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‘You can’t know, you’re not 5’: Exploring children’s views of what it is like to be in Primary 1

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that starting school is a significant time in most children's lives, formatively impacting on cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, health and wellbeing, and lifelong chances. The last three decades have witnessed a surge in national and international policy and research attention on early years educational provision and practice, where improving children's experiences to ensure all children get the best start in life, has become a major focus. However, what this experience should involve in terms of effective practices, most especially in the earliest stages of beginning school, remains an area of debate. Little of this debate takes into consideration the perspectives of children themselves. By contrast, the study reported in this thesis set out to do exactly that.

This study investigated the time when young children had begun compulsory education within a Scottish primary school context. Through the adoption of an ethnographic approach, it set out to gain an in-depth, contextually grounded, understanding of children's every day, lived experiences of being in school based principally on how the children themselves talked about these experiences.

The main participants in this study were 50 primary 1 children attending a single Scottish primary school. Over the course of a 10-month period, data for this study were primarily gathered through close observation, and the use of participatory activities, thus providing spaces for children to share their experiences, views, and perceptions of being in school. Building on processes of reflexive interpretive analysis, this thesis presents and discusses how the children talked of this time and explores what impacted on and shaped their experiences of being at school.

The study found that the children’s day-to-day, lived experiences of school had had a profound impact upon their emergent conceptualisations of necessary ‘practices of being’ in school, which strongly linked to ‘practices of belonging’ and social positioning. From the wide array of findings, three principal themes are fore grounded for a closer discussion: children’s
emergent sense of identity and belonging; bodily movements and choice; and opportunities for peer friendships. Most notably, it was found that the children commonly perceived of school as a place where you would be judged to be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in ways that became intrinsically linked to judgements on capabilities and belonging as a learner in school. A fragility in this sense of belonging emerged that impacted upon the children’s willingness to take risks in their learning, for fear of making mistakes or ‘getting it wrong’. On bodily movement and choice, the study highlights how the children experienced tensions between the systems and structures that regulated their bodily movements and their own preferences for freer movement in school spaces. On peer friendships, the thesis argues that the findings point up how a focus on socialisation within the school spaces needs to be widened out to provide opportunities for children to build, negotiate and maintain old and new peer friendships.

Analysis of my observations and of children’s talk revealed how their reported experiences were imbricated in the school systems, structures, and design and use of spaces. Accordingly, the study necessarily involved a degree of examination of, and reflection on, current school systems. Drawing on the findings of this study, it is observed that one necessary element of a reconfiguration of early years education involves a refiguring of the architectural design and pedagogical use of school spaces that currently place an emphasis on order and control. It is observed that many school systems, structures and spatial organisational practices result in schools remaining firmly focused on notions of a ‘ready child’, where children believe their role is primarily to ‘fit in’. Following the lead of this thesis, seeking to foster children’s own voices and attend to their perspectives may act to undermine this conceptualisation of the ‘ready child’.
Lay Summary

Starting school is a significant time in most children’s lives, formatively impacting on cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, health and wellbeing, and lifelong chances. However, what this experience should involve in terms of effective practices, most especially in the earliest stages of beginning school, remains an area of debate. Little of this debate takes into consideration the perspectives of children themselves. By contrast, the study reported in this thesis set out to do exactly that.

The main participants in this study were 50 primary 1 children attending a single Scottish primary school. Through the adoption of a school-based ethnographic study, it set out to gain an in-depth, contextually grounded, understanding of children’s everyday experiences of being in primary 1 based principally on how the children themselves talked of their experiences.

The study found that the children’s experiences of being in primary 1 had had a profound impact upon their emergent conceptualisations of necessary ‘practices of being’ in school, which strongly linked to ‘practices of belonging’ and social positioning. Three key themes emerged: children’s emergent sense of identity and belonging; bodily movement and choice; and opportunities for peer friendships. Most notably, it was found that children commonly perceived school as a place where you would be judged to be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in ways that were intrinsically linked to notions of capability and belonging. A fragility in this sense of belonging emerged that impacted on children’s willingness to take risks. The study revealed how the reported experiences were imbricated in the school’s systems, structures, and in the design and use of the school spaces. These were observed to commonly remain firmly focused on notions of a ‘ready child’, where children’s role was to find ways to ‘fit in’. Following the lead of this study, seeking to foster children’s own voices and attend to their perspectives and preferences may act to undermine this conception of a ready child.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.0: Scope Of This Study

This thesis reports on a research study which investigated the time when young children begin compulsory education within a Scottish primary school. The main participants in this study were 50 primary 1 children attending a single Scottish primary school. Through the adoption of an ethnographic approach, it looked to gain an in-depth, contextual understanding of the children’s every day, lived experiences of being in a primary 1 setting, with a particular focus on how the children themselves spoke about these experiences. The children’s talk was interpreted against a close observation and analysis of their school’s structures, systems, and spatial organisation. As the following chapters reveal, it uncovered how the children’s experiences impacted on their emergent constructions of necessary practices of ‘being’, practices of ‘belonging’, and social positioning in the school setting. Analysis of my observations and of children’s talk revealed how their reported experiences were imbricated in the school’s systems, structures, and design and use of spaces. Accordingly, the study necessarily involved to a degree an examination of, and reflection on, current school systems.

To set the scene this current chapter:

- describes my journey to this particular topic;
- provides a rationale for the study and presents its purposes and research questions;
- outlines key features of the Scottish context for early years education and succinctly sets out the remaining chapters.

1.1: My Background

I began my professional career as a primary school teacher in the early 1980s. During my career I have held a number of professional roles within Scottish primary schools, I also worked as a Probationer Teacher Supporter for my Local Authority, and in 2008 I moved into the world of Higher Education to work as a Teaching Fellow on Masters in Education
programmes, and later the MA in Education course. In 2012 I began my current role as an Education Fellow, working within the field of Primary Initial Teacher Education at the Moray House School of Education and Sport.

My biography is that of someone who has yet to leave the world of formal education. I have gone from my own school experiences to embarking on a Bachelor in Education degree, and then into the world of school and university. Along the way I have completed additional studies, with embarking on a Doctorate in Education being what I deemed as my next learning logical step.

I did not enter into the world of teaching, as many do, as a result of being inspired by teachers and teaching in my own life experience. My experience was quite the opposite. I did not enjoy school and felt invisible most of the time. I was the quiet child, average, following the rules, and so barely visible within the teaching styles I encountered. In my early teens I experienced a life-changing event with the death of a parent. The impact this had not only on my day-to-day life, but my education was profound, and yet little help was offered. I entered into a career in teaching because I felt it could be ‘done better’.

1.2: ‘The Stone in My Shoe’

My current role working with primary education students involves critical exploration into the qualities, skills, knowledge, and understandings that are features of an effective, high quality practitioner. I work with the students to interrogate theory, research, policy and professional practice and beliefs that underpin the approaches adopted in schools, and ultimately impact on the choices they will make in their classrooms. I encourage them to become increasing critically reflective, introducing them to the work of writers such as Brookfield (1995; 2017) and Schon (2008), where the focus is on thinking about what you are doing, why, and what is the impact? As part of their studies, students are asked to engage in a practitioner enquiry, where they are encouraged to critically reflect upon the ‘stone in their shoe’ – aspects of their practice that they feel need further attention through an in-depth,
evidence-based investigation. Critical reflection has long been a strong feature throughout my own career, and I believe essential to continually develop my own practice. Embarking on my Doctoral studies I was very aware of some of the ‘stones in my shoe’.

Much of my professional career has involved work within the field of Early Years education; it is an area that I have a special interest in. A particular ‘stone in my shoe’ arose from proposed changes arising from the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (Scottish Executive, 2006; 2007) and the Early Years Frameworks (Scottish Government, 2008a; 2008b), which I discuss further in Chapter 2. Changes to Scottish Government policies and guidance advocated the need for increased attention to high quality early years educational experiences in supporting children’s development and learning needs. In particular, it was deemed necessary ‘…to ensure [that] continuity of experience, learning and the curriculum between home, pre-school settings and the early years of primary school’ was a strong feature of all professional practice (Scottish Executive, 2007:9). How this would be facilitated was not clearly defined, and thus was left to individual local authorities, pre-schools, and schools to review and decide what might need addressed across their own early years’ settings.

I held a particular interest in what these proposed changes involved in practical terms in early primary school classrooms. I engaged in dialogue with students, colleagues, and early years school practitioners, exploring their views, and comparing these to my own thoughts. Here I found individuals’ views and interpretations of effective practices in primary 1 varied, most especially around conceptualisations of play and play-based approaches to learning in this setting. I began to ruminate over what effective early years experiences in the primary 1 setting could and should involve.

I began to explore literature within the field of school transitions, some of which I discuss further in Chapter 2, and realised how little available research had looked at what happens once children had begun school, with much predominately focusing on children’s transition into school. I was interested
to know what happened once children had started school, and what made an effective experience at this stage of their educational lives. As a practitioner myself, I was most interested in the day-to-day, ‘lived’ experiences of being in an early primary classroom and how those who were directly involved experienced and perceived of this time. Thus, in the initial stages of my proposed doctoral research my focus was on the exploration of children’s, teachers’ and parents/carers’ experiences and views of primary 1. In preparation for undertaking fieldwork for my research, I enrolled in an audit of an MSc in Childhood Studies course: Listening to Children: Research and Consultation, to enhance my skills and knowledge in the role of researcher. This became the catalyst for what became the main direction of my research study, which looked to foreground what children themselves had to say about starting school, and the importance of knowing about this time and place from the children’s viewpoint.

Consequently, an investigation into children’s own experiences, perceptions, and views of their everyday life in primary 1 became the metaphoric ‘stone in my shoe’ that needed addressing in this study.

1.3: Aims and Research Questions

Starting school is commonly acknowledged as a significant time in most young children’s lives, marking the beginning of their engagement in compulsory, more formalised, planned educational experiences within an institutional setting (Dunlop, 2002; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Yoleri, 2015). For most children this involves making the transition into a very different socio-cultural environment where they are faced with markedly different social, emotional, physical, and cognitive expectations and demands, which for some can be problematic (Fabian, 2002; Stephen, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Ajeckso, 2013, Keinig, 2013). Children’s experiences of this time are understood as having a profoundly normative, long lasting impact on their academic trajectories, attitudes and life outcomes (Stephen, 2006; Kennedy et al., 2012; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016); thus, ensuring all children are supported to have the most effective, high quality experience is deemed to
be of the utmost importance. However, what constitutes an effective, high quality experience is debated, grounded in differing socio-political perspectives of the purpose of education, notions of children, childhood, and of learning (Stephen, 2006).

Unpacking what would be the main aims of this research study involved close and careful consideration of what was known, and what was required knowledge, about this time.

Recent times have witnessed a move away from more traditional views of pre-school and the initial stages of primary school as being two very different settings with very different expectations and approaches to child development, learning and care. The advent of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Early Level which encompasses children aged 3 to 6, called for a need for greater continuity across the two settings, where the transition into school was viewed as a process, rather than an event. As discussed in Chapter 2, much time and attention were thus given to how to best prepare children to make this journey into the school setting in ways that would create a smoother experience. However, I found that less research attention was given to what should happen once the children had started school, and to the ways in which this transitional process might be best continued.

It is widely acknowledged that schools, and planned experiences within schools, are predominately designed for children by adults (Grever, 2012; Cudworth, 2015; Dix, 2017). Historically, school policies and practices have been managed by adults on children’s behalf (Grever, 2012). Thus, decisions as to what is working in the school setting, what is not, and what needs to happen, or change, are based on adult perceptions of what this time should involve for children. This is not necessarily a bad thing; however, this assumes that adults can always know best how children experience or make sense of this time, or indeed what children want. Consideration of any alternatives involves problematising the taken-for-grantedness of this time and place in children’s lives (Tuan, 1977) and uncovering the previously unthought of (Kellock & Sexton, 2018). Moss (2019) contends that there are
stories out there to be heard, which can be drowned out by those who have the power and privilege to control the narrative for their own ends.

This research study was underpinned by the premise that adults do not necessarily automatically know what is best for children, and that children themselves should have an intrinsic part in discussions about, and decisions on, what happens in their lives (Davis et al., 2014a). Consequently, this research study looked to provide an opportunity to (re)examine and (re)consider what being in a primary 1 was like from the perspectives of the children living this experience.

The aims of this study were to gain a better understanding of:

- the ways in which children can experience being in primary 1 through an exploration of how the participating children themselves talked of this time; and
- a better sense of what can shape and impact upon their experiences, views, and perceptions of this time.

These aims were pursued through four main research questions:

- What are these children’s experiences, perceptions, and views of being in primary 1?
- What seems to impact on and shape their experiences and understandings of this time and place?
- Do these children appear to find aspects of their primary 1 school experience problematic, and if so in what ways?
- From this exploration into these children’s experiences, is it possible to gain a clearer understanding of what may need to be (re)considered to ensure all children are better supported to have a positive, effective start to their early years’ primary education?

A better understanding of the nature of children’s own experiences, views, and perceptions of being in primary 1 will better enable those involved in planning children’s school experiences to move from what works for most children, to what works for all (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Fabian, 2013). At
the same time, it is acknowledged that this study explored a particular group of primary 1 children, at a particular time, and in a particular place. Accordingly, the question of generalisability is given detailed consideration in Chapter 3: Methodological Approach and Methods.

1.4: Early Years Education: Scottish Context

Although part of the United Kingdom, Scotland has devolved powers for education (The Scottish Parliament, 1998) that set it apart from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Scottish educational provision is largely state funded with the vast majority of schooling provided by Scottish local authorities (Smith, 2018).

Scotland’s *Curriculum for Excellence 3-18* (CfE) (2004) evolved from a national debate on education in 2002, with its predecessor, the 5-14 curriculum, deemed as being content heavy, fragmented and overly assessment driven (Reid, 2013). The *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) was developed from five National Priorities for Education: Attainment and Achievement; Framework for Learning; Inclusion and Equality; Values and Citizenship; Learning for Life (Bryce et al., 2013). Its central ideals are described in terms of values, purposes, and principles. It aims to place children at its heart and promote four capacities of: Successful Learners; Confident Individuals; Responsible Citizens: and Effective Contributors (Priestley & Minty, 2012). It advocates the need to ensure all children are provided with the support they need to acquire necessary skills, knowledge, and attributes to enable them to succeed in learning, life, and work (Scottish Government, 2006).

Encompassing the age groups 3-18, CfE thereby brings together early years provisions, primary and secondary schools, and further education (FE) colleges. The introduction of an Early Level, focused on supporting young children from age 3 through to 6, marked a change from the more traditional view of pre-school education and the beginning stages of primary school as separate settings with distinct educational and care agendas. The focal point
became the need to ensure a ‘smooth transition’ across these settings, not only in what children learn, but how they learn (Scottish Executive, 2007).

The roots of early years education and care in Scotland lie in conditions of childhood poverty and educational disadvantage (Clark & Munn, 1997). Children enter compulsory (primary school) education in Scotland in the August of the year nearest their 5th birthday. This timeframe of ‘age readiness’ is calculated from the end of February through to the beginning of the following March; thus, most children will be aged between 4.6 and 5.5 years at the time they start primary school. It is notable that children’s start age for compulsory education in Scotland is among some of the youngest in the modern world (McNair, 2023). Parents/carers can apply to their local council to request a deferral where their child is aged 4 on the date school starts. Based on this, if a deferral is granted, a request can be made for their child to attend an early year’s education setting for a further year, starting school in the following year’s intake. However, government funding is generally only available for a child whose 5th birthday falls in the January or February, therefore parents/carers may need to self-fund.

Prior to starting school most young children will have attended some form of pre-school provision at: a local authority setting, private nursery, voluntary groups such as play groups, or child minders (Scottish Government, 2022). It is common for children to attend any combination of these on a regular basis (Stephen, 2018). Attendance at a pre-school provision is voluntary, ultimately at the discretion of the child’s family. However, as part of a ‘compelling narrative of how social and economic problems can be eliminated by early childhood services’ (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008:5), government funding for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) is available for all children aged 3 and 4 years old, and vulnerable 2 year olds, to attend some form of pre-school provision for 1140 hours per year (30 hours per week if taken in school term time). Consequently, it is unusual for a child to transition into compulsory schooling without having some experience of a pre-school provision first. As Chapter 3
will reveal, the children who participated in this research study all had had some form of prior pre-school experience upon starting primary school.

1.5: Overview of The Structure of The Thesis

Following this introduction to the research study, Chapter 2 provides a review of the key themes within pertinent literature that have formed the backdrop to my study. It presents issues raised in preceding research and identifies gaps that were influential in determining the direction of my research study, and the choice of methods adopted. In Chapter 3 the methodological approach and methods adopted are clearly outlined, along with a discussion of the theoretical framework that grounded the study. The context of the study, data collection methods employed, ethical considerations, and the processes of analysis are all set out within this chapter.

Chapters 4 to 6 present an interpretive analysis of the salient findings of this study. Chapter 4 discusses how the physical structures and organisational design of the school environment impacted upon the children’s school experiences, and on their emergent sense of their own identity and place in this setting. Chapter 5 then presents and discusses the ways in which the children had come to see school as marked by rules and routines, and how their understandings of school as governed by rules had a direct impact on their notions of competence and belonging. Chapter 6 moves to look at the importance of the children’s peer relationships in school and presents a discussion of key findings relating to the building, negotiating, and maintaining of old and new friendships at school.

Chapter 7 then draws together the array of findings from this study and addresses the research questions in an integrated fashion through the selection of salient themes that have received less attention in preceding research. This chapter then draws on this synthesis of key themes to point up implications for future practices and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0: Introduction

This chapter presents an analytical summary of key literature that has provided the foundation for my research and influenced the direction of its methodological approach and methods. Given that the fields within early years education literature are extensive, it has been necessary to limit this discussion to the areas that are most pertinent to my study. Consequently, this chapter focuses on five fields that have played a significant role in informing, and providing a framework for, my research study.

The chapter begins by looking at the current direction of early years education policy and practice in Scotland, and debates around their perceived aims and rationales. It considers how this current policy relates to early years education in primary schools in particular, and the tensions inherent in this policy. Next, it examines the research literature that has focused on views of transitions as being problematic, most particularly in relation to children’s adjustment to school life in terms of ‘readiness’. It then goes on to consider how changing conceptualisations of children and childhood, including those that feature in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), have led to calls for more research that seeks to ensure that children’s voices are heard. Debates concerning how this might be achieved are addressed. Building upon these preceding sections, it then focuses on the literature within the field of Children’s Geographies, which principally draws attention to the importance of the complex, personalised, ‘lived’ nature of the relationship’s children have with and within the spaces they occupy. This section undertakes a critical analysis of conceptual understandings of space, place, and spatiality, before exploring related notions of identity and belonging, agency-structure tensions, power, and children’s spatial rights. The final section in this chapter looks at literature within the field of children’s peer friendships. It begins with an analytical overview of how friendships are understood within different disciplinary perspectives and points up the disciplinary focus of attention in my own
research study. Attention then shifts to a discussion of key research literature concerning children’s school friendships, and how close attention to how children *themselves* defined, understood, and ‘did’ friendships in school would be an area that merited close attention in my work.

**2.1: The Direction of Scottish Early Years Education Policy and Practice: A Focus on Intervention and Prevention**

It is widely acknowledged within the literature focusing on early years education that the last three decades have witnessed an unprecedented level of interest in the lives of young children at both national and international governmental levels (Neuman, 2002; Woodhead, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2013; Smith, 2013; Nutbrown & Clough, 2014; Boyd & Hirst, 2016; Babic, 2017). In line with this general trend, since the late 1990s, a series of Scottish government policies and initiatives have been introduced that have continued to have a major impact on the nature of early years provision, on children and their families’ experiences, and on the practices of those who work with young children in early years settings (Wilkinson, 2003; Stephen, 2006).

Nutbrown & Clough (2014) observe that much of this early year’s education policy and practice must be considered within its historical context and in terms of how it ‘fits’ within current social, cultural, and political thinking. The enduring theme of viewing the early years of children’s lives as highly formative of their long-term prospects has played a central role in shaping much of government policy in early years provision and practice (Woodhead, 2006). Governments have increasingly perceived that investment in early years provision and education ‘may provide a solution to achieving societal goals’ (Oberhuemer, 2005: 29). Fuelled by growing concerns over a perceived lack of educational attainment and increasing levels of disengagement with the education process, particularly from certain socio-cultural groups of children, solutions were seen to be situated in the need for increasing levels of government *interventions* into early years educational provision and practices (Oberhuemer, 2005; Moss, 2013).
Discourses and proposed initiatives within Scottish government early years policy have focused on the necessity to intervene to improve early education experiences for all children and to overcome any barriers to their learning and development (Scottish Executive, 2007). This theme of combating inequalities through intervention and prevention featured heavily in the Early Years Framework I & II (Scottish Government, 2008a; 2008b) documentation, which set out a vision of ensuring all children have the best start in life and of addressing ‘the needs of children whose lives, opportunities and ambitions are being constrained by Scotland’s historical legacy of poverty, poor health, poor attainment and unemployment’ (p.1). This interventionist approach continued through subsequent government guidelines, for example, Early Years and Early Intervention (Scottish Government, 2008c), the Building the Ambition (Scottish Government, 2014) and the more recent ‘refreshed’ version Realising the Ambition: Being me (Scottish Government, 2020).

Overarching the direction of Scottish early education policy is the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2012a) multi-agency approach, which threads through existing school policy and practices. It focuses on helping practitioners in identifying, managing, and overcoming risks early in a child’s life, putting the child, their needs, and their rights at the centre.

The literature on early years education and care does not dispute the importance of this time in young children’s lives, nor, that all children deserve to be supported to have the best possible start to life through experiencing high quality education and care (Fabian, 2002; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Wood, 2008; Bruce, 2011, Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). Much of this thinking has been further supported by the findings of two major longitudinal research studies, namely, The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al., 2004) launched in 1997 and the Growing up in Scotland (GUS) study launched in 2005. Both projects tracked and gathered extensive data about the lives of particular cohorts of children and have thus provided a wealth of findings related to issues around: cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural development; childcare; and home and community. Commonly
highlighted in these studies are the ways in which many children benefitted from access to high quality educational experiences in their early years, which helped to reduce the inequalities in their cognitive development and health and wellbeing. These studies found that a high-quality pre-school experience and well supported transitions into primary schools helped children overcome some of the potential barriers faced when moving to this new education setting.

Subsequent publications from the GUS study in particular have gone on to influence Scottish early years policy in supporting children in their transition from pre-school to primary school, for example: *Growing up in Scotland: early experiences of primary school: the transition to school* (Bradshaw et al., 2012); *Growing up in Scotland: early experiences of primary school* (Scottish Government, 2012b); and *Characteristics of pre-school provision and their association with child outcomes* (Scottish Government, 2014). It is notable however, that despite this documentation looking at factors that lead to a successful transition to school, data were collected from adults on behalf of the children.

There are those, such as Stephen (2006), who have drawn attention to the fact that judgements on what constitutes a positive, effective early years’ experience, and a good start to life, are necessarily ideological concepts, grounded in socio-political, cultural, and historical perspectives about education, children, childhood, and learning. On this theme, Gillies (2013) states that it is distinctly necessary to recognise that all educational systems are essentially political – founded, developed, and operated under the control of politicians.

This focus on providing a ‘high quality’ early years’ service has been challenged by some researchers. For example, Moss & Dalhberg (2008) caution against unquestioningly accepting discourses of ‘quality’ in early years education and argue that:
We live in an age of quality. Every product and service must offer quality; every consumer wants to have it. In this historical context, quality has become reified, treated as if it was an essential attribute of services or products that gives them value, assumed to be natural and neutral. The problem with quality, from this perspective, is its management. How can quality be discovered, measured, assured, and improved? What goals, to be achieved by technical means, will enhance performance, and increase value? (p.3).

They contend that using the language of ‘quality’ in much research and policy alludes to the existence of an inherent attribute, something that is universal, objective, certain and stable. Thus, it can be defended as something that can be reducible to a set of norms, or as templates for practices, that can be quantifiable and measurable. Moss & Dalhberg (2008) argue that such a conceptualisation of ‘quality’ leaves no room to consider that different perspectives may exist, or that different definitions may be applied to different contexts or settings. Notions of quality, they argue, arose from a move towards increasing managerialism and accountability in education. This move was marked by a rhetoric of how effective, high-quality services would increase efficiency and productivity in educational outcomes, and thus eradicate what ails children and society at large. They observe that the discourse of quality:

- offers a compelling narrative of how social and economic problems can be eliminated by early childhood services, delivering predetermined outcomes through early intervention with powerful technologies; of workers as competent technicians; and of children as redemptive agents, able if given the right start to rescue society from its problems. The discourse is positivistic and technical, instrumental, and calculating, tempting us with a high return on public investment. It is inscribed with certain values: certainty and mastery, linear progress and predetermined outcomes, objectivity and universality, stability, and closure. It draws heavily on certain disciplines, namely child development, management, and economics (2008:5).

Rivzi & Lingard’s (2010) work highlights how policy language purports to speak of ‘truths’; of how things are and should be, and as such aims to steer educational discourse and practice in particular directions. It has been noted
that much of government policy works to convince the reader that both the policy and the solutions offered are valid and sensible (Belsey, 2002; Kingdon & Gourd, 2014). Ball (2012:68) seeks to remind us that through proposing ‘ideal solutions to diagnosed problems’ through the language of policy, governments can seek to enable and frame their own visions of particular problems. Winter (2012) contends that any analysis of how particular problems are made ‘visible’ needs to scrutinise the language of the policy, thus probing policy discourses to reveal how the construction of such problems may need to be challenged.

Ailwood (2008) has observed that an increasingly interventionist role by governments in early years education and care has opened provision and practices to increased scrutiny in terms of accountability, performance, and standardisation. It has been argued that such interventionist early years policy has been responsible for a move away from an aim of nurturing children, to one where the focus is primarily on raising children’s attainment (Nuttbrown & Clough, 2014). On this theme, Priestley & Minty (2013) contend that despite claims of a more democratic educational system, with greater levels of autonomy, there remains a strong instrumentalist slant to CfE that continues to push practices down a standardised performance route. In a similar vein, Lloyd claims that:

far from reflecting the importance of capitalizing on the enrichment of diversity, recent and current education policy is founded upon the principle of the same provision for all as a means to entitlement to an equal opportunity, remaining focused on homogeneity and uniformity of practice. (2010:141)

It is therefore argued that too much of government education policy is less about placing value in and respecting children for who they are, and more about focusing on who they will, or should, become (Qvortrup, 1994; Spyrou, 2022). Rather than seeing childhood as ‘ways of being’, in the here and now, it is viewed as the object of social and economic investment (Kjorholt, 2013; Babic, 2015). Rizvi & Lingard (2010) have described how the rise of new technologies has resulted in national level policy being increasingly
scrutinised within global contexts, through policy networks such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank. Thus, Rizvi & Lingard (2010) contend, educational systems are driven by and re-defined in terms of human capital development. This has pushed education systems down the route of greater international convergence and accountability. Apple (2010) argues that the consequence of this merging of global contexts has been increased pressure on countries to remain educationally and economically competitive. It is within this context, Reid (2013:450) observes, that Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence can be viewed as the government’s way of ‘ensuring Scotland’s place in the ‘global market economy’, rather than as a way to address the needs of the moment ‘as a good life here and now’.

It is within this debated context of the direction of Scottish early years education that my study was founded. Despite calls for greater continuity in children’s early years educational experiences between pre-school and starting primary 1, how this should, and indeed could, be enacted in the historically more traditional learning setting of primary 1 appeared to be less clear.

Reid (2013) cautions that much of current early years policy and guidance offers little in the way of support for professional judgements of how to identify and prioritise particular forms of practice in early years settings. She observes that much of this early year’s policy is aimed at pre-school rather than primary, and, as such, does not acknowledge the shift in educational culture that this transition into primary school commonly entails. Moreover, practitioners striving to place children’s own notions of what is appropriate for themselves in the forefront creates unresolved tensions with the proposed attainment and accountability goals of much of school practice. These tensions remain unacknowledged in much of the early years policy documentation.

As has been discussed, schools embody and perpetuate certain belief systems or hegemonic discourses inscribed into their landscape via
particular ideologies and policies (Cudworth, 2015). Although schools are intended to create positive learning experiences for children, it must be recognised that ‘those who design them may have different needs or views as to what this should involve’ (Kellock & Sexton, 2018:117). On this theme, Collins & Coleman (2008: 294) contend that ‘schools are places where adult-led ideologies play out’, not only in separating the world of children from that of the adult, but in making decisions about what is appropriate for children and thus the purpose of their school experience.

Aitken (2018a:9) highlights the ‘strong connection between how we think about children and legislate on their behalf’ and points up how greater consideration needs to be given to particular conceptualisations of childhood and children when considering what makes a positive educational experience. As previously discussed, young children starting primary school are commonly viewed as human beings who have not yet reached biological or social maturity, and so school is deemed a place for necessary child development, including their socialisation and education through the systems and processes of being in school (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Blundell (2016:15) cautions that the introduction of compulsory school education in particular has historically created the idea of a ‘standarised child as a template for the construction of pupil hood and school life’. He contends that the notion that all children should be in school doing the same things is still the focus of many centrally directed legislative interventions. Collins & Coleman (2008:288) argue that central to this is the ‘dominant social construction of children as ‘our future’, designed to create common citizens from diverse populations’.

As I will discuss more fully later, much of this thinking appears to be driven by a notion that young children starting school are passive recipients of this school experience. Collins & Coleman’s (2008:289) work looks to counter this by pointing up that ‘while young children may have extremely limited opportunities to shape educational spaces at the formal policy level, the influence of their presence within school spaces and upon this form of
environment must not be discounted’. On this theme, Aitken’s (2018a) work looks to highlight how schools and their practices are more than just policy driven contexts, rather, they necessarily involve important contextual interrelationships between both human and non-human materials in these spaces. In exploring what factors might contribute towards children having a positive start to their primary school experience, and how tensions pointed up in this section might possibly be encountered, it was therefore necessary to consider the everyday school context of primary 1, where ideologies, policy, practices, materialities, and human agency intersect. This required a closer investigation of this time in young children’s lives in situ.

This section has established how despite policy calls for greater continuity in young children’s early years educational experiences on starting primary 1, how this should, and indeed could, be enacted is less clear, and worthy of a closer investigation of this time in children’s lives. In particular, it looked to investigate the existence of possible tensions that may arise, including tensions between accountability and performativity, and a more child-centred, ‘needs driven’ approach to teaching and learning, as children make the move into the more formal educational world of school.

In the following section I turn to an analysis of research literature that has focused on children’s transitions into primary school. I highlight how much of this literature has tended to focus on the transitions between pre-school and school, with less research investigating, or reporting on, the time when children have started school.

2.2: Children’s Experiences of Transition in The Early Years

A major consequence of this interest in, and interventionist approach towards, early years education, has been an increased level of attention to children’s experiences of transitions into pre-school and school. Much of the dominant discourse around this time infers that despite being seen as a natural part of life (Margetts & Keinig, 2013), children commonly find the changes they experience during these transitions unsettling and problematic, impacting on their level of self-esteem, creating insecurities, and affecting
their academic learning outcomes (Brostrom, 2002, 2007; Fabian, 2002; Brooker, 2008). Moves towards ensuring a ‘successful’ transition were thus deemed to be essential in supporting children’s future development, health and wellbeing, and academic progress (Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Dockett & Perry, 2013). The perceived importance of this time has been reflected in a wealth of literature that focuses on this time in young children’s lives from around the world, most notably in Australia, New Zealand, USA, and across Europe, in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Portugal, and in the United Kingdom.

For this thesis, the concept of transition is defined as the process of moving from one context to another, thereby ending membership of one educational setting and entering a new one (White & Sharpe, 2007; Ackesjo, 2013). To keep a tight focus on the purpose of my thesis, the following sections centre on providing an analytical summary of two main themes in the literature on pre-school to primary school transitions: issues of continuity and discontinuity as children enter the new school environment; and matters around preparation for school to ensure children are ‘ready’.

2.2.1: Continuity and Discontinuity: A Problematic Issue?

Literature which has focused on children’s transitions from pre-school settings into school has commonly recognised that this time necessarily involves tensions between change and familiarity in children’s lives and experiences (Rimm-Kaufmann et al., 2000; Fabian, 2013). A common premise has been that children can find adjusting to, and negotiating, the new school environment somewhat problematic, and this is often seen to be detrimental to their overall development and wellbeing (Brostrom, 2007; O’Connor, 2013). Identifying precisely which features of the school environment and school practices might prove problematic for children, and how these problematic features might be addressed, has been a common theme in much of the literature.

Most of the literature on this transition to school has highlighted the ways in which beginning school commonly entails children having to negotiate a new
environment, with new routines and procedures and new ways of behaving in these spaces (Margetts, 2007; White & Sharpe, 2007; Ackesjo, 2013). Fabian (2000) stressed how this time involved three main categories of discontinuity: the physical environment; social knowledge; and philosophical approaches to learning. Much of the literature has argued that the root of the problem lies in the intensity of the changes this time brings (Boyle & Petriskyi, 2014), coupled with the accelerated pace of change (Keinig, 2013). Correia & Marques Pinto (2016) argue that these factors work together to make the transition into school a highly demanding phase in children’s lives.

**The role of continuity in children’s experiences**

Kennedy et al. (2012) contend that when the environment they enter is markedly different from what they previously have known, children are likely to feel unsettled and anxious:

> it is undoubtably the case that the experience can engender a degree of stress, uncertainty, and emotional discomfort, as children relinquish some of the security of the familiar and readjust to the uncertainty of the new. (p.20)

They talk of how children’s experiences of school transitions not only involve them making necessary adjustments to the physical environment of school, but that this time also involves an identity shift, most especially regarding how they find themselves being assessed against particular expectations of an ‘ideal’ pupil. Common demands placed on children were found to be increased levels of compliance and the self-regulatory behaviour that this new environment and the role of a school pupil demanded (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016). In addition, Fabian (2007) found that children were commonly required to acquire a new ‘language’ of school, where they were faced with new ideas of acceptable ways of ‘being’ a pupil in school, including ways of managing their time and communicating needs and desires. In line with the findings of Griebel & Neisel (2002), Fabian reported that children were most often required to change previously acceptable representations of ‘self’ in order to conform to the given requirements of
‘ways of being’ in school, having to quickly learn what was acceptable behaviour and what was not in this setting.

Research literature which looks specifically at this time of transition into school has offered up various solutions as to how to address this ‘problematic’ time in children’s lives. It is commonly proposed that ways should be sought to remove aspects of discontinuity within transition experiences, although how this should happen is debated (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000).

The Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), by establishing an Early Level covering ages 3 to 6 year olds, claims to provide a clearer bridge between children’s pre-school and primary school experiences (Scottish Executive, 2004; Reid, 2013). The aim proposed in the principles and practices of CfE and it’s *Building the Curriculum* guidance documentation was for a more interconnected experience, with greater levels of continuity, collaboration and consultation between the different educational settings thus aiding a smoother transitional experience for children (Scottish Executive, 2007). This marked a challenge to the more traditional view of pre-school and primary school as two separate settings, and its underlying assumption appeared to be that Primary 1 settings should become more akin to pre-school in their design and delivery of experiences. Underpinning this change was a call for primary schools to adopt a more active, purposeful play-based, learning and teaching approach in the classroom, which it was argued would thus help facilitate a greater continuity of learning experience for children (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2007; Scottish Government, 2008a; Scottish Government, 2010).

That play has the potential to be a transitional activity, serving as an effective medium to bridge the two settings and enable children to have a smoother, more continuous experience is little doubted (Brostrom, 2007). However, issues around a shared definition of ‘play’ and ‘active’ learning have been the focus of much debate within the literature. Priestley & Minty’s (2012) study argues that despite calls for a more active approach to learning, there
remains little clarity as to what this will involve in practice. Their work found
that the term ‘active’ learning was most often construed by teachers as a
proposed need for kinaesthetic learning activities. This has led to tensions
between separate times for work and times for play, with little constructive
change to the main formal learning processes of the primary 1 classroom as
a consequence.

Drew & Mackie (2011) have pointed up tensions around conceptions of
‘active learning’ in the Curriculum for Excellence policy, arguing that it was
somewhat ironic that this term should be linked to understandings of learning
through play, when in fact, what is advocated was the learning of skills
deemed necessary for future workplaces. They noted ways in which the
concept of active learning was neither fully discussed nor defined in policy
documentation, which simply alluded to a normative, shared understanding
among educators. In line with Priestley & Minty’s (2012) report, their
investigations into various understandings of active learning found it was
commonly construed as a need for practical, physical activities, and they
argue, overlooked the nature and place of processes of metacognition and
co-construction of knowledge and understanding within this concept.

Stephen (2018) maintains that some of the difficulties in transferring an
active, play based approach into primary settings as a vehicle to support a
continuity of learning experience lie in that fact that:

defining play remains elusive and bounded by theoretical
and philosophical positions and links between specific play
activities and learning outcomes are more often asserted
than evidenced. (p.231)

In a similar vein, Bruce, Meggit & Grenier (2010) contend that despite the
word ‘play’ being widely used in the field of childhood, it is probably one of
the least understood aspects of practitioners’ work due to the multiple ways
in which it is interpreted. Accordingly, Sue Rogers (2011) maintains that
despite a wide consensus as to the value and benefits of play in early
childhood education discourse, how this could and should be transferred
conceptually and practically into early years educational settings is often perceived as being less straightforward.

This exploration of the literature focused on the desirability of continuity in children’s experiences as they transition into primary school has highlighted some of the complexities and different ideologies around this time. I now turn my attention to literature that has focused on questions relating to the possible place and value of discontinuity in children’s experience as they start school.

**A place for discontinuity?**

It is notable that there is a body of literature within this field that disputes whether the discontinuities children experience on starting school are in fact problematic. It is thus suggested that far from finding changes encountered in school troublesome, many children find these to be empowering, enjoying the new challenges and experiences that being in school affords them (Dunlop, 2002; White & Sharpe, 2007; Loizou, 2011; Ackesjo, 2013). For many children, it is claimed, this fulfils their need to be viewed as more grown up and moving on in life (Spodek, 1988; Brooker, 2008; Fisher, 2010; Garpelin, 2014). Dockett & Einarsdottir’s (2017:134) study found that rather than a clear either/or scenario, transitions might be considered as impediments to continuous development, but they can also serve as prompts for new learning through new experiences.

Rather than focusing on the removal of all barriers and striving for continuity through familiarity and sameness, research literature has increasingly focused on the possible nature of the support that could be afforded to children: to help them deal with any discontinuity being in school might bring (Brooker, 2008; Fabian, 2013); and to foster and build skills of resilience (O’Farrelly & Hennessy, 2014; Scottish Transitions as a Tool for Change (TAATFC) Project, 2019).
Biesta’s (2016) paper calls for greater consideration of the aims and purposes of those approaches and systems which are put in place for children. He contends that:

The issue here is that something never works in the abstract sense but in relation to a particular purpose or set of purposes. (p. 80)

His discussion centres around the idea of what constitutes a ‘good education’ – a discussion that can also be applied to the idea of what makes a good transition into school. Both refer to courses of actions that are designed to bring about a desired result, and accordingly, what the desired result should be is foundational.

Correia & Marques-Pinto (2016) have argued that the transition process can only be viewed as successful when the child likes school and makes progress in their learning. Conversely, they conclude, it is deemed to be unsuccessful when children display anxiety, avoidance, and negative attitudes towards school. The desired outcome, therefore, is for all children to have a positive, successful transition experience. Drawing on Moss & Dalhberg (2008) once more, such processes need to acknowledge that differing perspectives can and do exist and, as such, recognise the subjectivity, multiplicity, and dynamic nature of children’s experiences of this time.

Keinig’s (2013) work has highlighted the need to acknowledge that this period of rapid and profound change can create negative experiences for some children and thus attention must be given to those who find this most difficult. Some research attention has been given to investigating groups of children who can find this time of transition into schools problematic, although these groups were not found to be extensive. O’Connor’s (2013) study found that some children had needed some extra time in comparison to their peers, to become familiar with school environments to make a successful transition. Rothe et al.’s (2014) study based in Germany found that the transition process to school was particularly difficult for socio-economically disadvantaged children. Others, such as Whitehead (2006) and
Child & McKay (2001), found that boys were more likely than girls to find the transition into school problematic. These studies appear to have looked to identify groups of children who shared similar problems or issues on starting school, and consequently appear to lack any nuanced exploration of what factors impact on individuals rather than on homogenous groups.

That this is an area worthy of close investigation was highlighted in the findings of Harrison & Murray’s (2014) Australian-based study. Here it was found that children who had held a negative perception of school at the beginning of the school year retained this view throughout the year. Furthermore, and perhaps most concerning, a third of children changed from a positive view of being at school to one that had become more negative over time. Thus, these findings suggest that the children’s experiences while at school had somehow impacted upon their feelings of wellbeing in negative ways.

Literature that has focused on issues of child-readiness, and counter debates around school readiness, is now discussed.

2.2.2: School Readiness: Adjustments, ‘Fitting In’, Diversity

Much of the literature that focuses on the time when children start school commonly looks at issues around supportively preparing children for school and conceptualisations of children’s ‘readiness’ for school (Brostrom, 2002; Dunlop, 2003; Fabian, 2013; Fisher, 2010). It is less common to find literature that has examined continued, or further, support once children have started school, with the most notable exceptions including the work of Australian-based Dockett & Perry, and Iceland’s Einarsdottir, and a few UK based studies, such as those of Brooker (2002) and Dunlop (2013). Research literature on school transitions was found to focus most predominately on the time of moving into, rather than the processes of being in school.

Dunlop & Fabian’s (2007) work has suggested that the traditional view of children starting school has its roots in the notion that it is the child’s job to
adapt to the new setting, and children should learn to adjust and cope. This notion is grounded within the nativist/maturational theoretical perspective, which sees any problems or difficulties the child may encounter as lying with the child, and a lacking in the child (Fortune-Wood, 2002; Davis et al., 2014b; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016). A successful adjustment to school was therefore premised on the child possessing the necessary social, behavioural, and academic skills to enable them to adapt to the demands of this new setting (Margetts, 2002). Dockett & Perry’s (2007) study concluded that adults were commonly found to hold the expectation that children could work out what was needed and make the necessary adaptations to adjust to life at school. Underpinning this expectation is the 'underlying assumption that the environment being adjusted to is normative and represents an objective, rational standard of behaviour and outcomes' Fortune-Wood (2002:137).

Thus, a great deal of the literature that looks at the time of children’s transition to school focuses on the ways in which children can be supported to be ‘school ready’. The driving force in much of this research is the development of effective practices and skills that will help children enter school and settle quickly to begin the process of learning (Brostrom, 2002; Fabian, 2007, 2013; Brooker, 2008; Fisher, 2013; Keinig, 2013). Transition is often viewed as a one-way system, where the main focus is on how to prepare the child to ‘fit-in’ to the rules, routines, and cultures of school life (Stephen et al., 2010). Whitebread & Bingham (2011) contend that this model of ‘readiness’ is particularly attractive to, and driven by, government policy thinking, where children are delivered into school ready to conform, and the onus is placed on parents and teachers to ensure children are ready to learn. Readiness for school is defined into two separate categories; readiness to learn; and readiness to perform as a school pupil (Carlton & Winsler, 1999).

Brooker (2008) contends that while a model of a ‘ready child’ may seem somewhat attractive, this creates both a negative and limiting view of the
transition process. Much of this thinking is founded on the assumption that there is an identifiable development level at which children can function at school, generally associated with chronological age (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Readiness for school is perceived as a measurable goal, and successful school transitions viewed as a hurdle children must overcome (Brooker, 2008). Consequently, children find themselves judged against a set of normative criteria (Davis & Smith, 2012; Davis et al., 2014c), with those deemed not to meet these criteria finding themselves labelled by adults as ‘immature’ or ‘unready’ (Fortune-Wood, 2002). Those who do not fit the perceived norms of readiness can find themselves excluded, usually in the form of a delayed school entry (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). McNair’s (2016) work has highlighted the ways in which any choice around deferred entries commonly rested with the judgements, and therefore within the power, of local authorities, rather than being situated in the needs and desires of the children and their families.

Counter to this thinking, the argument has been made that the problem must not be perceived to lie in the fact that some children are deemed not yet ready for school, but rather that schools and school systems are not ready for children. (See, for example, Stephen & Cope, 2003; Stephen, 2006; Whitebread & Bingham, 2011, McNair, 2016.) It is contended that a focus instead on the concept of a ‘ready school’ acknowledges the diverse range of children’s experiences, needs and backgrounds (Dockett & Perry, 2013, 2015; Fisher, 2013; Stephen, 2018). Adopting Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) holistic, ecological model, children are viewed not as isolated individuals, but rather as products of their worlds, and transitions are situated within, and influenced by, their dynamic, interconnected worlds of child, home, school, peers, and community (Rimm-Haufman et al., 2000; McNair, 2016; Davis & Smith, 2021). Therefore, only through acknowledging the diversity of children’s experiences and skills, can schools begin to understand the nature of children’s needs and the support that they may require (Brooker, 2008; Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015). Florian & Linklater (2010) maintain that the importance of this cannot be underestimated, as only by understanding the
diversity of children's experiences can schools move from what works for most children to what works for everyone.

That Scottish government policy still has a way to go in acknowledging and addressing this in practice, is reflected in the language of the 'refreshed' policy document *Realising the Ambition: Being me* (Scottish Government, 2020). Despite advocating that the focus should be on child-centered practices, flexibility and remaining responsive to the uniqueness of the child, the document also describes school transition practices as helping children adjust to environmental and structural changes and 'to settle in and find their place' (p.92). It appears that the onus remains on the child to adjust, and that normative discourses of school practices continue to hold sway.

This section has highlighted how little research has looked at the time after children have started school, with the majority of transition literature focusing on how to best prepare and support children to adjust to school life. Much of this literature has also been guided by the assumption that the onus of adjustment lay principally with the child. Addressing a gap in research that looks specifically at what happens when children *have started* school and generating a better understanding of this time and place in children's lives, was thus a key driver in my research study.

### 2.3: Educational Research: Children’s Rights and Voices

Greene & Hill (2011:3) posit that research that looks to explore and understand children’s own experiences and views can be:

> allied to a moral perspective on the role and status of children which respects and promotes entitlement to be considered as persons of value and persons with rights.

Thus, the involvement of children in the processes of research on their lives is more than just a case of exploring issues from their perspectives, but rather is grounded in a fundamental right of children to be able to share their point of view (Clark & Moss, 2001).

While research interest in children’s lives is not at all a new phenomenon, more commonly children have been seen as the object of study rather than
the subject (Christensen & Prout, 2005). In Chapter 3 I discuss the development of a ‘sociology of childhood’ which featured re-conceptualisations of children and childhood, where children were viewed as competent ‘beings’ with agency, rather than needy or incapable (Qvortrup, 1994; James et al., 1998; James & James, 2004). On this theme Spyrou (2020:4) contends that:

The discovery of the child in the present, a child who is irreducible to a set of development characteristics, has provided childhood studies with a promised land on which to build its edifice.

