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**UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN
TRINITY COLLEGE
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY**

**SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ECOLOGIES OF CHILDHOOD:
A CASE STUDY OF CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON
THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD.**

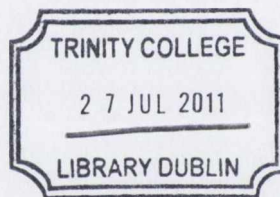
A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of

Doctor of Philosophy Ph. D

Author: Margaret Rogers

Supervisor: Professor Robbie Gilligan

Date of Submission: 24th August 2009



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Summary

Title: Social and Physical Ecologies of Childhood:

A case study of children's perspectives on their neighbourhood

Margaret Rogers

This study set out to gain a greater understanding of children's lived experience in their neighbourhood informed by ecological models of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Gibson (1979) and taking a constructivist, exploratory approach. Within this, children were positioned as social actors and local experts on their lived experience, but also as developing persons impacted by and impacting on their environment. The aim of the study was to explore the daily lived experience of a group of children, aged 9 – 12 years, in their urban neighbourhood, in this case, an area of social housing designated as an area of disadvantage in Ireland. In order to achieve this, a case study approach was chosen, employing a range of qualitative, participatory methods. This positioned the children as active research participants and emphasised authenticity in the presentation of the data they contributed.

A secondary aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of the methods and approaches used to access and explore children's experiences, and engage them as active research participants. The study adopted a constructivist approach which was concerned with eliciting a richly detailed, authentic account of children's daily lives as described and presented by themselves, rather than a quantitative or positivist examination of socio-economic macro system effects. Field work for the study took place over a period of one year.

The study sought to explore the autonomous spaces of childhood, within which children enact and transact their daily lives, frequently away from the gaze and direction of adults. It centred on two 'ecological niches' (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005) – neighbourhood and middle childhood - exploring the social and physical ecologies and activity content of the children's daily lives through their words and images.

It explored the opportunities and risks children routinely encountered in their neighbourhood and their responses to these experiences. The study focused specifically on children's informal and unstructured place and space use, daily routines, and time spent out of school during afternoons, evening, weekends, or holiday times in a varied and diverse range of micro-settings.

The study findings offer a detailed insight into the everyday lives of the children who participated, particularly their relatively autonomous 'free-time' spent in the company of other children. Accessing the participants' perceptions, values and experiences of the neighbourhood and their views of '*what would make it a better place for children*' was prioritised, effectively linking the micro and meso system experiences of children to the political, economic, cultural and socio-legal macro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The study findings reveal the children to be significant users of their neighbourhood. As such, they are shown to have developed a detailed knowledge of its affordances (Gibson, 1979) and substantial local expertise in relation to the opportunities and risks it presents. The importance of friends and friendship, particularly within the autonomous times and spaces in which children enact and transact their daily lives, was found to be critical to their sense of satisfaction, in tandem with the opportunity the neighbourhood terrain affords for physically active movement and play.

This study's contribution is to present richly detailed accounts of the children's perceptions and experiences, foregrounding their priorities and concerns. It makes explicit what, for these participants, creates a meaningful and satisfying experience of neighbourhood, in the life course period of middle childhood. In addition, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of utilising an inclusive, participative approach in accessing children's lived experience. The study findings lend weight to the importance of taking children's views and experiences seriously and not relying solely on adult sources of information in terms of policy and planning.

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CHAPTER ONE

Agency is a hallmark of human functioning and from the earliest days of life, purposive actions are embedded in a dynamic, reciprocal transaction between the individual and the environment.

(Heft and Chawla, 2006, p. 206)

Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore children's own perspectives on their daily life experience in the setting of their local neighbourhood, using a qualitative, participative approach. In particular, it sought to explore the autonomous physical and social spaces in which children enact and transact their daily lives, frequently away from the gaze and direction of adults. In order to encompass the contextual, situated and dynamic complexities which such a study might involve, an ecological perspective, based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992, 2005) was adopted. This framework provided a useful model from which to think about children's daily life experiences within two specific 'ecological niches' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It enabled an exploration of how, where and with whom children spend time, and how they enact and transact their daily lives in their neighbourhood setting. The study also sought to examine the effectiveness of a range of participative methods in eliciting the children's views and involving them as active, expert research informants.

Background

The study was conceived and implemented as an attempt to add to our understanding of children's perspectives on their lives. It is underpinned by a conceptualisation of children as active agents in their development and environment, impacting on and shaping their experience and having an in depth knowledge or 'expertise' in their own lives (Heft and Chawla, 2006; Mayall, 2002; McAuley, 2002). However, children are also understood to be developing persons living, growing and changing within an ecological system in which both immediate, '*proximal processes*' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p6) and remote systemic effects shape their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992). Children are also recognised as persons with limited access to power or control over resources and with needs for and rights to provision, protection and participation (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989).

In light of the professional experience of this researcher¹ these positions – children as social actors *and* developing persons, with both provision and protection needs *and* participatory rights - are not in conflict in the way that they are sometimes presented in the literature (see Chapter Two), but are concepts that merit mutual consideration.

While it may be argued that neighbourhood, or more specifically disadvantaged communities have been extensively researched, I would contend and I believe this study demonstrates that, in respect of children's daily lives and perspectives, this is not the case. Children's voices and experiences are rarely given priority in research, nor are they meaningfully represented in planning or decision-making processes at local or national level (Matthews, 2003). Equally, the kind of in depth qualitative analysis which reveals the diversity and heterogeneity of their experience is rarely undertaken. Therefore, I would argue that this study offers a much needed qualitative focus on children's lived experience, presented largely through their own words and images, drawn from their active participation in the research process.

The Study Focus

The study focuses on two 'ecological niches' (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) in children's lives. The first is spatial – that of **neighbourhood** as both a location of physical activity and a site of social interaction and the second is essentially temporal – the life course period of **middle childhood** (ages 7-12) when children are most active in, and occupied with what their neighbourhood has to offer, often being paid scant attention by adults (Hart, 2002). This life course phase represents a time of significant transition between home and the wider community or society, mirroring a similar transitional function of neighbourhood between home and the wider physical and social world (Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Time, as significant factor, is also examined in relation to how children live their daily lives, both in relation to adult structured institutional (e.g. school) or domestic (e.g. bedtime, meal times) routines or the unstructured times where children's autonomy is most evident. Variations associated with day or night, seasonal differences, special events (e.g. holidays) are also considered.

¹ Derived from twenty years working in the design, delivery and management of community based child and family services.

Refinement of the Research Focus

Engagement with the literature, particularly in relation to studies of children and neighbourhood, combined with reflective questioning from my own professional experience, resulted in a further refinement of the research focus. Specifically, it led to a more precise identification of a potential sample population and a clarification of the context and location of the study site. The temporal period of middle childhood was identified as an 'ecological niche' worthy of attention because it represents a period in the life course when children are at their most active and engaged in their local neighbourhoods. The context of social and economic disadvantage, particularly as manifest in urban areas of large scale social housing was also of particular interest to me, as it was the setting in which much of my professional life involved in the provision of neighbourhood based children's and family support services, has been spent.

Rationale for the Study

During middle childhood from seven to twelve years of age, the world of children centres very much on their immediate environment and their experience of family, neighbourhood and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This study focuses in particular on the second of these elements, that of neighbourhood. That is not to say that family and community are excluded from the study. To do so would be impossible, given their central and inextricable significance in children's lives. However, the primary lens is focused on how children use and value their neighbourhood setting, seeking to understand and communicate their lived experience, views and perceptions as prioritised and described by themselves. The purpose was to learn about the daily lives of children, particularly those facets of their lives that are lived away from the gaze or at least the close attention of adults. The importance of such knowledge is to better understand children's experience, to guide decisions about policy and provision and most importantly, to give prominence to children's views in the decision making process. As Moore (1986a) stated:

We have no business making policies and spending money on facilities for children until we have an understanding about what parts of the environment children actually use and why.

(Moore, 1986a: p. xvi)

The specific profile of the study group was chosen because, as alluded to above, it is during childhood and particularly middle childhood, that children make the greatest use of their local neighbourhood and environs, and are generally free to explore and play autonomously away from the direct 'sight and sound' of adults (Hart, 1979; Moore 1986a; Morrow, 2001b). As their primary site for activities and social encounter, the neighbourhood functions as their play and social arena (Lindon, 1996). They frequently attend school within its catchment. Often they enjoy a high level of freedom of movement and autonomous mobility within its boundaries. They are the most active users of the neighbourhood's physical characteristics in a fundamentally different way to adults, who tend to move through rather than use, its spaces. It is through this usage that children learn about their neighbourhood and develop a high level of competence in its negotiation (Moore, 1986a). They come to know its landmarks, the location of places, things and activities that interest them and the best routes to and from sites of interest. They also learn the practices and customs, norms and behaviours of the area, who the other 'key players' are and what areas are preferred or to be avoided (Rissotto and Guiliani, 2006).

In the course of my previous career in community based services, I had become acutely aware of the 'blank spaces' in our knowledge. It was evident to me that there was a dearth of understanding and insight into the content of children's daily lives, from their perspective and within the largely unobserved world of their informal play and social interaction. In my professional experience, the information on which service design and intervention decisions are based is almost exclusively derived from adult sources and adult interpretations of children's needs and living situations. Despite the rhetoric of an oft cited 'strengths based approach' (Saleebey, 2006), access to services is frequently determined through risk assessment frameworks derived from deficit based conceptualisations, largely determined by 'social address' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I was curious to know what children's own perceptions of their daily lives in this setting were, what children did, where and with whom outside the structure of formal services, such as school, family support and community development, and particularly what opportunities and risks they encountered in their daily lives and how they negotiated these.

I felt strongly that such knowledge was essential to understanding children's lives from their perspective and to engaging with children in ways that were truly inclusive and participatory. Having had the opportunity to seek out children's perspectives on a range of issues as co-ordinator of children's participation in the World Forum 2001² (Barnardos, 2001), I was convinced that only by directly accessing children's own views and experience could we begin to understand their lives (Jack, 2006).

Given the growth in awareness of the value of children's participation, the development of effective methods to consult with children and access their views, it was timely in my opinion, to look at how this awareness and practice could be applied to learning more about children's daily lives in their neighbourhood. This was particularly so as children and childhood had become an important focus of both national and international policy throughout the latter half of the 20th Century (Hayes, 2002).

International and Irish Policy Contexts

The study is set within a context of increasing policy and legislative focus on children's rights and wellbeing. Two documents are particularly pertinent. The first is the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1989). The second is *Our Children, Their Lives – The National Children's Strategy* (National Children's Office, 2000), which arose because of Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC in 1992. I begin with the former.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UNCRC recognises children as bearers of rights, as well as citizens in need of care, protection and support, principles which this researcher upholds. Its ratification has been instrumental in focusing attention on the lives of children worldwide. However, this is far from a panacea for all the ills and challenges faced by contemporary children. Radical attitudinal as well as legislative change will be required in order to realise the potential impact of the convention on the daily lives of children.

² The World Forum is an annual conference of the International Forum for Child Welfare, an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to the promotion of children's rights and wellbeing. In 2001 the World Forum was held in Ireland, hosted by Barnardos.

As stated by Hart (1997), its articles 'are a challenge to all nations, for certainly none fully complies with all of them' (p11).

The National Children's Strategy

Our Children, Their Lives – The National Children's Strategy (National Children's Office, 2000) is a ten year strategic plan for the co-ordination and development of the systems, structures and services which will ensure the implementation of the UNCRC for Irish children and children living in Ireland. It sets out an ambitious and wide ranging set of objectives, based on a broad and holistic conceptualisation of children – the 'whole child' perspective (p. 24-25). This identifies the multi-dimensional contexts within which children live and recognises children's own capacity to shape their own lives. Its objectives derive from three overarching goals:

Goal 1 - Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

Goal 2 - Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will be benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.

Goal 3 - Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

(National Children's Office, 2000, p28.)

In devising the strategy, an extensive consultation with all key interest groups, centrally including children and young people, was carried out (NCO, 2000). This process was highly influential in informing the strategy and shaping its objectives and established the priority accorded to children's views. Among the actions implemented under the strategy was a research scholarship programme, through which this study was supported.

International Research on Children in Urban Settings

In tandem with the increased focus on children's lives and participation in Ireland, the study was informed by a growing body of work undertaken internationally which has examined children's living situations in cities and urban spaces (Lynch, 1977, Chawla, 2006, Driskell, 2002). This work has not been undertaken to date in Ireland. This study seeks to fill this gap.

Two projects in particular warrant mention: the *Child Friendly Cities* (CFC) initiative and *The Growing up in Cities* (GUIC) project. I begin with the former.

Child Friendly Cities

The Child Friendly Cities initiative (CFC) was launched in 1996 to act on the resolution passed during the second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) to make cities liveable places for all; in UNICEF terms, for 'children first.' The Conference declared that the well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and of good governance.
(<http://www.childfriendlycities.org/home.htm>)

The initiative was responding to a number of emergent and developing trends i.e. the rapid growth in urbanisation worldwide, the growing recognition and acceptance of municipal and community responsibilities towards their citizens and the increased significance of cities and larger urban settlements within national political, social and economic systems.

CFC provides a framework for implementation of the UNCRC within a local government process. It envisages doing this through partnership with children, actively engaging them in a process of consultation and development based on their lived experience and expertise. The approach is comprised of nine elements or 'building blocks' which are both interconnected and interdependent and which hold children's active participation as fundamental to the process as a whole. These are as follows:

Children's participation – promoting children's active involvement in issues that affect them; listening to their views and considering them in decision-making processes;

A child-friendly legal framework – ensuring legal, regulatory frameworks and procedures which consistently promote and protect the rights of all children;

A city-wide children's rights strategy – developing a detailed, comprehensive strategy or agenda for building Child Friendly City, based on the UNCRC;

A children's rights unit or coordinating mechanism – developing permanent structures in local government to ensure priority consideration of children's perspective;

Child impact assessment and evaluation – ensuring that there is a systematic process to assess the impact of policy and practice on children in advance of, during and after implementation;

A children's budget – ensuring adequate resource commitment and budget analysis for children;

A regular state of the city's children report – ensuring sufficient monitoring and data collection on the state of children and their rights;

Making children's rights known – ensuring awareness of children's rights among adults and children;

Independent advocacy for children – supporting non-governmental organisations and developing independent human rights institutions such as children's Ombudsman or Commissioners for Children to promote and vindicate children's rights.

The CFCI experience provided compelling evidence of the 'implementability' of child-friendly planning and design, as well as its effectiveness. Throughout the last decade, many cities have become involved and numerous large and small scale initiatives have resulted, with GUIC sites being incorporated in many instances. Examples of adapted or renovated play areas, inter-generational public spaces and management of traffic, parking and pedestrianisation are now evident in many cities.

To date in Ireland, the cities of Dublin, Galway and Drogheda (a regional town) have development programmes designed to meet the CFCI criteria. In terms of this study, the principles of inclusion, advocacy and participation were informative, building on examples of consultative processes which characterised the *Growing up in Cities Project* to which I now turn.

Growing up in Cities Project

Growing up in Cities is an international participatory action research project which aims to enable young people to document their community environment, propose feasible priorities for change and then to bring key players together to act on at least some of the recommendations (Chawla et al, 2005). The project focuses on communities in which children face challenges such as low-income, social exclusion, violence and/or living and working on the streets, frequently in combination. GUIC was conceived more than a decade before the publication of the UNCRC, by urban planner, Kevin Lynch. Lynch (1977) conceptualised the urban environment in terms of the lived experience of the people in it, and therefore as more than an aesthetic or functional settlement, or site of cultural identity. He argued that to evaluate a human settlement it needs to be analysed at the level of peoples' actions, perceptions and interactions as they inhabit and shape their environment (Chawla, 2002b).

Lynch recognised the importance of including children's views and experience in this analysis and consequently proposed and developed a pilot project initially entitled '*Children's Perception of the Environment*' as part of the UNESCO 'Man and his Environment Programme' (Lynch, 1977). A pilot was carried out in nine communities across four countries: Australia, Argentina, Poland and Mexico. The intention was to demonstrate that low cost research methods, eliciting the views and experiences of young people, could be used to inform and influence policy at metropolitan and national level in areas where such findings could have most effect.

The design was such that it could be completed using simple means, could be adapted locally and culturally and could produce significant local information relevant to local planning decisions and further policy related research (Chawla, 2002b).

Lynch's assumption was that, as children begin to move outwards into the physical environment around them during late childhood and early adolescence, not alone were they impacted on by the quality of that environment, but that their views and insights could make a valuable contribution to planning. Therefore, he proposed that researchers should talk directly to children, have them draw or use maps and actually observe how they acted in the environment. This information would then be used to inform the relevant agencies who had responsibility for the environment (Lynch, 1979). His hope was that the project would be extended to further sites and countries and that it would progress to a point where children were involved in urban design and planning as a matter of routine. However, this proved to be a vision whose time had not yet come. *'In the 1970s the idea that young people had ideas of value to create more liveable cities was still a generation ahead of its time.'* (Chawla, et al, 2005, p.55).

Despite this, the vision and intent of the project was not lost. In 1994, Louise Chawla, an environmental psychologist and then Fulbright scholar based in the University of Trondheim in Norway proposed a revival of the project. The purpose was to take a longitudinal view, revisiting the original findings and comparing them with contemporary situations. The project was revived in 1997 (Chawla, 2002b), under the auspices of Childwatch International and sponsored by UNESCO, trading on the change of priority and impetus which the UNCRC had brought to the notion of listening to children's views. Standard project methods including structured interviews, drawings, discussions, child-led walks, and child-taken photographs were used with groups of children aged from nine to fifteen years of age, in sixteen countries www.unesco.org/most/guic/guicmain.htm.

The project has had mixed success, in many ways encountering similar resistance to its forerunner (Chawla et al., 2005; Swart-Kruger, 2002). A review of the achievements of the project undertaken in 2005 identified five key points which underpin the success of participatory action research (Chawla et al., 2005).

1. The importance of a broad-based alliance including residents (children and adults), community development projects, NGOs, and government bodies such as agencies responsible for housing, health and education.
2. Political know-how in order to work within the local political scene able to build alliances and co-operation to build commitment to change, even among those with no history of such action.
3. Achieving a realistic funding commitment and a budget which includes capacity for on-going monitoring and evaluation.
4. Having '*the right tools to engage young people and to enable them to present their experiences and ideas in compelling ways*' (Chawla et al, 2005, p. 81) within appropriate ethical principles, working with young people as partners.
5. Communication skills to reach a variety of audiences including children and young people; adults and public institutions, through a variety of media.

In designing, implementing and evaluating this study, these key points formed the basis for the approach taken. The study site chosen was one of urban social housing, replicating many of the conditions of children's lives which were the focus of attention in GUIC.

Social Housing in Ireland

Ireland has a long established pattern of owner occupied residential housing relative to its European neighbours (Somerville, 2007). This is comprised primarily of housing purchased in the private commercial market, but also of local authority tenant purchased homes, a trend which increased markedly in the 70s and 80s (Fahey, Nolan, and Maitre, 2004). This is in part a result of historical events, but, as Fahey et al. (2004), point out, it has also been strongly promoted by government policy. Social housing for those unable to afford to purchase their own homes, has been provided primarily by local authorities, characteristically in large grouped schemes or neighbourhoods or on a much smaller scale, by not-for-profit social housing associations (Drudy and Punch, 2002). In both cases, rents are calculated differentially in relation to income, a situation almost unique to Ireland, and are considerably lower than the private sector (Fahey et al., 2004).

In addition, tenancy agreements for local authority tenants tend to be of long duration and not subject to market forces, unlike those in the private sector, giving local authority tenants relatively stable security of tenure (Brooke, 2004).

Social or public housing in Ireland has traditionally been socially and economically segregated. Clusters of housing types were designed and built to meet social and economic demands, such as labour market needs or housing shortages (Brooke, 2004; Williams, 2006). It is frequently configured in dense urban clusters of 'flat' or housing complexes or, more latterly, in sometimes vast peripheral housing estates on the outskirts of the larger cities, often under-resourced and lacking supporting infrastructure such as shops, schools, transport and community amenities, (Fahey et al., 2004).

The proportion of housing which originated as 'social housing' has fallen markedly in recent years both as rates of tenant purchase have increased, promoted by a range of policy and fiscal incentive initiatives including mortgage tax relief and grant aid for first time buyers or local authority tenants (Brooks, 2004) and as construction of social housing has decreased. Home ownership is strongly associated with residential stability, which in turn has been found to be an important factor in relation to reduced or elevated stress levels, with unstable neighbourhoods showing stronger impacts on health (Boardman, 2004).

While the age profile of local authority tenants tends to mirror the general population, the family structure and socio-economic profiles vary considerably. Almost twice as many lone parent families live in social housing and many (although not all) families tend to have low incomes (as would be expected given the eligibility criteria) (Dept. of Environment and Local Government, 1999). Social housing policy both in Ireland and internationally, has served to stratify populations and cluster large numbers of low income families in what are frequently physically and socially marginalised urban areas (Fahey, 1999). This speaks very much to the possibility or absence of choice and control. Those who have access to capital or credit retain choice and mobility. Those who lack access do not (Punch, Redmond and Kelly, 2004).

In some areas, particularly those perceived as less desirable, the population can be more transient resulting in less stable and cohesive neighbourhoods. More recent government policy has shifted away from creating large enclaves of social housing and has moved to a more integrated approach (McCafferty and Canny, 2005). However, this has done little to date to alter the already established patterns of exclusion in larger social housing areas.

Urban Regeneration

In an attempt to address some of the inherent problems in areas dominated by large scale social housing, a range of policy measures aimed at alleviating disadvantage have been activated since the mid 1990s (Corcoran et al, 2008). In terms of infrastructure, these have tended to fall into two categories – physical remedial works by local authorities (Williams, 2006) or larger scale physical, social and economic regeneration involving private and public investment, frequently linked to area based tax or other incentives (Hogan, 2006). Alongside, although not necessarily integrated with, these measures a range of targeted social interventions have been deployed (Haase and McKeown, 2003) such as family support, community development and early school leaver or adult education schemes. It has been difficult to accurately evaluate the effectiveness, or indeed the total costs of such measures as they are administered by a range of government agencies and departments with a lack of integration within and between bodies and initiatives (Corcoran et al, 2008). However, research in the UK tends to point to a failure of urban policy to achieve its objectives (Williams, 2006).

Regeneration strategies are closely bound to prevailing economic conditions. Recent experience in Ireland has shown the limitations of the latter, when private developers have reneged on contracts in the context of a deteriorating economic climate (Bissett, 2009). During the study period, there was little evidence of remedial works or redevelopment in the study site, but it had benefited, over the previous decade, from significant development through the efforts of the local community development project.³ A brief area and community profile is now outlined.

³ As reported by members of the Study Advisory Panel.

Area and Community Profile

The study site now briefly introduced, and developed in Chapter Three, is an area of relatively self contained social housing within a provincial city. Built in the 1980s, the estate has a population of 5,500 and consists of approximately 1,100 housing units. The area is designated as one of socio-economic disadvantage, and as such, is a nominated RAPID⁴ area. The majority of residential houses are rented from the local authority, with some 34% being privately owned or 'purchased' by former tenants. Over the years, a number of dwellings have been converted for community or 'incubator' enterprise use, for example, youth and family support projects, an adult education centre and number of service based businesses such as a local hairdresser. This was part of a planned strategy to support the provision of neighbourhood based services and facilities.

Despite the fact that the levels of unemployment have fallen dramatically over the past 10 years from a high of 70+% in the 1980s, to 40% in 1996, 21% in 2001, the socio-economic profile of the community is still in sharp contrast to the adjoining communities where unemployment is in the 4% - 9% range, reflecting the national average (CSO, 2006). The percentage of the population in the area aged 14 or less is 30% and there is a high proportion of lone parent families, ranging from 41%-58%.

The area is relatively remote from the city's main employment sites and has no major employers within its boundaries. The largest employer in the area is in fact the local community and enterprise centre which employs over 90 people, the vast majority of these being through Fás Community Employment or Jobs Initiative schemes⁵. A planned industrial estate, comprising several large industrial units is located on the eastern fringes of the estate.

⁴ The RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment and Development) Programme is a Government initiative, which has been established to ensure that resources allocated through the National Development Plan are effectively targeted in forty-five of the most disadvantaged areas in the country.

⁵ These are training and work experience schemes aimed at supporting long-term unemployed people to enter the labour market.

This was built by the regional Enterprise Development Board almost 20 years ago, presumably with a view to attracting inward investment and creating local employment. However, this did not materialise. As an alternative, the units have been adapted to accommodate a range of community services. These include a youth development project, a probation and welfare training initiative, an indoor soccer pitch, snooker and pool halls and facilities for boxing and martial arts clubs.

More recently a shopping centre, comprising a supermarket, a pharmacy⁶, petrol station, a number of other retail units and community services has been developed. This complex is within walking distance of most areas within the estate and is well used by local residents. In terms of amenities and recreation, the area is poorly served relative to many other areas. Of 31 playing fields in the city only two are located in the area and of nine private and public swimming pools, none are located in the designated area or indeed within a five mile radius. As described in the RAPID report for the area,

The negative perception of the area is characterised by the grazing of horses on public space, the practice of dumping rubbish in open spaces, community activities are barricaded into defensive environments and empty properties are vandalised and burnt out.

(RAPID, 2001, p. 14)

In common with many such areas throughout the state, media attention frequently focuses only on the negative and the sensational, in ways that reinforce stereotypes and marginalisation, while failing to highlight the many positive aspects of the community.

The Study Group

A core group of 32 children living in the area and attending the local primary school participated in the study, 17 boys and 15 girls. They were actively involved for periods from six to thirteen months on a weekly basis. The children were aged from nine to twelve years and drawn originally from one fourth and later, two fifth class groups in the local Primary school, which serves the neighbourhood catchment area.

⁶ Previously there was no pharmacy within walking distance of the estate. Access to 'over the counter' pharmacy supplies, or prescription medication required a bus or car journey to the city centre or surrounding suburbs.

In addition during the course of fieldwork an in-school survey was carried out involving a further 132 children.

As was inevitable given the duration and degree of contact with children during the course of the study, I was privy to many personal and significant events in the children's lives – births, deaths, marriages and separations, moving house and indeed, country, visiting a father in prison, winning a world championship trophy, being awarded a scholarship for 2nd level education. Many of these events were tangential to the research questions, and a small number, for reasons of privacy and confidentiality will not feature in the study findings at all. Nonetheless, they serve to illustrate the diversity, richness, challenges and achievements which go to make up the fabric of the children's lives. They demonstrate that children and childhood are as integral a part of the life of their environment and community as other residents, both being influenced by, and influencing, the life system of which they are a part.

In order to maintain the commitment to privacy and confidentiality given to the children and their parents, neither their own names nor those of their neighbourhoods nor particular identifying features will be used in presenting the findings. In their place 'nicknames' chosen by the children are used and place names or other identifying markers have been fictionalised⁷. Similarly, copies of study materials provided in the appendices have been anonymised where relevant.

A Practitioner Perspective

As outlined above, I had worked in community and neighbourhood based services for many years prior to undertaking this study. In that context, I had begun to question the extent to which services really understood or incorporated children's perspectives and lived experience into their planning and decision-making.

⁷ In presenting the study within the local area, both for the purpose of acknowledging the children's input and of using the findings to contribute to local policy and planning, an alternative summary document was prepared. Those with local knowledge would have known the school and locations. In addition, photographs taken by the children were displayed in the school and local library and, at the children's request, their names were used for this purpose. The rationale for these decisions is discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter.

At a broader macro system level, policies in relation to area regeneration were coming to the fore and I felt this presented an important opportunity to access and include children's views. The commitment in the National Children's Strategy (2000) to prioritise the child's voice and to better understand their lives provided the impetus to seek answers to these questions at an empirical level which is what this study aims to contribute. How this was realised is documented in the succeeding chapters.

Thesis Outline

The remainder of the thesis is set out as follows:

Chapter Two outlines a wide multi-disciplinary range of key literature which informed the study.

Chapter Three describes the study methods, outlining the qualitative research approach and strategies used. It includes an evaluation of the process from the children's perspective and a reflexive analysis of the study methods limitations and strengths.

Chapter Four presents a narrative description of the social ecology of the children's daily lives in their neighbourhood, illustrated by their own words and images.

The data presented reflect the central importance of friends and friendship in their lives and the important roles played by the adults who populate their social networks, from parents, extended family, neighbours and parents of friends, through to the many adults they encounter in their daily social and recreational interactions.

Chapter Five outlines the physical ecology of the children's daily lives, focusing on their use of place and space, activities, preferences, perceptions, concerns and proposals for improvement. The text is richly illustrated with photographs and drawn images depicting the physical landscape and features which hold meaning and significance for the children and which feature in their play and accounts of daily life in the neighbourhood.

Chapter Six presents the integration of the social and physical as realised through the children's activities – play, sports, recreation and use of time.

Chapter Seven sets out the discussion of the analysis, drawing out key themes emerging from the data and links the study findings with comparable and contrasting themes from literature.

Chapter Eight summarises and draws conclusions from the study as a whole, synthesising key messages from the analysis and including reflections on the effectiveness of the methods and the research process.

Conclusion

This study is based on a recognition that children's experiences and perspectives provide adults with valuable information and insight otherwise unavailable to us. It honours children's expertise and local knowledge and seeks to present their experiences in ways which retain their authenticity and meaning, while at the same time, reflecting on how it adds to our knowledge and understanding.

It encompasses a commitment to ensuring that the voices of the participating children are central, that their daily lives are better understood and that the information they contribute is presented authentically. As such, it reflects and is consistent with the goals of the National Children's Strategy (2000). This commitment is realised in a number of ways. The methodology employed throughout the study privileges and promotes children's inclusion and participation. It focuses strongly on using their words and images, thereby ensuring their 'voices' are central both in the research process and in the presentation of the findings.

As outlined, this study is qualitative and participative in approach, adopting a case study design. In common with similar studies (Berg and Medrich, 1980, Hart, 1979, Moore 1986a), and those carried out by the 'Growing up in Cities' project, the scale and local nature of the study means that it is neither statistically representative nor rigorously comparative. However, similarities and contrasts with these and other comparable studies are identified. As a stand alone case study, it provides a fascinating window onto the day to day lives of a group of children, including images and accounts of aspects of their lives which would be unlikely to be accessed through more conventional/traditional research methods.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Introduction

The study of a group of children in the context of their neighbourhood requires consideration of a range of perspectives and is best informed by a multi-disciplinary approach, avoiding what Prout (2005, p. 145) refers to as a “*the naïve assumptions to which monodisciplinary work is vulnerable*”. Taking children and childhood as the fulcrum, psychological and sociological conceptualisations were considered, grounded in an ecological framework in the Bronfenbrenner tradition. An appreciation of children as key informants, active research participants and ‘experts’ in the subject area was informed by a childhood studies perspective (James and Prout, 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005). Children’s rights to have their views heard and taken account of, as articulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), also underpinned the study approach. An understanding of the concepts of neighbourhood and place and space use drew on contributions from geography and environmental psychology as well as social science (Bartlett et al, 1999; Chawla, 2002; Christensen and O’Brien, 2003; Matthews, 2001).

Search Methods

Search methods used to identify appropriate literature included:

Keyword, author and subject searches were undertaken through Trinity College library and information services databases, for example, Social Science Citation Index (SSCI); Psych Info; with emails alerts from a range of journals and publishing houses being set up to keep abreast of newly published material. Additional strategies included:

- Searches of relevant bibliographic databases
- Reviews of contents of peer reviewed qualitative journals over a ten year period including:
 - Childhood
 - Children and Society
 - Children Youth and Environments
 - Urban studies and many more

- UNESCO, GUIC and Child Friendly Cities web sites (among others)

The search parameters in general spanned a thirty year period although older material was also sourced through citations where relevant. Specific material published within a ten year span was prioritised. Keywords and word combinations included for example: children and neighbourhood; middle childhood; childhood; play; place and space; place attachment; neighbourhood effect; children and poverty; children and mobility, participation, participation in research, resilience, risk, social networks and social capital.

A number of key studies undertaken over the past thirty years were influential, providing models for the methods employed. They include Hart's '*Children's Experience of Place*' (1979); Moore's '*Childhood Domains*' (researched in 1975, published in book form in 1986a); Berg and Medrich's (1980) '*Children in Four Neighbourhoods: The physical environment and its effect on play and play patterns*' and Burke's (2005) '*Play in Focus: Children Researching Their Own Space and Places for Play*'. In addition, as case studies they also provided points of comparison and contrast to the study findings. As these were identified as studies of particular relevance, detailed summaries of their approach and findings have been included. However, as a first point of reference for seeing children's lives in context, the differing and changing ways in which children and childhood are, and have been, historically conceptualised is briefly presented.

Conceptualisations of Children and Childhood

*For hundreds of years children have been treated primarily as property.
Recently, they have begun to be considered to be persons.*
(Hart, 1992, p. 53)

Childhood as a distinct life course phase has a relatively recent pedigree as an area of research interest (Ariès, 1962, Clarke, 2003). Postman (1994) links the emergence of childhood as a recognised phase of life specifically to the invention of the printing press which heralded a shift from an oral to literacy based society.

While there is some dispute as to the value accorded children in previous centuries (Pollock, 1983) there is ample evidence that they were not accorded the position in either law or social custom that we assume as a norm today (Hart, 1992; Postman, 1994). Even in this modern age, the notion of children as nurtured and protected consumers is still largely a minority world view (Hart, 2008). Throughout the world today, the majority of children contribute economically to their families and society. Approximately 154 million children aged 5-15 years in developing countries work from an early age (UNICEF, 2005).

Psychological Perspectives

From the 19th to the late 20th century the study of 'the child' has largely been pursued by developmental psychologists, with most attention being focused on understanding and indeed measuring children's cognitive development (Hogan, 2005). Jean Piaget is widely recognised as a major figure whose delineation of stages of cognitive development has been influencing learning and teaching since the 1960s (Piaget, 2001 - originally published in 1950). However, his work is not without criticism, largely centring on an apparent assumption of universality, without sufficient reference to cultural, experiential or other contextual variations (Rogoff, 2003). For example, it is argued that Piaget's ages and stages model frequently underestimates children's ability to understand concepts and solve problems (Donaldson, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). In later writings, Piaget revised his model to take account of cultural or contextual variations (Piaget, 1971) but the linear nature of his approach is still regarded as limited by many (Corsaro, 1997, 2005).

Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (1978), has also been influential in examining the social interaction associated with learning and the importance of cultural context in the learning process, in common with Bruner (1977). Writing in the 1920s (although not translated and widely disseminated until the 1970s) Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the importance of social context in learning through two key concepts - that of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) by which he meant the potential to develop when supported, guided or scaffolded by a *more knowledgeable other* (MKO).

Vygotsky maintained that spoken language and social exchange are key to this process, whether in the form of direct instructional content (formal teaching) or informal conversation, such as a parent explaining their activities to a child (e.g. preparing food) or a peer demonstrating their knowledge or skills.

The developmental paradigm has been subjected to criticism both from within the discipline and from other standpoints. Within psychology, there exists divisions and contested approaches to the conceptualisation and consequently the study of children and childhood, particularly in relation to children's learning processes. It is argued that, children in the abstract and collective usage of the word have generally been conceived of as passive (Qvortrup, 1993). This perspective has been highly pervasive. From the old adage that 'children should be seen and not heard' to the passive, listening oriented design of classrooms and curriculum, there is an underpinning assumption that children are and should be passive rather than active, despite the compelling evidence to the contrary.

The moment children act, they individualise themselves; they cease to be a mass and become the intensely distinctive beings that we are acquainted with out of school, in the home, the family, on the playground, and in the neighbourhood.

(Dewey, 1915, p. 22)

The conviction that children were active learners and constructors of knowledge was evinced by Maria Montessori who devised a radically different method of 'education' based on providing a prepared environment which facilitated children's independent choice. Montessori (1973) believed that learning happened, not through passive listening but through '*experience in which the child acts on his environment*' (p.6).

Criticisms of developmental constructions have also focused on how children are conceived of as incompetent in comparison to adults, defined by linear age related measures inaccurately assumed to be universally shared (Rogoff, 2003). Specifically, a qualitative focus on children's own subjective experience has been absent in developmental research (Hogan and Gilligan, 1998). John Morss (1996) is a proponent of critical psychology which seeks to challenge the hegemonic position of developmental psychology.

He characterises developmental psychology as a set of pervasive, influential stories which require deconstruction. For this to happen it is necessary to establish a critical distance from which to scrutinise. He argues that the word ‘development’ directs us away from issues of particularity and personal experience and that the so called ‘facts’ of development are not constant, but subject to on-going revision. In particular, he opposes what he termed “*the baleful influence of biology*” (Morss, 1990, p. 8) which he sees as the basis for classifying development as a sequence of changes “*held to be parallel across contexts*” (p. 3) which has dominated developmental thinking. Morss (1996) identifies “anti-developmental tendencies” within the Vygotsky tradition and acknowledges that Vygotsky’s work is “*very effective in placing children’s development in a social context*” (p.26) but contends that the above tradition remains within the developmentalist frame, failing to move substantially beyond an adaptive, evolutionary developmentalism.

Morss (1996) also proposes an increased emphasis on qualitative research, advocating what he terms “*ethical hygiene*” (p. 154) as an alternative to traditional methods emphasising controlled and matched samples. This involves participants giving informed consent, knowing they have the right to withdraw at any time, having access to the material and its analysis and having the right to veto usages of information which they find objectionable.

The hegemonic position of developmental psychology has remained largely unresponsive to challenge or self-critique until relatively recently (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Burman, 1994; Flavell, 1999; Greene, 1999; Hogan, 2005; Morss, 1996). However, the need to understand children as real, diverse, living human beings, and as research subjects and active participants, rather than objects has gained recognition (Hogan and Gilligan, 1998; Hogan, 2005; Rogoff, 2003).

Sociological Perspectives

Over the past 25 years the notion of childhood and children themselves have become a focus of sociological interest. Prior to this, children as a social group were largely absent from sociological discourse, other than as objects of ‘socialisation’.

Mead and Wolfenstein (1955) promoted the idea of childhood as a cultural construction, demonstrating that childhood varies significantly across cultures and that children are both social and economic actors in many societies. These more dynamic conceptualisations of children are reflected in contemporary theoretical constructions.

Chris Jenks (1982) was an early contributor to this emerging discourse and drew together the work of key thinkers, posing the question of how we may think about 'the' child. The mid-80s 'Childhood as a Social Phenomenon' project, a 16-nation research project, co-ordinated by Jens Qvortrup (1993) focused on childhood, as a constant social construction through which all humans pass between infancy and adulthood, albeit at different times, with different experiences and in differing cultural contexts. Within this conceptualisation, children are seen as a distinct social, even minority group, lacking power and influence, but subject to the same economic and political forces as adults, although affected in different ways. Qvortrup (1993) argues that children are both economic and social participants in and contributors to society, but are frequently rendered invisible, largely because information on and about them is not collected or collated in useful or visible ways (Fitzgerald, 2004). Equally, because children are subsumed within a larger social unit – the family – which bears responsibility for them in a private capacity, the state or wider society only intervenes (or takes public responsibility for them) in exceptional circumstances, adding to their invisibility.

Through the late 1980s and 1990s in particular, an emerging discourse which has come to be known as the 'new social studies of childhood' (James and Prout, 1997b; Prout, 2005), promoted the recognition of children as 'social actors', 'agents' and 'experts'. It critiqued developmental psychology as:

...setting up adulthood as the standard of rationality, for rendering putative stages of growth as natural and assuming universality to childhood which historical, social and cultural studies suggested it does not have.

(Prout, 2005, p. 60)

The above, it is argued, conceptualises children in terms of dominant western/northern thinking, assuming that to be a universal norm.

Further, it positions 'the child' as a 'work in progress' – dependent, immature and incompetent - requiring to be nurtured, socialised and 'developed' through relatively linear stages, in order to successfully negotiate the pathway to the ultimate goal of adulthood – a 'becoming' rather than a 'being' in his or her own right. Finding resonance with emerging discourses on children's rights, as articulated in the UNCRC, (1989) the 'new social studies of childhood' gained rapid acceptance. It underpinned the 'Children 5-16 – Growing into the 21st Century' research programme, a major five year (1996-2000) UK research initiative under the direction of Professor Alan Prout. The programme generated twenty two research projects examining the lives of school aged children in the UK (www.hull.ac.uk/children5to16programme). It was envisaged as responding, with a multi-disciplinary approach, to a dearth of child-centred research, specifically on the period of middle childhood (Prout, 2002).

A significant number of the studies were of particular relevance and value to this study. These included young people's views of place and environment (Matthews and Limb, 2000); children's views on what it means to be a child (Mayall, 2000a); on urban regeneration (Greenfield et al., 2000); on children and parents' constructions of risk (Scott, 2001); and the dangers of safe play (McKendrick, 2000). The strengths of this discourse, from a child-centred perspective, is the status and esteem it confers on children, seeing and promoting them as social actors, active participants and experts in their own experience. It further allows children's experience in both its diversity and commonality to be examined and understood in both an ecological and structural space (James and James, 2001).

Scholars who subscribe to this view reject developmental approaches on the basis that the term development assumes progression, effectively devaluing children by positioning them as not fully complete beings (Woodhead and Faulkner, 1999). However, taking solely the sociological view is unsatisfactory as its characterisation of children can be seen as partial and ultimately limiting. It fails to accommodate the complexities of a comprehensive conceptualisation of what it means to be a child and to 'inhabit' childhood as a biological and social being, both present in and moving through a process of growth, change and development.

Equally, it does not take account of the view that *human* development is a lifelong process, ‘*and is thus neither inherently progressive nor restricted to childhood*’ (Tudge and Hogan, 2005, p. 106). Instead, it posits a mutually exclusive, dualistic framework which appears to preclude the biological dimension of human development in favour of a socially constructed ideal. A more integrated approach which draws on a range of disciplines and learning, recognising childhood as both a biological reality and a social construction is required (Hayes, 2002).

As Prout (2005) has more recently suggested:

(T)he distinction between being and becoming has been used to draw a line between the concerns of the sociology of childhood, which wishes (for good reasons) to see children as beings, and those of developmental psychology, which (again with good reason) wishes to see children as becomings. This leads to a self-defeating loop in which the very condition of children’s lives, their culture-natures and their being-becomings, are spilt and denied.

(p. 144)

The multi-disciplinary approach has been endorsed by others (Woodhead and Montgomery, 2003) as one which can potentially give rise to a more creative and inclusive conceptualisation of childhood (Prout, 2005). The dichotomous portrayal of being and becoming, as a central tenet of the sociology of childhood, has also been critiqued as assuming a fixed and complete adult state, as opposed to a lifelong process of change (Lee, 2001). Prout (2005) also recognises that the emphasis on children as ‘beings’ is in danger of overstating autonomy “*as if it were possible to be human without belonging to a complex web of interdependencies*” (p. 66). Much of our lives, not alone during childhood but throughout the life course can, as Heft and Chawla note, be described ‘*as a set of apprenticeships with someone more experienced in a particular domain*’ (2006, p. 204). From this perspective, the notions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ need not inevitably be cast as oppositional or problematic, nor indeed confined to one generation or life phase. Instead it can be seen as a dynamic interdependent process, a meso-system exchange throughout the life course, which people of all ages move back and forth between, in the context of life-long learning and continuous human development, perpetually ‘being’ and ‘becoming’.

As Lee (2001) argues, given the uncertainties and discontinuities which mark contemporary adult life, the notion of the fully mature or 'complete' adult, no longer pertains. Framed within this context, children's lived experience and local expertise has a significant contribution to make. This study aims to examine how this might be realised.

In conclusion then, childhood can be understood as both a 'fixed element' in the structure of human society, and at the same time, a transient and transitional period for developing humans in their phenomenological being. Taking this perspective, an ecological approach provides a useful framework for the study of children's daily lives in context.

Ecological Perspectives

The experience of children and young people can only make sense in terms of the society within which they are developing. Individuals do not grow from childhood into adulthood in a social vacuum.

(Lindon, 1996, p. 3)

Tudge and Hogan (2005) argue that ecological approaches, such as those inherent in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) "help us to bridge the divide that exists between psychology and sociology, providing the crucible in which context and individual undergo dialectic transformation" (p. 104). For the purposes of this study, two ecological perspectives have underpinned the approach - the bioecological model, as advanced by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992, and 2005) and Gibson's (1979) theories of perception and affordance. An ecological approach provides a frame of reference within which to explore and understand the interrelationships between the temporal state of middle childhood and the spatial and social contexts of neighbourhood. The first of these, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, is now discussed.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model

In *The Ecology of Human Development, Experiments by Nature and Design* (1979) Bronfenbrenner outlined a four tier systemic environmental structure within which human beings live and develop.

1. **Microsystem:** Immediate environments (e.g. family, school, peer group, neighbourhood and childcare settings)
2. **Mesosystem:** A system comprised of connections between immediate environments (i.e. links between a child's home and school)
3. **Exosystem:** External environmental settings which only indirectly affect development (such as parent's workplace)
4. **Macrosystem:** The larger cultural, political, economic contexts which impact on children's lives

He visualised this system as '*a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next*' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). He suggests that these four interrelated systems, encapsulate both the immediacy of the developing person's daily experience and the impact of the many different systems in the wider environment.

He defined human development as:

[T]he process through which the growing person acquires a more extended differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 288)

The ecological perspective in the study of human development takes the view that not alone are human beings influenced by the environments within which they exist, but that they actively contribute to the creation and shaping of those environments, thus being active agents in their own development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992).

Therefore, within this conceptualisation, the developing person is seen not as a passive recipient of external stimuli, but as "*a growing dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides*" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). The environment encompasses the physical, social, cultural, political and historic settings within which the individual grows and develops. The environment and the person both exert influence in a two-way exchange, characterised by reciprocity. Bronfenbrenner proposed that the quality of the systems and the relationships with the people within them, combined with the characteristics, perceptions and actions of the individual, are what shape development over time.

From this apparently simple and logical configuration of the original (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) the model was later expanded and reformulated as the “*bioecological model*” (Bronfenbrenner, 1988a, 1992; Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). For example he further critiqued and amended the model to include the element of time and the life course, which he named the *chronosystem*, (Bronfenbrenner, 1986)

...that makes possible examining the influence on the person's development of changes (and continuities) over time in the environments in which the person is living.

(p. 724).

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) went on to define proximal processes as actions or events that give rise to developmental outcomes, the actualisation of potential for:

(a) differentiated perception and response; (b) directing and controlling one's own behavior; (c) coping successfully under stress; (d) acquiring knowledge and skill; (e) establishing and maintaining mutually rewarding relationships; and (f) modifying and constructing one's own physical, social, and symbolic environment.

(p. 569)

These proximal processes are the drivers of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). Attentive observation of children in their environment supports this view (Tudge and Hogan, 2005). Despite the modifications made to the model over many years, a number of themes remain consistent throughout: consideration of the social and historical context, the active developing person and the imperative of not studying the individual in isolation from the social (Darling, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner's motivation to promote an ecological approach arose in response to what he saw as the limited and generally decontextualised study of children which was prevalent within developmental psychology at the time, which he described as:

[T]he science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 19).

He urged researchers to move beyond the confines of the laboratory to the places where children lived, learned and interacted.

He stressed the importance - nowadays a 'taken for granted' truism – of not considering the child in isolation from the key influences in his or her life i.e. family, community and the prevailing socio-political environment.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) was also critical of what he saw as 'deficit thinking' which pervaded 'helping' social services and welfare systems, wherein individuals, families or other groups are identified, and frequently required to identify themselves, as deficient in some way, in order to access services or support. The professional mind set trained and employed to evaluate or assess in this way often lacks a solution focused approach which requires a belief in the capacity for change. He argued for:

“... the rejection of the deficit model in favour of research, policy and practice committed to transforming experiments.

(p. 291)

Bronfenbrenner's work has had and continues to have far reaching effects on the theoretical frameworks used to study children and their lives (Brooks-Gunn, 1995).

The bioecological model has influenced and underpinned approaches to research studies of children and their multiple and varied environments for 30 years and is credited with transforming the study of human beings and their environments (Moen, 1995). It has become an established element in the teaching of psychology (Darling, 2007; Rogoff, 2003).

Limitations of the bioecological model

The model has, however, attracted criticism. It has been noted that a static model, as Bronfenbrenner's 'nests' are frequently depicted, fails to illustrate the interactive and relational qualities that are the essence of the bioecological model. Rogoff (2003) contends that the diagramming of Bronfenbrenner's model has led, perhaps unintentionally, to a limiting view of individual and cultural processes as separate entities. She suggests that Bronfenbrenner's image of concentric circles or "nested" systems "*constrains ideas of the relations between individual and cultural processes*" (p. 48). She argues that the image portrays the four ecological systems (micro, exo, meso, and macro) as independent, unidirectional and hierarchical influences.

This, she contends, fails to examine “*the contributions of individuals and cultural practices as they function together in mutually defining processes*” (p49), in effect failing to reflect that cultural and personal processes create each other. She proposes that human development is “*a process of people’s changing participation in sociocultural activities of their communities*” (p52) with people both contributing and inheriting such practices.

Darling (2007) posits that the concentric circle model, frequently depicting a lone child in its centre, represents merely the first phase of Bronfenbrenner’s work. She sees the core of his work, as it developed over time, as seeing the developing person as active, “*shaping environments, [and] evoking responses from them*” (p. 204). This analysis reflects the reciprocity which Bronfenbrenner stresses. She emphasises the importance of the phenomenological premise and the reality that different environments have different affordances, giving rise to ecological niches “*in which distinct processes and outcomes will be observed*” (p. 204) rather than randomly distributed, objectively defined developmental processes.

From the sociological perspective, Prout (2005) suggests that Bronfenbrenner’s 1979 ecological model was created in an attempt to resolve “*the separation of the individual and the social [which] leads to the creation of two tracks along which separate lines of enquiry run*” (p. 65). Citing the 1979 work, he concludes that while the ecological model urges consideration of the interaction, exchange and reciprocity between the depicted systems, it has failed to adequately conceptualise how this might be achieved. This study will attempt to demonstrate that a constructivist approach, directly exploring the experiences and perceptions of children in their neighbourhood within the context of two *ecological niches* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) may provide a means.

Ecological niches are defined as:

.. particular regions in the environment that are especially favourable or unfavourable to the development of individuals with particular personal characteristics

(2005, p. 111).

Two such 'ecological niches' – the physical and social context of neighbourhood and temporal niche of middle childhood - provide the structure for this study's exploration of children's perspectives on their daily lives. This is complemented by the work of Gibson (1979), who provides a distinct but complementary ecological approach.

Gibson's Theory of Affordances

Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances has particular relevance for a study of children in their neighbourhood, when their perceptions and activities are the focus of study. Also taking an ecological approach, Gibson emphasises the interaction of perception and affordance. He proposed that perception of the physical environment was primarily concerned with relationships and how they are directly perceived by the individual and that reciprocal effects result from actions associated with perceptions. He suggests that as children grow in confidence and competence, their range of actions and possible actions expand and with expanded actions, a greater sense of agency, reciprocity and competence is achieved. Gibson concluded that the nature of this relationship was such that understanding of the individual and the environment in isolation from one another was not possible.

Gibson's focus is not purely physical. Social interactions and interrelations are also accommodated. As with Bronfenbrenner, the relationship between the individual and the environment is central and both are concerned with change occurring over time.

For Gibson (1979), as more information is received, perceptions and the opportunities or constraints they present, are changed and modified and the changed interaction which results engenders progressively more change (Tudge, Gray, and Hogan, 1997). This has congruence with Bronfenbrenner's idea of proximal effects and the processes by which experience shapes and is shaped by context. Affordance theory states that the world is perceived not only in terms of objects and spatial relationships but also in terms of perceived possibilities for action or 'affordances'. In other words action, or indeed, constraint, is driven by perception.

Gibson's theory of affordances provides a means of examining the functional properties of a neighbourhood and how they are used, including if used as intended or adaptively.

Children's perceptions, changing capacities and physical development, as well as their evolving interests enable them to adapt and create opportunities using the environment in different ways to other users.

The functionally significant features of children's outdoor environments have been examined by Heft (1988) who created a useful taxonomy of the physical functions of children's environments, based on the findings of three earlier works *One Boy's Day* (Barker and Wright, 1951), *Children's Experience of Place* (Hart, 1979) and *Childhoods Domain: Play and Place in Child Development* (Moore, 1986a). Heft's taxonomy is based on physical activity and features, focusing on features such as surface qualities (hard, smooth, rough etc.) things that can be climbed (trees, walls, hills), things that provide shelter (trees, buildings, materials) and graspable or detached objects. However, his taxonomy excludes the social contributions of other people (children or adults), which Gibson contends, is one the richest sources of affordance.

Following on from Gibson (1979), Kyttä (2006) conceptualised a framework (the Bullerby model) by which 'ideal' environments for children strike a balance between independent mobility and measurable actualised affordances. In this framework *'children enjoy sufficient possibilities to move around adequately in the environment and perceive the environment as a rich source of affordances,'* (p. 141).

Building on Heft's (1988) work Clark and Uzzell (2002) developed a 'socio-environmental affordances scale' which enabled a systematic assessment of aspects of home, neighbourhood and community affordances, based on surveys and focus group discussions with teenagers aged 11-15 years. They examined the dual concepts of social interaction and retreat in four environments - home, school, neighbourhood and town/city centre. Their aim was to further the work of both Gibson (1979) and Heft (1988) by developing a more integrated taxonomy of socio-environmental affordances which allows comparison across different environments. Clark and Uzzell (2002) found that neighbourhood, school and town centre each supported social interaction and retreat behaviour, with the town centre affording greater social interaction than neighbourhood or school.

In contrast the neighbourhood provided more opportunities for retreat than did school or town centre. Home environments were much more associated with retreat (Clark and Uzzell, 2006). Given the more constrained ranges of younger children, due to mobility, resource and permission restrictions (Hart, 1979) for them neighbourhood plays a more central role as a site of social interaction and performance. Both Gibson (1979) and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) give cognisance to time as a further important context in the lives of children.

Time as a Context in Children's Lives

Children's lives are, for the most part, very highly regulated and timetabled by adults, almost at times without children being fully aware that this is the case (Rasmussen, 2004). Routines such as school attendance, family meals, waking and bedtimes, outdoor curfews and scheduled activities, to a large extent, shape the patterns of children's days and nights. Many report that this is becoming increasingly so, due to increasing urbanisation, commercialisation, privatisation and regulation of activities (Gaster, 1991; Karsten and Van Vliet, 2006), as well as an increased preoccupation with risk and protection (Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007). It is further compounded by perceptions of children or young people as sources of risk or fear themselves (Malone, 2002; Matthews, 1995; Morrow, 2000). It is also, perhaps, symptomatic of constraints on parents' time, due to increased participation in the labour market (Dunn et al., 2001; Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2006).

Alwin (1995) identifies three aspects of time as relevant to the context of human development - biographical time – the life span of individuals; historical time – events or changes in the social environment; and the intersection between the two. This is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1988a) 'chronosystem'. Writers in the life course tradition stress the dynamics of time and its relationship to transitions and significant lived events (Elder, 1995). They emphasise that events experienced in the same historical time by one or more members of a closely linked or interdependent system (such as a family) affect all other members, although not necessarily in similar ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Children also grow up as members of a generational cohort, whose relationships intertwine with those of other generations such as parents, grandparents, nieces and nephews. (Alanen and Mayall, 2001; Alwin, 1995). Generation has been identified as the constant and universally distinguishing feature which constitutes children as a social group. *'Childhood is always embedded in one or another form of generational frame'* (Alanen and Mayall, 2001, p.12) defining (and frequently confining) them in terms of experience, expectations, opportunities, identities and access. Children's daily lives are enacted in terms of generational relationships which shape their status and participative opportunities as well as shaping their identity. A generational marker in the context of this study, is the life course phase of 'middle childhood' to which attention is now drawn.

Middle Childhood

'Middle childhood' is commonly defined chronologically as the life course period between early childhood and adolescence, usually defined as occurring between seven to twelve years of age (Borland et al, 1998). During this time children generally enter formal education, begin to form autonomous friendships and to engage with the wider community beyond home and family, frequently in neighbourhood settings (Katz and Ksansnak, 1994; Scourfield et al., 2006; Watt, Dickey, and Grakist, 2005). As such, it is a time when children *"begin to have sustained encounters with different institutions and contexts outside their families and to navigate their own ways through societal structures"* (García Coll and Szalacha, 2004, p. 82).

The pervasive use of chronological age categories has been subject to critique on the basis that they are frequently used to confine, control or limit children's visibility and participation (James, 2005). For the purposes of this study, the range 7 – 12 years was used to sample a cohort of participants. In doing so, it neither assumed nor implied homogeneity of ability or experience. Rather it recognised that such chronological measures are imperfect, as children's growth, development and being is shaped by a range of factors including ability, biology, culture, environment, gender and opportunity (Rogoff, 2003).

However, this age span does represent a time when children commonly make most use of their local neighbourhood, effectively 'colonising' the outdoors in a way that is more diverse and extensive than other age groups and fundamentally different to the way that adults and older adolescents do (Chatterjee, 2005; Chawla, 2002b; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986b). In saying that, it is recognised that in many respects the differences in neighbourhood usage between age groups, child or adult, is quite porous and by no means mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, certain identifiable characteristics of this period in children's lives are relevant to understanding the context of their neighbourhood use and experience.

During this phase of life, children gradually acquire more autonomy in terms of travel, playing away from home for more extended periods and making or initiating independent social arrangements with friends (Parker and Asher, 1993). Even while still largely subject to greater or lesser degrees of parental agreement or negotiation, this period augurs a significant shift in children's self-directedness (Corsaro, 2003; Phillipson, 1994). It is frequently a time during which children's social networks expand and diversify significantly. Not alone do they develop autonomous friendships, beyond the more constrained world of early childhood (Franco and Levitt, 1998) but relationships with other adult family members for instance, grandparents or aunts and uncles, take on a more autonomous character as children's social and recreational worlds expand. Parents of peers and close friends become more significant and other adults such as sports coaches or club leaders frequently become prominent in the child's active social network (Levitt, Guaccifranco, and Levitt, 1993).

Children's level of freedom, sense of safety and willingness to explore or roam at a distance from their homes is influenced by familiarity, local knowledge and frequently by their parents' knowledge and familiarity with their friends (Allès-Jardel et al., 2002; Anderssen and Wold, 1992; Chawla, 1990; Kerns et al., 2001; Parkinson, 1987). The quality of children's attachment relationships has been shown to have a bearing on their co-operation and compliance with parental boundaries and conversely on parents' trust in their children's competence and self-management (Kerns et al., 2001; Musser and Browne, 1991), influencing the negotiation of behaviours and freedom of movement.

Increasingly, as children explore and investigate a wider and more diverse range of ecological settings, they progressively acquire greater flexibility and freedom through a process of negotiation with parents and other adults (Dunn, Kinney, and Hofferth, 2001; Hart, 1979; Spencer and Woolley, 2000). This process frequently involves assessments of competence on the one hand, and risk on the other made by both adults and children based on experience, perception or local knowledge (Allen, 2005; France and Utting, 2005; Hargreaves and Davies, 1996; Jones, 2004; Scott, 2001; Valentine, 1997). If desired destinations and amenities are accessible, (generally within walking distance of their homes) and can be reached with safety, children, alone or with peers, have greater opportunities to develop autonomy and control (Bartlett et al., 1999).

Linked to children's expanding range behaviour, exploration, and autonomous activity structuring, middle childhood is a time when place preferences and attachments come to the fore as both knowledge and experience combine (Bow and Buys, 2003; Kyle et al., 2004; Manzo and Perkins, 2006). Place attachment has been linked with future community participation (Pretty, Chipuer, and Bramston, 2003) and investment in community conservation and development (Witten, McCreanor, and Kearns, 2003). All of which serves to underline that children's daily lives are lived in an ecological context in which they act and interact. Therefore, an ecological approach is required in order to understand their experience.

Moving from the ecological conceptualisations of a child's development and the life course phase of middle childhood, I now examine the concept of neighbourhood and its function as an important setting in which children transact their daily lives.

The Concept of Neighbourhood

What constitutes a 'neighbourhood' is commonly spatially defined, ranging from a geographic area or vicinity, to an administratively boundaried and locally identified territory within a larger urban area, where people live and interact socially (Warran, 1981).

Neighbourhoods are also a locus for the development of social networks and social interaction among residents, whether in close networks of practical and emotional support or more distant 'neighbourly' relationships, as Bridge (2002) describes '*non-intimate, convivial relations between people who know each other to nod and wave to*' (p3). Philip Abrams (Bulmer, 1986), focusing on interactions between adults in six areas, defines neighbours as "*simply people who live near one another*" and neighbourhood as "*an effectively defined terrain or locality inhabited by neighbours*". The pattern of interaction between neighbours he names "*neighbouring*" but distinguishes between that and "*neighbourliness*" which he defines as "*a positive and committed relationship constructed between neighbours, a form of friendship*" (p. 21). Therefore, both physical and social components and the interaction between the two are considered.

The neighbourhood is a site of shared public space. Neighbourhoods where this space is well used, surveilled, maintained and 'owned' by residents have been found to afford a much higher level of safety and cohesion for all residents, including children (Bartlett et al, 1999) than those where public space is underused and seen as a liability rather than an asset (RAPID, 2001). The concept of '*defensible space*' (Bartlett et al, 1999, p. 125) suggests that insightful planning which creates inviting open space arrangements, which are well-lit, overlooked and have benches or common recreation areas, serves to encourage usage. This in turn leads to an increase in the sense of ownership and correspondingly, a decrease in instances of anti-social or criminal behaviour.

Neighbourhoods are dynamic and change both over time and in response to internal and external influences. They can promote or detract from health and wellbeing. Bartlett et al (1999) suggest that some of the characteristics of neighbourhoods, which promote health and well-being may include:

- Security of tenure in terms of housing;
- Social bonds between residents, particularly parents;
- Opportunities for play and recreation;
- Access to services such as health, education, transport, and recreation;
- Security of community ownership and influence over their neighbourhoods.

Characteristics of neighbourhoods, which undermine well-being or make it more difficult to sustain include:

- High rates of crime, particularly violent crime;
- Ambivalent or conflictual relationships between residents;
- Ambivalent or conflictual relationships between residents and non-residents;
- Neglect or poor maintenance of buildings, common areas and public space leading to vandalism, problems with refuse etc.

(Bartlett et al, 1999).

Neighbourhoods are not homogenous environments. They are comprised of a diversity of demographics, family types and structures, natural and built features, socio-economic profiles, resources, community and state services. They also encompass a diversity of opportunities and risks (Chawla, 2002b). Because an area is termed 'disadvantaged' it may be assumed that all its residents experience similar levels of need or deprivation or indeed share similar characteristics. This is not the case. Research into 'neighbourhood effect' has demonstrated that a range of factors coalesce to influence life outcomes of residents (Andersson and Musterd, 2005; Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov et al., 1993; Cardak and McDonald, 2004; Jencks and Mayer, 1990). However, Boardman (2004) stresses that much research into '*neighbourhood effect*' has been concerned with *whether* neighbourhoods have an influence, but have failed to pay adequate attention to *why* that might be. This, he suggest, requires more contextually rich analysis, with particular attention paid to '*variation within and across social contexts*' (p. 2481). The question as to why neighbourhoods of themselves create or contribute significantly to life outcomes, positively or negatively is an important one, clearly, as this understanding is crucial to informing the planning of housing provision.

Children in the Neighbourhood

Children need neighbourhoods that convey a sense of human continuity, that are familiar and trustworthy, but where strangeness and danger can be encountered too; they need to move on their own two legs, take chances, seek multi-sensory stimulation, experience their nonhuman surroundings and acquire a capacity for innovation in a dynamic world.

(Mead, 1984, p. 3)

The neighbourhood as a physical but also social context within which to examine children's daily lives is one which has been of growing interest to social scientists, geographers, and planners (Bartlett et al, 1999). Neighbourhoods are not only physically defined spaces, but also socially constructed spheres within which dynamics of hierarchy and dominance are enacted (Malone, 2002). For children, and indeed, in retrospect for adults, they comprise the landscape of childhood (Woolley, 2006), dominated by physical characteristics, seasonal changes, and social interactions, as well as being influenced by the wider socioeconomic and political forces which shape all of our lives.

From a child's perspective, neighbourhoods are a key domain. They are a site of activity, mobility and experience and encompass spaces within which children encounter other people, peers and adults. *'For children, the neighbourhood is more than a physical setting. It defines a social universe'* (Berg and Medrich, 1980, p. 320). From a very early age, neighbourhoods provide children with their early experience of the wider world beyond their home and family. Neighbourhoods play a central role in children's lives, supporting or constricting their freedom of movement and their opportunities for play and social interaction (Bartlett et al., 1999; Berg and Medrich, 1980). The UNCRC recognises the role of neighbourhoods in supporting children's access to play and recreation as well as a site within which to actively participate in the cultural life of their community and society (UNCRC, Art, 30). According to Bartlett et al (1999):

Ideally, a neighbourhood should be a place where children can play safely, run errands, walk to school, socialise with friends and observe and learn from the activities of others.

(p. 122)

Children's access, freedom and safety within their neighbourhoods are impacted by the conditions that prevail, physically and socially (Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg, 1991). Views of what constitutes culturally appropriate parenting practice, levels of safety, crime or risk, environmental factors such as planning, maintenance and provision of amenities all shape how children perceive, use and value their neighbourhood environment (Malone, 2007; Tucker, Gilliland, and Irwin, 2007; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997).

