‘We Were All Very Out of Breath’

Peer Culture, Disabled Children and Segregation
A qualitative study of the peer culture of children with learning disabilities in specialist settings out of school hours

By

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Abstract

Peer Culture: Disabled Children and Segregation

Within the UK children with severe learning disabilities spend varying amounts of time in specialist settings away from home environments and local communities. They experience high levels of surveillance and intervention in their daily activities (Shakespeare 1999). Generalised research into the impact of such provision has raised questions about the extent to which services, segregated and inclusive, influence potential friendships and peer group participation (Morris 1998, Shakespeare 1999). In response this qualitative research has sought to identify and explore the peer culture of children with severe learning disabilities receiving care in specialist non-educational settings. In order to incorporate multiple methods of communication and to avoid exclusion data were collected through participant observation, supplemented by documentation and staff meetings.

Corsaro defines peer culture as 'a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share' (Corsaro 1988:3). However, due to the specific research groups and recent developments within childhood sociology and disability studies, this became problematic. There were two specific concerns within Corsaro’s approach, an acceptance of agency as an essential possession and the minimal significance allocated to context. Adopting an ambiguous ontology encouraged the development of an understanding of agency which is inclusive of incompetence, dependence and immaturity - three characteristics associated with children with learning disabilities.

Grounded analysis of data revealed the existence of a complex, dynamic and fluid peer culture which operated within and beneath adult defined structures and social order. In referring to Gibson's (1979) theory of affordance it became clear that the emergence of peer interactions was vulnerable to contextual circumstances and the affordances within these. This reveals the impact of institutional generated structures on the peer relations of children. The inference of this is that careful and considerate attention needs to be directed toward friendships and peer relations in the policy and practice development of specialist services to disabled children if social exclusion is to be minimised.
The names of children within this thesis are fictional in order to protect confidentiality.
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Part One

Peer Culture: Disabled Children and Segregation

Peer Culture: Disabled Children and Segregation

She never found it hard to talk to other children, and soon they were gathered round her, sitting in pools of water on the warm stone, their shirts drying quickly in the sun (Pullman 1997:151).

This description of Lyra, the child heroine of Philip Pullman’s trilogy, joining a group of unknown children with relative ease is one example of the richness of children’s literature; especially its understanding of the importance and value of peer relationships. Many of the most renowned children’s writers explore the activities of children’s peer groups: The Famous Five, Swallows and Amazons, Harry Potter and Charm School. These books tell tales of children sharing their understanding of the world around them, resolving difficult issues and operating within their own rules and social order.

While this has been a successful formula for bestselling children’s fiction, indicating that this is a topic of interest to children, there has also been consideration of the significance of peer relationships within mainstream childhood sociology (Corsaro 1997, James et al 1998), adulthood (Allan 1989) and old age (Hockey & James 2003), within different cultures (Krappmann 1996), for children (Deegan 1996), for people with learning impairments (Atkinson & Williams 1990) and for disabled children within mainstream situations (Watson et al 1999). However, there has been little research which explores in detail the peer relations in the lives and experiences of groups of disabled children who do not have the opportunity to mix with their mainstream peers and more specifically those with learning impairments. Yet as humans and as social beings our first relationships are established in childhood with those around us, when we interact with adults and other children within the context of our environment, at home, school and in a host of other places.

This thesis addresses this by focusing on the day to day peer group experiences of children with learning impairments who are grouped together away from mainstream environments within adult-defined specialist settings. These settings operate outside of school hours in what is commonly understood to be children’s leisure time.

In opening the thesis I draw attention to the visibility of mainstream childhood within current society and academia, highlighting the absence of disabled children within this category. This leads to a reflection on the emergence of the research project, outlining the
aims of the research, positioning them within the wider picture of childhood sociology and disability studies.

**Visible Childhood(s)**

It is recognised that sociological understandings of childhood have evolved significantly over the latter half of the last century and in the opening years of the new millennium. This development is thought to have begun with the exploration of children in history undertaken by Aries (1960) which identified the constructed nature of childhood (Archard 1993). The idea of childhood as a stage of life separate from adulthood has since been examined, defined, redefined and critiqued by both academics and researchers. However, in the UK it was the collective work of James, Jenks and Prout in the 1990s which served as a watershed in raising the profile of childhood studies, establishing it within the general arena of sociological enquiry. As James and Prout explained

> The traditional consignment of childhood to the margins of the social sciences or its primary location within the fields of developmental psychology and education is, then, beginning to change: it is now much more common to find acknowledgement that childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture rather than a precursor to it: and that children should be seen as already social actors not beings in the process of becoming such (1997:ix).

This statement transcends the more subtle theoretical variations witnessed within childhood sociology (James, Jenks and Prout 1998), and indicates the two main principles of current understandings which have remained consistent over the past two decades since they were identified in detail within the Childhood as a Social Phenomenon (Childhood Project) (Qvortrup et al 1994). First, is the significance of the perspective which recognises the position of childhood as an ‘integrated structural form’ within the social and cultural context of society (Qvortrup 1994:23). The second key principle focuses on the way in which children engage with the wider context, as actors demonstrating agency, interacting with and contributing to society as opposed to being passive recipients of adult attention (James and Prout 1997).

> As I will outline later in chapter 3, the majority of research which has emerged from the sub-discipline of childhood sociology reflects the lives of mainstream children. This was a necessary route for sociologists to adopt as it is this detailed body of work which established the field securely within sociology. Thus children became visible within sociology. However, it is not only the scholarly argument within sociology which has contributed to the emergence and recognition of childhood. In parallel to the academic development, there
has also been the increase in moral reflection within western society which has resulted in discourses of human rights and responsibilities being applied to children. This has fuelled a recognition that children have a voice which needs to be heard.

The outcome of human rights movements has been expressed through legislation relating to the position and role of children within society. The imperative to recognise children’s rights has grown over recent years, particularly since the ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). Within this there are a number of articles relating to the rights of children to be heard within their respective societies, most pertinent are articles 12 & 13:

**Article 12**

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

**Article 13**

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.

The combination of theoretical developments within childhood sociology and the public debates and legislation about children’s rights has also increased the visibility of children within society as a whole. The immediate and most recent result of this is the emergence of diverging theories about childhood(s); for example, life course (Hockey and James 2003), standpoint theories extracted from feminist perspectives (Mayall 2002), and children as embodied beings (Prout 2000a). As I will discuss in chapter 2, recently Lee (2001) and to a lesser extent Prout (2000b) have raised questions relating to some of the core assumptions within childhood sociology relating to the definition of agency. This leaves unanswered questions about the nature of agency and both its role and significance within childhood(s).

Thus childhood sociology is becoming a diverse and exciting field of enquiry, opening up to new directions and possibilities. At the time of writing, the exploration into alternative perspectives and theories is primarily focussed on the experiences and lives of mainstream children, there is little inclusion of disabled children within the main body of childhood research (Watson et al 1999). However, I believe that the possibility and potential for
situating disability issues and experiences within mainstream childhood sociology is beginning to emerge, as will become evident as the thesis unfolds.

Disabled Childhood(s)

This research, which is grounded in childhood sociology, focuses on children with learning impairments in the UK. Rather than immediately immerse the reader in theory and empirical debate about disabled children I want to take a moment to explain how this work came about, as this represents the backdrop to the research.

As a student social worker placed in a respite setting for disabled children I recall sitting at the dining table one day. The children were having their tea with the staff, there was a lot of laughter, shouting and general exuberance. One of the girls, who did not use language, joined in. Her excitement meant that as she shouted she also spat. Immediately the staff told her off saying that she should stay quiet. The atmosphere dropped, all the children falling silent.

From that moment on I began to wonder how groups of disabled children could be naughty and engage in activity together when there were always adults present. I also became interested in finding out more about the experiences of children whilst away from home, whether at play-schemes, after school clubs or overnight respite. This concern gradually evolved, resulting in my MSc dissertation which was an exploration of the experiences of disabled children whilst staying in a local authority respite setting. In recognising that the groups of children observed had some shared cultural understandings, I found myself drawn to Corsaro’s (1997) definition and description of peer culture.

The proposal for this research therefore emerged from vague ideas and concerns I had, combined with a realisation that there was little evidence of the experiences of disabled children away from home, and even less which specifically related to children with learning disabilities. It also seemed a natural progression, following on from the masters degree, to use peer culture as the main sensitising concept.

The primary focus within this research is the experiences of children and young people diagnosed as having moderate to severe learning impairments. This is for two reasons, first

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1 The reference to 'moderate' and 'severe' levels of impairment originate from medical measurement of impairment. This practice is not supported by the disability movement due to the belief that it individualises disability. Within this context I have used the terms because they are the criteria applied within the research settings for assessing the degree of a child’s impairment.
because this has been identified as a particularly under-researched group of children, and second because it is usually this specific group of children who are assessed as in need of the specialist services which feature within this study.

Once the separate ideas were collated, the research proposal began to shape itself resulting in my statement that

The aim of this study is to discover the reality of peer culture for children within learning disabilities who are segregated from mainstream child-care environments. To find out whether they are able to ‘gain control’ and ‘share’ within an environment governed by adults. I would intend to discover if there are any dominant themes in the way children with learning disabilities develop social skills within their own peer group. This may then clarify the impact of current policy, provision and practice which tends to exclude children within learning disabilities, on the reality of life as a child with a learning disability (ESRC Application form 2000).

The aims of the study have remained relatively unchanged throughout the three and half years it has taken to complete the thesis. However, what has altered is my theoretical and conceptual approach to the research, which has undergone an unforeseen metamorphosis. This can be traced through the critical appraisal of the literature, the design of the research and the analysis of data, from which emerges a challenge to the hegemony unintentionally created by the focus within childhood sociology on mainstream childhood concerns.

Disabled Children in the UK

The status of disabled children in the past decade within the UK can be traced through the titles of reports which range from ‘Gone Missing’ (Morris 1995), ‘Still Missing’ (Morris 1998a,b), ‘(still) Invisible Under the Law’ (Corker and Davis 2000), ‘Still Missing Out?’ (Sharma 2002). There is recognition that disabled childhood(s) are both marginalised and under-represented within society (Sharma 2002) and research (Morris 1998d). There is little knowledge about how many children receive care away from home, where these children go and what they experience (Morris 1995, Morris Abbott & Ward 2002).

The extent of these concerns indicates the mounting disquiet among researchers and academics that the lives, circumstances and experiences of disabled children are continuing to be marginalised within policy, practice and society. As Sharma explains:-
Despite changes to disability benefits and other services, many of Britain's 360,000 disabled children and young people and their families still live in poverty and are socially excluded (Sharma 2002:5).

This figure of 360,000 is an approximation as it is difficult to identify how many disabled children there are in the UK. This is also the same figure used by Utting (1997) and Morris (1995) which is derived from the 1989 OPCS study. Recent data from the 2001 census indicates that there are 29,310 disabled children who are defined as 'in need' within the 1989 Children Act, who are known to social services departments across England (http://www.doh.gov.uk/cin/).

Within these figures it is not possible to ascertain how many of the children had learning impairment although the British Paediatric Association (1994) estimates that within an average population of 250,000 there are 200 children with severe learning disabilities. The number of disabled children who are receiving services is equally difficult to identify, as is explored further in chapter 4.

This uncertainty about the situation of disabled children within the UK corresponds with the concerns raised by Morris (1998a,b), Middleton (1999) and Utting (1997) that more research needs to be carried out to identify and explore the childhood experiences of this marginalised group. There is now a growing body of empirical evidence which highlights the general nature of the marginalisation experienced (Morris 1998a,b, Watson et al 1999, Priestley 1999, 2003), explores the placement of children in residential schools (Morris, Abbott & Ward 2002), children's hospices (Robinson & Jackson 1999), mainstream educational experiences (Priestley 1999) and the financial implications of childhood disability (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1999). The focus reflects adult-defined concerns, such as those relating to the immediate financial implications of disability and impairment or children's projected adulthoods, most especially as future employees and citizens. There is little research which considers the 'here and now' issues within children's everyday lives.

Within research when relationships are examined the focus tends to reflect an interest in either the family unit, looking at siblings, parents and extended family (Tozer 1996) or at the relations of children non-disabled peer groups (Watson et al 1999) in a variety of different settings. There is little research which specifically considers the relationships between disabled children themselves (Morris 1998a).

There therefore remains an urgent need to engage further with the multiple experiences of children through seeking to discover the children's understandings of their childhood(s)
In particular Priestley states the need for an increase in research which reflects a social model perspective of disability (2003). This thesis answers this request for further research by choosing to be explicit in its focus. It looks at one issue, that of peer culture, within a very specific arena involving a particular group of children who are not only marginalised in society but also in research (Morris 1998d, Priestley 2003). This builds and elaborates on previous research, mostly in the early to mid 1990s, which considered the experiences of a variety of different types of short term breaks (Robinson 1996) through drawing on parental perspectives.

More recently there has been research which indicates a gradual and tentative cross-fertilisation of theories, concepts and research methods between disability studies and childhood sociology (Watson et al 1999). This has indicated the potential which exists in broadening the theoretical and empirical scope of research and has, in many ways, prepared the way for this specific research to occur.

**Disability Studies**

The theoretical developments within disability studies, which have served to raise the profile of disabled people in the UK, occurred in parallel to those within childhood sociology. However, they reflect a focus other than that of agency. The social model of disability which has emerged from understandings of social constructionism views disability as embedded in society, the way it is shaped and the way the lives of people with impairment are affected. It has been used as an essential tool in identifying the processes of oppression and social exclusion experienced by disabled people within society (Barnes 1991, Oliver 1990).

Whilst researchers have accepted the social model as providing an important insight into the lives of disabled children (Morris 1998a,b,c) its use has been somewhat limited. Its main purpose has been identifying the role of education in providing or limiting projected employment opportunities and segregation rather than exploring the here and now element of disabled children’s lives (Kliewer & Drake 1998).

However, the research within the ‘Life as a Disabled Child’ project (Watson et al 1999) has begun to engage in a debate relating to the combining of aspects of the social model of disability with childhood sociology’s perception of structured childhood (Corker & Davis 2003).

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2 For the sake of clarity within the context of the thesis, the term 'disability' is used and understood within the interpretations of disability studies; whilst impairment refers to biological and medical concerns.
The emerging issues raised, which are discussed in depth within chapters 2-4, result in a more detailed exploration of disabled childhood(s). This research therefore contributes to the increasing amount of empirical evidence about disabled children's experiences whilst also engaging in emerging debates about the theoretical approaches to understanding both disabled and mainstream childhood(s).

Obstacles and Challenges of the Research Aims

As I have outlined, the proposal for the thesis was precise: to explore the presence of and nature of the peer culture of children with learning impairments who spend time in specialist settings. However, from the outset this was not going to be a straightforward piece of work as there were a number of challenges which needed resolving in order to ensure successful completion of the research.

At an empirical level I was concerned whether the interactions among disabled children could be understood within the accepted conceptualisation of peer culture within sociology (Corsaro 1997) which is so embedded in mainstream childhood. It was important to be aware from the beginning of the potential dangers of attempting to 'fit' the findings into mainstream research, theory and evidence of childhood. It was therefore critical to be realistic about the possible outcomes of the research, and be prepared to question both theory and practice in order to ensure that the findings would be a true reflection of the experience of the children participating. The enquiry into the appropriateness of peer culture as a sensitising concept is introduced within chapter 2, although it is interwoven throughout the entire thesis, especially in the concluding chapter where I consider the concept in the light of the findings.

Enmeshed with the empirical concerns were issues in addressing the theoretical approaches of two very different areas of sociology. Childhood sociology's preference for exploring and considering the agency of children described in chapter 2 sits in opposition to the rigid structural approach of some areas of disability studies, this is explored further in chapter 3. Therefore this thesis represents a delicate tightrope walk between the two. The hoped for outcome - a theoretical balance between the concerns of the two, is sought through disturbing ontological certainty as I explain in chapters 2 and 3.

Methodologically I was aware that the group of children who I anticipated would take part in the research did not all use language as a primary method of communication. I was therefore conscious that I would need to seek alternative methods of data collection other
than interviews and focus groups, which rely on verbal skills. This obstacle, described and discussed in chapters 5 and 6, is not commonly present within mainstream research. However, it acted as a catalyst in my own personal development as a researcher, pushing me to look beyond the accepted ‘norms’ within research methods. The decision to use participant observation as the primary method of data collection, outlined in chapter 6, not only ensured inclusion of all the children within the research regardless of their preferred method of communication, it also produced a detailed picture of the context within which the children were interacting.

It is acknowledged that research with children requires ethical rigour, however this was even more the case within this project as the group of children involved are considered to be particularly vulnerable and at risk of exploitation within research. Thus chapter 5 addresses the complex issues which surround research with a group of children for whom communication, and thus the process of gaining informed consent is potentially problematic.

**Thesis Outline**

In preparing the thesis for final presentation I decided to be guided by the material rather than by academic expectation. Therefore the final written product consists of a higher than usual number of chapters – some of which are shorter than might be expected in a PhD thesis. The outcome of this is that the sometimes competing ideas, concepts and analysis stand clearly within their own space, before finally being merged in the final chapter.

The thesis begins with a critical review of the literature which explores the current knowledge of the three central elements of this research: theoretical understandings of peer culture, the nature of disabled childhood(s), and the provision of specialist services to disabled children and their families. Peer culture as a concept has been central throughout this research and is therefore awarded a prominent position as the focus of the opening chapter of the literature review.

Chapter 2 traces the evolution of the concept of a separate children’s culture, beginning with the work of the Opies (1959,1969), who compiled an extensive body of evidence of the language used among children, and of their games and activities. The chapter explores in depth the definition of peer culture proposed by William Corsaro (1997), looking at the theoretical influences which informed his thinking through to the epistemological basis of his identification of peer culture among children. It also reflects upon problems which arose
within this conceptualisation in relation to the research, particularly essentialist notions of agency and the position of context within the concept.

Chapter 3 presents a generalised view of childhood before progressing to explain the developments in sociology in defining 'childhood(s)'. It is against this backdrop that I discuss the predominant stereotypical views of disabled childhood(s) within society as a whole. The increasing impact of the theoretical development and implementation of the social model of disability has meant that these stereotypes are beginning to be challenged. This is witnessed in the growth of empirical evidence which is beginning to identify the nature of disabled childhood(s); which is reflected in the work of Morris (1998a,b,8c), Middleton (1999), and Watson et al (1999). The chapter considers previous research with disabled children and people with learning impairments which has made both theoretical and methodological contributions to the thesis.

Chapter 4 contextualises the provision of specialist settings within the policy and provision of welfare, in relation to history, culture and ideology. The chapter begins with a reflection on how such settings emerged from the institutionalisation of a wider group of marginalised people, including the 'feeble-minded', the 'insane' and 'deviants'. In tracing the gradual division and specialisation within such categories it is possible to appreciate the social, ideological and moral acceptance of the segregation of children with learning disabilities from their mainstream peers. In reflecting on the general nature of specialist provision within the UK during the period of the research the macro context of the charitable settings becomes visible. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the empirical evidence of the distinctive contemporary structural features within specialist settings: spatial organisation, daily organisation and supervision.

The thesis then alters focus in chapter 5 to reflect upon the considerations which influenced the process of designing the research particularly in relation to pressures within disability research and ethical positioning. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the position of emancipatory research within the thesis. This debates and subsequently defends my decision not to follow the call within the disability movement to follow this paradigm. Instead the research adopts a rigorous and detailed application of ethics which is embedded in all aspects of the project. However, it is made particularly transparent in the exploration of informed consent, harm and exploitation, privacy and autonomy, and consequences for future research and the translation of each of these into the research process.

3 Categories of 'feeble-minded', 'insane' and 'deviant' were commonly applied in the organisation and division of the early welfare services (Scull 1979, Jackson 1996)
Chapter 5 finishes with a discussion of the importance of reflexivity within the research process and what it has meant in real terms throughout the three year project. It is at this point that I place myself within the thesis reflecting upon my impact on the design process.

Chapter 6 presents the research design, the process of gathering fieldnotes and the analysis of the data. The chapter opens with a description of the distinctive features of the groups of children and young people within the research: the diversity of the group, especially relating to the wide range of learning (and in some cases physical) disabilities, age (5-16), and the different communication methods employed by the children, which meant that I needed to ensure an inclusive research design.

Following an explanation of the decision to use a qualitative approach, there is a reflection on the use of observation as the main method of gathering data, particularly participant observation and the least-adult role (Mandell 1991). In seeking a way of minimising the differences between adult and child I was able to position myself as something other than carer, play worker, adult, professional or therapist. The children responded to this, accepting me into their groups, activities and interactions.

Data were also gathered through meetings held with staff toward the end of the fieldwork. These served to verify my initial analysis and informed my understanding of the adult perceptions of the peer groups which I had observed. Throughout the research I was also provided with various documentation, such as policies, setting procedures and newsletters which gave me with an appreciation of each of the two research settings and their provision of services.

The second half of chapter 6 considers the management and process of analysis which was used both throughout and after the fieldwork, particularly focusing on how I read, coded and analysed the data. Having suspended ontological belief, the generation of ideas and theory emerges from the data. Therefore the chapter presents a detailed description of how this occurred, providing clarity and transparency in how the findings were identified.

Before immersing the reader in detailed analysis of the findings, chapter 7 presents the institutional and adult accounts of the children and settings which were evident during the course of the project. This provides readers with a description of the nature of each of the two settings, reflecting on their similarities and differences; their histories, culture and ideologies.
Presentation of the analysis begins in earnest in chapter 8 with an introduction to the overall peer group and multiple sub-groups. The presentation of the children’s interpretation of the groups they find themselves in demonstrates the children’s awareness of each other. The chapter explores the levels of connection between the children that were apparent. In analysing the data it also become evident that whilst there was one general peer group there were also sub-groups whose membership reflects a shared history and common interests. In establishing the nature and level of the connections between the children chapter 8 explores in further detail the social order which was identified in the analysis.

Chapter 9 draws together the evidence of children’s interactions to answer the question ‘is this peer culture?’ Initially this is discussed in relation to Corsaro’s definition of peer culture, recognising the presence of routine and ritual in the way the children have adapted their own games; reflecting shared understandings of their rules and the materials at their disposal. However in identifying the shared concerns of the children, particularly relating to Corsaro’s claim that children persistently try to ‘gain control of their lives’ (Corsaro 1997:118), it becomes apparent that the children who were observed do not engage in this as their primary concern. Rather the children’s concern for the wellbeing of their peers was the persistent theme.

In answering the question ‘is this peer culture?’ it becomes apparent that, within the thesis, what was observed was more than Corsaro’s definition, raising the significance of the context. There appeared an interdependence between the children, their interactions, the adults and the environments which made identification of a children’s culture as defined by Corsaro and various colleagues difficult to achieve. Therefore the chapter concludes with a proposed broadening of Corsaro’s conceptualisation which incorporates the context, raising the significance of the body in time and space, and accepting the capriciousness of the interactions which were observed.

Chapter 10 explores the nature of the observed activity further, in particular the evidence that the children’s actions and interactions emerged from the melee. They were not static, rather they would be visible one moment and gone the next, or would have evolved into another activity. The interactions between the children were also intertwined with the context, and often with the actions and activity of the adults who were present. In order to examine this more closely I turn to Gibson’s theory of ‘affordance’ (1979) which assists the process of understanding what was appearing in the data. The recognition of material, ecological (which incorporates time and space) and human factors in the provision of opportunities for peer interaction sheds light upon, and helps to explain, the dynamic and sometimes erratic interactions which were observed. This also helps to explain the
differences in the number and degrees of peer interaction which were observed between the two settings.

The idea of time and space is carried further in chapter 11, which progresses to examine the embodied nature of the peer interactions. Throughout the analysis the 'body' became increasingly apparent in the role it played in the passivity, actions and interactions of both the children and adults.

Before presenting detail about the body and interaction the chapter begins with a reflection of the children's corporeality. This provides an appreciation of the significance of the embodied nature of the children's lives within such settings, before I introduce a description of the ways in which the children are regulated in time and space. The data not only identified this bodily situating of the children but indicated that the children responded to and resisted this through their own management of their bodies. Mealtimes, which are a particularly ordered part of the day, reflected many instances of the children collectively subverting the adult-defined activity.

The concluding chapter reflects upon the potentially significant contributions and implications of the findings in relation to the provision of services, understandings of disabled childhood(s), childhood sociology and disability studies. On a policy and practice level the findings will inform the development of specialised services, thus impacting on future possibilities for children's participation in peer interactions. The data within the research provides detailed empirical evidence of the shape of one aspect of disabled childhood(s) thus complementing research which has gone before. On theoretical and methodological levels the findings have contributions to make to both childhood sociology and disability studies.

The chapter also considers the potential contribution of the thesis to the debates within sociology as a discipline about the relationship between structure and agency. In reflecting on the work of Giddens it is possible to see that this research reflects many of his ideas within structuration theory. However, by taking this one step further the thesis concludes in presenting peer culture as a synthesis between structure and agency.
Part Two

A Critical Review of the Literature

"The Bouncy Castle". Graham.
Conceptualising Peer Culture

This chapter focuses on the concept of peer culture which was at the foreground when the initial proposal for this research was constructed and has remained the primary sensitising concept throughout. The first section references the anthropological work of the Opies in the 1950s and 1960s, whose research identified the existence of a separate children's culture. This significant work remained predominant until the sociological contribution of William Corsaro and colleagues, whose focus on the interactions among schoolchildren led to the conceptualisation of peer culture in relation to children which is the focus of the second part of the chapter.

The final section of the chapter considers potential flaws in Corsaro's conceptualisation of peer culture in the light of recent developments in childhood sociology. Of particular concern within this thesis is the perception of agency adopted by Corsaro and his response to the contextual situation of his data.

The Emergence of the Concept of Children's Culture

Whilst the current concept of childhood as a social construct is thought to have emerged as long ago as the latter stages of the seventeenth century (Aries 1960), it is not necessary to cast one's gaze so far back to establish the emergence and formal recognition of peer culture. This section of the chapter focuses on the work of folk anthropologists Peter and Iona Opie. Their recording of playground games, rhymes and ditties provided evidence of a cultural world which was generated and managed by children. This represented a significant first step toward the acknowledgement of the existence of a separate children's culture.

Most relevant here is the Opies' account of The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren (1959) which is a detailed and complex account of the rhymes, ditties, games and folklore which passed among children in the 1950s. The project involved schoolchildren from a variety of different locations in the regions of the UK and Ireland including both rural and urban schools. Their main aim was to record the rhymes and ditties which were appropriated, altered and reproduced by the children beneath the adult approved social order.
The Opies claimed that their recordings were evidence of a children’s culture which was separate from that of adults. They likened their discovery to the findings of anthropologists in distant countries saying that

The school child’s verses are not intended for adult ears. In fact part of their fun is the thought, usually correct, that adults know nothing about them. Grown-ups have outgrown the schoolchild’s lore. If made aware of it they tend to deride it; and they actively seek to suppress its livelier manifestations. Certainly they do nothing to encourage it. And the folklorist and anthropologist can, without travelling a mile from his door, examine a thriving, unselfconscious culture (the word ‘culture’ is used here deliberately) which is as unnoticed by the sophisticated world, and quite as little effected by it, as is the culture of some dwindling tribe living out its helpless existence in the hinterland of a native reserve (Opie & Opie 1959:1-2)

There were a number of key features of the identifiable lore and language which the Opies highlighted: continuity, uniformity, the speed of transmission, wear and repair, and regional variations.

When discussing the continuity of children’s lore and language, the Opies stated that children are ‘like the savage, they are respecters, even venerators of custom’ (1959:2). They identified that whilst there may be numerous variations, the essential themes of children’s lore and language remained the same. As an example they claim that throughout time children who are perceived as weak are taunted, and that girls enjoyed magic (which is something you can’t argue with even now, given the success of Harry Potter), and boys enjoy playing tricks on one another.

They were also aware of and presented the ways in which children appropriate rhymes from adult cultures, personalising them, incorporating their own geographical and temporal experiences. For example they trace the commandeering and subsequent evolution of the song ‘Davie Crockett’ as its popularity spread throughout the UK. Within a very short space of time the different regions in the study adopted their own variation according to local influences. Thus they identified three factors, firstly that the speed of transmission can be fast, secondly that the basic song remained the same (reflecting uniformity) and lastly the subtle differences in the song reflected regional variations.

The Opies also identified what they referred to as the process of wear and repair. Here they recognised the ways in which children maintained rhymes and ditties over time, passing them on from one generation to another. The children then altered them when they were worn out or less relevant and updated them according to the current fashions.
The Opies’ work is significant for the main reason that it was the first, highly detailed, recording of an identified children’s culture. Their focus on lore and language opened the possibility that children have their own world over which they maintained control, direction and outcome. This was consolidated a decade later in their presentation of *Children’s Games in the Street and Playground* (Opie & Opie 1969) which, whilst it had a similar design to their previous work, focussed on the formation, maintenance and rules of action games such as chasing, catching, seeking, hunting and racing (Opie & Opie 1969).

The Opies’ belief that there might be a children’s culture which was a unique creation of children, operating independently from adults and which evolved over generations, was not openly challenged in the years immediately following publication. Rather, their work was hailed as pioneering, unique and informative, providing a valuable insight into children’s worlds.

**Sociological conceptualisation of Peer Culture**

At the same time the Opies were exploring the possibility of children having their own culture, mainstream sociology was beginning to conceive the idea of ‘peer groups’ engaging in activity separate from the majority. Emergent work from the Chicago school in the late 1950s and 1960s reflected attempts to move away from ‘macro-sociological abstraction’. As Thornton explains:-

> The identification of a subculture, by contrast, tends to be the tangible and immediate result of qualitative micro-sociological research. Subcultures are known to their members and often investigated through their eyes, to the extent that the distinction between subcultural insider and non-subcultural insider is often a matter of collective perception rather than any legal, physical or geographical divide. (Thornton 1997:3)

Initial presentations of subcultures and peer groups focussed on concepts of deviance focussing on crime, substance abuse and prostitution. Indeed the formation of peer cultures was presented by Al Cohen (1966) as a minority group response to the social structural rules existent within a society. It directly refers to deviance as being in excess of acceptable rule-breaking which serves the purpose of testing boundaries and setting conformity. The fact that deviant sub-groups are seen to engage in reprehensible behaviour which occurs outside moral, judicial and social values is not relevant here. Cohen did however highlight important features of subcultures which are helpful in appreciating the attraction of the concept of peer culture in exploring and seeking an understanding of children’s lives.
Cohen (1966) rejected the previously favoured functionalist paradigms, which focussed on causes of deviance; preferring to concern himself with how the actor gained ‘cultural knowledge’. To do this he explored the interactions between the macro culture and subculture. Cohen also applied G H Mead’s concepts of role theory to shift the focus away from seeking an understanding of the motivation and causes of behaviours to the relationships between the roles ascribed and assumed within culture.

**Conceptualising Children’s Peer Culture**

The shift in focus, towards understanding the relationships and roles within peer groups, which was occurring generally within sociology, provided those interested in children’s worlds with a window into their worlds. In the 1970s there was a growth in work by sociologists which indicates the beginnings of enquiry into peer interaction and thus peer culture. The main proponent of peer culture within childhood sociology who was influenced by action theories is the American sociologist William Corsaro who has drawn on the work of the interactionists G H Mead, Cooley, Luckmann, Berger and Denzin in his research with children (Corsaro 1979a, Corsaro & Molinari 1990).

In the 1970s Corsaro began to explore the nature of communication between schoolchildren (Cook-Gumperz & Corsaro 1977, Corsaro 1977). This work led Corsaro, with the collaboration of a number of colleagues throughout his research career, to his conceptualisation of peer culture. It was his interpretation of peer culture which directly informed the nature of the proposal for this thesis. In order to appreciate why it appeared an attractive way of exploring children’s lives, there follows an account of its emergence and core characteristics as outlined by Corsaro.

**Influences on the Definition of Peer Culture**

Corsaro developed his concept of peer culture not only on the foundations of action theories but has drawn on three other primary sources to inform his work: Vygotsky’s collectivism, Qvortrup’s description of structural childhood and the concept of interpretive reproduction. This detailed examination of the precise definition of peer culture proposed by Corsaro requires an appreciation of the specific concepts which informed his thinking,

**Vygotsky’s Collectivism.** Corsaro’s stated intention was to move the study of children’s actions away from the psychological focus which had dominated previous research concerning children’s lives (Corsaro 1988a,b,1997). His main criticism was that the
individualistic stance adopted by behavioural and constructivist psychologists had failed to perceive the nature and position within society of child peer groups (Corsaro & Eder 1990). He was also keen to avoid research which he describes as ‘idealised and adult-based’ (Corsaro 1986:82).

In order to break away from these potentially restrictive approaches, Corsaro and Eder focused on the importance of the relational aspect of children’s lives by adopting a Vygotskian belief that relations are employed in ‘producing and maintaining cultural systems’ (Corsaro & Eder 1990:199). The crucial point is the idea that not only are children participating in relations but that these relations are critical within the cultural context of children’s lives. This approach therefore permits researchers to distance themselves from the individual view of the child to one of children existing within a collective group, thus the idea of peer culture. In other words relations and interactions represent a collective process that occurs in a public rather than private realm (Corsaro and Eder 1990:199).

**Structural Childhood.** I have already noted that Corsaro’s work was informed by theories which originated from the Chicago school and Vygotsky’s relational focus. However, in later years his research has been significantly enriched by the changes which have occurred within childhood sociology. Corsaro is drawn to Qvortrup’s proposal that researchers view childhood from a structural perspective, which reflects three key assumptions:-

(1) childhood constitutes a particular structural form; (2) childhood is exposed to the same societal forces as adulthood; and (3) children are themselves co-constructors of childhood and society. (Corsaro 1997:30).

In suggesting a structural approach to research, Qvortrup is drawing on childhood sociology which has grown over the past few decades from a reconceptualisation of children as agents (James and Prout 1990, Qvortrup 1994, James, Jenks and Prout 1998, Jenks 1996). Children are perceived to be dynamic agents assessing, altering and contributing to the societal circumstances in which they find themselves (James, Jenks & Prout 1998, Corsaro 1997). This approach also broadened researchers horizons encouraging exploration into the cultural worlds of children, something Corsaro was already engaged in.

The structural perspective of childhood proposed by Qvortrup (1991) provided Corsaro with a basis for his description of children’s ability to act agentically in appropriating, changing and reproducing societal structures as their own shared culture. As he states
Children are active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children's cultures whilst simultaneously contributing to the production of adult structures (Corsaro 1997:4)

**Interpretive Reproduction.** The thinking which lies behind interpretive reproduction permitted Corsaro to synthesise the concepts of agency with a structural view of childhood and collectivity to identify the phenomenon of peer culture. The process of interpretive reproduction is defined in the way Corsaro perceives children to be engaging with, interpreting and understanding the social world in order to achieve a 'fundamental social knowledge on which they continually build' (Corsaro and Eder 1990:200). As such it is crucial in understanding Corsaro's conceptualisation of peer culture. Corsaro and Molinari explain

The term *interpretive* captures innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society. Children produce and participate in their very own distinctive peer cultures by creatively appropriating information from the adult world to address their own concerns. The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalising society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural production and change (Corsaro & Molinari 1990:17).

Thus children are presented as acting collectively as agents within a process of cultural reproduction which is unique to them. Corsaro and Eder (1990) further reflect on the status of the interpretive reproductive approach, claiming it to have a dual nature. In adopting Giddens' concept of structural duality they see that peer culture is not only the *process* of children's interactions, it is the *product* of those actions as well.

Corsaro and Eder (1990) state that their aim is to avoid the use of a linear model of development which they feel is restrictive in understanding children. To do this Corsaro went on to clarify interpretive reproduction further in 1997 by presenting a visual representation resembling a type of spider's web (see Figure 2.1). Essentially he uses the different elements within an orb web to represent the key facets of the interpretive reproductive process. Represented by the radii of the web are the social institutions and the cultural information which are interwoven into a life. At the core of the web spiralling outwards is the thread of a person's life gradually widening and expanding through four life-stages; pre-school, preadolescent, adolescent and adult.
Corsaro warns that this conceptualisation of peer culture gives a structure for understanding children's relations, yet it is not intended as a limiting concept. As he points out, although spider's webs follow a basic pattern, no two are the same! What he intends the model to achieve is an understanding of the interrelationship between the collective activities of children and adults.

**Defining Peer Culture**

Throughout his writing Corsaro has maintained two critical points in relation to peer culture. First and foremost is that peer culture is identifiable as

a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share (Corsaro 1988a:3)
To illustrate the routines of children, he presents examples of observations of activities regularly engaged in by groups of children which are identifiable as unique to them (Corsaro 1997). He uses Luisa Molinari’s observation of the game *il seggiolini* to demonstrate that children share and participate in routine games. In this case the children are placing desks and chairs in a row; then walking along them. Corsaro comments that, whilst there were small daily alterations within the game, it retained a basic fundamental format. In essence his claim is that this game is produced and shared by the children.

By artefacts, Corsaro refers to ‘childhood material culture’ meaning ‘clothing, books, artistic and literacy tools and most especially toys’ (Corsaro 1997:109). He considers the child as a consumer of adult designed products and criticises studies of child consumer culture for failing to recognise the way in which children produce their own material artefacts (Corsaro 1997). Although Corsaro does not provide his audience with examples of artefacts produced by peer cultures, he does refer to their artwork, building blocks and games. This brings to mind a recent popular pastime of children which was described to me by my nephew. Groups of children would raid the school (and home) toilet paper, wet it and mould it into monstrous, imaginary figures, known as Erics. Once dried the Erics would be coloured in with felt tip and swapped among the group. It would be reasonable to suggest that this is the sort of artefact to which Corsaro is referring.

The activities, routines and artefacts which children engage in and the relationships between children are viewed by Corsaro as indicators of the values and concerns held by children, which is the second part of his definition of peer culture. Corsaro describes the friendships and relations between children and the importance attached to status, identity, position, acceptance and rejection. He states that this is evidence of the value attached to this apparent social order. He also maintains that this is the reason why children expend a significant amount of time and energy in maintaining their peer groups (Corsaro and Eder 1990, Rizzo & Corsaro 1995).

Themes of Peer Culture

Within his definition and conceptualisation of peer culture Corsaro also outlines a second critical point: that there are two consistent themes which stand in addition to his concept which indicate a purpose of/within peer culture. Corsaro has claimed that

(1) Children make persistent attempts to gain control of their lives and (2) they always attempt to share that control with one another (Corsaro 1997:118. Corsaro and Eder 1990, Corsaro 1993)
Evidence of this is presented within data which Corsaro refers to in his descriptions of children's activities and routines. He reports that whilst children demonstrate autonomy and control within their own groups, they also do so in their interactions with adults. It is this point which Corsaro considers to be significant.

Corsaro demonstrates situations where children assert their own needs, agendas and views in such a way that 'they both mock and evade adult authority' (Corsaro 1997:140). Within this, children are dynamic in their interactions with adults and adult defined rules and social order. Thus they are not interacting beneath the social order: rather they are engaging with it in a proactive fashion. For example, he discusses children playing games such as King of the Castle where they position themselves in a higher position over adults (Corsaro 1997:118). He also refers to the strategies employed by groups of children to subvert cleanup time, which is generally viewed as an adult-directed activity (Corsaro 1997:113).

Identifying Peer Culture

The epistemological basis for Corsaro's conceptualisation of peer culture is one of language. His research record reflects foundations of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis (Corsaro 1977,1985,1986, Cook-Gumperz, Corsaro & Streeck 1986). Whilst he has employed ethnographic methodologies in latter years incorporating observation of action and interaction, his reliance on language as a primary indicator of peer culture remains central in his conceptualisation (Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998). As he states:-

Language activities are crucial for culture production since it is through language that shared interpretations develop (Corsaro and Eder 1990:212).

Corsaro draws on children's descriptions of their activities and his observations of the verbal communication between children. Whilst the majority of his data were collected using participant observation (this is discussed in detail in chapter 6), he also used covert observation techniques and video recording equipment. The subsequent evidence of peer culture presented is a richly detailed account of the verbal communication among children and adults, supplemented by descriptions of their non-verbal interactions (Corsaro 1997).

For example, Corsaro's description of the game 'arriva la banca' played by a group of Italian pre-school children relies on the use of language and word play to describe a process of interaction. In the same way, the explanation that children use rituals and games to overcome fears uses evidence of rhymes, chants and routines which are essentially language based. This can be seen in Corsaro's description of 'la Strega' (the witch) a game played by
Italian children. Essentially this is a game of tag in which the child chasing is a ‘witch’, key to the game’s success is the use of verbal prompts which control the pace and nature of the game (Corsaro 1997).

This second section of the chapter has outlined peer culture as conceptualised by Corsaro and various colleagues, whose work reflects an ontological view of children as collective agents operating within structured childhoods. His claim is that peer culture consists of a stable set of identifiable features such as ‘activities, routines, artefacts, values and concerns’ (Corsaro 1997). Within these Corsaro also identifies two themes within peer culture which remain consistent. These themes recognise a purpose of peer culture, firstly to ‘gain control’ and secondly to ‘share that control’ (Corsaro 1997:118). The themes indicate the importance of autonomy and control within the functioning of peer culture as defined by Corsaro.

**Childhood Sociology and Corsaro’s Concept of Peer Culture**

The work of Corsaro complemented the Opie’s exploration of children’s lore and language by further theorising the interactions among children. The idea of a separate children’s culture was argued in sociological terms and responded to the changes which were occurring within childhood sociology at that time. Corsaro not only considered the children’s world but attempted to examine the relationship between it and the adult world, through interpretive reproduction. On the surface these theories appeared valuable at the outset of the present research. However, there are some issues which stem from the ontological and epistemological foundations used by Corsaro which make this conceptualisation problematic.

The final section of this chapter considers the problems which arise in the light of recent developments within childhood sociology. Drawing on the current discussion within childhood sociology regarding the concept of agency, the stability of the concept of peer culture is drawn into question. When this is discussed in parallel with the degree of importance given to context, Corsaro’s concept is destabilised even further, as I shall demonstrate.

