role in school-based research was quite complex:

[the study was]...an on-going balancing act between being recognised as an ‘adult’ and at the same time avoiding the preconceived ideas, practices and connotations associated with ‘adulthood’ or specific adult roles such as a teacher, member of staff or a parent. This status as an ‘other’ was inevitably negotiated and renegotiated with both children and adults during the entire process of the study.

(Christensen 2004: 174)



Similarly, Davis and others (2008) have written about the fluidity of the researcher's role, describing how participants seemed to perceive the researcher in shifting, sometimes contrasting ways: as Friend/Mediator/Entertainer and Authoritarian/Non-Authoritarian/Helper. As Konstantoni and Kustatscher (2016) argue, these multiple and sometimes uncomfortable roles are not necessarily controlled or created by the researcher—instead, they evolve through interactions within the dynamics of the research context. Agar (1996) similarly notes that researchers may have very little control over how participants view them, despite intentions to cultivate certain roles for themselves.

During my research, I did not try to take on a certain role, such as the 'least-adult role'. Instead, I was inspired by Corsaro (in Corsaro and Molinari 2008), who took on the role of a new person, a 'novice' at the setting who was seriously interested in children's experiences (e.g. Christensen 2004). I do think it was clear to many of the children that I was some kind of 'atypical adult'. For example, a child approached me in the garden to ask me to let him into the storage cupboard. At that point in my fieldwork, I had no idea if children were allowed to do this, so I explained to him that I did not know about opening the cupboard, and suggested he ask a nearby practitioner (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2013). I tried to use situations like these to highlight to children that I truly was a novice at their nursery, although by the end of my fieldwork I was much more confident about what was allowed. This approach helped me keep my own roles straight in my head as well as highlight to the children that—whoever I was—I was not quite the same as the practitioners. However, my adult-centric approach also demonstrates that I had my own barriers to children's participation. I could have asked children themselves more frequently how things worked at the nursery. At times, this approach actually seemed to create distance between myself and the children. I was literally sending them away.

In other ways, I interacted very closely with the children. For example, I often read stories to them, comforted them when they were upset, or played with them. Playing with the children was another way that I signified my role as a different kind of adult at the nursery—it was very rare to see a practitioner actually join into children's games, and children rarely invited them to. In contrast, some children would often

try to involve me as a participant in their play—for example, by assigning me roles in dramatic play scenarios (field notes, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2014). Sometimes I found this quite overwhelming, particularly with the preschool children. I began to feel as though I was missing a lot that was happening around me in the nursery because I was spending so much time reading stories or playing (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2014). I would often write about ‘hiding’ or ‘escaping’ from certain children who were particularly interested in playing with me, so that I could take on a less involved role for a while.

My relationships with the younger children were particularly affecting for me, perhaps because they took much longer to evolve. Around March, when I was starting to feel overwhelmed by the older children’s attention, I seemed to simultaneously have some kind of breakthrough with many of the younger children. For example, I came into their playroom one morning to be greeted by one of the children shouting my name and jumping into my arms for a cuddle. This was followed by another child coming over and showing me his dinosaur toy, and yet another child rolling a block over to me (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2014). These kinds of embodied, emotional interactions seemed to lay the groundwork for trusting relationships and communication with young children during my fieldwork.

In turn, my relationships with the children seemed to help me build relationships with practitioners. Over the course of my fieldwork, many practitioners seemed also to think of me in a hybrid kind of way, as a researcher but also a colleague. This closeness and collegiality was very fruitful during my research, as it allowed me to ask questions and participate in situations that a more detached position might have precluded. This was particularly the case with two practitioners in particular, who took me under their wing and had many discussions with me about their (and my) beliefs about early childhood practice.

However, as I have touched on several times in this chapter, the relationships I developed with participants shaped my data collection in ways I was not always aware of at the time. This issue is taken up in the following discussion of data analysis.

### 3.3.4 *Analysing ethnographic data*

As is common in ethnographic research, my approach to analysis was broadly thematic. The field notes were stored in NVivo, where I also did some organising via descriptive coding (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). These codes were derived through an interplay between what arose from the data and the pre-existing ‘sensitising concepts’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) that were described in the literature review chapter of this thesis—children’s participation as a lived practice, with child-adult relationships being the particular focus. However, while I used NVivo for this initial descriptive coding, the rest of my analysis was done mainly through analytical writing. This is in contrast to some advice regarding qualitative analysis, which recommends a progression through increasingly analytical ‘cycles’ of coding the data (e.g. Saldana 2015). My approach instead involved a long and messy process of bringing themes together in different ways, in different relationships with the literature, and exploring my own ethnographic voice. In the process, I attempted to be as transparent as possible about the partial, situated and contingent nature of the knowledge I was producing (Haraway 1988) while also including multiple voices and perspectives. Therefore, writing became a core ‘method of knowing’ in my research; I ‘wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer program’ or through more systematic analytical coding (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005: 970, 973).

The process of creating field notes—deciding what was significant or important enough to write about—has direct implications for the production of knowledge. Issues about who I observed, who I spoke to, whose meanings and perspectives were privileged—all of these considerations have shaped my own understandings of the setting and therefore the learning that is presented in this thesis (Coffey 1999, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). As previous sections have discussed, my sampling strategy was not fixed—instead, I interacted more fluidly with the children and practitioners. Therefore, the content of my field notes was influenced by relationships in a variety of ways. For example, there were some children I had to make a special effort to observe, because they rarely interacted with me (or other

adults at the nursery) of their own accord. This was another way that reflexivity was helpful, because it prompted me to think about which children I had developed relationships with, and why.

As this example suggests, during my fieldwork I interacted with some children and practitioners more than others. This led to me initially privileging some participants' knowledge, particularly in the case of practitioners. An example of this is that I became very close with one practitioner in particular, who was very interested in my research, and who spoke in great depth about her ways of working and the motivations behind them. Over time, I began to apply her explanations to the practitioner staff as a whole, assuming she was articulating universally held beliefs. It was only after I had left the setting and began writing about the nursery in more analytical and systematic ways that I realised I had assumed that her ways were everyone's ways. She was conveying important information about the nursery—but the ways that she worked with children were hers, and others had very different styles that were not necessarily underpinned by the same beliefs. The realisation that I had been privileging this practitioner's perspective spurred me to make my analysis more robust, especially in terms of looking for counter-evidence of claims I was making. This was particularly important given that one of my research questions focuses on tensions and challenges that arose in the course of living children's participation at the setting. By purposefully reading my data for 'complexity, messiness, contradiction, ambiguity and so on' (Mason 2002: 177), I was able to construct an analysis that more fully unpacked the ways that practitioners and young children lived participation together at Castle Nursery.

During the process of analysis, I also realised how fully I had been involved with many of the scenarios I had 'observed' at Castle Nursery. As Mason (2002: 92) argues, it is rare for ethnographers to actually attempt a position of complete observer, because this defeats the purpose of immersion and first-hand experience in the field work setting: 'you are supposed to know what it feels like rather than simply act as a detached witness'. My place on the 'participant-observer continuum' (Mason 2002: 92) was fluid and shifted throughout my visits to the nursery and Wild Wood. As I have discussed previously, my role veered further toward the participant

end of the spectrum the longer I was in the field, and it became increasingly difficult to make observations of situations that I was not directly involved in. As my focus was specifically on the relationships between children and practitioners, most of the data I have discussed in the findings chapter are excerpts in which I was not directly involved. However, as part of a reflexive approach, I have incorporated my own voice in to the written ethnography at times, rather than try to create a false picture of objectivity and detachment.

### **3.3.5 Section conclusion**

This section has discussed the production of ethnographic knowledge, and the role of relationships in shaping that knowledge. The section has looked at the ways that relationships with children and practitioners influenced my note-taking and data analysis. A reflexive approach was useful for unpacking some of those relationships and for supporting a robust analysis.

My relationships with practitioners and children also influenced the ways I went about negotiating key ethical issues. In the next several sections, I give a reflective account of how I approached ethical issues such as informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, protection from harm, and knowledge exchange.

## **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Very broadly, ethics can be defined as ‘questions of value, and judgements about which habits and customs are good and bad’ (Gallagher 2009b: 11). In social research, ethical judgements have many dimensions—the Social Research Association (2003), for example, argues that ethical principles include obligations to society, colleagues and funders/employers, in addition to the more commonly discussed obligations to research subjects. This section of the chapter, however, deals mainly with obligations to research subjects.

Alderson and Morrow (2011: 3) define research ethics as being ‘concerned with respecting research participants throughout each project, partly by using agreed standards’. As this definition suggests, social researchers are expected to take part in

formal ethical review processes, and there are many resources that articulate agreed-upon standards for social research (British Sociological Association 2002, The Social Research Association 2003, Graham et al. 2013, Economic and Social Research Council 2016b, 2016a). Before beginning my fieldwork, I completed the University of Edinburgh ethical assessment forms and submitted them for review—a useful process, as it required me to reflect on some of the risks and harms that participants in my research might experience.

However, research ethics do not begin and end with formal review. For example, Guillemin and Gilliam (2004: 264) distinguish between two dimensions of research ethics: ‘procedural ethics’—the process of formal ethical review—and ‘ethics in practice’, where the researcher faces ethical dilemmas in the field. Lahman and others (2010) similarly note that formal ethical review often focuses on the minimum standard of ‘do no harm’, but argue that ethics can go beyond this to be more aspirational. For example, Ellis (2007: 3) puts forward a relational ethics, which ‘requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences’. Thinking of research with young children, a relational view on ethics is reminiscent of Dahlberg and Moss’s (2005) relational ethics of responsibility, listening, respect, and welcoming of the Other (e.g. Farrell 2016). From this view, ethical decision-making involves reflection and possibly uncertainty.

Having gone through procedural ethics, I expected that ethics in practice would involve the issues that I highlighted during that process: informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and protection from harm. However, I also expected that ethics in practice would be unpredictable, and that ethical issues could arise that I had not anticipated. In this section, I discuss my plan for dealing with key ethical issues, and how those plans played out in practice.

#### *3.4.1 Negotiating informed consent*

The Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (2015) defines informed consent as the process of giving participants ‘appropriate’ information, and ensuring that there is no coercion, so that participants can make a decision about their

involvement in research. Recommendations for best practice in informed consent are typically underpinned by similar criteria:

1. Consent involves an explicit act, such as a verbal or written agreement;
2. Participants can only consent if they are informed about, and understand, something of the nature, purpose and likely consequences of the research;
3. Consent must be given voluntarily, without coercion;
4. Consent must be renegotiable.

(adapted from Gallagher 2009: 15–16)

The use of an ethnographic methodology meant that I spent time observing and participating in daily life, rather than inviting participants for a discrete, time-bounded experience. Data collection became blurred into the everyday goings-on at the fieldwork site. Ethnography, therefore, complicates the issue of informed consent, if informed consent is taken to mean a one-off, formal decision made at the beginning of research. However, this becomes less of a problem if consent is understood not as an isolated act, but as one part of an ‘ethical continuum’ (du Toit 1980: 284), something to be negotiated continually throughout the research (Gallagher 2009b).

Informing participants is also complicated by an ethnographic methodology. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 210) argue, even when ethnographic research is not being done covertly, ‘ethnographers rarely tell *all* the people they are studying *everything* about the research’. For example, if the project is very exploratory, the ethnographer may not actually know what will be involved. Some participants may not be particularly interested in the ethnographer or the project. This ambiguity about what it means to be ‘informed’ about the research is echoed by Gallagher and others (2010), who argue that it can be hard to ensure that any participants in social research (whether adults or children) are sufficiently informed. They also challenge the ‘gold standard’ of researcher’s understanding of the project, arguing that researchers themselves may not fully appreciate the implications for participants.

This may particularly be true in ethnographic projects, which tend to be open-ended; it may therefore be difficult to assess the harms and benefits of participation, as the ultimate focus of the research is not known (Gallagher 2009b). Gallagher and others believe that

Neither researchers nor their participants can hope for anything more than a partial, contextual and incomplete understanding of what they are doing. Discrepancies between researchers' and participants' understanding of a project may be hard to spot, and may also be unstable, changing over time, as the research unfolds.

(Gallagher et al. 2010: 479)

While the general 'murkiness' of informed consent is widely acknowledged, it is also generally accepted that the researcher should be as 'open and honest' as they possibly can be as they carry out the study and build relationships with participants (Rossman and Rallis 2003: 77). My approach to informed consent was based on Alderson and Morrow's principles of 'respect, trust, clear information and good communication', while also acknowledging that participants' status as 'informed' was inevitably partial. This 'partially informed' status applied to both children and adults, as this section will illustrate, and means that issues such as confidentiality and anonymity must be given thorough consideration.

My research design required me to consider how to approach informed consent for different groups of participants: visitors to the site, children's parents, the children themselves, and members of staff. I will consider each in turn.

#### *3.4.1.1 Informed consent with visitors*

The nursery frequently had visitors who were not permanent staff—for example, students doing a childcare qualification course or a volunteer placement, music and yoga teachers, tour groups, and occasionally another researcher. I planned to take an informal approach to informed consent with visitors, if I wanted to include them in my field notes. This would involve: explaining my research, saying what I had observed and asking their permission to use it in my analysis, making it clear that this was optional, and assuring them that their name and other identifying features



would be disguised in the report. If this situation arose, I would make a note of my discussion with the visitor in my field notes, and record their decision about being involved.

I did speak to many visitors during my fieldwork, but in most cases did not anticipate specifically writing about the visitors in my thesis or quoting them directly. However, in several cases I have incorporated visitors into my analysis. I was able to discuss my research with the visitors as planned. However, as I have used my observations of the visitors to set up contrasts with the practices of Castle Nursery, I have therefore made particular efforts to disguise their identities. I use the generic term ‘visitors’ so as not to identify them through their professional titles. As this example illustrates, ethical considerations such as consent, confidentiality, and anonymity are inextricably interrelated rather than separate concerns (Farrell 2016).

#### *3.4.1.2 Informed consent with parents (opt-out proxy consent)*

I did not directly engage with parents as part of the data collection for my research, as the focus was on the interactions between children and practitioners in the nursery setting. Therefore, I did not need to negotiate informed consent systematically with parents regarding their own participation. If I had wanted to include conversation with a parent in my field notes, I would have followed the above procedure for consent with visitors. Much like my experiences with visitors, I had conversations with parents that informed my thinking, but not in a way that required them to be written directly into my thesis, or quoted.

However, parents’ young children *were* directly involved in the research. In such cases, parental proxy consent is usually seen as necessary, especially when young children are involved (Coyne 2010). Parental proxy consent has long been the norm for research with young children, based on the assumption that young children cannot comprehend researchers’ explanations of the project, and therefore are never ‘truly informed’ (Hughes and Helling 1991: 228). I was conflicted about parental proxy consent. Alderson and Morrow’s (Alderson and Morrow 2011: 100–101) principle of ‘respect, trust, clear information and good communication’ clearly applied to parents as well as children—I recognised that it was necessary and

desirable for parents to be informed and given a choice about a research project involving their children. I also believed that it was more meaningful to negotiate children's involvement with the children themselves. This tension between respecting children's capabilities, while also respecting parents' rights and responsibilities to their children, is a common issue in childhood studies research (Graham et al. 2013).

Using the University of Edinburgh's Ethical Audit as a guide, I evaluated that my research:

- Was unlikely to induce psychological stress or discomfort;
- Did not require physically invasive procedures;
- Did not involve sensitive topics;
- Was unlikely to trigger disclosures of harm or abuse;
- Was unlikely to be used in way that would adversely affect participants;
- Did not seek out children who were members of any particular "vulnerable group"

(<http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/ethics>)

In addition, my research was embedded in the nursery setting, with trusted adults close by if children did seem to feel uncomfortable or became upset. As I believed that the risks to child participants in my research were low—'no greater than those in everyday life' (Barnardo's, no date: 4)—after much deliberation, I decided not to seek parental proxy consent, but did offer parents the choice to 'opt-out' their child from the research.

The parents of the children at the site were emailed an information leaflet describing my research and making it clear that they could opt-out of their child's participation in the research (see Appendix A). Printed copies were also made available at reception, and posted on a noticeboard. The information leaflet encouraged parents to contact me or the senior management team at the nursery if they had any questions or concerns about my research. There was an attached opt out form, which parents could turn in at reception. The leaflet made it clear that opting out was ok, and that

service provision would not be affected if parents did opt out. However, it also made clear that the nature of ethnographic research meant it would be impossible to exclude participants completely; if a child wanted to speak to me or play with me, it would have been problematic to refuse based on parents having opted out—but I would not use those interactions in my data. No parents chose to opt out.

#### *3.4.1.3 Informed consent with young children*

Negotiating informed consent directly with children is said to be a key part of rights-based research (Beazley et al. 2009, Alderson 2012). While the UNCRC does not directly deal with children's role in research, there are strong links to Article 12, as choosing whether to participate in research is quite clearly a 'matter affecting the child'. The debate also links with Article 13, dealing with the child's right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to 'seek, impart and receive information' about the research. Alderson (2012) notes that there is a large body of non-UNCRC legislation and policy that supports children's right to give or refuse informed consent. However, guidance on negotiating informed consent in research involving children can convey conflicting information. It has become increasingly common for social researchers to negotiate consent directly with children, rather than rely on parental proxy consent (Gallagher 2009b, Graham et al. 2013). By doing so, researchers demonstrate an understanding of young children as 'reliable, voluntary' participants in research (Farrell 2016: 226). The trend toward negotiating consent with young children directly extends outside the childhood studies field. The ESRC (2015), for example, in its ethical framework, advises against assumptions that children cannot give consent because of their age. At the same time, ethical guidelines may class children as a 'vulnerable' group requiring special protection and consideration in ethical review (e.g. The Social Research Association 2003). The University of Edinburgh's ethical audit did, at the time I undertook it for my research. There is a tension, then, between respecting children's participation rights (assuming they do indeed want to participate) and ensuring they are protected from harm during the research process.

Einarsdottir (2007) suggests that picture leaflets are a useful tool for explaining

research to young children; Harcourt and Conroy (2005) suggest that pointing out the concrete tools that will be used in the research may help make researchers' explanations feel more concrete to young participants. I drew on these suggestions by writing two letters to the children—one for each age-based group. The text of the letters explained that I was there to learn about their nursery, and that I would be writing things down in my notebook to help me remember what I was learning. The letters included a picture of me and a picture of my notebook and pen. I planned to introduce myself and read the letters to both groups during their gathering time which—as I remembered from my MSc research—took place each morning. I hoped that the letter format would be fun and engaging for the children and that the letters would start a dialogue about my research.

My idea of introducing myself to the children in a one-off meeting at gathering time did not work out as planned, for several reasons. First, different children attended the nursery each day, so a one-off greeting would not have reached every child. Second, while I had discussed my plan with one practitioner, who agreed to support me during gathering time, this practitioner was then called away and someone else took over. As Moser (2008) has argued, personality played a role here; I was feeling shy and not especially confident during the first few days of fieldwork, and did not feel comfortable putting myself forward during gathering time to this practitioner who I did not know yet.

I did eventually have one formal introduction session with the children, supported by a practitioner who invited the preschool children to the music room 'to meet a new friend'. About ten children decided to join us. In the music room, I introduced myself and showed the children the letters I had written, which they did seem excited to open. I read the text of the card out loud. More interesting to the children were the large puffy letter stickers I had used to spell out my name on the envelopes. This sparked a lot of discussion amongst the children about their own names and how they were spelled, which helped me begin to learn the children's names. Amanda, one of the preschool children, also volunteered to deliver the letters to the two classroom spaces, where practitioners posted them on noticeboards. While the letter session was more limited than I'd hoped, in terms of a formal introduction to the

children, it was indeed useful in terms of starting a dialogue about who I was and why I was at the nursery. For example, while I could never have planned this, the group of children who came along to that session included three girls who were key social gatekeepers for their (largely separate) groups of close friends. Being 'in' with them because of the letter session helped me get to know the other children who tended to play in these groups.

After the initial introductions, I used different tactics to inform children about my research. As a general rule, I tried to be obvious about taking notes, hoping that my notebook and pen would serve as reminders of my purpose at the nursery. The notebook and pen did spark conversations throughout the fieldwork, with children often asking me what I was writing about. In one example, Vanessa, a child from the preschool room, sat next to me in the garden one afternoon and watched me write in my notebook, asking, 'What are you writing? Did you write what I said? Excuse me...why are you not writing what I'm saying?' (field notes, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2014). Conversations like this one offered a chance to discuss what I was doing at the nursery, though these rarely went beyond generalised explanations. It would be hard to argue that these conversations and communications with children really amounted to them being fully informed, or giving or withdrawing 'consent'.

While I was, in Rossman and Rallis's (2003) words, as open as I could be with the children, the partial nature of their understandings about the project were unavoidable. Some of the children understood that I 'wrote about the nursery' but did not always know that I was specifically writing about them in that moment, or what I would do with my notes. There were times when children seemed to reject my presence. In one example, I was standing near a group of children who were climbing on a pile of wooden pallets. A practitioner was nearby, supporting them by asking questions about the stability of the pallets and encouraging them to test out their balance as they climbed. This seemed a very interesting scenario to record in my notes, but as I took out my notebook, one of the children began staring at me. When I smiled at him, the child scowled and then shouted, 'AAAAAA!' in my direction. I took this as a message that my presence was not welcome, and I have not

used this observation in the findings chapters. I use it here only for illustrative purposes, stripped of detail.

#### *3.4.1.4 Informed consent with practitioners*

While I had permission to conduct my research at Castle Nursery, I could not assume that access to the site and support from the head of centre equalled consent from the practitioners I would be interacting with on a daily basis. To negotiate informed consent with the practitioners, I planned to use the traditional method of providing them with information and asking them to sign a form indicating their willingness (or not) to take part in the research. I created a consent form which briefly described my research (see Appendix B). On the form I tried to reassure staff that I was not judging or evaluating their practice with children. On the back of the form was a place to tick ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to being involved in the research. The form explained that if they ticked ‘no’, this did not mean I would never interact with them or observe their interactions with the children—only that those observations would not be included in my data. The form also explained that if they agreed to be part of the research, they could still change their minds and withdraw from the research at any time.

On paper, my approach to informed consent with staff appears straightforward. However, it was more complicated in practice. I had arranged with one of the managers to hold informal meetings with practitioners during the first few weeks of fieldwork, as it would not be possible to meet them all at once. However, once in the field, it was clear that arranging these meetings would have meant disrupting the flow of routines that I did not yet understand, pulling people out of the space they were working in and requiring someone else to leave their space and cover for them. I decided instead to use a less disruptive tactic, and left the consent forms in the staff room with an envelope where they could be returned. Several people signed a form straightaway. However, after this initial activity, no one else signed a form until I had chased them and reminded them several times.

I was still scrambling to get signatures on consent forms up until the last week of fieldwork, when I did a final push on getting people to sign the consent forms. One

person declined involvement, and I did not use my interactions or observations of her in my data. There were also two practitioners who left the nursery during my fieldwork, before I had done the consent form with them. In the first case it was someone I had only met once, and who therefore only featured in one anecdote. The second person, however, was someone with whom I'd spent a lot of time, making observations and having conversations. I had talked with both of these members of staff about my research—they knew who I was and what my research was about. My guess was that both of them would have ticked 'yes' on their consent form. However, I did not feel comfortable using observations I had made, as neither member of staff had been given the chance to decline involvement. This unfortunately meant that I had to leave out some useful data. However, my analytical thinking about these anecdotes was supported by other data, and the consequences to the research were therefore fairly minor.

### *3.4.2 Anonymity, confidentiality, and protection from harm*

As I have discussed, both children and practitioners at the nursery could be envisioned as 'partially informed', existing somewhere on a spectrum between completely uninformed and completely informed about the purposes of my research and the implications of taking part. Each person's location on that spectrum was different, and not dependent on being a child or adult—for example, some of the more interested children probably became more informed about my research than some of the practitioners. As Gallagher and others (2010) argue, while I knew the most about the research, even my knowledge was not 'complete', particularly during the fieldwork stage of my research. This partiality of understanding meant that as the research progressed and I began analysis and writing, I had to pay close attention to anonymity, confidentiality, and protection from harm.

#### *3.4.2.1 Anonymity*

Anonymity is the 'practice of ensuring that participants cannot be identified in research outputs' (Tisdall et al. 2009: 223). One element of anonymity is typically the use of pseudonyms in the written outputs. This is the case in this thesis—all

names used are pseudonyms. Some of the pseudonyms I have used were chosen by the children themselves. This was inspired by Gallagher (2005), who invited primary school children to invent 'secret names' to be used in his thesis. This has resulted in some distinctive names being incorporated into my thesis. 'Secret names' were not in fact particularly secret; it was not possible to speak to each child alone, so our discussions of secret names usually happened with a small group. In two cases the group setting led to children choosing similar secret names (e.g. Rose Flower Rainbow and Rose Flower, who is a different person, as well as Emily Maya and Emily Too).

Anonymity involves not only a change of name for participants, but also the more general masking of specific identities (Rossman and Rallis 2003: 74). I have been careful in the thesis to avoid describing participants in ways that would identify them. For my research, it was in fact practitioners who posed the greatest challenge when it came to this element of anonymity, due to their small numbers. While there were enough children at the nursery that their identities could easily be masked, I have had to leave out some descriptions of practitioners. For example, there were only two male practitioners working at the nursery during my fieldwork. One of these men left the nursery partway through my fieldwork, and had not signed a consent form. Therefore, any reference to a male practitioner indicates one easily identifiable person. When writing about this practitioner, if I felt that there was a risk of negative consequences if he were identified, I have referred to him more generically as 'a practitioner' and at times used different gender pronouns to disguise his identity.

Similarly, I sometimes do not name the practitioners in the findings chapters, even by using a pseudonym. At other times, I do use pseudonyms, but use multiple names for the same practitioner. This is to avoid building up an identity for the pseudonym, which would lead to the practitioner themselves being identifiable. I have also avoided making distinctions between practitioners based on their specific job descriptions. For example, one practitioner was actually a nursery teacher, a job title that is tied to different training, working conditions and level of pay from other members of staff at Castle Nursery. However, I have not identified her as the



‘teacher’ in the findings chapters, in order to avoid identifying her. The limitation of my approach to masking practitioners’ identity is that practitioners are, at times, represented in a more generic and detached way in the thesis than children are.

However, I felt this was a necessary measure to protect practitioners, particularly in moments when the thesis discusses tense or difficult situations.

### *3.4.2.2 Confidentiality and protection from harm*

Confidentiality is the ‘treatment of information as private’, and the commitment not to share data without the permission of the participants (Tisdall et al. 2009: 223). I did not systematically collect extensive personal data about the children or adults at the site. Collection of personal data was limited to people’s first names and which of the age-based groups they were associated with. This information is peppered throughout my field notes, which were kept in password-protected files, and backed up to an external hard drive as per the University of Edinburgh’s data protection policies (The University of Edinburgh 2016). My main concern about keeping data private was children’s interest in writing in my notebook. During my MSc research, for example, children would often take my notebook away to write in it, and a few times it ended up in different rooms, or once, buried in the sand in the garden. Based on this experiences, I was concerned that participants might read my notes—practitioners, for example, could easily have glanced at my notes accidentally if a child was drawing in it nearby, or if they picked up the notebook to return it to me. During my PhD fieldwork, I did let children draw and write in my notebook freely. Unlike in my MSc research, I was more careful to keep the notebook close by. None of the children seemed to mind this restriction.

One potential exception to confidentiality would have been if children disclosed abuse or neglect. The nursery had child protection procedures in place to deal with such situations; had this happened during the course of fieldwork, I would have informed the head of centre or one of the depute heads. The exception to confidentiality was made clear in the informational leaflets that went to parents. Similarly, had I witnessed other worrying behaviour or situations with children, I would have discussed this with the child’s key worker or other staff member. This

exception to confidentiality is bit murkier, as judgements about what is ‘worrying’ and needs to be discussed with staff are subjective. In practice, however, most of what I observed took place in the presence of staff, and I never observed anything that concerned me that had not also taken place with practitioners present.

The broad concept of protecting research participants from harm underpins all of the ethical considerations that are discussed in this chapter. As previously mentioned, I judged my research to be low-risk for the children and practitioners involved. It did not engage with ‘sensitive’ topics such as ethnic identity, religious beliefs or illegal activity (Alderson and Morrow 2011). However, people’s own definitions of what is considered ‘sensitive’ can vary; in fact, the presence of a social researcher in the centre may very well cause some distress (Alderson and Morrow 2011). Gallagher, for example, describes how even though his ethnographic research with primary school-aged children did not address a typically ‘difficult’ topic, there were many ‘emotionally delicate situations’ that arose, often in response to something he said or did (Gallagher 2009a: 61).

Like Gallagher, I was involved in various emotionally delicate situations during my fieldwork. For example, I was playing in the garden with Ryan, a child from the preschool class, and he invited me into one of the playhouses with him. The playhouse had two levels, and he indicated that I should come upstairs with him to see what was in the loft. He then seemed to forget about me and went back down the stairs, out of the house, and closed the door. I heard the latch click into place, meaning I could not let myself out. I did not think he had purposely locked me in—when I called to him to remind him I was inside, I could hear him trying to open the latch. However, before he could, a practitioner noticed the situation and came over, freeing me and chiding him for locking me in. ‘No thank you Ryan,’ she said to him, ‘We don’t lock people in the playhouse, it’s not safe.’ She instructed him to apologise to me.

I did not know this practitioner well enough to feel comfortable ‘correcting’ her perception of what had happened. I chose to accept the apology that Ryan offered, trying to strike a balance between being cheerful and reassuring about this specific

situation, while also not implying to the practitioner that she had got it wrong. This example shows, once again, that during fieldwork I came up against my own barriers to children's participation. In a reflexive provocation, one of my supervisors suggested that this example made me seem 'afraid of the adults', and I think that is an accurate assessment of how I felt, especially at the beginning of fieldwork. My silence and failure to defend Ryan seems like a betrayal, motivated by my lack of confidence and unwillingness to rock the boat at the fieldwork setting. Thinking back to Mandell's (1988) 'least adult role', one particular thing I could have learned from her approach was her willingness to align herself with children, even when this made her strange to adults. Warming (2005) also discusses how her determination to make common cause with young children sometimes led to her participation in transgressing adults' rules and directions. However, she felt this risk to her relationship with adults was worthwhile, as it helped her build trust with the children more quickly, and allowed her to ask more meaningful questions. My tendency to defer to adults over young children, particularly at the beginning of my fieldwork, is a major point of personal reflection and learning from this research project.