The neighbourhood is both a transitional space, a link between home and the wider environment and society and a physical space in its own right, within which children transact a large part of their daily lives (Hart, 2002). It is the site of play and other activities, movement from home to school, social interaction with friends, neighbours, extended family and community. Where community resources are well developed, they support developing identity, attachment to place, social cohesion and a sense of belonging. Where they are absent or poorly developed, social exclusion with all its negative connotations can result (Matthews, 1995).

The Neighbourhood as Public Space

Critical to developing a society where people can exercise choice is their ownership of public space

(Mayall, 2002, p. 165)

Ownership of space and territory, whether for private or public use, dominates particularly Western/Northern society (Childress, 2004). As minors, children and young people do not own property or space and can only claim ownership or precedence when adults decide or provide, benignly or otherwise. However, recent conceptualisations of children as competent individuals and '*creators and carriers of culture*' (De Coninck-Smith and Gutman, 2004, p. 134) have resulted in a focus on children's daily lives in urban settings. With this has come recognition that children and young people share and use public space, whether or not it is designed or designated for their use (Matthews and Limb, 2000; Morrow, 2000). Childress (2004) for example, notes how the designation and naming of a space for specific purpose, for example an athletic field, implies a single correct use, rather than the multiple uses to which such as space could be put e.g. a meeting or gathering place, a thoroughfare, a camping ground, a building site. Ownership and non-ownership is also explored by Jenks (2005) who associates the concept of '*trespass*' with children's and young people's presence in and use of space. He notes how this constantly gives rise to assessments made by adults as to whether children and young people are in the 'right' or 'wrong' place at the right or wrong time or for the right or wrong purpose not alone in public areas, but even within the spaces of their 'own' homes. Mayall (2002) found that children themselves acutely feel such assessments.

They feel they are not accepted as rightful users of public space, that adults think they are in the wrong place at the wrong time and that adults suspect their motives

(p. 101).

Yet, it is frequently noted that children and young people are the most frequent users of public space such as streets, parks, greens, shopping centres, beaches and fields (Childress, 2004; Matthews and Limb, 2000), possibly because they cannot claim ownership of their own space or perhaps, as Childress (2004) suggests, because they are '*more intensely public beings*' (p. 196).

Children's use of and interest in public space also stems from their embodied physicality, their need for and pleasure in movement and active physical play (Factor, 2004; Ferreira et al., 2007; Fjortoft and Sageie, 2000; Hart, 2002; Jutras, 2003; Pellegrini, 1987; Rissotto and Tonucci, 2002). At times children may also be pulled towards the outdoors because of limitations in available space due to cramped housing conditions (Bartlett, 1997; Swanson, Ernst Meyer, and DePanfilis, 2004). In general, children show a marked preference for spending time outdoors, with friends, in spaces where they can be physically active (Burke, 2005; Hart, 1979, 2002; Wridt, 2004).

Children's Perceptions of Neighbourhoods

Considerably more attention has been paid to adolescence and indeed early childhood rather than middle childhood in studies of childhood environments. This may perhaps be because adolescents are seen as more problematic in terms of their use of, or even their presence in public space (Clark and Uzzell, 2002; Matthews and Limb, 2000; Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith, 1998; Matthews, Limb, and Taylor, 1999; Valentine, 1996) and the early years are seen as developmentally more significant (Clark and Moss, 2001; Piaget, 2001 - originally published in 1950; Smith, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). However, a number of studies internationally (although not to date in Ireland) have focused specifically on primary school-aged children's use, perceptions and experience in their neighbourhood (Aber, Brown, and Jones, 2003; Asher and Gottman, 1981; Berg and Medrich, 1980; Bryant, 1985; Chaskin and Baker, 2006; Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Corsaro and Eder, 1990; Cunningham and Jones, 1996;

Driskell, 2002; Garcia Coll and Szalacha, 2004; Hart, 1979; Heft, 1988; Levitt et al., 2005; Moore, 1986a; Thompson et al., 2006).

Van Andel (1990), examining the place preferences of children aged 6 – 13 found that they were primarily associated with resourcing activity (playgrounds, open space) and the presence of other children. Schiavo (1987, 1988) found differences both in age and gender in terms of how children and young people used their neighbourhood, with young children using it more, having more positive perceptions of its advantages and affordances and with boys showing a preference for more physical play.

‘Disadvantage’ as a Neighbourhood Context

[T]he best measure of public concern for children is the extent to which children are protected from poverty.

(Bradshaw, 2003b, p. 162)

In this study, the neighbourhood socio-economic profile, as an area of designated disadvantage, is an important contextual issue. However, in approaching a study seeking to gain children’s perspectives, I felt it was important not to regard it as **the** defining issue, as might be assumed, nor to allow it to dominate, filtering all other perspectives through this particular lens. To do so would run the risk of defining children’s lives by their ‘social address’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Such undifferentiated labels frequently fail to recognise contextual and individual differences in the lives of children and/or families, or the degrees of difference within and among the residents of the neighbourhood. They also perhaps limit the capacity of ‘outsiders’ to appreciate the values, adaptations, and priorities that communities and individuals hold which may not conform to common assumptions associated with a social address label. I believe this suspension of the assumed to be an essential prerequisite in objectively and openly hearing and considering children’s experience.

This notwithstanding, the specific neighbourhood context (as outlined in Chapter One) and consideration of its impact on children’s lived experience cannot be ignored and accessing children’s experience of their neighbourhood is essential in this regard.

Hearing and seeing children's direct experience provides important insights, as Ridge (2003) points out '*an understanding of childhood poverty that is grounded in the lives and experiences of children is an essential part of addressing the intractable nature of child poverty*' (p. 9). Because the literature on poverty and disadvantage is so vast, the following review is confined to specific issues pertinent to the study, namely neighbourhood effect, criminality and parenting in the context of disadvantaged areas and educational disadvantage. It draws on recent Irish as well as international literature.

Neighbourhood Effect and Children

As outlined above, neighbourhoods are an important element of the ecological context of urban children's living situations, but their effect on children's lives has not been extensively studied (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov et al., 1993; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Poverty has long been recognised as perhaps the most significant factor linking childhood development with poor socio-economic outcomes in adulthood (Gregg, Harkness, and Machin, 1999). The correlation between neighbourhood effect and children's development however, is less clearly understood. In many studies, the evidence has been mixed and inconclusive (Jencks and Mayer, 1990). Some suggest that neighbourhood effects on children are substantially less significant than the influences of family. Watson et al, (2005) for example, argue that

The fact that a specific type of area or tenure has a relatively high poverty rate does not in itself indicate anything about the impact of the location or tenure per se on poverty – such effects could be entirely attributable to the socio economic composition of the households involved.

(p. 119)

It has been suggested that more finely tuned measures, including perceptions of adults and children are required in order to understand neighbourhood dynamics and effects on well-being (Coulton and Korbin, 2007). Jencks and Mayer (1990) and Brooks Gunn et al, (1997) reviewed and analysed large scale data on neighbourhood effects, many concerned with adult outcomes such as educational attainment, early or lone parenthood or criminal activity. Brooks Gunn et al (1997) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework to track connections between the macro system planning processes and the micro-system effects on families and individuals.

However, some significant effects have been found. Two major experiments in social housing re-distribution in the USA - the Gautreux Assisted Housing Programme in Chicago from the 1970s to late 1990s and the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration project carried out in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1996 - found significant changes. In both programmes, residents of highly impoverished neighbourhoods were offered relocation to less poor areas and their life trajectories and those of their children were studied. Extensive follow up studies of both programmes (Turner and Briggs, 2008) found that children of families who took part in the Gautreux programme were more likely to complete school and move on to college courses, while those in the MTO programme did not show significant change. On the other hand, it has been found that children and young people experiencing higher levels of deprivation evaluate themselves negatively in relation to more affluent neighbours or peers (Jencks and Mayer, 1990). This last has been found to be true more so of male adolescents, than females (Orr et al., 2003).

Harkness and Newman (2003) found that home ownership, even in a low income area, was more beneficial to children than living in rented accommodation in a 'better' neighbourhood. Research undertaken by the Combat Poverty Agency in Ireland has shown that families, particularly lone parent families living in private rented accommodation may be at a higher risk of poverty than similar families living in 'disadvantaged' areas (Fahey et al., 2004), due to social isolation, and lack of sources of material support. Bures (2003), found that residential stability (often associated with home ownership) was linked with good mental health. However, many effects are thought to be more strongly associated with family or individual characteristics or other 'unobservable' variables.

Two specific mechanisms have been linked with living in neighbourhoods – socialisation and individual agency (Small and Newman, 2001). Socialisation can have two aspects – firstly, where children and young people tend to engage in similar behaviour to their peers especially, their more dominant peers and secondly, where there is a scarcity of positive role models within their sphere of experience.

While evidence for neighbourhood effect has been mixed, it has been argued that the lack of conclusive evidence may arise from methodological weaknesses, rather than the non-existent relativities. Causal links between neighbourhood effects and outcomes for children and young people, such as early school leaving or teenage pregnancy have been demonstrated by Harding (2003), using the ‘counterfactual’ model. Matching children at age ten on observed variables such as family income, parents’ education and family structure, he found that children growing up in high-poverty neighbourhoods were more likely to drop out of school before completion and have a teenage pregnancy, than were children growing up in low-poverty neighbourhoods. Harding (2003) concluded that outcomes for children and young people were exacerbated by living in a neighbourhood with high concentrations of poverty.

Contemporary social theory holds that concentrated-poverty neighbourhoods have serious and lasting consequences for their residents and that, all other things being equal, poor children who grow up in high-poverty neighbourhoods will experience significantly worse outcomes than poor children in more affluent communities.

(p. 677)

Suggested reasons why this might be include social isolation from employment or educational networks, lack of role models and pervasive lower expectations. Research underpinning area-based strategies to improve outcomes for children and families has shown that where families live and how they interact in local neighbourhoods impacts on the well-being of both children and parents (Jack, 2006), albeit that direct causal relationships remain unclear, possibly because many such families are subject to multiple inequalities and disadvantages, including exposure to crime and criminality.

Criminality

Exposure to criminality and its consequences is perhaps one of the most insidious risks faced by children and young people in marginalised communities. Lower levels of social cohesion, fear and isolation from or rejection of external control services such as police may exacerbate this risk (Atkinson and Flint, 2003). Social disorganisation has been associated with higher rates of crime or ‘antisocial’ behaviour, while shared common values and goals within communities has been associated with more social control and social relationships (Elliot and Huizinga, 1990).

The provision of services and institutional resources such as schools, police protection, libraries, community facilities, family support services and other resources, described by Furstenberg and Hughes (1997) as *'the benevolent intrusion of agents into the community'* (p.24), has been found to promote opportunity and prevent or reduce the incidence of problematic behaviour. Many parents and indeed children associate perceived risks with being in public spaces such as neighbourhoods, streets, parks and places at a distance from home, largely associated with 'stranger danger' and indeed public space is also associated with perceptions of young people as a source of risk (Valentine, 1996).

Increasingly parental concerns about safety and risk are seen to be contributing to limiting children's freedom of movement and the development of 'skilled watchfulness' among parents (Scott, 2001). However, in areas in which crime, particularly violent crime is endemic, (Kaufer Christoffel, 1995) parents' capacity to protect their children is seriously challenged. Children can be affected by community level violence either directly by experiencing, witnessing or indirectly by hearing accounts of incidents (Linares, 2006). Dealing with the impact of living in areas and situations of on-going conflict has been found to have become 'a way of life' for children in some cases, but for some, the consequences have included being diagnosed with symptoms of stress (Leonard, 2007). The importance and value of incorporating children's experiences and perspectives into community safety initiatives has been recognised. Children have a 'place specific' knowledge of what goes on in their areas including gangs, car crime, policing and drug related crime and have much to offer in developing strategies to reduce or eliminate crime and the fear it evokes (Nayak, 2003).

Educational Disadvantage

Educational disadvantage is considered a key risk factor both as an outcome of childhood poverty and as a predictor of adult poverty and has been strongly associated with inter-generational factors. Harding (2003) found that children and young people from high-poverty areas were more likely to drop out of school than were their peers from less impoverished areas.

Brooks-Gunn et al (1997) found that while neighbourhood conditions were often significant predictors of future outcomes, the effect was generally less than that of family related circumstances such as income and educational attainment. In addition, they noted that neighbourhood effects were more evident in pre-school children and adolescents and while the reasons for this somewhat unexpected finding are not clear, they conclude that the influence of school may be more significant during this stage. Results from a review of a number of studies reported by Halpern-Felsher et al. (1997), noted that the presence of affluent neighbours, more so than the presence of low-income neighbours was found to have a positive influence (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Klebanov, 1993).

Mayer (2002) found that economic segregation in the US between 1970 and 1990 had a positive impact on educational attainment for higher income children and a negative outcome for lower income children, in effect increasing inequity in the educational system. Children living among neighbours that are more affluent tended to have access to a greater variety and quality of recreational experience, and in some cases, higher expectations in relation to both education and future employment.

Overall, they conclude that neighbourhood effects do have an impact on educational risk and attainment, but that there is little consistent evidence on how specific neighbourhood influences are linked to outcomes for children. On the other hand, neighbourhoods which support access to social networks of caring and resourcing kin or other adults and which offer a range of educational and recreational services to children and young people can contribute to their self-efficacy and sense of self-worth, enhancing resilience in the process (Gilligan, 2000).

Place Attachment and Place Preference

Place attachment refers to the emotional connection formed by an individual to a physical location due to the meaning given to the site as a function of its role as a setting for experience.

(Ponzetti, 2003, p. 1)

A satisfactory experience of neighbourhood leads to the development of place attachment and preferences, usually built up because of accumulations of experience associated with place, over time. Using photography as a data collection tool, Ponzetti (2003) undertook a study of the place attachment of elderly residents living in rural towns in Illinois, USA, looking in particular at what influenced their decisions to remain in their particular community. His findings reflected those of similar studies (Milligan, 1998) albeit using different methods, which found that the physical landscape and built features held meanings associated with people, social connections and events.

Ponzetti (2003) concluded that place attachment includes three dimensions of the individual and their identity in the world (self); their interaction and integration in the social relationships (others) and the physical space which they use (environment). Bow and Buys (2003) offer a more limited definition stating that:

[P]lace attachment occurs through a positive affective relationship between people and place because of people's satisfaction with, evaluations of and identification with a specific place.

(p. 4).

The significant difference between the two is perhaps the latter's specification of a positive or satisfactory relationship while the 'self-other-environment' model is neutral, accommodating either positive or negative associations. This allows for attachment to be expressed as concern for example, in relation to neglect or deterioration in local conditions. While place attachment in adults is commonly associated with memories and/or attributed emotional or restorative qualities, children's place attachment tends to be much more in the present and associated with physical or social activity (Korpela, 1996).

Mesch and Manor (1998) found that two factors contributed independently to place attachment in the context of neighbourhoods, i.e. the perceptions of the local environment and the availability of close friends and neighbours living nearby. Studies conducted with adults examining place attachment and mobility (Ponzetti, 2003) show that strong affective links with places and spaces associated with childhood persist into adulthood and old age.

Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) compared attachment to place across three 'spatial ranges' – house, neighbourhood and city, examining both physical and social dimensions. Their findings indicated that attachment to house and city were stronger than to neighbourhood and that social attachment was more significant than physical in all settings and across all age groups. Adams (1995) argues that place attachment develops through bonding with nature during middle childhood and that the link between place identity and bonding is children's experience and ownership of play, with repeated episodes building layers of experience over time. The sense of place attachment that develops forms the basis for a commitment to preserve communities in adult life. On this note, I move to examine play in the daily lives of children.

Play in the Daily Lives of Children

Play is the way that children learn about themselves and the world they live in. In the process of mastering familiar situations and learning to cope with new ones, their intelligence and personality grow, as well as their bodies.

(Whewey and Millward, 1997, p. 1)

Play is how children engage with their world. It has been described as the 'work of childhood', in an attempt to convey its developmental contribution, having both immediate and future oriented benefits (Pellegrini, Galda, and Flor, 1997; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). Cotton (1984) identifies links between play and adult work maintaining that play builds competence, capacity to cope with the environment, ego strength and, as a gratifying experience, investment in life. Conversely, play has also been defined as purely a means of enjoyment and inherently unproductive (Garvey, 1977). As stated in Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy '*play is what children do when no-one is telling them what to do*' (NCO, 2004, p. 11). This would resonate with children's own views which have been found to clearly differentiate between what they perceive as work and play (Wing, 1995). Depending on the focus of the activity and the materials used, children have been found to understand learning activities as a blend of play and work (Cooney, Gupton and O'Laughlin, 2000).

Physical play has been identified with enhancing mobility, co-ordination, balance, dexterity, and spatial awareness (Pellegrini, 1987). Through playing with objects children come to understand concepts of size, capacity, composition, weight and measure (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Play with other children develops social competence, language skills and an understanding of roles and relationships (Bergen, 1998). Imaginative play allows children to explore and experiment with roles and activities they meet in their lives and to encounter and manage risk (McKendrick, 2000). Through play, it is suggested, children develop skills and competencies across all their developmental domains (Erikson, 1963).

Play has also been widely acknowledged as a creative process.

A child's play is elicited in response to a person/object in a context where he/she feels secure. Over time the child expends physical and mental energy for pleasure through the application of skills such as improvisation and creativity.

(Sayeed and Guerin, 1997, p. 46)

It has been suggested that both children's freedom to play and choice of play activities have changed considerably in recent years. A study of children's play preferences in Australia found that children increasingly played at home using an growing array of electronic media, such as playstation games, the Internet, TV and DVDs. However, the same study also found that children's preferences were for more outdoor play – the street, the bush, local open space - but that they were constrained by parental concerns with which they complied (Tandy, 1999). This is attributed to a range of factors: the prevalence of the motor car and increased traffic; increased commercialisation of recreation and leisure with children and young people being targeted as lucrative markets; reduction in allocation of open space in housing developments motivated by both profit and increased demand for housing and parental concerns about risk. Characteristics of neighbourhoods that successfully facilitate a safe, accessible and diverse play experience have been identified as having:

- The widest range of locations available;
- The highest relative safety of the front street;
- The widest range of activities engaged in by the children;
- Traffic calming, street closure, walls and driveways;

- Grassy areas set back from roads;
- Networks of footpaths around and through the estate, linking public spaces;
- Cul-de-sacs with footpaths and informal play areas;

(Wheway and Millward, 1997)

Children's play and use of space is inextricably linked with the presence of friends and play mates. Friendship is a key contextual factor in children's everyday lives in neighbourhood as in other settings.

Friends and Friendship

The study of children's daily lives in their neighbourhood or indeed any location must include consideration of friends and friendship. Friends and friendships are intrinsic to the social lives of children. Not only do they provide companionship for play and recreation, it has been found that they play a vital role in children's healthy development and emotional well-being (Lawhon, 1997). During primary school years, friendships take an increasingly significant role in children's lives, as they begin to form friendships that are based on shared interests and similarities in personality (Haselager et al., 1998; Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Although proximity, access and encounter continue to play a determining role (Erwin, 1993).

It has been found that, in the course of their interactions with friends, children develop a range of skills, and coping mechanisms including enhanced literacies, both verbal and emotional, through communication, negotiation and resolution of conflict (Pellegrini, Galda, and Flor, 1997; Pellegrini, Galda, Flor et al., 1997). Higher levels of self-worth (Bagwell, Newcomb, and Bukowski, 1998), and social competence (Hartup, 1996) have been noted as has the development of prosocial skills. Friendship groups can also be associated with antisocial behaviours (Gest, Graham-Bermann, and Hartup, 2001) and an increase in challenge to adult control (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Children who lack friends, or are unable to sustain friendships, have been shown over time to increasingly develop traits such as excessive shyness, being easily angered, uncaring or dishonest which lead to their exclusion from peer groups (Ladd, 1999; Waldrip, Malcolm, and Jensen-Campbell, 2008).

Friendship has also been found to contribute to children's socio-emotional adjustment and academic competence (Vandell and Hembree, 1994). It has been shown to have a buffering affect in terms of experience of adversity in early childhood (Schwartz et al., 2000), mental health in middle childhood (Ostberg, 2003) and overcoming shyness and associated problems such as loneliness and anxiety (Fordham and Stevenson-Hinde, 1999). It has also been shown that friends provide one another with social and cognitive scaffolding, providing support through the many transitions and adjustments that children face in their daily lives (Hartup, 1996).

The Neighbourhood as a Contextual Factor in Friendship

All relationships exist within a context – social, spatial, environmental and increasingly, virtual (Valentine and Holloway, 2002). These contextual factors are just as applicable in relation to children's friendships. Factors which facilitate or limit children's social interactions include the public built and natural environment within which they live; activities and interests and the resources that determine their availability; their school situation and their family and extended social network ties (Erwin, 1993). The physical environment, housing and other buildings streets and open spaces, designated play or sports facilities or informal, wild spaces serve to structure children's access to contact and shared activity.

[T]he act of play itself was partly a product of social interaction patterns which, to an extent, were related to the land use configuration and nature of the built environment

(Berg and Medrich, 1980, p. 341)

For younger children in particular, proximity is a key factor – line of sight to and from home, safety considerations such as traffic or other potential hazards which may be perceived to pose a threat to children's safety, impact on their freedom of movement and access to play facilities.

As a result, siblings and local children are the most likely source of friends and playmates (Berg and Medrich, 1980). Recent studies would indicate that for children of all ages, independent mobility is becoming increasingly constrained and their use of public space has diminished over the past generation (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg, 1991; O'Brien et al., 2000).

Neighbourhoods of high density are more likely to afford access to greater numbers of children, facilitating more spontaneous and informal large group activity, such as team sports or large group games (Berg and Medrich, 1980). Housing configurations which include pedestrian pathways, non-transit traffic routes (e.g. cul de sacs) or are clustered around accessible green areas enable safe and easy access for children and provide spaces within which they can meet and interact (Bartlett, 1997). The local availability of facilities such as parks and playgrounds also promote the development of friendships and opportunities for group play, as do informal 'wild' areas, with less visibility which offer some privacy and opportunity for more imaginative adventurous play (Berg and Medrich, 1980).

Parental attitudes which encourage and foster friendships or limit them are also key. Parents' own networks can act to both facilitate children's friendships, expanding their children's networks to friends outside school, and to enrich their cognitive understanding of friendship (Uhlendorff, 2000). Family support has been shown to be predictive of friendship quality, and the combined impact of family support and friendship has been found to contribute to the development of self-esteem (Franco and Levitt, 1998). Security of early attachment has been shown to influence children's interpersonal relationships across the life span and to have a correlation between child-mother attachment and peer relations, particularly in middle childhood (Schneider, Atkinson, and Tardif, 2001). Similarly, a correlation between parent-child connectedness and the development of empathy and social competence has been shown to impact positively on children's peer relationships and development of friendships (Clark and Ladd, 2000).

Children's own adaptations, initiatives, personal characteristics and interests are significant. Erwin (1993) identifies social class as having a major impact, affecting socialisation practices of parents, values and of course, access to facilities, both public and private. The increase in privatised and commercial play, recreation and leisure provision, serves to structure, control and ultimately limit children's opportunity to develop autonomous friendships. It has been found that children from lower socio economic backgrounds tend to use facilities on a more 'ad hoc' basis, or to use only those provided specifically to children and families on low income (O'Donnell and Stueve, 1983).

The quality of friendships – the degree of companionship, support and conflict they provides (Parker and Asher, 1993) as well as the level of participation – number, duration and time spent with friends can be an indicator of social satisfaction or indeed a determinant of future levels of social or anti-social behaviour (Sancilio, Plumert, and Hartup, 1989). The activities, routines, values and concerns which go to make up children's relationships with their peers, their peer culture (Corsaro and Eder, 1990) play an important role both in children's daily lives but also in their longer term socialisation and adaptation to the demands of the adult world.

Through their friendships and social play, children process information received from the adult world, making sense of what can sometimes be confusing or ambiguous messages. The information and skills they develop enable them to negotiate more effectively with adults and thereby '*become a part of adult culture and contribute to its reproduction*' (Corsaro and Eder, 1990, p. 201). Through their participation in peer settings such as school, clubs, teams or informal groups, children develop both self-knowledge and a strong sense of group identity. The keeping, exchanging and disclosure of secrets is a characteristic of older children's friendships and something they value as evidence of solidarity and mutual trust (or distrust if confidences are broken) (Watson and Valtin, 1997).

Gender Differences in Friendships

In a study of adolescent relationships, Youniss and Smollar (1985) identified that girls were more inclined to engage in intimate disclosure and talk based relationships, while boys' friendships are likely to be more activity based. Similar differences have been observed in how younger children engaged in different forms of play and interacted in small groups. Girls were observed to exchange more information and were more intimate, while boys showed more aggression (Lansford and Parker, 1999). Robin Moore's (1986b) study of children's use of a redeveloped school playground observed that boys spent more time in competitive games, while girls preferred non-competitive skill development activities and time spent talking and 'being together'. Boys have been found to prefer sports based physically active play (Blatchford, Cresser, Mooney, 1990), while girls tended to favour more talk based interaction and were more likely to engage in domestic or craft play within the home. A study of children and adolescents emotional responses found that boys expected a negative response to displays of emotion, more so than did girls (Zeman and Shipman, 1997).

Friendship and Conflict

Conflict is a common occurrence in children's friendship and is both manifested and responded to in a variety of ways, impacted by gender, culture, motivation and intention (Bagwell and Coie, 2004; Benjamin et al., 2001; French et al., 2005; Joshi and Ferris, 2002). Boys have been found both to use physical aggression more than girls do and to view it as more hurtful (Bagwell and Coie, 2004) while girls tend to use more verbal and social aggression such as gossip and verbal hostility, exclusion and facial expression (Galen and Underwood, 1997). Conflict of itself is not inevitably a 'bad thing' and can in fact be viewed as both a necessary component and a helpful process in learning to negotiate personal preferences and inter-personal boundaries (Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995). However, children's responses to conflict can vary depending on the perceived closeness of or value placed on the relationship. Conflict among close friends is more likely to be perceived as less serious or threatening, to be more short-lived and to elicit a pro-social response aimed at reconciliation, whereas conflict with non-friends is likely to be perceived as more provocative and to result in disengagement (Hartup et al., 1988; Ray and Cohen, 1997).

Resolution of conflict among friends is frequently characterised by compromise, accommodation and greater equity (Butovskaya and Kozintsev, 1999; Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995). Persistent conflict, particularly where there are issues of power inequity is likely to be perceived by victims as bullying.

Bullying

When approaching a study of children's daily lives in their neighbourhood, the likelihood of coming across accounts of bullying must unfortunately be anticipated. For some children and young people, neighbourhoods can become 'tyrannical spaces' (Percy-Smith and Matthews, 2001) where the impact of children's exposure to bullying can impact severely on their self-esteem, participation and indeed, personal safety. It is often a hidden, misunderstood, or ignored phenomenon. A study of bullying in Irish schools found that 43% of primary school children and 26% of students at second level experienced bullying either as victims or perpetrators, but 65% of primary school children and 84% of second level students who were bullied had not told their teachers (O'Moore, 1997). The same study noted that a high degree of apathy existed among teachers, parents and indeed peers. Guidelines issued by the Department of Education and Science define bullying as '*repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical conducted by an individual or group against others*' which is '*systematic and on-going*' (Department of Education and Science, 1993, p. 2). It goes on to provide detailed descriptions of a range of behaviours including:

- Physical aggression
- Extortion
- Intimidation
- Isolation
- Name calling
- Slagging

The latter, it explains can be '*good-natured banter*' but when it extends to personal remarks about for example, one's appearance, one's family or one's sexual orientation '*then it assumes the form of bullying*' (op cit, p. 3).

In children's everyday lives, bullying frequently is perpetrated as low level insidious annoyance or victimisation, rather than high profile events, but rather actions and experiences that form part of the everyday experience of some children (Percy-Smith and Matthews, 2001). Bullying can occur between friends and playmates and between non-friends (Olthof and Goossens, 2008). Frequently at neighbourhood level, it involves older children or teenagers bullying younger ones. Percy-Smith and Matthews (2001) found that boys tend to be bullied by boys while girls are bullied by both boys and girls. Participation in bullying has been linked with a desire to be accepted by what are perceived as dominant or popular groups (Olthof and Goossens, 2008).

The impact of bullying can be detrimental to children, young people and indeed adults. In-school strategies including peer support programmes to deter bullying and support victims, have been found to be effective when actively endorsed by both teachers and pupils. Over time, they have improved the ethos and culture of the school, creating a safer more supportive climate for pupils and promoting the development of skills such as mediation and negotiation as alternative conflict resolution strategies (Naylor and Cowie, 1998). Such roles played by adults are key supports to children's negotiation of daily life, as are the many other ways that adults, parents and others resource and support children in their neighbourhoods.

Risk in the Daily Lives of Children

The concept of risk has gained considerable profile in contemporary society, underpinned by various theoretical perspectives (Lupton, 1999). Beck (1992) coined the term 'risk society' asserting that post industrial society with its increased complexity, unpredictability and emerging hazards (e.g. pollution, radiation), combined with greater access to increasingly complex information, has created an unprecedented level of distrust and anxiety. This, he contends, in common with Giddens (1991), has given rise to heightened perceptions of risk. Beck relates this to a shift from widespread acceptance of established institutional structures of the past, to an increasing individualism, in essence a reduction of structure in favour of agency. Giddens (1999) concurs, and attributes the rise of risk consciousness to a preoccupation with the future, and an increased focus on human responsibility and its corollary, blame.

While these theories have gained wide acceptance, they have also been critiqued. Tulloch and Lupton (2003) argue that not enough attention has been given to how individuals think about risk and how it impacts on daily life. They conclude that factors such as gender, age and occupation shape how risk is perceived and assessed and these contextual factors must be considered.

In terms of children's daily lives, Kelley and Mayall (1998) note that children are marginal to Beck's conceptualisation, in which attention is focused on adults. In exploring children's views, they found that their conceptions of risk and their strategies for managing it, were influenced both by their direct experience (e.g. of bullying) and their parents perceptions and fears. They found that parents externalised risk, seeing the home as a place of safety and identifying traffic accidents or abduction as potential threats to their children. Similarly, abduction and traffic accidents were the most commonly feared risks for parents in Valentine's (2004) study, with only one per cent of parents identifying accidents in the home as likely risks (p. 15). She concludes that parental fears for children in public space "*are constructed and mobilised through media, vicarious experience, 'community' and educational campaigns*" (p. 29).

Focusing on school-aged children (aged 5 – 11 years), Gill (2007) advocates for a balance to be struck between protection and proportionate risk-taking. He notes developmental advantages associated with risk-taking such as learning to manage risk and develop resilience. He also notes that children "*have an appetite for risk-taking*" (p. 16) which if repressed through over protection, may lead to more excessive behaviour. Echoing findings by Hart (1979), Prezza et al (2005) found that physical ecology had an impact on parents' perceptions of risk. They found a higher perception of social danger, fear of crime and lower sense of community cohesion among mothers who lived in larger urban contexts. Mothers, who lived in greener areas, and had more neighbourhood relations and a greater sense of community cohesion had a more positive perceptions of children's mobility.

Leonard (2007) also found that children did not simply respond passively to the risks they encountered in their daily lives, but developed coping strategies to avoid, minimise, or manage the risk.

In some instances, risk taking itself was a strategy involving actively occupying contested spaces and participating in risky activities such as rioting. In the context of living with multiple and potentially cumulative risk factors such as consistent poverty and exposure to violence and crime, the presence of protective or buffering factors takes on significance and the concept of resilience merits consideration (Shumow, Vandell, and Posner, 1999).

Resilience

Resilience in humans is understood as the capacity to ‘bounce back’ or recover from significant adversity. In relation to children, Gilligan defines it as:

[Q]ualities which cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity, in whatever form it takes and which may help a child or young person to cope, survive or even thrive in the face of great hurt or disadvantage.

(Gilligan, 1997, p. 12)

Not all children who are exposed to adversity are impacted in the same way. A recognition that some children can be exposed to serious risks and adversities and that these impact not alone on their daily lives, but on their life course trajectories and outcomes has generated interest in the concept of resilience as a mitigating factor (Kaplan, 1999; Kirby and Fraser, 1997).

Personal and familial factors are key to the development of resilience, particularly the kinds of close, nurturing relationships that most children experience in their homes and family networks, which provide the essential ‘secure base’ (Bowlby, 1977) from which children and young people explore and learn to manage their life experience. Where this is lacking or indeed, as an additional resource, there may well be a range of other factors and actors within a child’s life and social network who may play a vital role in supporting their capacity to cope with adversity (Gilligan, 1999, 2000). Having access to a range of support sources (social capital) which are perceived as positive has been shown to contribute to a sense of well-being and an increased capacity to cope with adversity (Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007).

However, the development of resilience appears to be a complex and non-linear phenomenon. Not all children with similar characteristics or support resources and exposed to similar risks will respond in similar ways. A more complex and dynamic interrelationship between different factors such as beliefs, goals and competences can result in differing trajectories and outcomes (Freitas and Downey, 1998). Evidence for substantial community effects is mixed, but some factors such as involvement in out-of-school activities, hobbies and sports, educational attainment, mentoring and parental involvement have been shown to be significant (Gilligan, 1998, 2000; Shumow et al., 1999; Ungar, Dumond, and McDonald, 2005).

Social Capital

The concept of social capital has emerged as a prominent element in relation to issues such as social exclusion (Kearns, 2004), community regeneration (Rabrenovic and Pierce, 2003), citizen participation (Body-Gendrot and Gittel, 2003) and health (Drukker et al., 2003). A number of definitions of social capital have been devised all of which include the notions of trust, networks, social norms and relationships (Kawachi and Kennedy, 1997; Kearns, 2004; Putnam, 1995). Many emphasise the role of social capital at community level. While there is a wide degree of consensus in relation to definition, differences of opinion are evident in relation to benefit.

Drukker et al. (2003) found that increased informal support is related to fewer symptoms of psychological distress and higher levels of well-being. Anecdotal evidence supported the idea that people in 'deprived' neighbourhoods were more likely to trust and help each other while more affluent neighbours may not develop such ties. Their study also found that residentially stable neighbourhoods, characterised by higher levels of home ownership, were more cohesive and safe than unstable neighbourhoods. In relation to children and young adolescents, this study showed that low employment expectations and exposure to violence has an impact on development. The fact of living in low income neighbourhoods was associated with higher levels of externalising problem behaviours, such as aggression. One interpretation offered was that lower informal social control (i.e. correcting or reprimanding) was exercised due to a belief that children needed to be able to defend themselves.

Edmondson (2003) also contends that '*solidarity and trustworthiness do not take the same forms in all parts of every society*' (p. 1723). She urges caution in regarding social capital as a form of 'social engineering' which can be applied as a simple solution to the need to improve health and well-being at community level. While acknowledging the value of the concept of social capital as promoted by Putnam (1995), and others, Edmondson argues that it is a complex and situationally variable concept, which bears deeper interrogation. Morrow (2001a) argues that the model proposed by Putnam effectively excludes children and young people who cannot participate in the political processes he describes.

Social Networks

Social networks are intrinsic to the definition of neighbourhood which is conceived as having both geographic and social dimensions particularly in urban areas (Bridge, 2002). Children are frequently linked to parts of wider social networks of kin and family (parental) friends, what Morrow refers to as:

[A] web of interlinked individual, neighbourhood and community specific networks which are embedded in material and environmental circumstances such as streets, park and school; and social circumstances such as parents' social networks, family structure in so far as some children have two homes.

(Morrow, 1999a, p. 141)

Social networks frequently serve to extend children's opportunities (such as holidays or trips), or provide alternative sources of support and care (grandparents or other relatives babysitting or childminding). However, as Bridge (2002) points out, it is possible for network structures to have both positive and negative effects.

The sorts of network closure useful for mutual support of children in a neighbourhood might also act as a form of social control that stifles individual mobility and extra-neighbourhood contact.

(p. 23-24)

In such situations, structures which enable children's and young people's participation in wider networks which support their participation are essential. As this study was acutely focused on ensuring children's active participation, it is timely to outline both the policy and practice implications of this issue, before moving onto the methods which enabled it.

Participation and Consultation

We seem to have become very adept at listening to children's and young people's concerns and ideas, but not so skilled at involving them in proposing and implementing solutions.

(Willow, 2002, p. 2)

In policy terms, Ireland has proactively adopted a position of consulting children and young people on areas relevant to their lives and on involving them in policy development at national as well as local level. This is evidenced through the development of the National Children's Strategy (National Children's Office, 2000) and subsequent research and policy publications such as *Ready Steady Play* (National Children's Office, 2004), *Young Voices* (National Children's Office, Children's Rights Alliance, and National Youth Council of Ireland, 2005), and a range of publications produced under the National Children's Strategy Research Series. In addition, structures and fora have been developed to enable the participation of children and young people in civic society in Ireland. These include: Dáil na nÓg⁸; Comhairle na nÓg⁹ and the Children and Young People's Forum.

This approach has been adopted because of Ireland's 1992 ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, and is derived from article 12. Apart from it being an intrinsic right to self-determination, the active participation of children and young people has been shown to have substantial benefits not alone for children and young people themselves, but also for society as a whole, as their perspectives and experience inform and improve policy development and implementation (NCO et al, 2005, op cit). The issue of children's rights and the priority or precedence which should be afforded them, is one that continues to be debated in both Ireland and other countries, between those who advocate protection on one side and those who cite liberation on the other. A middle ground – the pragmatist view - is proposed by Coyne et al (2006), arguing that a balance needs to be struck between protection and liberation, a view supported by Alderson (1995).

⁸ The young people's parliament

⁹ The young people's council

Hart (1997, 2008) argues that children need to be supported to participate and given the opportunity to develop their capacity for authentic engagement in a variety of settings and through a range of channels, with due attention paid to their varying abilities, cultures and environments. His '*Ladder of Participation*' (reproduced in Chapter Three), adapted from Arnstein's (1969) 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' has been widely adopted as a means to benchmark and measure participation of children and young people, usefully providing clear definitions for each level described. However, Hart (2008) recently reassessed both interpretations and applications of the ladder as a model and suggests that the time has come to move beyond its narrow and linear conceptualisation. He suggests that in some instances, a scaffold, representing a multiplicity of participation modes and routes, might be a more useful image.

Despite the increased profile and rhetoric of participation, in reality it continues to be dominated by adult agendas and structures, as opposed to initiatives emanating from children or young people (Hill et al, 2004). Many would argue that participation as an effective and authentic process has yet to be validated. Lack of critical evaluation of the effectiveness of different approaches and issues such as over or under representation of different groups have been identified as gaps in research (Kirby and Bryson, 2006, Tisdall and Davis, 2004).

An over emphasis on 'consumer views', a common focal point for consultation, has been critiqued for its focus on existing service users, in effect, excluding the views of the excluded (Cockburn, 2005). Clarke and Percy-Smith (2006) articulate a number of tensions inherent in participatory processes. These include the preparedness of policy makers or service providers to respond reflexively to children's views, which may require change in existing systems or services and the need to move beyond abstract consultation to participation rooted in lived reality. In effect, a need to move beyond consultation to forms of participation that actually result in change (Percy-Smith, 2006).

Comparative Case Studies

This study process was conceived with the aim of engaging a group of children actively as research participants (Hogan and Gilligan, 1998; Greene and Hogan, 2005). The approach was informed and influenced by a growing body of work which has gained profile over the past ten to fifteen years (Alderson, 1995, 2000, 2005; Driskell, 2002). The recognition that children are 'experts' in their own lives and experience has been championed by many researchers working within the new social studies of childhood discourse (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Christensen and James, 2000; Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Mayall, 2002; Morrow 1996). The capacity of very young children to reflect on and communicate their experience has been convincingly demonstrated by Clark and Moss (2001) with the development of the Mosaic approach.

The effectiveness of using of a variety of child friendly methods, individually or in combination, has been demonstrated to good effect by the many teams involved in the Growing Up in Cities project teams (Chawla, 2002b). A detailed manual based on this collection of studies and outlining the application of such methods has been produced by Driskell (2002). More recently still, the use of photography as a consultation tool on a large scale has been employed in determining children's concepts of well-being, as part of the development of indicators of well-being for children in Ireland (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006).

A number of key studies have specifically addressed the experience of children and their neighbourhoods (Berg and Medrich, 1980; Burke, 2005; Chawla 2000b; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986a). For the purposes of the present study, four of these have been chosen as comparable case studies, as age range, methods and approaches involved closely resemble this study. Three of these studies took place approximately thirty years ago (Berg and Medrich, 1980, Hart, 1979, Moore 1986a¹⁰) and the fourth is relatively contemporary with this study (Burke, 2005). Two were undertaken in the UK (Moore and Burke) and two in the USA (Hart; Berg and Medrich).

¹⁰ Fieldwork for Moore's study was undertaken in 1975.

Children's Experience of Place – Roger Hart, 1979

Hart's study investigated children's daily lives in the 'phenomenal landscape' of their local neighbourhood, seeking to discover children's spatial behaviour and land-use to examine their knowledge of and feelings for places in their environment. Eighty-six children aged five to twelve years approximately took part. Hart (1979) selected a sub sample of 20 children from eight families for more in depth study. He used a range of innovative and targeted techniques, each designed to elicit specific aspects of knowledge. His interest was in the child's experience and participation in the outdoor landscape. He was keen to elicit experiential meanings about sensations as well as activities – what it feels like to splash in water or squelch in mud. Hart also drew on his own childhood experience and memories in order to relate with empathy and understanding to the experience of his research subjects, believing that: '

[M]any places in any child's 'phenomenal landscape' would carry a personally as well as socially determined meaning for that child
(p12).

He focused his data collection under four separate headings with specific data collection techniques allocated to each.

- Spatial Activity: Geographic diaries; parentally defined range: log records
- Place Knowledge: Place representation; place recognition and naming;
- Place values and feelings: Structured interviews; place expeditions; parental questionnaire
- Place use: Land-use surveys, geographic diaries; informal observations (log records)

He identified successively wider 'ranges' throughout which children played and travelled:

- 'free range'
- 'range with permission'
- 'range with other children'
- 'range with adults'

These, Hart (1979) found, were subject to on-going negotiations and amendments (similar to Valentine, 1997) and while both parents were involved in setting range limits, mothers tended to be the key administrators. He observed that younger children's play happened within a few hundred yards of their home and that children adapted the places around their home for different purposes. Interestingly, he noted that range expansion tended to coincide with school 'grade' rather than age, specifically. Boys' ranges tended to be more extensive than girls' and this differential increased with age.

Parents' reasons for limiting range movement were associated with fears and anxieties, related to the physical landscape itself (roads, rivers, steep inclines) perceived social dangers from peers – getting into 'bad' company and risks presented by 'strangers' to the area. The design and layout of the suburban neighbourhood, which afforded parents good visual and auditory range, resulted in children who lived there having a relatively large 'free range' compared to children who lived in denser and more noisy areas. Hart (1979) also latterly became aware that range had a temporal dimension and that a system of 'checking in' comprised an element of the negotiation and management of range permissions. He noted differences in parental practices between, what he termed, 'native' and immigrant parents and in relation to birth order. He noted also differences in the purposes of range movement with girls' movements being more socially oriented for example, more frequently involving visits to houses of friends.

Children's place knowledge and ability to represent it in models was associated with age, with the range extent, (most notably, 'range with permission') and with active independent locomotion. When children were passively transported, as in a school bus, they had little or no knowledge of the areas between home and school.

Place values and feelings revealed a variety of preferences. Notably Hart found that children selected very different places when being interviewed, than those they chose as 'place expeditions'. As a participant-observer, he found this aspect of his research to be most revealing, allowing him entry to the child's world in a more experiential way.

The more I allowed myself to be 'led' by the child, the more I experienced that child's environment. Only by allowing myself to experience their 'view' of the physical environment and then stepping back in order to describe it, could I approach any holistic understanding of the child environment situations.

(p. 184)

Waterways and ponds were highly favoured, although forbidden to all but older children as independently accessed sites. Woodlands were also popular, although tinged with anxiety for some children, as were quarries. Indeed many of the children described places that they both feared and liked, such as abandoned buildings or woods. Places to hide and 'look outs' were highly valued, things that are often overlooked in spatial planning for children. Hart found that girls cited places in their homes more frequently than did boys, particularly their own bedrooms, but as this was not a focus of the study, it was not investigated further. Some boys cited their father's workplaces. Only older children mentioned aesthetic attributes of places when describing their place preferences.

In terms of place use, Hart was interested in seasonal differences, noting children's time spent out or indoors and the activities they engaged in. He noted that during the summer children tended to play outdoors where they could be seen by other children and as they got older, they ranged progressively further from their homes. *'During the winter the number of child initiated meetings are much reduced'* (Hart, 1979, p86). There were less children out playing, less time spent 'meandering'. Specific seasonal activities, such as ball play in summer, tobogganing, skating and skiing in winter were evident, (although in the later case, participation was restricted to children who could afford the requisite clothing and equipment).

Fields and lawns close to home were used for organised games, as the designated sports spaces, such as the town ball field was too far for most children to travel to independently. Cycling was more popular with boys who ranged quite far afield, frequently 'cycling around' as opposed to having a particular destination in mind. Interestingly, Hart observed that children spent a lot of time alone resting or 'dabbling', activities which he regarded as been given little recognition by environmental planners.

Hart's stated purpose in undertaking this study was to obtain an aggregate and integrative understanding of children's experience of place. His interest was predominantly spatial rather than social. While throughout he does speak about 'children' both as individuals, dyads and groups, his focus is primarily on individual children. He did not examine children's relationships to each other, nor with adults in their neighbourhoods in terms of their place experience. His approach to gender is largely dualistic. Hart's comparisons frequently highlight only contrasting or opposing aspects and he does not explore differences or similarities in either segregated or mixed peer groups. These finer nuances can be significant and can expose similarities and difference which challenge the conventional and stereotypical and which give a fuller picture of motivators and limiters in children's actions which this study will attempt to address.

Childhood's Domain: Play and place in child development. Moore, 1986a

Robin Moore's 1986 publication is based on a study conducted in 1975 in three neighbourhoods in urban UK – inner London, out London 'New Town' and 'old city' pottery town in Stoke on Trent. Ninety-six children aged 8-12 years took part. They were gender balanced and equally distributed across the three sites. The children were initially asked to make detailed drawings of their favourite places and these were followed up with qualitative interviews. Unlike Hart (1979), Moore was at pains not to appear to 'test' children's spatial knowledge and wanted very much to position them as *experts* in their own place experience.

A quarter of the children, judged by Moore to be particularly 'expert' – that is whose drawings and accounts were most extensive, detailed and articulate - were asked to lead him on field trips of their 'territories'. Whether this means of judging expertise was valid is unknown. Some children might have been more expressive or demonstrated greater expertise 'in situ', as opposed to when presented with the task of drawing or mapping their favourite places. Equally, it may have over-sampled children who were more outgoing or gregarious at the expense of children who were more introverted but no less 'expert' in their range behaviours. Nonetheless, a sub-sample of 25% is substantial and is likely to have provided a wide array of children's perspectives and experiences.

Moore (1986a) was particularly interested in the importance of play and the link between play and public policy.

If play is considered a developmentally crucial mode of learning, and therefore part of a child's broad education, it must inevitably become the business of government, acting in partnership with non government community interests.

(p. xiv)

Like Hart (1979), he also felt that gaining an understanding of children's use of their environment was an essential prerequisite to policy and provision decision-making. As previously noted, he stressed that policy and expenditure should be guided by an understanding of how and why children use various aspects of their environment.

Moore also focused on the notion of 'range', offering three levels for which he outlined characteristics, conditions and constraints.

Habitual range: More or less contiguous space right around the child's home, highly accessible for daily use, bounded by temporal rather than distance and age constraints.

Frequented Range: Less accessible extensions of habitual range; bounded by physical constraints (particularly busy roads) and parental prohibitions. It expands with age, use of bicycles, availability of traffic-free routes and the presence of other children to travel with.

Occasional range: Highly variable extensions of frequented range by foot, bicycle and public (or private) transport; dependent on child's personality, the degree of freedom and training offered by parents, the availability of travelling companions and the presence of arresting destinations.

(Moore, 1986a, p. 17)

He was particularly interested in two aspects of range behaviour: range expansion, (changes in the extent and variation of ranges over time, or as new possibilities or

opportunities arose); and repeated range use, which created a sense of attachment in which place, activity and experience take on significance or meaning for the child.

As the full potential of newly discovered places is explored in depth, a sense of attachment and meaning arises. In some special places, the process can go on for years with the layering of successive 'play episodes'. A purpose of this book is to understand the characteristics of such persistently memorable places and to cast light on their role in human development.

(Moore, 1986a, p. 19)

Moore noted that ranges were dynamic in many ways. What was frequented by one child might be occasional to another or to the same child at different times. Range behaviour was varied by age, gender, weather, parental constraints and permissions, fluctuating or competing interests. Specifically range behaviour was often determined by time. Immediate streets, greens and alleyways were used most frequently in the short windows of time between end of school and doing homework, eating or sleeping. More distant terrains were used at weekends when longer stretches of time were available.

Moore's findings strongly assert children's intrinsically different relationship with the natural and outdoor environment to that of adults. Their focus and rhythms are distinctive and they have purposefulness of their own. The children in his study frequently did not move in linear ways and they spent periods in reflective, sensuous interaction with the environment.

Given the opportunity, children spend more time wandering around outdoors than most adults, and their patterns of interactions are more intimate, fluid and intense. For this reason, it is important that they have spaces where they can wander at their own pace and not have to keep up with adults or be chastised for dawdling.

(p. 57)

He noted children's initiatives and adaptations for example, how they located and exploited materials using abandoned or found materials, to make and use tools, camps, furnish dens or populate imaginative play scenarios.

He noted also how children referred to and used playgrounds. Many children included playgrounds in their drawing and accounts. Consequently, Moore argues that rather

than dismiss or decry their value (as many play proponents do), adults should seek to understand what it is that children value in them.

The point is to recognise the validity of children's own judgements as users of environments especially provided for them, rather than condemning every playground out of hand. One reason why playgrounds are valued by young people is because they provide clearly identifiable pieces of local turf where they can hang out and meet each other.

(p. 110)

One of the clear advantages of Moore's expeditions with the children was how he came to know the characteristics and properties of many of the sites the children took him to visit, in a way that interviews, drawings or photographs would never have revealed. In many instances, places that children frequented had their own micro-climate, being sheltered from the elements by virtue of lower relative elevation (dips or crevices), vegetation, sheltering walls or buildings or capturing sunlight. Often this resulted in noticeable temperature difference or protection from wind, weather, and noise.

In congruence with Hart, Moore noted that the negotiation of permission to go to particular places or to extend the spatial or temporal boundaries imposed by parents was an integral part of the parent-child relationship. He observed the degree of accommodation or flexibility exercised on both parts, with parents keeping directions or instructions sufficiently vague to allow children more latitude than might be explicitly stated. Permissions were often linked with the presence of other children, the age of the child, gender and the parent's own knowledge and experience of the terrain. Restrictions or reprimands imposed by other adults frequently related to children congregating in groups, particularly in the vicinity of shops and being perceived or characterised as a threat, regardless of how innocuous or non-threatening their presentation.

Unlike Hart, Moore explores the presence and participation of adults in children's environments.

Fathers, he notes, rarely get a full understanding of the extent of children's ranges and tend to be aware or engaged around sites associated with male interests, such as sports

or fishing. He found no indication of fathers' presence in their daughters' territories. The irony of cities and suburbs having been largely designed by men, with scant regard for the interests of women and children is not lost, as he asserts:

An obvious issue is raised here. It is men, rather than women, who have largely decided the form of cities, the layout of neighbourhoods and the design of housing – with little regard for the needs of mothers and children. Yet historically, it is women rather than men who have carried the burden of caring for young children and who as a result have developed a fuller understanding of children's play and environmental requirements.'

(p. 211/212)

Similar again to Hart, Moore's study de-emphasised the social aspects of children's outdoor engagement, although he does note that this may have been a design flaw, as he only asked children about places and not people. My own study could potentially have taken this route, had the children themselves not emphasised the intrinsic importance of friends and family from the very outset, when negotiating the use of cameras in the project. Consistent with a participative approach, their views took precedence.

Similarly, to the present study, Moore asked children what they would like to see changed. Interestingly, he judged many of their suggestions to be unambitious, relating, as they did to improved football provision and play facilities. He attributed this to their generally low socio-economic status and hence, expectations. He cites Berg and Medrich's (1980) study in California, where children and young people had no difficulty naming improvements or amenities they would like to see in their neighbourhood.

This may, as Moore suggests reflect wider ambition or greater exposure to opportunity, but perhaps, in assuming children to be unambitious, he underestimated the value children place on the 'ordinary' day to day activities in their lives.

Moore proposes the retention of rough spaces which can absorb the impact of exploratory, adventure based play and provide a 'habitat' which is both interesting and

challenging, rather than bland, sterile environments. Linking diversity and access, he argues that:

[C]ollectively, children require an environment with sufficient diversity that their many individual needs are met simultaneously. It must be accessible to all, regardless of ability or disability ... Access and diversity go hand in hand.

(p. 235)

Finally, in agreement with Hart, particularly his later work (Hart, 1992, 1997, 2002), Moore argues strongly for the inclusion of children and young people in planning and for their active participation in decision-making.

People must learn to investigate and resolve the issues of their own life-situations, rather than accept answers only from 'experts'. Young people, especially, have been so little involved in decision making that their special needs in the urban environment are hardly ever considered. The ability to do this effectively must be rooted in childhood, where a person can learn to explore and understand the phenomenal world – as in traditional cultures, where physical resources and social consequences are more obviously interdependent.

(p. 250)

Children in Four Neighbourhoods: The Physical Environment and its Effect on Play and Play Patterns, Berg and Medrich, 1980

Unlike Hart (1979) and Moore (1986a), Berg and Medrich (1980) identified the neighbourhood as both a physical and social environment. Linking children's presence and use of the neighbourhood to their restricted mobility they examined how neighbourhoods '*influence the things children do, can do, like to do and are able to do*' (p. 321) in four contrasting neighbourhoods in Oakland, California. Recognising play as central to children's lives in middle childhood, they characterised children's play and related activities in their neighbourhood outside of school time as '*environmental learning*' (p. 323). They concluded that the identification of places to play or not to play and the means to get there were of intense concern to children and their parents.

Similarly, to the present study, they used the neighbourhood primary school as a primary reference point, on the basis that its catchment area was generally coterminous with the boundaries of the neighbourhood it served. As neighbourhoods tend to share

common characteristics in terms of layout, housing style, cost, and access to amenities, Berg and Medrich assumed that, not only did children from the same neighbourhood spend their time in the same physical environment, but also it was likely that they spent it with friends from families similar to their own. However, they do not reference family size, structure or stability of residence, so, while some characteristics may be shared, it is likely that individual differences within neighbourhoods may not have been taken into account.

The study findings across the four sites highlighted some common features. Land use and the child density affected patterns of social interaction. Children wanted to be near children of their own age. This they identified as a determining factor in the quality of children's daily lives. Where children lived in areas with a high child population, their play was more spontaneous. In less densely populated areas, children's contact with other children, other than their siblings, was largely based on formal arrangements, mediated through parents. In these areas, children readily identified that what they did not like about their neighbourhood, despite available, safe, accessible space, was that there was *'not enough children around'* (p. 337).

In terms of children's place use, it was clear that children favoured both structured and unstructured play opportunities, whose functions were flexible, rather than rigid.

Specifically they identified that children showed preferences for places that offered privacy, places where only a child would want to go, such as vacant lots or clogged up streams, which:

reflects children's desires to have something that is theirs, at a time when virtually everything else – houses, shops, streets, public transportation – is built for or 'belongs' to adults.

(p. 340)

Safe mobility and transit was a major influence on children's play patterns. Berg and Medrich identify *'traffic safety'* and *'personal safety'* as the two key issues.

In neighbourhoods with lower crime rates, neither parents nor children rated personal safety as a concern. However, in areas where violence or harassment was a real fear, children's response was to learn to take precautions, rather than be excluded from the

streets, demonstrating that engagement with their environment was an integral aspect of their nature. The authors conclude that

Neighbourhoods themselves are artefacts of the adult world, largely built around grown-up needs. Children are obliged to find ways of 'fitting in' – adapting to the environment that they happen to live in.

(p. 342)

However, just because children are flexible and adaptable should not mean that policy and planning can ignore their needs. Berg and Medrich (1980) consider that children have '*a basic right of childhood – the right to experience and explore the world around them safely, spontaneously and on their own terms*' (p. 344).

Play in Focus: Children Researching their own spaces and places for play, Burke, 2005

This study undertaken with 32 primary school children in Leeds, UK in 2002 describes '*an intervention that attempted to position the child as expert and researcher of their own play environments.*' (Burke, p. 27). Burke's focus was on centring the child as expert and co-researcher, using visual methods as 'ways of seeing' and presenting their findings. *Play in Focus* was a case study within a wider study of play opportunities in East Leeds. A similar approach to my own study of providing children with simple cameras and asking them to 'record' the places and spaces in which they played over the course of a week was employed. As Burke states '*there was a large element of trust, commitment and responsibility generated from initial discussions about their role in the research process.*' Photographs were developed and used as the focus for photo-elicited interviews (PEIs) or 'conversations'. Burke highlights the extent to which such conversations are influenced by the immediate context in which they take place – classroom and school and by the learned patterns of adult and child interaction, common to both. The vital importance of allowing children to identify the important content and context of their photographs is also highlighted.

What might appear featureless or bland to an adult eye, may give rise to a wealth of detail in relation to the significance of particular place, linked to the activity that takes place there, or its meaning for the child in terms of events, activity, people or time.

Often a photograph revealing little to the adult eye was transformed through conversation into a space offering great riches for play

(p. 47)

Children's intimate knowledge of natural or man made features contribute to their sense of ownership and belonging. Similarly to the children who participated in this study, the children Burke worked with took more outdoor than indoor photographs (70%-30% respectively) and when asked to chose an image to talk about, twice as many children chose photos of outdoor space rather than indoor. Photographs of gardens and planting featured. Media was also represented, but was clearly not as significant as children's preferences for outdoor play.

Grass as aesthetic material, play material and functional surface also featured, highlighting again the importance for children of features taken for granted or thought irrelevant to them by adults. Covered spaces and child constructed 'dens' were also special places for children. Natural materials – leaves, twigs, stones – were used as props, decorative materials or 'currency' in imaginative play, in ways of which adults were unaware.

In contrast to my study, where photographs were taken at several points during the study period (May, September and January), the photographs Burke collected were taken during one week in November. Nonetheless, the conversations arising from them included references to '*seasonal games and associated play, demonstrating children's awareness of the passage of time*' (p49).

Similarly to the study presented here, Burke's account presents a picture of urban childhood in the 21st century which is at odds with both 'conventional adult wisdom' and that of many researchers who decry the 'end of childhood' and its submergence into privatized, commercial, electronic or other 'un child like' spaces.

In common with Moore (1986), writing a generation earlier, Burke advocates for adult concerns not to deprive children of access to trees, shrubs and 'waste ground' as significant and much appreciated features of children's spatial experience.

She concludes that the hypothesis that the children were 'expert' in their own environment is validated and that children, from an early age, are competent to take on the role of research participants and informants. She found visual methods such as drawings and photographic journals effectively '*engage children in detailing the meanings attached to their experiences*' (p50). Finally, Burke notes that, despite the restrictions and limitations imposed on children's environments through adult-centred planning that '*children will play in ways that resemble features of play known to past generations in the UK and to contemporaries in urban environments across the globe*'. She contends that an accommodation between children's preferences and adult concerns needs to be reached through incorporating the child's view into an informed dialogue between children, parents and the wider community.

The above four studies, focusing on school-age children and their neighbourhoods highlight children's expert knowledge of their neighbourhood and its central importance in their daily lives. The role of perception and the deeply experiential nature of the children's engagement with the physical ecology of their neighbourhood spaces are compelling common themes.

The physicality of children's use of space and their unique relationship with the landscapes they occupy on a daily basis contrasts strongly with the use and meaning of public space for adults. Singly and collectively, these case studies provide points of potential comparison and contrast with findings of this study. In contrast to this study, the emphasis on all four studies is located in the physical ecology of the children's experience. This study aims to focus equally on children's experiences of both the social and physical ecologies of their neighbourhood.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a review of a wide and varied range of literature, informed by many disciplines and reflecting the diversity of issues and themes entailed in the study of the daily lives of children. Centrally, children as social actors and participative members of both their local and the wider world is a key thread running through both

the ecological and the sociological conceptualisations explored. While there remains considerable distance and even dispute between psychological and sociological approaches to the study of children, beyond the scope of this study to reconcile, an ecological framework provides a space within which the contribution of both disciplines can be accommodated (Tudge and Hogan, 2005). The literature highlights the importance of neighbourhood as an 'ecological niche' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), functioning as a key physical and social domain for school-aged children. Its importance as a site of physical activity and social encounter, particularly with peers, has been shown to be central to children's daily lives. Before moving to examine this in the findings chapters, the methods used to elicit the views, experiences and perceptions of the children who participated in this study are described in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE

The Study Methods

Introduction

This chapter outlines how this study was scoped and designed, the methods used and the process of implementation. It recounts the process through which the study evolved, what adaptations and changes occurred throughout implementation and the strengths and limitations of the design as it pertains to the research questions posed. The chapter is presented in three sections. Section one outlines the theoretical underpinnings which informed the study design, and presents the ethical considerations which were central to the study's conception and implementation. Section two describes the fieldwork process and methods used. Section three presents reflections on the effectiveness of the methods in addressing the research questions. Specifically, their usefulness in undertaking participatory research with children is evaluated. The results of an evaluation of the research process undertaken with the children at the conclusion of the fieldwork are presented, as are notes from a later feedback session with them on the study findings. The chapter begins with an outline of the underpinning methodological approaches which framed and oriented the study. In brief these are:

- A qualitative approach
- A participative approach
- An action oriented approach

SECTION ONE

A Qualitative Approach

It is not 'futile' to try to reconstruct the 'geography of childhood', it is simply necessary to recognise that only a partial description can ever be achieved.

(Hart, 1979, p.155)

Qualitative research '*is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world*' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.3). The nature of this qualitative inquiry was exploratory, aiming to collect and collate children's own accounts of their everyday lives in their neighbourhoods. The purpose was to gain understanding of the relatively neglected world of children's lived experience, making it accessible to a range of audiences, both children and adults. Therefore, a constructivist framework was employed, emphasising authenticity, truthfulness and participation (Denzin and Lincoln, op cit, p. 194). Constructivism recognises that experience and meaning are subjective and particular and sees knowledge as being created within the interaction between researchers and research participants (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In such an interaction, the researcher becomes both facilitator and participant. The constructivist approach does not claim to arrive at a complete or final interpretation, but offers an authentic account of the lived situation of participants analysed in the context of other experts and theories (as with the comparative case studies drawn on in this study). Finally, the constructivist approach acknowledges the power relations between researcher and research participants or indeed the power dynamics inherent in the location and purpose of the inquiry (Clark, 2004).

Children's own accounts have not been greatly evident in social research in this country and are not represented in quantitative socio-economic profiles, frequently used to classify, characterise and discuss children's lives, (Daly and Leonard, 2002). Nor are they considered in established methods of matched and controlled samples, commonly used in psychological research (Morss, 1996). Frequently data sets are produced which attribute a '*social address – that is an environmental label – with no attention to what the environment is like, what people are living there, what they are doing, or how the activities taking place could affect the child*' (Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1983, p. 382-383). This study specifically set out to compile a qualitative 'self-reported' account of children's lives, in order to foreground their knowledge and experience. Standardised measures of health, educational attainment or socio-economic status were not employed nor were in depth social histories taken. Therefore, the study's contribution should be seen as complementary to more quantitative work.

Qualitative studies are based on employing flexible research designs which are amenable to adaptation to particular participants or settings (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

This allows for creative and intuitive or emergent analysis (Lofland, 1995). For example, the approach entails conducting interviews in the format of '*normal conversation rather than formal question-and-answer exchange*' (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 8). This is particularly important in the context of research with children, in order to minimise the power imbalance inherent in the adult-child relationship and remove the notion of 'right or wrong' answers.

A Participative Approach

Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship.

(Hart, 1992, p. 5)

Increasingly, children have come to be recognised as key informants about their own lives (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Christensen and Prout, 2005). It is also becoming recognised that they have an equal right with adults to be heard (Greene and Hill, 2005). More and more they are being included as subjects in research and recognised as having a valuable contribution to make. This confers a responsibility on researchers to undertake research which enables children's informed consent and supports their active participation. The methods used in the study were designed to encourage and support the children involved to do just that. The study design was informed by methods commonly used in participative action research (Pretty et al., 1995) and increasingly in research with children of all ages (Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006; Clark and Uzzell, 2006). Many of these have successfully been adapted to ensure a child centred approach, giving the children a greater element of control and choice in the data collected and presented (Driskell, 2002; Kiernan, Guerin, and MacLachlan, 2005; Meucci and Schwab, 1997; Ridge, 2003; Skiveness and Strandbu, 2006). The multi-method approach employed in this study was not limited to 'question and answer' based inquiry. It employed many creative ways commonly used by children to express their views and experience. In this respect, the drawings, photographs and group collage activities, as well as the spoken and written word used in the study, enabled a high level of participation in the research process (Darbyshire et al, 2005) resulting, I would argue, in the generation of a rich and inclusive fund of data.