**Agency**

The view that children are agentic is at the core of Corsaro’s ontological position in relation to his interpretation of peer culture, as he states ‘children are active, creative social agents’ (1997:4). This view is evident from his early work which identifies and recognises children
as social actors (1979). He substantiated this claim further following the changes which occurred within childhood sociology in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At this time childhood sociology, through perceiving children as agentic, instigated a fundamental shift in thinking about children. The concept of the agentic child resulted in children being introduced as beings, as opposed to ‘becomings’ (James and Prout 1990, Qvortrup 1991).

This provided Corsaro with further evidence of children engaging proactively with their social world. He refers to Qvortrup’s (1991) ‘emphasis on children as active, co-constructors of their social worlds’ (Corsaro 1997:40) to qualify his claims. His subsequent descriptions of children’s agentic action portray a consistent peer culture, in which children engage equally, in pre-school and school settings. This indicates that Corsaro believes that children either possess, have at their disposal or are able to access, agency at all times (Corsaro 1997, Rizzo & Corsaro 1995).

Within his work Corsaro does not refer to instances when children do not demonstrate agency in their actions or where agency is not observed within interactions. Children’s competence and autonomy within social situations and their cultural evolution is presented in such a way that the possibility of incompetence is not raised. Rather the achieving of competence and autonomy is described as an important factor in peer culture participation (Corsaro and Eder 1990). When this is considered in regard to current thinking about the relationship between children and agency, this becomes questionable.

Within sociology the recognition of the concept of children as agentic has raised the profile of childhood studies and served to validate the growth in research in the area (Prout 2000a, James and Prout 1990, James, Jenks & Prout 1998, Qvortrup 1994). Children are perceived to be active within their life experiences rather than passive recipients of adult social worlds. They are portrayed as dynamic in assessing, altering and contributing to the societal circumstances they find themselves in (James, Jenks & Prout 1998, Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998, Corsaro 1997). Children are generally situated as socially competent (Prout and James 1990) who are either immersed in their own worlds (Corsaro 1997), negotiating meaning (Mandell 1991b), and sharing cultural knowledge (Kantor, Elgas & Fernie 1998) or occupied with making sense of adult worlds (Waksler 1991b). They are no longer objects of research but rather subjects with contributions to make (Christensen & James 2000). In recent years however, this approach has been criticised for failing to recognise the existence of dependencies and immaturity within agentic action (Lee 2001). This issue requires further exploration.
Lee argues that the concept of agency which is generally applied within the sociology of childhood implies the pre-existence of agency in each individual (Lee 1998). He also claims that, by focusing on the successful deployment of agency, researchers then privilege competence and completeness. This leads to the next thread of his argument, which is that a reliance on assuming a perception of agency which is based on completeness and independence fails to recognise 'the dependencies that underlie even the most mature performance of independence and a sensitivity to the incompleteness of social order' (Lee 1998: 460).

Corsaro’s conceptualisation of peer culture as I have described in this chapter, is based on an understanding of agency which privileges these essentialist notions of competence and maturity. As such it provides an image of children engaging with their peer culture in such a way that agentic action is relatively stable, and not swayed by inconsistency, dependency, immaturity or external factors.

An outcome of adopting an essentialist agency is that those children who live outside the mainstream perception of childhood have been inadvertently excluded from studies of peer culture. Children who have dependencies which are beyond those commonly associated with children; for example, those in the looked-after system, refugee children, and disabled children, have been omitted from explorations of children’s demonstration of agency. As I shall explain in the next chapter these children’s lives are not necessarily stable; they have a variety of dependencies unique to each child which need to be accounted for when appreciating their exercising of agency.

This leads to the need to incorporate dependence in such a way that it is not portrayed negatively or left open for misuse. Lee proposes a radical solution to addressing the independence/dependence dichotomy. He suggests that sociologists move away from an essentialist stance of agency toward an acceptance of ‘immaturity’ and ‘incompleteness’ which embraces ontological ambiguity. In doing this Lee is proposing a fundamental shift in the way in which sociology as a discipline views both children and adults, as he explains:

To disturb the model of agency as self-possession is to disturb maturity as the standard model for sociological actors. If we can so disturb agency it would be no longer necessary to ‘mature’ children by deciding that they are agents. Childhood would open the door for sociology to see beyond its desire for completeness (Lee 1998:469).

Whilst this uncertainty may be daunting for some it provides the researcher with an unspoilt lens through which to explore the social world. It facilitates lateral thinking and an openess
to new thoughts about adulthood and childhood, and disabled/non-disabled. This is exactly the basis for this thesis.

The idea that agency may not be an essential possession therefore encourages exploration into a range of issues such as when and how it occurs, what facilitates its use, and whether it is influenced by macro level factors such as economics, policies, cultural, institutions, social structures. This links in to the discussion within childhood sociology about 'situating children's social competence' (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998), which positions agency and associated actions in relation to context. As Hutchby and Moran-Ellis explain

The social competence of children is to be seen as a practical achievement: that is, it is not something which is accorded to children by adults, like a right, and thus can be redefined or removed. Rather, social competence is seen as something children work at possessing in their own right, the display of which is an active, agentic achievement. But it is an achievement that is bounded by structural features of the milieux in which children live their lives (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998:14).

It is this relation between agentic action and context which is the second potential problem which emerges from Corsaro's conceptualisation of peer culture which requires examination.

**Contextualising Peer Culture**

Before exploring Corsaro's concept of peer culture, it is important to briefly re-visit the Opies' research which was predominant for so long. Whilst it is significant, it had one flaw, one which perhaps Corsaro has mirrored, if somewhat differently. They made one essential claim which renders their work as problematic. That is their certainty that the lore of children is 'unnoticed by the sophisticated world, and quite as little affected by it' (Opie & Opie 1959:2). By failing to recognise overtly the relationships and interplay between the world of children and that of adults, the Opies, unwittingly, were failing to recognise the unavoidable presence of relationships between children and adults. As Prout and James explain

To a significant degree this is the fate of pioneers such as the Opies (1977, 1984) who despite the richness of the ethnographic archive which they assembled, present a picture of childhood as a world apart. It is linked to the dominant adult culture only as a sort of anachronistic lumber of previous times. (Prout and James 1997: 27)

Although this is now viewed to be problematic, the initial response was not to fault the lack, of incorporation of adults into the children's world; rather researchers sought to explore this separate world in more detail. The concept of an autonomous world of childhood had its attractions in that it provided a sub-group which was perceived as deviant from the general
population. Also the production by children of their own rhymes, lore and language provided researchers with evidence on which they could base their analysis. It was from this epistemological source that Corsaro's work emerged.

The majority of Corsaro's research centres on the peer cultures of children attending preschools in Italy and America. Collaborative work has widened the scope of his work to include older children (Corsaro & Eder 1990, Rizzo & Corsaro 1995). For example Rizzo & Corsaro (1995) provided a comparison of the friendships of children between three different schools. However, criticism was directed at that work by Rosenblatt and Howes, who believed that:

The authors present the classroom social ecologies as if only one fundamental type of activity setting is relevant. Given research findings that peer interactions often differ between structured and unstructured time, this comparison may offer greater understanding of the role of the social-ecological setting (Rosenblatt & Howes 1995:431)

However, Corsaro does refer to the importance of context (Cook-Gumperz & Corsaro 1977, Corsaro & Molinari 1990, Gaskins, Miller & Corsaro 1992, Corsaro 1997). But, there is little detailed description and exploration of the contexts within which the children live out the peer culture identified by Corsaro and colleagues. The outcome of this is the development of the concept of peer culture which recognises the context without exploring how precisely this is then instrumental in shaping or contributing to the observed culture.

The differences between the uses of structured and unstructured time is only one aspect which Corsaro appears to omit. The day to day experiences of all children are multi-faceted with educational and social concerns which need to be accounted for. James, Jenks and Prout have been particularly concerned with what is sometimes seen as the definitive outcome of research which can be so non-dimensional. Viewing Corsaro's work from this perspective therefore leads me to concur with the idea that

The notion of a separate and autonomous 'children's culture' may, we suggest, be in part a product of the specificity of these research contexts, making the concept of 'children's culture' an artefact of the research process itself (James, Jenks and Prout 1998:87)

Through assuming a consistency in the relationship between agency and the contexts of children's lives, Corsaro has presented a concept of peer culture as autonomous and stable with a degree of predictability. Whilst this might be the case within the settings where Corsaro carried out his studies, there has been little further research which considers the peer culture of children whose life experiences are not within the mainstream. This has led
to an inadvertent obscuring of dependency (which in itself can be very variable) and has also denied the potential role of context in the generation of peer culture.

Due to the focus on mainstream issues, Corsaro's conceptualisation of peer culture has been utilised by researchers only in limited ways, for example focusing on issues such as culturally diverse settings (Deegan 1996) and gender (Thorne 1986, 1993). The research within this thesis is also focused by the way in which it is situated in settings which differ in the way they have been designed to focus on a specific group of children. Understanding of the lives of disabled children who are considered to have severe learning disabilities and of the provision of services to these children, is explored further in the following chapters. Suffice it to say that the subjects and settings within this study do not include many of the mainstream components which formed Corsaro's conceptualisation of peer culture.

**Summary**

This chapter has focussed on the conceptualisation of peer culture in relation to children's lives. It has traced the emergence of the concept of a separate children's culture (Opie & Opie (1959) within folk anthropology through to its evolution as an integral concept within childhood sociology.

The development of peer culture in relation to children and childhood follows its emerging recognition within mainstream sociology in the 1950s and 1960s. The American childhood sociologist William Corsaro initially developed this idea throughout the late 1970s resulting in the articulation of a definition of the concept in the 1980s. The central focus within this chapter has been an examination of Corsaro's conceptualisation. Beginning with the ontological and epistemological foundations from which he developed his ideas, it was possible to appreciate his description of peer culture as a 'stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers' (Corsaro 1997:96).

However in reflecting on Corsaro's concept in the light of recent developments and discussions, particularly in the UK, within childhood sociology, there appear two issues which are problematic. The first is his use of the concept of agency which reflects essentialist notions of competence. The second relates to the degrees of attention he allocates to contextualising peer culture.
The outcome of this is a decision to destabilise ontological belief referring to agency, and leave it suspended until a later point in this thesis. It also leads to further exploration of the context of children’s lives in forthcoming chapters in order to place the discussion about peer culture within the context of this research.
Disabled Childhood(s)

This chapter provides a canvas against which the anomalies in the perceptions of disabled childhood(s), particularly those of children with moderate to severe learning disabilities, are identified. By beginning with a reflection of the popular societal images of mainstream childhood, it is possible to appreciate the climate within which childhood sociologists are working.

Cultural stereotypes of disabled children are then described, after which the current perceptions of how these stereotypes fit into current sociological perceptions are outlined. The next section describes the contribution of the social model of disability which emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century. Through challenging previous research, cultural and social discrimination and perceiving disability as a social construct this theoretical development has encouraged innovative research which seeks to explore the experiences of disabled children. There is also reflection on recent empirical evidence of the experiences of disabled children and associated literature. Research based on the social model of disability has highlighted the high levels of supervision and segregation of disabled children which are beyond that experienced by most of their mainstream counterparts (Morris 1997).

The next section of the chapter features a detailed exploration of a significant piece of research into the lives of disabled children which represents the first formal collaboration between the two disciplines of disability studies and childhood sociology. This thesis responds to and seeks to explore the concern raised by researchers within 'The Life as a Disabled Child' project (Watson et al 1999) about the impact of supervision and regulation on the friendships of disabled children.

The concluding section of the chapter introduces the theoretical and ontological concerns which have been raised by those working with people with cognitive impairments. This brings into question the validity of accepting dichotomous relationships between sociological concepts. This reflects concerns already raised in the previous chapter about essentialist perceptions of agency. Thus the argument to maintain uncertainty and ambiguity within ontological reasoning is strengthened and enhanced.
Images of Childhood

On the whole the popular perception of childhood in the UK is understood as a period within one’s life which features three key areas of progress: physical growth, intellectual development, and learning about becoming part of society. Whilst these are tended to at a local level within families, there is also concern at a wider level which is reflected in the activities and focus of government bodies which respond to and provide for the needs of children, in other words health, education and social services.

The growing concern for the welfare of children has seeped into UK culture and is evident in the content of TV programmes, both children’s and adult’s. For younger children The Tweenies ‘play safe’ whilst the CBBC Website caters for the concerns of older children featuring issues relating to health ‘get real’, future employment ‘work it’, and ‘sort it’ which covers issues such as bullying, domestic violence and puberty (http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/real/sortit/index.shtml).

The main Children’s Charities use slogans which suggest that childhood at the present time is in crisis and in need of rescue, for example ‘Giving children back their future’ (Barnardos), ‘Making a world of difference’ (Save the Children UK), ‘A Force for Change’ (The Children’s Society). Society hears messages that childhood is somehow in decline and diminished in comparison to adult memories of their own experiences. In reflecting on the future for his new-born son, John Humphries, journalist and broadcaster, summed up what is a relatively accepted image of childhood at the start of the millennium.

This over-protectiveness is based on a variety of fears but above all the fear of the shadowy horror of evil men who lie in wait......The outside world and the strangers in it are identified with the alien. Children are confined to a cage – a hugely comfortable cage packed with treasures and diversions, but a cage none the less. Whereas my older children lived in the street and the parks and the playgrounds, a modern child stays indoors to watch his own television, to stare at his own computer screen. He exercises so little that childhood obesity has become a serious problem. Other effects are more insidious............ A modern child’s relationship to the consumer society is corruptingly close. (Humphries, The Times 04-05-2000)

Whilst some may disagree with aspects of Humphries’ comments, the underlying sense that childhood is changing or altered is the cultural climate within which childhood sociologists are operating. It is also the overview of childhood from which disabled children are often marginalised, as I will discuss later in the chapter.
Childhood Sociology

As stated in the previous chapter, childhood sociology emerged in the latter two decades of the 20th century as a result of the ontological re-positioning the child. Within this children are perceived to be agentic (James and Prout 1997) and to be existing within a structured childhood (Qvortrup 1991). This sociological questioning of the nature of childhood was a direct reaction to the individualisation of children and problematising of their condition which is evident in much medical, psychological and pedagogic research.

The outcome of childhood sociology's theoretical developments has been research which is primarily concerned with portraying the ordinary experiences of children within the structures of their lives. The focus of empirical work has been on the main categories of childhood structures which mainstream children are believed to experience: health and welfare, pedagogy, family and home life and peer interactions.

On a macro level the focus has been on health and welfare services in the form of legislation (Lee 2000), health services (Mayall 1996, Alderson 1993) and rights (Alderson 2000, Archard 1993). The focus on school experiences also tends to reflect a macro level concern (Waksler 1996). There has also been an exploration into the more immediate local life experiences of childhood in respect of family life (Brannen & O’Brian 1996, Mayall 2002) and out of school activity (Adler & Adler 1998). Researchers have been interested in a multitude of issues such as the impact of divorce, step-families, poverty, employment, local communities and social isolation on children, siblings and their family units.


Childhood sociology has therefore focussed on the common structures which are believed to shape childhood(s) such as schools (Waksler 1991b, 1996), home environments (Alanen 1998, Wyness 1997), local communities (Morrow 2002) and the mainstream care system (de Montigny 1998). Researchers have successfully demonstrated evidence of children's agentic actions and their contribution to the social world (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998). Children have been portrayed as either immersed in their own worlds (Corsaro 1997), negotiating
meaning (Mandell 1991b) and sharing cultural knowledge (Kantor, Elgas & Fernie 1998), or occupied with making sense of adult worlds (Mandell 1991). Thus children are no longer objects of research but rather subjects with contributions to make (Christensen & James 2000).

As I have outlined, this ontological and epistemological shift has raised the profile of children within sociological enquiry and identified them as active members of society. However, in seeking to present the collective experiences of mainstream childhood in this way, academics within childhood sociology have inadvertently excluded those whose life circumstances result in higher levels of dependencies, immaturity, and uncertainty, particularly disabled children. There has also been an omission of the structural experiences which differ from the mainstream such as those within specialist residential schools, respite settings, families with disabled children, health and therapeutic intervention and special transport needs. The outcome of this is that the societal perception of disabled children which stands at a distance from that of their peers has remained relatively unchallenged and liminal within childhood sociology until the past decade. The following section of this chapter therefore focuses on describing the stereotypical images of disabled children which prevail within UK culture.

**Cultural Stereotypes of Disabled Children**

They have their arms and legs, can see and hear, run, play, etc., but most have never been to a Birthday party or a sleepover... they are last to be chosen to play, and first to be blamed. Their illnesses aren't fatal, but a small part of their hearts and souls die with every rejection. Their behaviours may seem odd or unpredictable to themselves as much as society. They are overlooked. (Forgotten Kids.virtualave.net)

To gain an appreciation of existing stereotypes of disabled children it is beneficial to briefly reflect on the historical context of disability within UK society. The Victorian era in particular is identified by many within the disability movement as significant in the shaping of public perceptions of impairment as the source of difference. The works of Dickens and Bronte include a number of characters with impairments: Smike, Tiny Tim, Helen Burns and Mr Rochester to name a few. Tom Shakespeare (2000) provides a comprehensive review of the cultural images of disableity which were presented in the literature of the time. They inspire pity, describe courage against the odds. Characters are either victims of fate or heroes buffeted by life but not broken by it.
It is claimed that these images result in the production of a negative stereotype, of individuals within society who require assistance and intervention, who depend on others and are not able to control their own destiny. It is argued that it is these stereotypes which remain within society today (Shakespeare and Watson 1998, Oliver and Barnes 1998, Middleton 1999a).

The result of such stereotypes is the perception of disabled children as helpless, in need of assistance, guidance or protection. Indeed, this portrayal of disabled children can be seen in our current society. The telethons, such as Children in Need, rely on this perception to raise money, and in turn reinforce societal acceptance of segregation, specialist intervention and surveillance. I would agree with Shakespeare (2000), Davis and Watson (2002) and Middleton (1999), who claim that this positions the disabled child in a dependent role. The latter is beyond levels of dependence usually ascribed to mainstream children.

It is important to be clear that this does not ignore the reality of impairments which are the source of such dependence, discomfort and restriction for many children. The need for assistance with simple daily tasks or the dependence on others to provide total personal care is a facet of many children’s lives. These dependencies are not questioned here, but they are not the primary issue. Of concern is the subsequent failure to notice independence, ability and agency as and when they occur or develop.

Rather than dwell overlong on the negative stereotypes within society, I turn attention to consideration of how they are being successfully challenged by recent theoretical developments. The contributions of the social model of disability to our current understanding about disability and disabled children are particularly significant in influencing the focus of recent research. Therefore the next section of this chapter outlines the principles within the social model of disability and provides a reflection on the subsequent impact on research concerning the lives of disabled children.

The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability was originally conceptualised by disabled activist Paul Hunt in 1966, it was refined by the UPIAS (Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation) in 1976, finally undergoing academic scrutiny in the late 1980s (Oliver 1990, Barnes 1991). It is regularly referred to within disability related research and is generally understood to perceive the disablement of people with impairments to be the product of social barriers
rather than biological error. It has also contributed to the introduction of current legislation concerning disabled people in the form of The Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

The social model emerged from a sense of economic and social injustice and was initially informed by Marxist principles (Oliver 1990, Barnes 1991). Combined with the activities of disability activists such as DAN (Disability Action Now) and DPI (Disabled People International) the social model of disability has been responsible for a review of the opportunities experienced by disabled people and a recognition that many disabled people's lives do not reflect the majority (Barnes 1991, Marks 1999, Shakespeare 1998).

Within disability studies itself, the primary focus was initially on raising the profile of disabled people, ensuring that their voices are heard, their experiences understood and lives positively changed. On an empirical level academic interest in the social model of disability has primarily concentrated on the position of disabled adults within society. There is a growing foundation of research which provides clear and detailed accounts of the experiences of disabled adults not only within the UK but also with European and global perspectives (Gant 1997, Priestley 2001, Dixon & Hyde 2000). Although this does not directly relate to the experiences of disabled children, it does provide an insight into their projected life and societal expectations of their cultural participation, achievements and life experiences. As I have argued elsewhere, this projected adulthood has a significant impact on the shaping of the structures which surround disabled children's lives and shape their childhood experiences (Cocks 2000).

At a theoretical level this has led to heated, and ongoing debate concerning the social construction of disability identity and the embodiment of impairment. From this a perspective has emerged that is informed by parallel debates regarding gender and oppression within feminism.

Those who believe that the struggles within feminism can inform disability studies argue that there are similarities between both movements in the efforts to raise the profile of an oppressed societal group (Linton 1998, Wendell 1996). They argue that the social model of disability would benefit from the inclusion of epistemological solutions which recognise beliefs, identities, cultural values and representations (Priestley 1998:78). This stance offers more scope for appreciating the experiences of disabled children which supplements the early definition of the social model of disability. Indeed these ontological and epistemological viewpoints are reflected in much of the research with disabled children (Morris 1998a,b,c, Middleton 1999a,b, Robinson and Stalker 1998, Russell 1995, 1996a,b) as I will describe shortly. What has happened therefore is a gradual move away from meta-
narratives in favour of discovering the heterogeneous, multiple, situated experiences of disabled children (Davis and Watson 2002).

**Empirical Evidence of Disabled Childhood(s)**

In the past there have been few research projects whose design and methodological processes directly involved the children (Ward 1997). Initial research concerned with discovering the experiences of disabled children relied on data gathered from parents, carers, service providers, therapists and other adults who were involved in their daily lives (Gerard 1990). This was mainly due to unresolved epistemological and methodological concerns regarding styles of communication and ethical uncertainty regarding the consensual ability of children which existed in the 1980s and 1990s. As Beresford explains:

Disabled children are doubly disadvantaged when it comes to having the opportunity to express their views and concerns in research. Methodological and ethical arguments, together with a simple failure to accept the value of the children’s viewpoint, have precluded children in general from being accepted as bona fide participants in research. Having an impairment, or illness, marginalises some children even further (Beresford 1997:1)

In the 1990s three specific developments opened the field for researchers to explore the experiences of disabled children through direct consultation with the children themselves. Firstly methodology began to explore alternative forms of gathering data from children other than interviews and questionnaires, resulting in a growth of guidelines and information available for researchers (Corsaro 1997, Lewis and Lindsay 2000, Greig and Taylor 1999, Christensen & James 2000). Critical to accessing the experiences of children with limited communication skills was the development of methods of observation, in particular participant observation, in relation to children (Mandell 1991, Graue & Walsh 1998, Corsaro 1997).

Secondly the ethical challenges which related to research with children were explored in depth. There were two developments which had an impact on how children were assessed as competent. One was based within the legal definition, which emerged from a case in law, and is widely referred to as Gillick competency (The Children Act 1989). The other was based on the exploration of rights and consensual issues within childhood sociology. This resulted in clearer definitions regarding consent and assent of children and young people (Archard 1993, Alderson 1993, 1995, 2000).
Thirdly theoretical developments within disability studies and childhood sociology increased the impetus to include disabled children's voices and opinions within research (Ward 1997, Morris 1998a, b). The outcome of these changes were a number of projects which set out to discover the nature of disabled childhood(s).

**Discovering Disabled Childhood(s).**

Relevant to this thesis are two significant empirical publications: Morris (1998 a,b,c) and Middleton (1999). Although both pieces of work are generic in terms of disabled children they provided the foundation from which further research has emerged. Their innovative approaches in including and presenting children’s experiences of childhood set a standard for inclusivity in research.

Middleton’s (1999) work explores the experiences of disabled children referring to data provided by children with various disabilities and life experiences. She effectively presents the multiple issues which collectively and individually contribute to children’s experience of discrimination on grounds of their impairments. She identifies adults’ failure to protect children from discrimination, commenting that

> Rather than receiving help to understand or address the structural issues around discrimination or bullying, the respondents found themselves pathologised as in need of psychiatric help (Middleton 1999:12).

Having recognised this, Middleton turns her attention to the structural issues which are accepted as part of disabled children’s lives which contribute to the differences in their childhoods compared to mainstream children. However, the data were gathered through interviews which exacerbated the exclusion of the views and experiences of children with very little or no formal communication skills. Also her reporting of methodologies used in gathering and analysing data is minimal, thus introducing questions about the validity of some of her findings. Thus whilst Middleton’s work provides a useful overview of the issues and experiences of disabled children, and in this sense is significant, it appears to lack clarity and rigour in presentation.

Morris’ empirical research (1998a,b,c) was more rigorous in attempting inclusion of disabled children and was more focussed in its aims. The project successfully sought the views and opinions of disabled children and young people who spend significant lengths of time living away from their homes and families. Within the research Morris included children with cognitive impairments and specifically sought participants not usually included within research.
The outcome of Morris’ research was a comprehensive account of the experiences of children in a number of different types of care setting ranging from residential schools, respite care homes and specialist holiday settings. Within this she addresses a number of concerns of those who participated: being away from home, relationships, having a say, abuse and communication needs (Morris 1998a). Most pertinent to this thesis was her description of the importance of peer friendships. As she said:

Friends were very important to most of the young people we visited, including those who were said to be autistic, or have autistic tendencies (Morris 1998a: 20).

However, Morris fails to provide detailed explanation of those friendships which were identified by the participants. Perhaps this happened for two reasons: firstly, this was a general inquiry into the experiences of those living away from home and thus covered a wide range of issues and topics. Secondly, Morris was particularly concerned to explore the implications of such provision and in doing this her focus was more policy motivated than theoretically driven.

From the perspective of this thesis, however, these pieces of research indicate evidence that childhood as experienced by disabled children, particularly those with more severe impairments, is different to their mainstream peers. They also point towards gaps in knowledge and understanding about children’s lives in three particular arenas: firstly, in the significance of peer relationships; secondly, in the structural differences within their lives, and thirdly, in an understanding of the experiences of children who use unique communication methods or no formal communication at all. From the work of Morris and Middleton it is clear that disabled children live within different parameters of expectation, provision and related segregation to their mainstream counterparts.

This lack of understanding of the differences in disabled childhoods compared to their mainstream peers highlighted by Morris and Middleton was further explored through the ‘Life as a Disabled Child’ Project (Watson et al 1999). This highly significant piece of research is the focus of the following section of the chapter.

Life as a Disabled Child Project

The ‘Life as a Disabled Child’ project was part of the ESRC “Children 5-16: Growing in to the 21st century” programme. Disabled children, for the first time, were included within a major
piece of mainstream childhood sociology enquiry. In addition it reflected a collaboration between those in disability studies and childhood sociology. There was a synthesis of concepts from both fields which complemented one another, enriching the whole project whose results are a comprehensive presentation of the life experiences of disabled children at the turn of the millennium. The consequences of this project are both exciting and significant in the way it raises awareness and understanding about how children experience the disablement and the structures which society surrounds them with.

Critical in achieving this was an ontological shift away from the perception of disabled children as a homogenised static group. As Davis and Watson explained

> There is an essentialist and totalizing understanding of both disability and children as categories. We start from an awareness that the current understandings of disability and disabled children are historically contingent and are not stable descriptive classifiers (Davis and Watson 2002:160).

Thus the team of researchers embarked on a theoretical exploration and review which resulted in a challenge to these understandings at a number of levels, as I shall now explain.

**Theoretical Implications**

First and foremost the ‘Life as a Disabled Child’ research was ‘an opportunity to construct a competing discourse which presents disabled children as agents and not passive, dependent victims’ (Davis and Watson 2002:161). There was a synthesis of the argument of the social model of disability against a focus on dependence, with childhood sociology’s repositioning of the child as independent, agentic and ‘being’. The subsequent ontological platform recognised disabled children as agentic, independent within their lives and as subjects rather than objects within the research process. The claim is that the research provides empirical evidence demonstrating that ‘children adopted strategies through which to assert their own agency’ (Watson et al 1999:19).

By using reflexive techniques (Davis 1998) the researchers within the project chose to reject what they felt was an ‘essentialist and totalising understanding of both disability and children as categories’ (Davis & Watson 2002:160), thus demonstrating a preference for the destabilising of child/adult and disabled/non-disabled perceptions and choosing to suspend total ontological certainty.
The project also purposely rejected meta-narratives and instead sought to recognise the multiple voices and experiences among more than 300 children living in Scotland and England. In presenting the heterogeneity of disabled children’s voices they successfully demonstrated the complexity and diversity of disabled childhoods.

However, there exists within that research one flaw. Whilst there is detailed discussion about the conceptualisation of child/adult and disabled/non-disabled there is little reflection on the nature of agency. Agency is referred to as something the children possess and demonstrate, without further reflection on its precise character. When agency is identified it is in the context of resistance to the structures present (Davis and Watson 2002). There is little contemplation to how those instances come about, or when agency is not observed. It seems therefore that an essentialist view of agency was applied within the ‘Life as a Disabled Child’.

Empirical findings:

The ‘Life as a Disabled Child’ project recognised specific features of the structures within which disabled children live out their childhoods. The project described the high levels of surveillance experienced by children within the structures of their lives (Watson et al 1999). The findings indicate that many children spend time away from their local environments, either at specialist segregated schools or at other segregated settings.

The environments within which disabled childhoods occur are highly structured, with notably high levels of surveillance. These structures are multi-faceted, with perception, policy, cultural influence and history as part of their framework (Davis and Watson 2002). The research raised concern regarding the impact of those structures on the children within them. As Davis and Watson explain

Very often, Disabled children’s opportunities are restricted because other peoples perceptions lead to oppressive practices (Davis and Watson 2002:161).

Unfortunately, due to the wide scope of the project and the wide range of settings involved, the research failed to explore in depth the different types of structure or the nuances of their characteristics. This is one of the key issues which the present thesis specifically develops and explores in detail in the following chapter.

Previous research, although generalised, has consistently raised concerns about the friendships, peer relations and experiences of children within specialised settings (Morris
However the 'Life as a Disabled Child' project reflected on the nature of those concerns in further depth.

Relevant to the present thesis are the comments regarding the 'high degree of surveillance by adults' (Watson et al 1999:2) which along with 'physical barriers' (Watson et al 1999:16) were seen to be related to the incidence of peer relations. As Watson et al commented:-

Play and interaction between children were mediated through adults. Indeed, in one school, an adult commented to us that she felt that if it were not for her presence the children would not communicate at all. This statement was undermined by our own observations of child-child interaction on the rare occasions when staff were absent. (Watson et al 1999:12).

There is recognition that peer groups are subject to structural influences in the way children find themselves gathered together on the grounds of impairment rather than age, gender, interaction or anything else. However, as this research was intended to provide an overview of life for disabled children with a range of diverse impairments and contextual experiences, the researchers were not in a position to explore these issues any more closely.

In the concluding report (Watson et al 1999) there remained a great number of unanswered questions. What stands out is the concern regarding the impact of highly structured settings on the peer relationships of disabled children. It is this which the present thesis explores. However, rather than remain general in seeking the experiences of a wide range of disabled children there is concentration on the experiences of one particular group of children – those with severe learning disabilities who spend time within specialist segregated out-of-school settings.

Before concluding this chapter and progressing to an exploration of the nature of segregated settings, I wish to pause for a moment to reflect on the position of research relating to learning disability within disability studies and the significant ontological and theoretical implications of that.

**Learning disability**

The definition and discussion regarding the social model of disability earlier in this chapter was written in a generic sense. This subsequent section of this chapter introduces concerns which have arisen about the social model from those working with adults with learning impairments and strengthens the case for more research to accept an ambiguous ontology.
The majority of literature relating to learning disability focuses on adults; however, I believe that there are important theoretical developments which have a contribution to make.

**Defining Impairment**

The social model of disability has been criticised for its focus on material factors and subsequent reluctance to explore definitions of impairment (Goodley and Rapley 2002). Whilst there has been discussion about the level to which the body should be considered within the social model (French 1993, Crow 1996, Morris 1991), there has been less discussion about the actual definition of impairment. Some believe that this has resulted in a hierarchy of impairment where people with learning disabilities occupy a liminal position (Goodley 2001). As Goodley points out in his critique of the social model

The epistemological point being made is classically Cartesian: some elements of humanity are open to sociological investigation ("mild learning difficulties"), while some are left in the realms of static, irreversible, individualised biology ("severe learning difficulties") (Goodley 2001:213).

This builds on axiomatic assumptions about competence, as suggested by Jenkins (1998). He claims that competence is assumed in the absence of proof of the contrary. However, this is turned full circle by Booth & Booth (1998), who suggest that people with learning impairments are assumed incompetent unless they can prove otherwise. This leaves people with learning disabilities rigidly compartmentalised; either striving to prove they are not incompetent, or those who are labelled incompetent, regardless of their actions.

More recently Goodley and Rapley (2002) have addressed these concerns through a post-modern perspective. They suggest a deconstruction of the discourses of dependence and incompetence which surround people with learning disabilities in order to reveal and explore the interdependencies which feature in daily life. The point being that people do not operate independently in isolation of society but rather they engage in social interactions interdependently. This becomes particularly important when related to people with learning disabilities since they tend to be assessed according to their own dependence, rather than the interdependent social structures of which they are a part and in which they have a role (Goodley & Rapley 2002).

Goodley and Rapley claim that this 'invite(s) us to reconsider how we conceptualise (in)dependence' (2002:137). This ontological re-positioning in order to move beyond dichotomous conceptual ideas is important within the present thesis. Goodley and Rapley's
argument echoes and strengthens the case put forward in the previous chapter for adopting an ambiguous ontology regarding agency.

**Strengthening the Case for Ontological Ambiguity**

At the outset of this research there were three potentially problematic dichotomies within research with children with learning disabilities, (the majority of whom are labelled as having 'moderate to severe learning disabilities'); child/adult, disabled/non-disabled, competent (agentic)/incompetent (non-agentic). It became critical to find a way of eliminating the positioning of concepts in dichotomous relationships. This is because these dichotomies carry with them hidden understandings which influence strength/weakness, included/excluded, ability/inability. Within these there are certain positions which are considered preferential for full participation within society.

This perhaps explains the continuation of the cultural stereotypes of disabled children which focus on weaknesses and inability which thus encourages a portrayal of disabled children as subordinate and disempowered. It also highlights the difficulties faced by researchers who are attempting to raise the profile of a liminal group. In focussing on the effects of restrictions and discrimination, the resulting picture positions the subjects of research in a potentially contentious relationship with the structures around them.

The oppositional nature of the dichotomous relationships portrayed also tends to lead to a predominance of empirical evidence which demonstrates conflict and friction between the two concepts. This is seen in the work of Corsaro where he claims that one of the main themes of peer culture is for children (agency) to 'gain control over' the adults around them (structure) (Corsaro 1997). In the same way the empirical evidence within the "Life as a Disabled Child" demonstrates children resisting structures (Davis and Watson 2002). Whilst these are important findings, they tend not to identify the interdependencies which exist between agency and structure, competence and incompetence and dependence and independence. Thus the dynamic of the more complex interrelations which can lead to the production of, or an evolution from, the status quo remains in the background.

Therefore in dismantling the existent dichotomies in theoretical approaches to disabled children’s lives and to the concept of peer culture, this thesis is accepting ontological uncertainty and ambiguity. It is also opening the horizons of perception in order to explore beyond conflict and resistance, and to identify instances where conflict is absent or where
the two operate in harmony. My belief is that this in turn provides a clearer picture of the total experiences of disabled children within a specific structure, not just part of it.

Summary

This chapter opened with a presentation of childhood from a mainstream perspective, outlining common understandings about the structures and experiences of children within mainstream society. This was enhanced by a brief summary of childhood sociology's perception of childhood from a theoretical and empirical viewpoint. This provided a backdrop against which the childhood differences of disabled children were highlighted.

There is reflection on the cultural stereotypes of disabled children as passive, victims of fate, in need of assistance and dependent on adult intervention which exist in the UK. Focus then altered to consider the challenges which are being made to those stereotypes at both theoretical and empirical levels.

On a theoretical level the social model of disability which has emerged from the arguments of disability activists, and which is formally defined within academia by those within disability studies, has had a significant and growing impact on the way disability is perceived within society. Through applying a social constructionist perspective, disability is viewed as a product of societal barriers and structures as well as the outcome of an impairment. Whilst there is little reflection on disabled children within this theoretical perspective it is informative since it provides insight into their projected adulthoods.

Empirical evidence which challenges cultural stereotypes of disabled children's lives is limited. However, the recent works of Morris (1998a,b,c) and Middleton (1999) are significant for including concepts of the social model within their research. Also, through data gathered from the children themselves, their research sets a precedent for inclusion of children in research. In identifying that disabled children's lives are different and that their experiences are valuable they have provided a foundation from which others can explore disabled childhoods.

These differences have been explored in further detail within the "Life as a Disabled Child" project which is unique in its collaboration between childhood sociology and disability studies (Watson et al 1999). Disabled children are perceived as agentic subjects within the research process. The outcome of this is evidence of disabled children existing within highly structured lives where surveillance by adults is notably high. The final report of the project
raises concern for the peer relations of children within such structured lives (Watson et al 1999); however, due to the nature of the project those involved were unable to explore this (and other issues) further. It is this impact of highly structured settings on the peer culture of disabled children with severe learning disabilities which is the exact focus of the present thesis.

Rather than accept the theoretical stance proposed by those within the "Life as a Disabled Child" project, this chapter questions the validity of viewing concepts in dichotomous relations. This is discussed in relation to the recent developments within research with people with learning disabilities (Goodley and Rapley 2002) which questions the value of competence/incompetence, dependence/independence. The latter support the idea of interdependence where there is less rigidity and judgement of those within the various interactions being discussed. This line of reasoning is similar to that proposed in the previous chapter concerning agency. Thus the argument for an ambiguous and uncertain ontology is strengthened.
Specialist Provision

The focus of this chapter is the provision of services for disabled children and their families which are beyond and in addition to the mainstream concerns of health and education. In order to appreciate the importance of this distinctive type of provision it is necessary to look at history. A review of the ideological and cultural beliefs which have shaped and continue to shape policy sheds light on the acceptance of provisions which segregate children from their mainstream peers, within specially designed and operated settings, away from their families and local communities.

The chapter progresses to consider the current context within which children with learning impairments are provided for. The recognition that it is difficult to ascertain the numbers of children who receive this type of provision leads to an exploration of the policy, and also charity responses to perceived need. This analysis of the mixture of different service providers, philosophies, and agency agendas helps to explain the complexity of the resulting picture and also the degree of disparity in provision across the UK.

The focus then narrows to examine what is known about the specific structures within specialist provision for disabled children, with reference to recent research which has begun to explore this (Morris 1998a,b,c, Watson et al 1999). The nature of the material and spatial design within settings is described, as is the specialised organisation of time which reflects shift patterns and medical needs and also connects with external agencies involved in the management of the lives of disabled children.

Historical Origins

It is critical to appreciate the historical evolution of both the ideologies and practices within specialist provision as this explains the emergence and acceptance of the various settings within a wider cultural context. It illuminates and helps to understand the social acceptance of the segregation of many disabled children away from their families and local communities. I start with considering the situation of disabled children within the development of welfare at the start of the last century. In doing this it is possible to see how the provision of
services for disabled children, in the last 100 years, has become the responsibility, not only of the parent but also of both state and charities. This exploration adds to Morris' (1995) argument that there is a difference of ideology behind the provision of services for disabled children compared with that of mainstream children.

The origins of social ideology relating to disabled children are linked to the emergence of asylums, and the definitions of madness and insanity in the nineteenth century. Prior to the industrial revolution those within these groups were viewed as socially destitute and the responsibility of their parish who provided for them within their local communities (Scull 1979). However, the migration from rural to urban location in the Industrial Revolution introduced new social problems as well as benefits, as Scull explains:

For the structural foundations of an effective system of parochial relief were undermined and brought close to collapse by the rise of an urban-industrial order. Despite the fact that they were no longer concerned with individuals, but with an amorphous mass, and despite their growing conviction that many of the 'poor' were undeserving, the new class of entrepreneurs could not wholly avoid making some provision for them, if only because of the revolutionary threat they posed to the social order. The asylum – and analogous institutions such as the workhouse – allegedly constituted their response to this situation. (Scull 1979:27).

Scull (1979) shares Oliver's (1990) assessment that the primary justification for intervention and segregation gained full force with the rise of capitalist economy and when the institution became a primary mechanism for social control. Thus there was an increase in central concern which is evident in the legislation generated, principally The Poor Law 1834.

Oliver (1990) explains that the outcome of this was the increasing division of “deviant” as a category into more specialist categories such as “feeble minded” and “insane” which divided people according to those who could work and those who could not. Put crudely, the categorisation of disabled and feeble minded was the product of ideologies driven by economics and social control rather than welfare (Oliver 1990).

The mid to late nineteenth century witnessed a growing concern and what is sometimes described as ‘moral outrage’ at the treatment of residents within such institutions. The rise in philanthropic interest in the feeble minded, which paralleled a general movement for social reform in the UK, impacted on the lives of disabled people and children in two ways.

Firstly the introduction of separate provision designed specifically to house disabled people, such as Sandlebridge in 1911 (Jackson 1996). These settings were an alternative to the previous housing of disabled people within poor houses. The creation of separate
accommodation and services was considered at the time to be a positive move away from the hardships previously experienced by disabled people (Oswin 1998). Norah Fry, in her role within The Royal Commission for the Feeble Minded 1904, proposed that parents would be acting in the best interests of their children if they sent their offspring to receive education and training at special 'colonies' (Oswin 1998).