Spyrou argues that too much research is rooted in the desire to make a diagnosis of what is wrong based upon particular conceptualisations of, and attention to, children as future beings. There is a need to acknowledge how children’s futures are intimately woven with their present and past, to explore the temporality of children’s lives in the spaces they occupy (2020:5). How we re-think ‘voice’ is important with regards to how we might come to better understand children’s own worlds. Spyrou observes that this must involve close consideration of ‘how children’s voices are produced, affirmed, amplified, dismissed, or silenced’ (2020:6). Komulianen (2007) advocates that conceptions of ‘voice’ need to be considered as processes, rather than locations. Viewing voice in terms of processes acknowledges that the meaning of what is said comes into existence through interactions and conversations with others. This has implications for how children’s voices are facilitated in research studies, where knowledge will be generated along with children rather than taken from them (Ferreira et al., 2018).

Angus (2011:235) maintains that ‘privileged discourses are dominant, taken for granted discourses’, with too much of current practice in children’s lives seeing adults having the power to decide agendas on children’s behalf. Historically, children’s voices have not been taken closely into consideration, as it was presumed, they were unable to make accurate judgements on matters that concerned them and their lives (Messiou, 2006). A more democratic alternative, therefore, would be one where children are seen as
having not only the necessary abilities, but also the innate right to be consulted, valued, and respected. Messiou (2006) states that if the aim of a rights-based approach is to address the marginalisation of children in matters concerning their own lives, then it is a necessity to turn to an exploration of children’s own views.

The requirements of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (1989) have played a substantive role in influencing the direction and language of much of the policy and practice in education both nationally and internationally.

The UNCRC (1989) consists of 54 articles that enshrine civil, economic, social, and cultural rights for every young person under the age of 18 (Hill & Tisdall, 1997). These are not intended to be viewed separately, but rather as interrelated and complementary, broadly encompassing three overlapping kinds of rights: the *provision* of children’s basic needs; *protection* against neglect, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination; and the right to *participation* in their families, communities, and society from their first years (Alderson, 2008). The move to include children’s right to participation, while also emphasising children’s particular vulnerabilities and needs, is frequently referred to in the literature as ‘participation rights’ (Tisdall, 2015; Blaisdell, 2016). However, as Blaisdell (2016:16) notes, ‘the actual phrase ‘children’s participation’ does not appear’ in the text of the UNCRC documentation.

Key to addressing the legal and social status of children and their right to express their views on matters affecting them is Article 12 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009), which states:

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.

Article 12 is complemented by a following group of articles: Article 13, children’s right to freedom of expression; Article 14, right to freedom of thought, conscience and (to an extent) religion; Article 15, right to freedom of association; and Article 17, the right to information, including information on their rights. These participation articles have acted as a catalyst to provide steps to ensure children have the rights to be included in decisions, and that actions, in their own lives are acknowledged and respected.

Respecting the right of children to be heard within education is therefore deemed fundamental to their right to an education (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009:21). In Scotland, The Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act (2000) is modelled on Article 12, and states that it is the duty of an education authority, in providing school education for all children under their jurisdiction, to have:

> due regard, so far as is reasonably practical, 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. (Section 2.2).

Educational policy and practices, at a national and local government level, look to reflect a blended approach of care, education and learning through a more child-centred approach, where children are to be considered to be an integral part of the process (Scottish Executive, 2006, 2007; Scottish Government, 2010, 2014, 2020).

However, despite claims for the need to recognise the importance of including children’s views, there remains no clear framework in place that ensures children’s participation in the decision-making processes of their lives are meaningful, effective, and sustainable (Davis et al., 2014a; McEvilly, 2015; Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). Collins & Coleman (2008) contend that although policies and practices of education are grounded in the rhetoric
of children’s rights, ironically children are still not generally consulted about many aspects of their experiences.

Similarly, Alderson (2008:81) contends that while children’s provision and protection rights enjoy wide support, the adoption of children’s right to participation has been less straightforward in its application. This, she argues, is due in part to overly broad conceptualisations of the meaning of participation, and models of practice that look to prioritise talking, thinking, and deciding, which can discriminate against particular groups of children. Many of these challenges are recognised. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (General comment 12, 2009) states that a basic requirement for the effective implementation of the right of the child to be heard is the avoidance of tokenistic approaches, or the placing of limitations on where and how children’s views can be expressed. It views children’s participations as part of a process rather than one-off events. However, it is argued that little appears to have changed to challenge the view that ‘there are giant gulfs between rhetoric and reality’ in practices of consultation with children (James et al., 1998:6). Thus, despite support in principle for the right of children to be involved, the creation of circumstances where this is made possible has often been less in evidence (Clark, 2001; James, 2009; Hogan, 2011; Tisdall, 2012, 2015; Davies et al., 2014a).

This has been especially true of the rights of young children’s participation, where the capacity clause of Article 12, which advocates due weight be given in accordance with the age and maturity of the child, can lead to discriminations based on notions of competency and what is deemed to be in their best interest. Notably, The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009, paras 29 &30), states that Article 12 makes it clear that biological age should not determine the significance of children’s views. Rather, the capacity of the individual child to understand, assess the implications of a particular matter, and express their own views on this, should be deemed a more useful guiding feature. Thus, it is argued that in all educational environments, including those in early years, children should be actively
enabled and given the opportunities to express their views, where they wish, on all matters concerning them (The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009:21).

In my research study I recognised the importance, and the right, of the children to be able to share their own experiences and views on what it was like for them to be in their primary 1 setting. I also acknowledged the need for careful consideration of the research methods I would employ, to ensure all children who wished to express their views were able to do so. In Chapter 3 I discuss the methodological approaches chosen and the methods employed, where children’s right to participate was a key consideration in my planning and research process.

**Children’s views on starting school**

Undertaking a review of the research literature around young children’s early years educational experiences revealed limited research that looked to explore children’s own views of this time. There were some notable exceptions. Dockett & Perry have reported on a range of studies undertaken in Australia, where they have focused primarily on issues of readiness for school and children’s own expectations and experiences of starting school (1999; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2007). They found that the children commonly expressed an expectation that being in school would be a different experience, and that they were looking forward to this aspect. The children’s main concerns on starting school were around understanding the rules of school, and that by knowing the school rules they could best stay out of trouble. Dockett & Perry advocate that further debates are needed on what is understood by readiness, and what is expected of children as they start school.

Similarly, Einarsdottir has looked at Icelandic children’s accounts of their transitions into school (2005; 2007; 2010; 2011). Her study has highlighted how individual differences were found regarding which parts of school were enjoyed, or not. At the same time, some commonalities were found to exist, for example, the ways in which the children spoke of enjoying their free time
in school, and that reading, and mathematics were boring parts. In general, the children felt that they had no influence over what happened in school, and in line with Dockett & Perry’s work, they spoke of needing to know the school rules.

Loizou’s (2011) Cypriot based study found that children spoke of feelings of empowerment from the new experiences being in school afforded them. However, in similar ways to Einarsdottir’s study, the children spoke of how their time in school was managed by their teachers, with little opportunity for choice. Nonetheless, the children did talk of how school made them feel grown up and how they were learning new skills.

The notion that schools were viewed by children as a place of rules to be obeyed is a recurring theme in many of the studies that have explored children’s own perceptions of being in school. Jensen et al.‘s (2013) Danish study found that although the children had little idea of what to expect on starting school, they expressed feelings of anxiety about the prospect. Their imaginings of school were of a place where teachers would scold them and where there would be strict rules around what they could do. That this perception of school as a place of rules to be learned endured was highlighted in Griebel & Neisel’s (2002) German based study, which found that older children remembered their school transition experiences and recounted these as the time when they had to learn what they must do.

Studies that have investigated children’s own views of early years education in the United Kingdom were found to be more limited. Although some authors have written extensively about children’s transitions, most particularly Aline-Wendy Dunlop and Hilary Fabian; few researchers have looked to explore children’s early school experiences from the perspective of the children themselves. Notable exceptions within a Scottish context are Konstantoni’s (2011) doctorate thesis on Young Children’s perceptions and constructions of social identities and social implications; Promoting social justice in early childhood; Kustatscher’s (2015) PhD thesis ‘Exploring Young Children’s Social Identities: Performing social class, gender and ethnicity in primary
school; and McNair’s (2016) doctoral thesis which explored a group of children as they transitioned from a single pre-school setting into multiple primary schools. Consequently, there is to date very limited research to draw on when considering how young children find starting school and what impacts on and shapes their experience.

Accordingly, it was deemed necessary that any exploration of what it was like to be in a Scottish primary 1 setting should involve consultations with children who were experiencing this time and place. The aim of my research study was therefore to conduct an exploration into children’s own views and perceptions of what it was like to be in primary 1, using a range of participatory activities with the children.

2.4: Children’s Geographies: The Spaces Children Occupy

Building on the preceding sections, this section focuses on literature within the field of Children’s Geographies, highlighting key issues that were foundational to the direction of my study. Principally concerned with the study of space and place in children’s lives; experientially, politically, culturally, and historically, this field focuses on the ways in which children’s life experiences, opportunities, attitudes, and identities are both socially and spatially constructed (Kraftl, 2013; Nairn & Kraftl, 2016; Aitken, 2018a).

Children’s geographies

Interest in children’s geographies began with a focus on the multiple places and environments that children experience and was initially heavily influenced by developmental and environmental psychology (Aitken, 2018b). Aitken’s (2018b) paper draws attention to how the term children’s geographies appeared first in print in Roger Hart’s (1979) work. Hart suggested that the way to best explain human behaviour was to focus on understanding how children experience different places. This field of study looked to raise geographical questions, (which were arguably commonly overlooked), about the nature of children’s environments and the kinds of
relationships children can have with and within these spaces (Lauer, 2009; Green & Turner, 2017).

Aitken (2018b) explains how this field has developed from merely having its focus on the environments that children experience in their everyday lives, towards a more political thrust by feminist and critical theorists interested in exploring young people’s identities and diverse ways of knowing places. He cites two important developments: recognition of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (1989); and the rise of the ‘new sociology of childhood’ (James & Prout, 1997), as playing a pivotal role in propelling children’s geographies onto a world stage. He explains that:

> once more geographers were asked about the places of children, but this time they were fielding questions after what was called the spatial turn in social sciences and the humanities. The importance of space to our understanding of the world propelled this turn, and from its geographers offered a panoply of spatial theories and concepts. Children’s geographers challenged notions of childhood — from sociology, anthropology and in policy circles — that were now rooted in spaces and embedded in places. (Aiken, 2018a:4)

This geographical turn has raised the profile of two important areas of study in children’s lives (Aitken, 2018a). Firstly, it raises questions concerning the kinds of things particular environments afford children, and how children might experience and find their way in these environments. Secondly, it highlights the importance of a focus on researching what children themselves have to say about these spaces. Aitken contends that this spatial turn has paved the way for a consideration of the politics of children and their geographies, focussing most particularly on issues of democracy, justice, citizenship, and diversity. In summary, he states that:

> Children’s geographies today are about the spaces of young people’s lives, characterized experientially, aesthetically, politically, morally, and ethically. (Aitken, 2018a:19)
The field of children’s geographies thus provides a useful reminder of how conceptions of childhood are spatially informed, and of how ideas about children and children’s spaces inform one another (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Schools are a geographical reality for most children, where their time in school is spatially constructed in terms of the built/constructed environment; social spaces, and learning spaces; and the socio-cultural conditions and ethos, which impact upon their school experiences (Catling, 2005). Schools embody and perpetuate certain social, cultural, historical, and political beliefs that are literally build into the landscape (Kraftl, 2006; Cudworth, 2015). It is therefore contended that only through a close examination of the structures, systems, and spatial organisations of schools, in conjunction with what children themselves say and do, can an understanding of this time in children’s lives be more fully comprehended (Blundell, 2016; Aitken, 2018a; Kellock & Sexton, 2018).

**Space, place and spatiality**

Space, place, and spatiality are foundational concepts of geography (Blundell, 2016). Nonetheless, terms such as ‘space’ and ‘place’ have been debated and contested (Horton & Kraftl, 2013). Horton & Kraftl highlight how whole texts have been devoted to the exploration of conceptual understandings of these terms, most particularly with regards to their usage within a range of different disciplines, including different branches of geography, such as: physical geography; human geography; urban geography; political geography (Massey, 2005; Cresswell, 2015). A thorough analytical exploration of all these debates is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, this section undertakes a critical analysis of the key concepts of space, place, and spatiality within children’s geographies, to bring out how these concepts are imbued with quite distinctive meanings. In doing so, it seeks to highlight how these terms came to be understood in my own research work.

Horton & Kraftl (2013:266/7) contend that particular assumptions regarding the concept of ‘space’ have tended to dominate thinking, namely: that space...
is an *abstract* concept, something that is ‘out there’ and beyond the human mind and body; that space can refer to a *surface* or *container*, thus is measurable and can be represented/mapped; and that space is *politically neutral*. These understandings tend to conceptualise ‘space’ as being fixed, static, closed, finite, and limiting (Massey, 2005; Horton & Kraftl, 2013). However, Blundell (2016) posits that in order to engage in more productive geographical research, there is a need to open up thinking to include alternative conceptualisations of space. This is supported by the work of Massey (2005:19), who argues for a ‘re-imagining of the concept that liberates it from some of its chains of meaning’, replacing embedded notions of closure and stasis, with openness, heterogeneity, and dynamism.

A common argument within the literature, (Horton & Kraftl, 2013; Cudworth, 2015, Blundell, 2016; Aitken, 2018a), is that *spaces* need to be viewed as more than fixed, ‘empty containers’ in which humans live, and that there is rather a synchronous dimension of degrees of interplay through, and with, those who occupy them. Accordingly, it is contended that any conceptualisation of spaces should acknowledge them as dynamic, socially constructed phenomena, within which lives are lived, and can be somewhat regulated and controlled (Massey, 2005; Blundell, 2016). Much of this thinking draws on Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the production of space, which looked to move understandings of space beyond more conventional dualistic constructions of its physical and mental dimensions, to one that represented space as a three dimensional triad (Horton & Kraftl, 2013; Zhang, 2022). Lefebvre’s (1991) work argues for three interrelated spatial understandings, that is: spatial practices (perceived); representations of space (conceived); and representational space (lived). Lefebvre’s introduction of a third ‘lived’ space is marked by the interrelationship between the physical form and the mental construction of spaces, where spaces are viewed as socially constructed, never neutral, and as continuous works in progress. Blundell (2016:55) posits that this ‘Thirdspace’ conceptualisation, ‘which presents space as an actually lived and socially created spatiality, both concrete and
abstract at the same time’, is vital to better understanding the social realities within which people live.

As discussed, schools are built as spaces for children where they might safely develop, embodying and perpetuating particular socio-political, cultural, and historical perspectives about children, childhood, and learning. Attention has been given to how the needs of children can be best accommodated within particular school structures, systems, and spatial organisation (see, Fisher, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Grever, 2012; Pollard et al., 2023). Some studies have looked to explore particular designs of school spaces, such as, open plan spaces (Reh et al., 2011), outdoor spaces (Tanner, 2000; Dovey & Fisher, 2014), or play-based learning environments (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Woods, 2017). However, as Kraftl (2013) has argued, these studies can oftentimes lead to a rather singular dimensional, architectural, view of such school spaces, focusing primarily on only their physical and material elements. Kraftl (2013) argues that it should be viewed as impossible to divorce the social processes from the spatial processes, and that any explorations of the physical, material, non-human elements of school spaces are limited in what they can tell us, without understanding how children engage with, and through, these spaces.

In line with this, my research study looked to explore important geographical issues around the nature of the school environment and the relationships children can have with, and through, the design and use of the different school spaces. Thus, the school spaces were to be understood as more than ‘empty containers’ for the children to occupy, rather within the spatialities of these school environments it was recognised that the children’s lives would be made, enacted, and ‘lived’, through a series of social interactions. Kraftl (2006) further argues that much can be learned from paying close attention to the everyday, the mundane, and banal, that often goes unnoticed, unacknowledged, or indeed underestimated within the spaces children occupy. Thus, in conducting my own research, I recognised the need to be able to pay close attention to the many physical details, systems and
structures of the school spaces children occupied, while also seeking to better understand the ways in which the children participated in these spaces, and how they came to understand these spaces as places in their lives, and their own place within them.

Cresswell (2015) argues that Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial understanding of a third, ‘lived’, space is somewhat close in its definition to that of place. One of the most common and straightforward definitions of ‘place’ when used in a geographical sense is that it represents a ‘meaningful location’ (Cresswell, 2015). It is generally agreed (Horton & Kraftl, 2013; Cresswell, 2015; Green & Turner, 2017; Hammond, 2022) that a geographical space becomes a place through its association with meaning and human inhabitation. Similarly, Tuan (1977) contends that places can be best conceptualised as humanised spaces.

Agnew’s (1987) work is helpful in outlining three fundamental aspects of the term ‘place’ which he feels account for most examples of usage, namely: a location; a locale (material setting for social relations); and a sense of place (subjective and emotional attachments). He points up that although the term can be most commonly used in everyday language to discuss or describe a location, it should be noted that notions of ‘place’ are not fixed entities. In line with this, Cresswell (2015:26) argues that ‘place’ is not purely understood as a thing in the world, ‘but can be conceptualised as ways of [humans] knowing, seeing and understanding the world’ and their position within it.

It is commonly viewed that any understandings, meanings, and ways of perceiving of ‘place’, or a sense of placeness, are created through human experience (Tuan, 1977; Nairn & Kraftl, 2016). Horton & Kraftl (2006) point up the importance of acknowledging the performative, experiential nature of the creation of places in our lives. Understandings of place are thus recognised as being continually and dynamically made and re-made, maintained, and contested through human interactions and experiences within occupied spaces; eternally volatile and continually unfinished (Tuan,
In line with this, authors have highlighted the importance of personal experiences in how we come to attach meanings to spaces as places, and our own sense of placeness as a consequence (Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2015; Hammond, 2022). Tuan (1977) highlights the importance of the emotional element in this process, and the important role of individual ‘feelings’ in how we come to attach meaning to certain places. He notes that these ‘feelings can take longer for us to acquire but are nonetheless a key component that should not be overlooked, nor underestimated. Hammond (2022) highlights how attention to the personalised nature of experiences also requires acknowledgment that no two people will likely experience the world in identical ways, nor will they develop identical understandings of places.

Any understanding of how people come to construct meanings of places also means grappling with how particular events, materials, bodies and spacings come to matter (Horton & Kraftl, 2006, 2013). Calls have been made to devote more research attention to the different, interconnected, interdependent, aspects of spaces that can help better uncover the complexities of the relationship’s children have with the spaces they occupy (Cresswell, 2015; Aitken, 2018a). Aitken (2018a) highlights how this should include an exploration of the possible opportunities and constraints they can face, and of the ways they can come to make sense of spaces as places in their lives.

These geographical lenses thus offer insights not only into how schools are constructed as spaces for children to inhabit, but also into how these constructions might shape and impact on children’s experiences and have a bearing on the ways in which children can come to see schools as being, and having, particular places in their lives (Blundell, 2016). Considering schools as places in children’s lives, I recognised how the children’s understandings would be created through individual, experiential, socially constructed,
dynamic, interactions within their school setting. Acknowledging that we are as much a part of the construction of meanings of places, as they are of us, also meant acknowledging the nature of a sense of ‘placeness’ which emerges from such interactions. Accordingly, my research study would look to explore not only how the children came to see the school spaces as places in their lives but came to see and understand their own place within them.

**Identity, belonging: knowing your place**

Horton & Kraftl (2013:160) point up that ‘identity is a profoundly geographical concept’, involving social interactions between people and spatial landscapes. Therefore, the ways in which children’s identities are/can be impacted within school spaces remains a topic of interest for those concerned with the socio-spatial dimensions of school and schooling (Collins & Coleman, 2008).

As discussed in a preceding section, schools commonly look to reinforce particular expectations of childhood and children through the ways children are positioned, and particular ways of being are required through spatial disciplining (Teather, 1999; Blundell, 2016). Cudworth’s (2015) work has highlighted how the ways in which children were able, or enabled, to operate within their school spaces, had a profound effect on their sense of identity and belonging. He found that the design and processes of school spaces not only influenced how children behaved, but ultimately what they conceived was possible for them. He concluded that the school environment not only played a key role in influencing children’s behaviours but was also a key medium in their processes of learning about themselves.

Teather (1999) points up how notions of positionality impact upon children’s developing sense of knowing their place within the context of spaces they occupy. How children feel in different environments, how they represent themselves, interact with others, and develop a sense of belonging, can be viewed as having a profound effect on their emergent sense of identity (Hammond, 2022a). Blundell (2016) observes that an understanding of
*knowing your place* can refer to a literal position in material spaces, that is, physical spaces and places where we feel we belong and are welcome, but also places from which we deem ourselves excluded. Thus, Blundell (2016) argues, a *sense of place* emerges, as children begin to position themselves through these emerging understandings of belonging. He notes also that tensions can emerge between where children look to place themselves and where others look to place them. Horton & Kraftl (2013) have observed that this can lead to a sense of children being ‘othered’, where they find themselves as being positioned outside the norm, in any given situation or setting. Cudworth (2015) contends that we can come to better understand how forms of educational inequity can exist as a consequence of particular spatial productions of schools, and which impose a sense of *knowing your place*.

Teather (1999) reminds us how it is important to note that identities are not stable or static entities. She highlights how individuals may acquire and enact multiple identities in different spaces and at different times, and how these can operate alongside one another. In line with this, Horton & Kraftl (2013:164) contend that any sense of identity/ies, is only ever a provisional state that is ‘constantly being revised, developed, negotiated and contested’, and that identities are always space and time specific. Thus, in returning to Horton & Kraftl’s (2013) earlier point, any consideration of how children’s identities emerge, and are enacted in schools, requires close consideration of the interactions between children and their spatial landscapes.

This section has highlighted how a geographical perspective, through a close examination of school structures, systems, and spatial organisation, can help uncover the ways in which children can come to understand school and their place within it. However, this does not mean that children are merely passive beings, where socio-spatial dimensions of school and schooling act upon them. Schools are not merely a collection of processes that have a one-sided effect on children, rather, they are dynamic processes that are also influenced by the practices of children as social actors within them (Zhang,
2022). In this next section, important issues of children’s agency, power and children’s spatial rights are discussed.

**Children’s agency versus structure tensions**

It is commonly acknowledged that children exist as social actors, who are not only aware of the world around them but have their own thoughts and beliefs that they seek to enact in their lifeworlds (Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Hammond, 2022b). The influence of children’s presence *within* school spaces and *upon* this structured environment must therefore not be discounted (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Jones et al., 2016).

Esser et al. (2016) state that agency should not be considered as something pre-existing or as solely in the possession of an individual, rather, that agency and agentic behaviour emerge through various social interactions. To better understand children’s engagement with, and co-production of, aspects of the school environment, therefore requires an understanding of the nature of the shaping forces that exist (Jones et al., 2016). Holloway & Valentine’s (2000) work has highlighted how children’s lives and behaviours are commonly shaped by outside forces beyond the realms of their control. Their work seeks to focus on the *extent* to which children’s agency might be realised, and ways this is influenced by the structuring of teaching, learning and spatial management in school settings. In line with this, others such as Jones et al. (2016), have looked to examine the conditions under which certain behaviours are made possible or impossible within the school environment. Tisdall & Punch (2012) posit that attention to these relational understandings of children and their lived environment helps better uncover some of the complexities and ambiguities around the ways children’s agency might be negotiated and navigated. There is an important requirement therefore to address issues of children’s agency and school structures together, and to acknowledge that agency-structure tensions can and do exist.

Brooks & Waters (2018) observe that paying close attention to spatialities and children’s agency can go some way to revealing particular adult-child
dynamics, and thus issues around power plays and power distribution can become clearer. Houen et al.’s (2016) work exploring school classrooms, found them to be typically orientated towards particular adult-centric conceptualisations of the need for social order, where adults set and enforced the rules. Their study looked to explore ways in which teachers might afford children greater agency, while still maintaining order. However, their study appears to leave unchallenged the domination of practices based on adult centred ideologies and governance. Houen et al.’s (2016) findings pointed up that children looked to assert their agency through their knowledge of the school systems, structures, and rules, and used this knowledge to manipulate and subvert adult authority. This is in line with Collins & Coleman’s (2008) work, which revealed how children found ways to enact agency even in the most adult controlled spaces. Blundell (2016) contends these tensions arise as a consequence of what adults consider to be important features of the school environment bearing limited resemblance to what children want. It is thus suggested that a main cause of children perpetually looking to find ways to manipulate, subvert, circumnavigate, and/or ignore certain school systems, structures, and rules, is grounded in a desire to control, and enact their own needs.

Aitken (2018a) contends that attempts by adults to act wholly on children’s behalf in autocratic ways, that exclude or ignore children’s own views, can be best understood as a form of repression and violence against them. He argues for a need to give children the capacity to employ choice and to have a greater say in gaining what they most desire. Aitken’s (2018) work presents a clear supposition – that young children must have the right to make and remake their own spaces, and as a consequence, themselves. Collins & Coleman (2008) maintain that while children’s rights may be recognised in school policy, they appear to have little purchase within the school setting and their day-to-day life. Aitken (2018a) views this as part of a broader issue, arguing that notions of children’s rights are commonly considered at a universal level, thereby failing to take into account their needs within individual localities and contexts. He argues that in successfully moving
beyond the universal level, children’s rights must be understood as complex, ongoing processes, rather than fixed procedures, which take a one-size-fits-all stance.

Kraftl (2006) states that much can be learned from research that pays close attention to what goes on in the background of the space’s children occupy. He argues that too little attention has been given to the ‘detailed, localized, banal, and material constructions of childhood (i.e., materialized, localized ‘geographies of childhood’)’ where every day, mundane experiences of children tend to go unnoticed, unacknowledged, and underestimated (2006:488). Horton (2010) further argues that too often research which does set out to explore the everyday experiences of children in a school environment does not sufficiently challenge the normalising of particular designs and usage of these spaces, which he contends helps to (re)produce and normalise certain hegemonic notions of the ‘ideal’ pupil and school environment. In my own research I recognised the need in my observations and interpretations of my findings to be reflexively aware of the nature and effects of these hegemonic assumptions.

Drawing from this critical analysis of literature within the field of Children’s Geographies, I was able to appreciate how such a geographical perspective offered opportunities to examine the school environment, and children’s experiences and understandings of being in primary 1 (Kellock & Sexton, 2018). This field of study has also served to forefront the value of an ethnographic approach to research, which seeks to explore children’s in situ, ‘lived’ school experiences (Aitken, 2018a). I came to appreciate how only through a close examination of the school structures, systems, and spatial organisation, in conjunction with close attention to what the children themselves said and did, could this time in their lives be more fully understood.

2.5: Children’s Peer Friendships in School

Within the structural organisation of Scottish primary schools, children commonly spend around six hours, five days per week, in the close company
of their classmates. The majority of this time at school is spent within designated classroom spaces, where children work, learn and socialise together, thus potentially making these peer relationships all the more intense (Corsaro et al., 2003; Vincent et al., 2018). Consequently, the kinds of relationships children have with other children within their school setting are of significance and merit close attention (Deegan, 2005; Corsaro, 2018; Zhu, 2019). Of particular interest have been the nature, determinants, and effects of the friendships that young children establish at school. While there is a consensus across the literature on the important role that children’s friendships play in their school life, there are distinct disciplinary differences in how these friendships are best understood and in the foci of research attention. Accordingly, this section begins by providing an analytical overview of these disciplinary differences. It also points up the disciplinary perspective and focus of attention that was most pertinent to my own study. Attention then shifts to a succinct presentation of key findings, from across these different disciplinary perspectives, concerning children’s school friendships that have informed my own work.

**Differing perspectives on, and approaches to researching, children’s friendships**

It is commonly recognised that children routinely participate in more than one form of peer relationship, and that friendships are a particular kind of relationship (Ladd et al., 1997; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Friendships are generally understood as a voluntary relationship between two people with the intention of facilitating social-emotional goals based on mutual affection or reciprocity of liking (Allan & Adams, 2007; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). This special form of relationship tends to be based upon shared interests and involve altruistic sentiments, trust, emotional attachment, caring, goodwill and joy (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Coelho et al., 2017; Corsaro, 2018). While these features are commonly viewed as differentiating friendships from other relationships, the definition of friendships has been understood in contrasting ways across different disciplines (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011), resulting in
multifaceted ways in which friends and friendships can be categorised (Corsaro et al., 2003; Allan & Adams, 2007; Zhu, 2019).

Research on children’s friendships is a topic of interest in a range of disciplines, most especially within the fields of developmental psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Zhu, 2019). Zhu (2019) points up how these disciplines have quite distinct research interests, have offered different definitions of friendships, and adopt different approaches in undertaking research on friendships.

Developmental psychologists tend to focus on the quality and outcomes of friendships between children and are interested primarily in their influences on functioning and in the developmental processes involved (Corsaro et al., 2003; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Zhu, 2019). Those adopting this approach commonly use, and may go to great lengths to define, fixed definitions of friendships prior to the research being undertaken (Corsaro et al., 2003; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Friendships are considered as fairly static entities acquired by children, and seen to involve a dyadic, voluntary relationship underpinned by mutual affection, liking, and reciprocating behaviours (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Research approaches commonly use such definitions of friendship to engage in sociometric testing to measure and report on various friendship patterns, such as those with/without friends, high/low quality friendships, gender divides, age related differences, and so on (James & James, 2008; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016). Analysis of these network diagrams is commonly used to help identify and flag up children who are deemed most at risk of failing to form supportive friendships. Critics of this approach argue that this tends to confound notions of children’s popularity with ideas of friendships, resulting in a somewhat narrow view of these relationships (James & James, 2008). In line with this, Bagwell & Schmidt (2011) point up that although such a research approach provides important information, most especially regarding the potential outcomes of friendships and how they contribute to life adjustment and development, it
does not take into account the transient and nuanced nature of these relationships.

Unlike developmental psychologists, those working within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology tend to shy away from providing any universal or fixed definition of friendships in their research studies (Allan & Adams, 2007; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). These disciplines adopt a process approach and seek to research the social and cultural contexts through which individuals negotiate and understand the meanings and practices of friendships (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan & Adams, 2007; Corsaro, 2018).

Those guided by an anthropological perspective look to explore how definitions of friendships emerge and are understood within and across socio-cultural contexts and will often undertake comparative studies to explore potential differences and similarities (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Anthropologists commonly focus on how the social and economic structures and cultural practices of different societies allow for, or indeed hamper, the nature, and practices of friendships.

Sociologists commonly look to pay close attention to how people come to define, understand and ‘do’ friendships within the social contexts and institutions they occupy (Adams & Allan, 1998). They regard conceptualisations of ‘friendships’ and ‘friends’ as fluid, socially constructed, dynamic entities, where understandings are not simply internalised and reproduced, but are constructed by individuals through their everyday, lived, context driven experiences. Thus, it is commonly left to those who are taking part in the research to give/share their own definitions and understandings of friendship and friends (Corsaro, 2003; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Zhu (2019) contends that this openness towards exploring understandings of friendships can enable researchers to better explore important connections between individuals’ understandings, their experiences, and the surrounding social contexts. It is common for researchers within this disciplinary perspective to adopt an ethnographic approach in their work, as this provides opportunities to undertake a more detailed, situated account of how individuals come to
understand and perform friendships within a particular context (James, 1993; Corsaro et al., 2003; Konstantoni, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015; Zhu, 2019). It was this sociological, ethnographic perspective which was most consonant with my own research purposes and foci, and which has guided my research actions and reporting of findings.

Aside from being alert to these disciplinary differences in how friendship is construed and researched, it is important more generally to recognise the fuzzy, shape-shifting ways in which the terms friend and friendship can be deployed. Bagwell & Schmidt (2011) point up that the ways in which people oftentimes use the term ‘friend’ demonstrate inconsistencies and a diversity of definitions and understandings. Allan & Adams (2007:124) highlight how ‘friend is an evaluative term rather than a categorical one, with no clear definitive external criteria of who qualifies’, unlike terms such as mother, father, siblings, teacher, and so on. Those considered as friends in one situation, may be deemed as acquaintances or mates in a different situation (Allan, 1996). Thus, notions of what, or indeed who, is a friend, can be defined in different ways, by different people, at different times and in different social contexts (James, 1993; Allan, 1996; Adams & Allan, 1998; Zhu, 2019). In line with this, Zhu (2022) notes how the boundaries between friends and non-friends can oftentimes be blurred.

Bagwell & Schmidt (2011) point up the importance of researchers remaining open to analysing the ways in which terms ‘friends’ and ‘friendships’ are used when seeking to understand the conditions of friendships in children’s lives. Deegan (2005) observes how children themselves will actively construct any understandings of friends and friendships, and how these understandings are situated and interpreted through their own experiences within their immediate social contexts. As such, individual children should be viewed as a primary source of knowledge and information on this subject. Chapter 6 will reveal how my own research work sought to do exactly this.
The importance of children’s school friendships

Turning now to consider key findings concerning children’s school friendships, I look first at findings that have emerged principally from studies within developmental psychology. Much of the research literature regarding children’s school peer relationships has focused primarily on the importance of having and establishing friendships and on identifying their nature, determinants, and effects. Research has looked to identify children who may be most at risk of failing to establish supportive relationships with others, primarily so that interventions may be planned for and enacted by adults responsible for the children’s overall care and wellbeing (Roffey et al., 1994; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004; Antonopoulou et al., 2019).

Research has commonly found that having friends at school contributes in positive ways to children’s emotional wellbeing, levels of self-esteem, and academic competences (Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1996; Marcone et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2016; Coelha et al., 2017; Antonopoulou et al., 2019). Children who were identified as having friends at school were found to hold a more favourable impression of school (Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1996; Danby et al., 2012) and show higher levels of enjoyment (Brooker, 2008; Pearce & Bailey, 2011; Marcone & Caputo, 2019). Conversely, a lack of friends was found to contribute to poorer social, emotional, and academic adjustment in school, and lead to more negative impressions of school, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety (Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1997; Berndt, 2002; Danby et al., 2012). A lack of friends was found to have a detrimental impact on children’s development of social skills, their sense of identity, and their cognitive development, in ways that could have lasting consequences for children and their educational outcomes (Ladd et al., 1996; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004; Marcone & Caputo, 2019).

Social competency and peer acceptance

Two themes that have commonly emerged from much of the children’s friendships research literature are those of social competency and peer acceptance. Much of the research pursuing these themes has centred on
identifying potential issues concerning children’s ability to make and sustain friendships (Fink et al., 2015; Coelha et al., 2017; Antonopoulou et al., 2019). A correlation has been found between children identified as having larger numbers of friends and their ability to demonstrate higher levels of social skill competency (Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1996; Coelho et al., 2017). Children with greater numbers of friends were deemed to be better able to regulate their emotions and behaviours, negotiate and resolve possible conflicts with their peers, and show an empathetic understanding of others (Danby et al., 2012; Fink et al., 2015). Conversely, children with few (or no) friends possessed poorer social skills and were more likely to display aggressive, disruptive behaviours towards their peers (Antonopoulou et al., 2019; Tillman & Prazak, 2019).

Judgements on children’s levels of social competency have been commonly linked to children’s perceived levels of developmental ‘readiness’, and any problems or issues viewed as lying with, or in, the children themselves (Fortune-Wood, 2002; Davies et al., 2014b; Yoleri, 2015). Those found to have few friends tended to be characterised as being immature, needy, timid, anxious, aggressive, disruptive, whereas those with lots of friends were described as being popular, mature, competent, and ready for school (Coelha et al., 2017; Corsaro, 2018; Antonopoulou et al., 2019). Researchers who have sought to critique this innately ‘child-deficit’ stance, where any issues are seen to lie solely with the child, have looked to draw attention to the complex ways in which context plays a significant role in friendships (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Konstantoni, 2011; Corsaro, 2018). This critique will be discussed later.

A further focus in children’s school friendship research has involved an exploration of peer acceptance and friendship group patterns. Studies have shown how particular social identities, such as gender, age, or ethnicity, impacted on how children would construct and enact friendships groupings (Thorne, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000; Renold, 2005; Thomson, 2005; Pearce & Bailey, 2011; Martinez-Garcia & Rodriguez-Menendez, 2020). Children
were commonly drawn to notions of ‘sameness’ in others, and social identity commonalities provided gateways into negotiating and building their friendships (Thomson, 2005; Konstantoni, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015; Iqbal et al., 2017; Corsaro, 2018). Children’s awareness of cultural diversity, involving identification of certain socio-cultural, ethnic, and biological characteristics in their own make up that connected them to, while also setting them apart from, others, was found to be evident from a very young age (Konstantoni, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015, Iqbal et al., 2017). Friendship group formation commonly involved the selection and categorisation of who belonged in and those seen as outside of particular peer groupings (Corsaro, 2018), where children would create and enact certain ‘them’ and ‘us’ boundaries in their relationships with others (Corsaro, 2003; Konstantoni, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015; Zhu, 2019). These enactments of particular friendship groupings were also found to be reflective of particular hegemonic discourses and practices within settings, which looked to create and sustain acceptable ‘norms’ in ways of being and belonging (Konstantoni, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015; Zhu, 2019).

However, researchers have also highlighted ways in which children’s friendships and friendship groupings were found to be decidedly complex and nuanced (Corsaro, 1979, 2003, 2018; Konstantoni, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015; Zhu, 2019). It was observed that the ways in which children might negotiate and perform their friendships could not be wholly reducible to a single category, nor function. Konstantoni’s (2011) and Kustatscher’s (2015) work demonstrated how young children’s friendships and friendship groupings commonly involved multiple, complex, and intersected ways in which social identities were performed, with particular identities foregrounded at different times, in different situations, and for different purposes. Despite children often being drawn to aspects of ‘sameness’ with others, friends and friendships were also flexibly understood as those who could perform a particular function, or service, at a particular time (Adams & Allan, 1999).
In line with this, Zhu’s (2019) study, which investigated older (mid-primary age) children’s friendships in a Chinese rural boarding school setting, found that ‘no type of friendship could be described as simple’, and recommended that researchers be sensitive to the complex meanings and functions of friendships within the settings they explore (2019:300). Zhu (2019) found that children’s friendships could be categorised into three main types: intimate friendships; instrumental (useful) friendships; and collective friendships. Intimate friendships were primarily based on notions of ‘best friends’, constructed through children’s shared interests, mutual liking, caring, and emotional support, and were commonly fiercely protected from ‘outsiders. Instrumental friendships on the other hand, were based primarily on the perceived usefulness of others; commonly involving aligning oneself with others deemed to be more powerful, and possessing coveted assets such as financial wealth, being popular, or higher levels of academic prowess. Through these instrumental friendships children would seek to gain a better quality of life for themselves. The final category of ‘collective’ friendship reflected the ways in which Chinese school structures and systems endorsed the need to work together, and to take care of one another, for the collective good. These different types of friendships were not found to exist in isolation from one another, but rather were part of the complex, diverse, dynamic, and context driven ways in which the children built and performed their relationships with others.

What these research studies had in common was their ethnographic approach, which enabled an in-depth, situated, and emergent understanding of children’s friendships that looked beyond a single moment or factor. This was an approach that I wished to adopt for my own research study, so that I might better understand the dynamic, nuanced relationships children formed with others in the primary 1 setting.

**Children’s friendships upon starting school**

Literature that has focused on children’s friendships upon starting school commonly advocates that having friends at the onset can play a vital, positive
role in supporting their initial adjustments to the transition process (Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1996, 1997; Peters, 2003; Danby et al., 2012). Fabian (2002) asserts that children commonly feel more confident when they begin school along with a friend and that this contributes to a greater sense of familiarity and continuity. Ladd et al. (1997) found that having friends provided children with valuable support in dealing with some of the various challenges a new setting can present, acting as a buffer to help soften the impact of these challenges and any stresses they might face as a consequence. Having friends thus provided them with a greater sense of security and with a level of emotional support. In a similar vein, other studies have found that friends helped impact positively on children’s own sense of belonging in the new setting (James, 1993; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004; Danby et al., 2012).

Research studies on children’s school friendships which take into account association with the context within which they occur were found to be more limited. Exploration of the context within which children’s friendships exist forefronts an understanding that children’s friendships do not just happen, but develop and endure within particular, complex, social, and cultural settings (Adam & Allan, 2010). Such an exploration requires consideration of the possible affordances and constraints of the school environment, systems, and spatial organisation, on how children may construe, negotiate, and enact friendships with others (Corsaro, 1979, 2003, 2005, 2018; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Konstantoni, 2011, 2012; Kustatscher, 2015; Zhu, 2019).

Fink et al. (2015) highlight how for many children starting school is the first time they have full day contact with a particular cohort of children; and argue that consideration of how children might be supported in developing these new peer relationships should be of paramount importance. Carter (2023) points up how, upon starting school, children are placed in a position of enforced socialisation, where they are required to navigate the negotiation and building of new friendships within their school settings. Children have been found to give serious attention to the act of building and maintaining
friendships at school (James, 1993; Ladd et al., 1997; Kustatscher, 2015; Walker et al., 2016), and in doing so they were found to employ a range of strategies (Corsaro et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Danby et al., 2012). Corsaro’s (2018) work observed how the making of friends was a demanding task, which involved a series of multiple, complex strategies that had to be understood, selected, and enacted by children. How quickly a child gained mastery of the necessary social strategies was seen to have an impact upon their successes in making and sustaining school friendships (James, 1993; Danby et al., 2012; Fink et al., 2015).

A common theme found to run through much of the research literature on school friendships was the role of play and opportunities for children to engage in playful activities in school. A multitude of research studies strongly advocate that young children’s friendships not only develop, but thrive, in situations where they have opportunities to engage in playful situations (Roffey et al., 1994; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Bruce, 2011; Coelho et al., 2017; Corsaro, 2018). However, research that has focused upon the time when children start school has found that opportunities for children’s play commonly becomes very limited (Corsaro, et al., 2003; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016; Tejada et al., 2022). As discussed earlier, tensions were found to exist between political and cultural drives for academic attainment, performativity and accountability, and any desire to promote a more child-centred, needs led approach in school organisation and practices (Tejada et al., 2022). Thus, it has been found that children’s academic progress has been predominately afforded precedence over attention to children’s friendships (Roffey et al., 1994; Corsaro et al., 2003; Cassidy, 2009; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016). Roffey et al.’s (1994) work has pointed up how, rather than specifically focusing on fostering children’s friendships, schools tend to shift their focus to the promotion of children’s pro-social behaviours, in the belief these would help create and sustain positive relationships between the children.

Research has found that young children prioritise those they consider friends as those they play with (Konstantoni, 2011; Marcone & Caputo, 2019).
Having playmates seems to be a key driving force in young children’s desire
to make and to have friends (Peters, 2003; Corsaro et al., 2003; Danby et al.,
2012). However, this raises questions of whether friends are sought so a
young child has playmates, or do those they play with become their friends,
or, based on findings that suggest friendships are innately complex, is it
various combinations of each?

Much of the research literature that focuses on children and their school
playmates looks most specifically at interactions in the playground, and ways
in which children engage in games (Thorne, 1993; Renold, 1997; Epstein et
This time is acknowledged as an important opportunity for children to build,
negotiate and maintain friendships through unstructured, child-led, shared
activities in school (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Bruce, 2011; Danby et al.,
2012; Corsaro, 2018). In contrast, others have observed how children’s
playground experiences are commonly not reflected in their experiences
inside the school building, where classroom practices do not make access to
child-led, playful activities with classmates easy (Corsaro et al., 2003; Carter
& Nutbrown, 2016). As discussed earlier, the Curriculum for Excellence
advocates for Scottish primary schools to adopt a more active, purposeful,
play-based, learning environment. I was thus interested to explore whether
this curricular drive was reflected in the experiences of the children in my
study within the context of their school environment.

Although I did not set out to explore friendships as a primary focus of my
research, I recognised the importance of closely examining the relationships
children had with their peers, how the children themselves understood and
enacted friendships, and the affordances and constraints of their school
setting. As the findings presented in Chapter 6 will reveal, my ethnographic
study has allowed me to present a nuanced, contextually grounded picture
of:

• how the children in my study *themselves* construed the nature of
  friendship,
• how they acted to negotiate and maintain friendships,
• diversity, as well as commonalities, within friendship patterns, and
• different trajectories of friendships.

This chapter has presented a summary of key literature that has been foundational in guiding the focus and direction of my research study. In reporting on preceding pertinent literature, it has highlighted the gaps and areas of interest that my research study looks to address. Taking ahead this task, the following chapter re-visits the research questions, which framed this study and discusses the methodological approaches and methods employed to fulfil its aims.
Chapter 3 Methodological Approach and Methods

3.0: Introduction

The preceding chapters have set out the aims of this research study and the backdrop against which this study was conceived. In this chapter I discuss the methodology chosen for, and methods employed in, this study to address the four research questions, which framed this investigation:

• What are these children’s experiences, perceptions, and views of being in primary 1?
• What seems to impact on and shape their experiences and understandings of this time and place?
• Do these children appear to find aspects of their primary 1 school experience problematic, and if so in what ways?
• From this exploration into these children’s experiences, is it possible to gain a clearer understanding of what may need to be (re)considered to ensure all children are better supported to have a positive, effective start to their early years’ primary education?

I begin by discussing the epistemological and theoretical perspectives that underpinned my research study and guided the choices of methodology and methods. Building from this, I discuss the related issues of my role as a researcher, reflexivity, and power, which played an important methodological part in the design and conduct of this study. I conclude this section with a discussion of the important ethical considerations which guided the conduct of this research study – ethical considerations that were pertinent to its focus on working with young children.

Next, I go on to discuss the design and context of this research study, including how the choice of setting and participants was arrived at. I discuss the data collection methods employed in this study, providing a rationale for the choices made and giving the reader an insight into the main processes involved. I then discuss the data analysis processes adopted and the ways in which the findings of this study were arrived at.
I conclude this chapter by providing an overview of the structure of the remainder of the thesis.

3.1: Addressing Issues of Validation, Trustworthiness, and Generalisability

A fundamental aim of this thesis is to present my research in such a way as to inspire confidence in the validity of this study and its findings. As such, my objective is to demonstrate my intentions in conducting and reporting on my research study through an open, honest, clear account of the processes involved. I acknowledge the contested nature of terms such as validity, particularly in a research study such as this, which seeks to adopt an exploratory, interpretivist approach (Richardson, 1996; Leitch et al., 2010). This research study does not set out to uncover a single, objective ‘truth’, but rather embraces notions of complexity, multiplicity, and temporality in human beings’ lives and in their interpretations of their social world. Rather, I am guided by Mishler’s (1990) reformulation of the need for an approach in interpretive research studies that seeks ‘validation’ through ‘trustworthiness’ in the research processes undertaken.

Mishler’s (1990) reformulation of truth in objectivist research as trustworthiness in interpretivist research shifts the focus from a set of universally applied rules for assessing validity to trust in the research processes undertaken and in the ways in which particular claims came to be made. Mishler advocates that a focus on trustworthiness moves validation of research to a place that acknowledges the ways in which knowledge is constructed and re-constructed in the social world. As such, any claims of validation and trustworthiness arise from providing clear descriptions of the substance of the research study, including: the processes of research design; data collection methods; analysis of data; and subsequent interpretations of the data and conclusions drawn (Potter, 1996; Leitch et al., 2010).