### *3.4.3 Knowledge exchange and feeding back to participants*

Given the open-ended nature of this research, it was difficult to be specific at the outset about a plan for knowledge exchange and feeding back to participants. In terms of knowledge exchange, findings and reflections from this research have been presented at a variety of childhood conferences. Methodological reflections have been incorporated into a journal publication (Blaisdell 2015) and further papers will be written once the thesis is finalised. However, researchers are increasingly expected to engage in more active knowledge exchange activities that target specific audiences (Tisdall 2009). For example, I have incorporated some of my emerging findings into my teaching work on the BA Childhood Practice Programme at the University of Edinburgh, which involves practitioners working in early childhood settings. I have also presented about my research to students on the MSc in Childhood Studies course.

In terms of feeding back to the participants in this research, at the time that the thesis was being submitted I had not yet felt ready to create formal feedback—a leaflet or briefing, for example. While I had hoped to do this soon after fieldwork, at least sending some kind of preliminary feedback to Castle Nursery practitioners, I was simply not confident enough about my findings and their implications. However, during the fieldwork I had many conversations with the practitioners about my research, which served as an informal conduit of feedback. Post-fieldwork, I have in fact started working at the nursery, which offers an unusual opportunity to continue engaging with practitioners as my analysis and writing develop.

In terms of feeding back to children, I considered whether it would be possible to create some kind of ‘feedback/dialogue project’ with them. I thought perhaps this could involve the children and me reflecting together about the nursery—particularly their experiences there. To this end, in the final month of my fieldwork, I brought a large sketchbook with me to the nursery. This seemed an appropriate medium for a feedback project, as so many of the children had enjoyed writing and drawing in my notebooks over the course of the research. During this final month, many children did create elaborate drawings in the sketchbook. Often these drawings were collaborative and dynamic, incorporated into children’s play. For example, Lucy and Jake began their drawing by contributing to a map of the playroom that I had been working on. Their drawing then spun off with a life of its own, incorporating skateboards, monkeys, stars, fire, and rockets (field notes, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2014).

I had wondered if the children might create something that could be left in the nursery as an artefact of my research and a provocation for future reflection. However, the drawings in the sketchbook were very meaningful to children in the moment, but would have been less so if divorced from their contexts. This meant that the sketchbook did not seem useful for future reflection without me or the children there to explain it. However, children’s interest in the book did create opportunities to discuss the fact that my fieldwork was winding down and I would soon be leaving the nursery. The end of my fieldwork coincided with many of the older children leaving for school, which meant that the general topic of transition was much discussed. While the sketchbook drawings did not evolve into quite the feedback

project I had envisioned, they did spark some dialogue about my role at the nursery and children's experiences there.

#### **3.4.4 Section conclusion**

This section has discussed how I addressed some key ethical issues such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, protection from harm, and knowledge exchange. In all of these areas, my plan evolved over time and was shaped by my developing relationships at the fieldwork setting. The section has noted that 'ethics-in-practice' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) were not always straightforward and could involve uncertainty.

### **3.5 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has given an account of the methodological approach taken in this research project, with a focus on relationships. It has made an argument that an ethnographic approach offered the potential for the youngest children to be included in the research. The chapter has presented a rationale for the selection of Castle Nursery as the fieldwork site and for sampling within that site. It has also provided a reflexive account of the fieldwork, including a consideration of how my relationships with children and practitioners affected ethical issues. The chapter has particularly highlighted the relational, contingent, and partial nature of the knowledge produced by the research.

The next chapter begins to discuss the findings of this research. It unpacks the ways that children's participation at the setting was situated within wider policy and practice trends, particularly trends toward play-based pedagogy. In doing so, the chapter also explores how practitioners created opportunities and constraints that shaped how children's agency was enacted at the setting.

# Chapter 4 Embedding children's participation: creating the conditions for free-flow play

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins to explore how children's participation was lived and negotiated at Castle Nursery. In doing so, the chapter provides an analytical 'thick description' (Geertz 1973, Emerson et al. 2011) of daily life at the nursery, situated within the context of Scottish policy trends. The chapter takes the first steps toward addressing three of my research questions:

**Question 1:** How are approaches to children's participation at the setting situated within wider policy and practice trends, particularly trends toward play-based pedagogy?

**Question 2:** How do practitioners create opportunities and constraints that shape how children's agency is enacted at the setting?

**Question 4:** What tensions and challenges arose in the course of living children's participation at the setting?

Critiques of 'top-down', one-off models of children's participation have argued that more attention needs to be paid to the wider contexts of that participation, including macro-social trends (Desmet et al. 2015). Therefore this chapter begins by providing a brief, broad-brush review of Scottish policy trends, focusing on two main areas. First, this section discusses trends in the implementation of children's rights and children's participation. Second, the section turns to a review of early learning and childcare trends in Scotland. In particular, the prominence of play and 'child-centred' or 'child-led' learning is discussed.

The chapter then turns to an examination of how daily life at Castle Nursery was organised. Decisions about how time and space will be organised in early learning

and childcare settings are usually made by adults, and reflect adults' beliefs and values about young children, early childhood, and the purposes of early learning and childcare (Wurm 2005). Therefore this section discusses daily timetabling and uses of spaces at Castle Nursery, and looks at how the organisation of routines connected to children's play and participation.

Finally, the chapter discusses how age was negotiated at the nursery as an area of difference, in terms of how participation was lived. The experiences of very young children were different from the experiences of older children, and the chapter explores how practitioners worked with difference and inclusion. The final section also explores some of the tensions that arose between children and practitioners, particularly regarding care practices and the limitations of a participatory approach.

## **4.2 Situating Castle Nursery in the Scottish context**

### *4.2.1 Children's rights and participation in Scotland: a familiar list of challenges*

The United Kingdom ratified the UNCRC in 1991 (CRAE 2016). As a devolved administration within the UK, the Scottish Government shares responsibility for implementation of the UNCRC, in line with the devolution settlement put forward in the Scotland Act 1998 (DCSF 2009, Tisdall and Davis 2015). In terms of children's rights, devolution in the UK has transferred a number of relevant powers to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, including health and social care, education, and housing (The Scottish Parliament 2015). However, the Scottish Government has claimed that its ability to implement the UNCRC has been limited by the reservation of other relevant powers to the UK Parliament at Westminster (The Scottish Government 2013a). Despite these limitations, the Scottish Government has expressed a commitment to children's rights:

This Government's ambition is for Scotland to become **the best place in the world for a child to grow up**. Recognising, respecting and promoting rights is essential if we are to make that vision a reality [...]

Our approach is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – a piece of international law which makes clear what children can expect from us and what our responsibilities are towards them.

(The Scottish Government 2016, original emphasis)

As Tisdall (2015b: 770) notes, in recent years the Scottish Government has consistently incorporated children's rights rhetoric into its message about children's policy—giving children's rights 'front-line, rhetorical prominence'. Scotland also has an active non-governmental sector that works on children's rights. This includes a Children and Young People's Commissioner, charged with promoting and safeguarding the rights of children and young people (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland 2016b), and Together, an umbrella organisation for children's charities that promotes and monitors children's rights in Scotland, and supports children's organisations to integrate children's rights into their work (Together 2016).

However, ratification of the UNCRC in the UK does not automatically incorporate it into either UK or Scottish domestic law; commitment to children's rights in Scotland, then, is 'more moral than legal' (Tisdall and Davis 2015: 216). For example, while the recent Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 creates certain duties on Ministers and public bodies regarding furthering, promoting, and reporting on the UNCRC (Together 2014), these duties have been critiqued for being 'vague', 'weak' and 'toothless' (Tisdall 2015b: 782). Despite hopes to the contrary, the Act has failed to significantly change the legal basis of children's rights in Scotland (Davis et al. 2014). As Tisdall and Davis (2015) argue, there has been a tension between children's rights and children's wellbeing in Scottish children's policy; wellbeing has received stronger statutory provisions, with rights playing a more secondary role (Tisdall 2015a).

Particular rights have instead been incorporated in a 'piecemeal' fashion, with participation rights 'scattered across various pieces of legislation' (Tisdall 2014: 172, 2015b). For example, as Tisdall and Davis (2015) note, the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 (para 2.2) includes a duty on education authorities to



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.

In another example, young people aged 16 and 17 have recently been granted the right to vote in Scottish Parliament and local government elections by the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015. Lowering the voting age follows on from the 'unprecedented level of political engagement' by children and young people during the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, in which 16 and 17 year-olds were also allowed to vote (Together 2014: 3). Finally—but not exhaustively--the Scottish Government has rolled out a Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA) which will be used across its legislative and policy portfolio; this is in support of the new duty on Ministers as set out in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (The Scottish Government 2015a). The CRWIA assessment does include a section on children and young people's 'views and experiences', though how this section will be interpreted remains to be seen (e.g. The Scottish Government 2015b).

As the CRWIA suggests, there has been a particular interest in Scotland in consulting with children and young people, a practice that is now 'commonplace' for both the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament (Tisdall and Hill 2011, Together 2014). There are numerous youth fora in Scotland, such as the Scottish Youth Parliament, Young Scot, and the Children's Parliament, which frequently contribute to consultation events with the Government (Tisdall and Hill 2011, Together 2014), and pupil councils are commonplace in schools (Children in Scotland and the University of Edinburgh 2010). The trend toward participation as consultation has even included young children—in 2010, the office of the Children and Young People's Commissioner undertook a large-scale consultation of children aged two to five, as part of a wider exercise taking place across Scotland (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland 2016a). However, children and young people who have been involved in collective participation initiatives in Scotland describe a 'familiar list of challenges':

- tokenism and one-off opportunities to be involved,
- lack of feedback,
- issues about inclusion/exclusion from consultations,
- difficulties navigating bureaucratic structures, and
- lack of sustainable funding to make children and young people’s participation an enduring part of organisational culture

(Tisdall and Elsley 2012)

These challenges are not limited to Scotland; as Tisdall (2013) notes, this list of challenges appears across country contexts. The Scottish context therefore illustrates many of the key issues that emerge from the general children’s participation literature. While there is a great deal of rhetorical attention paid to children’s participation, how that participation is experienced by children and young people seems to leave something to be desired.

#### *4.2.2 Early learning and childcare in Scotland: play, participation, and tensions*

Young children in Scotland have a variety of entitlements to state-funded early learning and childcare, depending on their age and other factors. All children over three years old are eligible for approximately 16 hours of early learning and childcare per week during term time, starting from the first term after their third birthday (The Scottish Government 2016c). Some two year-old children are also entitled to these hours, if they meet certain eligibility requirements—such as being looked after or in kinship care, or if their parents are in receipt of qualifying benefits such as Income Support or Jobseeker’s Allowance (The Scottish Government 2016c). The number of children attending formal early learning and childcare in Scotland has steadily increased since 2010 (Care Inspectorate 2015). Attendance at some kind of formal early learning and childcare is now a ‘near universal’ experience for Scotland’s young children (Siraj and Kingston 2015: 11). For example, the most recent statistics available indicate that 96.6 % of eligible 3-4 year

olds in Scotland were registered for their state-funded early learning and childcare (The Scottish Government 2015e).

High levels of attendance, however, do not indicate that young children's experiences in formal early learning and childcare are homogenous. Early learning and childcare in Scotland is a mixed system, with providers including local authority nurseries, nursery classes attached to local authority primary schools, private nurseries and non-profit and voluntary sector playgroups (Bradshaw et al. 2014). In some local authority areas, childminders can also deliver the early learning and childcare entitlement (Scottish Childminding Association 2016). In addition to the variation caused by this mixed system of provision, there have also been barriers to accessing early learning and childcare. The Scottish system is 'complex, confusing, unfair, and lacks transparency' for both parents and providers (Commission for Childcare Reform 2015: 4). The campaign group Fair Funding For Our Kids (2015) highlights several barriers to accessing early learning and childcare, including:

- the timing of sessions offered by local authority nurseries, which tend to be half-day only, making the provision difficult for working parents to access;
- some local authorities will offer funded places in private 'partnership' nurseries, which are more flexible, but this practice is not consistent;
- the funding of partnership nurseries may be unstable, with children needing to change nurseries if funding is withdrawn or reduced.

They argue that the early learning and childcare system in Scotland is fragmented and hard to navigate (Fair Funding For Our Kids 2015). There are 'acute shortages' in available childcare for disabled children, children who live in rural areas, and children whose parents work atypical hours (Rutter and Stocker 2014: 18).

Given the weak legal standing of children's rights in Scotland, it may be that the integration of children's rights into the work of children's organisations becomes an important way to make rights real (Tisdall 2015b). Early learning and childcare therefore represents one area of the childhood sector where rights can potentially be made real in children's lives. In terms of children's participation rights, however,

deeply held beliefs about young children’s competence, maturity and need for protection can shape the way that participation is understood and practiced with young children (Alderson 2008). There are tensions in the Scottish early learning and childcare regarding how early childhood is constructed and how practitioners are advised to work with young children.

For example, there is a strong thread in the public conversation about early childhood in Scotland that tends to focus on implications for the future. Policy documents tend to reflect the belief that ‘a large part of the pattern for our future adult life is set’ during the early years, including the period before birth (Education Scotland no date: no pagination). The provision of early learning and childcare has been one element of a wider agenda to improve outcomes for children and families in Scotland—particularly for children who are ‘more vulnerable or disadvantaged’ and whose parents need ‘routes into sustainable employment’ (The Scottish Government 2016c: no pagination). In addition to the provision of state-funded early learning and childcare, there have been multiple policy interventions in the last decade that support the view that early childhood is a critical period. One key example is *The Early Years Framework*, a flagship policy from the Scottish Government, which draws on Heckman’s human capital argument for investment in the early years: ‘the rate of **economic return on early years investment is significantly higher than for any other stage in the education system**’ (The Scottish Government 2008: 7, original emphasis).

The *Early Years Framework* identified several overlapping elements that the Scottish Government believes would need to be changed in order to improve outcomes for Scotland’s young children—for example, effective collaborations between public, private, and third sector services (The Scottish Government 2015d). These elements of change have now been integrated into a national, multi-agency ‘improvement programme’ called the Early Years Collaborative. Here, Scotland’s Community Planning Partnerships<sup>2</sup> are expected to use a shared approach to

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<sup>2</sup> Each of Scotland’s 32 local authorities has a Community Planning Partnership, consisting of the local authority and partners such as health boards, police, fire service, and a range of other stakeholders (The Scottish Government 2013b, 2015c).

improving outcomes for young children and their families—supporting ‘local practitioners to test, measure, implement and scale up new ways of working to improve outcomes for children and families’ (The Scottish Government 2016d: no pagination). The Early Years Collaborative is intended to work toward specific ‘stretch aims’ (The Scottish Government 2014b: 37): for example, that 85% of children in every local authority have reached their expected developmental milestones at the time of their 27-30 month health review (The Scottish Government 2013d: no pagination). These stretch aims, in turn, are linked to Scotland’s national framework for integrated children’s services and improving children and young people’s wellbeing, *Getting it Right for Every Child* (The Scottish Government 2015d). Many early learning and childcare settings have become involved with the work of the Early Years Collaborative, carrying out various small-scale projects intended to improve outcomes for children and families (The Scottish Government 2016b).

A strong focus on improving outcomes, coupled with language that represents early childhood as a critical period, would be in keeping with the broader trends discussed in the literature review chapter of this thesis. In the policies and initiatives presented above, there seems to be a view of young children as becomings, vulnerable to the wrong kind of outcomes that would be costly, both socially and economically (e.g. Moss and Petrie 2002). As the literature review chapter discussed, a deficit model of early childhood may not be conducive to recognising their participation and contributions to life in family and community. However, in Scotland there are also elements of the public conversation that are more in keeping with a strengths-based perspective on early childhood, which may be more compatible with a focus on young children’s participation.

This is particularly the case when it comes to advice on early childhood practice, where practitioners are urged to see children as ‘competent and active’ (Education Scotland 2014: 23). In Scottish early learning and childcare, there has been movement away from adult-led practices and toward learning experiences that are play-based and ‘child-led’ or ‘child-centred’ (Education Scotland 2014, Armstrong 2016). This trend is exemplified in the three key practice guidances that specifically

address the early learning and childcare context: the Early Level of Scotland's national *Curriculum for Excellence* (Education Scotland n.d.), the *Pre-Birth to Three: positive outcomes for Scotland's children and families* guidance (2010), and *Building the Ambition: national practice guidance on early learning and childcare* (Education Scotland 2014). All three documents highlight the importance of practice being child-centred—to 'acknowledge children's views and actively involve children in meaningful ways in everyday decisions in the ECEC setting' (Education Scotland 2014: 23).

In the early learning and childcare context, guidance documents indicate that 'child-centred' practice involves supporting children's play. Play has been defined in Scotland's national *Play Strategy* as 'children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward' (The Scottish Government 2013c: 10). The *Pre-Birth to Three* guidance (2010: 71) argues that 'the importance of play cannot be overstated' and makes connections to the UNCRC, which enshrines children's right to play (Article 31). More recently, *Building the Ambition* (2014: 28) notes the 'intrinsic value' of play in terms of how children try out their ideas, cope with reality by using their imagination, and learn new skills.

Play-based, child-centred approaches would seem to offer a wide scope for young children's participation in early learning and childcare settings. However, there may be tensions for practitioners regarding what it means to be 'child-centred' in their practice. For example, in a blog post about early childhood practice in Scotland, Armstrong (2016) suggests that there is uncertainty about what being child-centred means. She suggests that some practitioners interpret being child-centred to mean that 'everything has to come from the children' and that adults 'have nothing to contribute' (Armstrong 2016: no pagination).

Uncertainty also features in key Scottish guidance documents for early childhood practitioners. While advocating a play-based approach to early childhood practice, *Building the Ambition* (2014: 28) also notes that play is a 'complicated concept to define' and that practitioners might feel unsure about their role in planning and

supporting children's play. Practitioners in Scotland are urged to provide opportunities for young children to learn 'through purposeful, well-planned play' (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2007: 1), while also being advised to avoid 'over directing' play (Education Scotland 2014: 28). Underpinning this tension is the high-pressure message that play 'is not just crucial to the wellbeing of each child, it is essential to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of Scotland as a whole', as high-quality play provision can help 'increase the likelihood of improved outcomes for children and lessen the impact of factors that lead to poorer outcomes' (The Scottish Government 2013c: 5–6).

Scottish tensions and uncertainties about play-based approaches, and practitioners' role within those, echo tensions that Alderson (2008) identifies about young children's participation more broadly. As the literature review chapter of this thesis has discussed, children's participation challenges hierarchical relationships between adults and children. In early childhood in particular, adults are generally assumed to have 'superior knowledge and good sense' and to have responsibility for protecting and controlling young children 'firmly and safely' (Alderson 2008: 141). Early childhood practitioners may therefore find it difficult to know to what extent they should hand over control to young children, in the name of being 'play-based' and 'child-centred'.

#### *4.2.3 Section conclusion*

The opening section of this chapter has begun to answer my first research question, tracing the Scottish policy and practice trends in which Castle Nursery was situated. The section has identified children's rights and children's participation as having rhetorical prominence in Scottish policy, though that rhetoric is not always supported by legal measures. While children's participation has been a popular initiative, there is a 'familiar list of challenges' in participation initiatives that echo issues in the literature more broadly. In the early childhood context, practitioners in Scotland may face a raft of contrasting advice, underpinned by the high-pressure message that early childhood is an essential time to 'get it right' for every childhood. This pressure may limit opportunities for children's participation, as it emphasises an

image of young children as vulnerable, and early childhood as a period of risk. However, at the same time, practitioners are urged to foster ‘child-centred’ practices that recognise children’s competence as active learners. While play-based, child-centred practice seems to offer scope for young children’s participation, there may be uncertainties about the role for practitioners in planning children’s play. These tensions once again echo broader tensions in the participation literature, regarding child-adult relationships and the role of adults in participation initiatives.

The next section of the chapter begins to explore how Castle Nursery fit with the Scottish trend toward play-based, child-centred early childhood practice. The section opens by discussing the educational philosophy that influenced practices at Castle Nursery. The section then turns to an examination of how the conditions for children’s play were created, looking at daily routines at the nursery.

### **4.3 Creating the conditions for play: educational philosophy, and daily routines**

#### *4.3.1 Educational philosophy: Froebelian influences*

At Castle Nursery, children’s play was the main driver of daily life and considered a high-status activity. The ‘style’ of play that practitioners seemed to foster at Castle Nursery could be understood as ‘free-flow play’ (Bruce 2012: 13). Free-flow play, as defined by Bruce, is driven by children’s ‘ideas, thoughts, feelings, relationships and their physical bodies’ as well as by interactions with the material environment (Bruce 2012: 13). As the following excerpt from my field notes illustrates, the interpretation of play-based practice at Castle Nursery involved minimal structuring by practitioners.

It is late morning in the garden, on a sunny day in March. It is windy in the streets today, but sheltered and mild here in the garden, and a lot of people are outside. Practitioners are in different areas of the garden, sometimes interacting with the children, sometimes leaving the children to their activities.

Jessica, a practitioner, has asked Gabriella, one of the youngest infants, if she would like to play in the sand. Gabriella is now sitting between Jessica’s legs and patting her hands in the sand. Jessica is talking to another practitioner, but



is also frequently ‘checking in’ with Gabriella—making eye contact with her and speaking to her affectionately.

Luke, one of the toddlers, is standing alone, watching a skirmish between a group of magpies and crows up in the treetops. He stays there for quite a long time, observing the birds’ movements. Jake and Marie, children from the preschool room, are zooming around the garden on tricycles with Sophie from the infant and toddler room. Later, the three of them settle into the sand with some plastic action figure toys that Jake has brought from home.

Their game is interrupted by Gregor and Lea, who run into the garden with small sticks that they are using as magic wands. ‘Hex!’ they shout, pointing their wands at various people. ‘Hex, hex!’ Sophie immediately jumps up and finds her own stick, merging into their play. ‘Hex!’ she calls, holding her wand out in front of her, and the new trio moves into a different area of the garden to keep casting their spells.

Ryan, a younger member of the preschool group, and Pete, a practitioner, are chatting away to each other. Pete is sitting on a barrel, and Ryan is leaning out the door of a little playhouse. Ryan keeps opening the door to the playhouse, saying something to Pete, and then slamming the door closed. He is in fits of giggles. Pete is playing along, pretending to be surprised each time Ryan slams the door. They both seem to be enjoying each other’s company.

(field notes, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2014)

This opening account suggests that children’s free-flow play was central to life at Castle Nursery. As the excerpt illustrates, children had freedom to pursue many different types of activities during their play, with practitioners playing a supportive or facilitating role. This did not mean that practitioners were completely hands-off. As the interactions between Pete and Ryan illustrate, practitioners were present and responsive to children. In some cases, such as the interactions between Jessica and Gabrielle, practitioners took a more active role in supporting children’s play. As this chapter will discuss, there were some differences in how practitioners and children worked together, based on the children’s age—very young children tended to have much closer contact with practitioners than older children did.

Castle Nursery was unusual in the early years field, in that the theories that informed daily practices were explicitly articulated (Stephen 2012). Specifically, Castle Nursery’s approach to early learning and childcare was influenced by the work of German educational philosopher Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). Froebel is known as

the ‘father of the kindergarten’—a key pioneer in early childhood education (Woodard 1979: 136, Bruce 2010). In fact, it is due in part to Froebel’s influence that the pre-school period is considered such an important foundation for children’s future development (Weston 2000, Hockey and James 2002).

Rather than prescribe ‘a code of management for the schoolroom’, Froebel’s work provided a philosophy of education from a deeply spiritual point of view (Harris 1887: ix). Today, Froebel’s work is most often described in terms of principles, rather than specific prescriptive practices (Bruce 2012). Froebelian principles broadly include:

- The integrity of childhood in its own right;
- The relationship of every child to family, community and to nature, culture and society;
- The uniqueness of every child's capacity and potential;
- The holistic nature of the development of every child;
- The role of play and creativity as central integrating elements in development and learning;
- The right of children to protection from harm or abuse and to the promotion of their overall well-being.

(The Froebel Trust, no date)

An in-depth review and critique of Froebel’s work is outside the scope of this thesis. Nor does the thesis attempt to evaluate how well Castle Nursery implemented Froebelian ideas. However, as the above Froebelian principles illustrate, there may be compatibility between a Froebelian approach and participatory practice with young children. For example, a belief in the integrity of childhood as a period in its own right resonates with the literature on children’s participation, where the child as competent social actor has been such a powerful idea (e.g. James 2011). Similarly, by recognising children’s relationships with family, community, nature, culture and society, Froebelian principles resonate with discussions of children’s participation as a relational practice (e.g. Mannion 2010).

At Castle Nursery, the influences of these Froebelian principles emerged in two main ways: through texts, and through talk. Froebelian texts were posted in different places around the nursery, including direct quotes from Froebel's work, excerpts from other Froebelian writers, and writings which expressed the nursery's own interpretation of Froebelian principles. For example, a corkboard in one playroom displayed three small posters titled 'The Principles', 'The Pedagogy' and 'The Environment'. Each poster detailed specific ways that Froebelian ideas were interpreted at Castle Nursery (field notes, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2014). Texts such as these created material traces of Froebel's influence at the nursery, creating a visible presence for Froebelian principles. Other sources of guidance were also made visible at the nursery. For example, one playroom displayed material about children's participation rights from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. The *Pre-Birth to Three* guidance was also displayed, and in the other playroom there was information about *Curriculum for Excellence* (field notes, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2014). However, the most central influence on practice seemed to be the nursery's Froebelian approach.

Children's play is an 'essential element' of contemporary Froebelian practice, and a focus on play is in keeping with broader trends in Scottish early learning and childcare practice. However, as this chapter has discussed, there may be tensions in play-based approaches regarding the role of adult practitioners. Play can be defined and interpreted in a variety of ways (Wood 2010). For example, under certain interpretations, 'play' might include activities that are highly structured by adults, if the activities are considered somehow 'playful' (Adams 2005). However, at Castle Nursery, practitioners created the conditions for children's play to be more free-flowing. As Bruce argues,

Play will not fit into tight timetables. Children need time and space and people who encourage play in order for it to flourish and develop with depth. Play needs the right circumstances, conditions and atmosphere. Then it burgeons.

(Bruce 2012: 13)

The conditions for free-flow play at Castle Nursery were created during daily routines. Daily routines are examined in the next section, discussing arrangements of both time and spaces at the nursery.

#### 4.3.2 Daily routines: practitioners facilitating free-flow play

The main temporal milestones of a full day at Castle Nursery are visualised in Figure 4.1. As the figure demonstrates, the daily timetable at Castle Nursery was characterised by long stretches of time for children to pursue their interests. Many local authority-run nurseries in Scotland are organised into two sessions per day: one group of children comes to the nursery in the morning, and another in the afternoon (Morton 2015). Castle Nursery, however, did not have this morning/afternoon divide. The nursery was open from 8:00 am to 5:45 pm, with one (relatively) stable group of children attending each day—though the makeup of the group varied from day to day. However, as I discussed in the methods chapter of this thesis, my visits to the nursery were mainly in the mornings, ending shortly after lunchtime. Therefore my data rarely include afternoon activities.

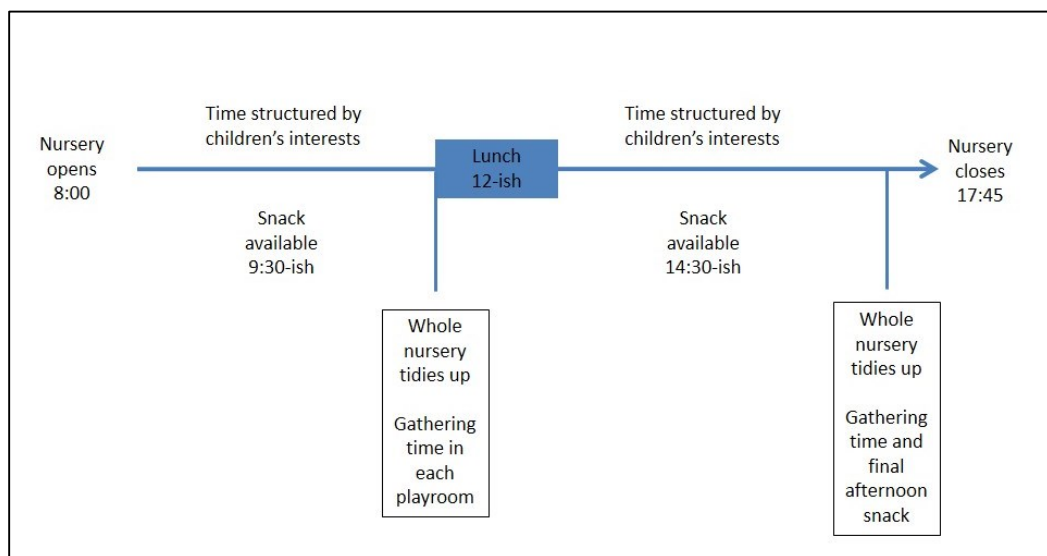


Figure 4.1: A visualisation of the daily timetable at Castle Nursery

During the long stretches of time that characterised the daily timetable, practitioners did offer specific activities that the children could take part in, though these were

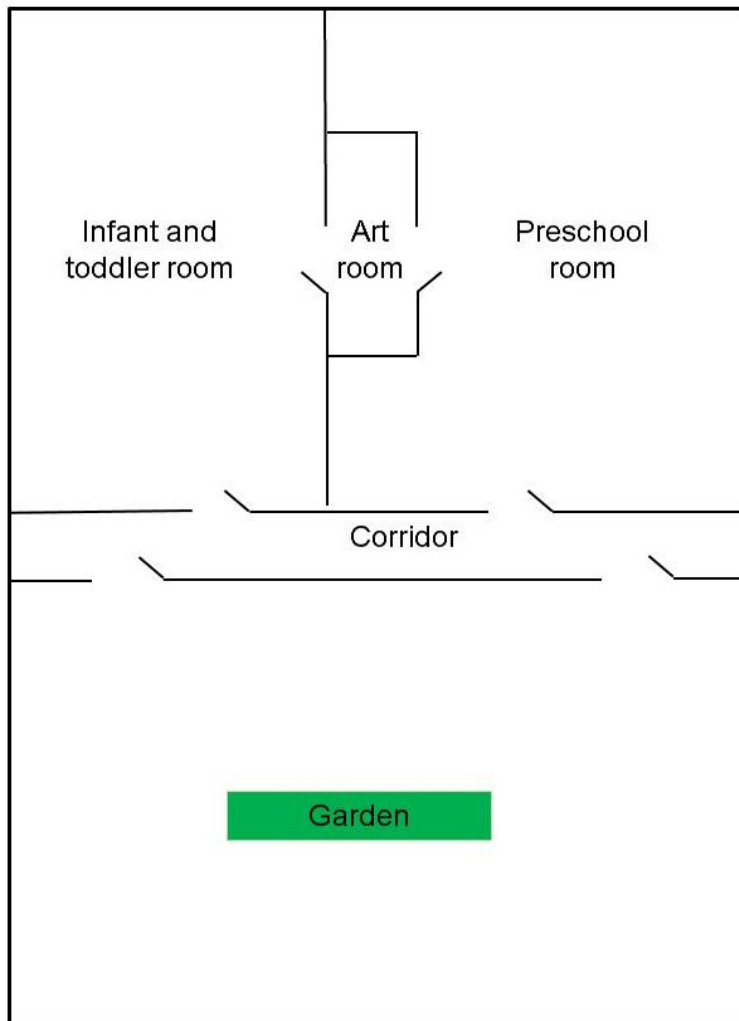
optional. Trips out of the nursery were commonplace—for example, to the shops to buy food to cook for lunch (field notes, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013). In another example, several children who had been interested in trains were invited to take a real train journey from the city centre to a nearby town (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2014). At Christmastime, practitioners in the preschool room introduced a few different holiday-themed activities, such as using an Advent calendar to count the days until Christmas, and learning carols for a Christmas show for parents (field notes 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2013). Practitioners also offered longer-term activities within the nursery—for example, one practitioner was developing a gardening project, with the idea that children could learn about growing, harvesting, and cooking with different fruits and vegetables (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2014).