An Outcomes/Action Approach

The researcher should learn what kinds of outcomes community members would consider a benefit and plan to give back to the participants and to their community as many of those benefits as possible.

(Sieber, 1993, p. 10)

A final, but important element in the study design was to incorporate an action/outcome component to try to ensure that the information which the children contributed was fed into local systems of planning and decision-making. The participants were asked what they would do if they were 'in charge' to make their area 'a better place for children'. To achieve this aim a local Advisory Panel comprised of senior statutory and community representatives was convened. The members of this group represent some of the key decision and policy makers for the local area. The panel provided local knowledge and expertise, access to information such as local development plans, feedback and guidance as the study progressed and facilitated local contacts relevant to data collection. This panel met five times during the field work phase and once subsequently in order to be appraised of the study's progress and findings. While not wishing to overstate the outcomes of this process, this structure proved to be an effective forum through which the findings were disseminated locally. Subsequent to the studies completion a presentation of findings was made to the Chief Executive of the newly formed Area Regeneration Board, and at his invitation, information and guidance on the methods used were imparted to his staff, to assist them in further consultation with local children and young people.

The Research Questions

The research question under examination in this study sought to discover:

How do children both enact and transact their daily lives in their neighbourhood during middle childhood, what are their views of that experience and what does this reveal about their neighbourhood as a context in children's lives?

The substance of this question necessitates a qualitative inquiry (May, 2002) seeking, as an outsider (adult, non-local, temporary relationship) to gain insight into the daily lived experience of the study's child participants. Qualitative research '*seeks to answer questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings*' (Berg, 2004, p. 7), looking at how people occupy and make sense of their surroundings. It is concerned with how human beings come to attribute meaning to situations, events and relationships '*as social products formed through activities of people interacting*' (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). The task of the researcher is to try to understand this process of interpreting or applying meaning to experience, or indeed to symbols such as words and language. In order to do this, the s/he must '*enter into the defining process or develop a sufficient appreciation for the process so that understandings become clear.*' (Berg, 2004, p.10).

Derived from the research question the following sub-questions were devised in order to scope out themes identified from the literature and to provide a structure which would inform the research design and analysis.

- How do various elements of the children's environment e.g. housing, surrounding neighbourhood, private and public spaces and community provision feature in their play and daily lives?
- How does this change seasonally or in response to events or circumstances in the environment or in the lives of the children themselves?
- How do children perceive and use places in the neighbourhood, both those designated specifically for children or spaces which exclude them?
- How is this reflected in their 'sense making' in terms of identity, belonging and expectations?
- What adaptations or coping mechanisms do children develop and adopt in order to adapt to their environment?

- What opportunities do the neighbourhood and environment afford children and how do children both avail of and create opportunity themselves?
- What are the risk factors that children occasionally or routinely encounter in the course of their play and social interaction in the environment?
- What are the children's views of what would make their neighbourhood a better place for children?

In order to effectively access children's perceptions and experience, it was considered essential to develop methods which would facilitate children's active participation. This, it was hoped, would elicit accounts rich in detail and meaning. Therefore, a second and associated question was to discover and evaluate:

What kinds of approaches and methods can facilitate children to reveal the frequently unobserved and unknown aspects of their daily lives and to have their views and experiences captured and authentically presented in ways that have meaning both for them and for adult audiences?

This question implies both an attitudinal and value driven approach. It requires the development of tools which engage children as key informants and 'experts', empower them to actively contribute to data generation and collection and enable them to participate in shaping the research process.

Research Design

In order to accommodate the depth and duration of contact envisaged in the study, a single case study design was chosen (Mason, 2002). While it was recognised that this would limit the data collection to one site/case, the opportunity for more prolonged engagement with participants, potentially yielding a richness of detail was felt to be a compelling factor (Atkinson et al., 2001). The study was informed by phenomenological and ethnographic strategies of inquiry.

Case Study

A case study design is indicated where the focus of inquiry is on contextual issues, (compatible with the ecological model adopted) within a real life setting. It is applicable where the aim is to undertake research that is exploratory and descriptive and where the researcher does not control behaviour or events (Yin, 2003). A case study approach entails the collection and presentation of detailed information about a particular participant or small group, frequently including the accounts of subjects themselves (de Vaus, 2001). It may involve the systematic collection of information to provide an understanding of characteristics, practices and identifying social forces or it may focus on a selected range of activities, behaviours or phenomena (Tuan, 2002). As such it is a form of qualitative, descriptive research, which looks in depth at an individual or small participant pool, drawing conclusions only about that participant or group and only in that specific context (Yin, 2003). Case studies do not seek or claim to discover generalisable findings; instead, emphasis is placed on exploration and description. In essence, a case study approach aims to develop as full an understanding as possible of the site or subject matter in question. As such, case studies can be considered illustrative. Single case studies can create opportunities for cross comparison with similar studies, as with the four key studies outlined in Chapter Two.

Addressing the study's second research question, a case study strategy, undertaken over an extended period with a single group, provided an opportunity to develop and evaluate the study methods. It enabled a variety of methods to be used and adapted to the group's interests and to further explore emerging data as the study progressed. This was essential to a study where the objective was to attain an understanding of what is important about and to the case study subjects, in their own world. Such designs '*aim to develop what is perceived to be the case's own issues, contexts and interpretations, its "thick description"*' (Stake, 2005, p. 450).

The decision to focus on a single area and group of children was also related to the desire to incorporate an action/outcome dimension to the study, using the findings and indeed the process to inform and influence policy and provision at a local level. This desire was informed by the ethical consideration of 'beneficence' – the commitment to try to ensure that some benefit to participants flows from their participation in and contribution to the research process (Sieber, 1993).

The most practical way to achieve this was to ensure that the information and insights provided by the children participating in the study were fed into local process for planning of policy and provision (Matthews, 2003). This process and its outcomes are outlined below. Informing local action through research requires ethical scrutiny and the consideration of both process and outcomes such as consent, confidentiality, expectations of results and subsequent use of the data generated (Morton-Cooper, 2000). A balance between private and public information and recognition must be struck.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, based on the work of philosopher Edmund Husserl (1970), is concerned with how reality is experienced by the individual, rather than how it might objectively be viewed. In particular, it is concerned with how people attend to and understand their everyday lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). A phenomenological understanding of children's tacit knowledge and 'commonsense' making of their social and physical use of their neighbourhood was sought (Giddens, 1984). A phenomenological approach does not prescribe a set of formal methods. Its essence is to devise methods which are closely related to the subject matter, so that meaningful engagement can occur (Danaher and Briod, 2005). The researcher develops questions that commit to gaining a better understanding of the lived experience of the research population. Assumptions, if not entirely set aside, are at least acknowledged and made explicit so that their influence can be minimised. The phenomenological approach yields a narrative and descriptive account, which particularly when concerned with children, exists in the present and in the 'first person'. When researching children's worlds the investigator, who was once a child, but has essentially lost that experiential perspective, must attempt to open themselves up both '*to the subject matter and to the child we once were*' (Danaher and Briod, 2005, p. 218).

Ethnography

Ethnography is a form of qualitative research which seeks to explore the nature of social phenomena, rather than to test hypotheses about them (Atkinson et al, 2001). As such, it is applicable to the detailed investigation typical of case studies.

The research questions suggested the need for an ethnographic approach involving multiple methods, extended contact in the field featuring repeated interviews and other means of collecting data, in order to develop a deep understanding of the lived experience of participants. Ethnographic research places the subject, in this case children, in the position of knowing 'expert' and the researcher as the learner, rather than 'tester' of theory or hypothesis (Emond, 2005). The duration of contact also enabled the development of an open and trusting mutual relationship and the opportunity to clarify questions and responses. Ethnography is increasingly regarded as an appropriate research method in examining the social worlds of children (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998). As a stance, it privileges the present and the current, making it a more useful approach in the context of children's lived reality than approaches which inevitably see children as linked to a future being and as inextricable or indistinguishable parts of adult systems and institutions such as family or school (Christensen and Prout, 2005). While these systems and institutions are key components within the context of children's lives, their function in structuring generations or preparing for futures tends to cast children in terms of 'becomings' rather than active participants in the present (Qvortrup et al., 1994). The focus of this study aimed to be very much in the present, daily lived experience of the participants, attempting to understand their experience and negotiation of their lives as lived in the now.

Study Population - Participant Profiles

The core study group comprised 32 primary school children, 17 boys and 15 girls, aged from nine to twelve years drawn and from fourth and fifth class in the main primary school for the catchment area. The length of their involvement varied from a maximum of fourteen months to a minimum of six months, due to changes in class size and gender composition. A detailed profile of the children and their lived circumstances is presented in Chapter Four. In addition, during the course of the study a school survey was undertaken to which 132 children aged seven to twelve years responded, bringing the total number of children who contributed to the study to 164.

Study Site

The study site, as described in the introduction, was a large, local authority housing estate on the outskirts of a city in Ireland. This site was chosen, as outlined above, as one of two areas in the greater urban area which fit the profile of a disadvantaged area with a large youth population. In common with many such areas, this neighbourhood was characterised by higher than national or regional average rates of unemployment, welfare dependency, lone parent families and a high incidence of both petty and serious crime, including violent crime (CSO, 2006). On the other hand, it was an area with a dynamic community development infrastructure, a range of sports, children's, young people's and family support services and facilities which had been established and developed over the preceding ten years – the life-time of the study participants. In common with many such areas, it was frequently the subject of pejorative media attention¹¹. This, particularly at a national level, consistently emphasised the challenges and problems in the area, such as crime, often using pejorative and stereotyping language. In contrast, it failed equally consistently to present a balanced picture of the positive initiatives and successes which also formed a significant part of the life of the neighbourhood.

Sampling Strategy and Access

The sampling strategy adopted was purposive (Mason, 1996) designed to fit the study foci of neighbourhood and 'middle childhood'. Four key criteria were identified:

1. A sample size of between 12 – 25 children¹²;
2. An age range of 7 – 12 years;
3. A gender representation preferably within the range of 40% - 60%;
4. Frequent, regular access to such a group within their neighbourhood setting over an extended period.

In order to access such a population, a number of options were considered.

¹¹ An informal review of local and national newspapers was maintained throughout the field work period.

¹² Representing the common composition of a primary school class group, allowing for children's option not to participate.

One was to make contact with one or more service providers in the area, such as community development projects or after-school clubs who catered for children of the desired age profile. This option was discounted as a primary point of contact as my prior knowledge of such service provision would indicate that children attending such services are often referred for specific reasons. Therefore, their daily routines and activities may be influenced and shaped by specific circumstances which would not be typical. Consequently, the preferred option was to approach local primary schools which served a distinct catchment area, co-terminus with a defined neighbourhood or set of neighbourhoods¹³.

In the early stages of planning the study a number of potential host schools were identified. The criteria used were that:

- The school would serve a defined, identifiable ‘neighbourhood’;
- It would be co-educational throughout.

Following this, approaches were made to two schools, through the school principal. The Board of Management of the first school declined permission for the study to take place. The second school was receptive, largely, it would appear, on the basis that the principal saw potential opportunities and benefits for the children who might participate. Gaining access through the school was undoubtedly aided by the fact that I had a recent background as a manager with a large voluntary agency in the area which had a positive reputation for working with children and families. From the school’s perspective these ‘credentials’ gave confidence and a reassurance that I was someone who would approach the work with the children professionally and in a way that would ‘fit’ with the school ethos.

Following a meeting with the school Principal and consultation with teachers, a fourth class group was identified and a preliminary schedule of contact based around a combination of class based activities and individual interviews was agreed.

¹³ Primary school in Ireland is, in general a universal, state funded service, based on local geographic catchment areas. Predominantly, children attend generally, through not exclusively, on the basis of proximity to home, albeit that parental preference based on gender, religious affiliation or culture can also be a factor.

This involved planning a series of activities which fitted with the class timetable and linked to aspects of the curriculum, while retaining the flexibility to be responsive to the children's interests and initiatives. Issues arising in terms of the operation of the study within the school setting, such as obtaining valid consent and using a variety of research methods, while working within the school structure and discipline, were addressed. The principle of honouring children's right to dissent or not to participate in some or any aspects of the research process was the subject of both initial and ongoing negotiation and accommodation. The implementation of this principle in practice is addressed later in this chapter.

An Ethical Approach

In undertaking research in which children are the key informants, a clear ethical framework needs to be established and implemented. The ethical approach and considerations within this study were, and continue to be, an integral part of the research design, implementation and dissemination. They permeate all aspects of the work from original conceptualisation, through study design, fieldwork and data collection, analysis and dissemination.

The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College is a specialised research centre, dedicated to the development of child-centred, multi-disciplinary research. It is committed to the highest ethical standards in its work. It has developed a set of ethical guidelines which inform the practice of researchers and research projects it undertakes (Whyte, 2003). These principles are derived from a set of core values:

- Having a commitment to the well-being of those participating or involved in the research process (**Beneficence**);
- Having a commitment to doing no harm (**Non-Maleficence**);
- Having a commitment to the rights of those involved including the right of individuals to take responsibility for themselves (**Autonomy**);

To these core values, the Children's Research Centre adds the following:

- Being child-centred in its approach to research, listening to children, treating them in a fair and just manner (**Fidelity**);

These formed the basis of the ethical approach adopted.

Ethical considerations which guided the study design and implementation were also informed by a growing body of literature and professional experience gained in the field (Alderson, 2004, 2005; Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Farrell, 2005a; Hill, 2005; Kellett, 2005). Alderson, in particular has been to the forefront of developing guidance for ethical practice with children in research and has outlined three levels of children's involvement:

- Children as *unknowing objects* of research who are not asked for consent and who may not even be aware they are the subject of research;
- Children as *aware subjects* who are informed and asked to consent, but where research is adult designed and controlled;
- Children as *active participants*, who are informed, take part willingly and where flexible methods which allow scope for personal accounts or topics raised by children to be included and represented by a range of means including photographs, drawings, drama, focus groups etc. Children may also be involved in planning, conducting and/or reporting on such research.

(Alderson, 2005)

Alderson notes that where children have greater control as active participants they may find the process more enjoyable and the findings may be a more accurate reflection of their views and experiences. She cautions, however, that with greater participation there is a risk of greater disclosure, which children may not either realise at the time or may later regret, especially if it is reported in ways that they feel are inaccurate or disrespectful. Therefore, ethical considerations are not just a consideration in planning and designing research projects, but must guide and inform practice throughout from planning to dissemination.

Hill (2005) identifies issues of ability, particularly in relation to language and understanding and power differentials between adults and children, as key distinguishing features of participative research with children as opposed to research with adults. This is particularly crucial in terms of gaining fully informed consent and in explaining the purpose and possible outcomes of the research process. The language used with children must be adapted to their understanding and their right to dissent, disagree or opt out must be fully explained and honoured.

In terms of this study, the ethical approach was grounded in the recognition of children as '*competent research participants*' (Alderson, 2005, p. 25) having valuable information and expertise to contribute. They were positioned as autonomous actors – having the right to choose to participate or to decline and as hospitable strangers who could choose to what extent they wished to share their views and experience with me, as an outsider in their world. Within this, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations to children's autonomy and control and in terms of this study, these are now discussed as components of the informed consent process.

Informed Consent

Having gained access to a potential population, the issue of informed consent by the children and their parents was addressed. Given the participative nature of the study, informed consent on the part of the participating children was indispensable. However, obtaining valid informed consent from children to participate in a process that is essentially unfamiliar and where the outcomes are uncertain, is rife with ambiguity. The notion of obtaining consent from young children is one which has gained recognition only relatively recently in terms of social research (Alderson, 1995, 2004, 2005; Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Hughes and Helling, 1991; Morrow, 2004, 2005; Wiles et al., 2007; Wiles et al., 2005). The sociological perspective, seeing children as competent, informed social actors and even expert participants as championed by the 'new social studies of childhood' discourse (Christensen and James, 2000; A. Clark and Moss, 2001; James et al., 1998; James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002) and others, has informed practice in this respect.

In seeking to work with children, particularly children of the age group in this study (9-12 years), in a context of respect for their autonomy, expertise and active participation, it is necessary to maintain an awareness that they are not entirely autonomous, by virtue not alone of age, but of cultural norms and definitively, legal status. Consequently, the co-operation and informed consent of parents and responsible adults (in this case teachers), particularly in relation to access and type and degree of contact, is essential. However, honouring the principles of article 12, UNCRC (1989) which promotes the rights of children to express their views and opinions, the children's right to choose whether or not to participate and if so, to what extent, was given primary consideration. Therefore, prior to seeking written consent, I met with the children to explain the study and offered the choice to take part or not. Contingent on their interest, written consent from themselves and their parents was then sought. Individually and collectively, the children were subsequently given the choice to participate in or to opt out of any activity. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that their choice was, if not constrained by virtue of the school setting and structure, certainly influenced by it.

In order to ensure that the consent process with the children remained authentic and that they were provided with adequate information to enable them to make an informed choice about whether to participate or not, I formulated a number of guiding principles for myself.

1. That the children would be informed as clearly as possible of the purpose of the research, how it would be carried out and the possible uses to which their 'data' could be put. This information would be provided in verbal and written form and discussed openly with the children in advance of seeking consent.
2. That the children's interest and initial agreement would be sought before the written consent of parents. While recognising that parents could refuse permission even if their child consented, the initial choice to participate was given to the children.
3. That informed consent was a continuous process rather than a one-off event and that children's consent could be withdrawn and reinstated, formally or informally, throughout the process and that this would be accommodated.

4. That account should be taken of the fact that the children in a school setting are largely a 'captive audience' and ways would need to be found and negotiated for children to retain meaningful choice throughout the research process.
5. That interpretation and analysis of the data would be based solely on the children's accounts and perspectives, and that any conclusions, interpretations or assumptions made by the researcher would be clearly identified as such and justified, based on the data provided by the children.¹⁴
6. That the children's safety and welfare, including their privacy, would take precedence over research priorities, even if that meant the data collection and presentation was restricted or constrained.

Consent must be viewed as an on-going process, rather than a one-time decision, particularly in research undertaken over an extended period, such as this study. The ubiquitous consent form is of more significance to researchers, as a demonstration of having met their obligations, than to children who largely saw it as a formality to be negotiated so that they could be involved in the project activities. Therefore, at every stage, when planning or discussing methods with the children or when inviting children to participate in activities, either individually or in groups, the children were offered a choice and their freedom to decline was reiterated and, on occasion, exercised.

Child Protection Arrangements

The protection and welfare of children participating in research is a core responsibility of the researcher or research team, as well as the institution or agency involved.

Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Dept. of Health and Children, 1999) place a personal as well as corporate responsibility for

¹⁴ During the course of the study, the children's frequent descriptions of and references to some local services, and the adults involved, led me to facilitate focus groups on this specific topic with the children and subsequently I interviewed three local service providers in relation to their work with children in the area. Points of relevance from these interviews are incorporated in the findings and discussion.

children's safety on all citizens, but particularly those working with or providing services to children. Alongside this, my own background had instilled in me an acute awareness of safe practice in terms of working with children. This would include ensuring that children are not exposed to risk or harm because of their participation and that the research is conducted in a manner that is child-centred and respectful. Practical considerations such as contact venues, time spent alone with children and issues arising from the subject matter or indeed, any issues of concern arising, must be dealt with sensitively and appropriately, in accordance with recognised good practice guidelines.

To this end, a number of steps were taken. I undertook to work within the school's established child protection policy and procedures, provided evidence of my Garda vetting confirmation, obtained through the Office of the Minister for Children¹⁵ and outlined the ethical approach developed by the Children's Research Centre. In particular, the voluntary nature of children's participation and their right to dissent was emphasised. On this basis, an agreement was reached around how I could safely interview children on a one to one basis, which afforded them privacy and confidentiality, while also working in a way which was consistent with good practice. Parental permission, as well as children's own consent, was obtained for all participation, including use of children's materials, such as photographs, drawings, or written logs in disseminating the study findings.

Based on previous professional experience and practice, and operating as a sole researcher I chose to impose two key restrictions on my work with the children. I decided I would not use my car to transport children nor would I go anywhere outside the school grounds with them unaccompanied. These specific options were excluded, not on the basis that either the activities or indeed myself as a researcher posed a risk to the children, but that they reflected common sense health and safety awareness.

¹⁵ Garda vetting is a process by which a person's identity is checked against Garda records to ensure that they do not have a criminal conviction, or pending prosecutions which would contraindicate a suitability to work with children. In practice it shows whether a person has a criminal conviction of any type. Garda vetting is but one aspect of good recruitment or vetting for research practice. An important symbolic as well as practical gesture, it recognises the importance of not exposing children to harm by screening the suitability of people who work with them.

They were consistent with recommended child protection practice e.g., *Our Duty to Care* (Department of Health and Children, 2002) and ensured that children would not be encouraged to think that going on exploratory adventures with, or taking lifts in cars of virtual strangers was acceptable practice.

One consequence of this decision was the restriction it imposed on potential data gathering options, such as child led tours or site visits, as working as a sole researcher did not allow for this activity. I did feel that it was a regrettable limitation in some ways, and that that data might have been enriched had this restriction not been imposed, particularly in terms of children's descriptions of 'out of bounds' places or means of access which they employed. Other studies (Driskell, 2002; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986a) where child led trips have been employed have demonstrated their value in terms of richness of data, such as experiential and sensory information arising which might otherwise not have been exposed. However, contemporary (and possibly risk averse) child protection standards contra indicate such practice by a sole researcher. I did on occasion visit children in their homes for the purposes of collecting or delivering photographs or undertaking interviews. From time to time, I met some of them in the street when I was in the neighbourhood. In this context we had informal conversations and the children sometimes pointed out features or places they had told me about in interviews or which had featured in their photographs. As an alternative to child led trips, towards the end of the study period, I visited a number of the sites some of the children had spoken about, such as the Astro turf, a number of sports facilities and the wild area (see Chapters Five and Six), in order to appreciate more fully, what the children had described.

Privacy, Confidentiality and Anonymity

A commitment to maintaining confidentiality and privacy was given at the outset of the study, in terms of how the information gathered would be managed, disseminated and used. This covered issues such as the children's own names and identities, the neighbourhoods in which they lived, identifying features of the environment (as shown in photographs), who would have access to the information (raw data) gathered and how the study findings would be disseminated and used. To this end, the children were invited to choose alternative names for them to be used in the study.

All of the materials generated (interview transcripts, tapes, logs etc) were stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office and password protected on a laptop computer. Permission was obtained to reproduce and use the images (photographs and drawings) the children made and they were given the opportunity to identify any images that they did not want included or displayed. In some instances, children specifically asked that material they contributed would not be shared publicly, and this has been respected.

In terms of use of the material, this was considered from the dual perspectives of local use and wider dissemination. From the outset, the action orientation of the study was predicated on using the data to inform, and hopefully influence, policy and planning for development in the local area. Much of the data gathered and analysed has pertinence for local use and in keeping with the commitment to the children to *'put all the information together, decide who needs to know about it and give it to them'* (study information leaflet), updates on the study as it progressed were given to the advisory panel. Within this format, information was presented in general terms and not attributed to individual children. Wider dissemination of the material in formats such as published work or public presentations have been and will continue to be anonymised.

Positioning the Role and Relationship of the Researcher in the Setting

Positioning and negotiating my own role as a researcher in the study was an important consideration throughout. Because of the duration the study and the extent of contact with the children, as well as my relationship with other key players, it was important to reflect on and clarify my role and contribution to the various research relationships. In relation to the children, from the outset I distinguished my role from that of a class teacher or school staff member. While not entirely positioning myself in a *'least adult role'* (Mandell, 1988), I did use a number of strategies or 'markers' to establish this difference, similar to the approach adopted by Corsaro (1997, 2005). I introduced myself and encouraged both children and staff to use my first name (as opposed to the more formal Miss/Ms/Mr titles used by pupils to teachers). While I did clearly lead on various research methods and activities, I used negotiation and discussion (rather than direction) to manage activities. I did not utilise or implement the in-class methods of discipline (e.g. awarding stars for good behaviour or putting names on the board as a sanction).

To the children, I described myself as a research student undertaking a university 'course' and described the research process as a 'project' that I was asking the children to work on with me.

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that this study (as with most research involving children) took place in the context of an outsider/adult – child exchange within which learnt modes of communication (by both adult and children) set particular boundaries (Burke, 2005; Mayall, 2002). Such boundaries may, for example, impede a child from discussing behaviours, activities or locations which are prohibited (Hart, 1979). In addition, the adult-child dynamic, particularly within a school setting, where children are encultured to give the 'right' answer, i.e. the one they believe the adult is seeking, must be assumed to impact on the exchange (Mishna, Antle, and Regehr, 2004). It must also be assumed that at times, children actively exercised their agency, discrimination and powers of choice, in terms of information shared and withheld.

As previously outlined in relation to consent, I repeatedly emphasised the voluntary nature of the children's participation e.g. that children were invited to take part in each activity, their preferences and suggestions for activities were sought and frequently implemented and they could refuse or opt out of any activity if they wished. Clearly, I was an adult being at least one if not two generations older than the children (and indeed some of the teachers). I was a non-resident of the area, and had a noticeably different speaking accent to the children so I was 'an outsider' coming to learn about the children's lives and experiences. This naturally gave rise to some curiosity. When asked questions of a personal nature such as where I lived, if I had children, their ages, what kind of car I drove, I responded factually and openly. When relevant, I occasionally shared anecdotes or stories (such as one of my son's being an avid Liverpool football club supporter) which were relevant or similar to experiences or situations described by the children.

In relation to the class teachers of the various classes (four over the period of the fieldwork) and indeed other teachers in the school, I maintained a similar identity. I addressed them as Miss/Mrs/Mr and they addressed me by my first name. I described myself as a student and I deferred to them in terms of timing of sessions vis-à-vis competing demands in the school schedule.

On the issues of consent and discipline, I did establish and maintain a distinct approach, while endeavouring not to undermine their classroom management. However, I did stress and repeat, where necessary, that participation in research was voluntary (as distinct from school attendance, which was not) and that children had the right to withdraw or not take part in an activity if they so chose. As outlined above the class teachers and other school staff accepted this principle, and only on rare occasions was it necessary to revisit it.

The issue of my approach to maintaining discipline (or not, more frequently) became something of a source of amusement, particularly to the class teacher with whom I had most contact. As the study progressed and this relationship became more comfortable and informal, she informed me in a characteristically direct manner, that I was '*a pushover*'.

In relation to the Advisory Panel, convened largely for the purpose of facilitating access to and input from local policy and provision decision makers, I maintained a quite different profile, more in keeping with my previous professional role of service manager and, at times, 'expert'. While acknowledging my 'student' credentials in relation to undertaking research, I nevertheless maintained an authoritative presentation of both the research process and myself. I felt this was appropriate to the purpose and contributed to maintaining confidence and indeed enabling the members to justify the time they allocated to attending meetings, in terms of their respective roles and employments.

Uses of the Study Findings

In keeping with the principle of beneficence and taking an action/outcome orientation, it was always an intention that the findings from the study would inform local planning and provision. Updates on the study and briefings on the findings were made to the Advisory Panel on a quarterly basis throughout. During the course of the fieldwork, and largely because of the Advisory Panel structure, interest in the findings and indeed, in the process of consulting with children was expressed by a number of key stakeholders. These include representatives of the Health Services Executive (HSE), the local area RAPID co-ordinator and the local authority Social Inclusion Officer.

On conclusion of the fieldwork, an exhibition of the children's photographs and drawings was held in the school to which parents and community providers and representatives were invited. Subsequently, information about the project and a selection of the children's photographs was displayed in the local library from June to October 2007. With the children's permission, a number of photographs have been retained by the library as part of their local history collection.

At local level also a meeting was arranged with the CEO and staff of the local Regeneration Board, at which a summary draft of findings relating to the children's views of their neighbourhood, risks encountered and specifically their views on '*what would make it a better place for children*' was presented. It was agreed that the findings would be incorporated into the regeneration plan for the area, which would include an ongoing process of consultation with children and young people. This process is ongoing.

At a national level, it is anticipated that the findings will form part of the wider learning from the OMC Research Scholarship Programme and will serve to highlight issues pertinent to the implementation of the National Children's Strategy, not least as an example of participative research methods which can be used with diverse groups of children and young people. In terms of wider dissemination to date, presentations of the findings have been made at two national¹⁶ and one international conference¹⁷.

SECTION TWO

Fieldwork

Fieldwork with the children began in May 2005 and was concluded in June 2006. Contact with the children was largely maintained on a twice weekly basis during the school year (allowing for holiday breaks).

¹⁶ *Children living with poverty and disadvantage: New Knowledge, New Perspectives Conference*, 22nd November 2006, Croke Park, Dublin. *Barnardos Tomorrow's Child Conference*, 5th and 6th November 2008 Dublin.

¹⁷ *Connecting People, Participation and Place: First International Conference on Participatory Geographies*, 14th-15th January 2008, University of Durham

During July and August of 2005 I volunteered in two local summer projects, one school based and one provided in the local community centre. A central element of the field work design was the duration of contact with the children, planned originally to be carried out over the course of 12 months. This was considered important for a number of reasons:

1. It allowed for a tracking of children's activities over a sufficiently extended period to ensure a more comprehensive picture of their lives could be gained, rather than that which a one off 'snap shot' or short term contact could provide.
2. It allowed for a build up of trust, familiarity and the development of fuller participation and collaboration than short term contact would facilitate.
3. It was possible to examine seasonal changes, special or particular events and times of year (e.g. holidays, festivals, in and out of school time etc.) and their impact on the children's lives and activities.
4. In the event although not planned at the outset, it gave space for flexibility in terms of changes in the study group to be accommodated, and for similar core data to be collected from a larger group of children than originally envisaged.

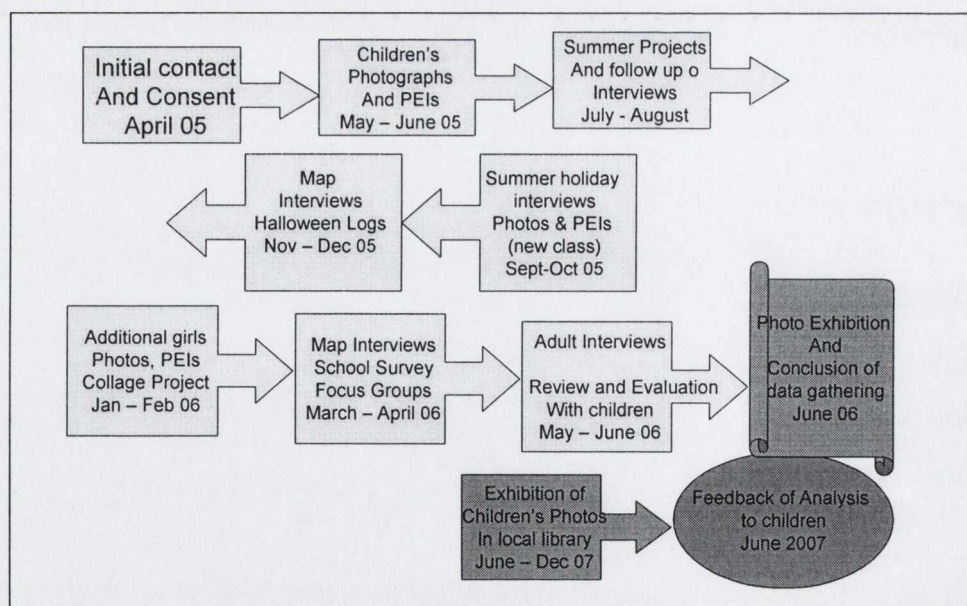


Fig: 3.1 The Fieldwork timescale

Methods of Data Generation and Collection

Reflecting the participative approach outlined above, a range of qualitative, participative visual, oral and written methods and activities were devised, drawing on comparable work (Burke, 2005; Driskell, 2002; Hart, 1979). These were selected in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the children's lived experience and, even more importantly, to privilege the participants' choice of what data they chose to contribute. The methods were designed to be used in a variety of formats and settings, including large or small group based activities with the children and individual qualitative, semi-structured interviews.

Methods included:

- Child taken photographs
- Photo Elicited Interviews (PEIs)
- Children's drawings
- Children's logs of daily events
- Semi-structured individual interviews using street maps
- Focus group discussions
- Group collage using large area maps
- A school survey
- Individual interviews with local service providers

Photography and Visual Methods

Traditionally in academic research and literature, the written, verbal and indeed the numerical is prioritised with charts, diagrams and graphs often providing the only visual relief in reams of printed text (Marvasti, 2004). However, the use of images, static and moving, has a well established pedigree (Clark and Moss, 2001; Leach, 2006; Nicholson, 2001; O'Connor, 2007; Pahl, 2006). Marvasti (2004) noted the use of photographs as data by American sociologists over 100 years ago. Photography, as a data collection tool has been used in ethnographic research for many years, almost since the invention of the camera. During the 19th century, photography became popular as a recording device in different cultures and physical phenomena and was widely used in colonial explorations, where it was accorded a certain status in terms of being seen to be 'scientific' and 'accurate' (Bateson and Mead, 1942; Pink, 2001).

Classical anthropological studies such as Bateson and Mead's '*Balinese Character: A Photographic Study*' (1942) combined text and photographs to stunning effect. Its value as a research tool has been widely recognised in terms of the capacity to capture and portray information which oral and/or written methods may lack.

Through our use of photographs, we can discover and demonstrate relationships that may be subtle or easily overlooked. We can communicate the feeling or suggest the emotion imparted by activities, environments and interactions. And we can provide a degree of tangible detail, a sense of being there and a way of knowing that may not readily translate into other symbolic modes of communication.

(Prosser and Schwartz, 1998, p. 116)

In recent research with children and young people, photography has gained popularity for reasons to do with collaboration and participation (Clark and Moss, 2001; Driskell, 2002; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006; Pink, 2001), and it was this approach which informed the decision to make use of it in this study. It was chosen in order to bring the richness of children's own accounts to the fore and to graphically present their experience (Pink, 2001, Prosser, 1998). Visual images can be very powerful. They can prompt discussion about the personal relationships to situations and locations in the pictures, allowing children to articulate and demonstrate their expertise. Photographs and the discussions they provoke make '*visible the invisible*' (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998, p. 250), such as feelings of well-being or otherwise.

Many researchers (Balen et al., 2006; Boylan and Ing, 2005; David et al., 2005; Devine, 2000; Hart, 1994; Hill, 2005; Mayall, 2000b, 2006b; Merlo et al., 2007; Sonja, 2004) discuss the notion of 'empowerment' and the relationship between the researcher (often adult, middleclass, educated, privileged, outsider, separate or 'other') and the researched (frequently poor, ill, victimised, 'deviant' and/or, as in this case, young). Use of self generated images, either photos or drawings, can help to shift the power balance in favour of the 'researched' giving them choice, control, subjective and first hand data, rather than being presented with the researcher view, including predetermined assumptions, concepts or questions – no matter how open-ended. It can also serve to establish greater ownership of data.

Description and Review of Methods

Children's Photographs

The photographic 'brief' given to the children was to take photographs of the places in their neighbourhood where they spent time, played and 'hung out' during their everyday life, including places or things they liked or did not like about their neighbourhood. A significant agentic input by some children at this point was to strongly negotiate for the inclusion of friends (despite the researcher's reservations). They made it clear that friends were intrinsically linked with places and activities and their inclusion was essential to reflecting their daily lives in their neighbourhood. On this point I deferred to their expertise.

Among the reasons that photography was a useful and appropriate method in this study were:

- The autonomy it conferred on children in terms of choice of image;
- The ability to capture and present images of physical places, spaces, objects and people;
- The insight it provided into the children's private worlds – homes, structured and unstructured play times and play spaces, friends, family, living environment, interests;
- The dual value of photographs as data in themselves, but also as 'triggers' for photo elicited interviews and other conversations;
- The accessibility of the media;
- The value of the visual in terms of capturing and conveying images in a powerful and explicit way;
- The motivational factor for children who enjoyed using cameras.

Self generated images are just that – self made, produced, owned, selected and submitted. In this instance, children were asked to take and choose photos to talk about for research purposes. They retained ownership of the images and gave permission for copies to be kept and used to illustrate the research. They chose what was recorded on film, which images were prioritised and discussed and their interpretation was recorded as data. Therefore, they established the meaning, value and significance of the images.

The use of cameras allowed the children to choose specific features, themes or examples of activities or places which they favoured, both in terms of places and things that they liked, frequented and used and in relation to things they felt needed to be changed. It provided an insight into areas of their daily life that might otherwise have been missed, because I would not have known to or perhaps not felt it appropriate to ask about such things. Photographs provided a level of intimacy and facilitated bringing things of a personal and otherwise private nature into the data. These included such as aspects of children's living situations as homes, family members, photographs of house interiors and décor, bedrooms, ornaments and personal belongings, photographs of photographs of family and things like posters or murals, depicting children's interests and, in some cases, involvement in decorating or personalising their bedrooms.

The privacy around this was an important issue when it came to children's choices of photos for public display. All of the children had the opportunity to choose and 'vet' photos to be exhibited and equally to decide if there were images they did not want displayed in public. For example, one child told me '*Don't put the picture of my Mam on the wall*'. In conclusion, this medium allowed children's own choices to come strongly to the fore and despite some minor technical hitches¹⁸, its use was a valuable and effective participatory method.

Photo Elicited Interviewing

Photo elicited interviewing (PEI) is a method by which photographs are used as triggers or prompts for qualitative interviews (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998). Developed by Collier and Collier (1986), the technique has been found to lend itself particularly well to work with children (Coad, 2007; Epstein et al., 2006; Rasmussen, 2004). '*PEI empowers the interviewees to teach the researcher about aspects of their social world otherwise ignored or taken for granted*' (Clarke-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 1524).

PEI's were conducted individually with each child who completed the photo taking exercise, with the exception of one child who did not return the camera.

¹⁸ In a small number of cases, children had some difficulty with cameras, because either the camera malfunctioned or children forgot to open the lens cap. Where this happened replacement cameras were provided or, if they wished, children kept the cameras for longer and took replacement or other photos.

I gave each child their set of printed photographs and then asked them to tell me about them. This generated stories and narratives concerning places, events, people and activities. The interview was supplemented by a set of standard questions (see Appendix 2) that were asked of each child concerning where they lived, how long they had lived there, who else was in their household or family, whether they participated in clubs, teams or other structured activities. They were also asked what they would do, if they were *'in charge'* to make their area *'a better place for children'*. The interviews, which usually lasted for between 20 and 30 minutes, were tape recorded and fully transcribed.

As Burke (2005) described, interviews or conversations with children (or indeed adults) are highly context dependent. The relationship between the adult and the child is an intrinsic part of the context. How questions are phrased, what the adult pays attention to, the time allowed for children to develop their thoughts or stories, are crucial elements which can develop, constrain or turn the flow of conversation in many different ways. In PEIs, conversations which started from a point of interest in a photograph frequently developed along different lines, prompting a story about a person related to the photograph site or an incident remembered which was connected to it in some way. PEIs gave rise to many stories, anecdotes and insights which would not have been included in pre-scripted interview schedules.

Children's Drawings

During the course of the PEIs it became evident that relying on photographs alone would have left substantial gaps in the story. Children's narratives and stories often included references to places, people and experiences that did not feature in their photos. When I asked why the children hadn't taken photographs of certain places they frequented and spoke about, one child explained – *'well we wouldn't bring the camera to the Astroturf, 'cos it might be dropped or broken'* (Frankie). Therefore, the idea of *'favourite place'* drawings was suggested and children then produced a range of images which had not featured in photographs, but had been spoken about.

The concept of a favourite place is one which recognises that attachment is not simply an emotional bond with another person, but can also be spatially based (Chatterjee, 2005; Chawla, 1990; Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001, 2002; Korpela, 1992; Scourfield et al., 2006). Favourite places were most frequently associated with activities, such as the local Astroturf soccer pitch, or as with places to meet or 'hang out' with friends e.g. 'the graffiti wall' or indeed the local street. An interesting and important note to make is that for many children a favourite place was not necessarily a single or fixed location. At different times or in different contexts children named different or multiple sites as favourite places.

Individual interviews using maps

Local area maps, enlarged from ordinance survey maps were used as tools for individual interviews. These interviews were semi-structured with a common set of base questions being asked and various supplementary questions relating to children's individual responses and narratives (see Appendix 2). They were used to trace children's range of movements and independent travel within the neighbourhood and to locate sites of play and activities and frequently used or visited areas or venues. This included routes frequently taken, places frequented and avoided, limits of parental permission, and locations of friends, play sites, amenities and facilities used within the local area. The maps also served as prompts to places and activities outside the local area which children referred to in our conversations.

With each child, I initially located their home and school as reference points and then invited the children to mark or colour in sites of interest or relevance on the map. The map based interviews were particularly enlightening, and worked very effectively as a means of focusing children's attention specifically on the larger physical features and layout of their neighbourhood, including streets, expanses of open space, routes and connection between areas and other locations.

Seventeen children (the initial study group) also participated in semi-structured one-to-one qualitative interviews based on how they had spent their summer holidays.

Individual Activity logs

A series of activity logs were used at different points throughout the study period.

These were designed as simple one or two page worksheets on which the children were asked to record the patterns of their days at various times such as:

‘What I did yesterday’

‘What I did at the weekend’

‘What I did during midterm break’,

or in relation to specific times or events e.g. Halloween.

These were generally completed in class and were used at different times throughout the study period in order to gather information on children’s routines and activities.

The children also completed a short questionnaire asking them about what work they did at home, in their community or in school, as well as what they would like to be when they grew up (see Appendix 3).

The degree of detail varied from child to child with some providing scant outlines of no more than a few words, while others were richly detailed with children adding drawings, doodles or additional commentary. Analysis revealed similarities and differences in children’s routines. Although it was not a direct focus of the study, this activity also provided insight into children’s level of literacy, which proved useful and indeed significant in terms of conclusions drawn.

Group collage using large scale area maps

Themes and ideas brought up by the children during the study developed into more detailed class wide discussions around planning local amenities of interest to them, such as a local equestrian centre or additional sports facilities. Arising from this, I invited a local authority architect in to visit the children to talk about her job and how neighbourhoods are designed and planned. From the ensuing discussion of what the children thought would make their area ‘*a better place for children*’, the idea of making a collage, based on things that the children would include if they were re-designing their neighbourhood, came about. The architect offered to provide large scale maps of the area, as used by local authorities.

She suggested the children could use these as a backdrop, allowing them to locate their suggestions for amenities or neighbourhood improvements onto the actual sites where they felt they should go. As with the individual mapping interviews, the children collectively located their individual houses and other landmarks such as the school, community centre, church, sports fields, playground and shopping centre. Materials were gathered from magazines, catalogues, newspapers and supplemented with clip art and copies of photographs the children had taken in the area. Two maps were used – one to represent the area as it was at the time and the second to represent what the children felt would be '*a better place for children*'. The children worked on the collages in small groups, in weekly sessions, over a number of weeks. The collage activity provided a means for children to translate their ideas on how to make the area '*a better place for children*' into a spatially located visual image. Analysis of the collage itself and the conversations and discussions which accompanied its construction give rise to a children's 'blueprint' for a neighbourhood, detailed the amenities, facilities and use of space which they prioritised.

Focus group discussions

Arising from the individual interview processes with the children, two significant themes emerged strongly. These were the central importance of friends and friendships in the children's lives and the role played by adults, particularly non-familial adults, in the children's activities and participation in the neighbourhood. In order to explore these issues in greater depth, I invited the children to participate in a series of small discussion groups based on these topics. The first of these was on the theme of 'Friends and Friendship' and the second that of 'Adults in the Community'.

I was aware that in relation to friendships in particular, most children had nominated others of the same gender as friends, and on this basis, I structured the groups by gender. Six to eight participants at a time took part in facilitated discussions in the informal setting of the general purpose room or library room, removed from the more disciplined site of the classroom. A number of exploratory questions related to each theme (See Appendix 2) were devised to guide the discussions. In addition, each child was given a copy of the questions as an individual questionnaire so that they could give personal views or comments should they choose.

Thus, individual as well as group comments are reported. In order to ensure that each child had the opportunity to participate in the discussion, the groups were facilitated on a turn-taking basis with one child speaking and another child writing at a time. A flip chart was used by the children to record points discussed and the sessions were audio recorded for later transcription.

Small group discussions, both in terms of the direct content, but also the general side conversations or comments which accompanied them brought a wealth of additional insight. Specifically, working with single gender groups in this context was very revealing. Things that had not arisen (or been asked about) in standard interview schedules came to light and were discussed, such as boyfriends (for girls) and ambivalence towards An Gardaí (for boys). Children's peer interaction prompted active participation and quite animated discussions took place.

Class based discussions

The large class based discussions were perhaps the least productive source of specific data, as logistically, it was difficult to keep track of all the children's comments and inputs. The number of children and general background noise made it impractical to record these sessions for transcription. However, they were very instrumental in maintaining regular contact and a focus on the overall purpose of the study, as well as being an opportunity to maintain momentum and motivation for the participating children as a group. A number of the discussions which emanated from these activities, specifically around changes or improvements which the children felt would enhance their area were valuable and often prompted refinement or inclusion of more targeted and specific data gathering techniques.

The School Survey

Throughout the individual interviews and class group discussion, the children had been asked what they felt would make their area '*a better place for children*' and *If you were in charge, what would you do to make your area a better place for children?* From their responses, particularly their references to issues in the neighbourhood that affected younger children and older people, as well as themselves, the notion of finding out what other children would have to say emerged.

I asked the children if they would like to find out what other children in the school thought. The purpose of this exercise was three fold. From a data gathering point of view, it sought the views of a wider and more diverse range of children. across the study age span (7 – 12 years). From a participation perspective, it aimed to give the core study participants the opportunity of researching the topic of neighbourhood among their peers and from a local policy perspective, it accessed the views of a substantial group of children. The method chosen was a simple three question survey (See Appendix 5). Planning and designing the survey was done as a class group exercise and the children formulated the wording of the three questions as follows:

1. *What do you like best about your area?*
2. *What do you not like about your area?*
3. *What do you think would make your area a better place for children?*

The children distributed copies of the survey to all classes from second to sixth (age range 7 – 12 years), explaining its purpose and telling their peers about the research project. I was anxious that no child would be excluded from responding to the survey on the basis of learning difficulties. Having discussed this issue with teachers, they agreed that when the survey was distributed they would read the questions to any children who would have such difficulties, and record their answers verbatim. One hundred and thirty-two completed responses were returned.

While the design of the survey was limited to just three questions, the results strongly supported many of the key themes which emerged from the work with the core study group. The design gave the children the opportunity to contribute brief qualitative answers, many of which were very revealing.

Interviews with local children's services providers

In many of the individual interviews and focus group discussions, a number of local children's services providers were frequently named. It was evident that these individuals, and the services they provided, played a noteworthy role in many of the children's daily lives in the neighbourhood. As a result, I contacted three local services and carried out individual semi-structured interviews with key staff.

These were based on questions and themes that emerged from the data gathered with the children (see Appendix 2)

Children's Evaluation of the Research Process

A review and evaluation of methods and the research process was carried out with the children at the conclusion of the fieldwork. The aim was to gauge the effectiveness of the methods from the children's perspectives and to give them an opportunity to evaluate their experience of taking part in the research study. The evaluation process comprised an introductory group discussion, following which each child was asked to complete a two-page anonymous¹⁹ evaluation form, rating the methods and the participative process (see Appendix 4). The activities used throughout the study were listed for children to choose which they liked or did not like doing and in addition, they were asked if they felt that they:

Were listened to?

Were treated with respect?

Had a chance to have your say?

Had a choice to do the project or not?

They were asked to separately score the activities and the researcher from 1 – 10 and finally whether they would choose to participate in a research study again if they were asked. While the response to this exercise is not presented as a rigorous measure of the children's views of the research process, it is nonetheless an indicator of what aspects of the project they enjoyed or did not like, and of how they rated the experience.

Objectively, the response must be seen in the context of an 'in school' experience which was novel and an alternative to formal school work. It was an opportunity to interact both individually and in groups with an interested, sympathetic adult, who provided (mostly) interesting activities (without cost) and did not make arduous demands, such as homework or impose strict or punitive discipline. As such the study was likely to be viewed more positively than perhaps if might have been if done in a different setting or context such as during children's free time.

¹⁹ A number of children chose to include their names

Taking the above into account, the children's response to the research process was overwhelmingly positive. All of the children who responded indicated that they had enjoyed the project and would agree to participate in research again, if asked. Selection of individual activities showed strong preferences for some methods over others, although most were popular and no method was universally disliked. Of the options chosen, taking photographs (23), closely followed by art and craft activities, drawings and activity sheets were the most popular. Class discussions, group discussion and the map collage exercise were not popular with five children, and four children respectively.

The following are some of the children's comments on what they liked about the project:

'I liked when we discussed our problems and what we liked';

'I liked taking pictures';

'Having fun, trying to change stuff';

'That we can share our ideas of what we wanted in [the area]'

The combination of methods chosen was designed primarily to be suitable for use with children of the age profile of the participants, including children of differing abilities. In choosing methods and activities, child-friendliness, accessibility and autonomy were key considerations. Pragmatic choices in relation to cost, safety, access, practicality and suitability of use within a school setting also had to be made. However, this did not unduly constrain the range and usefulness of the methods chosen²⁰. Using a combination of visual (photos, drawings, collage and illustrative graphics), oral (interview, discussion groups) and written (activity logs, written stories, questionnaires) activities captured a richness and variety of data which single methods, such as qualitative interviewing alone could not do. They provided a resource which was not as literacy dependent as questionnaires or written accounts might be, and were, therefore, more inclusive, accommodating differences in ability, interest and mode of expression.

²⁰ A small grant was secured from the Irish Youth Foundation which provided a budget for activity materials including photographic development and exhibition costs, refreshments and an 'appreciation' outing for participants.

Graphics and colour were used to be attractive, humorous and pleasing to the eye and to make a distinction between the research activities and school work exercises²¹.

Original copies of all written material produced by the children were retained, with their permission for analysis, as were digital copies of all photographs and drawings.

The Children's Participation

The children's active participation in the research process was evidenced in a number of ways. The consent process as outlined above, ensured that children were fully informed and given the choice to participate or to decline to be involved if they so wished. At various times individual children chose not to participate in particular activities, such as writing on the flip chart during group discussions, or being photographed as part of the process. One child who opted not to be photographed was offered the option of being the photographer instead, a role which he took on with relish.

As the study progressed, children became more confident in their input. They actively made suggestions about content, proposing solutions to issues in their neighbourhood that they wanted changed, such as identifying facilities and services that would make their neighbourhood '*a better place for children*'. In terms of the practical management of activities in the class and group setting, the children spontaneously took on roles of responsibility, such as distributing and collecting materials, making suggestions for new activities or amendments to existing ones. They offered additional sources of information such as photographs from home, additional drawings of activities and events outside of the study activities or taking additional photographs with personally owned cameras. The children suggested and collected materials for a collage exercise and used their local knowledge to determine potential sites for provision of amenities in the community. They played an active role in planning, organising and running the school exhibition of their photographs.

²¹ Over the course of the study a selection of clip art illustrations were repeatedly used in the materials which effectively 'branded' the study and gave it a distinct identity (Dillon, 2006).

However, in terms of initiative and control, it is equally evident that the children's participation was largely at an operational or implementation level, rather than one of conceptualising or planning the study, or determining the research focus. In this regard, they were not afforded a participative role. The study was conceived, initiated, shaped and managed largely by myself, within the terms of the OMC scholarship programme, academic requirements and with the co-operation of adult gate-keepers. The fieldwork was influenced and to an extent, constrained, by well established ethical and child protection practices, informed by my own background in managing community based children's services. Taking the stages of participation outlined in Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' (Hart, 1992), in reality it can only be claimed that the level of children's participation in this research exercise equated to levels five – *'Consulted and informed'* –in some respects and six – *'Adult initiated shared decisions with children'*. In terms of the research focus, study site and age, group Level four – *'Assigned but informed'* - is the truest estimation of the participative relationship.

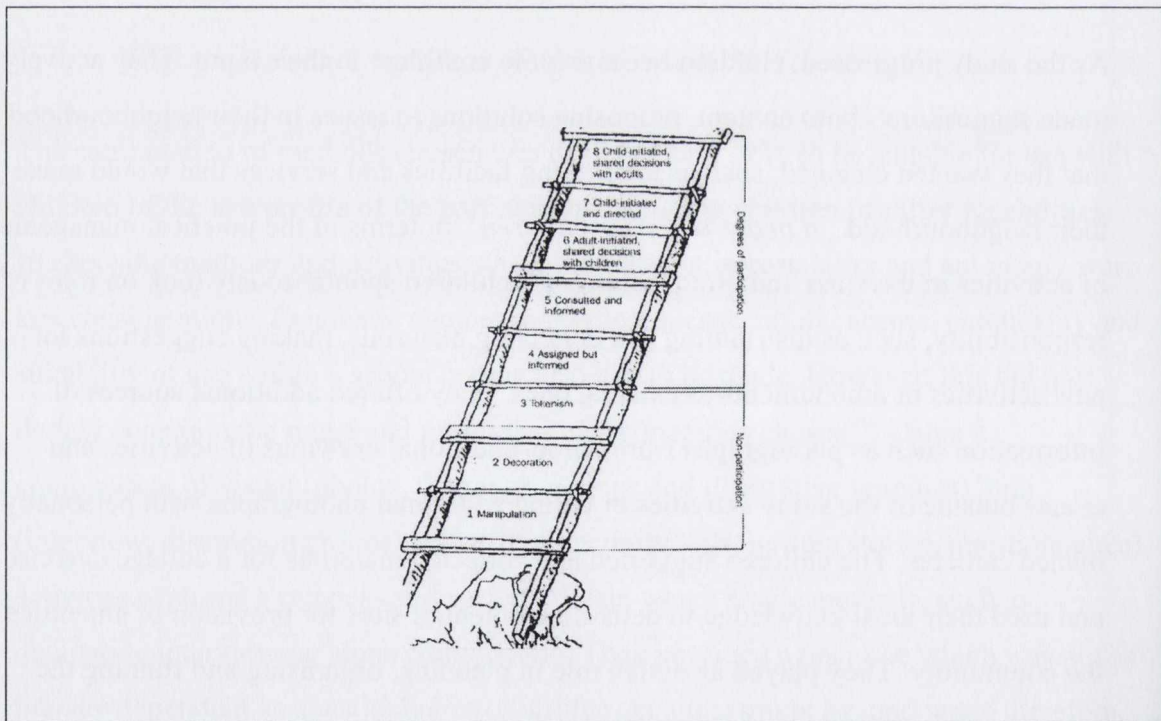


Fig: 3.2 Hart's Ladder of Participation

Feedback of Initial Findings to the Children

I returned to meet the children in May 2006 with a summary of key messages from the analysis at that point. It was presented in the form of a PowerPoint slide presentation which the children were invited to comment on (see Appendix 6)²². They highlighted things that had changed in the intervening period. The 'green box' was no more, as renovation and reconstruction work had begun in that area (Chapter Four). Dumped rubbish had been cleared from some black spots, although a number remained. One of the featured pets had passed away (Chapter 5). Overall, the children affirmed that the presentation captured the essence of the project from their perspective, their only suggestion for change being that '*more photographs*' should be included.

Reflection on the Methods' Strengths and Limitations

Overall, I was very satisfied that the variety and combination of methods used facilitated both the active participation of the children involved and the collection of rich data sets. The variety and range enabled a high level of participation by all children and provided choice for children who favoured some methods over others. The process was inclusive and empowering as all methods were accessible to all and no child was unable to participate or use any particular medium, although occasionally children exercised their right of choice or preference. The methods seemed to have achieved an appropriate balance between challenge and accessibility, allowing children of mixed abilities to participate at a level suitable to their varied competencies. The variety of methods used vindicated their inclusion on the basis of the range and richness of the data they elicited.

Varied data sources yielded different types of data. For example, single gender discussion groups gave rise to discussions and disclosures re boyfriends and girlfriends which did not arise from other data sources. Photographs were used to highlight visual concerns such as refuse, as well as private domains such as home interiors and gardens. In some instances, the places, people or things were represented in more than one medium and in others, they appeared in only one.

²² This was done on two occasions, as some of the children were absent due to a school outing on one of the days.

Therefore, it was demonstrated that a diversity of methods was useful, not alone to engage children's interest, but also to provide opportunities to capture data which single medium, such as photographs or interviews alone, might not provide.

In terms of working with a group of children over an extended period, the range of methods provided enough variety and attractiveness to maintain their interest and motivation. Visual, oral, and written data were produced and oral data (individual interviews and focus group discussions) were transcribed into written format for analysis and coding purposes. Common and recurring themes, as well as more individual contributions were identified.

That is not to say that lessons were not learned, or that glitches did not occur. Despite careful planning and preparation, there were incidents either where materials were not satisfactory or where activities could have worked better. The cameras used were technically limited and subject to 'human error' (e.g., not opening the lens cover). While it could be argued that digital cameras have undoubted advantages over analogue in this type of work – producing images that are quick and easy to develop, store and show on a computer or laptop - there exists the danger that 'imperfect' images might be deleted or edited, losing something of the spontaneity and realism of the analogue product. In this study, I combined both technologies ordering both prints and negatives for children to keep and having CD copies made for myself to analyse and reproduce. On balance, I feel this was a useful combination, but, having said that, as digital technology becomes increasingly common and accessible, it is likely its appeal, particularly in relation to speed and quality, will supersede that of analogue film.

Working as a sole researcher undoubtedly imposed limitations and restrictions on the types of data collected and the methods used, as previously noted. Options such as working off site or undertaking child led field trips were curtailed. Working in a school setting had both advantages and disadvantages, but in my view, the advantages in terms of access, continuity, consistency, duration and range of activity possible outweighed the disadvantages. In addition, as a major part of the daily lived experience of children, at least in this part of the world school activity and participation, both formal and informal, provides an important window into the lives of children.

School-based research has been, justifiably to some extent, criticised from the perspective of 'the captive audience' status of children (Mayall, 2000a). Nonetheless, the willingness and co-operation of schools in facilitating access does afford children the opportunity to participate in research (and other extra-curricular activities), that they might otherwise not have the opportunity to do. Where this is done with flexibility and a willingness to accommodate creative methods, the experience for participants and researcher can be mutually satisfying.

In this particular setting, the opportunity for children to participate and be involved in a novel, diverse and interesting range of activities was seen by the principal and staff as a positive contribution and 'added value' in terms of the children's school experience. This was certainly a contributing factor in their decision to extend such a high degree of co-operation to the study process. The degree of co-operation and enthusiastic participation on the part of the children was also testament to their willingness to be involved, although it is acknowledged that for some, part of their motivation undoubtedly sprang from an interest in temporarily escaping formal lessons as much as in engaging in research activity.

Finally, and most importantly the rich, graphic, qualitative nature of the data generated, both visual and text based, provided a powerful and insightful account of the lived experience of the participating children.

Organisation and Analysis of Data

Due to the multiple data generation methods used, large volumes of data were amassed. All individual interviews (82 in total) and focus group discussions (nine in total) were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Digital copies of all (775) photographs submitted were kept and catalogued, of which 643 were included in the analysis²³. Artwork produced by the children was digitally recorded with their permission. Hand written logs produced by the children were also, with their permission, retained.

²³ This represents all the valid photographs taken by the children throughout the study. A valid photograph was defined very simply, as one in which an image is sufficiently visible so as to be identifiable. Photographs which were blank, where the image was obscured by shadow or obliterated by light leakage, were excluded.

The photographs were sorted into 18 categories or variables. The category headings and their contents are outlined in Table 3.1, p. 121. The categories were further summarised under four broad headings:

- Places – neighbourhood, home, school, amenities
- People and Pets – friends, family, neighbours
- Activities – soccer, sports, clubs, holidays
- Concerns – issues of concern to some children

The first three of these categories were ultimately used as the foundations for the presentation of the findings in Chapters Four (social), Five (physical) and Six (activity), with the final category, ‘Concerns’ being a cross-cutting theme throughout.

Interview and focus group transcripts were coded using ‘Nvivo 7’, following the photograph categories and adding others as they emerged (examples). ‘Free nodes’ were clustered into ‘tree nodes’ based on main categories above. Data contributed by each child was also grouped by case. The school survey responses were sorted by gender and age, and responses were grouped under similar headings to those emerging from the core group data.

Var. No.	Variable Name:	Variable content
001	ID	Child's identity code
002	Gender	Child's gender
003	Time	Time of year when photographs were taken
004	Neighbourhood	Outdoor neighbourhood sites e.g. streets, greens, etc.
005	Homes	External and internal images of children's homes
006	Friends	Friends
007	Family	Close family members
008	Extended family	Extended family such as aunts, cousins etc
009	Neighbours	Adult or child neighbours
010	Self image	Pictures of the children themselves
011	Pets	Pets and animals such as dogs, horses, birds etc.
012	Soccer	Soccer related photos such as footballs, pitches
013	Sports	Sports other than soccer
014	School	Photographs of school premises, personnel or activities
015	Amenities	Local amenities such as shops, church, community centre
016	Concerns	Rubbish, vandalism, boarded up houses
017	Clubs	After-school clubs and summer camps
018	Holidays	Holiday homes, scenery, activities

Table: 3.1 Photograph Data Analysis

Reliability, Validity, Generalisability

Taking a case study approach, this study did not set out to compare one set of children, circumstances or experiences with another in a similar or different setting. Nor did it attempt to construct a profile which is representative of all or indeed any other children, other than those who took part. To do such would have required a positivist position, assuming an objective standardised range of measures. Rather, the aim was to adopt a constructivist approach, emphasising authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). From this stance, the study set out to explore the lived experience of a group of children in the context of their local neighbourhood over a period of a year.

Nonetheless, comparisons with the children's stories and experience can be drawn from similar studies outlined in the literature, generating a degree of *confirmability* and *transferability* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). While not undertaken as a representational piece of work, the study nevertheless has the potential to yield results that are applicable to similar contexts and situations. This is proposed on the basis that human beings tend to behave in similar and predictable ways and those behaviours or experiences found in specific groupings may be expected to have commonality or resonance with similar or comparable groups (Berg, 2004).

Limitations of the Study Design and Implementation

While in general this study achieved and surpassed its aims, inevitably it also had some limitations. Some of these were inherent in the design and others arose due to external circumstances and constraints. Firstly, as previously noted, child-led site trips were not included. While it is reasonable to assume that the presence of an adult researcher in such a context may cause children to alter their behaviour to some degree, nonetheless the value of such contact has been well demonstrated (Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986a). Were similar work to be undertaken or replicated, it is something that I would endeavour to include.

A second limitation was the failure to establish contact with representatives of two local services, one community – the local football manager and one statutory – the local community Garda who, despite several attempts, did not respond to requests to contact me during the fieldwork.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study design and methods proved equal to the task set by the research questions and yielded a rich and insightful account of children's lived experience in a neighbourhood setting. Analysis was integral to the process, informing the data collection as it progressed (e.g. the decision to explore specific recurring themes in depth through focus group discussion) (Yin, 2003). Inevitably, the findings gave rise to further questions relating in particular to contemporary attitudes to children's autonomy, meaningful participation in policy formation and implementation. These are noted as areas for future research and attention.

Areas for Future Research

The impact of neighbourhood and the growing restrictions on children and young people's movement, autonomy and access to self-chosen and self-managed activity is an area that is ripe for research attention. As outlined in the reviewed literature, many studies have looked at the issue of 'neighbourhood effect' but almost exclusively through the lens of 'poverty' and with children's and young people's lives as a future 'outcome' rather than a primary source and a living reality in the present.

In terms of the broader issue of children's meaningful participation in the many settings of their lives, at community, social, cultural, political levels, the study was a small step in developing useful tools to further this ambition. We remain at some distance in this country at this time from actualising children's active and equitable participation. Much of what is done in the name of children's participation is adult-led and structured, and is little more than a token gesture in the direction of inclusion of children and young people in decision-making at a policy and provision level. This surely is an area for substantial development and one to which studies such as this can contribute.

Conclusion

Overall, the study design, methodology and analysis satisfactorily achieved the study aims and objectives and adequately generated answers to the research questions. A richly detailed and finely nuanced account of this particular group of children's daily lives in their neighbourhood, presented in words and images, was produced. The data enabled an in depth analysis and discussion of a number of key themes identified and enabled the findings to be compared and contrasted with findings from extant research. The methods employed combined with the flexibility of the approach were effective in facilitating children's active participation. It allowed them to influence both the research process and the data generated. The accounts generated graphically portrayed many aspects of the children's daily lives in their neighbourhood and the varied opportunities and risks they routinely or occasionally encountered. Their perceptions, experiences and aspirations were elicited. Impacts of both changing seasons and passing time were evident. Children's experience and their 'sense making' in terms of perceptions, expectations and desires for change were, I think, realistically and convincingly elicited.

Finally, children's views of what changes would make their neighbourhood '*a better place for children*' generated a 'blueprint' for child-friendly neighbourhood design which, I would suggest could be applied in many urban settings. On that note, it is timely to move to the presentation of findings, narrative descriptions of which are presented in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Social Ecology of Children's Daily Lives

Introduction

This chapter and the one that follows present narrative descriptions of the social and physical ecology of children's daily lives in their neighbourhood. In keeping with a constructivist approach, they are richly illustrated with children's words and images in order to authentically present (as opposed to represent) children's experiences. It must be acknowledged that written words and reproduced images however articulately or graphically presented and analysed have limitations. They cannot capture or impart the richness of a lived experience. They allow us to read, see and reflect on what is presented, but cannot convey the experiential, sensual physicality of the content of the active daily life of a child (Chawla and Heft, 2002). This must be left to imagination and memory – cognitive rather than physical and sensory functions (Moore, 1986a).