My aim therefore is to earn trust in this study through making visible to the reader the multiple decisions, procedures and interpretative practices
involved in each stage of this research study. Additionally, I aim to show that these practices were driven by my understanding of the need to embed integrity and trustworthiness in the conduct of this research study and in my own position and practices as a researcher. Much of this research study centred upon data gathered via sustained interactions with the participating children, and, accordingly, care has been taken to describe the ways in which communications were established with them and taken ahead.

Capturing the essence of the children’s accounts of this time was a cornerstone of this study. Consequently, trust in the research findings is sought by providing the reader with examples of the multiple ways in which children spoke of this time, and from which conclusions were ultimately drawn.

The aim of this research study was not to construct broad generalisations of children’s experiences of being in primary 1 based on the findings. It is acknowledged that this study explores, analyses, and seeks to interpret how a particular group of children in a particular time and place had spoken of their experiences (MacNaughton et al., 2010). This study was not designed to explain how all children will experience starting school, but rather was an exploration of ways in which children can experience and interpret this time.

The relative and situated nature of this study is acknowledged and as such no strong claims of generalisability are made with regards to the findings. However, it is suggested that the findings of this study can be tentatively considered in terms of the likelihood of their ‘typicality’ (Richardson, 1996). While wholly acknowledging the contextual nature of this study, it is posited that some similarities can exist across and between Scottish school settings, such as ideologies, materials, resources, curriculum guidelines, structures and so on (Prout, 2011; Kraftl, 2013). Consequently, although no claims are made of any straightforward transferability of the findings from this group of children to all children starting school, trust in the emergent ideas and theories arising from the findings of this study allows one to consider how this time can and may be experienced.
3.2: Ways of Knowing

This research study is situated within a theoretical framework which rejects a social reality external to individuals or an objective world independent of the individual awaiting discovery (May 2001). Rather, this study presupposes complex, multiple realities, where ‘meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world’ (Crotty, 1998:8). This research study is underpinned by the belief that all human beings actively interpret and seek to make sense of their world, and that their actions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours can be justified and articulated by them (Hammersley, 2013). In accordance with this theoretical standpoint, this thesis is framed by epistemological perspectives from a constructionist standpoint, where meanings are socially constructed and re-constructed based on situated knowledge, influenced by culture and society (Crotty, 1998).

The research study is therefore premised on the assumption that children come to understand the world around them by actively interpreting their daily interactions with people and objects (Hill, 2006). In order to better understand the world as experienced by the child we must seek to see it as they do. This symbolic interactionist, interpretative process, involves the researcher aiming to put themselves, at least to a degree, in the place of, to see the world from the perspective of, the child. This interpretivist purpose is ‘possible only because of the ‘significant symbols’ – that is, language and other symbolic tools – that we humans share and through which we communicate’ (Crotty, 1998:75).

3.3: Ways of Knowing: Conceptualisations of Children and Childhood

The main participants of this research were the children. Accordingly, it was important in this section to consider how children and childhood are best conceptualised, given that how childhood is conceptualised significantly impacts on the ways in which research related to children’s lives is enacted and interpreted (Alderson & Morrow, 2004).
As Chapter 2 discussed, research interest in children and their lives is not a new phenomenon. However, historically much of this has been concerned with research on children (as the object of research) rather than research with children (as the subject of research) (Christensen & James, 2000; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Greene & Hill, 2011; Hogan, 2011; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Bound within particular discourses that view children as needy, vulnerable, dependent, incomplete, and incompetent, is firmly planted the notion that adults know best when it comes to decisions on what children want and require (Komulainen, 2007). This conceptualisation of children and childhood validates adults as the expert informants on children and their lives, and so excludes children from assuming any role of an expert in their own lives, and from being consulted by adults on decisions regarding how they live their lives (Christensen & James, 2000; Mayall, 2000; Hogan, 2011; Davis et al., 2014c).

The past few decades have witnessed fundamental shifts in the understandings of children and of their place in social and political life (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010) which have had implications not only for what research is undertaken, but the methods employed (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). A newer sociology of childhood movement (James et al., 1998, James & Prout, 2007) has seen a substantive shift away from the notion that children are incomplete, passive, dependent receptors of socialisation, towards a re-conceptualisation of children as competent, whole, complete beings with agency (James et al., 1998; Brostrom, 2012; Moss, 2019). Part of this newer conceptualisation of children involves crediting them with knowledge, rather than just an opinion or perspective, and challenges the notion that children have nothing of importance to tell us about their own lives (Mayall, 2000; Greg et al., 2000; Emond, 2011; Greene & Hill, 2011; McEvilly, 2015).

Furthermore, it is argued that children are not only able to provide reliable information about themselves, but that this information is generally more accurate than that gained from even the adults who know them well (Bell,
2007). It is therefore contended that research which actively engages with and explores children’s views on their life experiences not only allows us to understand the world of the child from their perspective, but also counters the position where adults may commonly hold a taken for granted view on children’s behalf (Mayall, 2000; Hogan, 2011; McEvilly, 2015).

Greene & Hogan (2011) claim that there remains a wariness around research that relies on the views of children on their own lives, as it can be perceived as unreliable and idiosyncratic. What children have to say may be viewed as ill-informed, irrational, and irresponsible, or otherwise as entertaining, amusing, or cute (Nutbrown, 1998). Furthermore, it is argued that the younger the child, the greater the risk of the unreliability of their views, as younger children are deemed to be more highly suggestible and lacking in the ability to discuss or describe their worlds (Moss & Petrie, 2002). Arguments which look to discount, or at least devalue, the reliability of young children’s perspectives, reflect conceptualisations of children as ‘adults in waiting’, yet to garner the necessary skills to have an opinion worthy of inclusion (Nutbrown, 1996).

Gallagher & Gallagher (2008) contend that the claim that children can, and indeed are best placed to, provide insights into their lives is premised on the assumption that each person is best placed to know themselves. They suggest that people are not only knowable to themselves, but that their voice can hold a place of privilege over others. In line with others, such as Greene & Hill (2011), they caution against a simplistic equation of age with a particular level of ability or knowledge. Rather, they seek to challenge the notion that human beings will become a complete, static or ‘all knowing’ entity, and argue that we are all ‘constitutionally immature’ in that we are all incomplete, imperfect, changing beings who continuously evolve and develop throughout our lifetimes. Pivotal to arguments relating to the validity of undertaking research with children is whether children are viewed as ‘adults-in waiting’, or are respected as individuals with competencies and rights, and afforded a central position within society (Nutbrown, 1996).
This research study was framed by the premise that what the children themselves had to say about their experiences, views, and perceptions of being in primary 1 was worthy of study. It holds the view that all children, including the youngest in society, are competent, social actors who not only have a perspective worthy of inclusion, but have the right to be heard. At the same time, issues surrounding the subjectivity, relativity and complexity of views are acknowledged. The children in this study are part of a specific group that share a common experience of starting primary school, yet this is not to suggest that their experiences will be uniform. There is a danger, Davis (1998:326) counsels, that ‘in an effort to contrast children’s lives with adults’ through seeking to emphasise that children are social actors in their own right, that children are subsequently represented as a homogenous group with a single voice.

Davis (1998) argues that any child or small group of children cannot be seen as a single representative of all children. Beasley et al. (2009) observe that essentialist notions of ‘the child’ are in effect attempts to tidy up what is a fundamentally messy world. Consequently, this research study joins others in its challenge to the notion that children represent a homogenous group, and rather, acknowledges the need to stay alert to the multiplicity of children’s experiences, views, and perceptions (Punch, 2002; Clark et al., 2003; Lowe, 2004; James, 2007; Bell, 2008; Greene & Hogan, 2011; Quennnerstedt, 2013).

3.4: Children’s Participation in Research: Consultation and Listening

Conceptualisations of children as able, competent, whole beings credited with knowledge about their own lives has led to calls for more research where children are active participants (Christensen, 2004; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Clark et al., 2010; Tisdall et al., 2010; Konstantoni, 2011; McNair, 2016). A growing number of researchers have looked to engage in research that seeks to work directly with children and aims to give children a stronger platform from which to have their perspectives heard (James et al., 1998; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Clark, 2004; Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011;
Konstantoni, 2011, Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Kustatscher, 2015; McNair, 2016). However, decisions about the ways in which children can and should participate in research continue to be debated. (See, for example, Christensen & James, 2000; Punch, 2002; Clark et al., 2005; Hill, 2006; Burke, 2007; Tisdall et al., 2009; Brostrom, 2012; Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019).

The very nature of participatory research indicates that it looks to involve participants in some, or all, of the stages of the research process (Cahill, 2007). In this sense participatory research is understood to be a collaborative process (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Gallagher & Gallagher (2008) posit that a shift to more participatory methodologies in research that involves children can be viewed as a reaction to more traditional views that children are in some way subordinate to adults, and accordingly ‘participation’ is seen as both a ‘tool’ and an ‘aim’ towards greater emancipation. Participation in this sense infers that power is somehow shared between those involved and enacted through the structures of taking part (Alderson, 2008). However, Gallagher & Gallagher (2008) caution that while participatory research may hold potential for a more democratic approach, participatory methods do not straightforwardly equate to ‘freedom’.

This is in part due to the broad applications of the term ‘participation’, which it is argued can be used to mask tokenism and illusions of consultation with children in the research process (Cahill, 2007; Davis, 2008). Hart’s (1992) ‘Ladder of Participation’ is often cited as a starting point for thinking about research projects which involve children and their participation. Eight rungs are presented, where the lowest three rungs are viewed as essentially non-participatory, in that they give an illusion of children’s involvement that is nothing more than ‘manipulation’, ‘decoration’ or ‘tokenism’. The five remaining rungs represent increasing degrees of child-led and child-initiated participation. Although not without its critics, (see, for example, Alderson, 2008), who allude to the adult-centric nature of such a model, it can be a
useful instrument to begin the process of reflection on the role children will play in any research project.

My research study was sensitive to the need to ensure children’s participation was not to be situated in the bottom three rungs of ‘manipulation’, ‘decoration’ or ‘tokenism’ (Hart, 1992). Davis (2008) advocates that the most successful participatory projects with children are those where the adult researchers perceive themselves as learning alongside the children. To this end, my aim in this research study was to be largely guided by the children and, through consultation with and listening to them, I set about exploring what it was they felt I should know about being in primary 1 and how they made sense of this time. To do this, I needed to embrace the messiness, provisionality, reflection, interpretation and analysis involved in the research process (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010), and be prepared to relinquish to a degree control of the direction in which the research took me. Perhaps hardest of all was the need to accept children’s right to choose (or not) ways to participate, which ran very much counter to my expectations when my role was that of a teacher in school rather than researcher. (In section 3.7 I discuss more fully my role as a researcher in the school setting.)

It is noteworthy that the terms ‘consultation’, ‘listening’ and ‘participation’ are often used interchangeably when talking about the inclusion of children in research, but core to authentic participation are issues of power (Hill, 2006). The initial idea for this research project was mine, thereby the children were not involved in initiating or leading the design of the study. However, it was important to me that I was not precious about leading or controlling the study as it evolved.

Finally, it should be recognised that notions of listening to children and learning from them are not without tension (Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011). Listening to children is central to respecting them and their worth but it cannot be taken for granted that more listening means more hearing (Roberts, 2000; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). For this study it was
acknowledged that there is a subtle difference between ‘listening’ to children and ‘hearing’ them (Christensen & James, 2000; Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). Consequently, every effort needed to be made to not only listen to children’s voices but understand them (Brostrom, 2012). It was therefore essential that children’s participation in the study extended to ongoing conversations where I shared with them what I thought I understood from listening to them, thereby enabling them to make comments on this, add additional thinking or re-direct my understandings.

3.5: Choosing an Ethnographic Approach

Recapping on the main themes of the preceding sections, the aim of this research study was to investigate children’s experiences, views, and perceptions of what it was like to be in primary 1. Interest lay in exploring children’s descriptions, understandings and interpretations arising from their everyday lived experiences of this time, and, as such, knowledge generated in this study was conceived as subjective, complex, multiple, limited in its generalisability and sensitive to the context in which it occurred. This study assumed the standpoint that children’s experiences of being in primary 1 were inextricably part of their lived experiences within the school setting and structures (Toren, 1996; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Green & Turner, 2017). Therefore, it was considered that a deeper, richer understanding of the ways in which children spoke of this time would be gained from witnessing the children’s daily interactions as they occurred in the school setting. Thus, adopting a qualitative, ethnographic approach to this research study was deemed to be the best way ahead.

Debates exist around what counts as ‘real’ ethnography with respect to design, focus and data produced (Agar, 2006). For my own ethnographic research design, I was principally influenced by the works of Agar (1996, 2006), Robson (2002) and Emond (2001). In Agar’s (2006) paper ‘An ethnography by any other name’ he concludes that more than one type of ethnography is possible but cautions that not all are acceptable. He talks of boundaries that exist in style and design, where studies that make claims to
be ethnographic should be characteristically abductive, seeking to uncover ‘surprises’ and aiming to make sense of these through continual reflection on the multiple, complex connections between supposed meaning and the influence of context. Similarly, Robson (2002) advocates that ethnography is more a question of research style than a specific prescription about set procedures. Principally, the aim is one of investigating the social worlds of the participants of the study, described by Emond (2011:24) as follows:

Ethnography is a generic term for a set of research tools which places the emphasis on uncovering participants’ understanding of their social and symbolic world.

The adoption of an ethnographic approach is commonly deemed useful in exploring the social worlds of marginalised groups, such as young children (Emond, 2011; James et al., 1998). Such an approach creates the potential for researchers to more closely examine the day-to-day lives of children, and to capture something of the rich complexities of how they are lived (Toren, 1996; Greene & Hill, 2011; Greene & Hogan, 2011). Supporting a shift from children as the ‘object’ of study to the ‘subject’ of study, within such an approach the children are afforded the position of expert and so enabled to become the instructors (Emond, 2011).

Ethnography is a participatory methodology (Agar, 1996). Ethnographic research methods commonly entail the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in the world of the participants, observing ‘real-life’ situations over an extended period (Agar, 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It involves a comparative, descriptive analysis of everyday life, where the primary method of gathering data is participant observation, thus affording the researcher the opportunity to construct ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) and gather contextual details of participants’ interactions within their social worlds (Toren, 1996). Given that the accent in participant observation is on open, fine-grained exploration of a social setting, it may provide a rich source of ‘unlooked for’ data (Agar, 1996; Toren, 1996). Toren (1996) contends that participant observation should be considered as not so much a method, but as a particularly intense way of living; a day-to-day experience in which the
researcher is simultaneously caught up in and distant from the world of the participants.

Toren (1996:109) contends that ‘ethnography as a qualitative method challenges us to render transparent our own involvement’ in order that a reader can make informed judgements of the theories that emerge from the data. In adopting an ethnographic approach in their study, researchers may look to adopt a role that ranges from the position of detached observer through to complete immersion as a full member of the community they are investigating (Emond, 2011).

In my research study, the role I adopted was somewhat constrained by the context in which I found myself, as an adult researcher in a child’s world. (I discuss this further in section 3.7). Complete immersion as a full member was not an option; I was not 5 years old, and I was not ‘experiencing’ being in primary 1 as the children were. Yet I quickly discovered that any role of a detached observer was also not feasible, due to the nature of the context, where spaces were often small and my presence obvious and regularly actively acknowledged by the children. Rather, in line with Rachel’s (1996) notion of ethnography as a ‘craft’, knowledge of children’s experiences of this time were necessarily created, not only through observation but through interactions with the children. However, I contend that the adoption of such an approach to the research design enabled me to ‘experience’ the world of what it was like to be in primary 1 in ways that no other research method could have afforded. This in turn better facilitated opportunities for me to actively challenge my adult-centred understandings, as I looked to explore and understand the ways in which the children experienced and made sense of this time and space through watching and listening to them in situ (Emond, 2011).

3.6: Reflexivity

Reflexivity is commonly regarded as a central methodological tool in qualitative research to validate not only the practices of the research study, but also the representations made from the data gathered (Christensen &
James, 2000; Davis, 2000; Punch, 2002; Pillow, 2003; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Punch (2002) contends this has a particular relevance where the research process involves adult researchers aiming to investigate, interpret, analyse, and evaluate the world from the position of the child.

In this study, I acknowledge I am not able to simply report on a world that is 'out there', rather, through ongoing processes of close analysis, reflexivity, and interpretation of the data, I sought to present how particular constructs of meanings, and so representational ‘truths’ from this study emerged (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008). Thus, processes of reflexivity played an important role in the production of these ‘truths’ (Pillow, 2003). Despite the benefits of an ethnographic approach which enabled an insight into how children experienced and made sense of being in primary 1, I do not contend that I experienced this time and place in similar ways to them. I therefore aim to make no claims of a ‘confessional tale of shared experiences’ (Pillow, 2003:180), rather I was afforded an opportunity to bear witness to their experiences of this time. This required me to move from accurately recording what was seen and heard, to actively engaging in processes of reflexivity to try and gain a sense of what was happening and why (King, 1996). A failure to engage in reflexive practice would have risked misunderstanding the significance of what was witnessed (Davis et al., 2017).

Engaging in processes of reflexivity not only acknowledges that researchers are intrinsically part of their research but highlights the importance of ‘the researcher becoming consciously aware of these factors and thinking through the implications for her/his research’ (Pillow, 2003:179). Reflexivity involves processes of self-analysis and political awareness (Callway, 1992), self-reflection, internal dialogue, scrutiny and problematisation that can lead to increased self-consciousness (Illeris, 2004, Davis et al., 2017), thereby providing a greater insight not only into what we believe we know, but how we came to know it (Pillow, 2003).

Reflexivity acknowledges the affective engagement of the researcher in the research process (King, 1996; Edmond, 2011; Connolly, 2017). Any efforts to
hide or deny reactions and the influences of my own beliefs, assumptions and experiences would thus have been at odds with the principles of transparency in adopting a reflexive approach (Beasley et al., 2009). Although I could lay no claim to a shared experience with the children participating in the study, I was not a stranger to the world of primary school or the processes that occur in this space. Developing understandings of the ways in which the children were experiencing and making sense of this time required me to be aware of, and attentive to, my own personal experiences, and the beliefs and convictions that resulted from them (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Spivak (1998) warns that awareness of and ‘making positions transparent does not make them unproblematic’ (cited in Pillow, 2003:183). However, drawing on Davis et al.’s (2017) assertion that one’s own preconceptions can be put to good use through reflexivity, I sought to engage in the ‘uncomfortable’ practice of reflexivity were seeking to know ‘truths’ acknowledges the tenuous, contested, multiple nature of knowing (Pillow, 2003). King (1996) advocates that this acknowledgement can help amplify rather than restrict the voices of participants in the research study.

This process was by far one of the most challenging in the research study. Early into my field research I became rather overwhelmed with the amount of data collected; filling journal pages after pages, afraid I would miss something vital. Slowly, I learned that I needed to regularly take time to reflect upon and critically analyse what I was bearing witness to, building time into the research process for robust reflexivity and keeping separate detailed notes on this in a ‘reflexive journal’. Heeding advice on the need to regularly ‘step back’ (Connolly, 2017; Davis et al., 2017) to gain an overview of what was being witnessed, I began to take short periods of time away from my fieldwork to provide me with the necessary time and space to reflect upon, question and problematise the data being gathered. My fieldnotes, audio recordings, transcripts, and the children’s drawings, along with the teachers’ interviews and parent/carers’ questionnaires were central resources for this reflexive process, however I also greatly benefitted from discussions with my supervisors, and colleagues interested in my research
work. One of the main benefits of this reflexive process was how it helped me to not only identify emergent issues, but also areas that I needed to follow up or begin to explore more fully. Over time I learned to accept that engaging in reflexivity throughout the research process was to be messy, continuous, problematic, demanding, often incomplete, but essential.

3.7: ‘Insider’ Researcher – Negotiating My Role as Researcher

Given that the aim of this study was to explore every-day, ‘lived’ experiences of being in primary 1 from the perspectives of the children, this had profound implications for my role as a researcher, not only with regards to how I would enact this role, but also for how I was perceived by those involved in the research study.

I termed myself as something of an ‘insider-researcher’ due to my background in and extensive experience of primary education. In the early stages of the research study, I quite naively, unquestioningly, felt this would give me a strong advantage in conducting this study. I rationalised that I began from a place of ‘expert knowledge’ of both primary school settings and experience of engaging with young children, and that these would be strengths in undertaking the role of researcher. However, I was quickly to discover that although my background knowledge and experience were at times the helpful advantage that I had supposed, they also raised a series of dilemmas that I had to strive to overcome during the process of the research study.

Two main challenges emerged that were pivotal to the success of the research study. Firstly, I had to ‘think like a researcher’ rather than a teacher. Underpinning this study was the notion that I was there to learn from the children and that I could not fully understand their world without their help (Christensen & James, 2000). My position therefore required that I was not ‘the knower of all truth, but the recorder and interpreter’ of children’s multiple subjectivities (Beasley et al., 2009:369). In order to do this, I needed to continually challenge my thinking and question whether I was remaining open to ‘seeing’ as a researcher willing to learn from the children, or being
held hostage by ‘preconceived ideas, practices and connotations’ associated with my thinking as a teacher (Christensen, 2004). Consequently, it was crucial to this study that I remained open to learn and that I was prepared to hear things that might jar with, or challenge, my own beliefs, and understandings of school life from my perspective of ‘teacher’ (Cree et al., 2002; Agar, 2011; Danaher & Broid, 2011; Emond, 2011). Accordingly, I do not make any claims of a ‘position of objectivity’ in this study, rather through the acknowledgement of and reflexive understanding of ‘self’ in the research process, analysis and reporting I look to instil trust in the validity of this study (Toren, 1996; Punch, 2012; Unleur, 2012).

A second challenge fundamental to the success of this research study was in building trusting relationships with the participants (Christensen, 2000; Coates & Coates, 2006). Adults undertaking ethnographic research with children face generational issues and must acknowledge they are not and cannot be surrogate children (Mayall, 2000; Christensen, 2004). As noted, despite spending time with the children in their school setting, I did not claim to be able to understand or experience life as they did. I made no attempt to adopt the persona of a child, but rather that of an adult researcher genuinely interested in learning from the children (Christensen, 2004).

This did leave a dilemma of how the children might come to see me, particularly within the context of the school setting, where adults are often ascribed the role of an authority figure (Cahill, 2007). Christensen (2004) advocates that adults doing research with children should look to present themselves as ‘an unusual’ type of adult. Various suggestions from childhood studies research are put forward for an adult researcher to consider, for example, adopting the role of: ‘an adult friend’ (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988), ‘a student/learner’ (Kustatscher, 2014), ‘an acceptable incompetent’ (Hammersley & Aitkinson, 1995) or Mandell’s (1991) suggestion of aiming to adopt ‘the least adult role’. Davis (1998) contends that the real skill of an adult researcher is in creating a ‘non-adult’ role that is acceptable to the children. The parameters of the adult researcher’s role therefore need to be
considered, negotiated, and re-negotiated throughout the research process (Davies et al., 2000).

Through early negotiations with the school staff, I asked to take the unusual step of being known to the children by my first name. This was counter to normal school practice and was a way I could distinguish myself from other adults in school. Furthermore, my role within the school would be purely that of researcher and I would take no responsibility for the children in any academic or disciplinary capacity. The only exception related to issues of children’s health and wellbeing. (I discuss this further in the ethics section 3.9.) This frequently involved a delicate balancing of my adult status, where I, other adults and the children grappled with my position and practice of ‘being’ in the school setting.

The next section looks specifically at power relations and discusses ways in which it was possible to feel both powerful and powerless in the processes of the research study.

3.8: Power Relations: Being Powerful, Being Powerless

Ethnographic study is dependent on acceptance into the community one is researching and hinges on issues of trust and respect between researcher(s) and participants (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). The vulnerability of any piece of research is that it needs participants who are willing to take part in it (Christensen, 2000). The relational processes of an ethnographic approach mean that issues of power need to be considered with sensitivity and fully addressed (Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). This was particularly pertinent as an adult researcher entering the world of school to undertake research with children, where certain assumptions exist regarding adulthood and the role of adults (Christensen, 2004; Connolly, 2017).

Whilst it is acknowledged that issues of power exist in all research relationships, research that is conducted with children can pose dilemmas (Punch, 2002; Spyrou, 2011). Much of what is written about children’s participation in the processes of research highlights the need for adult
researchers to be mindful of, and alert to, possible power imbalances, (Punch, 2002; Christensen, 2004; Clark, 2005; Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011). As the aim of this study was to learn from the children what it was like to be in primary 1, the way the research was conducted and the relationship between the children and myself would be pivotal to what data would be gathered.

This study acknowledges that we feel powerful and powerless through the actions of others. Rather than conceived as something that resides within a person and their social position, power is enacted and negotiated across and between the interactions of researcher and child participants (Christensen, 2004; Connolly, 2017). Drawing from Foucault's (1971) theory of ‘power as an action’ (cited in Gallagher, 2008), power is seen to be exercised rather than possessed. In this research study, any attempt to exercise ‘power over’ children would tend to be manifested through the roles I chose to adopt. Since this was counterproductive to the aim of the study, steps were taken to avoid being drawn into the more typically authoritative role of an adult in the school setting. However, the actual process of enacting this was at times far from straightforward, requiring ongoing negotiations and relationship building throughout the duration of the study.

Punch (2002) warns that adult researchers should not assume that children will be happy to accommodate them in their spaces, and therefore it is the responsibility of the researcher to remain alert to signs of possible tensions or discomfort. In this study, although children had been approached with regards to their choice to participate or otherwise, (see ethics section 3.9), it is acknowledged that they were not afforded the choice as to whether or not I could be in the school setting, this having been negotiated with the adult gatekeepers. Although I aimed to respect their choice to participate in my study with regards to when and how, on occasion the class teachers, in a well-meaning attempt to help and support me, would look to send children to talk to me. This required careful negotiation to ensure children did not feel coerced through the authoritative actions of adults, particularly of their
teacher, who generally held the position of being able to instruct them as to what they could/could not do in school.

Although it is acknowledged that children can be more vulnerable to inequalities in relation to adult/child power relationships in the school setting (Punch, 2002), this is not to suggest a lack of agency on the part of the children themselves. Gallagher (2008) posits that for researchers and participants to enter into any reciprocal relationship during the research process, children must see benefits of their choice to participate. The enactment of power is two-dimensional, and children can exert power over the adult researcher in overt ways, such as refusal or non-conformity, or in more covert ways in the things they say and do in the researcher’s presence (Cree et al., 2002; Connolly, 2017). Connolly (2017:117) observes that:

> Adult researchers need to be aware of the possibility that what children say and do in their presence can sometimes reflect their attempts to challenge and undermine [the] authority and control that the researcher exerts over them as an adult.

There were occasions during my sessions with the children that a child chose to use language such as ‘you’re a bum, he’s a bum’ or ‘stop it poo-head’, or to lie on the floor or dance around the table; behaviours they had not normally displayed with other adults in school. In my journals I reflected on how the children had made me feel ‘powerless’ during such occasions, and on why these incidents made me so uncomfortable. Connolly’s work helped me make sense of these times and these incidents became part of the data collection set.

In summary, issues of power were inherent in this research study and were recognised as an integral part of the research processes. Central to the appropriate exercise of power in this study was the careful consideration of ethical issues, the topic to which I now turn.

**3.9: Ethical Considerations**

All research brings ethical decisions, and these decisions continue to develop and evolve throughout the entirety of any research study process
Ethically sound research requires consideration of, and attention to, informed consent, issues of confidentiality and offers of anonymity, as well as respect for dignity and protection from harm for all participants. Moreover, in research conducted with young children ethics are of particular significance as these children are potentially more vulnerable to unequal power relationships (Punch, 2002; Gallagher, 2008; Einarisdottir, 2010). In this section I outline how ethical considerations were addressed and respected in this particular research study.

This research study was conducted within the ethical framework of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) and approved by the Moray House School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.

**Access and informed consent**

To gain consent to undertake this research study, it was necessary to go through a series of gatekeepers. Initial permission had first to be sought through a series of adult gatekeepers, beginning with permission secured at local authority level, through the head teacher and staff of the participant school, and then through consultations with the children’s parents/carers. Only once this adult permission was in place, was I in a position to approach the children to ask for their informed consent to volunteer to participate in this research study. I was aware the adult gatekeepers held the power to limit access to the children and to situate themselves directly between the children and research access (Punch, 2002; Bushin, 2007). However, Bushin (2007) counsels that it is more helpful to see the adult gatekeepers as those with whom the researcher should discuss and negotiate, rather than as those whose presence must be overcome. Consequently, I chose to share the proposed aims of my research study with the adult gatekeepers through a series of in-person meetings, thus enabling the opportunity for a two-way dialogue on the rationale for, and design of, this study, where any possible questions or concerns could be raised and addressed.
I talked directly to parents/carers at an Open Day in June and again in August 2016. I also attended a Parents’ Open Evening in September. Along with information leaflets, consent forms were sent out which were to be signed and returned to me (see Appendices A & B). An updated information letter was sent out in December where I also sought additional permissions to continue the study through to the end of the school year.

My research involved spending significant amounts of time in the primary 1 classroom. I was mindful that my presence should not be overly intrusive, therefore this involved regular, ongoing oral negotiations with the teachers with regards to access to both spaces and the children. Written consent was sought for their participation in the study (see appendix D).

Two children were not permitted to take part in the research study therefore no observations or comments were written about these children. These children sometimes approached me to tell me things or wanted to join activities along with others, but nothing they said or did was recorded or included as part of the data set. Care was taken not to take photographs or make audio recordings of five of the children, where consent to do so had not been given.

A common misconception in research with children is that the permission of the adult gatekeepers is sufficient (Alderson, 2000; Davis, 1998). In this research study I acknowledged, and considered of the utmost importance, that the children should be the final gatekeepers in their own worlds (Bell, 2008; Gallagher, 2009). A separate information sheet was created for children which I used to explain to the children the purpose of my research and their proposed role within it (see Appendix E). Informed and written consent was secured from each child through the application of a sticker on this sheet, indicating a Yes/No response. I further recognised that consent should be an on-going process as the research process unfolds (Ebrahim, 2010; Wiles et al., 2012). Verbal consent was sought prior to each proposed activity and children were assured of their right to stop and leave at any point.
The concept of consent is likely to be unfamiliar to young children, so this aspect needed to be given further consideration (Gallagher, 2009). The ethnographic nature of this study involved inhabiting the spaces children occupied, and therefore I deemed it essential to stay alert to any verbal or non-verbal clues that the children were uncomfortable with my presence and to remove myself where possible. Young children may find it particularly difficult to articulate the withdrawal of their consent to participate at any given time (Cree et al., 2002). Thus, influenced by Kustatscher’s (2014) work on the use of movable picture magnets as a way to provide a vehicle for ongoing consent processes, I looked to provide a similar non-verbal, visual display which the children could use to opt in and out of the research process as wished. This took the form of large whiteboards placed in the classroom spaces, each divided into two columns; one side labelled ‘I am happy to help’ and the other ‘Not just now thanks’, as illustrated in Figure 3.1 below:

![Figure 3.1: Visual photo magnet consent board](image)

Each child had their own individual photo-magnet which they were invited to move between the two columns depending on whether they wished to ‘help’ me, be part of my research work, or not, at any time in the school day. The children’s photographs made it easier for me to quickly identify who was opting in/out at any one particular time. It was my responsibility to regularly check and stay alert to these boards, with the premise that I would not approach, or expect help from, anyone whose photo-magnet was placed on the ‘Not just now thanks’ side of the board. Particularly in the early days of
the study, children would frequently change their magnets and checked that I responded appropriately.

**Confidentiality and anonymity**

Guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality were afforded to all participants and to the research setting. Each child was assigned a pseudonym which was used both in the transcripts and this written report. Direct quotations from parents/carers were identified by the pseudonym of their child, i.e., Bert’s parent. The teachers were randomly allocated a letter rather than a name, e.g., CT Y, and their identity protected through careful wording in this report. Where it was necessary to refer to additional staff members, these were referred to by their job title, i.e Depute Head teacher. The school setting was assigned a pseudonym and details of where it was located kept indefinable.

In line with issues of confidentiality, all hard copy data were kept in a secure place and electronic data on an encrypted laptop and encrypted flash drives. Data have only been shared publicly once all identifying features had been removed. Where I used notebooks during observations in school, I was careful not to include any identifiable information such as names. Any personal, more detailed, notes made during my school visits were always undertaken on a password protected iPad which remained with me.

During the research process, challenges to confidentiality arose where class teachers and other school staff made enquiries as to the findings of my study. All were content with my explanations that I could not discuss specific data or particular children, but I would endeavour where possible to give a little general feedback which would not break with confidentiality. By far the biggest challenge arose when a member of staff joined an ongoing activity I was undertaking with a small group of children and proceeded to question the children as to their thoughts of being in school. In this instance I felt I had no option but to end the task and move to ‘safer ground’. However, the ways in which the children responded to this incident provided a useful ‘research moment’. On occasion, there were times when I asked the class teachers
something in relation to an observation of a child to seek some additional contextual information.

**Protection from harm**

Ethical dilemmas lurk in any research that directly involves people (Robson, 2002). Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2007) remind us that research studies take place in the real social world and can therefore have real consequences in people’s lives. Consequently, the wellbeing of the research participants needed to be my prime responsibility and remained a central concern throughout the study. I was mindful that the nature of the research might result in some information being divulged that participants might later wish to retract, or that sensitive issues might be raised, even when this was not the intention of the study. For adults participating in the research all efforts were made to ensure that participants were aware of and retained the right to withdraw any, or all, of their personal data. To support this, teachers were sent transcripts of their interviews for comment and given the option to comment on these transcripts, add to them, change them, or retract any parts. Children were able to listen to their own audio recordings and to know what was written about them in my fieldnotes, and thus given the opportunity to make further comments. However, I acknowledge it was harder for children to ask for their data to be withdrawn. Care was taken to ensure that all children were not put under any form of duress during the research study or felt pressured into taking part.

The health and wellbeing of the children was of particular concern, and something I remained mindful of through the research process. I have an Enhanced Disclosure Certificate and a sound knowledge of child protection issues in line with my past and current occupations. I made sure to reassure children that I would not share their stories with other people, however, a necessary caveat was that should I feel concerned with regards to something they shared with me, then I would aid them in seeking further help and support. During the course of this study the need for any such intervention did not arise.
My negotiated role as a researcher did not involve taking any day-to-day responsibility for the children. The only exception to this was with regards to their safety and wellbeing. If I became concerned that a child would hurt themselves or others as a consequence of their actions whilst in my vicinity, when no member of staff was present, I would encourage them to make safe and sensible choices. Similarly, if a child became upset or hurt themselves, then I would provide support.

3.10: Research Study Design

The following sections provide an overview of the context of my research study, including the setting and the participants, and set out the data collection processes and methods employed.

3.10.1: The Research Setting

Fieldwork was carried out in a single Scottish primary school; henceforth identified as Aberforthe Primary School (APS). Selection of this school came about through early informal discussions of my proposed research study with a small group of head teachers from three Scottish Local Authorities. Following up on interest shown to become involved, the final selection of a school setting was based primarily on geographical location that enabled ease of access; and on the expected number of around 50 children who would start primary 1 in the August of that year, which seemed a manageable and appropriately sized participant group. The school was semi-open plan in design which I considered would enable me to have regular and easy access to the whole cohort, rather than having to split my time in different classrooms. However, it transpired that my hopes for this fluidity of access did not fully come to pass due to the day-to-day use of the classroom spaces, something I will discuss in later chapters.

Aberforthe Primary School was a non-denominational primary school located within a small Scottish Local Authority. Situated close to the town centre, the school was set within a densely populated housing area with an even mix of local authority and privately owned accommodation. At the time of this study
the school roll was approximately 400 children, with a further 80 pre-school aged children enrolled in the nursery facility located within the main school building.

The school had a semi-open plan layout organised around four main teaching areas linked by ‘through-way’ corridors (see Figure 3.2 below). The central space of the building comprised an open-air quadrangle which could be accessed via multiple doors, although this space was generally used exclusively by the school nursery children and staff. A large concrete playground wrapped around the school building and the school boundary was marked by a wall and railings. The school was situated next to a community space used for local outdoor sporting events, which could be accessed via the school playground. This community space, referred to as ‘the pitch’, was used daily by the school children at break times and lunchtimes, with staff supervision. Different age stages within the school, commonly referred to as ‘infant’, ‘middle’, and upper’ stages, were allocated particular timeslots of access to this space during a typical school week, rationalised by the staff as a way to prevent overcrowding of the space due to its popularity with the children.
At the time of my study, the school had a new intake of 52 primary 1 children, who were organised into three primary 1 classes. The primary 1 classroom
were located in what was commonly referred to as the ‘Infant Area’ of the school building (see Figure 3.3 below). This consisted of a large shared ‘Open Area’ surrounded by four classroom spaces. The three primary 1 classrooms each had a large sliding door which enabled the Open Area and the classroom space to be used flexibly. The fourth classroom space was used as both a resource base for teachers and as a multi-purpose support for learning base.

A ‘throughway’ provided access to other areas of the school and was frequently used by other staff and children during the school day. This area also provided access via a door to the central outside quadrangle area. Although this outside space was not used by the primary 1 children or staff during the time I spent in school, I was aware that some discussions were ongoing as to ways in which this space might be used for an outdoor learning approach to aspects of the teaching and learning in primary 1.

Figure 3.3 Floorplan of the school ‘Infant Area’
3.10.2: The Research Participants

The children

The main participants of this research study were 50 primary 1 children who started Aberforth Primary School in August 2016. This particular cohort consisted of 52 children and although all the children expressed a desire to 'help' with my investigation into what it was like to be in primary 1, the parents/carers of two children, although happy that their child took part in the study, did not give consent for their child's data to be used, (see section 3.9).

Children in this study group had been organised into three primary 1 classes, which are referred to as P1W, P1Y & P1X for the purpose of this thesis. Both P1W & P1Y consisted of only primary 1 children, however P1X was what is commonly referred to in Scottish primary schools as a ‘composite’ class, consisting of 10 primary 1 and 10 primary 2 staged children. In early negotiations with the school and parents it was agreed that only the primary 1 children of this class would participate in the research study, although permission was sought and given by the primary 2 children and their parents for my presence in their classroom and the shared Open Area. The inclusion of children in this study group who were part of a ‘composite’ class was initially considered to a valuable dimension to this study, as ‘composite’ classes are a feature of many primary schools and various hypotheses have been made as to the impact this form of organisational structure can have. However, the organisational structure of this particular composite class meant that the primary 1 and primary 2 pupils were considered and planned for separately. Primary 1 and primary 2 children often followed their own separate programmes of work, and were generally taught separately, and were sat grouped together at tables in different areas of the classroom space. The main rationale given was that the primary 1 children should be experiencing the same kinds of learning experiences as their peers in the other two classes, and that the primary 2 children were not considered to be ‘repeating’ primary 1. Thus, this class, although termed a ‘composite’ class, in effect did not always function as one where children of different ages were
learning together. Consequently, it was simply not possible to pursue the investigation of how children’s placement in a composite class may impact on their experiences at the start of their primary education.

It was clearly necessary to provide the readers of this ethnography with a clear picture of the characteristics of the children who participated in the study. My original plan had been to collect information about the children via the Parent Questionnaire (see Appendix C), where I included a background information page requesting details on their child’s age on starting school; their pre-school experience; any siblings; and social background. However, as discussed later (see section 3.10.4.4), due to the return rate of these questionnaires (67%), and many of the returned forms having this page only partly or wholly incomplete, this was not the efficient source of information I had hoped for. Consequently, data on the characteristics of the children was collected from multiple sources, including school records; their class teachers; and some parents/carers. The following sections present these data, including children’s social background; gender; ages on starting school; and their pre-school experiences.

Social background of the participants

The demographics of the area within which the school was located were found to be predominately Scottish, white, middle class and this was reflected in the study group. Based on information provided, nearly all children were identified as being white, Scottish/British; with two children identified as having additional Albanian and Azeri heritage. The lack of ethnic diversity within the study group is therefore acknowledged, and the implications of this for the study findings are recognised.

Gender

The study group consisted of a similar number of boys (24) and girls (26). This balance of the number of girls and boys was also reflected in the construction of each of the three primary 1 classes (see Table 3.1 below), having been an intentional decision on the part of the school.
Table 3.1: Overview of participating children’s gender including distribution of boys and girls in primary 1 across the three classrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P1W</th>
<th>P1Y</th>
<th>P1X</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number in class</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Overview of participating children’s gender including distribution of boys and girls in primary 1 across the three classrooms

**Ages on starting school**

Age is often posited as having an impact on children’s experience in school (Palmer, 2016). As discussed in Chapter 1, Scotland has one of the earliest starting ages for children to begin compulsory primary education, where legislation decrees that 5 years old is the appropriate age for a child to start school. As the Scottish education system has one yearly intake of children in the month of August, children’s ages on starting school may range anywhere from 4.5 to 5.6 years old. In this study, the participating children’s ages ranged from 4.6 to 5.6 years old, with slightly more of the cohort being aged 5 or older at the time they began school. Table 3.2 below gives an overview of the participant children’s ages at the time of starting school as found across the three primary 1 classes.

Table 3.2: The age range of participating children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P1W</th>
<th>P1Y</th>
<th>P1X</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: The age range of participating children

*Denotes deferral age range: within this participant group a total of four children were eligible to apply to have their placement in school deferred until 2017 due to their birth date, but their families opted not to do so. Two children had had a deferral approved from the previous year, and so started school aged 5.6.
Although the age ranges within P1W & P1Y were similar, it was notable that P1X was composed solely of primary 1 children nearer the top end of the starting age range. Discussions with the school staff uncovered the intentional nature of this decision to create a composite class with similar ages – the primary 2 children were commonly nearer the younger age of their year group.

**Pre-school experience**

All of the children who participated in this research study had attended some form of pre-school, although the nature and type of experience varied. An overview of the composition of this study group’s pre-school experience is given in Table 3.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aberforthe Primary School (APS): Primary 1 50 children</th>
<th>Other pre-school settings 13 children (26%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aberforthe Nursery (AN) 37 children (74%)</td>
<td>Private (PN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Authority (LAN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PN 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 37 children that attended AN:
- 29 children attended AN only
- 8 children attended AN and a private nursery on a part-time basis.

Table 3.3: Overview of participating children’s pre-school experiences prior to starting APS

As illustrated, of the 50 children taking part in this study, the majority, 37 (74%), had attended Aberforthe Nursery (AN) (shown in pale blue) and 13 (26%) children attended other preschool settings (shown in grey). These other pre-school settings included a mix of private nurseries (PN) (shown in
yellow) and local authority settings (LAN) (shown in red). Of the 13 children who had attended other pre-school settings, a total of 8 children attended 4 different PN settings (shown in shades of green); and 5 children attended 5 different LAN settings (shown in shades of orange). Of the 37 children who attended AN, 29 children attended only this setting (shown in dark blue), 4 also attended PN1 part-time (shown in purple) and 4 also attended PN2 part-time (shown in pink).

**The primary 1 class teachers**

The three primary 1 class teachers participated in this research study in two important ways. Firstly, as gatekeepers, by enabling me to have freedom to inhabit the different spaces of school along with the children and witness all parts of their everyday life. Secondly, by agreeing to take part in a one-to-one interview with me which enabled an exploration of some of their perceptions, ideas, thoughts, and views of the children in their classes and their understandings of the children’s school experiences. These interviews also provided insight into the structures, systems, norms, and general expectations of this school environment, giving a crucial backdrop against which to compare and contrast what the children said as I took ahead the analysis. Given the concern in an ethnography to delineate how participants’ experiences are mediated by the structures, norms and practices of a particular setting, the insights into this setting provided by the teachers proved of distinct value.

At the time of this study, all three class teachers were emerging from the early stages of their teaching careers: with their teaching experience spanning from between 5 to 7 years. Only one teacher had had prior experience of teaching in the early years, including experience of teaching in primary 1. The other two each had experience of teaching middle years (7-9 years old) and upper years (10-12 years old). This was their first experience of teaching in primary 1 since gaining their teaching qualifications, and both had requested a move to early years as this was an area of their own professional practice they were interested in developing further.
**The primary 1 children’s parents/carers**

The parents/carers of the Primary 1 children were invited to participate in the research through sharing their thoughts, perceptions and experiences of their child being in primary 1 via a questionnaire, which was sent home a few weeks after the children had started school. Of the 52 questionnaires sent out 30 completed questionnaires were returned (61.5%), with by far the largest proportion of these completed by the child’s mother. The intention was to use the parents'/carers’ responses to these questionnaires to compare and contrast how the children themselves had spoken of this time and place. A later section will reveal the extent to which this exercise of comparison and contrast proved possible.

### 3.10.3: Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted over a ten-month period between August 2016 and May 2017. Personal work commitments meant I was able to spend the equivalent of approximately three days per week in Aberforthe Primary School and I looked to vary the times of my visits to ensure I could become familiar with all aspects of the school week experienced by the children.

The original plan to spend between August and December in school with the children was extended via negotiations with the gatekeepers to remain in school until the end of the school year. This came about due to a variety of circumstances. Firstly, I realised that the initial plan of five months was overly short, particularly as the time needed to build trusting relationships had taken many weeks and I felt the children were just beginning to ‘open up’ and share their stories with me. Secondly, my in-depth analysis of the data only began in earnest towards the end of December and into January and raised questions and issues that I was keen to return to explore with the children. Lastly, the opportunity to take a sabbatical leave from work meant I had an opportunity to carry on working in the field that I had not anticipated.
Detailed below in Table 3.4 is an overview of the stages of data collection and analysis undertaken over the 10-month period of the fieldwork stage.

Listed as phases, I have tried to capture the different periods the research study went through, moving from an initial ‘settling in phase’ through to actively working with the children to help me make sense of issues raised in the data collected. Stage 5 also afforded a previously unanticipated opportunity for ‘imaginings’, where children were asked to draw and talk about the kind of schools they would like to attend ‘if they were in charge’. Although this listing may give an impression of a linear, logical study, the reality was far from this. Phases are listed here to demonstrate the ways in which the key focus shifted and developed, but not to suggest these were neat packages of time or events. Throughout, the fieldwork was messy and necessarily responsive to the will of the children and the structures and systems of the school. Notably, as the children settled further into the daily routines of life in primary 1 the time for me to engage in dialogue directly with them was increasingly pushed to the fringes of ‘after their schoolwork was completed’, during breaks such as lunchtime and playtime, and during free-choosing sessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Who</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting up phase</strong></td>
<td>information sharing</td>
<td>HT, P1 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consent for study</td>
<td>LA Education Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting with Head teacher and primary 1 teachers (April &amp; May 2016)</td>
<td>Parent/carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting with Local Authority Manager for Early Years Education (May 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking to parents: Primary 1 Open Day (June 2016); Parent meeting on start day of school (August 2016)</td>
<td>P1 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explaining my intentions/study hopes to children (August 2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Data Collection</td>
<td>5 weeks Aug-Sept 2016</td>
<td>Open observation of children’s day-to-day experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Listening to children’s stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: Data Collection</td>
<td>6 weeks Oct-Mid Nov 2016</td>
<td>Observations, participatory activities with the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Data collection with Parents/Carers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Early analysis of data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4: Analysis</td>
<td>Analysis, reflections, and early writing</td>
<td>Collation and in-depth analysis of all research data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>Identification of areas for future investigation</td>
<td>Analysis of children’s transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid Dec – Feb 2017</td>
<td></td>
<td>Analysis of questionnaire data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Analysis of fieldnotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher interview transcripts sent to teachers for comment/feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identification of main themes arising and areas for further exploration with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P1 teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 5: Returning to school</th>
<th>Focus on exploring areas that had arisen in data analysis and inclusion of P1 children in data analysis process.</th>
<th>Participant observation informal chats with children: field notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 weeks</td>
<td></td>
<td>Focused discussion/analysis of issues from data along with children:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-May 2017</td>
<td></td>
<td>a) Circle time with Myles and Celia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b) Discussion of photographs of school spaces:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c) Designing your ideal school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transcribe taped conversations with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P1 children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                   | 17x P1 children (3 groups) |
|                   | 9x P1 children (2 groups)  |
|                   | 8x P1 children (2 groups)  |

Table 3.4: Overview of the Fieldwork phases 1-5: August 2016 – end of May 2017

3.10.4: Data Collection Methods

Whether data collection methods used with children should be different to those used with adults is a source of much debate (Christensen & James, 2000; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). Christensen
(2004) claims that researchers should not look to select particular methods just because the research is with children, rather that the data collection methods chosen should be fit for purpose. In the following sections I explain which data methods were selected and my rationale for each choice.