The experiences offered by practitioners reminded me of the concept of ‘provocations’ or ‘invitations’, that I had encountered when working in Reggio Emilia-style preschools in the United States. The terms ‘provocation/invitation’ are used interchangeably and can refer to many different things--collections of materials, questions posed by practitioners, the light changing in a room (Wurm 2005). The core idea is for practitioners to provoke children’s ‘thoughts, discussions, questions, interests, creativity and ideas’ (Racheous 2014: no pagination). Invitations might be created by a practitioner, but are intended to be open-ended—the intention being for children to build on the initial ‘provocation’ and make their own interpretations. At Castle Nursery, practitioners did make these kind of informal ‘invitations’ to children, in a variety of ways. However, the primary concern seemed to be for children to explore their own interests, with minimal structuring from practitioners. There were only a few times each day when all of the children were expected to come together—the gathering times that took place at lunch and in the afternoon, and lunchtime itself.

By organising time in such a flexible way, Castle Nursery practitioners lessened traditional hierarchies between adults and young children. Their approach can be contrasted with a plethora of advice regarding how adults can (and should) manage children’s time in early childhood settings. For example, it is common practice in early learning and childcare settings for adults to create a predictable, structured

daily schedule. Within this schedule, adults designate discrete blocks of time, which are assigned to specific activities, such as arrival time, circle time, activity or group play time, bathroom time, cleanup time, lunch time, and nap time (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning 2007). Often the daily schedule is presented to children visually, by using picture cards that are arranged chronologically (Lentini and Fox 2005). Transitions between these discrete activity times are managed by adults. For example, adults may provide a 1-3 minute warning that a transition is coming (Banerjee and Horn 2013). Sensory cues may be given to children to indicate that a transition is happening—for example, singing a song or ringing a bell (Ostrosky et al. 2002, Songs for Teaching 2010). The intentions behind this advice about timetabling is usually couched in benevolent terms. For example, a daily routine is said to reduce children’s anxiety about the unknown (e.g. Markham 2014, Zero to Three 2014). However, there is undoubtedly a controlling effect, as adults try to structure and manage children’s experiences. At Castle Nursery, in contrast, practitioners created opportunities for children to take the lead.

Children could also take the lead regarding *where* they would like to spend their time. As Figure 4.2 illustrates, Castle Nursery was housed in a purpose-built, stand-alone building. The main spaces that children used, and where the bulk of my observations took place, were the two playrooms, the art room, the corridor and the garden. The two main playrooms at the nursery were designated for two age-based groups of children—the ‘infants and toddlers’ (from birth to three years old) in one room, and the ‘pre-schoolers’ (three to five years old) in another. This kind of arrangement is common practice in early childhood settings, connected to Piagetian age-and-stage framings of human development (Gallacher 2005). In an age-and-stage framing, children at each stage of development are assumed to have collective needs, that differ from children at a different stage (Butin and Woolums 2009). Following this logic, children need to be segregated into different learning environments that cater to their specific age and stage requirements (Butin and Woolums 2009).



*Figure 4:2: The main spaces of Castle Nursery. Some details have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the setting.*

At Castle Nursery, the children were indeed assigned to these two age-based playrooms—which provided a ‘home base’ for the children. The practitioners were also divided in this way, with each age group having a dedicated staff team. However, rather than create a rigidly segregated environment for the children, at Castle Nursery the boundaries between the playrooms and other areas of the nursery were permeable, with opportunities for children to move fluidly between spaces. For example, one morning in November, Ailsa and Eveline—two children from the preschool room—were pretending they were going to a sleepover together. During this play, they moved back and forth between the preschool room and the corridor, pretending to check if their parents were there to pick them up for the sleepover.

‘Let’s get our things ready,’ Ailsa suggested. She dashed to the door and hauled it open. They hurried out into the corridor, Ailsa calling ‘Bye!’ over her shoulder as she went. Moments later, they returned to the preschool room, now carrying their jackets and rucksacks. They made a big production of putting these on, in preparation for being picked up.

Eveline suggested, ‘Let’s go see if my mummy is here yet’. They went back out into the corridor together—returning again shortly after. ‘Not yet’, Ailsa announced to the room at large. They decided to play in the bricks while they waited for the sleepover to begin, periodically going back out into the corridor to check if Eveline’s mummy had arrived.

(field notes, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2013)

As this example illustrates, Ailsa and Eveline did not need to ask permission from an adult to leave the preschool room. There were two practitioners in the room, one who was sitting with some children in the writing area, and another who was serving snack. Both of them looked up and noticed the girls moving in and out of the space, but the girls were not challenged by practitioners, and no adults followed them out of the room to supervise what they were doing. The girls’ play could develop without interference or control by practitioners.

Children’s fluid movement around nursery spaces also extended to the outdoor garden, as the following excerpt illustrates.

Ossian and Ryan were playing together for an extended period this morning. They were in and out, moving constantly from place to place. It was hard to follow what they were doing.

They started in the art room, where they picked up some cardboard coffee cups. They took these out to the garden and used them to dig in the sand. Then they ran inside for a while. The next time I saw them, they had come back out to the garden. Ryan showed me a worm he had found in one of the planters. Ryan was putting the worm into a coffee cup. Then they went back down to the sand pit again, digging in the sand with the worm in the cup by their side. This lasted until it was time to go in for gathering.

(field notes, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2014)

Once again, in this example, Ossian and Ryan did not need to ask permission from adults to move between spaces. As with Ailsa and Eveline, their movements and activities were driven by the momentum of their play. Notably, in both examples,



children's play was not constrained to specific locations deemed appropriate by practitioners (Rutanen 2012). Ailsa and Eveline, for example, used the corridor as a play space. In contrast, Gallacher (2005) describes how certain spaces—such as the kitchen and the staff room—were forbidden to children in one early years setting. At Castle Nursery, no space on the ground floor seemed to be completely off-limits to children and their play. Children were rarely required to 'be in the right place at the right time' (Harden 2012: 88).

Children's presence in, and movement between, the spaces of the nursery were facilitated by practitioners in a variety of ways. As Figure 4.2 shows, the nursery was not open plan. Opportunities for children to move around the nursery were created by practitioners. For example, Ossian and Ryan were able to move so fluidly between the indoor and outdoor spaces because of staffing patterns. While there were dedicated staff teams for each playroom, the practitioners often moved between spaces at the nursery as children's play required. The garden, for example, was opened in the morning as soon as there were enough practitioners present for one person to go outside. At least one practitioner always stayed in each playroom but other practitioners moved more fluidly; if the bulk of the children were outdoors, the bulk of the staff would also be outside. The adaptable staffing patterns at Castle Nursery could be contrasted with more structured practices, in which children are expected to move as a group between the indoor and outdoor spaces—led by practitioners (Rutanen 2012).

As this discussion of daily routines has illustrated, the way that Castle Nursery practitioners interpreted 'play-based' early childhood practice involved several elements. First, practitioners explicitly valued children's free-flow play, in keeping with Froebelian principles. Secondly, practitioners created the conditions for free-flow play by organising daily routines in flexible, fluid ways. Thirdly, practitioners' way of working lessened hierarchies between adults and young children, contrasting with many common practices and advice regarding early childhood practice. While play-based early childhood curriculum can easily become controlled by adults, at Castle Nursery children could largely shape their own experiences.

In the literature review chapter of this thesis, I discussed theorisations of agency as arising and shaped by the context of relationships (e.g. Oswell 2013, Esser 2016). Child-adult relationships are a particular consideration regarding how children's agency is shaped (Leonard 2016). The ways that practitioners organised daily routines at the nursery actively and purposefully create opportunities for children to enact agency. Practitioners did not seem interested in traditional, 'teacher-authored' ways of working that might constrain children's expressions of agency (Kumpulainen et al. 2014: 225, Wood 2014). Instead, practitioners fostered practices that supported children's agency, so that children could engage in a variety of activities of their own choosing, through their free-flow play. This approach by practitioners is in line with what Wood (2014) describes as an established discourse of early childhood practice: that children should be relatively free from adult intrusion, and should be able to exercise control over their own play activities.

#### *4.3.3 Section conclusion*

This section has continued to answer my first research question, regarding how Castle Nursery's practices were situated within wider policy and practice trends. In keeping with broader Scottish trends, Castle Nursery practitioners took a play-based approach to early learning and childcare. Their particular interpretation of play-based early childhood practice was founded on Froebelian principles that were compatible with participatory ways of working. At Castle Nursery, play-based early childhood practice was based on flexible timekeeping and fluid uses of spaces—practices that allowed children a great deal of influence over their daily activities.

The section has also begun to answer my second research question, regarding how practitioners created opportunities and constraints that shaped children's enactments of agency. The section described ways that practitioners mainly created opportunities for children's agency by arranging daily routines in flexible ways. Daily routines seemed to lessen hierarchies between young children and adults; there was a focus on free flow play and adults were not directive of children's activities. Children's participation initiatives have been critiqued for failing to challenge the underlying

dynamics of child-adult relationships in society (Davis and Hill 2006). At Castle Nursery, however, daily routines seemed designed to create more egalitarian relationships between young children and adult practitioners (e.g. Teamey and Hinton 2014) and to create opportunities for children to shape their own daily experiences.

The next section continues to explore the idea of egalitarian relationships and lessened hierarchies. The section begins by looking in more depth at how the very youngest children—the infants and toddlers—were included in the practices of free-flow play. The section then unpacks some tensions in negotiating care and participation for the youngest children.

#### **4.4 Inclusion, care, and tensions: living participation with the youngest children**

##### *4.4.1 Including the youngest children in free flow play*

Inclusion is a key part of children’s participation; if participation means ‘taking part’, inclusion means ‘being allowed or enabled to take part’ (Davis and Hill 2006: 1). Young (2000), while not writing specifically about children, notes that areas of difference—such as gender, sexuality, or race—are a key way that exclusion can arise. She argues that meaningful inclusion requires the acknowledgement and attention to how difference ‘conditions’ social experiences (Young 2000: 83). At Castle Nursery, age was a key area of difference that affected children’s daily experiences, particularly in the case of the youngest children.

Age-based hierarchies are a fundamental framework of many schooling systems. As James and others (1998: 73) describe,

Children progress with their same-age peers through a fixed series of educational stages linked to an established, spatial hierarchy of classes. Each of these carries differing obligations and duties in relation to levels of educational attainment.

Age and stage hierarchies have also become accepted truths in early childhood education that are rarely questioned (MacNaughton 2005). For example, most of the

early childhood settings where I have worked have subscribed to the accepted truth about children's age-and-stage requirements. In these settings, age-based differences were a foundational framework for how the spaces were organised and used, and there was little to no crossover between age-based groups of children. At Castle Nursery, in contrast, children and practitioners related to the playroom spaces in far more inclusive and flexible ways. As the preceding section has touched upon, the children at Castle Nursery were indeed divided into two age-based groups. However, they were not expected to exclusively stay with those groups; practitioners supported children's 'boundary crossing' between the different nursery spaces.

For example, one day Naomi and Cerys—two children from the preschool room—spent the morning in the infant and toddler room. They initially giggled a little bit about being there, laughing to each other and saying, 'We're babies now!' Soon, however, they settled into more serious play and even joined the infants and toddlers for gathering time. There was a visitor to the nursery present, who later asked Maria, a practitioner, about why Naomi and Cerys had been there. Maria explained that children were free to visit other spaces, and that Naomi in particular had 'strong ties' to the infant and toddler room, because she had started at the nursery when she was quite young and had therefore spent a lot of time in that space (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2014). In this example, Maria demonstrated the flexibility of how age-based spaces at the nursery were actually used. It did not seem remarkable to her that Naomi and Cerys had been in the infant and toddler playroom. Observing this interaction, I reflected on an experience I had in one of my professional settings. The teachers from the older groups would send their students to my 'baby' room as a punishment: 'If you're going to act like a baby, you can go to the baby room'. Being sent to the baby room indicated that a child had not lived up to expectations regarding his or her position on the age-based hierarchy. In contrast, Maria's reaction to Naomi and Cerys suggested that she did not think of the girls as being 'too old' for the infant and toddler space, or that their visit to the space represented a demotion in their higher status. Instead, the girls were welcomed into the space, where they could explore their own thoughts and feelings about 'being babies' during the course of their play.

By changing the more typical patterns of relationships between children in early childhood settings, practitioners at Castle Nursery indicated a willingness to ‘do things differently’ in a way that facilitated children’s participation (Butler and Teamey 2014: 215). Indeed, looking generally, practitioners at Castle Nursery seemed to resist applying age-based criteria to categorise the children. One practitioner, for example, actively rejected the importance of age, explaining to me that she thought of the babies and toddlers as ‘just little people’ instead of any particular age (field notes, 21 November 2013). However, the fact that chronological age was not an essential reference point for the practitioners did not mean that age-based differences were completely dissolved. Despite the practitioner’s assertion above that she did not ‘see’ age, there were indeed differences drawn between the younger and older children at the nursery. Differences were expressed, for example, in the language that was used to describe the children. The terms ‘babies’, ‘wee ones’, and ‘little ones’ were frequently used by both children and practitioners to describe the younger children, as was ‘big ones’ to refer to the older children (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2013; 8<sup>th</sup> November 2013; 28<sup>th</sup> January 2014; 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2014). Being a ‘little one’—an infant or toddler—did have an impact on children’s daily experiences, particularly regarding inclusion in free-flow play.

For the preschool children, the freedom to move around the nursery was fairly straightforward. As this chapter has discussed, the nursery was not built in an open-plan fashion—all spaces were separated by doors. This was not a big issue for the older children, who could open these doors without much problem. Many of the children in the infant and toddler room, could also open the doors, and therefore exercised similar freedom to move around the nursery. However, the doors between spaces served as ‘harder’ boundaries for the babies and toddlers, who were not able to open them without help.

Notably, doors around the nursery were not propped open in the name of equal participation for the babies and toddlers. A practitioner explained these restrictions as being about safety—particularly in the case of children who could not walk. She pointed out that children who were only able to crawl or bottom-shuffle were less visible and therefore more likely to be stepped on or be struck by a door (field notes,

11<sup>th</sup> June 2014). However, concerns about safety did not mean that the infants and toddlers were completely restricted to their playroom. Instead, their movements around the nursery were directly facilitated by practitioners. Practitioners used a variety of ways of ‘listening to children’—‘not just with our ears, but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation)’ (Rinaldi 2001: 80)—in order to offer support and include the youngest children in free-flow play.

For example, one morning Camilla, who was about a year old, stood by the door in the infant and toddler room until a practitioner, Mia, noticed and invited her to ‘go through’. Camilla had recently started walking, and was still not very steady on her feet. She was also very small, due to some health issues in her infancy. The practitioners were generally protective of Camilla’s safety, although they also acknowledged that she was quite robust and outgoing. In this example, Camilla did go through into the preschool room, followed by Mia. Mia watched Camilla closely, but hung back and gave Camilla a lot of space to walk around on her own. Mia talked casually with the preschool practitioners as Camilla made a few circuits of the space, pausing at the snack table, then the reading area, then the writing table, before making her way to a large play structure. The structure had two levels, reached by a set of tall steps.

When Camilla approached the steps of the play structure, Mia seemed to become more concerned about her safety. She quickly made her way toward Camilla. In the meantime, Camilla began climbing the stairs on the structure, which were very tall compared to her own height. In order to climb, she had to hold the railing, lean back, put her knee on the step, and pull herself up. Mia came over and sat behind her, close enough so that her body would be a barrier if Camilla fell, but not actually touching Camilla or asking if she needed help. As Camilla moved up a stair, so did Mia, maintaining the closeness but also the space between them. Camilla looked back from time to time at Mia, who smiled at her but did not say anything. Camilla paused for a few moments on the top step, looking down at the children below. Then she began to crawl backwards down the stairs. Mia, still behind her, backed down as well, maintaining the closeness between them, but also the space (field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2014).

In this example, Mia and Camilla negotiated a balance of support that worked for both of them, enabling Camilla to engage in the free-flow play and exploration that was such an important part of life in the nursery, while also ensuring that she was physically safe. One way to understand this would be to think of a hybrid and somewhat delicate role for Mia, between protecting Camilla from harm and facilitating her participation. This involved sensitivity and non-verbal communication. Mia did not announce to Camilla that she was there to keep her safe, or otherwise explain her presence on the steps. Their wordless exchanges of glances and smiles seemed to indicate a ‘source of reciprocal communication’ between the two of them (White 2016: 81).

Sensitivity to non-verbal, reciprocal communication was a common thread in the ways that young children were included in the nursery’s practices. In another example, I observed how a practitioner and young child communicated during the process of making their way to the garden. While still in the playroom, Chelsea (the practitioner) asked if anyone would like to go to the garden. Rowan, who was about nine months old, lifted her hands up in response. Chelsea picked Rowan up and sat with Rowan in her lap, helping her put on a coat and hat, and talking to Rowan about what she was doing: ‘Let’s put on your coat, my love, so that you will be nice and warm outside.’ She carried Rowan to the garden and settled down near the sand area. After a few moments, Rowan crawled away from Chelsea, in order to go look at a stone that was sticking up from the sand. She reached the stone, pulled it out of the sand, and explored it by touching it to her mouth. Chelsea watched this and smiled at her a few times, at one point asking, ‘What have you found? A stone!’ (field notes, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

Much like Mia in the previous example, in this situation Chelsea offered flexible support to Rowan. She and Rowan communicated with each other in a variety of ways, including—but going beyond—verbal communication. Moving beyond verbal communication can be quite challenging for adult practitioners. For example, Paradise and others (2014) describe how difficult it was for teachers to stop themselves from giving constant verbal instruction to students during a task, even when the teachers had been given instructions to focus on non-verbal guidance.

Chelsea and Mia, in contrast, seemed very comfortable with non-verbal communication—finding a way to reach understanding across difference between themselves and the very young children (Young 1997).

Practitioners working with infants and young toddlers also supported free-flow play within the infant and toddler playroom itself. One way they did this was by creating spaces where children could easily move around and explore. The furniture in the room was arranged in such a way that there were many open spaces and pathways for children to move through. The children, for their part, took full advantage of this. For example, on my first day at Castle Nursery, I sat in the infant and toddler room, watching what was going on around me in the playroom space. One of the things I noticed was how dynamic the children were—how they seemed to be moving constantly around the space. Given that the children were all under three years old, there were a variety of ways that children moved themselves around. Many of the children had already learned to walk independently. However, other children used different tactics to move around the space. Some were still unsteady on their feet, grasping shelves and furniture to support themselves, dropping into a crawl when there was not anything to hold onto. One of the children had recently learned to crawl, and seemed to relish this new skill. He pounded his hands and knees into the ground as he crawled around the space, making such a noise that one of the practitioners winced and chuckled, ‘we always know where Julian is!’ Sally, another child, used a skilful ‘bottom shuffle’—sitting up and scooting along on her bottom to get around the space (field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2013).

The youngest children, then, were included in free-flow play in a variety of ways. They were able to move around the infant and toddler playroom itself in fluid ways that were guided by their play. They were also supported by practitioners to go into other parts of the nursery, requiring subtle and multi-method ways of ‘listening’ to young children and creating opportunities that shaped their expressions of agency. Practitioners worked more closely with the babies and toddlers to facilitate their inclusion than was generally required for the pre-schoolers. Their efforts seemed to be directed at a similar goal to their work with older children: allowing them to



exercise agency and make choices about where they would like to go and how to spend their time.

The efforts put forward by practitioners meant that the youngest children were accepted into everyday life alongside everyone else—another way in which practices at Castle Nursery seemed designed to lessen age-based hierarchies and create more egalitarian relationships. Greater chronological age did not bring higher status (James et al. 1998). Despite some undeniable distinctions between the ‘big’ and ‘little’ children, the youngest children were not sequestered away from the others, or confined to their own playroom. Instead they were just as visible around the nursery, and had access to the same spaces, as the older children.

#### *4.4.2 Tensions in negotiating care and participation*

Thus far, this chapter has established that children’s free-flow play was not a peripheral or low-status activity at Castle Nursery, but instead formed the backbone of daily life. Free-flow play was made possible in large part by the ways that time and spaces were organised at the nursery. Through a lens of children’s rights, this suggests a mainly informal interpretation of children’s participation rights. Rather than participation occurring when ‘named and operated’ formally by adults (Malone and Hartung 2010: 33), participation was embedded into a range of practices. Participation was also interconnected with other rights: children’s right to play, for example, enshrined in Article 31 of the UNCRC.

In the process of establishing the importance of free-flow play as a means of informal participation, the chapter has presented life at Castle Nursery as characterised by (mainly) harmonious relationships, facilitation and communication. However, proponents of children’s participation have been critiqued for portraying participation as a ‘bland’ and ‘cosy’ process (Woodhead 2010: xxii), with Cairns (2006: 218) noting that participation projects are often ‘uncritically accepted as making a positive contribution’ without a deeper examination of how rhetoric matches up with reality. While Castle Nursery was, indeed, a fairly harmonious environment, tensions did emerge as practitioners tried to ‘live’ their participatory values.

One particular area of tension at Castle Nursery was the negotiation of the ‘care’ element of early learning and childcare. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) point out, ‘care’ is often ill-defined in ECEC contexts. For example, ‘care’ may refer generally to the custodial care of children (Sims 2014), or a general sense that ECEC should be a nurturing environment (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). In this section I use ‘care’ to refer specifically to practices of care, such as feeding and nappy changing—practices that early childhood practitioners are expected to undertake as part of their work (e.g. The Scottish Government 2014a). Care practices are not neutral, as demonstrated by the wide ranging literature on relational ‘care ethics’ (e.g. Tong and Williams 2014). Framing care as a relational, ethical issue implies that:

...there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life. Normatively, care ethics seeks to maintain relationships by contextualizing and promoting the well-being of care-givers and care-receivers in a network of social relations.

(Sander-Staudt 2016: no pagination)

Care ethics have been developed and analysed across diverse areas of study and encompass a large body of literature. It is outside the scope of this chapter to provide a thorough review of that literature (for this, see Tronto 1993, Bath 2013, Tong and Williams 2014). However, a key tension emerges from the care ethics literature, which relates to how Castle Nursery practitioners negotiated care practices. As Goldstein (1998: 252) argues, the relationship between the ‘one-caring’ and the ‘cared-for’ in the early childhood setting can be contentious. At Castle Nursery, where children experienced a great deal of freedom to shape their own daily activities, negotiations of care practices could sometimes be fraught.

Tensions regarding care practices were particularly visible in the infant and toddler space, where many children were still in nappies. As I remembered from my own time as a practitioner, the scheduling of nappy changes can be a sensitive issue. In order to make sure that all children are changed regularly, practitioners may impose a schedule of nappy changes that is designed for efficiency. This approach may help ensure that children do not spend extended periods of time in soiled diapers, avoiding health issues such as nappy rash (Atherton and Mills 2004). However, an

‘efficiency’ approach can be disruptive and frustrating for children, whose activities are interrupted. For example, in one of my previous work settings, there were three predetermined times for nappy changes, and at each of these set times the children’s diapers would be changed in alphabetical order. In contrast, Castle Nursery practitioners were far more flexible about nappy changing. There were set times of day when nappy changing would happen, but these were more of a broad framework than a rigid timetabling. One practitioner was generally assigned to ‘personal care’, as nappy changing was called. The practitioner would gradually make her way through all of the children’s nappies, rather than rush through for efficiency’s sake. However, despite the more flexible approach to nappies, there were still examples of tensions that arose between the practitioners’ agenda and children’s.

For example, Lily experienced great frustration when a nappy change interfered with her desire to go outside. She had attempted to join a group of children who were going to the garden, but the practitioner accompanying them had noticed that Lily’s nappy was soiled. The practitioner gently blocked Lily’s way, crouched down, and said to her, ‘Lily, I think your nappy needs done.’ Straightening up, the practitioner made eye contact with Beth, another practitioner in the room, and then assured Lily that she could come outside as soon as her nappy was changed. This explanation did not stop Lily from feeling unhappy about being left behind. She stood at the door and shouted, ‘Ga-den!’ with increasing frustration. Beth, noticing this, came over to her and explained that she could go to the garden after having her nappy changed, ‘We don’t want you to get a sore bottom!’ Lily was not convinced by this. She responded by shouting, ‘Ga-den!’ angrily and shaking her head. At this point, a third practitioner—the one who was actually doing the nappy changes—came over. Reaching down toward Lily, she said, ‘Let’s get your nappy done so you can go outside’. Lily reached up and took her hand, and the practitioner led her to the nappy changing area. Shortly afterward, Lily emerged from the changing area and Beth brought her outside to join the others (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

In another example, Kirstie was cuddling a soft toy and looking at a book when she was approached by Jean, a practitioner, to have her nappy checked and possibly changed. Kirstie quite firmly shook her head and said, ‘No’. Jean seemed a bit taken

aback, and tried to convince her, saying, 'It would be very quick.' Kirstie once again said no. Jean seemed unsure, but responded, 'Ok' and went away to change another child's nappy, returning after a few minutes had passed. This time, rather than ask Kirstie if it was ok to change her nappy, Jean instead asked, 'Which nappies would you like?' Kirstie immediately replied, 'My own.' They went together to Kirstie's bag, but there were not any nappies there. Jean asked Kirstie, 'Do you want to go choose one?' Kirstie nodded and they went off to the changing area together, where Kirstie chose a nappy from the box of spare ones and climbed up onto the changing table (field notes, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

As Brooker (2010) argues, an approach to care that involves respect for the competence of young children may cause tensions regarding whose priorities are foregrounded. Both of these examples illustrate a clash in priorities between children and practitioners. Neither Lily nor Kirstie wanted their nappies changed when practitioners approached them, but there seemed to be limits to how accommodating of the children's wishes practitioners were willing to be. In both cases, practitioners' actions could be understood as looking after children's physical health—an essential part of the 'care' element of early learning and childcare (Shin 2015). This was particularly the case with Lily, where practitioners were concerned about her staying too long in a soiled nappy. However, it seemed that both Lily and Kirstie felt interrupted and irritated by care practices. Goldstein (1998: 252) attributes care-related conflicts between practitioners and children to young children's 'low levels' of foresight and judgement regarding what is inappropriate or unsafe (Goldstein 1998: 252). Practitioners at Castle Nursery would have been unlikely to agree with this sweeping deficit view of young children—but nappy changing did seem to be an arena where practitioners' agendas were at times given precedence over the wishes of young children.

Children's sleeping arrangements were another area of care where tensions sometimes arose. Many of the younger children were still having daytime naps, some even having more than one. Sleeping is another practice of care in early childhood settings where 'efficiency' agendas can be put into place. For example, children may all be expected to sleep at the same time, or at least rest quietly on a mat, so that

practitioners can have planning time or go on their lunch break (Pattinson et al. 2014, Nothard et al. 2015). At Castle Nursery, in contrast, the young children's daytime sleep routines were flexible and tailored to the individual child—there was not a universal 'rest time' when all children were expected to be sleeping. Similarly, decisions about where to sleep were usually made by the children. The infant and toddler room had two main options for where children could sleep: in the dedicated sleep room, which was a small room separated from the main playroom space, or children could sleep in their buggies, usually in the garden. In keeping with general practices at the nursery, practitioners tried to follow the wishes of the child regarding his or her preferences about where to sleep.

Once again, practitioners' sensitivity to children's preferences did lead to mainly harmonious interactions about sleeping. However, Brooker (2010) particularly highlights the 'triangle of care' between children, parents and practitioners as a potential site of contestation. At Castle Nursery, tensions did indeed arise during my fieldwork between Fergus, his parents, and practitioners regarding where he should sleep. These tensions came to light one afternoon, just after lunch, when Mary, a practitioner, came out of the sleep room holding Fergus, who was crying. Red-faced and sweaty, he clung to Mary, who soothed him while looking quite distressed herself. She went over to Sandra, another practitioner, and explained the situation. Fergus's parents were concerned that he was not sleeping well enough at nursery because he usually slept in his buggy. That morning at dropoff, his mother had requested that he sleep in a cot in the sleep room instead. However, Fergus himself did not seem to agree with this decision; he had stayed awake in the sleep room, crying and waking up the other children despite Mary's efforts to soothe him to sleep. Now the practitioner was not sure whose wishes to respect.