From this a number of institutions were built to house adults and children who were assessed as feeble minded. In accounts of institutions such as St Lawrence's and Earlswood given by residents it appears that those incarcerated were not solely people with learning disabilities, but included single mothers, orphaned children and homeless women (Jackson 1996, Atkinson, Jackson & Walmsley 1997). These were large institutions of the kind which Goffman studied and on which he based his conclusions in 'Asylums' (Goffman 1961) resulting in his observation that:-

The handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organisation of whole blocks of people – whether or not this is a necessary or effective means of social organisation in the circumstances – is the key fact of total institutions (Goffman 1961:18)

The other impact of philanthropy lay in the political influences of those involved, such as Mary Dendy, in shaping legislation. The most significant was the introduction of the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act (Jackson 1996). This was the first parliamentary recognition and categorisation of learning disability as an issue separate from mental health, poverty and other classified deviant categories. It also formally shaped the nature of provision into the 20th Century. As Jackson explains, the act:-

Obliged local mental deficiency committees either to provide suitable supervision for persons identified as mentally defective or to send them to institutions or place them under guardianship. Significantly this legislation ensured state support for institutional care previously provided by the voluntary sector (Jackson 1996:168).

Thus the provision for children outside their homes and within specialist settings was accepted into legislation and into wider UK culture. This perceived improvement in provision was fuelled by an understanding that those caring for them were better trained and equipped to meet the needs of targeted groups. This organising of specific provision therefore had another noticeable consequence which is identified by Scull (1979) in relation to the variety of specialist services. That is the development of expertise in specific areas of welfare which resulted in the burgeoning of 'helping occupations' (Scull 1979:17).
Provision within this framework remained relatively stable until after World War II. The Curtis Committee report (1944) was commissioned to investigate the concerns at the time about the circumstances of all children who were living away from home. It highlighted the poor conditions and disparate provision for children and considered these inadequate (Social Services Inspectorate 1983/4). However, the report failed to engage with the experiences and provision for disabled children, as the committee felt that it was beyond the remit of their task (Oswin 1998). In contrast, the services for mainstream children developed and were defined in the subsequent 1948 Children Act. In this way disabled children were marginalised within legislation and remained in large institutions.

However, the latter part of the 20th century witnessed growing concern among researchers and parents about the fate of children with learning impairments. King, Raynes and Tizard's (1971) substantive and highly influential research into the patterns of residential care for disabled children in the late 1960s examined the practices within a range of child care settings such as hospitals and care homes. They observed that 'it was the social organisation of the establishment, rather than the handicaps of the children' (King et al 1971:6) which resulted in the differences in provision which they identified. This, combined with an increase in parent groups, such as MENCAP, resulted in reform within the care system and a growing awareness of the strength and significance of the structures within such settings.

In 1974 The Harvie Committee reported on the residential care facilities which were provided by local authorities in the UK for children with severe learning disabilities. However as Oswin explains:-

The Harvie report disclosed neglect caused by children with learning difficulties falling between the two stools of medical care and local authority responsibility, but no action was taken (Oswin 1998:39).

Similar findings resulted in the 1976 Committee on Child Health services, with the subsequent identification of the poor conditions of children within institutions. The recommendations were far reaching, laying out reforms for the provision of child-centred services. However, there was resistance to change, especially within the medical profession (Oswin 1998).

Gradual reform did occur in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which meant that children were no longer resident within institutional settings. However, there remained concern about the placing of children within such settings for short term stays, voiced by Oswin (1971, 1984, 1998). The influential research carried out by Oswin highlighted the isolation and stress
experienced by disabled children in settings away from home, raising questions about the suitability of such provision.

It is recognised that the need for respite care for disabled children emerged from the provision of emergency care to support families in times of crisis (Russell 1996b). These were families who would historically have been divided by long-term provision but were now struggling to cope with the daily problems of living together. The concerns regarding placing children within such large institutions for short periods of time, coupled with improvements in community care, therefore resulted in the development of settings specifically designed to provide respite care, away from home and out of school hours.

It was also around this time that disabled children were included in mainstream childcare legislation. The 1989 Children Act, which remains the predominant legislation in 2003, recognised disabled children as 'in need'. It also states that it is the duty of local authorities to 'provide a range of services appropriate to those children's needs' (Children Act 1989:s.17(1)). This significant piece of legislation heralded the allocation of funding for the provision of services to disabled children which was intended to be proactive in providing support rather than reactive to crisis. It also brought legislation identifying them as children first and disabled second.

There are some who feel that, despite the Children Act, disabled children are 'still invisible under the law' (Corker and Davis 2000). Claiming that legislation has failed to parallel the recent advances within both disability studies and legislation and within childhood sociology, Corker and Davis (2000) believe that the outcome of this is the growth of local interpretations of local authorities' responsibilities toward disabled children and a subsequent lack of consistency of provision across the country.

Respite care settings became the popular form of provision by local authorities and charities alike to support disabled children and their families in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Robinson 1996). They were and are operated both by local authorities and the charity sector in response to an identified need for children with learning disabilities and their families to have 'break' from the stresses of daily living (Stalker 1996). Some of these services have been found to be a positive experience (Robinson, Weston & Minkes 1995, Robinson & Stalker 1993) whilst concerns have been raised about access to such services (Morris 1998b,c), the quality of care (Hubert 1991) and the impact of provision on children's friendships (Morris 1998a, Watson et al 1999).
In response, alternatives to overnight respite care have also emerged. Other types of specialist setting which offer care away from home, out of school hours, segregated from mainstream children is that of specialist playschemes, youth clubs and activity centres (Robinson 1996). These differ in that they do not offer overnight accommodation; however, they are subject to the similar degrees of regulation and control as respite settings. In many respects these types of settings are still viewed as an innovative way of providing care away from home.

These relatively new types of setting have not been researched to the same degree as respite centres. Reference to them tends to be within the broad context of 'respite' and there is therefore little literature to draw on which focuses on their precise services and structures. It is not really known how many children attend these settings or how much time is spent within them. My own experience of running specialist playschemes and after-school clubs in the mid 1990s is that some children spend considerable lengths of time within them.

This review of the historical development of services for disabled provision sees children with learning impairments originally categorised as deviant, along with other socially perceived misfits. Their position has gradually shifted to recognition as being feeble-minded and 'disabled'. The recognition in the past two decades as 'children' is therefore a relatively new development within the context of time and explains why some practices still reflect their historical roots and ideologies.

Ideologies

In reviewing the historical development of specialist provision throughout the twentieth century Oswin has identified moral ideologies which underpin much of what has gone before, saying:-

With hindsight it seems as if throughout history terrible wrongs have been inflicted on disabled children. Ironically, many of the wrongs were actually initiated by people who were enlightened and trying to help them; for example, the reformer Norah Fry recommended more asylums. However, it has to be remembered that a philosophy of rescue from something worse ran through all the early provision of services for children growing up with disability (Oswin 1998:40).

Within UK society and culture there is an historical context of concern for the wellbeing of disabled children. However, many within the disability movement have criticised the institutionalisation of disabled people (children and adults) claiming that it is a practice which should cease altogether (Oliver 1993). It is felt that the ideological influences of the
'ascendant Enlightenment philosophies' on which their inception was based has disempowered and discriminated against disabled people (Oliver and Barnes 1998:32).

On the other side of the argument of whether institutional care of any type is appropriate in the current UK society, there is concern that such overly negative portrayal of such provision has created further exclusion for those within. As Jack states:-

The effect of this has been to relegate residential institutions to the status of an undesirable last resort on the margins of community care (Jack 1998:1).

Those who believe that there is a place for segregated services within welfare provision do still recognise that the practices and structures within them would benefit from further examination (Kellaher 1998). They advocate that this is done in the wider social, cultural and structural context within which they exist (Jack 1998).

The climate within which this thesis is written is therefore one of uncertainty and confusion about what is the best way to support disabled children and their families. In reviewing the literature there exists a recognised conflict between three primary competing ideologies (Priestley 1999). Firstly, the ideologies of the disability movement reflect concerns about exclusion and citizenship. Secondly, the ideologies of human rights, which have been used by various different social movements, create a conflict about whose rights should be prioritised: the children’s, their carers, or the community? Lastly, there is the continuing influence of medical ideologies which focus on normalisation, overcoming disability and individualisation.

Each of these ideologies exist within the provision of specialist short term breaks to varying degrees. It is therefore important to recognise their presence, the confusion which they can cause, and their potential influences on the structures within the settings.

The history of provision for disabled children with learning disabilities and the ideologies behind them demonstrate inconsistencies in ideology, in legislative practice, in sources of provision (state or charity) and in dual categorisation as both disabled and child. It is almost as if these uncertainties about how best to shape provision have contributed to the slow evolution of services by comparison with other mainstream services for children looked after away from home. The following section of the chapter presents an overview of current UK provision within the UK.
Current Provision

This second section of this chapter presents the nature of provision and places the research settings in a wider context of provision in the UK. In the opening chapter of this thesis I highlighted the difficulties in identifying the precise numbers of disabled children. This is even more problematic when seeking to discover the number of service providers, who they are, where they are, what they do and how many children they care for.

In 2000 the Quality Protects Children in Need Working Group surveyed the number of children receiving care provided by their Local Authority under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 in one particular week. The resulting data revealed that 29,000 disabled children received some form of service within that week, representing 12% of all the children in need. Within that figure, 64% were children with some type of learning disability, 42% had communication difficulties, 41% behavioural issues and 39% needed personal care.

However, the report also questions its own findings, saying that the figures revealed discrepancies which indicated inaccurate reporting of disabled children by local authorities. It suggests that this is due to difficulties in definition and confusion about whether children receive support on the grounds of their impairment or a family issue (Quality protects Children in Need Working Group:2000). Also, these figures do not differentiate between physical, learning or profound disabilities.

None of these figures include charitable provision or the types of services offered by them. Such figures proved impractical to come by as neither the Charity Commission, Charities Direct nor The Charities Aid Foundation UK were able to assist me in searching for information, without parting with substantial sums of money. The difficulties experienced in tracing these figures illustrate and re-enforce the point made by Morris in 1995 when she said 'we don't know enough about who they are, where they are, what their life feels like to them' (Morris 1995:5). This is mirrored in Utting's (1997) comments about the paucity and scarcity of information.

This lack of statistical information relating to where services are, who is providing them and most importantly who is visiting them, situates the two research settings within this research in a slightly muddied context. However, the process of tracing recent policy developments assists in clarifying the context within which these services are provided.

As described earlier in this chapter, the overall agenda in the last thirty years has been to move away from institutions and transfer care into the community (Priestley 1999).
relation to the provision of short term care away from home for disabled children in the community, this is problematic and difficult to achieve. Some children have challenging behaviour or physical disabilities in addition to their learning impairment which require appropriate, balanced and knowledgeable management and a safe environment. It has become increasingly difficult to recruit foster or link carers with the appropriate skills and accommodation willing to care for children when the financial rewards are low. The outcome is that schemes are oversubscribed (Robinson 1996).

Integrated play-schemes and after-school clubs are limited due to the costs of providing the extra support and training required. This results in Sharma’s comment that the outcome is lack of options about leisure activities which causes situations where ‘families have no option but to segregate their children’ (Sharma 2002:25).

For these reasons short term settings have remained one of the primary forms of provision within services for disabled children. As Middleton explains:-

Respite away from home remains for most families with a disabled child the main plank of welfare provision, and is used in circumstances which would not be thought acceptable for non disabled children of the same age (Middleton 1999b:131).

These settings are mostly situated within communities and engage with them; for example, in the process of fundraising strategies and recruitment of volunteers. This happens at an organisational level. My own experience shows that the level of children’s actual participation in the community when at these settings is limited to organised trips out, attending charity hosted days out, and welcoming the occasional visitor into the setting.

Priestley (1999) identifies that discourses of segregation remain within the administration of community care. This is reflected in the number of ‘special’ policies, statutes and guidelines relating to disabled people. In reference to disabled children, there are a number of legislative structures in place which are administered specifically in relation to them. Priestley explains:-

The relevance of the point is simply that community care policy making remains located within a welfare heritage which takes disability as a separate administrative category. In so doing it perpetuates a tradition in which the needs of disabled people are accommodated within a segregated system of welfare production (Priestley 1999:50).
This, combined with economic policies reducing financial support, results in the continuation of processes of separation and marginalisation. In addition to this in order to receive support parents find that they need to stress their child’s dependence thus presenting an imbalanced picture of their child, as Middleton explains:-

This sets the child apart from other children, and her parents apart from other parents. It is a pernicious process in which it is difficult to intervene, since it is underpinned both by attitudes that devalue disabled children and by a cultural emphasis on self-reliance. Meeting the narrow eligibility criteria which will secure help means placing oneself outside the self help society, and into a dependent, resource-draining sub-group (Middleton 1999a:58).

These rationing processes have been identified as part of a wider political landscape featuring scenes of social justice, equality and rights. Jordan (1998) explains the effects of privileging the concept of social justice which has occurred during the current Labour government.

It demotes claims from need, and insists that any such must be shown to be genuine. The needy must therefore demonstrate (or even parade) their neediness, and mark themselves out from those whose claims rest on contributions, merits or deserts (Jordan 1998: 73-74).

Jordan also explained that the outcome of such downplaying of need has resulted in those who are 'in need' finding it difficult to access services.

Whilst there are settings which are operated by social services departments and backed by government funding, the majority are provided within the charitable sector, many of whom also rely on public funding. As both the settings within this research hold charitable status, I intend to focus on the historical roots of charitable provision in relation to disabled children.

Such charities have been involved in the provision of services for disabled people for many years; for example, the Shaftesbury Society and Barnardo’s (late 19th century), Mencap (1946), The Leonard Cheshire Foundation (1948) and Scope (1951). It is important to recognise that these charities are not all necessarily positively viewed by disabled people. There are claims that rather than assist disabled people in leading 'ordinary' lives the charities have served to entrench cultural stereotypes of dependency and the structural segregation of disabled people (Campbell & Oliver 1996, Shakespeare 2000). Indeed it was frustration at the practices of such organisations, the Cheshire homes in particular, which resulted in the formation of the UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation), the first organisation to represent fully the views of disabled people in the UK (Barnes 1991, Campbell and Oliver 1996).
Politics aside it is valuable to understand the contribution of charity, how it has shaped the lives of disabled people, and why charitable actions are rarely questioned. Charity is an emotive concept to deconstruct as it is surrounded by claims to helping, altruism, giving and volunteerism. In many respects charity can also be closely linked to religion and morality (Whelan 1996) and social identity. Therefore to fault charity is often seen as an attack on faith, values and, what are perceived by some as, the foundations of society. To appear to criticise those involved can be viewed as an attack on general qualities which are admired and promoted as reflective of our goodness as a society. That is not the intention within this chapter; however, if understanding is to be gained, a critical understanding of philanthropy is needed.

It is interesting to consider why it is that many of the services disabled children receive are provided by the charitable sector. Middleton claimed that:

A disabled child is seen as non-contributing, not only in the present but also in the future. The pressure is therefore to invoke pity and hope for a sympathetic response. It is no coincidence that many of the services for disabled children are provided by charities (Middleton 1999a:58).

The balance between charity and state provision is a fluid ratio which is very vulnerable to dynamic changes within politics, cultural opinion and media focus. The political aspect of this has been the focus of much research into the role of charity in welfare services (Whelan 1996, Jordan 1998). In many ways, some of which are overt, governments dictate the pressures put on charities regarding their varied focuses on areas such as provision, fundraising, policy and campaigning.

More recently the political rhetoric regarding social justice, social exclusion and equality of opportunity has resulted in restrictions, bureaucratic assessments and a reduction in real services provided (Jordan 1998). Funding has been reduced and thus local authorities are closing service settings, which in turn is putting pressure on charity to provide. This has recently been argued in Parliament by Tony Baldry (MP for Oxfordshire), where several respite settings for disabled children have recently passed from the local authority to Barnardo's who sub-contract to social services. As Baldry explained in Parliamentary debate:

That shortfall of funding is no more evident than with respite care services for children with severe disabilities. Currently, the responsibility for local authorities to provide such discretionary services is a matter of "may" rather than "must". Thus, in the pecking order, those discretionary services come after statutory provision. Where money is tight, they simply fall off the edge (Tony Baldry MP 17-07-02).
When those services, and more importantly children, fall off the edge it is the charity sector which inevitably holds the safety net engaging in and responding to the “contract culture” which has emerged. This adds to the marginalisation and low incorporation of disabled children within the mainstream welfare services. It also results in charities and voluntary organisations assuming the role of providers rather than innovators or advocates (Middleton 1999b).

However, the outcome of provision by charities is not necessarily negative; many are progressive in creating positive experiences for disabled children. This is evident in the work of organisations such as that providing the play setting within this research, which has a community team working toward and supporting the integration of children into mainstream play-schemes. Other organisations such as People First in the Midlands, which is run by and for people with learning impairments, do not work directly with children but they currently offer training and awareness courses to service providers.

The charities each have their own individual histories (including philosophical origins and culture) which shapes the character of the provision. This creates diversity, and at times disparity, in what is received by those requiring support. Charities often still rely on Government funding in order to continue service provision and are therefore not always entirely independent of Government agendas. The point here is that, in order to continue operation, charities may sometimes find themselves compromising principles or their aims and objectives.

The media also plays a role here. Generally there is a ‘hot topic’ which is promoted by the media; for example, child prostitution, child abuse, teenage pregnancy or refugee children. This has a direct bearing on donated income and at times public allocation of funds. In order to remain afloat, charities find themselves altering their focus in line with the current trend (Whelan 1996). In the past decade the circumstances of disabled children as a whole have been the focus of little media attention.

The combination of these factors leads to continued segregation of disabled children assessed as having exceptional ‘need’, such as those with moderate to severe disabilities on the grounds of ideology, economics, need and cultural expectation. The marginalisation of these particular children is therefore accepted within society as being in the children’s’ best interests. The fact that it is unknown quite how many children are situated within state and charity provision (or outside them) demonstrates a combination of apathy and perhaps
uncertainty about discovering how many children are involved and how their life experiences are affected.

**Contemporary Structures**

Up to this point this chapter has focused on outlining the historical, ideological, cultural and social context of the emergence of specialist short break provision for disabled children. It has also described the current policies which impact on the provision of services to an unidentifiable number of children. This provides a foundation from which to appreciate the next section of the chapter, which focuses on the nature of contemporary provision, in particular the structures which are features of, and unique to, such provision.

**Spatial organisation**

The physical, material spaces in which specialist provision occurs are designed or adapted by adults in order to achieve specific purposes, which vary to a certain extent according to the individual agency aims. Before considering the precise nature of the physical characteristics of specialist provision, it is critical to appreciate Gleeson's description of the inseparable relation between spatial restriction and experience of disability:

Disablement is a profoundly spatial experience, meaning something that is lived and produced at every imaginable scale, ranging from a chair or stairway through to the macro policy realms that constitute state institutional practice (Gleeson 1999:195).

Within specialist settings it is possible to identify characteristic themes within the material design which are informed by different ideological perspectives. One such theme is the product of medical ideologies, therapeutic agendas and notions of overcoming disability. Material evidence of this is witnessed in the public spaces in such settings which are occupied by special equipment designed not only for play but for personal care; for example, mechanical hoists in corridors, ramps and sensory toys. However, it needs also to be remembered that some of these pieces of equipment are a necessity in order to achieve the practical management of impairment.

Ideological influences from the personal social services are evident in discourses of respite for the carers and caring for the 'needs' of the child. Statements and attempts to create an environment which appears to be a 'home from home' cause confusion in the actual purposes of such settings. As Kellaher explains in her analysis of respite care provided for the elderly:
Images of home, of family and of domesticity have obfuscated the real nature of residential institutional living for decades. The frequent refrains 'It is just like their home here' and 'We don't have rules, you don't have rules at home' have served to confuse staff and residents alike, and to undermine the benefits to be derived from sharing living in certain circumstances (Kellaher 1998:190).

This is witnessed also in settings for disabled children which contain a mixture of homely furnishings and features more associated with medical environments. These two, combined with the presence of necessary health and safety notices (which are not features of homes) required by social policies, result in settings which have their own unique materiality.

These spaces are usually designed with 'disability' as the primary concern with little regard to other features of childhood. In the design it is also possible to identify generational perceptions of disabled childhoods. Bedrooms are decorated to adult taste or, failing that, display Disney characters: it is rare to see a centre which reflects the culture of mainstream children. Posters of the latest boy bands, or pin ups of the current 'in babes' are rare, as is evidence of Pokemon, Game Boys and Playstations.

The structures which exist therefore tend to be rigid responses to agencies' attempts at finding a balance between competing ideologies, policies and cultural expectations. This creates a somewhat schizophrenic identity, where the unique spatial nature of specialist settings is vulnerable to a variety of agendas.

Daily Organisation

The daily organisation of time within disabled children's lives is acknowledged as different within disabled childhoods, and it is recognised that 'the qualitative structuring of daily and yearly time may be especially poignant for it has dramatic and powerful consequences for their personal experiences of childhood' (James, Jenks and Prout 1998:75). The focus here is on the daily structuring of time within specialist settings which impacts on the overall nature of such provision.

One of the most significant movements within the day which effects the temporal nature of provision is that of staff; when they come on duty, who is on duty and when they change shifts and take breaks. This was noted in a very early piece of research, whose eventual title describes this very succinctly: 'They Keep Going Away' (Oswin 1984). Oswin explored the experiences of children within short term residential services for children with learning disabilities. Although the research was more hospital based and carried out at a time when
the provision of services were changing, it did raise concerns about the perceived negative effects on children of staff working shifts and coming and going throughout a child's stay. This shift pattern remains within the majority of respite settings in the UK, especially in those which offer overnight visits.

However it needs to be pointed out that these are not always experienced as negative effects, as my own previous research within a local authority has shown. A focus group of teenage boys commented that they liked staff changeover as it meant new people would be coming in and that the early afternoon shift handover signalled a change in the pace of the day, bringing opportunities to go out or begin another activity (Cocks unpublished). Thus the movement of staff within the day has potential for both positive and negative impacts on the temporal rhythm of daily experiences of specialist provision.

Other influences on the temporal rhythm of daily experience in such settings are caused by pedagogic and medical concerns. There is a rhythm which is dictated by caring tasks, for example, changing and feeding (here I refer to tube feeding which can be at specified times of the day). Also when schools are operational, then the times of the school day and special transport services also influence the temporal nature of settings. In the same way, arrival and departure times of children in the holidays have an impact.

Thus it is important to recognise that the structures within specialist settings both reflect and are influenced by temporal rhythms. As James, Jenks and Prout state:

Through this patterning of time, children's access to and participation in a diversity of social arenas becomes proscribed: children's time is inextricably linked with the social space of childhood (James, Jenks and Prout 1998:75).

**Supervision**

One significant feature of the structures of special provision which is geared toward disabled children is the level of supervision and degrees of surveillance which are witnessed. This is an attribute of many environments occupied by disabled children, as Watson et al (1999) highlighted :-

A striking feature of the study was the high levels of surveillance of disabled children by adults we observed. Disabled children spent a disproportionately large amount of their time in the company of adults and in social spaces where adults were actively present (Watson et al 1999:11).
The ratio of adult to child is far greater within specialist settings; indeed many children are assessed as requiring one to one, or even two to one care. In other words a child will be accompanied by an adult at all times in all sites within the settings. This contradicts the claim that respite offers a home from home, as this does not reflect the structure within a family setting. This results in a restriction on autonomous behaviour which is greater than for their mainstream peers (Priestley, Corker and Watson 1999).

It is the impact of these structures, in particular surveillance, on the peer interactions of children with learning disabilities that this research set out to discover. Whilst the 'Life as a Disabled Child' project (1999) was an extremely comprehensive and valuable piece of research, it covered a wide range of children in a variety of different settings. This work is more focused, seeking the experiences of a specific group of children in what are extraordinary types of service provision.

**Summary**

In order to ground understanding of the nature of special provision in the UK, this chapter looked back at the development of welfare in relation to the situation of disabled children within it. Whilst this whistle-stop tour of history is brief, it outlines the way in which disabled children were first situated in society as socially deviant, then were further categorised as feeble-minded. From this division, categories and definitions of disability arose and were incorporated into legislation. The provision of segregated services within institutions is therefore something which is embedded in our histories as a nation, a state, a society and a culture.

Positioning children with learning disabilities within the context of current provision is difficult to achieve, as the second part of the chapter demonstrated. There are few readily available figures which explain how many children with learning disabilities there are in the UK, there are none which detail what support they receive or from whom. Services are provided within both the charity and state sectors, resulting in inconsistency in available information.

In addressing this, and in seeking another way of contextualising the settings within this research, there is an exploration of the difficulties faced by service providers and parents alike. Funding shortages, government policies and parents need for support contribute to the continuation of services which segregate children. Whilst there is a growing movement over the past few years to integrate children into their local mainstream provision, it remains
that specialist services are the primary source of service available to many children and their families.

This chapter has concluded with a description of the features within such settings which set them apart from environments occupied by mainstream children. The design and organisation of space and the material elements of such settings describe settings which do not reflect mainstream childhood culture. Rather they contain within them unique structures. It is the exploration of the experiences of a marginalised group of children within these particular structures that adds a unique dimension to this research.
Part Three

The Research Design and Methods

"Red". Elia.
Considerations in the Research Design

This chapter focuses on the process of designing and planning this research which included a number of major issues which significantly influenced the shape of the research design. The outcome of taking these factors into account is evident in the decision to adopt a qualitative approach, which used participant observation as the primary method of data collection. Following from the suspension of ontological certainty the research design also reflects a more grounded approach which focused on the emergence of the findings from the data.

The most critical factor within this research was the position of the group of children as "vulnerable", because of their status as children, as disabled people and children with learning disabilities using multiple methods of communication. To address these characteristics appropriately and respectfully, it is important to recognise the wider debates and commentary available which is generated by previous researchers.

The disability movement has a strong and acknowledged political opinion about how research with disabled people should be addressed if it is to be considered valuable in tackling the social exclusion of disabled people (Stone & Priestley 1996). The implications of this are discussed with reference to the group of children in the research and the developments among those working with adults with learning disabilities.

The chapter describes the ethical framework which draws on contributions from childhood sociology, disability studies and learning disability research. There is also a discussion about the use of reflexivity in opening the research and incorporating the researcher into the script.

Emancipatory or Participatory research?

The question of how to approach the research required detailed consideration of the current discussion within the disability movement about the position of emancipatory research involving disabled people (Oliver 1992, Stone and Priestley 1996, Barnes and Mercer 1997,
Barnes 2003). Within disability studies there are two concerns which are at the centre of ongoing debate about how research should be carried out. The first is an expectation that research should be based on the principles within the social model of disability. The second is whether research within disability studies is only truly effective in challenging social exclusion if it adheres to the principles within an emancipatory paradigm.

The social model of disability is recognised to be at the core of sociological enquiry on the exclusion of disabled people from society (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare 1999, Corker & French 1999, Priestley 1998a). It has reached a point where is it believed that the concept of disability as socially constructed should be the foundation for all further research. This is evident in statements by those within the disability field such as:-

"We now feel that only a critical approach to disability research, rooted firmly in social model discourse and practice, enables a human rights perspective to be given to issues which shape disabled people's lives (Moore, Beazley and Maelzer 1998:13)."

This is generally not contended within disability studies as there are a growing number of accepted variations of the social model informed by a range of perspectives, such as feminism (Wendell 1996), postmodernism (Corker & Shakespeare 2002) and generation (Priestley 2001). The potential limitations of adopting a singular approach are constantly being reviewed and challenged by those working within disability studies. Indeed there is currently a series of seminars addressing issues on how research can evolve within this, which is titled 'From theory to practice: Implementing The Social Model of Disability' hosted jointly by the Centre for Disability Studies at Leeds and the ESRC (2003-2004).

The critical point is that researchers within disability studies are expected by their peers to actively avoid replicating the individualistic research which emanates from medical research and which is believed to re-enforce and justify social exclusion (Barnes & Mercer 1997). Thus I have positioned the social model of disability firmly within this research at a theoretical level.

It is, however, the second expectation of disability studies within research which I want to explore further. This is the debate about whether research should be participatory or emancipatory. The call to make research involving disabled people emancipatory has been credited to Michael Oliver (1992). This proposal to privilege one particular approach was a response to the need to eliminate the oppression experienced by disabled people which was felt to stem from 'the parasite people' (Hunt 1981). Whilst initially this derogative term applied to two particular researchers, Miller and Gwynne (1975), it has become a more
generic term within disability studies for those perceived to have discriminatory or ill-placed intentions. As Oliver explains

It ...became apparent that there was increasing anger, hostility and suspicion amongst organisations of disabled people that much that passed for ‘disability research’ was nothing more than a ‘rip off’ (Oliver 1997:15).

The key principle within an emancipatory paradigm relies on a change in the social relations between the researcher and the researched. The aim should be that it is the researched who take the lead in setting the issues and schedule for the research which should operate in a climate of ‘reciprocity, gain and empowerment’ (Oliver 1997:17). The researcher is also required to share ownership of the research.

There have been efforts to implement this. Whilst some projects have appeared to be successful (Priestley 1999a, Ward and Simons 1998), others have admitted to difficulties and problems along the way (Moore, Beazley & Maelzer 1998). Researchers have found themselves faced by a multitude of obstacles such as the management of the demands and expectations of funding bodies (Moore, Beazley & Maelzer 1998), ethical issues in the sharing of responsibilities and rights (Stalker 1998), and the confusion between subjectivity and objectivity in the research process (Oliver 1999). This has led to a questioning of whether this is the appropriate way to undertake research or whether ‘participatory’ research would be an adequate substitute.

At the latest of the ESRC/Centre of Disability Studies seminars (February 2003) mentioned earlier, there was open debate about whether participatory research is being confused with emancipation and thus clouding the picture. The key differences in participatory research are that ownership remains with the researcher, which overcomes some of the issues raised by funding. The expectation remains that disabled subjects become participants in the research process, being actively consulted throughout. Walmsley’s presentation of her perception of the differences between the two approaches is useful here (see Figure 5.1).
### Participatory Research and Emancipatory Research (Walmsley 2001:196)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participatory Research</th>
<th>Emancipatory Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phenomenological (getting inside the experiences of research subjects), Qualitative methods</td>
<td>Research as political action; either qualitative or quantitative methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Ideology</td>
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<tr>
<td>not prescribed; likely to be either normalisation or social model of disability, and to promote positive images of disabled people</td>
<td>Adoption of Social Model of disability; research only undertaken if it will practically benefit disabled people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is In Control? Researcher in partnership with disabled people, particularly at data collection stage</td>
<td>Disabled People in control of all aspects from formulation of questions to dissemination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Researcher Expert, sharing expertise with research subjects; sometimes also an advisor/supporter</td>
<td>Expertise at disposal of disabled people, accountable to disabled people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Matter Issues relevant to the lives of disabled people</td>
<td>Explores and identifies appropriate avenues for Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability Accountable to funders</td>
<td>Accountable to disabled People and their organisations</td>
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However, there are concerns within disability studies that a participatory approach does not necessarily eliminate the oppressiveness of research as Oliver explains:–

They do not confront the objective structures of oppression and, despite personal intentions in many cases, disabled people are still positioned in oppressive ways. Whether we like it or not, failing to give disabled people (through their own representative organisations) control over research resources and agendas inevitably positions disabled people as inferior to those who are in control (Oliver 1999:187).
From the perspective of this thesis both of these paradigms are unachievable due to the unique nature of the group of children. The children involved are not in a position to empower themselves and do not know how to guide, influence or question research. Due to their limited communication and understanding, and through the oppressive shaping of pedagogic and welfare provisions, these children are inadequately equipped to participate in emancipatory research (as conceived within disability studies), thus making them extremely vulnerable. As a researcher bound by academic, temporal and funding issues, I am not in a position to create an immediate change in their lives, or to empower them and help them to actively respond to any oppression they might experience. This is exacerbated by the inescapable facts that I am an adult who uses extensive language to communicate, who is non-disabled and living outside their culture. Therefore this research does not, and at a practical level cannot, reflect the principles of emancipatory or participatory research advocated within disability studies. I therefore needed to seek a way forward which, whilst neither emancipatory nor participatory, would ensure the endorsement of those within disability studies.

To those working within research with people with learning disabilities, the issues mentioned previously are familiar and are continual sources of concern that this causes the exclusion of those with learning disabilities (Walmsley 2001). The result is rigorous, continual and challenging ethical reflection from a small number of researchers (Stalker 1998, Swain, Heyman & Gillman 1998). It is this approach to research which, combined with understandings of ethics generated within childhood sociology, has ultimately informed and enhanced the ethical discussion in the next section of this chapter.

Before explaining the ethical framework within this thesis it is important to state that in the light of this discussion I chose consciously to use the title ‘subjects’ when referring to the children who took part in this research. To use the word ‘participants’ implies degrees of involvement which in reality were not present (Alderson 1995). Neither were the children merely objects, clients, cases or anything else. Rather they were actively involved in the gathering of data, assisting and providing me with detail of their lives. They were not involved in the planning, progress and interpretation of this research, as the word participant can imply.
**Ethical Considerations**

The following discussion represents the merging of my personal principles with ethical concerns and which ultimately shaped and influenced the ontology, epistemology, research design and methodology of this thesis. This detailed inclusion of ethical reflection and awareness also meets the academic expectations which exist within any piece of scholastic research where the focus is on a 'vulnerable group'.

The British Sociological Association's (BSA) statement of ethical guidelines provides the starting block from which this research is designed and developed. This general overview of the research process from an ethical standpoint assists the researcher in resisting the isolatory nature of their work by situating it within a more macro context of sociology, not just 'children', 'disability' or 'disabled childhoods'. The statement's primary purpose lies in highlighting the principles on which ethical decisions and the resolution of dilemmas should be based – at its own admission it does not 'provide recipes' (BSA 2002:1).

The BSA guidelines served to overrule the social work values defined by CCETSW (reference, article 30), which had previously shaped my understanding of professional ethics. This dominance of one over another has not always been easy within this research as the two have at times comes into conflict. Most particularly, I agreed within the 'Research Protocol' (see Appendix) to notify the managers of the settings of any 'bad practice'. Halfway through the fieldwork observations I observed an incident of 'poor practice'. A child was not in immediate danger, although they were placed in a position by staff which failed to respect them and could have become physically harmful. After discussion with my supervisor, I concluded that the impact on the child had been minimal, that the staff member was leaving, and to question the staff's competence would have jeopardised the access I had to the setting. I also had to take into account the management style of the setting, which may not have viewed the incident from the same perspective as myself. What I did do was make detailed notes of the incident as a record should anything further have happened. Had I been attending the setting wearing my social work hat, my response would have been different and I would have spoken to the manager about it.

The ethical stance within this thesis has also been influenced by the developments of those within childhood sociology and working with disabled children. The introduction of the Children Act 1989, and the promotion of the voice of the child, provoked some in childhood sociology to turn their gaze toward children's rights (Alderson 1993, 2000, Archard 1993), as it did those within disability studies (Ward 1997, Morris 1998d), using legislative changes as their primary justification for the increase in research. This urgency to explore children's
voices was compounded by the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991).

As research into the lives of disabled children is becoming more commonplace, attention has more recently turned toward issues of ethical integrity (Costly 2000). The specific vulnerability recognised among disabled children as research subjects means that researchers are seeking ways to ensure that their rights and innate humanity are not violated by the research process (Ward 1997, Morris 1998d, Alderson 1995).

The core ethical issues, as outlined by Hammersley and Atkinson (1997), offer the researcher a framework from which to base their considerations. Through exploring the definitions and implications of informed consent, privacy and autonomy, harm, exploitation and consequences for future research, it was possible to find a starting point in designing the research. What follows therefore is discussion, within an ethical framework, of the contributions from childhood sociology, disability studies and research with adults with learning disabilities which have been influential in the design of this project.

**Informed Consent**

The popular view of informed consent relies on a specific set of interactions: i presentation of information, ii understanding, iii followed by a response. These then result in either the consent being given or withheld (Morris 1998d). This also relies on the information being presented in an appropriate format and on the child being able to assimilate information and respond to it. Essentially the child is required to indicate at least some degree of competence (Ward 1997).

On a sterile level, competence can be judged in relation to the Gillick decision (Archard 1993:78), which arose from a case heard in the British courts which sought to establish a girl’s competence in consenting to a medical decision. The outcome based judgement of competence not solely on the age of consent (16) but on notions of ‘maturity’, ‘understanding’ and ‘intelligence’. In the light of discussions surrounding the privileging of maturity, it is possible to see how these classifications are based on an adult-centric view of childhood. This leaves the researcher in danger of replicating the dichotomous child/adult relationship. There is also a risk that in using this interpretation of competence the researcher will be making decisions which have the potential to create discrimination, as some children risk being assessed as incompetent within the research process.
The search for further understanding of 'informed consent' is primarily discussed in terms of ensuring presentation of material which is understandable to the child (Alderson 1995, Ward 1997, Morris 1998, Beresford 1997), of ensuring that parents do not feel overlooked in the process (Ward 1997), that the children do not respond positively purely because this is what they feel is expected of them (Alderson 1995, Beresford 1997), and of ensuring that children know they can refuse (Alderson 1995, Beresford 1997).

These discussions are based on an understanding of childhood which remains focussed on the mainstream child, who is presumed to have some age-appropriate channel of communication which adults know and understand. This is reasonable when the children researched demonstrate sufficient understanding of appropriately presented materials in order to consent. Indeed this happened with some of the children within this research. On first introduction and subsequent meetings I would talk to the children about the research, its aims and objectives, likening it to carrying out a school project which will be shared among children, adults and carers. This proved successful since it would elicit conversation about the focus of the work and gave me an opportunity to include the children in my thinking. The only difficulty that arose was that as time went by the children were less interested in me and as one boy said to me one day 'it's a very long project'. For the children I think this was the most frustrating aspect – that the results were not instant.

Far more problematic was the inclusion of the children who made up a large number of subjects within the research. They did not access known or recognised communication methods, or were unable to engage in an exchange such as that described above, which would result in the researcher gaining informed consent. Discussion surrounding informed consent in this area becomes very sparse and with little conclusion. Whether this is due to a feeling that the current definitions are sufficient, or whether there is lack of interest in what is perceived as an inaccessible group, is unclear. What is clear, however, is that there is little consideration about how to engage with those children whose competence is not always perceived. As Alderson explains when considering very young or disabled children:

They challenge assumptions that children's competence relates to their measured intelligence, reading and maths ability, and placid compliance. Children who are fortunate to live sheltered lives...... may be misperceived as inevitably very dependent when they do not have the chance to show their potential strengths. A further mistake is to assume that disadvantaged children are even less competent than sheltered ones. Competence grows through experience rather than with age or ability and very young children can have profound understanding (Alderson 2000:131).
I would argue that the children within this research (although some may not have communication as adults define and understand it, and they may not be perceived as competent), do possess a profound understanding: of themselves, of the presence of others and of their environment. For this reason I hold the view that the children I was working alongside were able to assent to my presence. Assent is represented within the relation between the researched and the researcher, by the trust within that relationship and acceptance of that persons presence. It removes the reliance on the child demonstrating adult-centric attributes such as maturity, competence and completeness; rather it accepts the child's state of being.

Seeking assent requires the researcher to remain constantly vigilant to the responses of the child at all times: it is not something gained at the beginning of the research then put aside. The researcher needs to attune themselves to the child's unique communication in order to know when to remove themselves. The following extract from my journal illustrates the time spent building a relationship and shared understanding of each other with Tim, an autistic boy with no speech and limited intellectual capacity. He was assessed by the staff as requiring one to one attention the whole time because of his often loud and aggressive behaviour.

For most of this afternoon I have spent time with Tim. I began by sitting nearby, watching the other children and sometimes watching him. As he did not react to my presence and indeed began to look at me I watched him more closely. After some time I moved closer to him and was eventually sitting next to him. He appeared to accept my presence where I have seen him forcefully push others away. He was sitting playing with some fluff, I felt very rewarded when he let me have some of the fluff - I had requested a piece to see if he would part with it - something else he is reluctant to do. We then proceeded in a game of passing the fluff between us, he directing how long I could hold it for. At times he would look directly into my eyes, I really felt that, although he has no concept or grasp of why I am here, I do feel that he knows that I intend him total respect as a person and therefore he is happy with my presence here (Play Setting/journal).

There were other times when gaining assent was not so easily achieved and I was clearly pushed away by the children. Whenever this happened I would not question their action but remove myself from their space. What I had not expected was that this would sometimes result in the child or group of children coming to me, asking me to join in. This left me with the sense that through the action of respecting their choice I was opening channels of trust and interaction by not acting in a particularly adult-centric way.
Harm and Exploitation

Consideration of harm and exploitation becomes critical with this group of children who are viewed as being so vulnerable. However, a balance needs to be sought which acknowledges the vulnerability of the children but rejects the view of them as passive and unable to participate in research by sharing their experiences. This would then avoid the scenario described by Alderson (1995) where:-

Traditional ethics .... rightly stresses the importance of non-interference, and of avoiding deliberate harm. Yet little is said of the harms of protecting children so much that they are silenced and excluded from research. (Alderson 1995:54).

Problems regarding the impact of the research can and do arise when assent is the predominant way of gaining the children’s trust. This is seen very clearly in the work of Goode (1991), who gained assent through building a trusting and complex relationship with Christina, a deaf-blind child at the centre of his research. When the research ended it was with negative consequences for Christina, who had flourished as a result of such a rewarding relationship, as Goode admits:

My departure from State Hospital was an unhappiness for Christina and me. The implications for her life were great. Without the benefit of her ally, she quickly regressed to a point where her behaviour was indistinguishable from that of the other residents (Goode 1991:157).

The potential for this problem occurring must be recognised from the outset and has been recognised in research with adults with learning disabilities (Stalker 1998). If you purposely work at gaining the trust and building friendships with those who rarely experience this level of intimacy, you must prepare them for your departure when the work is complete. Throughout I have made clear to the children the regularity and duration of my visits. On a lesser scale, if I had spent a lot of time with one particular child and was aware of their growing attachment, I would never just up and leave. I would always make sure that they either joined an activity or that a staff member remained or would join them, in order to avoid them sensing abandonment. However, I cannot deny that problems did occur and although they were solvable they were unfortunate and left me with a sense of acute sadness at the speed children would attach themselves to me as a ‘friend’ as if this relational opportunity was rare. Sometimes the children would become possessive about who would play with me next, excluding others from joining in by telling them to go away or that I was their friend. On the whole though, I was able to extract myself by moving to another part of the setting or asking if we could all be friends.
Consideration also had to be given to the fact that for the children this was not the first time they had been observed, scrutinised, judged and assessed. Their label ‘disabled’ has led to them experiencing intense scrutiny by a wide range of professionals in order to define and assess their ‘needs’, be they physical, emotional or social. I did not want the children to associate my observations with these assessments, feeling that I had exploited their assent to participating. Critical to achieving this was my constant return to an ethical stance, asking myself whether any action of mine or anyone else resulting from the research would have a negative impact on the children.