3.10.4.1: Participant Observations and Informal Conversations

Participant observations are considered a key research method in ethnographic studies that seek to explore the everyday lives of participants within the context of their natural world (Emond, 2011; Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). In this study, participant observation was used as a central method of data generation as a way to develop a contextual, detailed, rich exploration of the everyday interactions and cultural meanings of the children’s experiences of being in school (Agar, 1996; Davies et al., 2000; Emond, 2011). This involved spending extended periods of time in the school setting observing the children’s day-to-day lives, how they were enacted, and listening to the ways in which they were understood within children’s anecdotes and informal conversations. Time was spent observing the children in both the indoor spaces, (the classroom, open area, dinner hall, gym hall, computer suite and library), and the outdoor playground areas.

As discussed, my choices with regards to my role as a participant observer were somewhat limited. Within the often-confined spaces of the school I could not lay claim to the role of a wholly detached observer, as my presence was apparent and often actively acknowledged by the children when they invited me to watch what they were doing or, on occasion, to join in an activity with them. Nor could I take the role of a full member of the community of ‘being in primary 1’. Consequently, I settled on the role of ‘marginal participant’ (Robson, 2010) where my role was often largely passive, accepted by the children as someone whose ‘main job’ it was to watch and listen to them, and who occasionally joined in some of their tasks alongside them if invited to do so.

The data generated were in the form of fieldnotes. During my observations I wrote ‘thick’ descriptions (Geertz, 1979) of what I was witnessing, who was
involved and included as much detail as I could of the setting, the time, emotions, reflections, comments made, etc. For this purpose, I had ‘special’ blue coloured notebooks, (I filled five altogether), which the children recognised as my place to ‘write things down’. Often times they would come and tell me what I needed to write down or else check that I had noted something that had happened in this book which they felt to be important. On a few occasions the children took my book from me and wrote in their own comments for me; usually letters or numbers they had been learning that week or their name. The non-evaluative, descriptive nature of this space mean that I could read back to the children any comments I had made about them if asked. Only later, in my own private spaces would I write up my reflections on my observations in the form of a reflexive journal; a space where I looked to analyse and make sense of the data and added more personalised comments. (I used a password protected iPad for this purpose.)

Where to physically position myself was a constant dilemma. The open area was a useful space from which I could observe all three primary 1 classes, but the downside to this was a compromise on any opportunity for more detailed observations. Spending time with a particular class or group of children resulted in a fear of missing something elsewhere. It took me some time before I accepted that I could not see or hear everything that was going on, and that I might miss as much as I observed on any given day, but that this was the nature of research in the field. Robson (2010) talks of the considerable burden on the shoulder of the researcher and realising this was an inherent part of the nature of participant observation went some way to consoling myself that this was ‘normal’.

A fear of missing something important was also one driver of participatory activities with the children. Heeding the advice of Corsaro & Molinari (2000) to be around the children but let them approach me, and the advice of Griffin et al. (2016) to wait for children to want to share their stories, meant that within the first few weeks only a small group of children from within each class had engaged in conversation with me. I was afraid that this would
mean that I was only hearing some of the children’s voices, and others who were less content to speak directly to me or to be approached directly by me had had no way to express their thoughts on being in primary 1. This had however been a useful time to get to know the children better, and I was able to draw on this knowledge at later stages of the fieldwork.

3.10.4.2: Participatory Activities with Children

Given that the main aim of this research study was to investigate from the children’s perspectives what it was like to be in primary 1, data collection methods which afforded the children the opportunity to talk of their experiences of being in primary 1 were a necessity. A common data collection method used when seeking the views of participants is the interview, however I had concerns about adopting the more traditional, formal ‘question and answer’ approach with such young children. The success of an interview is dependent on how comfortable the participants feel with the researcher (Griffin et al., 2016). Punch (2002) cautions that many children may lack experience in communicating with an adult on a one-to-one basis and may therefore find the experience overwhelming, which would in turn impact negatively on the quality of the data. An alternative would have been conducting interviews in small groups, so children had the support of others. However, this did not address my biggest concern, that focusing on more formal interview styles thereby privileges verbal facility, thus excluding those who may have more limited language abilities or indeed a preference to communicate their views in other forms (Tisdall, 2008; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010).

Clark (2005) contends that the greater the diversity of methods the more opportunities children have to express themselves and advises that a ‘multi-method approach is necessary if as many children as possible are to be enabled opportunities to express their views’ (p36).

She advocates that the adoption of a mosaic approach using a range of visual and verbal forms of communication styles best acknowledges the ‘hundred languages of children’ as described by Malaguzzi, the first Reggio
Emilia director (Clark, 2007). Clark (2007) states that this approach, which combines more traditional approaches of data collection with participatory tools for children, better accords to Rinaldi’s (2001) ‘pedagogies of listening,’ and takes listening seriously.

For this research study, a variety of activities was planned to enable the children to share their experiences and views on being in primary 1, and the children were invited to take part in any or all that interested them. These included: drawing activities, the making of audio recordings, the use of story books, of circle time, of photographs and of toys. Participatory activities are described in the following sub-sections along with consideration of the data they produced.

**Drawings and audio recordings**

As a way to get to know the children and to better explore their thoughts on what it was like from their perspective to ‘be’ in primary 1, I invited the children to draw me pictures of things they liked about being in school and things they did not like. I set up a table in the open area which could comfortably accommodate four children and provided paper and pens. Children were invited to join me at various times, (although notably this required negotiations with the class teachers), over a six-week period from October through to early November, and in total thirty-nine of the children opted to participate. Mostly this involved small groups of three or four children at one time, although numbers did range from one to four. With hindsight I realised that the way I had organised the space resulted in the children perceiving this to be ‘an activity for four’, and consequently if no chairs were free then children took this as a sign they could not join in at this time. Unintentionally I had ‘schoolified’ the activity, which I did not fully comprehend until I was reflecting on this afterwards. The advantage however was that the small numbers made it easier for me to listen to, and engage with, the children during their time with me.

The children generally appeared to enjoy the opportunity to draw pictures and were keen to use this approach twice more with me during my fieldwork;
drawing pictures for Myles and Celia (described later) and creating pictures of what their 'ideal school' would look like as a way to explore what, if anything, they would like to be different about being in school.

Drawings provided a useful vehicle for the children to represent their interpretations of what it was like for them to be at school, effectively having them drawing their worlds into existence (Literat, 2013). However, the drawings were not viewed only as an end product, as understanding what was being expressed in the drawings was key. It should not be assumed that what is being drawn is obvious, and therefore great care needs to be taken in looking to interpret children’s drawings (Punch, 2002). One of the simplest ways to do this is to engage the children in dialogue about their drawings, encouraging what Coates & Coates (2006) refer to as ‘simultaneous utterances’. Drawing gives more time for reflection, to play around with ideas, where no direct answer need be given but instead children are freer to ponder and contemplate their responses. My experience was that children engaged in both these activities in varying degrees; some children drew very detailed pictures but offered little in the way of a verbal commentary, while others drew little but spoke a lot.

A further important feature, which I had not fully anticipated in advance of adopting this approach, were the conversations that struck up between the children as they drew. Often my role became that of listener, as I followed the direction of the children’s conversations as to what school meant to them and the ways in which they compared and debated experiences. This provided a rich source of data I had not anticipated.

Concerned that I would ‘miss’ data, I asked the children for permission at the beginning of each session to make an audio recording using a small digital recorder. This became invaluable as I could listen over again to what the children had said and connect their words to the circumstances around their talk. Also, the children had a habit of talking over one another, with some vying for attention with regards to what they had to say. Again, the audio recordings made it easier to pick through this and to draw my attention to
other comments made in the background, which might have otherwise been missed.

After the sessions a small number of children asked to hear the audio recording. Often, they only listened for a short period of time, but interest in audio recordings grew and increasingly during the research study children began to ask if they might use my digital recorder to record a message for me. After giving the children some basic instructions on how it worked, their use of my digital recorder became an invaluable means of data collection. The advantage was that children would take the recorder into their own spaces and record whatever message they chose, at a time of their choosing. Conversely, the disadvantage was that I was offered no opportunity to probe what they said, and oftentimes I was left with large quantities of data to then listen to and make sense of. Unlike the audio recordings made during the drawing activities, I opted not to transcribe children’s individual messages for me verbatim, but to listen to these and pick out what I felt were the important parts of what was said, how it was said and how it related to children’s conceptualisations of being in primary 1. As an aside, occasionally a child for whom I did not have parental consent asked me if they might use the recorder to leave me a message. I made the decision to allow the child to do so, but then unfortunately had to discard the messages they left.

**Story books**

As a way to encourage conversation with the children I brought along with me some storybooks, namely, Janet & Allan Ahlberg’s ‘Starting School’; Pat Thomas’s ‘Do I have to go to school?’; and “I’m worried” from the Wayland series on exploring feelings. I produced these within the ‘reading corners’ spaces of the school setting but had mixed and limited success. Very few children showed an interest in looking at these books with me; in total only nine children chose to do so. These children allowed me to read one of these books with them and briefly chat about its contents, but quickly looked to produce another book of their choice for us to read together from the class
library. As a consequence, perhaps the most important lesson I learned was that the children enjoyed having books read to them, but that they were less accommodating of me having the ultimate choice as to what these books should be. This served to remind me of Christensen & James’s (2000) contention that methods employed need to resonate with children in order to yield success, and that ultimately the children are the gatekeepers to this.

**Soft toys: Myles and Celia**

A few months into the fieldwork I began to feel I had exhausted the ‘tell me what it is like to be in school’ approach with the children. There were only so many ways to approach such a question from my position as the researcher. Consequently, based on the work of Jenny Mosley (Mosley, 1996; Mosley, 2016), two soft toy characters were introduced to the children: Myles, a hippopotamus, and Celia, a ballerina rabbit.

![Figure 3.4: Soft toys used. Myles (on the left) and Celia (on the right)](image)

I bought these toys for the purpose of the study. I wanted ones that were easily transportable and easily handled by the children, that they might find interesting and appealing. I introduced each toy with small groups of the children, where I planned to promote discussions around ‘what might it be good to know about being in school?’ A background story for the toys was created and shared with the children, namely that Myles and Celia were going to start school soon and that they did not know what to expect. The children were invited to offer Myles and Celia any advice they thought might be useful with regards to their knowledge of what school would be like and what would likely happen there.
Designed as an open, ongoing activity, following our chats, the children were invited to draw pictures or leave Myles and Celia messages about ‘useful things to know about school’, if they thought of anything later. For the days I was not in school, I left a basket in the open area where children could leave things but generally this was not well used. Mostly the children chose to wait to sit with me on the days I was in back in school, and to either draw pictures for me to give to Myles and Celia or ask me to write messages down in my notebook. Often, they would take my recorder to talk directly to Myles and Celia. Mostly the children were most forthcoming with ideas on occasions I either had Myles and Celia with me, or else I had a photograph of them to hand.

The question of whether Myles and Celia were ‘real’ was raised on occasion and I did not pretend if challenged that they were, as I felt this to be dishonest. It was notable that the children seemed to belong to three separate groups: those who fervently believed them to be real and would actively argue their case with any who challenged them on it (a surprisingly large number of the children); those who believed Myles and Celia to be toys but went along with providing advice anyway; and a third, albeit much smaller group, who recognised and dismissed them as ‘just a toy’ and opted to play no role in offering any advice to them. With the third group of children I made it clear I respected their stance but invited them to still offer advice for any boys or girls who might be about to start school.

**Photographs**

The advantage of photographs is that they do not rely on drawing, writing or verbal abilities to represent images and so convey information (Punch, 2002). Often photography is employed as a participatory method by having children take photographs of aspects of their lives which can then be shared with the researcher. Although I was interested in adopting this approach with the children the opportunity to do so, for a variety of reasons, did not materialise.
In this study, I used photographs to further explore with the children some of the emergent issues concerning the use of school spaces which had arisen following the initial analysis of data collected between August and December. Using a variety of photographs, I had taken in the first few weeks of the field study of their classrooms, the dining room, gym hall, outdoor spaces, and open area, I asked the children to tell me about these spaces and the sort of things they did there. Although this provided a useful means to explore further some of their thoughts around how different school spaces were used and their role within them, I did reflect later on whether more useful data would have been gathered if I had asked the children to take their own pictures of school spaces and then talk about which spaces they had photographed and why.

**Circle Time**

As with the photographs, Circle Time activities were primarily used to further explore some of the issues that seemed to emerge during the initial analysis stage of the data collected between August and December. In these sessions I looked to explore three key aspects with the children: their thoughts on what happens if you find school difficult; how they saw their own role and the role of the teacher, and the children’s imaginings of what could be different about school.

Questions regarding each of these areas were posed through the soft toys, Myles, and Celia; using the phrasing ‘Myles was wondering…’ and ‘Celia asked if…’. Children then responded directly to Myles and Celia, offering their thoughts and advice. The aim of structuring the sessions in this way was to explore issues that had arisen in the data without highlighting that these issues had come directly from the children themselves. This would not only offer an element of de-personalisation but position the children within the role of an advisor with inside knowledge.

Three groups of children took part in Circle Time sessions. However, in the final session the children were less keen to respond to the questions Myles and Celia posed and were more focused on playing with one another and
finding novel ways to entertain each other through jokes, songs and making noises. In addition, I did not notice someone take the recorder away during the session, and so I had little in the way of audio recordings of what conversations had occurred and had then to rely on making notes from memory after the event. This all served as a useful reminder of the unpredictable nature of research, and the need to portray outward calmness and lack of concern when these things happened for fear of denting my hoped for impression of myself as an ‘unusual adult’ in the school setting, and not someone looking to control or exert power over the children.

3.10.4.3: Semi-Structured Interviews: With P1 Class Teachers

Looking to gain an insight into the class teachers’ own views and perceptions of the children’s experiences of being in P1, I undertook a semi-structured, one-to-one interview with each of them to explore three main areas:

- Their perceptions of ways the transition processes prior to starting school had helped support the children; to gain an insight into what they perceived to be necessary and useful skills, knowledge and understanding about school and being in school.
- Their views and perceptions of how children had adjusted and adapted to life in school; including any issues that had proved problematic, or which children had had specific difficulties.
- Their perceptions, beliefs, and understandings of pedagogical approaches to early years education; including insights into their views on a more play-based approach to learning and teaching.

One of my early ideas when planning this research study had been to create a separate section within the thesis where I analysed and discussed the teachers’ views on the children’s experiences of being in primary 1, including any positive features, issues, or barriers they might have witnessed. I had thought to directly compare their thinking with what the children themselves had said. As the focus of my study became more firmly grounded in a desire to forefront what the children had to say about being in primary 1, the data from the teachers were subsequently used as a way to better understand the
context within which the children experienced being in school, and some of the factors that may have shaped or impacted upon their experiences.

I had hoped to conduct these interviews around 6-8 weeks into the fieldwork, as I reasoned that by then I would have gained an initial insight into the day-to-day organisation and structure of being in P1 through my observations and early discussions with the children, which I could draw upon. However, negotiations with the class teachers over timing resulted in the interviews occurring a little later; with two interviews taking place at the end of November and the final one taking place in the first week in December.

The class teachers were given the option of where and when they would like the interviews to occur. Two teachers opted for ‘off-site’ interviews, which took place at the end of the school day in a quiet corner of a coffee lounge, and the third teacher opted for a time in school during their non (class) contact time, with this session held in an empty school office. The interviews lasted from between 40-75 minutes and, with the permission of the teachers, were audio recorded so I might focus on the discussion and the participant rather than trying to write detailed notes ‘in the moment’ (Blaxter et al., 2006). Once this audio recording was transcribed, a copy was emailed to the teacher for any comments, changes, or additions they wished to make.

As is typical of semi-structured interviews (Robson, 2010) pre-determined topics were planned, based on particular areas I wished to explore, which I shared with the teachers in advance of the interview. I also planned a series of prompts to have to hand during the interviews (see Appendix F). However, as my main aim was to explore the teachers’ views and perceptions from their real-life situations, I used my discretion to enable the teachers to talk about any related issues that they felt to be important. This allowed for an in-depth, relaxed enquiry into the teacher’s views, perceptions, and descriptions of their classes’ experiences of being in primary 1, offering opportunities for probing and further expansion of ideas. These interviews provided an invaluable insight into not only the teachers’ perceptions and view of this time, but also into what shaped and influenced these views.
Likewise, I was interested in exploring the P1 children’s parents/carers’ perceptions and views of their child’s experiences of being in primary 1. In this case, the numbers involved meant it was not feasible to do this through interviewing, therefore I chose to use a qualitative, open-question questionnaire as an alternative. Through these questionnaires I looked to explore their views on three main aspects (see Appendix C):

- Ways in which they felt their child was prepared for starting school, including the exploration of feelings and emotions.
- How they perceived their child to have adjusted to life at school; including things the child talked to them most often about
- Perceptions of their child’s learning; including what they felt the children should be learning about and their thoughts on play as a way of learning in school.

Although the use of questionnaires created the potential to reach out to greater numbers of participants, it is acknowledged that certain issues and limitations arise with such a method. The language used in such questionnaires is of utmost importance with the need to provide clarity, to avoid overly long or complex questions, leading questions, or jargon laden phrasing (Robson, 2010). The care needed in constructing these questionnaires meant that I looked to pilot an early version with a small group of friends who were also parents of a child starting school. This helped me refine the wording of some of the questions and remove any issues of ambiguity.

Questionnaires were sent home with the P1 children in early October; each with a self-addressed envelope so questionnaires could be returned to me with a measure of confidentiality. Robson (2010) warns that a low response rate can be a problematic feature of such a data collection method; so, I was pleasantly surprised that of the 52 questionnaires issued, 30 were returned completed (67%). The level of detail with which these were completed varied and occasionally questions were left blank.
As noted in a preceding paragraph, a ‘background information’ sheet was included as part of the questionnaire data collection process, as I had hoped this would be an efficient way to gather useful demographic information which could be used in my findings analysis. As previously discussed, many of the questionnaires that were returned to me had this section only partly completed, or not completed at all, so it was not possible to pursue much of my intended line of analysis. On reflection, it is possible that parents/carers found this to be too invasive or perhaps did not see the relevance of such information to my enquiry.

Data gathered from the returned questionnaires provided a useful insight not only into the views of some of the primary 1 children’s parents/carers, but also into their understandings of how their child was experiencing being in primary 1. As discussed later, this information was helpful when analysing how the children themselves talked of this time.

3.11: Processes of Analysis

The adoption of an ethnographic approach to the research study necessitated that analysis was an ongoing, integral part of the research process, rather than an isolated stage (Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). This process began during the fieldwork stage of the research study and continued beyond, up to the point of the final draft of this thesis. Torin (1996:111) notes that an ethnographic approach ‘gives rise to rich, systematic data that enables the analyst to build theories that are new, enlightened and historically valid’. However, this view did not prepare me for my own experience that to reach this point would be a messy, complex, exhaustive, and exhausting process, that was punctuated with occasions of self-doubt and worry that I was ‘reading’ the data accurately.

Analysing the data is commonly acknowledged as one of the most challenging parts of an ethnographic study, as such an approach has the potential to generate large volumes of data that require to be scrutinised (Eady, 2008; Silverman, 2013). I found this to be the case in my research study, where the volume of data generated seemed to grow exponentially
over the course of the fieldwork and the ensuing analysis process thus threatened to become overwhelming. Following Robson’s (2000) advice that the key to effective data analysis is ensuring good housekeeping systems are established and maintained, I created Word documents that I filed in folders, both electronically and in hard copies. These included: copies of the children’s and teacher’s transcripts with subsets organised according to the source of collection i.e., likes/dislikes conversations, teacher interviews, children’s own audio recordings etc.; collated data from parents/carers’ questionnaires; and the children’s drawings. Over time these were annotated with emergent themes and patterns, and data collated into MindMaps, tables, and lists (see Appendices G; H; I, for examples of initial data analysis and coding). I diligently numbered and dated all entries in my research diaries and Reflexive Journals. I found these processes of organisation not only helped me to manage the large quantities of data produced but facilitated increased levels of flexibility in comparing and contrasting the findings from the data sets produced.

However, despite my best efforts to retain a semblance of order, the data analysis was a messy process that required continually moving back and forth between the data sets, coding, and re-coding, writing, and re-writing, scrutinising, and re-scrutinising. Dey (1993) cautions that without these processes of in-depth analysis we would have to rely only on our surface impressions and intuitions about the data, thus the adoption of an open-ended, critically reflexive approach was an essential part of the analysis process throughout (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). Most especially, this required that data be analysed purposely through different lenses, with a concerted bid to problematise and test various theories and unpicking the ways that claims to understandings came to be made (Torin, 1996; Alvesson, 2003).

**Notebooks and Reflexive Journals as tools for analysis**

Data analysis began with the commencement of the fieldwork through notetaking into designated notebooks or my iPad, and the use of reflexive
journals, where I diligently recorded and reflected on what I heard and witnessed in the school setting, and my perceptions of their relevance.

I am sitting in the open area writing up some notes. B has stopped beside me to ask what I am doing, so I explain I am writing about some things I have learned about being in Primary 1 that day. He nods and looks at my notebook, he points to my writing – ‘that’s a J and a G and an S, I know my letters’ he tells me.

(Field notes, 19 Sept. 2016)

I have been thinking about how often the children refer to ‘doing their work’ in school when they talk to me about school — and how this seems to relate to particular tasks like sounds, reading, letters and numbers. This seems to suggest that they perceive school as doing the academic stuff – that this is what you do in school. This seems to relate to what I am seeing in school – days are pretty much planned around certain learning activities and are fairly uniform and busy. M mentioned that school makes him tired – is this something others feel? An area I think I would like to explore.

(Journal notes, 23 Sept. 2016)

Over the course of the study space for reflection and reflexivity became an invaluable place to start to make sense of the data gathered. Furthermore, I found the writing processes involved invaluable in supporting the ongoing development of my thinking and ideas. Having this thinking logged in a concrete form meant I was able to review and revisit my analysis of the data throughout. This also served the purpose of an audit trail, which Eady (2008) recommends as a useful way to track emerging data back to its original source.

**Analysis during transcription**

Much of the data gathered was in the form of audio recordings. Although there are specialist data analysis computer programmes available which claim to speed the process of analysis, I opted to undertake the transcription of these manually. Although this was a long and involved process, requiring
listening and re-listening to the recordings to check for accuracy in my transcriptions, I believe this enabled me to develop an in-depth, detailed knowledge of the data gathered, and was invaluable in beginning the process of analysis. Listening to the tapes not only allowed me to reflect on what was said, but also to contemplate and add further annotations on how this was said and in what context. This was particularly useful for paying close attention to the ways in which the children might look to problematise situations and how they appeared to make sense of these against the backdrop of school structures, systems, rules, and norms etc. Furthermore, it gave insights into the ways the children, through interactions with others, looked to explain, compare, debate, and test out their ideas of what it was like to be in school, highlighting how understandings are produced and reproduced through social interactions within the school spaces (Agar, 1996).

Initial coding

Eager to gain a sense of what it was the children wanted to have me know about being in primary 1 from their perspective, during the fieldwork I was listening for themes that arose and made initial notes on these. Once I had hard copies of the transcriptions, I began the process of coding the data to continue to identify themes raised (see Appendix G). Initially I attempted a line-by-line analysis, but found this to be unhelpful, so I began looking at what individual children said and wrote words or short phrases in the margins to reflect the key themes emerging, along with highlighting text that I felt was important. Undertaking this for each transcript generated a large amount of data, that I then looked to collate into emerging themes. I used coloured markers to highlight similar or linked themes, and then created tables of similar phases, which I then looked to compile into MindMaps (see Appendix H). This began to give me a better sense of the matter’s children talked about and led to the emergence of four broad themes:

- The school environment: indoor and outdoor spaces (coded green)
- Pedagogy and curriculum: the ‘work’ children do (coded orange)
- Relationships: peer, family, and teacher (coded red)
• Controls: power, rules, routines, regulation, and surveillance (coded blue)

I created separate folders for each broad theme and created MindMaps of issues raised (see Appendix I). I also returned to the data and began to select salient quotations which exemplified different features of these themes raised by the children. I began to analyse the data to look for similarities, differences, contradictions, and silences; what was and was not said.

Once again, the sheer volume of data gathered threatened to become problematic, therefore I returned to the research questions to guide my exploration and analysis, and to the literature to look for ways in which these findings compared, contradicted, and contrasted with previous claims made. Having gathered data on children’s ages, gender, and pre-school experiences (see section 3.10.2), I used this as a further lens to look for any patterns that might have emerged within the study findings, where at times I created new representations to explore this further, such as a sociogram on friendship patterns, found in Chapter 6.

From this stage of the analysis my four broad themes became further refined and revised into the following areas:

• Relationships and friendships with peers: the importance of building, negotiating, and maintaining peer relationships.
• The physical environment of school: design and use of spaces, artefacts, territorialism.
• How the environment works: practices of belonging, of being; rules and routines.
• What it means to be a learner in school.

These themes then became the focus of my analysis and interpretation of the findings, which I looked to explore in line with the literature in each field. This stage then formed the basis for the three findings chapters in this thesis.
Within a broader context

In using an ethnographic approach to the research study, I was not only aiming to represent what the children spoke of regarding their experiences of being in Primary 1, but also to contextualise these accounts against the day-to-day structures and systems of school, norms, expectations etc., and to interpret the potential origins of their representations of their experiences. Thus, in the analysis process I looked to the transcripts of the class teachers’ interviews and the data collated from the parent/carers’ qualitative questionnaires. Here I looked to compare and contrast these data sets with what the children had spoken of and what I had witnessed in my observations. With hindsight, I realised that had I had a better sense of the emergent findings in the children’s data, my subsequent data collection with the teachers and parent/carers could have been better targeted to illuminate and explore these emergent findings.

Analysis with others

Alvesson (2003) asserts that any in-depth analysis of data requires a problematising attitude and a willingness to explore interpretations from a variety of angles. This involved me working between developing interpretations from the data and challenging these interpretations through the application of possible alternative resolutions, and continually returning to the data to see if my interpretations would still hold. Coates & Coates (2006) caution that it is difficult to ‘see’ with anything other than our own adult eyes, and advocate that the researcher should engage in narratives with the children as part of the analysis stage. Consequently, the decision was made, in consultation with the school, teachers, parents/carers and the children, that I could extend my fieldwork to enable me to explore further with the children some of the themes that had emerged from the early data analysis, and to seek clarifications and explanations, affording me a further opportunity to test and reflect upon my early assumptions and interpretations. Accordingly, this created a whole new set of data to be transcribed and analysed for both new information and further analysis of ‘older’ findings.
3.12: Limitations

This chapter has presented the methodological approaches and methods adopted in this research study to fulfil its given aim: an exploration of children’s own experiences and perceptions of being in primary 1. In doing so, it has described in detail the context of the study and how data were gathered, analysed and subsequent conclusions drawn. In addition, it has delineated the scope of this research study, whilst also acknowledging its limitations.

Selection of the participants of this study was in part contingent on negotiating access to the school setting through the local authority and the head teachers. The final choice was a pragmatic one, based on ease of access due to the school’s geographical positioning. Yates (2004) has pointed up how most often the circumstances open to us can and do shape what we are able to do; something that resonated within this study design. The school was expecting a new intake of around fifty children, organised into three primary 1 classes, which seemed a reasonable and workable participant sample size. However, as previously discussed, there was little ethnic diversity within this group of children, with almost all children identifying as white and Scottish. All the children who took part in the study had English as their first language. This acknowledgement is important to fully contextualise the findings of this study. The lack of ethnic and linguistic diversity points up the need for caution in generalising from this study to the experiences that children may have in multicultural, multilingual classrooms.

The following chapters discuss in detail ways in which the school environment played a significant role in the children’s experiences and how they interpreted their purpose of being in school and necessary ways of ‘being’. It is acknowledged that the design and spatial organisation of this school setting therefore played a key role, and thus, care has been taken to ‘set the scene’ for the reader. This school layout was semi-open-plan, and in all cases the classrooms were dominated by tables and chairs, with ‘activity’ spaces such a library corners, craft tables, role play spaces and so on,
predominately located in the Open Area spaces. Although learning experiences included many elements of an ‘active’ approach, such as songs, games, crafts and so on, and the extensive use of Interactive SmartBoards, most of the children’s time in the classrooms was spent engaging in more formalised learning approaches of sitting, listening, and working at their tables. If I had observed in a school with a contrasting configuration of space and teaching approach, I might have encountered rather different accounts of the children’s primary 1 experiences.

This study yielded a vast amount of data, which made the data collection and analysis process extensive and lengthy. I continuously deliberated over what needed to be included in this thesis to fully represent what these children had said and why this new knowledge was so important. Consequently, not all of my data analysis findings have made it into this thesis. I have selected what I believed to be the most salient findings in terms of addressing and answering my research aims and the questions that framed this study.

Lastly, it is acknowledged that it cannot be claimed that all children who participated in the study are equally represented in the knowledge this study generated. As I discuss more fully in Chapter 7, ethically it was imperative that all children retained control over when, and if, they contributed to the conversation of what school was like for them. That chapter of the thesis also reflects on restrictions which I experienced to my access as a researcher – restrictions which, however, in fact helped to reveal valuable insights into school structures and systems, the organisation of school spaces, school ethos and children’s emerging school identities.

3.13: Overview of Remainder of Findings Chapters

Having set out in detail the theoretical underpinnings that provided a framework for this research study, and the methodological approaches and methods used; chapters 4-6 provide a discussion of findings that emerged from this study.

Chapter 4 focuses on the children’s relationship with the new school
environment and their understandings of their place within the school spaces. Chapter 5 builds from this and looks at ways in which the school structures, systems and spatial organisation impacted upon their understandings of 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging in this place, and the challenges they faced as a consequence. The final findings chapter moves on to explore the children's understandings of friendships in school and, in particular, explores issues raised around the building, negotiating, and maintaining of their old and new peer friendships in primary 1.
Chapter 4 Being in Primary 1: Sizing up

4.0: Introduction

This chapter centres on an interpretive analysis of findings regarding the nature of children’s school experiences, understandings, and the kinds of relationships they had with, and within, the school environment. In doing so, it uncovers ways in which the environment impacted upon children’s views of what it was like to be in school, and their own place within it.

As discussed in chapter 2, children’s time in school was understood as being both spatially and socially constructed through the built/constructed environment, socio-cultural conditions, and the school ethos. The physical spaces of school were thus viewed as more than ‘empty containers. It was recognised that within the spatialities of the school environment children’s lives would be made, enacted and ‘lived’ through a series of social interactions. The school environment and the ways in which the children spoke of what it was like to be in primary 1 were inseparably interrelated. Attention was paid to the physical details, material resources, and cultural practices of the space’s children occupied, while also seeking to better understand children’s own understandings of, and participation in, these.

The chapter is organised around two broad themes. Firstly, it explores the ways in which the children talked of the physical size of the school environment and how they linked this to a sense of in-placeness and out-of-placeness (Collins & Coleman, 2008) grounded in conceptualisations of age, being bigger and competence. It reveals how the children spoke of the importance of their transition to a bigger environment as they too were bigger, and therefore considered themselves as being more capable, judging themselves as ready to belong to this place.

It then presents and discusses the ways in which the children spoke of the particular school spaces they saw themselves as having access to, and thereby a strong affiliation with. It shows how the design and use of spaces in the school environment resulted in the formation of a strong sense of
belonging to particular spaces, and consequently their own ‘sense of place’ (Teather, 1999) in school. Related to this, it examines how the children spoke of particular ‘ways of being’ in these spaces, with a focus on movement and bodily control.


I look first at how the children talked about the size of the physical environment of school and their experiences and perceptions of this bigger space. I then consider how perceptions of size appeared to substantively underpin children’s constructions of their identity. Using the lens of spatial positioning and conceptualisations of in-placeness and out-of-placeness (Collins & Coleman, 2008), I examine the children’s talk about ‘being bigger’, most especially in terms of their chronological age that was intrinsically linked to notions of competency for school.

4.1.1: School Is a Big Place

The size of the school building clearly made a strong impression on the children; and they frequently alluded to this during our conversations around what it was like to be at school. The children tended to use the language ‘big’ and ‘huge’ to describe school in a general sense, for example, ‘it is a big school’ and ‘it is a big place’, or ‘our school is huge’. They also tended to refer to many of the different individual spaces of school as being big, for example, ‘there is a big kitchen’, a ‘big playground’, ‘we have our dinner in a big dining room’ and ‘we have a big gym’. A notable exception was the classroom spaces which children did not allude to in terms of being big or a big place.

Most comments relating to the size of the school were expressed in the form of a factual statement, that is, presented as a ‘truth’ that needed to be known. This was particularly pertinent during conversations around what children felt it would be necessary for those less familiar with school to know, as this excerpt illustrates:
I: Myles and Celia were hoping for your help. They were wondering if you could help them to know what it will be like when they go to school. What do you think Myles and Celia should know about being in school?

Ben: Myles and Celia — we have a class — and it is big — it is big and big and big and big and big — it is a big school.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 30 Nov. 2016)

The frequency with which ‘big’ was used in children’s descriptions of school highlighted the importance afforded to this, and the way in which it appeared to impact powerfully on the children’s perception of what their school was like.

An analysis of the data revealed there to be no discernible differences regarding which children saw school as being a big place and their age, gender, or their pre-school experience. The latter was perhaps the most surprising finding as it might have been assumed that those children who had attended Aberforthe Nursery (74% of the participant group), which is situated within the main school building, would have had a level of familiarity with the size of the school environment that would negate any impression of the school as being a ‘big’ place. This was not the case. Possible reasons for this finding were beyond the scope of the findings of this study.

4.1.2: How Children Feel About School Being Big: ‘Nervo-Cited’, Fun and Being a Busy Place

This study uncovered central ways in which children talked of their feelings regarding school being a big[ger] place, giving an insight not only into the types of feelings children had but also into their complex and often individualistic nature.

4.1.2.1: Feeling ‘Nervo-Cited’ About Big School

The language used by the children demonstrated degrees of difference when asked how they felt about being in ‘big’ school, for example, ‘I was a bit worried’, ‘I was quite worried’, ‘I wasn’t worried’, ‘I am not worried’, I feel a bit
nervous sometimes’, ‘I was very excited’, ‘I am quite a bit excited to be at school’.

Analysing such statements closely revealed that it was not unusual for children to experience a mix of positive and more negative emotions, for example, ‘I was a bit worried, but I was excited’, ‘I was nervous on the first day …but I was excited to go to school’, and ‘I was a little bit worried, but it is good, it is fun’. Claudia even had her own word to explain how she felt, ‘I was nervo-cited’, she told me because she had felt nervous and excited at the same time. Reference to feelings of ‘nervousness’ or ‘worry’ were particularly attached to comments made about the first days of starting at school, but were not confined to this time, for example:

\[\text{I: What would you tell people school is like?}\]

\[\text{Olive: It makes me feel sweaty, especially when I do my reading. I think people will feel nervous. But school is good. I like when we do singing on the carpet.}\]

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

Corresponding to the findings of Einarsdottir (2007), the children in this study spoke of their expectations of school as being different and involving change. As this example typifies, children spoke of looking forward to the fact that school was going to be a big place:

\[\text{I: Celia said she was a bit worried about coming to school.}\]

\[\text{Matilda: Oh, don’t worry, school is good.}\]

\[\text{Brian: Don’t worry, when I was coming to school I was worried about school, but I was quite excited ‘cos it is a big place.}\]

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 2 Dec. 2016)

These findings are significant in that they demonstrate something of the range and the complex nature of emotions felt by these children. They also would seem to reveal that binary categorisations of emotions such as nervous, worried, happy, excited etc. are not helpful in adequately explaining the complexities of how children may feel about the changes experienced in
a new setting. To suggest that children will find this time ‘troublesome’ due to the ‘sharp’ changes to the environment (see Brostrom, 2002, 2007; Fortune-Wood, 2002; Boyle & Petriwskji, 2014; Yoleri, 2015) or as empowering due to these same changes (see Dunlop, 2002; White & Sharpe, 2007; Loizou, 2013; Ackesjo, 2015) gives a false impression of an either-or scenario. As demonstrated through the children’s comments, it is and was entirely possible to feel both concerned and excited about changes to the new environment simultaneously.

4.1.2.2: Our School Is Fun

When asked how they felt about school being bigger, I found that children often spoke in ways that conveyed a sense of pride and enjoyment related to being in school, for example, ‘it is fun’, ‘it is good’, ‘I love school’, ‘being at school is cool’. I found it was not uncommon for children to tell me it was ‘just the right size’ for them, as the following excerpt typifies:

Rosie: Our school is huge.
I: Is it too huge — or just the right huge?
Rosie: Just the right huge — I love school.
(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

The children frequently spoke of enjoying having large spaces in which they could run, particularly the spaces of the playground and the gym hall:

Anna: Our school is big.
I: What is that like?
Anna: It is fun, we run, it is busy, and we run and run — in the gym hall and the playground.
I: You like that?
Anna: Yeah — we have lots of space to run.
(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

Rosie: I am going on the pitch.
Heather: I play with Frances and Beth on the pitch.
I: It sounds like you like the pitch.
Rosie: Yeah, ‘cos it is huge, even when nobody is on the pitch.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 27 Oct. 2016)

Children also talked of enjoying opportunities to spend time in a variety of different spaces within the school environment, for example, they told me ‘We get to go to computers and play games’, ‘I like the library - I like getting books’, ‘I like being in the dinner hall, I see all my friends’.

However, not every child spoke in positive ways about school being a bigger place.

I: What is it like to be at school?

Ben: It is big — at school there is a big kitchen — there is a big playground, and it is a big school — and a big gate — and when you get there you will definitely not like it.

I: You won’t like it?

Ben: No — it takes too long.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 30 Nov. 2016)

It was difficult to surmise from this exactly what Ben meant by ‘it takes too long’, but what was clearer was the way in which he harboured some negative feelings towards being in a bigger place.

4.1.2.3: Being Part of School: Lots of People, Getting Lost and Noise

Children’s school experience is not only about the physical spaces they encounter but the ways in which these spaces are ‘lived’ by them on a day-to-day basis (Kellock & Sexton, 2018). Asked what it was like to ‘be’ in school many children talked of it being a very active, full location with lots going on, for example:

I: What might it be good to know about being in school?

Fiona: It is busy, it is a busy, busy place.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

I: What might it be good to know?
Adam: There is lots of lots of lots of lots of lots of people.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

The number of times Adam uses ‘lots’ appears to suggest he wants the sheer volume of people at school to be recognised. Likewise, Fiona appeared to wish to emphasise just how busy she believed school to be. It was not possible to infer from these statements whether these children found these issues problematic, rather these statements appeared to be presented by them as a ‘fact’ to be known.

Other studies, for example Dockett & Perry (2007), have found that a common feeling when children started school was the fear of ‘getting lost’. Although not explicitly described as a fear of getting lost, some of the children in my study did talk of difficulties in finding particular places within the school, for example: ‘it is hard, it is a big place’, ‘we have to go to the office, I don’t know where that is’. Ways this could be problematic when you were new to the school were also acknowledged during chats with the children, for example when Susan offered to draw a map for some expected visitors to the school:

Susan has decided she wants to draw “Myles and Celia a picture of the school to help them. She thinks this will help as they drew pictures for “Jolly the Elf to help him find their classroom when he came to visit. She thinks that this will also help Myles and Celia find their way around the school when they arrive.

Susan: We drew pictures for him [referring to Jolly the Elf] ‘cos it is a big school, and he won’t be able to find the right classroom. So, he founded the right classroom.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

*Myles & Celia were the toys I introduced for some of the participatory activities with the children (see Chapter 3: page 102).

**Jolly was a toy elf introduced by the teachers for a writing activity.

I discovered that knowing how to find your way around the physical environment was something considered very important by the children. The children would frequently tell me and show me where different spaces of the
school were to be found, for example: ‘that is the door to the way to the toilet’, ‘you will find my class in there’, ‘you go that way to the office’, ‘it is this way to our playground’. I had noted that, especially during my early days in school, the children would frequently check that I knew where I was and ask if I knew how to get to different spaces of the school, for example: ‘Do you know where the playground is?’, ‘Can you get to the dinner hall?’. Furthermore, there was an understanding by the children that navigating your way around the school spaces was something you needed to be able to do independently, as Michael informed me: ‘You will have to learn to get there by yourself, I won’t always be here to help you’.

For some children being in school was problematic at times due to the levels of noise in the school spaces. Children mentioned that the school bells were often very loud: ‘I do not like the bells, they are too noisy’, ‘You hear that bell, I don’t like it, it gives me a fright’. Adam, as our conversation below shows, did not care for the fire bell either:

Adam and I are sitting together at a table in a corner of his classroom. He has finished his work and is drawing a picture, which he is talking to me about.

Adam: I am going to draw a picture of you — ‘cos I like you.

I: Thank you, who else do you like in school?

Adam: Kevin and Sam — I know what I don’t like — the fire bell, I do not like them.

I: You don’t like fire bells?

Adam: It is too noisy; I don’t like it.

(Journal notes, 2 Dec. 2016)

However, I found most comments made by the children about levels of noise related to people and the activities being undertaken in school, as the comments below exemplify:

Ben: Wish some of them would stop singing ‘cos it is too noisy.

Frances: School is noisy sometimes; I don’t like it noisy in my classroom and in the playground when people scream aaaaargh.
Yvonne: Some people are noisy. I wish they would stop.
Stella: I don’t like it when people are noisy.
Adam: I don’t like loud teachers.

These comments relating to noise in school are significant as they demonstrate not only the sorts of issues the children wanted to talk about, but also the fact that they felt able to identify and articulate things that impacted negatively on their experiences, and in some cases seemed to bother them very much indeed. On close examination, neither gender nor age was indicative of whether noise might be an issue, this appeared to be more closely aligned to personal preferences and levels of noise tolerance.

4.1.3: Constructs of Identity: Age, Bigger Self and Competency

It is acknowledged that schools play a central role in helping to shape social identities (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Collins & Coleman, 2008). Particular cultural norms relating to children’s physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics underpin not only the structures and systems of schools, but judgements relating to access and competency.

The following findings show how the children related the bigger size of school to their own bigger self, particularly in relation to their chronological age and uncover the ways this influenced their sense of in-placeness and out-of-placeness (Collins & Coleman, 2008) for being in ‘big’ school. These views appeared to be underpinned by a collective, tacit socio-cultural understanding of ‘bigger being better’ and validation of age as an appropriate measuring tool of competency for school (see, Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Brooker, 2008; Davis & Smith, 2012; Davis et al., 2014).

4.1.3.1: Being 5: Identity and Centrality of Chronological Age

Children’s chronological age was a prominent feature of accounts of their own school identity. Children frequently wanted me to know their age and would routinely categorise themselves according to those who were already 5 years old: ‘I am 5’, ‘I have already been 5’, ‘we are 5’ and those who were not: ‘I am just 4’, ‘I am still 4, ‘I am not 5 yet’. There was a general tendency
for children to talk of being 5 years old with feelings of great pride and of achieve-ment, and for those not yet 5 wanting me to know that they too would be 5 soon, for example: ‘I will be 5 on my birthday soon’, ‘I am just 4, but I will be 5 next’, ‘I am still 4 but I will nearly be 5 the next day’.

In this study group just over half of the children (55%) were 5 or older when they began school in August, which meant that a significant percentage of the children were under 5 on starting. Their ages ranged from the youngest at 4 years 7 months to the oldest at 5 years 6 months. In contrast to Konstantoni’s (2011) findings, I found that the children were less interested in me knowing their exact age, or who was younger/older than them, than me knowing that they were 5 or would soon be 5, thus highlighting a commonly held perception that being 5 at school was important.

It was common for children to talk of their chronological age as the perceived reason for them being in school, for example: ‘I am 5 so I am at big school’ and ‘when you get 5 you get to go to school’. They appeared to strongly associate age and in particular ‘being 5’ as the ‘time of life’ (see, James & Prout, 2015) for being at school.

Furthermore, age was salient in conversations around understandings of the grouping and categorising of children within school. It was common for children, particularly those with older siblings or relatives in school, to demonstrate their understanding of the age stratified nature of school and schooling, for example:

My sister is 7, she is in primary – she is in [class teacher’s name] class, primary 4. My cousin is 9, he is bigger than me, he is in primary 5.

(Field notes, 27 Oct. 2016)

In this way, the children’s perceived understanding of the age stratified nature of the [Scottish] schooling system had ‘normalised’ their understanding of the timing of their movement into [and potential movement through] school (Rogoff, 2003; Thorne, 2004). These findings are in line with
preceding research (Konstantoni, 2011; McNair, 2016) that found children frequently used the categorisation of age to not only define their own identity, but as a form of justification for permitted access to places such as school.

For those children in this study who could not yet claim to be 5, justification for their place in school was more problematic as a result. In such cases, these children were often keen to defend their ‘right’ to be in school due to the fact that they were almost 5, (as I have detailed), or by citing the fact that they were big or bigger now, for example, ‘I big now, I am at big school’, and ‘I am a big boy’, or ‘when I was a baby I didn’t go to school’, ‘I went to nursery when I was little’. In this study the characteristics of ‘being 5’ and ‘being big’ were by far the most common explanations given by children as to the reason why they were in school.

Understandings are not created in a vacuum, but are constructed within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts (Rogoff, 2003). It was striking that a close examination of the language used by both parents/carers and their teachers uncovered strong similarities in the types of phrases and language patterns used in relation to ‘being bigger’ and going to school, indicating a shared narrative between the child and significant adults in their lives. For example:

\[
\text{I am a big boy now. [child]} \\
\text{We told him he was a big boy now. [parent]} \\
\text{and} \\
\text{When I was little, I went to nursery. [child]} \\
\text{She had outgrown nursery. [parent]}
\]

It was quite common for teachers to use the language of ‘being big’ when addressing the children, for example: ‘we are big boys and girls now’, ‘this is big school’, ‘well done, you are such a big girl’. Comments by the teachers regarding age were concerned with children’s age and their perceived readiness for being in school.
I think he is quite young though, one of the youngest, so he needs a lot of help in school.