Sandra, the second practitioner, seemed equally conflicted about what to do. She thought it through out loud, saying 'No, I don't know...he wants to be in his buggy, but Mum and Dad want him in a cot...it's so hard when this happens.' Using a hopeful tone of voice, she asked Fergus if he wanted to sleep in a cot, explaining that 'Mummy and Daddy think you'll sleep really well'. This did not convince Fergus; he wailed, 'Nooooooo!' and began crying again. Eventually the two practitioners

decided that some sleep was better than no sleep, and asked Fergus if he wanted to sleep in his buggy. He agreed, but was so agitated that he was not able to relax. He ended up staying awake, and was brought back into the playroom—going on to have an afternoon where he seemed very tired (field notes, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

As Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 92) have argued, the ‘care’ element of early learning and childcare can be understood as an ethic that foregrounds ‘attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness to the Other.’ Bath (2013) also explicitly connects an ethic of care to an ethic of listening to children. In Fergus’s case, practitioners seemed to be pulled in multiple directions. Both Mary and Sandra seemed distressed by the situation—it seemed that they would have preferred to listen to Fergus and let him sleep in a buggy. However, they also seemed to feel obligated to meet his parents’ expectations that he would sleep in a cot. Sandra’s comment that ‘It’s so hard when this happens’ suggests that Fergus’s case was not the first time that practitioners felt torn between parents’ and children’s wishes.

Discussion of the ‘caring’ element of early learning and childcare has tended to be uncritically positive—reinforcing the ‘hegemony of nice’ by focusing on smiles and hugs, without examining the underlying politics of caring (Goldstein 1998: 245). As Fergus’s situation illustrates, the negotiation of caring routines between children and adults can become a less ‘nice’ struggle for control. As this chapter has argued, Castle Nursery was an environment where practitioners generally did not try to control children’s experiences. However, the arena of care seemed to throw up some barriers to children’s participation. Care practices shaped the enactment of children’s agency in particular ways. While much of practitioners’ work seemed directed toward children making free choices, during care routines the choices on offer were, at times, more limited. In all three examples presented above, children’s agency mainly took the shape of their resistance to adult demands—Lily by shouting at the door, Kirsty by politely saying ‘no’ to a nappy change, and Fergus’s tearful protests about sleeping in a cot. This is not to suggest that practitioners were blithely overriding children’s preferences. As all three examples illustrate, practitioners did interact with the children with sensitivity and did try to find ways to ‘listen’ to the

children they were working with. In Fergus's case, practitioners seemed particularly upset about the conflicting demands they were navigating.

Hierarchical views of young children and adults might suggest that adults know best and that young children 'cannot understand much' about matters that concern them (Alderson 2008: 141). Even at Castle Nursery, where adult-child hierarchies were purposefully lessened, practitioners seemed reluctant to cede control entirely to children when it came to matters of care. Lily's example in particular illustrates that children's health could become a 'hard limit' to how fully children's views were taken into account by practitioners. Children's competence about their own care was respected, but only to a point; practitioners were willing to negotiate and discuss these issues with children, but not to let children take the lead entirely. The limits thrown up by care practices seemed to be an enduring tension in how children's participation was negotiated at the nursery, unlikely to come to any clear resolution.

#### *4.4.3 Section conclusion*

The section has continued to answer my second research question, regarding how practitioners created opportunities and constraints that shaped children's enactments of agency at the nursery. The section began by examining how age was negotiated as an area of difference at the nursery, looking at the experiences of the youngest children—the infants and toddlers. Practitioners took pains to include young children in the nursery's ethos of free flow play, facilitating children's movement around the nursery spaces. By doing so, practitioners created opportunities for young children's agency, and further lessened age-based hierarchies, this time between children themselves. With age did not come higher status—instead, the youngest children had access to the same spaces at the nursery as the older children, often mixing together.

This section has also touched on my fourth research question, which asks about tensions and challenges that arose in the ways that children's participation was lived and negotiated at the setting. The youngest children's inclusion in free-flow play was facilitated by subtle, sensitive communication between practitioners and children, in which children's wishes were listened to and respected. However, there were limits to how much control practitioners were willing to cede to children, particularly

babies and toddlers. For example, the doors between spaces were kept closed in the name of protecting babies and toddlers—meaning that the youngest children could not move around as freely as older children. Similarly, practitioners were not willing to forgo nappy changes in the name of children’s participation. While these restrictions may seem like common sense to adults, they do illustrate that children’s participation and the lessening of hierarchies had limits. Children’s health seemed to be an area of specific tensions for both practitioners and the very young children at the setting.

#### **4.5 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has begun to answer three of my research questions. The chapter began by exploring how Castle Nursery’s approach to participation was situated in wider policy and practice trends, particularly trends in early childhood education and care (Question 1). As a Scottish early learning and childcare setting, Castle Nursery operated in a policy/practice context where children’s participation was rhetorically valued, but where a ‘familiar list of challenges’ existed regarding how that rhetoric became reality. Scottish guidance for early learning and childcare advocates play-based, child-centred practices, while at the same time highlighting the critical nature of the early childhood period for shaping children’s future. Therefore, practitioners may feel unsure about their role in planning and managing children’s play-based experiences. In keeping with Scottish trends, Castle Nursery did indeed foster play-based, child-centred practices. However, the ‘free-flow’ play found at the nursery seemed to be based more on Froebelian principles than on Scottish Government advice.

The chapter has also begun to answer Question 2, regarding how practitioners created opportunities and constraints that shaped how children’s agency was enacted. Castle Nursery practitioners interpreted play-based early childhood practice in a way that involved a great deal of scope for children to shape their own daily experiences. Time was organised flexibly so that children could pursue their interests, and practitioners supported children’s fluid movements around the spaces of the nursery. Practices that foregrounded children’s own preferences also served to lessen adult-



child hierarchies and to create more egalitarian relationships between young children and practitioners than may be found at more structured early childhood settings.

Practitioners also sought to lessen age-based hierarchies between children themselves, ensuring that the very youngest children had access to all of the spaces at the nursery and were included in the ethos of free-flow play.

Finally, the chapter has touched on Question 4, which focuses on tensions and ambiguities in how children's participation was negotiated at the setting. While practitioners sought to facilitate participation and to lessen hierarchies between themselves and the children, there were limits. Children's health seemed to be one of these limits, with practitioners being reluctant to forgo nappy changes and feeling torn between children's own preferences and those of parents regarding sleep routines.

The next chapter continues to look at children's free-flow play at Castle Nursery, now through a pedagogical lens. The intersection of children's participation, pedagogy and power is explored.

# Chapter 5 Learning through play: a pedagogy of relationships

## 5.1 Introduction

Play, in early childhood settings, is often put forward as the ‘highest form’ of children’s learning (e.g. Bruce 2012: 13). This chapter looks at free-flow play at Castle Nursery through a pedagogical lens. Over the course of the chapter, several research questions are addressed:

**Question 2:** How do practitioners create opportunities and constraints that shape how children’s agency is enacted at the setting?

**Question 3:** How does children’s participation intersect with pedagogy and power at the setting?

**Question 4:** What tensions and challenges arose in the course of living children’s participation at the setting?

The chapter argues that the practitioners at Castle Nursery fostered a pedagogy of relationships. Relationships, as the chapter explores, included both human and non-human actors; a ‘relational materialist’ approach (Hultman and Taguchi 2010). Therefore, the chapter begins by describing the role of the physical environment, and the open-ended nature of children’s learning experiences with that environment.

The chapter then turns to an examination of roles for practitioners in the pedagogy of relationships. Namely, the chapter looks at three main elements: prioritizing children’s knowledge, facilitating dialogue, and lifelong learning.

Finally, the chapter presents a composite account of a day at Wild Wood, the Forest School site. In this closing section, the chapter discusses how children and practitioners negotiated a pedagogy of relationships together, through collaborative engagement. The chapter also touches on some tensions that arose at Wild Wood,

noting that even at Castle Nursery there were limits to how far practitioners were willing to take a participatory approach.

## **5.2 A pedagogy of relationships: creating many possibilities for learning**

### *5.2.1 Creating and interpreting the physical environment*

Barad (2012: 52) argues that ‘knowing is a direct material engagement’ involving entanglement between various human and non-human actors. At Castle Nursery, the emphasis on free-flow play meant that children could interact with many different fellow actors during the course of their day, and that those fellow actors became incorporated into children’s play in open-ended ways. Looking through the lens of my own practice background, I found daily life at Castle Nursery to be incredibly dynamic: it was like no other early years setting I have worked in or visited.

For example, one morning I observed three children—David, Richard and Beth—stalking through the corridor, holding small Lego spaceships they had built. The spaceships were ‘Imperial starships, like Star Wars’ and the children were using the ships to ‘look for baddies’. Soaring their starships through the air, the children moved down the corridor, swooping the ships into the nooks and crannies (field notes, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013). About a month later, I saw the same three children again, now running down the hall under a fleece blanket. They were using the blanket as a spaceship. As they ran past me, David told me that he was the pilot. Beth, in the middle, noticed that the blanket had slipped off of Richard’s head. ‘Get on board, Richard!’ she shouted, but Richard was too far behind. ‘Oh no!’ he shouted, rolling to the side of the corridor. ‘Turn around!’ David called, and piloted the spaceship back to where Richard was waiting. Beth lifted up the side of the blanket. ‘Get on board!’ she called again, and Richard ducked underneath (field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2014).

In this example, non-human actors like the Lego and the blanket were a core element of the children’s play. Rather than see the Lego and blanket as passive, fixed objects, Lenz Taguchi (2010b, 2011: 38) suggests that materials can be understood as

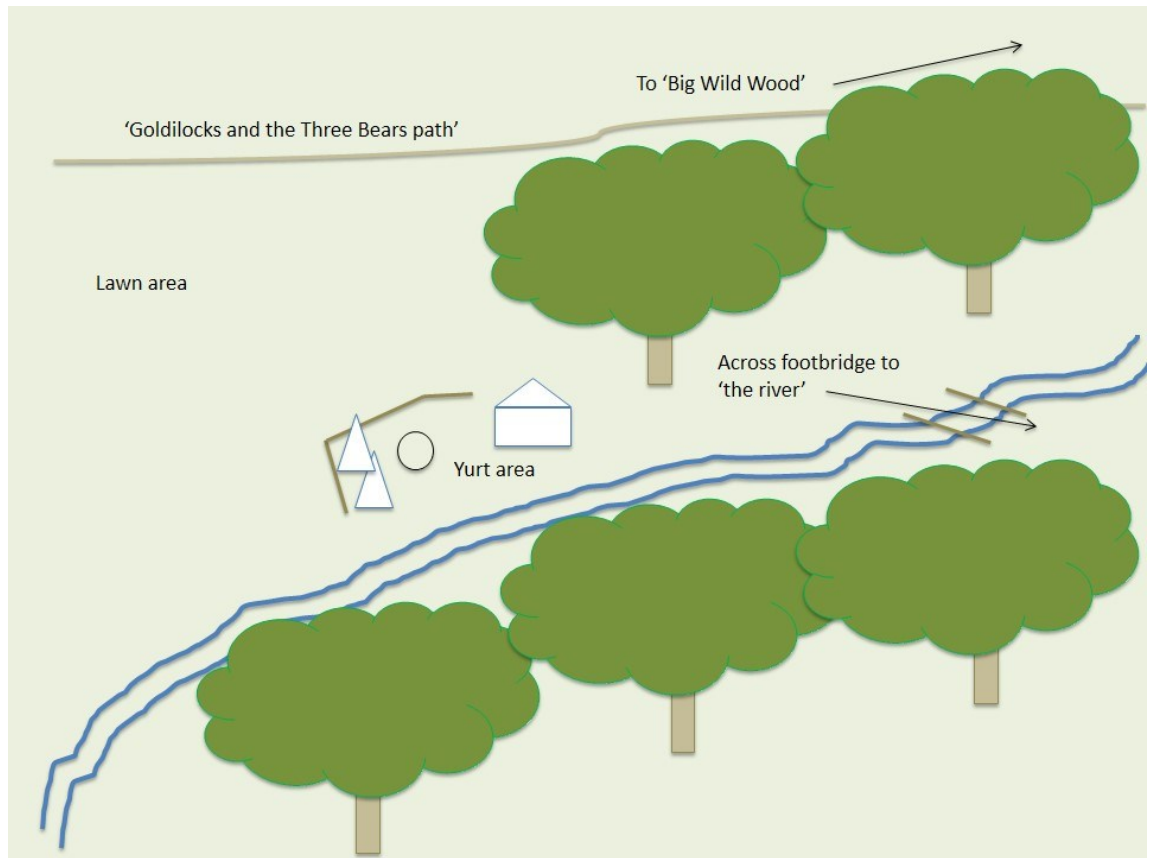
actively creating possibilities for play. For instance, in the children's initial spaceship game, the small size of the Lego starships created the possibility for the children to search for baddies in the tiny spaces around the corridor, shaping the course of their play. Similarly, in their later game, the floppiness of the blanket created the moment where Richard 'fell out' of the spaceship, leading to a dramatic rescue by Beth and David. Through a relational materialist lens, the Lego and blanket could even be understood as playing with the children (Lenz Taguchi 2011).

In the early learning and childcare literature, the physical environment is often referred to as the 'third teacher' (Strong-Wilson and Ellis 2007: 40, Dowling 2010). Dowling (2010) argues that practitioners' beliefs about how children learn are reflected in the provision of materials, the allocation of space, and how those materials and spaces are allowed to be used. In Froebelian literature, the environment is also seen as quite important. Saracho and Spodek (1995) note that, in Froebel's own kindergartens, children's play was in fact fairly structured by adults. However, this practice has evolved in many contemporary Froebelian settings, with a great deal of emphasis placed on allowing 'free access to a rich range of materials that promote open-ended opportunities for play, representation and creativity' (The Froebel Trust no date).

At Castle Nursery, children were encouraged to learn through their free-flow play rather than through direct teaching or adult-planned activities. The physical learning environment, therefore, was very important to practitioners and had been cultivated with great care. Both playrooms at Castle Nursery were stocked with a variety of open-ended materials, such as large and small wooden blocks, Lego, tools for writing and mark-making, and other playthings such as toy cars, baby dolls, and dressing-up clothes. Each playroom had a book corner and a 'house' area with play ovens, pots and pans, dishes and cutlery. The art room housed an easel, usually used for painting, a water table, and a work bench with real tools, as well as other arts and crafts materials such as more paper, pens and sellotape, clay and modelling tools, fabric, wool, sewing materials, and recycled materials such as bottle lids, egg cartons, and plastic containers. There were usually some kind of natural materials displayed in the art room as well—for example, pinecones that had been collected by

the children at Wild Wood (field notes, 11 June 2014). The garden at the nursery was a highly ‘naturalised space’ (Nedovic and Morrissey 2013: 281), incorporating elements such as plants, trees, stones, sand, soil and water alongside climbing structures, a slide, and a swing. There were large metal drums and sets of chimes that children could play. Tricycles and balance bikes were available outside, as were child-sized rakes and spades. An outdoor cupboard housed a variety of other play materials for use in the garden, such as pots and pans and toy construction vehicles.

The Forest School site, Wild Wood, was also a rich learning environment. Wild Wood was a large, privately owned outdoor centre, reached by a 20-minute drive from the main nursery building. The site incorporated quite a few purpose-built elements, such as an archery range, a climbing wall, and a swing set. However, the children and practitioners from Castle Nursery mainly went to the less cultivated areas of Wild Wood during their visits, which are pictured in Figure 5.1. These included various points along the river, which flowed through the site, walks along the Goldilocks and Three Bears path (named by the children because of several disused cottages along the way that reminded them of the story), and longer walks through the forest up to Big Wild Wood, also named by the children (because the trees were bigger there).



*Figure 5:1 A visual representation of different areas at Wild Wood*

As one practitioner described, there had initially been some ambiguity about Wild Wood as a learning environment. When trips to Wild Wood first began, practitioners thought they should bring materials and activities to the site—crayons and paper was one specific example. However, in her opinion, bringing even these open-ended materials to Wild Wood curtailed children’s explorations. When crayons and paper were *not* provided, she said, children realised that charcoal from the fire pit could be used to make drawings on rocks and logs (field notes, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014). In the same conversation, this practitioner noted that the site itself changed significantly with the seasons—the leaves turning colour in the autumn, frost coating the grass and plants in the winter, mud appearing in the spring and berries in the summer, to name a few examples. For her, these changes were themselves opportunities for children to learn about the natural world and their relationships with it. The Wild Wood site, then,

was conceptualised as intrinsically being a rich learning environment, without the need for practitioners to supplement what was available.

While Castle Nursery was a more ‘planned’ environment than Wild Wood, practitioners did not make many changes to the environment there during my fieldwork. This stability was explained to me by the head of centre as a way of supporting children’s explorations of the spaces. Because children could come to the nursery and know where things were, they would be better able to make choices about what they would like to do, and their play could progress and deepen over time (field notes, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2014). However, this did not mean that the materials in the environment went completely unchanged during my fieldwork. One main source of change was children themselves, who often brought toys and other items from home and incorporated them into their play. For example, during my fieldwork children brought in costumes, special pyjamas with a cape attached, new lunch bags, a purse full of tiny ‘magical’ items, a toy ambulance, toy trains, sparkly slippers, a large plastic truck, and a karaoke microphone.

The fact that children were allowed to bring in items from home illustrates a key quality of children’s participation at Castle Nursery. While the practitioners greatly valued the rich learning environments and created them with care, children’s contributions were also valued. Rather than forbid home toys from being brought into the nursery, or requiring children to keep their home toys in their bags or on a shelf, children’s toys were ‘in the mix’ with the rest of the nursery materials (see Kable 2011, for a spirited discussion of this issue). The learning environments were not controlled by practitioners in order to preserve some kind of pedagogical purity—implying that practitioners did not plan the environment with specific, fixed learning outcomes in mind. Instead, children’s learning was allowed to evolve through an open-ended process of making connections with ‘other human beings, things, artefacts, milieus and environments’ (Lenz Taguchi 2011, p. 40).

### *5.2.2 Learning through connections: creativity and problem-solving*

At Castle Nursery, because of the emphasis on children’s playful exploration, there were rich possibilities for open-ended connections to be made. Children’s learning

was not considered to be isolated from their everyday experiences. Instead, learning took place ‘in the middle of things’ (Lenz Taguchi 2010a: 61) with great potential for what might be learned and how. For example, one morning in the preschool room, Emily Too was sitting at the writing table. She had been drawing on a piece of paper, and now wanted to use some sellotape. She went to get the dispenser and pulled out a length of tape. It promptly got tangled and stuck to itself and to her paper. As she attempted to untwist it and flatten it out, the tape stuck to her hands. She began running her hands over the paper, noticing when they were hampered by the stickiness of the tape. She experimented with sticking her hand to the paper and lifting it up, chuckling to herself.

Another child, Jake was also at the table. He had not been interacting very much with Emily Too, but when she began playing with the sellotape, he seemed inspired to join in. He used scissors to cut a length of sellotape which, much like Emily Too’s, became tangled and twisted. Jake used his scissors, stuck to the paper with sellotape, to lift the paper up, saying ‘Look at this!’ The sun happened to be shining through a nearby window, and it cast a shadow of Jake’s paper onto the table. He noticed that he could move the shadow of his own hand so that it merged with the shadow of the paper. ‘Can you see my hand?’ he asked Emily Too, and then moved his hand so that its shadow emerged. ‘Now can you see it?’ He and Emily Too found this phenomenon so interesting that they continued to sit with their papers, the sellotape and the sunlight until it was time to tidy up for lunch (field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

Lenz Taguchi (2010a: 37) argues that pedagogical encounters involve certain ‘turning points’ that change the learning experience. In the above example, one turning point could be the moment when the sellotape twisted and became stuck to the paper. This moment seemed to change the trajectory of Emily Too’s experience with these materials. Another turning point could be when the sun shined onto Jake’s paper, creating a shadow. Materials such as the sellotape and paper could therefore be understood as enacting agency: ‘making a difference in some other agent’s action’ (Latour 2005: 71). To recognise the agency enacted by materials is not to argue that objects have thoughts or intentions (Pickering 1993), but does acknowledge that



non-human actors participate in social life (Latour 2005). By broadening the definition of ‘social actor’ to include the non-human, educators might think differently about how spaces, time, and materials are organised and what possibilities are afforded by that organisation (Lenz Taguchi 2010a).

Practitioners at Castle Nursery seemed willing to step back and allow children to explore connections with both human and non-human elements of the nursery environment. In doing so, the children seemed to incorporate a great deal of creativity into their daily life at the nursery. While the term ‘creativity’ has multiple, contested meanings, here creativity can be defined broadly as involving ‘imaginative and inventive ways of thinking and doing’ (Prentice 2000: 146). At Castle Nursery, children’s creativity was often quite playful. For example, Emily Too once spent time in the art room making a gift. She fashioned a box out of folded paper and sellotape and wrapped the whole thing up in a piece of fabric, and placed it conspicuously on the table next to me. When I asked what was inside the gift, she whispered, ‘My heart socks!’ and gleefully tore off the fabric, revealing a pair of socks with heart shaped designs. Who was the gift for? ‘Myself!’ she chortled, hugging the socks to her chest (field notes, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2014).

While children’s creativity often involved processes of making, such as Emily Too’s gift, another notable element of creativity at Castle Nursery was children’s confident approaches to problem-solving. Freire (1970: 65) proposed that ‘problem-posing education’ offered scope for reflection, creativity, and collaborative inquiry. In problem-posing education, rather than transmitting fixed knowledge (a ‘banking’ model), teachers engage on more equal footing with students—taking a dialogical approach that is rooted in real experiences (Kolb 2014). Problem-posing education encourages critical thinking not only about the subject at hand, but also about the learning process itself (Shor 1993). While Castle Nursery did not subscribe to a formalised ‘problem based learning’ approach (e.g. Walker et al. 2015), the practice of problem-posing and problem solving were key elements of pedagogy at the setting.

A problem, broadly defined, is not necessarily negative, but ‘something thrown in front of you’—a task, proposal, or question, for example (Adair 2013: 43). Many of the problems that children encountered were ‘posed’ by emergent connections and turning points that occurred during their play. For example, one afternoon in the garden, Ossian and Ryan were playing with a small toy car, running it around the top of a covered barrel. Ryan accidentally dropped the toy car through a hole in the cover, and it fell to the bottom of the barrel—far below where the boys could reach. While Ryan pressed his face to the barrel cover, keeping a close eye on the whereabouts of the car, Ossian ran to get a stick. He shouted, ‘Got it!’ as he managed to snag a corner of the car with the stick—but the car slipped off the stick, and the stick slid into the barrel along with the car. ‘Don’t got it!’ Ossian called. Ryan went and got another stick, but it was too short to reach the car. Then Ossian tried to use a spade to retrieve the car. None of these tactics worked, and in the end they left the car in the barrel and moved on to play somewhere else (field notes, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2014).

The particular problem of the car in the barrel emerged from the ‘intra-actions’ between many different actors. ‘Intra-actions’ is a term coined by Barad (2007: 33) which ‘signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies’. Barad argues that the more commonly used term, ‘*inter*-actions’, emphasises the separateness of social actors and the individuation of their agency. The term ‘intra-action’, in contrast, highlights that agency is not a pre-existing quality held by individual humans or things. Instead, agencies can only emerge in relationship to each other (Barad 2007). In the above example from my fieldnotes, the problem faced by Ossian and Ryan could therefore be understood as being created by the entangled agencies of Ossian, Ryan, the car, barrel and sticks, among other actors. Phenomena such as gravity and friction could also be framed as fellow social actors contributing to the situation. By allowing children the time and space to explore the physical environment through play, practitioners at Castle Nursery created conditions for Ossian and Ryan to learn about the various agential qualities of these different social actors, and to negotiate the ‘problems’ that emerged because of those qualities.

Over the course of my fieldwork I was consistently struck by children’s willingness to address problems without involving practitioners. For example, one afternoon at

Wild Wood, the children and practitioners had walked to a shallow area of the river where children often chose to visit. On this day, many of the children were wearing waterproof wellies, and waded into the water right away. Maddie, however, was only wearing semi-waterproof snowboots. She hovered at the edge of the river, walking in slowly and pausing as she noticed the water getting deeper. 'I'm only allowed to get wet up to here,' she told another child, pointing to where the rubber part of her boot ended. It was not clear where the rule about not getting wet came from. The practitioners did not ban children from getting wet—quite the contrary, in fact, as being wet was generally seen as an opportunity for discussion and learning. In any case, Maddie watched the other children wade around, but stayed near the edges of the river, in the shallow water. She kept asking the other children how deep the water was where they were.

At one point, Maddie waded further into the water, attempting to cross over to where her good friend Christine was playing. She spotted a deeper area of water in her path. She called to Christine, 'How deep is it?' Christine, who was wearing tall wellie boots, waded across to the opposite bank to where there was a pile of sticks. She chose a long one and brought it over to the area of the river that was in question, lowering the stick into the water until it touched bottom. Christine pulled the stick out, and showed Maddie that the stick had absorbed water and darkened. The darkened area represented a point of measurement, which Christine explained to Maddie, telling her, 'It's this deep.' Maddie looked sceptically at the darkened area of the stick, then back at her boots. According to the measurement on the stick, the water would go over the rubber part of her boots. Maddie returned to the shore (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

Maddie's example suggests—as do the previous examples presented in this section—that children's confident approaches to exploring the physical environment were strongly linked to other elements of the pedagogical approach at the nursery. For example, in a setting where children's experiences were more closely managed, their confidence about problem-solving would perhaps have been different. In the example presented above, two practitioners were nearby, but Maddie did not involve them in her situation. Practitioners also did not involve themselves in the situation—

for example, one practitioner was watching Maddie and Christine, but did not join in to steer their explorations. Instead, Maddie and Christine worked together to answer the question ‘posed’ by the connections that emerged between the water and Maddie’s boots. The children’s robust approach to creatively addressing problems was arguably supported by the ‘enabling context’ created by practitioners (Davis et al. 2012: 196).

### *5.2.3 Section conclusion*

Building on the first findings chapter, this section has continued to address research question two, which asks how practitioners created opportunities and constraints that shaped how children’s agency was enacted at the setting. Simultaneously, the section has also made a start to answering research question three, regarding how children’s participation intersected with pedagogy and power at the setting.

At Castle Nursery, the pedagogical approach seemed to create many different possibilities for children’s learning—rather than focus on fixed, predetermined outcomes. Children’s participation and agency were intrinsic to how practitioners supported learning. The ethos of free-flow play created many opportunities for children to explore the physical learning environments and make creative connections. The section argued that children’s agency was ‘entangled’ with the agencies of other social actors, including non-human actors. Practitioners cultivated rich physical learning environments, prioritizing open-ended materials, in order to facilitate children’s learning through creative play. Through their play, children explored the agential qualities of many different social actors, particularly negotiating the problems and questions that those qualities created.

Practitioners did not only play a background or enabling role, but also sometimes directly supported children’s learning. The next section therefore teases out some roles for practitioners in a pedagogy of relationships.

### **5.3 Role for practitioners in a pedagogy of relationships**

#### *5.3.1 Prioritizing children's knowledge*

During a conversation I had with several practitioners, they expressed frustration that outsiders perceived the nursery as being 'laissez-faire', or a 'free-for-all' in which children did 'whatever they wanted' (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014). These quotes illustrate that while practitioners at Castle Nursery did emphasise children's free-flowing play, they still saw a key role for themselves. For example, as these same practitioners noted, while Froebel did put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of a rich learning environment, he equally emphasised the importance of relationships between children and adults in the process of children's learning and development (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014). At Castle Nursery, one way that practitioners more directly supported children's learning was to explicitly prioritise children's knowledge.

An illustrative example of this can be seen in the naming practices at the nursery. There was a mixture of conventional-sounding names for nursery spaces—'the corridor', 'the garden'—and more creative, sometimes whimsical names that were coined by children. Creative names were particularly evident at Wild Wood—in fact, even the name 'Wild Wood' had been coined by one of the children, when the nursery first started running trips to the site. Many of the areas within Wild Wood had also been named by the children. The path along the back of the lawn, for example, was dotted with several small, derelict cabins. Because of the cabins, the children referred to the path by various names such as 'Goldilocks's Path' and 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' House'. On one of my visits to Wild Wood, the group went to an area of the site called 'the Bumpalumpas'—named after a story one of the children had told about magical creatures who lived in the woods nearby (field notes, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

The children had also named some of the birds that tended to lurk around the central yurt area, ready to pick up scraps of food that the children had left behind. These birds were known as Mr. Robin, Cheeky Crow, and Mr Magpie. New names were

invented all the time; for example, at some point during my fieldwork the name Rosie Crow began to be used by the children. I discovered this one day at Wild Wood, when there were two crows hopping around the site. When I commented that there were ‘two Cheeky Crows today’, I was immediately corrected by the children I was sitting with. ‘That’s Rosie Crow,’ said Beth. ‘Yeah, that’s Rosie Crow,’ Jacob echoed. ‘Rosie Crow is the mum. Cheeky Crow is the baby,’ Beth said firmly, pointing to each of the crows (field notes, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2014).

The names for places and creatures at Wild Wood were adopted by all of the practitioners that I observed during Wild Wood visits, demonstrating the sticking power of children’s terminology. Naming practices can promote powerful messages of inclusion or exclusion (Kostanski and Puzey 2016) and reflect specific experiences and priorities. For example, an ‘official’ street name can be contrasted with the informal names that residents of the street might use (Regier 2010). The different names being used reflect different knowledge about the street, based on different experiences (Regier 2010: 198–199). At Wild Wood, by using children’s terminology, practitioners at the nursery seemed to be giving priority to children’s knowledge and experiences. The names that children gave to certain areas of the site did not need to make sense to outsiders—for example, as a new person at Wild Wood, it took some time for me to learn what was meant by ‘Big Wild Wood’ or ‘visiting the Bumpalumpas’.