Along with police checks and interviews with the management of the settings I also prepared a research protocol (see Appendix) which outlined the more practical issues protecting the subjects from harm. It also anticipated potential ethical dilemmas laying out agreed procedures intended to resolve them (Sieber 1992). This served to protect everyone involved in the research process, including myself.

Privacy And Autonomy

Issues of privacy and autonomy were particularly pertinent due to the vulnerability of children within research which Hammersley and Atkinson believe is due to:—

the assumption that children’s private lives are legitimately open to scrutiny in a way that those of adults are not, especially professional, middle-class adults (Hammersley & Atkinson 1997:267).

The recognition of privacy within the research lies in the sensitivity of seeking the children’s assent. If a child did not wish me to be present, I removed myself. If I was uncertain, I would remove myself; so rather than assume a positive response to my presence I assumed a negative.

What became difficult was protecting the children’s privacy when they were interacting with me. On one occasion a girl had been trying to tell me something for the entire length of my visit – each time she began to talk the staff would position themselves within hearing range, regardless of the girl’s request that they ‘go away’. This highlighted the fact that children have the right to choose who they share their privacy with, and I felt privileged that the children trusted me to do this.
In order to uphold that trust not to abuse their privacy, I double-checked that any data shared does not disclose the identity of the children. For this reason children’s names have been changed in the presentation of data to preserve their privacy. I have also altered details of the settings to avoid their identity being recognised.

Consequences for Future Research

Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) give a sound warning of the possible impact of a project on future research, explaining that if the subjects and gatekeepers have a negative experience they may not be willing to allow further researchers into their environment. This is especially pertinent considering the vulnerability of both the children and the settings. As mentioned previously, this was the first piece of research to be carried out in either setting; therefore I was very aware that my own actions could jeopardise the possibility of the settings opening their doors to others in the future. In staff meetings I have ensured that I have explained my ethical stance to the staff, with detailed discussion about the issue of seeking assent and about my role as researcher. By acting in an ethical way I have hopefully set a precedent for the way future research will be carried out.

By exploring the detail of Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1997) ethical framework in direct relation to this specific research, it seems clear that consideration of ethics cannot merely be a posture assumed in order to satisfy the requirements of academic and professional research; rather it is a position which should be declared by the researcher. What is apparent is that by resolving ethical uncertainty the researcher can ensure sound practices without the need to adopt a specific political stance. Essentially I believe that ethics should be above the political influences which abound in academia, particularly disability studies.

It is therefore my own beliefs that have largely influenced the extent to which I have ensured that my ethical stance is accurate and well informed. In doing this I have considered the impact I personally make within the research process. This results in careful adoption of reflexivity in the way I have worked throughout the project. It has also impacted on the decisions made in choosing the most appropriate research design and methodology.
Reflexivity

The role of reflexivity within sociology has experienced a degree of scrutiny and debate (May 1999, Slack 2000, May 2000) which has left its meaning open to interpretation and vulnerable to misuse. Imperative therefore in avoiding confusion is the clarification of the definition, application and position of reflexivity within this research.

Reflexivity is an approach which researchers can apply to bridge the gap between themselves and the researched. This is seen in the call within disability studies to move toward emancipation by using reflexivity to address the imbalance of research relations (Barnes and Mercer 1997, Davis, Watson & Cunningham-Burley 2000), and within the sociology of childhood to widen the scope of the researcher to hear the voice of the child (Davis 1998). However, there lies a danger in subscribing to this call as it may serve to falsely raise reflexivity to a privileged position as the only route to ethical rigour which can withstand academic examination, without its process or meaning ever being defined or explored.

Initially my concerns about the value of reflexivity focused on the potential difficulties existent in the relations between researcher and researched, especially concerning the production of power and knowledge. I was drawn to the claim that reflexivity has the potential to reduce the power relation between myself and the researched through recognising one's own personal vulnerability (Stone & Priestley 1996). Within this there remained a nagging doubt that if used incorrectly it might as easily widen the power relation if I were to claim an epistemological high ground over the children. In order to overcome this, I have ensured that lay explanations for peer culture, which are represented through the observed interactions, institutional and adult accounts, are not suppressed in favour of my explanation. For example, the use of an inductive approach during coding and analysis brought to the forefront the children's knowledge of their activity, rather than privileging mine. The subsequent analysis chapters within this thesis therefore feature a significant amount of data in order to ensure clarity. I have tried to be explicit in the presentation of my own interpretations in order to achieve epistemological clarity.

I was also aware that as I have different narratives at work in my own life, such as academic, private and social, so would the children. As Davis explains, self-reflection on the part of the researcher leads to recognition of the potential for 'many different cultural voices' amongst the researched (Davis 1998). Engaging with reflexivity in this way thus allows for the existence of uncertainty and the possibility of multiple explanations and experiences caused by the complex interplay between the material and individual. Rather than perceive
the existence of these multiple explanations as problematic I have positioned them squarely in the centre of the description of peer interactions. Through this it is then possible to be situated ‘parallel’ to the research subjects in attempting to explain the social world (Hammersley and Atkinson 1997) by addressing the potential risk of epistemological privilege, whilst retaining a sense of realism.

Practical Reflexivity

But what is reflexivity? An honest answer to this question might be that it is something easier to do than define. (Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley 2000:201).

Indeed the process of writing how my actions and thoughts throughout this research were reflexive was not always a comfortable process. It required continual consideration of my conduct, a review of my questioning of prejudices held at the outset, and their subsequent dismissal as insubstantial and subjective judgements. Indeed, my biographic statement which follows seems a somewhat sterile abbreviation of the events and motivations which led me to this point. It is devoid of the processes involved in suspending my own experiences of a privileged childhood within a middle-class family unit and my interaction as an adult with children currently in my private life. My journals are testament to the fact that this is merely the tip of the iceberg and trace the development of the research, my relations with the children and my own personal journey. It is not possible to extract reflexivity from within the project as it is intertwined with, and has seeped into, the very fabric of the research.

Self-orientation

As an element of reflexivity, and as a response to proposals within disability studies that it is important for researchers to acknowledge their own role in the production of research (Stone and Priestley 1996), I complete the consideration of the influences present within the research design by including myself.

Each person’s life is based on belief of some kind, and therefore such beliefs should be duly respected. But unless that belief is subjected to the tests of reason and reality, it remains individual and subjective and lacks the universality to be communicated to others. (Daisaku Ikeda. C on the LS. Vol 2 129-131).

The ontological roots within this research are not only rooted in the literature as presented within the literature review, but they are also informed by my own personal beliefs which cannot be dismissed. In many ways this research represents the merging of my beliefs with
academic discussion in relation to the experiences of disabled children. The outcomes and findings presented are a direct result of my interpretation of the children's peer culture. This interpretation is subject not only to theoretical scrutiny but also to my beliefs, perception and previous experiences not just in working with disabled children but of life itself. This conceptualisation of the relationship between myself and the research not only represents a certain ontological position, it also supports the epistemological drive to be reflexive.

In my mid-twenties, disillusioned with the hierarchical oppression existent within the commercial hotel industry, I accepted a post as a night care assistant in a holiday centre for physically disabled adults. My understanding of the world changed in those months before moving to day shifts; sitting talking to the insomniacs who generously and openly shared their personal experiences and life stories with me. I was shocked by much of what I heard, and decided to become a social worker with the naive belief that this would enable me to 'change the world'. It was at this point that I began to work directly with disabled children. A series of posts, which were shaped and buffeted by financial, social and political pressures, led me to review my role in replicating the difficulties created by 'the system'. I could no longer remain in a position which I felt required me to subjugate the needs of the children to enforce a bureaucratic, systematic conditioning of the children which makes them dependent on the beneficence (or otherwise) of the system. This led me to my MSc in Disability Studies, which permitted me to freely explore my understanding of disability.

Whilst working as a social worker I had a reputation for putting the children first to the point that I would rather risk controversy than step down. I grew impatient with the reliance on specialist knowledge and intervention. Children were moved from one provision to another without consideration of their established friendships; this inevitably distressed the children, who would express it in a number of ways.

This questioning of specialist provision directly led to the evolution of this research. So often in the past I have been told about children who were 'so severely' disabled that they do not have friendships and are not aware of other children around them. Then I have met these children and observed them watching and interacting with their surroundings in ways that indicated that perhaps the description allocated to them might have been inaccurate. In the same way, I have watched children who experience high levels of surveillance being reprimanded for behaviour which may have been deemed amusing if carried out by a mainstream child. Then during my MSc research I observed the occasional child attempt to challenge the system whilst staff remained unaware. I began to wonder whether children did indeed have a peer culture which was either suppressed or perceptually neglected by the adults around them. My desire to explore further the experiences of these children whose
interaction with others and their environment appeared so misrepresented was the starting point of this thesis.

**Summary**

The focus within this chapter has been to review and reflect upon the influences which shaped and impacted on decisions I made as a researcher throughout this project. The issues discussed demonstrate that the process of designing the research was not simple or straightforward. The unique vulnerabilities of the children within this research raised a number of concerns about how to progress whilst also protecting them.

Within this, there were a number of factors which had to be taken into account; the research preferences within disability studies, developments within childhood sociology, ethical frameworks and the inclusion of reflexivity. Whilst this might appear a cumbersome list, the effort made in appreciating them has enhanced the project as a whole.

In order to establish a framework, I explored issues within Hammersley and Atkinson's (1997) ethical guidelines: informed consent, privacy and autonomy, harm, exploitation and consequences for future research. In reflecting upon this in the light of developments within the three areas of research with children, disabled children and people with learning disabilities, it was possible to give detailed consideration to the issues involved. This comprehensive ethical stance thus compensates for the earlier recognition that this research is not and cannot be either emancipatory or participatory, due to the nature of the group of children involved.

There is one final point I wish to make. That at the root of this is my own respect for everyone, the children and the staff, for the lives they lead, the experiences which shape them and for agreeing to participate in this research. It was a brave decision on the part of both settings to allow me access, as neither had experience of 'research' before and have put their trust in me to present them fairly and accurately. The children trusted me and allowed me into their groups without question: they offered me their friendship, accepting my presence as a 'least adult'. Following Waksler (1991), I would ask the reader to be generous in their judgement of the settings. The aim of this work was not to assess the quality and standard of care but to study the peer groups within such settings. As Waksler so aptly explains.
Detailed scrutiny of everyday behaviour almost always reveals elements that even those engaged in the behaviour might want to disclaim or at least explain as being undesirable but required by the situation. Readers might find it instructive to consider what would be revealed by a detailed examination of their own daily activities – work habits, housekeeping, study methods (Waksler 1991b:96).
This chapter provides a detailed account of the methods used in the collection of data, its management and analysis and thus provides transparency in how the work was carried out. The chapter opens with an explanation of the reasons for choosing a qualitative approach and a description of the overall research design.

The chapter progresses with an exploration of participant observation which was the primary method of data collection, in particular discussion of the researchers adoption of the 'least-adult' role advocated by Mandell (1991a). This role allowed the researcher to be viewed as something other than an adult with authority or knowledge of the settings, and this was accepted by the children. There is also a description of the other methods of data collection, such as the meetings held with staff, upkeep of a research journal, and material data such as policies, newsletters and other publications generated by the settings themselves.

The final section of the chapter discusses in detail the management of data and its analysis which draws primarily on the principles of grounded theory. There is a description of the way in which coding was approached and how theory was introduced within the analytic process. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the dissemination of findings which is yet to occur after the submission of this thesis.

The decision to use a qualitative approach was influenced not only by the factors discussed in the previous chapter but also by the nature of the settings and the groups of children who were taking part within the project. The research was set in two settings which provide services to children with learning impairments who are assessed as being in need of extra support outside school and the home. The decision to carry out the research within two settings was made in the hope that if peer culture were identified it might be possible to explore whether there were elements which transcended the difference of the two settings. The particular settings were
approached because they provided out of school services within the same local area, thus increasing the possibility that some children would attend both of the settings. The fact that they both hold charitable status was appealing, as it appeared that they followed a similar remit.

The impact of choosing these settings was that the children within this research had a wide range of learning disabilities: some also had physical impairment. The difficulties the children had were medically assessed as ranging from 'moderate' to 'severe'. Whilst some children used language effectively, others had limited vocabularies. Some of the children used makaton to communicate, others used pic symbols. There was also a group of children who did not use any form of recognised communication method.

The children represented a mix of class, gender, race and culture which reflected the wider community as a whole. There was a notable under-representation of children from ethnic minorities which perhaps mirrors the concerns about a lack of uptake by families from these groups (Shah 1995). This diversity was further compounded by the extent of the age range, which was 5-16 years old.

It has been noted that disabled children experience a great deal of questioning in the assessment processes which are a feature of their lives (Shemmings & Shemmings 2001). Therefore I was determined not to replicate this in research and be mistaken for a professional judging either their abilities or their needs.

Another factor is that the majority of children who took part do not maintain attention or concentration for periods of time: either walking away to move onto something else or changing the activity. Hyperactivity is fairly common in children with learning disabilities and there is an increasing number of children whose disabilities are specifically associated with relational and social activity; for example, challenging behaviour, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Happe 1994, Ellis 1990).

It was immediately clear that there were certain methods of research which would not be appropriate within this project. For example, it would not have been possible to design a questionnaire which was accessible to children without requiring the potentially influential assistance of adults. Indeed, the use of questionnaires to discover the lives of disabled children in the past have tended to reflect parents and/or carers views rather than those of the children, as can be seen in the research by Gerard (1990). This led to her commenting that this had
decreased the validity of her work, suggesting that qualitative methods might have been more successfully deployed, resulting in a clearer picture of children's lives. In the same vein the use of advocacy in answering questionnaires in research with adults with learning disabilities has been questioned as misleading and potentially damaging (Walmsley 2001).

It became paramount to seek ways of overcoming the complexities of the group and to find a way to avoid prioritising the spoken voices of those children considered more able within communication. This meant that forms of data collection and processes of analysis needed to be carefully assessed in order to ensure inclusion of all the children within the setting.

Choosing a Qualitative Approach

The decision to use a qualitative approach was informed by the pre-existing factors already discussed and also by an understanding of the history of research with disabled people. This evolution of qualitative methods has provided researchers within an accessible form of methodologies which respond to disabled children.

This thesis set out to discover whether peer culture as conceptualised by Corsaro (1997) exists within an identified marginalised group in a specific type of setting. I was interested to discover if the structures within the setting influenced the presence and nature of peer culture in any way. I was not working within a rigid hypothesis; rather, I started out with a number of issues which I wanted to explore.

I was also conscious of the historical context of research in disabled people's lives. Barnes & Mercer (1997) and Oliver (1992), along with others at the forefront of disability research, feel that the use of quantitative research based on a medical model has validated, and in some cases created, the oppression of people with impairments (Moore, Beazley & Maelzer 1998, Barnes & Mercer 1997, Morris 1998a,d). It would be fair to say that many of those within the field of disability studies are sceptical of the value of quantitative research, fearing a recurrence of the past and introduction of further oppressive policy. As Jenny Morris has pointed out:-

Much research concerning disabled children has been characterised by two major inadequacies: it has been based on a medical model of disability; and it has failed to concern itself with the experiences of disabled children, focussing on that of service providers and parents. (Morris 1997:242).
Qualitative approaches are now at the forefront within disability studies, and researchers are seeking to find new ways of working which respond to the unique qualities of the children being researched. Whilst this is the case, I would also argue that there is a place for quantitative research in highlighting the position of disabled children within society. The problems discussed in the introduction about not knowing exactly how many children receive care and the provision within the U.K. could therefore be ascertained.

Within qualitative research methods there are a number of approaches to gathering data which are particularly useful within this thesis. The most significant is observation, specifically participant observation, which was chosen as the primary method of gathering data. There has been much discussion about what are the most appropriate, ethical and accurate ways to research childhood, with observation being endorsed as a valid and suitable way of accessing children's lives (Graue & Walsh 1998, Greig & Taylor 1999).

An additional influence in finalising the research design was the empirical evidence within childhood sociology of the successful use of methods which are qualitative in nature, such as the work of Mandell (1991a,b), Waksler (1991) and the research generated within the ESRC 'Children 5-16: Growing into the twenty-first century' project. This reflects the overall ontological shift within the sociology of childhood away from a functionalist view toward the interpretive, agentic concepts that are currently in dominance (James Jenks and Prout 1998, Prout 2000a). The majority of literature concerned with the practical aspect of research with children also focuses on qualitative methods (Graue & Walsh 1998, Lewis & Lindsay 2000, Christensen & James 2000). Perhaps this is because the philosophical underpinnings and basic principles tend to respond to this group more positively than quantitative methods as is shown in figure 6.1.
The research design (see figure 6.2) was thus qualitative in nature with participant observation being the primary method of data collection, supplemented by meetings with the staff, material data produced by the settings, and a research journal. What follows is a consideration of the methods used, their characteristics and how they contributed to this research.
Figure 6.2 The Research Design

Detailed insight into the peer culture within specialist, segregated settings.

ANALYSIS

CODING

Data

OBSERVATION:
Participant
Least Adult Role

STAFF MEETINGS
after fieldwork complete

TEXTUAL DOCUMENTS
agency policies, aims newsletters, publications

Qualitative Methods

Ontology of Peer Culture, disabled childhoods

Research Participants:
Communication, concentration etc

Gatekeepers:
requirements, expectations of research.

Researcher subjectivity and role within the work

Research Objectives:
Inductive, analysis primarily led by data
Observation

The use of observation is believed to have many benefits for research with children for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is viewed by some as being empowering for those observed and indeed for the researcher (Greig & Taylor 1999). Secondly, it is a ‘study of behaviour in its natural settings’ (Greig and Taylor 1999:84), therefore contextualising culture (Graue and Walsh 1998). It also responds to a variety of abilities (Ward 1997). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly within this thesis, when applied correctly it does not exclude participants on account of communication differences (Ward 1997). The use of observation was therefore chosen as the primary source of data for this research because of the nature of the group of children whose experiences I was seeking to discover, since I felt that this would allow the flexibility required in order to be fully inclusive of all the children.

Participant Observation

Within this thesis the main method of data gathering is through participant observation, with the researcher adopting a least-adult role. This decision evolved from the belief that it is possible to suspend ‘adult’ and ‘child’ resulting in a ‘social member’ who engages with contextual action (Mandell 1991a). This contrasts with the perspective that the worlds, culture and intellect of adults and children exist in a dichotomous relationship which cannot be bridged (Coenen 1986). It also opposes the view that the power and age differentials cannot be overcome, thus leaving the researcher as ‘always adult’.

The role of ‘culture’ as a concept within this research is crucial in deciding to adopt participant observation as the main source of data. As I set out in the introduction it is the culture of children’s lives which I set out to explore and sought to understand within a particular context. Context is an important aspect within this research and something not prioritised within Corsaro’s work as highlighted in chapter 2. Participant observation provided a way of overcoming this and incorporating the context into the data without creating priority. This led me to concur with Bogdewic who states that

the fundamental reason to select participant observation over other research techniques relates to the significance of the cultural context in answering the research question (Bogdewic 1992:46).
The decision to adopt a least adult role was also influenced by the fact that I wanted to create relationships with the children based on honesty and friendship. I wanted to avoid non-participatory observation because being observed is not an uncommon occurrence for these particular children who are monitored, assessed and judged by a wide range of professionals whose concern is with the progress of the child. I was keen to ensure that I would not be mistaken for another Doctor, Social Worker, Therapist or Psychologist, who was going to give ‘an opinion’ on the individual children. Evidence from Mandell (1991a) shows how, through adopting participant observation, it is possible to have an input into how the children and indeed the staff would view the researcher.

Key in this method of observation is the Meadian way of acceptance, which eliminates the ‘status differentials’, such as gender, class race and age, resulting in ‘field workers accept(ing) their research subjects as they come to them’ (Mandell 1991a:40). This is critical for the subjects for whom, as explained in the literature review, identity is imposed on them by society, the settings and the adults within their lives. Thus through participant observation I have attempted to adopt an attitude devoid of the traditional identity structures that feature in adult-adult relations. I was also clear from the start that all I wanted to know about the children from the staff was any imperative health and safety information, for example if a child was epileptic, so that I could respond accordingly.

Participant observation meant that I was open with the children about my purpose for visiting, an approach advocated by many researchers (Morris 1998d, Bogdowic 1992, Ward 1997). This was very much in tune with the ethical position of the research which is to gain assent from the children (see chapter 5).

The Participant Observer

There are a number of methods of carrying out participant observations, each of which have advantages and possible pitfalls (Graue and Walsh 1998, Greig & Taylor 1999). Initially I was going to use Corsaro’s ‘reactive strategy’ (1997), however, I found that Mandell’s (1991a) least-adult role was more effective and comprehensive.

Corsaro’s approach appears to be a useful way for an adult researcher to participate in a “least adult” way. Looking for ways not to act like an adult, he noticed that ‘adults primarily initiate contacts with children: that is, they were primarily active rather than reactive’ (Corsaro
He found, for example, that adults began conversations with children without expecting to become engaged in extended interaction. 'Adults seldom enter the playhouses, outside sandpiles, climbing bars or climbing house' (Corsaro 1985:28). His strategy became one of not acting like a child but rather of not acting like an adult (Graue & Walsh 1998:107).

However, Corsaro did not actively engage in children's activity; rather he followed, and was guided by, the children, unlike Mandell who describes:-

Undertaking a responsive, interactive, fully involved participant observer role with the children in as least an adult manner as possible. This entailed neither directing nor correcting children's actions. While my size dictated that I could never physically pass for a child, I endeavoured to put aside ordinary forms of adult status and interaction — authority, verbal competency, cognitive and social mastery — in order to follow their ways closely (Mandell 1991a:42).

Although aiming to achieve this, I was also aware of the importance of Graue and Walsh's (1998) warning that, however much you may try to become a child, it is not entirely possible because of your own experiences of childhood, physical development and subsequent life experiences. Thus I was not devoid of power in that I had chosen the role I would play — a choice not open to children. This was brought home to me during a conversation, while I was carrying out research for my masters degree, with a young man with learning impairments. I was explaining that as a visitor and non-staff member I had no responsibility. The immediate response was 'but you're an adult". This one comment, seemingly innocuous, remains with me as a reminder that 'adultness' is still present within participant observation even if to a lesser degree.

The suspension of an ideology of 'adult' and 'child' challenges the researcher to reflect on their own presentation of self and, within this research, required a great deal of reflexivity (see chapter five). Although preparation is vital in that this is the process through which ground-rules are created for conduct in the field, the real test comes once the observations have begun. Similarly to Mandell, who had pre-defined guidelines for how her research was going to be conducted, I found myself re-writing and changing my approach as I progressed (Mandell 1991a).

Establishing the Child/Researcher relationship. In essence the successful establishment of the child/researcher relationship was critical to the outcome of this thesis. Before entering the field I had gone through the process of negotiating access with the managers, staff and
parents of the children, yet I had not yet met any of the services’ users. I was very conscious that because of the rigorous vetting procedures in place, I had planned all the details of the research before meeting any children. Within this I had envisaged the format for the relationship with children to reflect certain characteristics:

- there would be an absence of carer/recipient interaction.
- the researcher would not demonstrate authority.
- the researcher would not respond to or intervene in conflict.
- the children/researcher would interact in spaces usually occupied by children only.

Within the early stages of the pilot study it became clear that achievement of these characteristics would not immediately ‘apparate’, but would grow out of mutual understanding. For example, the projected ‘absence of carer/recipient relations’ was challenged early on when a child approached and sat on my knee, immediately highlighting that it was for me to set the agenda. I explained that as I was little, I could not see past his head and that he was too heavy for my knee. This type of incident happened on a number of occasions with several of children in both settings; however, I found in time that it occurred less and less. Toward the end of the second block of observations, I realised that some of the same children were indicating to me to come and sit next to them, by patting the neighbouring seat, whilst the others had stopped requesting to sit on my knee. Thus indicating that there was a gradual shift in the way I was being perceived by the children, who were realising that I was not within the setting in an adult caring role.

There arose problematic issues of authority within conflict on a number of occasions when I witnessed children disagreeing and threatening (and sometimes succeeding) to hurt others. Particular difficulties arose when children would look to me to intervene, at which point I had to be sensitive in how I reacted. This is illustrated in the following incident where, during a game of chase with two children, we stumbled into an argument about a piece of equipment.

We ran across the climbing frame and over the bridge, Jack was in the lead and we were both being chased by Douglas. On turning the corner up onto the bridge Jack stopped still, I also stopped, as did Douglas. Ahead of us there was one boy, Charlie, holding the seat of the zip slide, another boy, Thomas, was reaching out to it. Charlie began spitting at Thomas who continued to hold out his hand and was saying ‘No, no, no’. Thomas then stepped forward and pinched Charlie who was still spitting. They pushed at each
other and Thomas stumbled into the wall of the climbing frame, he then ran away screaming loudly and crying.

During this Jack who had been running in front of me was watching. He turned to me four times each time pointing at the boys arguing and making a cross noise ‘Ah’, he had a frown on his face. I said that I couldn’t do anything as I was not allowed because I was not staff. I watched with the boys as a member of staff came up the ramp to Charlie who was still holding onto the slide. Jack went up to staff and was pointing at Thomas who by now was at the other end of the play area and then pointing at me. I asked if he wanted me to tell staff and when he nodded I explained to the staff (play setting).

In this incident I was requested to intervene by Jack, whose anxiety was increasing at the mounting tension. To intervene would have put me in an authoritarian adult role, but to have ignored his request would have broken the relationship we had achieved. Therefore I limited my action to explaining why I would not do anything, using the term ‘not allowed’ purposely as it infers an adult-imposed restriction. When Jack was trying to explain to staff what had happened I checked with him first if he wanted me to tell the staff what had happened and thus avoided an adult/adult conversation, entering the interaction at the child’s assent.

Acclimatising to children’s worlds was a process which began in the pilot study and has continued throughout the research. It involved re-learning the different forms of communication used, such as makaton and pic symbols, although I used to be conversant with each; like any language, it is easy to forget if not used regularly. I needed to attune myself to the different sounds in the speech of the children using the settings, learning their unique expressions, vocalisations and body language. I also drew on previous research and work with adults with complex communication methods and self-stimulatory behaviours which is based on principles of following and respecting the communication methods of others (Caldwell 1996).

Mandell (1991a) refers to the importance of language used and self-expression with children. Within this research it become clear that attention to language was not sufficient, I needed to look beyond the discursive nature of interaction. I needed to become aware of my own body language: how I stood, where I sat, what I was wearing, whether I had shoes on or not. I stopped myself from leaning against tables or walls; instead I sat and sometimes lay on the floor in the middle of the action. Hardest of all, I stopped myself standing with my arms crossed!
It was also important to let go of any embarrassment or self-consciousness in order to play alongside the children. This involved being prepared to climb over, under and through the play equipment within the settings, whizzing down very wet slides, scrambling through grass and leaping around a bouncy castle. This also meant being able to match the level of energy expenditure by the children and being able to adapt to the high noise levels (Mandell 1991a). It also helps that I am relatively short!

**Establishing the Adult/Researcher relationship.** Mandell (1991), in her research within classroom settings, explores the relations between the adults within the research setting and researcher concluding that:–

> The teachers initial reaction are data on adult conceptions of childhood interaction as being immature, sometimes cute, but not worthy of this kind of constant attention. (Mandell 1991a:45).

The reality of this was clear from the start of this work, when I was told by one member of staff that the children do not have peers because of their disability. Similar to Mandell, I was at the receiving end of jesting comments about my activities, most often directed at my appearance at the end of a day when I was usually either covered with grass stains, mud, paint, or water. Indeed one day, after having been completely saturated with water by one of the children, I was told ‘I hope you’ve got dry pants with you’. I would argue that for staff to watch an adult so immersed in the play and activity of the children is probably unusual and therefore elicited these types of comment.

However, the difficulty within the adult/researcher role lay more in the negotiation of responsibility and participation. In one of the settings where the day’s schedule is more directed by adults, it was difficult avoiding being given tasks to do with the children and so I found myself ducking out to visit the loo, or take notes whenever I was aware staff were deciding on the next activity. The other setting presented a different problem in that there were a lot of volunteers therefore on each visit I would meet new people, so the process of establishing a role became constant. I also found myself having to explain my role each time someone would ask me to do something, or to ‘watch’ a child while they did something else.

During the initial block of observations it was relatively straightforward to establish my role; however, later in the fieldwork this became harder. As time progressed, the curiosity of the staff about me increased, particularly once I was pregnant and was therefore more easily...
allocated an identifiable social status – mother-to-be. I found myself fielding questions about my private life far more than before. In both of the settings I experienced the staff trying to include me in their conversations, which happened in the periphery of the children’s action and thus drawing me away from my focus. This required constant vigilance against being positioned alongside the adults by the staff, which ran the risk of being perceived by the children as one of the adults.

Problems with Participant observation

Participant observation has been perhaps rightly criticised for a perceived lack of validity in being vulnerable to researcher subjectivity. It is for these reasons that it has been stressed how important it is for the researcher to consider their impact in research (Silverman 1999). Within this thesis, this has been addressed in two ways. Firstly, in the detailed and transparent positioning of reflexivity as central throughout the research process. Secondly, in the presentation of significant amounts of data in the analysis chapters, including sufficient detail to ensure that readers can appreciate observed interaction within the context.

There were times when I was aware of my own errors in judgement concerning my behaviour in certain situations. Although this is a criticism that has been levelled at the use of this type of approach, I would argue that mistakes, when used to learn and refine your approach, can only be beneficial to the quality and validity of the work. It has long been established that one of the ways in which children (and adults) learn is through righting wrongful action.

In relation to the concept of validity, this research is based on the belief that the truth of children’s peer culture is demonstrated through their interactions and relationships. The correct observation and recording of these truths is the responsibility of the researcher. Mandell demonstrates in her work how, through adopting a Meadian approach in interacting with children, it is possible to achieve what is a:-

mutual understanding, is a social product, a joint creation which emerges in and through the defining of interactions of selves (adult researchers) and others (children) around social objects (Mandell 1991a:41).

Therefore what becomes important is the formation of mutual understanding of social objects between the researcher and children. This relationship and its product - ‘mutual understanding’, when accurately recorded, represent the process through which the truth has been discovered.
By maintaining rigorous recording of the relationships, as will be discussed later in this chapter, and understanding it, it is then possible to demonstrate the processes of validity.

There are however gaps left open by the use of participant observation which need recognition. This is a lack of description provided by the children of the purpose and intention behind their interaction – particularly of the type which would be gained through interviews or focus groups. When the research proposal was initially developed I had intended to use focus groups as a way of both generating and validating data. However, as the first year progressed, I realised that within this there were fundamental difficulties I was unable to resolve. Although aware of Ward’s view that:

Disabled children and young people are likely to have different perspectives from those of disabled adults. Research projects undertaken by adults will benefit from employing disabled young people as consultants to advise as the project progresses, with, of course, appropriate payment being made for involvement (Ward 1998b:44-45),

I was unable to reconcile this view with the difficulties posed by the particular group I was working with. As I considered in detail the aim of the research, which was to gain a picture of peer culture for all the children (who had a variety of different levels of communication) I realised that the use of a method which relied on the discursive ability of the participants would exclude a large number of the children whose reality I was intending to capture. Participants would have been invited to join a group on the basis of their communication. I therefore concluded that this approach would be potentially inadequate in the way in which I would only be able to include a small number of children whose experiences were likely to vary from their associates with more diverse communication. For these reasons, I accepted the loss of potentially informative data in favour of inclusion for all.

**Staff Group Interviews**

I also held a group interview with a number of staff at each of the settings when the fieldwork and initial analysis were completed. The purpose of this was to discover directly from staff their views of the children: the nature of their relationships, how they interacted with one another and how they thought the children experienced the settings. The meetings, which lasted about an hour, were recorded with the permission of staff (see Appendix 2). However, one of the recordings failed, as the meeting was held outside on a windy day due to a shortage of space in
the setting itself. Fortunately I had taken notes on large paper flip chart, which had been written with the on-looking staff contributing to throughout, and which I was able to write up immediately after the meeting.

The meetings were semi-structured as I had specific issues which I wanted to raise (see Appendix 3). Rather than use specific questions I began the meetings with a list of topics which I wanted to raise, such as who participated within the peer groups and did the staff feel the group activities were cultural in any form. Once the topic was raised I allowed the conversation to flow, listening to the direction of discussion rather than encourage the staff to remain focussed on my agenda. This resulted in interesting data which revealed staff openly debating opinion and beliefs about the children. This way my influence on the staff commentary was restricted to the overall topic, leaving the finer detail to be directed by the staff.

At the end of each meeting I explained some of my early thoughts as they were evolving in order to gain some feedback. I felt that this was appropriate as I had completed the observations and the staff had tolerated my presence for over a year with minimal information from me. The staff appreciated hearing some of my early thoughts about the peer groups of the children they worked with and received my comments with apparent interest.

**Material Data**

The research is also supplemented by the use of documentary materials which essentially fall into two categories. First, material produced by children, given to me to during the research. Second, material generated by the settings, including policies, procedures and any other written documents.

At the outset I anticipated gathering pictures, drawings and artefacts produced by the children as evidence of their cultural activities. I had hoped that they might provide some children with a way of communicating their knowledge and views of the settings and of participating in the project. However the use and analysis of such data proved problematic. For example, one piece of artwork gained early in the research is unusable as it reveals the identity of the setting, which I am not willing to compromise. I also found that I was not given sufficient pieces of the children’s creative efforts to be able to consider them in an analytic sense.
However, I had promised the children that I would put the pictures to good use and am reluctant to fail on this count. Therefore, the few pieces I gathered are included as section dividers within the presentation of the thesis. Not only does this add a different dimension to the aesthetic presentation of the research, it also serves to remind the reader and myself of the children who willingly took part in the project.

The material generated by adults was however more analytically useable. Firstly, it helped in setting the scene and establishing the character of each setting (see chapter 7). Secondly, the policies and procedures of the settings provide a description of what the settings are aiming to achieve. Thirdly, analysis of certain materials provided an insight into the views, approaches and attitudes of the settings and staff, as is shown in chapter 7.

**Data Collection**

This section considers data within the research from a number of different perspectives, tracing the process of gaining access in order to gather data through to its analysis. The position of gatekeepers meant that I did not have access to the group being researched until the pilot studies began. There is also a reflection on the forms of data which were gathered and how they were managed using technology. However, the software applied had its limitations, thus the final part of this chapter is dedicated to a detailed description of how I went about the process of reading, coding and analysing the data which I had gathered.

**Gaining Access**

Gaining access was only the first step in the process of maintaining the agreement of the gatekeepers. In order to ensure the process of working with gatekeepers was trouble free, I followed the five stances which Silverman (2000) highlighted as appropriate for ‘securing and maintaining’ access which are illustrated in figure 6.3.
When beginning this thesis initial contact was made with the potential settings by telephone and appointments were made to visit the managers in order to discuss with them the proposed research. For a number of reasons, I made a conscious decision to approach the managers directly rather than contact the executive boards. Firstly, I felt that the managers were most likely to really appreciate the proposed work, because of their detailed knowledge of disabled children. Secondly, I wanted to establish a good rapport and so relied on the principle that direct contact from me, rather than a directive from an executive board, would enhance the quality of our future working relationship. This reflected Silverman’s obtaining ‘bottom-up’ access (2000).

In order to ensure that the meetings went in favour of the work I drew up a well formed outcomes sheet which outlined the planned aims of the appointments (see Appendix 4). This was a practical way of achieving ‘impression management’ and ensuring that I was certain about the aims of the meetings before they began (Silverman 2000). Both meetings went well and the management of each setting agreed to get back to me once they had sought approval from their respective executive boards. Once this was gained, it was agreed that I would meet with staff in order to ensure their support. The manager of one of the settings wanted the decision of whether or not to proceed to be made by the staff as he felt that they were the people most likely to be affected by the research.

It was at this stage that a protocol was drawn up which outlined my projected role within the settings and outlined the responsibilities of the setting and myself in the research process (see
Appendix 1). Once discussed and agreed, this became the ‘contract’ between the settings and myself.

The decisions concerning contact with parents and carers were primarily influenced by my own previous experience and the guidance of the managers of the settings. Parents of disabled children are well known within services for their common lack of response to information when they perceive things to be running smoothly. However, it is also generally true to say that they do contact settings when dissatisfied or concerned. Having failed on a previous piece of work to gain any signatures of consent from a group of approximately thirty parents, I realised the impossibility of gathering over one hundred and fifty signatures. The managers of the settings both suggested that this would not work and it therefore would be advisable to inform parents of my work but not to request their agreement. The view of both managers, independent of each other, was that parents put their children in their care and trust the settings to take whatever action to protect their offspring. Therefore letters were sent out to parents one month before I began the fieldwork (see Appendix 5) allowing parents and carers the opportunity to opt out. Before each block of research I would double check to see if any there were any new children attending the setting, so that their parents could be sent letters and be informed of my presence.

Discussion of the ethical concerns relating to negotiating access with the children is within the previous chapter. However, it is crucial to note that the work with the children was ongoing throughout the fieldwork. I would explain to the children that I was doing a project a bit like the ones they do at school, where the finished work would be shown to other adults and children. Not only did I need to discuss my work at the outset with each child, I found that I had to repeat this on each visit, and sometimes more than once in a visit with some of the children. By doing this I ensured that it was possible for children to withdraw their agreement at any time.

Carrying out the Observations

Generally the observations occurred in six week blocks at intervals throughout a twelve month period. Each six week block comprised two observations each week, one at each setting, thus resulting in twelve observations per block. The intention was to observe the settings through the seasons and festive holidays such as Christmas and Easter. By the completion of field notes there were forty-eight recorded visits which represented 195 hours of observation.
The length of each observation varied according to the planned activity of the day, the day of the week and whether or not it was school holidays. School term weekday observations were from 4.00pm until 6.30pm in one setting, and 4.00pm until 8.30pm in the other. This difference reflects the times children attended each of the settings. During the holidays and at weekends the observations were from 10.00am until 4pm in both settings. The aim was to organise my attendance at the settings to reflect the times children attended so as to purposely avoid arriving at the same time as staff and other adults.

The nature of the observations and my role as least adult eliminated the possibility of taking notes during activities. This meant that approximately once an hour, or as necessary, I removed myself from the immediate surroundings to take notes. Initially the plan was to use a dictaphone to record my observations; however, this was impracticable because there was no private space for me to go to in either of the settings. I therefore resorted to hand-written notes which were always transcribed within twenty four hours of each observation. When life overtook my aim to transcribe within such a time limit, the data was kept, but not given precedence in the analysis (this occurred on only two occasions).

From documents and fieldnotes to Data

This process is difficult to define, as I perceive all my recordings about this research as data of some form or another. In referring to “all my recordings” I refer to my research journal, the documentation provided by the settings, the drawings given to me by the children and my notes taken during observation, as well as documents given to me by the staff.

The research journal represents a lengthy record of all my thoughts, ideas, concerns and evolving plans within this research. By referring to it, I can trace the development of an idea or the reason for a particular decision. Within it I challenge my own perception of the settings, question the understandings I have and formulate new ideas. It forms the historical record of this work.

Textual documents are primarily in the form of formal paperwork, such as the policies and procedures of the settings, the agreement drawn up with each of the settings, and the health and safety regulations. These documents were mostly used to build an accurate description of
each setting. Certain documents, such as fundraising material and newsletters, were analysed in order to achieve an understanding of how the settings view the children’s relational ability.

Achieving good note-taking was an ongoing process, as it requires the observer to provide precise detailed descriptions without losing the energy and essence of what is observed. As Emerson et al explain:-

Fieldnotes involve *inscriptions* of social life and social discourse. Such inscriptions inevitably *reduce* the welter and confusion of the social world to written words that can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and time again (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995).

As Emerson et al (1995) indicate, the process of transforming jottings in the field into comprehensive fieldnotes is not necessarily straightforward. Accuracy is critical if researcher subjectivity is to be transparent and reflexive. The researcher needs to be clear where to situate themselves within the notes.

The way in which knowledge and interpretation are represented is important in order to maintain clarity. Therefore, in this research I wrote detailed fieldnotes about incidents and events first, including the views and reactions of those involved. Then, within my journals I would follow with my own thoughts and reactions, thus recording and exploring the position of myself within the research. This practice meant that subjectivity was a positive and useful tool which contributed to the transparency of reflexivity throughout the research.

On a practical level I needed to ensure that each observation contained a record of the numbers of children to staff, the times of day and the weather (as this impacted on and sometimes restricted activities). The description of the layout of rooms tends to precede the account of an incident or interaction in order to provide contextualisation within the notes.

Once completed the fieldnotes were transferred into text files within my computer ready to be transferred to NUD*IST for analysis and storage. It was at this point that I considered the notes to assume the status of data.
Data Analysis

Attention now focuses on the processes of analysis which were used in understanding and interpreting the data. This was something which was present from the early stages of data collection through to the final stages of writing up. Therefore it warrants the detailed attention afforded here.

When approaching the process of coding, I was very aware of the impact that the initial coding would have on the rest of the project as ‘early coding gives guidance to the next field observations...’ (Strauss & Corbin 1990:30). Coding began within days of the first observations and continued throughout the research.

As the intention of the research is to explore children’s culture within specialist provision, I really wanted the coding and approach to retain a child-focused foundation. My starting point was the desire to achieve a satisfactory level of qualitative analysis which had its roots in the data. Whilst exploring literature concerning reading, coding and sorting data, I had a progressive realisation that to a great degree this work follows the principles of grounded theory. As Strauss and Corbin explain grounded theory is :-

inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (Strauss and Corbin 1990:23).