(Teacher interview CT(Y), 2016)

I don't think she is 5 until the end of February… she wasn't ready for the structure… she would have benefitted from more time at nursery.

(Teacher interview CT(W), 2016)

Consequently, it can be argued that these findings demonstrate how the children’s talk of the importance of being 5 and being big[ger] as a necessary attribute for them to be in school was grounded in collective, tacit, socio-political cultures and linked to adult discourses in the home and in school.

These findings suggest the presence of a culturally held belief that age and ‘being big’ play a significant role in particular ‘regimes of truth’ (MacNaughton, 2005) about children and their school identity. It is important to note that in the process of creating a ‘normal school child’ within particular categorisations, other ways of thinking and being are therefore marginalised as a result (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Fortune-Wood (2002:135) cautions against the ‘creation of artificial boundaries’ through categorisation by age in particular. This is viewed as especially problematic as it can lead to age being regarded as a measurable and reliable marker of children’s development, competence, and abilities within the systems of schooling (see, Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Kagan, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Brooker, 2008; Vogler et al., 2008).

4.1.3.2: Being Bigger Is Better: Perceptions of Competence/Ability

Whereas a view of themselves as ‘being bigger’ was generally spoken of in positive terms by the children, in contrast ‘being little’ was often talked about in a more disparaging way. There was a strong tendency for the children to talk of themselves as ‘being little’ when discussing something they were unable to do or do well, for example ‘when I was littler, I couldn’t ride my bike’, ‘I couldn’t climb the stairs when I was little’. It was therefore my understanding that children’s conceptualisations of ‘being bigger’ and ‘being little’ were being discussed mostly in relation to their chronological age, and
that as such, similar to Konstantoni’s (2011) findings, the children identified clear links between concepts of age, size, and perceived competencies.

It was common for children to use these notions of ‘being big’ and ‘being little’ as ways to differentiate between ability levels and perceived competency in relation to themselves and others in school.

*Chloe:* Carol, you will have to write Polly’s name because she doesn’t know how to, I do… see… I am big.

(*Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 6 Oct. 2016*)

*Rosie:* Alice used to scribble on her paper.

*Blair:* Yeah, Alice always scribbles on her paper, every time she gets one.

*Blair:* But she was 4.

*Rosie:* I used to scribble when I was 3.

(*Ideal School, Field notes, 22 Mar. 2017*)

This was not confined only to perceived judgements of intellectual ability, but also encompassed physical aptitude, for example, ‘he can’t play football like me, he is littler’, and emotional capacity, ‘Alice is 4, but she will be 5 — she cries.

I found that the act of crying was often discussed by the children. They tended to talk of this as something babies do or that they did when they were younger, but not something they routinely did now they are at school, as these comments made to me show:

*Garath:* When I was baby, when I was zero, I would cry whaaaaaaa.

*Ben:* I never cried [at school] — I am not even a baby.

At the same time falling over or being hurt at school was apparently viewed as being an acceptable occasion to cry at school.

*Arthur:* I don’t cry at school — well just if I falled and hurt myself.
However, during the length of my time in school I frequently witnessed many children crying and for a variety of reasons, for example, as the result of a fall or being bumped, through frustration at not being able or allowed to do something, feeling unwell or tired, missing family or friends, feeling confused or isolated from others, or as an avoidance strategy. In fact, the act of crying seemed to me to be a fundamental strategy used by children to express themselves and their needs, and at times they used it as a method of exerting resistance in particular situations. Nevertheless, the ways in which the children spoke of the act of crying suggested they wanted me to know they held a very negative view of crying in school, and it was something they were keen to distance themselves from.

These findings might be best explained in terms of Brooker’s (2008) observation of children’s need to be perceived as competent in their new role as a ‘school pupil’ by those around them. Brooker found that children spoke of fear, anxiety, and lack of confidence in school as the reasons why someone might cry. As such, the act of crying is likely seen as a demonstration of the lack of ability to cope in school. This appears to be supported in my findings by the following excerpts:

\[I: \text{Does being at school make you worried?} \]
\[\text{Ben: No - I never cried.} \]
\[(\text{Helping M&C, Field notes, 30 Nov. 2016})\]

\[\text{Ben: I am not a cry-baby.} \]
\[\text{Barbara: You cry sometimes.} \]
\[\text{Ben: Don’t say that it is rude. I am not a cry baby.} \]
\[(\text{Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016})\]

These findings highlight some of the ways in which children may feel under pressure to perform in school in particular ways in order to maintain an aura of competency against certain normative criteria in relation to how they should ‘be’ in accordance with their chronological age (Davis & Smith, 2012;
Davis et al., 2014). Those deemed to be behaving in ways out of sync with their expectations related to their age (James & Prout, 2015) are judged to not be able to cope in the school environment and are therefore deemed ‘out-of-place’. This has the potential to place undue pressure on children to behave in particular ways, where a failure to do so is deemed to be a deficit on the part of the child, without any consideration of the impact of the school environment (Baker et al., 2009; Davis & Smith, 2012; Davis et al., 2014). Nor does it consider or respect any form of diversity in terms of children’s individual development and needs (Vogler et al., 2008; James & Prout, 2015).

4.2: A Sense of Place: Issues Around the Design and Use of School Spaces

Continuing to build on the premise that children’s lived experience is directly impacted by the spatial organisation of the environment in which they exist (Cudworth, 2015), this section of the chapter focuses on ways in which the children talked about and made sense of the design and use of school spaces.

The section begins by looking at school spaces the children frequently referred to and those they rarely, if ever, spoke of and considers why this might be the case. Building from this, it goes on to explore ways in which children expressed a sense of ‘belonging to’ particular school locations and discusses the implications of a perception of ‘knowing your place’ which emerged from this sense of belonging. Finally, it looks at how the design and use of school spaces impacted on ‘ways of being’, with a particular focus on the demands placed on children’s bodily movements and their resulting views of ‘spaces to sit’ and ‘spaces to run’ in the school environment.

4.2.1: Important Spaces: Access and Time

In the first part of this chapter, I highlighted different ways in which the children spoke of school as being ‘a big place’. As the floor plan (Figure 4.1) below illustrates, Aberforthe Primary is comprised of a range of bounded
spaces in a style that is commonly referred to as a semi-open plan design (Refer to Chapter 3 for further information on the school setting).

![Aberforth School Building Floor Plan](figure4.png)

**Figure 4.1: Aberforth school building floor plan (not to scale)**

I found children were able to identify most of the individual physical spaces that comprised the school building as a whole and were generally able to indicate where each of these spaces could be found, for example, ‘the office is through that door’, ‘the toilet is through there’, ‘primary 3 area is that way’, ‘the dinner hall is down that way’, ‘the big ones (older children) are round that side’. However, I found when exploring with them what it was like to be at school the children had a strong tendency to talk to me about only certain spaces within school, for example they most frequently talked about their classrooms and the playground, and commonly spoke of the dinner hall, gym hall, library/computer area and the toilets. These spaces have been shaded blue in Figure 4.1.

Initially I surmised that the likely reason children spoke most often about these particular spaces was due to the fact that these were where children would typically spend their time during a school day in primary 1. This
thinking corresponds to the work of James et al. (1998) and their view of the critical role of ‘space’ and ‘time’ in shaping children’s understandings. My observations revealed that with the exception of the gym hall where they might spend time only two or three times per week, these ‘blue’ school spaces were where children typically did spend the majority of their time.

However, closer analysis of the data revealed that this did not in fact provide a full explanation as to why the children spoke of some spaces while choosing not to talk of others. One noteworthy exception was the shared Open Area space next to their classrooms, which I have shaded green. Despite my observing the children spending some time in this space on a daily basis, the children rarely spoke of it. In point of fact, I found that the only times children talked about this space was when I had asked them a direct question about it, for example:

*I: What about this space, the Open Area?  
Eve: Yeh, we get to play there sometimes.*

(Field notes, 31 Oct. 2016)

Overall, these findings suggest that there was evidence of a strong correlation between the frequency of time spent in a space and the frequency with which children talked of this space. However, I suggest that this does not provide the full picture of why children deemed some areas to be more important to know about than others. The findings discussed in the subsequent sections of this chapter shed light on why the design and use of specific spaces gained a particular sense of importance in children’s eyes and impacted on their developing sense of ‘knowing your place’ in these spaces.

4.2.2: Territorialism: Spaces They Belong to And Belong to Them

Teather’s (1999) work talks of a ‘sense of place’ children experience when they start school. Using this as a lens to analyse the data of this study I explored how the children appeared to conceive of certain spaces within the school environment as being where they belonged. The resulting findings are
significant as they raise awareness of ways in which children can develop a sense of their own and others’ place in the physical spaces of school that is strongly influenced by the design and use of these spaces. This ‘sense of place’ can influence how children perceive who is welcomed into particular spaces and who is not.

4.2.2.1: My Class Is Here and That Is His Class

I found it was very common for the children to talk of belonging to a particular classroom within the school building: ‘this is my classroom’, ‘do you know where my classroom is, it is here’, ‘I am going into my classroom’, ‘I am in here’, and for them to want to physically take me to show me where their classroom was to be found. Additionally, they would point out the classroom spaces that did not belong to them, but belonged in their view to other children, for example:

Brian: My class is in there…that is his classroom. [He is referring to Roy who is standing with him but is not in his class.] I am in P1Y, that is P1W.

I: So, you have different classrooms?

Brian: Yeah, that is mine. [Points to the classroom area.]

(Field notes, 19 Sept. 2016)

The children would share with me the given ‘name’ of their classroom space (each class in the school has a number that designates the year i.e., primary one has a number 1, and a letter that is linked to their teacher’s surname). For example, they would tell me: ‘that is called P1Y’, ‘my classroom is P1Y’, ‘this room is P1X’, and so on. As the extract below typifies, the children would very often attach this ‘name’ not only to the classroom space but to themselves as well, for example:

Susan: I am going to do P1Y. We are called P1Y.

I: You are called P1Y, why are you called P1Y?

Susan: It has to be a big Y [after the P1] and a capital too.

I: Is everyone in that class P1Y?

Susan: Yes, ‘cos they are P1Y, next door are P1W.
I: Next door are called P1W, so does every class have its own name?

Keir: Even the big… see my sister… she is P4Z.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

These extracts illustrate the development of children’s own sense of place in this setting through affiliation with a particular classroom space and a ‘name’. Furthermore, they reveal something of children’s understanding of the school building space being constructed as a series of different classroom spaces, and that all children are organised into and therefore ‘belonged to’ particular individual classroom spaces as a consequence.

The findings also uncovered ways in which children would express a certain tribal affinity with a particular group of children who belonged in their classroom space, i.e., their class, ‘I am P1Y’, ‘we are called P1Y’, next door as P1W’. Membership of this class set them apart from others, and not just within the school as a whole but also within Primary 1. The language they used suggested notions of inclusion and exclusion of children based on the class they belonged to: ‘this is my class’, ‘that is her class’, ‘he goes in there’. It was common for some children to use comparative and at times ‘competitive’ language to describe their class, for example: ‘I am in P1Y, we are the best’, ‘I have the bestest class’, ‘we are good, next door are not so good’, ‘I like my class the best’.

For the most part, my overall impression from my conversations with the children was that they were somewhat pleased and proud to show me and tell me about their classrooms and classes. The children seemed to value being part of a particular space (classroom) and group (class); and this appeared to give them something of a sense of their ‘place’ in school, both physically and in terms of their status – a place where they were welcomed and belonged.

However, I discovered instances where being separated into a particular classroom or class did not always sit well, for example:
I am sitting chatting to Brian in the Open Area as he draws me a picture of school.

Brian: This is my classroom.

I: Do you have your own classroom in school?

Brian: Yeah — mine is over there — I sometimes go into that one [He points to the class next to his, the other P1.]

My friend is in there — but no one sees me ‘cos I am invisible.

(Journal notes, 21 Oct. 2016)

Eve has joined me at a table in the Open Area. She has agreed to draw me a picture of some of the things she likes about school.

I: Is that a drawing of your classroom, Eve?

Eve: Yes.

Eve: But I like when I can go in there. [She points over the room to the classroom next to her one.]

I: Why is that?

Eve: My friend Joan is there — and they have good books and toys.

I: Are you not allowed in there?

Eve: Just at Golden Time. [She sounds sad.]

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 31 Oct. 2016)

Both Eve and Brian indicated that in having ‘their own classroom’ space they were unable to enter other classroom spaces freely and that there was a requirement to gain permission to do so first. This lack of freedom to choose where and consequently whom to spend time with was something I had observed through watching the daily routines of the children in school. I witnessed the way this began from the point of their entry into the school building in the morning when they would be required to move quickly into their own classroom spaces. This was generally repeated following play times and after lunch times. I recorded that:

I have been in school observing the children now for a few weeks and the overwhelming feeling I have today is how much more settled into a routine the children seem. They
appear to be into a set routine of arriving at their classroom areas, dropping off bags and hanging up coats, then going to sit at their desks. They come quickly into the area, get organised and disappear into the classrooms – within a few moments I am generally left alone in the open area, and it feels like their school day has started. The downside of this for me is that they do not come over to chat in the ways they used to. They smile and wave, but quickly disappear into the classroom areas and the air of purposefulness with which they do this make me reluctant to try to talk to them. I feel like I will be an interference. This is going to provide some future challenges for me as I try to gather data and look for spaces to chat with the children. In some ways it feels they are more relaxed, but also that it is less relaxed, if this makes sense!!

(Journal notes, 26 Sept. 2016)

When I wrote this journal entry my main concern had been access to the children for the purpose of my research. Being inside their classrooms, often closed off from the rest of the area, had been making it difficult for me to move around freely and engage with the children. However, on reflection, it also serves to highlight how using the space in this way reduces any opportunity for autonomy or choice on the part of the children, most especially with regards to where they can be at any particular time in school. This is very much in contrast to most pre-school experiences, which typically encourage choice and independent thought in their children concerning what they can do and where they can be.

These findings highlight that belonging to a particular classroom space and a particular ‘named’ class can be viewed as something positive and empowering for children, giving them a sense of ‘place’ in the school environment. However, enforced segregation into classes and the way the classroom spaces were used has the potential to cause fundamental constraints on autonomous choices as to where children can spend time and whom they can spend time with. In this study it was evident that most often where the children could be inside their own classrooms, despite the semi open-plan architectural structure of the space.
4.2.2.2: Where Is Your Chair?

I am sitting at one of the tables in the open area and writing in my notebook. Ben and Heather stop to talk to me.

Ben: Is this your seat? [He points to where I am sitting.]

I: No, I don’t have my own seat in school, do you?

Heather: Yeah, we have it in our classrooms.

Ben: That is mine over there.

Heather: Where is your chair?

I am unsure how to respond. I do not have a chair, and this is causing them some discomfort.

(Journal notes, 7 Oct. 2016)

This extract from my journal highlights a moment when children showed some concern that I did not have my own chair within the school space. This was not something that I had previously considered to be important, in fact I was quite pleased with my ability to move freely in and out of spaces. These children however saw me as being ‘anchorless’ and having no ‘place’ as a result of having no chair to call my own. From reflecting more deeply on this incident, I began to have a better understanding as to why the children commonly wanted to talk about and show me where they sat in their classrooms. Having your own space, in the form of your own chair in your classroom, reinforced for them a sense of belonging and knowing that they had a place of their own. In confessing that I did not have my own chair, the children were finding it very difficult to work out where I belonged in school and where my place was. Everyone, in their eyes, had and indeed should have their own chair.

Each classroom was designed to contain numerous tables and chairs and was organised so that there was a chair at a table for every child in class and a separate table and chair for their teacher. The overall effect was that the classroom spaces were dominated by tables and chairs. Each child was designated a particular seat at these tables, most commonly at the directive
of their class teacher. When the children spoke of being in their classroom, they would commonly talk about being in my chair or at my table.

*Michael:* *This is my classroom, so I will need to draw my table.*

*Polly:* *This is me in my classroom, this is me sitting down - I am at my table.*

*Joan:* *I like my classroom, I will draw my table, I like sitting in my seat.*

(Field notes, Nov. 2016)

The children would frequently draw me pictures of themselves in school, which involved them sitting on their chair and at their table in the classroom.

![Figure 4.2: Children’s drawings ‘sitting doing my work’](image)

The importance of knowing about this feature of classroom spaces was further emphasised when children would remind others that they needed to show me where ‘their’ particular space was in the classroom.

*Matilda:* *This is the classroom.*

*Heather:* *You forgot to do your desk.*

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 2 Dec. 2016)

In addition, they frequently felt the need to point out to me where other children in the class sat.

*I:* *What is this you are drawing?*

*Polly:* *This is my classroom — I like my classroom.*

*I:* *What do you like best?*
When, later in the school year, the P1 teachers began to reconfigure tables and move children into different groupings/seats in their classrooms, some children expressed to me an element of distress at no longer being able to sit at what they perceived to be their own chair. They told me ‘I used to sit there, but I am not allowed to anymore’, ‘Ben has got my chair now, and I am in Sam’s’, ‘That was my old seat, I liked it best’. These findings suggest that the children can see these enforced changes as setting them adrift from their rightful place and as such creating a potential disruption to their sense of belonging. I am aware that there are many, many good reasons for teachers to wish to re-arrange seating, but these findings suggest that perhaps the impact this can have on children should be better acknowledged.

My findings thus suggest that due to the design and use of tables and chairs in classroom spaces, children had developed a strong affiliation with a particular classroom space which they saw as ‘their place’. This appears to develop a sense of where they and others belong.

4.2.2.3: Outside Spaces We Belong To: The Playground

A sense of ‘belonging’ to a particular location extended to the playground. Playgrounds are a near universal, but arguably under researched, feature of UK primary schools (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Pearce & Bailey, 2011). It is generally considered that school playgrounds are designed as spaces expressly for children (Trantor & Malone, 2004; Thomson, 2005; Collins & Coleman, 2008) and that playground spaces matter a great deal to children (Catling, 2005). The findings of this study uncovered ways in which the children talked of the playground spaces and a sense of belonging to, and ownership of, this school space.

In Figure 4.1 I used blue shading to highlight the spaces of the school children talked about most frequently. I have indicated that it was very
common for them to talk of the playground, yet I have represented this by only shading a small section of a larger playground space that wraps around the whole school building. (Refer to Chapter 3 for more detailed information on the playground). It was very common for the children to talk of spending their time in a particular area of the school playground, ‘We play in this bit’, ‘This is where we play at playtime’, ‘We play here, every day we play here’. As illustrated, the area of the playground children would point out to me was mostly found to be directly outside their classrooms, extending slightly beyond them in both directions. I also noted that this area was adjacent to the door children used on a daily basis to enter and leave the school building. The children therefore tended not to stray far from the locality of areas inside the building where they spent most of their time.

The language used by the children often reflected a sense of ownership over, and defensive stance towards, this particular space in the playground, for example: ‘this is the little one’s bit’, ‘they shouldn’t be here, this is our bit’. In reality, excluding the perimeter wall and fencing, there were few solid boundaries in the playground which might have created a distinct division of space. Through my observations I discovered that ownership of the playground spaces appeared to be more of a tacit understanding of where you belong, and that this was not only a view held by these children but also by the older school children, ‘we have come round to the little one’s bit’, and the adult helpers.

Ownership of this particular playground area by the children was generally through occupation, with most of the Primary 1 children spending playtime and lunchtime in this area. The only exceptions were times when the children were able to spend time on the adjoining local community ‘pitch’, a space that was separated by fencing and was timetabled to ensure equity of access throughout the whole school. At these times, as many as perhaps a third of the children would choose to play on the football pitch, with the remaining children staying put in ‘their’ playground: ‘I am not going on the pitch today, I am staying in our bit’.
Occupation of a space can be a fairly effective method of controlling ownership over a space, however Thomson (2005) found that children would often use a whole variety of spatial strategies to claim spaces as their own, such as building barriers or expelling intruders. Although I did not witness any instances of barriers, I did on occasion witness some minor attempts to expel those they felt did not belong, such as verbal confrontations: ‘you can’t go there’ or ‘go back to your own bit,’ or by ‘reporting’ the intrusion to an adult in the playground. However, I rarely saw this result in the successful expulsion of the ‘intruder’. The most successful attempts of expulsion came when children reported this intrusion to an adult, who might then suggest it would be better if the ‘intruder’ played somewhere else, but this was not a given. Therefore, I found that despite the children talking of belonging to a particular playground area and attempts to claim this as their own, the reality of where you could be was in actual fact a much more fluid and flexible thing.

There were occasions when the children would knowingly occupy other spaces of the playground and therefore perhaps saw themselves as becoming the ‘intruder’. They would make a point of telling me: ‘I went to my big brother’s bit’, we played ‘over there in the other bit today, it was okay’, ‘we went up the top pitch, but the big ones let us’. The fact that they deemed this worthy of mentioning makes me believe that this was a conscious decision to flout the ‘norm’ and a way of pushing the boundaries of ‘their place’ in multiple senses.

4.2.3: Movement: Spaces to Sit and Spaces to Run

4.2.3.1: It Is Where We Have to Sit Down.

_A small group of children have come to join me at the table in the Open Area and are drawing me a picture of things they like and do not like about being at school. One of the girls is drawing a picture of a table with all the children in her group sitting around it.

Adam: We always have to sit down and every day we have to sit down, sit down, sit down._

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016)
As this extract typifies, children expressed an overwhelming impression of school as being a setting where you have to sit. The children spoke often of where they had to sit and this typically referred to particular indoor spaces of school, for example in their classrooms, ‘we sit at our tables’, this is me sitting on the carpet, I am sitting reading my book’, in the dinner hall, ‘I get to sit with my friends when I eat my dinner’, we sit at a long table’, in the school computer suite, ‘we sit at the computers, sometimes we sit on the same seat’, and at school assemblies, ‘we sit on the floor and we sing on a Friday’.

Children would tell me of times when they enjoyed the act of sitting in school, for example: ‘I do like school, I like to sit on my chair’, ‘I like sitting at my table writing’, ‘I like to sit in my seat’, ‘I like sitting in the dinner hall with my friend’. Linked to the previous section on a sense of belonging, this appeared to indicate a certain level of positivity in how they felt about sitting in their own chair. However, not all comments with regards to sitting in school were positive. Some of the children had told me that they did not enjoy having to sit in school: “I don’t like I have to sit and sit”, and “all day, sit, sit, sit — I like outside best”. For others, the way in which they spoke of this as being problematic related not only to the act of sitting but also the length of time for which they were required to sit:

Finn: I don’t like being stuck in my chair for ages, doing nothing.

Arthur: I am sitting on my seat for thousands of hundreds of years.

Arthur: I hate sitting on the carpet because I get tired.

Michael: We have to sit. We are there until playtime.

Frances: You have to sit in front of the board and sing, it takes ages.

Ben: It makes my bones hurt when it takes too long to sit.

The findings highlighted how some children expressed having a problem with the length of time they felt they were required to engage in the act of sitting. Additionally, some children talked of the physical impact of this act of sitting on their bodies, especially if they were sitting for a long time, making them
tired or indeed Ben’s comment that all the sitting was ‘making my bones hurt’.

It was common for children to tell me that they needed to sit in order to ‘do their work’ in school: ‘this is me sitting and working’, ‘I am sitting at my desk doing my work’, ‘we are sitting and working’, ‘I have to go at sit at my table to get my jobs done’. Related to this was a perceived notion of having to sit and having to listen: ‘we sit and listen on the carpet’, ‘this is me sitting in my chair, I listening to my teacher’, ‘you need to do good sitting and good listening in school’. Not all of the children spoke of enjoying this, as this extract illustrates:

Finn: I don't like having to sit in my chair for ages, doing nothing, having to listen to the teacher.
Jane: And you have to pretend to be listening.
Finn: Yeh, you have to pretend to be listening.
(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

My observations supported the children’s perceptions that they spent substantial periods of time sitting, albeit I noted that they would move to sit in different locations, for example, sitting on their chair or on the floor, in the classroom, open area, dinner hall, computer suite, etc. My impression was that some children would find this more problematic than others, with some children engaging in activities designed to subvert the act of sitting, the most common of these being the fetching and filling of their water bottles, walking around the room until the teacher noticed, asking to go to the toilet. Asking to go to the toilet was a favourite ploy, and a small number of children used this as an excuse to spend as much time walking around as possible, often using the pretext of coming to speak with me as a way of extending this time out of their chair even longer, (or perhaps just as a work avoidance strategy). Some children also used this as an excuse to flout the rules of running in school, as this extract from my journal shows:

The children are not permitted to run in the classroom area. However, I have noticed that when the children leave the area to go to the toilet, they often run as soon as
they leave their classroom and stop running just before they arrive back. It is most commonly boys who run the fastest and are more willing to take the risk of being caught. Girls have more of a tendency to skip, and only run when they are very sure no one will see. They have learnt not to bother if I see them as they know I will not give them a telling off, (which I am finding I mind more than I thought I would). I do remind them to be careful not to fall or hurt themselves.

(Journal notes, 13 Sept. 2016)

I noticed that a small minority of children found it difficult to comply with the physical act of sitting in one place.

I am watching from the back of the room. The children are gathered on the carpet and the lesson is the weather. Most of the children are sitting fairly still and seem to be attentive. They have now been sitting here for 5 minutes and the strain of this is beginning to tell on Henry. He is shifting his position often and is sliding on his bottom further and further away from the main group. At times he moves to lounge on the floor, and it is generally at this point the teacher speaks to him and asks him to sit up or sit nicely. After 10 minutes the teacher warns him, he is now in serious danger of losing some of his Golden Time if he does not sit ‘at peace’. Each time the teacher speaks to him he makes an effort to sit up straight with his legs crossed, but after only a few moments he is back wriggling again. It feels like he is trapped in a constant cycle. I wonder how much attention he is actually paying to the lesson. Some of the other children are showing signs of being restless, Logan too is shifting his position often but in a less obvious way. Henry seems to be the one finding sitting on the carpet particularly challenging, although others are shifting their positions, he seems to be the one that regularly ‘gets caught’.

(Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

A close analysis of my field notes revealed that it was more likely to be boys who seemed to display difficulty in sitting for a sustained period of time and who were more likely to ask to go to the toilet as a way of avoiding sitting in their classrooms. However, I also observed that there were at least three girls for whom this was also the case.
4.2.3.2: It Is Where We Get to Run: Playground Spaces, Gym Hall

Where inside spaces such as classrooms were mostly associated with lots of sitting, in contrast the outside space of the playground was generally perceived as a space to move around, and in particular run. Children frequently made reference to seeing the playground as somewhere they liked because they saw it as where they were able to run, for example:

Claudia: My favourite place is the playground ‘cos you can run around.

Garath: I like running, I like running in the playground.

Fiona: I like to play, I pretend that I am running outside in the playground, me, and Henry, we like to run.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

Children’s desire to run in the playground was something I noted early in my study, perhaps as this was in sharp contrast to the type of physical activity, I was witnessing inside the school building. As I stated in my journal, it was something that as an adult observer I found fascinating and terrifying in equal measure.

I have just spent another playtime watching the new primary 1s in the playground. It terrifies me how fast they run across the concrete surface, and I find myself holding my breath in case they fall. I think that is perhaps down to the teacher or mother in me. Chasing is the most popular game, although today three of the boys are playing a sort of a follow the leader game. The only time they seem to stop running is to eat their snacks, before taking off once more. Sometimes they run full tilt to the wall, I am amazed they do not hit it. A group of the girls have asked if I want to play tig, I have respectfully declined – I cannot imagine I would be able to actually catch anyone – perhaps that is the thinking behind asking me!! When the bell rings they run fast to their lines, everyone seems to want to be there first. With so many people in the playground at one time I cannot believe there are not more accidents than the few bumps I have witnessed. It is interesting to note that all the adult helpers seem to be armed with mini first aid kits!

(Journal notes, 13 Sept. 2016)
Comparable to Thomson (2007), my observations appeared to indicate that for the majority of children being in the playground was an opportunity to move freely and quickly in the space. Unlike other studies, (for example, Pearce & Bailey, 2011), I found there to be no gender bias related to this, with boys and girls generally equally likely to spend their time in the playground running, chasing, and playing active games such as tig or follow the leader.

As noted earlier, Aberforth the school playground was a large wrap around space constructed in concrete which dominated the architecture of the space. Trantor & Malone (2004) contend that it is this typical design feature of school playgrounds that is in part responsible for the ways the playground space is accessed and used by children, playing a part in privileging certain kinds of play to the detriment of others. They maintain that such a design privileges physical prowess in these spaces, by those who are faster, bigger, and stronger.

Through my observations I witnessed the ways in which the children who wanted to run tended to fill the majority of the playground space, often with little thought or concern for other playground users. Those choosing not to run or to move quickly around the playground appeared to inhabit spaces on the outer fringes of the playground. I observed them sitting or standing next to the school building wall, in school doorways or on steps, next to the boundary walls and fencing, or in locations which had ‘fixed’ seating such as tyres or benches, which were to be found positioned in the outer fringes of the playground space. When I enquired why they had chosen to sit or stand in these spaces they told me: ‘I don’t like getting bumped’, ‘You can get hurt out there’, ‘I don’t like the boys chasing me’, ‘You get pushed’, ‘I got hurt, someone hit me, ‘It’s too busy’. It is therefore significant to note that some children appeared to make a deliberate choice to occupy the outlying spaces of the playground in part as a perceived way to keep themselves free from harm from those running in the playground. However, my findings also suggested an element of preference and personal choice related to why they
occupied particular spaces, for example: ‘I like the quiet bit, it is nice over here you know’, ‘I am having my snack, I just want to eat, I am hungry’, ‘I want to sit with my friends’, ‘we like it here, we are singing, it’s fun’.

I found that children’s perceptions of locations to run were not solely restricted to the playground or indeed the outside space of school. Earlier, I highlighted the ways in which children subverted the ‘no running’ rule of school in the classroom spaces and that when out of the sight of their teachers they might run to and from the toilet. However, it appeared that there was in fact a space inside school where they saw themselves as being permitted to run, namely in the gym hall:

Garath: I like running.
I: Where do you run?
Garath: At gym, sometimes we do it outside.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 9 Nov. 2016)

I: What sort of things do you like, Anna?
Anna: Gym, we run and have fun — that’s all the people, it is so busy busy, we run.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

This chapter has presented and discussed ways in which the children talked of what the experience of being in the school physical environment meant for them, and how they were making sense of their own place in this new setting. These findings have highlighted how the children were developing a sense of where and how they ‘belonged’ in school, and their emergent understandings of competence and ‘in-placeness’ in relation to this. The next chapter moves to discuss ways in which the impact of the school rules, systems and structures not only dictated ways they could, or should, be in school, but how this came to affect their sense of identity and competence as a learner in school.
Chapter 5 Children’s Experiences and Perceptions of School as A Place of Rules and Routines

5.0: Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses how the children spoke of their experiences of school as a place of knowing and following particular sets of rules and routines. The discussion is organised around three broad themes. Firstly, it provides an interpretive analysis of the children’s talk of school as a place of existing rules they had to learn, exploring their understandings of the highly structured and time-constrained nature of school days which allowed little opportunity for independent choice. This section concludes with a discussion of how these children’s understandings of the rules of school impacted on their perceptions of the purpose of being at school and their role within this place as an ‘ideal’ pupil.

Next, this chapter turns to the topic of how children spoke of school as a place that has ‘good’ and ‘bad’ people, and to the ways in which perceptions of the ability to adhere to the school rules brought about this categorisation of self and of others. This section explores how the systems of rewards and sanctions and in particular the significant effect of the Traffic Light system impacted upon children’s perceptions of being ‘good’ and bad’. Attention is given to how expectations for self-regulation in school, and the often public nature of surveillance underpinning the use of the traffic light system, led to high levels of anxiety in some children.

The final part of this chapter explores the children’s judgement of the rules of school against their own sense of ‘fairness’ and the degree to which they deemed particular systems or rules as warranted. This section highlights that children were far from ‘powerless’ within these structures of rules and rule conformity, exerting various, often subtle, forms of resistance.
5.1: The Importance of Knowing the Rules of School

5.1.1: School Is a Place with Rules

It was common for the children to explain daily events of life in school as having structural rules regarding where you ‘could and could not be’ and what you ‘could and could not do’ in the course of the school day. Often, they would explicitly demonstrate their knowledge of these rules through the adoption of an ‘instructor role’ in order that I might better understand how things ‘work’ in school, as the extract below demonstrates:

Most days I am in, Michael seems to have assumed the role of looking after me and making sure I know what I need to be doing! It is almost time for playtime and the children are lining up to go and get their coats on. Michael comes over to me and says, “Now Carol, remember, when the bell rings you need to go into your lines. I won’t be there to tell you, you need to be able to remember, okay?”

I thank him for reminding me and tell him I think I will remember. He takes my notebook and pen and puts them on the table next to me, with the pen on top of the notebook. “There”, he says and smiles at me. “What have you got for snack? I tell him I have a cereal bar today. “I have a cereal bar, imagine us having the same”, he tells me.

He finds me after break. “Did you remember?” he asks. I tell him I did and thank him for his help. “Well done”, he says, “Did you have your snack?” I tell him I was too busy chatting and didn’t have time, so I will need to eat it later. “Lunchtime”, he says and wanders off. I feel like I have just been told I don’t have permission to eat my cereal bar until lunchtime now, which is slightly unsettling, but definitely amusing! I find it interesting to note that he clearly sees me as someone who should also follow the rules.

(Journal notes, 30 Nov. 2016)

In this extract, Michael used language that was typical of the ways in which children would speak of the rules of school when he said ‘you need to go into your lines’. In almost all cases children used language which suggested that these rules were considered non-negotiable, where phrases such as ‘you need to’, ‘you have to’, ‘you must’, ‘we get to’, ‘we are allowed’, etc. were
common. On occasion the children talked about these obligations in the first or second person, ‘I have to’, ‘I am allowed to’, ‘you must’; but at other times as part of a collective group of children, ‘we have to’, we get to’.

It was clear therefore that the children held a strong impression of school as a place of rules and, furthermore, they saw these rules as applying to them. However, I am not implying that the children envisaged no alternatives to these rules of school when they used this language of ‘you have to’ or ‘need to’. Rather, I am suggesting that this use of the language of obligation shows how children perceived of school as a setting in which rules already exist and that knowing what these rules are was therefore viewed as a necessary part of being in primary 1.

In the case of this extract, Michael is including me as part of this collective who must know and understand the rules of being in school, which you will note surprised me a little at the time. Later reflections upon this had me pondering on possible reasons for this, with part of me hoping it was a response to my successful role as an ‘unusual adult’ (Christensen, 2004) and validation that children looked to adopt the role of my instructor in an effort to help me better understand the world of school alongside them (Emond, 2011). What I was surer of, however, was that this interaction had raised an important and somewhat uncomfortable conclusion: that I had perceived any rules of being at school to apply to children, not adults, and that as such I saw myself as ‘above’ needing to know the rules for my sake. This highlighted for me the importance of engaging in practices of critical reflection on everyday practices to enable views and beliefs to be uncovered, as without acknowledgement of these assumptions it is difficult to then consider ‘alternative narratives’ (Moss, 2019).

5.1.2: Learning the Rules or Learning the Routines: A Matter of Perspective

It is well documented in much of the literature within the field of school transitions that one of the great challenges for children is adapting to the expectations of a new environment. (See, for example, Brooker, 2002;
According to Dockett & Perry (2002), where adults tend to view this as children socially adjusting to the new environment, children on the other hand see this as seeking out the rules of operation and aiming to work out what is expected of them.

In line with the findings of Dockett & Perry (1999, 2002, 2004) and Thornberg (2008), the children in this study spoke of the importance of learning the rules of school. However, it is of note that they saw this as being something they must learn to do for themselves, for example: ‘I need to remember to…..’; ‘I mustn’t forget…..’. In the earlier extract Michael informed me that, “I won’t be there to tell you, you need to be able to remember”. The language of ‘remembering’ suggests that the rules of school are something that the children perceived they have previously been shown or told.

Through my observations I was able to witness ways in which the children were slowly inducted into particular ‘ways of being’ by their teachers from the very first days of school. This generally involved ‘walking’ children through what they should do and giving detailed verbal instructions. I subsequently observed how the children were then able to begin to adopt these specific routines and enact them independently.

My observations revealed the emphasis placed on creating a highly structured day for the children through the introduction of set routines by their teachers. I noted that the performance of particular tasks on a daily basis did appear to give the children some sense of familiarity, both with the setting and with their role within it. As the extract presented on page 143 of Chapter 4 demonstrated, the children seemed to have developed a strong sense of what was expected of them in this setting over a matter of a few short weeks. My observations also revealed that what was missing was a degree of choice or flexibility in the daily structure. This lack of choice or flexibility made it easier to see why children might interpret being in school as having to know the ‘rules’ of this place.
Although I observed the teachers set out to induct the children into particular ‘ways of being’ in school, it was notable that they did not refer to this as children ‘learning the rules’, rather they spoke of the importance of children learning the ‘routines of school’. The following extracts from teacher interviews demonstrate this collectively held view:

*I think they have settled in really well. I have been surprised at how quickly they have settled in. They have been able to get into the way of the new routines. They have learnt the expectations, they know what they should be doing at this time, the independence they show is amazing.*

(CT Interview, CT(Y), 2016)

*It has got better; we are more into a routine.*

(CT Interview, CT(X), 2016)

*I am surprised at how quickly they settled into the routines. We did a lot of training at the start.*

(CT Interview, CT(W), 2016)

I contend that although the language may be different, the sentiment behind ‘knowing the rules’ or ‘knowing the routines’ is similar in that they both require children to adhere to and display particular social skills in school. Whereas the children saw the requirement as having to learn and perform ‘rules’ for themselves, the teachers saw this as children being able to follow the ‘routines’ of school independently. Independence in this sense therefore referred to children being able to carry out particular behaviours or tasks without additional support, rather than any reference to independent thought or reasoning. Both understandings place the onus for success with the children, and both are driven by the highly structured nature of the school day.

When referring to the successful adoption of the school routines, the teachers described the children as being ‘settled’. One might assume therefore that any failure to acquire these routines would label the children as being ‘unsettled’ and would reflect poorly on their capability to successfully adjust to school life (O’Kane, 2015). Consequently, this way of thinking
leaves the door open to judge the child with regards to competency, and away from any critical consideration of the rules or routines themselves.

5.1.3: Being in School: A time To Work; To Play; To Eat

Linked to the children’s understandings of the structural rules of school was their understanding of the ‘time related’ nature of this place, where they saw the undertaking of different tasks and activities as being both organised through and constrained by time.

Children talked of how different activities occurred on different days, and of the sorts of activities that occurred perhaps once or twice in the week, for example:

- On Monday we go to gym with [name of teacher].
- Is it Tuesday? Tuesday, I need my library book ‘cos we go to library.
- On Friday we do Golden Time.
- We have Healthy Tuck on a Friday.

When talking about the day-to-day activities of school, children referred to their days as being organised into three broad areas: a time for work; a time for play; and a time to eat. Each was deemed to happen separately and at set times, for example:

- We stay in school for a wee bit and then it is playtime.
- We are only allowed to play outside sometimes, after we do work.
- You must eat your lunch and then you go outside.

It was common for children to talk of the ‘time constraints’ of their day, in particular with reference to the times when they could play and when they could eat, as the following examples demonstrate:

- I am sitting in the open area writing up some thoughts in my journal. The bell has gone for playtime and the children are collecting coats and leaving the area. Adam comes to stand by me, he tells me:
“You will have to get ready now, hurry or playtime will be over.” He seems concerned that if I don’t stop what I am doing that I will miss out on playtime. I hadn’t really thought about how small the window is for free play, that fifteen minutes isn’t such a long time really.

(Journal notes, 21 Oct. 2016)

Barbara: If someone gives you a sweetie you are not allowed to eat it. 
I: When are you allowed to eat? 
Ben: Just at lunch time. [sounds unhappy about this] 
Barbara: Lunchtime and playtime. 
Ben: Not when you are inside. 
Barbara: Not even when you are outside after lunch. 
I: Do you have to eat your lunch before you go outside? 
Ben: After two bells you can eat as much as you want. 
(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016)

This latter extract carries the same message as Michael telling me in the earlier example that I was unable to eat my snack until lunchtime, having missed my ‘window of opportunity’ at the morning playtime. These findings suggest that the children held the belief that times to do certain things are non-negotiable within the structure of the day – there were ‘rules’ about when things happen, they were telling me, which should be known.

The lack of flexibility as to these timings was raised by the children in ways that suggested some children found this problematic, for example:

Kevin: Sometimes I get annoyed when I am not allowed to get something, if I am not getting something to eat ‘cos I am not allowed. 
(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

Adam: I don’t like lunchtime ‘cos you get the longest play out and I don’t like having a long time. I always need the toilet. And I never stop needing it when I go outside ‘cos it
These findings highlight that some children found that the rigidity of the structure of the day, with set times for set activities, impinged on their ability to satisfy some of their basic comforts, such as not being able to eat when they are hungry, not being able to easily visit the toilet. Furthermore, as typified in Adam’s comments, children spoke of having to be outside when they would rather be in or in some cases vice versa: ‘I wish I could play out more’. This suggests that if children had a choice some would prefer to have different ways of doing things.

Einarsdottir (2010) suggests that school timetabling tends to reflect what is valued and important, where ‘time to work’ is often valued over ‘time to play’. The findings of my study seem to suggest that certain requirements as to the timing of school activities are privileged over any desires, and at times needs, of children.

A final but important point to make in this section is that my observations revealed that children generally appeared to lack an accurate sense of time. Frequently they were heard to ask if it was time for something to happen yet, for example: ‘is it lunchtime yet?’ ‘when will it be home time?’, ‘have we had one play time?’, and so on. Although they seemed to understand that there were particular times for things, they could not generally independently work out how long it was until or from a particular activity. Consequently, this meant children by and large had to rely on external sources such as school bells and their teachers or school helpers to make sense of the structure of the day.

5.1.4: Notions of Rules = Notions of Pupils

As in Einarsdottir’s (2007, 2010) work, the children principally considered school as being a place where you ‘do your work’ and ‘do learning’.
You must do your work, that is very important.
You do your activities; you have to do your learning.

Children therefore interpreted being in school as ‘doing’ something related to the academic purpose of school; doing your work; your learning; or your activities. Similar to Einarsson’s (2010) findings, this perception of ‘doing’ was viewed as revolving around curriculum subjects and tended to be focused on subject knowledge, with language and mathematics the most frequently cited:

Do good work and do good number and do good writing.
You have to do maths and gym.
We have to draw in school, and do maths, and cut out.
School is about numbers, and learning letters.
I am doing ‘w’ and we are doing ‘h’.
We have to do our sounds and remember the alphabet.

Associated with this, the children spoke of the requirement to behave in particular ways and display what can be deemed as specific work-based skills, for example:

Beth: You have to listen to the teacher, look at whoever is talking, sitting with hands in a basket.
Adam: And colour in the lines.
Beth: I am good at colouring in the lines.
Adam: Me too.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 30 Nov. 2016)

Children spoke of how important it was to do as they were told in school, most especially if instructed to do something by their teachers:

Listen to what the teacher says to do.
Do what you are told.
Do what the teacher says you have to do.
Additionally, particular dispositions were also deemed necessary according to the children, for example:

*You have to be quiet in class.*
*You have to be kind.*
*We need to be lovely and nice.*
*Not cheating.*
*But not do silly things.*

Children also recounted what can be considered as:

- etiquette rules, 'you must hold the door if you go first';
- safety rules, 'you can’t run inside'; and
- procedural rules, 'you should hang your coat up there', 'finished work goes there', 'you have to ask to go to the toilet'.

These findings suggest that children saw being in school as requiring them to follow a series of preordained rules which value and promote particular socio-cultural traits of following orders; listening to others; being kind; and exhibiting self-control. Principally they saw the main reason for coming to school as doing ‘work’. Notably they appeared to interpret ‘doing work’ as the successful completion of curriculum-based tasks set by their teachers. In all of this, children gave little impression of experiencing or having the opportunity to practise democracy through freedoms of choice and consultation. Rather, what was experienced was the need to adjust to pre-determined norms and values through the learning of set rules and routines in their day-to-day school lives.

### 5.2: Social Practices and Constructions of Identity

This section centres on how children spoke of their experiences of school socialisation structures, examining how these structures impacted on their understanding of expected social practices and the identities created by these structures. Firstly, I examine how the children spoke of school as a place with ‘bad’ and ‘good’ people and show how the school Traffic Light system appeared to have had a significant impact on the construction of
identity positions. I then unpack what the children thought being good or being bad in school involved. Next, I investigate how the rewards and sanctions associated with the Traffic Light system were understood in relation to ‘getting’ and ‘losing’ time and the exercise of choice to play. I then explore ways in which expectations of self-regulation and the often public nature of surveillance underpinning the use of the traffic light system led to instances of anxiety in children. Lastly, I discuss the ways in which the children interpreted feedback from their teachers on schoolwork and how this influenced them to classify learning as being good or being bad.

5.2.1: There Are More ‘Goodies’ Than ‘Baddies’ in School

Ben: There are more goodies than baddies in the school. I am a baddy.

I: Why are you a baddy, Ben?

Ben: I am sometimes. I am actually a baddy. [He moves away to do something else and so ends our conversation.]

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016)

This extract illustrates the way in which the children frequently used the language of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in order to label themselves and other children in school. Ben wanted me to know of the existence of two opposing categories of people that could be found in school; one deemed to be ‘good’ or the ‘goodies’ and the other as ‘bad’ or the ‘baddies. Without much in the way of an explanation as to why he understood this to be the case, Ben told me he was ‘a baddie’ in school, labelling himself as belonging to that particular group. I found it was extremely common for the children to talk in terms of being a bad or being a good person, and to identify themselves and others in school in this way, for example:

Rosie: But I am never bad, I’m never bad.

Arthur: Yeah, I am bad, I am on amber.

Rosie: Yeah, we have bad people in school.

I: Why are you on amber?
Arthur: Em, I wasn’t doing very good singing in the gym hall.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

Given this shared understanding amongst the children that two categories of people existed in school, those who were ‘good’ and those who were ‘bad’, I wanted to see if I could find out more about where this thinking might have originated from. In addition, I was interested in why some children, like Ben and Arthur, saw themselves as being ‘bad’ people, whereas others, such as Rosie did not.

In pursuing these questions, I was guided by the work of MacNaughton (2005). MacNaughton observes that the meanings of words have origins in social, cultural, and political standpoints, and that it is only when we actively seek to deconstruct these words that we can begin to reveal the, often unquestioned, meanings that operate within them. This led me to look more carefully at the times and the contexts in which the children tended to use the language of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in relation to people in school.

As the preceding extract illustrates, I found that there existed a strong link between children’s understandings of being a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ person and their interpretation of the Aberforth whole school behaviour management approach which used a Traffic Light system. (A fuller explanation of this system and its deployment can be found in Appendix J.). In that extract, Arthur had categorised himself as being ‘bad’ because ‘I am on amber’ due to the fact he was not ‘doing very good singing’. Being ‘on amber’ referred to his name card being placed on the amber coloured traffic light on the classroom wall display, which can be seen in the picture below.
Figure 5.1: Traffic light system commonly used in schools

Traffic Light displays such as this were prominently displayed on the walls of each of the children’s classrooms; and the frequency with which they spoke of these displays and the traffic light system led me to understand this to be a very important feature in their everyday life in school. I discovered that the children commonly interpreted the colour of the traffic light their name card was on as a judgement of what kind of person they were, as Arthur did in the previous extract. The example below is typical of the very many conversations I had with children on this aspect of the Traffic Light system.