Notably, the creative names used at Wild Wood were not whimsical for the sake of it. For example, when a new yurt had been installed at the site, a practitioner suggested that children could name it. She had an idea in mind for what this name could be, based on language one of the children had used to describe the yurt. Jacob, one of the preschool children, had noticed that the fabric in the ceiling of the yurt overlapped in a way that created a dark star shape. He pointed to the star and traced its shape with his finger in the air, singing, ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’. The practitioner told the group of children that Jacob had called this shape the ‘star shadow’, and she suggested that Star Shadow could become the name of the yurt. The children listened to this story with great attention, looking up at the ceiling themselves; several of them commented that they, too, saw the star shape and many

joined in with singing ‘Twinkle, Twinkle’. However, the name Star Shadow never took off. The practitioner tried referring to the yurt as ‘Star Shadow’ twice more (that I observed), but the children continued to simply call it ‘the yurt.’ The practitioner soon reverted back to calling it ‘the yurt’ as well (field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

In the example of Star Shadow, the practitioner in question tried to prioritise one child’s creative language about the yurt, by sharing Jacob’s experience and the terminology he had coined. However, when the rest of the children did not seem inspired to name the yurt ‘Star Shadow’, the practitioner did not push it. The example of ‘Star Shadow’ illustrates that the naming practices at Wild Wood were not just about whimsy. The focus was not on having creative names for their own sake, but rather on acknowledging and foregrounding children’s knowledge. The children seemed to prefer a more conventional name for the yurt and, in this example, their preferences were given priority. The belief that children’s knowledge should be given priority was a key element of the pedagogical approach taken at Castle Nursery. It calls back once again to Moosa-Mitha’s (2005) definition of children’s participation—the acknowledgement of their voices, agency and contribution. The naming practices at Castle Nursery and Wild Wood not only acknowledged, but actively foregrounded children’s voice and contributions.

Foregrounding of children’s contributions became even more noticeable when it was set in contrast to approaches taken by practitioners from other settings, which happened several times during my fieldwork when visitors spent time at Castle Nursery. In one example, the Castle Nursery group had hiked up to Big Wild Wood with a group of visiting children from another local nursery. One of the teachers from the visiting nursery noticed that a small green shoot was growing out of an old tree stump. She raised her voice, calling the children over, and pointed out the shoot. ‘Can you see? A new tree is growing where the old one used to be!’ The children looked but did not say much. The stump was very close to the wooden fence that marked the boundaries of the Wild Wood Site. Julie, the practitioner from Castle Nursery, laughed and said, ‘Our children use that stump to hop over the fence’ (field notes, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2014).

Here, Julie seemed to subtly point out a tension between herself and the visiting teacher, regarding whose knowledge was prioritised. The teacher from the visiting nursery had focused on her own knowledge about the stump as an opportunity to teach a lesson about how trees grow. Julie, on the other hand, put forward the children's knowledge about the stump as useful for climbing. In this case, the moment of tension was good-humoured and fleeting. However, Julie later described to me an encounter she had with a different visiting teacher that had been more fraught. While at Wild Wood, she told me, a few of the children had noticed a buzzard flying above the lawn, and had stopped their play to watch it. Buzzards were often present at Wild Wood, and one of the children had recently begun calling them 'a prey of birds'—perhaps an interpretation of the phrase 'birds of prey'. The visiting teacher knelt down next to the children and had a 'teachable moment' with them, telling them the bird was actually called a buzzard and that it was flying above the lawn in order to look for some food.

Julie told me that she felt the children were silenced by the 'teachable moment'. This silencing, as she described it, was both literal, in that the children stopped talking when the teacher began to transmit information, and figurative, in that children's own knowledge about buzzards was not being respected. Instead the teacher attempted to replace children's knowledge with a fixed, correct terminology. Julie had explained to the visiting teacher that at Castle Nursery, practitioners valued children's own words for things. The two of them, according to Julie, could not come to an agreement about this issue. The visiting teacher felt strongly that it was an essential part of her job to teach children facts that they did not know, while Julie felt it was more important for children to go through the process of thought and interpretation that would produce their own knowledge (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

The issue of whose knowledge is prioritised is a common tension in early childhood education and care. For example, DeVries and others (2002) draw attention to children's 'ingenious efforts' to construct knowledge about the world. They give an example of children's thoughts about how bubbles are shaped:



Children made triangular and square-shaped [bubble] wands. It was clear that they expected to see triangular and square bubbles! The day after one child failed to make a square bubble, he excitedly proclaimed to the teacher, ‘I know how to make a square bubble! I was thinking about it all night, and what you’ve got to do is blow each corner real fast!’ When he tried this, he concluded, unconvinced, ‘I just have round breath today.’

These ideas were created by the children themselves, and *even though wrong*, they were ingenious efforts to explore the world of bubbles and construct their knowledge.

(DeVries et al. 2002: 35, emphasis added)

Here, DeVries and others do give some respect to children’s knowledge. Children are framed as actively interpreting the world—a constructivist position, based on Piagetian theorisations (DeVries et al. 2002). Piagetian constructivism does have some resonance with the concept of children’s participation. As Corsaro (2005) notes, Piaget contested the notion that children were passive ‘blank slates’ in their own processes of development. Instead, Piaget emphasised children’s active roles in their own learning and respected their ways of thinking (Woodhead 2011, Punch and Tisdall 2012). However, in the example given above by DeVries and others, there is also a focus on the *wrongness* of children’s knowledge about how bubbles are made. This is repeated later, when children’s ideas are described as ‘wonderful but wrong’ (DeVries et al. 2002: 41). Tactics are presented for how adults can gently lead children to construct a correct understanding. Here, DeVries and others reflect a key critique of constructivism: its ‘overwhelming concern’ with adult competence as the endpoint of development (Corsaro 2005: 16).

In the above example from DeVries and others, the desired outcome is for children to eventually be steered toward a correct answer regarding how bubbles are shaped. In contrast, in the two examples from Wild Wood discussed above, Julie placed strong significance on children’s knowledge in its own right. Here, Julie seemed to be engaged with the politics of knowledge, particularly the tendency for adults’ knowledge to be portrayed as neutral and objective. She pushed back on the idea that children’s knowledge could only be valid when it matched up with a ‘correct’ (adult-centric) standard. This approach honoured children’s thinking and interpretations,

whether or not this was in alignment with practitioners' own thinking or fit a predetermined correct answer (Aukerman 2013: A5).

### 5.3.2 *Facilitating dialogue*

Another role for Castle Nursery practitioners was to facilitate dialogue. Dialogic pedagogy has been defined as:

learning processes in which teacher and pupils critically interrogate the topic of study, express and listen to multiple voices and points of view, and create respectful and equitable classroom relations.

(Lefstein and Snell 2015: no pagination)

Pedagogy can therefore become 'concerned with ideas, not correct answers' (White 2016: 36). This resonates with the approach taken by Castle Nursery practitioners; as this chapter has previously discussed, practitioners tended to prioritise children's knowledge and ideas about the world—oriented toward process, not product.

An example of how Katrina, a practitioner, facilitated dialogue about children's ideas can be found in the following excerpt from my field notes. Katrina began by recounting a story during gathering time about a problem that had arisen earlier that morning in the garden, which involved a worm and several preschool children.

Katrina: 'This morning, something happened in the garden, with a worm. Some of the worm was out of the ground, and some was in the ground. One person thought they might try pulling it out, but Amanda said wait! That might hurt the worm. Michael suggested winding the worm around a stick, to gently pull it out of the ground—but the stick he found had thorns on it.'

'They would poke the worm!' Michael interjects.

Katrina: 'Then, someone noticed a magpie up in a tree that was eyeing the worm.'

Now a few of the other children join in. 'Yeah, the magpie will eat the worm!' Some of them sound worried, and others sound gleeful at the prospect of seeing this.

Katrina: 'And Michael thought the builders might lay concrete over the worm.'

At this the group explodes with chatter about the builders—scaffolding has been erected on a building near the nursery, and from the garden the children can see the builders at work.

‘The worm will be covered!’

‘He can’t get out!’

‘They will hammer him!’

The story breaks down into multiple, simultaneous conversations between children. Katrina listens to and joins in with some of these conversations. Eventually she says, ‘We can keep talking about this while we’re eating,’ drawing the children’s attention back to her and beginning the process of sending children to wash their hands before lunch.

(fieldnotes, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014)

Aukerman (2013: A7) describes a dialogic pedagogy as one that ‘sees meaning-making as fundamentally unfinished, contingent work that centrally depends on the refraction of multiple voices.’ In this example, Katrina’s approach resonates with Aukerman’s emphasis on multiple voices. She facilitated a collaborative storytelling effort between herself and the children—including input from children who were not even involved in the original situation. Rogoff (2014) notes that narratives are a common way for learning to take place; children may participate in creating these narratives as part of their learning about community and cultural values (Rogoff 2003). However, in the example given above, the narrative initiated by Katrina did not seem to have a particular endpoint in mind. She did not attempt to wrap the story up neatly or to steer it back to a central lesson of some kind. Rather, the intention of this narrative seemed to be for the children’s ideas about the worm’s plight to be made visible to each other and to be discussed in open-ended ways (Aukerman 2013).

This particular example of dialogic pedagogy at Castle Nursery could also be analysed through a lens of children’s voices. Through this lens, the practitioner heard and amplified the voices of children, both in the original event and in the re-telling that occurred during gathering time. The ‘voice of the child’ is an oft-used term in children’s participation literature, though what ‘voice’ means is often left unexamined (Noyes 2005, Lundy 2007). For example, in the above example with

Katrina's story, 'voice' has been presented mainly as verbal communication between children and Katrina during the storytelling process. However, in the childhood studies literature, there are tensions about the privileging of comprehensible verbal communication, which risks excluding children who do not communicate primarily through speech (Tisdall 2012). Non-verbal ways of expressing voice, such as movements or non-verbal utterances, may be discounted (Komulainen 2007).

Katrina's dialogue with the children could be reframed to add in some of the non-verbal elements of the conversation. For example:

Katrina: 'This morning, something happened in the garden, with a worm.' **[she leans forward, eager to tell the story].**

**[Hearing this, Amanda immediately perks up her head and looks excited. Katrina mirrors Amanda's movement and facial expressions].**

Katrina: 'Some of the worm was out of the ground, and some was in the ground. One person thought they might try pulling it out, but Amanda said wait! That might hurt the worm.' **[She mimes pulling the worm out of the ground, and puts her hand up as if to say, 'Stop!'].**

**[Amanda, listening to the story, beams with pride at her role in protecting the worm].**

Katrina: 'Michael suggested winding the worm around a stick, to gently pull it out of the ground—but the stick he found had thorns on it.' **[She mimes winding the worm around a stick].**

'They would poke the worm!' Michael interjects.

Katrina: 'Then, someone noticed a magpie up in a tree that was eyeing the worm.' **[She points upwards, as if the magpie is above her head].**

Now a few of the other children **nod their heads vigorously** and join in. 'Yeah, the magpie will eat the worm!' Some of them sound worried, and others sound gleeful at the prospect of seeing this.

Katrina: 'And Michael thought the builders might lay concrete over the worm.' **[She moves her hand horizontally, as if smoothing out concrete].**

**Several children grimace at the thought and shake their heads.** At this the group explodes with chatter about the builders—scaffolding has been erected on a building near the nursery, and from the garden the children can see the builders at work.

'The worm will be covered!'

‘He can’t get out!’

‘They will hammer him!’

The story breaks down into multiple, simultaneous conversations between children. Katrina listens to and joins in with some of these conversations. Eventually she says, ‘We can keep talking about this while we’re eating,’ drawing the children’s attention back to her and beginning the process of sending children to wash their hands before lunch.

(fieldnotes, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014)

White (2016: 71) notes the importance of the body in young children’s communications, arguing that language is ‘a complex, quite remarkable interplay between bodies, words and meaning—it is not an either/or as is commonly perceived.’ She also argues that children who do learn spoken language continue to integrate non-verbal elements into their communication, though their reliance on non-verbal elements decreases (White 2016). As the re-framing of the excerpt illustrates, Katrina’s story was primarily told by verbal means, but she did incorporate non-verbal elements into the narrative. She acted out certain parts of the story—winding the worm around a stick, for example. Katrina was also in tune with children’s own non-verbal contributions to the storytelling. For example, when Amanda realised that she was going to be part of the story, she perked her head up and looked at Katrina with anticipation. Katrina playfully mirrored this reaction back to Amanda.

I also observed examples when practitioners would engage in pedagogical dialogue with children, without using much speech at all. In one instance, Anya (a practitioner in the infant and toddler room) was sitting on the floor with George, who was about a year old. George had a small basket of toys next to him. He pulled out a little wooden stick and threw it across the floor, grunting dramatically with the effort. Anya watched the stick’s trajectory, turning her head to see where it had gone. She turned back to George and they looked at each other with surprised facial expressions. George reached his hand toward the stick and made a sound that rose up at the end like a question. Anya also pointed toward the stick, mirroring George. ‘It’s over there!’ she said. George crawled over to the stick, sat down, and threw it again. He looked back at Anya and made the same questioning noise, reaching toward

where the stick had landed. ‘Now it’s over there!’ she exclaimed, also pointing toward it. George once again crawled toward the stick. This time, the stick had landed near an empty hot chocolate tin. George picked up the tin and banged it on the floor. When he heard the loud noise it made, he turned to Anya again. ‘Wow!’ she said, and banged her hands on the floor. ‘That is making a big noise!’ (field notes, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2014).

As this example illustrates, pedagogical dialogue between children and practitioners did not have to exclusively involve words. Like Katrina in the previous example, Anya was in tune with George’s non-verbal communication as well as the vocalisations he was making. The spoken word did not seem to be placed hierarchically above other ways of interacting and learning (e.g. Lenz Taguchi 2011). It was not only what George said, through vocalisations, but also what he did, that Anya mirrored. For example, she stretched out her arm in the same way that George had. Similarly, she banged her hands on the floor in the same way that George had banged the hot chocolate tin. Dialogue, therefore, could involve not only verbal, but also embodied and material elements (Albon and Rosen 2014).

### *5.3.3 Lifelong learning*

A final role to discuss for practitioners in a pedagogy of relationships was as lifelong learners. This chapter has mainly framed children as the learners in the child-practitioner relationships at Castle Nursery. However, as this brief section suggests, it was not only children who were understood to be learning and developing. Practitioners were encouraged to reflect on their practice, to develop their own ideas and interests, and to undertake formal coursework and training opportunities. During my fieldwork, one practitioner was on a Froebel training course, one was doing a postgraduate degree in outdoor education, and another was studying for a degree-level qualification. The nursery also hosted students from the local colleges who were studying for vocational qualifications in early education and childcare.

An emphasis on lifelong learning is another key element of contemporary Froebelian practice. For example, Bruce and others (1995: 30–31) note that Froebel believed that development and learning occurred throughout the life course, not just in

childhood. Practices at Castle Nursery were not static, but could evolve over time. For example, one practitioner discussed with me how she had found Froebelian principles to be a useful tool for stimulating reflective practice at the nursery. Thinking back to a time when a group of practitioners had done a Froebel course together, she remembered that the course had sparked deep discussions about their work at the nursery. Over time, the discussions had led to some changes in how the nursery was run.

For example, at one point children were expected to formally choose and ‘sign in’ to the garden space, with a limited number of children being allowed outside at any given time. Based on what she described, this practice was very different from the way the garden was run at Castle Nursery during my fieldwork. Taking a reflective approach and adapting practice was not always ‘an easy road’, she said. The discussions were sometimes uncomfortable. However, no matter how uncomfortable it could be at times, she considered a reflective approach to be an important element of her work at Castle Nursery. Reflective thinking about practice helped her—and, she felt, other practitioners—understand what it meant for Castle Nursery to be ‘Froebelian’ (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

The metaphor of a ‘journey’ of practice was used by one practitioner (field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2013). Part of this journey was to negotiate and re-negotiate the roles of Froebelian principles at the nursery. This is a common approach to contemporary Froebelian practice; settings tend to draw on what they find useful in Froebel’s philosophy and leave outdated ideas behind (White 1905, Bruce et al. 1995). Taking an interpretive approach to Froebel’s work is, in fact, a longstanding tradition:

It is for us who profit through the labours of Froebel to carefully discriminate between the good and the bad.

An unwise discipleship would copy him literally, and take special pains to mimic all his false notes. But such a following would prove an enemy of Froebel’s cause.

(Harris 1895: ix)

At Castle Nursery, this theme of change and adaptation in what it meant to be ‘Froebelian’ was very strong. The head of centre at Castle Nursery particularly emphasised the importance of being open to adapting Froebel’s work, comparing it to what she felt were overly rigid applications of other educational philosophies, such as those set out by Montessori and Steiner. In her view, the Froebelian pedagogical practices at Castle Nursery were not fixed; there was always room for reflection and the potential for thoughtful change (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

Another such example was the way that practitioners chose the groups who would attend Wild Wood. This practice had been changed in direct response to practitioners feeling it was too formal and adult-structured. When trips to Wild Wood first began, it was the practitioners who chose fixed groups of children who were invited to attend, for a six-week block of trips. This was in keeping with suggestions from the formal Forest School training that several practitioners had undergone. Inviting a consistent group of children for discrete blocks of time was a strategy to make sure all children are included and have the same opportunities to attend. However, as one practitioner described, this fixed system soon began to feel too restrictive (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014). She said, for example, that children often wanted to go to Wild Wood with specific friends, who were not always in their group. Children did not always want to go to Wild Wood on their designated days, or some children wanted to go who were not in the fixed group.

Over time, the practitioners had decided to open up this process of choosing the groups to be less formal and more dialogical from the outset. One or two days before the trip, the practitioners who were going to Wild Wood would sit down and talk to the children they knew were due a turn. These children, if they decided they wanted to go, then thought about who else they’d like to invite, with the practitioners keeping an eye on the bigger picture of attendance—which other children were due a turn, or which children had already been at Wild Wood that week, for example. The process of choosing the group was unhurried, and relaxed; sometimes the composition of the group changed right up until it was time to leave the nursery on the morning of the trip. In keeping with Castle Nursery’s philosophy of mixed age



experiences, Wild Wood groups always included children from the infant and toddler space.

As this example illustrates, practitioners seemed open to learning from the children. In the case of Wild Wood groups, practitioners had learned from children's input—their participation—that the original way of choosing groups was not working very well for children. In another example, Joanne, a practitioner, was in the garden with Claire, a child from the preschool room who was around four years old. Claire's younger sister, Rose Sally, was in a buggy, and Joanne was trying to rock her to sleep. Several other practitioners had tried to help Rose Sally sleep—she had been looking very tired and had been crying a lot during the morning. After Rose Sally finally fell asleep, Joanne asked Claire, 'Rose Sally was very tired this morning! Did she sleep last night? I wonder if she is not feeling well.' Claire thought for a moment and said yes, Rose Sally had slept just fine. Joanne noted that Rose Sally had not eaten much for morning snack, which was unusual, and asked Claire, 'Did she have breakfast?' Claire thought again and said that yes, Rose Sally had eaten a large breakfast. 'Well, that explains why she wasn't hungry this morning,' Joanne replied (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

As Alderson (2008: 138) notes, young children may not be included in participation initiatives because their views are considered 'unreliable' or not sensible. In this example, in contrast, Joanne explicitly sought Claire's input about Rose Sally—treating Claire as a trusted source of information. Their conversation illustrates that practitioners at Castle Nursery did not always assume that they knew best. For example, Joanne could have proceeded on her assumption that Rose Sally had not eaten at morning snack because she was unwell. However, she seemed to accept Claire's alternative theory that Rose Sally was just not hungry. Joanne recognised her own limited knowledge of Rose Sally's experiences, and drew on Claire's wider scope for understanding (Clark and Moss 2011).

Emphasising that adults are also learners resonates with ideas from childhood studies that trouble the 'finished' state of adulthood (Lee 2001). As these examples illustrate, both children and practitioners at the nursery were understood as 'beings in

the process of becoming' (Freire 1970: 65)—with learning and education as ongoing, lifelong processes.

#### *5.3.4 Section conclusion*

This section has continued to answer research question three, which asks how children's participation intersected with pedagogy and power at Castle Nursery. The section particularly focused on the role of practitioners in creating a 'pedagogy of relationships'.

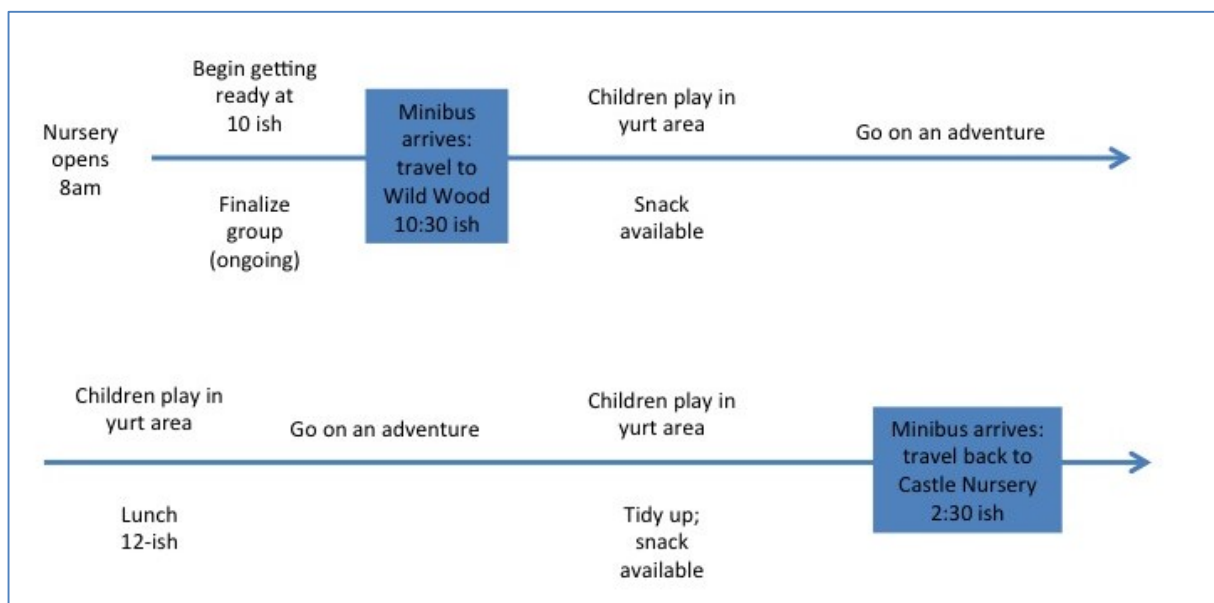
As the first section discussed, practitioners at the nursery created an enabling context for children to explore relationships with each other and with non-human actors in the physical environment. However, practitioners also took a more direct role at times. This involved two main approaches to supporting children's learning: prioritizing children's knowledge and facilitating dialogue. Both approaches suggested that it was the process of learning, not the end product, which mattered to practitioners. For example, practitioners valued children's own terminology, rather than comparing it to a 'correct' adult standard. Practitioners also supported children's learning by reflecting their own words and movements back to them, once again foregrounding children's own knowledge. Practitioners were also understood as being learners themselves. This framing of childhood and adulthood as 'becoming beings' highlighted the importance of learning as a lifelong process—a journey that children and practitioners undertook together.

The final section of this chapter presents a composite account (Smith 2006) of a day at Wild Wood. In doing so, the chapter seeks to more fully demonstrate the ways that children's learning was integrated into the relationships of daily life and supported by practitioners in a variety of ways—most of which foregrounded children's agency, voices and contribution (Moosa-Mitha 2005). The section also begins to describe some of the tensions that could arise, illustrating that a pedagogy of relationships was not always harmonious.

## 5.4 On the journey together: a day at Wild Wood

A day at Wild Wood reflects the intertwined nature of ‘being’ and ‘knowing’. As Barad (2007: 185) argues, ‘We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world’. At Wild Wood, much like at Castle Nursery itself, children’s learning was understood to take place in the context of their playful explorations. However, during a visit to Wild Wood, the group of children and practitioners stayed together and negotiated their activities in much closer dialogue than they typically did at Castle Nursery. These negotiations involved collaborative engagement, flexible leadership, and the blending of ideas and agendas at a ‘calm mutual pace’ (Rogoff 2014: 74).

The importance of a calm, mutual pace was apparent from the beginning of a day at Wild Wood, which actually began at the nursery itself. Practitioners tried to maintain the same relaxed approach to timekeeping that they used at the nursery, although the timetable was more crowded, as Figure 5.2 shows.



*Figure 5:2 Timetable of a day at Wild Wood*

Despite the busier timetable on Wild Wood trips, there was rarely a feeling of needing to rush. For example, plenty of time was allocated to the process of getting

ready. This happened in a designated area of the corridor, where children met and began dressing themselves, with help from practitioners as needed. The nursery provided waterproof trousers for all of the children—though many brought their own from home. In the winter months, the process of getting ready could take quite a long time, as children would put on multiple layers of clothing.

At one point in my field notes, I described the children as ‘surprisingly patient’ with the sometimes long wait for everyone to be ready (field notes, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2013). In January, for example, I noticed that Kristin and Christine, two of the older children, had dressed themselves quickly, and had been hanging around in the corridor for the others to be ready for about 20 minutes. Seeming unbothered by their wait, they sat with each other, playing with small trinkets that they had brought from home and watching the others get ready (field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2014). The word ‘patient’ is not commonly used to describe young children, who are, for example, often generalised as being in their terrible twos, a stage of life supposedly characterised by ‘bestly two year old behaviour’ (Flynn 2014: 82) including ‘mood changes, temper tantrums and use of the word ‘no’’ (Hoecker no date: no pagination). However, Alderson (2008: 116) offers an alternative explanation for young children’s frustration, suggesting that tempers often fray when ‘fraught, rushed adults impose demands and restrictions’.

On Wild Wood days, the patience shown by the young children could be partly attributed, perhaps, to the sense of collaborative engagement fostered by the practitioners. For example, children who were ready first were often asked to help other children get dressed, or to help pull the various trolleys full of supplies. Children, then, while not always ‘leading’ during this process, were consistently involved as active partners. An unhurried and good-humoured feeling from both children and practitioners during the long process of getting ready was a general trend. As one practitioner joked, as she struggled out the door, surrounded by children and dragging a trolley laden with supplies, ‘We always get there in the end’ (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2014). Collaborative engagement continued as children dressed themselves and helped others get dressed, negotiated whose hand to hold during the walk to the minibus, chose a seat on the bus and buckled their seatbelts.

Once the minibus began moving, children talked to each other and to practitioners, often singing along to the radio and pointed out interesting things they could see through the windows.

Upon arriving at Wild Wood, the general pattern was for the group to make its way to the yurt area, which served as a ‘home base’ for the day. Here, collaborative engagement and the blending of agendas were once again evident. For example, the practitioners would set up snack for the children, putting out a variety of food such as raisins, oatcakes, cheese and breadsticks, as well as water and milk to drink. Children often helped with the setup. The children could come over to the yurt to get some food when they wished, and meanwhile played within the boundaries of the yurt area, which were defined by a wooden fence. One practitioner stayed near the children who were playing, while another would stay with the snack. The snack was generally available for a half hour to 45 minutes, and then practitioners would begin clearing it away in preparation for an adventure.

‘Adventure’ was the term used by both practitioners and children to describe explorations around the site. As the timetable shown in Figure 5.2 illustrates, ‘adventures’ played a large part in a day at Wild Wood. During these adventures, Rogoff’s (2014) qualities of blending ideas and agendas were very evident, negotiated through verbal and nonverbal dialogue between practitioners, children, and the material elements of the Wild Wood site. For example, a loose destination was usually chosen—‘an adventure to the river’, for example, or ‘an adventure to Big Wild Wood’. Despite having a loosely specified destination, however, adventures were nonlinear and meandering. The flexible nature of adventures can be illustrated by the following example from my field notes, which describes an adventure to Goldilocks’s Path.

Maddie, one of the pre-schoolers, was invited to choose the destination for the adventure. This opportunity was casually offered by one of the practitioners while the group was playing in the yurt area. ‘Where should we go on our adventure today? Maddie, do you want to choose?’ A few of the other children who were nearby gathered around and called out some suggestions. They seemed really excited to find

out what she would decide. Maddie eventually chose to go to Goldilocks's Path. This path was a popular destination for adventures; it had many interesting features that the children like to explore, including fallen trees, disused cabins, and a lot of mud. Maddie led the group on a winding journey toward the path, detouring to have a bit of fun with walking backwards and sideways. Some of the others joined in, including the practitioners.

There were two 'little ones' in the Wild Wood group that day—Sarah and Fergus—both of whom were not only 'little' in terms of age, but also in terms of size. When the group reached the path, the older children were moving much faster than the little ones. The group very quickly became dispersed, with the vanguard of older children going far ahead of the little ones in the back. The two practitioners accommodated the children's different speeds; one practitioner moved briskly to stay near the children in the front, while the other drifted further back until she was with Fergus and Sarah. Led by Maddie, the older children arrived at a steep embankment, and began clambering up over the protruding roots and large rocks that made it an appealing place to play. The practitioner who was with them stayed at the bottom, watching them, and speaking with them as they climbed.

When Fergus and Sarah arrived with the other practitioner, Fergus tried to climb up the embankment, but got stuck in a muddy bit at the bottom of the hill. He watched as the mud crept over his wellies—it made an interesting squelching sound. 'I stuck', he said. One of the practitioners offered him a supportive hand, and he clambered a little ways up the embankment, then turned to come down again, going back into the mud. Squelching his feet, he grinned at the practitioner and said again, 'I stuck.' The practitioner smiled back and once again offered him a helping hand out of the mud and back up the embankment. The two of them good-humouredly repeated this cycle a few times before he moved on to different explorations (field notes, 17 February 2014).