My key concerns were that the work would be inductive. I felt that, as there has been so little research into the lives of disabled children, it could be potentially limiting to focus on an established theory prior to coding since it would influence my thinking. Therefore even in approaching the data for the first time, I wanted to be clear about how to address it so that the outcomes of my interaction with the data would be clear, traceable and systematic.
Reading the data

Prior to embarking on the process of coding the data gathered, I tried to take a step back from the project and reduce the connection between myself and the settings which had formed. This was providentially provided by the six-month break I had for maternity leave, which in many respects was well timed. This facilitated my approach to the process of coding with an open mind and fresh view of the work. I needed to review the level of reflexivity which I was adopting before I began to really look at the data. I was conscious of the warning given that:

Communication of meaning is an action which requires - at a minimum - both an initiator and a receiver, and neither has a monopoly on the meaning of what passes between them. The contexts of initiator and receiver are both relevant to understanding, and meaning is therefore not a fixed 'thing' but always subject to negotiation between observers (Dey 1993:35).

An important point to recall is that one of the aims of the entire project outlined in Chapter 1 was to identify an aspect of segregation for disabled children within a cultural context. It was at this point of the research that I had the option to read the data from my position of observer and non disabled, ex-social worker adult, who was going to be seeking and attributing meaning through the process of coding. However, I chose to address the data from, as far as possible, the position of detached spectator instead.

The first reading of data is a tentative step in the process of coding, and how it is approached is significant (Mason 1996:108), since the first impressions and attitudes you might discover at this stage may well influence the rest of the coding. Therefore I set out to 'read' the data on three different levels: literally, interpretively and reflexively (Mason 1996:109). In the early stages I purposely set out to read each recorded observation three times over, recording the thoughts and views I had separately so that I could identify how I came to view the data. Latterly the three ways of reading the data became fused, although by this stage I was aware of how my differing perceptions originated.

To describe in more detail how this process of reading the data operated, I use the example below:
Another boy, Mark, was standing in the middle of the playroom holding a ball: when he saw me he threw the ball at me. So I caught it and threw it back, he then batted it back at me using his wrist. We continued playing for about 20 minutes. At one point a senior member of staff came in and said 'I see Mark's got you playing his favourite game' and then to Mark he said 'Let me see you catch the ball, like this with both hands'. Mark caught the ball once. The staff member went away and Mark reverted to batting the ball with his hand (play setting).

The different readings of this passage would highlight various aspects of the observation as follows;

Literal: this is a description of the interaction between the observer and a child, Mark, which happened in the playroom lasting for a specified length of time. The interaction also involved the incident of another person joining the activity for a limited period and then departing.

Interpretive: illustrated here are the rules and structure within the ball game, where the researcher threw the ball and the child batted it back. This could be seen as the manipulation of a game of catch by the child. It also demonstrates the impact of adult intervention within the rules of that game, where Mark caught the ball once on adult instruction. Mark's return to his previously defined rules reinforces the possible existence of child-defined social order.

Reflexive: this passage illustrates the process of researcher access to the participants, by the way in which Mark invited the adult to join his game. It highlights the position of the researcher within the environment and negotiation of roles within the setting. The staff member's comment to the researcher about Mark illustrates a conflict on behalf of the staff in viewing the researcher in a least adult role. By returning to the established rules of the game, the researcher is playing the least adult role possible given the preceding interaction.

Within this illustration I have highlighted key words which relate to the reading and re-reading of the data. What I found is that these same words and issues re-appeared in the readings on a regular basis. These evolved into tentative codes, and thus the process of sorting and coding had begun even within the initial readings.
Coding

As illustrated by adopting different approaches to reading, I was identifying codes within the data. This was an important stage within managing data as coding is seen as a key process since it serves to organise the copious notes, transcripts or documents that have been collected and it also represents the first step in the conceptualisation of data (Bryman and Burgess 1994:218).

Essentially the initial identification of codes as illustrated above is the process recognised within grounded theory as open coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990). However, I found this process harder than anticipated due to the deliberations involved in the selection of 'labels' for the codes. I didn’t want the codes to be weighted with common social meaning or to contain the potential to bias future use. For example, when selecting a label for the code which was going to be used to illustrate adult intervention in conflict, I did not want a label that might suggest the outcome or method of intervention. Instead I chose the label 'response' as I felt that it would indicate the involvement of adults without revealing or hinting at anything else. Throughout the process of naming codes the thesaurus was never far away!

Whilst attaching labels to codes I began a record of the coding for a number of purposes. Firstly, so that each time I resumed coding I could review the meanings of codes in my own mind so that I could ensure consistency in my application of the system. Secondly, it was important to maintain a traceable record of the coding process, so that at the end of the project I would be able to track the origins of any codes, their evolution and place within the research. Lastly, by maintaining systematic contact with the codes I was able to retain my focus and proximity to the data.

This initial stage of coding was carried out manually rather than within NUD*IIST, whilst later creative thinking was assisted by the use of 'Inspiration', which is a software package designed to provide a visual mind-mapping tool for school project work. This served to help me be certain in my mind of how I was approaching the data and to gave me a confidence in thinking laterally.
Elaborating the Coding

Once I had some initial ideas about the coding, I adopted a systematic approach to their elaboration in order to ensure consistency and maintain clarity in my work. Doing this is particularly important if criticism of the 'messy' nature of qualitative research is to be overcome (Bryman & Burgess 1994). I was especially keen to ensure that anyone approaching my research would be able to see how I had interpreted my data. The ultimate aim was to produce a transparent piece of research, with nothing hidden. However, this is not to say that there was not a degree of flexibility and allowance built into the approach in anticipation of any unexpected findings.

After the initial reading of the data set, I returned to it once more, along with the early codes, and set about a microanalysis (Strauss & Corbin 1998). By employing analytic tools; questioning and comparisons (Strauss & Corbin 1998) it is possible to approach the data in a structured and ordered fashion. By working through the data, line by line, it was possible to seek hidden meanings, exploring the depths of information gathered.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe the four main types of questions which are useful to the researcher:

- Sensitising Questions – essentially these questions are comprised of who, what, why, when and how. They serve to sensitise the researcher to the context and direction of action.

- Theoretical Questions – these seek to discover the 'process and variation' and begin to assist the researcher to make connections between different codes and concepts.

- Practical and Structural Questions – these provide assistance in establishing the 'structure of the evolving theory' (1998:77) by querying the concepts being developed and highlighting the connection between theory and data.

- Guiding questions - these seek to identify the areas which need further data when the researcher returns to the field. Providing guideposts for the researcher in further work.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) also view comparative analysis as a primary feature of all research within the social sciences as they explain:
we not only speak of comparing incident to incident to classify them, but we also make use of what we call theoretical comparisons to stimulate our thinking about properties and dimensions and to direct our theoretical sampling (1998:78).

Their belief is that the use of comparisons assists the researcher in maintaining objectivity in reading and coding data. Also that, through adopting a comparative approach, it is possible to think at different levels and identify various dimensions within data.

The process of questioning and applying comparative techniques generates vast quantities of potential codes and categories. In order to find a structure and maintain order within the material produced, I therefore adopted a systematic coding as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998), which has evolved from the grounded theory approach first developed by Glaser & Strauss in the late 1960s.

Open Coding

The purpose of open coding is to begin to conceptualise the phenomena which emerge from the data. Successful coding is achieved through the identification of the properties and dimensions of the phenomenon. Figure 6.4 gives an illustration of how Strauss and Corbin’s model of open coding has been applied within this thesis.

The key product of this process is the creation of categories. Yet as Dey (1993) stresses the relationship between data and categories is more complex:

Categorisation of the data requires a dialectic to develop between categories and data. Generating and developing categories is a process in which one moves backwards and forwards between the two. It is this interaction of category and data which is crucial to the generation of a category set (Dey 1993:99).
Half the staff team were in the kitchen having their lunch. Apart from Stuart who was standing near the table assisting children in opening crisp packets, drinks and yoghurts, the others were feeding the children. Stuart went into the kitchen to get something. Jamie and Robin left the table. Jamie ran into the art-room and Robin ran outside into the garden. Both of them were looking behind them as they went. Another member of staff, Tim saw this, but was unable to leave as he was assisting a child who was holding tightly onto his arm. When Stuart came back into the room from the kitchen Tim told him what had happened. Stuart went outside to find Robin.

The **Phenomenon** is the experience of mealtimes.

The **Properties** and **Dimensions** of this action are:

- Adults having lunch in the kitchen and the organisation of supervision during indicates that **mealtimes have a pre-defined structure**.
  - Children recognise when no adults are actively supervising them illustrating a level of **monitoring** the situation by the children.
  - Children leave the dining area without permission **challenging** and coming into **conflict** with the structure in **varying degrees**.
  - Adults **respond** to the children’s challenge in **different ways** according to their own **assigned roles** within the structure of mealtimes.
  - Children’s actions tend to be based on the **degree of presence** of adults.

The resulting categories can be identified as: Pre-defined structure Conflict

Further clarity is gained through asking questions such as:

- What are the identifying features of mealtimes and who defines the structure of mealtimes?
- Why are mealtimes structured? What roles do people have within this structure (child & adult)?
- How often do children challenge and come into conflict with the structure? What is the nature of this conflict? How do adults respond to conflict?

Other questions which can be asked are:

- When does this happen? How often does this happen? How long does the conflict last? Where does this happen? What is the shape of the environment where these actions occur?

**Axial Coding**

Named ‘axial coding’ by Strauss and Corbin (1998), the process of seeking and making connections between categories and subcategories represents the early stages of conceptualising the data. Critical to Strauss and Corbin’s axial coding is the way in which connections are made through the category’s properties and dimensions; thus ensuring a
stability and depth in the connections made. This process of connection does not exclude the continual identification of further categories and codes.

It is within this process that the researcher links categories with concepts and begins to draw in theoretical possibilities in order to understand the data. This reflects an inductive approach which is seeking to facilitate the evolution of concepts from the data. This process represents the heart of analysis of specific phenomenon and categories and is where theories are used to question, identify and explain the research findings. It was at this point that Inspiration software was particularly useful.

To illustrate the use of axial coding within this thesis, I continue in figure 6.5 with the previous data extract.

![Figure 6.5 Axial Coding of a Data Extract.](image)

Experience of mealtimes

supervision

joint 'oiled' by roles allocated to players pre-defined structure

shared properties & dimensions

This leads to the question:

What theories could explain this connection and relationship between the two phenomena?

The phenomenon identified in Figure 6.4 was 'the experience of mealtimes', although it is also possible to state that there are other phenomena within the data extract, such as supervision. Through axial coding it is possible to explore how these two phenomena interact. By exploring their connections through common properties and dimensions, it is possible to describe their
relationship. In focusing on the point of articulation where the two separate phenomena 'join' and interact the connections become clear. This then suggests possible questions which might explain what it is that maintains, or oils, the correlation which is apparent. This introduces theoretical questioning into the equation and allows, in fact encourages, the researcher to explore, test out and play with, theories and concepts. It is therefore from this point that the researcher begins to interpret and theorise their findings.

**Dissemination**

As I write this I am beginning to look forward to where this research will end and I find myself asking - should it end? One of the problems identified within disability research is ensuring that policy makers and agencies providing services learn from research, as Corker and Davis explain:

Children constantly tell us this and ask us, as researchers, to be their advocates, but we remain on the horns of an ethical dilemma because policy makers and practitioners, for the most part fail to listen (Corker and Davis 2002:90).

This research will not sit on a library shelf gathering dust, anyone who knows me will realise that this is not a whimsical statement. This research was and is motivated by a desire to contribute to understandings about specialist provision and how that shapes the lives of children with learning disabilities. Therefore this research has always viewed dissemination to be an essential part of the research process.

The children have already had some feedback at the end of the observations; I spoke to them about the research and my initial ideas which emerged from the fieldwork. There is also a plan to put together pictures and posters to be displayed in the settings about the findings. I will also be spending time with the children talking through the research and answering any questions. However, I regret that for some of the children it will not be possible to make the findings accessible, due to communication difficulties and levels of impairment.

Parents and staff within the setting will have access to written reports about the findings and the plan is to organise alternative forms of dissemination such as meetings and seminars. The managers will receive more detailed reports about the findings; indeed one of the managers has already requested the opportunity to read the final thesis.
In addition to seeking publication of the findings within the academic and professional arena I will be referring to McGrath's guidelines about 'influencing the UK policymaking process' (McGrath 2002). How that will take shape is not known at the point of writing however this is the intended path to ensuring that the dust does not settle.

**Summary**

This chapter has focused on the overall research design from its inception through to completion and beyond. The decision to adopt a qualitative approach was supported by the ethical discussion in chapter 5, combined with the aims of the research, which were principally inductive in nature. The history of quantitative research with disabled people also assisted the decision process, as did the suitability of the available methodologies within qualitative research which facilitate the researcher's entry into the lives of children.

The use of observation as the primary method of data collection is explored in detail, especially the use of the 'least adult' role in participant observation. This provided the opportunity to include all of the children attending the setting, regardless of their communication skills, as I was focusing on their interactions not their language. The data was supplemented by meetings with the staff at the end of the fieldwork, material data from the children and settings, and my detailed research journals.

The processes which were involved in gaining access to such a vulnerable group were not straightforward; rather there was careful negotiation with a number of gatekeepers, not only before commencing the fieldwork, but also throughout the duration of the research. Within this there was a discussion of the research protocol which was agreed with the managers of each setting before commencing any data collection.

The chapter then discussed the practical process of gathering fieldnotes and identifies the point at which notes, journals, observations were considered data. It is the subsequent management and analysis of that data which is the focus of the final section of the chapter. In order to make the analytic process transparent there is detailed description of the way in which data were coded and interpreted. The chapter concludes with a brief but important reflection on the dissemination which is currently being planned and which will be put into action after the completion of the thesis.
Part Four

Analysis

"Hopscotch". Callum.
This chapter outlines the backdrop against which the children's interactions occur, by introducing the two research settings. It also supplements the discussion about specialist provision in chapter 4; providing specific detail of the institutional nature of the settings and adult accounts of the peer groups which were observed. Specialist settings are generally understood in terms of their purpose and stated provision, resulting in a superficial knowledge which omits the precise characteristics and day-to-day activities which are unique to each individual centre. This is exacerbated by the fact, that for sound safety reasons, these types of provision have restricted access to the general public.

In reflecting upon particular characteristics of the two settings, specifically their publications and booking systems, it would seem that they are similar; however, there were some fundamental differences which sets them apart from each other. It is these differences which are described in the first section of the chapter, providing institutional accounts of the children they cater for and the purpose of their provision.

The second half of the chapter focuses on the expression of adult accounts given by the staff groups of the settings, throughout the fieldwork and in the staff group interviews. This demonstrates the wide variety of views and perspectives held about the children, their needs, abilities, peer relations and interactions.

**Institutional Accounts**

The two settings where the observations were carried out have definite similarities. When I initially explored the possibility that they were potential research settings they stood out because they appeared to be orientated toward the children themselves, not just their disabilities viewed from an educational or medical bias. In addition they both provided an out-of-school service to a group of children with similar impairments, who came from the same geographical areas and attended the same local schools. I felt that the settings were analogous to the extent that they would enable me to observe 'peer culture(s)’ across two settings.
The two settings are both operated by registered charities and thus rely on teams of fundraisers who advertise their 'need' for funding. The nature of the fundraising strategies have common themes, portraying the families and children in need of support thus worthy of charitable donation. Both publish a regular newsletter outlining the activity of the centres and the success of fundraising events. These were my first introduction to the settings. The language and tone is very similar when describing the care the children would receive and the necessity for the children to be catered for in specialist ways. The implication is that this group of children is especially difficult and exhausting to care for over any length of time, resulting in the need for something which,

...can provide their hard-pressed parents with sanity-saving, essential respite (play setting, newsletter extract).

The children's visits to the settings are planned through the use of comparable systems, which are influenced by a number of factors. The 'booking system' is usually operated by a senior manager within the settings who has to balance parental requests, which have a tendency to be primarily based on their own needs or reflect an attempt to articulate their child's needs, with the individual impairment needs and characteristics of the children, with the allocated staffing levels, policies and limitations of the physical building. This results in the children having little or no say over when they visit or who they spend time with. Age, personality, friends, level of ability, shared interests and shared life history are not the principle factors in deciding who attends when. The result of this is the division into potential peer groups through adult-determined beliefs, wishes and protocols.

Sometimes groups observed in the settings would be a mixture of children and young people aged between six and sixteen. More often than not the allocation of children within groups would be based on factors related to impairment; there were 'quiet days' for children perceived as vulnerable or requiring more care, whilst 'noisy days' were for children who are considered to be energetic and liable to upset the 'quiet' children.

When physically entering the buildings of respite and play settings initial impressions and experiences are very similar. The following description of the care setting could easily be written about the play setting and many others as well.
On approaching the setting you are faced with a large imposing building which clearly has some purpose other than a domestic residence. The driveway is full of cars and the ‘special’ bus, donated by a charitable organisation which advertises its activity along its side, thus highlighting the fact that the passengers of the vehicle are in some way in need of support. There is a ramp, outlined by handrails, which negotiates its way to the front door past steps.

Access for visitors can only be through ringing the bell and then waiting for staff to attend to the door, recognise you and allow you in. Your presence is noted before you pass through a further locked entrance into the general area open to all. There is a faint smell of disinfectant and something else indistinguishable which lodges at the back of your nose and remains until you leave.

The walls are adorned with murals which feature the children’s artwork; some display the artist’s name, while other pictures remain anonymous. There is a board on the wall near the entrance with pictures of staff and their names, sometimes indicating who will be on duty and when. Toys are scattered on the floor, packed in boxes or left as if abandoned. Furniture is usually pushed to the sides of rooms, making space for activity and for wheelchairs.

Brightly coloured specialist play equipment stands out: soft play areas, big soft mats, squishy balls and blue swings which can accommodate children with physical disabilities. Shoes are abandoned near the special play areas where footwear is not permitted. Hoists in the changing areas, special seats in the dining areas and other such equipment merge into the background and are accepted as part of everyday life. The outdoor areas have a range of climbing frames and swings similar to the sort you would find in any playground.

There is a temporal structure which pervades the activities in the settings, which features mealtimes, attention to personal care, arriving and going away again. The staff oversee the smooth operation of these activities, watching their clocks, monitoring the passage of time until they can go home themselves. They talk of parties, life outside the settings, of mutual friends, of the children, the children’s families and the children’s problems whilst often the children mill around them within earshot (Journal Record of an initial Visit to the Care Setting).

After spending some time in the field, I came to the conclusion that whilst these similarities were useful in identifying the research settings and identify specific characteristics about specialist provision which transcend local variation, there are also fundamental differences which are too great to be put aside. The precise differences are in fact an essential component in identifying the complexity of the relations and lives of the disabled children observed.
In order to be clear about the differences between the two settings, I want to examine each in the light of their historical evolution, philosophy and subsequent culture. It is a combination of these three factors with the macro-societal influences as discussed within the literature review which have resulted in the structures within which the children are engaging with their peers. What will become clear in the analysis which is to follow this chapter is that it is these very structures which directly relate to and impact upon the level of, type of and regularity of peer interaction.

The Care Setting

The first setting is based in a rural village, where it has a history as being part of community provision dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, when it operated as a hospital for children with physical disabilities. This is particularly evident in the local pub where pictures of the setting throughout its history are displayed on the walls. Local shops have collecting tins for the setting and many people locally know of the activities of the setting. At the time of writing there is a campaign to raise a large sum of money for a proposed building project, posters are displayed in the locality, and the wider area. The change of provision from hospital to respite care occurred in 1980 as a response to parental need and there is pride that

the essential purpose......of caring for children still continues nearly one hundred years later (newsletter extract).

During the course of a year it provides varying amounts of respite care to approximately 110 children. The children usually visit overnight with occasional day visits for younger children or those who are being introduced to the setting. The number of overnight stays varies from one night to two weeks at a time and is primarily funded by the local Social Services department. The precise level of service provision is decided and reviewed annually between the parents, management and other care professionals.

The history of care, and the traditional values which I described in chapter 4 can be traced through this setting’s evolution and is evident in the stated philosophies and beliefs held by the staff about providing care. Indeed ‘care’ is the primary provision within this setting and as such has informed the cultural flavour of the setting. Newsletters stress the levels and expertise of care and the emotional investment of staff in caring for the children. The staff are described as being extraordinary, ‘incredibly caring people’ (newsletter); as the new manager, who began work at the setting after fieldwork was completed, commented:
I am in no doubt that the people that perform the duties of carers are very special people (Manager in Newsletter).

In the staff group meeting it became clear that providing for the children’s needs, coupled with giving them attention, was viewed by the staff as their principal role. The following extract is from the staff group meeting and demonstrates the staff’s understanding of their purpose.

Staff 1: also I think that with the carers here they really, everybody really, shows an interest in the individuals that come here, and I think they like that; they get the attention don’t they. But they might not, I’m sure they do get, because of the ratios we work on here, they do get an awful lot of attention, and I think that they enjoy it and they feel important.

Staff 1: ....I was watching him the other day, whoever it was the carer picked up, that he was a bit hungry and that was what was bothering him. I think, I mean something that has always impressed me here, is how well cared-for all the children are, I think that is another thing they like about coming here. I’ve only met one child who’s a bit reluctant and doesn’t like coming here – he’s more able. but all the others, they are so well cared for – something for them to do and I think that all their main... (pause) they get an awful lot of attention that makes them feel quite

Staff 2: Special

Staff 1: yeah special, special is a nice word they are made to feel special... I think that through that they, I hope they see the carers as friends. We do try to create a home from home atmosphere, we don’t want to be a school atmosphere, friendly but firm sort of atmosphere you know. (care setting interview with staff)

As this setting offers overnight respite care, it is required to comply with The Care Standards Act 2000 which outlines the codes of conduct for those working within the setting. Regular inspections carried out by the local council result in pressure to adhere to the systems, rules and regulations which are in place. Whilst this is a necessity to remain open, the manager commented on the excess paperwork required and the impact of this on time available for the children.

The executive committee, comprised of people within the local community, visit and are active in, the running of the setting; particularly the fundraising and financial side of provision. I was not aware of any of them being involved in the direct caring of the
children. They appear to be recruited on the grounds of their track record in charitable work and skills which could be of use to the financial operation of the centre.

The strong culture of care with its historic roots, legislative expectations and external influences has resulted in the overall structural features being fairly rigid, pre-determined and overwhelming for all involved. This structure influenced the way in which staff interacted among themselves and with the children. The staffing is organised in a hierarchical fashion in which authority is filtered down though the ranks. The manager exercised her authority very clearly; on two occasions when I was present she shouted when chastising staff. This passed down through the staff group and those staff who were more junior were clearly directed and corrected by their seniors.

This was to such an extent that the junior staff would not contest or contradict the more senior staff. On one occasion, there was a group of children and two junior staff sitting in the dining area. One of the children said he was going to get a chair for the senior staff, who was in the kitchen. He got up and began to move a nearby chair. The senior, on coming into the room, told the boy to sit down and stop being silly, which he did with his head down. Neither of the two junior staff explained to the senior staff why the boy was standing; apparently reluctant to question the authority of the senior staff.

The staff team was relatively young, and comprised of mostly women who were not married and lived in the accommodation situated on the first floor of the building. Allocation of work was influenced by gender in that male members of staff, when on duty, would be responsible for the care of the boys while the women would care for the girls.

In the staff group interview the general consensus was that the primary role of staff is to care for the children. They exercised language of care, referring to the importance of caring for the children, making them feel special and loved, as was seen in the extract earlier in the chapter. This suggests that the staff believe that the children are in some way not loved elsewhere, or are unlovable, or in need of extra love and attention.

For the children this structure meant that the experience of the setting was of rigid boundaries.Spatially there were many places which were 'off limits' for activity. Children would need to ask staff for artwork materials, as they were stored out of the way in a locked space. Access to the office area and dining room was through a bolted gate; in the same way the back door into the garden was kept locked, only being opened by staff.
The building in which the setting is situated was originally a private home and has been altered through the years. The main area for activity has a dual presentation, homely with sofas and a television, yet crowded with special equipment, a soft play area and sensory area. This results in a shortage of physical space, more specifically unallocated space, which has a clear impact on the amount of opportunities for peer interaction. Not only was there less space in which to move, hide, withdraw and play; it was also easier for the staff to survey. Although the ratio of adult to child within both settings was similar, the shortage of space meant that the distance between children and staff was less, resulting in what appeared to be greater degrees of supervision and intervention.

On a temporal level, there was a specific rhythm to the day which prioritised caring tasks such as changing nappies, feeding, drinks times and shift changeover. Staff were continually aware of the passage of time, checking among themselves when the next event was going to happen and what tasks needed to be completed beforehand. Of particular concern were the major events of the day – children arriving and going home, mealtimes and shift times. The children's time was closely managed by the staff who commented that 'well, these children have no idea of the passage of time' (Care staff group interview).

The Play Setting

The Play setting evolved from the activities of a group formed by a local paediatrician and an adult orientated service provider which hired local facilities for the use of families with disabled children. After a number of years the charity established itself on one site with specialised play equipment and facilities for 'play'. The aim then and now is to provide disabled children with the opportunity to play. They cater for approximately 200 disabled children although this is difficult to establish since they also offer their play facilities for use by schools and playgroups during term-time, although over the summer period they claim to offer 2,500 child places.

When I first visited the setting and asked about their aims and philosophies, I was informed that the setting held the belief that it was not necessary to justify a child's right to play. About two weeks later I was provided with an 'ethos' and statement of the 'approach' used in their work. These outlined the beliefs and primary aims of the setting. The 'approach' document clearly states that the primary purpose is 'play', with care as a secondary concern. They state that this is achieved through creating

An atmosphere where self-expression, co-operation, learning and sharing are encouraged, nurtured and supported. (Extract from the Play setting 'approach').
What is interesting is that this is in direct conflict with their published fundraising literature, which is freely available. The newsletters and other written material highlights the importance of play on a developmental level and states the belief that through play the children can challenge their disabilities. This presentation of impairment as a disability, and the idea that an impairment can be either cured or minimised through adult expert intervention, reflects the medical origins of the setting. There are also statements which indicate a belief that it is the children who face their disability, thus individualising the issue. From a fundraising perspective there is perhaps a belief that it is necessary to justify the provision of 'play', allocating it a purpose which will be understood by potential charitable donors.

However, of primary concern within this thesis is the view adopted by the setting management and staff who unequivocally subscribe to the 'ethos' and 'approach' by describing their role as providing children with the opportunity to play. This culture of play is reflected in the way staff approach their employment and talk about their roles. In the staff group interview there was a continual flow of ideas put forward by the participants and an enthusiasm for thinking about the way the children interact with each other and with the staff. They were not hesitant to put across their views and opinions, and openly debate issues with each other and me.

The executive committee of this setting was, in many ways, similar to the care setting with its primary focus being the financing and management of operations. However, there was one member of the board who also acted as a volunteer offering hands-on assistance. This also allowed the board a line of communication with the day-to-day activity of setting and the experiences of the children.

The resulting structure of the setting, although present, was open to influence by both adults and children. Mealtimes were changeable, care tasks occurred when required in a slightly haphazard fashion, there was no staff changeover, with staff remaining on duty all day. The rules and regulations surrounding health and safety were adhered to rigidly but remained in the background. Bumps, bruises and grazes were dealt with efficiently and without fuss and soon melted into the background.
There is a hierarchy within the setting which responds to the tasks involved in day-to-day issues. The positions of seniority are respected; however, all staff are expected to contribute to the day-to-day running of the setting and take responsibility for themselves.

Whilst there is a core staff team, there are also a high number of volunteers in their late teens/early twenties, which results in a vibrant energetic atmosphere. Although the gender ratio favours female staff, there is a strong male influence in key senior positions and among the volunteer population. There is no staff accommodation, which results in staff leading independent lives away from the centre. Some of the staff are married with children of their own.

Staff describe their role as mainly supervisory, ensuring that the children are safe in their activities. They explained to me that there are three main reasons for becoming involved in activity; when asked to do so by the children, when an activity was conflictual in nature or when children needed direction. During the staff group interview there was very little reference to the caring tasks which were also a feature of their daily responsibilities. Rather, staff were keen to explore ideas of being facilitators of play and ‘playthings’ there for the children to use in order to participate in peer interaction.

The physical space available to the children is substantial, both indoors and outside, where the presentation is focused on play. There is an absence of homely comforts such as sofas, nor does the setting profess to provide a home from home. Outdoors there is a complex climbing frame with slides and monkey bars which dominates the whole area. In addition there is a large bouncy castle which is inflated daily throughout the summer. There is a wide range of equipment from which the children are allowed choose. Whilst there is a lot of equipment that is present in mainstream playgrounds the setting also features specialist pieces of play apparatus, such as special swings, see-saws and a low-lying platform swing. In addition to equipment, the setting is also designed with interactional spaces, which do not have a defined purpose and are therefore open to the children’s interpretation.

It was rare for staff to deny a child access to something they wanted to play with. There were few areas which were out of bounds to the children, although staff did lock off particular activity rooms when there were few children and staff present. The children did not appear to be too concerned about this. The main play area had a number of places where the children could hide from the staff, withdraw form the activity and move around freely, as did the outside playground.
Adult Accounts

The staff group interviews, supplemented by staff comments throughout the fieldwork provided a clear indication of the views held by the staff of the children’s peer groups and activities. The staff provided a number of accounts of the children, some of which are contradictory. These accounts provide an insight into the supervision styles and levels of intervention experienced by the children. This section begins with a reflection on adult accounts of specific children, before considering staff views of the peer groups and whether they perceived there to be peer culture(s) among the children.

‘In a world of their own’

This was one of the first descriptions of the children given to me by the manager of the care setting; and again on my first visit to the setting by staff. It was a phrase which was regularly used during informal conversations about the children, particularly in the care setting. This label was used primarily in reference to children who are diagnosed as having social function related disorders such as autism, those assessed as having behavioural difficulties and those with profound impairments.

From this view emerged the belief that it was only through the intervention of the adults that the children were able to communicate and interact with one another. Staff explained that organised activity, which would be planned at the beginning of each shift, was particularly important in achieving interaction. Examples of this which were provided by staff in the care setting related to organised painting or collage, or going out for a planned walk with a group of children.

Also, when discussing the children who they considered to ‘be in a world of their own’, the staff in the care setting tended to view themselves as the children’s friends. They did not view their position as employee or adult status as a barrier to friendships which are based on trust, reciprocity and mutual emotional involvement. During fieldwork I was informed several times by different members of staff within the care setting that some of the children did not have friends. Rather that they were their friends.

‘One-to-One’

This phrase is commonly used across service provisions for disabled children and adults to identify those who require an adult/carer with them at all times. This is decided by the management of the setting according two specific factors: a child’s perceived aggression
toward others and themselves, and the level of personal care a child requires in the course of the day. Children who are designated the same carer throughout the day are commonly those who have profound impairments, thus requiring consistent personal assistance. For the children diagnosed as having autism and associated behavioural difficulties one-to-one care usually consisted of two or more staff taking it in turns with the child in order to have breaks from what was viewed as a taxing role.

The majority of children who are allocated one-to-one do not use formal communication methods and those that do, tend to utilise a minimal vocabulary of makaton. These children were described to me by staff in both settings, at varying points of the research, as existing in a 'world of their own'. Staff would name particular children saying that they were outside of the peer groups and that I would not observe them interacting with others. As the manager of the care setting explained during the staff group interview

> The autistic children they don't communicate, a lot of the time, with each other (Manager in the care setting).

Within the play setting, in particular among the senior and long-serving staff, there was a view that the one-to-one children did sometimes relate to the other children and were part of the general activity. On one occasion, the play leader brought to my attention two children, one of whom is allocated one-to-one care, touching feet and looking at one another. This contrasted with the care setting where staff would often intervene in contact between one-to-one children, particularly those perceived as aggressive, pulling them away from other children and physically sitting between children.

'Special, because they are disabled'

This specific phrase was used in the staff group interview in the care setting, although the word 'special' was used in both settings. Within this, there are three points worth extracting: first, there is an underlying assumption that because the children are disabled they, and their peer groups, are going to be different to their mainstream peers. Second, that because they are disabled they are automatically 'peers'. Third, that the children are 'special', therefore anything associated with them is also special.

The over-use of the word 'special', particularly in educational provision, is generally contested by those within disability studies as a justification of the institutionalisation of children with impairments (Adams et al 2000). It has become a dominant discourse within the provision of services for children with impairments and is seen as divisive in the way it
serves to increase the marginalisation of disabled children. In drawing on the work of Foucault (1977), Adams et al explain:

The knowledge produced within the discourses of specialness connect, firstly, not only with power over others, but with power to define others (Adams et al 2000:242).

In defining the children as special, so the staff define themselves as ‘specialists’ who provide for them.

‘Peer Groups because of the carers’

In the interview with care setting staff this was one of the first descriptions of peer groups. Within the day-to-day running of the setting the staff will decide an activity before the children arrive and quite often prepare it in advance. It is believed that this ‘stage management’ provides the children with the opportunity to interact and that without it the children would not do so.

Another interpretation of this was provided in a staff discussion about how peer groups form around a particular member of staff, stating more than once that ‘peer groups are shaped around the carers’. To explain this staff gave an example of a member of staff who is particularly liked by the one-to-one children. The children gather close to that member of staff, thus placing themselves within the proximity of other children – thereby forming a peer group. It was within this context that staff again referred to themselves as the children’s friends and being the ‘X-factor’ in bringing children together.

‘Less Embarrassment of Ignorance’

The staff group interview within the play setting identified that the majority of children generally accept each other with little discrimination. The staff provided examples of children who use differing methods of communication interacting together, without assistance and finding ways of relating to one another. This is through the use of gesticulation, touch and copying the actions of others. They also described children asking staff to show them certain signs and ways of saying specific things, asking staff to act as ‘translators’ of another’s communication.

When asked why they thought this was, one staff member suggested that the children have ‘less embarrassment of ignorance’; this was unanimously agreed with by the remaining staff members present. This idea was explored by staff with a discussion about specific children
who were not afraid of appearing foolish gesticulating, repeating themselves and touching others, leading them by the hand.

Staff in the care setting did mention particular children requesting assistance communicating with other children. However, the focus within their conversation was on their role in providing that assistance – not the children's expression of a desire to connect with their peers.

'More a case of ability not disability'

The idea that the children were peers because of their ability to engage in an activity was put forward forcefully by the play staff, although it was also mentioned by the care staff. The staff stated that certain children chose their peers because of their ability to partake in a particular game. This was viewed as positive. However, I would suggest that within this statement is a covert recognition that children also exclude others on the grounds of inability. The careful choice of words by staff thus avoids suggesting the possibility that marginalised children who are discriminated against by society actively engage in similar processes.

The idea of the children being non-discriminatory was mentioned again when staff began to talk about friendship, saying that the children appeared very accepting of their impairment differences. The staff believe that the children do not exclude other children on the basis of impairment.

Within the care setting staff-group interview there was also a description of children being drawn into a group because of an individual child's ability. The staff explained that those with less communication and ability were sometimes drawn to those perceived as more able:

Staff 3: when one child is more able, not dominant, but more able, then the other children will tag along (care setting staff-group interview).

'Friends'

The staff in both of the settings identified some children as friends. Usually this applied to pairs of children who spend much of their time playing together, and the occasional group who visit regularly on the same days. These children also tended to be those who used
recognisable methods of communication, particularly language. On the whole the children mentioned were over twelve years old.

The activities of these friends were games which are familiar to adults and children alike. They played hide and seek, talked about the latest pop-groups, sat drawing pictures together and 'hung out' in spaces away from adults, doing relatively little.

Within the staff group interviews there was also discussion about one-sided friendships. These were described as more noticeable when one of a pair of friends was absent. This is described in the following extract:

Staff 1: Is Sarah older or Julia?
Staff 2: Sarah is the older
Staff 1: but Julia is the more articulate with speech and that, but when Sarah is not here Julia is like really lost, but if Julia is not here Sarah is not that lost, I mean she obviously misses her but it's not like 'oh my god, my friend's not here'. But Julia is the more able one ...
Staff 2: yeah and she would be the one you would think... would take this opportunity, if it was me, to really have the rest of them wrapped round her little finger. And she's not, she's lost completely, she doesn't know what to do with it (care setting staff group interview).

Staff in both settings also referred to incidents when a child would claim that another was their friend, yet the other child would spend their entire time attempting to disassociate from them.

Activity or Peer Culture?

Within the staff group interviews I asked those present to describe to me the nature of peer culture(s) within the settings. After initial hesitation, and a comment that 'this is like doing nvq!', the staff within the play setting identified peer culture(s) as

It is something that they all relate to and to each other through (play staff group interview).

The staff talked about a wide range of activities and games which the children played. They focussed on games such as chase, hide and seek, artwork, pretend play, playing on the bouncy castle, playing on the swings – all of which have a common meaning within adult
and child worlds. The conclusion of this discussion was that it was through activity that the children found out about each other and the setting. The staff also commented that some of the activities played by certain children were very complex to a point where staff did not always understand what the children were doing. From this staff concluded that it was this activity which set the children apart from the adults.

There was then a degree of hesitation and debate about children with autism and whether they were part of a peer culture, or indeed whether they wanted to be a part of it. Staff talked about how some children would lead the staff by the hand, taking the staff and themselves into an activity: this was viewed as evidence of children wanting to be part of an activity. However, some of the staff stated the belief that certain children cannot join in with activity and were therefore outside of the peer activities.

Within the interview with the care staff the main activity identified as possible peer culture was the children’s shared interest in music – particularly Westlife. Staff commented on one particular group of children who bring in pop videos to watch while they are at the setting. This was an older group of children in their teens. Other activities mentioned were pretend play, artwork, playing in the soft play area, especially rough and tumble, and swinging on the swings. Many of the activities and incidents related by the staff were those which they themselves had instigated, reflecting their stated belief about children interacting because of staff-led opportunity.

**Summary**

This chapter has presented a focus on the institutional and adult accounts of the children, the peer groups and their activities. Whilst the two settings have similar characteristics, such as fundraising strategies, booking systems and client group which transcend local differences, it is these precise variations which are the focus of the second part of the chapter.

The description of the two settings prepares the canvas for the analysis which is to follow and for the assessment of the significance of the findings. It also provides empirical evidence of the specific nature of service provision and how the evolution of services described in chapter four become manifest in the settings which exist at the current time. What becomes clear is the significant influence of the aims and philosophies of each of the settings on the subsequent approaches and viewpoints taken by the staff. The two contrasting institutional accounts of children’s need for ‘care’ on one hand, and ‘play’ on the
other resulted in significantly different management structures and staff views of the their roles as demonstrated in the second half of the chapter.

The focus on adult accounts within the final section of the chapter presents a wide variety of opinions about the children held by the adults working within the settings. The identification of contrasting views of children ‘in a world of their own’, ‘special because they are disabled’ or ‘peer groups because of the carers’ achieves two things. Firstly, it provides an insight into the beliefs which inform the actions of those carrying out supervision. Secondly, it presents the majority adult interpretations of the interactions of the children who were involved in the research, highlighting the presence of multiple and sometimes complex views which inform the style of staff supervision.
Interaction: Children’s Perspectives

This chapter considers the nature of interaction between the children by presenting the children’s perceptions of their peers, whilst also demonstrating the complexity of children’s interactions. By reflecting upon the children’s perspectives it is possible to appreciate that definitions of peer groups are not solely within the adult domain. Children’s interactions among themselves and with adults in both settings reflected a wide range of activities which were engaged in at varying levels. They contained spontaneity, pretence, laughter, tears, organised games, role-play, inaction, repetition and much, much more.

The chapter focuses on four particular aspects of children’s interaction which relate to the intensity of interaction and the degrees of involvement in interaction; the participants, group membership, degree of action and predictability. In exploring the diversity and extremes within each of these it is possible to appreciate the complexity within peer interactions which make identification of a static peer culture problematic.

Who’s Playing?

Whilst the groups observed were identified by adults as peers due to their assessed identity as discussed in the previous chapter, they were also diverse in many other ways such as age, level of impairment and personality, to name but a few. The data gathered demonstrated the ways in which these children perceived themselves and included all the children present within the overarching peer group. As explained in the previous chapter, there was a significant group of children (approximately 25%) who were considered to experience an isolated existence at the settings. These were mainly children who are diagnosed with social function related disorders, those allocated one-to-one care and another group who nearly always remained on the periphery of activity just watching. However the empirical observations revealed that these children were accepted as part of the overarching peer group by the other children in the setting.
Throughout the data there were recurrent instances of an activity which I coded as ‘solo’. These activities were primarily carried out by children described by the adults as ‘in a world of their own’. The predominant feature of these observed activities was the total absorption of children in relating to objects in what adults refer to as auto-stimulatory behaviour. This is the continual repetition of a behaviour, such as twizzling sticks, ribbons or other items, water play and sand catching, which is perceived to provide a child with some degree of self-stimulation. The key element is the intense repetitive nature of the activity. In the following observation I noted Jake’s total absorption in a piece of cellophane:

Jake was walking down the path toward the trees, he was carrying a piece of cellophane between his two middle fingers and flicking it. After flicking it he would let go, the breeze would catch it and he would run to catch it. He repeated this for about twenty minutes whilst standing near the trees, (Play Setting).

The most common activity was ‘sand catching’, which has differing versions but essentially involves a child picking up a handful of sand or dirt from the ground and then sifting it, either through their other hand or an object such as a shoe or their clothing, such as the hood of a jacket. During the sifting part of the operation the child would intensely observe the flow of the material and the reflection and refraction of light through it.

The children within the settings appeared to recognise the activity of the solo children as something which held a shared understanding and value; thus positioning them within the peer group. The following extract illustrates the children discussing the sand-catching game as if it were a group activity, not something engaged in only by the solo children:

A group of us were sitting by the swings in the sand wondering what to do next. Polly then suggested the sand catching game: when I asked her to show us she explained that you have to pick up a handful of sand and let it drop, trying to catch it with the other hand. She demonstrated this as she talked and filtered sand through her fingers, not really catching it but letting it sift through her fingers, (Play Setting).