The chapter is presented in five sections. The first section briefly introduces the children as individuals and study participants, outlining some of their individual characteristics – age, gender, family structure, length and stability of residence in their neighbourhood. Section two presents some aspects of the social context of the children's lives from the perspective of family and generational connections of kinship. These show the children to be embedded in generational relationships and supportive reciprocal social networks, as evidenced by their accounts of family relationships, activities and exchanges within their immediate and extended families including grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins,²⁴ nieces and nephews. Section three examines the important context of friends and friendship. Returning to the generational theme, section four outlines children's experiences and views of other adults in their neighbourhood. A final section on animals and pets concludes the chapter.

²⁴ Cousins also featured prominently as friends and playmates as well as members of the family network. They are mentioned here in the context of 'extended family' and included, as relevant in later sections, as friends and playmates.

As a largely self-reported qualitative study, this account cannot claim to be definitive or fully comprehensive. Nonetheless it does ‘open a window’ onto aspects of children’s daily lives in a setting which is largely unnoticed and frequently unconsidered by adults. With that in mind, we now proceed to ‘meet the children’.

Let me introduce you ...

As outlined in Chapter Three, the core study population were a group of 32 children living within an defined neighbourhood of a large suburban local authority housing estate on the outskirts of an Irish city. The group comprised a gender balanced sample of 17 boys and 15 girls aged from nine and a half to just under eleven years of age at the study’s outset drawn from one 4th and latterly two 5th class groups in the local Primary school, which serves the neighbourhood catchment area.

All but one of the children participating in the study was white Irish. One child was of Irish/Asian descent and another child was possibly from a ‘settled Traveller’ family²⁵. All of the children had established extended family networks, either within the neighbourhood itself or within the wider surrounding urban area. Some also had family connections in other parts of the country and abroad. A brief profile of individual children, collated from their interview data, class records²⁶ and my observations is outlined in Table 4.1, overleaf, illustrating the diversity of children’s living situation and life experience.

²⁵ This child did not identify herself as such, but references made to having a ‘trailer’ and dealing with horses, as well as the family name, would suggest a Traveller heritage.

²⁶ Class records accessed included class registers, children’s home addresses and dates of birth.

Child's (pseudo)name	Date joined project	Gender	Living situation – family structure, length of residence	Observed Characteristics
Adam	28/04/05 10 yrs 2 mths	Male	One younger brother. Lived with both parents, initially, but they separated and his father left the family home during the course of the year.	Keen footballer, witty, mischievous sense of humour.
Winnie	28/04/05 9 yrs 9 mths	Female	Lived with mother and two siblings. Close to Dad and three half-sisters from his current relationship. Mum had new baby during study	Small, quiet in groups, chatty in 1-1, some learning difficulties - v. poor literacy.
Annabelle	03/05/05 10 yrs 4 mths	Female	Youngest of three children, lived with both parents, always in same house. Older sibling died during the course of the study.	Popular, lively, good student. Participative in school and research. Musician, singer.
Yoda	04/05/05 10 yrs	Male	2 nd eldest of 6 children living with both parents. Had always lived in the same house.	Bright, able student, very close to family, especially younger siblings.
Smerger	04/05/05 10 yrs 2 mths	Male	Youngest of three boys, lived with Mum and step-father. 8 years in the area, apart from one period of 6 months. 1 year in present house.	Keen footballer, goalie with local team. Loves horses, enthusiastic research participant.
Carrie	04/05/05 9 yrs 9 mths	Female	Eldest of two children. Lived with mother. Lived in current house 3 years, two other houses previously, all in same estate but different parts of the neighbourhood.	Loves outdoors, camping, horses, football. Not into 'girly hair and nails stuff'.
Rollodinio	05/05/05 10 yrs 3 mths	Male	Younger of two brothers. Older brother had severe cerebral palsy. Always lived in same house, with both parents.	Keen footballer supporter and team player. Keen research participant. Tendency to 'get into trouble' with adults – 'short fuse'.
Wayne (Rooney)	05/05/05 9 yrs 8 mths	Male	Eldest of three children. Always lived in same house with both parents.	Prize winning world kick-boxing competitor. Much travelled (China, USA, and Greece). Keen football supporter (Man U) and team player.

Table: 4.1 Participant Profiles

Child's (pseudo)name	Date joined project	Gender	Living situation – family structure, length of residence	Observed Characteristics
Stormtrooper	09/05/05 9 yrs 6 mths	Male	Eldest of three siblings. Lived with parents, always in same house.	Very bright, participant in 'gifted' programme in local university. Musician, 'hoping to be an archaeologist'. Subject to some bullying in school and in the area.
Mr. Bond	11/05/05 10 yrs 5 mths	Male	Only child. Lives with both parents. Moved house three times within the area (some time spent living with grandparents). One year in current house.	Into karate, football fan, large PS games collection. Very close to grandparents and uncle who live close by.
Steven (Gerrard)	12/05/05 9 yrs 8mths	Male	One of two brothers. Lived with mother.	Bright, popular in class. Participated in group sessions but very quiet, shy in one to one interviews.
Hazel	20/05/05 10 yrs 3 mths	Female	Only child. Lived with mother. Moved during the study to Grandmother's house in area.	Talkative, lots of stories, anecdotes mostly about activities with friends and family. 'Best friends' with Bernadette.
Jennifer	13/01/06 11yrs	Female	2 nd youngest of 10 siblings. Always lived in same house with both parents.	Very bright, competent, mature. Best friends with Clare. Very concerned, critical of poor maintenance of area.
Jacqueline	23/05/05 10	Female	2 nd eldest of 5 children. Lives with mother and siblings. Always in the same area, but in different houses – three moves.	Close friends with Carrie and Donna. Conscientious about school.
Steve	23/05/05 10 yrs 11ths	Male	Middle of three siblings. Stayed several days a week with 'Nana/guardian' in study area, while parents lived 'in the country' but seemed to have daily contact.	'Star' footballer – top goal scorer, keen all round sports player. Popular admired by peers.

Child's (pseudonym)	Date joined project	Gender	Living situation – family structure, length of residence	Observed Characteristics
Bernadette	26/05/05 10 yrs	Female	One of two siblings. Lived with both parents, but Dad in prison for duration of study. Aunt, cousins, lived in same street.	Gentle, sensitive child, mediator, peace-maker. Some learning/literacy difficulty. Best friends with Hazel and Mary (cousin).
Mary	12/09/05 10 yrs 4 mths	Female	Lived with Mum, step-father, brother and two step-sisters. Older sister in UK. Dad not mentioned. Moved from UK in summer of 05.	Quiet (in research), bright, mature. Best friends with Bernadette (cousin).
Frankie	12/09/05 10 yrs 9 mths	Male	Elders of 6 children. Lived with both parents. Had lived in two other houses prior to present house. There 3 years.	Keen soccer fan and player. Father involved in coaching local youth team and playing in adult club. Popular, admired by peers. Shy in 1 to 1 research situation.
Ronaldo	12/09/05 10 yrs 5mths	Male	Youngest of four siblings. Lived with both parents, always in same house.	Keen soccer supporter and player.
Max	12/09/05 9 yrs 11 mths	Male	Only child. Lived with both parents, always in same house.	Bright, good humoured, popular. Into singing/performing 'want to be famous'.
Peter	13/09/05 10 yrs	Male	Only child, lived with both parents, always in same house.	Learning/literacy difficulties, very overweight, plays music, into PS games, bikes, Subject to serious bullying in the neighbourhood.
Jack	13/09/05 10 yrs 2 mths	Male	Youngest of four siblings. Lived with both parents, always in same house.	Keen soccer player, learning/literacy/behavioural difficulties (SNA in class). Subject to bullying in area.
Georgie	13/09/05 10 yrs 9 mths	Male	2 nd eldest of 5 siblings. Lived with both parents, always in same house.	Involved in several sports teams. Disruptive in class/school, observed to bully other class mates.

Child (pseudo)name	Date joined project	Gender	Living situation – family size and structure, residential stability and movement	Observed Characteristics
Daniel	13/09/05 10 yrs 7mths	Male	Younger of two siblings. Always lived in same house with both parents, mixed Irish/Asian origin.	Loved horses, fishing, and soccer. Literacy difficulties.
Connor	13/09/05 10 yrs	Male	2 nd eldest of 5 siblings (twin). Always lived in same house with both parents.	Keen soccer player. Literacy and slight speech difficulties.
Donna	20/05/05 10 yrs 6 mths	Female	3 rd youngest of 5 children. Lived with both parents, always in same house.	Best friends with Helen. Very keen on horses (settled traveller background).
Helen	13/01/06 10yrs 11mths	Female	Middle child of 5 siblings. 'Baby sister' had died two years previously. Moved from UK three years previously to 'Nana's house. Lived in present house with both parents for past two years.	Best friends with Donna. Learning/literacy difficulty. Difficult to maintain interest/attention in group, but very responsive in 1-1 setting.
Sarah	16/01/06 10 yrs 1mth	Female	Youngest of four siblings (all left home). Lived with Mum, always lived in same house. Dad separated but regular (twice weekly) contact.	Confident, chatty, bright. Very participative. Sometimes competitive /attention seeking in group.
Rebecca	16/01/06 10yrs 5mths	Female	Only child. Lived with both parents in same house.	Quiet, shy, gentle child. Literacy difficulties. Close friends with Cathy.
Dawn	16/01/06 10yrs 3mths	Female	Youngest of 5 siblings. Only one other living at home. Lived in same house (twice) for 8 years. Moved to other house in area and back again. Dad separated but in weekly contact.	Bright, playful, lively, energetic, participant. Tendency to 'slag' or tease others in group or class.
Clare	16/01/06 10yrs 2mths	Female	Youngest of 4 siblings. Only child still living at home, always in same house. Parents separated.	Shy in group, but chatty in one-to-one. Best friends with Jennifer.
Cathy	19/01/06 11yrs 6mths	Female	4 th of 9 siblings. One half sibling (dad's son in UK). Lived with mother. Regular contact with Dad who lived with Nana in local area. Always lived in area, moved house due to fire.	Generalised learning difficulty/delay, poor literacy. Enthusiastic research participant. Close friends with Rebecca.

Residential Stability and Mobility

Of the 32 children who participated in the study, 22 children had always lived in their current home. Six had lived there for between six and eight years (own age 9-11 years); and three for between two and five years. One child had lived there for less than one year. Six children had moved within the area to different houses, but stayed in the same locality. Therefore, 88% of the children had spent at least half of their lives to date living in the same areas, indicating a high degree of residential stability (Somerville, 2007). Of those who had experienced house moves, and lived in their current house for two years or less, two had lived in the area, albeit in different houses. Two children had emigrated from the UK, but their families were originally from the area or had family connections there. The fact that most of the children were long-term residents in their neighbourhoods, would suggest that they were very familiar with the terrain and were well integrated into durable social networks of family, relatives, neighbours and friends (Tracey and Whittaker, 1990), as Clare's account illustrates. Residential stability has been associated with good mental health (Bures, 2003).

MR: *Have you always lived in that house?*
Yeah, since I was born, I never moved. Yeah I know everybody around my area.

(Clare)

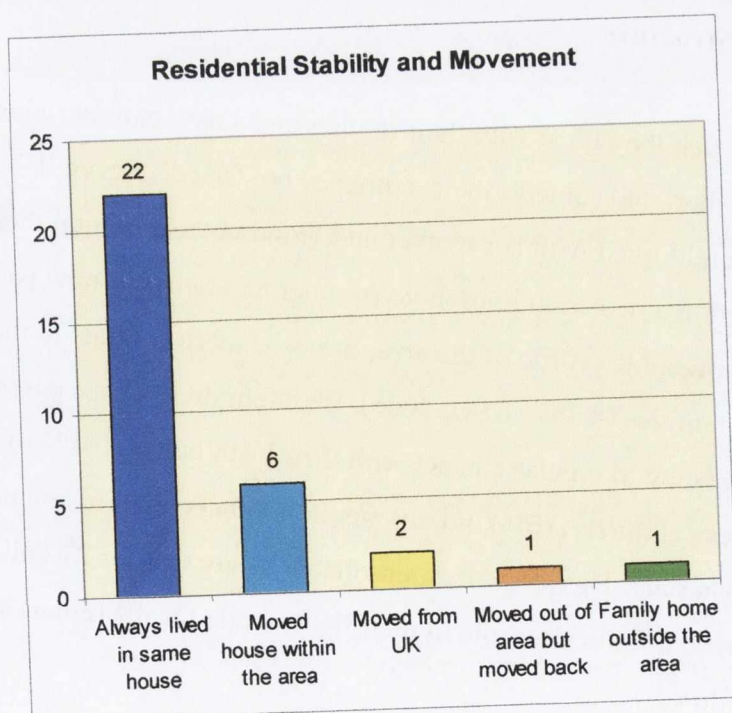


Fig: 4.1 Residential Stability and Movement

Family Structure – Mothers and Fathers

At the beginning of the study, 19 children lived with both parents (one couple separated during the study) (59%, reducing to 56% by the end of the study period). Twelve children's parents lived apart at the beginning of the study, increasing to 13 by its conclusion (44%). One child's father was in prison throughout.

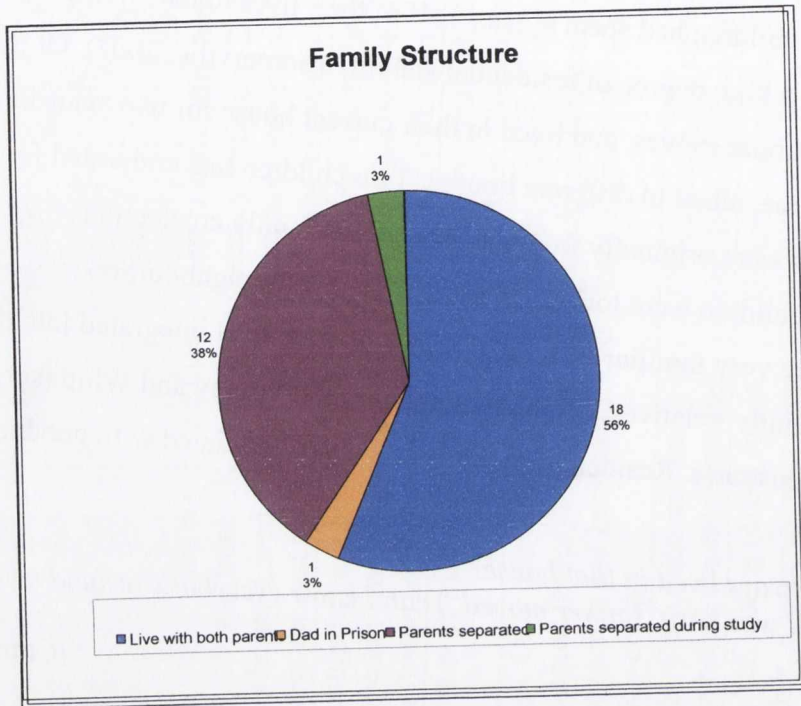


Fig: 4.2 Family Structure

Five children indicated that they lived with their mother and a new partner, whom some referred to as a 'step-father' and some as their mother's 'boyfriend'. Seven lived with their mother alone and one child lived with her mother and grandmother. In total then 24 of the 32 children (75%) lived in a two adult household (mother and father or new partner). This figure reflects the demographic profile of the area, but is in sharp contrast to the national average for separated families (8.7% - CSO, 2006). Eight children whose parents were separated spoke about being in regular contact with their birth fathers (61% of those separated). Five of these children (16%) did not mention fathers at all in any of the interviews or other materials. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that for 27 children (84%) their birth fathers played a significant role in their lives, while for the remaining five (16%) they appeared not to do so.

This issue and the children’s accounts of contacts with their fathers are returned to later in this chapter²⁷.

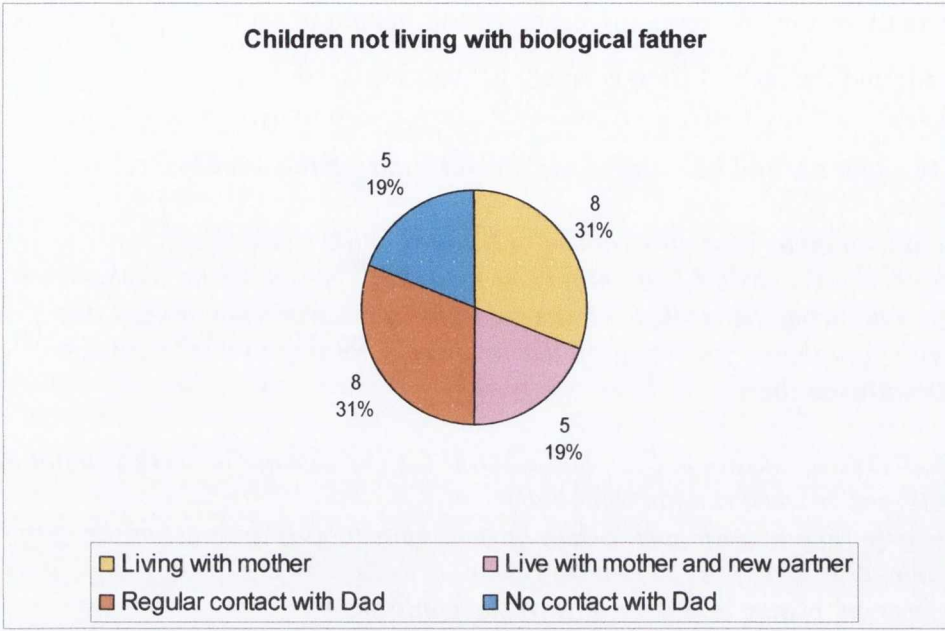


Fig: 4.3 Children not living with biological father

It is important to note that this profile can only be said to be indicative of the children’s perceptions of their family situations, as data on their family composition was collated from their accounts of their living situations. It is possible that it may not reflect a fully accurate picture, as for example not mentioning fathers may have been situational rather than a reflection of actual experience and indeed, some children who used the term ‘father’ (or indeed ‘mother’, although this, in my opinion, is less likely), may not in fact have been referring to their biological parent. However, given the length of engagement with the children and the range of times and means used to gather data, it is more likely than not to be an accurate reflection of the children’s family structure.

A number of children had lived with other family members, mainly grandparents at some point in their lives. One child whose parents had bought a house outside the city lived in the area for most of the week with a guardian (whom he referred to as his Nana) and only spent two or three nights a week in the family home.

²⁷ No formal information was gathered in relation to parents’ marital status (single, married, co-habiting, separated, divorced, widowed or any combination of same). Neither were children asked whether their ‘siblings’ were full siblings, half siblings or step-siblings. Therefore, direct comparison with census data is not possible.

While he did not provide a detailed explanation for this situation (nor was one sought), there seemed to be an element of choice by the child to remain in the neighbourhood, possibly motivated by his keen interest and participation in sports in the area, socialising with friends and the lack of friends where his parents lived.

MR: *Oh right, ok, and you stay at your Nana's during the week?
Yeah.*

MR: *and then go to your other house in Kilburn at the weekends?
No I stay Yeah, well I go out for, no I wouldn't go out on the weekends, I go out during the week, for like two nights a week or something. I like going out there, if it's raining like or there's nothing to do for a week, I'd stay out there.*

MR: *So were you mostly in [neighbourhood] for the summer or were you out in Kilburn or were you half and half?
Mostly [neighbourhood], I slept in [neighbourhood] for most of the Summer.*

MR: *Oh right, is that where most of your friends are?
Yeah, I've not one friend out in my mother and father's*

MR: *The house is just on its own is it?
Kind of, there's other houses around, but they're all dopes. They don't do anything, they don't like playing any sport, they just like walking around.*

(Steve)

Family Size

Family size varied substantially among the participating children, from comparatively small family units comprising one adult and one child, to households with up to eight current members. Five participants were 'only children' having no siblings, six had one sibling, six children had two siblings and five children had three. Six of the group had four siblings, two had five and two children had eight and nine siblings respectively. In some cases, not all family members were living in the same household, as some older brothers and sisters had moved out to their own homes. In addition to two siblings who lived with her, one child named three 'sisters' who were the children of her father and his new partner. Another child mentioned her father's son, from a previous relationship, who lived in England.

In total ten (31%) of the children could be said to be members of large families, by contemporary standards and 17 (or 53%) were in families of one, two or three children, which is on a par with the regional and national average (2.6 per household – CSO 2006).

In some instances, it was apparent that some siblings did not share both parents, but this information only came to light if children volunteered it. It was not sought, nor pursued in depth when it arose. One child gained a sibling as her mother had a new baby and one child lost a sibling because of a violent assault during the course of the study. One child in a two child family had a severely disabled sibling and one child spoke of a 'dead baby sister'. In summary then, children's family and living situations were varied and diverse and included a range of family sizes, structures, age ranges and family histories.

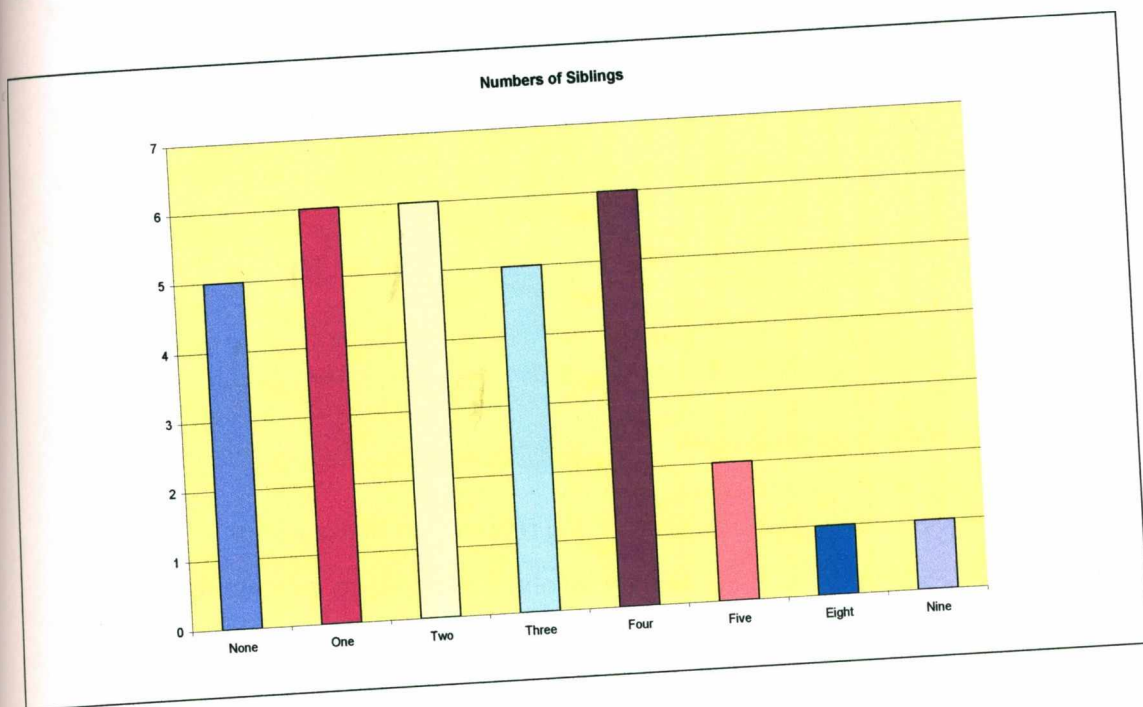


Fig: 4.4 **Number of siblings**

Mothers and Fathers

Parents are obviously central figures in the lives of the children. In this study, it was evident that they fulfilled the normal, expected roles of providers, carers, companions, monitors, encouragers, disciplinarians and primarily, emotional attachment figures – people who loved the children and are loved by them.

My mother, my step-father, my brothers and my sisters help me with my homework. (Mary)

My father, because he works to look after his family and he loves you. (Mr. Bond)

My father, my mother, my brother, look after you – my father looks after me and buys games for me and my brother.

(Rollodinio)

And my parents are very good too and the parents that live around me are very good too.

(Donna)

Mothers

Children's references to their mothers pervaded many of our conversations and they were frequently the first person named when children were asked '*Who are the adults who are helpful and supportive to you?*' They were mentioned in the context of daily care and domestic routines, family and parent/child activities, range permissions and provision of resources. Not alone children's own mothers, but also mothers of their friends were frequently mentioned, as were grandmothers and other female relatives or extended family members.

My Mom, my brothers, my mother's sisters, my Mam's brother, my friends, my friends' Mams. Dads, my Dad, my step-Mum, my two nanas. My two granddads that are up in heaven

(Dawn)

Mothers were particularly noted for their caring role – often in terms of providing food, accompanying children to or being directly involved in activities, welcoming and supporting children's friends, being helpful and supportive in times of stress or illness.

But, em, my Mam always gets us sweets when we're sleeping in mine or her house and she always gives us 'Taytos' (snack food) like, or if I'm going up to her house to sleep she'll give me and (friend) sweets and all that.

(Jacqueline)

In common with Hart (1979) and Moore (1986a) mothers, rather than fathers, were most often cited in relation to setting, negotiating and monitoring range boundaries. They were also prominent in excursions beyond the immediate neighbourhood, particularly on trips to the city centre, shopping centres or eating out.

MR: *So do you go into town much, do you do other things in town
Usually my Mam goes much but sometimes I go to get new clothes for the
Summer holiday 'cos its probably going to be hot and eh, I'm getting a
short pants that go up to there (indicating below knee) then leave the rest of
your leg and I'm getting t-shirts and I've sun glasses ... that's it.*

(Mr. Bond)

Family Members



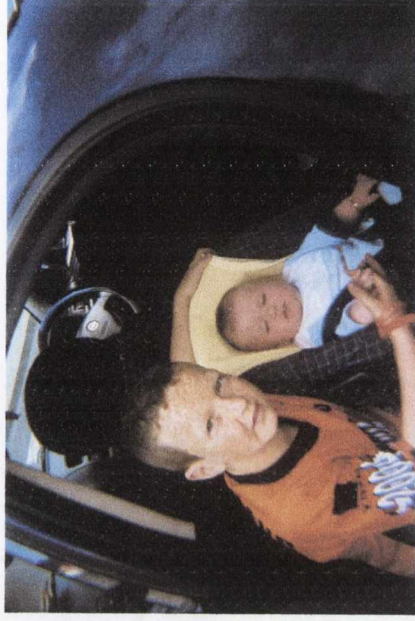
Brother, Cousins and Pony



Brothers and Cousin



My Mam, My House, My Car



Me and my Baby Cousin

Mothers were also frequently involved with children's activities, either as escorts, bringing children to activity venues, or including children in their interests, such as swimming.

[A]nd on Wednesdays we go swimming on our own, just my Mam and my sister and my brothers, because em, because we just go for a swim and we come back out and then there's a Jacuzzi in [sports centre], but its only for 18's. But my Mam's friend she closes the whole place at 7, its closes at 7 and then she lets us in there for an hour, in the Jacuzzi. ... When my Mam was having a baby, on David, she was having another baby like and she started going swimming because she thought it was good for her ... and then we went swimming then ever since 'cos my Mam liked it.

(Jacqueline)

Fathers

Fathers also featured prominently in children's daily lives with some actively sharing in many of their activities, particularly sports. One Dad was the manager of one of the local soccer teams while another volunteered at the school, using his skills as a gardener to undertake classroom projects with the children growing plants from seed. Children talked about time spent with their fathers both when their fathers participated in their activities and when they were included in their fathers' activities. They were identified as carers, providers, figures of affection and even playmates, playing a significant role in children's day to day lives (Lamb, 2004).

We just go down sometimes, do you know like, when its conker²⁸ season, we go down sometimes with my Dad and have conker battles with the conkers. The last time, about two years ago, we went, me and [sister],[brother] and my friend Derek, well about a year ago, we went up to the [woodland area] and my father climbed the tree and started shaking it and all the conkers fell on us. It was raining conkers [laughs]. There was spikes and all on our heads.

(Yoda)

On Sundays, I'd go watching my father's match - he plays for [local team name], the C team. My father is coach for the [boys'] team, yeah, he's the manager.

(Frankie)

I go there [local park] with my Dad and the dogs - two dogs, one's a bull staff and one's a terrier

(Max)

²⁸ 'conker's are chestnuts, the fruit of the horse-chestnut tree. They are used in traditional autumn games.

For one child whose father was imprisoned for the duration of the study, many weekend accounts told of travelling to visit him.

and on Sunday I went to [named prison], I went up to see my Father
(Bernadette)

Children's Relationships with their Non-resident Fathers

The absence of fathers in the lives of some of the children was striking. Thirteen children did not live with their birth fathers and, of these, five children spoke about step-fathers or their mother's 'boyfriend' either as household members or as prominent in their family life. Five children made no mention of fathers throughout the study duration. For many children however, their separated fathers continued to maintain regular contact and play an active role in their lives. In a number of cases, the child's father continued to live in the wider estate, sometimes with a new partner or in his original family home.

and then my father lives with his girlfriend and kids, and on my birthday they always call out and everything. I might be going to stay with my father for a week, I think and then I'll be staying at home with my mother.
[Summer holiday plans]
(Winnie)

I usually go to [xxx] as well, 'cos that's where my Dad lives. My Dad lives up with my Nana.
(Cathy)

For children whose fathers did not live close by, more formal contact arrangements were frequently put in place.

Well see sometimes, I think it's every Wednesday, every Thursday I go to my Dad's, he lives out in [named area]
(Sarah)

For some children, maintaining contact with their father was prioritised over participating in activities in their neighbourhood.

I used to go to the [club], dancing, but it's still on, but I don't really go, that much, 'cos it's of a Friday now and it used to be Thursday and Tuesday, but of a Friday I go to my Dad's, d'you see, and I can't just say 'no' to my Dad, just for dancing group, so I don't go to it anymore
(Dawn)

One child spoke about missing her friends when visiting her father.

And then when I am over in my Dad's I have nothing to do 'cos I have no friends over near my Dad's, so I don't really like going over there. But you see I have loads of friends over here, 'cos I'm not used to going over to my father's. But if he gets the house in [this neighbourhood] it'll be grand because I can walk down home and there's loads of children in [this neighbourhood], you know like.

(Clare)

This highlights one of the challenges for separated fathers and their children to maintain contact, when separated by distance or living in an unfamiliar neighbourhood (Stewart, 1999). For one child, both his father and his step-father were named as supportive adults in his life.

Smerger *my father, my stepfather, actually, my step father, my mother,*
Child in group *Do you have two fathers?*
Smerger *yeah, I do.*
Georgie *a step father and his 'father' father.*
Smerger *Dad lives in [named area of neighbourhood].*

(Focus group discussion on supportive adults in the community)

Grandparents and extended family members

All of the children spoke of contact or involvement with extended family, primarily grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, who in a number of cases lived close by, within walking distance. Grandparents were regularly referred to by many children and it was clear that for many of the children, their grandparents played a significant role in their lives and were regarded with great affection. Eighteen children named their grandparents, primarily their 'Nana' and seven mentioned grandfathers. The majority of those children had grandparents who lived locally in the neighbourhood or within the greater city area.

I go on my motorbike. I'd go across to the Gaelic grounds (on the roads) or down around Spruceville

MR: Why do you go down there?

My Nana.

MR: How often do you see her?

Nearly everyday I go down or she comes up to me.

(Adam)

I go to Cherryville, 'cos that's where my Nana lives, I go up about twice a week.

(Max)

Here's a picture of the church is there, the school is there, there's a field where we play and my Nana lives just there, down by that silver car next to the house.

(Helen)

Five children spoke about having spent some time living with grandparents, either as babies, before their parents had their own home, or during periods of transition between homes. Jacqueline explained how her grandmother moved in with the family because *'her house was burned down and robbed, so she stayed with us till she got another house'* (Jacqueline). During the course of the study, one child moved with her mother to live with her grandmother. A number of children spoke about family visits to grandparents at weekends or for special occasions.

We go to visit my Granddad on Sundays.

(Annabelle)

Grandparents who lived at a distance maintained contact through visits to or by children and their families, sharing holiday times and visits for special occasions.

We're going to see my Nana at the weekend, for my birthday.

(Stormtrooper)

Some grandparents played an active role in the children's lives, babysitting, providing care or supervision while parents worked. A number of children spoke about going on holidays with grandparents (and other family members) or simply being there within the neighbourhood, providing another place to call to or a familiar site for play.

And the second place that I hang around the most is my Nana's, I go to my Nana's when my parents are working.

(Mr. Bond)

That's outside my Nana's gate and we play soccer in that square there.

(Steve)

Yeah, and usually I go to the church with my Nana, or usually I go down [city area] when my Nana comes up to collect me. I have a Nana down there, my father's Nana.

(Winnie)

In some cases, grandparents provided opportunities for holidays and were also frequently named as providing money and gifts.

My Nana is buying me night vision glasses so I can see in the dark and a flashlight and glasses as well. Granddad will get me a present, he is going to come down and ask me what I want (for Christmas).

(Mr. Bond)

My Granddad because when I see him he gives me money and he baby-sits me.

(Clare)

My Nana buys my d'you know like, toys and clothes and she buys me gifts and then sometimes I get party stuff d'you know like, straws and stuff.

(Hazel)

All of this contact and exchange indicates a well established network of concrete and emotional family support (Tracey and Whittaker, 1990), both directly to the children themselves and indirectly, through support to their parents. Children also spoke about providing help or assistance to their grandparents, indicating the inherent reciprocity in these relationships (Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007).

I get a lift by my mother and I bring my Nana shopping in the new Dunnes [shopping centre], which is too big. She loves the new one though, my mother.

(Jack)

Grandmothers were mentioned much more commonly than were grandfathers (18 vs. 7). There was no indication from the children's accounts as to why grandmothers featured almost three times more than grandfathers did. Possibly, they played a greater role in shared care and were more prominent in the lives of children. Given the proportions of female headed lone parent families, it could be speculated that similar patterns of lone parenting had occurred in the children's parents' families, and that therefore contact with fathers for that generation had been disrupted, with consequent absence of grandfathers in this one.

This study did not include taking a generational family history and so this question cannot be answered, but it is perhaps an issue which could be addressed in future work.

Adult Relatives – Siblings, Aunts and Uncles

Most of the children mentioned extended family members regularly in their accounts of daily or routine activities in family life. In many cases, children reported that their extended families lived close to, or within walking distance of, their own homes. A number of children who were younger members of their own families and/or from larger families spoke about older siblings who had left home, become parents and formed their own family units, but maintained close ties with their families of origin.

MR: *Do any other people live in your house with you?
Just me and my Mam, 'cos all my brothers are like 20 or something and they all have their own house and their own jobs. My sister is 27 and she lives down in the Grange, you know, and she lives down there. My brother is 22 or something and he lives in Spruceville and my other brother is 30 I think and he lives, you know the way we have houses there and then you go up a passage and there's bungalows. Yeah and my niece then just comes at weekends and I play with her as well and she comes at weekends and she sleeps in my house on Fridays and she sleeps in her Dad's house on Saturday and she's 7, because her Dad has to work on Saturday morning, so she sleeps in my house.*

(Clare)

My aunts, uncles, cousins and brothers take care of me and give me money
(Annabelle)

As with grandparents, aunts and uncles were commonly associated with day to day life, family trips or holidays and visits to or by relatives.

I went down to my uncle's mobile home down in [seaside resort] and he brought me on his water ski and I went dolphin watching and I stayed there for a week, 7 days, you know.

(Hazel)

We went up to [seaside resort] and I met my aunt and she gave me a fiver. She's from [county] like and she came up to [seaside resort] and she asked me where was my Mam but I said I was with my club. She said 'here' and she got out her purse and she gave me a fiver [€5].

(Jack)

And I'm going to Paris with my uncle in March for St. Patrick's Day, I'm flying in, yeah, with my uncle and my father wants to go to Disneyland, you know, Orlando. He wants to go there with me and stuff.

(Sarah)

In some cases, aunts or uncles lived with the children's grandparents, facilitating contact and family links. The presence and varied contributions of aunts and uncles are described by children below.

My uncle lives across the road, my brother lives across the road and my aunty lives across the road.

(Jack)

...and this is my auntie's garden [next door] with all ornaments and stuff

(Bernadette)

Other relatives - my aunty lives in [county area] but she comes down about every 2nd week or something and we usually go up there as well. She has a trampoline, well her son has a trampoline it's huge and it has a net around it so you don't fall off it. She gets the bus when she comes up to visit.

(Yoda)

The connections to and continuity of family across generation was captured in Mary's account of how her aunt had previously attended the same school.

And my aunty's name is Tina, she used to go to this school and we look like each other, a little bit. You can see her picture on the walls outside the office, and you can see her, we look the exact same,

MR: *Was she the same age as you are now?*

Yeah, she still looks the same

(Mary)

Uncles and aunts were shown to take an interest in children's activities and to provide encouragement or special advantages to children

My uncle wants me to join Beechville Rovers [local soccer club] though.

(Mr. Bond)

We go to [rugby ground] to see rugby games, my uncle works there

(Wayne)

My uncle works in there [pool club] every Tuesday, but if I go, my uncle puts his hand in his pocket and takes out some money, so I don't have to pay for anything and he gives me a can of coke.

(Jack)

... and my uncle put us up on them [horses], we were jockeying them

(Carrie)

In some instances, children reported that parents and extended family were involved in work or business together, indicating another aspect of family network and connectedness.

Yeah, my father goes to work and my Mum just stays 'cos my father, my uncle and their friend, no my father, my father's brother and my father's other brother and a friend they own their own business, a patio paving business.

(Steve)

These accounts demonstrate that the ecological niche of this neighbourhood provided many children with rich, multi-generational, durable and reliable layers of social connectedness and support, operating in a range of settings, which Bronfenbrenner (1986) suggests is favourable to the well-being and development.

Child Relatives – Siblings, Cousins, Nieces and Nephews

As might be expected, the children's accounts of their daily lives and family relationships prominently featured other children – siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. The age range of siblings among the children in the study varied widely, from new born to adults in their 30's who had separate residences and families of their own.

I have 8 brother and sisters but they all don't live in my house. I have about 6 brothers who live in my house and one of my sisters lives over in England and the other one then is just moving out today, I think.

(Jennifer)

I have two sisters and no brothers. My (other) one is only a baby sister. She got her christening a few days ago.

(Best)

However, in many families, children's siblings were either relatively close in age or younger and were spoken about in terms of time spent together, shared play or interests.

As with other family members, they featured in photographs and in accounts of play, activities and domestic routines or contexts. Younger siblings, nieces and nephews (and younger children generally) were spoken of with warmth and affection and frequently featured in children's photographs, revealing a caring and empathetic sensitivity. Care taking, such as playing with or bringing younger children for walks was in some cases an enjoyable activity. Occasionally, duties such as babysitting or 'minding' were a source of complaint or perceived as a burden. One child and his siblings in particular seem to spend a lot of time minding their younger brother and sisters.

Usually my sister and me have to bring Alice and Joe up there and we get about a Euro or something [for babysitting]

MR: so you do a fair bit of babysitting, minding the little ones

Yeah sometimes we get up at about half seven and mind them for about an hour and we get about €1.50 or €2. It's lousy

(Yoda)

I go there sometimes [indicating adjoining neighbourhood on map]

I would mind my nephew. I would bring him down there, he's moving house now and I would go down playing with my friends down there as well.

(Jennifer)

and sometimes we'd just go walking again, around, we'd go back to my house and we'd get something to eat. We'd get my baby brother and Carrie would get her cousin and Donna's gets a friend's child and we bring them for a walk.

(Jacqueline)

Relationships with siblings could sometimes be a little fraught, but such episodes seemed to be infrequent and short lived and in general, children reported positive relationships.

We don't kill each other like, but we roar at each other and my Mam tells us to stop, she sends us up to bed for an hour, to cool down and we all have our own rooms so... So we all go into our room for about 20 minutes, she calls us back out then. So sometimes, like, we mostly get on because if we don't get on we get sent up to our rooms

(Jacqueline)

Cousins also featured regularly in the children's accounts of their daily lives, commonly being named as friends and playmates in their own right.²⁹ For some children, they provided a ready made reservoir of friends (Turbell, Blue-Baring, and Pereira, 2000).

I usually go with my cousins Katie and Paul. Katie is one, it was her birthday last week or something. Paul is 3. They live in the same house as Nana.

(Mr. Bond)

There'd be Chloe, my cousin, there would be her sister, there will be my other friend Ciara and there will be my other cousin, Rachel. One of my cousins lives across the road, but Rachel comes down to sleep in my house.

(Sarah)

Not all networks of kin or social support are unproblematic. In some instances, children referred, either directly or indirectly, to tensions or conflicts within their family networks.

Well do you know there are loads of stray dogs going around, and my brother has two dogs, ok, and he doesn't look after them at all, he doesn't live with me, but they're his dogs and he just leaves them out on the road and he doesn't feed them, or nothing and he won't get rid of them over my niece likes them. She plays with them like, but em, they bite people that walk up and down and they do be roaring at me, then, telling me to go in and get my mother and my mother doesn't own them at all and like there'd be war over the two dogs.

(Clare)

As the children's accounts of their family relations clearly evidenced, immediate and extended family are central to the children's social ecology, playing important roles within their social networks. It was clear that many of the children who took part in the study were embedded in close networks of extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins and that these mesosystem relationships were highly valued and significant. From an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), they provide multiple "supportive links" (p.214), supporting children's 'ecological transition' (p. 210) between microsystems.

²⁹ Because of the prevalence of cousins in children's lives and this 'dual' role of 'relative' and 'friend' their involvement is reported in both the family context and that of friends and social activity section.

They provide material and emotional support, both to children themselves and to their parents. Reciprocal exchanges such as babysitting or childcare and opportunities such as holidays or trips were common. Such networks make an important contribution to children's sense of belonging and membership of a supportive, reliable, available and caring network (Levitt et al., 2005; Samuelsson, Thernlund, and Ringstrom, 1996). From a developmental perspective they are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's hypothesis 34 which states:

The developmental potential of settings in a mesosystem is enhanced if the roles, activities and dyads in which the linking person engages in the two settings encourage the growth of mutual trust, positive orientation, goal consensus and a balance of power responsive to action in behalf of the developing person. A supplementary link that meets these conditions is referred to as 'a supportive link'.

(p. 214)

In short, as one of the focus group contributors summed it up when asked why these people are important:

You can tell them secrets you can't tell anyone else. They take care of you, they trust you, they take care of you better than anyone else.
(Boys Focus Group)

The children's accounts of their social lives in the varied micro-settings of their neighbourhood illustrate how their daily lives are situated within social networks populated by family, peers, neighbours and other community residents which function to both provide opportunity and impose constraints. Children themselves are shown to be active contributors within these systems and relationships.

SECTION TWO - Friends and Friendships

From the outset of the study, the children emphasised the central importance of friends in their daily lives and the inextricable links between friends and friendship and the varied activities they engaged in, in the neighbourhood. From the earliest stage of discussion around the use of cameras, children negotiated the inclusion of friends, despite this researcher's initial reservations. In keeping with other studies on children's place experience (Hart, 1979) or perceptions of their neighbourhoods (Chawla, 2002b), I had wanted children to photograph 'places and things' that were important in their daily lives.

As will become evident in the findings, privileging the children's wisdom and expertise in this regard was to prove vital to the study's sense making of children's daily lives and to gaining insight into this most important aspect of the social ecology of their neighbourhood. The findings on friends and friendship are drawn from a number of data sets – individual interviews, focus groups discussions, drawings and photographs.

The development of sustained and durable friendships is a key feature of the period of life classified as middle childhood or pre-adolescence (Asher and Gottman, 1981; Franco and Levitt, 1998). With the rapidly increasing development of children's social and physical competence together with the expansion of their autonomous range of travel, their opportunities to develop relationships with peers and to construct friendships of their own choosing becomes a key feature of their lives at this time (Bigelow and La Gaipo, 1980; James, 1996). Much research on friendship among children has focused on the notion of peer acceptance or rejection and its outcomes for children and young people (Parker and Asher, 1993). Until relatively recently, much less attention has been paid to children's own definitions and valuing of friends and friendship (Berndt, 2004; Morrow, 2006). The children's accounts drew clear distinctions between playmates and companions and those whom they regarded as close friends, even though in everyday language, the word 'friend' tended to be used to cover both. Every child without exception, spoke about the importance of friends. It was clear that friends were integral to their activities in the neighbourhood and that the presence of friends was one of the things they most liked about where they lived.

Mmm, it's kind of a good area and all my friends live around.

(Mr. Bond)

Eh, there's the field right at the top of the avenue, eh..., and I've a load of friends around there.

(Adam)

I have loads of friends there and there's only a shop down the road from me, you just go down the hill and its across there and there's a little curvy and there's a green here and you can play loads of games like rounders and kit kat and fancy dress.

(Dawn)

The images overleaf illustrate the bonds of affection between friends captured in the children's photographs.

Friends



Best Friends



My cousin and my friend



Friends and Team Mates



Hanging Out at the Graffiti Wall

How are friendships made?

Friendships are defined as relationships which exist in more than one setting, for example in school and the neighbourhood (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). In this study it was apparent that friends were made in a number of ways. Many friendships appeared to be formed on the basis of proximity i.e. children who lived close to each other. Some were made through contact in school and some because of existing friendships between parents. Family ties and links of kinship were also common, with many children naming cousins as friends. Many children in the study group had developed autonomous friendships based on mutual liking and shared interests, rather than simply proximity or parental influences, consistent with other studies of friendships in middle childhood (Berndt, 2004; Hill and Tisdall, 1997). A number of children who lived in different parts of the estate or in adjacent areas (although still within walking distance) nominated each other as friends, and spoke about shared activities and substantial time spent together. Common interests and activities such as sport (particularly for boys), or clubs were undertaken with friends.

Durability of Friendships

Throughout my contact with the children over the course of a year, it was evident that friendships were durable and largely consistent. Friends who were named in early interviews in the summer of 2005 were mentioned repeatedly in the various interviews and conversations that took place throughout the year. They featured in children's photographs and accounts of activities and social events. Friends' interactions were observable during contact time for example, sitting together during study activities (outside of classroom structure), playing together in the school yard, talking and referring to each other in the classroom or supporting each other in situations of conflict with other children. It was evident in children's stories about their lives that many friendships were of several years duration and were often sustained through changes in circumstances such as house moves within the neighbourhood or within walking distance.

Most of children's references to their daily activities, particularly those undertaken during their 'free' or unstructured time, were populated with mentions of friends or playmates. Structured activities including school, after-school clubs, sports clubs and hobbies time and again included comments about the involvement of friends or the ubiquitous 'we'.

This is consistent with many studies of children's neighbourhood experience and play (Berg and Medrich, 1980; Burke, 2005; Whewey and Millward, 1997).

Why are friends important?

The children's estimations of why friends are important as can be seen, were strongly associated with the qualities of solidarity and loyalty, kindness, generosity and emotional support, as well as companionship and having fun. A 'good friend' was characterised as someone who would '*stick by you*', who was kind, generous and trustworthy. These characteristics were common for both boys and girls. Having common interests, doing things, having fun together and sharing intimacies were identified as the hallmarks of friendship.

*They stick up for you when you're in trouble.
When you are down they can cheer you up.
You have fun with them, you trust them not to leave you out or tell your secrets. They are kind and generous. They help you out when you need help. They would share money, clothes, toys and things with you.
A good friend is someone who trusts and respects you*

(Girls' Focus Group)

*Because otherwise you would be lonely.
Otherwise you would be bored.
They stick by you. They stand by you – when you're in a fight.*

(Boys' Focus Group)

Friends were experienced as a reliable source of emotional support

They help you, they care for you, when you are down, they bring you up.

(Girls' Focus Group)

They are there for you. A good listener.

(Boys' Focus Group)

and as people who could be trusted with confidences and disclosures

*You trust them not to leave you out or tell your secrets.
Someone who wouldn't talk about you behind your back.*

(Girls' Focus Group)

The emphasis children placed on such qualities as loyalty, solidarity and trust demonstrate the value they place on close friendships and the importance such traits assume in peer cultures in middle childhood (Berndt, 2004). These traits can be categorized under five headings, defined by role and function:

Friendship Traits

Role/function:	Characteristic	Children's description
Supporter / Helper	Loyalty / Solidarity	<i>'They help you out when you need help.'</i> <i>'When you are down they can cheer you up'</i>
Companion / Playmate	Fun / Companionship	<i>'Play, Have fun, go places do things together'</i>
Confidante / Listener	Trustworthy / Accepting	<i>'If you have a problem you can tell your friends and they won't tell anyone else.'</i> <i>'Someone who forgives you'</i>
Provider / Benefactor	Generosity / Kindness	<i>'They are kind and generous'</i> <i>'They would share money clothes, toys and things with you'</i>
Negotiator / Mediator	Conflict Resolution	<i>'because if you disagree like, you just figure it out with your friends. There's no reason to fight about it'</i>

Table: 4.2 Friendship Traits

These characteristics of loyalty, solidarity, intimacy are characteristic of friendships in middle childhood when, as traits, they assume as much if not more importance than mere companionship (Berndt, 2004).

Friendships and Gender

Close friendships, as opposed to play mates have been shown to break down on gender lines with both girls and boys largely nominating same-sex friends, although mixed gender playmates (Phillipsen, 1994). This is consistent both with the responses of the participants, as noted and with my observations during the study. The majority of children identified their friends as being mostly of the same sex, although more boys (four) compared to two girls identified both boys and girls as friends. One boy identified his friends as 'mostly girls'.

Conversations and disclosures on the topic of 'girlfriends' and 'boyfriends' emerged in the single gender discussion groups, which had not previously surfaced in mixed gender groupings or through other data sources, such as photographs or individual interviews. This was much more prevalent in the girls' groups, where, within minutes of coming together, despite a whispered '*we won't talk about boyfriends*', linked couple names were being written on sheets of paper and compared and exchanged within the group. Being in a single gender group, the girls clearly felt a sense of freedom to discuss these issues which did not happen in mixed groups. In this regard, they sought reassurance that the tapes of the session (recorded for transcription purposes) would only be listened to by me and not shared with their class group. Most of the discussion was between them and was only referred to in the focus group discussion on friendship in relation to stating the importance of friends keeping secrets and confidences, being jealous or having to choose between friends and boyfriends and not '*stealing*' each other's boyfriends.

If your boyfriend rings your friend to give you a message and she doesn't pass it on and goes to meet him instead.

If you have to pick between boyfriend and friends.

(Girls' focus group)

I enquired what having a 'boyfriend' meant to them, for instance, was it someone they met as part of a group with other friends or someone they met and spent time with alone. The general reply was both, but that mostly they met with a group of friends. However, it was indicated that girls and boys did 'pair off' and 'go for walks'. Prompted by this discussion, I raised the issue in the boys' discussion groups. Their response was much more muted, although some acknowledged that they had 'girlfriends' or in some cases 'friends who are girls' and one boy professed to having three girlfriends. The only sentiment expressed by one boy in relation to having a girlfriend was the difficulty of balancing her expectation of spending time with her, while wanting to '*hang out*' with the boys.

Friendships and Conflict

Friendships were not without their problems. Children acknowledged the inevitable conflicts that can arise in friendships or other social relationships. Conflict in friendships was explored by asking '*Can friends ever be a problem?*' *Do friends always agree?* and *Can you disagree and still be friends?*

Many children described situations and circumstances in which friends could indeed pose problems for them. These included minor conflicts such as not wanting to do the same things, issues of loyalty such as going off with other people, to the exclusion of a friend or children feeling under pressure to do things they might not want to do.

Yes, when you are fighting with them.

Yes, because they don't do everything that you want to do and they always snake off with other people.

Yes, because when they fight with you and when they get grumpy with you.

When they force you to do things when you don't want to do it.

Sometimes they don't want to play the same game as you do.

(Girls' Focus Group)

Friends wanting children to do things or to go to places their parents would not permit was also named as problematic.

If your mother says you're not to do something and your friend asks you to do it.

(Girls' Focus Group)

Resentment or jealousy if friends spent more time with others or if they were seen to take a parent's attention were cited as issues by some children:

When your friend takes your space with your mother.

Yes, because they don't do everything that you want to do and they always snake off with people.

(Individual comments in girls' focus group)

Friends breaking confidences or disclosing secrets was something that could cause great annoyance or upset.

When they tell your secrets - yesterday I got a new boyfriend and my best friend told the whole club, everyone in the club!

(Individual comments in girls' focus group)

Both boys and girls acknowledged that friends do not always agree, they sometimes want to do different things or have different interests or they simply get into a disagreement or have a row.

*No because if you support Man U. and they support Liverpool.
No they might like something different to you.
Sometimes friends fight. They might like one place and you might like
another.*

(Individual comments from boys' focus groups)

However, disagreements of themselves did not generally pose a threat to friendships, particularly close friendships or those of long-standing. For the most part such issues were transitory, close friendships endured, and children found ways to reconcile differences or resolve conflicts. In general, the children showed that they recognised that differing interests and priorities are an intrinsic part of human relationships. Issues such as 'wanting to do different things' or play different games were not generally seen as a difficulty and could be sorted out through negotiation and compromise.

*Because if you disagree like you just figure it out with your friends. There's
no reason to fight about it, because, say if I'm in her house and I want to do
nothing and she wants to play pool, we just figure it out.*

(Jennifer)

Their responses and strategies for dealing with conflict varied depending on the seriousness of the altercation or the offence taken, the strength and quality of the relationship in question and, most probably, the impact of the personalities involved. Some conflicts were short-lived and quickly resolved:

*Because sometime you might even have a fight and after a while you will
forgive them.*

(Max)

*No, it just means you argue with them and then you make friends. Say if me
and Bernadette were fighting and we say 'I hate you' and then we'd say
'sorry' on the phone. Yeah, and then she rings me and we'd be all friendly
again.*

(Bernadette and Hazel)

Not all situations were conducive to an early resolution and for some children conflict was indicative of a longer term rift.

*If I fight with someone, I wouldn't ring them back in 5 minutes or 10
minutes later, 'cos if you do that what's the point of fighting with them.*

(Jacqueline)

They have to say sorry to me first or else I won't say nothing.

(Mary)

I didn't talk to my friend for about a month, but I made friends with her again because she has a trampoline.

(Annabelle)

While most conflicts appeared not to move beyond verbal exchanges, on occasions, arguments or provocations escalated into physical aggression:

There's these two girls down my road and they torment me badly right, every single time, Susan and Carol right, Susan always kills Carol for whatever reason and Carol hits back and then they torment me then and I went out one day then and I tore Susan around the place, 'cos she's always killing her sister, one day, she's always kicking her, digging her for some reason, so one day I was getting sick of it and I told Susan I was going to kill her 'cos she was killing her on purpose and I went up and gave her a dig.

(Bernadette)

Boys references to conflict or aggression were more oblique and arose in the context of friends '*standing up for you*' or '*sticking by you*' in a fight, or in the context of some of being subject to aggression by other or having been bullied or '*killed*', as they described it.

It's not safe because the last time I went up there with my friends and they ran away from me and all the people up there just killed me for nothing like. They don't even know me, they just killed me.

(Jack)

Boys tended not to speak about perpetrating aggression towards or between each other, in the way that the girls did. However, clearly such aggression does take place. Whether these particular boys did not participate in it, or whether they just chose not to disclose or discuss it with this researcher is not evident from the data gathered, but given the prevalence of aggression among young men and neighbourhood incidents reported by the children, or occurring during the study period, it is an issue that warrants further attention. The most commonly cited cause of rows, particularly those that did give rise to physical aggression or extreme anger were related to offence taken in response to insults or verbal aggression about parents or family³⁰. Specific examples were provided only by girls, although boys also spoke about '*If they slag you about your family*' as a provocation.

³⁰ Other aspects of children's exposure to or involvement in aggressive or anti-social behaviour in the wider neighbourhood context are outlined in Chapter 7

There was this girl and I was at her sleep-over and she slagged my mother. So I tore around the place and that's why I hate her now and there's another girl and she slagged my mother and I killed her after school.

(Mary)

Do you know the other day, my brother was out on his horse and my best friend's brother was out on his horse and there was a girl up in Spruceville that was slagging my brother and this was yesterday, I think, yeah yesterday and they were slagging my brother and my best friend's brother was hanging around with my best friend and then we went up and then we killed her. Look this is what I did, look, I tore her down, I tore her by the top of the head and knocked her down and I pulled her along the ground.

(Donna)

Some children revealed how some of the complexities of adult relationships impacted on their relationships with other children and how they had to deal with them in their daily lives. This description by Jacqueline illustrates how such incidents can cause annoyance, or embarrassment or hurt, but also, how some children are aware of such sensitivities and adapt or moderate their responses, even in the face of provocation.

She was slagging my baby brother John, and that he is all this and that and that my father is not his father, and he is, right and I said to her, 'its none of your business and he is' and I went up and told her mother. She doesn't have the same father as her brothers and sister and I knew that, but I wouldn't say that because I would feel lousy for her. She keeps; she's always annoying me.... Yeah just cos my Dad moved out of the house when my Mam was pregnant on John and em, now she's that John is not his child, but I just ignore her the whole time, cos I know myself that John is my Dad's child.

(Jacqueline)

This commentary reveals that, for the most part, children were aware of and could manage conflict within their relationships. Conflict within friendships was more readily resolved than conflict between non-friends as reported by Newcomb (1995). Conflict directed at family members was found to be more provocative than personal insult or 'slagging' and was more likely to evoke an aggressive response. For some children, conflict was undoubtedly the more insidious experience of bullying. As defined by The Department of Education and Science *Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Primary and Post Primary Schools 1993*

Bullying is repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical conducted by an individual or group against others.

The guidelines go on to clarify that isolated incidents of aggressive behaviour, although unacceptable, may not equate to bullying. However, when such behaviour is systematic and persistent, it does constitute bullying behaviour. Bullying, like other forms of abusive behaviour, encompasses an unequal power relationship involving dominant aggression, as opposed to what might be considered reciprocal or even playful conflict (Frey and Hoppegraff, 1994). The incidence of bullying, as it manifested in the study, is discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

SECTION THREE - Adults in the Community

During the course of the study arising from individual interviews, activity logs and group discussions, it became evident that many non-familial adults in the community played a significant role in the children's daily lives. When this was explored in focus group discussions, the children generated a diverse list of adults whom they identified as helpful including:

- People who provide everyday services such as: bin men, coal men, vegetable men;
- people who provide care such as doctors, ambulance drivers;
- people who provide direct services to children such as: school teachers, sports coaches and (youth) club leaders;
- people involved in community work – estate maintenance, community development staff;
- neighbours;
- parents of the children's friends.

Teachers, shopkeepers, [ice-cream] cone men, soccer coaches, principals, club people, Mam, Dad, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, cleaners, priest, binmen, doctors, ambulance drivers, coalman.

(Annabelle – Girls' Focus Group discussion)

Bernie T, because she does all the things down in the [youth club] every Friday night, like pool and soccer. Bernie T. is a wonderful woman!

(Steve – Boys' Focus Group discussion)

The people that (are) going around picking up rubbish. And the coal man. Leaders in the club and when I was in my club they were very nice to me, they bring us swimming and shopping and Winnie's mother is very good too.

(Donna – Girls's Focus Group discussion)

Christy is the best manager for [area team], he roars at everybody, but he is still loved.
Stormtrooper's Dad he brought us bowling [school outing].
(Boys' Focus Group comment)

The children's naming of significant adults in their community (other than family members) highlights their participation in multiple settings, such as community services, in their neighbourhood and the role played by these adults in supporting children's ecological transitions between settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These relationships emanate from the wider policy and provision context (macro system) the influence of which is manifest in the micro settings of their daily lives. Issues such as housing, planning, health, education, transport, justice, sanitation, income and service provision all have pertinence to the lives of children to a similar and sometimes to a greater extent than they do on the lives of adults (Bradshaw, 2000; Brooke, 2004).

This discussion and the comments made by the children highlight a number of things. Firstly, children are very aware that they are embedded in networks of supportive relationships of care and provision afforded primarily by their immediate and extended family, but also by significant others, such as parents of friends and they value this highly. They experience these networks as providing practical, emotional and informational support (Tracey and Whittaker, 1990) or what Levitt et al (1993) describe as '*convoys of social support*' (p. 811) of which they are beneficiaries. In a later section, we will also see how children themselves contribute to such networks through the assistance, practical and emotional, they provide to others through their work (babysitting, housework, school duties) and relational exchanges. Secondly, the children show an acute awareness of a range of services and service providers which contribute to their daily lives. They showed an appreciation of what might seem to be very mundane activities, such as picking up litter and estate maintenance. As we will see in the next section on the physical environment, this may be because such services have a direct impact on the quality of their experience as active users of outdoor space (Spilsbury, 2005).

The children's comments relating to the various clubs and structured activities for young people – youth and after-school clubs, football clubs – demonstrate that they are appreciative of the role of the contributing adults.

These extended networks and the quality of the relationships which exist in them, together with the opportunities for expanded and new experience (Kelmer Pringle, 1986) they offer, support the children's transitions between settings (meso-system relationships). In addition, they provide a degree of bridging social capital taking them beyond the boundaries, both physical and socio-economic of the neighbourhood setting (Warr, 2005).

Finally, the children's discussion of helpful and supportive adults in their community demonstrates an awareness of their place within a web of support structured by both an inter-generational frame and a policy environment where adults' contributions are defined not alone by occupational roles and responsibilities but also by reciprocal interpersonal exchanges and relationships characterised by care and support. The importance of social network support will be revisited in Chapter Seven.

Adults Who Are Not Helpful

The focus groups discussions also explored the territory of adults who were perceived as not being supportive or helpful by the children. A small number of children cited some neighbours or other local adults. As a proportion of the overall discussion the instances of non-supportive adults were very small and, as the example below indicates, were largely related to disputes between children in which adults became involved.

There are parents that live around us and do not like us and do not help any other people and I have a problem with a lot of people and they never come out to help and they do not like their kids playing with us.

(Donna)

FF – friends Nana – calls us [abusive names] reads [reprimands] us and tells our mothers lies about us.

(individual comments in Girls' Focus Group)

One or two children clearly had come into conflict with neighbours or other local adults and described instances of adults insulting them or calling them names.

'Some adults are mean, give you cheek'. However, other children expressed the view that this did not happen without provocation or cause.

They won't give cheek if you don't do anything on them – that's the way it is.

(Steve)

Hazards and Risks in Children's Social Ecology

In the wider ecology of the children's daily lives the actions and inactions of a range of other players – individuals and institutions – gave rise to considerable risks and concerns. People whom children identified as unsupportive or whom they had a problem with were those associated with crime and anti-social behaviour in the area. This theme featured strongly in the school survey responses also. The following quotes demonstrate the extent to which such issues impacted on the children's perceptions.

The people that rob cars and burn them. Who write all over the burnt houses and walls and poles.

People who litter, people who get drunk and keep you awake because they don't stop blaring music, people who do graffiti and people who vandalise.

Thieves, drunks.

Some people who rob cars and houses are scumbags.

(Comments from Girls' and Boys' Focus Groups)

What I don't like about my area is all the fighting and shooting.

(Boy, aged 12)

The people fighting in the area, the drugs and the guns.

(Girl, aged 9)

One child described her understanding of the reasons why a local shop had closed down:

I don't know. I think she was too old or something, cos she's 70 something.

MR: oh right, so she retired?

yeah and do you know what also, because about two weeks before, somebody broke into her shop with a knife up to her throat, so she got frightened, so and they robbed fags and money and stuff, so she didn't want to open over that, either.

(Clare)

And another girl gave an account of a shooting through the windows of a house on her street.

Because they shoot and they always wakes us up and sometimes they run into my garden to hide, because my garden is close to it. They broke, you know she got weather glaze [windows], the baby was there by the window and they fired something and the baby got glass in him. But I don't know if he got hurt, cos the ambulance came as well. So I don't know what happened, but they all say that he got glass in his head.

(Sarah)

Another girl spoke about the possibility of 'kidnappers' and then went on to describe watching stolen cars raced in the neighbourhood, from what she felt was a safe vantage point.

MR: *When you go out to play, how long would you be gone?*

The whole day and then I'd come back, there I have to come in at 9 o'clock, cos after that we don't know if there's a few kidnappers around at that time and sometimes I go around S's [friend] place and sometimes there's robbed cars and we go behind, there's a shop there and we go behind these guards place, its still in [own area] but its down the hill, near the shop I go to. The cars race in pairs, and when they crash into one another, nothing happens, except they get dented.

(Mary)

These examples highlight the extent to which these children were aware of and exposed to risk and in their neighbourhood. Their rejection of the behaviours involved indicates a moral sensitivity (Mayall, 2002) and empathy for others. Children have been shown to be more sensitive to victimisation of others than often assumed (Dulmus and Hilarksi, 2006), girls somewhat more so than boys. However, in two of the boys' focus group discussions an area of conflict with adults/institutions arose which was of significance - that is their relationship with the Gardai³¹. The following excerpts outline their concerns:

MR: *So, are there any other adults in your community you have a problem with? yeah, Gardai.*

MR: *Gardai, why is that? 'cos they pull you for nothing. yeah, they pull you for nothing.*

MR: *At your age? At anyone's age! the last time I was walking down with my friend, in the pitch dark, he came up to me, tried to pull me into the car. They don't even do that, they come up to you.*

³¹ 'The Gardai' is a colloquial term for a member/s of 'An Gardai Siochána – the Irish police force.