Barbara: And we’ve got traffic lights and if you have been good you go on green, and if you have been a bit bad you go on amber, and if you have been really bad you go on red.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 2 Dec. 2016)

From these conversations I was able to understand how children commonly interpreted being on the green coloured traffic light as a sign of them ‘being good’. Conversely, if they found themselves on the amber or red coloured traffic light this was a sign that they were being bad, whether that was being ‘a bit bad’ or ‘really bad’. I concluded therefore that the way in which the school traffic light system operated was integral to the children’s identification and designation of the different identity positions of being a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ person in school.
5.2.2: What Children Thought Being Good and Being Bad in School Involved

Systems, such as the Traffic Light approach deployed in Aberforthe Primary, are commonly used in primary schools to shape social practices through a process of normalizing and supporting certain behaviours. As such, their key focus is on encouraging what is deemed to be ‘acceptable’ behaviour and discouraging those behaviours that are deemed to be unacceptable. As discussed in Chapter 2, the deployment of such systems is often underpinned by the belief that children’s behaviour has a direct impact on the quality of learning engagement and academic outcomes (Fontana, 1994; Scottish Executive, 2006; Scottish Government, 2013; Payne, 2015; de Noble et al., 2015).

Given that the children interpreted the Traffic Light system as establishing who was ‘good’ and who was ‘bad’ in school. I therefore wanted to investigate what the children thought being good or being bad in school involved.

An examination of the language used by the children demonstrated a strong link between the language of ‘doing’ something (actions); perceptions of being a bad or a good person, and Traffic Light colours, as the following extract reveals.

Matilda: When you are in school you do, you don’t do bad things, you do good things, and you don’t do bad things. When you are doing bad things you will go on amber, when you do loads of bad things you will go on red. Then you do good things you’ll — emmm — and be happy.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 2 Dec. 2016)

In this extract Matilda spoke of the need to not ‘do bad things’ and ‘do good things’, thereby suggesting an understanding that it was the actions of the children that led them to be on certain coloured traffic lights and consequently to be judged as being good or being bad. Accordingly, I was interested to understand what these actions might involve.
I found that the children spoke of being judged against particular types of social actions or behaviours in schools. In the majority of cases, children perceived ‘being good’ at school as centrally related to how they performed in their schoolwork, for example:

I: What makes you good at school?
Brian: Being good and being bad and being really bad and doing good work and good and do number and do good work and do good writing.
Matilda: And not cheating.
Brian: And no cheating at games.
Barbara: Amber was looking at Blair’s when she didn’t know her numbers.
Brian: What you do is, if you be really good you will be on really, really good. If you do really good, you do numbers and be nice.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 2 Dec. 2016)

Children commonly spoke of the need to do ‘good writing’ or ‘numbers’ and would also comment on the need to ‘do your sounds’ or ‘do good drawing’. These were all tasks I witnessed as a regular part of their core daily classwork. The language they used seemed to suggest that this required that they not only complete their schoolwork tasks, as in ‘do your sounds’, but produce a satisfactory or ‘good’ product, for example, ‘do good writing’. This appears to be somewhat counter to Payne’s (2015) suggestion that in classroom management systems the focus tends to be on correcting or re-focusing children’s behaviour rather than on poor task outcomes. The children in this study appeared to conceive of ‘being good’ in school as not only the ability to do a particular task but also the ability to do it well.

Furthermore, as the preceding quotations have illustrated, not being able to do something for yourself was viewed negatively. In the preceding extract we hear how Matilda, Brian and Barbara discussed the need to not cheat at school, which implies an understanding that schoolwork should be performed as an individual, rather than with others or indeed with the help of others. In
Chapter 4, I highlighted the way the children perceived of their ‘work’ or ‘learning’ in school as related to sitting at their own desks and undertaking a task set by their teachers. Adding to this account, the children, in order for them to be perceived as ‘being good’, may also have viewed learning as a solitary activity at their desks, for which they were responsible.

It is important to note that the children talked of judgements of doing ‘good work’ and ‘being good’ as linked to certain visible actions or behaviours in school. There are those who suggest, (see, for example, Fontana, 1994; Sullivan et al., 2014) that this can be a key drawback to using behaviour management systems, such as the Traffic Light system. By focusing too strongly on observable behaviour there is a danger of too little consideration being given to the motives or reasons that underlie the cause of the behaviour itself. There arises a danger too in children conceiving that there must be a ‘good’, or alternatively ‘bad’ way for them to ‘be’ in school.

I found that the children also spoke of the need to display certain dispositions in school, for example, in the preceding extract Brian talked of the need for them to ‘be nice’. Logan also spoke of the need to be nice and associated this with being on the green coloured Traffic Light:

*I: What does on green mean?*

*Logan: It means that you are nice.*

*I: I see, and what happens if you are on — yellow?*

*Claudia: Amber.*

*Logan: It means you are quite bad.*

*I: And what if you are on red?*

*Logan: And you’ve been very naughty.*

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

We see Logan using opposing categories to identify people in school; those who are ‘nice’ and those who are ‘naughty’, and these categories were understood to be integrally associated with the school Traffic Light system. Those who were nice would be found on the green coloured Traffic Light, or
perhaps correspondingly, those who were on the green coloured light could be classed as being nice. Accordingly, those who were on the amber or red traffic light colours could not be classed as nice and consequently found themselves given a label of being naughty.

In the following extract, Henry spoke of the need to not do silly things in school, otherwise you would find yourself on the amber or red coloured lights.

*Henry: When you be at school you do some activities, you have to learn but not do silly things ‘cos you will actually — eh — your traffic light will get changed to amber then red — that was just the end.*

(Helping M& C, Field notes, 28 Nov. 2016)

I found MacNaughton’s (2005) work on how meanings in language can emerge as a consequence of binary oppositions useful in analysing further the origins of the children’s use of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It puzzled me as to why children readily used this language to describe themselves and others in school when I had not witnessed any occasions of adults in school using this language, either in relation to children or to their behaviour. What I had observed was that during their interactions with the children’s teachers would commonly use positive affirmations such as: ‘good job’; ‘good work; or specific praise such as, ‘well done that was good singing; ‘good sitting’; ‘good listening’; ‘what a great sentence, good for you’. When children made mistakes or encountered problems, teachers continued to use positive phrases such as ‘good try, you did your best; ‘I can see how hard you worked, good for you’. It is feasible that children’s adoption of the language of ‘bad’ arises as a consequence of teacher’s usage of ‘good’; drawing their conclusions that if something (or someone) was not deemed good, then it must necessarily be bad. Furthermore, in judging something to be ‘good’ teachers are sending the children strong messages of preferred ways of being, in accordance with both their own and the wider school’s expectations of children in this place.
5.2.3: How Rewards and Sanctions Associated with The Traffic Light System Are Understood

Conversations regarding the school Traffic Light system revealed a shared understanding by children of the rewards and sanctions associated with it in the form of ‘getting’ and ‘losing’ time. The children typically spoke of this in the following way:

*Jane:* When you are got off at Golden Time you have — if you are on red you get off your Golden Time.

*Tom:* Some time.

*Henry:* I know…

*Fiona:* Shhhhh!! You get 5 minutes off your Golden Time.

*Anna:* I've got 5 minutes off my Golden Time before.

*Henry:* Me too.

*Anna:* I have just had one minute off my Golden Time, one minute, 60 seconds.

(Circle Time, Field notes, 27 Feb. 2017)

Golden Time, as referred to in this extract, was a further component of the whole school behaviour management approach adopted by Aberforthe Primary. It was designed to work in conjunction with the Traffic Light system. Any child with their name card on the green coloured traffic light at the end of the school week was rewarded with half an hour of ‘free-choosing time’, known as Golden Time. During this time the child would be free to select from a range of provided play-based activities or bring their own toy or game from home. Golden Time was allocated on a Friday, although the exact timing of this remained at the discretion of individual class teachers to enable them to fit it flexibly around their own class timetables. Having your name card on amber or red coloured lights resulted in having an amount of time deducted from this given half hour. The amount of time taken away generally took the form of minutes, as the children described to me in the preceding extract – ‘you get 5 minutes off’. Once the forfeited time passed, the child was then able to engage in Golden Time for what remained of the half an
hour slot. The amount of time a child ‘lost’ was ultimately decided by their class teacher, however losing 5 minutes of time was generally viewed by the children as the norm.

It was possible for children to accumulate ‘time off’ their Golden Time over the course of the week. This was understood by the children in the following way:

Beth: We have amber and red.
John: Don’t be naughty or you will get on amber or red. If you go on red you lose 5 minutes of Golden Time, if you go on red again you lose 10 minutes.
Beth: And if you are on green, you can still play.
(Helping M& C, Field notes, 30 Nov. 2016)

The children tended to refer to Golden Time as a time when they could play, as exemplified in the comment by Beth in the extract above. Others talked of this as not only a time to play, but as a time to play in ways of their own choosing, for example:

Adam: I like Golden Time when you bring toys.
(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016)

Eve: I like Friday at Golden Time, I go in there, [she points to the classroom next door], and read books and play with my friend.
(Likes & Dislikes, Field Notes, 31 Oct. 2016)

These findings suggest that the reward of Golden Time was interpreted by the children as a reward of time to play inside school in a way of their own choosing, in contrast to the ‘normal’ requirement to ‘do work’ or follow given directions.

This understanding of Golden Time as a reward of time to play in school versus time for work was reinforced by the teachers’ choices of how children who had lost some of their Golden Time should spend this ‘lost’ time. I commonly witnessed children being given some form of written task to do during this ‘lost’ time; and on occasion teachers would use this as a time to
have children ‘catch up’ with any of their unfinished class work. A tentative
collection from my observations was that the children who were most likely
to lose some of their Golden Time tended to be those who had ‘unfinished’
class work tasks in need of completion.

5.2.4: Anxieties Around the Traffic Light System: ‘I Don’t Want to Get a
Row and Go on Red’

Fear of making the wrong choice, and consequently having your traffic light
moved from green, was a source of concern for some children. In the
example below, Adam spoke to me of his anxiety that if he made a mistake in
school he would ‘get a row’ and ‘go on the red’ traffic light.

Adam: I made a mistake at school [pauses] ‘cos I kepted
forgetting what words and the teacher asked why I did
that. ‘Cos I kepted forgetting what one was next and what
one was next [pauses] I forgot.

I: But that is okay, isn’t it?

Adam: I don’t want to get a row and go on red.

I: You won’t go on amber or red because you forget?

Adam: No. My daddy says that.

I: It is okay to forget things.

Adam changes the subject and jokes about pens, so I
leave it be.

(Helping M&C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

Fontana (1994) has argued that systems based on reward and sanctions can
have a negative impact as the desire for the reward is so strong that the child
becomes over-anxious, or that sanctions are so alarming that the child
becomes fearful and confused. Consistent with this, Adam expressed his
anxiety that his traffic light would be moved from green if he did anything
wrong, even if that were due to a mistake on his part or because he did not
know something. For a system designed to have a positive impact on
children’s motivation to behave in socially acceptable ways and to do well in
their learning in school, it would appear for some there is a real danger of it
having quite the opposite effect. Dix (2017) suggests that where socialisation
systems in school create anxiety in children, there is a strong likelihood this anxiety will override a focus on effective learning. While it was not possible for me to know the exact impact Adam’s anxiety had on his learning, the fact that he talked of feeling anxious and worried about making mistakes suggests that he was approaching his learning with caution and was unwilling to take risks.

Blair also spoke to me of the potential for anxiety linked to the traffic light system in school, concluding that it might make people scared to be at school.

*Blair and I are having a chat while he is drawing during choosing time. I am asking him about coming to school and what Myles & Celia might need to know. He says people might be scared of what it is like [at school]. They will be scared of going on different traffic lights. This is a little concerning, as I am finding some children seem to have a very negative and almost ‘fearful’ attitude towards the traffic light system. When I enquire as to why this might be, Blair tells me ‘They won’t like being on red’.*

(Journal notes, 25 Nov. 2016)

Some children spoke of the way the colour of their traffic light impacted on their feelings of happiness in school. During our conversation about things, he liked and did not like about school Logan drew a picture which included the traffic light system.

![Figure 5.2: Logan’s drawing of traffic lights](image-url)
During our conversation about his picture Logan told me: ‘I like having my traffic light on green, it makes me happy’. Conversely, he spoke of not liking having his name card on the red coloured light: ‘putting myself on red — I don’t like when I get into trouble’. Logan revealed that he was very aware of the consequences of where his name card appeared on the traffic lights, citing his preference for having it on the green light and not liking it when he got into trouble. It was interesting to note that in his drawing Logan replicated the Traffic Light display that appeared on his classroom wall, adding his own name to the amber light to show this was what made him unhappy, and on the green light to show this one made him happy.

Logan was not alone in showing awareness of where his name card appeared on the Traffic Light display in the classroom. I noted in my journal other times when children had directed my attention to the Traffic Light displays, often with an accompanying remark about where their name card was positioned.

*Holly is looking at the Traffic Light display on the wall behind where I am sitting. She approaches me to tell me.*

“I stay on green the whole day and the whole night”.

(Journal notes, 5 Oct. 2016)

Some of the children’s parents/carers also remarked on their child’s interest, and at times they felt overly great interest, in the school Traffic Light system, as the extract below reveals:

*Perhaps Yvonne seems a little hung up on the traffic light system. She is desperate to remain on green however she shares with us who might be on amber too.*

(Parent Questionnaire, 2016)

Yvonne’s stated [over] interest in the Traffic Light system appeared to derive from her eagerness, or perhaps this might also be interpreted as anxiety, towards having her name card on the green coloured light. The fact that she shared who was ‘on amber’ demonstrates that she was not only aware of
where she was situated on the school Traffic Light display, but where others were situated also.

As previously noted, Traffic Light displays were prominently displayed on primary 1 classroom walls. Consequently, these displays were easily viewed by all who happened to be in, or happened to visit, the classroom. Marx & Steeves (2010) contend that the very public nature of such systems helps recruit children into the process of monitoring and managing behaviours. My findings suggest that this was indeed the case. The children appeared to be very aware of where they were situated on the Traffic Light display and most appeared to wish to avoid having their name card moved on to amber or red. Furthermore, they appeared to be very aware of where others were situated on the display and would make judgements of others based on this, for example:

Finn: Two people are on amber.
Logan: Yeah.
Joan: Oh, that is not good.
(Field notes, 8 Mar. 2017)

The system of Traffic Lights therefore appeared to add additional pressure on the children to conform to particular types of behaviour through a process of ‘naming and shaming’. My findings suggest that some children experienced levels of anxiety related to this and for some this led to a somewhat unhealthy fixation with the Traffic Light system in general. These findings correspond to those of Dix (2017) who argues that systems involving naming and shaming are often responsible for lowering children’s self-esteem, warning that this can lead to poor self-image and low expectations.

5.2.5: How the Rewards and Sanctions Associated with Schoolwork and Learning Were Understood

I: Are you finished with your drawing Henry?
Henry: Yeah.

Anna: Can we put a sticker on it?
This extract illustrates common ways in which the children appeared to actively look for a 'reward' when they had completed a piece of schoolwork. Through my observations I was made aware of a range of different 'rewards' employed by teachers as both incentives and as ways of providing feedback on the children's academic work. Teachers routinely used stickers, smiley faces and, in some cases, customised stampers to provide children with tangible forms of feedback on their individual pieces of schoolwork. As the extract above reveals, the children seemed to have become used to receiving these forms of feedback and consequently they appeared to hold an expectation of them being awarded for everything they produced in school, including the drawings they had made for me.

Children were invited to create drawings during my research as a way to share with me their thoughts and experiences of being at school. These were not designed to be viewed as 'schoolwork' and accordingly I did not provide the children with 'feedback' on these, but rather used them as a platform to explore their thinking. I found however, that perhaps in the absence of my providing feedback in the ways their teachers did, children began to add what could be construed as their own feedback on to their drawings. Some examples of this can be seen in the drawings below:

Figure 5.3: Susan drew ticks and crosses on her drawing
As illustrated above, children commonly used happy or smiley faces and ticks to demonstrate something they perceived to be good, or something they liked. Conversely, the addition of a sad face or a cross on their drawings was used to show something perceived as not good or that they did not like.

Often children would add these on to their drawings at the end of our chats before handing their drawing over to me, as the following extract from my journal reveals:

> A small group of three children have been drawing me pictures of things they like about school and things they do not. I have asked if I may keep their drawings. Alice is not keen but has let me take a picture of it so she can keep the drawing for herself. Adam handed his drawing to me and then took it back. He told me ‘I am going to put a tick on that side but not on that side, what I don’t like and what I like’. Having done this, he hands his drawing over to me and goes back to his class.

(Journal notes, 7 Oct. 2016)
These actions may reflect the fact that children tended to receive feedback in these forms from their teachers after a piece of schoolwork had been completed.

Preceding pages have described the association the children made between positions on coloured traffic lights and ‘being good’ or ‘being bad’ in school. I found this thinking to be mirrored in their understanding of many of the commonly used feedback symbols, where a tick was green and thus good, and red [pen] on their class work was not good.

_Alice_: I will do a tick.

_Susan_: What colour is a no?

_Alice_: Red is a no. A tick is good. It is green.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016)

A perception that good things are green was also evident in both John and Martin’s drawings. Martin drew lots of green circles on his drawing of things he liked and told me he liked having lots of green traffic lights on his work. Similarly, John opted to not only draw a tick on his drawing of things he liked but chose to make this a green tick. In the extract below, Logan explicitly related this thought process to his own schoolwork when he told me:

_Logan_: I don’t like bad smiley faces and I don’t like red. Well, I like nice smiley faces and me doing my best work.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

It is common practice for teachers in schools to use symbols such as ticks, crosses, smiley faces, etc. on children’s class work to give feedback on their learning. However, these findings suggest that children may also internalize these symbols as representations of whether their class work is judged to be good or bad. In turn, this has the potential to have them see their own abilities in the learning they do in school as ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

**5.3: Whose Rules: Conformity or Resistance?**

It has been established in this chapter that the children spoke of school being a place with rules and an important part of their role within this place was to
learn and follow these rules. Within the structures and systems of rules in the school environment it was difficult for the children to exercise much in the way of autonomy over what they could and could not do in this place. However, I found that the children were, and viewed themselves as, far from powerless in the school setting.

In this section I discuss the ways in which the children judged the rules of school against their own conceptualisations of ‘fairness’ thus revealing the degree to which they viewed particular systems of rules as warranted. I set out how the children explored ideas of alternative applications of the rules of school, then move on to discuss the ways in which the children resisted conformity.

5.3.1: Notions of Fairness: Why Rules Can Be

Thornberg (2008b) contends that children are not just passive recipients of school rules but are active agents in their own socialisation process, capable of judging for themselves the value of these rules. Correspondingly, I found that the children in my study were capable of providing a reasoned argument as to why certain rules might be needed, why they were of value.

For some children the need to have rules was judged as important as this made school a nicer and safer place for everyone to be, and systems to enforce these rules were therefore deemed necessary, as the extract below illustrates:

Tom: *If you don’t have traffic lights, you might just be bad and nobody would care, and then you could hurt somebody, and the teacher wouldn’t even care.*

I: *So, if you didn’t have the traffic lights do you think people would be bad in the classroom?*

Tom: *Yeah.*

I: *So, having traffic lights in the classroom stops people from being bad?*

Tom: *Everybody would be bad.*

Fiona: *See, if you don’t have traffic lights and if you are bad, nobody would care.*
Tom: That is what I said.

Fiona: You might forget about people being bad, if you didn’t have traffic lights, if you keep looking and you didn’t see the traffic lights you wouldn’t know they had changed their traffic lights. And if they had been really, really bad they might need a big row, a big row from the teacher.

(Circle Time, Field notes, 27 Feb. 2017)

Fiona and Tom reasoned that rules in school were a necessity as without them people would behave in ways that might be ‘bad’ and this could lead them to upset and hurt other people. They contended that people in school should not be able to just behave in any way that they wished, as this would lead to school being an altogether unpleasant place to be. They also argued that the Traffic Light system would help people to remember to not ‘be bad’. For some children then there appeared to be a sense of wellbeing and ‘order’ to be gained from knowing that rules exist in school.

In this extract both Tom and Fiona talked directly about the teacher. Tom felt that if there were no rules in school then even their teacher would not care. What he meant by this was not made explicit, however in the context of our discussion, he seemed to be inferring that without rules as a way to measure and judge what was acceptable behaviour then there would be no way for the teachers to ensure order in school. If people were able to behave in any way they pleased, without any rules in place, then teachers would just let this happen. Similarly, Fiona suggested that allowing breaches of these rules to be tracked can help the teacher know who might need to have ‘a big row’.

It was common for children to desire others to conform to the rules of school; and I witnessed frequent instances where children would show displeasure at others’ actions if they considered them to be ‘breaking the rules. Sometimes children would admonish another child openly, for example by telling them to ‘stop being loud’, ‘stop chatting’, ‘that doesn’t go there’. However, on most occasions children would seek out an adult to report the perceived misdemeanour, as the extract below demonstrates:
This afternoon, while sitting near the classroom doorway, Stella approached me to tell me that Chloe and Polly were under the table. “That’s where the bags go”, she tells me, “They shouldn’t be there”. I look over and see the girls sitting under the table, it may be a game they are playing, I am not sure. I am reluctant to intervene as this is not my role as a researcher, and not how I want the children to see me. I am trying to not have the children see me as an authority figure and this is something I continually struggle with when I am in school. I look to see where the class teacher is. She is working with another group and is unaware of this happening. I eventually opt for saying to Stella “I wonder what they are doing?” Stella looks at me in a way that suggests either she does not expect this response or is unimpressed by me. She leaves and goes to tell the class teacher. The class teacher asks Polly and Chloe to finish off their work and sit at the table properly. Stella appears to be happy now and goes back to her own work.

(Journal notes, 28 Nov. 2016)

Stella was clearly very unimpressed by the fact I would not intervene, as she had perceived it was an adult’s job to make the girls behave in a more appropriate way. However, I did not get the impression that her actions were led by a goal to get the girls ‘in trouble’, but rather that she felt that the rules of what you can and cannot do were being broken and as such this needed to be rectified. Further observation of Stella seemed to confirm this. Stella demonstrated through words and actions that she had a strong knowledge of the school rules. She actively followed the given rules and could be described as a child who ‘did what she was told’ in school. Her motivation for this appeared to derive from a sense of it being ‘the right thing to do’. Stella seemed to like, and indeed need, order, and this appeared to give her a sense of comfort and wellbeing, therefore others not following the school rules was upsetting to her. Her demeanour was generally calm, and she appeared happiest when everyone was ‘following the rules’. She became visibly anxious and upset when children did not do this.

It is difficult to gauge how much of this kind of thinking arises from children’s personality and how much is in fact learned through the systems and
structures children find themselves exposed to in school. However, it is important to acknowledge that the understandings children develop with regards to the systems of rules in school are complex and the judgements they make are interrelated with the ways in which they perceive and value these rules.

Not all aspects of the systems around rules were deemed fair by the children, and as a consequence these aspects were much less valued. One example, illustrated in the extract below, was their judgements of the system of Golden Tickets used by one of the teachers in school to motivate the children to abide by the school rules and to encourage particular ways of being in school.

_**Fiona:** I am going to draw a school. I am going to draw things I don’t like about school — I don’t like not winning — I am going to draw me sad. I’ve a sad face ‘cos I didn’t get the Golden Ticket. I am going to draw never ever win Golden Tickets. I have never actually got one. If I was the Golden Ticket winner, I would just look in the box._

_**Jane:** I don’t get Golden Tickets either.

_**I:** Why do you get Golden Tickets?_

_**Martin:** For good listening and good sitting._

_**Logan:** One day someone got 20 Golden Tickets. I don’t like it when I am not the Golden Ticket winner and everyone else is — that is me — sad. I do try._

_**Jane:** There is not [any] point — you won’t win._

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

Here we can see that a system designed as a strategy to encourage and support children to ‘try hard’ and ‘do their best’ in actual fact led to some children feeling demotivated and sad. During the above conversation, Fiona, Jane, and Logan tried to help me understand ways in which this was not, in their view, a fair system. Logan told me he tried, but still did not get any Golden Tickets, whereas someone in his class, according to him, got 20. Jane concluded that there was no point in trying.
5.2.3: Children’s Playful Subversions, And the Need for A Jail

The following conversation arose from a discussion with a small group of children regarding what they would change about school if they were the one in charge of making choices as to how school should be. As this extract shows, the children began to have some fun with alternative suggestions:

*I:* What things will you do in your school?

*Tom:* Put everyone on amber. [*He laughs at this idea.*]

*Martin:* All the people on amber?

*Tom:* Everyone on red. [*Tom and Martin both laugh at this idea.*]

*Joan:* Red could be good; amber could be good and green could be really bad.

*Tom:* You are going to be a really angry person in my school. [*I am not sure who ‘you’ is.*]

*Martin:* Everyone is on green, and nobody gets any Golden Time. [*They all laugh together.*]

(Ideal School, Field notes, 22 Mar. 2017)

I was struck by the way the children in this group enjoyed the idea of ‘playing around’ with the rules of school and turning the rules back to front. It struck me that this conversation would have made a very good starting point for looking at the rules of school and including children in a dialogue about why particular systems were organised the way they were. It was a novel experience for the children to ‘play around’ with the ideas of the rules of school and something they perhaps need to have more opportunity to do.

Blair offered up an alternative idea of what should happen to anyone who was ‘being bad’ in school.

*Blair:* I am putting a jail in my school.

*I:* What is the jail for?

*Blair:* It is for — you see — instead of amber or red and green, I am going to have a jail for it.

*Rosie:* No Blair, don’t draw a jail, who would put jails in school?
Blair: It can be whatever you want it to be. [He looks at both Rosie and me, I think he is looking for reassurance that he is free to choose what he wants for his own school.]

I: It can be however you want it to be.

Rosie: You want it to be like that? I don’t want to go to jail.

(Ideal School, Field notes, 22 Feb. 2017)

As an alternative to having the system of Traffic Lights, Blair decided that what his school needed was a jail. He reinforced this notion of the jail being for ‘bad’ people through his drawing of a figure (which can be seen in the top right-hand corner of his picture) dressed in striped prisoner clothing.

![Figure 5.6: Blair’s drawing of needing a jail in school](image)

When I enquired as to why he thought there should be a jail in school, Blair explained to me that jail is where you go when you are bad. He told me ‘If you drive your car too fast the police will put you in the jail, really’. For Blair, jail represents a place you go to if you break the rules, therefore in his school, those who break the rules would need to go to jail.

5.3.3: Forms of Resistance

Rules, as acts of control, are dependent on the complicity of those subjected to them (Gallagher, 2011). I found that the children exercised a number of ways to resist, subvert or ignore the rules during the school day and that their
reasons for choosing to do so were multiple and complex. In all cases, however, this was a conscious and often planned action on the part of the child.

Moss (2019) contends that resistance comes in all shapes and sizes. It has been noted that the structures and systems of the school required that the children spend sizable portions of their day in their classrooms, often sitting at their desks and tables. One of the most common strategies I witnessed children use to avoid or resist this need to sit in class was asking to visit the toilet, as I noted in my journal:

*I am sitting in the open area writing up some notes in my notebook. I am aware Blair has left the classroom, for what I believe may be the third time this morning. He sees me looking at him and tells me “I am going to the toilet”. However, he seems in no hurry to do so. He comes over and stands beside me and asks what I am doing. He stands and watches the children in the classroom next to his for a few minutes more, before heading to the toilets. On his way back he stops off by the ‘home’ corner and picks up some of the toys. After a few minutes he looks in my direction. I ask him what they are doing in class today, “Numbers” he tells me. He eventually heads back to class, and I see him go to sit in his chair and pick up his pencil and start to work.*

(Journal notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

Leaving their seat, or indeed their classroom was not something children generally had any say over within the structure of the day. However, asking to go to the toilet was a guaranteed way of being able to do this with the teacher's permission, and without getting into trouble. Teachers did not ever refuse children this request, even when it was seemingly apparent to them that there was another underlying reason for this apart from a need to use the toilet. On occasion the teacher would look over at me and smile in a way I recognised that was acknowledging they knew the real reason the child was making the request was not to do with a desire to visit the toilet. This seemed to be something of a tacit agreement between the teacher and the children.
Although it was common for many of the children to use this strategy at some point during the school day, I noted a greater incidence of this behaviour in children who appeared to find it harder to conform to the need to sit in one particular place and to undertake their schoolwork independently. During any given day, I would note that a small group of the same children, both boys and girls, would frequently ask to go to the toilet. The time they would spend out of class embarking on activities other than visiting the toilet, i.e., walking around, watching others in the classroom, chatting to me and so on, would often be quite lengthy. In doing so they ran the risk of receiving a reprimand from their teacher, but this seemed to be a ‘pay-off’ they were willing to accept.

Within the classrooms I discovered it was common for children to employ what Gallagher (2010) referred to as ‘stealth tactics’ to avoid the detection of rule breaking or to disguise their intended actions. Children would frequently wait until they were confident that the teacher was distracted before ‘breaking a rule’. For example, they might leave their seat and hope to return before the teacher noticed. If the teacher happened to notice, which was actually a common occurrence, some were quite adept at coming up with a reason for being away from their seat, for example, that they were collecting some resource, or the very popular stated purpose of needing to sharpen their pencil. In this way, the children did not actively seek a confrontation or desire to be seen as openly defiant.

Instances of open defiance against rules were very rare. When they did occur, they took one of three forms: a child might have a tantrum and cry; they would choose to defy rules and be prepared to bear the consequences; and thirdly a child might outright refuse to do something. When these incidents occurred, I was conscious that the teacher’s response varied according to the child involved and the context in which it happened. Even these instances of open defiance did not appear to be deliberate acts of insubordination but arose from a child’s genuine difficulty in conforming to what had been required of them at a particular time.
In chapters 4 and 5 I have presented and discussed the ways in which the children talked of their experiences of being in school, pointing up how these experiences could be seen to be intertwined with the nature of the physical spaces they occupied and the rules, routines, and spatial organisations of the school. Chapter 6 now goes on to discuss how children spoke of their relationships with their peers within the school setting. It looks at the positive impact of having and being with friends in school. It also explores challenges that emerged around opportunities for building, negotiating, and maintaining old and new peer friendships in primary 1.
Chapter 6 Peer relationships

6.0: Introduction

This chapter centres on an interpretive analysis of this study’s findings regarding the nature of children’s peer relationships in primary 1, with a particular focus on friends and friendships.

As discussed in Chapter 2, although this study did not initially set out to explore children’s friendships per se, I acknowledged that the children’s relationships with others in the school setting would be entwined with their experiences of being in primary 1, and therefore would be an area of significance that would merit close attention. My research approach did not set out to adopt a fixed definition of friendships, but rather, I adopted a sociological perspective, where I looked to pay close attention to how the children came to define, understand, and ‘do’ friendships, within the context of the school setting. Accordingly, the findings in this chapter draw on how the children themselves spoke of friends and friendships in school, and on my close observations of the ways in which children’s peer relationships were enacted within the school spaces. Salient factors connected to who the children perceived to be their friends are discussed, along with the ways in which the children’s understandings and enactment of school friendships were found to be imbricated in the school’s systems, structures, and spatial organisation.

This chapter is organised around three broad themes. It begins by presenting and discussing the ways in which the children described the importance of peer friendships in school and uncovers how they viewed there to be imposed restrictions upon when and where they could spend time with their friends. It moves on to discuss the importance of who the children themselves considered to be a friend and explores salient factors that had played a key role in the construction of their friendship groupings in school, namely: gender; proximity to others; and pre-school experience.
Next it explores how the building, negotiating, and maintaining of both old and new peer friendships in this new school setting had presented the children with some particular challenges. Drawing on individual case studies, it explores some of the ways in which the dynamics of the school setting had impacted on established peer relationships and the development of newer friendships with others in school, leading some children to feel isolated and sad.

The final section focuses on peer conflicts in the school setting and discusses ways in which these varied in nature between the indoors and outdoors spaces, and between the responses of boys and girls.

6.1: Peer Friendships in School

As noted in the introduction, this first section begins by presenting and discussing the children’s accounts of the importance of being able to spend time with those they considered to be friends in school. It reveals how they spoke of enjoying the social aspects of being with friends, but also their perceptions that these were limited to specific times and school spaces, regulated not only by the timetabling of the school day, such as playtimes and lunchtimes, but by teachers who held additional powers over the children’s ability to be with their friends. The section then moves on to explore and analyse friendship group patterns, exploring issues around whom children looked to spend time with and those they identified as a friend at school.

6.1.1: Enjoying Being with Friends: But There Is a Time and Place

When asked what they liked about school the children frequently spoke of being able to spend time with their friends, for example: ‘do you know what I like — that’s me and my friends together’; ‘I like playing with my friends’; ‘I like getting to see my friends’.

Being able to spend time with those they perceived to be friends was clearly very important to the children, and for some it was identified as one of the
main reasons they enjoyed being at school, as the extract below demonstrates:

_Penny: I love school. I get to play with my friends. I don’t like the weekend ‘cos I don’t see them._

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 2016)

These findings were comparable to those of other researchers (Ladd, 1990; Blatchford & Sumpner, 1998; Brooker, 2008; Pearce & Bailey, 2011; Fink et al., 2015; Kellock & Sexton, 2018) in that they clearly demonstrated that spending time in school with their friends had the potential to impact positively on children’s overall levels of enjoyment of school. It was sociable activities such as playing, eating, talking, and sitting together that the children spoke of enjoying most. However, it was found that the children spoke of opportunities to engage in such social activities with friends as happening in particular school spaces and at certain times in the school day, as the extracts from their conversations below show.

Commonly, they spoke of enjoying spending time with friends in the school playground:

_Eve: I like to play on the pitch with my friends.
Brian: I like playing football with my friends.
Susan: I play chase with my friends in the playground._

Or in the school dinner hall:

_Amber: I like sitting with my friend at dinner.
Rosie: I like having my lunch with my friends._

Most notable in these findings was that the children seldom talked of spending time together with friends in the classroom spaces. On the very rare occasion children spoke of spending time with friends in their classrooms, this was discussed in conjunction with allocated ‘free play’ time, such as Golden Time, and most commonly connected to time spent in the Open Area space, as this extract demonstrates:
John: You play at Golden Time — this is the area we can come to, and all the classes are allowed here, [referring to the Open Area space outside the classrooms], and we play together with our friends.

(Field notes, Nov. 2016)

In summary, these findings revealed a common understanding by the children that times to be with their friends in school were mostly limited to particular spaces and restricted to particular times in their school day, chiefly those of playtimes and lunchtimes.

6.1.2: Friendship Group Patterns: The Role of Gender, Classmates, Pre-School Experiences

It was noteworthy that these occasions of playtime, lunchtime, and indeed Golden Time, also represented opportunities for the children to have a level of autonomy over whom they could spend time with. It appeared that this element of choice of association was an important distinguishing feature of those they counted as a friend.

The children regularly spoke of having particular children they liked to spend time with when in school, and it was common for them to name certain children they considered to be their friends, as these extracts from their conversations with me show:

*Amber: My friend is Heather.*

*Heather: I like playing with my friends – Susan, Amber, and Kirsten.*

*Sam: I play with Kevin. We are friends.*

*Randell: I like to play with my friends, this is Garath and me doing chase.*

Frequently, in their drawings for me of things they particularly liked about being in school, the children would draw other children that they would name for me as their friends, for example:

*Rosie: That is me playing with my friends Clara and Heather.*
Although data were not gathered specifically to enable a robust mapping of friendship groupings for this study group, it was possible however to identify some notable and important friendship patterns from the children’s narratives, as illustrated in the preceding quotations, and from my observations of the children in school. Analysis of these data uncovered ways in which factors of gender, being classmates and pre-school experience played a key role in the construction of many of the children’s friendship groupings, and these factors are discussed more fully in the next sections. Although these data were analysed to examine if there was a correlation between age and friendship groupings, this was not found to be the case. Friendship groupings demonstrated no links between the ages of children and those whom they were likely to call their friends. Similarly, when looking at the children who appeared to have no apparent friendship group or who appeared to find it more challenging to make or maintain friendships in school, (a topic which is discussed more fully in section 6.2), age was not found to be a salient factor.

To provide a visual reference point for discussion in this chapter, some examples of friendship groupings, based on the data available, are illustrated below in Figure 6.1 in the form of a sociogram. As a cautionary note, this sociogram does not entail any notion of children’s friendships groups as fixed or straightforward entities but is simply intended to highlight some of the key patterns that emerged from the data gathered.

It should also be noted that the identification of the particular friendship groupings featured in Figure 6.1 is based primarily on data gathered during phases 1-3 (August-December 2016) of my fieldwork (see Chapter 3, section 3.10.3). Through the processes of a more in-depth, critically reflective analysis of these data in phase 4 (December 2016 – February 2017), certain friendship patterns and children’s understandings of their school peer relationships began to clearly emerge. The opportunity to extend my
fieldwork in the school setting into May of the school year afforded me an opportunity to follow-up on some aspects of my findings, which added to my overall analysis.

**Figure 6.1**: A sociogram of examples of the children’s friendship groupings

Organised by individual classes, the boxes illustrate examples of friendship groups, with different border styles used to exemplify additional information, (see sociogram key above), such as children who did not appear to have any particular friendship groups, or who were also friends outside of school. Lines
and bold text are used to illustrate ‘across’ group friendships. The shading of boxes is used to illustrate gender patterns, as per the key. Children’s preschool experience is found in brackets next to their name.

6.1.2.1: Gender Divide in Play

Friendship groups were generally found to be divided into boy groupings and girl groupings, comparable with other research studies which have explored young children’s relationships with their peers (Pearce & Bailey, 2011; Konstantoni, 2012; Manaster & Jobe, 2012; Martinez-Andres et al., 2017; Martinez-Garcia & Rodriguez-Menendez, 2020). As the children’s quotations presented earlier exemplified, girls would most often identify other girls as being their friends, and boys would name other boys.

A tendency towards a boy/girl gender divide in friendship groupings was most evident in observations of the children playing together in the school playground. Analysis of the data revealed that not only did boys tend to play with other boys, and girls with other girls, but that the choice of games and activities in the playground also revealed a gender divide in friendship groupings. The following journal extract demonstrates how girls and boys might choose to play with friends in the same areas of the playground, but enact their play in different ways:

*I have noticed that given the opportunity, many of the boys tend to gravitate to the pitch area and play football. This game seems to involve someone [whoever is nearest] kicking the ball and everyone else chases after it. There are no teams as such, but I notice some boys will pass to others consistently, whilst ignoring others perhaps closer to them. Is this them passing to friends? There are also girls down at the pitch area, but they are mostly playing away from this ‘boy’s only’ game and they do not become involved as a rule. The girls are gathered in smaller groups. Some walk around the outside of the pitch, others are playing a chasing game. A few are standing chatting. Occasionally Frances runs over and tries to kick the ball, but she is rarely successful and quickly goes back to join a group of girls at the side of the pitch. She appears to be aware that her actions are causing some of the boys to become annoyed with her. I wonder therefore if it is her
intention to disrupt the game rather than an intention to try and join in that drives her actions – perhaps a bit of both?

(Journal notes, Oct. 2016)

It was noted that although both boys and girls might choose to play on the large pitch area of the playground, this tended to be largely the domain of boys and their games of football. The school rules dictated that the pitch area was the only designated space for children to play football, thereby restricting this activity to one area of the school playground. As the pitch area was very large this meant that room was available for other types of games to happen in this space also, but the markings of the football pitch meant that by far the largest portion was seen to be ‘reserved’ for football, with other games pushed to the peripheries of the pitch area. As the above extract illustrated, boys tended to dominate the main space of the pitch with their games of football, whereas the girls tended to occupy the spaces around the periphery, only occasionally venturing into the central pitch area. Boys appeared to play as one large group within the markings of the football area, and the girls tended to occupy the outside edges, playing in smaller friendship groups.

That it was found to be boys and games of football that largely dominated outdoor play spaces was in line with other research which has explored children’s playground activities and games. (See, for example, Thorne, 1993; Renold, 1997; Epstein et al., 2001; Thomson, 2005; Pawlowski et al., 2014; Pawlowski et al., 2018; Martinez-Garcia & Rodriguez-Menendez, 2020). In much of this research, gendered power relations enacted in and through football in school playgrounds were uncovered, where the systemic privileging of football as a male-only domain results in boys perpetuating this view through actively excluding girls from playing. However, my findings, based on my playground observations, did not reveal blatant attempts by the boys to actively prevent the girls from joining the football game, in particular via aggressive behaviour patterns such as those reported in MacNaughton’s (2011) work. At the same time neither did I witness any attempts by the boys to invite or encourage girls to join in their football games. That the children held a common perception that playing football was something that ‘boys do’
in school was perhaps best reflected in the fact that only boys spoke to me of enjoying playing football. Despite the girls talking of enjoying playing on the ‘pitch’, no mention was made of playing, or indeed a desire to play, football. Notably, when I witnessed instances where girls made to join the ‘football space’, such as that illustrated in the preceding extract, these tended to be deliberate attempts to interfere with and disrupt the boys’ football game. I saw the boys mostly responded to this with displays of annoyance towards the girls, whereas the girls seemed to find the situation humorous, gathering together afterwards and giggling. Therefore, whilst it may be considered that the boys dominated particular playground spaces with their games of football, and that girls were generally excluded from these games and space, I witnessed that the girls were capable of disrupting this power dynamic if they so choose to do so.

While it appeared on first impressions that the boys were involved in a single game of football consisting of one large group, a closer examination revealed there were in fact many smaller sub-sets of boys playing together within this larger group. The game therefore took the form of multiple football games/teams within a larger game, often driven by who managed to reach the football first. Friends prioritised passing the ball to other friends, thereby having their own small team effectively playing against (or in some cases it appeared to be in spite of) other boys. There was a strong sense of a bond between these smaller groups; displayed both physically – in passing the ball only to friends, hugging and ‘high 5-ing’ each other; and verbally through words of encouragement and praise. It was possible to identify within these smaller groups ways in which those boys deemed to be skilled at playing football, particularly through displaying ‘masculine skills’ of sporting prowess such as strength, speed, competitiveness (Connell, 1995; Martinez-Garcia & Rodriguez-Menendez, 2020) tended to gravitate towards one another, and so choose to play together.

Not all of the boys in this study group chose to play football on the pitch area, with some electing to play mostly in the playground spaces located near to
the school building. For the most part these boys’ games, generally played in groups of three or four, tended to involve running and chasing, and often seemed to involve role playing which required an ongoing narrative to be created. I observed that ‘outsiders’ to these groups, both male and female, were regularly ‘repelled’ either verbally, when the ‘intruder’ was told to “go away”, “you’re spoiling the game”; or physically, by moving the game away to a different space in the playground. Although this was a location where I tended to spend much of my time during playtimes and lunchtimes, these groups of boys were unlikely to try and engage with me, nor did they seem to particularly welcome my presence within the vicinity of their games.

I noticed that the majority of the girls chose to play in the playground areas near to the school building, and it was common to see lots of small groups of two, three or four girls playing together here. These groups engaged in a wider variety of activities than the boys, ranging from: singing or dancing together, walking around the playground chatting and holding hands, sitting together chatting, or playing with personally owned small toys or artefacts; to engaging in role-play games such as ‘house’, ‘holidays’ or ‘pets’; or more physically active games such as chase or tig. That many of the girls were observed engaging in physically active modes of playground play was somewhat contrary to the findings of other studies (Pearce & Bailey, 2011; Martinez-Andres et al., 2017) which explored children’s games in the school playground. However, the findings of this study revealed how the girls were more likely than the boys to change from very active to less-active activities/games and vice versa during the course of playtimes and lunchtimes. Additionally, it was found that although generally fairly stable, the membership of girls’ friendship groups might change more frequently than those of the boys, with newcomers welcomed into games more readily. The girls were also more likely to come and sit and chat with me during play time, and occasionally looked to include me in their games, happily allocating me a task or role to play.
It is important to note that not all friendship groups were male-only or female-only in composition; and that friendship groups also were not necessarily fixed. However, for the most part, boys seemed to gravitate towards other boys as playmates and girls towards other girls, and these single gender groupings appeared to be the more stable ones. Closer examination revealed that a shared interest in particular types of play appeared to perform a major role in friendship group compositions. It was noted that boys tended to engage more consistently in physical activities/games and were more likely to 'close-off' their groups to exclude others, actively repelling anyone who looked to join their group or game. In comparison, girls engaged in a much wider set of activities and their friendship groupings had a greater tendency towards being more open and fluid.

6.1.2.2: Being Classmates and Being Friends: Exploring Issues of Proximity

It was found that it was common for those children named as being a friend to also be a classmate with very few instances of friends being named as someone who was in a different class. (See sociogram Figure 6.1). It was noted that the organisational structure of the typical school day involved the children spending the vast majority of time in school within their own classrooms and with their classmates. Accordingly, this raised the question of whether spending extended periods of time in close proximity to their peers impacted on friendship groups and thereby played some role in children identifying classmates as being their friends.

At the point of starting school all children had been allocated their own class, along with their own chair and table, (as discussed earlier in Chapter 4), with the seating arrangement in the classrooms most commonly organised into groups of four or six children seated at a ‘group’ table. All the class teachers gave these group tables within their classrooms a name, (i.e., the Apples; Lions; Superheroes and so on), thus the children who sat together developed a sense of a ‘shared group identity’, which children would use to label themselves and others in class, as this quotation shows:
Rosie: I am a ‘Giraffe’, but she is a ‘Lion’.

The teachers discussed with me their intent to create ‘social groupings’ within the class by organising the children in this way. Yet it was notable that the children appeared to have had no say as to where they sat in the classroom, or who was part of their social grouping, this decision having been at the sole discretion of the class teacher. As such, the social groupings could be considered as somewhat artificial, showing no discernible link to, or consideration of, the children’s preferences. That friendships would necessarily emerge from these randomised classroom social groupings was a notion challenged by the work of Berndt (2002) and Bruce (2011), who have highlighted the importance of choice and mutual interests in establishing ‘high quality’ friendships. Therefore, the data from this study were analysed to see if those the children spoke of as their friends in school were those, they sat beside in their social classroom groupings. Did close proximity to others in the classroom spaces play a role in the creation and nature of school friendships?

It was found that although some children were seated beside others that they identified as their friends, this was equally not always the case. Consequently, no strong correlations between those children who sat together in social groupings and those they considered a friend were to be found. Some strong friendships appeared to exist despite not being seated near to each other in the classroom spaces. Importantly, it was found that this separation had the potential to impact negatively on children’s enjoyment of being in the classroom, as this extract from my conversation with Amber demonstrates:

*I: What is it you like about school and friends?*

*Amber: I like having dinner — me and Heather sit and have lunch together — because we can sit together, because she is in a different group, and she doesn’t sit beside me. She sits over there. [She points to a nearby table in the classroom. Amber looks and sounds very unhappy as she tells me this].*

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 27 Oct. 2016)
Amber and Heather sat at separate tables within the same classroom. This arrangement did not impact upon their close friendship, with each identifying the other to me as their ‘best friend’. Yet Amber was clearly unhappy that she could not sit next to her friend in the classroom, and that she had to wait until lunchtime to be able to ‘be with’ her friend. This seating arrangement had not appeared to encourage Amber, or indeed Heather, to establish a strong friendship with those they sat beside. The girls were still drawn to each other when the opportunity arose, at times when they could choose whom to spend time with at school.