Thus the children view and own ‘sand-catching’ as shared, they do not view it as a part of, or the result of, an impairment: rather it is an activity worth carrying out which can be played together or independently of the group. This recognition thus places the ‘solo’ activity observed within the cultural understanding of the peer group as a whole.
One-to-one children

For the children who were allocated 'one-to-one' status, interaction with others was closely monitored by the adults around them. On a superficial level it would seem impossible or unlikely that these children could engage in peer activity, due to the extreme levels of supervision. Access to these children by other children was usually monitored by the adults within the settings, especially those charged with being the individual child's allocated carer, who either denied contact or maintained control of it. However, there is evidence that not only do the children seek interaction with others but that their peers will approach them. Some of the children who were aware of the aggressive tendencies of others appeared not to be concerned about risk: rather they continued to attempt to engage with their peers. When adult attention was superficial or distracted there were instances when children would approach these other children. In the following extract, Cameron approached Ruth who is viewed by adults as aggressive and who is allocated one-to-one care.

Ruth was sitting in the chair in the soft play area watching some of the children. Cameron came to sit close to her and placed a green fluorescent rug over him. They sat looking at each other for a few minutes, then he knelt closer and stroked her arm, making a noise which sounded like a gentle whine, he then brushed the hair on her forehead gently with his hand. She reached out her hand, pointing at him with her finger and then her whole hand, she then put her hand on his head, which he bowed down as she touched him.

Staff sitting behind Ruth saw this and took hold of Cameron's shoulder, pulling him away saying 'that's not a good idea: she'll pull your hair'. Although I didn't hear the reply, staff then said 'you don't mind?!!' looking at him quizzically.

Ruth and Cameron remained sitting looking at each other. Then staff moved Cameron away from Ruth, positioning him on the floor at the foot of the chair and proceeded to play a game with him. Ruth hung her foot over the chair tapping him on the shoulder every so often (Play Setting).

(reflection in Journal - Ruth has no speech and limited communication, she does hit out and grab but she appeared very relaxed during this and was attentive, really looking at Cameron.)

Within the observations within both settings there were regular incidents of children approaching and engaging with aggressive children allocated one-to-one care. Some of the children would stand close by to a child allocated on-to-one and watch, whilst others would stand either holding out a hand or sit so close that the children could touch each other.
There are, however, instances which reveal that this is not the case for all the children, some of whom avoid being near others who are liable to hurt them. Observations at mealtimes show some children trying to avoid being seated next to an aggressive child; moving down the table or not sitting down until staff are in the immediate vicinity. Not only does this illustrate that children are aware of each other but that this knowledge is based on historic foundations of shared lives and experiences. Staff in the play setting described the manner in which a boy always shields himself with his arm over his head when a particular peer comes close. The boy waits until that child has gone out of range then returns to his previous activity. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the children are conscious of the way their peers are liable to behave and respond accordingly.

**Watchers**

Watchers was the coding name given to a number of children who spent much of their time on the periphery watching the activity. Considerable time was invested by these children in observing the actions of others; either as individuals or groups. The process of watching happens either covertly or overtly.

On a covert level children would position themselves so that they were out of the line of sight of the person/s being observed and maintained that cover whilst watching. I became accustomed to looking at peripheral spaces whenever a group of children were interacting, more often than not I would spot a child standing, sitting or hiding at a distance watching the activity. There were certain spaces which I came to identify as 'watch-towers'. Although these spaces were not always towers in adult understanding they held the same characteristics, the observers would commonly be raised from the floor, had a view over the setting and could hide themselves behind part or all of the structure. The children being watched would not be aware that they were the object of anyone’s attention.

Overt watching had various levels of involvement, ranging from standing apart from the observed and maintaining that distance, to keeping a distance whilst following the person being watched, to the extreme instance of watching at close proximity and remaining in the observed child’s space. These latter instances of watching were not necessarily exclusive of the observed child; indeed it would sometimes evolve into a fluid interchange between the two.
As Shuna left the conservatory she was followed by Martin who had previously been watching her from the comfy seat by the door. He followed her at a distance and was laughing as he watched her run across the room. Shuna ran around the playroom for a while, not directly engaging with anyone but sometimes picking up toys from the floor and looking at them. She would occasionally look over her shoulder at Martin. When she went back into the conservatory Martin returned to the comfy chair but continued to watch Shuna (Care Setting).

Both Shuna and Martin are children who were described to me as unaware of what was happening around them and most definitely unaware of each other. Here however, there is demonstration that they were watching each other, reacting to each other’s movements and that they do indeed have an acquaintance of some sort.

Where’s Jamie Gone?

Having established that the children included all of those present on any one day within a general cohort\(^1\), the focus now adjusts to reflect on the connections which were witnessed between the children. The children come and go within these settings, not always knowing if they will see each other again soon. Whilst friendships were observed (and will be discussed) it is important to first recognise the significance of acquaintances and the strengths of the connections existent between the children. According to the Oxford Dictionary, acquaintance implies a ‘knowledge more than mere recognition’ whilst remaining void of claims to intimacy. In observing the interactions between the children, I would not claim to be in a position to comment on the presence or degrees of intimacy, however, the data does indicate the knowledge and shared understandings held between the children about each other.

On arrival at the settings, many of the children would follow similar routines as they entered the buildings, walked around looking at the settings and the people present. If a regular visitor on a particular day was absent the children would ask staff where they were. During the period of the fieldwork a boy stopped attending both of the settings; in both settings his absence was noted by the children. Due to the differences of communication it was not possible to ascertain whether the children were reacting to a personal loss of a friend or whether they were making note of a change. What is clear, however, is that the children knew when he was there and noticed when he stopped coming.

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\(^1\) Children’s recognition of the group in which they are positioned by the adult-defined booking system is referred to from this point on as the cohort.
In the same way, although certain children would not commonly be seen playing together, it was apparent that they knew about and were aware of each other. This is contrary to the many comments I received about the children ‘being unaware of each other’. The following extract illustrates the staff response to the interaction of two children who have been attending one of the settings for many years, although they attend different schools.

Stuart was swinging on the orange swing whilst Matthew was looking on. After a bit Matthew tried to take hold of the swing, but was pushed away by Stuart. After watching for another five minutes, Matthew tried again, and was once more pushed away. He then shouted ‘Off Stuart’, looked at him, then turned around walking away. Staff who had been standing nearby called to Matthew ‘I didn’t know you knew his name’: she sounded surprised. The two boys turned, looked at her, then carried on (care setting).

Evidence such as this in the data points to the children holding a degree of knowledge of each other. Not only do they recognise each other, but also they know their names which indicates more than a passing interest.

The dictionary definition of friendships implies a degree of emotional closeness beyond that of acquaintances and claims that friendships feature a ‘mutual benevolence’. It has to be recognised that observation is not an ideal method for ascertaining the internal aspects of friendships such as motivation. However, during the course of fieldwork a number of children who use language to communicate did talk openly to me about their friends. I also found that on discussing the research with children in terms of their experience of visiting the settings, friends would be the first topic they would raise. It is these data which I refer to here.

During the course of the fieldwork I noted a number of consistent friendships between children. These appeared to exist more among children who visited the settings together on a regular basis or those who attended the same school, in other words those with a shared history and experiences. The friendships also tended to reflect age similarity, corresponding to classes at school.

On the whole these long standing relationships were held among pairs of children, although there were occasional trios. Often pairs of children would remain together throughout the course of the day negotiating with others, engaging in a number of different activities and sitting together at mealtimes. Whilst engaging in group activity the pairs would remain in close proximity to one another, watching each other’s interactions and leaving a game in unison, often without obvious communication passing between them.
The data also reflect the way pairs would maintain and protect their friendships. To illustrate this, I draw on an observation of Fiona and Emily who were drawn to the activity of Aimee and Natasha:

Aimee and Natasha were at the end of the room. Aimee was drawing a picture, naming another respite setting locally whilst outlining the shape of a building. Then she said ‘Bag’ and began to draw items of clothing. As she was finishing this, Fiona and Emily came up and stood watching. When this was finished Aimee began to draw around her foot. As soon as she had finished, Aimee gave Fiona the paper. She sat down and then proceeded to draw around her foot. As Fiona was passing the paper to Emily, Natasha snatched the paper and pen from her. Fiona, having finished her foot picture, moved away. Emily however was waiting to do hers, she kept looking at Fiona and then at Natasha drawing her foot. When finished Natasha gave Emily the paper. Fiona was near the outside door at this point, Emily looked at her, then the paper about three times. She then dropped the paper and pen and ran down the room to re-join Fiona, (Play Setting).

There are three points worth extracting from this data. Firstly the presence of two pairs of friends joining together to engage in an activity, thus creating a peer sub-group. The second is Emily’s decision to remain with her friend rather than partake in an activity she has waited patiently to carry out. The third is Fiona’s apparent disregard for her friend’s dilemma.

Many of the children referred to the staff as their friends, adding another dimension to their circle of friends. There appeared to be confusion about the role of staff. Those who ‘cared’ for the children were often described by the children as friends. As explained in chapter 7, some staff, particularly in the care setting, also refer to themselves as friends of the children. This particular interpretation of ‘friend’ is supported not only by the children but by the adults too.

There is another aspect of this connection between the children and the staff which directly relates to the data and analysis. The children, in a significant number of activities, included the adults within their cohort. It was at times impossible as well as inappropriate to attempt to extract adults from peer activities. Therefore data which does include adults and their role within children’s interactions are discussed in detail in chapter 10 and wherever relevant within any subsequent analysis.
'Children with thick tongues don’t speak’

This was explained to me by a boy within the play setting when I asked a friend of his what his name was. So far within this chapter I have presented a unique group of children whose characteristics are extremely diverse and who find themselves grouped together because of their impairments which for them is not their primary identity. The children’s perception and acceptance of their adult-chosen companions is achieved in such a way that they encompass all the children despite their differences. This acceptance of difference is evident in the children’s discourse within statements such as ‘those with thick tongues don’t speak’ where children state the difference without judgement or derision.

It is not possible to consider inclusion within this chapter without recognition that there were instances when exclusion occurs. Among the groups observed there was evidence of difference which resulted in some children being excluded by their peers. On the whole the incidences which I observed tended to reflect understandings of impairment; for example, I was told one day that a child was not allowed to join an activity because they would not be able to access all the areas which would be used during the course of the game. The children were not basing their decision on a dislike for their peer, rather a recognition of the physical limitations within the activity.

There were also moments where gender was highlighted as a difference and one which would exclude potential group players. For example, on one occasion myself and another girl were both ejected from a play area by a boy pulling at our clothes and arms because the activity was for ‘boys only’. The girls were not so obvious in the way they excluded boys from activity, yet I often noted that girls would subtly organise themselves into single-sex groups, physically situating themselves away from where the boys were playing.

The General Cohort

In the previous chapter I explored the variety of adult and institutional accounts of the peer groups within the settings. One explanation of peer group membership is based on the premise that the children are a unified group because they have been assessed as being in need of the provision due to their level of impairment and, for some, their family circumstances. A contrasting view is that many of the children attending the settings are isolated from peer interaction because of their impairments and the perception that they are 'in a world of their own'.
The evidence presented in the early part of this chapter of children actively interacting with one another directly challenges the adult account of children existing outside the general peer group membership because they are in some way separate from their peers. The evidence of children, including those described as ‘in a world of their own’, interacting within the general cohort, not outside it, therefore challenges adult perceptions of these children. This empirical evidence of children being part of a cohort within which they find themselves situated, in the way they watch the activity and the way in which they are included by their peers is therefore a significant finding.

Theoretically, this demonstration of the inclusionary nature of the cohort draws on two significant pieces of previous research. In order to explore this further, I referred to Mandell’s (1991) view of self-involvement as representative of the engrossment observed in children when relating to an object which excluded others. As she explains, this is when:

"The children are busy exploring and manipulating objects and taking themselves and their relationship with objects into account. Private meanings prevail and the extent to which the child’s self-other interaction with an object is meaningful for the child is indicated by the child’s total absorption with his own activity (Mandell 1991:165)."

She notes that there are two significant subdivisions within this category determined by the instigator of the action. The first is when children’s action is self-chosen. This was evident within both of the research settings with children running, jumping, climbing over the play equipment, digging in the sand, playing with the toys and equipment provided but not involving or interacting with the others. I coded these actions as ‘focus on object’, noting them as being exclusive of the others in the settings. Mandell’s second subdivision features children’s absorption in an activity set out by adults. Within the settings typical examples of this lay in activity around the art table, where paints, paper and glue would be laid out, or with the train track which staff would place on the floor, stationing the carriages and people ready for the children to use.

Especially pertinent within Mandell’s focus is the view of these activities taken by the teachers and the subsequent labels attached to the child. The child engrossed with self-chosen objects is viewed as egocentric whilst the child absorbed in teacher-directed activity is ‘an active, co-operative child’ (Ibid:166). Both these subdivisions reflect an unspoken acceptance that children at varying points of the day will engage in both activities. Adults usually accept that part of children’s activity will involve inexplicable actions such as running, skipping and pretend play. Whilst the observations within both settings confirmed existence of these subdivisions, there emerged a third subdivision which accommodates the children within this research who were viewed as outside the peer group.
To appreciate this third subdivision it is necessary to adopt a perspective proposed by Goode (1991). He explored the auto-stimulatory behaviour of deaf-blind children within a State Hospital in America. His suggestion is that adults fail to perceive these behaviours in any other way but as a product of impairment; thus the adults become blind to the meaning and relationships of the children with their environment. Goode describes the skills of

'An alternative object reader': that is, a person who by virtue of not knowing an object's correct uses did things with them which were completely inaccessible to most persons (Goode 1991:155.)

As I have shown, the data generated evidence of children who demonstrated these skills with dexterity, whilst at the same time there is evidence of the staff's belief that these activities are pathological and should be discouraged. The latter is the significant point which separates this activity from Mandell's other two categories. Often staff do not view the behaviours of certain children as anything other than the product of their impairment, thus directly impacting on the perception of the staff toward the position of the children within their peer group.

I would therefore argue that these children who are perceived by many as socially inept do have a position within their cohort, not outside it. The problem has been that the focus of adults privileges the 'social' aspect of a child's impairment, thus clouding perception of these particular children within their peer group. The point here is to reveal the position of those children who previously were viewed as social isolates.

Through questioning the perception of these children and listening to the other children's description of these 'solo' children, it is possible to discover their inclusion within the cohort through the existence of shared and culturally understood activity. Therefore it is reasonable to say that the exclusion experienced by these children stems from adult perceptions and their allocated roles of protectors, resulting from concerns of safety, rather than their peers. By exploring how these children, who have not had the option to choose their company, interact and relate to one another, it is possible to challenge adult perceptions of the peer group and suggest a re-shaping of its meaning within the context of the children's interpretations.

The account of children being a peer group due to their shared assessment as being in need of the provision of service is also challenged by the findings presented in this first part of this chapter. The children, through their recognition of differences based on categories other than impairment, such as age and gender demonstrates that the children do not view
themselves as similar. Rather they note their differences and act upon them in the way they engage in activity. It is this point which is expanded in the following section as I explore the evidence of sub-groups within the general peer groups who were observed, thus challenging further the adult belief that the peer groups are simply shaped by the children’s actual presence in the settings.

**Sub-Groups**

When considering the shape of the peer groups, it is critical to consider the enormous diversity within the cohort – the children have multiple ability, multiple communication methods, varying degrees of intellectual ability, genders, age groups, ranging from five to sixteen years, and they all have their own individual personality. The commonality is the fact that they have been assessed as disabled and in need of special provision. The ways in which the children engage with their peers within the settings varies according to all the above and more. The outcome of this is the high number of observed sub-groups within the general cohort.

On the whole those sub-groups which were observed reflected one or both of two specific characteristics: a shared interest in a particular activity, or a shared history. These had a notable effect on the cohesiveness, membership and continuity of a group, as I will demonstrate.

**The Flexibility of Shared Interests**

The children observed were on the whole engaging with each other due to a shared interest in a specific activity. Indeed the staff in the play setting were aware that the key feature within many of the sub-groups was their shared enthusiasm for a particular game. The staff confirmed my belief that children engaging with each other are more likely to reflect a shared interest than a shared impairment or level of ability. Activities such as chase, building sandcastles, and watching tv, were the central focus, rather than the individual abilities of the children.

Often games which would attract children were those which employed fantasy. These imaginary games afforded the children with an identity other than ‘disabled’. The children were recognised by others, both adults and other children, by their activity. Thus they became a group of dinosaurs, treasure hunters, shopkeepers, cooks and racing drivers. Not once did I observe them assuming identities which indicated disability or impairment.
There was one particular sub-group that was regularly apparent which would form in order to engage in a game of football. The membership of the group was fluid, changing according to who was visiting the care setting and wanted to join in. The group was mostly made up of boys, although girls were not always excluded and were generally incorporated into the games when they wanted. The children who were involved in football were more able, although they would at times include others in their activity. There was one instance when a group of boys moved from a game of football to a game of hockey. A couple of the players were not so certain of how to play hockey yet they were still included and instructed through actions, physical direction, shouts and orders what to do.

There were other sub-groups which enjoyed specific activities, such as water play, running on the soft play area, chasing each other and sitting painting, or creating artwork of one form or another. These groups featured children of very varied abilities and their formation was based on the shared interest and enjoyment of the activity.

On the whole these groups did not have fixed boundaries. Children were welcomed into the activity and assumed roles which facilitated continuation of the game. Equally, the impact of a child leaving a shared activity was absorbed and the equilibrium maintained due to flexible membership which incorporated anyone who approached no matter what.

Boundaries of Shared History

The sub-groups which reflected a shared history tended to have a more fixed membership which had evolved over time. Usually they had either a history of visiting the settings over a number of years or of attending the same school. Generally the membership was made up of girls, although occasionally boys from their schools would join in. The sub-groups which indicated a history would often be comprised of friends who share the same life-experiences, thus indicating the existence of shared generational concerns and issues.

One of the main groups I witnessed within one of the settings comprised girls who mostly attended the same school. Although they engaged in a number of different activities they would simultaneously be engaged in conversations about school, mutual friends and pop bands. The pop group West-Life was continually discussed, as was Shane who appears to be the most popular band member. The conversations about Shane would become fantasy as the girls would pretend to be his girlfriend, 'telephone' him, argue with him, break up with him and return to being his girlfriend. These conversations were real to the point that genuine tears would be shed when they discovered his apparent infidelity with their friends.
The girls also know many of the dance moves to the teenage pop bands. They would either stand alongside each other or dance to their reflections in the mirror.

Another group who attend the same school would talk about planned outings and discuss who was going. Within some of these discussions it was difficult to ascertain who were children and who were adults since they were all spoken about in the same manner. The one time I asked for clarification of status, I was laughed at, then found myself marginalised in the periphery of the conversation. I learnt quickly to absorb information and ask other children or staff later to clarify who the children had been talking about. This made it clear to me that to be a part of the sub-groups with the shared history you had to have the same experiences and knowledge as of those within it. You were allowed to enquire about certain conversations but it would not be possible for an outsider to assume membership of it. The boundaries were closely guarded and the children did not appreciate intrusion into conversations.

In the care setting there is one particular group which has evolved directly from the booking system. Exactly the same children are allocated the same weeknight during term times. This shared history can be seen in the way the children relate to one another and the friendships which have formed among the group. This is not only recognised by the staff but also by other children, who aspire to attending on that particular night of the week and being part of the group.

**Degrees of Action**

The presentation of institutional and adult accounts in the previous chapter perhaps creates the impression that activity in such highly structured settings is pre-planned and defined by the adults only. However, this was not the case. Interactions varied in speed, direction, density and duration with little predictability. Whilst some of my observations verged on the boring side, others were filled with excitement, movement and detail. It was not possible to predict what each visit would produce – however there was a consistent difference in the quantity and density of interaction between the care setting and the play setting. Within the play setting there was noticeably more evidence of peer interactions, which were dynamic and drawn out over lengthy periods of time.
Fast and Furious

Observations revealed actions which would rapidly change direction and speed. In the following extract the fluid nature of interaction is apparent:

There were two girls up in the tower: it was difficult to see them because they were sitting down peering at everyone in the room. I moved closer and they beckoned to me, so I joined them. They told me to remove my shoes and then began giving out further directions. I was told to slide down into the soft play area, they both followed. I was then instructed to sit on the soft horse which I tried to do but became unbalanced. They then jumped onto the horse as well, subsequently falling off on top of me. We lay in a heap, laughing. Then we repeated the game several times, each time landing in a heap (Care Setting).

Data from the Play setting reflects very similar patterns where there is an absence of definition in the activity engaged in by the children. These observations portrayed a faster, perhaps more exciting and dynamic flow of action than the care setting. Within the play setting one action was swiftly followed by another as is seen in the next extract when a water fight evolves into another totally different activity. The extract begins at the end of the water fight, in which some of the children were throwing sodden balls at one another:

Sally began to collect the wet balls in the skip at the front of the tractor she was sitting on. She wouldn't let anyone take any and shouted if someone took a ball out of the skip. The others found a bigger soft ball and were using that to throw at each other, the aim being to hit each other with it because it was wet and soggy. The game, which had begun in the paddling pool, then progressed to the entire play area. Sally took the tractor and the balls down to the end of the garden, I followed and was in turn followed by Tim and Matthew, they then took the balls and were throwing them over the fence. Staff told them off and tried to stop them throwing the balls, Sally was shouting and Tim began to hit me (play setting).

Sally, Tim and Matthew had hijacked the material element of the water fight and used it in an alternative activity. Meanwhile the children involved in the water fight succeeded in continuing a version of their game using only one ball. Thus what was originally one activity, evolved into two diverse games within a short period of time, without planning or consultation among the children.
Inaction: Restful or Boredom?

Whilst many of the observations are rich in detail demonstrating vivid, dynamic and energetic interactions there were times of complete inaction. It would be inaccurate to present data reflecting only moments of high activity, as this would fail to provide readers with a sense of the whole experience of specialist provision. Inaction was most common in the care setting, where staff and children would be sitting in the main area, seemingly disengaged from one another, as if waiting for something to happen. On these occasions staff would perhaps be talking among themselves or watching the television. The children present would either be watching each other or looking toward the staff, or gazing at their surroundings. The following extract describes the scenario when I arrived one day, it remained static for half an hour when some children arrived into the setting, the television was not on nor was there any music playing:

I went through to the play area, Arthur was in the soft chair sitting sucking his fingers looking out at the room, his eyes did not appear fixed on anything, although whenever something/someone moved he would briefly look up then away. Harry came out of the conservatory area and said to the air 'need toilet' staff said to him 'go on then'. Harry went into the loos and did not return for a long time - at least 30 mins.

Keiron was sitting at the top of the tower, he was on his knees and looking out through the coloured panes of perspex, every so often he would stand and look over the top. He did not hold his head above the tower moving enough to see and not be seen.

Nearby, Alex was sitting in his wheelchair. Every so often he would laugh although it was not clear what it was that he thought was funny.

Two of the staff on duty were near the back door, one sitting down, the other leaning against the table. They talked about going to the pub, who was on duty next and another member of staff (Care setting- summer 2000).

The notes in my journal which I made later that day expressed my discomfort as an observer within this situation. Not wanting to instigate action and interaction I found myself sitting among the children staring into space or alternatively fielding questions from the staff about my private life.

There were moments of inaction in the play setting too, particularly in the afternoons after school, during the winter months. Children would position themselves around the room in spaces which were at a distance from one another; usually in the soft play area, on the rocking horse or the bridge and watch the movements of the staff as they prepared for
supper. Staff explained that sometimes the children were tired and needed time out to recover from their school day. In the background there was either music or television and some of the children would sing along: on one occasion singing the 'Twelve Days of Christmas' in February! The children appeared content to watch the activity around them, in what appeared to me to be a relaxing atmosphere. As an observer it was comfortable to sit within an area near to the children, without feeling the need to do anything or to talk to anyone.

**Spontaneity and Predictability**

The observations revealed that peer interactions contained degrees of both spontaneity and predictability. The ways in which activities would evolve and change with no pre-defined pattern or direction demonstrated earlier in the chapter reflect, not only the density of interactions, but also their spontaneous element. However, there was also a certain predictability within interactions which revealed the mechanisms of a social order, operated by the children. Significant is the fact that this was both within and beneath the adult surveillance and pre-defined perceptions of the peers.

Degrees of spontaneity are visible in the earlier extracts within this chapter, where children follow the flow of action acting instinctively without planning or forethought. The smooth movement from one activity to another not only reveals the evolutionary nature of interactions, but also highlights that they can also be impetuous. The following example sees Sam playing on his own beside a yellow mat, then when Alan arrives the two boys engage spontaneously in a new activity.

Sam jumped down onto the yellow mat, whilst looking around as if to see if there was anyone watching. He said 'hands' and held out his hands, then cupped them together, then clapped.

Alan was carried in by the staff, who helped him remove his coat and shoes. He came to play on the soft play area near Sam and began shooting at people, if he shot at staff they would pretend to be injured and collapse on the floor. He then joined Sam and they began to take turns falling onto the mat, Alan who was the older and bigger of the two would sometimes indicate to Sam that it was his turn by standing at the bottom pointing up at him. The staff watched this although were not involved in the direction of the game (play setting).
Social Order within Peer Groups

The peers within the setting appeared to engage in a social order of which they had a shared understanding. The social order, observed in the way children assumed and allocated a variety of roles, demonstrates the way in which the sub-groups operated and as such reflects a complex set of relations which are established within any peer group activity.

The social order first became apparent in the care setting where there is a particular group which visits during term-times. This has been happening for a number of years. The relations and subsequent interactions which were observed on these days had a predictability about them which illustrated the roles among the children. It was through considering the roles assumed on that particular weeknight that I was able to then identify roles which were assumed at other times by other children. It is also possible to see that the peers employed a social order which was similar to the ones demonstrated by the staff within the settings.

The children participating in peer group activity did not all share an equal part in how an activity was carried out. Indeed children assumed, allocated and shared out a variety of different roles which gave strength to and stabilised the playing-out of the activity. There were a number of core roles apparent in the majority of observed activity:

The leaders would most often be a child who uses language as their primary method of communication, although it is not always the case. Some children demonstrated leadership through using hand signals and leading by the hand. It was the leader who would direct an activity, sometimes choosing what the group would do and telling them what to do. The leader would often suggest and direct what roles the others were to assume.

Followers were those who would enter into an activity following instructions and complying with the rules and direction of the leader. On the whole they did not challenge the shape of an activity or question the directions of the leader.

Observers were children who would watch from the periphery, they were part of the activity but would not always participate in all the action; rather they watched what was happening. Sometimes observers would exchange their role for that of follower and vice versa. The two appeared closely related and often correspond to those who chose not to play a dynamic part in what was happening.
The Protectors had multiple tasks ranging from maintaining the activity rules and those of the setting. These children also would assume the protection of others from being upset or hurt. Usually this child would not only monitor what they were doing but were closely interested in the actions of the others within the group.

Border guards were particularly concerned with ensuring that there were no intruders into their activity from other children but also from adults. They took their roles very seriously, often gesticulating widely when there was an interloper or shouting at them to go away. There were times when the threat of outside interruption would result in the border guard moving the children physically to another area to continue the game.

The objectors/radicals was a role that children tended to assume themselves rather than be directed to do so. This tended to arise when there would be a child accepted among a group participating in an activity who would want to do it his/her own way regardless of what everyone else wanted to do. This child would come into direct conflict with the protector.

The following observation illustrates a group of children who adopted a variety of these roles in the process of carrying out their game.

There was a group of children who had been playing outside, they came in then decided to play a game of Hungry Frogs. There were 3 children playing plus Milo who was directing the game by giving instructions to the others, he was the oldest and biggest in the group. I asked if I could join in and they said yes. The two girls and Frank were told not to start until he told them they could play. Milo was writing their names down on paper, saying that they were going to have a competition. When they were told to begin they started hitting the frogs on order to catch balls. At this point, Benjie came in and began to touch the game and to hit one of the frogs - Milo appeared cross and told him not to play and then gave in saying that he was to be gentle. Benjie seemed to be winning, but was also putting his fingers into the frog’s mouth, making sure that the balls were going into his basket.

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2 Hungry Frogs is a board game in which players each have a plastic frog, which is positioned on the main playing board. The aim of the game is to open the frog’s mouth by hitting its head in order to ‘swallow’ food in the shape of balls. The winner of the game is the one whose frog swallows the most balls.
Then Frank began to get upset, flapping his hand and saying that Benjie was cheating. Milo also said that this was not how the game was to be played. He then took hold of the whole game and said to the original players ‘Come over here, play it here’. He sat down on the soft mat that is near the rocking horse. The others followed and then Frank began to play. Benjie was excluded from the move across the room and stood watching from a distance. Milo then told the boys to stop playing because he had to get organised first. He was writing down the girls’ names and then the boys’; he told me that they would play a league like in football. (Play Setting).

Milo was most definitely the leader of this game of Hungry Frogs, and was also keen to retain this by setting the rules as proved by the way he told the others to wait until he had written down their names. Entrance into the group of children was decided in the first instance by the group when I joined the activity, although in the second instance Milo took the lead in allowing Benjie to play. This, however, was conditional on him playing according to the rules. When this failed it was Frank who initially assumed the role of protector by objecting before being joined by Milo. Benjie, although allowed to be part of the group, took the role of objector/radical in the way he adopted an alternative interpretation of the game rules.

In the play setting, the social order witnessed tended to be flexible and changeable, with children swapping roles regularly. The children, on the whole, were aware of who the usual ‘leaders’ were of a game, and within the various sub-groups and were happy to assume the suggested roles. Indeed, as staff commented in the meeting I had with them, children would approach the ‘leaders’ who would be the focus of activity. There were, however, times when there were no clear leaders and the children demonstrated that they would also interact without the need for leadership.

In the care setting, where the adults were operating within a clear and rigid structure, the children were less likely to assume roles in a fluid manner. Rather, once children assumed one role they would usually stick with it for the rest of the visit. In the regular sub-group mentioned in the last page, the roles adopted by the children were fixed.

The primary roles which I have discussed will be familiar with the reader since they are not dissimilar to those in existence within adult society. This list of assumed roles is not exhaustive; rather it is intended to be a recognition of their existence and an identification of the primary ones.
This social order was not static; rather it was shaped by the children in accordance with the activity, which hints at an understanding of the social aspect of their interactions. The point I want to highlight here is that the social order is constructed of a multitude of roles, which feature dependence, understanding, independence, passivity, competence, and active. Neither characteristic of maturity or immaturity is privileged by the children: rather they accept and work with both in order to produce a workable social system.

Summary

The findings presented within this chapter are significant in the presentation of the children's perspectives of their peers and in challenging the institutional and adult accounts presented in the previous chapter. The chapter presents empirical evidence that the children, whilst recognising that they are positioned in a general cohort by their presence in the settings, are also a heterogeneous group with multiple identities other than disabled. This corresponds with and strengthens findings which recognised the heterogeneity of disabled children within mainstream and specialist schools to include the experiences of children with severe learning disabilities within this description (Watson et al 1999). This also challenges the adult and institutional accounts of peer groups as either uniform because of the children's assessed need or as separate from their peers because they are 'in a world of their own'.

In recognising the connections between the children, which ranged from acquaintance to friend to no connection at all, this research raises issues concerning adult definitions of friendship and the importance allocated to it. This reflects Deegan's (1996) comments, which were made in relation to mainstream children, about the confusion caused by current understandings of friendship. Recognising that children are drawn together into sub-groups because of shared interests and histories, and that these connections formed are important to the children, highlights the potentials for friendship contained within peer interactions. Thus, these relationships are perhaps more significant than at first realised.

The identification of sub groups indicates that the children's interactions are complex, fluid and dynamic, and evolving over time, not just at the point of interaction. The sub groups observed formed on the basis of either shared interests or histories. Within these groups their activity was the focus, and elements such as levels of dependence or independence, maturity or immaturity, which adults attach so much value to, were incorporated into the interactions without apparent significance. The sub-groups also highlight the way in which group membership can be either closely guarded or open to all-comers. That children regulate entry into peer sub-groups, especially where there are shared histories, illustrates
that peer group membership is not dissimilar to that identified by Corsaro (1997). This therefore refutes the adult account of the peer groups being different 'because they are disabled' presented by staff in the care setting.

The appreciation of a social order within the peer groups presents a more complex picture of the general cohort and sub-groups. This demonstrates that children with learning impairments are socially competent, and that their interaction is not sporadic or accidental: rather it is embedded in the groups' shared histories and understandings of interaction among themselves.

The depth and intensity of the relations between the children, and the significance of their connections, raises questions about the way booking systems operate in these types of settings. It also problematises the role of adults as supervisors within the environment, as there were times when children perceived adults as part of their groups and activities, and as their friends.
Games, Play and Culture

The purpose of this chapter is to draw together the aspects of peer interaction discussed in the previous chapters, addressing the question 'is this culture?' The first half of the chapter considers the routine activities which were understood and interpreted by the children in a way that indicates an understanding unique to them. This demonstrates a cultural knowledge which is shared, reproduced and altered by the children. In exploring the shared values and concerns of the children, it becomes apparent that they covered a wide range of beliefs, including concern for each other which was observed within the general cohort and sub-groups.

However, issues are raised in relation to the observed interdependencies in the emergence of interaction, indicating that it is not possible to diminish the significance of the settings themselves in the emergence of peer interactions. This makes the identification of an autonomous culture problematic. Therefore this chapter concludes with the proposal for a new definition of peer culture which responds to the findings within this thesis.

Indications of Cultural Understanding

In the previous chapters I have presented the key aspects of peer interaction which have been identified within the data. The first related to the children’s understanding of their connections with their peers and organisation of a social order. The second aspect related to the nature of interaction among the peers, more specifically the density, speed and predictability apparent within the data.

Each of these has been presented as separate aspects of peer interaction. This chapter now focuses on the interaction of these, including observations illustrating the fluid, dynamic, fast-paced and energetic character of peer interactions. This portrayal of peer interactions demonstrates that children perhaps engage in some form of cultural understanding which is represented by a shared knowledge of activity, rules, interests and values unique to that particular group. What follows is description of specific activities engaged in by children on a regular basis. Whilst each game had variations, there were shared similarities. This indicates that the children were replicating their shared understanding whilst also
interpreting and altering the status quo. This is something which Corsaro (1997) also identifies as interpretive reproduction within his conceptualisation of peer culture.

**Rules of 'Chase!'**

Many of the games observed had clear rules which were produced by their evolution within the particular settings, and thus unique to the peer sub-groups. Although the essential nature of the games embarked on by the children were familiar to me, I realised that there were variations which indicated the existence of a localised peer culture. These variations were routinely employed and understood by those participating without the need for explanation or direction.

When I met with the staff at the play setting after carrying out the fieldwork, they commented on the energy and depth of understanding of the rules required to participate in the games of chase which would occur. One of the staff explained that at times the progression of 'chase' was so fast and complex that she couldn't always grasp what the children were doing. The following is a description of a particular game of chase which carried on for about half an hour, with participants easing in and out, regaining their breath, and choosing which part of the chase to be involved in:

There are a group of children in the soft play area. Jack and Dougie are on the top of the tower watching what is happening. George climbs up the tower and knocks Jack off in the process. Jack laughs and pulls George down. On seeing the other two laughing, Dougie jumps off the tower and shouts 'chase' this rallying cry causes the other children in the area to look up from their activity. Several of them scramble to their feet waiting to see where Dougie runs. A split second later he's running around the soft play area, up the steps, and onto the slide, pausing to see who's behind him. There are at least four children moving toward the slide, some running at full pelt, others hanging back watching. George overtakes Dougie, taking the lead down the slide, running back around to have another go. Children are running round, taking turns going down the slide. Jack and George then go down together, Jack holding the sleeve of George's. Next moment I notice Dougie over the other side of the area with a few other children, he is 'shooting' at them, some fall down 'dead' and 'injured' while others shoot back. They run down the length of the room, away from the soft play area. The shooting continues outside for a while, Dougie in the lead with the others chasing after him, after about five minutes they are back inside at the top of the slide, catching their breath. They sit quietly looking toward the children on the tower. Dougie goes over and joins the group on the tower. They begin to fall down the hole in the centre of the tower, some pushing each other gently so that they fall softly, sometimes it is much rougher. The children then scramble back to the top of the tower, falling again into the middle. There is lots of shouting, screaming, laughter.

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One of the children looks nervously on from his position on the tower, he is not pushed, he does not join in but watches. The group at the bottom run off, one shouting 'chase', then they run up the tower, one stays at the top while the group slide down and run round the tower, trying to catch up with each other. When they do they overtake each other, swapping leadership, tripping each other up. Every so often members of the group sit down and rest, watching. Another boy stands and he claps his hands at the children and one copies him, he turns to another and claps, he gets the same response. He is laughing, (Play Setting).

When a game of chase begins, it is usually in response to the rallying cry 'Chase'. There is no discussion of who is to do the chasing; rather those present who wish to take part pursue the person who shouted 'Chase'. It would be easy to believe that the game is perhaps more similar to Follow-the-leader than chase; however, who is the actual leader becomes blurred once the game is established.

It is as if one of the rules of the game is that there is no clear leader, no definitive direction. This sharing of the leader role, and lack of clarity in the precise direction of the game, results in a process of progressive unity in sharing participation in an activity where all the children are in control. On the whole the staff were not involved in the way the game evolved (unless injury or conflict occurred). There were also games of chase involving staff which I am not referring to here.

In the care setting the games of chase were subject to higher degrees of adult intervention. The layout and size of the setting was not conducive to running around inside, as the spaces were small and toys would be spilt over the floor. The perceived vulnerability of the children who used wheelchairs was increased by these factors; therefore staff were less tolerant of chase, due to health and safety concerns. Once outside in the garden area, the children did engage in games of chase which reflected similar complexity to the play setting, although this did not happen so often.

**Adaptation of 'Cooking'**

The children's activity also reflected an understanding of the social relations between adults and an adaptation of them into their own games. A prime example of this was cooking, which was an activity of pretence enjoyed in both of the settings by varying numbers of children. It was often a group activity, although it was also engaged in by pairs or single children. The processes applied in carrying out the culinary preparations were similar regardless of the numbers involved or the setting. Within the activity of cooking it is
possible to see a clear social pattern reflected among the children. There was always a 'head cook' who would direct the activity of the others who usually readily accepted the instructions. This is seen in the following extract, where Ben is in charge of the kitchen.

Ben and Joe had been playing with the 'telephones' then Ben said to Joe 'Cook dinner', and put his arm out to him to get his attention, then pointed to the oven and play kitchen along the side wall. They went over to it and Ben said he was going shopping. He picked up the toy shopping basket and went down the room. He stood watching the other children for a while, then began to pick up pretend shopping and plastic fruit and vegetables.

Joe remained in the kitchen where he had plastic pieces of food and was using a carrot as a knife to cut into a chicken. He also put some pieces of fruit into a saucepan saying 'Pudding'; he put other things into the oven saying 'Hot'. He busied himself with the cooking for a while then Ben arrived back. Ben announced his arrival saying 'I've got the shopping' and tipping the shopping basket upside down thus spilling it all onto the floor. Joe looked at him as he said this, but did not comment.

Ben looked at the kitchen and then said he was going to 'Get more food' then walked off with the basket. While he was gone I saw him go up to another child and watch while they balanced on the disk thingy.

Joe carried on cooking passing me things then saying 'Wash', as he did he pointed to the sink unit and I pretended to wash up dishes etc. Ben came back and stood looking for a while, we were both busy with our tasks. He then put the shopping on the floor and said to Joe 'Guests have arrived' and then told me to put the food out. Ben continued to direct, Joe who continued to cook.

Ben then said 'All this cooking is tiring, let's go to bed' and took Joe's hand and walked away with him toward the spa, as he walked away he told me to stay and watch the cooking (Play Setting).

Like Ben in this extract, the leader also tended to act as the decision-maker and border guard when other children approached the game wishing to take part. As with other games similar to this, which featured imaginary activity, the boundaries were closely guarded by the participants.

This was not dissimilar to the way in which adults engage in the preparation of food. On the whole, when a meal is prepared direction comes from a single person, who controls the others within a rigid hierarchy (head chef, sous chef, chef de partie and commis chef), or parent directing children who are assisting. There is only limited space and employment within the process of cooking, resulting in the well-known phrase 'too many cooks spoil the
broth! It is exactly these features which are adopted and adapted in the imaginary games of children within the settings as seen in the extract.

Cooking was not always a one-off activity engaged in for a limited time. There were times when it would feature throughout a child’s visit. During one instance Stuart was cooking ‘tea’ when the staff called the children to eat. When approaching the table he became very distressed, trying to communicate something; after a while it became clear that he was concerned that he had left the ‘tea’ in the oven and that it would burn. Once a staff member realised what Stuart was saying, he began to laugh and settled down. As soon as his own meal was finished, Stuart returned to finish the preparation of ‘tea’.

The Wall Game

The peer groups appear to have developed unique ways of employing certain material artefacts within the settings. The settings were full of special equipment designed with play in mind. The children not only employed those pieces of equipment as designed, but also in their own ways. This demonstrated a shared cultural understanding not only of adult expectations, but also of a shared peer understanding in perceiving the opportunities held within specific pieces of equipment.

One of the settings had a bouncy castle; it is reasonable to say that they are commonly used for jumping around in. The following extract illustrates a way of using the bouncy castle unique to the children within the settings:

A large group of boys were sitting on the back bit of the bouncy castle waiting for the staff to propel them forward into the animal punch bags. This game was repeated over and over again, with the staff being told by the children when to let go of the back wall. Then the children asked me to join in and a few minutes later the staff went to sort something out.