He did.

What's your problem – bang!

No, they ask you where you're coming from and they, if you say the wrong place, they say, 'what's in your pockets?'

(Boys' Focus Group comments)

We don't like Guards – they're cheeky – they pull up beside you, search you, mess with us, slag us.

(Boys' Focus Group comments)

Such ambivalence was not confined to the core group, it was also indicated in some of the responses in the school survey.

Guards – they're stupid

(Boy, aged 9)

This has implications both for children's current experience within their neighbourhood, but also for their future participation as pro-social citizens. Clearly, the ambivalence of this relationship at such a relatively early age is one which needs to be given careful consideration. If children feel they are unfairly targeted and subjected to harassment, this will inevitably set up an oppositional dynamic which is not in their interest, in the community's interest, nor indeed in the interest of An Garda Síochána who rely on individual citizen and community co-operation to fulfill their roles in both crime detection and prevention. While the views put forward tell only of one perspective and the perception or motivation of the Gardai is not represented³², nonetheless, the children's accounts highlight what, on the face of it, appear as incidents of poor practice. In the context of a neighbourhood where serious crime is prevalent and where one aspect of the solution is seen as increased visible Garda presence, promoting positive, co-operative relationships with all non-criminal residents is crucial. In such a context, acting in ways which pre-dispose children to reject or resent the presence of Gardai in their neighbourhood is counterproductive, at best.

³² In relation to this specific issue, I made several attempts to contact the local community Garda to seek his response to the views put forward by the children involved but, despite leaving a number of phone messages to his mobile and office phone and messages left with various community contacts, he did not respond to my requests for contact.

As one child commented:

Some people call the guards. [those people are called] 'Rats'. If you 'rat' you get killed.

(Wayne)

Crime and Anti-social Behaviour

The issue of criminal and anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood was one that surfaced from several sources and evoked strong reactions among the children, particularly, but not exclusively the girls. Girls were more likely to express concern for personal safety and to talk about avoiding areas or places which might expose them to danger. Boys however, were equally strong in their rejection of such behaviour, but were less inclined to express it in terms anxiety or fears for their personal safety. Whether this is because they have internalised the notion that men should not show fear or whether they actually feel less vulnerable or more prone towards risk-taking than girls was not evident (Valentine, 2004). Possibly, boys would not consider it acceptable to disclose fear to a (female) researcher (Tulloch, 2000) although their accounts of how they would handle a situation in which they were afraid indicate that they are aware of potential risks.

- MR: *Are there any people you are afraid of in your area?*
People with golf clubs and baseball bats. And some times they hit you. Some people hit you hard and it would hurt you very bad. If you get a smack in the nose it will hurt and you will cry and you will go to bed.
- MR: *What do you do if you're afraid, where do you go?*
Go to your room, straight to bed, under the covers.
- MR: *What if you are not at home?*
Go into a house.
- MR: *Do you ever hear things at night that makes you afraid?*
Gun shots, robbed cars, burnt houses.
- MR: *Is there anyone you would you tell?*
The Gardai – on people who rob cars and burn houses. The guards come and they hide the cars from the guards around the back of the houses and when the guards are gone, they come out again.
(conversation arising out of focus group discussion)

This account highlights some of the contradictions and ambivalences that children face. On the one hand they identify the role of the Gardai in responding to crime but on the other, are aware that the response can apparently be ineffective, which combined with the animosity identified above, places children in a very invidious position vis-à-vis this relationship. This issue is taken up again in the discussion and concluding chapters.

When asked what the solutions to some of the issues in the area might be, one child said:

I'd clean up everything and I'd take away all the trouble as well. If anybody touches anybody they'll go to jail, cos with the children around, I don't want children to be getting hurt, because they are only babies and stuff and they can't go out playing. And open up all the boarded houses and people you see on the ground, you could pick em up and give em new clothes and give em houses if no-one wants them, or even if you could sell the houses and give the money over to charity.

(Dawn)

This issue and the institutional neglect it represents is discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

SECTION FOUR - Animals and Pets

It may seem strange to include a section on animals and pets within a chapter on the social ecology of children's daily lives in their neighbourhood. However the qualities of children's relationships with their pets – their affection, caring and links to family and friends through and because of having pets and animals - make this an appropriate inclusion. The majority of children participating spoke about family pets and this was evenly balanced by gender. Playing with pets was also reported by children in the school survey. A wide variety of animals were named as pets (as the sample photographs overleaf illustrate) predominantly dogs, but also cats, hamsters, rabbits, turtles and two parrots. A number of children owned several pets or were involved in the keeping of other animals such as birds, ferrets or horses. This was often done as a family or shared interest, mostly with fathers.

We have two dogs and loads of pigeons, and ferrets. They live out the back [garden] and we have birds - finches and linnets and they live in the loft with the pigeons.

MR: *in cages?*

Yeah, sometimes we leave them off, out the back like.

MR: *who looks after them?*

Me and my father.

(Daniel)

Pets



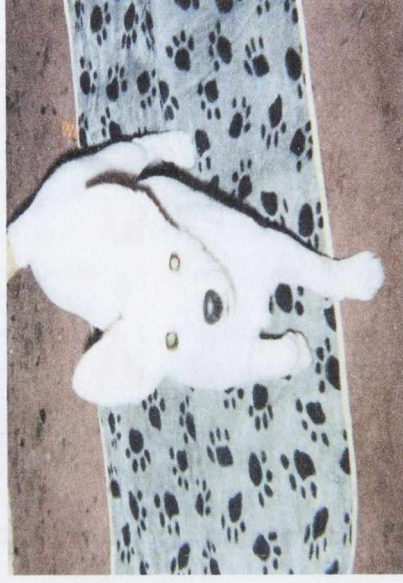
My Parrot - Rollodinio



I love my dogs, I have two - Bernadette



I have four dogs this is just one of them - Hazel



My dog - Winnie

Animals and pets were frequently mentioned, and indeed, photographed during the study and were routinely woven into the fabric of children's daily lives through their activities or hobbies – dog-walking, horse-riding and trotting, bird keeping and breeding - and as subjects of affectionate attachment.

[On Saturday] I'd usually get up in the morning, I'd feed my pup and then after I'd fed my pup I'd go up to the Astroturf.

(Rollodinio)

My cousins live down there, so I go down and play with him and then we'd go up to the shop and get stuff there and then we take out things and we go out to the back and play with his dog. His dog is a small one.

(Peter)

Keeping of pets itself could sometimes be precarious as Dawn's account illustrates:

I have a rabbit, but I have a corner house and people keep on jumping over the wall, trying to rob the rabbit. They robbed the first one, but they keep on trying to rob the second rabbit I got, but they can't because my rabbit runs too fast (laughs) they can't catch him.

(Clare)

However, animals in the neighbourhood were sometimes a source of concern or annoyance for children also.

I wouldn't like to go to (named areas), 'cos of all the people fighting and they wouldn't look after me and all and there's lots of dogs.

(Max)

I play soccer sometimes, I ball like 'Aggy' sometimes we just play like '45' or something up around there and sometimes we can't because the dogs chase us.

(Jennifer)

But there's lots of stray dogs going around (the area) and they should look after them properly, 'cos I don't know. But I want to get a cat then, and I got two cats before and they got eaten by dogs. So I can't get 'em anymore.

(Clare)

Animals and pets also provided children with ideas of what they might like to be or do when they were grown up. Many children cited animal related occupations ranging from working with horses as jockey's or grooms, to becoming vets as among their aspirations.

Having pets and being involved in the care and management of animals has been shown to be an indicator of children's well-being (Brookes and Hanafin, 2005) and, as shown in this study, is a further means by which children contribute to and to participate in shared household or family interests.

Horses in the Neighbourhood

Many children were enthusiastic about horses, some naming them as their 'favourite animal' and spoke about owning or 'jockeying' (bareback riding) horses belonging to other people in the area. They were included in many of the children's photographs. Some were also involved in the sport of trotting horses using a 'sulky' (see plate on following page).

That's my sulky for my horse. I haven't got that one now 'cos I sold it. I'm getting a new one. I should have taken pictures of my horse.

(Georgie)

MR: *What is your favourite things to do?
Fishing and soccer, and driving horses, trotting and that.*

(Daniel)

That's the horse and carriage, [photograph] I have a horse and carriage.
MR: *Where do you keep the horse and carriage?*

The horse is in the field and the carriage in the garden.

MR: *and what do you do with the carriage?*

We let people on it, small little children.

(Donna)

I love horses, I'm getting one in a few weeks. It's born like, but I don't know what to call it, its only a foal, like its like that little one over there. No, but like I'd groom it and all that. Yeah, but I'd still be able to jockey my friends horses, like you know, 'cos she has two of em like. I took this one of my brother and my three cousins and their horse and I took a picture of the horse on its own [Shetland pony type].

(Carrie)

Several of the other children who did not actually own horses nonetheless expressed an interest in them.

Also we go in the field and look after the horses, we look after them and bring them to grass.

(Mary)

Horses



My sulky for my horse - Georgie



My Cousin's Pony - Carrie



Horse on the green at my road - Donna



A foal - Adam

However, the grazing of horses in the area raised concerns also, as indeed was the poor care taken of some of the horses in the area. Grazing resulted in damage and dirt in the fields and preventing children using some green areas.

No it's a road and if you cross ok here there's a green there and a green there, but we can't go in there 'cos there's loads of dirt and stuff, and all horse footprints and all. 'cos we tried that the last time, I think it was two weeks ago and em, my cousin V, she fell so we can't go in there anymore.

(Sarah)

Sometimes we play rugby like, we throw the ball to each other and just do drop kicks and sometimes we play soccer.

MR: *Ah right, and where do you play soccer?*

There's a big green, but now there's a horse, and now you can't really play something there.

(Stormtrooper)

The lack of proper facilities for horses was something that was referred to many times by children and the poor conditions and care evident in relation to some of these animals was highlighted, both verbally and through photographs.

Clean up the greens, be better friends, no trouble or fighting, keep horses safe, clean the gardens.

(Girl aged 7)

In terms of *what would make your area a better place for children* provision of stables or an equestrian centre was suggested by a number of children.

Conclusion

The children in this study were shown to be embedded in intergenerational relational networks of kinship, lineage and attachment. These extend from their immediate family to a wider network of extended family comprising both adults and children. They are active participants in systems of mutual and often reciprocal support, primarily as beneficiaries but also as contributors. They benefit in many direct ways – such as enhanced opportunities (experiences, holidays etc), resources (money or gifts), as well as ties of warmth, affection and care. They are recipients of secondary benefits as a consequence of the support available to their parents, such as shared care and respite (Desmond et al., 1998).

It has been found that a history of family presence in an area gives children and families a sense of place and of belonging (Hay, 1998) and this was evident in the children's accounts of their daily lives, adding significantly to the richness of their social ecology.

Clearly having extended family close at hand enhances the opportunities for practical and emotional support afforded by frequent contact, particularly for children. Reciprocity was evident in the stories that children told about their relatives and the children were also contributors to this reciprocal exchange. The examples provided of caring for younger children, assisting in the daily routines of older people (helping a grandparent with shopping), expressing affection and connectedness through visiting to see a new baby, and marking intergenerational kinship connectedness through family resemblance. Children also occupy generational and relational positions as sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, grandchildren, nieces or nephews and indeed aunts or uncles all of which brings diversity of experience as well as social connectedness (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Drukker et al., 2005). These relationships provide awareness of reciprocal duties and benefits, observances of social practices and crucially a sense of belonging and identity.

As demonstrated by these glimpses into the social worlds of the study participants, children, both as individuals and in the context of their family settings, and despite the commonalities of age, location and policy context, differ substantially from each other in terms of family structure, life experience and opportunity. Children's lives are subject to the variables and vagaries of the primary adults in their lives, most prominently their biological and/or situational parents. Family size, composition, stability and cohesion are largely beyond their capacity to influence, but very much shape their experience (Seaman and Sweeting, 2004). As both this and the following chapter reveal, many of the study participants enjoyed the multiple advantages which flow from being members of supportive family and extended networks, benefiting from the strengths of both bonding and, to a lesser extent, bridging social capital which these provide (Warr, 2005).

A number of the children participating in this study were confronted by and grappled with many challenges in their lives, family breakdown, house moves, and bereavement, an imprisoned parent and for some, the consequences of living in a disadvantaged area subject to threats to their safety and well-being and that of people around them.

The well-being of both adults and children can be seriously compromised by such experiences (Hill and Angel, 2005), and children are less able to screen out the effects of frightening or stressful experiences, even though they may be less cognisant of the impact (Bartlett et al., 1999). Access to supportive, reliable and consistent informal and formal social networks can serve to buffer children against some of the effects of such adversities (Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007), especially those which support their personal growth and self-esteem (Gilligan, 1999). However, the complexities of how such support works, and what it can achieve particularly, when faced with multiple and cumulative risks, are not clearly understood (Freitas and Downey, 1998). In this study the children's positive presentation of their social networks, in particular, the qualities of their friendships, provide some insight into children's experience of such support.

The benefits conferred by social capital, particularly that associated with family networks can be a powerful mitigating factor in countering disadvantage. Several children in the study presented as optimistic, pro-social, personally ambitious and hopeful, clearly defying the type-casts and stereotypes frequently presented in the context of disadvantaged communities, both in the literature and popular media (Devlin, 2006). These issues are explored in more depth in Chapter Seven which sets out a thematic discussion. However, prior to that discussion we now move to examine the physical ecology of children's daily lives in their neighbourhood.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Physical Ecology of Children's Daily Lives

The everyday life of children takes place in concrete, physical spaces.

(Rasmussen, 2004, p. 155)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the physical characteristics and properties of the neighbourhood setting and the children's knowledge and use of them. It presents a detailed description of the physical neighbourhood and the places and spaces within it frequented and used by the children. Areas or features identified as liked or disliked by the children, their autonomous habitual and frequented ranges (Moore, 1986a) as well as places visited in the company of adults are identified. It demonstrates the extent to which the physical ecology serves to structure children's experience, both in terms of the affordances it offers (Gibson, 1979; Heft, 1988) and the use which children make of them. The presentation of the physical landscape in isolation from the social activities enacted in it is an artificial and somewhat incongruous proposition, as the children's descriptions verify. Their place identification and references constantly use terms such as 'we' or 'my friends' or refer to dyadic and small or large group play. However, in order to emphasise the physical features, associated affordances and perceptions highlighted by the children, such a proposition is employed. Children's use of and activities within the spaces are addressed in Chapter Six.

In undertaking the study, the aim was to produce an account of how children perceive, use and value their neighbourhood (Chawla, 2002), as faithfully and authentically as is possible by a third party, outsider/adult researcher. To this end, this chapter is again rich in quotations and illustrated with images selected from children's photographs and drawings. It is largely presented as an uninterpreted narrative, privileging the children's words and images. The methods chosen were designed to provide children with a means to depict and present their daily lives in ways which were both child centred and meaningful to them, while at the same time being accessible to diverse adult and child audiences. In relation to the physical landscape, photography proved an effective tool, illustrating children's accounts and descriptions in ways that render them visible to an 'outsider' audience.

The children's accounts and images furnish a vivid portrayal of many aspects of their lived experience, views and perceptions. These, combined with data derived from using local maps, demonstrate children's in-depth knowledge of their neighbourhood. They reveal their familiarity with aspects and features which frequently pass unnoticed, and unknown, in the daily lives of adults and whose significance for children is unappreciated. By way of orientation, the presentation of this data begins with a physical description of the neighbourhood layout, key features and amenities, based on children's descriptions and photographs.

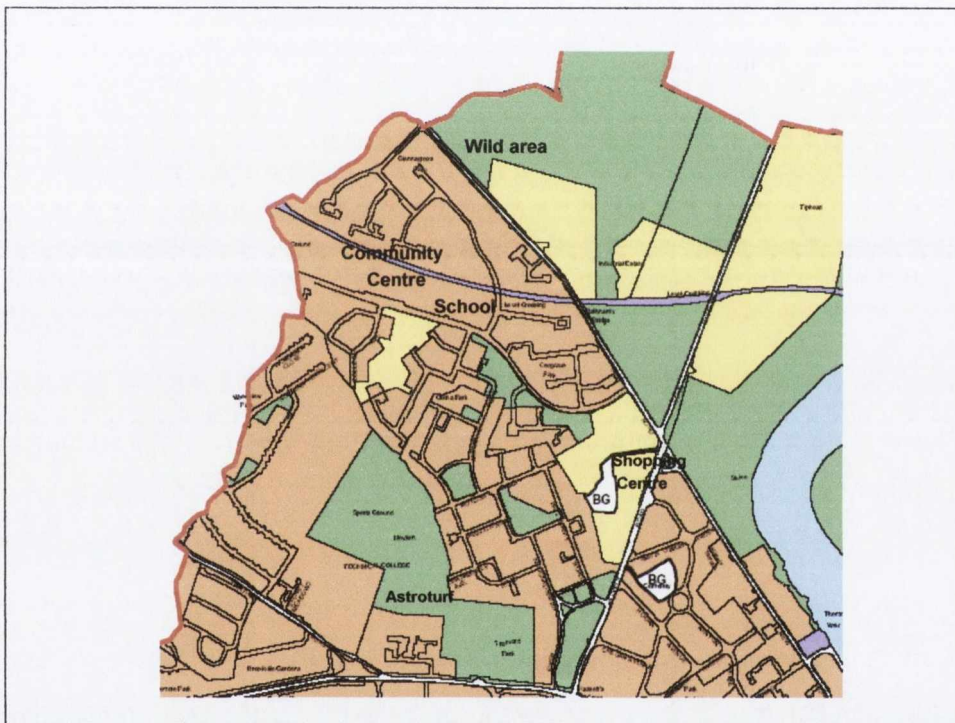


Fig: 5.1 Neighbourhood Map

Getting to Know the Neighbourhood

As outlined in Chapter One, the neighbourhood comprises a suburban local authority housing estate of in excess of 1,000 homes (see fig. 5.1 – Neighbourhood Map). Its physical layout incorporates large areas of open green space, smaller local greens which many of the houses face onto, as well as a network of streets, lanes or 'alleyways', cul de sacs and pathways between and within the groups of houses. These spaces, together with their own and friends' houses, comprise the main sites of the children's informal play and social interaction.

Externally, the estate abuts an older local authority estate, a private housing estate to the city side and the grounds of a third level college with open fields and development lands on two sides. The estate is divided by one main access road, which forms an axis along which core community facilities such as the primary school, church, health centre and community and enterprise centre, preschool and crèche are located. A large, well equipped playground is located alongside the community centre and close to the primary school. This has been developed and is maintained by the local community development project. It contains several large fixed wooden play structures for younger and older children including climbing apparatus and slides, as well as individual pieces such as spring mounted rocking toys and a model train. The children generally referred to this as 'the Park', rather than the playground and it featured prominently in children's accounts of their play and use of the neighbourhood.

Further up the road there is a football pitch used by the local football (soccer) club of which a number of the children who took part in the study are members. A hard surface 'all weather' soccer pitch is located in the same vicinity. On the outskirts of the estate, a 'wild' area of woodland and fields is to be found within the boundaries of what was once a large house and estate, now derelict. Although surrounded by security fencing and locked gates children, young people and adults have devised a number of access routes.

At the entrance to the estate, a shopping complex is located, comprising a generic range of retail outlets including a supermarket, newsagent, petrol station, pharmacy, fast food outlet, hair and beauty salon. A recent addition, which was of great interest to many of the children, is a new purpose built community public library as well as some community services such as a jobs club and a youth service organisation. Dotted throughout the estate, are a number of small local grocery/newsagent type shops selling daily life staples such as bread, milk, some fresh and canned produce, cigarettes, soft drinks and, importantly from children's perspective, a selection of inexpensive sweets and treats. All of these areas featured, to varying degrees, in the children's photographs, or drawings and accounts of their place and space use.

Children's Portrayal of the Physical Landscape

The children described, drew and took photographs of many both natural and built aspects of their landscape from large open spaces to specific areas or objects which they used or valued. Examples include:

- Streets, roundabouts and pathways within their local areas;
- green spaces close to their homes;
- 'fields' or open spaces between housing clusters;
- large rocks which were used as a site for dancing and games;
- a green metal (electrical) box which served as a place to sit and a popular meeting point;
- 'the graffiti wall'³³;
- local shops;
- community buildings (school, church, community centre);
- their own homes and home of relatives or friends.

They demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the outdoor landscape and could describe various features, locations and routes in precise detail. The photographs taken by the children show both the broad landscape of the estate – roads, greens and fields and the more specific, activity related sites. These include streets, pathways and particular features or landmarks. Many of these were either related to street based play, often close to home or with particular sites within short walking distance which were associated with gathering points, or linked with specific activities or interests such as soccer or horses. Many photographs showed children's own homes – gardens, house fronts and driveways – the micro-settings of children's home base. A number were also taken from such vantage points, highlighting this important transitional space between home and neighbourhood.

My house is about there, I took it from my gate.

MR: *Oh right, it's like you were standing at your gate.*

Yeah.

MR: *So you have good sort of open space then, do you play out around near your house then?*

Yeah, I play out there.

(Annabelle)

³³ A section of red brick wall which was used by children and young people locally to write names and messages.

Homes of friends or relatives (as discussed in the previous Chapter), were frequently included. Local shops were also depicted. A number of sites referred to in individual interviews were not included in photographs but described and discussed during the interview process. The children's photographs, interview accounts and routine activity logs demonstrated that in terms of their unstructured or self managed time, the outdoors was their primary activity arena.

Use of the Outdoors

The outdoors was a constant reference point in all the children's accounts of daily activity and play, being both a backdrop and a formative variable in their activities. All of the children described and engaged in physically active play outdoors, frequently on a daily basis. This ranged from street games such as 'Following' and '45' (chasing games with specific rules) and skipping, through sports, soccer, rugby, rounders, and included activities such as cycling, skating and 'walking around'. The local landscape was an integral part of the children's daily routine and site of social interaction with friends and playmates. It was here that they mostly met and played with friends, participated in sports training, walked to school or local shops and travelled from one location to another within the area. For many, the plentiful availability of outdoor space (often cited in tandem with the availability of friends), was specifically named as one of the things they liked about their neighbourhood.

That there is a field right at the top of the avenue and I've a load of friends around there.

(Adam)

We play in that field sometimes, a hay field and then we play loads of games in that big huge field.

(Bernadette)

We spend most of the time in the green across from the house.

(Smerger)

What I like about my area is all the park's and soccer fields.

(Boy aged, 12)

Play Sites

While play was not the only activity engaged in, it was the one most frequently mentioned in terms of the outdoors and a wide range of sites and activities associated with play were discussed. Play sites named, photographed and drawn by the children included:

- Streets
- Fields and greens
- Home
- Friends houses
- Football pitch
- Astroturf pitch (in a local college)
- The playground
- Walls (where children sit and talk or meet up)
- The school grounds
- Wild area
- Holiday homes
- A play centre.

Place Use

Children's descriptions of place use have been collated using what Moore (1986a) defines as *habitual*, *frequented* and *occasional* ranges (p17). *Habitual* ranges included the streets and greens in the immediate vicinity of the children's home, the green areas of '*fields*' and the wider landscape within the neighbourhood boundary. Children frequently referred to the area close to where they live as '*my road*' or '*my block*', indicated the configuration of housing in the neighbourhood.

Frequented ranges comprised other areas within and outside the immediate neighbourhood regularly used by the children, such as local parks, sports facilities, shops and other commercial areas, detailed below. Formal spaces such as sports grounds and the local playground are outlined, and a 'wild' or woodland area frequented more occasionally by some children. *Occasional* ranges which largely consisted of places accessed on trips, holidays or special occasions are discussed in the context of children's wider activities.

Streets, cul de sacs and Greens

In common with children throughout generations of urban and suburban living (Burke, 2005; Moore, 1986a; Ward, 1979; Wheway and Millward, 1997), the roads and streets immediately adjacent to where they live are important and much used play and activity sites. In response to the question: *'When you go out, mostly, where do you play?'* most children, both girls and boys, responded as follows:

We'll usually just go across the road and play with my friends or something.

(Mr. Bond)

There on the road like, you know, the road like the black there [street map] we play along the road there, and we play near my house too.

(Hazel)

I mostly probably stay around the road, or if not on the road, I'd probably come down and have a game of basketball in the [school] yard, sometimes. We play soccer on the road, mostly.

(Rollodinio)

Local streets and roads are the most immediately accessible outdoor space available to children living in a suburban housing estate, such as the one in this study site. Children occupy these spaces in a fundamentally different way to adults or indeed older adolescents, for whom they function as transit spaces – routes walked, cycled or driven from one 'place' to another (Elsley, 2004; Gaster, 1991). While adolescents may use these spaces to congregate and 'hang out', in the absence of a more available or attractive locale, (Clark and Uzzell, 2002) younger children actively use this space as both a site of encounter and activity in groups or as individuals, in addition to its transit function.

Yeah, there's a kind of little circle place, we can't pass my house and we can't pass the circle. 'Cos there's a kind of turn, so kinda, my house is here (map) and say if you go up to these houses there, there's a big circle then around there and we run around in there.

(Sarah)

I cycle round on that road and in that square and all up the yard. Sometimes I go on my electric scooter. I just go around the block or something.

(Peter)

Examples of photographs of streets and cul de sacs taken by the children are presented overleaf.

Neighbourhood Streets



Jacqueline



Peter



Cathy



Annabelle

The kinds of activities afforded by the streetscape included a range of running / chasing games, football/soccer, 'kerbs' (a game utilizing the footpath kerbs to bounce a ball), with children using and adapting the available surfaces, objects and vegetation, many associated with children's informal outdoor play for generations (Opie and Opie, 1969). Children's perceptions (Gibson, 1979) enabled them to identify and appreciate features of the environment which afforded play opportunities, all be they unintended as play facilities. These were used and adapted by children to creative and imaginative effect, serving as boundaries, markers, props and coverage, as well, frequently, as 'furniture' on which to sit or lean with friends. Walls and gates were used as goals and practice targets, kerbs were used to bounce balls off, low walls or features such as electrical junction boxes were used as seating and lampposts, as well as providing illumination on a dark winter evening, were used to twirl and spin around. The angle between the footpath and a boundary wall was used as a surface configuration for 'toss' (a coin throwing game). The affordances of the mainly hard, relatively smooth surfaces facilitate running, rolling, skating, kicking, skipping, jumping, as well as walking, running, cycling or driving, in common with Heft (1998). (See plates overleaf depicting streetscape affordances).

Because at night time, like around eight [pm] we all go out and there's a white line on the road and we make up all games. We play 'bulldog' and you have to run from side to side in it and the person on, when they say 'bulldog' you've to run from side to side without getting caught. And we play 'kerbs' and 'kitkat' and there's a master and a helper and there's all other people down there and the master says names of say people and the helper then goes down and then the people down there tells the helper says one of them and then that person has to run up and down the wall, four times and then the fourth time then you stop at the wall and say 'kit kat' and whoever gets there first wins and then that person who wins gets to go up and be the master.

(Dawn)

Some children reported that their presence or activities were viewed as a nuisance by some local adults and children were subject to chastisement or being told to 'go away'. However, this was not always the case, as the following contrasting comments from Best and Jack demonstrate.

Play Affordances



The Green Box



Twirling on the lamppost



"We play dancing at the Rocks"



Toss penny played against the wall

I just go anywhere. Sometimes I play if I have my friends and we play over at the big white gates and some people just tell us to go away, not the fella who owns it, but my aunt just tells us to go away when we play there.

MR: *And why do they tell you to go away?*

'Cos it's making too much noise, hitting the ball off the gate.

(Best)

When we are playing soccer like and if I want to play on my road there's a woman that'd let us play soccer outside her gate and when we hit her gate she said 'oh lads you're all right'.

(Jack)

These quotes illustrate the extent to which children's play and use of public space is regulated by adults. Whether subject to benign tolerance or constrained by irritation, the children's lack of ownership or perceived right to occupy and be active in public space is evident. In effect, children's adaptive use of the areas, even the streets where they live, is subject to adult authority and control (Hill et al., 2006; Morrow, 2000). Children can be perceived as 'trespassing' or causing a nuisance in pursuit of their normal, and one would have thought acceptable activities, such as playing football (Jenks, 2005). This is perhaps one of the reasons why the availability of substantial 'fields' and open space was so highly regarded by children in this neighbourhood.

Fields and Greens

Moving outward from the children's homes and immediate streets and roads, the housing areas are both bounded and divided by larger green spaces, commonly known locally as 'fields'. These areas vary in size, shape and maintenance, but they mainly comprise grassed tracts, with, at a passing glance, little variation, vegetation or striking topographical features, other than a sloping gradient in some parts. In some areas, they are used as grazing sites for horses, by individual owners, which as will be discussed later, are viewed with ambivalence by some residents, including children and as a valued feature of the neighbourhood by others.

The 'fields' are popular play sites and almost all of the children spoke about spending time there, largely engaged in physically active play such as chasing games, soccer or other ball games, or versions of many of the street games already referred to. Many children cited the fields as one of the features they like best about the area.

Understandably, for physically active children, the availability of abundant, accessible, green, largely (although, as will be seen, not entirely) uncontested space is a significant advantage. It allows for active, vigorous physical play and for children to be loud and noisy without being subject to constraint or reprimand. As the descriptions below illustrate, the extensive open spaces of the 'fields' were used for large group activity involving physically active play such as football (soccer and rugby) and chasing games.

We mostly go to the field and play soccer and rugby.

(Adam)

Here's the field where we play again. I took a picture of that.

(Helen)

The big field where you can play a lot of games, so you don't have to go on the road while the cars are on the road.

(Girl aged 9)

It is big, places to play.

(Boy aged 12, special needs group)

Other features of the landscape such as hills, boulders, and the grassy surface provided scope for varied forms of play (see plates, p 183). Natural landscapes have been found to enhance children's imaginative play and support the development of more diverse, responsive and creative play more so than overly designed, designated play facilities (Fjortoft and Sageie, 2000).

*You know the rocks in the field, we jump the rocks, and roll down the hills.
We play skipping and do dancing in the fields.*

(Clare)

I just go up for a cycle and go down the big hill [with] all my friends.

(Winnie)

Children's access to and use of the fields was not unconstrained however, and they frequently raised concerns in relation to their use by others and their maintenance. These are addressed in later sections on environmental concerns.

The Fields and The Soccer Pitch



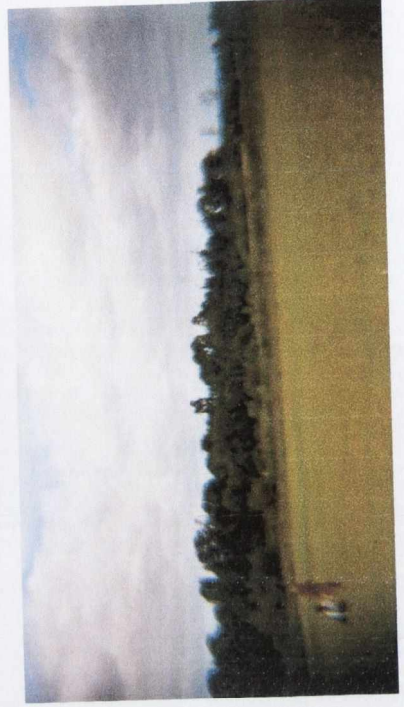
We always play soccer in the field - Adam



The Field where we play soccer - Smerger



The Soccer Pitch - Ronaldo



Playing with friends in the field - Frankie

The Community Playground

As noted in the neighbourhood description, a large community playground is situated in the grounds of the community centre. In the absence of local authority provision in the area (Webb and Associates, 1999), this playground had been developed on the initiative of the community development project. It is laid out in two main areas, one for younger and one for older children. The playground is maintained and generally overseen by staff from the community centre. Parents are expected to accompany and supervise younger children. Older children are free to come and go at will. The playground was mentioned frequently by the children and was a site used regularly for play and for meeting up. It is a short walk from the school and within five to fifteen minutes walk of most of the houses.

I'd go to the park - the one next to the community centre.

(Annabelle)

The park, up by [area name], it's up by the community centre.

(Frankie)

Most of the times I go up to the park.

(Sarah)

We play soccer. There's lots of shops and we love our playground.

(Boy aged 12)

In general, children spoke very positively about the playground and demonstrated a high level of ownership of it. It was named and drawn by some children as a 'favourite place'. It was used both in their own interests and sometimes with younger brothers or sisters. Such designated 'child friendly' provision is all too frequently regarded as the solution to children's play and outdoor space use, despite its limitations in both size and the kinds of activity it affords (Hart, 2002). Playgrounds tend to be regarded as safe and acceptable by parents, thus facilitating easily negotiated 'range permission' (Moore, 1986a). From a child's perspective, playgrounds are places where children, legitimately and unambiguously, have a right to be and to play actively, one of the few public spaces they can, to some degree at least, call their own (Matthews, 1995). Not all children however, experienced the playground as safe and welcoming. A number of children spoke of instances of bullying or rough play, which influenced their perceptions of the playground.

Sometimes I go after I go up to Mass, but that park is very dangerous cos some people push you down the slides and all. The last time I nearly broke my elbow and Susan (friend) fell and she hurted her ribs. See we were playing 'following' and we were going down slide and a person then, a boy or a girl, I don't know, we were playing 'following' and she pushed Susan down and then Susan then kicked me off and I fell on my elbow and she fell on her ribs.

(Bernadette)

Sometimes we go up to the park, but I don't really like the park that much, cos everything there is just the same, except for the train, it's for small babies. When I was there with my friends there was all these people pushing people down. I was the only one who didn't get pushed down, cos I slid down by myself and then I just came up behind my friend and I pushed him down.

(Stormtrooper)

While this may be no more than the normal 'rough and tumble' of physically active play, it perhaps indicates that the limited play possibilities inherent in structured playgrounds at times lead children to engage in more boisterous play (Hart, 2002) with sometimes unwelcome results.

The Primary School

The primary school was a significant landmark and site for the children. Apart from school attendance, it also served as a play site after hours when children used the outdoor play facilities – the tarmac school yard and the basketball court in particular. The school grounds are open and accessible and comprised of a series of linked single storey buildings, extensive grass and tarmac grounds, surrounded only by low railings and shrubbery. This is in sharp contrast to many other buildings and amenities in the area which are barricaded behind high palisade fencing. This was a deliberate decision on the part of the school management to promote the image of the school as integral to the community. It was situated within a few minutes walking distance of many of the children's homes and therefore readily accessible to them outside of school hours. The configuration of the buildings and planting provides a number of sheltered enclaves or 'microclimates' as described by Moore (1986b) which probably added to its attractiveness.

We play basketball in the school if it's not raining.

(Clare)

Favourite Places

I asked children to name their favourite places and as a class exercise, to draw them (see plates, p. 190). Almost all of the children named outdoor sites, with only two children naming 'my house' (a girl) and 'my room' (a boy) as their favourite places. Favourite places were primarily associated with play and often linked with preferred activities and/or with friends. Many children named different aspects of the open spaces of the neighbourhood, whose features held special meaning for them, frequently associated with play and friends.

My favourite place is:

Down by the rocks, we play snakes and ladders and slide down the hill.

(Clare)

Around the block, I call for friends.

(Rebecca)

The field

(Adam)

For several children, favourite places were associated with safety or avoidance of 'trouble'.

My favourite place would be in the bungalows and in the field

MR: *The bungalows – is that where the youth club is?*

Yeah, because, em, they get you out of trouble while you're on the road and you wouldn't be getting into any fighting and when I go over there I just mess with all my friends.

(Smerger)

My favourite place would be down in the [all] weather pitch in the college. That's good for playing soccer, 'cos there's goal things there and maybe the Park and the field where I play with my friends and my friend John's house.

(Mr. Bond)

For one child, the identification of one favourite place was a difficult choice given the contrasting features and attractions of his home place and regular holiday venue, although the presence of friends was a feature common to both.

That's kinda hard, 'cos in [estate] you can play soccer and go to the shop and there's a park around there. But in [coastal holiday home] they might be opening the play centre and there's a donkey down there and it had a foal and I don't want to miss being there when she's having a baby and it's kinda hard, 'cos I have friends down there and I have friends down at my other place [home], it's hard.

(Stormtrooper)

The Astro turf soccer pitch in the campus of a local college was named as a favourite place by several of the boys, keen soccer enthusiasts. Mainly it was used, on a scheduled basis as a training ground for local football clubs. However, as this extract demonstrates, it was also accessed 'informally' by boys on their own initiative. The attraction of the Astro turf was undoubtedly the quality of the surface, as graphically described below and the amenities provided – a range of pitch sizes, layouts and goal options. From the children's perspectives, this evidently more than compensated for the effort required to gain access. Smerger's eloquent account demonstrates the value placed on this facility by the boys who used it and the efforts they were prepared to make to access it. It graphically captures the quality of their experience of doing so.

Smerger This Saturday we're going to the Astro turf.

MR: You're going to the Astro turf?

Smerger Yeah and I have to get a bus over there because em you have to organise it and it's not that close to us.

MR: right.

Smerger and you have to climb a load of walls and you have to be fast running over there, in case you get caught by the fella who is the security guard in [local 2nd level school]. You have to get over a big wall.

MR: and when you go on a bus with the club do you have to do that?

Smerger No, when you go on the bus you go in to the [college entrance].

MR: Right, so when you're officially meant to be there, as opposed to when you just go yourself?

Smerger Yeah, but em, you don't want to walk over 'cos you're wasting all your energy 'cos you have to go out by [main road and city park] and then you have to walk all the way up and then you have to go out by the side and then you have to go in again and if the gates aren't open then you have to climb.

MR: Right, it's a long way alright to walk, and is there a short cut if you weren't going on the bus?

Smerger Yeah, through [2nd level school grounds] and then you climb over a wall and then you're in the college rugby field.

MR: Right, but that's the way the caretaker would get after you if he saw you. Is it?

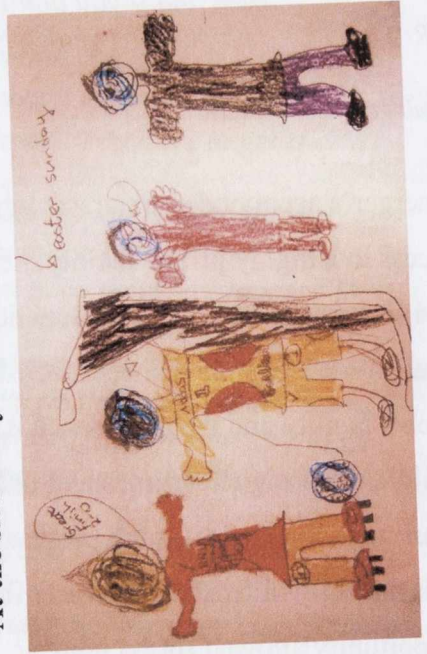
- Smerger *Yeah. Sometimes they wouldn't see you like, 'cos you'd be running and you'd flash and they'd be looking around and no-one else would be there.*
- MR: *right like 'did I just see something – what was that'?*
- Smerger *and then if you have clothes that match something you can just duck down like that and they won't see us.*
- MR: *Like camouflage?*
- Smerger *well we don't need a camouflage [laughs] we just have our hoodies up over our heads so he wouldn't see us.*
- MR: *and why do you like the Astroturf?*
- Smerger *Because it's soft and it's like a soccer field and it's for all weather. You can go rain, sleet or snow and when we're over there and you're like kicking a ball it's pure soft underneath your foot and you can slide tackle over there and there's four sets of different goals. If you want the tall goals, you just play the full pitch, and if you just want to do something small you can play the big width goals and the very short goals there that height.*
- MR: *Oh right, very good.*
- Smerger *You'd think it's easy to save in them but it's not, 'cos we'd have two on two with four [players] and you have to do flying keeper and once you take it you have your other player outside there and you pass it over to them and they chip it up to you and you just pass it in.*
- MR: *Oh right, that sounds very complicated and fly keeper means you go out and play as well and then you have to guard the goals as well?*
- Smerger *Yeah, and then you have to run back.*
- MR: *and you have to be very fast?*
- Smerger *and you have to shout 'keeper' and your only allowed hand-ball it then and if you don't shout 'keeper' the handball is a penalty.*
- MR: *Is a penalty, yeah, right, so you have to be very quick and keep your wits about you?*
- Smerger *Yeah.*

Smerger's account demonstrates what determined efforts can be expended in order to gain access to a highly prized facility, negotiating both physical and social barriers (walls, gates and security guards). The sensual description of the experience of playing on a high quality, well-equipped soccer facility graphically demonstrates the boys' appreciation of such a facility and the experience it affords. While 'official' access was sanctioned for children at designated times and under the supervision of responsible adults (team managers or coaches), such provision was very restricted (despite the fact that the facility was not fully utilised) and clearly the children's desire and motivation was greater than the opportunity allowed for by adults.

Favourite Place Drawings



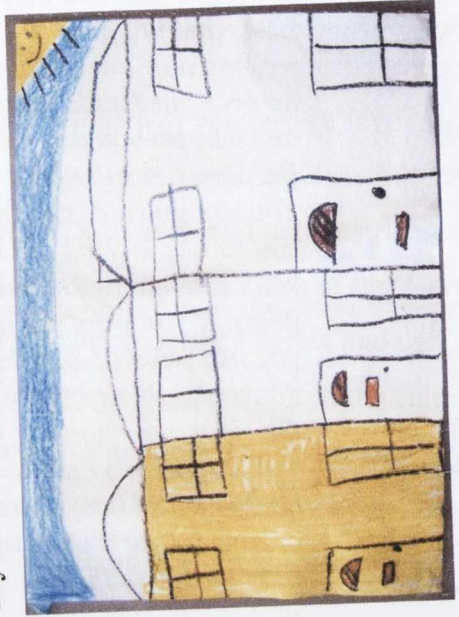
At the side of my house – I love it! – Jennifer



When we won our match - Steve



My Favourite Place is the Park - Annabelle



My Road - Max

Gaining access by 'unofficial' means may well in itself have contributed to the sense of satisfaction with the overall enterprise and it may well be that from the adult perspective, a benevolent 'blind eye' was turned when such access was achieved. This notwithstanding, the provision of, or more frequent access to, an equivalent facility within the neighbourhood was by far the most frequently cited amenity requested by boys, next only to the provision of a swimming pool, which was the most popular suggestion overall.

Wild Places

A number of children spoke of frequenting a 'wild area' on the edge of the estate. As described above, the area was bordered on one side by a derelict country estate which had previously been a working farm. It comprised a large house (referred to locally as a 'mansion') and extensive grounds containing what were once well kept avenues and gardens, fields for livestock and a natural woodland area. This area was known and spoken about by most children and frequented by some. For some children, it was only visited in the company of an adult while others went there with friends, although whether their parents knew or approved was not always clear. For some children it was definitely 'off limits'.

Based on one of the children's accounts of how to gain access to it, I visited it myself in order to have a better understanding of what the children described. The house itself was in a dilapidated and dangerous state with broken windows and a boarded up front door, which had been partially opened. Inside, the staircase had collapsed and large areas of the roof had fallen in. The woodlands and avenues contained many fine mature trees, among these a number of horse chestnut or 'conker' trees referred to by the children as one of its key attractions.

MR: *Are there other places you go?*

Well I normally go to [wild area] to pick 'conkers' and all with my 2nd cousin's cousin, but he's dead now, he used to live there, that why they named it after him.

MR: *that's the railway track there [looking at map]*

that's it, [the mansion] it's there, you go up and keep on going over and you just cross the road. You've got to be careful though 'cos there's cattle around on it.

MR: *what's it like in there?*

I don't know, its just a big field, there's a huge wall and its locked, so you can't go in and there's lots of trees in there, conker trees as well and they used to bring dogs over there and there's a swamp over there and they used to throw the dogs into the swamp. The dog was able to get out there, but that's why I wouldn't go near it.

(Peter)

Like many such places of childhood, the 'mansion' had acquired a certain mystique and had gained a reputation that was both inviting and scary at the same time. One child reported that the mansion was haunted, although only at night.

Well it's like just a mansion, the mansion and like it's haunted, and we goes into it. We goes into it only in the daytime, it's not haunted in the daytime, only in the nighttime. I saw a banshee down there.

MR: *What did it look like?*

It was all white. We walks up the stairs, like as if the stairs is going to fall, 'cos it's pure wobbly.

MR: *Is it not safe?*

No, you know Bernadette, she stuck her foot into a nail three times in the same place at the same time and cut her leg with a load of glass.

MR: *How do you get in, is it blocked up?*

Now well there's a gate like. There's two ways of getting into it, going down the dead dogs way but we don't go 'cos it smells too much and we get followed by a load of horses, so we goes up the gates way. We pushes out the gates and make a big hole in them and close it back out again, but no-one knows that and 'em we goes into it and then comes back out. We walks up along like by the mansion. We only goes down if we're bored like.'

(Helen)

Such contrary impulses are a common childhood phenomenon about places that hold a fascination for children (Hart, 1979). The mansion and its grounds combined to afford children a space that was both exiting and private, a site of adventure and imagination, a world distinctly separate from the largely adult structured and surveilled daily experience of their lives. Aside from the excitement and mystery, the grounds and woodlands surrounding the mansion provided exposure to nature and the opportunity to explore, play, and manipulate the environment in ways that more managed public spaces do not permit. Moore (1986a) emphasised the importance of such 'rough ground' for children's creative and adaptive play.

Rough ground is both adaptable and resilient. It generates creative interaction and can more easily absorb the messy results.

(p. 242)

Rough ground or wild places afford children's access to natural habitats rich in plant and animal life and allows them to act in and on the environment in ways that would be unacceptable, if not impossible, in the confines of suburban green space.

Children also need private places where they can escape to do what they please: Ways must be found to accommodate the necessity for children to physically manipulate the environment. Places are needed where stuff can be picked up, thrown about, gathered, jumped on, eaten, kicked, rolled on, climbed into, broken down, dug up, burnt and taken away, without causing offence.

(Moore, 1986a, p. 436)

It was evident that for some children the mansion and its grounds served such a function.

Places Not Liked or Avoided

The children were asked to identify any places they did not like, or any places they were not allowed to go to, locally and it was through this topic that many of the children's concerns came to light. Not liking places, or being told not to go to particular places or areas, was frequently associated with children's own concerns about safety, parents' concerns, or experience of bullying. A small number of children reported preferring to spend more time indoors for their personal safety, due to bullying or more generalised 'trouble'³⁴ in the neighbourhood. Indeed, a number of children, particularly, although not exclusively girls, spoke of staying close to home, so that they could go indoors if 'trouble' arose in their area. This finding is common to other studies of children's use of space (Hart, 1979, Francis, 1985)

On the street, with my friends, 'cos I don't want to go around anywhere else for safety like, I want to stay in my garden, if there's trouble I just go into my house.

(Jack)

Jack and two other boys in particular indicated that they had experienced bullying and that this directly influenced the places they avoided, even though such places might be otherwise desirable.

³⁴ The word 'trouble' was used as a generic term, by both children and adults, to allude to anti-social behaviour, intimidation or violence. For some children it also referred to bullying or fighting among peers.

I wouldn't like to go, you know where the shop is and there's our houses, I'd never go down the other way, right, because if I did, they all throw stones at you like.

(Stormtrooper)

[The allweather pitch] I'm not allowed that much to go up there, but I probably went up once or twice. If there are people that messes I'm not allowed go. If my brothers come with me I'm allowed go.

(Jack)

In the case of some of the girls, it appeared that a certain apprehension (their own or that expressed by parents), influenced their range behaviour. Two girls mentioned specific places, while others spoke more generally about avoiding or not being allowed to go anywhere that was unfamiliar. The reasons why this was so were sometimes ambiguously presented as 'in case something happens':

I'm not allowed go out of [own area], just in case anything happens

(Sarah)

Sometimes I go to the park with my Mam or sometimes with (Melissa's) Mam. I just don't like to go on my own in case like something happens to me or something

(Rebecca)

These examples, both boys and girls, highlight how the presence of friends, older siblings or adults provides a sense of protection and enables children to go places or access facilities which would otherwise be denied. On the other hand, it is likely that these children's access was limited as it was dependent on the availability and willingness of parents or older siblings to accompany them.

In some instances, the condition of the environment itself was a deterrent to children's use or willingness to go places.

I'll go, just around the blocks, but I can't go there anymore cos my wheel got punctured with all the glass there. I can't go anymore around the blocks there's all rats and stuff, cos there's loads of rubbish dumped.

(Sarah)

The frequency and passion with which these and other concerns were raised by many children merits their fuller exploration and this is done in depth later in this chapter.

Autonomy, Range Permission and Prohibition

Parental permission and personal experience influenced individual range behaviour within the neighbourhood and general factors such as weather, time of day, seasonal variations and time of year had an impact. Other inhibitors, such as access to places at specified times, or children's own determination of what was desirable or safe (although in some instances, desirability was prioritised over safety), were also pertinent. Range permission was explored through asking children:

- a) Would they ask or tell their parents where they were going, when they went out?
- b) Were there any places they were not allowed to go?

It's grand, 'cos there's loads of places around me, I'm allowed most places. 'Cos I'm allowed like down to [supermarket], like but my friend, like, she's not. She's nine, I'm ten. She's almost the same age as me, but her mother and father won't leave her down. 'Cos like they think it's too dangerous, 'cos you've to walk over the hill and there's a main road like and the hill like, then, you know.

(Clare)

Almost all of the children reported that their movements, places they went to, people they were with and time spent away from home were monitored by parents or carers. In some instances, this was reported as quite a detailed monitoring, where places and people were named and times or length of absence agreed.

I'd have to tell my Nana if I went to the park. She'd be looking for me for my dinner and she wouldn't know where to find me. I could go down there when I'm not having my dinner up there. But I have to tell her or she'd miss me. She'd say 'go straight to the Park and if you're leaving come straight back, or if you're leaving the Park come back and tell me.' So I'd tell her I was going to the park, or if I was going somewhere different.

(Mr. Bond)

For others, arrangements were more casual but appeared to be based on the assumption that children did not stray too far from their home range, or would be back within an agreed timeframe. In common with Hart's (1979) findings, it was evident that children 'checked in' from time to time.

No I stay around my house, because I'd be messing too much and I wouldn't be back on time. Sometimes she allows me up there [allweather pitch], but she gives me a time and I have to wear a watch, but I don't like wearing a watch when I'm playing soccer. I take it off and I put it in my pocket and when I'm going for a slide tackle it hurts.

(Smerger)

It was also evident that time was used as a determinant of range permission, linked to activity routines, mealtimes and hours of daylight, which varied seasonally. In many cases, it was evident that parents knew where and with whom their children would be and on this basis were happy to allow them to roam with little restriction.

Yeah I'd say I'm going down to my friend Jason's, 'cos she knows where he lives and Paul's is just across the road.

(Max)

Yeah my Mam, I'd say I'm going down to Carrie's house and then we're going to Donna's and she'd say 'grand, be back by half eight'.

(Jacqueline)

Yeah, I'd say to her I'm going to the field or to the Astroturf and she'd say 'watch the road' and stuff.

MR: *would she say a time to be back?*

Yeah, if I'm going away after school, she'll say be back by six or half six, it gets dark at half five.

(Frankie)

Some children were more subject to limitations on their movements than others, and explained this as a safety precaution either on the part of their parents or possibly both their parents and themselves. Mobile phones too were used to negotiate and manage absences, with children relying on parents to contact them when needed for meals or to let parents know if they changed their plans, a contemporary means of checking in (Davie, Panting and Charlton, 2004).

I'd tell her that, I'd say 'Mam, I'm going up to the park or I'm going to Bernadette's house', or 'I'm going up to the hill' and then I'd tell her to phone me for my dinner and what time I have to come in at.

(Mary)

Just one of the boys maintained that there wasn't anywhere he was not allowed to go, that no time was set for him to be back or that his parents wouldn't know where he was, if they wanted to contact him. However, none of his accounts indicated that he went any further than any other of the children did.

MR: *Do you tell your mum where you're going?*

No.

MR: *Is there anywhere you're not allowed to go?*

No.

MR: *Would she know where you are?*

Not much, I might be down in the school or down here playing soccer or battering³⁵ windows or battering John [caretaker].

(Adam)

The most significant range difference among the group was the freedom to travel into the city or to go to the cinema complex which was located in a large shopping centre, some miles from the estate. Only a small minority of children had this level of freedom, with the majority only going on such trips with adults or possibly older siblings or cousins. For the most part, children's habitual range, and range with permission coincided with the boundaries of the neighbourhood itself.

Range with Parents or Other Adults

In general then, most children's unaccompanied range was confined to within the estate itself or to the shops or streets immediately bordering it, where there were specific destinations such as the local 'chipper'. Beyond the boundaries of the estate the majority of children were accompanied by parents, older relatives or other adults.

I go into town with my parents, I'm not allowed in on my own, I go to Supermacs and then go shopping. I can go to the local shop (for crisps, sweets) but I'm not allowed to go there (shopping centre) without a grown up.

(Mary)

³⁵ Throwing stones

None of the children seemed to view this as an unreasonable or unwelcome restriction, and appeared to take for granted that an adult, most commonly a parent, would accompany them.

Occasional range (Moore, 1986a) trips, such as visits to the city centre or shopping centres appeared largely to be initiated by adults. Children were included, perhaps because they were involved in the trips themselves – as in shopping for clothes, or possibly because their parents would not leave them unsupervised at home. Such trips frequently required transport, either public or personal which adults provided or paid for. There was somewhat more disparity in relation to independent travel outside the neighbourhood, to the city centre, or destinations such as swimming pools or the cinema which were at some distance and required transport. Only four of the children, two boys and two girls spoke about going ‘into town’ or the cinema with friends and without adults. As these were among the older children in the group, age, rather than gender may have been significant.

Compliance with Parental Permission

The children in general indicated that they broadly complied with parental range permissions, albeit that the vagueness of some of the directions provided a degree of latitude which was possibly taken for granted on both sides.

Yeah, she'd say 'don't disappear' or something and if we wanted to go down to the farmers field or something we'd have to ask her, it's the field where the goal posts are. She can't see us from the house, but my father usually walks up a bit and calls us and we can hear him. Well, she'd tell us not to go too far, you know where the little shop is, not too far over there. We usually ask her before we go too far anyway, so she just says 'don't disappear' and stuff like that.

(Yoda)

It is reasonable to assume that in some cases children’s reported compliance could be understood as happening in the context of conversations with an adult in a school setting. Some children, on the other hand exposed their strategies for subverting parental permission.

I'd say, very quietly, 'Mam I'm going down to the chipper' and then she'd be out looking for me and when I'd come back I'd say 'but I told you' [laughs].

(Adam)

Contrary to evidence from other studies and growing themes in the literature which indicate that children's outdoor ranges are diminishing (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997), it was not apparent in this study that parents placed restrictions on children's outdoor play due to 'stranger danger', concerns with traffic or due to their own lifestyle demands. Concerns about local traffic did not really arise in the context of this estate, as there was only one major access road, and most roads were local residential streets and cul de sacs, rather than transit routes. Therefore, traffic was not an issue in relation to range permissions. While the level of car ownership and usage in the neighbourhood has increased substantially in recent years (observation by local service provider), a number of families of children in the study group (22%) did not own cars, so local traffic levels may have been comparatively low, relative to many suburban areas.

Range permission or restriction appeared determined by local knowledge or perceptions of risk or possible 'trouble' associated with particular parts of the estate, frequently by children themselves.

I can't go to Ashville without her permission and I can't go to Birchville without her permission, at least not from Beechville (own road), 'cos you'd have to go all the way up there (on map). She'd let me go on my own once I tell her where I'm going. Yeah, but I don't know if she would let me go because of the shootings. There were shootings down there, most of the shootings are down there. They're putting bars up near Ashville, so people can't pass through, only they took away the two bars.

(Mr. Bond)

Places Prohibited

Two local areas were repeatedly cited by a number of children as places they were not allowed go because of 'trouble' which was associated with them and some, although not all, children who lived in those areas, were subject to closer parental supervision or accompaniment. This indicates the frequently localised and specific nature of trouble spots, contrary to common area wide assumptions commonly applied.

MR: Are there any places you are not allowed to go?

I'm not allowed go up to Birchville or not to town.

MR: *Do you go in with your parents?*

Well if not my parents, I go in with my friends, there's three of us goes in, to see the pictures, into the pictures, we get the bus on the main road. I think there's one goes the whole way out, if not we'd probably get two buses.

(Steve)

Down to [public park outside the area] or even the [local college – site of Astroturf pitch] on my own. I go with some friends, yeah and she wouldn't let me go up to Hollyview or Birchville, and em, that's all

(Frankie)

I'd sometimes, if we went to go to the shops, we have to walk all the way, say, there's a shop up there and we have to walk all the way up and there's bars and broken glass there and broken glass there and if we go up on our bikes we can't go up and there over the other side, there's two shops up by my place and if you go up then the other side, people take your bike if you leave it outside the shops, so we're not allowed. No, I'm not allowed go to the shops on my own, only if my Mam goes with me, over all the trouble.

(Sarah)

In contrast to other studies (Hart, 1979), there did not appear to be a consistent disparity in range permission based specifically on gender. Both boys and girls cited places they were not allowed to go to (or in some cases would choose not to go), within the neighbourhood and in general, there was little or no difference in their range behaviours. For many boys, their habitual range was greater, primarily as it included the Astroturf which lay outside the estate boundary. This did not feature at all in the ranges of participating girls. However, this would seem to be more a function of boys' interest in playing and practicing soccer, than related to gender as a factor in range permission *per se*. It may have also been that playing soccer was seen by parents and children themselves, as a safe and desirable pastime and one to be encouraged, rather than more aimless 'hanging around'.

Permissions or prohibitions within the neighbourhood were largely based on perceived or real evaluations of risk or dangers and in most cases, seemed to be accepted by children as reasonable, quite possibly because the validity of parental concerns were confirmed by their own direct local knowledge. The children's daytime experience of safety and access differed substantially to that which seemed to pertain at night. Many children spoke about stolen cars being raced around the estate and sometimes subsequently burnt out at night.

This was a source of concern and aggravation, both because of the noise, which disturbed sleep and also because of the safety risks, which at times restricted children's play in the streets, and forced them to retreat indoors.

Sometimes I don't go out really, go out that much so, most of the times I go up to the park (beside community centre). and sometimes we play 'kitkat' we run across the road but if there's any cars we stop and sometimes in the night we can't play because all the cars come out speeding. Motor bikes and stuff, so we can't play.

(Sarah)

This and other concerns raised by the children and the impact these had both on their perceptions, and lived experience are now outlined.

Concerns about the Neighbourhood Environment

Despite the positive aspects of their neighbourhood identified by the children, many were also acutely aware of some of its shortcomings. Many children reported a number of concerns which impacted specifically on their use of the outdoor environment, and on their daily lives. A number of children used the research process as an opportunity to highlight these concerns.

These included:

- a perceived lack of play and sports amenities to support their particular interests and preferences, such as goals, nets and local pitches for football (soccer and rugby), and basketball and other sports facilities (especially for girls);
- concerns in relation to horses grazing on green areas;
- broken glass and the aftermath of 'bonfires' frequently associated with outdoor drinking by older teenagers and adults;
- stolen, burnt out cars
- the persistent presence of dumped refuse;
- risks and hazards associated with the many vacant, boarded up houses in parts of the estate.

These issues surfaced repeatedly in both the school survey and the children's interviews.

It was particularly notable that a number of the girls chose to use their cameras to highlight these concerns.³⁶ While similar issues were also raised by some boys particularly in the context of how they impact on their play and use of outdoor space, concern at the condition of the neighbourhood was much more prevalent among the girls. A top priority many children reported was to have an environment free of refuse, broken glass and the blight of boarded up and frequently burnt or vandalised houses on their landscape. This was reported both in individual and group discussions with the core study group, and strongly evident in the school survey responses in which these issues were also named.

I think people should stop throwing rubbish around the roads and setting the rubbish on fire. Instead people should clean the roads. This would make my area a cleaner and better place for children.

(Boy, aged 8)

I really think that if all the burned, boarded up houses were knocked down and rebuilt, the estate would be lovely.

(Girl, aged 12)

Dumped Rubbish

The impact of the pervasive presence of dumped refuse on children's play, the health risks it gave rise to, their sense of disgust and their concern for other children and adults was emphasised repeatedly during the study. In their daily lives and routine activities in particular areas of the neighbourhood, children (and other residents), are persistently confronted with the problem of decaying, festering refuse.

Like in the shop and greens there'd be all rubbish and stuff and there loads of stuff there and you know they could just clean it all out and leave children play.

(Helen)

That's the rocks were we all play there, but there's glass, sometimes there's glass in around the rocks. My house is up here a bit and I took a picture of this because it's all rubbish there and that's across the road from my house as well. ... And this is Glenville down there as well but there's all spray paint on the walls, all the way up there, you know, people's names and stuff. And this is the track [railway track] and there's all peoples' names on that as well with spray paint.

(Clare)

³⁶ Highlighting concerns had not been suggested to the children, as part of the project brief, but it became clear that collectively they had discussed the matter amongst themselves and chose the opportunity of the research project to graphically highlight an issue of importance to themselves.

Them ones [photographs] are where all the rubbish is dumped along there and they're always throwing them out in the middle of the road and the cars have to stop to put the rubbish back on the footpath. That's another one there where they throw rubbish down in people's gardens. That's another one and that's the same garden there that they throw all rubbish in.

(Sarah)

As previously noted, this issue was graphically highlighted by photographs several children took of sites of dumping, scarred bonfire patches and overturned and broken wheelie bins (See plates, p. 204).

Refuse management and collection is a joint responsibility of both residents and the local authority. Clearly subscribing to the collection and removal of refuse is the responsibility of individual residents. However, the local authority has responsibility for the general environment and for ensuring that a workable refuse collection and removal system operates. They also have responsibility for the management and maintenance of housing stock. Empty dwellings contributed to significant dumping, exacerbating the problem. This issue is dealt with in more detail a little further on. Some residents claimed that people from outside area drove in and dumped rubbish in abandoned houses, but the children who participated in the study indicated that most of the refuse was the responsibility of local people. However, they felt the council had a shared responsibility, particularly in relation to boarded up houses which tended to attract refuse dumping and vandalism. The sense of stigma and shame arising from both their own perception of the area and their awareness of the perceptions of others was an issue for some.

Well the first one (photograph) was the alleyway and it was just in an awful mess, so I just said I'd take a picture of it, they just need to clean it up or something. It's awful, everyone can see it.

(Jennifer)

Refuse Dumping



Litter and rubbish – Clare



Dumped rubbish - Sarah



Rubbish and broken Glass - Jennifer



Dumped rubbish - Helen

MR: *and who do you think should be looking after the area?*
The city council, and like as well this morning my mother was just putting out our bin and they just went flying past and they didn't collect any bins and then all the fellas come here from school and they take all the bins and empty all the rubbish and that how it gets all dirty and stuff, and all the other people puts their rubbish into other people's gardens to get rid of it.

MR: *when the houses are empty?*
Yeah, to get rid of the rubbish.

MR: *and what do you think about, like somebody must drop the rubbish, somebody must put the rubbish there?*
Yeah, loads of people do.

MR: *so do you think it should still be the city council who clean it up?*
Yeah and they should open up the houses as well, and support the homeless people.

(Helen)

Like I'd clean it and say get the rubbish out and fix the pillars and stuff like that and get all the bad people out of the area and stuff, because like they're putting all bad people into the area instead of taking them out like and they're the ones throwing the rubbish around and stuff like that.

MR: *Who do you think is responsible for keeping the area looking well and looking after it?*
The corporation.³⁷ But they probably do try to they keep it clean but it's the people who live there that do throw all the rubbish around and stuff like that, but I don't know.

(Dawn)

Under the auspices of the community development project, a local environmental project funded by Fás³⁸ had been established to help maintain the area and to try to combat the dumping of refuse. While this project did keep many of the public areas clear maintaining the green areas, streets and community buildings, the persistent dumping of refuse, particularly in and around empty houses, or in alleyways was still very evident.

Yeah, it's just across the road and that's all rubbish and stuff and they burn that some nights and there's a baby living in there, and they have like railings and they open the top window to get some fresh air but they can't open it anymore.

MR: *because of the smoke?*

³⁷ The City Council – previously known as The Corporation

³⁸ Fás is a state agency with responsibility for training and labour force support measures. One of its initiatives is to fund local organisations to sponsor community employment projects. These have the dual aim of resourcing local community services by providing long-term unemployed people with training and work experience on a time limited basis, to equip them with skills and experience which will enable them ultimately to re-enter the workforce.

Yeah, they burn mattresses and stuff and do you see they painted over all the walls and stuff, see there, they burn tackies [sports/training shoes] and stuff outside. The older people, they get younger people and give them matches to light 'em up, light up all the rubbish. There's another one [photograph] look.

MR: *So are you saying older people give matches to young people to burn rubbish?*

Yeah, sometimes they do.

(Sarah)

This is a picture of where I live, well, not the house I live in, it's just at the corner and they throw rubbish in there. [person's name] used to live in there and the bricks fell and they drop all their rubbish in there. It's boarded up. And there's a picture of the square where we play, but some of it is kind of glassy but you can't really see the glass. And this is a picture of another alley, that's just across the way from the other alley and people go into these backs, that's open there that's cut, cos they cut it [opening in palisade fencing] and its all dirty there, look at the muck and the papers and that. Now I have another boarded up house, there's all rubbish and dirty stuff.