As this example illustrates, adventures at Wild Wood involved a blending of ideas, agendas and pace (Rogoff 2014). For example, Maddie was invited to choose the destination, and she did so amid discussion with the other children. In this case, the

practitioners did not intervene in the process of making the decision, beyond making the initial invitation to Maddie, though on other visits they played a more active role. For example, during the winter months there was a stretch of time when practitioners chose the initial destination of adventures—a whole-group visit to the main chalet where the toilet was located, because one or more of the children needed to go to the bathroom (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2013; 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013; 17<sup>th</sup> January 2014; 17<sup>th</sup> February 2014). In the summer months, practitioners were more likely to find a nearby bush or tree that could discreetly be used as a ‘fairy toilet’ without changing the entire direction of the adventure. There was also an example where a child fell ill upon arriving at Wild Wood. One practitioner stayed with her at the yurt area, waiting for her parents to arrive, while the other practitioner invited the rest of the group on an adventure to the river—quite a nearby destination, in hearing distance of the yurt area in case the practitioners needed to call to one another (field notes, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2014).

White (2016) argues that a core element of dialogic pedagogy in the early years is a consideration of ‘what is meaningful to this child at this moment, and how do I know?’. In the example of this particular Wild Wood adventure, practitioners seemed open to letting children express what was important in a variety of ways. For example, they playfully followed Maddie’s instructions about walking backwards and sideways, joining in with the bodily experiences she had suggested (White 2016). They were also flexible about the pacing of the groups’ progress, allowing the older children to go ahead, and not rushing the younger children. This involved mainly non-verbal interactions. For example, practitioners changed their own positions in the group in order to support children’s different paces, without spoken discussion. This could be understood as an embodied dialogue between the practitioners—as well as between the children and practitioners, as it was children’s movements that sparked the ‘discussion’. By being responsive, practitioners demonstrated that their attention was oriented toward the children (White 2016).

Relationships with the physical environment played a key role in how the directions of adventures emerged at Wild Wood. Fergus’s play in the mud, for example, could be framed as happening ‘in-between’ him and the mud; the mud acted on Fergus by

sticking to his boots, just as he acted on it by squelching his feet. The mud ‘asked certain questions and formulated problems’ in the way it interacted with Fergus (Lenz Taguchi 2011: 38), and he brought the practitioner into the relationship as well. She responded, not with words, but with eye contact and an outreached hand—demonstrating the role of non-verbal ‘voice’ and communication (White et al. 2015). White (2016) also discusses the role of emotion in child-adult relationships—for example, the practitioner demonstrated an affectionate understanding of Fergus’s game, conveying respect for him as an ‘author of his own learning’ (White 2016: 170).

This example of one Wild Wood adventure offers a rich illustration of how a pedagogy of relationships was practiced at the nursery. The calm pace and blending of agendas meant that Wild Wood visits tended to be fairly harmonious. However, tensions did sometimes arise during visits to Wild Wood. For example, children once became very upset when the group went to the river and were besieged by midges—tiny, biting black flies that swarmed around their faces (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014). On one winter visit, Lucy could not seem to get warm, and went on a ‘spiral’, as one practitioner put it, becoming increasingly agitated and clinging to practitioners for comfort (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2013). These particular moments of tension arose from children’s relationships with the physical environment and non-human elements at Wild Wood. However, there were sometimes tensions between children and practitioners as well.

In one example, Jacob (a child from the preschool room) became annoyed during an adventure because he wanted to go a different way from the rest of the group. The group of children and practitioners were heading toward the river, but Jacob wanted to go the opposite way, toward the swing set. The entire group stopped while one of the practitioners tried to talk this over with him but, in this case, dialogue was not a path to agreement. Jacob became more and more irritated and eventually walked away from the group, running off in the opposite direction. Eventually he stopped and turned around to look back at the group. A second practitioner began walking towards him, at which point he started running away again.



The second practitioner eventually caught up to him, and when he refused to return on his own, led him back to the group by holding his shoulders and physically guiding him. ‘Stop pushing me!’ he shouted. Looking somewhat abashed, the practitioner did remove her hands, saying ‘Okay Jacob’. He walked back to the group under his own power. When he was reunited with the group, the first practitioner knelt down and took his hands, which he allowed. She said, ‘Jacob, I know you wanted to make a different choice.’ Jacob did not say anything. The practitioner squeezed his hands and stood up, beginning to walk in the direction of the river. Jacob followed next to her, seeming to move on from his disagreement about the destination of the adventure (field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

The tensions that arose during this situation with Jacob illustrate some challenges around participation and child-adult relationships, particularly regarding how power is exercised. The relational approach to pedagogy at Castle Nursery could be framed as empowering, as it enhanced children’s ‘power-to’ exercise agency and produce change (Allen 2014: no pagination). However, as Blackburn (2000: 13) notes, claims of empowerment without critical examination can create a ‘convenient veneer’ that hides the dynamics of power relations. Power is not necessarily ‘an evil’, imposed by powerful adults onto powerless children, but instead is enacted and negotiated through more fluid, small-scale interactions (Gallagher 2008b). In the example with Jacob, his desire to go to the swing set stretched the limits of practitioners’ flexibility. They did need to be able to ensure children’s safety, one reason for the group to stay together with two practitioners to support each other and the children. Jacob also challenged practitioners’ beliefs that the less cultivated areas of the Wild Wood site were more desirable learning environments for the children, as compared to the purpose built elements like the swing set. In this example, Jacob could be understood as exercising power over practitioners in the ways that he evaded their attempts to control him, just as practitioners exercised power in the tactics they used to get Jacob to return (Gallagher 2008a).

This thesis has drawn on a relational understanding of participation, but thus far has focused largely on relationships as they emerged in the moments of observation. In contrast, the example with Jacob illustrates the effects of long-term relationships

between practitioners and children. Jacob frequently seemed to push against the boundaries of what practitioners would tolerate. For example, on the way to the minibus just that morning, he had suddenly laughed and said ‘Let’s go in the street!’ He lunged in that direction, dragging his walking partner along with him. Both practitioners reacted immediately to this—one whipping around to look at him, reaching out an arm and saying, ‘Jacob,’ in a warning tone, and the other, who was closer, moving over quickly to stop him physically (field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2014). The situation at Wild Wood, therefore, was one of many interactions between Jacob and practitioners where participation and power were negotiated—one strand in ‘a tangled web of volatile relationships’ (Gallagher 2008b: 145).

#### *5.4.1 Section conclusion*

This section has continued to answer my third research question, now adding in the element of power to the discussion. At Wild Wood, the pedagogical approach taken by practitioners was geared toward foregrounding children’s own knowledge, ideas, experiences, and interpretations. However, at Wild Wood, practitioners and children moved around the site in much closer contact than they did at Castle Nursery itself. Therefore, a day at Wild Wood involved more collaborative engagement between practitioners and children—but was still shaped mainly by children’s interests. Practitioners’ approach could be framed as ‘empowering’ for children, but the reality was more dynamic. At times, children and practitioners negotiated tense relationships of power, as Jacob’s example illustrated.

Jacob’s example has also touched on my fourth research question, which asks what kind of tensions and challenges arose in the course of living participation. Even at Castle Nursery, where practitioners tried to put children’s preferences first, there were limits to how far practitioners were willing to go. The section gave an example where practitioners reached those limits, and where a delicate negotiation of power and agency took place. As the example with Jacob shows, not everything was negotiable—once again, as practitioners consistently discussed during my fieldwork, life at Castle Nursery was not ‘laissez-faire’ where children could do anything they

wanted. These limits were not predetermined, but instead arose relationally in moments of uncertainty for both children and practitioners.

## **5.5 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has addressed several of my research questions. The chapter opened by looking at two questions simultaneously: How do practitioners create opportunities and constraints that shape how children's agency is enacted at the setting? (Question 2), and how does children's participation intersect with pedagogy and power at the setting? (Question 3) The chapter demonstrated that agency, participation, and pedagogy were inseparable at Castle Nursery. Practitioners enabled children's exploration of the physical environment, as well as their relationships with each other, through the ethos of free-flow play. The physical environment included many open-ended materials for children to work with. Materials themselves enacted agency, shaping the direction of children's play.

The chapter then continued to look at how participation and pedagogy intersected at Castle Nursery, with a focus on the more direct pedagogical roles for practitioners. Practitioners prioritised children's own knowledge and facilitated open-ended dialogue, once again enabling children's agency and highlighting their contributions to their own learning. Practitioners were also framed as lifelong learners at the setting, reflecting on their own practice, learning from children, and engaging in various training activities. Therefore both children and practitioners were seen as 'becoming beings' together. Adults were not assumed to know better than children. However, there were limits to how far practitioners were willing to go in their participatory approach.

The chapter closed by touching on my final research question: What tensions and challenges arose in the course of living children's participation? (Question 4) The chapter argued that while Castle Nursery practitioners did try to put children's preferences first, not everything was negotiable. There did not seem to be predetermined limits on children's participation—instead, challenging moments arose relationally, sometimes in unpredictable ways. These moments at times involved negotiations of power between children and practitioners.

The final findings chapter digs deeper into the issue of tensions and challenges, looking at a variety of scenarios where practitioners seemed to struggle with a participatory approach.



# Chapter 6 Facing uncertainty: tensions and challenges in living children's participation

## 6.1 Introduction

Children's participation was the foundation of early childhood practice at Castle Nursery. As the first two findings chapters have discussed, children's participation was not a one-off or periodic exercise, in the tokenistic or tick-box model. Instead, it was integrated throughout the organisation of daily routines, into pedagogical approaches, and into the care element of practitioners' work. However, living children's participation was not always harmonious or easy for practitioners.

This final findings chapter, therefore, focuses entirely on my fourth research question:

**Question 4:** What tensions and challenges arose in the course of living children's participation at the setting?

In doing so, the chapter argues that in living children's participation, practitioners were often faced with uncertainty (e.g. Urban 2008): about their own practice, about their role in standing up for children's participation, and about the consequences of working in participatory ways.

The chapter looks at three interconnected arenas where tensions arose. First, the chapter looks in more depth at children's 'ambiguous agency', examining how practitioners dealt with situations where play was challenging. While children's participation was a core element of practitioners' ethical identities at Castle Nursery, working in participatory ways was a learning journey for practitioners.

The chapter then discusses a shared sentiment amongst practitioners: pride in doing things differently from the wider early childhood sector. The section describes

practitioners' resistance to 'schoolified' formal learning practices. However, the section also describes how practitioners had to balance their own opposition to schoolified practices against their commitment to children's participation.

The chapter closes with an account of a quality improvement inspection at Castle Nursery. During the inspection, practitioners' fears about the consequences of being different came to light. Practitioners worried that inspectors would not understand their ways of working, and that a poor score would open the door to forced changes.

## **6.2 Challenging play: the ethics work of participatory practices**

Critiques about overly positive portrayals of children's participation resonate with Walkerdine's (1986) excoriating deconstruction of play-based early childhood education. Taking a historical view, she describes the development of what is now known as progressive pedagogy, attributing its development in part to Froebel's work.

In a progressive approach, children learn through play—the 'proper medium of expression for children' (p. 57). As Walkerdine describes, in the modern, play-based classroom,

All has been transformed to make way for 'active learning', not 'passive regurgitating'. This pedagogic space is filled with groups of tables, not rows of desks. There may be no playtime, since work and play are indistinguishable [...] Children may choose their own timetables.

A whole fictional space is created, a fantasy-space in which the ideal nature, the most facilitating environment (rather like a greenhouse) is created in the classroom. Away from the decay of the inner city, the air in the classroom smells sweet. The teacher is no authoritarian father figure, but a bourgeois and nurturant mother. Here all can grow properly.

(Walkerdine 1986: 58)

By removing the overtly authoritarian role of the teacher, the classroom becomes a more harmonious place, as 'children who were not coerced would not need to rebel' (Walkerdine 1986: 56). Children are happy and docile; teachers benevolent and loving. For Walkerdine, however, the classroom described above is a romanticised, 'impossible fiction' (p.58). Drawing on Foucault, she argues that while the children

in question may have been ‘freed’ from overt, didactic structuring of their learning, in more subtle ways they are still disciplined and ‘regulated into normality’ (p. 55). This regulation takes the form of constant surveillance, monitoring, and assessment of children’s development against a standardised ideal of what is ‘normal’ (see also MacNaughton 2005). Ideal of normal development represent beliefs about the ‘proper’ knowledge and skills that a child should possess, as well about the moral development of the child, the inculcation of good habits and the importance of happiness and positive emotions (Walkerdine 1986).

As the preceding sections have described, practitioners at Castle Nursery did not seem particularly invested in regulating or intensively monitoring children’s activities, nor guiding them toward predetermined learning outcomes. However, the emphasis on learning through free-flow play did have normative elements—for example, valuing ‘creative’ interconnections between people and the learning environment. In the literature review chapter, I discussed Bordonaro and Payne’s (2012) assertion that only certain kinds of agency are deemed acceptable for children. They describe the ideal child of the Western imagination: innocent, safe, happy, protected, shielded from public life, morally sound (e.g. Boyden 1997). However, children’s agency can threaten this ideal; children may ‘challenge the moral and social order’ in a variety of ways (Bordonaro and Payne 2012: 366).

In both the academic literature and more informal sources of advice for early years practitioners, a great deal of attention is paid to ‘behaviour management’ (MacNaughton et al. 2007, Fabiano et al. 2013, *The Perpetual Preschool* no date). Various other terminology is also used, such as ‘behaviour support’ or ‘behaviour intervention’. What these terms have in common is that they are all used to describe ways that practitioners can modify children’s behaviour that is ‘disruptive’ to the schooling environment (Hemmeter et al. 2007). For example, a repetitive daily routine is said to be a helpful strategy for classroom management—reducing ‘undesirable’ disruptions by children (Dicke et al. 2015: 2). Anderson and others (1996: 35) argue that a daily routine is ‘enormously important for your sanity as a teacher’. As children learn the daily schedule, they become increasingly able to manage themselves and the day runs smoothly and predictably (Anderson et al.



1996). Another starting point for avoiding ‘disruptive’ behaviour is for practitioners in educational settings to be clear about their expectations for the children, by formulating classroom rules such as ‘We use walking feet’ or ‘We take turns’ (Fox et al. 2005: 8). This approach to behaviour management often involves children themselves being asked to come up with strategies for how to stop or prevent ‘negative’ behaviour (MacNaughton et al. 2007). Children, therefore, are framed as participants in this process—but the approach still involves micromanagement from adults and can become quite technical. The predetermined rules for behaviour may be enforced with little critical reflection about the context in which ‘negative’ behaviour is taking place (MacNaughton et al. 2007).

At Castle Nursery, in contrast, practitioners seemed to embrace heterogeneity in daily life, instead of trying to control or homogenise children’s experiences. Practitioners did not use a set list of behavioural rules and consequences. Instead, their approach was intended to be more contextualised and dialogical with children. For example, in one situation a child seemed to be aware that different practitioners at the nursery might have different ‘boundaries’ for acceptable types of play. In this example, I came upon Flora and Emily Too in the corridor. They had a tub of coloured pencils with them, usually kept in the art room. Flora was confidently sucking on the coloured pencils and then drawing on her own stomach, and on Emily Too’s face. Emily Too was more tentatively licking the pencils and experimenting with drawing on Flora’s arm. My first reaction was an instinct to control the situation. There was a mess—the pencils were scattered everywhere—and I immediately thought of the germs that were being exchanged as the girls put the pencils in their mouths. Was it healthy for the children to put pencils in their mouths? Could they become sick from doing this? (field notes, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2013).

Through a less controlling and anxious lens, the wet coloured pencils did make very vivid and beautiful marks, compared to how they worked when dry. The pencil marks on the girls’ skin looked almost like face paint. Flora—who seemed to have initiated the play—must have learned about this quality of the pencils through experimentation. Surely that indicated creative thinking and action on her part.

Applying a pedagogical lens, Flora and Emily Too's play could even be understood as 'process-focused art experience' in which children experiment with new and interesting materials (National Association for the Education of Young Children, no date). I wondered whether Castle Nursery practitioners would find this play acceptable, or if it would challenge them the way it had challenged me.

For her part, Flora herself seemed to perceive what she was doing as being transgressive. When I approached the girls, Flora whispered to me, 'Don't tell the teacher'. I agreed—'Ok, I won't'—and left the area. Later the same day, I once again came across Flora in the corridor. This time, she had a small bottle of nail varnish and was painting Alina's fingernails. When Flora noticed me, she asked if I would also like some nail varnish. I agreed, and sat down with her and Alina. As she painted my nails, Flora matter-of-factly warned me, 'Don't tell the teacher I have it.' Before I had a chance to respond, she looked over her shoulder and saw Pete, a practitioner, coming down the corridor. 'Pee-eeete' she called in a singsong voice. 'Do you want some nail varnish?' Pete cheerfully said, 'No thanks!' and kept going. Confused, I turned to Flora. 'Who's 'the teacher'?' I asked. She did not answer. Just then, Emily Maya burst out of the preschool room and snatched the nail varnish from Flora. 'This is mine from home!' she shouted, and stormed back into the room. Flora ran into the garden.

The first time that Flora told me not to tell the teacher, I assumed that 'the teacher' meant practitioners in general. I thought Flora was avoiding all adults because she knew any practitioner would stop her from drawing on herself and Emily Too. However, the second example with Pete suggests that there was a specific person she was trying to avoid. Pete certainly was not 'the teacher' that she was worried about, as she had invited him into her transgressive play. I never found out from Flora who 'the teacher' was. However, this example illustrates something about how boundaries were drawn and children's behaviour was managed at Castle Nursery. Flora seemed to know that she was not breaking some kind of universal rule about acceptable behaviour. Instead, she was worried about one person in particular who she thought would not approve of what she was doing. At Castle Nursery, the free-flowing ways that children's participation was lived at the nursery meant that many

types of play were allowed by practitioners. However, allowing many kinds of play did not mean that there were no boundaries or limits on what children could do. The boundaries for what acceptable in children's play were contextualised rather than universalised.

Practitioners negotiating their own boundaries and approaches to 'ambiguous agency' seemed to be part of their process of ongoing learning and development. Sometimes, practitioners at Castle Nursery seemed to experience self-doubt about how to handle certain situations. For example, during my fieldwork, one practitioner called Mary—who was fairly new at the nursery—often expressed concerns that she was not doing things 'correctly', particularly when she found children's play challenging. One morning in the garden, Ryan was using a metal pitchfork to dig a hole in the sand. Another child, Alina, approached him, and he swung the pitchfork at her, missing Alina's face by a few inches. Mary was sitting nearby when this happened, and she immediately reacted by saying, 'No thank you, Ryan. Did you see that the pitchfork came very close to Alina's head?' Ryan seemed to be considering her words, but Mary did not seem confident that he would play safely with the pitchfork from now on. She did not say anything more to Ryan, but began gathering up the other gardening tools, telling a fellow practitioner that she was going to put them away in the cupboard. The other (more experienced) practitioner commiserated with Mary, but told her that actually, the preferred way at the nursery was to leave the tools out so that children could learn to use them safely. Mary seemed embarrassed, and returned the tools to the sand area (field notes, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2014).

Mary's example illustrates that working at Castle Nursery was a learning experience for practitioners. Practitioners brought their own beliefs and practices to the nursery, which sometimes jarred with existing practices. For example, in Ryan's case, Mary might have been employing a strategy that she had used in other settings—subtly removing the gardening tools to prevent another incident. However, many of Mary's existing strategies were challenged by the very different approach taken at Castle Nursery. The learning process about participation could be, at times, 'alienating and profoundly disorienting' (Teamey and Hinton 2014: 32); for Mary, the moment of learning with the other practitioner involved some discomfort, as she seemed

embarrassed about putting the toys away. Mary's worries about doing things 'right' seemed to be exacerbated by children's challenging play, but perhaps touched on something deeper—her own insecurities about her role and identity as a practitioner.

Another practitioner, Barbara, found herself being challenged by children's play that she felt was limiting their experiences at Castle Nursery. The play in question involved the Disney animated film *Frozen*, which was released during my fieldwork in December 2013. The film was about the relationship between two sisters called Elsa and Anna, who lived in a fictional kingdom under a spell of eternal winter. The film and its musical soundtrack quickly became massive global phenomena (Knopper 2014, Konnikova 2014). The first time I heard about *Frozen* at Castle Nursery was in late January, when I was invited by Ailsa and her close friend Hazel to join them in their game of 'playing *Frozen*' in the preschool room. Ailsa was being the 'little daughter' and Hazel was being the 'big sister'. Ailsa instructed me to go sit in a big chair and be the king. The king, Ailsa explained to me, was nice, and he was tired, so I should go to sleep in the chair. Hazel went into the play kitchen and pretended to cook food for the family, while Ailsa wrapped a baby doll in a blanket and rocked it in a small cradle, telling us 'this is the new sister' (field notes, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2014). As far as I could tell, the way that Ailsa and Hazel played *Frozen* did not adhere particularly closely to the plot of the film, nor did it represent a significant departure from how they usually played. Both Ailsa and Hazel consistently played in ways that involved acting out family relationships, assigning roles to themselves and to other friends and to the practitioners who were willing to be involved. While Ailsa, in particular, did frequently talk about *Frozen* after its release, the film seemed to be only superficially influencing the pair's activities.

For different group of preschool girls, in contrast, *Frozen* became a more central interest and significantly changed their play. Emily Maya, Christine and Harriet became absorbed by *Frozen*, often singing the songs from the film and talking about the plot to each other and to anyone else who happened to be with them. For this group of friends, there also seemed to be a competitive element to their infatuation with the film. For example, one February morning at the writing table, Emily Maya began humming a tune under her breath. Christine looked up and asked knowingly,

‘Are you singing *Frozen*?’ ‘Uh-huh,’ replied Emily Maya. ‘Isn’t it so funny when Olaf falls off the cliff?’ ‘Yeah!’ said Christine. ‘He goes like this.’ She acted out the character of Olaf, sitting up and looking around after falling. Harriet was watching this and intervened, saying, ‘No, he doesn’t. He goes like *this*,’ and acted the scene out slightly differently. Having been corrected, Christine acquiesced. ‘Yeah, that’s what he does,’ she agreed sheepishly. Harriet sighed. ‘Have you even SEEN *Frozen*??’ she asked, with an exasperated tone (field notes 5<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

In fact, it turned out that Christine had not seen *Frozen* in its entirety. ‘I have the songs,’ she explained to Harriet, and she said that she had also watched it ‘on the computer’, probably referring to the film’s trailer, and other clips that had been released online. Emily Maya had not seen the actual film, either—she, too, was basing her knowledge on internet clips and the soundtrack. Listening to this conversation, it was not clear whether Christine and Emily Maya had even realised *Frozen* was a full-length film until Harriet confronted them. Harriet, having gone to the cinema to see the film, clearly felt her knowledge was superior, and telegraphed that through her tone of voice. The competitive element of this early interaction continued to be a factor as the girls’ *Frozen* play developed. Material markers of their knowledge about the film became particularly important. First Harriet, then Emily Maya and Christine, began coming to the nursery wearing princess costumes from the film, gliding through the playrooms in full length, store-bought ‘Elsa’ gowns. Their love of *Frozen* was now displayed on their bodies.

Children wearing costumes to the nursery was not unusual in itself. Just as children were allowed to bring toys and other materials from home, they were also generally allowed to dress how they liked at nursery. Jake, for example, often wore a pyjama top to the nursery, which had a superhero cape sewn onto the back. This outfit was clearly special to him; he drew attention to it by running down the corridor, glancing over his shoulder to see the cape streaming out behind him. ‘Look at my cape flying!’ he crowed proudly. ‘I’m a superhero in my pyjamas!’ (field notes, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2014). Indeed, not just costumes, but also everyday clothing often played an important role in children’s play, in a variety of ways. Dressing up clothes were provided for the children in both playrooms, and children were also allowed to

change into other items from their own spare clothes. Emily Maya, in her pre-*Frozen* days, often changed her clothes several times during the day, wearing a different dress, or a different top. Naomi and Marie, two girls from the preschool room, once traded clothes in order to ‘be’ each other for the morning (field notes, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2014). It was also commonplace to see children in various states of undress as they played around the nursery. ‘We’re naked!’ Lucy squealed in delight one morning, as she raced through the corridor with a friend toward the garden, both girls dressed only in their underwear (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2014).

Despite the fact that children wearing ‘unusual’ clothing, changing their clothes, or wearing few clothes altogether was commonplace in the nursery, many of the practitioners seemed to see the *Frozen* costumes as a different situation. This may have been, in part, because the film had so thoroughly permeated popular culture; it was clearly a phenomenon and seemed to be everywhere—on the radio, on television, and in print ads, and shops were full of merchandise. This ubiquity was soon reflected at the nursery, as more and more children became interested in *Frozen*. Once the costumes had been introduced, the interest in *Frozen* expanded into an interest in princess films more generally. Rose Flower Rainbow, for example, arrived wearing a mermaid costume and wig from the film *The Little Mermaid*, while Emily Maya expanded her horizons and wore a costume from the film *Brave*. The costumes remained popular among the preschool girls for several months. Most practitioners limited their reactions to sharing subtle looks of amusement and/or mild exasperation, listening as the girls talked incessantly about princesses throughout the early months of 2014. However, Barbara articulated more heartfelt objections to the princess phenomenon.

Barbara described her frustrations with the *Frozen*/princess play one morning in the preschool room. We were sitting at the writing table, watched Emily Maya walk slowly through the playroom, singing ‘Let it Go’ under her breath, deep in the imaginary world of *Frozen*. Barbara told me about two events that she found difficult, both of which had happened that week and specifically involved Emily Maya. The first event was that Barbara had invited Emily Maya along on a walk to a nearby outdoor art installation. Many groups of children had gone out to see the

installation and it was about to close. The installation was about a twenty minute walk from the nursery, and it was February, so Barbara had insisted that Emily Maya dress warmly. Emily Maya, however, did not want to change out of her sleeveless, lightweight princess dress or even cover it up with a coat. Barbara was very frustrated about Emily Maya's decision and told her it was 'too bad when we miss things because of our dresses'. Emily Maya was not swayed, and she therefore never participated in a walk to see the art installation. The second event had happened at Wild Wood. Barbara described her relief that Emily Maya had wanted to go to Wild Wood that day and had agreed to not wear the gown. Again, the cold weather meant that Emily Maya would not have been able to go to Wild Wood, had she decided not to change out of the princess dress. Despite Barbara's hope that the grip of *Frozen* had been broken, at Wild Wood Emily Maya had been so fixated on the film that she talked about it non-stop, all day. Barbara became particularly exasperated because Wild Wood was covered in a dusting of snow. She wanted Emily Maya to 'drop into the moment', as she put it, rather than spending time in her imagination about *Frozen*—there was real snow to be played in. For Barbara, the *Frozen* play was constraining Emily Maya's participation in the more preferable activities that were available in the nursery and Wild Wood environments (field notes 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

Bordonaro (2012) argues that when children's agency is 'ambiguous'—when it challenges the moral and social order—children's agency may be labelled as inappropriate. Children may then be subjected to social interventions attempting to 'mainstream' their agency into something more acceptable (Bordonaro 2012: 423). Barbara certainly seemed to feel like the *Frozen* play was somewhat inappropriate. She found it troubling that Emily Maya chose to stay at the nursery, missing a pedagogical experience, so that she did not have to take off her *Frozen* dress or cover it up. Similarly, Barbara would have preferred Emily Maya to leave the imaginary world of *Frozen* behind and experience the real winter weather that was going on at Wild Wood. However, Barbara was also open to questioning her own reactions. During our conversation, after she described her desire for Emily Maya to 'drop into the moment' at Wild Wood, she posed a rhetorical question: 'Why is that necessarily

right?’ Why, she asked, should her ‘adult need’ for Emily Maya to behave a certain way take precedence over Emily Maya’s own wishes (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014). Therefore, Barbara did not impose the ‘social intervention’ that Bordonaro (2012) warns about—she did not ban the costumes, for example. Instead, she lived with the ambiguity she felt about the *Frozen* play.

In the example with *Frozen*, Barbara seemed to engage in reflective practice. Bolton (2014: xiii) argues that reflective practice involves ethical reflection: an examination of ‘thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and professional identity’ in professional life. Barbara was willing to critique her reactions to Emily Maya, as they compared to the principles and values that she held regarding the importance of children’s participation. Reflective practice like Barbara’s can be framed as ‘everyday ethics work’:

...the effort people (in this case professionals) put into seeing ethically salient aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done.

(Banks 2016: 36)

Barbara was a far more experienced practitioner than Mary, having worked at Castle Nursery for a number of years. Even for Barbara, however, reflective practice did not bring certainty. While Barbara seemed relatively ‘comfortable with discomfort’, there were other situations where practitioners, like Mary, seemed to doubt themselves and feel unsure about how to proceed.

Bordonaro and Payne’s (2012) writing on ambiguous agency focuses on children and young people living in extremely difficult situations, whose enactments of agency are in ‘stark contrast’ to normative views of childhood—for example, child soldiers. Examples of ambiguous agency at Castle Nursery are far less stark; after all, the children at Castle Nursery were ‘in place’ in terms of what is expected of Western childhoods. However, Wood (2014: 5) draws out similar issues to Bordonaro and Payne by arguing that within play-based early childhood approaches, there are always questions of ‘whose agency, power and interests’ are supported or marginalised. She notes, for example, that certain kinds of play—such as ‘rough and



tumble' play—may be restricted by practitioners (Wood 2014). Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed many different moments when practitioners seemed to reach their own limits, in terms of how far children's participation could go. Even for individual practitioners, limits seemed shifting and contextualised.

For example, a practitioner once sent a child out of the preschool playroom because he kept destroying other children's brick constructions. I was in the corridor when this occurred. I heard a crash from the preschool playroom, and the voices of several children raised in cries of outrage. Moments later, the practitioner burst into the corridor, holding the door open for the culprit. She instructed him to sit at one of the lunch tables in the corridor, telling him sharply, 'It's not fair to children doing the building if you come and knock it all down. Come out here and give them a chance to build without you doing something to it' (field notes, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013). I was taken aback by this incident. It was the only time I ever saw a practitioner exclude a child from one of the playrooms or other nursery spaces. It was also the most harshly I ever heard a practitioner speak to a child. It speaks volumes about practices at Castle Nursery that I found this incident so shocking. In other settings where I have worked, exclusion was routinely used as a behaviour management strategy. Certainly, this was an aberration for the practitioner; many of my observations note her tendency to be reflective and patient, not reactive and short-tempered. I later learned that she was dealing with some difficult situations in her family life, which may have contributed to her uncharacteristic actions.