The children then told me to sit in the hole of the wall and were pushing me forward into the animal shapes. There were three boys left playing the game. Simon was the main one pushing the wall, with a bit of help from Alistair and Ethan. Then Simon was on the wall next to me and telling me where to sit and what to do. Whenever we landed on the bouncy castle he would take hold of my arm and say again. This game carried on for a while until we were all very out of breath. Alistair and Ethan left leaving myself and Simon on our own in the bouncy castle. Simon then took both my hands telling me to jump. We were joined by a couple of younger children who began to run at the wall. Simon stopped jumping and joined the smaller children with the wall game. I sat in the castle watching while I got my breath. After a bit Simon came and sat next to
me, still shouting at the others as they ran at the wall (Play Setting).

This game was always initiated by the children. On the whole it would involve groups of three or more children who would share directorship of the activity, deciding as a group when to move and what to do next. The activity itself involved a group of children running at the wall in the bouncy castle, then throwing themselves on top of it. Their cumulative weight would then be sufficient to hold the wall down on its side. At a given signal the children would slide off the wall so that it 'propelled' them up and forward. As the children fell forward off the wall, they would laugh while gathering together again to run at the wall.

This game also had precise rules in that those participating were expected to comply with the group consensus regarding the time to move, run and jump. If a child did not follow the group movement, then they would find themselves excluded from further group communication. Thus they would be re-positioned outside the activity and experience peer rejection. Such children would sometimes hover nearby waiting; more often than not they would then be included once more in the activity. Once admitted to the group the child would then follow the rules without breaking them again.

The wall game also had a number of variations. Sometimes it would be played with a leader who directed the movement and gave out instructions of when to jump, run and sit on the wall. This role was usually assumed without consultation with the other children. The participants would not question the leader, although there were a couple of occasions when dissenting members would leave the activity, going elsewhere to seek another activity.

When the group weight was not sufficient to keep the wall down so that children could sit on it and have enough force to spring off it, the children would seek out the missing weight. This often involved adults, although more for their physical size than anything else. Children would bring an adult into the game, telling them what to do, either verbally or by pointing to the wall. The adult was not allowed to intervene or influence the game – if they attempted to do this, the children would lose interest. This resulted in the children either leaving the adult or telling the adult to leave.

There was a more elaborate variation of the wall game which was more physically demanding. Once the children had jumped from the wall, they would then propel themselves into the upright animals which were also a part of the bouncy castle structure. They would do this with enormous energy; quite often resulting in them falling over or bumping into each other. Once collapsed, a child quite often opted out of a round or two of
the activity until they had regained their breath. Whilst sitting out, they would watch the others; occasionally giving the prompts of when to jump and when to stop.

Another variation, equally demanding, was to jump through the hole in the wall before the others had collapsed it, so that they could climb onto the top of it before it was released. This way they added further excitement to the process of being propelled forward. This required judgement, speed and daring. The result of not being quick enough was being squashed by the wall with the children sitting on top. This happened regularly, and was the source of amusement for all concerned.

Local Variations of Hide and Seek

A game known to the majority of children, and already discussed in previous chapters, is that of hide-and-seek. This occurred in both of the settings, although in the play setting the games tended to be more elaborate and involved large groups of children. The hide-and-seek witnessed in the care setting tended to be more basic, with fewer participants, and usually did not to continue beyond the first ‘find’. In some ways the hide-and-seek witnessed was no different from the games engaged in by mainstream children.

The decision to play hide-and-seek was usually made by a group of children who would be at a loss of what to do next. They would have finished an activity and be standing around apparently aimlessly, at that point one of the children would suggest hide-and-seek, and the others would agree instantly. There was rarely a negative response. It would usually be the one who suggested the game who would decide who counted, although most often they would assume the role of seeker themselves without question.

In the standard game the aim of the hidden players is to remain out of sight of the seeker for as long as possible, and for definitely longer than your fellows. There were a number of variations of this game. Most common were instances when a child would ensure that they were found fairly promptly in order to then become the seeker’s assistant. Another variation was to hide so well that it was possible to leave the activity and join another without friction. There were times, when the seeker would not ‘find’ a particular child; apparently on purpose as they would walk past a hiding child, look straight at them and then continue looking elsewhere, not returning to ‘find’ the hidden child. Apparently this was employed as a method of excluding unwanted extras within the activity.

The more commonly understood version of the game is where the last person to be found then becomes the seeker, thus continuing the game ad infinitum if desired. One deviation
which appeared popular was that the seeker would join the hidden players and as a group they would then hide from the adults. It was important to remain quiet and out of view, similar to the game of sardines. This was usually accompanied by a lot of ‘Shhhs’ and giggles, which inevitably highlighted their presence to the staff. Once an adult had spotted the children, they would run, jump and clamber out of their hiding place laughing and shouting. They would usually then run off together and quite often begin again or find another activity.

In the care setting, where hide-and-seek was not so prevalent, the games had a slightly different feel to them. The numbers involved were smaller, the games quieter occupying a much smaller space. The activity was also more open to the intervention of staff, who, when recognising the game would join in and find the hidden children. This was generally accepted, and the children would then continue under adult direction.

Pretend Play

Throughout the observations it was critical to recognise that, whilst an activity may appear to be ‘pretend’, it was a serious activity for the young person. During the following ‘telephone call’ I recall my own increasing anxiety as Judy became upset to the point that I was not certain if she was crying.

Judy then pretended to telephone Shane from the pop group Westlife. In the course of the conversation she said she hated him and that she was going to put the phone down on him. She put the phone on the floor, then hung her head saying ‘I hate him! We’re not going out any more’ (Care Setting).

Pretend was an important activity and one which I witnessed on many occasions. In the same way it was evident that these pretend games were not superficial or frivolous. Indeed games of dinosaurs, bounty hunters and police were taken seriously and often resulted in conflict when someone broke the pretence.

Play

In many respects it seems slightly bizarre to be presenting peer interaction as something which is purely playful. The work of many childhood sociologists has been to raise the concept of play to a level which makes it a meaningful and acceptable pastime to adults. This has been in order to challenge adult interpretations which have at times allocated play as having no more meaning than pure frivolity. So why, as an academic concerned with
portraying disabled childhood interactions as complex and worthy of attention, am I returning to the idea of play as frivolous?

The children who were observed were engaged in a multitude of different interactions which represent a cultural understanding, a social order and learning processes. However, in the midst of this there is still a delight in activity which remains devoid of complexity. Recognising this is critical if understanding of peer interaction is to be complete. The fun, laughter and sheer joy the children displayed in participating deserves to be recognised just as it is, without academic questioning and attempts to make it something which it isn’t.

There were many occasions when the children engaged in activity with no other apparent outcome but enjoyment, of being with others, laughing, and playing with their material environment. Flying high on a swing, running at full pelt down the garden in the wind, laughing at another’s antics, watching television or playing wildly spraying a hose pipe on a hot summer’s day are activities which, within this section, I choose not to scrutinise. To do so would run the risk of contaminating the fun with adult-centred thinking. What I hope is that the reader will be reminded of the activities which they themselves embark on with the sole purpose of play - dancing wildly to loud music, walking in the rain, eating mangoes naked, going high as you can on a swing when no one is watching. These do not require exploration, but an acceptance that they are playful activities and as such have a place within the consideration of peer interactions. They should not be dismissed on the grounds of frivolity.

In identifying eight predominant rhetorics used to describe play, Sutton-Smith muses:-

But there still remains the issues of whether play need have a function apart from the joy of playing, the associated joy of living, the increases in enjoying ones own play skills, and the play interests and associations that naturally follow (Sutton-Smith 2001:45)

This first section of the chapter has focused on the various games and activities of the children which were regularly observed within the settings, and which are identifiable as cultural. The regularity of games such as chase, hide and seek and cooking within both settings demonstrates the degree of similarity of activity within the two settings. Also the wall game, which is unique to the play setting, demonstrates the existence of very localised cultural activity. Thus, in the light of analysis it might be possible to claim that there was evidence within the data of peer culture which is similar to that described by Corsaro (1997).
**Artefacts**

One of the defining aspects of peer culture identified by Corsaro are the artefacts which identify the cultural activity of children (1997). Within the two settings the children did not appear to produce materials which could be claimed to represent the children’s culture. Whilst the children carried out artwork, this usually involved colouring in pictures (usually Disney ones), producing items for a collage as directed by the adults or individual pieces of work. None of these indicated a shared culture.

The settings contain high quantities of adult-designed ‘artefacts’ which indicate to the observer the purpose of the operation. Soft play areas, sensory areas, simple musical instruments, climbing frames and lifting equipment are visible to both children and adults. Whilst the presence of these artefacts does not identify peer culture, the ways in which the children use them perhaps does.

One approach toward adult designed artefacts is seen in the use of the ‘bucket’ swings. These are swings designed for children with physical impairments and are nearly always blue in colour. While I describe elsewhere in the thesis the children using the swings as an adult might expect (swinging, hanging-out and taking turns) there was also evidence of these swings being twisted, climbed upon and thrown. In both settings these swings were broken at least once as a result of rough usage, while the standard swings remained intact. Why exactly this happens is not possible to ascertain within observation however it does demonstrate that the children use adult defined artefacts in similar ways within both settings.

**Shared Values and Concerns**

The idea that children’s peer groups have shared concerns is in many ways at the core of Corsaro’s conceptualisation of peer culture (as explained in chapter 2). He identifies that within this there are two main themes:

1. Children make persistent attempts to **gain control** of their lives and 2. they always attempt to **share** that control (Corsaro 1997:118).

The data within this research indicate that this is indeed sometimes the case. Indeed the following chapter considers evidence of children resisting the adult structuring of time and
space. This regular activity reflected cultural understandings of where power and control lie— with the adults. The children shared this resistance with others and occasionally shared that control with others, helping them to leave the dining area. However, this was not necessarily shared with the general cohort, suggesting that this is perhaps an element specific within the sub-groups; nor did resistance and control appear to be a primary concern of the children.

What was interesting, however, was the level of shared concern which the cohort demonstrated toward its members. This was the consistent theme which appeared to run throughout the data gathered and has already been highlighted in chapter 8. Early on in fieldwork there was an incident at one of the settings which resulted in one of the children being taken to hospital for treatment for a minor injury. Throughout the remaining part of the day many of the children repeatedly asked after the boy, whilst those without language sat nearby listening to staff as they made re-assuring noises. When the shift changed, one of the children told each staff member about the incident. The atmosphere definitely changed and was notably subdued, with little running about or activity for the remaining length of the observation. One boy who was distressed by the events approached staff on a number of occasions touching his head saying 'Oww' (the injured boy had hurt his head).

The following data illustrate the concern shown by children for their peers when they were upset. It was common for the children to attempt to soothe others particularly when they cried:

After tea the children gathered by the door to the office. Darren was throwing a soft ball around, and was told not to do so, the office staff came around and asked him not to throw the ball. Then he was told to go and sit at the chair by the table, he sat down and began to cry as he sat there. Staff coming into the room asked what he was crying about the other staff pointed out that he had been told off and crying wouldn't make them change their minds because he had been naughty. Mitchell came up to him and then said 'Don't cry'; his head was to one side. Then Darren jumped up and slapped him on the top of his head. The staff did not see this but said to Mitchell to leave him alone as he had been naughty.

Mitchell walked a few steps back but stood watching Darren. After about ten minutes he approached Darren again and said 'lets go play'. Darren sat looking at him and then continued to cry. This carried on for a while, then without any discernible reason Darren stood up and went up Mitchell and said I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. Then he hugged Mitchell and kissed him on the lips. The staff laughed at this saying it was a bit far to go. Darren then said to Mitchell 'play now' and the two boys went to the soft play area holding hands for the first few steps, (Play Setting).
Despite the fact that Darren had hit him, Mitchell continued to show concern for him and, although he kept his distance, waited nearby. On the whole the children would become agitated whenever one of their number became upset, regardless of the circumstances. Some would step in and offer solace either by touching, cuddling or patting or by standing close watching until the upset child would settle. Others would go and fetch a staff member to assist.

Instances of upset were not the sole scenarios when children displayed caring for each other. Some children actively engaged in caring for each other in more day-to-day tasks. For instance, a favoured undertaking was helping children who used wheelchairs to move from a to b. Sometimes the 'helper' would tap the person on the shoulder first before releasing the brakes and moving off; however there were times when the child using the wheelchair would look decidedly disconcerted about being moved without warning.

There were also more intimate moments of care observed within both settings. These private exchanges occurred within the public arena under the supervision of the staff. Although the staff were sometimes aware of there happening, they often passed by unnoticed. In one of the settings there were two children who regularly attended on the same day of the week. Julie requires total assistance in physical care and is unable to move herself around the room; Ian is mobile and has a limited vocabulary. For long periods of time Julie remains unattended to. The following extract illustrates Ian's response to this:

Julie was facing the television although had her head turned away toward the sensory play area. Ian came into the room and saw her there. He picked up a chair from the table and put it next to her, sitting down so that he was now in her line of vision. He said hello and took her hand with both his hands. He sat looking at her stroking her hand, she blinked a few times as if she recognised him. He remained sitting next to her for at least half an hour at the end of which it was time for me to go home, so I don't know how much longer this was going to carry on for. He would smile at her and mumble soothing noises, occasionally he would lift his hand and stroke her hair out of her eyes. Whenever he did this she followed his hand with her eyes (care setting).

It was not unusual for Ian to spend long periods of time with Julie, quietly mumbling to her and gently holding her hand. The staff were aware of the contact between the two, although their comments reflected the view that the contact was one-sided on Ian's part and that Julie was not really aware. In the observations Julie did not respond adversely and appeared relaxed and at ease whenever Ian was nearby, whilst she would frown or appear startled when other children ran past noisily.
It appears therefore that the children within this research demonstrated a broader set of shared values and concerns than described in Corsaro’s work (1997). I suggest that this is due to the nature of the settings, which have particular philosophies, ecologies and thus different opportunities within them for peer interaction.

It is important also to remember that, for many of these children, care is an important aspect of their lives as many are in need of the support from others, their peers and adults around them. It is this which leads to my next key point in identifying whether what was observed was cultural or not.

**Summary**

This chapter has drawn the key points from the previous chapters into a discussion about whether the evidence within this thesis indicates the presence of a peer culture. Data demonstrating shared understanding of rules, activity, and adult activity are presented as evidence that there is a cultural understanding between the children. Whilst the children shared understandings about each other within the settings, there was also evidence of routine activities and actions which indicate peer culture. In the same way, there was evidence that the children had shared values and concerns beyond those identified by Corsaro (1997), reflecting a concern for each other’s welfare and happiness.

However, it was not possible to observe, nor is it possible to present, a peer culture which is autonomous or separate from the settings. This is because of the observed inescapable interdependencies (Goodley and Rapley 2002) which existed between the children, the adults and the environment. It was the presence of these connections which have rendered Corsaro’s descriptions of peer culture problematic within the context of this research.

Due to this interdependence between children and context, it is therefore more appropriate to conclude that the children within this particular research were engaging in cultural activity unique to the settings within which they found themselves. To go any further by defining it as an autonomous peer culture or as a sub-culture would be misleading at best and plain wrong (and therefore unethical) at worst.

The evidence of peer interactions emerging and evolving from the settings raises the significance of the role of the settings in shaping the peer activity in the degree and number of opportunities for interaction. It also questions the stability of the cultural interactions
observed, suggesting that they are more volatile and vulnerable than those which are portrayed by Corsaro (1997). It is this which is the focus of the next chapter.
Emerging Interaction

Having recognised the nature of interaction, the existence of multiple peer groups, and cultural aspects in peer activity, this chapter progresses to consider how the peers who were observed interact with one another within the context of the research. Key to understanding this is the exploration of the role of the settings in how that interaction comes about. This chapter therefore focuses on evidence of peer interaction in the data which was not always continual within the settings, nor apparent at any time of day; rather, something which surfaces out of the general melee when conditions are fertile and supportive. It is not that interaction or culture does not exist, rather it remains dormant until the right conditions occur for it to flourish.

Analysis shows that emergence of interaction was interdependent on the presence of affordances. This concept of affordances stems from Gibson’s (1979) accounts of perception of the environment. In recognising both the presence, constraint and absence of opportunities within the two settings, it is possible to identify the significance of context in the production of, and participation in, peer relations, particularly in relation to the ecological, material and human aspects of the settings observed.

Emerging Interaction

During the observations there were usually groups of anything between four and twenty children present at any one time. It was rare that the entire group would be engaged in the same activity, rather groups would form and disperse, individuals would watch from the periphery and pairs would protect themselves and then split. This was observed as an evolving process where children would come together, part, join in, and leave: groups rarely remained static for any period of time. The following extract, whilst lengthy, provides a sense of how much activity occurs in a period of less than ten minutes, and captures the essence of the speed at which peer interaction can occur, evolve and disappear.

It also illustrates the depth to which the emergence of activity is intertwined with the cultural and structural aspects of the settings. It would not be realistic or honest to present the events without including the actions and reactions of adults who enforce the existing structures. Thus the analysis which follows includes the adults’ interactions where it is
relevant, and contributes to understanding of the cultural processes the children were engaging in.

Paul then ran out from the building and toward the climbing frame: he looked at it and then turned around towards the bouncy castle; running, he veered off that path and went to sit on the see-saw. James, who had come out with him, jumped on the see-saw as well. James' mother came out and talked to him saying that she would come and pick him up later after he had had lunch and a big play: she used makaton while she said this. As she left, he waved and said 'Bye' then turned in the see-saw facing toward the car park and watched her, when he heard a car go he turned back in the see-saw and made it rock with Paul.

Anthony came running out. He stopped and looked at Paul and James then ran over to the bouncy castle and went to get on. The staff in the bouncy castle saw this and said 'Shoes', he sat on the floor and took off his shoes and socks, staff tucked the socks into the shoes. I was standing nearby and realised that Anthony was pointing down at my feet, saying 'Shoes' so I took off my shoes and got on the bouncy castle with him.

We played chase for a short while. Paul got off the see-saw and joined us running in the bouncy castle. Anthony then ran off toward the climbing frame looking at me and running each time I got closer, we chased like this for a bit, with Paul alongside for a while.

I then stood at the top of the climbing frame and was able to watch James and Paul who were playing together, they cycled down the path together until the bike got stuck in the sand. The boys were digging at the sand in front of the bikes front wheel. James said he had to go and get a builder's hat so that he could dig properly. Paul was left digging, he then saw me and said 'bike stuck'. James did not come back straight away and Paul stopped digging walking toward the main building. He stood and looked at James, who was standing in front of the chalet, wearing a toy hard hat, and playing with Anthony. When Paul saw this he went up to him took his hand and said 'playing with me' and pulled him away.

The two then went together toward the sand, leaving Anthony by the chalet watching them. They got a bucket, filled it with sand and went up to the top of the bridge on the climbing frame, James emptied the bucket onto the path below. They repeated this several times, at one point telling me to walk underneath, I refused but a mother walked past, had not seen what they were doing and a spade fell on her shoulder. She said to the boys that they had missed her. Staff then saw what the boys were doing and told them both to come to her at the bottom of the climbing frame, they stood in front of her. She said that they had promised not to throw sand at the centre and that it was naughty. She said to them they could play in the sand or with it but not to throw it. She then walked away, one of the boys then said to the other I know. He filled the bucket with sand and went to the top of the twisty slide and slid the sand down, the other boy was at the bottom and stood so it covered his feet. They then took turns James giving instructions to Paul about whose turn it was. Paul took turns.
as instructed but was also making up his rules and slowly going further up the slide each time sand was poured down it, when he saw this James did the same.

Matthew came along and joined in. He slid down the slide while Paul and James stood still watching him then James told him 'Go away'. While this was happening Paul had seen some children cycle past the frame. He followed after them jumped on a nearby bike and peddled fast after them. James didn't notice his friend's defection straight away but when he did he stood watching him, (Play Setting).

Paul, James, Matthew and Anthony, in a very short period of time, engaged in a string of different activities. There was no definitive point when they would end one activity and begin another; rather the interaction seemed to emerge from the situation. For example, the game of racing bikes down the track evolved into digging in the sand, then into throwing sand, ending in burying feet in sand in a fluid movement of participants, materials and focus. The intervention of the staff was not only instrumental in the change of activity involving the sand, but it caused the action to move from one location in the setting to another.

My analysis led to evidence of interaction which seemed to emerge out of the general activity of the day. There appeared to be no predetermined agreement between the children about commencing a new activity, nor did their action follow precise patterns of activity. This led to the conclusion that interaction came out of the general environment rather than being exclusively operated by the children themselves.

**Affordances**

Identifying peer interactions as emergent rather than static, sometimes evolving whilst at other times not emerging raises important questions. What are the conditions in which peer interactions emerge? Why is it that sometimes there is an absence of observable peer interaction? What leads to some interaction becoming a sequence of activities, such as the data extract at the beginning of the chapter, whilst some remain short lived?

In seeking to unravel this, Gibson's theory of Affordances (1979) was particularly useful and insightful. Within the theory of affordances, which is part of a wider piece of work relating to the psychology of perception, Gibson identified affordances as a redefinition of the values and meanings attached to everyday objects. He explains:-
The perceiving of an affordance is not a process of perceiving a value-free physical object to which meaning is somehow added in a way that no one has been able to agree upon: it is a process of perceiving a value-rich ecological object. Any substance, any surface, any layout has some affordance for benefit or injury to someone (Gibson 1979:140).

What is particularly useful in utilising the concept of affordance is the way in which there is a perceptual shift which mirrors the principles within assuming an ambiguous ontology as outlined in chapter 2. The standard values and meanings of everyday life are suspended whilst the data are examined from the perceiver's, in this case the children's, viewpoint.

From an analytic point of view, recognising affordances therefore encouraged a broadened appreciation of the interactions which drew upon the settings. Rather than look solely at the interactions between the children I began to consider how they were using their environment to interact with one another. It was also clear that, within the two settings, the degrees of and depth of peer interactions were different; yet many of the children visited both. This indicated that there was a possibility that the settings presented different sets of affordances.

Gibson identifies different types of affordances, three of which are particularly useful in understanding the data gathered within this research: material, ecological and human. Each of these relates to an aspect of the settings and was clearly identifiable within the two settings, as I shall explain.

Material Affordances

In describing material affordances Gibson (1979) uses humankind's adaptation of the natural environment to clarify his meaning, as he explains:-

Civilised people have altered the steep slopes of their habitat by building stairways so as to afford ascent and descent. What we call the steps afford stepping, up or down, relative to the size of the person's legs (Gibson 1979:132).

Thus objects can be designed with purposes in mind. However, they also have alternative affordances. Children may view steps as a place to jump from, to hide from adults, or to test their skills of balance. Adults may perceive other affordances; a storage place for other objects, the sight of a grand entrance, aesthetic enhancement of a setting, or as a barrier to access for someone who cannot climb steps.
Within the data there was evidence of the material phenomena which exist within specialised settings, such as soft play areas, play towers, swings and seating areas which afford children with the opportunity to engage with one another. It was evident also that each setting was unique, and each had varying amounts of space which reflected different design and operational features which were influenced primarily by the philosophies of the two agencies – play and care.

Considering the data, it was apparent that the swings in both settings were especially laden with a multitude of affordances and perceptions. The swings were sites where children would talk about school, home, friends, holidays and each other, or even just sit without swinging. In occupying swings next to each other and engaging in the action of swinging, or pushing each other, the children were not required to look directly at each other or engage in socially expected visual communication. Swings were also places where one-to-one children could engage with other children who would help to push them, without staff intervention. Also swings were regularly places where children withdrew and chose to watch the activity of others. At other times the swings would become the focus of group activity, with children gathering without staff intervention as the staff perceived the children to be engaging in a known accepted activity. Thus the children’s responses to the swings were variable according to a variety of perceptions held by the children.

Another significant aspect of the material nature of affordances relates to the size, location and subsequent use of ‘watch towers’ by the children. Some of the sites within the settings afforded the children with spaces from which they could withdraw from the hub of activity and watch as is seen in the following extract.

For the first hour Max was sitting up at the top of the tower looking through the portholes at the tv: mostly he was lying on his front, but every so often he would stand up and look over the top. Then Krystina went up the tower (I have often seen her up there too). She stood near to Max and began rocking. Max stood looking at her with a slightly startled expression on his face. She then sat on the floor blocking his route out of the tower. Max remained where he was, staring at her. After a few minutes she stood up and he walked past her and came down the tower. At one point it was not possible to see Krystina from the floor area so Max walked to the foot of the stairs to the tower. When he saw her there he returned to the middle of the room. When the Thomas the Tank music was playing he would march on the spot to time with it, smiling and half waving his hands, while doing this he would look round at staff, with eyebrows raised in an expectant manner. When he got no response, he returned to watching the video (Care Setting).
It was not uncommon for children to use the physical design of the settings for their own means. Groups of children would regularly be found hiding away from adults in spaces which afforded them the opportunity to distance themselves from the adults – thus lessening the degrees of supervision experienced.

**Ecological Affordances**

The idea that affordance also has the capacity to exist within the ecology is a significant aspect of Gibson's theory (1979) in relation to understanding peer culture. When considering the affordances for the emergence of peer culture, this requires the researcher to widen their perception to consider not only individual material objects but the total context: its design, operation, objects, artefacts, agents, and the fixed features as well as the transient ones.

Realising the multi-faceted nature of sites, and the variety of affordances contained within them, led me to explore the sites within each setting in more detail. What gradually became apparent was that it was not so much the individual sites which were impacting on children’s interactions, but rather the output of the combination of the physical characteristics and way in which the sites were being interpreted by the children. This output is best represented by the affordances offered by the backdrop provided by the sites within the settings. The nature of the physical characteristics of the sites affects the affordances offered to children to exercise peer interaction. Key physical features when exploring the impact on peer activity can be divided into two distinct categories: location and design.

The precise location of various sites provides a wide range of opportunities for children. Specific outcomes of site location are the provision of lookouts and spaces which afford children the opportunity to distance themselves within the settings:

'Look-outs' are sites which are located away from the central areas of activity and tend to provide quieter spaces. One affordance of such sites is the provision of a space from which the children look out. In both settings there are sites which are different in appearance, design and perceived use; however, they are similar in that they are situated away from the central arenas of action, set above ground level and difficult for adults to access. These sites, which on the surface appear different, offer the children 'lookouts' from which they can observe the activity without necessarily being drawn into it: the child can then choose whether to leave the lookout and join in or whether to remain watching.
It is also interesting to note that in both settings children use sites located near the main entrances into the play areas as a lookout. From these areas children are able to watch a door without getting in the way, or being drawn into the action by the door. It is also relevant that these areas have a higher occupation rate at times when staff and children are arriving and leaving.

Also significant within the degrees of affordance offered by a site was its distance from the hub of the setting. A by-product of being further from the heart of day to day activity is that these sites tend to have a lower supervision intensity. In the care setting there is a room located off the main play area. Staff can see into this room from the play area but have a tendency to position themselves near the room rather than in it; thus affording children the opportunity to distance themselves from the structure of the setting whilst also gaining a greater space in which to interact. That room is also separate from the rest of the setting, whilst the other areas tend either to be thoroughfares from one part of the setting to the other or directly overlooked from the central play area.

Where the play setting occupies a larger ground-area, there are a higher number of sites which offer children distance from the settings, such as the sand area – in particular the part of it under the climbing frame which is difficult for the staff and some of the children to access. There children can withdraw from the centre of activity, resulting in interaction which has a tendency to involve smaller groups of children. Within these sites accessed by fewer children, there appears to be more effective child-led control over an activity's participants and the boundaries within that activity.

I went outside to look and see who was in and where. I met Polly who I have met before at both settings. She took my hand and said 'Come and make sandcastles' and led me down the path to the area of sand beside the twisty slide. The game followed a similar pattern: she would choose the bucket and then hand it to me saying 'You do it.' Once the bucket was full she might sometimes say 'More' or pat it down, otherwise she watched as the sand was patted down. Then she would point to the sand saying 'There' and wait while you tipped the bucket over, then she would watch as you removed the bucket revealing the castle. Occasionally she would participate in the process of building the castle whilst at other times I would notice Polly sitting watching the other children playing in the general play area, not looking at the sandcastle at all.

After a short while Jake came and joined us building sandcastles. When he first sat down Polly looked at him momentarily and then carried on telling me it was my turn and that I was to 'Do it'. Jake chose a bucket and began to make sandcastles too, Polly watched as he filled the bucket using the spade she had been holding.
As Jake and Polly sat together making sandcastles, they appeared, on the surface, to be absorbed in the activity; yet whenever there was a noise from the general play area, or a child ran past, they would look up and watch. (Play Setting).

Not only were Jake and Polly using the sand to make sand castles, it was also acting as a place from which to observe the other children without having to join in, and also without looking as if they were not part of the general group. Once engaged in building sandcastles there was also less chance that staff would intervene: there was a tendency not to interrupt children who were engaged in an activity which had acceptable adult-defined occupation. This is not dissimilar to Waksler’s (1991) research, which shows that adults are less likely to intervene or perceive deviance in a mainstream kindergarten so long as adult-defined understandings of an activity are adhered to. As Waksler commented: ‘the issue here is not to conceal what one does but to do it unnoticeably’ (Waksler 1991:110).

As I briefly mentioned earlier, the design of sites has a direct impact on the level of supervision experienced by children, and thus the degree of adult intervention in child interaction. The focus here is the way in which the design of a site either raises or lowers the amount of supervision, thus impacting on the degrees of affordance present. In lowering the supervisory level some children gain greater freedom to engage in peer activity. However, for other children it is the perceived presence of adults which facilitates and sometimes moderates peer interaction.

Also significant is the way in which the design impacts on the structure existent in an activity, and thus the need for adult guidance or supervision in its use. This is most clearly seen in the use of the blue swing, which is a special swing designed for children with physical disability, and where adults are needed to help a child get on and off the swing, to fasten the safety harness and then swing the seat.

When reflecting on the way sites offer a lookout, I mentioned how their location can affect their accessibility to adults and children alike. Accessibility is often also a result of the design of equipment and play areas. Whilst certain pieces of equipment elicit a higher level of supervision, others tend to attract less adult attention. The equipment and play areas in both settings were designed with the children in mind and as such are not always easily accessed by adults. For example, a child’s climbing frame is sometimes difficult for adults to use because of its size and physical challenges. Few adults still retain the strength, suppleness and motivation to swing off monkey bars, climb ropes and hang upside down off a climbing frame! It also needs to be recognised that some areas are equally inaccessible to some children as well as adults. Children who use wheelchairs or need adult assistance in
participation, find themselves excluded from various activities due to the physical limitations presented by the nature of the layout of some equipment. Thus some sites can contain both negative and positive affordances; which either constrains peer interaction or nurtures it.

Other sites possess features not enjoyed by adults resulting in a reluctance by the latter to enter a site. At one of the settings there is a bouncy castle, which, whilst it is enjoyed by some adults, it is possible to note that others do not enter into it, choosing instead to stand by the side and watch. Another factor is that anyone using the bouncy castle has to remove their shoes and socks first (this same rule applies to the soft play areas) and a consequence of this is that adults who do not like to remove their shoes and socks avoid entering these sites. One member of staff expressed the sentiment ‘that it gets tedious constantly taking your shoes on and off all day’ (Journal, June 2000).

The bouncy castle and soft play areas were not the only places which were less accessible to staff. The top of the climbing frame, or underneath it, were popular places for peer activity. There children used the equipment as a starting point for activity such as games of chase or hide-and-seek. Finding themselves out of the view of staff, the children would then pretend to hide from staff, and when there was no response from staff, the children would then fall into a game of hide-and-seek among themselves. So whilst the presence of staff may help the beginning of the activity, it would then evolve into something among the children.

Smaller pieces of equipment are generally more flexible, can be incorporated directly into an activity, and can be moved around the setting as the children choose, for example, bicycles, balls, soft mats, spades and other such ‘play’ material. Analysis revealed the ways in which specific pieces of equipment are used to facilitate peer group activity. Sometimes this would appear to be purposeful on the part of the children, whilst sometimes the use of equipment appeared accidental. For example, children sitting on or near the soft play area would develop and evolve their activity around the pieces of equipment available to them. In the following example a group of children are initially sitting around, then gradually they become drawn into an activity as a group

Susan was sitting on the big tube in the soft play area watching the other children when Stuart fell onto the yellow tube, causing her to fall off. When at first Stuart landed on the tube she froze, looking at him, then laughed, the tube then rolled to the side and she fell off, still laughing. Stuart was laughing too, up to this point the Susan had been playing her own game jumping on the tube looking at the others when they made loud noises. She went and jumped back on the tube at the same time and same end as Stuart, but since there was not
enough space at that end, the staff nearby asked her to move up the tube, which she did, and then Stuart jumped on.

Stuart fell off almost straight away. I was sitting by the tube on the squishy peanut ball, the girl leant down into me, as we moved back her expression froze for a second as we realised that we wouldn't be able to remain upright, this movement caused both of us to fall. Susan was laughing as she hit the mats and jumped back on the tube as I got back on the peanut, she repeated the lean, although this time it was clear what was going to happen etc. While we were doing this for the third time I realised that Stuart had climbed inside the tube, I could hear him laughing. The tube was then rocking with Susan sitting on the top laughing before falling off and looking in the tube. I put my feet in the tube then another boy was behind me, he pushed so that I went more into the tube, the boy inside was laughing.....there was then an incident which resulted in the children being told off by staff. At this point Susan returned to the top of the tube and began to resume the game she had been playing on her own before Stuart jumped on the tube (Play Setting).

The children in this extract were all involved in their own action then, due to Stuart jumping onto the tube, began to engage with each other. This use of equipment to bring together a group of children in a joint activity was observed on many occasions. By using the equipment, mostly on purpose and sometimes accidental, the children bridged that initial moment of interpersonal contact through a third party – in this case a material object.

This leads to a perception of ecology which is not static or clearly identifiable, which changes, it can be both positive and negative and is open to the views of those engaging with it. In the context of this thesis the settings observed contained a multitude of affordances related to the respective environments. The important point here is that, through assuming ontological uncertainty about agency and context, the researcher was enabled to perceive the ecological affordances from the children's perspectives. This led to identification of the perspectives and an appreciation of how the children utilise the structures around them on a collective level which in turn produces identifiable peer interactions.

**Human Affordances**

Gibson's theory of affordances (1979, Hutchby 2001) also encourages the researcher to view humans as the source of affordances. As he explains:-

Behaviour affords behaviour........sexual behaviour, fighting behaviour, cooperative behaviour, economic behaviour, political behaviour – all depend on the perceiving of what another person or other persons afford, or sometimes on the misperceiving of it (Gibson 1979:135).
Within the research settings in this thesis, this is especially important, as one of the concerns at the outset was the impact of the high levels of supervision and surveillance experienced by the children (Watson 1999). As such the role of adults in contributing to affordance for children to participate in peer interactions was significant. Adults’ perceptions of the children’s ability and understanding of peer interactions impacted on the degree of interaction observed. In the play setting, where adults perceived and openly acknowledged the possibility of connections between the children, there were a higher number of affordances for interaction observed. Thus it can be concluded that humans, through their own behaviour, can limit or increase the presence of affordances.

In chapters 3, 4 and 7 the influences upon, and the actual levels of, surveillance experienced by disabled children were discussed at length. The data within this research highlights that the level of supervision is not the only factor critical in considering the impact on opportunity for peer interaction. The style of supervision also has a significant influence on the affordances present in the settings.

The staffing levels in the care setting were high, usually at an adult/child ratio of 1:2. At mealtimes this would increase, as management would sometimes join the group. Also in this setting many of the staff lived in and would pop in to see the children, sometimes in the evening or at mealtimes, and whilst they usually did not partake in the general activity, their presence did increase the adult to child ratio. There were very few times when the children would be alone without staff supervision. This led to data which show that within the care setting the opportunities for interaction arose more often within the presence of staff.

The occurrence of opportunity for peer interaction was erratic and was dependent on the type of supervision the staff were engaging in. Opportunities for children to interact were most common at times when the staff gaze was directed elsewhere resulting in somewhat superficial and token supervision. Staff were regularly engaged in conversation about care tasks, the children, general social conversation, or, in the evenings, watching television. At all these times, although they were physically present in the room, their concentration was not necessarily focussed on the children. The following extract demonstrates the emergence of peer interaction in these circumstances.

There was a lot of milling around as various children were arriving. There were two staff in the main area unpacking bags and organising the children, telling them where they were going to be sleeping. While this was happening Susan and Gus who had already arrived were sitting on the sofa. Lesley was walking around the room. Each time she came close to Gus he would
reach out his hand and touch her arm. Susan sat watching this gradually moving along the sofa so that she and Gus were touching. After about ten minutes of this Lesley then went into the sensory area and lay down, Gus saw this, got up and joined her. He pulled at her foot for a bit and then sat close to her watching. Every so often she would look up at him. Lesley moved along the sofa to occupy the space Gus had been sitting in. When staff noticed Gus in the sensory area they told him to leave Lesley alone and to leave the area. He sat looking at the staff who then returned to unpacking. He did not leave the area but continued watching Lesley, (Care Setting).

The opportunity for interaction existed when staff were absorbed in their caring duties, out of this the interaction between the three children emerged. This extract also demonstrates the size of the peer groups within the care setting, which remained small. Whether this is a direct consequence of the levels of supervision, or to do with the size of the group in attendance, is difficult to ascertain.

The observations within the care setting revealed that peer interaction tended to be limited to individual instances, rather than an evolutionary flow of different activities, such as was shown in the previous extract. There were a large number of instances when interaction would start, then falter on the intervention of staff. Staff were usually situated in close proximity of any action and therefore in a position to intervene in haste.

This was in direct contrast to the Play setting, where interaction was often in a constant state of change and evolution, involving varying numbers of children as illustrated in the opening extract of this section. The levels of supervision were structured differently, as there was a combination of staff and volunteers. The levels of staff were lower than the care setting, yet once combined with the number of volunteers (which was flexible), the ratio of adult to child was, on average, similar to the care setting.

The interaction at the play setting was indicative of the fact that there was more opportunity for the children to engage in a series of complex interactions. The children were left to their own devices far more within this setting, while staff would stand back at a distance, taking an overview of the activity as a whole. It also has to be remembered that, while this is indicative of the style of supervision adopted, it is also an effect of a larger play area.

Rather than stand and watch, directing the action, staff in the play setting would join in with whatever the children were engaged in. I regularly witnessed staff making sandcastles, running wildly around the soft play area in a game of chase, or sitting colouring-in alongside children. It was clear that staff within the play setting are very aware of their impact on
Children’s activity, in the staff group interview they discussed a number of concerns; one was that they would sometimes get in the children’s way, to the extent that sometimes on joining the activity the children would stop until they left again. They felt that they have three choices when supervising, the first being to ‘join in fully with an activity’, the second to ‘only join in now and then’ and the third to ‘watch and wait’. On the whole the staff engaged in each of these more or less equally.

Children perceive adults not only as carers, staff or others, but also as tools for assisting them to achieve interaction. Thus humans became ‘objectified’ in the provision of affordances. It was clear that the staff in the play setting were, to an extent, aware of this in their comments that they were the children’s ‘playthings’. They perceived themselves as tools for facilitating peer interaction and were willing agents in this happening.

There were many occasions when I witnessed children using the staff to facilitate their interaction with others. This happened in two ways. On a basic level staff would be asked to come and act as ‘communicator’ between children. This was most common when there were groups who did not use the same method of communication. Staff in both settings are aware of their role in this, as they explained they are often asked to come and act as interpreters of makaton, pic symbols or such like, so that a game can continue.

However, what occurred, in the play setting in particular, were incidents when staff would be dragged into a game and directed what to do. It was not uncommon in the play setting to see staff being pulled by the arm to a piece of equipment and instructed what to do. In the same way, groups of children would insist that staff fulfilled a particular role in an activity. Commonly games of hide-and-seek resulted in groups of children telling an adult to search for them. The staff member was not allowed to be a free agent in how they sought out the children, and directions would be heard coming from the children as the adults filled the seeker role. If staff made any attempt to alter the course of the activity or to partake beyond a certain level then the children would exclude them. In the following extract, staff were brought into the water game in order to facilitate children’s involvement in a water fight; however, the staff’s exuberance at playing in the water in a way similar to children resulted in the children leaving the area entirely.

Sally pulled at a member of staff in the direction of the hosepipe. When they got there the staff helped to pull the hose down to the water play area. Emily, on seeing the hose, joined the group of about ten children who were gathering around the water, splashing and running about. Hannah was holding onto staff for balance while she splashed a couple of the other children nearby. Freddie was sitting in the middle of
the area laughing as he pointed to children in turn as his one to one staff member splashed each at his direction. It was very chaotic.

I noticed that the two members of staff who were helping were beginning to splash children of their choosing, then they turned to splashing each other. Another member of staff also joined in. Water was going everywhere and the noise level increased dramatically. As the staff game increased the children began to leave the area or move to the perimeter of the game and stand watching (Play Setting).

Sally was clear what she wanted the staff to do: the hose pipe was too heavy for her to move herself, permission (on that particularly hot day) was not really needed for the hose to be put on; she was using the staff to start an activity. Hannah would have found it hard to join in splashing without something to hold onto, so in this case the staff was in effect objectified in order for her to participate. In the same way Freddie was able to direct the splashing and be involved, through using the staff; although it was not something he could physically achieve himself. Difficulties only arose when the staff forgot their own roles as objects, or were unwilling to assume that position, resulting in the end of any peer interaction among the children at that time.

In the care setting, children would try to use staff to facilitate activity; however, staff tended not to accept this role preferring to become completely involved in an activity to the point that they were then participating as staff members. In these situations the staffs’ reluctance to assume the mantle of ‘object’ thus making them devoid of a role, was perhaps rooted in the very clear structure and hierarchy in existence, which allocated very clear roles for everyone in the setting, both children and adults.

**Perceiving affordances**

The presence of affordances within both settings is only demonstrable by the evidence of children partaking in peer interaction. This indicates that the children not only perceived the affordances as they arose, but were collectively joining in a shared understanding of those affordances by engaging in interaction. Thus affordances rely on the perception of the opportunities contained within.