MR: *and that's near you is it, near your house?*

Yeah and that's another thing near me, it's the house next to the corner, but they just cleaned it up a bit, but they have to get all these bits out, over dumping rubbish.

(Helen)

Changes in the system for refuse collection from local authority to private enterprise were seen to have contributed to the problem, partly because of increased costs and partly because the private provider did not collect extra bags in the way that the local authority has previously done. One local service provider (and resident) identified this as an issue for larger families in particular.

When the council were doing it they took everything, and [private company] they can charge whatever they want on it, and if you have a big family you're going to have a big bin. And if you have a big family you are going to have a lot of rubbish and if you have a bin full and you can get nothing else into the bin and you have another black bag. You cannot put out the black bag, you've got to hold that bag until the follow week's collection, your bin is empty, you put that black bag in which means now your bin is half full again. So the next week you might have two black bags and that's what's happening, you should be allowed to put out extra bags with your bin, you're paying enough for it.

(Service Provider 3)

Bonfires and Broken Glass

The issue of bonfires and their impact on the landscape had been mentioned frequently by children during the course of the study, particularly at specific times of the year (May and October). More pressing concerns were the more regular bonfires that were associated with outdoor night-time drinking, which not alone left refuse and damage to the sites in the vicinity of the children's homes and play areas, but resulted in children and families being kept awake, subjected to noise and frequently, drunken fights.

People who litter, people who get drunk and keep you awake because they don't stop blaring music, people who do graffiti and people who vandalise.
(Annabelle)

I just don't think they're [bonfires] nice, unless they're allowed to, but sometimes it just gets way too far, because drunk people and everything are just down there and people are just up all night and they're shouting and there's fights and everything. They shouldn't happen at all really unless its bonfire night really.
(Jennifer)

Children repeatedly spoke about the prevalence of broken glass in the area citing the nuisance and the risks it posed, both to themselves and to other children, especially younger ones. The broken glass was largely identified as being a consequence of outdoor drinking, after which broken bottles were littered around green areas, streets, paths and laneways. This presents a hazard for children, who from an early age are the most frequent and active users of such public spaces, routinely running, rolling, sliding, tackling (playing football), cycling and indeed falling over on surface littered with broken, jagged glass.

I'll go, just around the blocks, but I can't go there anymore cos my wheel got punctured with all the glass there. I can't go anymore around the blocks there's all rats and stuff, cos there's loads of rubbish dumped.
(Sarah)

Well I play 'following' and do you know, we catch people and we always do dancing like, in the fields, do you know, the fields on top of the hills and stuff, but it would be better if there was no rubbish or glass, cos if we're dancing now in the fields we could get cut or something, and there's rubbish like.
(Clare)

People drink and leave the bottles behind them and there are babies running and they trip.

(Girl aged 9 – School survey response)

*I say remove the glass from the grass so the kids can play soccer in it.
Then clean the roads and paths to make a better place for us children.
(Boy aged 8 – School survey response)*

One child spoke about how she planned to sweep up the broken glass from her area, demonstrating her frustration and concern for younger children in the area.

'cos its all dirty down in the square, the kids can't play or nothing, all the small little ones, the babies can't play, 'cos all the glass broke. If I'm finished club early today I'll go down and sweep it all, and if anyone breaks a bottle, I'll break them. You know like people come up there, and they're breaking bottles and it's not even their area. Well now I'll only sweep where the glass is, I'll get the yard brush and sweep it all.

(Helen)

The glass was not only a hazard for children.

Yeah for the horse instead, 'cos there's a big bonfire mark in the middle of the field with a load of glass and they get it stuck in their hooves and they have to get the vet to take it out.

(Smerger)

Broken glass in this context represents not alone a hazard to children's safe play, in itself, but is also symptomatic of wider concerns and issues. Excessive use of alcohol is often associated with areas of concentrated disadvantage and has been identified as a both a product and a cause of stress (Hill and Angel, 2005). One of the adult service providers interviewed also commented on the prevalence of alcohol use in the area, both in and outdoors.

Like I see people and they drink a lot, and they drink a lot at home and every first Tuesday (of the month, children's allowance day) they drink a lot. You see especially now in the summer, if you go around the areas in the summer, or an odd area, not all the areas, an odd area, in the summer, you'll see them outside their front, sitting down drinking their beers and drinking their cans and I suppose by one or two o'clock in the morning they're killing one another and that kind of thing, you know.

(Service Provider 3)

Children's images of bonfire remains and site littered with broken glass are presented overleaf.

Bonfires and Broken Glass



Scorched patch - Carrie



After the Bonfire – Winnie



A bonfire - Clare



Broken Glass - Jennifer

Some children also raised the issue of drug taking in the area, highlighted by one child who took a photograph of discarded syringes she came across in an alleyway near her home.

*There's all [syringe] needles down there, but I wouldn't do down by it,
I just took it from there [street end of the alleyway].*

(Helen)

Even more concerning was the children's exposure to manifestations of violent crime such as 'shootings' and weapon related violence, frequently linked to the illegal drug trade.

What I don't like about my area is all the fighting and shooting.

(Boy, aged 12)

The people fighting in the area, the drugs and the guns.

(Girl, aged 9)

This facet of neighbourhood life, the one which is probably most profiled in local and national media and associated in the public mind with this and similar areas, is rarely discussed in the terms of its impact on the lives of young children. Understandably, attention tends to be acutely focused on the actual victims and perpetrators of crime and the law and order implications arising. But rarely is it noted that frequently children are also witnesses and indirect victims, subjected to the fear and revulsion that results from violent assault resulting in intimidation, injury or death. As was evident from the contributions of a number of children in the core study group, children can find themselves living in very close proximity to such events (within hearing or visual range). They are thus made very aware of the risks and threats to personal safety arising from the proliferation and increasingly common use of weapons or other forms of intimidation, whether within local 'feuds' or in the enactment of violent crime. The children's responses indicate that they are both frightened and distressed by the presence and proximity of such threats in their neighbourhood and even within their personal family or social networks.

All the fighting, screaming, shouting, killing and what I hate the most is the shooting.

(Girl, aged 12)

There's gun shots down in [neighbourhood street]. People are breaking glass bottles. People steal cars and burn them out.

(Boy, aged 9)

In instances where fear, intimidation or risk causes families to leave areas, either in the short or long term children can be just as adversely affected as adults suffering apart from the fear and distress which must accompany such experiences, disruption not alone to home and residential stability, but also school attendance.

I don't like bullies and the way people's houses are getting burnt, like my house. It got burned, see what I mean and my house was private and my family and I had to move out of [neighbourhood]. The 6th of January '06 I got back into this school.

(Girl, aged 12)

Stolen Cars

Racing and burning out stolen cars was also raised by many children, with the burnt out wreckage often being left on the sides of roads or in the fields where children played. One child pointed out where large boulders had been placed across a stretch of green area in order to prevent cars from being driven through, and burnt out.

That's the rocks here, outside my house, over cars being blown up and everything there, a car was blown up just there'

(Jennifer)

These issues exemplify how the consequences of behaviour by different actors or groups of actors in which children are not directly involved, but which are enacted in spaces used by them at different times, can permeate their lived experience, impacting on their safety and well-being. A further example of such exo-system impact is shown in the poor management of vacant dwellings by the local authority.

Vacant and 'Boarded Up' Houses

Throughout the period of the study, dozens of houses throughout the estate were empty and boarded up. Many had been vandalised and in many, refuse had been dumped in both front and back gardens. Many of the children graphically described this phenomenon and a number took photographs to illustrate their concerns. They also spoke about the additional and cumulative risks that result, affecting people living in adjoining houses.

These included vandalism, houses being burnt out, people climbing on damaged and dangerous roofs and the accumulation of refuse, leading to infestation of pests such as rats.

Yeah and then I have this photo and it's the bungalows, there's the alley and there's the other alley, and I just took a picture of the bungalows, the three bungalows that are boarded up

(Helen)

Yeah, and there's another one [boarded up house] there beside it and there, there's two children living in the house, they just burned [it] and all the rats came to the house.

(Carrie)

Boarded up houses were a more widespread problem in some parts of the estate than others for a number of reasons. As one of the service providers explained, in some instances, small single storey dwellings had been built as homes for lone, mostly elderly people. Over the years there had not been sufficient demand to keep such dwellings occupied and they were too small for family use, generally having just one bedroom. A number had subsequently been converted for community use, but the remainder have simply been left vacant and fallen into disrepair and/or been vandalised. As one of the children pointed out, this was partly because they were single story and the roofs were easily accessible. Both children and local service providers reported that a decision had been made by the local authority that they would be demolished, but the timeframe for this action was not known. Certainly nothing was done in relation to these houses for the duration of the study.

Some areas in the estate had developed an unfavourable reputation and, as a consequence, houses there were difficult to let as prospective tenants simply refused to accept houses offered. It also appeared that as part of the planned regeneration, some further houses were scheduled to be demolished and therefore were not repaired and re-let when they became vacant. During 2005, there were in excess of 70 houses (or 6% of the housing in the estate) vacant³⁹. Many children included images of boarded up houses in their photographs and spoke about them in interviews (see plates p. 213). They also were brought up by children in the school survey exercise.

There used to be houses, but they got burnt, three or four houses. They're thinking about building a roundabout or a park for the children, I'm not sure about [if they are going to build] the park

(Carrie)

³⁹ Information sourced in a report compiled for the local authority, profiling the tenants and housing of the area. For reasons of confidentiality, the precise reference is not included in this section.

Empty, burnt out houses



Boarded up houses - Cathy



Boarded up bungalows - Helen



Empty houses beside my brother's house - Dawn



Boarded up house and rubbish in the garden - Sarah

This commentary demonstrates the priority children place upon this issue and their desire to have the blight of vacant and vandalised houses removed from their neighbourhoods and to ensure that it is maintained in a way that creates a safe environment for children and other residents. These very concerns had been identified in the area's RAPID development plan, but no reference was made within it to the impact they have on the landscape from the perspective of children who use it. The children who participated in this study however used the opportunity to clearly articulate how their lives are affected to as great, if not a greater extent as other residents. While they could and did propose solutions, they have neither the power nor the resources to have them implemented. Therefore, an onus of responsibility rests on those who are tasked with neighbourhood maintenance and management to seek and incorporate the views and experiences of children into their planning and implementation. The issue of local authority responsibility and management of 'voids', as they are known by housing authorities, is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

Conclusion

These findings show that accessible outdoor space is a key resource in the lives of the participating children and a highly valued feature of their neighbourhood. The outdoor terrain of the neighbourhood was extensively used by the children and they displayed a detailed and intimate knowledge of its landscape and features. It afforded space in which to play actively, to assemble, to move and to travel autonomously within its confines. The neighbourhood topography was easy to negotiate and supported a range of physically active play and sport activities – running and chasing games, football, rolling, jumping, dancing and cycling. Children identified favourite places and features and in some cases gave examples of more than one.

In common with many other studies of children's play patterns and neighbourhood use, the streets, greens, informal public areas and non-designated spaces were the most popular, frequently and widely used spaces (Berg and Medrich, 1980; Cunningham and Jones, 1996; Fjortoft and Sageie, 2000; Hart, 1979, 2002; Moore, 1986a; Wheway and Millward, 1997). The children creatively adapted and incorporated many mundane features of the streetscape such as walls, lampposts, cul de sacs and electric junction boxes into their physical and imaginative play, including things that are unintended and frequently unconsidered in their placement, in relation to children (Kraftl, 2006).

They enjoyed a high degree of autonomy within the confines of the estate and were competent in finding their way to and from sites of interest such as the park, friends or relatives homes, local shops and sources of adventure, such as the 'wild area'. Their detailed descriptions of places, routes and landmarks demonstrated their place knowledge and way-finding abilities (Hart, 1979).

The children clearly demonstrated their expert knowledge of their neighbourhood and of the many 'taken for granted' or overlooked aspects of it that had particular significance for them and that they used or adapted to their own purposes. The availability of accessible, local space, in combination with friends and playmates was of central importance to them and for many was what contributed to their neighbourhood identity, sense of belonging and satisfaction. Their use of the neighbourhood public space provides a unique insight into the area's strengths and challenges as both a physical and social setting in the lives of the children and their words and images eloquently capture and portray their perceptions and concerns.

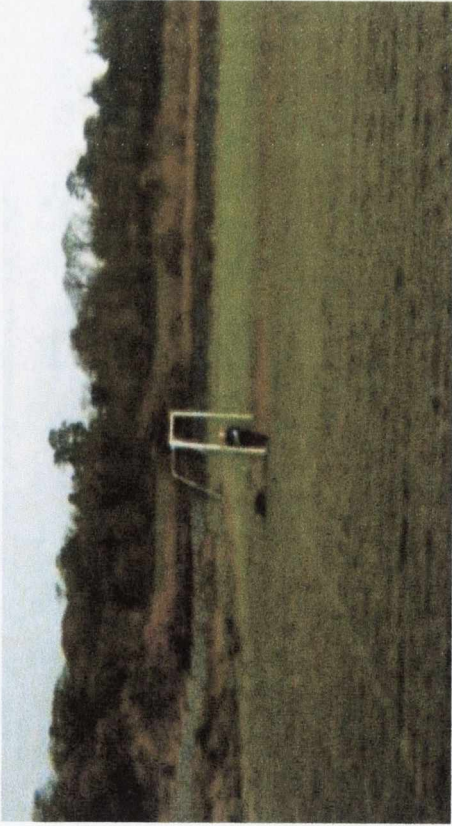
Their occupation of the fields and greens in the neighbourhood was largely uncontested by adults or older teens during the hours of daylight, but children had to contend with the aftermath of other users' nighttime activities – remnants of bonfires, burnt out cars, broken glass and litter. The presence of grazing horses constrained or created a nuisance for the majority of children, albeit that some children owned horses or 'jockeyed' them and saw them as an important and valued aspect of their landscape. The incidence of rubbish dumping was also a concern and annoyance to many children and a source of hazardous risk.

The marks of the neighbourhood's character are written large on the landscape and during middle childhood, children more than any other residents are intimately acquainted with its story. The concerns which the children so graphically illustrated had a serious impact on their safety and well-being and exposed them to many hazards and risks in pursuit of their play and daily negotiation of their neighbourhood terrain. While many of the concerns raised are probably equally repugnant to adults, their impact in the daily lives of children is appreciably more, given the differences in how they use the neighbourhood outdoor space.

The adults I spoke to were at pains to point out the strenuous and commendable efforts being made by the community in relation to maintaining the environment. However, the extent of the direct and immediate impact on children's lived experience appeared to pass largely unrealised and untackled, leaving children to cope with the consequences through their own resourcefulness or avoidance strategies (Hill et al., 2006).

In the next chapter, the integration of social and physical, as manifest in children's activities and use of time are presented.

Soccer and Sport



The Soccer Pitch - Ronaldo



A Match - Yoda



My Soccer Ball - Max



Trainers and Kit Bag - Steven

CHAPTER SIX

Integration of the Social and Physical - Children's Play and Activities

Introduction

Chapters Four and Five presented separate accounts of the social and physical ecology of the children's neighbourhood, in order to allow an examination of both in detail. In reality children's lived experience, social and physical, is experienced as an integrated and interdependent whole. Children enact and transact their lives in physical spaces, populated by social networks of friends, family, peers and non-related adults and institutions, primarily during middle childhood, in the home, school, neighbourhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1988b, 1995). Even when children spend time alone, they are physically and spatially located usually in their homes or neighbourhoods (Hart, 1979, Moore, 1986a). Their self-concept, identity, physical being and sense of belonging are socially and spatially defined (Scourfield et al., 2006; Spencer and Blades, 1993). In other words, the social and physical ecologies of neighbourhood are inextricably linked and interdependent in the daily lives of children and this primarily manifests in their use of time and activities.

The focus in this study was predominantly on how the children routinely spent their 'free' time in their neighbourhood setting. To this end, the present chapter focuses on children's informal play but also includes the structured activities which they identified as priorities. It describes the places and spaces in which these occur, the actors involved (both present and remote) and the time (clock, calendar and ontogenic) by which they are regulated, capturing a rarely seen 'child-eye' perspective. The children's accounts of their activities and encounters demonstrate the extent to which their use of time is structured by adult agendas, both personal (e.g. parents and family) and institutional (e.g. school, housing and social policy). In essence then, the study takes account of both the time *of* childhood and of how time *in* childhood serves to both control and construct children's everyday lives (James and Prout, 1997a).

Informal Play

Physically active play is a defining characteristic of middle childhood (Bartlett, 1999; Berg and Medrich, 1980; Hart, 2002; Pellegrini, 1987) and is central to children's social interaction with peers (Corsaro, 1997, 2003). Children are rarely static, they are constantly on the move, spending short periods in any one place or involved in one activity (Wheway and Millward, 1997). It was very evident in this study that physical play and movement formed the essential content of the children's unstructured and self-managed time, particularly in social engagement with friends and playmates. While some of the children showed signs of beginning to eschew play and play things in favour of more adolescent activities such as watching DVD's '*walking around*' and '*hanging out*', for most, play remained the main component of their unstructured time.

In the study, many categories of play and activity were shared by both girls and boys, particularly those associated with physically active outdoor play (chasing games, ball games), most commonly played in mixed gender groupings. Media based activities (as shared activities with friends, as distinct from family or solo use) such as watching TV or DVDs were also cited by both girls and boys but tended to involve same sex, close friends. Girls identified a more extensive and diverse range of activities (25 categories, compared to 18 for boys) which included more activities involving fantasy or role based play, which was not so evident in boys' descriptions. While the volume of activities was not hugely different, the proportion of time expended in different activities was significantly so, with sport related activity being notably more prominent for boys than girls.

Street and Open Space Games

Most of the games described by the children were self-initiated and self-managed, often involving quite complex roles and rules. They generally featured physically active play, running, chasing or jumping and as noted in the previous chapter, frequently incorporated elements of the local environment, either built or natural, as boundaries, props or markers. Games were commonly played in mixed gender and age groups and appeared to be open to any or all children present to join in. This form of play is inherently collaborative and co-operative and often entails structured turn-taking.

Em Right, It depends on how many players you have on your team and you all have to make up a word and you all have to have one letter and whoever is on has to follow you around the block and make them talk to you until you give them your letter and then they have to get all the letters and try and put the word together and when they get it their team is on.

(Steve)

But we always dance and play 'following' and we play '45 home free', and then you have to run and one person is 'on' and all the rest of us have to run and hide and when they see us we have to touch off the rock before they catch us and 'em if they catch us before we touch off the rock, then they're on next.

(Clare)

Children's Play Sites

There were some marked differences in terms of space usage by the girls and boys with boys, very much favouring outdoor space and engaging in active physical play, soccer and other sports. Girls, while naming the fields and greens as favoured play sites, also showed preferences for playing in the local streets, in the homes of friends, in the playground and were more likely to mention 'sleep overs' and going to the shops as part of their play routines, a pattern noted in similar studies (Karsten, 2003; Munroe and Romney, 2006).

But if you come out of that and go up the hill and then go up another big hill, there's another one up there and there's a kind of a small little fence and we play volley ball and stuff in there.

(Dawn)

I usually went up to the park, or if I didn't go to the park I probably stay down there and get a game of soccer

MR: *Right and what would you do in the park?*

Em, we'd play 'following', hide and go seek or that's all I'd say

(Rollindinio)

MR: *Where would be the main places you play around?*

The Park (beside the community centre) well, not really like, the supermarket, that's down there

MR: *What do you do at supermarket?*

We just go down and get rolls

MR: *Where do you play with friends, mostly?*

In my friend's house, its just up the road from me, about here (map), (road name) there's her house there, yeah opposite my road, that's (road name)

(Helen)

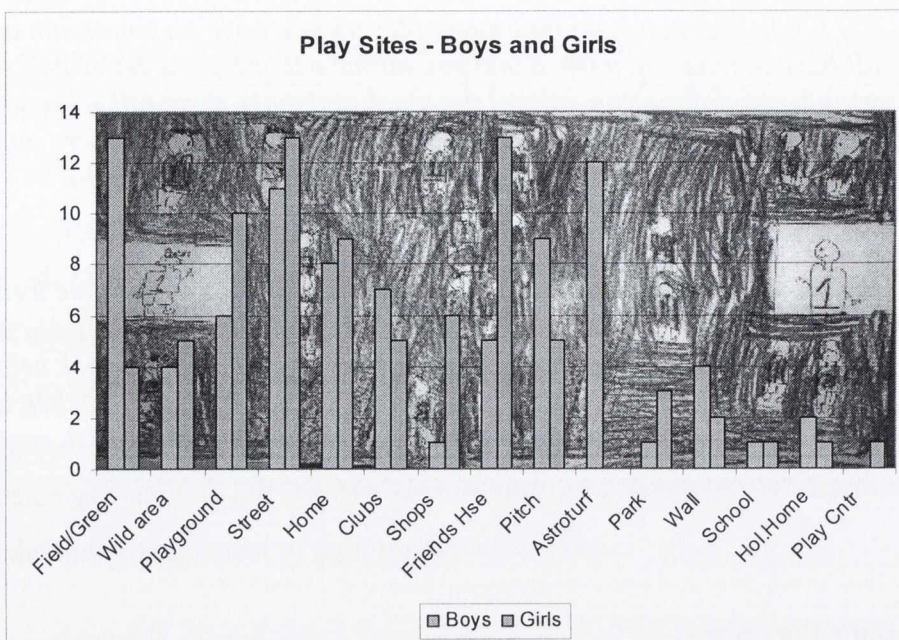


Fig: 6.1 Play Sites – Boys and Girls

In terms of activities in the neighbourhood, by far the most prevalent for boys was ‘soccer’. This could include casual and informal games among anything from two to a group of five or six players, played on the street, on local greens or in one of the designated soccer facilities such as the local soccer ground, or the Astro turf pitch in a local college. Alternatively, it could mean formal team training or matches as a member of a club team.

Em, we usually go to the all weather pitch, to play soccer, it's at the community centre it's the big pitch next to the Park. We play sports down there.

(Yoda)

If not out on the road, I'd probably go up to the all weather pitch near the Park.

(Adam)

All but two of the 17 boys who participated named ‘soccer’ as the primary activity shared with friends. Seven initially named soccer exclusively and a further eight named it, in combination with other activities, mainly other sports. Soccer was named as a daily activity by most boys, sometimes being played several times a day, both in school breaks and during free time, in addition to structured training or matches for those who were members of local soccer clubs.

The interest in soccer *per se*, above other football games was striking and was as evident in the school survey responses, as with the core study group. It possibly appeared more prevalent because of the looseness in the use of the term 'soccer' and the range of ball related play it involved. Children's participation in sports, more so than informal physical play, is commonly influenced by parents' interests and encouragement and is frequently associated with traditional gender roles (Clarke, 2000). A number of the boys' fathers or male family members were involved in local soccer teams and clubs. The promotion of soccer as a sport/entertainment through TV and play station games may also be a factor, although the 'chicken and egg' nature of that relationship was beyond the scope of this project to explore. The influence of high profile (UK) premier league or international teams and players and the esteem in which they are held was evident in both the passionate support expressed for particular premierships teams and the adoption of the persona of individual players both in play and indeed as 'aliases' in this study.

We spend over three hours a day. We play teams in the square if the sun is out and then if the grass is dry we play on the grass

MR: *Ah yeah and do you go down to the all weather pitch much?*

The one in the area? No, mostly we go to the Astro turf if it's fine. We play soccer in Barry's field, across from [supermarket], he cuts the grass, that's where they should put goals.

(Steve)

I like Barry's field because you can get a good game of soccer with all the people living there.

(Boy aged 11)

While the prevailing interest in soccer is traditionally more strongly associated with boys and men and the celebrity profiling and commercial promotion of premier league soccer in particular, undoubtedly contributes to its attraction, it seems likely that its popularity with children also rests on its accessibility. It requires little or no equipment other than a ball, space and willing players, when played on an informal basis. It does not cost money and the 'rules' appear to be universally understood. The shared imagined vision of a soccer stadium in a field or street, where gates, traffic cones or clothing can become goals and invisible line markings are accepted and honoured, is a clear demonstration of the power of children's imaginative agency. It demonstrates their capacity to both adapt and adapt to their environment, creating within it the means to realise their goals, both figuratively and in actual score lines.

Having said that, many of the boys who participated in the study lamented what they saw as a lack of adequate football facilities in the neighbourhood. At least three sites were identified where soccer pitches with 'nets and goals' could be located and, in terms of things that would make the neighbourhood 'a better place for children', this suggestion had widespread support.

I think the land we have, the land it's not really used for much, there's no sets of goals, there's no set of goals that you can play in and there's no nets and you have to go chasing the balls then, and if there were fences up against the side it would be better instead of the ball just going to break a window

MR: *Right, so if there was some kind of enclosure?
Yeah, like the Astroturf.*

(Smerger)

[the green] across from where I showed you, did you see it when you came down to collect the camera, that's where we want the goals.

(Jack)

Children's 'Camps' or 'Dens'

Some of the children spoke about making 'camps' in the neighbourhood. Camps or dens are most commonly created from 'found' materials, scraps of timber, cardboard cartons, discarded carpeting or furniture and often use landscape features such as walls, fences, hedges or trees to provide structure and support.

You know there's big field down there and we always go down because there's a big tree and we got all wood the other day and we made a small camp and then if you just come up and down the small little path, there's a big field and we play soccer in there and 'following'.

(Dawn)

These child-built structures were child-sized and only children would most likely choose to enter. They create a private, sheltered and distinctly 'owned' space for children, frequently out of sight of adults and in places that were not valued or little used by them. They were temporary structures and the construction of them – an inherently social and collaborative enterprise involving a group of children – seemed as important a part of the process as was their occupation and usage as Rollodinio's account demonstrates:

- I'd probably go out with my friends and we'd make a big camp.*
- MR: *Oh really, and where would you do that?*
We'd probably make it in, you know the field just up there (past school), we'd make it there and if it was raining then we go into it and we'd make a fire around there.
- MR: *Oh I see and what did you build the camp with?*
We'd use wood.
- MR: *and is any of it still there or are they all gone?*
No they're all gone.
- MR: *Are they? And what else would you use to make it?*
We'd use wood, probably doors, carpet.
- MR: *Yeah, whatever you can find, basically and how many people would it fit, how big would it be?*
About 12 or 13 people.
- MR: *Are you serious, that's amazing, so you'd make a huge big camp?*
Yeah.
- MR: *and how long would it last?*
It would last for about a week, or two or three weeks.
- MR: *Right, and then what would happen, does somebody come and take the stuff away or does it just collapse?*
No then people would knock it down, so when they knock it down we'd kinda know, so in the end we just knock it down and light it all up instead of building it again, cos it takes about three hours to build it.
- MR: *Yeah, set it on fire, is that what you mean by light it up?*
(nods)
- MR: *And then would you build another one?*
Probably, yeah.
- MR: *And would you just do that in the summer or would you do that at other times?*
Probably all the time, sometimes, yeah.
- MR: *And like where would you get the stuff, would people just throw it out?*
Eh, we have a friend next door to my cousin, and he has loads of wood and he gives it out to us.
- MR: *Oh great, so that is like your den, is it – where you all meet up or go in out of the weather?*
Yeah, probably sometimes, yeah.
- MR: *and what would you do there, would you play games in there, or would you just sit and talk or ..*
I'd say that, yeah
- MR: *Talk?*
Yeah.
- MR: *and is it all boys or girls or both?*
Mostly boys and girls.
- MR: *and everybody would help with making it, would they?*
Yeah.
- MR: *Very good, sounds like good 'craic'.⁴⁰*
[Laughs] yeah.

(Rollodinio)

⁴⁰ Colloquial word meaning 'fun'

The creation of 'camps' or 'dens' is a common way in which children colonise and make their own of public space. They act not alone as physical constructions, but also as spaces of social encounter that are uniquely inhabited by children themselves (Kylin, 2003). They also function as places of retreat from adult and others' gaze, and indeed, weather (Clark and Uzzell, 2002; Moore, 1986a). In this study the process of making 'camps' as a social, collaborative process appeared to be as important to the children as the end product.

In addition to children's informal play and activities, organised sports, teams and clubs were a common feature of daily life for many of them, providing activities and opportunities which not alone included peers but also brought them into contact with a variety of interested and supportive adults.

Community Provision - Sports, Teams and Clubs

Over the course of the study, the children identified a range of local provision which they used and some participated in a number of different options. Locally available provision for children included:

- Community programmes for all children (e.g. summer camps, pool club);
- community facilities specifically for children, i.e. the playground;
- community facilities for all residents to which children had access at times (e.g. the community centre, outdoor and indoor sports facilities);
- sports coaching and clubs (e.g. soccer, Gaelic games, rugby, martial arts);
- private or commercial activities such as computer or music classes;
- extra curricular programmes provided by schools (e.g. summer camp, sports);
- statutory/voluntary services such as HSE funded youth or family support services; Garda diversionary programmes, St. Vincent de Paul holidays;

Some programmes targeted specific populations of children e.g. those assessed as being of 'at risk'.

When we were set up it was really to work with kids that were deemed to be 'at risk' in the area, kids that maybe had difficulties at school, that the home situation there were problems there, just kids that needed additional support.

(Local Service Provider 1)

Others were designed for the general population, both within and from outside this particular neighbourhood.

We have kick-boxing, kung-fu, boxing, martial arts, and other martial arts. Band, pipe and drums, CC [parish] pipe and drum band. We have the soccer pitch [indoor soccer] which is, we have different groups from the areas and outside groups, kids and adults. They get together, get the money together and come down and play a game of soccer for an hour in the evening, on the indoor pitch. We have the youth clubs here in unit 3, there a youth club of a Tuesday night, then our own one and of a Wednesday night there's a youth club for about only 12, they're teenagers 14-17 years of age.

(Local Service Provider 3)

There was no swimming pool within a five mile radius of the neighbourhood, but swimming lessons and outings were organised for children by local service providers and the school.

Well, skipping and stuff. I usually go swimming as well but my favourite thing is swimming.

(Cathy)

While additional and improved soccer facilities, as discussed, were a priority for many of the boys, many girls expressed an interest in having facilities provided for a variety of sports. Basketball in particular was popular, as were swimming, badminton, volley ball and gymnastics. A multi-purpose sports and leisure facility was suggested by some of the children to make the area 'a better place for children'. Such an amenity would indeed meet many of the children's interests and needs, and no doubt those of other local young people and adults. In the absence of local facilities, children improvised using whatever amenities were available or for some, had opportunities provided through local after-schools clubs or summer projects.

I play house, school and dancing. I play acrobatics and handstands.

(Jennifer)

Most of these programmes were accessible to the children free of charge or at very nominal cost (e.g. €1 per session or per day of activity), apart from those provided on a commercial basis and privately accessed by children and/or families.

The community based provision can be broadly classified as that which was aimed at:⁴¹

- Providing safe, accessible, age appropriate play facilities for children;
- Expanding children's range of opportunities for life skills development;
- Enhancing children's community participation – primarily through sports, or other community based development programmes;
- Responding to perceived or identified concerns or deficits within the local environment by providing supervised, structured activities after school or during summer holidays;
- Providing targeted support to vulnerable children (or adults).

The proliferation of such provision has been a feature of community life and community development in Ireland over the past twenty years (Lee, 2003). However, the value of such provision has been found to be mixed (Hart, 2002; Jack, 2005; Sheppard, MacDonald, and Welbourne, 2007). While changes, improvements or solutions have been claimed by a variety of service providers, there is little solid evidence which can definitively attribute impact to specific interventions. Some kinds of programmes, sports or recreation, such as outdoor pursuits, have been found to promote resilience and mental health (Gilligan, 2000; Ungar et al., 2005). It has been suggested that children who live in disadvantaged areas have less access to and make less use of commercial play facilities, to the detriment of their overall physical activeness (Powell et al., 2006; Ziviani, 2008). In terms of physical activeness, accounts of the children in this study did not bear out this assertion.

Some specialised activity programmes can require high levels of skill and training and high ratios of adults/staff to children and are therefore frequently beyond the capacity of community organisations in disadvantaged areas to provide on a regular or consistent basis. One local service provider, referring to funding cutbacks, emphasised this point.

Look at my own project, as I said, I'm gone from having 16 youth leaders to having six. When we had the 16 youth leaders, we were catering for young kids and up to 14, 15, 16, years of age. We were bringing kids away canoeing. We were doing all sorts of activities with kids, hill walking, canoeing and everything that went with it.

(Local Service Provider 2)

⁴¹ Synthesis of local service providers aims and objectives

Children's Participation in Clubs and Groups

Participation in organised sports clubs was much more prevalent in boys in the study than in girls. This appeared to be related to a lack of provision for girls, rather than a lack of interest or willingness to participate. Ten of the 17 boys were members of local soccer teams which involved regular training and playing matches. Many of the girls expressed an interest in a range of sports, including basketball, volleyball, swimming and soccer. However, they reported that there was little or no local provision such as clubs, teams or facilities for these activities and just one girl was a member of a sports club. Basketball coaching had been provided by the school some years previously, but apparently ended when the particular teacher had left. Soccer and Gaelic games (football and hurling) featured strongly, while rugby was played informally, rather than in a club or team context, despite the fact that the estate is close to a major rugby grounds.

After-school clubs provided through the community development project and the local youth service were used by 14 children, seven girls and seven boys. Other youth amenities such as a pool/snooker club were used by eight children, four girls and four boys. A number of children also participated in summer projects and camps organised by various groups within the area, such as the school, the community development project and the youth service. These services seemed to be highly valued by the children who used them as they provided an enhanced range of opportunity and experience to children, as well as an alternative to less desirable occupations. Identified by one child as one of his favourite places, he said:

We do homework, arts, crafts, swimming, soccer, cooking, we do everything ...

(Smerger)

*MR: What do you like best about [your area]?
The club.*

*MR: Tell me about the club.
Some go to Wales, some went to Galway this time. Now we're back in
the club doing homework, cooking, buns, in the youth centre.*

*MR: Are your friends in it too?
Yeah my best friends.*

*MR: What age is it for?
Ten and over.*

(Donna)

MR: So do you go to any after school clubs or summer camps?

Well I'm going to one now, do you know the Vincent de Paul, it's a Euro and you get to go rock climbing, swimming and everything, and it's all kinds of sports and you get to go out racing and all that, so, I'm going there, it's a euro a day in the summer, when we get our holidays.

(Jacqueline)

While additional and improved soccer facilities as discussed, were a priority for many of the boys, as noted, many girls expressed an interest in having facilities provided for a variety of sports. Basketball in particular was popular, as were swimming, badminton, volley ball and gymnastics. In the absence of local facilities, children improvised using whatever amenities were available.

I play house, school and dancing. I play acrobatics and handstands.

(Jennifer)

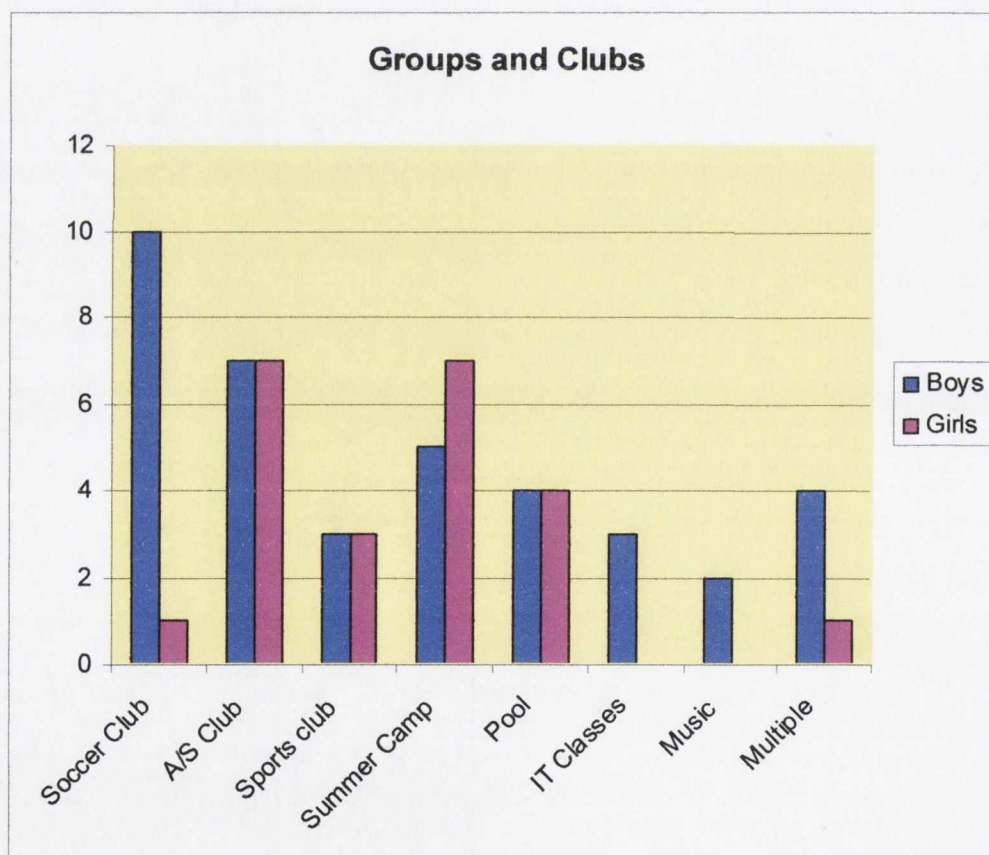


Fig: 6.2 Clubs and Groups by Gender

Regardless of the limitations in formal provision, particularly for girls, there was no evidence that children in this study led sedentary, inactive lives.

We play soccer, we play volley ball, we play tennis, we play basketball, we play, what else do we play, skipping and sometimes we go into the school and play basketball, they have all the hoops.

(Bernadette)

Indoor Play and Home Based Activities

All of the children described some measure of indoor play. Girls spoke of and engaged in a wider range of indoor playful activities, more frequently involving friends, including imaginative role modelling play (school, house, celebrity modelling), craft play (making things).

I goes down to my friends house and we goes up to my room and we goes out the back into my shed and we plays with all my things out my back, out in my shed.

MR: *What kinds of things do you have in your shed?*

I have black boards, and dolls and all, 'Bratz Dolls', you know the 'Bratz Dolls' that's on TV and I have a huge jet, the 'Bratz' jet and I have the swimming pool.

(Dawn)

Boys more commonly spoke about using electronic media such as playstations, or watching DVDs.

I play with the X box. If it's raining, me and him [friend] just go into my room and we watch DVD's cos I have a DVD player, or we go over to his house.

(Stormtrooper)

We'd just go up and if it rained we'd go in my friend's [house]. He usually brings me in and lets me play his x-box. He usually sleeps in mine or something. He usually plays my play station. He likes to play 'bottle' on the PC. And I always like to play 'Battle for Middle Earth', from Lord of the Rings.

(Mr. Bond)

'Sleep overs' were a popular social activity, predominantly, although not exclusively with girls. These frequently involved watching DVDs accompanied by substantial quantities of snacks and treats.

Bernadette comes to my house sometimes, so does Ann. Ann comes 24/7 she sleeps there as well. She sleeps there anytime her mother goes out, do you know for a couple of pints, cos my mother and her are best friends, so then Ann just comes in and sits there. Ann doesn't have to ask like, my mother said it. And just last week I had a slumber party because it was my cousin's birthday I had a slumber party for her in my house. There were three girls sleeping, no four, there was four, cos we all had sleeping bags and my cousin slept in beside me and there's you know in my bed there's two bunk beds, like there's two of 'em and you can pull out another bed. So my cousin slept in with me and my best friend Ann had her own bed and my friend Tara had her own bed.

(Hazel)

While friends were regular visitors to each others homes, the children's time at home was spent primarily in the company of siblings, parents and other family or household members and was largely structured around domestic routines, eating, sleeping, homework, games, reading or relaxation involving various media (TV/DVD/ CDs/ Playstations).

MR: *What other things did you do at home?*

At home I got a new book over the summer, Darren Shan, it's about a vampire, tales of death, it's a novel like, but it's a scary one. Yeah, he's a half vampire, a vampire turned him into one. I read loads of books kind of over the summer. Yeah, 'cos I really like reading books sometimes and you still can get them books you get free in the cereal, they're good books, Roald Dahl and all that. They're good ones, Roald Dahl and James and the Giant Peach and all that. He wrote that I think it was his first book and he turned it into a movie. I have it on DVD. It's half real and half cartoon. Oh yeah, and I got a few X-box games over the summer – do you know what a play station is? Well it's kind of like that but on x-box you can download CD's and all and save the CD's. I'd be able to save CD's and then, if I want to put on a song, I just put it on like.

(Carrie)

Some girls also spoke of talking to each other on the phone in the evenings.

My other friend, Amy, now she's gone to Spain for a week, but I still have other friends. I ring her every night.

(Jacqueline)

Girls Activities with Friends



Fig: 6.3 Girls Activities with Friends

Boys Activities with Friends

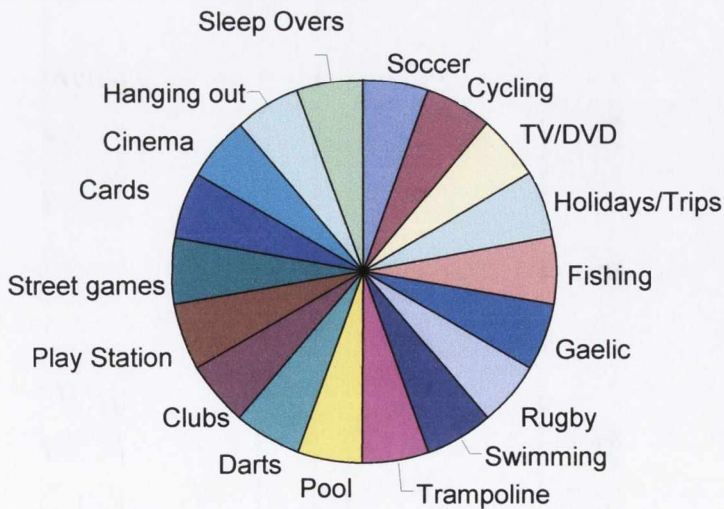


Fig: 6.4 Boys Activities with Friends

In terms of social life and entertainment, children in late childhood / preadolescence tend to be in transition from toy or imaginative based play to experimenting with social roles. This was reflected in how a number of children in the group referred to this transition, naming toys or games they used to enjoy, but which they had lost interest in or even felt they were 'too old' for.

Yeah I have loads of toys, well not really though because I'm getting too old for toys. I have my video now and I have one of the diaries that you have to put in a password in to and you lock it straight away. I have one of them, I have a phone, I have a bike, I leave my bike in my bedroom, so you can just walk in like and I have a lock for it.

(Hazel)

Children's play patterns, particularly those enacted in the home environment have been shown to be influenced by parents' perceptions, particularly in relation to gender roles and parents' expressed interest or participation in children's activities (Clarke, 2000). Other forms of play such as board games, card games and activities such as singing and dancing together, were undertaken indoors in dyads or small groups. In general, indoor play served as what children did before and after 'the main event' which was primarily outdoor activity.

Media Based Activity

Various forms of media were used by the children (and their various family members) on a daily basis. For children of this age watching TV or DVDs in the company of friends, particularly, may be seen as an activity which is a form of social interaction or play (Adams, 1992). Watching TV with family or siblings was also social, as in a 'gathering place' and a shared activity with parents or siblings, but more passive or sedentary in nature, and more linked to passing time, rather than being actively engaged (Fox, 2004). Although from the descriptions of some sports enthusiasts, watching sports, such as championship or league matches involving favoured teams was both participative and dynamic. Most of the children reported watching TV or DVDs as their alternative activity of choice when weather curtailed their outdoor activities. It was most associated with early morning, late evening and rainy days. Watched alone or with family members it could be seen as a transitional activity between play and sleep.

And then I'd just wake up and I'd watch telly for about an hour and then I'd go out playing
(Steve)

Well if I wanted to go in, I'd go in and then I'd watch telly for awhile and then I'd go to bed
(Rollodinio)

MR: *Do you spend much time at TV?*
Sometimes, if it's raining I watch it.
(Rebecca)

On many occasions TV watching was a family activity with parents or siblings but some children watched TV or DVD's alone in their bedrooms.

I go to my bedroom and I go on the computer. I play 'pin the ball' and games and spider and loads of other stuff.
(Sarah)

MR: *Do you have a TV in your bedroom?*
Yeah.

MR: *Is that where you watch it mostly?*
[nods 'yes']
(Rebecca)

MR: *Ok, so you watch your DVD's in your bedroom, do you?*
Yeah I have a DVD, a TV with a DVD on it so my mother won't be forking out more money for a DVD.
(Hazel)

Electronic games using 'Playstations' or 'X-Boxes' were mentioned frequently with a decided gender slant evident in their usage, being referred to by boys much more commonly than girls. This tendency has been noted previously and may be associated with the content of the games available or that tend to parents buy electronic games more for boys or regulating girls' access more strictly (Walkerdine, 2007). It has been suggested that this effectively limits girls' access to and competence with technology (Swanson, 1996).

MR: *what do you do at home, in the house?*
I play the Xbox or the play station and I listen to the CD player

MR: *what kind of music do you like?*
'John Paul' and 'Eminem'
(Max)

These technological 'toys' appear to transcend generation or age constraints to an extent and it was common for both older siblings and indeed parents (predominantly male, in both cases) to share this interest (Swanson, 1996).

MR: *and how long have you had your play station?*

Two or three years

MR: *and do you play it everyday*

No, yeah, most days I think and my Dad had his PS1 for, about nine years and he still has it

MR: *Does he play as well? Do you play with him; do you play doubles games, the kind that two people can play?*

Yeah, sometimes we play a ship kind of game, with two ships going around shooting everything and then we play Star Wars two players.

(Mr. Bond)

Predictably, home was the site of daily domestic routines involving sleeping, eating, self-care and homework. By most accounts, children's homes and parents were welcoming of friends and within certain constraints, such as parents' time demands and children's own responsibilities such as homework or housework, social activities were supported and encouraged or at least tolerated.

Mostly we play soccer and rugby and we play Gaelic but mostly I play outside my door and my friends always come into my house to play a game and I go into theirs as well.

(Jack)

Like if Carrie is not allowed sleep in my house, like if my mother is too busy or if she has work and I might be able to sleep up in her house.

(Jacqueline)

Occasionally, siblings set out boundaries on territory within the home.

My brother won't let me into his room no more, cos he always has friends in and he won't let me in. He's always messing with his phone, calling people.

(Jack)

The home is also a place of retreat. Similar to findings by Clarke and Uzzell (2006), this study found that, as well as a play site, the children used their homes as a quiet space, a place to withdraw from company or indeed from conflict. It was a place of shelter in which to relax, to rest, to avoid unpleasant weather and as a place to retreat to in the event of disagreement, hostility, fear or bullying.

Well on rainy days I really like having a blazing fire and watching telly all day.

(Jacqueline)

I don't want to go because there are people who'd kill you in there and I want to stay at home and watch films.

(Jack)

Like you know, if your friend snakes off on you and they'd be out with their friends, and then they come over to your house, then I just slam the door in their faces.

(Annabelle)

Many of the children took photographs of the insides of their homes including pictures of ornaments and features, pets, possessions, family members and frequently, photographs of photographs (see plates, p. 238), demonstrating their attachment to their homes and families.

Oh never mind that, that's just my mother's wind chimes, she has loads of 'em. She has dolphin ones and stars and flowers and butterflies. I just took that because I was coming out of the room. And this [photo of a framed picture], it lights up; and that's a picture of my niece in her pajamas, [child rubbing eyes on sofa] she was in my house, that was when she woke up. There's my mother's glasses and shelf and there's our sitting room there.

(Helen)

Yeah and that's a picture of my tomato plant, and that's a picture of my sunflower.

(Yoda)

*MR: Your garden is brilliant isn't it, who did all the stuff in your garden?
My father.*

*MR: Yeah, he has planted loads of things hasn't he?
That's the side of it, that's the bench, 'em I wanted to get everything so I just took a few photos.*

(Stormtrooper)

Few explicit complaints or criticisms of parents or family members arose during the study, and for the most part, children's comments were positive, respectful and affectionate, with few exceptions.

Homes and Gardens



Our Back - Rollodinio



My House - Yoda



Where I live - Steven



My Auntie's Garden - Bernadette

When you want something to eat and they won't make it for you, 'cos they are too lazy, lying on the couch.

(Ronaldo)

Many children in the study provided examples of their contribution to the running of their households such as helping with house work '*clean the wear [dishes]*' or cleaning their rooms and helping with the care of the other family members, particularly younger siblings or other relatives, often in exchange for pocket money.

I do my homework and I have to help my Mam with the house sometimes, I clean my room and then I just call up to Clare and all the rest or else I go on my computer and I email my sister.

(Jennifer)

Following on from various comments made by children an in-class log (Appendix 3) was used to explore the extent to which children themselves worked and contributed mainly to their family life but also to the lives of others in the community.

Children's Work

Almost all of the children indicated that they were involved in doing housework within the home. Tasks ranged from tidying their own beds and bedrooms to more generalised domestic work such as washing up after, and sometimes helping to prepare food, running errands to local shops for their parents or neighbours. Doing work in their gardens such as cutting grass or planting and minding younger children also featured. Just one male respondent described his contribution as to '*stay out of my mother's way while she's cleaning*' (Adam).

I clean my room and I Hoover the landing and sometimes do the dishes.

(Clare)

I help wash up. I help dry clothes. I clean the bathroom and fix my bed.

(Steven)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the children's working contributions was the extent to which it was similar across both genders, not alone in prevalence but also in the range of tasks undertaken. Both boys and girls described similar household tasks, such as washing dishes, tidying rooms and minding younger siblings.

I mind my baby sister.

(Wayne)

I look after my baby cousin and take her for walks and me and little children do club at home.

(Hazel)

Most of the children received payment for their work which they appeared to be free to use at their discretion. The money was used for a variety of purposes such as buying sweets and treats, but also items such as clothes, CDs or computer games. A number of children said that they saved their money, with some indicating it was saved for particular purposes, such as holidays. A number of children spoke of chores they performed outside of their immediate homes for relatives or neighbours, most usually this involved help with shopping or garden maintenance. All of the children who owned them indicated that they had some responsibilities for the care of pets, such as feeding, exercising or cleaning out cages.

I feed the birds and dog and horse.

(Daniel)

Walking, cleaning their cages and feeding them.

(Carrie)

The children's descriptions of work they undertook demonstrates the contribution they make primarily to their own families and households, in supporting their parents and in taking responsibility for aspects of their own self-care and sharing care of younger children in their immediate and wider networks. Through these activities, the children establish themselves as reciprocating members of their social networks and contributing social actors within the social ecologies of their families and community.

Walking to School

Almost all of the children walked either to or from school, or both. Twenty-four (74%) of the children said they always walked to and from school.

Four said they sometimes got a lift to school, but frequently walked home. Four children said they regularly got a lift to school. Some children got occasional lifts to school, frequently related to bad weather or because it coincided with parents leaving for work, but most seemed to walk home on a daily basis. This compares very favourably with figures compiled from the 2006 Census, which indicate that 46% of children nationally are brought to school by car (CSO 2006). Given the marked decrease generally in children walking to school over the past generation and the various attempts in some places to re-establish this practice through ‘walking buses’ (Mackett et al., 2007) and other initiatives, this must be seen as a welcome and beneficial feature of the children’s daily lives.

For many of the children, the walk to and from school seemed to be a social exercise. During the course of the study I observed many children walking home together in groups laughing, talking or playing games as they travelled. A couple of children spoke about coming to school early so that they could meet their friends and play or talk in the school yard, before classes began.

I was getting up early this morning, like, I like going in [to school] early so I can talk to my friends, like in the yard.

(Hazel)

Playing with friends, the shops, walking to school, games, playing with my dog.

(Boy, aged 7)

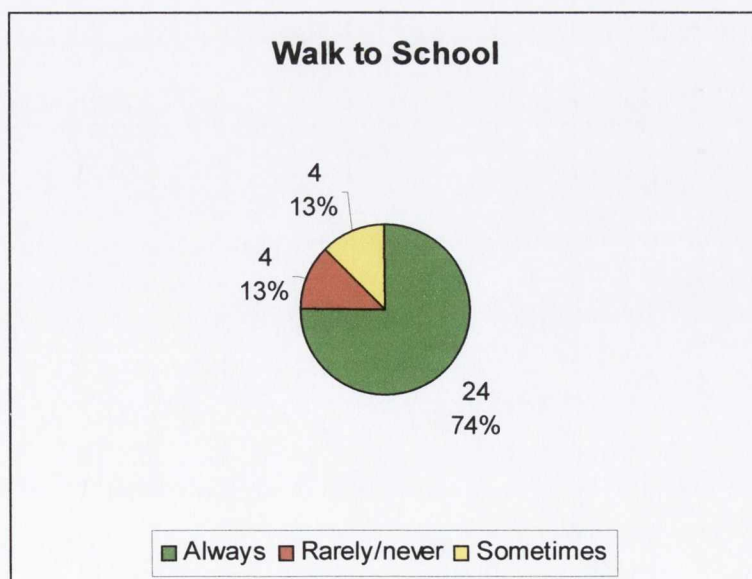


Fig: 6.5 Children who regularly walk to school

How Children Spend their Time

During the course of the study, at various points the children were asked to complete a log of their daily activities. These included what was done 'yesterday' during a mid-term break, or at the weekend. The children were asked to note what time they got up and went to bed and their activities in between (see Appendix 3). The purpose of these exercises was to obtain a sense of the structure and components of children's daily routines. The majority of the children completed the logs in detail, outlining the sequence of events and activities over the course of the day or days in question. Similar school day routines were reported by the children - getting up between 7.30am and 8am, getting washed and dressed, having breakfast and making their way to school. After school most returned to their homes, had some food, some changed out of their school uniform and either completed homework and went out to play or went out to play first and did homework later when they came in for the evening. Bedtime for most children was between nine and ten thirty pm. Therefore in general, their school week routine was similar and did not vary significantly. Summer time, and summer holidays in particular, meant longer days, later nights and for some (but not all) staying in bed later in the morning.

Week-end routines were more varied, with some children sleeping late and others having commitments such as football training, matches or martial arts classes which meant they were up and out of the house at similar times to their school days. Activities also varied and included things like trips to the city for shopping, family visits to a swimming pool, meals out or visits to relatives. However, within each day, most children spent some time playing outdoors with friends and many spent some time following their own interests such as listening to music, playing computer games, reading, or in one instance, adding to a scrapbook.

I'd stay out till 8pm on a school night and 9pm on the road and I'm allowed stay out till 10pm if I'm in someone's house. My Mam would know the families. She knows John's mother and Connor's mother. She went to school with Connor's mother.

(Mr. Bond)

Mid-term logs showed more variety again, with a few children undertaking long trips or overnight stays with relatives or to other cities. One child went on a shopping excursion to another city with her father and friends, while another went on a family hotel break.

This pattern is similar to that identified by Moore (1986) and seems similarly related to greater time available outside of the structured school or working week and parents' availability to provide transport or accompaniment or because children were included in their parents' activities (e.g. shopping). The logs showed that the children's daily lives are generally highly structured, primarily in response to the demands of school attendance. Waking up and bed-times were dictated by the need to be in school at 9am and time had to be allocated each day for homework, having uniforms ready for wearing and presumably having school bags unpacked and repacked once homework was completed. Many household routines appeared also to be structured to accommodate school attendance, with meals being prepared to coincide with children returning home in the afternoons.

As Mayall (2000a) notes, this finding reflects the extent to which the educational system pervades home and domestic life beyond the classroom and the school day. This impacts not alone on the lives of children, but also on the lives of parents who are 'co-opted' as supervisors and managers of children's school work in the home.

Time Spent Outdoors

The children reported spending most of their unstructured time outdoors during daylight hours and for some, late into the evening. This included afternoons after school finished, early evening (during the shorter days of late autumn and winter) and substantial parts of weekends and school holidays. School nights generally had an earlier curfew, with the children playing out later during weekends or holidays.

I'd be out of house.

MR: *Yeah, from what time?*

From about 9 o'clock to 9 o'clock and then I used to go back in and get something to drink and go back out.

MR: *and did you not go in for dinner during the day or anything?*

Yeah, I'd go in for that and go back out and then I'd go in for my tea and go back out.

(Adam)

About 9pm or something, cos it gets pure dark at 9, but we go, we usually go to bed at 10.30. Sometimes when it's a school night we have to go in at about 10. Last time we were up till half 11 watching 'Lord of the Rings' cos it started at 8pm, cos it's pure long, it's about 4 hours. I think it was the weekend, I'm not sure.

(Yoda)

Weather and Seasonal Variations

Wet or very cold weather were the main deterrents that children identified to outdoor play. During such times children retreated to the indoors, although frequently either bringing friends home or going to friends' houses.

If it's raining I would go in because there'd be nobody on the road. I'd just call my friends and we'd go to my house and watch a video or play with the play station.

(Peter)

And when it's sunny out we roll down the hill [laugh].

MR: *what other kinds of things do you do?*

Well this is the [community club], kind of, I used to do kung fu there but I don't anymore. We always do handstands and cartwheels and things like that you know, when it's sunny out. When it's raining, then we just stay inside my house.

(Carrie)

I'd be playing my play station, if it was raining.

(Frankie)

We can't go into the field now 'cos it's soaking, most of the time it's soaking not in the summer, now [November] it takes a long time to dry up. The grass is about [knee] high off the ground.

MR: *And that makes it hard to play soccer?*

Yeah, you can kick it [a ball] so hard and it'll only go about that far [indicates a few feet distance].

(Yoda)

For some children, the weather was not a deterrent and even during wet weather, being outdoors was preferable.

MR: *So do you stay in sometimes because the weather is bad or just because you don't feel like going out?*

Well my Mam makes me go out when it's not raining and when it is raining I want to go out.

MR: *So you like going out in the rain and what do you do then?*

Splash around in the water.

(Adam)

MR: *what kinds of things do you do?*

I play soccer, rugby, Gaelic.

MR: *on teams?*

Yeah, teams, [area team] there's training tonight at seven, no half six.

MR: *Do you train if it's raining?*

Yeah. He [manager] tells us to go home if it's raining and we say 'nah, come on, sure it's only a game' - that's what we'd be saying to him all the time.

MR: *So you prefer training to being at home?
Yeah, to get out of the house.*

(Georgie)

At certain times of the year however, the weather placed restrictions on the children's access to football coaching and training. It was not clear if this decision was motivated by concern about the children's welfare or a wish to preserve the pitch's condition for adult club members.

Yeah, but we don't have our next meeting till March - 'cos in the winter the ground gets too messed up.

(Frankie)

Hollyview that's where the all weather is and the sports ground - to play matches with [local club] on their pitch, they own it like. XX is our manager. I don't go training now it's not on till March, 'cos it's winter. I go every time it's on.... no-one is allowed play matches until March, the pitches are too wet. yeah, only the big players are allowed to play like.

(Jack)

Longer days or darker evenings impacted on the children's informal play also, although some innovations were made to lengthen their time outdoors, especially on autumn or winter evenings.

I'd stay out till, like coming from school I'd stay in to play the [PS] game until, for about an hour or something, 'cos you know there's hardly anyone out until a good while and then I'd go out and call for some of my friends and we'd get a game of soccer or something like '45' or stuff like that and manhunt. and at about, we usually play 'Manhunt' and '45' at about eight or seven before it's dark, 'cos it's hard to see them.

(Frankie)

I'd stay out till about six o'clock. We put torches on the ground for floodlights when we're playing soccer.

(Steven)

For some children, the evening hours place restrictions on their independent mobility and they were escorted or driven by adults.

I'd come home before it got dark or after it gets dark I'd get a lift home by Bernadette's Mam.

(Mary)

Holidays, Festivals, Events

Holidays, festivals and special events punctuate and mark the rhythms of all our lives and have a special place in the lives of children. They engage children in celebrations and rituals that form a significant part of family and community culture and identity. They create markers in time, both calendar time and the life course time, such as birthdays, by which progress through life is measured. Some children were specifically interviewed about their summer holidays.⁴² They described holidays both at home and abroad with parents or other extended family, as well as the way they spent their summer holidays in the neighbourhood. This included unstructured free time and participation in organised summer projects. Children's accounts of other holiday periods such as Easter and Christmas were also recorded as was information on specific occasions and festivals such as Halloween and 'bonfire night'.

Summer Holidays

The long primary school summer holidays, from the end of June to the beginning of September are one of the most significant periods of the year in the lives of children, particularly in terms of autonomous free time. It is a time when they are released from the highly structured and controlled regime of school term time, when hours of daylight are at their longest and when (allowing for the vagaries of the Irish climate), the weather permits substantial participation in the outdoors. Of-course, not all of the summer holidays are unstructured for all children. For many parents work demands mean that children's lives must retain some structure and supervision if not by teachers, then by other adults, such as childminders or those running community summer programmes. However, even within these constraints, children have increased opportunities for more flexibility, more self-determination and more variety in their daily lives.

The summer holidays frequently bring opportunities for more extensive travel and activity beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood than the week to week routines of term time allow (Moore, 1986a). Some may involve holiday periods spent in other locations within or outside the island of Ireland, and include time spent with extended family or friends.

⁴² These were the first group of children who participated in the study from May 2005. Other children who joined in September 2005 and January 2006 were not specifically interviewed about their summer holidays, but references to holidays were noted when they arose.

A number of children in the study group had access to holiday homes – mobile homes or houses - in other parts of the country which were used extensively during the school holidays. Some families returned to the same places regularly. This gave rise to an experience of ‘alternative’ neighbourhoods where the children were familiar with the terrain and local amenities and had established alternative networks of friends and companions whom they knew well through regular contact.

Yeah I go to [seaside resort]. I have lots of friends down there, more that I have in my own place, yeah, more than I have in my own place and they always play with me and we always go into arcades.

(Hazel)

Yeah we were down there for when my grandmother came down and after it, after the Nore valley, and that's all. We were just doing basically, there's never really anything to do down there except hang around with my friends. But if my friend in the caravan is not there I just go over the hill to the guys, over to where John and James's. Well the last time my friend Jason with the caravan was there, we went down to the beach, about the four of us go down to the beach together. You could even walk down there yourself.

(Stormtrooper)

Many of the children went or had been on holidays abroad, mostly to the sunny resorts of southern Europe – Spain, Lanzarote or Malta. One child had a trip to Florida to take part in a world martial arts tournament which included a visit to Disneyland. Some managed to combine their passion for soccer with a trip abroad. It was notable that most of the children's family holidays abroad took place during the school term, either June or September, possibly because these ‘off peak’ times are less expensive and made such holidays affordable for families on limited budgets.

I'm going to Spain, I'm going on Saturday, to Salou. and we're going up to Barcelona to visit Nu Camp, it's the biggest stadium in the world, 1,000 capacity, no 100,000 capacity, bigger than Croke Park.

MR: *who plays there?*

Barcelona (Players, Rondalinio, Besto, Victor Valdez - goal keeper)

MR: *Will you get to see them play?*

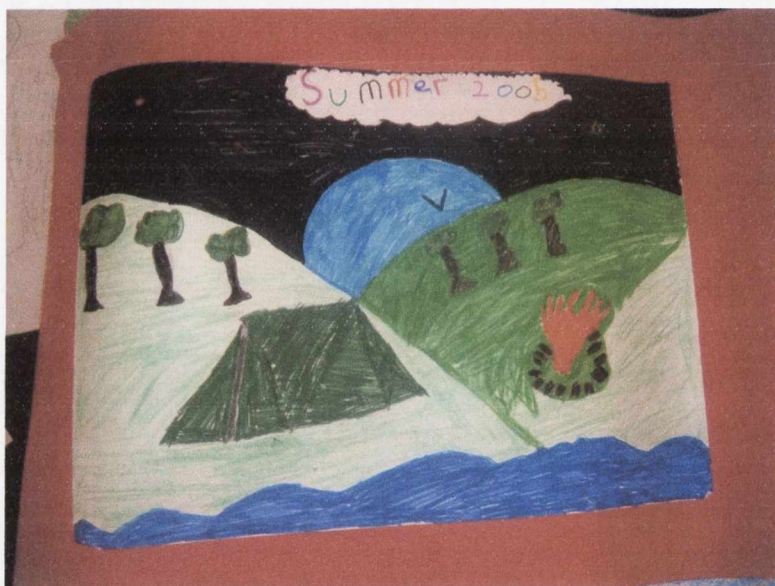
I hope so. We are trying to get tickets to watch Barcelona.

(Smerger)

Later in the year two other children talked about trips to Paris. The majority of the remaining children spoke of holidays in Ireland, mostly in self-catering rented houses or mobile homes in seaside resorts, or camping trips.

I went to [resort] and all for a week. I went there with my cousins, mother, and my brother. We rented a house down there. We went camping and all over the summer and went to [resort], we always do that every summer. I drew a picture and all of us going camping. I'll show it to you if you want me to, when we go down. It's a picture like on the mountains where I was and then river and all that and the fire and all is in it and I finished it up with the grass. [Class teacher] asked us to draw. Summer 2005 is the heading and she asked us to draw a picture, like to draw a picture and colour it in, I did camping.

(Carrie)



Many of the children participated in one or more of several summer programmes provided in the area. For a number of children who had no family holiday away from the estate, these programmes provided them with trips and activities such as day trips to seaside resorts and leisure facilities, or overnight trips to holiday camps in Wales.

It was Maggie's summer camp [local woman who voluntarily runs a summer club for children] she brings us everywhere, like swimming and all [seaside resort] and [outdoor pursuits centre] for two nights and the big house.