I had witnessed the children who sat together in these social groupings interacting with each other in ‘friendly’ terms, in ways that could be described as ‘getting along together’ in a sociable sense. This I noted reflected the ethos of the classroom spaces, where the teachers actively encouraged children to behave in ways that reflected kindness and respect towards others. Notably, within the first few weeks of being at school, each of the class teachers had undertaken some form of explicit classroom sessions which explored with the children their understandings of what it meant to ‘be a good friend’. These sessions focused mainly on these dispositions of respect, kindness and being helpful to one another. It was perhaps then unsurprising that when asked what it is like to be at school and what it was important for me to know, many of the children’s responses reflected that: ‘You have to be nice to other people’; or ‘we have to be friends and be kind’.

The findings of this study therefore reflected an important difference between being friendly with others in the classroom and those the children considered as being their friends. Close proximity to others, as in sitting in pre-designated social groupings, did not appear to impact strongly on the creation of friendships, and in some cases, inhibited children’s ability to be with their friends. This important finding is further explored later in this chapter, where I look more closely at some of the findings related to the building, negotiating, and maintaining of both old and new friendships in school.
My observations of the children during the school day uncovered ways in which the organisational structure of the classroom space, and in particular the privileged status of the curriculum, meant children were commonly discouraged from social interactions with their peers, even with those they sat next to in their groups. I witnessed that undertaking given schoolwork tasks independently was commonly privileged over any form of social interaction in the classroom spaces, as this extract from my journal notes typifies:

_I am sitting in the corner of the classroom. The children have just returned to their tables having been gathered together on the carpet to do some sounds work using the Smartboard. I look over at Michael and smile. He smiles back and puts his finger on his lips and looks at me. He points to his worksheet and wags his finger at me. I understand. He does not want to engage with me, he has work to do. I nod to show him I understand. Across the classroom I see that Garath and Randell are being told to stop chatting and ‘settle down’ by the teacher. “If you can’t work quietly together then I might have to move you away from each other”, she tells them. Everyone is starting their tasks and the teacher calls a group of children to join her at the carpet for a new lesson. I am struck by the lack of noise in the room and the fact that all the children are attending to the task they have been given._

(Journal notes, Nov. 2016)

As a consequence of this particular observation, I reflected upon the fact that Michael, who was normally very sociable, and happy to chat when we were together in the Open Area or outside in the playground, had wanted to let me know that his schoolwork must take precedence over talking to me when in his classroom. This also led me to reflect on the fact that the children in general had begun to move their magnets, (as discussed in on page 83 of Chapter 3), across to the ‘not able to help’ position when I was in their classroom. Yet the children were happy to chat in the other spaces of the school. This emerging understanding by the children that the classroom was a place to focus on given academic tasks independently, and in almost complete silence, was almost certainly reinforced by their teachers’ reactions.
to particular behaviours in the classroom, as the preceding extract revealed. Randall and Garath were good friends and sat next to each other at the same table. Yet while sitting next to one another in the classroom they were actively encouraged to ‘ignore’ each other and to focus on doing their schoolwork quietly and on their own.

These findings show that despite spending extended periods together with their peers in classrooms and often in close physical proximity to one another, opportunities to interact and engage socially with others tended to be limited. At times this was to the detriment of children’s feelings of happiness and wellbeing and their desire to spend time interacting with those they referred to as friends in school. These findings go some way to explain why the children rarely mentioned enjoying being with friends in the classroom spaces in the way they spoke of enjoying being in the playground or dinner hall, as discussed in section 6.1.1. It was notable that the children associated, and named, ‘a friend’ as someone they chose to spend time socialising with, and as such, the children appeared to make a subtle but important distinction between classmates they were friendly towards, and friends who were also classmates.

6.1.2.3: Pre-School Experiences and Friendship Groupings: ‘Familiarity’ and ‘New Together’

The possible effects of children’s pre-school experiences on friendship groupings were examined through a comparison of the friendship groupings outlined in the earlier sociogram (Figure 6.1) with the children’s pre-school experiences prior to starting school. To place the details of this analysis in context, I have inserted the overview of the study group’s pre-school experiences similarly presented as Table 3.3 on page 90 in Chapter 3.
Aberforthe Primary School (APS): Primary 1
50 children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aberforthe Nursery (AN)</th>
<th>Other pre-school settings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37 children (74%)</td>
<td>13 children (26%)</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private (PN) (8 children)</th>
<th>Local Authority (LAN) (5 children)</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other pre-school settings (PN &amp; LAN)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PN1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numbers of children attending other pre-school settings: 13 children (26%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children that attended AN only: 29 children (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children that attended AN and a private nursery part-time 8 children (16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1: Overview of children’s pre-school experiences prior to starting APS.

As illustrated, of the 50 children taking part in this study, 37 (74%) attended Aberforthe Nursery [AN] (shown in blue) and 13 (26%) attended other preschool settings [shown in orange]. These other pre-school settings included a mix of private nurseries [PN] (shown in yellow) and local authority settings [LAN] (shown in red). Of the 13 children who had attended other pre-school settings, a total of 8 children attended 4 different PN settings [shown in grey]; and 5 children attended 5 different LAN settings [shown in green]. Of the 37 children who attended AN, 29 children attended only this setting [shown in dark blue], 4 also attended PN1 part-time [shown in purple] and 4 also attended PN2 part-time [shown in pink].

It was common to find that friendship groupings were often comprised of children who had attended the same pre-school settings (see Figure 6.1). That these friendship groups frequently consisted of children who had attended Aberforthe Nursery (AN) could be attributed in part to the fact that almost three quarters of this study group [74%] had attended this pre-school setting. However, I suggest that the frequency with which this occurred was salient and inferred that an already established familiarity with others had
had a role to play in friendship groupings. This inference was strengthened when it was found that children from other pre-school settings also tended to name, and to play with, children from the same setting, for example, Garath and Randell had both attended PN1, as had Barbara and Frances. Kirsten, Iona, and Stella not only shared the commonality of having attended AN, but Kirsten and Iona were also linked by their part-time attendance at PN2. For two of the children, namely Brian and Eve, this familiarity with others from the same pre-school setting resulted in a friendship group that spanned different classrooms. In both Brian and Eve’s cases, this was as the result of them looking to maintain ‘old’ friendships from their time together in pre-school, a topic which is explored in the next section.

That children seemed to commonly form friendships with those they were more familiar with, raised the question of the situation of those who had arrived at Aberforthe Primary School without knowing any of the other children in their peer group. Within this study cohort, seven children had arrived at school ‘alone’ from different pre-school settings (see Table 6.1); this group included six boys (Henry, Tom, Martin, Kevin, David, and Ben) and one girl (Beth).

It was found that two of the ‘alone’ boys, Henry, and Ben, had yet to form any sort of stable friendship grouping with their peers, nor did they look to name any particular children as their friends. Rather they appeared to see all the children as being friends, as this quotation shows:

I: Who do you play with at school, Ben, who are your friends?

Ben: These are all my friends, I love everyone, I love the girls.

Rosie: Yes, he does!

(Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

Tom and Martin from this group of ‘lone’ arrivals had formed their own friendship bond. It is possible therefore that the fact that both boys were new to the school may have been a factor that had drawn them together,
supported by the fact that they were classmates. That this may be a feature, but not necessarily a determinant, of whom children formed friendships with, was evident when considering Kevin and David. Kevin and David were part of the ‘lone’ arrivals group and were also in the same class. However, despite a willingness from David to be Kevin’s friend, Kevin often chose to play with Sam instead – and on these occasions David would be left out.

Beth had formed a friendship group with two girl classmates, Barbara, and Frances, who had attended PN1. That these three girls had not attended AND was felt to be salient, and as with Tom and Martin’s friendship, it is very tentatively proposed that their ‘newness’ to the school may have been a feature of why this friendship developed.

It is notable that the above findings signify that the children seemed to be drawn to form friendship groupings with those children they were either most familiar with on starting school, or, in the case of arriving not knowing any other children, drawn together via being classmates and sharing this experience of being ‘new’. This did seem to suggest that establishing new peer friendships with children who were already familiar with one another may be more difficult to negotiate.

As discussed in Chapter 2, conceptualisations of the term ‘friends’ were used in an evaluative sense by the children (Allan & Adams, 2007). Children talked of their friends in ways that demonstrated how nuanced judgements were made based on their own preferences, and particular social-emotional goals (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Supporting research that has highlighted the importance of play in children’s friendships, the children in this study appeared to prioritise those children they liked to play with as their friends. It is unclear, however, whether children came to view playmates as friends, or, whether those they saw as friends became playmates, or indeed some nuanced version of both of these. Opportunities to be able to spend time with their friends was viewed by the children as being limited through the school systems and structures, most particularly, as discussed in Chapter 5, through school-based priorities of ‘work’ time over ‘play’ time. Ways in which these
priorities were found to have had an impact on how the children perceived and experienced opportunities for building, negotiating, and maintaining peer friends in their primary 1 setting are discussed next.

6.2: Building, Negotiating, and Maintaining Peer Friendships in The School Setting

Moving on from the depiction of salient friendship group patterns, this next section considers key findings that emerged around children’s old and new friendships in school. It begins by discussing how many children occasionally spoke of being in school as an opportunity to meet new friends, whilst others expressed a sense of loss and spoke of missing friends from pre-school that they no longer saw now they were at school. Next, drawing on individual case studies, it illustrates the particular challenges that some children faced in building, negotiating, and maintaining friendships in school. Firstly, it discusses the ways in which old friendships, such as the illustrated case of Polly’s and Chloe’s friendship, were impacted by the dynamics of meeting new children in school. It then looks at the cases of Brian and Eve, both of whom had found themselves placed in a different class from their friend(s) and explores how this enforced separation impacted upon them and their ability to not only sustain old friendships but to build new friendships. The final section centres on the children in this study cohort who had not yet formed any strong friendship bonds with their peers, focusing particularly on emerging issues of peer acceptance and peer rejection in the school setting.

6.2.1: Opportunities for New Friendships and The Loss of Old Friends

The children commonly spoke of school as being a place where they would meet new people, and for most it was viewed positively as an opportunity to make lots of new friends, as this conversation below exemplifies:

I: What’s it like being in Primary 1?

John: We’ve made loads of friends in school, but when I come to school, I didn’t know anybody, I didn’t know you or Frances or…

Beth: I didn’t know you.
In this conversation, John indicated to me the children he did not know at school, before going on to remember those he did know through being at pre-school together. Notably, all the children he mentions are in his class. John informed me that being at school had given him the opportunity to meet lots of new people and to therefore make ‘loads of friends in school’.

During this conversation, Beth chose to reprimand John for talking about nursery friends, telling him ‘We are talking about school’. I had been surprised by just how uncommon it was for the children to talk to me about their pre-school experience during our conversations, having fully expected this subject to have been raised by the children more frequently. Having contemplated why this might have been the case, I concluded that there were most probably two main reasons: I had focused very much on asking them to tell me about what it was like to be in school; and, I had made a conscious decision not to raise the subject of pre-school with them, but rather left it open to see if they raised the subject and made any comparisons between the two settings. It is therefore very possible, as Beth’s comments above suggests, that the children consequently did not believe I had an interest in hearing about pre-school, but only their experiences of school.

I found that on occasions where the children had talked to me of their pre-school experience this was commonly to tell me about something they missed from there, and most often this also related to people they missed, as these quotations illustrate:

Heather: I miss Mrs A — my teacher at nursery.
Adam: I prefer [name of nursery], I miss my friends.
Ben: I don’t see my nursery people.
Judy: I miss nursery ‘cos I have some friends that I really want to go and see.

Conversations such as these served as an important reminder that the children had not arrived in school from a social vacuum, but rather this time of ‘starting school’ represented part of the ‘ongoing nature’ of their lives (Ladd et al., 1997; Peters, 2003), and a time where their past and present experiences collided and merged. It was common for the children to talk of being happy and enjoying the new opportunities being at school presented, whilst also expressing some sadness for parts of the life they had left behind, in particular, people they no longer had contact with or saw at school. This ‘loss of others’ was found to be keenly felt by some children, in particular those like Ben and Judy who were part of a smaller group of children who had started school from one of the ‘other’ pre-school settings, or Adam who had been separated from friends who had transferred to a different school. That some children spoke of this sense of loss of people from their lives, with associated feelings of sadness, revealed its place in their ongoing adjustment to being in school and building new relationships with school peers. The impact of such a sense of loss should not be overlooked.

6.2.1.1: Challenges to The Dynamics Of ‘Old’ Friendships: Polly’s and Chloe’s Stories

It was found that the opportunities that arose from being at school to be with other people and make new friends also had an impact on the dynamics of ‘old’ friendships that had existed prior to starting school. One such example is that of Polly’s and Chloe’s friendship, which exemplifies the ways in which older, more established friendships could be altered during the experiences of starting school.

Polly and Chloe went to pre-school together and were now classmates at school. They sat at the same table in their classroom and were habitually observed playing together at playtimes and lunch times. They had talked with me of how they had been friends ‘for a long time’, and it was apparent from their conversations with me that their friendship extended beyond school,
with both girls regularly recounting tales of playing at each other’s houses and having gone on numerous outings and attended events together, along with their families. Their friendship, from my position of an outside observer, appeared to be solid and enduring. However, when an opportunity arose to chat individually with the girls, I became aware that a tension had arisen in their relationship since starting school.

While chatting with Polly about things she liked about school I had also used the opportunity to explore anything she might not like:

   I: So, are there any things you do not like about being at school?

   Polly: I don’t like when people are mad at me and sometimes, I am not doing anything.

   I: I don’t think I would like that either. When are some of the times people are mad at you?

   Polly: Well sometimes Chloe is mad at me because I don’t see her sometimes. It’s ‘cos I am playing with someone else, and she’s like — why are you not playing with me?

   I: Is that when you are out in the playground?

   Polly: Yeah, and she is like why you are not playing with me instead.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 6 Oct. 2016)

During this conversation, Polly raised a dilemma she had encountered that had impacted on her relationship with Chloe. Since starting school, Polly had begun to extend her circle of friends and consequently, on occasion, would happily play with other children during playtimes and lunchtimes. This, according to Polly, had resulted in Chloe getting upset with her and telling her off, which clearly in turn upset Polly. In telling me ‘Sometimes I am not doing anything’, Polly indicated that she was somewhat at a loss as to why playing with others might be seen by Chloe as a problem. What seemed clear was that neither Chloe nor Polly appeared to be happy with the current changes in their relationship, albeit for different reasons.
That Polly said, ‘I don’t see her sometimes’ and Chloe’s response was ‘why are you not playing with me instead’, suggested that a fracture had occurred in what had previously been a more exclusive friendship. Where Polly had appeared to embrace the opportunity in school to build friendships with others, Chloe appeared to be more resistant to any change or challenge to their friendship status quo. This became more apparent during a later conversation I secured with Chloe. I used the opportunity of being able to spend time individually with Chloe to explore her perceptions of being at school and ask about things she liked and did not like. Chloe could think of little she liked about school, telling me she much preferred to be at home:

_I: Is there anything you like doing at school?_

_Chloe: Not really. I just like going home. I get to play with Polly and my other friends._

_I: Is there anything you like doing at school?_

_Chloe: No, not really, I just like going home._

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 6 Oct. 2016)

In stating she much preferred to be at home where she could play with Polly (and her other friends), Chloe revealed her preference to retain the status quo of her ‘old’ friendships, and as such something of a resistance to opportunities that might arise in school for new friendships. Tuan (1977) states that it is not unusual for young children to be highly possessive of objects and people around them, as Chloe demonstrated in her relationship with Polly. However, what appeared more concerning from these findings was the impact this may have been having on Chloe’s adjustment to and enjoyment of school. It has been claimed that having a friend when starting school can positively support children’s adjustment to the new setting (Ladd et al., 1990; Berndt, 2002; Fabian, 2002; Antonopoulou et al., 2019). However, these findings suggest that this does not consider the dynamic, transient nature of peer relationships when starting school. The findings of my study demonstrated that while having a friend may indeed support some initial adjustment to starting school, as is suggested in preceding research, this is not a guarantee of any sustained, positive impact.
Corsaro’s (2003) work highlights the ways in which friendships can anchor a sense of identity in children, and in Chloe’s case this long, established friendship with Polly was part of her past experiences and part of who she was – Polly’s friend. Chloe found changes to the dynamic of this friendship unsettling, reflecting Brooker’s (2008) findings that changes in relationships can cause feelings of insecurity in children. In response to this situation, Chloe had tried to apply pressure on Polly to retain the status quo of their ‘old’ relationship and talked of preferring home to school, a place where their relationship was more familiar and secure.

Polly and Chloe’s stories point up that even apparently strongly established friendship bonds between children can be subject to change as a consequence of the new school setting, and that different children can respond to these changes in different ways. Polly embraced the opportunity to develop new friendships in ways that Chloe was reluctant to do. Furthermore, these changes to Polly and Chloe’s relationship had a significant emotional impact on both children, creating individual dilemmas concerning how to move forward.

6.2.2: Maintaining Old Friendships Through Separation: Brian’s and Eve’s Stories

In some ways similar to Polly and Chloe’s relationship, Brian’s and Eve’s stories related to changes to ‘old’ friendships since starting school. However, unlike Polly and Chloe, these changes were as a direct result of finding themselves physically separated from their ‘old’ friends as a consequence of being placed in a different primary 1 class. Brian’s and Eve’s stories were similar, in that each looked to negotiate and maintain ‘old’ friendships through the challenge of separation through organisational and physical boundaries. However, their individual stories also served to highlight the often-nuanced differences in children’s experiences of, and reactions to, building, negotiating, and maintaining friendships in school. I will begin by presenting and discussing Brian’s story, before then turning the focus to Eve.
6.2.2.1: Brian’s Story: An Account of Resistance to Belonging in One Place

During one of our conversations, Brian told me his friends at school were Roy, Paul, Evan, and Peter, all of whom were in P1Y located next door to his own class. This group of boys had been together in pre-school, where Brian had known Roy, Peter, and Paul from his time at Aberforthe Nursery (AN) and Evan from his time at the PN1 setting. Subsequent close observations of these boys showed that a strong friendship bond existed between them manifested most especially through a love of playing football, having formed what Corsaro (2018) identifies as a ‘smaller clique’.

Although it was possible for Brian to spend time with these friends during play times and lunch times, the organisational and physical boundaries of separate classrooms had made it impossible for Brian to be near these friends for large portions of the school day. I was first made aware that Brian took issue with this fact during a conversation I had with him as we discussed things he liked (and did not like) about being in school. The short conversation presented below demonstrated not only the particular and special affiliation Brian felt to his group of friends, but also the way in which he aimed to challenge any notion of not belonging to this group.

Brian: I am in PIY.

I: You are in PW Brian.

Brian: No. I am in P1Y, and I am in P1W too. It is a mixture. I am quite sneaky, so you won’t see me.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 27 Oct. 2016)

Brian wanted to be identified as a member of P1Y, his friends’ class. I was made aware that he knew that this was not true, as rather than refuting my statement that he was actually in class P1W, he counters this by saying he was part of both classes and that no-one could see him in the other class as he was ‘sneaky’. In doing so, he resisted the notion that he was identified by and categorised as part of a single class.
During my subsequent observations I noted that Brian would often ask to go to the toilet during a typical day and during this time would take the opportunity to stand and look into the classroom next door (P1Y). It occurred to me that what I had initially thought of as him ‘avoiding’ doing his schoolwork or displaying a general curiosity about what was happening in the class next door may have been him trying to engage with his friends, albeit from a distance. On observing him more closely over the coming days, I noted that following play times and lunch times, he and his friends would stand in the Open Area and discuss what they would do at the next school break. They were regularly some of the last children to move into their classrooms, and often held extended partings, including calls of ‘see you later’ and waves. While observing Brian in his own classroom, it was apparent that he did not appear to have anyone he was particularly friendly with, and I noted that on occasion he could be quite rude to those sitting near to him.

Being physically separated from his close friends was not merely an inconvenience that Brian aimed to resist, albeit somewhat ineffectually through his reluctance to remain in his own classroom. His isolation from this group also impacted in detrimental ways on his desire to adjust to the school structures, or to engage in building new friendships. His case serves to highlight the possible strength and endurance of some friendships, but also the ways in which some children may be reluctant to accept some of the changes being imposed upon them in school.

6.2.2.2: Eve’s story: “No One Is Actually Playing with Me”.

Through my observations I had concluded that Eve was a very quiet girl who appeared to spend most of her time as an observer rather than a participant during classroom peer interactions. She tended to keep to herself, going about her school tasks in a conscientious and methodical way, but rarely chatting with others in her class. She rarely acknowledged my presence or voluntarily engaged with me, which I respected. On one occasion Eve had joined me at the drawing table and she had chosen to respond to some of my
questions in relation to what she liked and did not like about being at school. These responses gave me a very different insight into how Eve experienced being in school, resulting in my having to revisit my conclusions from my earlier observations.

In ways that were comparable to Brian’s story, Eve told me her friend Jane was in a different Primary 1 class from her own, namely in P1X. Unlike Brian she was more forthright in her expressed wish to be part of this class rather than be part of her own, as this extract from our conversation illustrates:

_Eve: I like my friend Jane playing with me on the pitch. Jane is in that class [points to the classroom next door to her own]._  
_I: Did you know Jane at nursery?_  
_Eve nods._  
_I: What about inside school?_  
_Eve: I like going into that class [again she points to the classroom next door to her own] I play in there at Golden Time, and I can read the books._  
_I: Do you not like being in your classroom much?_  
_Eve: It makes me a wee bit sad._  
_I: Why are you sad?_  
_Eve: Because no one is actually playing with me, you have to play with someone else, someone in the classroom already._  

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 31 Oct. 2016)

Eve openly spoke of the fact that as her friend Jane was in a different primary 1 class, she only saw her at playtimes and during Golden Time on a Friday; a time when she was able to go to Jane’s classroom to play. Eve talked of missing being able to spend time with Jane, a friend from her time in nursery, and of preferring being in Jane’s classroom to her own. However, along with an expressed desire to retain her friendship bond with Jane, Eve also spoke of her sadness that she did not have any new friends in her own class.
Unlike Brian, Eve appeared open to the idea of making new friendships with her classmates, however, any such friendships had been slow to emerge. In telling me ‘no one is actually playing with me’, I was given an alternative insight into Eve’s quietness and observation of her classmates from the periphery that suggested this may have been less a matter of her personal choice than of the circumstances she found herself in.

The findings reviewed in this section have demonstrated that although friendship groups did exist across different classes in school, maintaining these friendship bonds may come with an emotional cost to some children (Kustatscher, 2017). Changes in the nature and circumstances of ‘old’ friendships may result in feelings of sadness and isolation in school; and for some, like Eve, Chloe, and Brian, it impacted on their ability to form meaningful new friendships with their new classmates. Both Chloe and Brian wanted to retain the status quo of the ‘old’ friendships they had, and neither appeared to be particularly driven to make new friendships with their classmates. Eve also wanted to retain her ‘old’ friendship with Jane but seemed to be more willing to make friends with her new classmates. However, she was finding this hard to achieve on her own. These findings suggest that children may require additional support in building, negotiating, and maintaining peer relationships in school and that this issue is of significance, as failing to consider it can impact negatively on children’s feelings of wellbeing and belonging in school.

6.2.3: Being Chosen — Peer Acceptance and Rejections

Eve’s comment that ‘no one is actually playing with me’ has highlighted how making friends in school often relied on peer acceptance and being ‘chosen’. (On this topic, see: Ladd et al., 1996; Corsaro, 2005; Carter, 2023). Over time, I noted that Eve had begun to form a friendship with Blair in her class, where Blair was the one initiating this friendship, actively seeking out Eve to talk to and play with.

Eve’s experience of struggling to make new friends was not an isolated case, and in many of these cases a struggle to gain peer acceptance also seemed
to be the key factor. There were found to be three main, and at times interrelated, categories of children who appeared most at risk: those children like Eve who were very quiet and shy, and tended to stay on the ‘fringes’ waiting for someone to approach them; children who displayed aggressive or passive aggressive behaviour traits in their day-to-day interactions with their peers; and those who had arrived ‘alone’ to school (as discussed earlier in section 6.1.2.3).

Previously, I considered the instance of seven children who had arrived at school ‘alone’, in the sense that they had not known any of the other children prior to starting school and found that commonly these children tended to form friendships with others who were ‘new together’. It was also noted that three of the boys from this group, David, Ben, and Henry, had yet to form any lasting, stable friendship groups. It is instructive to discuss David’s case and his sometime tenuous friendship with Kevin, and how he had found it difficult to gain complete acceptance. This was not due to any lack of desire to be friends from David’s part, as this quotation exemplifies:

David: “I like Kevin playing with me. I know what I don’t like. I don’t like when Kevin doesn’t want to play with me.”

David spoke of how he liked to play with Kevin, but this was reliant on gaining acceptance that was not always forthcoming. My observations of these boys had shown that Kevin played most often with Sam, but when Sam was not around, he would accept David’s advances and play with him. When Kevin and Sam were playing together David was generally left out. David undoubtedly wanted Kevin to be his friend, but this friendship appeared to be mostly one-sided and subject to constraints. Nevertheless, David would regularly go through the ritual of asking to play with Kevin even when most of his requests would be rejected. These friendship rejections inevitably meant David was left to try and find someone else to play with, or else he was left alone. The precise reasons why David had found it hard to gain acceptance into this particular friendship group of Kevin and Sam was not easily identified during the course of this study. However, it was notable that having
started school from the position of being unfamiliar with his peers, David, like all singletons, had had to start from a position of having to negotiate and build new friendships, which appeared in his case to set him at somewhat of a disadvantage with regards to peer acceptance and being chosen as a friend.

The reasons why some children might find acceptance by their peers more challenging have been the focus of much research (Ladd et al., 1997; Berndt, 2002; Coelha et al., 2017; Antonopoulou et al., 2019), where the focus has tended to be on the impact of stages of child development and social skills. Much of this research suggests that the likeability, popularity, and positive regard for a child can play a role in their prospects of making friends. In particular, the work of Ladd et al. (1997) and Berndt (2002) highlights many of the difficulties arising from repertoires of negative social behaviour that can provoke negative reactions from other children, resulting in peers’ exclusionary or avoidance practices. Although support for these claims was found in this study, other contradictory findings also emerged, suggesting that peer acceptance and rejection was a much more nuanced, individualised matter that drew on a multitude of factors.

This study found that although instances of negative social behaviour in the school setting, commonly in the form of aggressive verbal responses, tantrums, and physical hostilities, could result in peer exclusionary practices, this was not always the case. To exemplify this, I draw on my observations of three children in particular: Alice, Henry, and Logan.

I observed that Alice was prone to angry outbursts when she became unhappy with a situation, she found herself in, such as being prevented from doing something she wanted to do or having access to a resource she wanted. Mostly these took the form of verbal outbursts and involved shouting and crying, however on a few occasions this also involved her hitting another child with whom she was upset. Alice’s teacher would remove her from the situation and talk quietly to her, and once she felt Alice was calmer, she would look to resolve the incident along with the other child[ren] involved. I
was most struck by the other children’s reactions to Alice’s outbursts, as this extract from my journal shows:

*The children, gathered on the carpet watching a story about the letter ‘p’, when Alice suddenly began shouting at the girl next to her and slapped her hand. The teacher quickly intervened. It appeared that Alice was upset because the other girl had put her hand in front of Alice’s face while ‘air writing’ the letter ‘p’. A resolution was quickly found, partly due to the teacher helping Alice see that it was not intentional and that as an alternative Alice might have just asked for the other girl to move her hand further away, rather than slapping it. Shortly afterwards Alice and this girl were sitting close together with their arms around each other.

A little later I am sitting with a group watching them do their worksheets, when Alice has another outburst.

“She does that all the time”, Blair tells me.

“That is not fair”, Amber says, in response to Blair, “She can’t help it, she tries”.

“I did that too when I was little”, Susan then tells me.

I notice that the other children in the classroom do not seem upset at all when Alice has an outburst — in fact some pay it no heed at all it seems. Overall, they appear very protective of her — the girls in particular.

(Journal notes, Nov. 2016)

The other children appeared remarkably tolerant of Alice’s aggressive outbursts, even when these were directed at them personally. As the quotations from her classmates above appear to suggest, mostly her peers accepted this as part of who Alice was and appeared to attribute at least some of this behaviour to her age. Notably, Alice was at the younger end of the age spectrum when she started school, not turning 5 years old until a few months after she had begun school. The fact that Alice was younger [than them] appeared to elicit feelings of protectiveness towards her and prompted a defence of her tendency to be confrontational from many of her classmates, particularly from the girls. That her class teacher supported Alice to find alternative ways of expressing her feelings, and that Amber inferred it
was not her fault and that she tried to behave in ways deemed more appropriate for school, suggests that Alice’s aggressive outbursts were not seen as intentional, but rather due to shortcomings in her social development. An investigation of Blair’s comment ‘She does that all the time’ revealed that many of the other children in Alice’s class had also been with her in pre-school (AN) and as her behaviour had been similar in this setting, they viewed this school behaviour as standard for Alice. Consequently, despite her tendency to display negative social behaviours, the children accepted Alice for who she was, were very protective of her and tried to help her wherever and whenever they could, including welcoming and engaging her in their play.

I observed that Henry and Logan displayed similar behaviours to Alice, with both boys prone to angry outbursts and displays of aggressive behaviours. However, these two boys were more likely to engage in physical aggression and would sometimes push or kick the other children. Henry and Logan were both in the same class – but a different class from Alice. Notably, the children’s reactions to Henry and Logan differed from responses to Alice. Where Alice’s classmates had appeared to accept or perhaps ‘tolerate’ her behaviour, Henry and Logan’s classmates complained loudly to their class teacher each time the boys became confrontational or aggressive towards them. The teacher’s response was to reprimand the boys and on most days their name cards would be found on the amber, if not red, traffic light. I witnessed that the other children in their class would look to move away physically from the boys where this was possible, and where it was not, such as being sat together at their group tables, they would look to avoid many direct interactions and often try to ignore them. Unlike Alice, there appeared to be no tolerance of their behaviour or justifications offered for why this behaviour happened, and significantly this appeared to be the stance of not only their classmates but their class teacher also. When I raised the issue of Henry and Logan of having apparently yet to make close friends in school the class teacher attributed this to their aggressive behaviours, and consequently
rightly or wrongly the responsibility for this was placed squarely on the boys’ shoulders.

There are a number of possible factors that may have contributed to the contrast in reactions to Alice and the two boys. One of the most obvious was gender, and it is possible that there was more tolerance of Alice’s outbursts due to her being female. There was also the fact that Alice’s outbursts tended to involve less in the way of physical aggression than those of the boys, and that this lack of aggression towards others may be salient. That age was a factor was considered, as Alice was one of the younger children in this primary intake, and both of the boys were five years plus at the time of starting school. Levels of tolerance may subsequently have been related to notions of capability and social proficiency associated with the children’s age. Lastly, it is suggested that the class teacher’s responses to Alice, Henry, and Logan’s angry, and at times aggressive, behaviour may also have played a role. Henry and Logan found that their outbursts were penalised by their class teacher. As the number of complaints rose, the boys seemed to then gain a reputation for being ‘bad boys’, and were identified as such by the other children in the class, as this quotation illustrates:

Finn: “Who is that on red?”, (pointing to the traffic lights display on the classroom wall in the photograph he is holding). “That will be Logan, he is always on red”.

(Photograph Activity, Field notes, 8 Mar. 2017)

I have drawn on these examples to highlight some of the ways in which features of the school context, along with individual characteristics, were found to be salient both in how children enacted relationships with others in the classroom environment, and in how others responded with acceptance or rejection. Although a case for the salience of chronological age, gender and pre-school experience could be made as to why Alice, Logan and Henry elicited different reactions from their peer group, I argue that unique combinations of circumstances can occur, and so will require attention in order to better understand and support all children.
That peer acceptance resulted in close friendships was found to be the case in the majority of the children’s relationships with others, but not all. It was found that Alice, Ben, and Michael all appeared to have very good relationships with their peers yet did not seem to form part of a static friendship grouping, but rather moved in and out of various groups, according to their own choosing. Michael’s relationship with his peers seemed to equate most particularly to the children found in Konstantoni’s (2011) study referred to as ‘loners’, that is children who appeared to have no will or desire to play with others at times, much preferring their own company and own games. Michael was as likely to be found playing on his own, as he was to be playing with other children, and was part of a small group of children who regularly sought out the company of adults in school, be that their teachers, playground helpers, or me.

6.3: Peer Relationship Conflicts: More Trouble in The Playground

Despite a general school and classroom ethos of friendship, there were times when children would fall out or be unable to get along with one another. Although designed as spaces where children are protected from the ‘ills of the adult world’ (Gilliam & Gullov, 2019), schools are acknowledged to be socio-ecological microsystems, where peer cultures emerge, develop, are maintained, and refined (Corsaro, 2018). Consequently, through their daily interactions within and through the school spaces they occupy, children are able to learn about themselves and others, and the world around them. Research suggests that relationship conflicts should therefore be necessarily viewed as part of this cultural and social learning process, especially for very young children (Roffey et al., 1994; Berndt, 2002, Bruce, 2011).

It was found that it was rare for the children to talk of conflicts with others in relation to the inside spaces of the school building. On the occasions when this was spoken of, it generally related to: accounts of other children ‘borrowing’ things without asking – ‘I don’t like when [he] takes my rubber and doesn’t ask’, ‘[she] keeps all the pens and won’t give me any’; times when other children were being rude to them or others – ‘That is someone
being rude, he is sticking his tongue out’; or instances of name-calling – ‘[she] said I was a ‘smarty-pants, that is not nice is it?’: Pondering on why the children had rarely spoke of relationship conflicts inside the school building, I surmised that the tightly controlled, individualised work-based approach to the classroom organisation had enabled little opportunity for children to socially interact or engage with other children, thereby reducing the potential for conflicts to arise. Furthermore, any interpersonal conflicts that did arise were most generally brought quickly to the attention of their class teachers, both through regular classroom surveillance by the teachers and by peer governance; and these conflicts were subsequently quickly dealt with by the teacher. That this surveillance was a feature of life inside school was reinforced by witnessing children employing covert strategies in order to try and remain undetected, for example: whispered insults to others; taking and moving other’s belongings when the child was not paying attention; making faces; sticking out their tongues at others after looking around and checking who was paying attention to them. The ways in which these were enacted suggested that the main concern was hiding their actions from their teachers.

It was found that it was much more common for children to talk of conflicts with peers occurring in the playground and outside spaces of school. When discussing what they did not like about school, or what they felt people should know about starting school, children commonly mentioned their dislike of being hurt in the playground, as the conversations and quotations below illustrated:

\[I: \text{Why does this person in your picture have an unhappy face?}\]

\[\text{Matilda: Why is he sad? Because someone is going to push him.}\]

\[I: \text{Is that something you don’t like — pushing?}\]

\[\text{Matilda: No! I don’t like it when people push me. Sometimes I falled.}\]

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 6 Oct. 2016)
Alice: I don’t like to get pushed, so I will draw me outside. I am not happy I am sad. And I scream.

Frances: I don’t like people pushing me.

Susan: Do you know, I don’t like getting pushed.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016)

Although both boys and girls spoke of their dislike of being pushed or hurt in the playground, girls were most likely to see themselves as a victim and complain that it wasn’t fair.

Susan: See sometimes, [Boy’s name] bashed into somebody and he bashed my cheek, then he pushed me over for no reason.

(Helping M& C, Field notes, 1 Dec. 2016)

Although the boys also spoke of not liking being pushed or hurt in the playground, in general they seemed to more readily accept that it was part of the way things were at school, and part of the games they played, as this conversation with John illustrates:

John: That is something I don’t like. I don’t like when my friends push me in the school playground. This is the pitch. This is me when I got pushed. [He points at the drawing he is doing.] I am doing football. Because I got up and played football. I was having fun with my friends.

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 7 Oct. 2016)

These findings suggest that conflicts between children occurred both in the indoor and outdoor spaces of school but were more likely to be physical conflicts in the outdoor spaces — a place where children were less likely to encounter adult supervision and control. Despite both boys and girls talking of this in ways that showed they did not like these physical conflicts, girls were more likely to see themselves as the unwelcome object of these conflicts, whereas the boys commonly tended to see these as intrinsic to the nature of the games they played in the outdoor spaces.

The preceding findings chapters have presented an array of findings on the ways in which the children talked of their experiences of being in primary 1.
This has provided a valuable insight into how the children made sense of this time and place, and into aspects of their experiences they felt it was important to share. In the following, final chapter, I will return to the research questions which guided this study and look to address these through an in-depth, interpretive analysis of the key findings from this study.
Chapter 7 Discussion and Conclusions

7.0: Introduction

This research study was framed by the premise that it was possible to gain valuable insight into how the children themselves spoke of their everyday ‘lived’ experiences of being in Primary 1, and how they made sense of this time and place. Consonant with the ethnographic nature of this study the children’s talk was interpreted against the backdrop of the context within which it occurred. Consequently, this study involved the close examination of the structures, spatial organisation, and systems of school in conjunction with what the children had to say about this time and place. In many ways it necessarily became a reflection on, and consideration of, current school organisations.

The research study was framed by four research questions:

- What are these children’s experiences, perceptions, and views of being in primary 1?
- What seems to impact on and shape their experiences and understandings of this time and place?
- Do these children appear to find aspects of their Primary 1 school experience problematic, and if so in what ways?
- From this exploration into these children’s experiences, is it possible to gain a clearer understanding of what may need to be (re)considered to ensure all children are better supported to have a positive, effective start to their early years’ primary education?

These research questions have guided this study throughout. However, rather than address each research question in turn, which would lead to a somewhat disconnected account, this chapter is organised around pertinent key themes, which attend to these questions in an integrated fashion. The preceding chapters have presented a considerable array of findings. It was therefore necessary to be very selective in choosing specific areas for close analysis and interpretation in this final chapter. The areas addressed are the
ones that seemed most salient in pointing up matters that have received less attention previously.

Three substantive themes are discussed: children’s emergent sense of identity and belonging in school; bodily movement and choice; and opportunities for peer friendships. While these themes, and indeed all aspects of the children’s school experiences, can be seen to be closely intertwined, for clarity of exposition they are discussed individually in turn. Common threads relating to children’s understandings of practices of being, practices of belonging and social positioning weave throughout each theme.

The first area of discussion centres on how the children had developed a narrow view of what it meant to be deemed ‘successful’ in school based on notions of being ‘right’ and being ‘wrong’. This was commonly found to transfer to notions of a perceived entitlement to be in this place, or not, and to the ways in which they perceived of their own abilities as a learner in school. There is a focus on how the children commonly spoke of a fear of failing at school, and that uncovers a certain fragility to their sense of belonging, perceived as requiring continual justification in their day-to-day school life.

Attention turns next to how the children commonly spoke of feelings of happiness during times they could choose to run, jump, and play games in school, but perceived their classrooms as spaces where they must sit, listen, and do their work. The discussion of this theme centres on a tension that emerged between ways the children perceived they ‘must be’ in school, and their own preferences for opportunities to move around freely.

The final theme looks at how the children spoke of their peer friendships in school. It highlights their importance to the children’s emotional wellbeing. It examines issues of companionship and acceptance in school. A subtle, but important, distinguishing feature of difference between being friendly and having a friend is brought to the foreground. Discussion centres on how classroom practices impacted on the opportunities for the children to build,
negotiate and maintain old and new peer friendships in school, which had left some children more vulnerable to feelings of isolation and sadness.

A section on ‘a close mapping of the social landscape’ then highlights the contributions this thesis has made to the literature on school transitions and early years by providing a finely nuanced, in-depth, variegated, and dynamic portrayal of the social landscape of this particular school setting that brings out tensions and contradictions. The final section of this chapter synthesises the main conclusions of the preceding themes and points up their implications for future school practices and research.

Before addressing these themes, the chapter begins with a reflexive discussion of how specific approaches adopted in this research study enabled the research questions to be addressed in ways that they could not have otherwise been achieved. This initial section focuses on the importance of trusting relationships, related to positionality and ethics, and considerations of researcher access within a school setting.

7.1: Relationship Building and Trust: Positionality

My ability to hear children’s accounts of what it was like to be in primary 1 was contingent on their willingness and motivation to share them with me. In Chapter 3 I discussed my role as a researcher and issues of power that are particularly pertinent to research that involves adult researchers and young children. As I entered into the fieldwork stage it was with the knowledge that building good relationships with the children would be essential to the success of data collection. However, what I had not fully appreciated was just how long this would take, and the complex, multiple ways in which trust would be earned, or not.

Despite my early ambitions, I cannot claim to have heard from all children equally and therefore make no assertions that this study is representative of all the children’s voices or everything they thought about this time. Rather, I would claim that the findings of this study provided a much-needed insight into the ways in which children may experience this time and place. Despite
my best endeavours, a small number of children chose to have minimal engagement with me, very much keeping me ‘at arm’s length’ during the course of my fieldwork. Initially I found this both frustrating and worrisome in equal measure. I agonised over how I might truly represent children’s experiences and views on what it was like to be in primary 1 if I was unable to represent all the children’s voices equally. However, my desire to hear all children’s accounts needed to be offset against important ethical considerations, where I did not run counter to or indeed override the wishes of the child to participate. Thus, seeking to gain children’s accounts was not simply a ‘technical’ matter to be solved but required situated, sensitively judged decisions over when to encourage conversations and when that would not be appropriate. I came to see that my drive to hear a full account of every child’s experience arose from a place of quantity of data, rather than quality, when in fact much could be learned from reflecting on when and if children chose to contribute or not.

Gaining an insight into the children’s experiences was reliant not only on building good interpersonal relationships with the children but on the kinds of relationships I developed with each of them. I came to appreciate that trust was key; trust that I was interested in what they had to say, but also that I could be trusted with this knowledge. I had adopted an approach of ‘helplessness and foreignness’, similar to that discussed by Corsaro & Molinaro (2017), where I openly acknowledged my own lack of understanding as to what it might be like to be in Primary 1. Through these actions I looked to convey to the children my trust in their position of expertise from which their contributions arose (Le borgne & Tisdall, 2017). Yet, despite my best efforts to engage with all the children, a small number of children chose to say or share very little directly with me. I began to contemplate why this might be the case. I concluded that although there was most likely not one single factor involved, trust in me was a salient feature. In order to be trusted with their knowledge I had to be accepted by them as trustworthy.
Through spending extended periods of time in and around the spaces occupied by the children, they got to know me a little better, thus although I retained a persona of ‘foreignness’ I became less of a stranger to them. When children shared information with me I was careful not to pass judgement on what they said, and I noted it down diligently in my notebooks, thereby signalling the importance I placed on what they had to say. Additionally, I was careful not to convey what they had said to me to others, thus showing my intention to respect the confidentiality of what they told me. The more children engaged with me, the more I could actively demonstrate they could trust me, and the more forthcoming they would become. Taking initial steps towards trusting me with their knowledge developed at different rates in different children, and with 50 children participating over three classrooms I realised with hindsight that I had set myself a huge task.

Through critically reflecting on what the processes of ‘listening’ to the children really entailed, I came to better appreciate Bridge’s (2002) assertion that some social conditions and relationships are more likely than others to enable frank and open disclosures. As discussed in Chapter 3, I found that the children responded in different ways depending on where we were conducting our conversations and who was present. When the classroom teachers or other school staff were in close proximity the children were more likely to make a response that they judged as pleasing to the adult present. I became aware of the children’s perceptions that some things could, and some things could not be said in these situations, and this was underpinned by a desire to please adults in school. I concluded that in trusting me with their perceptions and views of what school was like for them, the children potentially made themselves more vulnerable to judgements of their capability and practices of belonging in school. It was important therefore that I listened to the children with a genuine interest in what they wanted to say, without expressing judgements or my own opinion, and that I looked to explore what was omitted or deemed unsayable.
7.2: Issues of Researcher Access: impact Of School Structures, Priorities and Being a Learner

Silverman (2013:141) counsels that ‘when [we are] studying an organisation, we are dependent on the whims of the gatekeepers. As discussed in Chapter 3, with my research study I was fortunate to have the full support of a range of gatekeepers including Local Authority officials, school management, school staff and parents/carers, who all could, potentially, have created impenetrable barriers to accessing the children. As I have pointed up, I was also ethically bound to uphold the will of the children with regards to if, when and how they chose to participate in this study. However, what I had not fully anticipated at the onset of my research was how the school structures, priorities and notions of being a learner in school would generally constrain my access to the children. Furthermore, I had not anticipated that it would be the children’s emergent views of these that would become the main drivers of my exclusion.

It is generally acknowledged that schools are highly organised settings, where teachers have felt increasing pressure to account for every moment of the school day and the children’s time. McNair’s (2016) work, for example, discusses the ways in which increasing ‘top-down’ pressures from Government, Local Authority and school institutional levels for measurable accountability and targets relating to children’s learning progress, have led to a strong focus on covering a prescriptive curriculum content, where there seems to be little opportunity for flexibility or choice in learning experiences. This was something raised briefly by each of the teachers during our interview sessions.

The preceding chapters have revealed how these highly organised, curriculum driven structures that prioritised ‘goal orientated’ learning (Karila & Rantavouri, 2014) resulted in the children constructing particular views of themselves as a school pupil and learner. Salient issues in relation to the impact of school structures and systems on children’s emergent identities and sense of belonging in school will be discussed further later in this
chapter. Here, however, I want to explore issues that are worthy of close consideration by all who look to undertake research work with children in such a highly structured school setting.

In the process of my fieldwork, I found that the highly structured systems of daily school life meant time to talk with the children was severely curtailed, and surprisingly the main drivers of this were the children themselves. What was most notable was the way in which this increased over time. I have argued in the preceding sub-section that the longer I was a presence in the school the more I was able to build ever stronger trusting relationships with the children, which led to more detailed and in-depth discussions of their experiences and views of being in school. However, what I also experienced was an increasing segregation of the times when children would choose to engage in conversations with me and the times they would not. Although I was welcomed into the classroom spaces by their teachers, the children increasingly prioritised completing their work tasks over any acknowledgement that I was present and would look to actively discourage me through word or gesture from ‘interrupting them’ during this time. By late November I found that time spent with the children in their classrooms would be largely occupied by observations, and any opportunity for conversations generally relied on waiting for a child or a small group of children to finish their work.