Having predetermined procedures to fall back on can be comforting for practitioners (Giovacco-Johnson 2010). In contrast, being open to 'unpredicted outcomes' (Moss 2014: 243) at Castle Nursery meant that practitioners did not have a rulebook to follow. The contextualised approach taken at Castle Nursery meant that practitioners had to:

...take responsibility for making very difficult decisions, without being able to fall back on rules and codes, purporting to be universal and unshakeably founded, which tell what choices to take.

(Dahlberg et al. 2007: 38)

Sometimes, children's activities could be annoying, destructive, or even harmful to others. It was in these situations that practitioners seemed to struggle the most with living their participatory values, at times resorting to strategies of control such as removing the gardening tools, or excluding a child from the playroom. Much like the examples given previously, regarding negotiations and tensions about personal care, struggles over children's ambiguous agency seemed enduring and unlikely to be resolved. These struggles were a key element of practitioners developing an ethical identity when it came to working in participatory ways with young children.

### *6.2.1 Section conclusion*

This section has highlighted one particular area of tension and challenge for practitioners at Castle Nursery. Children's participation was a core element of practitioners' ethical identity at the nursery—an important value that underpinned their daily work. However, practitioners' commitment to participation could be challenged by children's 'ambiguous agency'—their actions that pushed back on practitioners' norms and beliefs about what kind of play was appropriate and desirable. The development of a participatory ethical identity was a learning journey for practitioners, who needed to become 'comfortable with discomfort'. However, the 'ethics work' involved with developing a participatory identity could itself be a difficult, challenging process for practitioners.

The following section builds on the idea of participation as a core element of Castle Nursery's ethical identity. The section discusses the challenges of resistance—namely, resistance to formal, 'schoolified' practices.

## **6.3 Resisting 'schoolification': a delicate balance**

Amongst many practitioners at Castle Nursery, there seemed to be a strong sense of belonging—a discourse of 'we'. Nearly all of the practitioners at one point or another spoke to me about the nursery in ways that implied they thought of themselves as part of a coherent group: for example, using phrases such as 'how we work', 'our approach', 'what we do here', and 'here we are like a family'. This sense of coherence co-existed with significant diversity amongst the practitioners in terms

of age, professional experience, levels of formal qualification, nationality, and other life experiences. One key element to practitioners' feeling of coherence seemed to be pride in the ways that Castle Nursery was different from the wider early childhood sector. There was a strong theme of contestation and resistance that arose many times during my fieldwork, particularly to the 'schoolification' of early childhood settings.

The term 'schoolification' refers to 'downward pressure from a school-based agenda to teach specific skills and knowledge' in the early years (Moss 2013: 15), making the early childhood setting into an extension of primary schooling (Bennett 2013). Bennet (2013: 58) describes 'schoolified' early childhood settings as characterised by:

Age segregation, with children grouped by year of birth;

Personnel trained as teachers using a predominately knowledge transfer model with whole class exercises;

Large numbers of young children assigned to each group and insufficient attention given to the needs, talents and agency of the individual child;

A neglect of children's play, family outreach and the social dimensions of early education.

Castle Nursery practitioners often identified 'schoolified' practices they had encountered. One practitioner, for example, who had worked in other local nurseries, described how she felt compelled to challenge some of the practices she saw there. In particular, she felt that while young children were often given choices about what to do, these choices were tokenistic and merely covered up the fact that the activities on offer were 'very adult-led'. She described how she had tried to create opportunities for broader participation. For example, she refused to adhere to predetermined limits on how many children could participate in baking projects, and encouraged the children to decide what they would like to bake. Telling me this story, she laughed and shook her fist in the air, insisting that 'My babies will be listened to!' (field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2014). People may tell different stories at different times to different audiences, for different reasons Riessman (2008). In this example, the practitioner seemed to send a strong message to me about her

commitment to children's participation. For her, committing to children's participation meant standing up to more adult-controlled practices in other settings.

This example suggests that children's participation was a key ethical value at the nursery—one that practitioners were willing to stand up for and one that bound them together as a group. During my fieldwork, I observed another act of resistance to 'schoolified' practices by Castle Nursery practitioners. When asked by the local authority to adopt a standardised, outcome-driven, tick-box assessment tool, practitioners refused to do so, arguing that it left no space for children's own thoughts about their learning.

The monitoring and assessment of young children's learning and development is a topic of great interest and debate in the early childhood field. Jones (2011) argues that assessment in one form or another is always going on in early childhood settings. According to Jones, ongoing assessment is vital for guiding practice:

Each day as teachers and families interact with young children, they are assessing, either formally or informally, how language skills are developing, whether motor coordination seems on track, and if social interactions are appropriate.

Without continuous observations of children and the products of their work and play, adults have no way of knowing when to provide the correct pronunciation or definition of a word; when to provide a set of experiences that will support the child's understanding of an emerging concept; or when to model appropriate social interactions.

(Jones 2011: 15)

As this example illustrates, assessment in the early years tends to be closely linked with 'continuous observation'—the close monitoring of children's development. Practitioners are advised to watch children's play in 'naturalistic settings' (Whitebread et al. 2009: 63) and then transform these observations into data for the various assessments they are carrying out. Adults are expected to intervene when children's knowledge and skills are not 'correct'. From this point of view, assessment can be understood as a 'process of judgement', a measurement of one thing against another (Seidel 2001: 304). Children may be assessed against an externally derived standard, with practitioners' ongoing work with children shaped

by the results. Here, Rogoff's (2003: 162) 'racetrack' metaphor for human development comes into play. For example, practitioners may label children as being 'ahead' or 'behind' the relevant markers that are being used for assessment—with assumed associations for a child's future directions in life (Rogoff 2003: 163).

Assessment tools can take different forms, depending on their purpose, covering a variety of age ranges and developmental domains (Moodie et al. 2014). New assessment tools are always being created. For example, Whitebread and others (2009) have developed standardised tools for the assessment of children's metacognition and self-regulation, while Leong and Bodrova (2012) recommend a protocol for teachers to assess and support children's emerging skills at make-believe play. Many of these tools are only accessible by paying a fee, creating a strong commercial element to assessment (see Brookes Publishing 2014, Moodie et al. 2014, Teaching Strategies no date). As this plethora of assessment tools suggests, children's development may be assessed by different professionals at different times, for different purposes. For example, in Scotland there is a universal programme of developmental reviews for young children, conducted by health visitors and GPs using standardised tools such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire 3 (ISD Scotland 2010, The Scottish Government 2012). In their primary school years, children in Scotland encounter a variety of different forms of assessment, including a mix of standardised and non-standardised approaches (The School Run 2016, Education Scotland no date). At the time of writing, the Scottish Government had announced plans to introduce compulsory standardised testing in the first year of primary school (The Scottish Government 2016).

Toward the end of my fieldwork, the local authority area where Castle Nursery was located made a change to their assessment frameworks. The assessments in question were done at the end of the school term, so that children transitioning from nursery to primary school would have a record of their learning<sup>3</sup>. Castle Nursery

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<sup>3</sup> Children in Scotland generally begin attending primary school in August of the academic year when they are between four and a half and five and a half years old (Education Scotland no date). There are a variety of activities that tend to happen, to support children during their transition to primary school.

practitioners, along with other nurseries in the area, were encouraged to use a new form that focused on assessments of children's progress in literacy and numeracy. The new assessment form consisted of long, detailed lists of specific skills. Practitioners—specifically, the nursery teacher—were asked to assess children's progress toward mastery of each specific skill, designating that progress as 'developing', 'consolidated', or 'secure'.

The suggested change provoked strong reactions from several Castle Nursery practitioners, who expressed their disgust to me about the thought of using 'tick box' assessment forms. For example, Julie was building a fire at Wild Wood and was looking in her bag for her flint. She pulled the new literacy and numeracy assessments out of her bag and pretended to drop them in the firepit. 'Should we use these for kindling?' she asked Gillian, the other practitioner who was present. When I asked about the assessments, she described them as 'horrible', 'prescriptive', 'against the Curriculum for Excellence' and 'different from everything we do here at Castle Nursery' (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014). Similarly, Jan, another practitioner at the nursery, told me she was annoyed at the implication that narrow, standardised information about literacy and numeracy skills was what primary school teachers needed to know about the children. She called the assessments 'reductionist', saying that they diminished children's complex identities down to a simplistic list of judgments about their academic abilities, or perceived lack thereof (field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2014). For Mairead, a third practitioner, the lack of scope in the standardised assessment forms for open-ended contributions was a particular problem. She felt it would be difficult, using the tick-box forms, to incorporate either parents' or children's voices in meaningful ways (field notes, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2015).

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A key example of this is for nursery practitioners to share information about children with their new primary school (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010). This is meant to be a way for primary school teachers to begin learning about the incoming students, including what their experiences have been in the pre-formal schooling period. The format of transition records varies between the different local authorities in Scotland (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010).

While the new forms were optional, the practitioners I spoke to felt that the forms represented a shift in practices that would soon permeate most of the local authority area. After deliberation, the head of centre and the nursery teacher informed the local authority that they would not be using the new forms. The head of centre felt strongly that by rejecting the suggested forms, ‘we resisted’—pushing back on a practice that Castle Nursery practitioners strongly disagreed with (fieldnotes, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2015). The decision to resist was in keeping with Castle Nursery practitioners’ ongoing recognition that their work with children often contested dominant practices. By refusing to use the new forms, the head of centre and nursery teacher marked out an ethical boundary, delineating ways they were, and were not, willing to work with young children. As Ball and Olmedo (2013) argue, ‘practices of resistance’ such as the one taken by the head of centre and nursery teacher can be an important element of practitioners’ ethical identity. However, these practices of resistance also have costs (Ball and Olmedo 2013). In this particular instance, practitioners seemed confident about their act of resistance—refusing to go along with using standardised assessments. However, resistance was not always so clear-cut for practitioners.

For some practitioners, Castle Nursery was not only a place of resistance to formal schooling practices, but also a ‘haven’ of sorts for both children and practitioners. One practitioner, for example, told me that I ‘wouldn’t believe’ the kinds of things she had been asked to do in other nurseries or the ways that children were treated (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2014) . Castle Nursery, for her, was a rare refuge from the controlling and negative practices she had experienced elsewhere. Practitioners at the nursery worked hard to create, articulate, and maintain their pedagogical values. For example, during tours for prospective parents, practitioners explained in great detail that Castle Nursery was likely to be different from other early childhood settings, so that parents could be sure the nursery was the right place for them. However, despite the sense that Castle Nursery was a place of ‘safe harbour’ for both children and practitioners, interaction with the wider sector was inevitable.

Children and practitioners particularly came into contact with the school system at the end of my fieldwork, when many older children were preparing to start primary

school. The run-up to children going to primary school seemed to be a disruptive intrusion into the 'haven' of Castle Nursery. As the months of May and June progressed, many of the older children began doing more 'school things' in their play. Cerys and Naomi, for example, 'practiced for school' by writing their names on all of their drawings (field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2014). Rose Flower Rainbow and Emily Maya brought their own special pencil cases to the nursery, telling the other children that these pencils were 'for school' and refusing to use any other implements when drawing (field notes, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

Some children began to wear school uniforms to the nursery. Emily Maya, Harriet and Christine, for example, expressed great pride in wearing their school dresses, as the example below illustrates:

'Cara, did you see my dress,' Emily Maya cooed, pulling her dress out in front of her. 'It's my school dress.'

'Yeah,' Harriet joined in, tugging at her dress, 'I have my school dress, too. I'm going to school after the summer.' Christine, who was in the middle of changing her clothes, scrambled to find her own dress and put it on. 'Me too, me too!' she called.

(field notes, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014)

There were also changes in the physical environment at the nursery. In mid-June, practitioners moved the older children's pegs from the corridor to an outdoor hut in the garden. One practitioner explained that there was pressure from the local authority that the nursery should remain fully enrolled year-round. Therefore, as one cohort left the nursery, new children would be arriving over the summer. Because some of the children from the school cohort left in June, while others stayed for the entire summer, practitioners had determined that the simplest way to make space for new children's pegs was to move the school cohort en masse to the outdoor shelter, linking the move to the children's process of transition to school. The practitioner was not entirely comfortable with the moving of pegs, as she said it was driven by external concerns about enrolment rather than the children's own preferences.

While this particular practitioner had mixed feelings about moving the pegs, many of the children seemed very excited by the change. Many of them wanted to show me



where their new pegs and belongings were. Lucy, for example, brought me to the outdoor hut and proudly pointed out that her jacket and rucksack were now in this new location, ‘Cause I’m going to school!’ (field notes, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2014). The children seemed to enjoy the fact that their belongings now occupied a somewhat unconventional space—the fact that the pegs were now outside seemed particularly exciting. For Lucy, and for many of the other children, then, having their pegs moved to a new location seemed to be another way that their status as soon-to-be school children was made visible.

As this example illustrates, practitioners’ and children’s feelings about the children going to school did not always match up. Some practitioners in particular seemed to have very strong negative feelings about children going to school. For example, during the month of June, many children from the nursery went on short visits to their primary schools, accompanied by Castle Nursery practitioners. One practitioner in particular reacted quite strongly to school visits. Returning from one visit to a local primary school, she described how prescriptive she had found some of the activities that were on offer, conveying not only disagreement, but also a strong sense of sadness. Knowing that the children would soon be in a school environment seemed to make this time of year a very emotional one for her. She felt quite strongly that primary schools were not good places for children (field notes, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

Despite some practitioners having particularly strong reservations about the formal school environment, practitioners at Castle Nursery did not impose their own views onto the children. Instead, children’s own thoughts were foregrounded. For example, as the time approached for the older children to leave the nursery, ‘official’ transition activities at the nursery began. One activity was for practitioners to invite children for informal discussions about going to school. I was not present for these sessions, but a practitioner described them to me. She explained that the sessions were loosely structured and conversational, using mind-mapping and drawing as tools to stimulate discussion. Her intention for the sessions was to create opportunities for the children to express their ideas and understandings of what school would be like, in dialogue with their peers and with the practitioner. During the sessions, she said, children

talked about topics such as the school uniforms they would wear, what their new schools looked like, and doing homework. Some children knew a lot about their new schools because they had older siblings who already attended school, while others mainly listened during these sessions. These informal discussions were designed to centre children's diverse understandings about going to school (field notes, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

As this example implies, practitioners were willing to put aside their own deep-seated opposition to formal schooling in order to foreground children's voices. I have previously described how one practitioner was particularly saddened by the children's departure for primary school. On one of my last days of fieldwork, I was invited by this same practitioner to come along on a school visit with Kristen, Susan, and Alina, three of the preschool girls would be attending the same primary school. During the visit, there were significant contrasts between the primary school spaces and the spaces of Castle Nursery, particularly the way that our tour guides, the children we saw, and even we ourselves interacted with the school spaces, which felt quite restrictive and controlled. For example, the visit began with a guided tour of the school building, during which we traced a predetermined route that our guides had clearly followed many times before. There did not seem to be much concession toward what the children themselves might want to see at the school—the tour was quite generic. The children rarely had more than a few minutes to explore any of the spaces we visited. Even in the Primary One classrooms, where the children would be spending the bulk of their time, there were only limited opportunity to explore. In one classroom we were not invited in; in the other the children were invited to enter, but only for a few minutes, before our tour guide moved us on. We encountered few children on this tour, mainly seeing them when we briefly looked into the classrooms. It was clear that space and time were far more regimented at the primary school than they were at Castle Nursery.

After we had returned to Castle Nursery, the practitioner and I discussed the experience of visiting the school. Her general unease with school practices seemed to have been reinforced by the visit, and she specifically felt that being at the school had a negative effect on the children. While Alina and Susan had also been

somewhat quieter and more hesitant during the tour than they usually were at Castle Nursery, the practitioner was particularly worried about the changes she saw in Kirsten while at the school. I, too, had noticed a change in Kirsten during the school visit. One of the oldest children at the nursery, she was usually at the centre of her group of friends, animated and enthusiastic about their activities. She generally exuded confidence in her interactions with the people and spaces at Castle Nursery; a practitioner once described her to me as being ‘so powerful’ (field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2014).

During the primary school visit, however, Kirsten did not seem to feel particularly confident. Unusually for her, she was nearly silent; speaking only when spoken to directly. She did not move to explore the spaces when the opportunity did arise—for example, she did not join Alina and Susan, who spent a few minutes running around the empty gym hall—instead staying close to the practitioner, rarely moving more than a few feet away from her. When we visited the busy primary school playground, Susan and Alina hesitated only briefly before picking up some of the available play equipment and running away into the crowd, shouting, ‘Get my sword! Let’s get the baddies!’ Kirsten, however, lingered near the practitioner, quietly watching what was going on around her but not joining in. This was a particularly noticeable difference, as at Castle Nursery Kirsten often showed great enjoyment and flair for dramatic storytelling and imaginative play. It was surprising, then, that she did not want to join in with Alina and Susan’s game.

In our discussion, the practitioner expressed her belief that being in the school environment had suppressed Kirsten’s usually vivacious and self-assured nature. It was not until later in the visit, when we were alone on the playground, that Kirsten seemed to relax. On one side of the playground was a small, grassy area that housed gardening boxes, freestanding logs, a few small trees, and a chair carved out of a large tree stump. Kirsten climbed up into the chair and gazed mischievously down at the rest of us. ‘I’m the queen!’ she laughed. In our later discussion, the practitioner highlighted the way that Kirsten had returned to her ‘usual self’ when we were alone in the small garden area. This shift seemed to confirm the practitioner’s feeling that the changes she saw in Kirsten during the tour were caused by her having an adverse

reaction to being in the more institutionalised spaces of the primary school environment. Specifically, she said that Kirsten had been ‘silenced’ by the spaces and practices we had encountered.

Kirsten was not the only member of the group feeling uneasy during the tour. The practitioner herself had also seemed quite uncomfortable. This was particularly noticeable in the quiet corridors, where she took measures to constrain the children’s movements, although she seemed pained about making these interventions. For example, as we followed our tour guide, the long, empty hallways seemed to call to Alina to move her body—she swooped her arms, ran her hands along the walls and at one point ran ahead of the group. At Castle Nursery this would have been unremarkable, but in the school the practitioner took her hand to prevent her from running again, saying ‘I’m sorry darling, but we need to stay together.’ In the gym hall, she seemed aware that the tour guide wanted to move on, and encouraged Alina and Susan to curtail their play and keep moving through the school. On the playground she seemed a bit more relaxed, but it was not until we reached the small garden area—where we were alone—that the practitioner seemed to be at ease fully.

As this example has illustrated, school visits seemed to create a difficult position for this particular Castle Nursery practitioner. The various schools she visited were very different from the children’s space created at Castle Nursery. She was quite vocally opposed to many practices that she associated with schools—formal learning and prescriptive activities, for example—and did not feel that school environments were particularly good places for children. Nor was she herself comfortable at the schools she visited. Notably, however, despite her disagreement with nearly everything about schools, she did not openly challenge the practices she encountered while on school visits, or encourage the children to do so. She even participated in the practices, to some degree, as evidenced by her reluctant intervention when Alina was running in the corridor. The example therefore illustrates the ‘tightrope’ that one Castle Nursery practitioner walked, as she attempted to balance her own strong opposition to ‘schoolified’ practices with her commitment to children’s participation. In the process of subduing her own reactions, she became complicit in subduing the children as well.

### **6.3.1 Section conclusion**

This section has described another area of tension for practitioners at Castle Nursery, that arose from the ways they ‘lived’ participation with young children. Children’s participation was a core element of the nursery’s ethical identity, one that practitioners were willing to stand up for. For example, during my fieldwork, practitioners refused to adopt the standardised, tick-box assessment form recommended by the local authority. These acts of resistance seemed to bond practitioners together into a unified group with a shared vision for early childhood practice. However, resisting ‘schoolified’ practices was not always so clear-cut. The section has also described how contact with primary schools created tensions for practitioners, some of whom felt very strongly that schools were not good places for children. When children were preparing for primary school, practitioners had to balance their own opposition to ‘schoolified’ practices with their commitment to foregrounding children’s own views.

The final section of this chapter discusses the challenging experience of a quality and improvement inspection at Castle Nursery. The inspection revealed practitioners’ feelings of vulnerability about whether they would be allowed to continue working in participatory ways.

## **6.4 Being inspected and feeling vulnerable**

The quality of early childhood education and care provision is a key concept in the field, and has been for some time (Woodhead 1998, Sylva et al. 2006a, 2011, Dalli 2014, OECD 2015, Dalli and White 2016). As Dahberg and others (2007) note, as more and more children have access to early childhood education, increasing attention has been paid to the quality of that provision. As the literature review chapter of this thesis discussed, early childhood education and care is not only a social necessity due to changes in labour market participation (e.g. Dalli 2014), but also viewed as a ‘silver bullet’ that can address social problems. Much of the literature on quality has focused on what type of provision has the most benefit for children, with ‘low’ quality said to have little effect on children’s educational and

behavioural outcomes (Sylva et al. 2011). The concept of quality may dominate the literature on early childhood education and care, but what ‘quality’ actually means has been more slippery (Dahlberg et al. 2007). Sylva and others (2006a, 2006b, 2011), for example, have created detailed standardised measures of quality, including criteria for the physical environment, activities on offer, interactions that occur, and provision for learning about language and reasoning. Woodhead (1998), however, argues that there are many pathways to quality, and that while some minimum standards are required, quality is a concept that must be discussed and negotiated, rather than objectively measured.

In the Scottish context, quality of early learning and childcare settings is assessed by periodic inspections by the government agency Education Scotland (Education Scotland no date). According to Education Scotland, the inspections have a focus on quality improvement, with ‘learners at the heart’ of the inspection (HMIe<sup>4</sup> 2011: 6). Early childhood settings are encouraged to engage in self-assessment and make a case for what the setting does well, and what could be improved (Education Scotland no date). Settings are encouraged to create and reflect on a ‘shared vision’ of what quality means, clarify and agree on values and principles, and agree how the vision, values and principles will be put into action (HMIe 2007: 6).

In the month of January during my fieldwork, Castle Nursery was informed that a periodic inspection, conducted jointly by Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate, would be taking place in early February. The emphasis placed by inspection materials on a shared vision, values and principles might seem beneficial for Castle Nursery, where all of these qualities seemed quite strong. However, Castle Nursery practitioners did not seem to feel especially confident about the inspection process. Although the inspection was routine, as the inspection date approached, some of the practitioners became increasingly worried. Broadly, practitioners who

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<sup>4</sup> HMIe (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education) was the previous inspecting body for educational settings in Scotland. Some materials regarding inspection are from the time of HMIe, which was merged into the new body called Education Scotland in 2011 (Education Scotland 2012).

discussed their worries with me seemed to feel concerned that inspectors would not understand or appreciate the ‘Castle Nursery way’ of working with young children.

Practitioners also feared the consequences if inspectors did not appreciate their ways of working. For example, one practitioner noted that ‘losing points on paperwork and admin stuff wouldn’t be so bad, but losing points on child care and play would really hurt’ (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2014). Here, he seemed to be thinking about how a lowered score would feel, both for himself and for the other practitioners. The head of centre worried about the practitioners’ feelings as well. In the run up to the inspection, she expressed a great deal of empathy for the practitioners, noticing that some of them ‘feel really tense’. She said that she hoped to shield them from that stress as much as she could, but that the inspection was inevitably intrusive, and there was only so much she could do (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2014). These concerns on the part of the practitioner and the head of centre are in keeping with research that has examined the emotional effects of inspection on teaching staff (Penninckx and Vanhoof 2015). Perryman (2007: 188), for example, notes that teachers felt ‘fear, loss of control and sense of self’ in the run-up to an inspection in England, and ‘demoralised’ afterward, despite achieving a positive result.

The inspection notification sparked a flurry of activity as practitioners—particularly the head and depute heads—filled out the necessary self-evaluation forms and collected evidence of their practice (field notes, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2014). The windows were washed, cupboards were tidied, new photographs were hung on the walls, and fresh bark was spread over the garden. By the date of the inspection, the nursery was absolutely spotless, and the meeting room was set up for the inspectors with paperwork spread around the room for them to examine (field notes, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2014). The inspection was expected to last three days, during which the inspectors would go over this paperwork, but also spend time observing in the playrooms and talking to children, practitioners and parents (Education Scotland no date).

Ball (2003) has argued that in response to an increased focus on measurement and accountability, practitioners in educational settings may ‘play the game’—performing a more suitable self in the face of inspections. This performance is

referred to as a fabrication: a way of ‘presenting oneself within particular registers of meaning, within a particular economy of meaning in which only certain possibilities of being have value’ (Ball 2003: 225). At Castle Nursery, one practitioner in particular told me that she found it very difficult to ‘be herself’ with an inspector present. Mia, who was fairly new at Castle Nursery, was in the art room on the first morning of the inspection. One of the inspectors came into the art room to observe for a little while, and during this time the space became very messy from the children’s play in the sand and water tables. Some of the children even began dumping the sand onto the floor, which Mia said she tried to challenge by asking them to help clean up. However, the children involved ignored her and ‘just ran out of the space’, and Mia was unsure about what to do next. Feeling unsure was not uncommon for Mia—as a new practitioner at the nursery, she often expressed to me that she was still learning and at times did not know how to handle challenging situations with children. In this scenario, however, she felt that having the inspector there made everything even worse: ‘my words got all jumbled up and I don’t think I handled it very well. I second guessed myself and I don’t know what she wanted to see’ (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

In this example, Mia seemed to feel quite keenly the need to perform correctly during the inspection, and to perhaps fabricate an ideal version of her practice. She particularly worried that she might have jeopardised the inspection results by doing the wrong thing, due to nerves. Overall, however, the more substantive elements of practice at the nursery did not seem to change, in order to be more pleasing to inspectors. For example, the nursery’s Quality Improvement Officer<sup>5</sup> had suggested that one way to boost their inspection results would be to add the literacy and numeracy assessments (described earlier in this chapter) to children’s personal learning folders. As previously discussed, practitioners at Castle Nursery had already decided not to use these as a method of evaluating children’s learning and development. Therefore, in this case they rejected the advice of the Quality

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<sup>5</sup> Quality Improvement Officers are employed by local authorities in Scotland to ‘challenge schools and services to improve’ (The Highland Council 2016: 1) and support the implementation of annual improvement plans at each setting (Enquire no date).



Improvement Officer, even though this potentially put them at risk of a lower inspection result (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

Instead of making changes to their practices in the hopes of mollifying inspectors, the practitioners were prepared to spend a lot of time discussing and explaining their approach. One practitioner told me that it was important to have an inspector who ‘gets us’ (field notes, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2014)—someone whose underlying assumptions about teaching and learning did not fundamentally clash with Castle Nursery practices. Again, this concern resonates with research; Mackinnon (2011), for example, argues that inspection results are easily affected by this kind of clash. For the Castle Nursery practitioners, then, the success of the inspection process depended on the inspectors having an open mind and listening to their explanations about practices. These explanations took place informally in the playrooms—I overheard the inspectors asking practitioners many different questions—but some practitioners also participated in more formal interviews with the inspectors in a separate area of the nursery. One of them, passing me in the corridor, mimed being exhausted while doing a ‘blah, blah, blah’ gesture with her hand to indicate how much she had been talking that day (field notes, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2014). While she clearly found the process taxing, all of the practitioners I spoke to seemed to share the feeling that discussion and explanation were key to the nursery receiving a good score on the inspection.

Critics of ‘schoolification’ in early childhood education and care have noted that practitioners may embrace formal learning practices because these practices ‘legitimise’ what has historically been low-status work (MacNaughton 2004, Dahlberg 2013). Castle Nursery, as this chapter has discussed, took a very different approach. Resisting schoolified practices was a core part of the ‘ethical identity’ that practitioners had constructed. During the inspection, however, some practitioners at Castle Nursery worried that by being quite vocally ‘different’ within the sector, the nursery had become a target. For example, one practitioner said that ‘the wolves would be at the door’ should Castle Nursery have a lowered inspection score, and that the ‘door would be open to meddling’ from the local authority (field notes, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2014). Her concerns seemed to reflect a contentious relationship with the local authority, and the belief that her own managers and people ‘higher up the

chain' were not supportive of Castle Nursery's unconventional approach, and would take any available opportunity to impose changes (field notes, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2014).

For this practitioner, the inspection was not routine. It was high-stakes, in terms of Castle Nursery practitioners being able to continue working in the ways that they felt so strongly about. For this practitioner, the emphasis put on children's participation at Castle Nursery made the nursery's work precarious and vulnerable. Ultimately, the nursery received a good score on the inspection, and practitioners' fears about the nursery's vulnerability did not become reality. However, the process of inspection revealed some very deeply held views at the nursery about the potential consequences of resisting dominant trends in the early childhood sector. The inspection highlighted the 'dangers and difficulties' that resistance may entail (Fenech and Sumsion 2007: 110).

#### **6.4.1 Section conclusion**

This section has examined a final area of challenge and tension for practitioners—a quality and improvement inspection. The inspection seemed to represent another intrusion from outside the 'haven' of Castle Nursery, and was perceived by practitioners as a threat to their ways of working. Practitioners worried that if inspectors did not understand their unconventional approach to early learning and childcare, the nursery would receive a poor score on the inspection. A poor score could leave the door open for changes to be imposed from the local authority who oversaw the running of the nursery. Despite their fears, however, practitioners did not significantly change their ways of working in order to appease inspectors.

#### **6.5 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has focused on my final research question, regarding tensions and challenges that arose in the course of living children's participation at the setting (Question 4). The chapter demonstrated that practitioners were often faced with uncertainty about their work with young children. Several interconnected arenas of uncertainty were discussed. First, the chapter looked at several instances where children's play was challenging for practitioners. In contrast with common advice in

early childhood practice, Castle Nursery practitioners did not employ a rigid list of behaviours that were ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’. Instead, practitioners seemed to negotiate challenging situations as they arose, in a more contextualised approach. However, a contextualised approach meant that sometimes practitioners had to be comfortable with discomfort.