(Jack)

We went to Trabolgan. We went to Spanish Point and Kilkee and went to see the dolphins, one jumped straight over the boat.

(Donna)

The extent to which children live very much in the present was brought home to me when discussing in September what children had done earlier in the summer. In a number of cases, their accounts were quite hazy with details of locations and duration having been forgotten or not absorbed, possibly as plans and arrangements were made by adults without their input. Or it may indicate that events in the past, even the relatively recent past are overtaken by current interests and preoccupations.

Em, I think, oh I'm not sure, em, I don't really know, oh yeah we went to Ballybunion.

MR: *yeah, with your family, was it?*

Yeah, for about a week, I can't remember.

MR: *yeah, and what did you do there?*

Em, my brother and sisters d'you know, we all got a nice tan but my mother's sister minded John, 'cos he's tiny you know and Alice 'cos they're only one and two, but I don't think John was one then.

MR: *Right and are they your baby brother and sister? And did they not go with you?*

Lily went, 'cos she's three, but Alice didn't, 'cos she's two.

MR: *yeah, and the weather was good was it, 'cos you got a nice tan?*

Yep.

MR: *So how many of you went altogether?*

My father, my mother, me, [brother, and two sisters].

MR: *And where were you staying?*

Em, I don't know.

MR: *Was it a house or was it a mobile home?*

No it was a house, I think.

MR: *yeah, very good, so did you have a good time, were you near the beach?*

Yeah.

MR: *and what kinds of things did you do?*

We mostly went swimming, me, [brother and sister], so did [sister], but I don't know what my mother and father did really.

MR: *You don't know what they did?*

No, 'cos we were mostly out swimming.

(Yoda)

Halloween - Treats and Tricks!

The Autumn/Winter mid-term break happens at a special time of year for children, coinciding with Halloween. Halloween is an ancient annual festival which has been passed down through generations from Celtic times. For the Celts it marked the end of summer (Bealtaine) and beginning of winter, (Samhain), the Celtic new year.⁴³

⁴³ Bealtaine and Samhain are Irish language terms

It was believed to be a time when the earthly and the spirit world entwined as time and space were suspended and spirits were free to walk the earth. The name Halloween is derived from the Christian church's remembrance of the souls of the departed 'All Hallows' or All Souls' and 'All Saints'. All Hallows Eve, (Halloween) marks the evening of the day before. The celebration or remembrance of the dead is celebrated in many cultures (e.g. Mexico's day of the dead) but most of the traditions associated with Halloween in Ireland and England have their origins in local folklore⁴⁴.

Collection of data in relation to Halloween was done through references made in individual interviews, supplemented by a single sheet log form, suitably decorated in seasonal motifs, completed in class the following week. The children wrote accounts of how they spent Halloween; some drew pictures depicting their activities and some combined words and images. The children's accounts of how Halloween was celebrated reflected the continuance of many long held family and cultural customs and traditions and included stories of Halloween parties involving traditional games – bobbing for apples, retrieving coins from bowls of flour; dressing up in scary costumes and going door to door collecting 'treats' for the Halloween party. Most of the children had adopted the American parlance of 'trick or treating'.

I went trick or treating Halloween night. We had lots of fun. I went to my friend's party. My friend came over for a sleep over. We stayed up for a while. I was stuffed after all my sweets. I had lots of fun after the party. We played lots of games.

(Jacqueline)

On Halloween I dressed up as a skeleton with a knife with blood on it. I went to nearly every house, and went over then to my friends, and put our bags together. We went into my house and had a nut fight. We stayed up until 2 o'clock!!! When they went, I nearly got sick. The place was a mess. It was the BEST Halloween ever.

(Stormtrooper)

⁴⁴ Even those more recently attributed to American influences are often adaptations of Irish customs brought by nineteenth century immigrants fleeing famine and poverty here (e.g. the carved turnip adapted to pumpkins in the US or 'Jack'o' lantern').

I went trick or treating on Halloween with my sister and my friends. We went to 96 houses and I had a big party and a sleep over. We played lots of games, and it's was really funny because me and my sister and my friend Dara had to stick our faces into the flour six times. And we played lots of other games, like the Basin Game and the Apple Game and lots of more games too. And we really had good fun Halloween night. The End.

(Donna)

Yeah, all my friends come. yeah, like Halloween, we stick our face in the basin, there's 3 or 4 euro's in it or six and I won two and stuck my face in [laughs] and the flour game - there's all flour and there's a grape on top and if you drop the grape you have to stick your face in the flour, and we were bobbing for apples, I got a euro and my brother got two euro.

(Jack)

Bonfires, fireworks and some less social practices such as 'battering' or 'egging' houses of neighbours were also described.

MR: what were you doing at Halloween, were you at home?

I went out for a while, but I went in because people were throwing bangers at each other and my friend got a banger in the back.

(Peter)

Emm, I was gone, oh yeah I was down, me and my friend went down to this fella's house and the fella, he never told us, he just started doing it on his own, he had loads of eggs and he started battering people's houses. And we weren't battering people's houses, we were whispering, we were pretending to be whispering and the two of us bounced an egg off his head. They were pure sour eggs.

(Rollodinio)

Other accounts however, came through in children's interviews and these tended to highlight the less savoury aspects or aftermath of the event. The detritus of bonfires which left scorched patches of earth on green areas, often with broken glass, burnt, twisted metal and other rubbish which was not consumed by the flames. Accounts of animals being frightened, tortured or simply going missing around the event and children being frightened or injured by having fireworks (bangers) thrown at or close to them.

Em, I'd em not let children make bonfires in the field, because in case little children are running around and they slip and fall in, yeah [and] some people 'em, burn little pups in a bag and throw them into the fire.

(Annabelle)

MR: Do you have a dog at home?

No, I used to, but he got lost, the bangers frightened him at Halloween.

(Peter)

And on Halloween like, just coming home like, about two days before Halloween, I just got my mask and they threw eggs at the window.

(Stormtrooper)

I went around throwing eggs at people and doors and then I went trick or treating and I got three bags full. Then I was outside on my Nana's wall and running away from bangers and whistlers (fireworks).

(Adam)

Bonfires are not just associated with Halloween. May is a traditional time for local bonfires to be lit commemorating a heroic historical event associated with the area. While the children were aware of the tradition, they did not seem to be aware of the historical context, but understood it as a local 'celebration'.

MR: and they have a bonfire in May, do they?

Yeah, on bonfire night.

MR: and what's that about?

Lighting a load of bonfires and then some people just light bonfires really and some people just go around if their bonfire is bigger or something they just try and quench it.

MR: and why do they light them do you know?

I dunno. It's like a celebration or something.

(Mr. Bond)

Then on bonfire night then, if we are having a bonfire, the shop is only across the road and he comes out and he gives us free sweets, loads of sweets. Like most of the time the big boys and they all do a bonfire for us and we all sit on the wall and the wall is here and the bonfire is here and it's not too close, do you know.

(Dawn)

However, it also has anti-social connotations in terms of the remnants of bonfire damage on greens for several weeks afterwards.

And it's cleaner than the other field, because they usually light fires in the other field on bonfire night and in the other field they don't, so it's more clean.

(Mr. Bond)

While the children's accounts portray a wide range of activities and opportunities available to them, for some children, access to opportunity was constrained by cost which clearly was a significant issue for some families.

Costs and Constraints

The issue of cost and the significance of money were referred to by a number of children in the course of many of their conversations with me. One child talked about a trip to Fota Island⁴⁵ that he and his family had enjoyed some time ago, but was beyond the means of the family to repeat.

I don't know, we might be going to Fota Island next year, because we didn't have enough money this year, so, we went a few years ago and it was brilliant and Lily was only about one, or not even, and Alice and Jack wasn't born. And do you know, she kinda loved it, 'cos she was only tiny, and she said, she wanted to go again, when we said it, and she said she loved it and she wanted to go again, she was very smart.

(Yoda)

A number of children talked about saving money to buy items, either for themselves or as gifts for family members. One child spoke about saving money to buy his brother a Christmas present:

I wanted to save my money to buy a Christmas present for my brother. I'm going to buy him a CD holder. He has a load of CD's and he has no where to hold them so he puts them on the ground and when I go in there I know em, so I pick them up, so I'm going to buy him a CD holder. My other brother buys me lots of stuff. He bought me a CD. I'd wanted an MP3 player, but it's expensive.

MR: *So will you save up for one?*

That's what I want to do after Christmas though. I have a money box and all. I get money, sometimes I get money off my brother for babysitting for him and I get €2 off my mother and I put it into my savings box. There's €13 in it now. My brother, he saved €100.

(Jack)

and Jack also told me:

I saved it [money] up for some stamps in my saving box at home. I've got a box, like not a cardboard box, it's a steel box and it's round and you can put sweets into it, but I didn't want to. I cut it with a knife and put money into it. I'm going to bring it into school and get stamps - saving stamps (school savings scheme) it's like a bank, for children, you stick them in (on a card) save them up for my school tour, 'cos my mother said she wouldn't have that much money for the school tour, so I'm saving up myself.

MR: *for your spending money?*

Yeah and I'll pay for my tour as well, not just spending money.

(Jack)

⁴⁵ A nature reserve and wildlife park.

This demonstrates, as Ridge (2003, 2006) also found, that children living in poverty frequently experience restricted opportunities, but also try to protect their parents from the impact. The issue of poverty in the lives of children is returned to in Chapter Seven.

Future Plans – Children’s Aspirations

One further exercise undertaken with the children was to ask them what they would like to be when they ‘grew up’ and where they would like to live in the future. All of the children who responded, with just one exception (whose response consisted of a series of question marks), indicated definitive ideas for their future careers. Six of the boys, as might have been predicted, indicated they wished to become a ‘*soccer player*’ with ‘*artist*’ or ‘*actor*’ noted as alternatives for two of them. Other occupations included ‘*vet*’ (two boys and two girls); ‘*actor/actress*’ (one boy, one girl); ‘*teacher*’ (two girls); ‘*barrister*’ (girl); ‘*accountant*’ (boy); ‘*engineer*’ (boy); ‘*doctor or nurse*’ (girl); ‘*hairdresser*’ (girl); ‘*photographer*’ (one boy, one girl); ‘*archaeologist*’ (one girl, one boy); or to ‘*work in a big company*’ (one girl) or ‘*a stables*’ (one girl).

When asked where they would want to live, just six children indicated they would wish to live ‘*here*’ or in one case, ‘*in my own house*’. A number indicated that they would want to live abroad (Spain being nominated by six children), specifically somewhere ‘*hot*’ in one case. One keen soccer enthusiast wished to live next door to ‘Old Trafford’ (Manchester United’s football ground) and seven children responded that they want to live in ‘*a big house*’ or ‘*a mansion*’. In this regard, children’s experience of the wider world (or possibly their lack of it) was perhaps influential. Visits to other countries, or indeed knowledge of their own local ‘mansion’ presumably prompted some responses. Just one child referred to adverse conditions in her neighbourhood indicating that she wished to live ‘*away from danger and fighting*’. What was clear was that the majority of children had aspirations for a life with plentiful opportunities and were hopeful that such was possible.

A better place for children?

Notwithstanding the seriousness of the issues raised above, the children’s suggestions for what would make their area ‘*a better place for children*’ reflected both their attachment to their neighbourhood and their optimism as to its potential for improvement.

They proposed many sensible and practical solutions to some of the issues confronting the neighbourhood residents, both adults and children and identified a range of 'improvement measures' and proposals for its enhancement which again showed empathy and consideration for the interests of children of all ages, as well as adults and, particularly, older residents. Children's suggestions included measures related to three main areas:

- Reduction / elimination of crime and anti-social behaviour;
- Environmental maintenance, improvements and redevelopment;
- Facilities and amenities for services and recreation.

In summary, children's priorities to make this neighbourhood a better place for children include:

- Access to abundant safe space and varied settings for social interaction with other children facilitating involvement in a diverse range of play and recreation;
- Availability and access to friends and playmates;
- Quality sports facilities for soccer, swimming and a variety of other sports;
- Participation in a range of peer, family and community recreational and leisure activities supported by suitable and accessible facilities;
- Safe transit routes throughout the neighbourhood and to local amenities;
- An equestrian centre;
- A clean, unpolluted, safe, well-maintained environment free of litter, derelict dwellings and vandalism;
- Mixed private, social and affordable housing;
- Personal safety and protection from crime, danger, anti-social behaviour and its after-math;
- Access to a range of commercial and cultural amenities and opportunities;
- Recognition and participation as valued citizens whose expertise and local knowledge is recognized and incorporated into policy making, planning and provision.

Conclusion

This neighbourhood largely by virtue of its spaciousness and open, unobstructed terrain and the relative (in daytime) safety of its roads and streets afforded a highly accommodating environment for the promotion of physically active play which the children fully exploited. The proximity to other children provided a ready pool of playmates and potential friends which greatly enhanced the children's opportunities for social encounter with peers (as seen in Chapter Four). The children's lives were generally highly structured by time and routine, principally related to school attendance and general domestic routines and for some, by formal recreation or sports provision. By choice, their unstructured time was largely spent outdoors, subject only to restrictions related to weather, time of year and, as above, the availability of friends. It is during these periods of free-time that the children's autonomy, agency and intimate connection with the neighbourhood became apparent.

The children used the spaces, features and provision (both intended and unintended) in diverse, creative and imaginative ways. Their neighbourhood readily afforded opportunity for extensive physically active play and free movement and this comprised a substantial part of the children's activities. Access to such space, combined with the availability of friends, frequently named in tandem by the children, was how they characterised what they liked about their neighbourhood and this was what appeared to give them most satisfaction. The range of supportive, diversely populated, reliable and durable formal and informal social support networks which were so evident in the children's accounts provided them with additional opportunities and wider experiences. This seemed to imbue them with a sense of being cared for, supported and loved.

However, the neighbourhood was far from ideal in many other respects and several issues ranging from poor estate management and maintenance to anti-social and criminal behaviour and violence marred the lives of many of the children. This has a serious impact on their use of the physical environment, as well as on their social ecology to a greater or lesser degree. Bullying was an issue for some children that impacted on their use of the neighbourhood spaces and led them to withdraw from or avoid places or situations where they might be bullied. These and other emerging themes are discussed in Chapter Seven.

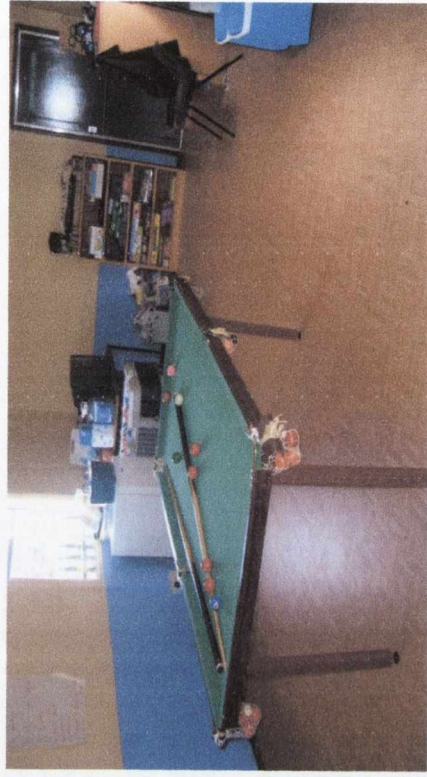
Favourite Places (photos taken by researcher)



The Playground



The woodland – wild area



An After-school club



The Mansion

CHAPTER SEVEN

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter explores the key themes which emerged from the analysis of the data, developing them with reference to relevant empirical studies and theoretical literature. They include both the physical and social aspects of children's daily lives such as place and space use, how the neighbourhood supports their play, friendships and social networks and similarities and differences related to gender. The chapter also highlights children's expert knowledge and the value it could potentially add to local planning, if harnessed effectively. It goes on to address areas of concern raised by the children including hazards and risks they encounter within the neighbourhood, as well as broader issues of poverty and educational disadvantage.

Although based on a case study of one group of children in a single urban neighbourhood in the Republic of Ireland, the conditions which prevailed in this neighbourhood, both positive and negative, are common to many such urban areas (Lynch, 1979; Chawla, 2002). Therefore, many of the insights emerging from the study may have wider applicability and contribute to our understanding of children's daily lives in a neighbourhood context. The transferability of such insights is supported by comparison with similar studies, such as those highlighted in Chapter Two, (Berg and Medrich, 1980; Burke, 2005; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986a).

Neighbourhood as Context in the Lives of Children

This study confirms neighbourhood to be an important setting in the lives of school-aged children, as many others have suggested (Bartlett, 2001; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1988a, 2005; Hart, 1979). In common with such work, the neighbourhood in this study was shown to be comprised of a diverse range of micro-settings which children occupy and transit during the course of their days and nights, structuring their daily lived experience.

While family influences remain predominant in children's developmental outcomes (McCulloch, 2001), neighbourhoods acquire an increasingly prominent role, especially during the primary school years, exerting a formative influence on children's sense of identity and social participation (Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Jencks and Mayer, 1990).

Neighbourhoods are more than the sum of their parts. They function simultaneously as sites of action and as of spaces of social encounter. This study examined the physical ecology within which the children moved, played and enacted their daily lives as residents and participating social actors (Buckingham-Hatfield, 1999; Hart, 1979; Matthews, 2003; Moore, 1986a; O'Brien et al., 2000). However, additionally, it explored the social ecology which was found to be populated by networks of kin, peers, community members (Berg and Medrich, 1980; Moore, 2003; Morrow, 2000) and institutions (Jack, 2005). The interconnectedness of the two was revealed, as children's physical, spatially located activities were frequently shown to be socially embedded, as manifested primarily in their informal play with peers. These physical and social ecologies served to structure the micro settings within which children transacted their daily lives, while simultaneously linking them to the macro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which determine much that pertains to their environment.

The study findings reveal the diversity of the children's living circumstances as exemplified by their family structures, access to opportunities and lived experiences, exposing the multi-layered heterogeneity of their lives. Such diversities illustrate the limitations of relying on undifferentiated classifications or social addresses (Bronfenbrenner 1979) such as 'disadvantaged', which belie the complexity of neighbourhood life. The study found that the children perceived and astutely discriminated between the positive and negative elements in their neighbourhood environment. This again confirms findings from other studies, particularly those undertaken under the auspices of the *Growing up in Cities Project* (Chawla, 2002b; Chawla et al., 2005) and others (Matthews and Limb, 2000; Morrow, 2000). In particular, the participants (including the school survey respondents), clearly identified positive and desirable neighbourhood characteristics such as access to outdoor spaces, which afford them self-initiated and autonomous physically active play and social encounter. Equally clearly, they identified those negative characteristics which constrained or threatened their presence in public space.

Middle Childhood and the Neighbourhood

The importance and value of engaging with children of this age cohort in gaining insight into their lived experiences is very apparent from the data presented. This is not to suggest that younger children or older young people, or indeed people throughout the life course should not equally be considered and engaged. However, as this and comparable studies demonstrate (Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1979; Lynch, 1978; Moore, 1986a), children at this age have a level of local, spatial and social expertise which is unique to their experience and they have the capacity and enthusiasm to communicate it effectively. During the years of middle childhood (7-12 years), children actively use and colonise outdoor space incorporating its features and affordances in their play (Chatterjee, 2005; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1979; R. Moore, 1986b). The children who participated in this study demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of their neighbourhood's character and condition and showed themselves to have developed a specialist expertise in relation to its impact on their daily lives. This kind of expertise is rarely acknowledged or understood by adult policy and decision makers (Davis and Jones, 1997; Hugh Matthews and Limb, 1998; Speak, 2000), representing a significant loss of valuable information and perspective.

In keeping with other similar studies (Hart, 1979, 2002; Moore, 1986a), this study supports the conclusion that children in middle childhood use the outdoor physical environment more diversely, more frequently and more intensely than both their younger or older counterparts and more extensively than adults in general. School age children's need for, and use of, neighbourhood space is quintessentially different from that of adults (Moore, 1986a; Wheway and Millward, 1997). For them, space is a commodity, a resource and a functional component of activity in their daily lives. Other work has found that older children's space use differs from that of younger children (McCreanor et al., 2006), and differs again from that of teens and young people (Clark and Uzzell, 2002; McCreanor et al., 2006; Skelton and Valentine, 1998).

The participants in this study clearly identified themselves as an age cohort, differentiating themselves from younger children and older teens, in terms of neighbourhood provision, interests and autonomy, validating my choice of this age group as a study sample. The majority of the participants self chosen activities were shared with age mates.

They did report that they played and socialised across age groups in their neighbourhood setting, where the available pool of children both siblings, extended family and other local children, was comprised of a variety of age groups. However, in doing this, the children described how they adapted their behaviour and activities to accommodate younger children in particular, limiting their range or choosing specific sites, such as the local playground (Berg and Medrich, 1980). In these situations, the children frequently described their role as caring or supervising.

During this period of the life course, children attain increased autonomy extending their range behaviour through a mutual process of negotiation with parents and their own exploration and agency (Hart, 1979, Moore, 1986b). Concurrently, children's social worlds expand through the development of self-chosen friendships (Corsaro, 2003; Parker and Asher, 1993; Phillipsen, 1994) and engagement in a wider range of recreational activities, such as informal and formal sports or youth focused services (Gilliland et al., 2006; Rasmussen, 2004). This was evident from the children's accounts of friendships and their participation in local activities and sports. The children's interests and interactions could be seen to diversify and change as they and their friends explored expanding territories and opportunities, in what Moore (1986a) noted as the continual negotiation and renegotiation of social and spatial boundaries.

Towards the end of the fieldwork phase, some of the children, notably girls, displayed a greater level of self-awareness and interests more commonly associated with adolescents. This coincided with the appearance (my observation) of the onset of puberty for some, although not all. Some expressed this as a perception of themselves being "*too old*" for toys and favouring other possessions, such as media and communications technology. This transition was also reflected in the children's analysis of the qualities of their friendships and other significant relationships, as revealed in focus group discussions. They described the development of higher levels of intimacy and emotional support in their peer relationships, expressed as sharing confidences and friends "*being there for you*" when feeling down or upset. This has been noted by Berndt (2004) and others (Bendelow and Mayall, 2002; Parker and Asher, 1993).

The emergence of changing relationships and gender identities and roles, such as 'boyfriends' among girls and to a lesser extent 'girlfriends', among boys, was another such dynamic as was (again for girls) an increasing interest in clothes, cosmetics and appearance, consistent with Morrow (2006).

This transition to a more reflective and analytical way of perceiving the world around them was also reflected in the children's perceptions of and attitudes towards conditions in their neighbourhood and the identity and meaning that they attached to it (Scourfield et al., 2006). Many of the children expressed their sense of shame, frustration or outrage at the neglect of the landscape and how this threatened their safety and that of others. In relation to this issue and others, children's moral agency (Mayall 2002) came to the fore, but they clearly lacked the opportunity and means to convey their views to relevant authorities. It was also evident however, that many of the study participants retained hope, optimism and motivation and perceived solutions to the issues confronting them in their neighbourhood. This is something which may diminish sharply as they move into adolescence (Daly and Leonard, 2002). At this point in their lives, the children had positive and trusting relationships with many of the adults in their social networks, particularly those who showed an active interest in their activities and welfare. This potentially provides the basis for co-operative and collaborative action, involving children in identifying and informing the development of solutions to some of the challenges which confront this and similar neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood Affordances and Children's Use of Space

The children's use of neighbourhood space served both social and physical functions and was adaptive, creative, imaginative and diverse. Similarly to Min and Lee (2006), this study found that children choose sites and spaces because of the affordances they offer for physical and social engagement. As Tandy (1999) also reported, the children frequently described their neighbourhood in terms of how it enabled or constrained their social interaction, play and recreation activities. Confirming Gibson's (1979) theory, this study shows how children's perceptions of the play affordances of their neighbourhood led to the adaptation and use of a wide range of settings, for a variety of activities.

Street structures such as walls, kerbs, cul de sacs, placed boulders and laneways were adaptively incorporated into their activities, serving as meeting points, props, boundary markers, hiding places and 'furniture'. For activities requiring firm, smooth surfaces (Heft, 1988), such as cycling, skating, skateboarding, riding quads or child sized motor bikes, children made use of the streets and lanes, combining transport and play activities. Other activities which were not so surface dependent but required open, relatively even space, such as team or large group ball games, chasing games or horse-riding, employed both open green areas and paved streets or other level surfaces, with weather, or as the children in this study highlighted, issues such as litter or bonfire remains influencing their choices. In other words, in pursuit of their chosen activities, the children adapted and incorporated the available terrain.

While the children undoubtedly used and enjoyed spaces and facilities designed specifically for their use such as the local playground and (more prevalently for boys), local sports fields and facilities, the majority of their time was spent in more public and non-designated spaces such as greens, fields, streets and pathways. This finding is common to other studies of children's use of space (Anastasia, 2003; Elsley, 2004; Francis, 1984/85; Gaster, 1991; Matthews and Limb, 2000; O'Brien et al., 2000).

It demonstrates as Burke (2005) also discovered, that children's street play continues to be an important aspect of their contemporary daily lives. Matthews and Limb (2000) noted that even where targeted and vibrant community programmes are specifically provided, only a minority of young people are likely to be engaged by them and only for limited periods. Hart (2002) goes further and suggests that children actively resist such prescribed provision and containment in favour of freedom, spontaneity and adaptability. This adaptive quality is not necessarily a judgement on the quality or suitability of structured provision (although, in my opinion, both quality and suitability warrant evaluation). Rather it confirms that *'the natural and physical world perceived from the perspective of the child affords a multiplicity of opportunities which adults seldom understand'* (Matthews, 2001, p. 63). This is not to say that relevant, appropriate, good quality materials were not appreciated. Many boys in the study repeatedly stressed their desire for improved soccer facilities such as goal posts and nets. The frequent nomination of the local AstroTurf soccer facility as a favourite place for many, underlines this point.

The study found that the children's social encounters were largely transacted in the public spaces of their neighbourhood (O'Brien et al., 2000). They went outdoors to meet and play with friends and playmates. They 'knocked in' (to each other's houses) for each other to come out to play and assembled in twos, threes and larger groups in the streets and surrounding open spaces. Within the neighbourhood, the extent of undeveloped space had been characterised in the area RAPID plan as a liability, rather than an asset. In this instance, what is sometimes perceived as a lack of formal structure, planning and development, worked to the children's advantage allowing them free movement to run around in groups, to kick footballs (without fear of breaking windows or causing other nuisance), to be loud and noisy and to occupy the available space with little constraint or competition (Valentine, 1997). The relative autonomy endowed by access to such space allowed children to transact social contracts of their own definition and choosing, away from the surveillance, expectations and obligations which prevail in adult supervised and controlled settings (Goodnow, 1995; Matthews and Limb, 2000). In this context, the children conducted relationships and adopted roles in terms of the behavioural norms of their peer culture - games with rules, for example (Corsaro, 1992).

The prevalence of physically active group based play characteristic of this age group (Pellegrini, 1987; Pellegrini and Smith, 1998) was validated by the data in this study. In fact, from the participants' perspectives, the potential afforded by the neighbourhood terrain in this respect was its most satisfying attribute. It has been suggested that such spontaneous, locally based play is more prevalent in lower socio-economic areas because families lack the resources to access private or commercial opportunities (Connolly, 2001). However, the children's testimony, including that of children who did have access to wider opportunities, suggests that plentiful space, ease of access and available playmates, combined with the spontaneity and autonomy they enjoyed was highly valued. This echoes findings by Matthews (2003) and Hart (2002). The priority given by the children to this aspect of their daily lives is one of the most prominent findings of the study. The children repeatedly cited the opportunity the neighbourhood provided to them to engage in physical outdoor play as what gave them the most satisfaction. From their perspective, ready access to free, autonomous space and social interaction, was a key contributor to their positive and optimistic characterisation of the area.

The retention of this level of autonomous, spontaneous, physically and socially satisfying play is something that it behoves community planners and developers to appreciate and preserve. The unstructured, the informal and the spontaneous is something that is increasingly being eroded as the privatisation and commercialisation of both space and amenities becomes ever more prevalent and the surveillance and control of children increases (Backett-Milburn and Harden, 2004; Kelley, Hood, Mayall, and Kelley, 1998; Valentine, 1997). The erosion of this vital component of children's active engagement (agency) and social participation is something that needs to be examined and curtailed in order that imaginative, creative and child-led play remains a prevailing experience of childhood (Karsten and Van Vliet, 2006).

Play in Middle Childhood

This study found children's play to be a core activity of middle childhood, encompassing a diverse array of activities, in a range of social combinations. From the assortment of group street and outdoor games such as 'Following' 'Manhunt', 'Kitkat' or 'Beat the Letter' to the more structured forms of sport-based play particularly soccer, the primary activity was characterised by spontaneity, self-structure and self-organisation. In common with Francis (1984/85), the study found that children aged seven to twelve largely spent their unstructured time with peers, in their neighbourhood areas.

The forms of play described by the children were shown to be largely child-led and relatively autonomous. Adults were generally not involved. Occasionally, children reported joint activities, such as computer games. However, more often when adults featured, it was as supporters e.g. in collecting 'conkers', or as providers of food or treats (e.g. sleep overs). From the children's perspective, the purpose of play was to have fun, to spend the time available to them enjoyably, freed from the constraints of adult imposed schedules or containment. They did not attribute any notions of self-development, achievement, status or acquisition to it, other than perhaps honing their football skills. This counterbalances the often prevailing adult assumption that the value of play is developmental 'work' (Mobily, Malcolm and Bedford, 1990).

However, play was shown to be crucially about social contact and interaction with other children.

Friends, friendship and peer company are experienced by children as essential to their well-being and play is the means by which they actualise this key relationship (Berndt, 2004; Furman and Buhrmester, 1992). The proximity of a plentiful supply of friends and playmates in the neighbourhood was a key resource factor in supporting children's play. As 'Jennifer' commented when asked '*Why are friends important?*' - *Because I wouldn't have a life without them.*

Friendship

Friends and friendship were shown to be of fundamental importance in the lives of the participating children. Next to their families, the children named their friends as their strongest allies. Having friends and maintaining friendships is perhaps one of the most important aspects of human development (Bendelow and Mayall, 2002; Wehner, 2005). While few of the friendships that children form in middle childhood may endure throughout their life span, (although some do), the experience of having friends and of forming relationships plays a significant role in children's mental health and well-being (Asher and Paquette, 2003; Gest et al., 2001; Pedersen et al., 2007). It provides the basis for the development of social support networks as well as buffering or ameliorating some of the impacts of adversity in children's lives (Attree, 2004; Criss et al., 2002; Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003; Schneider, 1999).

Friends who were loyal, kind, available, generous and trustworthy were represented as providing an important source of emotional support, alongside their value as companions and playmates (Levitt et al., 2005).

The capacity to develop personal social attachments has been found to be essential for the prevention of mental and emotional health problems, both in childhood and later life (Bowlby, 1977). Having the opportunity to do so is therefore an important aspect of children's well-being. As one child summed up:

They are kind, nice, fabulous, they can keep secrets, they help you, they care for you, when you are down they bring you up.

(Annabelle)

It has been noted that too often research on children's friendships has focused on issues of quantity rather than quality (Waldrip et al, 2008). In this study, children were facilitated to reflect on the qualities of their friendships, rather than to nominate or quantify friends *per se* (Parker and Asher, 1993). As shown in Chapter Four, the qualities that the children identified as important in their friendships centred on trust, reliability, support and companionship. These qualities distinguished 'real friends' from playmates or other children in the wider social network and were equally important to both boys and girls, although the identification of close or 'best friends' was more common amongst the girls. The nominated close friendships of the children in the study were almost exclusively based on same gender groupings, generally between children of similar age. While proximity was a determining factor in playmates, 'best' friends did not necessarily live very close to each other (as in the same street or block), indicating that preference was a more important factor than proximity.

Others (Aboud, Mendelson and Purdy, 2003; Berg and Medrich, 1980) have also found that friendships among children are frequently characterised by similarities in gender, age, activity preferences and cultural similarity, although there is ambiguity as to whether the relationship itself may influence the activity content. Issues such as personality and temperament become more significant in middle childhood (Aboud and Mendelson, 1998).

It has been found that girls tend to develop relationships that are more intimate, characterised by less physical aggression and greater verbal interaction (Underwood, 2007; Underwood, Schockner, and Hurley, 2001). Interestingly though, in this study, the girls were more forthcoming about physical or verbal aggression, citing explicit examples of rows or reactions to provocation. Boys, on the other hand, tended to speak about their experience of aggression more obliquely or in third party terms. Whether the gender of the researcher was a factor in this was not clear, but does bear considering. Repeated low level aggression, verbal or physical, was evident as a significant if not daily feature in a number of children's accounts, amounting to bullying for some.

Bullying

Bullying (Department of Education and Science, 1993) has increasingly come to be recognised as an unacceptable and potentially damaging experience in the lives of children (and indeed adults) (Sourander et al., 2000). It emerged as a significantly difficult issue for a small number of children in the study and as a relatively common occurrence, albeit one that they appeared to manage, for others. A small number of children report that they avoided certain places or facilities or restricted their use to when adults or siblings accompanied them. An analysis of the children's reported activities indicated that for two at least, they were more involved in structured adult-led and supervised activities (possibly a parental response to their experiences), and their peer networks seemed more limited. This is a common occurrence for children who are bullied, while conversely, children who bully often have extensive networks of friends and collaborators (Pellegrini, 1998). Girls also referred to avoidant or protective strategies that they employed in order to feel safe or avoid potential bullying, such as going places "*with a load of boys, so we don't get 'kilt'* [local word, meaning beaten up] (*Helen*) .

The 2006 Irish Health Behaviours in School-Aged Children (HBSC) Study found that bullying appears to be most common among 10-11 year old children and over 37% of children report having experienced it. Boys taking part in bullying outnumbered girls by a factor of two to one (Nic Gabhainn, Kelly, and Molocho, 2007). This would coincide with findings by Percy-Smith and Matthews (2001) which found that boys tend to be bullied by boys, but girls are bullied by both boys and girls.

It was evident in the study that bullying took many forms and was frequently present at a relatively low but nonetheless insidious level, commonly expressed as 'slagging'. In many cases, 'slagging' seemed to be the normal currency of communication and children, particularly boys, traded humorous banter and even insults which were sometimes taken in good part. It has been found that the perception of bullying is often related to the quality of the relationship between the people involved (Peets et al, 2007). A comment or behaviour might be considered humorous banter in one context, but experienced as offensive, embarrassing or hurtful in another (Dept of Education and Science, 1993).

In this study, 'slagging' directed at parents or other family members was perceived as particularly provocative and liable to evoke a strong response. The difficulty with managing such a ubiquitous form of interaction is that the impact is very subjective and it is extremely difficult to legislate what is appropriate or inappropriate. It can also be quite subtle and like many forms of bullying or other abuses, it is often carried on by stealth – looks, gestures or exclusionary behaviours that are difficult to observe or confirm and therefore to challenge (Leckie, 1997; Mishna, 2004).

It can be extremely difficult for a child to confront bullying or even articulate the fact that they are being bullied. Secrecy, fear, vulnerability and concerns that others (both adults and children), may not react sympathetically can inhibit a child from telling anyone. Further, even if a child does disclose, the outcomes may not be as desired. Interventions, unless skillfully managed and monitored overtime, can lead to more secretive and more intensive bullying, or children (both victims and perpetrators) may simply not receive a response that supports them to deal with the situation in an effective and healthy manner (Oliver and Candappa, 2003). Reciprocal friendships and social support provided by a network of trusted peers and/or adults are protective factors in both preventing and coping with bullying (Naylor and Cowie, 1998). This was evident in the present study as '*standing by you*' was a valued component of friendship and was a behaviour I frequently observed in the course of my contact with the children.

Gender

Gender differences which emerged in this study both supported and contrasted with findings from comparable studies. Hart (1979), Moore (1986), Wheway and Millward (1997) identified distinct differences between genders, most usually in terms of range behaviours and safety concerns. Generally, they found girls' ranges to be less extensive than similarly aged boys, frequently due to their own and parents' concerns for their safety. Hart (1979) also found boys' place knowledge and way-finding skills were more developed. However, in contrast, in this study, range differences of the girls and boys within the neighbourhood were not significantly different (although girls spoke more about concerns for personal safety).

Their local place knowledge and way finding (as evidenced by their capacity to give detailed descriptions of places, routes and directions) were similar. This may be attributable to the clearly defined and contained boundaries of the neighbourhood itself, and as such may be site specific. The fact that the majority of children, both girls and boys, walked to and from destinations such as school and shops within the neighbourhood may also have contributed (Hart, 1979) or perhaps it may reflect a shift towards greater equality between boys and girls in terms of autonomy, in this generation.

Participating girls reported visiting a wider variety of sites, including friends' houses and commercial venues such as shops, while boys spent more time in outdoor sports and recreational sites. This coincides with findings by Wridt (1999) and Cunningham and Jones, (1996). In terms of gender also, while there were similarities and common interests in space use, there were also notable differences in activities and social engagement between the boys and girls (Karsten, 2003; Matthews, 2001; Matthews and Limb, 2000). The majority of boys' activities featured structured or informal sports, primarily football. Girls however, while declaring interests in sport, or other recreational activities such as gymnastics and dance, were poorly catered for and they were more likely to talk about improvising or adapting sites and facilities to meet their interests in this regard. All of these variations and differences need to be considered in planning and implementing provision for children across a variety of domains (Chawla and Heft, 2002, Moore, 1986a).

Slightly more girls than boys noted places or areas which they would avoid on the basis of being local trouble spots or sites of personal experiences of bullying. Girls more often talked of (sometimes non-specific) fears for personal safety such as: '*in case something happens to me*' (Amber), or reported that they would limit their journeys to daylight hours unless accompanied by a parent or adult '*so I don't get kidnapped*' (Mary). The girls also more commonly than boys raised concerns in relation to the physical environment in the area, highlighting rubbish dumping and vacant houses and going to some lengths to take photographs of many examples to illustrate their concerns. Concerns in relation to anti-social behaviour, late-night noise, stolen cars and violent crime were common to both girls and boys. These are discussed further later in the chapter.

Opportunities Provided by parents and other Adults

Children's participation in, and transitions through, the various settings in their environment were frequently mediated through meso system relationships involving peers, family, extended family and other adults (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

All of the children in various ways spoke about opportunities and experiences provided by and enjoyed with their parents and/or extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Adults' involvement in hobbies, sports or recreation and parents' hospitality to friends and relatives featured prominently. A number of parents of the class group were actively involved in the school, local youth services and community groups or sports clubs.

These meso-system relationships, characterised by mutual trust and a positive orientation by all parties, reflect what Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to as *supportive links* which enhance the development potential of settings (p. 214). He proposes that when varieties of joint activities happen in a range of settings in the context of such enduring personal relationships, a person's motivation and capacity to learn is greatly enhanced.

Shared time with parents was undoubtedly very special to the children and often featured as highlights of their weekends or school holiday times. While not specifically the focus of the study, this aspect of children's daily lives is one that behoves attention and is an area potentially for specific research. This is particularly since family life and parent/child relationships are frequently challenged by forces similar to those which erode children's spontaneous play and independent mobility, i.e., increased labour market demands (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), commercialisation and privatisation of leisure (Gill, 2007). Yet, as the children clearly emphasised, family members are the people they can most rely on to care for and support them '*better than anyone else*' (Smerger).

Extended family members and parents of friends in particular were a regular source of additional opportunity for many children. This included additional holidays and trips, spending time with other children's families and being included in their activities. The children commented frequently on these sources of social network activities indicating they experienced them as a source of care and support which was much appreciated. Such network support, embedded in the children's neighbourhood experience (Morrow, 1999a) served to reinforce their sense of security and support.

In this respect, as in many others, the presence and functioning of social networks and the social capital they generate is a vital resource in the lives of children and an important component of the social ecology of the neighbourhood.

Social Networks and Social Capital

Social networks are intrinsic to the definition of neighbourhood which is conceived as having both geographic and social dimensions, particularly in urban areas (Bridge, 2002, Bulmer, 1986). Putnam (1993) is largely credited with the early conceptualisation of social capital. Morrow (2001a) however, is critical of the limitations of Putnam's model in relation to children's engagement. She argues that he centres his conceptualisation on civic and essentially political participation, thereby largely excluding children's presence in society as social actors, as they do not have the right to vote.

As the present study demonstrates, children are frequently spatially as well as socially linked to parts of wider social networks of kin and family (parental) friends, in what Morrow (1999a) describes as a web of interlinked networks. Social networks are important sources of information, support and practical assistance (Tracey and Whittaker, 1990). Mapping the social ecology of the neighbourhood showed the children to be embedded in durable and reliable networks of caring family, extended family and other supportive adults, although the configurations of such varied among the group. However, what was common was the children's perception of being supported and cared for. The perceived availability of support has been identified to be as important as actualised support (Tracey and Whittaker, *op cit*). The children perceived themselves to belong to social networks within which they were valued and loved, and were both receivers and contributors of reciprocal benefits. Parents, older siblings and extended family members were the primary sources of practical and material support and the children seemed to have ready and regular access to this resource.

It has been suggested that the time adults have most friends in their neighbourhood is during the time of their life when they are caring for children, thereby being linked into social and institutional structures and networks with other parents or carers or with organisations providing services to children and families (Bulmer, 1986; Hasler, 1995).

In this sense, it can be seen that children are a source and an enabler of social capital and linkage to adults in community life in ways that provide benefits such as social cohesion, social networking and bridging, highlighting the reciprocal qualities of these relationships.

A range of other adults in the community such as children's services providers, were perceived as providing practical support and opportunities for recreation as well as informational and emotional support to those children who took part. Neighbours, and especially parents of friends, were important network members and even retailers of everyday commodities (such as sweets, food and fuel) were named as supportive and helpful. These 'everyday' sources, often overlooked in research on social support networks can be important sources of both real and perceived support, contributing to children's sense of belonging and safety in their community (Spilsbury, 2005).

Teachers, particularly those who showed an interest in the children beyond the classroom – through sports and other extra curricular activities, or who were experienced simply as being 'nice' were also identified as sources of support, information and benefit. Such relationships contribute to children's sense of connectedness to school in middle childhood and have been shown to have benefits both in terms of health and school participation (Thompson et al., 2006), demonstrating again the value of *supportive links* functioning across settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Children who experience adversity have been shown to benefit substantially from rich and diverse social networks, especially those linked to their parents and carers (Jack, 2000; Ponrenke, 2007). Social support and social capital, especially where present in family and friendship networks may also help to ameliorate the effects of poverty, particularly as it impacts directly on children's lives (Attree, 2004). In many instances, such networks can buffer against, or compensate for, challenges such as financial or other family stresses (Desmond et al., 1998; Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007).

In this study children's accounts indicated that their support networks frequently contributed to extending their recreational opportunities (holidays, trips), providing alternative sources of support and care (babysitting, sharing care) and creating opportunities for peer friendships (cousins). This actual and perceived support was highly valued and appreciated, giving the recipients a strong sense of being cared for, supported and nurtured. Given the extent to which the majority of children presented themselves as happy, optimistic and positive about their neighbourhood, despite the varying levels of adversity and risk they were exposed to, it is likely that this experience of social support was an important factor.

It was also apparent that inter-generational bonds, which were often both socially and spatially linked to the children's neighbourhood life, served to enhance their sense of identity, connectedness and place attachment (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Spencer and Blades, 1993). However, as Bridge (2002) points out, it is possible for network structures to have both positive and negative effects.

The sorts of network closure useful for mutual support of children in a neighbourhood might also act as a form of social control that stifles individual mobility and extra-neighbourhood contact.

(p. 23-24).

One of the recognised disadvantages of very closely knit networks is that they can tend to limit children's exposure to wider or more diverse experiences, values or perspectives (Warr, 2005) and this appeared as a factor in this neighbourhood. It was evident that considerable effort and resources had been marshalled in order to make provision for children and young people within the community, to impressive effect. A number of recreational, sports and out-of-school services had been developed in the area. If there were to be any criticism of these efforts, it might be that there was an over emphasis on internal 'bonding' capital, focused on local integration and clustering of provision in a central location, as illustrated by this service provider's comment.

Somehow you have to have a central location for each of these to mix in and they're all small areas, but if you give each area its own resources you're sort of segregating, and you don't need segregation.

(Local Service Provider 2)

Judging by some of the preferences and suggestions expressed by the children, this policy may have been at the expense of smaller scale localised provision, such as simple play facilities or the frequently cited '*goals and nets*'. At the other end of spectrum, it also tended not to develop the potential for bridging capital, expanding children's opportunities outside the boundaries of the estate itself. The benefits of an expanded approach to social capital building which emphasises bridging, as well as bonding, both diversifying and expanding sources of social capital, has been promoted as a strategy for community development (Body-Gendrot and Gittell, 2003; Gittell and Vidall, 1998).

Reaching beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood is important in an ecological sense, creating links and accessing the wider social, economic and political systems which impact on and shape children's lives. Social networks relationships (meso-systems) can support transitions between settings in the micro-system, thereby facilitating children's movement between and competence within a range of settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This can be a particularly important dimension in the design of social capital building strategies for children and young people, whose access to wider networks of support may be limited due to age or lack of resources. In addition, their capacity to interact with and influence these wider spheres can be curtailed for similar reasons. Social support and social capital have been shown to have ameliorating or buffering effects, and to be significant contributors to the development of resilience (Gilligan, 2000).

Resilience

The concept of resilience, frequently juxtapositioned with that of risk, has been the subject of research over many years (Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen, 1984; Howard, Dryden, and Johnson, 1999; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1979, 1990; Werner and Smith, 1992). The children's positive presentation of their neighbourhood and daily life offered in this study, strongly suggests a capacity for resilience and an ability to transcend, to some degree, many of the challenges and adversities confronting them in their neighbourhood and community - at least at this point in their life history. The children clearly perceived themselves to be cared for and supported by reliable, durable and committed networks of adults - primarily parents, but also grandparents and other relatives (Shumow et al., 1999).

All named close friends whom they valued and who they felt valued them, and again, these relationships were enduring and for the most part appeared reliable (Attree, 2004).

The high priority and value placed by the children on the combination of accessible outdoor play space with available friends and peers with whom to play would seem to suggest that this combination of factors may well provide an important source of buffering from many of the concerns and adversities confronting the children and additionally can be seen as an important contributory factor in their resilience and optimistic outlook.

The nature of the children's play is also a factor to consider. Physically active play is strongly associated not alone with children's physical health, but also with their mental health, for example in promoting free expression of feelings and emotion and in coping with stress (Mulvihill, Rivers, and Aggleton, 2000). Play and autonomous action has also been found to support children's coping with and recovery from trauma (Boyden, 2003). Another characteristic of play is that it is absorbing. Children engaged in physically active play are highly concentrated, in effect, focused on the immediate, in essence, present in the present. This may serve to remove them from past or future concerns (the core of risk) (Lupton, 1999). In considering the positive and optimistic presentation of children in the study, despite exposure in some cases to considerable challenges and risks, the value of their accessible and expansive physically active outdoor play in promoting resilience should not be underestimated.

However, the hazards and risks associated with some aspects of their use of public space in the neighbourhood present the children who participated in this study with stark challenges which they are forced to negotiate in the enactment of their daily lives in this neighbourhood.

Negotiating among Hazards and Risks

The kinds of risks and hazards occasionally or routinely faced by the children participating in this study make grim reading. Contemporary concern for children's safety has grown exponentially over the past twenty years (Furedi, 1997; Gill, 2007; Valentine, 2004).

This is often in relation to fears or anxieties that are sometimes more perceived than real such as fears about 'stranger danger', exposure to traffic and concerns about dangers emanating from new technologies such as internet use (Beck, 1992). Increasingly, these concerns are used as rationales to limit children's freedom of movement and independence and increase their surveillance (Gill, 2007; Tandy, 1999; McKendrick, 2000; Valentine, 1998; Valentine and Holloway, 2001). However, the risks routinely encountered either directly or indirectly by children in this neighbourhood are of a proportion many parents would find hard to conceive, let alone manage. The children's accounts graphically revealed the extent to which the behaviour of others in the environment impacts on their daily lives, affecting their play, free movement, perceived and actual safety.

Strategies for safety management by both children and parents and the impact of these on children's negotiation of daily living within the neighbourhood setting were revealed, demonstrating the kinds of constructions and contingencies which children and parents use to accommodate or avoid risk. For example, as described by Carrie:

I go down (to a park adjacent to the neighbourhood) with my friends and sometimes my mother comes as well with my friends, cos you know it might be sunny out and it might be like 4 o'clock and I'm not allowed to go down there on my own after half three, it would be too dangerous on my own so, there could be like gangs and all.

(Carrie)

Such strategies have been found to be welcomed by children when they feel they are being cared for and protected, but resented when they intrude on or constrain their autonomy (Kelley et al., 1998).

The key concerns identified by the children generally fell into two categories, with some areas of overlap. Firstly, there were risks that emanated from the behaviours of groups or individuals in the neighbourhood involved in anti-social behaviour or crime. Secondly, hazards arising from the institutional failure to address issues of environmental estate management, specifically in relation to refuse and vacant dwellings.

Anti-social Behaviour and Crime

Behaviours and practices performed by others who occupy the same physical spaces (but at other times), were transmitted to the children's daily experiences through the traces left on the landscape – the detritus of bonfires and broken glass, for example, resulting from night-time outdoor drinking. Vandalism, damage to the local environment, violence and crime transacted in the micro-settings of others created a kind of 'shadow' world which insinuated itself into the children's day time experience. The resulting risks and hazards created in their physical and social ecologies sometimes forced children to retreat indoors, to avoid particular places, or indeed to directly confront and negotiate risks as they went about their daily lives, as also noted by Hill et al. (2006). As Bronfenbrenner (1979) outlined, positive and supportive links based on trust and a positive orientation to the developing person promote and facilitate positive outcomes, but equally the reverse applies.

Participation in anti-social behaviour has been associated with poor parental supervision, peer identification and early school leaving, the latter as both cause and outcome (Barnes et al., 2006; Woodward and Fergusson, 2000). The children who drew attention to it however, emphatically rejected the anti-social behaviour prevalent in their neighbourhood, repeatedly highlighting its negative impacts, both on their individual experiences and on the lives on their fellow residents, both children and adults. Their accounts of parents' supervision and monitoring of their movements and activities, involvement in their social networks and expressed concern for their safety and welfare would indicate that the attitudes and values evident in the children's responses were shared within their families and social networks. The children's own responses to perceived and experienced risks demonstrated their moral viewpoint.

Daytime activities during the children's free time were characterised by extensive periods spent outdoors, in the company of other children and with little or no direct supervision by adults, although the vast majority of the children reported that their parents knew where they were and who they were with. During the night time, a very different picture emerged.

As outlined in Chapter Four, the impression given by many of the children was of a neighbourhood which was transformed during the hours of darkness. Children (as young as seven years of age), reported knowledge of shootings, assaults and murders as part of their lived experience, in some cases, directly involving family members, relatives or neighbours. Robbed cars driven at speed and subsequently burnt out on their streets was a routine night-time phenomenon. An active and insidious drug culture had insinuated itself into children's play sites, evidenced by their exposure to abandoned syringe needles in grass areas and alleyways. Broken glass and 'bonfire' remains - the detritus of open-air drinking - were cited and photographed frequently. Disrupted sleep caused by people congregating late at night and the rows or fights which frequently ensued, provoked anxiety and well as frustration and annoyance.

There was no direct evidence that the children who participated in the study had personal involvement in the kinds of serious anti-social behaviour which was described. The impression given was that they did not condone or support such behaviour. However, a number did report at times being out at play in the neighbourhood until quite late in the evening, particularly during school summer holidays and some gave examples of being confronted with aggression on the part of others. Others described more minor incidents of what might be considered anti-social or nuisance behaviour - 'egging' houses, knocking on doors and running away, climbing onto roofs of buildings to annoy caretakers or to turn off security cameras.

It would be naïve to assume that some children would not get drawn into aspects of such behaviour, even though they may choose to be selective in what they would inform an adult researcher working in a school setting about. Ungar (2005) suggests that anti-social behaviour may be a way for children and young people to develop strong personal identities as strategies which support them to cope with adversity, a view shared by Leonard (2007).

The children's accounts did not give an impression of an effective response to criminal activity, either on the part of the Gardai, or within the community itself.

CCTV cameras, monitored by the Community Development Project, were widely used within the estate as a neighbourhood safety and crime deterrent measure and while they may have had some effect, clearly they were not effective in relation to the types of behaviour described by the children such as the presence of stolen cars. The cameras were monitored by local people (rather than Gardai) and anecdotally, it had been suggested locally that individuals may at times be subject to intimidation and that cameras might be averted from certain areas, at certain times, as a result.

While there was evidence of police response to reported incidents, from the children's perspective, it did not appear to be effective and they were aware that efforts by the police to deal with situations arising were sometimes thwarted. Some children cited a need for more '*police presence*' in the neighbourhood, (a phrase possibly overheard from adult discussions or media coverage) and for more cameras and security measures. The perception of ineffectiveness, combined with a strong sense of ambivalence towards the Gardai expressed by some of the boys, created the impression of a neighbourhood in the grip of an 'after hours' culture of crime and anti-social behaviour which was resistant to efforts to eradicate it. But children were not only exposed to risk as a result of criminal or anti-social behaviour. Institutional neglect and failure to implement adequate standards of housing stock management on the part of the local authority was also a contributing factor and this is now discussed.

Management of Vacant Houses

Many children identified vacant houses in the neighbourhood as a serious concern. The management and maintenance of the housing stock on the estate fell far short of standard local authority guidelines on estate management, which typically state:

When local authority houses become vacant prior to re-letting these houses shall be brought up to a proper standard. It is important that this work is undertaken in the shortest timeframe possible due to the possibility of vandalism to vacant dwellings and also the poor public image of having houses vacant where there is a general need for housing⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ Longford County Council estate management guidelines

Poor management of vacant dwellings, or *voids* as they are called, can give rise to a sense of dereliction in estates, particularly where the rate of vacancy is such as to render an estate, or parts of an estate, undesirable and difficult to let. This can create a downward spiral in terms of dissatisfaction and desire to move among tenants (Norris, 2001). While it must be acknowledged that local authorities require the co-operation of tenants and have little control over people who perpetrate acts of vandalism, nonetheless, they hold the primary responsibility for the maintenance and security of vacant stock and, under the terms of their own policies, have an obligation to manage this function as an integral part of effective estate management.

Similarly, the dumping of refuse in the study neighbourhood (collection of which had been contracted out to a private company) had become a serious health hazard with putrid rubbish and infestations of rats common in parts of the estate. Frequently this was linked to vacant dwellings, which were used as dumping sites. Decaying refuse posed a serious health risk to children and families, particularly those living close to 'black spots'. But it posed an even higher risk to children who use the local environment as their main site of outdoor play and social activity. The views of service providers interviewed differed in their perception of why this problem had become so prevalent. Some, as outlined in Chapter Five, associated it with the privatisation of refuse collection and the associated costs. Others attributed it to a lack of personal responsibility on the part of individuals. While both factors may have contributed, it was clear that the problem had grown beyond the point at which it could be successfully tackled by individual tenants, or indeed the local environment maintenance project run by the Community Development Project.

In this regard, I would suggest that the local authority has a dual role: firstly, to systematically clear dumped refuse and, where possible, identify those responsible and secondly, to ensure that an efficient and equitable system is maintained. Actively engaging the community, including children and young people, in identifying long term solutions is likely to provide a more satisfactory response than that which currently prevails.

The children were very animated in their desire to see these matters addressed. A number of the children used their cameras to record and highlight the issue. Some suggested a poster campaign, and one class session was dedicated to designing posters encouraging people not to litter (later used in the end of project school display). This represents a very practical example of how children's experiences and views and the solutions they proposed, can be harnessed to address local concerns such as refuse.

Harnessing Children's Local Expertise

The children who participated in this study clearly demonstrated their in-depth local expertise and their acute awareness of many facets of their neighbourhood's culture, practices and characteristics. As active users of the public spaces in their local neighbourhood, the children's accounts of their place and space use were illuminating and informative, providing potentially valuable insights for those involved in policy, planning or provision at local and national level. Such expertise can provide an important 'insider' perspective of benefit to planners working at both a spatial and temporal distance (Horelli, 1998; Roe, 2007).

Adult conceptualisations of childhood spaces and spaces for children are frequently romanticised and based on abstract ideas about fictional children (Honeyman, 2001). As this study testifies, living children have valuable expertise and knowledge of their local environment and of the kinds of places and spaces they require and desire. During middle childhood as primary users of outdoor and public space in their neighbourhoods, children are exposed to a wide range of opportunities and risks (Hart, 1979; Matthews and Limb, 2000; Moore, 1986a). Many of these opportunities are perhaps unknown or undervalued by adults and therefore are at risk of being overlooked in decisions around planning, development or indeed, regeneration (Matthews, 2003). Unstructured outdoor play is becoming a more and more rarefied commodity in many urban landscapes (Valentine, 2004; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Therefore, planning for neighbourhood development and play provision should encompass a review of children's play preferences ensuring equitable provision of opportunity for all ages and both genders (Gilliland et al., 2006) and ample opportunity for unstructured active outdoor play in a safe but satisfying environment (McKendrick, 2000).

If such opportunities are to be effectively realised a number of relevant issues must be considered. The first relates to establishing systems, methods and mechanisms, not alone for consulting with children and accessing their views, but also for actively including them in decision-making processes (Hart, 2007; Matthews, 2003). The second relates to time and its meaning in the lives of children and young people. Local development planning processes inevitably take considerable time, frequently extending to years from outset to implementation. This can render them effectively meaningless to children's lives in the present. To make such processes meaningful and inclusive of children, short term, concrete goals and outcomes need to be identified and achieved. Until policy moves beyond rhetoric into real and relevant practice, children will continue to be denied a voice in matters that concern them and will not be afforded the rights of participation theoretically guaranteed them by ratification of the UNCRC (1989).

Before moving to a conclusion of this chapter, two other issues warrant attention. These were not issues named by the children, but did arise tangentially from the data, and have serious implications for their lived experience. They are the issues of poverty and the related issue of educational disadvantage.

Poverty as a Context in Children's Lives

That poverty has a deleterious impact on children's health and well-being, life quality and future outcomes, is established beyond refute (Attree, 2004, 2006; Bradshaw, 2003a; McLellan, 2002; McLeod and Nonnemaker, 2000). Poor children are additionally constrained by consequences of poverty in terms of limited resources and opportunities (Ridge, 2002). Threshold or access criteria for services can lack an inclusive focus and fail to promote the development of social support (McLeod, Baker, and Black, 2006). Potential benefits can carry a burden of stigma (Ridge, 2002; Warr, 2005). Because of the widespread use of means-testing to assess eligibility for income support or other benefits, many families on low or irregular income can be excluded from receipt of additional or occasional supports. As a result, they may experience 'pockets' of poverty or more generalised social exclusion, which impact on the opportunities of all family members, frequently disproportionately so on children (Bradshaw, 2000; Jack, 2000).

Until recently, relatively little work has been done on exploring children's direct experience and views on poverty in their lives, thereby excluding an essential and informed voice from the discourse (Daly and Leonard, 2002; Ridge, 2003; Robinson, McIntyre, and Officer, 2005).

The focus of this study was firmly placed on the participating children's perceptions, experiences and views. No attempt was made to formally assess household income, although local service providers were asked for their impressions of the prevalence of poverty in the area. The participating children did not overtly classify themselves as poor. The living situations described by most would not conform to many of the standard definitions of consistent poverty which cite criteria such as lacking private transport, family holidays, adequate food, clothing, footwear and recreational activities.

Indeed, a number of children referred at various times to '*poor people*', clearly identifying them as 'other' than themselves. At one point, after such as reference, I asked a child '*are there any poor people in [neighbourhood]?*' To which he replied a definitive '*no*'.

Indications of children's awareness or experience of poverty in the study were gleaned from their comments about money or costs in relation to holidays, school trips, questions about possible costs associated with participation in the project (of which there were none) and specific references to money itself. During the course of the study a number of children commented from time to time about the cost of the materials used – cameras and film development, arts and crafts materials and an outing. Some children asked the price of things, while others commented: '*You bought all that for us?*' One child hesitated to accept a camera, until reassured that he would not have to ask his mother to pay for it.

While such comments are not evidence of poverty *per se*, they indicate an awareness of financial issues and possible constraints associated with them. As Ridge (2003) also found, one or two children in this study appeared to be very conscious of their parents struggling financially. These children reported efforts they made to protect them, either by not making demands they felt their parents could not meet, or by using their own resources, as the example given by Jack (Chapter Six) of saving money for his school trip.

For others, participation in activities provided by voluntary organisations such as the St. Vincent De Paul⁴⁷ which provided summer activity programmes in the area, indicated that families might be experiencing financial hardship.

Local service providers rebuffed the notion that serious poverty was a factor for the majority of families in the neighbourhood, despite its 'disadvantaged' designation.

Some of the kids here would come from families where the parents may be working, the grandparents may be working, there may be no needs, no wants in there, if a kid wants something, he just gets it.

(Local Service Provider 2)

There is no poverty here, and I don't care what anyone says, there is no poverty here, now you can't say anybody is very well off here, but there is not poverty here, it's just bad management, that's all that's here, bad management.

(Local Service Provider 3⁴⁸)

However, poverty is also defined in terms of relativities and social exclusion.

If you're a single parent living in a community with 3 or 4 children you're not going to be able to bring those kids swimming at €4 or €5 each on a regular basis.

(Local Service Provider 2)

In addition, it is established that children are frequently disproportionately impacted by poverty within households and that household resources are not always equitably distributed (Cantillon et al., 2004). Such relativities often become more apparent to children and young people when they enter secondary school and meet a wider and more socially mixed population against which they may compare their own circumstances (Ridge, 2003).

In this study, the primary school served the neighbourhood catchment and almost all of the children attending lived within the catchment area. However, their transition to secondary school will bring them into a broader catchment area and a more diverse social mix.

⁴⁷ St. Vincent de Paul Society is a charitable organisation whose stated aim is to tackle poverty in all its forms through the provision of practical assistance to those in need.

⁴⁸ Also a long-time local resident

It is at this point that the relativities of economic status can become more obvious and as young people's self-concept and self-identity is renegotiated during adolescence, their awareness of difference and of their specific economic relativities can become acute (Daly and Leonard, 2002), impacting on their sense of acceptance and belonging.

Middle childhood is a period when children commonly develop more autonomous interests in hobbies and activities beyond the family, immediate home range and local neighbourhood (Votruba-Drzal, 2006). It is a time when exposure to a range of new experiences is important (Kellmer-Pringle, 1975). However, it is also a time when the effects of poverty may serve to limit children's access to opportunity in many spheres. In a context where opportunities are limited and public supports are restricted to specific 'target' groups, many children who do not meet certain criteria or thresholds may lose out (Coulton and Korbin, 2007).

Children's direct experience of poverty is not well researched and measures of its impact are generally taken from adult outcome perspectives such as educational completion, marital and parental status and welfare dependency (Attree, 2004). It has been suggested that such limitations imposed by poverty can impact on children's self concept and aspirations, perhaps leading to an over-identification with traditional roles, relations and cultural norms, at the expense of educational or other aspirations (Connolly and Healy, 2004). At this time, targeted interventions can be effective in terms of future trajectories and behaviours, giving children the opportunity to develop both social and life skills (Aber et al., 2003; Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1996). This study indicates that relativities can be much more finely situated than broad definitions assumed by social address labels such as *disadvantaged* would imply. Policy responses that fail to recognise this may fall short of effective penetration.

Educational Disadvantage

While not a focus of the study, nonetheless the data⁴⁹ revealed serious evidence of educational disadvantage among some of the participating children.

⁴⁹ E.g. written materials provided by the children during the study and the participation by a number of them in remedial or learning support programmes within the school

Levels of literacy among some participants were poor, as evidenced by their completion of written logs, observation of their class participation and their involvement in remedial supports. The study was completed just one academic year prior to the children's transfer to second level, where the demands of a subject based curriculum were likely to present some of them with considerable challenges. For some, the risk of early school leaving or finishing school without attaining minimal qualifications was therefore potentially high. As is well established in the poverty related literature, this is likely to lead to poor employment prospects, low-skill / low paid work and a continuing cycle of disadvantage (NESF, 2002).

While the underlying causes of children's learning difficulties were not explored, it is recognised that both genetic and environmental factors can play a role (Boldt et al., 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1992; Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson, 2005; Solon, Page, and Duncan, 2000). Neighbourhood has been cited as one such factor (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov et al., 1993).

Similarly to poverty, educational disadvantage is a relative term. Children and young people tend to be educationally disadvantaged relative to their peers and to the expectations of the society in which they live (Combat Poverty Agency, 2003).

In the opinion of this researcher, formed on the basis of many years professional experience in community based early years services in disadvantaged communities, the primary school education system in Ireland is predicated on the assumption that children come to school with a well-established grounding in pre-literacy knowledge and skills. For the majority of children this is undoubtedly the case, but for those for whom it is not, a much more intensive and concentrated effort is required to ensure that they reach an adequate standard of pre-literacy, within the first three years of primary school. This issue is clearly one of wider social and economic relevance. It has implications for the availability and quality of early year's services, for the development of adult and family literacy programmes and, at its core, for the eradication of child and family poverty as a primary contributor to educational disadvantage (Entwisle et al., 2005; Solon et al., 2000).