As the preceding chapters have strongly demonstrated, children increasingly saw being at school as a place to do ‘their work’, and this commonly involved sitting at their desk in their classrooms and independently completing tasks issued by their teachers. The children increasingly perceived this as their main priority of being in school, and, as such, any interactions with me were not permissible until such time as their ‘work’ was complete. Consequently, these limitations on my capacity to engage with the children revealed the school’s ‘social order’, and the ways in which its structures aimed, and succeeded, to socialise children into the role of productive, disciplined workers within its ‘industrial order’.
7.3: Children’s Emergent Sense of School Identity and Belonging: ‘Being Right and Being Wrong’

This research study uncovered valuable insights into how the children perceived themselves and their peers as belonging in school, intrinsically linked to their perceptions of a sense of in-placeness and out-of-placeness (Collins & Coleman, 2008). A key finding was how the children related their notions of belonging in school to judgements of capabilities and competence, and most specifically to notions of being ‘good/right’ or ‘bad/wrong’. For the children, the school and classroom systems designed to support pro-social behaviour became intrinsically intertwined with judgements on their learning ability. Importantly, this study has uncovered ways in which the children’s sense of belonging in school evolved over time and was found to be somewhat fragile in its nature, being continuously challenged through their day-to-day engagements within the physical spaces, routines, and rules of the school.

It is commonly viewed that any understandings, meanings, and ways of perceiving of a sense of ‘place’ or ‘placeness’ are created through ongoing, personalised, human interaction, in and through the spaces we occupy (Tuan, 1977; Blundell, 2016; Nairn & Kraftl, 2016). Tuan’s (1977) work highlights how these occupied spaces are experienced through our senses, and from these experiences we begin to attach particular meanings and values. These meanings also have an emotional charge. Kustatscher (2017) points up that paying close attention to children’s emotions provides a crucial insight into how they can experience particular forms of belonging and notions of self-identification. The ethnographic nature of my study, where I was focused on closely observing the children’s actions and was alert to the contextually situated nature of their accounts, allowed me to examine the meanings and the feelings that the children were attaching to their classroom spaces. To me, as a consequence, this study uncovered some disconnect between how some children behaved in their classrooms with their teachers, and what they said they were thinking and feeling about being in school.
Similar to the work of Joerdens (2014), this study found that the children’s experiences of being at school centred on a process of entering and establishing membership. The preceding chapters have discussed the ways in which membership and belonging in school was deemed to be of great importance to the children and made them feel happy and excited. Children commonly spoke of a nervous excitement about beginning in school, and Claudia’s word ‘nervo-excited’ encapsulated this well. Early discussions with the children uncovered how the children commonly viewed their ability to belong in school as directly related to their chronological age, making a direct correlation between their age, competency, and identity as a school pupil.

Chapter 4 pointed up how the children’s views revealed particular culturally held ‘regimes of truth’ (MacNaughton, 2003) about age and school identity, which were also reflected in comments made by their parents and teachers. The findings thus revealed that age was a strong categorical term associated with belonging in school, linked to notions of capability and readiness (Skattebol, 2003; Thorne, 2004; McNair, 2016) and notions of being more ‘grown up’ and ‘moving on’ (Spodek, 1998; Cassidy, 2005; Brooker, 2008; Fisher, 2010).

In line with preceding research (Margetts, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2006; White & Sharpe, 2007; Ackesjo, 2013), the children’s feelings of nervousness were commonly linked to lack of familiarity with the school setting and to having to acquire new ways of ‘being’. (See, for example, Griebel & Neisel, 2002; Keinig, 2013; Boyle & Petriwskyi, 2014.) However, this study found that these feelings were generally fairly short-lived and that a greater challenge to the children’s sense of belonging arose from school and classroom systems designed to support and encourage pro-social behaviours, which became entwined with their notions of what it meant to be a ‘good’ pupil and a ‘good’ learner. Furthermore, the children began to use the language of being ‘good’ and being ‘right’, or being ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’, interchangeably, and used these terms as forms of self-identification, ‘I am bad’ and ‘sometimes I make mistakes.’
The children’s emergent sense of their school identity and their perceptions of ‘belonging’ in this place were underpinned by their understandings of a requirement on their part to be ‘right’. This commonly involved the children’s perception of not making mistakes in their actions in school, both in relation to ways of behaving in school spaces and to ways of completing their academic work. In line with Holt’s (1964) work, it was found that a powerful desire for membership in school fuelled, and was fuelled by, a fear of failure. This was compounded by certain structures and rules which were part of children’s daily life in school, most particularly those related to the rewards and sanction systems used in the school classrooms.

Systems in place within the classroom environments meant that the children were placed in a position of having to continually justify their actions and capabilities against a set of normative standards. Consequently, any sense of a failure to meet these requirements, real or imagined, resulted in the children making judgements as to their ‘suitability’ to belong in school. The term ‘suitability’ is used in Brostrom’s (2002) work and seemed to encapsulate the feelings of the children in this study, that they were ‘suitable’ to be in school, or ‘unsuitable’ to belong there.

As Chapter 5 has revealed, the Traffic Light behaviour management system used by the school as a way to encourage ‘normative’ pro-social behaviours was found to cause high levels of anxiety for many children. It was found that often the children’s own sense of self-worth and self-identity as ‘belonging’ in school was bound up in this Traffic Light system. To be assigned to a red Traffic Light by their teacher was an indictment of a ‘failure’ on their part and resulted in the children commonly attributing such terms as ‘being bad’ and ‘being wrong’ to themselves. A particularly troublesome outcome of this was how these perceptions transferred into their notions of their ability to learn and be a learner in school. The children spoke of how ticks on their schoolwork were green, and so indicated success and being ‘good’, whereas crosses were red and indicated failure and being ‘bad’. Systems of feedback used to support the children, such as smiley faces, stars, Golden Time or
Golden Tickets, ticks on their written work and ‘being on’ the green Traffic lights, had become associated with judgements of being deemed to be ‘good’ and ‘capable’ in school. These elicited feelings of happiness, joy, and self-validation of their abilities as a school pupil and a learner. On the other hand, crosses, unhappy faces and ‘being on’ the red Traffic Light were associated with judgements of being ‘bad’ and lacking in ability. Notably, the lack of a validation reward, such as not receiving a smiley face, or star, or Golden Ticket — even if no negative feedback/sanction was given, was still perceived by the children as a judgement of failure.

The innately ‘public’ nature of the rewards and sanctions systems used, most especially the ‘name and shame’ feature of the Traffic Lights displays in the children’s classrooms, was reflected in the ways the children spoke. Their conversations reflected not only their perceptions of their own school identity and abilities in accordance with this visual display, but also labelling of their peers. These systems had encouraged not only an ethos of comparing and contrasting themselves with others, but of surveillance and governance of others (Marx & Steeves, 2010; Gallagher, 2008).

A significant finding of this research study was the level of impact these reward and sanction systems had had on children’s emergent sense of their school identity and sense of belonging in this place. By far the most common source of anxiety experienced by the children in this study was their concerns around the types of things they might do that would result in ‘being on red’ and so ‘be wrong’. This fear of making mistakes was a powerful driver in their daily interactions in school, permeating most aspects of their school experience, but particularly pertinent in their classroom settings. Also, through these systems the children had felt pressured to continuously validate their worthiness to belong in school, where school membership was required to be constantly earned and re-earned on a daily basis.

This study found that pressures felt by children to maintain an aura of ‘being capable’, and therefore as ‘belonging’ in school, most especially in the eyes of their class teachers, led to learned strategies of ‘covering up’. As
previously discussed, the ‘trusting’ research relationships established in this study, built on an ethos of learning about school from the children, had resulted in disclosures that appeared disconnected from their actions in their classrooms or things they said to their class teachers. These disclosures revealed that the children had become skilled in aiming to present the ‘best image’ of themselves, or at the very least their own perception of this, for the benefit of their teachers.

Fisher (2013) points up that children will commonly look to develop their own strategies to enable them to cope in particular situations. In this study it was found that three main strategies used by the children had begun to emerge. Firstly, the children commonly looked to work out and decode what their teachers required from them and aimed to please them wholeheartedly. Secondly, the children would look to hide the fact they did not understand or did not manage to complete a given task or look to cover up a mistake they had made. Lastly, the children would ‘give up’ trying and resign themselves to a role of failure. The children might use any combination of these at any given time. In this study, it was not so much a direct fear of the powers of control of their teachers, as McNair’s (2016) work had emphasised, that was a key driver of the children’s actions, but rather anxiety around being perceived as not belonging in school. In this way, power was driven from a place of ‘consent to willingness’ (Lukes, 2005:109) where children’s conformity arose from developing notions of the ‘correct way to be’ in school, with no other options deemed as viable.

These findings are significant in two main ways. Firstly, they demonstrate that children do not always interpret a teacher’s decisions and school rules in the way that the teacher intended. It is therefore necessary to create opportunities to explore how children themselves understand the systems and structures of school, where those working with the children are actively prepared to hear perspectives other than their own. These findings also raise the question of exactly how rules and classroom practices in general are communicated to children. While teachers may have made decisions for the
best-intended reasons, these reasons may not have been communicated sufficiently clearly, or indeed at all, to the children.

Secondly, this research has revealed how school reward and sanction systems can promote the development of narrow views of what it is to be a learner in school, underpinned by notions of being right and being wrong. Such systems can perpetuate notions that being and belonging in school is about providing ‘correct’ responses (Spyrou, 2011). These systems perpetuate views that any perceived deficiencies or problems lie with the child rather than with the environmental systems or structures (Fortune-Wood, 2002; Yoleri, 2013; Davis et al., 2014). Consequently, in order to establish and maintain membership in school, and any sense of their capability to belong, children may learn to forgo any opportunities to display individuality, creativity or risk taking. It is suggested that this will not only have a short-term impact on children’s emergent notions of school identity and learning in Primary 1 but may have a significant impact on their lifelong views of themselves as capable learners, and indeed, what it means to learn.

It is therefore argued that children’s emergent fear of failure in school, either real or imagined, grounded in anxieties related to disappointing or displeasing others, has the capability to severely inhibit their capacities for learning, for originality, imagination, and inventiveness, and can impact on the joy of learning for learning’s sake.

7.4: Bodily Movement and Choice in School Spaces: ‘You Must Sit and Listen’

As Chapter 4 has revealed, the children commonly spoke of the different ways they could physically move, depending on which school spaces they occupied. The children viewed their classrooms primarily as spaces where they must sit, listen to their teachers, and do their ‘work’, whereas in spaces such as the playground and gym hall, they could run, jump, and skip. The children frequently talked of how they enjoyed being able to move freely in the outdoor, playground spaces. In contrast, the children talked of the requirement for them to sit in their classrooms, especially for extended
periods of time, in ways that revealed how they found this to be more physically and mentally demanding. Ben’s comment that the amount of sitting required made his ‘bones hurt’ was perhaps one of the most powerful examples of this.

These findings were comparable with preceding research, which also highlighted how young children found the requirement to sit for extended periods of time, especially within school settings, somewhat troublesome (Brooker, 2002; Margetts, 2003; Fisher, 2013). Much of this has been attributed to the design features of classroom spaces, where tables and chairs are found to dominate the overall space available (Alderson, 1999; Childs & Mckay, 2001; Brostrom, 2002; Whitehead, 2006). Chapters 3 & 4 in this study have revealed how the classroom spaces in this study were indeed dominated by tables and chairs, with any additional furniture and resources placed around the edges of the room, or in the shared Open Area. Chapters 4 & 5 have discussed how this design impacted upon children’s bodily movements and dictated the kinds of learning experiences planned for the children by their teachers.

However, this study also illuminated the meaning that children attached to the specific spaces they occupied in the classroom, and how classroom spaces that gave priority to the use of chairs and tables had shaped this. The children’s views of sitting in their chair was associated for them with notions of belonging in school and their understandings of what it meant to be a learner. Chapter 4 highlighted how the children had viewed their own chair as being their own space and place in their classrooms; somewhere that they could truly say belonged to them. It was notable that by not having a chair to call my own in school, the children had consequently viewed me as somewhat ‘anchorless’ and, thus, unlike them, lacking any ability to claim affiliation to a particular place. Given that having your own place to sit was viewed as an important indicator of belonging, it was therefore not a huge leap for the children to then perceive this act of sitting on your own chair as being an important, required feature of school life.
Preceding chapters have revealed that when the children mentioned the act of sitting on their chairs in the classroom, it was inherently linked to the act of ‘doing their schoolwork’. The children’s emergent notions of what it meant to be a learner in school were intertwined with behaviours of sitting and listening, and undertaking tasks such as ‘writing’, ‘drawing’, ‘doing their numbers’, ‘doing letters’ at their tables. All of these actions were contingent on the children’s ability to exercise self-regulation of their bodily movements.

This study uncovered a tension between how the children perceived they should ‘be’, that is, the requirement for them to sit in their chairs in their classrooms, to listen, to do their ‘work’ at their tables, and their preferences for, and happiness around, times when they could move freely and run, skip, and play. In addition, the children were found to have adopted various strategies to subvert these requirements to sit in one place for lengthy periods of time. These most commonly involved asking to go the toilet, filling up or fetching their water bottles, sharpening their pencils into the classroom bin, or fetching resources, such as books, glue sticks, paper, etc., from another part of the classroom. It was noted that their teachers commonly viewed these as ‘justifiable’ reasons to be moving around in the classroom spaces, thus, it was found the children used them frequently and openly. Occasionally, children would use the premise of a need to tell me something that I must write in my notebook as a reason for moving around the classroom. This was not one that was always welcomed by their teachers, and so these instances became less frequent over time. This change over time suggested that the children looked to work out which of their actions involving moving around the classroom their teachers deemed acceptable, and which they did not.

It was noted that some of the children’s movements were undertaken in clandestine ways, as their desire to move around was strong, but no ‘justifiable’ reason seemed to be available to them. In line with Gallagher’s (2011) work that focused on classroom noise, the children commonly looked for opportunities when their teacher’s attention was diverted to then move
around the classroom. This ‘out-of-sight’ movement strategy was also evident when the children found themselves in spaces that were not under the normal gaze of school adults, such as going to and from the toilets. Despite the requirement to walk in school, out of the gaze of adults the children would often run or skip. These findings further revealed a disjunction between the ways in which the children were required to self regulate their bodily movements in their classroom spaces, and the children’s own desires and preferences for ways, and times, to be able to move.

Kaftl’s work highlights that within educational settings ‘materials are ordered to create particular affects’ (2013:129). This study found that, despite the teachers’ plans to create a range of learning activities for the children, the dominance of chairs and tables in the classroom, and reliance on the use of these, constrained the nature of the learning activities that took place. In accord with other research, (Alderson, 1999; Harden, 2012), this study found that in being designed in this way, the classroom spaces were better suited for sitting and listening, providing little additional space for children to move around. In addition, having most of the available classroom space taken up by chairs and tables increased the need for the teachers to ensure the children could move safely around the space. Controlling the times when and where children were physically moving was therefore as much to do with keeping the children safe within the classroom space. The question this raised was why the classrooms needed to be full of chairs and tables?

It is commonly argued that school spaces are intentionally planned around particular visions of learning (Lippman, 2010; Kellock & Sexton, 2018). Gremmen’s (2016) work has found that although teachers commonly had multiple reasons for designing their classroom spaces in a particular way, these were mostly related to academic considerations related to how children were considered to best engage in school learning. Notably, work by Ellis et al. (2018) found that educators commonly had had little awareness of the high levels of required sitting times in their settings. Only through directly
highlighting this, were educators then able to take steps to reflect upon the times when they require children to sit, and to consider possible alternatives.

Kraftl (2013) contends that any consideration of alternative ways of learning requires alternative ways of thinking about spaces for learning. The findings of this study highlighted the joy, pleasure, and happiness the children spoke of gaining from being able to move around freely; to run, skip and play games, and how their desire to do so in the school day was strong. My study has highlighted the ways in which classrooms dominated by chairs and tables had led the children to view their chair, and the act of sitting and listening, to be associated with practices of belonging in school and ways of being a learner, although many of the children found the enactment of this act of sitting to be both mentally and physically troublesome. The implications of these findings for future practices of design and use of classroom spaces will be discussed in a later section.

7.5: Creating Opportunities for Peer Friendships

Findings discussed in Chapter 6 provided valuable insights into how the children’s peer friendships were understood, enacted, and had impacted on their feelings of wellbeing and belonging in school. Of particular significance was how the children spoke of imposed limitations on where and when they could spend time with their friends, and that their classrooms were commonly not considered a time or place to be with their friends. This revealed an important insight into which children they considered to be their friends and what they perceived being with friends in school involved. Subtle but important distinguishing features emerged around those the children viewed as their friends and those they were friendly with in school, that alluded to the importance of choice, shared interests, and the role of play, in building, negotiating, and maintaining close peer friendships. These findings have provided a unique opportunity to re-examine and re-consider the nature of peer friendships in school, along with the ways in which the design and use of classroom spaces impact on opportunities for children to make and sustain supportive friendships in school.
This research study found that spending time with their friends in school was very important to the children and was something they frequently talked of enjoying. Spending time with friends had the capacity to elicit positive emotions of happiness, companionship, and acceptance in the school setting. That considerable emotional benefits were to be gained from friends in school was comparable to the findings of other researchers’ work. (See, for example: Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1997; Berndt, 2002; Peters, 2010; Nix et al., 2013, Fink et al., 2015; Coelho et al., 2017; Carter, 2023.) However, the children perceived times to be with their friends in school as commonly limited to playtimes and lunchtimes. Despite spending extended periods of the school day in their classrooms with their classmates, this was not necessarily viewed by the children as a time or place to be with their friends. Consequently, the benefits the children spoke of regarding having friends in school were limited for significant parts of the school day.

That the children did not ordinarily consider their classrooms to be places where they could be with their friends was initially a source of puzzlement, as many of those identified by the children as their friends were also classmates. Here Lefebvre’s spatial trilogy theory (1991) proved helpful by drawing attention to the interrelationship between what happens in the space i.e., children’s ‘lived’ experience of being in the classroom, and their perceptions of what that space was for. This lens brought into focus how the children had viewed their classrooms in more generic terms as ‘friendly’ places, but fundamentally as places where you ‘do schoolwork’.

The children commonly talked of their classrooms as a ‘friendly’ space, where it was important for them to be ‘nice’, ‘kind’ and ‘respectful’ of one another, (as discussed in section 6.1.2.2). This was indicative of the emphasis placed on the importance of pro-social behaviours in school and the requirement to ‘get along’ with one another, where dispositions of ‘friendliness’ were deemed important ways of being and belonging in their classroom spaces. Gilliam & Gullov (2019:9) contend that such a focus speaks more to notions of social order and social stability, ‘through an
intrinsic desire to ensure the ‘civilising’ of children based on hegemonic ideals of social competence’, where children are civilised into becoming effective, socially competent members of society. This pays little heed to what makes a friend or friendship beyond notions of the social skills required by the children in order to be accepted by their peers (and society). While the children in this study welcomed that their classrooms were ‘friendly’ spaces, it was important to note that they did not deem being ‘friendly’ with others as the same as having as a friend in school. Those whom the children talked of as their friends were a much smaller, more select group, where choice and similar interests played an important role.

The children talked of being with their friends as commonly involving others with whom they engaged in interactive, sociable activities such as playing, eating, and talking together. In comparison, as Chapters 4 and 5 have shown, the children talked of their classrooms as places to ‘do your work’, where the focus was on undertaking your own academic tasks, set, or led by their teachers. The children talked of having their own chair and desk in the classroom, where they were often required to sit for lengthy periods of time, listening to their teacher, or ‘doing their letters, numbers, writing’. Times to ‘be’ with others in any sociable sense were perceived as rewards for ‘being good’ and completing their schoolwork, and as such were severely limited within the school day. Although it was noted that their teachers recognised the importance of children’s friendships, this was most commonly interpreted as a need for friendly, collegiate, cooperative working in the classroom spaces. Consequently, comparable with the findings of other researchers’ work, (James et al., 1998; Perry & Weinstein, 1998; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016; Wang et al., 2019), this study has highlighted how the classroom spaces were commonly designed and operated with a greater focus on cognitive and academic development that did not always make access to the building, negotiating, and maintaining friendships easy for the children.

Problematic issues around the making and maintaining of friendships were found to be the case for some of the children, impacting upon their feelings of
wellbeing, where the children spoke of a sense of isolation, and feelings of sadness, frustration, and loneliness. Notably, the case studies discussed in Chapter 6 highlighted the heightened risks for those children who had started school ‘alone’ or were placed in separate classrooms from their ‘old’ friends. Furthermore, it was found that boys belonging to these categories had a greater tendency to have difficulties in gaining peer acceptance and in forging new friendships in school. It is commonly advocated that making and maintaining friendships is reliant on children being likable (Antonopoulou et al., 2019) and possessing suitable social skills (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004; Fink et al., 2015; Tillman & Prazak, 2019; Carter, 2023). However, this would suggest that when children fail to form friendships then the problem is located within the child. The findings from this study did not support an argument that in all cases the child’s lack of social skills was to blame, rather, similar to the work of Peters (2003) and Danby et al. (2012), it was found that context and opportunity played a significant role.

The findings of this study point up the need to (re)consider children’s friendships in classroom spaces, looking beyond ‘getting along with one another’ and acknowledging the importance of personal choice, shared interests, and how friendships are forged through social interactions, benefitting in particular from opportunities to play together. It is argued that this must not be left to chance, nor can it be assumed that children who display pro-social behaviours will have the opportunity to build, negotiate or maintain strong, supportive peer friendships that promote wellbeing, companionship, and acceptance. While friendliness is important, it is not the whole picture. Practitioners need to be more aware of the dynamic, progressive nature of the processes in building peer friendships, and look for ways to better facilitate this in their classrooms.

Additionally, this study highlighted the emotional demands of having, or not having, friends in similar ways to other researchers, (Yoleri, 2015; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016). Comparable to Konstantoni’s research (2012:344), having friends in school was found to be an ‘important part of feeling included,
valued and respected’. This study found that where this desire for acceptance, through having and being with their friends, was not fulfilled, these children were less likely to enjoy being within the space of their classrooms; leading some to adopt avoidance strategies, such as frequently asking to leave the classroom, usually under the guise of visiting the toilets. Tuan’s (1977) work stresses how, based on our experiences, we project particular emotions, meanings, and values on to spaces. It is therefore argued that for some children in this study, their classroom experiences were already being accompanied with negative connotations. These connotations if left unattended could become increasingly more entrenched and impact on their sense of self.

7.6: A Close Mapping of The Social Landscape

Drawing together a number of the themes that have featured in the preceding sections, this section highlights the nuances in the picture of the social landscape of the school and of the children’s experiences and actions in this landscape that have emerged from my study. Gaining this nuanced picture was made possible by my lengthy immersion in this setting which also allowed me to present the children’s transition to school as an evolving process rather than as a narrowly time-limited event. The fine-grained extensive observations and continuing dialogue with the children, coupled with the deployment of perspectives from the literatures on early years education, school transitions, children’s geographies and friendships have allowed me to construct an in-depth, variegated picture of how the children understood and themselves enacted a particular social order. This portrayal has allowed tensions and the interrelationships of different features of this setting to be sharply delineated.

A central thrust of my approach in this study is captured in the following quotation from Linell (2009: 16) who notes how ‘sense-making processes and situated discourses are always interdependent with contexts [italics in original]’ and goes on to observe that ‘contexts and situations … are not static containers for ideas, thoughts, and interactions; they dynamically
change with the participants’ communicative and cognitive activities’. The dialectical interaction, implicit in this quotation, between the cultural practices and material resources of a setting, and the agentic deployment of these practices and resources by participants has very much been a guiding perspective in this study. In the following paragraphs I highlight central dialectical interactions that emerged from my study.

In common with preceding studies, (See, for example, Gallagher, 2010,2011; Payne, 2015; McNair, 2016), I have delineated how children were inducted, through mechanisms such as the traffic lights system, into playing the role of productive, disciplined workers within the school’s industrial order, and indeed acted to surveil [correct] and evaluate each other’s conformity with this order. At the same time, I have brought out the variability in children’s reactions to, and compliance with, this order. Much of the preceding research on transitions and on early years education has presented such conformity as being linked to the enforcement of children’s compliance within school settings, with McNair arguing that school systems are actively designed in ways ‘to erode children’s liberty’ (2016: 158). On this theme, my work, drawing on perspectives from children’s geographies, has pointed up how children’s bodily self-regulation and controls over movement in classrooms can be viewed to a degree as resulting from the materialities of the spaces (Kraftl, 2013) that they inhabited, rather than as an active, conscious decision by teachers to control the children. This points up the need to consider closely how the spatial organisation of schools may constrain, or alternatively afford, choices and interaction — a topic which I turn to in a following section.

While my study has delineated the ways in which the school’s structures, practices and spatial organisation acted to produce disciplined subjects, it has also shown how this process of socialisation did not straightforwardly produce passively compliant members of this social order. In particular, I have documented how children acted, for differing reasons, to subvert or ignore, and occasionally resist, the school’s rules and practices. Surface compliance also did not necessarily mean that the children had in fact wholly
taken on board the school’s specific expectations for being and acting, as the quotation presented on p. 144 brought into sharp relief.

Finn: *I don’t like having to sit in my chair for ages, doing nothing, having to listen to the teacher.*

Jane: *And you have to pretend to be listening.*

Finn: *Yeh, you have to pretend to be listening.*

(Likes & Dislikes, Field notes, 20 Oct. 2016)

What is at stake in this quotation is encapsulated in the distinction that Wertsch draws between ‘mastery’ and ‘appropriation’ (Wertsch, 1998: 53-58). He observes that mastery of a cultural practice, as in the children’s understanding of the need to display listening behaviour, does not necessarily entail appropriation: “the understanding that the process is one of taking something that belongs to others and making it one’s own” (Wertsch, 1998: 53). My long-term immersion in this setting thus allowed me to gain a differentiated picture of the social order of these classrooms and of children’s agency to resist and subvert as well as to comply and appropriate. It also allowed me to depict the contradictions that were evident in the social ethos that the school set out to foster. Considerable effort was invested in encouraging the children to display pro-social actions and attitudes and the children themselves expressed appreciation for this ‘nice’ atmosphere. However, the fostering of this ethos can be seen to have been vitiated to a degree by the encouragement of a very individualistic approach to schoolwork, and it was one where little attention was given to the nurturing of children’s friendships.

The preceding paragraph has highlighted what can be viewed as an important contradiction within the school’s practices. It would seem inappropriate simply to note this, and other contradictions and tensions, and then move on. Consonant with the central focus in an EdD on the interplay of research and practice, I move now to point up areas where my findings appear to show the need to reconceptualise school structures, practices, and spatial configurations.
7.7: Conclusions and Implications for Future Practices and Research

This section sets out to synthesise the main conclusions of the preceding discussion, highlighting some key implications and considerations for future school practices and research. Whilst it is acknowledged that individual contexts can differ considerably in how they shape children’s experiences of schooling, it is argued that certain commonalities across school organisations enable the findings of this study to have broader reference to school practices.

The research originated from a desire to better understand children’s experiences of this time and place, with the intention of gaining a clearer understanding of ways they might be best, or better, supported to ensure all have an effective, positive start to school and schooling. In conducting and writing up this research study, any notion that simplistic problems and/or solutions would be found, or indeed that neat packages of effective versus ineffective practices would emerge, were quickly dispelled. Instead, this study has helped to highlight the complexities of this time for the children and has reinforced how the experiences of being in school make demands upon children physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually (Margetts, 2007; Yoleri, 2015; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016).

Preceding sections have highlighted the ways in which the school systems, structures, and the design and use of school spaces, had a significant impact on the children’s emergent conceptualisations of practices of being, practices of belonging and social positioning in school. It can be argued that the findings of this study have demonstrated how school organisations appear to remain firmly focused on the notion of a ‘ready-child’ during the transition to school, rather than any notion of a ‘ready school’ (Stephen et al., 2010; Whitehead & Bingham, 2011; Kennedy et al., 2012). The embodiment of the belief system that children must learn to ‘fit in’ to the ways of school life continues to be literally built into the landscapes of schools (Cudworth, 2015).
The children’s perceptions of ‘belonging’ in school were grounded in their emergent sense of necessary ‘ways to be’, based on their abilities to adhere to the schools, and their class teacher’s, systems, and rules. This had led the children to see ways to ‘be’ in school as categorised into those that were deemed to be ‘right’ and those that were viewed as ‘wrong’. The children then used these understandings as a way to judge their own, and their peers, capabilities, and ability to belong in this place.

A fear of failure, or of being deemed as failing, had resulted in a heightened sense of anxiety for many of the children, whose talk centred on worries of ‘getting it wrong’ or ‘making mistakes’. A certain fragility in their sense of belonging in school emerged, where the children appeared to feel the need for continuing justification of their competence through their daily interactions in school. A major consequence was the children’s reluctance to ‘take risks’ in their behaviours or in their learning, where following the teacher’s instructions carefully, and looking to make their teachers happy, took precedence in their daily school lives.

7.7.1: A Red Light for Behaviour Management Systems?

As discussed previously, despite being designed on the premise of providing positive, formative, pro-social support for the children, the school’s Traffic Light behaviour management system was a main source of anxiety for many of the children and had become intrinsically intertwined with their notions of being a successful learner in school. It is important to point up that this was found to not be the intended outcome of this school system, and that the ways in which the children talked of their experiences and perceptions of this system were counter to the class teachers’ proposed intentions and perceptions of its value and place in the classroom setting. However, here I argue that such systems can potentially have a negative impact on children’s sense of wellbeing, of self-identity, and of what it means to be a learner in school, reinforcing the need to avoid risk and the need to follow directed instruction by their teachers and other adults in school. My concern is that
this may well be having a long-term negative and restrictive impact on how children conceive what it means to learn and be a learner in a school setting. This study has pointed up the need for a re-examination and re-consideration of all pro-social behaviour management systems. Further evidence-based research is required to explore: their value, or otherwise, in school settings; and how the children make sense of them and are impacted by them. Furthermore, I contend that there is a need to reconsider any over reliance on types of learning experiences that focus on an outcome that is then judged as being ‘right’ or being ‘wrong’, especially where this judgement is primarily in the hands of the teacher.

7.7.2: Space for Movement: Reconfiguring Classrooms

This study has highlighted how tensions emerged from the systems and structures of order and control that regulated the children’s bodily movement. Observations pointed up how the children appeared to enjoy, and gain a sense of security from, their growing familiarity with the structures, systems, and rules of school. The children spoke with pride of having their own class, classroom, and their own chair where they ‘belonged’. However, the day-to-day requirement to sit, especially for extended periods of time was for many children somewhat physically and mentally problematic. This study has highlighted a disjunction between the children’s understanding of the requirement to sit, listen and do their schoolwork at tables, and their preferences for physical movement and choice.

Safety in moving around in classroom spaces is of high importance, and it would be highly irresponsible to claim otherwise. Given that tables and chairs were found to dominate the classroom spaces, with little available floor space around them, it was understandable that controls on movement in and around these spaces were needed to ensure children remained safe. However, such choices of design and use of classroom spaces also arise from particular notions of how effective learning takes place, that in turn are related to specific conceptualisations of social order (Gallagher, 2004; Saltmarsh et al., 2015) and of children and childhood (Holloway & Valentine,
I argue that this study has pointed up the need to reconsider the place for, and use of, ‘non-human materials’ (Kraftl, 2013:120) in classroom spaces. In particular, the need for spaces that are dominated by tables and chairs and the messages this disposition of space sends needs to be more closely considered (Brooks & Waters, 2018). I was drawn to Kraftl’s (2013:120) work on a need for more ‘dis/order’ in school structures and spatial organisation, which it is claimed better facilitates children’s dispositions of creativity, risk-taking and exploration in their learning, and in enabling more freedom of bodily movement within school spaces. The findings of my research study have therefore raised the question of whether classroom spaces in the Primary 1 setting are focusing too much on order and control of children and their movements.

Ellis et al.’s (2018) work found that adults working with children in early years commonly had little awareness of just how long children were often required to sit during the course of the day. Their study found that when this was explicitly highlighted, these educators then looked to re-evaluate the design of their spaces and the ways in which children interacted within them. I suggest that more research needs to happen into why early years classrooms in school settings are commonly still designed around the need for each child to have their own chair and table space, and why this furniture still dominates classroom spaces, which anyway are generally limited in size.

Summarising the main thrust of the preceding paragraphs, the architectural design of school buildings can be seen to disconnect from what children, and indeed teachers, want and need, and is core to many of the problems of the use of space in school (Grever, 2012). At the same time, it can be argued that refiguring of the architectural design of the early years learning spaces needs to be intertwined with a fresh approach to the pedagogical deployment of these spaces.

In advocating changes on this front, I am conscious of the weight of political, historical, and cultural forces that have led to school designs and practices in the 21st century remaining predominately locked into a viewpoint that
prioritises bodily and social control of children. However, a clear-sighted recognition of these forces does not entail a counsel of despair. As Wrigley et al. (2012:96) have argued ‘education has suffered from the corrosive power of supposed inevitability’. It is important to see change as possible, and the findings of my study would seem to suggest that a spatial and pedagogical reconfiguration of school space is indeed called for.

7.7.3: From Sociability to Friendship

The children predominately spoke of school as being a friendly place, where dispositions of kindness, respect and caring for others were encouraged and valued. It was clear this gave the children a sense of security and impacted positively on their wellbeing. However, it was found that the structures and systems of school tended to focus more specifically on socialisation of the children and the development of pro-social skills, centring on ways of being ‘friendly’. The children talked of choice, mutual support, and/or shared interests as being important features of friendship. However, opportunities for children to interact with one another that involved choice, mutual support or shared interests were found to be limited by the ways they, and their learning experiences, were organised in the classroom spaces.

The preceding chapter has established the important role having friends in school played in the children’s school lives, and how making and maintaining both new and old friendships was challenged by the school’s systems and structures. This study has pointed up the ways in which children’s interpersonal and social relationships need to be considered beyond notions grounded in socialisation and indeed civilising measures (Gilliam & Gullov, 2019). Further research is needed into how children build, negotiate, and maintain old and new peer friendships on starting school, and the ways in which the school structures could better facilitate this through the provision of greater opportunities and support for companionship.
7.8: Coda

The limitations of this study have been clearly recognised in Chapter 3. However, in conclusion I would wish to defend the central premise of the study that greater prominence needs to be given in early years research and practice to exploring and being guided by children’s own views of their educational experiences. This premise can be defended as both valuable in itself, and in terms of the findings that have emerged from this study of previously overlooked, or at least insufficiently acknowledged, experiences and conceptions of being in school. Key to the reporting of findings has been the illustration of the range of experiences and perceptions in the group of children I studied. As Chapter 3 has established, taking ahead such an exploration of children’s own accounts of their perceptions of their school experiences faces distinct methodological challenges and requires careful footwork on the part of the researcher. I trust that other researchers and practitioners, working in contexts that may differ markedly from the school where I observed, will take ahead this delicate work of bringing into adult awareness the personal, every-day, often taken for granted, moments of what being in a primary 1 setting may involve for a child.
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Appendix A: Parent Information Letter

Who am I?
My name is Carol Smith and I am currently undertaking a Doctorate in Education (EdD) at the University of Edinburgh. I currently work for the University of Edinburgh as a Bicentennial Education Fellow on the PGDE and MA Primary Education Courses. Prior to this, I worked for 25 years as a primary school teacher for Falkirk Council, with most of my time spent working in early years education.

I have a strong interest in Early Years Education, and I am particularly interested in the time when children make the transition into the primary school, particularly in light of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE).

What do I hope to find out?
I would like to gain a clearer understanding of what it is like being in primary 1. I would like to hear about the individual stories of the children, their parents, and their teachers.

What this study will involve?
This research involves learning from:

Children: through spending time in school with the children, finding out what they think and what they have to tell me about being in primary 1. This will involve watching what they do, listening to their stories, asking questions, inviting them to draw me pictures and/or take photographs of what primary 1 is like.

Class teachers: who will be invited, through one-to-one interviews with me, to share some of their thoughts on what primary 1 is like for the children in their class, e.g. what the children seem to enjoy, things that perhaps can make the start of school easier or more difficult, and so on.

Parents/carers: who will be invited to share their thoughts on their own child’s experience of starting primary 1 through the completion of a questionnaire.

A later date, parents/carers will be invited to volunteer to become part of a forum group led by myself, to discuss and debate some issues raised around starting school.

Participation in the study is voluntary.
Consent will be sought from all participants in the study, and all participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Parents/carers will be asked to give consent for their own child to take part in the study. However, even where parental permission has been given, special care will be taken to ensure all children understand their participation is under their own control and voluntary at all times during the study.

Privacy
No names of children, parents, or teachers will be used in my thesis, any written publications, reports, presentations or papers. Pseudonyms will be used to retain anonymity. I may occasionally look to make audio recordings of conversations, for example, when talking with a group of children, but permission would be sought first. All audio recordings and any photographs taken by the children for discussion purposes will be kept in a secure place by me and destroyed on completion of my thesis. Copies of any photographs will not feature in any part my thesis, written publications, reports, presentations or papers.

Why this study?
By gathering information on what it is like being in primary 1, particularly from the children themselves, I believe we can be in a better position to evaluate and review current practices, with a view to making sure all children are supported in the best ways possible to make a positive, happy and effective start to school.

Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet.

If you have any further questions, my contact details are below:

Carol Smith
Bicentennial Education Fellow
Institute of Education, Teaching and Leadership (IETL)
Money House School of Education
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh
EH8 9AG
Tel 0131 651 4638
Email: Carol.smith@ed.ac.uk

Starting school:

What is it like to be in primary 1?

This research study is planned to take place between September and December 2016.
Appendix B: Primary 1: Parent/Carer consent form

Research study: Starting school: What is it like to be in primary 1?

This research is being carried out by Carol Smith, Bicentennial Education Fellow, Moray House School of Education, Edinburgh University, as part of her Doctorate in Education (EdD) studies. This research may also be used in written publications and presentations for educational or research purposes.

- I have read and understood the research leaflet provided.
- I understand that the anonymity of my child will be preserved. All names will be changed so no individual child can be identified. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality.
- I understand that my child will be free to choose to withdraw from the research at any time in the process.
- I understand that Carol will ensure that my child retains full control over their choice to participate or to choose to say no, at all times.

Part A: Parent/carer consent for your Primary 1 child to participate

Please complete and sign if you are happy for your child to participate in this research study.

I ___________________________ (name of parent/carer) agree for my child ___________________________ (name of child) to participate in this research.

To gather information from the children I may record some conversations or ask the children to take photographs.

Please tick (✓) to indicate if you are happy for me to:

[ ] Make an audio recording of your child  [ ] have photographs that may feature your child

Part B: Parent/carer Questionnaire consent

I am happy for the data I provide in my completed questionnaire to be used in Carol’s research.

I understand that all information I provide will be treated as confidential. My name or my child’s name will not appear in any report or part of any findings.

I understand I can withdraw any and all information I have provided at any time.

Signed ______________________ date ______________________

[✓] Once complete, this form should be returned to the school in the envelope provided.

If you have any complaints about my research or any related discomfort, then please contact:
Professor John M Davis, University of Edinburgh. Tel: 0131 651 6481
Appendix C: Starting school: What is it like to be in primary 1?

Dear Parent(s),

I am writing this letter to you as a parent or a guardian of a child going into primary 1. I am conducting a study to understand the experiences of children starting school and I would like to hear your thoughts on the subject.

I would like to know about your child's starting school experiences. I am interested in learning about the situations, challenges, and emotions your child encountered during this transition. I believe that sharing these experiences can help other parents and children understand the process better.

Please feel free to fill out the form and return it to me by the 31st of October. I will keep your information confidential and will not share it with anyone without your permission.

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
Appendix D: Teacher consent form

Research title: Starting school: What is it like to be in primary?

This research is being carried out by Carol Smith, Biennial Education Fellow, Murray House School of Education, Edinburgh University as part of her EdD studies. This research may also be used in written publications and presentations for educational or research purposes.

- I hereby agree to take part in the research of Carol Smith. I understand that data will be used for the completion of Carol’s EdD thesis and possible other publications.
- I have read and understood the research outline provided.
- I understand that should any significant concerns about a child’s wellbeing arise, Carol will first raise this with me and will then inform the head teacher.
- I understand that no names or personal details of practitioners, schools, or pupils will appear in any output from this research.

Participating observations:

- I agree to take part in participatory observations between August and December 2016. I understand that this will involve Carol spending time in my classroom and the shared open area on a regular weekly basis and taking notes.
- I will be able to decide the timing and frequency of all and any of Carol’s visits to my classroom.

Interviews:

- I agree to take part in two interviews with Carol, one around October and the other around December. I understand these interviews will take the form of a one to one discussion with Carol, and will be recorded with my permission only. Each interview will last around 45 minutes.
- I will be able to choose the time and place of these interviews.
- I understand I am able to withdraw my participation from this research at any time. I can also withdraw any and all information I have provided.

NAME (please print) __________________________

Signed: __________________________ date: ____________

My supervisors for this EdD study are:

Professor John Davis, Professor of Childhood Inclusion, University of Edinburgh

Dr Kristine Kastenbom, Lecturer in Childhood Studies, University of Edinburgh

If you have any complaints about my research or any related discomfort, then please contact Professor John Davis on 0131 651 6481.

If you require any further information on my research then please do not hesitate to contact me:

Carol Smith
Biennial Education Fellow
Murray House School of Education (EILT)
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, EH9 3JQ

Email: Carol.smith@ed.ac.uk Tel: 0131 651 4638
Appendix E: Child information sheet and consent

Would you like to help me and be part of my study?

You can change your mind and say NO at any time.

Stick on your sticker when you have decided.

[[Image: yes.png]] yes  Yes I would like to help you

[[Image: no.png]] no  No thank you

You can talk to your family about this.
You can ask me questions if you would like to.

Hello.

My name is Carol Smith.

I work at Edinburgh University

I would like to find out what it is like to be in primary 1.

Can you help me?

I would like to spend some time in school and

see what children do in primary 1

listen to your stories about school

write things down in my book about what you tell me about starting school.

I will share some of your ideas with teachers, parents and other children to help them think about what could make primary 1 great for everyone. I think lots of other people will be interested too, so I am going to write a story about some of the things I find out.

You could also chose to

Draw me pictures

Take photographs

Show me things you do in school

but just if you wanted to

I won’t tell any one who you are in my stories unless I get worried you are not safe. Then I will tell a teacher what you have told me.
### Appendix F: Teacher interview prompt sheet

#### RQ2 Starting primary 1: from the class teacher's perspective

**Key focuses:**
- expectations of child, notions of readiness, how ready were children to start school, which children have settled well and which have struggled, why, implications of this for you as class teacher?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your main impression of how the children in your class have settled into primary 1?</td>
<td>Own experiences of own class – how have things been? What is your impression of what children think of P1? Has it matched your expectations of children as primary 1 pupils etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have there been any specific difficulties in settling for any of the children? Why do you think this might be?</td>
<td>Which children appear to be coping/not coping? Why do you think this is? What are the outcome/possible implications of this for you as class teacher/for child as P1 pupil? What do the children seem to enjoy/not enjoy most?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me a bit about some the ways children are supported as they start primary 1?</td>
<td>Types of support give. In what ways might continued or further support be given to children/child? How can we ensure all children make a good start and have a good experience?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### RQ 3 Play-based pedagogical approach: current thinking and practices around adopting a more play-based approach to learning and teaching. CIE advocates a smoothing out process – current thinking around this?

**Uncover views/beliefs of early years learning and teaching, classroom practices, expectations of children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current CIE guidelines are advocating the need for a “smoothing out” of the transition into P1 by adopting a more play-based approach to learning and teaching as children start P1. What are your thoughts on this?</td>
<td>What kinds of strategies, approaches adopted? Explain some of thinking behind this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you see primary 1 as an extension to pre-school?</td>
<td>Exploring notions of continuity. Views of pre-school education and primary education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Finally

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have been talking about your children making the transition into primary 1, and you have very kindly answered my questions. Is there anything else you want to say about this subject, that perhaps I haven’t asked you about specifically here with my questions?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: Coding transcripts

Recording: tape lasts 38.36 mins

I have an 'e' in my name (they want to write their names on the paper)

A: I like colouring in and drawing
F: emm I like going to the church. (they all walked to the church in the morning for the Harvest Thanksgiving Service)

A: I don't like going to church because you have to go on a long walk.
F: I like long walks and I even got to see my flat
A: I hate when my mum tricking me going on a not very long walk but it is a long walk.
B: [has come to join us]
A: I like [playing with me. I know what I don't like. I don't like when [doesn't want to play with me.
F: I know, I don't like when [and don't play with me. Or when they laugh at me. They done that today with me,
A: I like learning letters, I like doing 'a' and 'n'
F: What is the good side? Seen as good versus bad?
Me: this is for the things you like and this is for the things you don't like.
Appendix H: Initial coding mindmaps

Being in primary 1:
Group 3

- Going to football
- Going to lunch

Dislikes:
- Adults deceiving you
- When friends laugh at you
- When friends don't let you play
- People being rude or unkind

Likes:
- Going to the school library
- Long walks
- Likes going to church
- Sitting on his seat
- Doing letters
- Learning letters
- Drawing pictures with dad
- Colouring in
- Drawing
- Pictures

Additional info:
- Likes going to church
Appendix I: Broad themes emerging

Some key themes from early Like/Dislike data analysis
February 2017

- In charge
  - Teacher
  - nice
  - bossy
  - Time is timetabled
  - play
  - inside
  - outside
  - behaviour
  - Tick, happy face, sticker means good work
  - On work
  - Green is good
  - Traffic lights
  - Amber is warning
  - Red is bad
  - Can be lost
  - Golden Time
  - Cross, red, unhappy face means it is wrong
  - Some freedom to chose what to play

- Rules & regulations

- Rewards & sanctions

- Relationships
  - Friendships with other children
  - Having friends
    - old
    - new
  - Spending time with friends
    - conflicts
  - Getting on
Appendix J: Behaviour management in schools: traffic lights approach

Traffic Light Behavioural System:

The Traffic Light Behaviour System is a system that is commonly adopted in primary school classrooms. The goal is to 'support' children in their ability to self-regulate their behaviour in the school setting, inline with the rules and systems of school policy and practice.

Green Traffic Light signifies attendance to acceptable or 'good' behaviour.

Orange Traffic Light is a warning that behaviour choices are moving in the 'wrong' direction.

Red Traffic Light signifies displays of unacceptable behaviour.

Advocated as an individualised motivational tool, each child has a name card, named peg, or similar, which is attached to the Traffic Light Display. The position of this indicates perceptions of the children's ability to demonstrate acceptable behaviours. Decisions of this level of acceptability are teacher-led and are generally aligned with the classroom rules.

At the start of the week (or in some cases each day), all the children's name cards are placed on the Green Traffic Light. During the course of the day/week, children may find their name card moved on to 'amber' or 'red' Traffic Light, as a consequence of rule breaking. Children are then encouraged to consider the future choices they will make and when better/good choices are displayed, their name card returned to green.

In the setting of this research study, all children who finished a day on a Red Traffic Light had 5 minutes time deducted from their Golden Time*. This meant sitting at their desk working until their sanction time passed, before then joining in Golden Time.

* Golden Time is a version of a reward system adopted by many schools. In this school setting, during Golden Time, children were rewarded with 30 minutes of 'free choosing time' on a Friday morning if their name card had remained on the Green Traffic Light, or if they had demonstrated significant changes to their behaviour in line with the school rules, following being placed on the Amber or Red Traffic Light. During Golden Time, children were given free reign to move around the classroom and Open Area spaces as they wished. Many children brought in their own games and toys specifically for this time.