The chapter then turned to a shared ethos at the nursery: resistance to formal, ‘schoolified’ practices. While some practitioners felt more strongly about schoolification than others, there was a shared sense that the participatory ways of working at Castle Nursery differed sharply from what was going on in the wider early childhood sector. The section gave an example where practitioners refused to adopt a tick-box method of assessment because it was ‘reductive’ and against their pedagogical values. However, resistance was not always so clear-cut, and practitioners sometimes found that children’s views did not mesh with their own. For example, when children were preparing to go to primary school, some practitioners had to dampen their own opposition to schoolified practices in order to foreground children’s own perspectives.

Finally, the chapter has suggested that there could be consequences for working in unusual, participatory ways. Castle Nursery had a quality improvement inspection during my fieldwork. During the inspection, practitioners expressed their concerns that the inspectors would not understand participatory ways of working. They were particularly worried that, should the nursery receive a low score on the inspection, there would be meddling from higher up the chain in the local authority. Despite their fears, however, practitioners did not ‘play the game’ by changing their ways of working. Once again, practitioners lived with the uncertainty created by working in participatory ways.

This has been the final substantive findings chapter of the thesis. The next chapter offers a conclusion to the thesis, summarising findings and looking at implications for literature, policy, practice, and future research.

# Chapter 7 Conclusion

## 7.1 Introduction

The broad aim of this research was to explore how children's participation was 'lived' and negotiated in an early childhood education and care setting, with a focus on child-practitioner relationships.

The exploration was shaped by the following specific research questions:

**Question 1:** How are approaches to children's participation at the setting situated within broader policy and practice trends, particularly trends toward play-based pedagogy?

**Question 2:** How do practitioners create opportunities and constraints that shape how children's agency is enacted at the setting?

**Question 3:** How does children's participation intersect with pedagogy and power at the setting?

**Question 4:** What tensions and challenges arose in the course of living children's participation at the setting?

The research questions were addressed using an ethnographic methodology, taking place over eight months in 'Castle Nursery', an urban, local authority-run early learning and childcare centre in Scotland. An ethnographic methodology allowed me to explore my research questions over an extended period of time, and to engage with different people and perspectives at the setting. Ethnography particularly facilitated an inclusive approach to researching with very young children, because it did not require spoken communication or the performance of a specific task.

In this final chapter, I review the main findings of my doctoral research. The chapter begins with a summary of findings, based on my four research questions. The chapter then moves into a discussion of implications for literature, policy and

practice. Finally, the chapter explores possibilities for future research, and offers some concluding reflections.

## **7.2 Summary of findings**

Answers to my research questions have been woven throughout the three findings chapters. In the following sections I now re-organise those findings by answering each research question in turn.

### **7.2.1 *Question 1: How are approaches to children's participation at the setting situated within broader policy and practice trends, particularly trends toward play-based pedagogy?***

Approaches to children's participation at Castle Nursery were in keeping with some Scottish policy and practice trends, while departing from others. Children and young people's participation has rhetorical prominence in Scottish policy (Tisdall and Hill 2011), and at Castle Nursery, children's participation was the foundation of daily life. Approaches to children's participation at Castle Nursery were particularly in keeping with Scottish trends toward play-based early childhood pedagogy. The ways that play were interpreted at Castle Nursery resonated with Scottish guidance documents on early childhood practice, which frame young children as 'competent and active' (Education Scotland 2014: 23). Daily life at the nursery could certainly be described as 'child-led' or 'child-centred' (Education Scotland 2014, Armstrong 2016), and children's views were consistently taken into account during everyday activities (Education Scotland 2014). Children's participation formed the backbone of Castle Nursery's approach to play-based early childhood pedagogy.

However, children's participation in play-based pedagogy at Castle Nursery departed from other Scottish policy and practice trends. Namely, children at Castle Nursery were not framed as vulnerable or in need of intervention. There are strands of Scottish early childhood policy that emphasise early childhood as a potential period of risk, where a 'weak foundation' can lead to future social problems (Deacon 2011: 9). The young child is seen as both a potential threat and a potential redemptive agent (Moss and Petrie 2002). These discourses about young children

lean heavily toward highlighting their future development, with less attention paid to their present lives. At Castle Nursery, in stark contrast, children's present lives seemed just as important to practitioners as children's futures. Practitioners listened attentively to young children's various forms of communication, and supported their enactments of agency—showing respect for children's capabilities in the here and now. Practitioners' approach to supporting children's participation was informed by Froebelian principles, which emphasised the child as a capable contributor to his or her family and community (The Froebel Trust 2013).

Another way that approaches to children's participation departed from Scottish policy and practice trends was that there did not seem to be the 'familiar list of challenges', such as tokenism and one-off opportunities to be involved (e.g. Tisdall and Elsley 2012). Participation was not an add-on activity or limited to formal, adult-controlled experiences such as voting on which book to read. Instead, children's participation was embedded into daily routines. Children could pursue their interests, rather than have the day structured by adult-planned activities. Spaces were also used flexibly. Children did have a 'home base' in one of the two age-based playrooms. However, the boundaries between spaces were permeable, and practitioners helped children move around between the nursery spaces. Practitioners facilitated inclusion—another 'familiar challenge'—in the nursery's participatory approach, particularly for young children. As the next section will discuss, one key way that practitioners seemed to overcome some of the 'familiar challenges' was by lessening social hierarchies between adults and children.

### **7.2.2 Question 2: *How do practitioners create opportunities and constraints that shape how children's agency is enacted at the setting?***

The framing of children as competent social actors with agency has become a core 'mantra' of the childhood studies field (Tisdall and Punch 2012). Children are generally framed as exercising agency when they participate (Wyness 2015). Both concepts can be understood relationally. Esser (2016), for example, argues that opportunities and constraints for the enactment of agency arise through relationships. Moosa-Mitha (2005: 381) similarly defines participation as the degree to which

children's agency is acknowledged in their many relationships. One key consideration for children's participation and agency is the hierarchical nature of adult-child relationships and how those relationships shape the ways that children's agency is enacted. Early childhood may particularly be seen as a preparatory stage of life, during which children are too immature to 'participate meaningfully' (MacNaughton et al. 2007: 164) and need the protection of mature adults who know best.

At Castle Nursery, a key way that participation was 'lived' was that social hierarchies between adults and young children were lessened. Practitioners did not seem to think they knew best about what children should do during a day at nursery, instead supporting children to exercise agency through their play and create their own activities. The ways that practitioners created opportunities for children's agency were sometimes fairly hands-off and took place in the background. For example, practitioners used adaptable staffing patterns so that children could move around the nursery in fluid ways, including moving fluidly between indoor and outdoor play. Children therefore had a great deal of influence over their daily activities, while practitioners often played a more facilitating role.

The safety measures put in place in the infant and toddler playroom illustrate that children's agency is not quantifiable, but instead is shaped by circumstances. For example, the closed doors could be understood as factors that constrained young children's enactments of agency—young children were not as 'free' as their older counterparts. However, practitioners still created opportunities for young children's agency that were *shaped* by safety measures, not eliminated by them. In the case of the youngest children, practitioners negotiated a delicate balance between facilitating infants' and toddlers' participation in free-flow play, and ensuring that they were physically safe. For example, practitioners took pains to include the youngest children in the ethos of free-flow play by helping children overcome some of the physical barriers between spaces. When Camilla wanted to go into the preschool playroom, she stood near the door until a practitioner noticed her and helped her go through. The practitioner stayed with her as she climbed a tall set of stairs, but at a far enough distance that Camilla could still navigate the stairs on her own.

Hierarchies between adults and children were lessened at Castle Nursery, but not entirely eliminated. While practitioners seemed to believe that children's experiences should generally be free from adult intrusion and control, they did at times impose more rigid constraints on children's enactments of agency. For example, practitioners were reluctant to forgo nappy changes, even when children objected. Children's agency then became about resistance to adult demands. Similarly, Fergus's enactments of agency were shaped by practitioners' decision to have him sleep in a cot, rather than a buggy. Rather than choose where he would like to sleep (a more typical arrangement at Castle Nursery), Fergus's agency was directed toward pushing back on the decision that was imposed upon him. Another example was given in the findings chapters of a day at Wild Wood, where Jacob wanted to run away in a different direction from everyone else. Rather than support this particular enactment of agency, practitioners felt they needed to constrain it. Jacob then pushed back against practitioners, running even further away.

Children's enactments of agency at Castle Nursery were also shaped by relationships with other social actors, beyond child-adult relationships. As the next section will discuss, children's expressions of agency through free-flow play formed the basis of the pedagogical approach at Castle Nursery.

### **7.2.3 *Question 3: How does children's participation intersect with pedagogy and power at the setting?***

Children's participation directly intersected with pedagogy at Castle Nursery. The pedagogical approach taken by practitioners was built on a foundation of children's participation. Rather than plan predetermined lessons or activities, practitioners emphasised children's learning through making connections with many different social actors: a pedagogy of relationships. Because practitioners believed that children learned best through their free-flow play experiences, the physical learning environment was a very important element of the pedagogical approach. Practitioners cultivated the physical learning environment at Castle Nursery with great care, stocking the playrooms and garden spaces with rich, open-ended materials for children to encounter and explore. Wild Wood, the nursery's Forest



School site, was also conceptualised by practitioners as a rich learning environment. Children's own contributions to the physical learning environment were welcomed and encouraged. Practitioners were open to children bringing in toys, costumes, and other items from home and incorporating those items 'in the mix' with the more practitioner-planned elements of the learning environment. The fact that children's home items were not sequestered away implies that practitioners did not plan the learning environment with rigid, fixed learning outcomes in mind.

Children's learning was seen by practitioners as an open-ended process that was integrated into their everyday activities. Practitioners did not attempt to control or overly shape children's learning experiences. In the course of their play and learning, children developed many different kinds of creative connections with each other and with the material environment at Castle Nursery. For example, Emily Too and Jake explored texture, shadow and light during their encounter with paper, sellotape, and the sun. By allowing children the time and space to explore the learning environment, practitioners at Castle Nursery created conditions for the children to learn about their fellow actors in the world—including non-human actors (e.g. Lenz Taguchi 2010). The agency of fellow actors therefore shaped children's play and learning in sometimes unpredictable ways. Often—as in the case of Emily Too and Jake—practitioners were not directly involved in children's experiences at Castle Nursery. The nursery's pedagogy of relationships created many possibilities for learning, rather than proceeding along a set list of topics and skills that practitioners believed children should learn.

Practitioners sometimes played more direct roles in supporting children's learning, while still foregrounding children's own contributions. For example, practitioners were explicit about prioritising children's knowledge, even when children's knowledge did not match up with a 'correct', adult-centric answer (e.g. Aukerman 2013). This was evidenced in the naming practices at Wild Wood, and by one practitioner valuing children's own terminology for buzzards, a 'prey of birds'. Another role for practitioners was to reflect children's own learning back to them, through dialogue. For example, after a few children encountered a worm in the garden and debated what to do with it, a practitioner recounted their debate to the

rest of the children during gathering time. Her story highlighted children's own ideas about the worm's plight, rather than guiding them toward a predetermined 'correct' approach to saving the worm. Practitioners working with younger children also used dialogue to support their learning. Dialogue could involve not only words, but also embodied and material interactions (e.g. Albon and Rosen 2014).

Finally, children's participation shaped the ways that practitioners themselves learned and developed. Both children and practitioners at Castle Nursery were framed as learners—'beings in the process of becoming' (Freire 1970: 65).

Practitioners at Castle Nursery were on a 'learning journey' and were open to changing their practices. For example, the way that groups for Wild Wood were chosen had evolved over time. At first, groups were chosen in a structured way by practitioners. However, practitioners noticed that children did not always want to attend when it was their fixed turn, and that children preferred to go to Wild Wood with friends of their choosing. Practitioners had therefore adapted their way of choosing Wild Wood groups. Practitioners also undertook professional development training, academic study, and were encouraged to develop their own interests in their work with children.

There were limits on how far practitioners were willing to take a participatory approach to pedagogy. In the nursery's pedagogical approach, children's participation also intersected with negotiations of power. This intersection was made visible during a journey to Wild Wood, when Jacob ran away from the group. Castle Nursery practitioners did try to enhance children's agency—their 'power-to' (Allen 2014: no pagination)—in daily pedagogical experiences, particularly at Wild Wood. In the example with Jacob, however, practitioners became entangled with Jacob in a more fraught struggle of 'power-over' (Allen 2014: no pagination). The example with Jacob illustrates that children's experiences at Castle Nursery were not a 'free for all' or 'laissez faire'. Practitioners often confronted their own limits when it came to children's participation. As the next section will discuss, practitioners' limits seemed to arise through their complex relationships with children, their own identities as practitioners, and with the wider early childhood sector.

#### 7.2.4 **Question 4:** *What tensions and challenges arose in the course of living children's participation at the setting?*

Tensions between children and practitioners seemed most likely to arise when practitioners had reached some kind of limit regarding how far they were willing to take children's participation. The example of nappy changing illustrates a limit on participation that practitioners seemed willing to work around, but not fully remove. However, other limits on participation seemed more ambiguous. For example, practitioners sometimes found children's play to be challenging. The nursery did not employ behaviour management techniques, such as a set list of acceptable behaviour. Therefore, practitioners had to negotiate these moments when play was challenging without a predetermined procedure to fall back on. When practitioners encountered children's 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro and Payne 2012), they reacted in a variety of ways, at times employing strategies of control.

Learning about how their own personal norms and beliefs interacted with 'living' children's participation was part of practitioners' 'ethics work' at Castle Nursery (e.g. Banks 2016). More experienced practitioners seemed to be comfortable with discomfort, while a newer practitioner found the learning process more painful. In one example, Mary, a newer practitioner, was very concerned with doing things correctly at the nursery. She seemed to feel embarrassed when corrected about taking the gardening tools away from a child. However, Barbara, who had been working at the nursery much longer, seemed to accept that working in participatory ways would mean that her own norms and values would be challenged. In the case of *Frozen*, she was willing to live with uncertainty about her own practice, rather than resort to predetermined, prescriptive, adult-led practices in the name of certainty (e.g. Urban 2008).

Sometimes practitioners also faced challenges from the wider early childhood sector. Challenges from the wider sector became visible during my fieldwork when the nursery went through a routine quality improvement inspection. Until the inspection, practitioners at Castle Nursery had seemed confident that their participatory ways of working contrasted sharply with more 'schoolified' practices in the wider early

childhood sector. In one example, practitioners refused to adopt a new tick-box assessment form because it was ‘reductive’ and against their pedagogical values. As this example illustrates, practitioners were proud of doing things differently and willing to push back on schoolified practices. The quality improvement inspection revealed practitioners’ fears that doing things differently made the nursery vulnerable to ‘meddling’ from higher up in the local authority. Practitioners were worried that the inspectors would not understand their participatory approach to working with young children, and that inspectors would give them a low score. Notably, despite this fear, practitioners did not amend their work to be more compatible with what they thought inspectors wanted to see. Instead, practitioners were prepared to engage in discussion and explanation with the inspectors, with the hope that inspectors would have an open mind.

There did not seem to be easy solutions for any of the tensions and challenges that arose during my fieldwork, as children’s participation was lived and negotiated at the setting. Uncertainty may be an unavoidable element of early childhood practice, particularly if children’s participation is embraced as fully as it was at Castle Nursery. As practitioners developed their professional identities, they encountered the messiness of an ‘ethics of participation’ and navigated an ‘ethics of power’ (Farrell 2016: 200). The role of uncertainty in early childhood practice is taken up again in section 7.3.2, which discusses the implications of this research for policy and practice.

This section has summarised the research findings in terms of my four research questions. The chapter now moves on to look at implications of the findings for debates in the literature, for policy and practice, and for future research.

### **7.3 Implications for the literature, policy and practice, and future research**

#### *7.3.1 Implications for the literature*

This thesis contributes to the literature in a number of ways. First, the thesis contributes to the study of children’s rights as ‘lived’—negotiated and practiced in

the specific contexts of children's lives (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012, Reynaert et al. 2015). The thesis has particularly examined the adult dimension of children's participation, focusing on how early childhood practitioners worked with young children. Rather than present adults uncritically as 'oppressors' of children, or for children to be framed as acting as independent 'agents of their own destiny' (Mannion 2007: 413), my thesis has framed children's participation as 'lived' through relationships between adults and children. In particular, the thesis has extended the literature on children's participation by describing how practitioners avoided some of the 'familiar challenges of participation' (Tisdall and Elsley 2012, Tisdall 2013). By embedding children's participation into daily routines, lessening adult-child hierarchies and actively facilitating inclusion, practitioners seemed to avoid the challenges of: one-off opportunities for consultation, tokenism, and exclusion.

The thesis also contributes to the literature on children's participation by highlighting the inevitability of uncertainty. Though a more critical approach is now widespread in the participation literature, there have been consistent critiques that children's participation is treated as a technical exercise in the literature (e.g. Hinton 2008, Malone and Hartung 2010). By discussing the intertwined roles of practitioners' resistance and practitioners' uncertainty as they lived their participatory values, my thesis can help move the children's participation literature further away from technical concerns. In the same vein, by drawing out the tensions and challenges—particularly the inevitability of uncertainty—the thesis pushes back on tendencies to present children's participation initiatives as uncritically positive.

Additionally, the thesis contributes to the literature on children's agency. Children's agency is a core concern of the childhood studies field, with relational understandings increasingly coming to the fore (e.g. Oswell 2013, Esser 2016, Oswell 2016). This thesis has explored relational theorisations of children's agency, and has particularly attempted to move beyond accounts that frame agency as quantifiable, such as 'thickened' or 'thinned'. Instead, the thesis has described children's agency as enacted and shaped by their many relationships (e.g. Esser 2016). Children's agency was not necessarily an act of resistance against adult-

imposed ‘structure’, as it has sometimes been framed (see Leonard 2016). Instead, children’s agency was enacted fluidly, in response to shifting circumstances and relationships.

In terms of the early childhood literature, there have been calls from prominent theorists (e.g. Dahlberg 2013, Moss 2014) for researchers to critically examine the ethical element of early childhood practice and to question the ‘schoolification’ of early childhood education and care. This thesis can contribute to the early childhood literature by making links between ethical dimension of ‘living’ participation, the role of resistance to schoolification, and uncertainty about the potential consequences of resistance. The thesis can also contribute to a growing body of early childhood literature that employs qualitative, small-scale research to study young children’s meanings and experiences (Kagan et al. 2016). A great deal of early childhood research focuses on justifying public investment in early childhood services and involves longitudinal studies, randomized control trials, and quasi-experimental studies (Farrell et al. 2016). Such research tends to focus on the futurity of early childhood, and to frame young children as ‘becomings’. This thesis, in contrast, is able to contribute to the early childhood literature by looking at how children’s participation is bound up with both their present experiences and their learning and development: young children as ‘beings in the process of becoming’ (Freire 1970: 65).

### *7.3.2 Implications for policy and practice*

Young children are entitled to the same participation rights as other children and young people under the UNCRC. However, as the literature review chapter of the thesis has argued, participation rights for young children are particularly challenging, as the mainstream discourse on early childhood focuses on children’s vulnerability and incompleteness. These views may frame young children as ‘too immature to participate meaningfully’ (MacNaughton et al. 2007: 164). However, this thesis has joined many other early childhood writings by arguing that it is the definition of participation that needs to be expanded to include young children, rather than the child being required to fit a narrow definition of participation (e.g. UN Committee

on the Rights of the Child 2005, Alderson 2008). As such, the thesis has been open to a broad definition of young children's participation that goes beyond 'talking, thinking and deciding' to encompass children broadly taking part in their various communities and relationships (Alderson 2008: 79). There are implications for policy here, as Scottish trends in children's participation have tended to be toward the 'talking, thinking and deciding' model of participation.

The thesis also contributes to the policy and practice literature by arguing for children's participation as a core element of ethical approaches to early learning and childcare. An ethical perspective encourages practitioners to consider their own beliefs about young children and the purposes of early learning and childcare, and to also consider whether and how these beliefs can together to form some kind of ethos for the setting (e.g. Dahlberg and Moss 2005). The ethical elements of early childhood practice are particularly relevant in a climate where practitioners may find themselves torn between conflicting messages about young children. For example, in the Scottish context, practitioners are urged to form caring, responsive relationships with the young children in their settings (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010), while also being encouraged to adopt a child-led approach, which is easily interpreted as everything coming from the child (Armstrong 2016). Underpinning this tension is the consistent message that early childhood is a critical period where the foundation of children's future life chances is set (Education Scotland 2014). In such a high-pressure environment, practitioners may particularly feel tempted to turn to technical, standardised programmes which claim to produce positive outcomes, but may have detrimental effects on the potential for children's participation. At the time of writing, the Scottish Government had announced plans to re-introduce standardised testing into primary schools, including in the first year of school (BBC News 2016). Therefore, a focus on the ethical dimension of early childhood practice is particularly relevant in Scottish early learning and childcare practice.

This thesis can particularly contribute to ethical perspectives by putting forward an argument for reflective practice in the early years. Reflective practice involves critical thinking about practitioners' own learning journey (Reed and Canning 2010), including their beliefs, experiences, and values (Bolton 2014). This involves asking

questions, staying with uncertainty, and working to uncover assumptions, acknowledging the subjective elements of early childhood practice (Bolton 2014). Reflective practice can help practitioners unpack how children's participation is being operationalised in their settings, particularly regarding understandings of voice. This research has highlighted the importance of non-verbal 'voice' in young children's participation, with Castle Nursery practitioners being attuned to various types of communications including body language and subtle facial expressions (e.g. White 2016). The research also highlighted what could be understood as 'spatial' voice, with children and practitioners' relationship with spaces in the nursery being a key way that participation was lived (Lundy 2007, Mannion 2010). This could also be applied to the temporal and material elements of children's participation at Castle Nursery; as previously discussed, the relationships that created opportunities for participation were not limited to human ones. Therefore, another area of contribution for reflective practice would be for practitioners to examine the spatial, temporal, and material elements of participation in their own settings.

To advocate a reflective approach does not mean that policy priorities—such as those described in the Scottish context—need to be disregarded or abandoned. Instead, the way that settings approach these priorities can be interpreted in more critical ways, much like children's rights are interpreted in a lived rights approach. For example, reflective practice at Castle Nursery helped practitioners feel confident about making an argument for their own ways of working, in the context of the quality improvement inspection. Reflective practice can support a critical questioning of why things are done the way they are in early childhood settings, possibly leading to thoughtful change over time. However, as the thesis has noted, meaningful reflection may not always be easy; it can be quite challenging and contentious. A whole-nursery ethos of reflective practice can perhaps mitigate some of these challenges as practitioners travel along their learning journeys together.

### *7.3.3 Implications for future research*

This research has explored how children's participation was lived and negotiated in one particular early learning and childcare setting, producing findings that are



contextualised to that setting. Future research could explore how participation was lived in settings that were different from Castle Nursery in various ways. For example, Castle Nursery served a population of children whose families tended to be well-off, with few children having recognised additional support needs, and without a particular focus on early intervention. A setting where these factors were different might not be as flexible in their ways of working with young children, with implications for children's participation. The socio-economic context of early learning and childcare settings may be particularly relevant in the Scottish context, as the Scottish Government has made a commitment to closing the 'attainment gap' in literacy and numeracy skills between children from varied backgrounds (The Scottish Government Communications 2016). The way that these priorities affect young children's participation could be explored in future research—for example via a multi-site ethnographic study.

This research has focused primarily on child-practitioner relationships at Castle Nursery. Future research could broaden this focus, incorporating the perspectives of parents. Parents have only been minimally discussed in this thesis, in regards to the situation where Fergus's parents wanted him to sleep in a cot instead of his buggy. This situation does invite a wider question about how practices at early learning and childcare settings sit with parents' own ways of interacting with their children. Research that explores how children's participation is lived in the family compared with childcare settings could offer insights into how institutional and family life intermingle. This might be particularly fruitful in a setting such as Castle Nursery, where participatory practices may have been quite challenging for parents, but would also be interesting in a more 'traditional' early childhood setting. Future research could simultaneously explore the use of methodological 'group accounts' (Harden et al. 2010, MacLean and Harden 2014) to learn about families' experiences of young children's participation.

This research was designed to be inclusive of very young children's experiences and perspectives, but perhaps could have gone further in terms of directly asking children about their own views on participation. As the methods chapter of the thesis discussed, the decision not to use task-based or talk-based methods was made so as

to not exclude the youngest children from the research process. In retrospect, a more nuanced approach could have been possible. Certainly, many of the children at Castle Nursery could have participated in light-touch methods, such as small group discussions, regarding their own thoughts about being listened to at nursery. Future research could incorporate more direct methods of talking to young children about their experiences, as a supplement to other methods which are more inclusive for the very youngest children. Future research could also involve young children as co-researchers or peer researchers, though this approach would need to be in addition to, rather than instead of, methods that were inclusive for very young children.

Finally, this research was limited to the domain of the early childhood setting, in large part because practitioner-child relationships were particularly interesting to me as a practitioner myself. However, children's lives incorporate a variety of contexts, and it would be fruitful to explore how young children's participation is lived outside the nursery. Formal settings such as nurseries are 'acceptable' places for young children, whereas public spaces may not be. Future research could therefore explore young children's relationships with public spaces beyond the nursery, and how children's participation is facilitated or impeded in those spaces. Future research could also explore young children's participation in other contexts such as the various family/carer arrangements that children may experience. There is also scope to explore whether/how young children are involved in more formal consultations, regarding both collective decision-making and individual decision making. All of these contexts offer the opportunity to examine how conceptualisations of early childhood influence how participation is lived.

#### **7.4 Concluding reflections**

This doctoral thesis has explored how young children's participation was lived and negotiated in an early learning and childcare setting, with a focus on child-practitioner relationships. Its key contributions were to show that participation is not always easy, and to unpack some of the tensions and ambiguities around participation. In particular, the research has highlighted that participation was supported by practitioners engaging in reflective practice, which helped embed

participation as an ethical element of early childhood practice at the nursery. The research has also critiqued some of the mainstream trends in early childhood policy and practice, particularly the tendencies to view early childhood as a critical period for ensuring positive developmental outcomes.

This thesis also represents a significant aspect of my own learning journey in the field of early childhood education and care. As a practitioner myself, I found the practices of Castle Nursery both inspiring and challenging. I have incorporated a reflexive approach into this thesis, to foster a level of transparency regarding: my own role in creating data, selecting themes and excerpts for interpretation, and framing those interpretations in my analysis. In doing so, this thesis has incorporated multiple voices and perspectives, while also leaving space for readers to engage in their own process of meaning-making, dialogue and reflection about young children's participation.

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# Appendices

## 7.5 Appendix A: Information sheet for parents and practitioners

### PhD research: Observing and participating in life at Castle Nursery



#### *Who am I?*

My name is Cara Blaisdell and I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. Some of you may remember that I was here two years ago, doing a photography project with the children. I am also an early childhood teacher.

#### *What is the research?*

I will be at the nursery for 10-12 months. My research has two main elements:

The first is to observe and participate in daily life at Castle Nursery, with the hope to better understand the respectful, participatory practice that goes on here. I am interested in how adults and children co-create the culture (the practices and routines) at the nursery.

The second element is a reflection on ways of researching with young children. I will mainly be using “participant observation”, which means that I will observe what goes on, join in with daily life, and have informal chats with children and adults.

#### *Why this research?*

I believe that my research will help me and other early years practitioners consider our approach to working with young children. I also hope to have something interesting to say about ways of researching with young children.

### ***Which children will be involved?***

My research will take place with children across the age range at Castle Nursery.

I will introduce myself to the children by telling them that I am here to learn about their nursery, and that my notebook helps me remember what I have learned.

Children are able to withdraw from involvement at any time, or change their minds about being involved. For example, I will be sensitive to children's verbal and non-verbal communication about how welcome I am to interact with them in any given situation.

If you have questions or concerns about your child's involvement, please feel free to get in touch with me, or speak to [management team]. Attached to this leaflet you'll find a form allowing you to "opt out" of your child's inclusion in the research. If you do opt out, this does not mean I will never interact with your child, but I will not use those interactions as data for my research.

### ***Anonymity and confidentiality***

When I write up my PhD, participants will never be identified by name. I will also be careful about sharing private conversations that I have with the people at Castle Nursery. However, there is an exception to confidentiality: if concerns arise during the research regarding child protection issues, I will notify centre staff, who will follow the procedures they have in place.

### ***Contact information***

Please feel free to say hello anytime. I am happy to chat with parents about my research. Otherwise, the best way to contact me is by email:

**c.b.blaisdell@sms.ed.ac.uk.**

I look forward to meeting you and your children over the coming year!

Best wishes,

Cara

## Opt out form for parents

Dear Castle Nursery parents,

If you are happy for your child to be included (anonymously) in my research, there is nothing you need to do.

However, if you would prefer that your child not be included, this form allows you to opt out of the research.

Simply fill in your child's full name and sign and date the form. The form can be returned at reception, or given to your child's key worker. Opting out does not affect your service provision in any way.

As my research takes place during everyday life at Castle Nursery, I can't guarantee that if you do opt out, that I will never interact with your child. However, I will not use any interactions that I do have as data for my research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch via email ([c.b.blaisdell@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:c.b.blaisdell@sms.ed.ac.uk)) or pull me aside for a chat.

Best wishes,

Cara

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent signature and date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **7.6 Appendix B: Consent form for practitioners**

PhD research: Observing and participating in life at Castle Nursery

Cara Blaisdell

### **Consent form for staff**

Dear Castle Nursery staff,

This form allows you to decide whether or not to participate in the research project. It's ok to say no, and your decision is confidential.

I will be visiting Castle Nursery a few times per week, for about a year. My research is about how children's participation is "made real" during everyday life. This might involve observing, for example, how children of different ages express their views, and how adults take those views into account. I'm interested in situations where this is easy, and situations where it might be more difficult.

I'm not evaluating or judging anyone's practice with the children (except my own!). Instead, I want to capture how very complex "doing" children's participation can be.

If you decide not to be involved, I will not use any of my observations that include you in my data.

If you do agree to be involved, you can change your mind at any time. Feel free to pull me aside for a chat or email me if that is more comfortable (c.b.blaisdell@sms.ed.ac.uk).

Best wishes,

Cara



**Please tick the appropriate box and return, either to Cara directly or to the envelope at reception:**

Yes, I agree to be involved in this research project

No, I do not wish to be involved in the research project

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature and date: \_\_\_\_\_