However, clearly the formal education system must play a much more proactive and effective role in ensuring that all children derive equitable benefits and achieve comparable outcomes from their school attendance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study findings suggest that neighbourhoods are not homogenous zones, comprised of children (and indeed adults) whose experience is universally common or comparable, or readily categorised. Neighbourhoods are diverse, finely nuanced and dynamic, varying over space and time and both affording opportunity and presenting challenges to their residents in a variety of ways. This study found that children's experiences are more diverse and subtle than many broad based quantitative profiles indicate and that 'social address' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is an insufficient measure. The children who participated in this study revealed a range of experiences, perceptions and responses to their neighbourhood which clearly evidences this. Nonetheless, indicators have been established which are known to play a significant role in determining the balance of opportunity or risk which a neighbourhood provides (Bartlett, et al., 1999). Evidence from this study would suggest that:

- Spaces that afford unstructured and unprescribed play and activity are highly favoured by children.
- Children's interests are diverse and changing and spaces that support a variety of usages are more likely to meet a wider range of needs and interests than narrow, rigid and inflexible provision.
- Gender is an important consideration. Provision for girls' active participation in sports and other popular recreational activities such as dance is highly desirable.
- Spaces that encourage inter-and multi-generational uses tend to be safer, better used, more easily maintained and therefore less likely to succumb to dereliction.

The priorities identified by children in this study, both the core group and throughout the survey responses, are clearly defined. Space and friends combined to provide autonomous, self-directed play were a top priority. Familiarity, safety (both social and environmental) and belonging come next.

Provision of recreational opportunity with a strong but not exclusive, emphasis on sport (primarily swimming and soccer) follows. Finally, the children indicated an interest in access to a range of specific programmes and amenities, including cultural and commercial options such as a library, cinema, shops and restaurants. Adapting Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, children's priorities are presented in Fig. 7.1, overleaf.

Despite the many risks, adversities and challenges experienced by participants in this study, they remained largely optimistic, enthused and solution focused. The children displayed interest and energy in addressing issues that impact on the neighbourhood and on their quality of life. They displayed a highly developed moral agency (Mayall, 2002) and generated sensible, practical and implementable suggestions for how their neighbourhood could be made a better place for children.

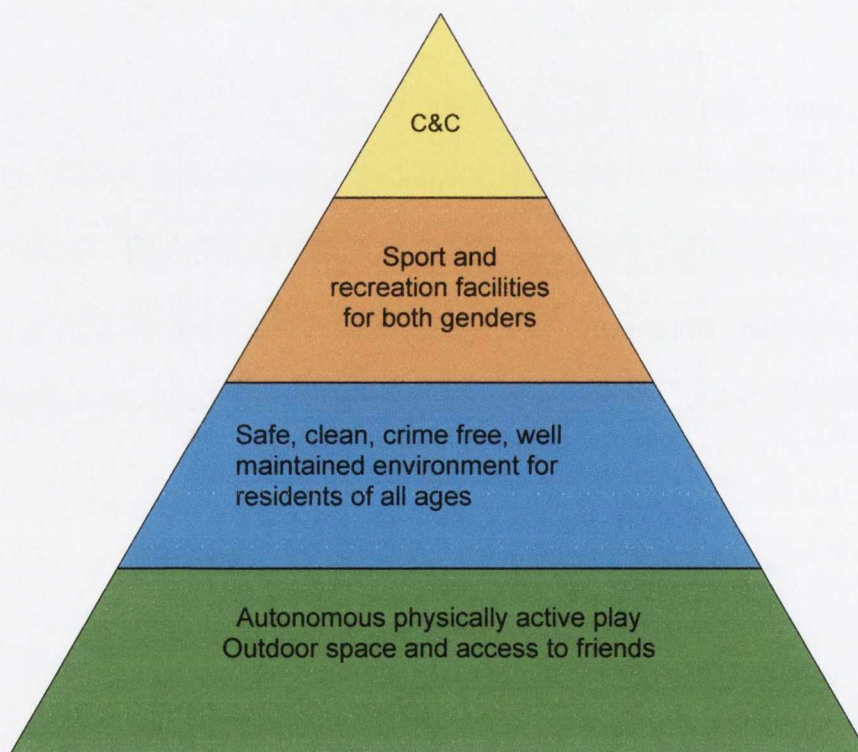


Fig: 7.1 Children's Priorities for Neighbourhood Provision

(C & C = Culture and Commercial – e.g. shops, library, cinema etc)

They demonstrated an understanding not alone of their own individual and peer preferences, but also awareness of and social empathy for others residents, particularly younger children and older people.

This positive orientation represents a 'window of opportunity' which may not endure. Comparable studies of teenagers and young adults have been characterised by negativity, expressed as pessimism or cynicism. Adolescents have been found to be less likely to actively engage in the delivery of solutions to challenges and adversity and in broader civic and democratic participation (Daly and Leonard, 2002; Schiavo, 1988). There is an opportunity to be grasped here, a harnessing of children's motivation as well as expertise, that bears serious consideration.

Unfortunately, it is currently an opportunity that is largely being missed. Children's knowledge, views and expertise are not routinely tapped in planning and decision-making. Despite a strong policy framework which endorses children's participation (OMC, 2000), the practice of consulting children in meaningful ways is not well established. For example, the local authority with responsibility for this neighbourhood had not (at this time) developed a play policy, nor had it engaged in any structured process for accessing and including the views of children of this age in its decision making.

Research would indicate that many of the factors which were present in some of the children's lives – lone parent household, consistent or relative poverty, educational disadvantage (frequently in combination) – are predictive of later involvement in anti-social behaviour in adolescence or adulthood (Barnes et al., 2006; Dishion, Capaldi, and Yoerger, 1999; Graber and Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Haynes, Reading, and Gale, 2003). Yet at this point, the children who participated in the study who witnessed such behaviour, directly or indirectly, in their neighbourhood strongly rejected it. So the question must be asked: What factors influence such a dramatic change in values and attitudes leading to participation in anti-social behaviour by children and young people who would previously have ardently decried such behaviour in their neighbourhood? And perhaps, more importantly: What can be done to support children to maintain the pro-social attitudes and values that they displayed during middle childhood? Ultimately however, reduction or removal of the factors which are known to contribute to young people's engagement with anti-social behaviour, which are socially constructed and policy related is the only socially just, effective and sustainable approach (Lane, 2001).

Finally, the qualities, aspirations and ambitions that children value and hold for their neighbourhood, as exemplified in this case study, and reflected in others, (Bartlett, 2002, 2005) are ones that would benefit all residents, young and old. Current wisdom derived from studies such as 'Child Friendly Cities' and others (Bartlett et al, 2001; Chawla, 2002; Percy-Smith, 2006) indicates that child-friendly neighbourhoods benefit all who live there and that multi- and inter- generational usage enhances safety, well-being and social capital building for all. On this note, I move to reflect on and draw conclusions from the study's findings.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Reflections and Conclusions

Our ignorance of the environmental behaviour of children is in some respects to children's advantage, for adults so often have such limited notions of what is safe and desirable for them that too much knowledge could be prohibitive to children's development.

(Hart, 1979, p. 3)

Introduction

This research project was an in-depth case study of the daily lives of a group of children aged 9 – 12 years of age, focusing on the interaction between the spatial and temporal 'ecological niches' (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) of neighbourhood and middle childhood. With due regard to Hart's sentiment above, the study focused specifically on the children's informal and unstructured place and space use, particularly their 'free-time', daily routines and time spent out of school during afternoons, evenings, weekends and holiday times in a diverse range of micro-settings. The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992) provided a framework within which children's phenomenological experience was examined, temporally, systemically and relationally, in the range of settings that they occupy in their daily life. The positioning of children within the model as active contributors, both influencing and being influenced by their environment, resonates with the positioning of children within this study as local 'experts'. The children's accounts of their lived experiences and perceptions of their neighbourhood reflect the penetration of influences from all layers of the ecological system, both proximal and remote.

This final chapter aims to draw together and reflect on the learning from the study, highlighting key messages distilled from the findings. It begins by reflecting on the efficacy of the methods used and the extent to which the second research question has been adequately addressed in terms of accessing and presenting children's lived experience. Key messages arising from the data are then presented with reflections on their relevance and implications for promoting a better understanding of children's lived experience.

The chapter moves on to suggest three propositions based on the analysis of children's identified priorities and finally, the potential contribution which the study offers to the fields of childhood studies and participative research with children is discussed.

Reflection on the Research Methods and Process

The nature of this inquiry was essentially qualitative and participative, underpinned by a constructivist approach. As it was an innovative approach to a new area of study with children in Ireland, a second research question, focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the methods used in eliciting children's views was posed and examined.

The methods were drawn and adapted from a growing cache of participative research methods used with children and young people (Driskell, 2002; McAuley, 2002). A constructivist research approach was employed emphasising authenticity, truthfulness and inclusion (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This informed the selection of data generating methods, which accommodated the young participants' agency and allowed their views to influence the data generation process. The methods were found to be highly effective both from the perspective of promoting children's active involvement in the research process and as a means of facilitating them to reveal and reflect on aspects of their daily lives. More significant perhaps, than the methods, *per se*, was the *process* of working with the children that was adopted throughout the fieldwork. This was in keeping with a constructivist approach to research.

At its outset, the study had two underpinning aims:

1. To gain a greater understanding and insight into the daily lives of children in their neighbourhood.
2. To develop, implement and evaluate methods to engage with children in order to access and adequately present their experiences and views to a range of diverse audiences.

The methods chosen facilitated the active participation of the children, whilst the approach which positioned them as 'local experts' allowed them to influence the research development in a central way. Specifically the methods, particularly the visual methods, provided the children with a degree of choice in deciding what data to generate and include. Within this, the children's insistence on including their social ecology in the photographic phase of the study opened up the possibility of examining this aspect of their daily lives on their terms, without which so much meaningful data might have been overlooked. This demonstrates the extent to which the 'live' engagement with children by adults who are receptive to their views and appreciative of their local expert knowledge is so important. It can produce a powerful two-way exchange to which both parties contribute and from which both can learn.

Throughout the study, the children had the opportunity to reveal, explore, discuss and explain their lived experiences, within a process that was respectful and appreciative of their expertise. The implementation process was managed in a way which was flexible and responsive to the children's priorities and allowed for an examination of emerging themes and ideas in greater depth. The duration of the fieldwork, over a twelve month period, had value at two levels. At a temporal level, it allowed an exploration of seasonal variations and events and revealed differences in terms of activities and opportunities connected to different times of year. More importantly, in terms of engagement with the study participants it allowed for the development of a trusting and equitable relationship with the children in which they progressively developed greater ownership of the research process.

The study methods used were tailored and adapted to respond to the children's initiatives and to investigate emerging themes in greater depth, for example, accommodating the children's wish to include friends in their photographs and using area maps as a means of developing their suggestions for neighbourhood improvements. Focus group discussions were used to explore the areas of friendship and relationships with adults, which emerged as important themes from the early data. From these discussions, specific local service providers who featured prominently in the children's daily lives were identified and subsequently interviewed. The flexibility and responsiveness of this approach demonstrates the efficacy of using an emergent design over an extended contact period which both strengthened and enriched the findings.

The research 'products' – photographs, drawings and children's own words - functioned effectively as means to present the children's views and perceptions of their neighbourhood in ways which are authentic and accessible to a range of audiences, both child and adult. This recognises that

'[L]anguage is an abstraction about experience, whereas pictures are concrete representations of experience'

(Postman, 1994, p. 73).

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of text and image based media in attempting to convey the experiential, present, lived reality of a child's daily life. As Heft and Chawla (2006) tell us:

A person outdoors encounters a dynamic, dense, multi-sensory flow of diversely structured information. In contrast, in secondary experience, when others tell about the world second-hand through a text or image, this information is radically reduced – literally in most cases to two dimensions.

(p. 209)

As researcher, I relied on words, images and observations to access and understand children's daily lives (Banister and Booth, 2005). In undertaking the fieldwork, I had the distinct advantage of being able to spend considerable time in the children's company, directly hearing their words with the richness of tone, accent, pace, emphasis, emotion, humour and intensity. I could also observe both the children's individual body language – gesticulation, expression, movement and eye contact - and their social interaction, all of which clarified meaning and context. In addition, the actual engagement in dialogue and discussion, face to face interaction and exchange was itself experiential and served to deepen and enhance my understanding and appreciation of the content of children's lives in ways that are difficult to transpose to text.

In formulating research findings within the context of theoretical, frequently objectifying frameworks, the extent to which children really understand what it is they have consented to in sharing their lived experience must also be questioned (Burke, Abramovitch, and Zlotkin, 2005). Despite these limitations it is hoped what is preserved and presented pays due respect to the children's contribution and succeeds in conveying an authentic account of the children's daily lives in their neighbourhood.

Their words and images provide us with a window through which we can focus an appreciative 'gaze' on at least some aspects of their world. With that in mind, the following key messages distilled from the analysis of the data are presented.

Key themes arising from the data analysis

The following seven themes have been collated from the data and are put forward as areas for consideration. While the findings which generated them are unique to this case study, these messages potentially have wider applicability. I would suggest they enable us to reflect on and gain new insight into children's daily lives in a neighbourhood setting, resulting in a greater appreciation of childhood and real children's lived experiences. Not least, they further demonstrate the value to be gained from accessing children's perspectives. In summary, the key themes are:

- Harnessing children's local 'expertise' to inform policy and planning in neighbourhood settings.
- The heterogeneity of children's experiences and neighbourhood life beyond the confines of 'social address'.
- Factors that serve to promote, constrain and even threaten children's lived experience and active participation in the social and physical ecology of their neighbourhood.
- Adult attitudes and conceptualisations which position children as outsiders.
- Appreciating children's 'presence in the present'.
- The social and physical ecology of neighbourhood as a context for the expression of children's agency.
- The value of space, friends and active outdoor play in children's daily lives.

Each of these messages is briefly elaborated below.

Harnessing Children's Local 'Expertise' to Inform Policy and Planning in Neighbourhood Settings

Recognition that the user, rather than the outsider, is the expert in matters of user-environment relationships has been professionally liberating for me.

(Moore, 1986a, p. xvi)

This study, in common with many others, demonstrates *'that children have experience and knowledge relevant to commenting on matters that affect them'* (Mayall, 2006a, p. 211). As hypothesised at the study's outset, the children who participated in this study clearly demonstrated a detailed local knowledge and expertise in relation to their neighbourhood. They used this to create and exploit opportunities for play, occupation and 'colonisation' of outdoor space which adults were not aware of or did not intend to be for children's use, in common with findings from similar studies (Hart, 2002; Moore, 1986a; Wheway and Millward, 1997). As well as being expert in its physical configuration, features and affordances, the children had in-depth knowledge of both positive and negative social dynamics and practices of the locality. This included events at 'exo' level in settings in which the children did not directly participate, but which had an impact on their daily lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This knowledge was used in the negotiation of transitions between and across settings at a meso-system level in decisions relating to use of place, companionship and timing of activities. This finding that children have a profound and insightful knowledge of their physical and social environment and a degree of detailed expertise has been corroborated persuasively in other studies (Chawla and Heft, 2002). That children's expertise is routinely ignored or unrecognised by adults in positions of power or influence has also been widely reported (Chawla et al., 2005; K. Malone, 2002; Matthews, 2003; Swart-Kruger, 2002).

In this study, the children's level of local expertise provided a perspective which was distinctive and insightful. It was clear however that this was largely unsought and unknown by adults. This absence means that such expertise is missing from key decision-making processes which impact directly and indirectly on children's lives in the present as well as on their future. Throughout the duration of the study, there were no formal structures to consult children in terms of local planning and provision.

While the practice of consulting and engaging children and young people has gained considerable momentum, at times the underlying attitudes of adult patronage and of 'knowing best' remain (Hart, 1992, 1997). The well-intentioned but dualistic attitudes of some adults were typified by a response of one adult service provider who, on the one hand recognised the value and necessity of talking to young people to find out what they wanted in services, but on the other, assumed that when they were enticed into services, young people would get what they 'need'.

*I believe someone has to go out and sit down on the street with the kids and find out what they want, because **we all know what they need**, [my emphasis] but you are going to have to give them what they want to get them in, to get what they need.*

(Local Service Provider 2)

In this respect, consulting with children and young people is used as a means of engagement rather than a participative planning or decision-making process. This highlights the reality that despite a growing discourse on children's rights and participation, there remains a disjuncture between adult rhetoric and the actual experience of children and young people in both personal and institutional spheres of governance (Morrow, 1999b). While within their own family systems, children's views may well be sought and/or expressed and taken account of, fundamentally they do not hold either the resources or the power to act independently or to significantly shape their lives in many regards (Butler, Robinson, and Scanlan, 2005; Cantillon et al., 2004).

Effective methods for consulting children and young people have been developed over the past decade or more (Speak, 2000). However, despite the growing cache of tools and the raft of policy documents which emphasise the value of participation (Agenda 21, UNCRC, NCS) (Chawla et al., 2005; Spencer and Woolley, 2000), there is little evidence that children's and young people's views are being incorporated in meaningful and sustained decision making processes (Horelli, 1997). Frequently adults' preconceptions and stereotyping of young people has prevented their views being taken seriously and accorded due consideration (Devlin, 2006; Matthews and Limb, 2000). Responses to what is perceived as 'the problem' of youth in public space commonly advocate structured activities and designated venues which often fail to engage children and young people's interest or to respond effectively to their needs (Hart, 2002).

Therefore, the value of including children's and young people's perspectives is not being realised, utilised or incorporated in ways that would make neighbourhood planning and provision more responsive and meaningful to them.

Recognising the Heterogeneity of Children's Experiences and Neighbourhood Life Beyond the Confines of 'Social Address'

This study highlights the strong elements of both commonality and striking diversity within a small sample of children in one neighbourhood. Differences in gender, family circumstances, parenting practices and children's own personal orientations, preferences and choices gave rise to individual, unique experiences and perceptions, in effect a variety of 'multiple childhoods' enacted and experienced in a common setting. Children's daily life in their neighbourhood, as Heft and Chawla (2006) also contend, was revealed as a complex, varied, multi-sensory and dynamic blend of physical and social actions, interactions and experiences enacted in a wide range of micro-settings.

Children's knowledge and expertise was situational and contextual, related to their individual as well as their collective experiences and rooted in their daily lived experience. Individually and collectively, the children's experiences were shown to be diverse and even surprising. The diversity of their life experience and their acute awareness of environmental concerns are just two such examples. They comprised of an array of contrasts and comparisons, the nuances of which are generally not represented in broad based profiles, such as those generated by 'social address' models of research (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) and equally rarely fully explored or appreciated in individual or family 'deficit' driven assessment or profiling (Bronfenbrenner, 1988b).

This research evidences that neighbourhoods and children's lives within them are not homogenous typecasts, as broad based definitions and classifications might imply. Children's individual situations, characters, values and aspirations vary substantially, frequently in ways that challenge and refute commonly constructed stereotypes (Devlin, 2006). For example, one child who presented as exceptionally bright, competent, articulate and ambitious (Jennifer) came from the largest family among the study group, a profile more commonly linked to poverty and educational disadvantage.

A detailed understanding of the many shades of difference in children's lives in a single neighbourhood points to the need to take a more finely tuned approach to local, and indeed national, planning and provision. From another perspective, the prevalence of media and social stereotyping of children, young people and indeed, whole communities, linked to social status or address can have a hugely damaging and exclusionary impact (Devlin, 2006). It can create barriers to wider social participation and jeopardise the development of social 'bridging' capital, which potentially effectively creates links to a wider pool of opportunity and resource (Warr, 2005).

Factors which Promote and Constrain Children's Neighbourhood Experiences

The children's accounts exposed a range of promoting and constraining factors which impacted on their experiences. Some emanated from themselves as active contributors while others arose from different parts of their environmental systems at micro, exo and macro levels. A focus on polarities serves to highlight the varied and diverse factors which both promote and constrain children's positive and satisfying experience of their neighbourhood in general, and their outdoor environment in particular. While children identified many factors that promote their positive experiences, they experienced many constraining factors also. Promoting factors such as children's agency, available outdoor space, access to plentiful friends and playmates, local knowledge and children's imaginative, adaptive powers serve to support children's autonomous active engagement.

However, many factors present in the neighbourhood also serve to constrain or impinge on this experience. These include hazards and risks emanating from both local crime and antisocial behaviour, but also from institutional neglect. Parents' fears linked both to these factors and to more generalised fears for children's safety – fear of abduction, for example – act as constraining factors as indeed do children's own fears and anxieties. Poverty was shown to be a constraining factor for some children, limiting access to wider opportunities beyond the neighbourhood based options. These and other factors are illustrated in Fig. 8.1, overleaf.

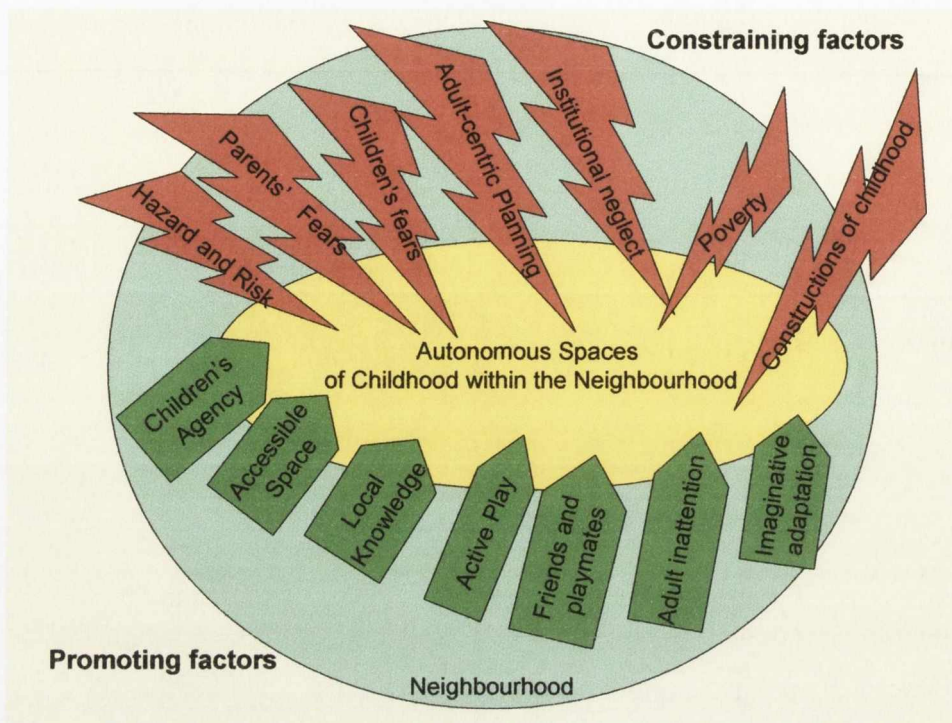


Fig: 8.1 Factors which promote and constrain children's autonomous use of space in their neighbourhood.

Adult-centric planning and constructions of childhood which view children as vulnerable or uninformed also place constraints on their participation, visibility and voice in decision-making.

Adult Conceptualisations and Attitudes that Position Children as Outsiders

Children and their presence in neighbourhoods or other public spaces is frequently conceptualised as problematic, leading to their marginalisation and exclusion from many areas (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Davis and Jones, 1997; Matthews, 1995; Valentine, 1996). Public spaces and developments are predominantly designed and built with adults in mind (Moore, 1986a). When children and young people are considered, it is most often in terms of the provision of 'token space' such as playgrounds and they are otherwise expected to fit in with adult priorities and usage (Matthews, 1995). Even in spaces which are designated as public, such as streets, parks or shopping areas, children are frequently perceived and responded to as if they were 'trespassers', in some way out of place or suspect by their very presence (Jenks, 2005).

As children do not own or control space or property (Childress, 2004), their access and usage is continually subject to adult sanction or permission whether benign or punitive, and at times by adults who have no greater claim on ownership of space than do children themselves (Adams, 1995; Moore, 1986a). Instances of children being 'moved on' from their own streets, or excluded from public sports facilities during winter months, demonstrated just some of the ways they can be cast as outsiders. Yet children do not have a forum to express their concerns or criticisms and adults generally find it unacceptable to be confronted by children about their behaviour (Lansdown, 1994). Other examples of exclusion and alienation also merit consideration.

Research internationally has shown that children who grow up with exposure to violence are less socially and academically motivated, less controlled in their own behaviour, less empathetic and more likely to use aggression (Newell, 1997). The prospect of being drawn into anti-social, gang related violence is a considerable risk for some children living in this environment. This is particularly so for some of the boys in the study who presented as being unafraid and therefore perhaps, more likely to participate in violence, as was found by Percy-Smith and Matthews (2001). In a neighbourhood which is beset by serious anti-social behaviour and crime perpetrated by a small but nonetheless powerful minority, many residents, including children and young people are forced to negotiate a balance between seeking personal safety, which may entail either avoidance or collusion and involvement, or exposing themselves or their families to serious risk.

The worrying evidence of early alienation, particularly in relation to some children's perceptions of, and relationships with, the Gardai is something that warrants attention. Negotiation of this key relationship may well be a decisive factor in either 'pushing' children and young people towards attitudes and modes of behaviour which are neither in their own interest nor in the interest of their community, rather than engaging them as pro-social citizens.

Collaborative partnership between the community both formally and informally, and statutory bodies, has been widely recognised as essential to promoting community safety, crime detection and prevention. The children demonstrated an awareness of the necessity for this, as was evident in their views about contacting the police when needed and their expressed wish for more security and safety.

However, the evidence of ambivalence and resentment towards the Gardai among a number of the participating boys highlights the need for a concerted strategy to combat alienation and to build community trust. This is an essential element in the process of creating more child-friendly neighbourhoods, both physically and socially. Recognising and harnessing children's local expertise is a crucial component for such a strategy.

Appreciating Children's Presence in the Present

The daily lives of the participating children were shown to be largely ordered by adult routines and scheduling. School and school related activity, domestic routines, and structured activities comprised a substantial proportion of children's waking hours, particularly during school term-time. Some children took part in more discretionary structured activity than did others, such as sports clubs, after-school clubs or hobbies.

Much of this activity (with the exception of soccer), took place indoors and under the supervision of parents or other adults. Such adult provided structures and provision tend towards a developmental, future oriented focus, at times failing to recognise and accommodate the fact that children live contemporaneously, that they are intensely present in the present. James and Prout (1997b) contended that this aspect of children's being in the present and indeed children's 'presence', is frequently excluded and suppressed in sociological accounts amounting to *'the denial or underplaying of the present of childhood through focusing on its importance for the future'* (p. 240). Such thinking equally permeates provision for children at local level.

The adult-centric future orientation is evident in planning processes such as re-development or service planning, which rarely accommodates an appreciation of children's lives in the present. The average medium to long term organisational strategic planning process (three to five years), can constitute up to half a lifetime in middle childhood and is therefore effectively incongruent with children's timely and meaningful involvement. This is a key consideration for the inclusion of children and young people in decision-making processes where realisation of the importance of immediate and short-term outcomes, as well as longer term goals, is critical.

In terms of one pertinent example, the participating children demonstrated both awareness and concern in relation to the environmental maintenance of their neighbourhood and how it impacted on their use of neighbourhood spaces. As evidenced by their photographs and narratives, many used the research process to highlight issues such as refuse dumping, proliferation of broken glass and the consequences of houses left vacant for prolonged periods. Children were expert in these physical manifestations in their neighbourhood. They also demonstrated direct knowledge of many of the social practices and behaviours occurring within it, albeit at a temporal remove, particularly those associated with anti-social behaviour and their immediate impact *in the present* on children's daily lives. While adults were also aware of and concerned about these issues, what is open to question is whether adults were sufficiently aware of the impact these concerns had on children, directly and indirectly, as active users of the environment.

What also bears consideration is the extent to which adults' focus is oriented towards the future and concern about the outcomes for children and young people in terms of '*what will become of them*' or indeed '*what they will become*', which is more associated with fear of children and young people. In this respect children's 'being' and 'becoming' in the *present* is over looked. Inclusion of children's lived experiences of the consequences of their neighbourhood concerns has the potential to effectively 'focus the mind' on issues to be dealt with in the present and the short term.

The data in this study further demonstrate that children's play by its nature is located and transacted in the present, in a spontaneous, dynamic and flexible process in which children continuously adapt, negotiate and actively engage (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986a). The absorbing nature of physically active play, most commonly transacted in the company of peers is characterised by children as 'fun' as clearly distinct, in their view, from 'work' or 'learning' (Wing, 1995).

The inherently present nature of physically active play is one of its most salient characteristics, essentially removing children from the impact of past and future concerns, locating them experientially in the present. This feature in children's daily lives is considered at a later point in terms of the importance the children attributed to access to space and friends. Prior to that, the issue of children's agency as manifest in this study is highlighted.

The Social and Physical Ecologies of Neighbourhood as a Context for the Expression of Children's Agency

Children's agency infuses their daily lives. In this study, the children's self-initiated play and activities, their adaptation to and of their environment and their transaction of social exchange spoke to the many ways in which they actively constructed their cultural worlds. This was so in spite of the constraints of the many adult created and adult serving structures and institutions which largely determined their lives (Corsaro, 1997; Prout and James, 1997). However, even within these spaces, children demonstrated their irrepressible agency managing from time to time to 'snatch' moments of self-directed or autonomous activity during waiting times, transition times or moments of adult inattention. For example, during the course of the study, I frequently observed how children creatively used the 'waiting' or transition spaces between scheduled activities to engage in conversations, games, jokes, songs, gestures or movements.

She has it on, it's starting [tape recorder]

So let's go, Bobby Joe

Hello, hello, hello [into microphone]

(Getting focus group underway)

Similarly to range permissions, children engage in a continuous process of negotiation and bargaining with teachers, parents and other adults, including this researcher, to wrest more time from adult control, as the following comment during an interview illustrates.

I can't wait till lunch time, is it nearly lunch time?

MR: You've another few minutes to go, about 20 minutes

Twenty minutes, can I stay here for another ten?

(Steve)

It is frequently in the context of their neighbourhood 'free play' and unstructured participation that children during the period of middle childhood have the greatest opportunity to exercise self-determination, choice and judgement (Prilleltersky, Dryden and Johnson, 1999) and to experience themselves as autonomous beings (Rissotto and Tonucci, 2002). This has been identified as a key contributing factor in the development of resilience (Masten, 2001). Autonomy develops largely during the unregulated time children spend in the social and physical ecologies of their neighbourhood, where they get to initiate and select activities and to have the option to develop self chosen and negotiated peer relationships.

In such a context, the impact of restraining factors such as the risks and hazards identified by the children in this study are particularly unacceptable. All the more so, as many arise through institutional malaise and failure to effectively address estate management and anti-social behaviour issues. The children's rejection of many of the conditions which prevail in their neighbourhood and their desire for change was clearly demonstrated. Their agentic approach was evident in how they used the research process to highlight and report concerns and indeed, to propose solutions. The children highlighted the impact of such matters not alone on their own experience, but also considered the impact on others. Their empathetic concern for younger and older members of their community, their identification of areas of responsibility and their advocacy for change speaks to their perception of themselves as moral agents (Mayall, 2002) and active contributing members of their society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The Central Importance of Access to Space and Friends in Children's Daily Lives

The feature of the children's neighbourhood experience that emerged as the most positive and satisfying element from their perspective, was the availability of extensive, outdoor, accessible undesignated public space combined with the presence of friends and playmates. This was most frequently reported as what children liked best about their neighbourhood. In this respect, children's preferences for their free-time were clear and unequivocal. The outdoors was used for a range of physically active play and sport or play-sport activities, as well as for congregating and assembly or 'hanging out'. Although subject to some constraints, and indeed at times serious hazards, these largely uncontested spaces afforded both physical and social engagement opportunities which were central to children's experience of satisfaction with, and positive perceptions of, their neighbourhood.

Adaptive, spontaneous play was also enacted in the local streets and cul de sacs where the children or their friends lived, adapting and exploiting perceived affordances (Gibson, 1979; Heft, 1988) integral to these spaces. Here however, the children's use of these spaces for play was sometimes contested by adults (Matthews and Limb, 2000; Moore, 1986a) who 'moved children on', complained of noise or had concerns about the risk of broken windows from flying footballs.

Conflict with neighbours or other local children was more evident in children's accounts of their street based play and transit than in the more open spaces of greens or fields, another reason, perhaps, why these were so frequently named as preferred play sites. As noted previously, some researchers have concluded that children use the streets and immediate local environment because of a lack of suitable or engaging provision (Matthews and Limb, 2000). However, others have argued (Hart, 2002; Wheway and Millward, 1997) that children actively choose local streets and undesignated spaces because they hold opportunity that adults fail to recognise. For example, they are immediately and easily accessible, therefore saving valuable time and effort (Moore, 1986a) and that they afford ready contact with other children (Berg and Medrich, 1980) which contribute to their attraction. In this study, such preferences came to the fore. The fact that extended family such as grandparents or other relatives frequently lived in local streets added to their attraction and to children's sense of ownership.

Children's perceptions, valuing and use of their neighbourhood revealed them to be creative, adaptive, imaginative, resourceful, highly oriented towards physical activity and intensely social. Their appreciation and prioritising of outdoor space, in combination with the availability of other children to play and interact with, was one of the most striking and indeed, hopeful aspects of the study's findings. It was revealed as a core element of a satisfying childhood experience on the one hand, and, in this neighbourhood, despite its many challenges an entirely feasible and attainable one, on the other. The majority of children, both the core study participants and the school survey respondents, presented as hopeful, optimistic, enthused and motivated about their neighbourhood. This appears, at least in part, to be a testament to the power and value of physically active outdoor play.

The Significance of Children's Neighbourhood Play – Three Propositions

The importance the children attributed to physically active autonomous and independent play in their neighbourhood and the extent to which this seemed to contribute to their favourable perception of the neighbourhood was a key finding in this study. This is seen in how the combination of *space* and *friends* formed a nexus within which spontaneous, autonomous, absorbing play occurred.

Children repeatedly cited this facet of their daily lives as what they liked best about their neighbourhood. Despite the palpable hazards which the children encountered and negotiated in their environment and their detailed knowledge of risks and concerns associated with aspects of their neighbourhood, their outdoor play emerged as a central source of satisfaction. For me, as a practitioner turned researcher, this was one of the most important and striking insights from the study arising as it did, from the children's collective accounts. Based on this key revelation, the following propositions are put forward.

Proposition 1 - The convergence of plentiful and accessible outdoor space combined with the availability of friends and playmates facilitates the enactment of absorbing, enjoyable, active play which in turn supports the development of a satisfying neighbourhood experience and contributes significantly to the positive perception of neighbourhood daily life.

Proposition 2 - Physically active and absorbing play serves to ground children in the present, one effect (among many), of which is to at least temporarily suspend concerns and anxieties about the past or future and allow children to be 'present in the present' physically, emotionally and cognitively.

Proposition 3 - This positive experience seems to effectively act as an important buffer against a range of adversities emanating from within and without the neighbourhood which impact on children's daily lives, thus enabling them to retain a hopeful and optimistic outlook, in effect contributing to their resilience and sense of themselves as competent social actors.

The strength with which this association can be directly linked with the children's positive outlook is inferred rather than deduced as its salience only arose in the transcription and analysis of the data, subsequent to the fieldwork. Nonetheless, the evidence of similar beneficial effects reported in comparable studies (Jutras, 2003; Prezza et al., 2001), is convincing and that, combined with the children's testimony, renders it compelling.

These propositions suggest the need to examine and re-consider the increasing erosion of children's autonomous access to outdoor space. The quality of social experience available to children in this context is appreciably different to that in other more structured and controlled settings. Interactions with friends are inherently on a more equal footing than those with adults. They allow a negotiation of the terms of the relationship in ways which are neither possible nor permissible in most other children's settings, including the family (Guldberg, 2009).

The physical affordances of the outdoor spaces available to the children and their use of them (Gibson, 1979) also impart autonomy, ownership and control enabling children to experience themselves as competent and powerful, relative to their experience in other settings. The absorbing nature of physically active play, which as suggested above, grounds children 'in the present' serving to eliminate past or future concerns, at least temporarily allows children to experience childhood as free from demands or restrictions emanating from the highly structured routines which tend to dominate their lives. I suggest that this combination of factors afford children the opportunity to experience themselves as competent, equal, active and autonomous beings, in this setting.

This study's insight into children's lived experience has a potentially important contribution to make to thinking, planning and provision for children. This process is one to which children, as valued and active contributors, should be invited.

Including Children's Perspectives in Planning and Decision-making

Any attempts to design successful environments with children should be preceded by an understanding of children's activities in and experience of the physical environment.

(Hart, 1979 p.3)

Many approaches to inclusion of children and young people have limited themselves to consultation, often on prescribed topics, and frequently with select or minimal numbers of participants.

If the valuable contribution that children and young people can make to planning and decision-making processes is to be realised and if the goal truly is to invite children and young people to meaningful participation and engagement as competent citizens (Heft and Chawla, 2006), then such limited approaches must be expanded to include their active input. For this to happen it must be recognised that children's participation requires resourcing, practically in terms of budgets such as expenses for time and transport, but also in terms of appropriate processes, skills developments (for both children and adults) and accessible media (Lansdown, 2001). Clearly, this is an on-going challenge. However, the positioning of consultative fora such as Comhairle na nÓg within local authority structures, if adequately resourced and effectively linked to national structures, has the potential to bridge some of the current gaps and build awareness within this important institutional setting (Murphy, 2005).

Research, such as that undertaken in this study, can serve to highlight the potential value of children's contributions and demonstrates the effectiveness of a range of participative methods and techniques which are available to resource and include children's meaningful participation⁵⁰.

What is perhaps also an important message for planning and policy purposes is to ensure that children's opportunities to experience autonomous outdoor play *remain* an integral part of children's daily lives. Especially when there is mounting evidence to suggest that spontaneous, unstructured, physically active outdoor play, and with it many opportunities for autonomy and learning, is being dramatically eroded in the lives of many children in contemporary society (Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007; Mattsson, 2002; O'Brien et al., 2000; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997).

Conclusion

Returning to the research questions and indeed rationale, some final thoughts are offered. The study presents richly detailed accounts of the participating children's daily lives in their neighbourhood setting. It explored their perceptions and experiences and by to

⁵⁰ After completion of the study, and following a meeting with staff of the local regeneration board, local primary school children were consulted about the development of a local regeneration strategy, using visual methods.

facilitating their active participation, allowed them to foreground their preferences, priorities, and concerns. It revealed what, for these children, creates a meaningful and satisfying experience of neighbourhood, in the life course period of middle childhood. The social and physical ecologies of the children's neighbourhood where they spent most of their 'free' time were examined. These were shown to be key contexts in which these children had the opportunity to exercise agency in the transaction of their daily lives to a greater degree than in other settings, such as school, home or community provision.

The neighbourhood as a setting was revealed to comprise a range of different 'spaces' which held an array of different meanings, affordances and potentials, as well as hazards and risks. Such spaces were shown to be not fixed or immutable, but fluid and subject to change, influenced by factors as diverse as time, weather, human behaviour, institutional action or inaction. The children's accounts of their lived experience and perceptions of their neighbourhood reflect the penetration of influences from all layers of the ecological system they inhabit, both proximal and remote (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The study emphasises the notion of 'multiple' childhoods (Boocock and Scott, 2005) with both shared and differing characteristics and qualities and therefore the need for much more finely nuanced and attuned responses in terms of provision and accommodation of difference.

The extent of children's knowledge and exposure to risk within the neighbourhood, both directly and indirectly was a sobering reality and one which calls for a much more targeted and determined response than that which has been evident to date.

This is the first study of its kind to be undertaken on this topic in Ireland. Recent Irish studies have included ones which focused on young people's leisure and recreation (Byrne et al., 2006; DeRóiste and Dineen, 2005), children's conceptions of well-being (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006), the impact of neighbourhood on children's education and aspirations (Connolly and Healy, 2004; Connolly and Neill, 2001) and pre-school children's experience of outdoor settings (Kernan, 2006). However, until now, children's own perceptions and use of their neighbourhood spaces have not been a focus of substantial research in this country.

This study's contribution is to present children's own accounts of their lived experience, to foreground their local expertise, priorities, concerns and to make explicit what, for them, creates a meaningful and satisfying experience of neighbourhood in middle childhood. Much of what was found in this study confirms findings from similar work (Burke, 2005; Moore, 1986a) but several points of differing emphasis and interest are revealed.

A key finding is that the study revealed the social and physical ecology of the neighbourhood to be a context which afforded the children's expression of agency, in the enactment of their play and social interaction – the ordinary magic (Masten, 2001) of daily life. The children's autonomous, peer based play appears for them to be an important source of resilience and satisfaction, supporting them in dealing with the challenges and adversities they faced and endowing them with an optimistic and hopeful view of their neighbourhood. This is an important revelation in terms of extending our understanding of resilience in childhood.

The use of ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gibbons, 1979) accommodated a conceptualisation of children as active participants (Hogan and Gilligan, 1999) and developing persons (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and took account of the wide variety of settings and systems within which children enact and transact their daily lives. Adoption of a constructivist approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) allowed the phenomenological experience of children's daily lives, both in the present and during this life course period to be explored, revealing insight into children's experiential perceptions and perspectives.

The study methods and approach, which were central to the research process, contributed to progressing the practice of engaging children as active research participants through implementing a responsive and flexible design, sympathetic to emergent themes which vary from those anticipated or prioritised by adults (Howard, Dryden and Johnson, 1999). This aspect of the study demonstrates that taking a constructivist approach enabled children's views, voice and perspectives to be accessed and authentically presented and facilitated them, as active agents, to extend and enrich the research enterprise.

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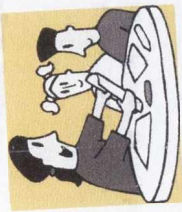
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Information and Consent

- A. Children's information leaflet***
- B. Child and parent consent form***
- C. Adult Information Note***



If you would like to help with this project, just fill in the permission form and ask your parents to sign it too.

If you or your parents want to know more, please contact:
Margaret Rogers - (Phone number)



This Project is supported by:
The National Children's Office Research Programme and
The Irish Youth Foundation



Children and their Neighbourhood



What do children have to say?

We would like to find out what you think about living in your area. We want to know things like ...



What kind of things are there to do where you live

Where you play or hang out with your friends



And most of all what **YOU** have to say about it

This is called a research project and to do it...we need your help!

*Here are some questions
You might want to ask...*



What is this project about?

It is about finding out what children think about growing up in their area.



Why do you want to know?

Because where you play and spend your time is a big part of your life and because your ideas are very important!



What do you want us to do?



Things like take photographs or make pictures and maps of your area and tell me about them in interviews.



Then what happens?



Then we put all the information together, decide who needs to know about it and give it to them.

Children and Their Neighbourhood Research Project

Agreement / permission form

Child's Agreement

I agree to take part in this research project. This means I may be asked to talk about my area, take photographs or make drawings. I can choose what activities I will do and can choose to stop if I want to. My name will not be used in the research unless I give my permission. Any pictures or other things I make during the research will belong to me and I can decide what to do with them.

Signed:..... Date:.....
(Child's Name)

Address:.....

School:..... Class:

Parent's Permission

I/we give permission for (child's name).....
to take part in this research project.

Signed:.....

Address:.....

.....

Ph:..... Date:.....

Children and their Neighbourhood Research Study

This study is a Ph.D research project, sponsored by the National Children's Office Research Scholarship Programme. The purpose is to explore children's experience of their local neighbourhood to discover how they 'perceive, use and value' their area and how this impacts on their life. The target age group are 9 – 11 year olds (4th / 5th Class primary school students)

The research methods are designed to be child-friendly, engaging and fun. Firstly, it involves children being supplied with disposable cameras and invited to take photographs of places in the local area they use or spend time in, e.g. parks, green spaces, community facilities, streets, gardens etc. Children are then individually interviewed about their photographs (20-30 minutes approx.)

At different times, the children are also asked to draw pictures of their favourite place, to complete activity sheets based on their daily routines or on special times or events e.g. holidays.

Again in individual interviews the children are asked to identify the places they use and spend time in, using local street maps to locate the areas they talk about.

The research is being carried out over the course of a calendar year (May 2005 – April 2006) in order to get a sense of how children use their neighbourhood at different times of the year, throughout the four seasons, holidays, school year and weekends.

The final stage will involve asking the children to identify the positive and negative aspects of their neighbourhood and to make suggestions for what would make it a better place for children. This information will be compiled and presented to parents, community agencies and the local authority. The format for this presentation (e.g. photo display, report) will be planned and carried out with the children's involvement and participation.

The researcher, Margaret Rogers, is a postgraduate student, registered with and supervised by Trinity College. She has been awarded a three-year doctoral scholarship to undertake this research and has undergone Garda vetting, through the National Children's Office. She has a background of twenty years experience of working in community based children's and family support services.

Appendix 2: Interview Guides

- A. Photo Elicited Interviews (PEI) Interview Guide***
- B. Street Map Interview Guide***
- C. Focus Group Discussion Guides***
- D. Adult Interview Guides***

PEI Interview Guide

The PEI interviews were based on what children had to say about their photographs and what stories, comments or questions arose as a result. In addition, where time permitted, a number of general background questions. At beginning of each interview, the format was explained and use of tape recorder. Juice and snacks were provided. Each child was given a photo album for their set of prints.

1. So here are your photographs, do you want to have a look at them and then tell me about them, one at a time?
2. Is your house in the photo or where is it close to where the photo was taken?
3. Do you play around your area, where do you play mostly?
4. Do you play more outside or inside?
5. Do you have many friends close (around) where you live? Do your friends live near you?
6. Do you go to other people's / friends houses much?
7. What do you do there?
8. What kinds of games do you play?
9. What do you do when the weather is bad?
10. Are you in any clubs or teams? (If yes) How often do you go? What do you do there?
11. How many people are in your family? Do you have brothers and sisters? Who else lives in your house?
12. Where is your local shop? Do you go there on your own, or with friends, or with an adult?
13. Do you walk to school or get a lift?
14. What other places do you go to play or hang out with your friends?
15. How far would you go? How long would it take you to get there?
16. What will you do in the summer, when you are off school? (first group only)
17. What other kinds of things do you do / games do you play?
18. Do you have any pets? What kind? What do you do with them?
19. What is your favourite thing to do?
20. What do you like about your area?
21. What do you not like about it?
22. If you were in charge, what would you do to make it a better place for children?
23. When I write up my report, I will not be using your real name, to keep in confidential. If you like you can choose a name for me to use? It can be any kind of name: a nick name, the name of a football player, a singer, someone in a movie or on TV or just a name you like? (If hesitant) Think about it and let me know.

Interview Guide, Map Interviews

Point out school and mark child's home and school on the map

1. Have you always lived in the same house?
2. If not, where else have you lived?
3. Who else lives in the house with you?
4. Can you show me the main places you play and hang out around your area?
5. Do your friends live close to you?
6. Where are the main places you go to meet your friends?
7. What do you do there?
8. When you're out with your friends how far would you go, would you stay close to your house or would you go farther away?
9. If you were going for a walk, where would you go?
10. Do you have a bike (skates, quad, motor bike) If you were going out on your bike, where would you go? (on your own, with friends, with family, with other adults)
11. Do you walk to school (everyday, some days, never)?
12. Are there other places you go (in the neighbourhood)?
13. If you were saying to your Mum/Dad you're going out to play, would you say exactly where you were going? Would s/he know where you were?
14. Would s/he tell you what time to be back?
15. If you were going out to play, how far are you allowed to go on your own, or with friends?
16. Are there any places you are not allowed to go without an adult?
17. Are there any places you would not like to go yourself? Do you go to the shops? What shops do you go to?
18. If you are going into town, what do you do, do you get a bus or go in a car or do you walk?
19. Are there any other places you go (outside the neighbourhood)?
20. Are you in any clubs or teams? (What do you do there, how often)⁵¹

⁵¹ Re repeated questions from PEI schedule: Some questions were asked in Map interview if there was not enough time to ask them in PEI interview.

Focus Group Discussion Guides

Friends and Friendship

1. Why are friends important?
2. What makes a good friend?
3. What kinds of things do you do with friends?
4. Are your friends mostly boys, girls or both?
5. Can friends ever be a problem?
6. Do friends always agree?
7. Can you disagree and still be friends?
8. What is the best thing about having friends?

These were sometimes supplemented with additional questions, depending on how the discussion developed, for example, *'If you have a row or fight with a friend how do you get back to being friends again?'*

Adults in the Community

1. Who are the adults in your area who are helpful and support you?
2. Why are these people important, how do they help and support you?
3. Are there any adults in the community that are not helpful or that you have a problem with?

Adult Interview Guide

- Do you live in the area?
- How long have you worked with children and young people in the area?
- What would you say are the most significant changes you have seen over that period of time?
- What opportunities does the neighbourhood provide for children?
- What would you say are the strengths or good points of the area as a place for children?
- Would you say there has been investment in facilities for children?
- Are the clubs and resources for children in the area well used?
- What would you see at the gaps in provision for children?
- Children talked about having football goals and nets and other play facilities located close to their homes, how feasible do you think that is?
- Do you think there is enough provision for girls?
- As someone who works with children in the area, what would your concerns be, or what would you see as some of the risks to children?
- Are there more risks now than there were in previous years?
- The area is categorised as disadvantaged – is poverty an issue for families in the area?
- Is there anything in the neighbourhood itself that you would feel is a threat to children?
- Some of the children talked about (and took pictures of):
 - Being kept awake at night by noise, stolen cars
 - Outdoor drinking, bonfires, broken glass
 - Rubbish dumped in various parts of the estate
 - Drugs

What is your response?
- If you were 'in charge' what changes would you make to make the area a better place for children?

Appendix 3: *Sample materials used*

- A. *My Photo Log***
- B. *What I did yesterday***
- C. *What I did at the weekend (Saturday and Sunday)***
- D. *What I did on my mid-term break***
- E. *Tell me what kind of work you do?***



What I did yesterday



In the morning... I got up at and I

then I

At small break I

Then I

At big break I

After school I

Later I

that night I

I went to bed at



Name: Date:



What I did at the weekend

On Saturday morning....

I got up at and I.....

.....

then I

.....

.....

In the afternoon I.....

.....

.....

Later I

.....

that night I

.....

.....

I went to bed at

Name:

What I did at the weekend



On Sunday morning....

I got up at and I.....

then I

In the afternoon I.....

Later I

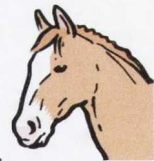
that night I

I went to bed at

Name:



What I did on my mid-term break.....



Name:



Can you tell me about what kind of work you do?

Do you help with housework at home? Yes / No



What ways do you help?

.....

.....

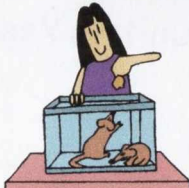
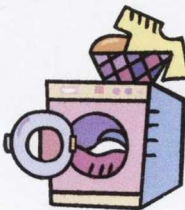


Do you help look after younger children? Yes / No

What ways do you help?

.....

.....





Do you help older people?

Yes / No

What ways do you help?.....

.....

.....



Do you help look after pets or other animals?

Yes / No

What ways do you help?.....

.....

.....



Do you do jobs in school?

Yes / No

What jobs do you do?.....

.....



Do you do jobs in your community? Yes / No

What jobs do you do?

.....
.....
Do you get paid for any of the jobs you do? Yes / No

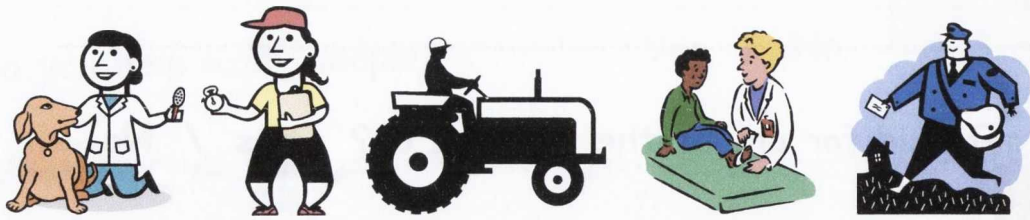


What Jobs do you get paid for?.....
.....

What do you do with the money you earn?.....
.....

What jobs do you like best?.....
.....

What jobs do you not like?.....
.....



What would you like to be when you grow up?



Where would you like to live when you grow up?



Appendix 4: *The Children's Evaluation Sheet*



Children and their Neighbourhood Research Project

What did you think about the research project?

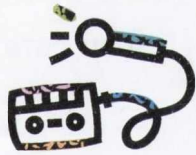
Did you enjoy doing the project? A lot A little..... Not at all.....

What did you like best about it?

.....

What did you not like about it?

.....



What activities did you like doing?



Photographs Interviews..... Drawings Class discussions

Activity Sheets Maps Group discussions Arts and Crafts

School Survey Map Collage Making cards Making masks

Were there any activities you did not like doing?

Photographs Interviews..... Drawings Class discussions

Activity Sheets Maps Group discussions Arts and Crafts

School Survey Map Collage Making cards Making masks



What would have made it better?.....
.....
.....
.....



Did you feel that you...

Were listened to? Always ___ Sometimes ___ Never ___

Were treated with respect? Always ___ Sometimes ___ Never ___

Had a chance to have your say? Always ___ Sometimes ___ Never ___

Had a choice to do the project or not? Always ___ Sometimes ___ Never ___

If you were giving the project marks out of 10 how would you rate it:

The activities

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The researcher

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

If you were asked to do a research project again, would you say yes?

Yes ___ No ___

Thank you!

Appendix 5: *The School Survey*



Children and their Neighbourhood Research Study

Hi, 5th class are doing a research project on what children think about their neighbourhood and we want to know what you think!



What do you like best about your area?



What do you not like about your area?



These are some of the things we like doing.



What do you think would make your area a better place for children?



.....



.....



.....



.....

.....



.....



.....

.....

Your name:..... Your Age:.....

Thanks for your help!



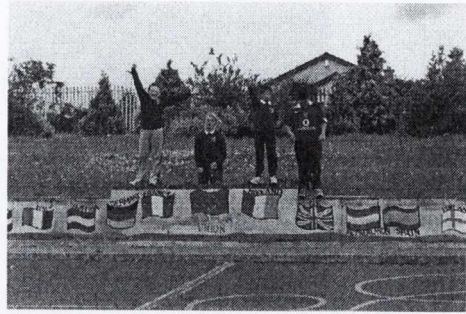
Appendix 6: Feedback of Data Analysis to Participants

Children and their Neighbourhood



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

1



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

2



Who took part?

- 32 children took part in the project
17 Boys and 15 Girls
- 17 (4th Class) Started in May 2005, 8 more joined in
September (5th Class) and another 8 (girls) joined in January
2006
- School survey was undertaken from
2nd to 6th Class – 132 children
responded
- 3 adult service providers were interviewed also



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

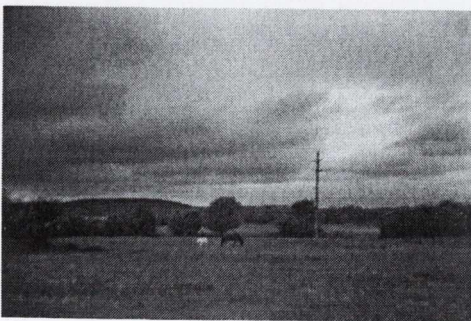
3

What did you do?

- Took photographs of places, things
and people in the neighbourhood –
mostly outdoors, some indoors
showing what the neighbourhood
looks like, where you live, play and
hang out.

Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

4



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

5



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

6



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project



Interviews & Groups

- We did interviews with the photographs and maps of the area
- We talked about Friends & Friendship and Adults in the Community in Groups
- We talked about what would make the area a better place for children and glued pictures on a big map

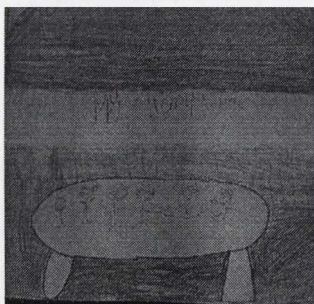


Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

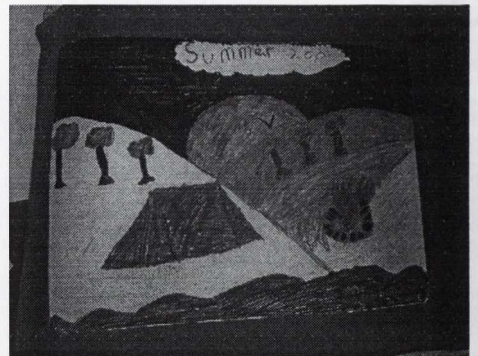
What else did you do?

- We drew pictures of our favourite places
- And wrote sheets about what we did at the weekends, on midterm breaks and at Halloween
- Sometimes we made masks or cards

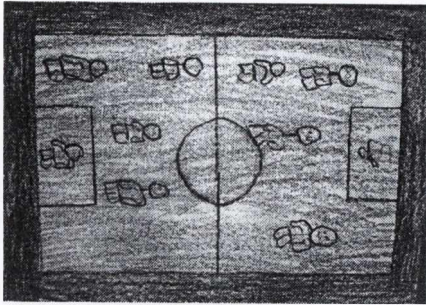
Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

13

What do you like best about your area?

- People – friends, family, neighbours, leaders
- Places – The Park, playground; fields (clean); Astroturf; All weather pitch; Space; School; Supervalu; clubs; church
- Activities – Soccer, games ('following', 'kitkat' '45' – group running / chasing games), rugby, basketball, swimming, club activities and trips,

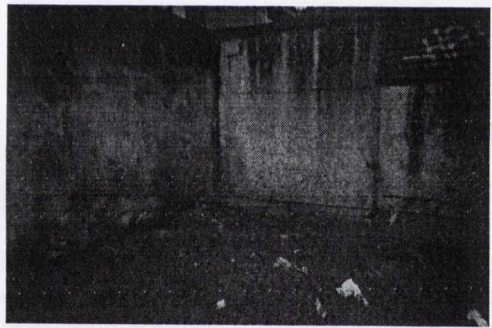
Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

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Some of us took
photographs of things
That need to change!

Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

15



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

16



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

17



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

18

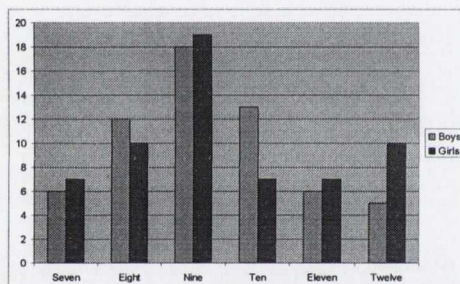
What do you not like about your area?

- Litter, dumped rubbish, broken glass
- Fights, shouting, shootings, (especially at night)
- Robbed cars
- Broken, burnt houses
- Bonfires, fireworks
- Horses on the fields
- Stray / vicious dogs

School Survey

- We did a survey of all the other classes. We asked:
- What do you like best about your area?
- What do you not like about your area?
- What do you think would make the area a better place for children?
- 132 children responded

School Survey Respondents



What they said...

- “My friends live so close to me. There is great scenery and a shop down the road.” (G. 12)
- “I like the all weather because I get a class game of soccer with my friends” (B. 10)
- “What I like best about my area is the park, the school, the church and the shop” (G. 9)
- “There is enough space to play. School: Supervalu: ((B. 7)
- “My friends, we play games, we have fun” (G. 8)

What they said...

- “I do not like all the guns and the big wars” (B. 9)
- “The fields are burnt and there’s always at least one burnt car in the field. Rubbish is always thrown everywhere.” (G. 12)
- “Robbed cars and shooting” (B. 8)
- “Sometimes people light fires and rob cars at night. There are a few bullies that (pick) on younger kids like me” (G.11)

Children’s Concerns

- Environment – Rubbish, rats, broken glass etc maintenance, boarded and burned out houses, graffiti (sometimes intimidatory)
- Safety – Bullying, fear of violence, actual violence, alcohol abuse / excess
- Crime – stolen cars, robbery, assault, drug use and dealing, availability and use of weapons
- Amenities – maintenance and supervision

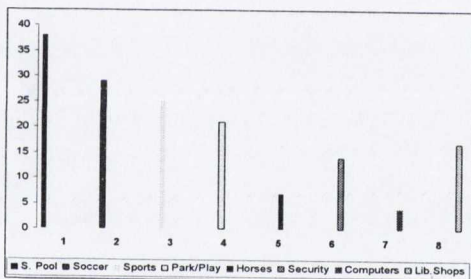
What do you think would make your area a better place for children?

- "Do not shoot people and kill people. Please stop" (B.9)
- "I would love if there was no such thing as a gun" (G.9)
- "What I think would make it a better place is get a big swimming pool and a library and computers" (G.11)
- "Clean up the greens, keep horses safe, clean up broken glass, no trouble or fighting, build a swimming pool" (G.7)
- "I really think that if all the burned, boarded up houses were knocked down and rebuilt. The estate would be lovely" (G.12)

What they said...

- "I think we should have an indoor swimming pool. We should have a skating park and a library and a place where just kids just hang out" (G.9)
- If they made a soccer pitch with real goals and a stadium. If they made a swimming pool, a library and a place for computers." (B.11)
- "Clean up the greens. Be better friends. Build a swimming pool. Clean the gardens." (G.8)

What would make it a better place for children?



We need a SPONSOR Campaign

- Swimming
- Pool
- On the
- North
- Side
- Of the
- River



Friends & Friendship

What makes a good friend?

"Loyalty, kindness, trust" – "Someone that sticks by you"

Can you disagree and still be friends?

"because if you disagree, like, you just figure it out with your friends – there's no reason to fight about it"

Can friends ever be a problem?

"when they force you to do things you don't want to do"

Adults in the Community

- Who are the adults in your area who are helpful and support you?

"Teachers, shopkeepers, coal men, soccer coaches, principal, club people, Mam, Dad, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, Brothers, Cleaners, Priest, Binman, Doctors, Ambulance"

"The adults who go around and pick up rubbish. Last week adults helped us pile up stuff for the bonfire"

Are there any adults in the community that are not helpful or that you have a problem with?

- *“people who litter, people who get drunk and keep you awake...”*
- *“the people that rob cars and burn them, who write all over the burnt houses and walls and poles”*
- *“the gardai they pull you for nothing”*

What jobs would you like to do?

Engineer, Actress or Barrister, Soccer player (5), Accountant, Actor, Artist, Vet, Garda, Nurse or a Teacher, Hair Dresser, Archaeologist or a Photographer, work in a stables, work in a big company, Beautician, Doctor, Teacher

What are the good things about the area?

- There are a lot of good things about the neighbourhood for children
- Lots of space to play sports and games
- Playground / Park / ‘Bays’ / School
- Clubs and Camps, sports teams and facilities

More Photos...



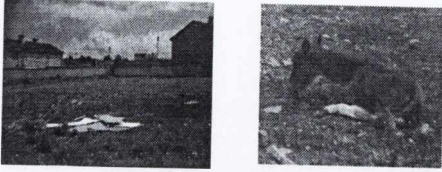
What are the gaps?

- More activities for boys than girls - sport/ soccer
- More goals and nets needed in local areas
- More activities for people who don't like sport
- More sports/activities for girls – basketball, dance

What are the problems?

- Children who have been bullied stay away from activities even if they like them
- There is too much crime, violence & drugs
- Rubbish, boarded up houses,
- No safe place for horses

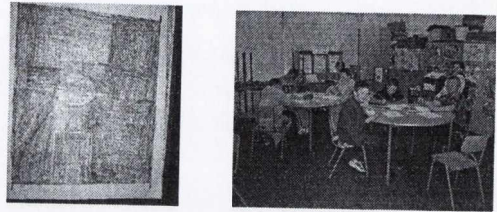
What needs to change



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

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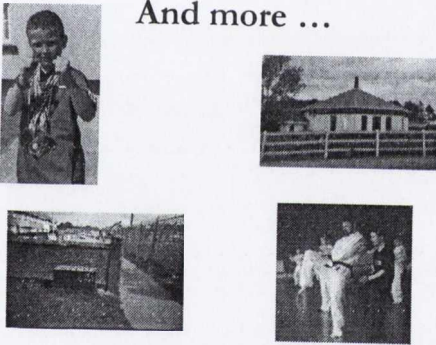
More images



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

38

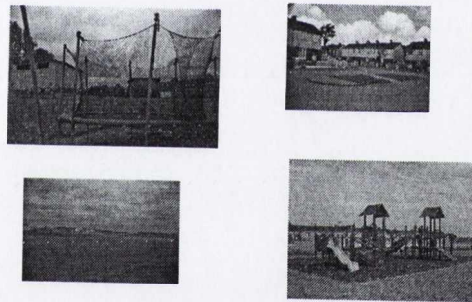
And more ...



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

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Favourite Places



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

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Children's Evaluation



- The children were asked what they thought about doing the project
- Most of the children had enjoyed doing the project – 'a lot'
- 16 said they would 'say yes' to doing research again if asked (3 left blank)

Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

41

Preferred Activities

- Taking Photographs (17)
- Arts & Crafts (15)
- Drawings; Cards; Activity Sheets: (13)
- Making Masks (11)
- Interviews; Maps; Map Collage: (10)
- Group discussion; class discussion; School Survey: (8)



Children and Their Neighbourhood
Research Project

42



Activities not liked

- Class Discussion: (5)
- Maps; Groups Discussion; Map Collage: (4)
- School Survey; Activity Sheets: (3)
- Interview: (2)
- Photos; Drawings; Arts & Crafts; Making cards; Making Masks: (1)

Our Exhibition

When the project was finished we put on an exhibition of some of our photographs.

Parents, families, friends, teachers, people from the Council and community leaders came to see them.

The Deputy Mayor launched the exhibition