The idea of perceiving material and physical objects is not a new one in the sociology of childhood and is evident in the work of Goode (1991), already mentioned in the chapter 8. Goode’s work with a deaf-blind child recognised the significance of perception of artefacts within the environment. However, the concept of understanding children’s perception of their environment in its totality, thus including adults, objects, ecology and each other as
Gibson suggests, is relatively new. Hutchby (2001) and Hernwall (1999) both use the theory of affordances effectively in broadening our understanding of technology within childhood.

The use of affordances within the context of this research is unique in the way it recognises and draws on understandings of the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. In realising the interdependence between the two, it is possible to acknowledge the inextricable relationship between the peer groups, their interactions and their context. It is at the point where children perceive the affordances within their environment, that agency and competence become visible to the observer.

This answers questions about children's agency and competence within these specific settings and demonstrates that it is the children's actions, and more specifically interactions, which provide evidence of agency. Agency which is interrelated with the context and is 'an achievement that is bounded by the structural features of the milieux in which children live their lives' (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1999:14). However, agency is not static or consistently observable, its presence is intertwined with the context in which it appears. Within this research this is a critical point, that with the strength and seeming rigidity of the structures in place in specialist settings, children can and do engage with one another competently and agentically, when the opportunity arises and when the children perceive it.

**Summary**

This chapter has focussed on the interactions between the children. In demonstrating the emergent nature of interaction that it is not consistent or predictable, and in recognising that it emerged out of the general melee within the settings, a number of questions arose.

In formulating and answering questions about how and why peer interactions emerge at particular moments, the analysis turned to the theory of affordances (Gibson 1979). In perceiving the environment as the source of opportunities for peer interaction, the focus widens from its narrow vision of peer interaction, incorporating exploration of the settings themselves. In considering the material, ecological and human factors involved, it is possible to appreciate why it is that interaction sometimes flourishes, whilst at other times it does not emerge.

This leads to a growing awareness that time and space are important factors within peer interactions. As such there have been glimpses of time and space in relation to the material, ecological and human affordances which involves children physically situating themselves
within interaction. It is this embodied experience of peer interactions which is the focus within the next chapter.
The Social Body: Interaction in Time and Space

This chapter explores the position of the body which was observed in the interactions engaged in by the peer groups. The demonstration that peer interactions emerge from affordances within the context of the settings indicates that interactions are experienced in a physical sense. The focus therefore turns to the temporal and spatial situating of children within specific environments designed for their use, their safety and their wellbeing which was observed in the positioning and regulation of the body and subsequent involvement of the body in social processes.

This chapter focuses on three specific aspects of the body which were identified in the data gathered. The first is the corporeal position of the children within the settings. Analysis then progresses to consider how this is primarily managed and defined by the adult and institutional accounts of children's understanding of time and space; thus shaping and impacting on the affordances present and the subsequent peer interactions. The third aspect concerns the ways in which children situate themselves within the settings, using their bodies to respond to and sometimes resist the adult-defined order.

Corporeal Bodies

In the early stages of analysis the focus was on the body as a form of communication. However, it became increasingly clear that, in seeking to replace discourse with another form of communication, something far more fundamental was being omitted. The children's existence within the settings was observed to be physical in the way they were situated, connected with one another and participated in interactions. This leads therefore to a brief reflection upon the corporeality of the children's existence in the research settings. For clarity, corporeality here refers to the existence and presence of the body in space and time (Frank 1991). Through doing this, it is possible to gain an understanding of the significance of the embodied aspect of peer interaction.

For the children within the settings, the body was a consistent feature within both inaction and interactions observed among the peers, and within the settings, including both material and social features. This includes those children who are allocated one-to-one staffing, those perceived to be in their own world and those with profound impairments.
The following extract demonstrates the physicality of the children's presence within the care setting. Whilst there is not much action the position of the bodies is illustrative of the corporeal existence within one particular space in the setting:

There were three children in the conservatory, each separate from each other. One was lying on the mat at the end of the room on his side, looking up at the glass ceiling talking to himself. Another was standing looking up at the glass ceiling, he appeared to be focussed on something, when I looked up there were the reflections of the lights from traffic outside and the reflection of the tree was twinkling slightly from the recent rain. There was a girl sitting in her wheelchair moving it so that she could watch the younger boy watching the ceiling (care setting).

The room remained quiet for 15 minutes as the children stayed in their positions watching the glass of the conservatory. The absence of action within this example does not mean that the children are not sharing something or collectively engaged in an activity; rather it is an intensely physical thing which is shared in time and in space – without the need for words, communication, movement or interaction.

Regulated bodies in Time and Space

Within the initial process of coding it became analytically clear that children’s time and space were being tightly regulated and controlled by staff within both settings. This regulation, which involved organisation of the body, had a direct impact on the number, degree and nature of affordances within the two settings. As such it is a significant factor in the emergence of peer interactions. Before considering how the children respond to and resist the situational processes which adults subject them to, there is therefore a brief outline of the regulatory practices which were observed.

The recognition of the importance of time and space is not a new idea in relation to children (Hockey & James 2003) or peer relations (Corrigan 1979). There is also recognition that the 'qualitative structuring of daily and yearly time' may have a significant impact on the lives of disabled children (James, Jenks & Prout 1998:75). The data gathered within this thesis provides an account of the shape of that structuring within specific types of setting in relation to the body.

Temporal rhythm refers to the flow of time, in this case the organisation of children's time within the settings. Children arrive at a time prescribed by the management of the settings
and agreed upon by the parents. The pattern of the day has a recognisable rhythm to it which is punctuated by personal care, administration of medication, staff changeover, mealtimes and drinks, and staff breaks. This structuring of time in effect organises and situates the body within a social order which is defined by adults, both within the settings and the wider society outside.

The basic temporal rhythm within the settings is relatively stable and also rather inflexible. It responds to the demands of external expectations relating to health and safety, standards of care and social perceptions relating to such provision (as discussed in chapter 7). Mealtimes were predictable, particularly in the care setting, to within ten minutes of a specific time. Times of staff changeover within the care setting were also inflexible, thus stalling activity in the early afternoon. While handover occurred, there were minimal numbers of staff present, which sometimes meant that children had to remain in one specific area. This time was often a point at which activity would stop, with both adults and children sitting around waiting for the next part of the day to begin.

What was clear was that the children were aware of the rhythm of the day which had been shaped by the adults. Children would gather near the dining area at mealtimes, and near the door at hometime, often telling me what was going to happen next.

The children therefore experienced the passage of time through the physical positioning and organisation of spatial occupation which was imposed on them. Thus it is not possible to consider the shape of the daily rhythm without recognising the spatial experiences of the children. As James, Jenks and Prout comment:

Through this patterning of time, children’s access to and participation in a diversity of social arenas, becomes proscribed: children’s time is inextricably linked with the social space of childhood (ibid 1998:75).

Within the research settings the organisation and regulation of space begins before children arrive, as I noted one day when I arrived early:

I arrived before the children today and so sat for about 15 minutes while staff put together the train set, they were saying how they thought specific children who were expected would enjoy using it. By the time children began arriving, it covered a large area of the play area. (play setting).

It was not uncommon for staff to ‘set the stage’ for children to interact within. Games would be laid out, activities decided in staff handovers and meetings and then implemented
by those on duty. Whilst there were degrees of flexibility within both settings, there was a notable difference in the play setting staff who appeared more amenable to changing the activity of the day and accepted input from the children.

Space was regulated in both settings, with staff deciding which areas within each setting the children could use during their visits. Staff were able to lock off certain areas of the settings, thus making them inaccessible for the children. It was the decision of the staff on duty whether to open the door to outside, open the art-room, or close off specific play areas. These decisions were related to a number of different issues; whether there were sufficient staff to supervise increased areas, the time of day, the staff's enthusiasm in being in a different place, the weather and the children who were in.

The regulation of space in direct relation to time was observed in the organisation around mealtimes. In both settings there was a routine which began before a meal, carrying on through to the process of clearing the dining area afterwards. Staff would be engaged in setting the dining area, whilst children observed and recognised the changes occurring around them. This was evident in the way children would gather close to the dining areas waiting to be told to go and sit down.

Approaching mealtimes indicate another regulation of the body which is more associated with biologised management – that of ensuring all the children had clean nappies, or had visited the loo and washed their hands, and were physically ready to eat. This procedure happened at other times of day; however, it was more obvious before meals since there was a buzz of activity and sense of anticipation preparing for food. The ordering of activity and the body over mealtimes had distinctive spatial and temporal elements which shaped the day for all involved.

Within the care setting, the regulation of children's bodies was more visible. This corresponds with the focus of the staff which is directed toward 'care' and its associated tasks, many of which relate to the management of the body. It also reflects the groups of children who attended. The care setting had a higher number of children with profound impairment visiting who required greater degrees of personal care. Some of the children relied totally on staff and adults to meet all their physical needs. This had an impact on the temporal and spatial experiences of some of the children. The following extract describes the way in which three children are situated within the setting by the staff:

The children who were in the play-area were all wheelchair users reliant on adults to position them; they were in a line facing toward the tv (which was not on) - they looked as if they
were waiting for a bus. After about 15 minutes one of the staff came into the room and commented so moved one of the boys round so that he could see the others. Then staff put the tv on lining up the children so that they could watch it, two of the children were watching whilst one was looking toward the Susie in the sensory area. The other children were milling around the room (care setting).

Another example of the impact of the organisation of body in space and time involves the small number of children who were tube-fed at prescribed times. The staff would give them their meal in the general play area when required. Then at mealtimes the children would be positioned\(^1\) at one end of the table, usually apart from those eating. Thus they were subject to a different spatial experience within the setting because of the structured ways in which the staff managed their bodily needs.

This section has demonstrated that the children experienced temporal and spatial structures within the settings in the way they were organised and positioned by adults in time and space. The following section within this chapter explores children's collective interaction especially relating to the situating and interaction of their bodies.

**Interacting Bodies**

The corporeality within more complex interactions was apparent in the involvement of physical bodies as tools for directing activity and negotiation, resolving conflict, or as an integral element of the activity itself. Children would place themselves where they wanted to be, point to where others should be, direct, push, and pull others into activity. Others physically withdrew from a range of situations, from activity, from others, the adults, conflict, noise and the general environment. Evidence of this led to the conclusion that children were communicating through their bodies and interactions.

In the following extracts it is possible to appreciate the significance of the body in the interactions between children. By altering the focus away from discourse the physicality between the children became apparent.

There were two children who tend to wander around the setting, apparently unaware of others around them. James would reach out to Sophia each time he walked past her. On the whole this was gentle although occasionally this would be slightly rougher. It ended up with Sophia lying in the sensory area,

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1 The children who were tube fed, also used wheelchairs and were nearly always reliant on others to push them and situate them within an activity or group.
with her bottle, drinking from it. James then sat in the sensory area too. He pulled at her foot for a bit then sat close watching. Every so often she would look at him and then carry on drinking her milk (care setting).

Four children were in the same area, two were doing artwork, while the staff and other children were watching Sam foot painting. Imogen, who had been lying on the floor turned onto her bottom and crawled over to Stuart and stroked his foot. She also stroked the staff’s foot. Staff told her to get off and moved her feet out of reach. Stuart however put his leg out and Imogen looked at it then touched him. Stuart watched her as she did this. They sat like this for about five minutes (play setting).

These extracts demonstrate the significance of the body within interaction and in establishing social connections. They also illustrate children’s openness to others entering their private space, in what is a very physical manner. What is interesting in the second interaction is the staff response to being touched, which was an instant withdrawal of contact. Why she responded this way is not apparent; however, what is clear is the contrast with Stuart, who further facilitated the contact with Imogen by putting his leg out. It was not uncommon to observe children engaged in close physical contact, stroking each other, touching feet or sitting close.

In certain activities children would situate themselves where they wanted to be, instructing others into position, or leave the area, thereby demonstrating their level of involvement. This seemed to happen particularly on equipment where turn taking occurred. For example, on the swings this was observed in the actions of children pushing others off the swings in order to have a go. Similar incidents occurred on the zip slide, where children would jostle for their turn. Thus, in situating themselves where they wanted to be, children were using their bodies as an expression of their involvement without requiring the use of language. In the following extract, from a journal reflection on the relationship between friends, Sarah, Emily and John are playing with the zip slide.

Sarah, Emily and John spent most of the day together, playing different games. Sarah was directing the others most of the time. At one point on the zip slide she was physically pulling and pushing the others around organising who was going to have a turn next. It seemed that she had more goes than the other two although every so often Emily would grab the slide seat and try to sit on it at the same time as Sarah, who would get cross shouting ‘No, no’ then push her off (play setting).
Within conflict the children’s bodies featured highly in the processes of resolution. Conflict tended to arise from disagreement about an activity or who should be included as participants in the group activity. In the process of achieving a solution, the children were observed doing any one (or more) of a variety of things; pushing others away, holding onto and physically directing each other, walking away from the situation, or moving an activity to another site.

The following extract demonstrates Jenny’s positioning and the use of her body in order to retain possession of the water-hose. The children regularly wanted to have the hose, as it was a source of fun and amusement to spray the staff and the children, whilst for others it was also a source of interest in the way the water came out of it. Also the person with the hose would generally demonstrate more influence over the direction of activity, and indeed movement, of others (adults and children) in the vicinity of the hose. There was often conflict over who would have the hose. In the following extract there is disagreement over the hose; however, Jenny, who is a small quiet girl, positions herself so that she retains the hose.

Jenny was holding the hose about 6 inches from the end: whenever another child snatched it from her, she would not say anything or make any noise, she would follow the hose and slowly manoeuvre herself in among the other children, take a hold of the hose and hang on until everyone let go, then walk off with it again (play setting).

In the previous chapter, I presented an extract where the children collectively left the water area when the staff became involved in an exuberant water fight. Those situations, where there was a conflict of interest in the use of a space within the settings often resulted in children moving to another area. In the next extract Keiron is observed moving away from the boisterous game of chase another group of boys was playing.

Keiron had been sitting inside the soft play circle for about ten minutes when a group of boys ran in from outside playing chase. They jumped onto the top of the circle. Keiron came out of the circle looked at the boys then went to sit at the top of the slide. About five minutes later when the boys ran off outside, Keiron came down the slide and went back into the igloo (which is a central feature of the soft play area) (play setting).

In this extract, the movement of time and space is evident in the embodied experience of Keiron. He has positioned himself away from the main activity and when it encroaches into
his space he removes himself to another area, and sits out the passage of time until he can return to his space.

Other ways of dealing with conflict in activity arose when children wanted to join an established game operated by a closed sub-group. In some instances, children were physically pushed away. On other occasions there were reflections of awareness of the gendered nature of bodies, as the game would be claimed either for 'boys only' or 'girls only'. At other times when the threat of intrusion by others was present children would move their activity to another area – usually one which was less accessible to adults, less able children or spaces which could only accommodate limited numbers.

Games of hide-and-seek were a particularly embodied activity where the physical presence of the body in time and space was its primary feature. Through examination of hide-and-seek it is therefore possible to appreciate the extent of corporeality for the children within the settings. Observations of the game reveal, that within this, the children have a shared understanding of their own corporeality in this particular environment. In the following extract, Philip joined the group, even though he was told he could not join in:-

As Laura began to count Philip ran off to hide at the top of the climbing frame in the tower. He was watching from there. The climbing frame had not been included in the game so far, in fact the game had been very contained within the tarmac bit at the bottom by the field gate. Laura did not go and 'Look' for Philip even though she had seen him run away. Staff nearby who had been watching asked 'What about Philip?' Laura did not respond to the question. Then Ben arrived, Laura called his name saying 'Hello' and then told him that they were playing hide-and-seek and she was going to hide, and did he want to join in (play setting).

Through failing to find Philip, who was wanting to join the activity, the other children were collectively and physically excluding him through their own physical activity. Other versions of this lay in children hiding in small spaces, thus regulating who could join in. This happened regularly in the care setting where there was a small tower in the play area. Children would climb into this space and restrict others joining in by sitting at the entrances to the tower, effectively blocking entry.

In some instances, children also used their bodies in such as way that they were part of the activity itself. One such activity, dancing in front of a mirror or a close circle of others, was very much a physical experience. What was interesting about this was that this activity usually involved the older girls, who would stop as soon as they thought anybody was watching, particularly adults. These girls were demonstrating the adolescent
embarrassment and awkwardness about the body which is similar to their mainstream peers as they learn the gendered rules relating to the body. In describing this process in relation to mainstream adolescence, Prendergast explains this transitory stage of girls identity as:-

An embodied transition, a new-being-in-the-world dominated by the need for 'mindfulness' and 'closure' in comparison both with girls own earlier childhood experiences and with those of boys in their peer group (Prendergast 2000:103).

Thus within this research there is evidence of children resolving issues of identity through their bodily experiences. This is an issue of concern to those researching the body in disabled adults lives (Iwakuma 2002), and this data raises the awareness that, for disabled children, the body also plays an important role in developing identity and requires further exploration.

Responding to and Resisting Adult Structure

The children within the setting reacted to the embodied organisation of time and space within the settings in a multitude of ways, many of which were diverse and unpredictable. However, from the data, there appeared a pattern of children responding to the structures around them in three specific ways; accepting, enforcing or resisting. Much of the data in the first relate to individual experiences of the children; however, the latter two involve peer interaction and collective action, which will be the primary focus within this last section.

The majority of the observations demonstrated that on the whole the children accept much of the organisation of their time and spaces. Children in general enjoy their visits to the settings and accept the processes within them. This is evident in children running into the setting on arrival looking around, seeing who is there and what equipment is out. The following example was a common entry into either setting:-

Then one girl arrived dropping her jacket as she came through the door, she then removed her shoes leaving them where they fell. Staff followed her into the room saying 'shall I put this away for you then?' the staff was laughing. The girl had run straight onto the platform in the spa and was looking around her at the people in the room, she then began to bounce on her knees and laugh. Staff then climbed up to the spa and the girl saw and cuddled into her whilst looking away, the girl then turned and kissed the staff who then wiped her face saying it had been a wet kiss (play setting).
The children physically explored the settings on arrival, moving from one part to another before settling into one activity and area. Rather than examine this further, the focus in this section is directed toward the group and collective activity of the children within the structure of the settings.

The children appeared aware of the presence of rules which were designed with health and safety in mind. For example, groups of children would regularly come across regulation and rules regarding the use of equipment and the spaces available to them. It appeared that the peers understood this, not only obeying the rules but reinforcing them themselves. As a newcomer to the setting, I found myself the recipient of the children's direction relating to rules. On one particular day I was involved in a bike race around the perimeter track. Some of the children had bikes; others were running. I was holding a bike by the handlebars and was running alongside a child without a bike. As Charlie ran up the ramp to the climbing frame, I followed. Suddenly Lizzie ran forward shouting 'no, no' while Charlie grabbed the handlebars pushing me backwards. It transpired that bikes were not allowed on the climbing frame.

Whilst there is plenty of data demonstrating the ways in which children would re-enforce rules, an appreciation of the shared understandings of children in resisting the structures in the setting is more reflective of their collective culture. In particular, an in-depth examination of the data revealed the ways in which children used their bodies to resist the adult defined structures and social order.

Within both settings, it was often the staff who would decide where the hub of activity was to take place. In the care setting this was often directive, with the staff deciding that all the children would remain in one place, for example, inside, outside or the main play area. This usually reflected the staffing levels at particular times of day. Resistance to this tended to be given by individual children who would go to the loo (which was situated between the play-area and door to outside) and then, when staff were not looking, try to open the outer door; running down the path with staff in pursuit, only to be brought back in moments later.

Also in the care setting the children were sometimes taken out to the local park or in the bus for a trip to another local park. On 80% of the outings which were observed, the staff decided among themselves who was to go out without consulting the children. The staff would get the children's coats and shoes and prepare them for going out. The following extract demonstrates Sally's use of her body to resist adult direction.
We went inside and Sally was told to put on her shoes and socks as she was going for a walk. She began to cry and protest standing by the gate to go out, but refusing to put on her shoes. Staff said that without her shoes she couldn't go for a walk. Sally carried on crying and moved into the play area and sat on the floor. At this point staff said that she didn't have to go if she didn't want. Sally went into the conservatory where staff left her, deciding not to take her (care setting).

The play setting was somewhat different, reflected by the fact that the staff were more relaxed about the location of the children. They would, however, attempt to move children to alternative activities if they felt that a child had been engaged in the one activity for too long. The following extract relates an incident when a staff member decided to move three children from their activity and spaces to another area of the setting:-

I went back outside where Patrick was back playing with the sand. Staff came up the path with a bag of footballs. Dan was standing nearby. Staff said to him that they were going to play ball and that it would be nice if Dan and Patrick would join in. Staff asked Dan to join them, there was no response. Then staff asked Alex to tell him that they were going to play football. Staff said this about three times, while Alex took about three steps nearer to Patrick but did not say anything to him. Then he turned his back on him and began to walk toward the staff who was opening the gate to the field. Staff threw the balls in and then came up and said to Patrick 'we'd like it if you joined us, come and play football', at the same time he took Patrick's hand. He led him down to the field and Daniel followed. He told the boys to go on into the field and kick the balls.

Patrick went in and picked up two balls, then dropped one and then threw the other. Staff in the meantime was having to retrieve a ball which had got stuck in a tree when he had been throwing the balls into the field. The boys looked at the member of staff and then ran out of the field up the path back to the sand. Alex followed, not going as far as the sand. When the staff turned around he was surprised to realise that none of the boys were there and that they had gone back to their initial games (play setting).

Patrick, Daniel and Alex collectively used their bodies to remove themselves from the attempted regulation of time and space by the member of staff. What is interesting to note is that these three children had been engaged in their own individual activity and returned to it. They came together collectively when it was in their shared interests to move together. In the play setting it was not unusual to witness children physically removing themselves from the regulation of adults. On the whole the staff found these instances amusing and left the children to continue with their chosen activity.
Within both settings the children also used the spaces around them to avoid adult intervention. This was observed one day when I was involved in conversation with two girls at the care setting. We had been in the main play area building bricks and talking. The girls were telling me about West Life and that Shane from the band was their boyfriend. One of the staff heard the word boyfriend and came over laughing saying 'so who's that then'. The girls said it was a secret, but the staff stayed nearby trying to listen until the conversation ended: then it was teatime.

At the table during tea, Pat was telling me that her boyfriend is Shane from Westlife. She was then talking about a different boy, saying that he was at her school. She was trying to avoid being overheard by the staff and was quiet each time they approached, she would also go 'Shhhhhh go away we're talking'. This happened quite a few times as staff were moving around the table. She then said after dinner she would tell me.

When we were told that we could leave the table she said 'Lets go into the bedroom'. I said that bedrooms were for sleeping and lets find somewhere else to talk. So we went into the playroom, she said that we were to sit against the wall under the window. She then told me about the other boy from school and said that he had dumped her. She said that he is now going out with her best friend. I asked what she did with him and she told me that they held hands and snogged. During this time the staff were popping their heads in the door trying to listen, the girl would tell them to go away and that she wanted to talk to me on my own, staff were the other side of the door (open). Then we went into the soft play area, and she carried on telling me about her boyfriend. The staff left us alone (care setting).

Space within this extract plays a key role for a number of reasons. Firstly, the girls were involving me in their private space and conversation. The staff were attempting to enter this space and not accepting the girls statement that the conversation was private. Also, the eventual physical move from one area of the setting to the soft play area demonstrated Pat's understanding that staff rarely entered that area of the setting. On another level this raises an issue of space and boundaries which were in place for me as a researcher and the agreement with management not to go into the bedrooms alone with any of the children. Thus this extract illustrates three different perspectives and understandings of space within one interaction; that of the child's, staff's, and the researcher's.

Choosing places where it was difficult for adults to access or where adults out of choice did not go was also a regular occurrence. For example, certain children were often observed sitting out of the view of adults in towers. In bodily situating themselves within the towers,
they were away from the hub of activity and outside the focus of the adults. The consequence of this was significant altering of the levels of supervision experienced. This occurred in both settings, with children using a variety of difference pieces of equipment to the same effect:-

At this time Gemma was at the top of the tower. She was sitting looking out into the room through the perspex peep holes. She would raise her head above the tower, yet sat back down when staff looked over in the direction of the tower (Care Setting).

When mealtimes were called, groups would sometimes hide in the tower of the climbing frame at the play setting delaying going inside. This was not so possible at the care setting where spaces were limited and staff could generally see into every part of the setting, children would, however, hang back at the bottom of the garden, or hover in the side play-room, postponing moving to another area on staff instruction.

Other instances of resistance of spatial ordering were seen in the children’s attempts to access areas defined by the adults as out-of-bounds for play activity. In particular this applied to the kitchens, offices, toilets and general reception areas, as is seen in the next abstract. I was sitting near the kitchen with a group of children colouring in when

David ran into the kitchen carrying a pair of adult shoes and put them on the work surface, he then helped himself to a can of coke out of the fridge and sat at the table. Staff came in and asked what he was doing as 'You know you're not allowed in here' he ran off and was laughing. When staff came back they said he had picked up a set of keys off the table (play setting).

The others all watched this happen and laughed out loud. There were other times when a group would drift apparently aimlessly near the kitchen as mealtimes approached, then one of the group would try to enter the kitchen, causing laughter as the staff shooed them away. For a few others however this was an urgent activity where the absence of food or staff attention caused distress and upset.

There was, however, a time of day which was especially ordered in terms of space and time – this was also when I observed a significant number of attempts by the children at resistance using the body. This was the period before, during and after meals. In these circumstances the majority of the children would be present and the cohort peer group would become involved. While an incident would usually be instigated by a smaller number of children, the others would support an action by joining in or by creating a diversion.
Joining in seemed to be particular to action which involved making noise, as is shown in the following extract. I suggest that loud shouts, giggles and noises acted as a rallying cry for the other children in the room:-

While the children were waiting for their lunch boxes, Kate began to bang the table, three other children copied and they were all looking at each other and laughing. Then Kim at the other end of the table squealed, which is part of her behaviour, the others banging began to squeal as well. They did not stop straight away. Kate then jumped up and ran to get her lunch box out of the big cool box; she was followed by two others (play setting).

This data also illustrates the effectiveness of a larger number of children grouping together. The staff were at a point of sensory overload, what with the specific structural tasks, surveying a high number of children, and increased noise, that they did not notice the children physically going to find their own lunches. This scenario was common in both settings (allowing for local variations).

Mealtime as a concept is full of adult interpretations and pre-determined adult expectations which reflect social order and cultural influences. Within the settings there are clear differences in the local culture regarding the consumption of food. In the play setting, mealtimes are flexible and occur in an allocated area in the play area where tables are set up immediately before a meal. The children often bring their own food and are, on the whole, allowed to sit where they like. They are, however, expected to remain seated until the majority have finished eating. Mealtimes are treated as a rest break for staff who do not sit down with the children and eat. This is the point of the day when supervision is at its lowest level. On the whole the staff tend not to watch over and correct children’s eating methods. I observed children eating their chocolate before sandwiches (something I was never permitted to do at school!), leaving half chewed food in front of them, eating with their fingers, and on a couple of instances licking the plate. This is not to say that anarchy ruled; the staff would step in on occasion or when they felt that something was going too far.

In the care setting mealtimes occur in the dining room: the table is usually laid with place names to indicate where the children are expected to sit. Staff sit down with the children to eat food which they have had prepared for them. Management will often join the staff and children for meals. This is the time of day when supervision is at its highest level. The staff are concerned with ensuring that all the children eat something, with the minimal amount of mess. Another feature of this structural order is the presence of a ‘socially therapeutic’ frame which has at its foundation the principles of normalisation (Wolfsenberger 1972).
This can be seen in the importance attached to children sitting together, eating with the appropriate equipment or their hands; 'socialising' and remaining until everyone else has finished.

Mealtimes are the one occasion in a day when the children are expected to congregate together, within a highly structured activity and within the gaze of adults. The assumption that might mistakenly be made is that the children do not therefore demonstrate peer interaction in these conditions. The reality is that not only do they interact with one another, they demonstrate a shared cultural understanding through their responses to adult direction by using their bodies. The peer groups at this point are actively involved in understanding, challenging, and at times changing, the structure within which they are interacting with one another.

Once seated in the dining areas, mealtimes became the time when children would challenge the adults, firstly through making a lot of noise and banging on the tables but more importantly by leaving the table, attempting to distances themselves from the table and by running into the play spaces in the settings. Sub-groups would evolve as children sat at the table and watched together what was happening. Some of the children were absorbed in their food, and as such rarely become involved with their peers or would only join in once they had finished eating. There were many occasions, however, when it was immediately clear who was taking part in the sub-group by the way they watched each other very closely and communicated through giggles, shouts, and general rowdiness.

In the following extract, the movement of Tim away from the seating area sets in process a group resistance to adult expectations that the children remain at the table until all the children have finished eating.

Toward the end of lunch Tim got out of his seat and then ran into the garden. The playleader told a member of staff where Tim had gone, he went outside after him. Another two boys ran out of the dining area into the garden. At the same time George stood up and was told to sit back down. As the staff told the children to quieten down at least two began to blow raspberries. The noise level increased noticeably as the children watched the noisy children (play setting).

Although the initial action was instigated by an individual, Tim, the other children soon joined in. This then formed a cohesive sub-group which effectively distracted staff from realising what exactly was happening. The result was that three children ended up outside playing successfully, thereby subverting the social order regulated by the adults while the
others finished their meal. The children had successfully overcome the structural expectation that all the children should remain at the table until everyone has finished.

This section has demonstrated how the children use their bodies in a number of ways to respond to and resist the spatial and temporal frameworks which shape their lives. Whilst accepting certain boundaries, the children actively engage with and attempt to subvert certain rules within the settings. There appears to be a degree of shared understanding about which of these boundaries to challenge and which are acceptable. This shared understanding is visible in the ways in which the children, as both individuals and groups, position themselves within the settings.

**The Body and Social Theory**

As a source of contention within disability studies, consideration of the body has been marginalised within research (Thomas 2002). This reticence to include the body stems from concerns that such a focus may return disability to biologised and medicalised conceptualisations which are viewed as political mechanisms for social control (Hughes 2002). The social model of disability, in defining disability as social and impairment and its connotations of the body as biological, has been criticised for omitting the possibility that the body could be social (Hughes 2002).

However, in recent years there have been a number of discussions identifying the body in a social context which has drawn on post-modern and feminist accounts and which has challenged current understandings of the social model of disability (Wendell 1996, Marks 1999, Iwakuma 2002). These arguments propose that perceiving the body from a social perspective avoids the medical biologising of impairment which is so criticised by those within the disability movement. They also argue that the body is an important factor in the life of a disabled person which should not and cannot be ignored (French 1999, Wendell 1996). As Marks explains:

> To leave out impairment means that it becomes difficult to distinguish disability from other forms of oppression (Marks 1999:115).

In this way the embodied experiences of disabled people are being recognised as important in describing and identifying disability as a form of social oppression.

This recognition of the 'social body' parallels the increasing inclusion of it within childhood sociology and this is recognised as significant within sociological enquiry relating to corporeal...
understanding (Williams & Bendelow 1998). James, Jenks and Prout (1998) proposed that reconceptualising the body would be a way forward in childhood research which would enhance understanding of childhood(s). This is evident in the increase in research which describes the embodied experiences of childhood, such as Alan Prout’s edited book (2000), which is dedicated to understanding the regulation, situation and resistance of bodies within childhood, and draws upon a number of studies exploring childhood experiences of the body.

Both childhood sociology and disability studies have recognised the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962), BS Turner (1996) and Shilling (1993) in order to present the body from a social perspective. It seems that there are three key points to the argument. Firstly, that to omit the body in any discussion of social processes is to present an incomplete picture which is ‘misleadingly reductionist’ (Prout 2000:11, Iwakuma 2002). Secondly, that the body has a number of functions beyond biologised conceptions as Prout explains:-

Children’s bodies then appear in a variety of roles; in the construction of social relations, meanings and experiences between children themselves and with adults; as products of and resources for agency, action and interaction; and as sites for socialisation through embodiment (Prout 2000:11)

The third aspect within the argument for considering the social body relates to Merleau-Ponty’s belief that ‘the body is the centre of the temporal and spatial matrixes’ (Iwakuma 2002:83). This responds to the reflection in the literature review upon James, Jenks and Prout’s (1998) description of childhood as inextricably linked within temporal and spatial boundaries which are primarily shaped and managed by adults. As Jenks explains

For the child then even the most elementary bodily functions are scheduled and play, which we superficially regard as free and perhaps creative, occurs in designated spaces within the curriculum (Jenks 2001:73).

In the context of this thesis, the perceiving of the social context of the body therefore adds three new dimensions to the observations. First, in viewing the body from a sociological perspective it is possible to position the biological aspects of impairment in the background, by changing the focus to consider the way in which the children physically experience segregated, specially designed and structured settings is the focus. Thus the embodied nature of peer interactions become apparent.

Second, the process of foregrounding the embodied experiences of children within their peer interactions fills the gap which was left by demoting language from being regarded as the sole source of information about peer culture. Within this, the theoretical approaches which
concentrate on the discursive practices relating to the body are also demoted. One of the criticisms of the body work of Foucault and Lacan being that their epistemologies are reliant solely on language, as Williams and Bendelow explain.

The upshot of this is a somewhat dematerialised, disembodied notion of human corporeality as a 'discursive' product (Williams & Bendelow 1998:35).

This led to a decision that, within the context of this thesis (which does not draw extensively on discourse), it would not be relevant to draw on the work of Foucault which relates to identity, power and control (1977, 1980) although this is something to explore in the future. The focus within the present research therefore remains on describing and illustrating the processes observed, without full explorations of motive, intention and 'mind'.

The third contribution of focussing on the body is an increase in understanding the situational processes relating to the children’s bodies which either limit or enhance the affordances for the emergence of peer interactions. The role of institutions in bodily order and control is a feature of the research of Frank (1991), who proposed that the body is ‘in fact constituted at the intersection of an equilateral triangle composed of institutions, discourses and corporeality’ (Williams & Bendelow 1998:62). This chapter has therefore presented a view of institutions, more specifically the settings, from ‘the body up’ as suggested by Frank (1991:49), which is within, and elaborates upon, the more theoretical and empirical discussions about specialist provision within previous chapters.

**Summary**

Presentation of the embodied aspect of interaction within the data gathered began with a reflection on the corporeal aspect of the connections between the children. This is a significant feature of peer interactions and recognises the connections between the children, as outlined in chapter 8, especially for those children who do not employ language. Analysis progressed to consider the regulation of children’s bodies within the settings and the employment of time and space to achieve an adult-defined order. Lastly, I presented evidence of children using their bodies to resist that adult-defined order and impose their own interpretation onto the adults present.

In exploring the social experiences of the children’s body, this chapter has demonstrated the important role which the body plays within the peer interactions in specialist settings. For children with differing communication methods, the embodied experience of peer interaction...
is highlighted. In recognising the extent of the corporeal element within interaction, it is possible to appreciate the significance of the body in the experiencing of and contribution to the time and space within which the children exist in the research settings. Particularly interesting is the way the children position themselves in relation to their peers, the adults and the material manifestations of the setting structures.

In describing the bodily experience of the regulation of time and space within specialist settings, an understanding develops of the impact of institution on the interactions of the children. This ‘body-up’ approach in viewing institutions, proposed by Frank (1991), introduces an alternative perspective to the observations, and has more than compensated for the epistemological demotion of language which was proposed in the literature review and research design.

The final aspect of the body which was presented in this analysis chapter relates to the children’s bodily resistance to the regulation imposed on them by the staff in the settings. In some ways this reflects Simpson’s (2000) commentary on the regulation and resistance within mainstream children in school which is not dissimilar to Corsaro’s belief that the main theme of children’s activities is to gain and share control (Corsaro 1997). However there is one fundamental difference and that is the lack of evidence that this is a ‘battleground, with both sides striving to capture the high ground’ (Simpson 2000:77). Within this data set, in these settings where it was established in the literature review that regulation and supervision are particularly high, the sides involved better resembled the imbalance of competitors witnessed in the story of David and Goliath. However, as I have already commented this was not a ‘battle’ per se, the children were accepting of many of the rules and regulations which shaped their lives. This was especially evident in their acceptance of the regulation of their body as far as health, safety and personal needs were concerned. Rather the children’s attempts to resist and subvert which resulted in incidences of children having control of the experienced regulation paralleled the adult defined social order operating within and beneath it.

Drawing on the recent discussions within both childhood sociology and disability studies the analysis presented within this chapter has therefore highlighted a significant dimension within children’s interactions, that of the body. In exploring and understanding the situational processes children’s bodies are subject to within the specific settings, it is possible to appreciate the ways in which children respond to and resist the structures which shape their environments and childhood(s). This also provides a clearer understanding of the nature of the peer interactions which I observed.
Reflection, Contributions and Implications

This concluding chapter both adds to and advances the commentary on peer culture, disabled childhoods and specialist provision which featured in the opening chapters of this thesis. In reflecting on the contributions of the findings to current understandings there emerge a number of implications for future research and work with disabled children. In addition this chapter positions the findings in the wider context of sociology especially in relation to the debates surrounding the relationship between agency and structure.

The aim of this final chapter is therefore threefold: to reflect upon the findings in relation to the literature review and methodology, to consider the potential theoretical and empirical contributions of the thesis to both theory and practice, and to highlight the implications of this work academically and within future service provisions for disabled children.

The chapter begins with an overview of the key findings which emerged from the analysis chapters. It then progresses to consider the theoretical contribution and implication of this thesis in relation to childhood sociology, disability studies and sociology as a discipline. The thesis finishes in considering the way forward, discussing the implications of this work in future research and for the provision of services for children with learning impairments.

The Research Findings

The research findings have a number of contributions to make to the current literature and empirical understandings of disabled childhoods which were discussed in the opening chapters of the thesis. They elaborate on previous research considering disabled childhoods by providing detailed empirical insights into children’s culture(s) within a very specific type of service provision. Analysis also suggests that whilst peer culture may have a universal element which transcends context it is important to consider the structural influences and the relationship these have with peer interactions and the subsequent characteristics of peer culture(s) within different settings. There are a number of significant findings which warrant further discussion at this point: accounts of interaction, identifying peer culture, the significance of context, the embodiment of peer interactions and the subsequent re-definition of peer culture(s).
Accounts of Interaction

The analysis opened with a presentation of institutional and adult accounts within the research settings which created a backdrop against which the research findings stood. It highlighted the adult discourses and practices within which the observations took place. On an empirical level it contributes to knowledge of the internal mechanisms of specialist settings discussed in chapter 4 by providing evidence of some of the practices within them.

The views and beliefs within the settings are superficially similar, especially because they share common fundraising and publicity strategies, however it soon became apparent that these were not reflected in the day to day running of the two settings. On closer examination of the institutional accounts, primarily in the form of written documentation, the reasons for these differences became clear. Essentially there are three factors which influence the daily practices within the settings: history, philosophy and structure.

The historical origins of the two settings were very different. The care setting, having evolved from a hospital provision over a century ago, retains a belief that the primary need of the children who visit is 'care', both physical and emotional, which is provided by specialist staff. This setting is in many ways similar to other centres that I have visited both as a social worker and as a researcher, therefore it is with confidence that I say that it represents 'traditional' respite care. At the time of writing the setting is fundraising to raise sufficient money to nearly double the number of bedrooms in order to increase the amount of care offered.

In contrast, the play setting is relatively young, with a 20-year history which emerged from the desire of a group of providers and parents to fill a gap in leisure opportunities for disabled children. The organisation, which is considered to be pioneering, set out with 'play' as their primary aim, and 'care' as a secondary consideration. However, as the thesis is being written I am aware that the executive board are investigating, with a serious commitment, the future provision of overnight respite care, thus the setting may be about to embark on an alternative style of service provision. What will be interesting to observe is whether the philosophy of the current service remains or alters to one of providing 'care'.

From these diverse beginnings two very different philosophies have emerged, that of providing 'care' and the other 'play'. These, combined with the historical origins of the settings, have subsequently had a significant impact on the current structures observed, for example the difference in hierarchical patterns, organisation of time and space and the use of non-specialist help, in the form of volunteers. The philosophical and ideological
characteristics within specialist settings are therefore significant in the shaping of institutional accounts of disabled children. The most fundamental difference being the care setting's account which focuses on the needs and dependencies of the children, whilst the play setting orientated its service toward the independent activities of the children with their peers. This difference in focus and view of the children is then evident in the varying adult accounts provided within the staff group interviews.

The range of adult accounts appears at first to be confusing and contradictory. However, it is this which is significant in providing the reader with a sense of the wide variety of styles of supervision which were witnessed within the fieldwork. This ranged from adults explanations of children 'in a world of their own', to peer groups whose culture is 'something that they all relate to and to each other through' (play setting staff group interview). It is within the context of these accounts that the children's interactions and thus the observations occurred. It perhaps explains the sense I had throughout the fieldwork that within the care setting in particular, the emergence of peer interaction was to some degree dependent on who was on duty.

Chapter 8 demonstrated the benefits of being in the role of researcher, who has the luxury of time and orientation to be able to stand back from the daily organisational tasks and observe from an objective perspective. The resulting data challenges the adult and institutional accounts in presenting the children's perspectives of their peers and the groups they find themselves situated within. This illustrates that children are not only aware of each others presence, but also of the mechanisms of a complex social system understood and shared by the children which regulates group membership and roles within activities.

This empirical evidence of the complexity of relationships between the children contributes a significant new dimension to the literature relating to disabled childhoods and elaborates on the heterogeneity identified by Watson et al (1999) and on a recognition that peer relationships are important to disabled children which was discussed in chapter 3. The children observed do not reflect the cultural stereotypes described in chapter 3, rather they are a diverse group of children and young people with a wide range of interests and dislikes. They are not groups because of their impairments, rather they are a cohort formed by their shared circumstance being situated together and peer groups because of their histories and interests.

Chapter 8 also presented the idea that the significance of the acceptance shown by children toward all of the peers they find themselves alongside is either overlooked or misunderstood by adults. The evidence of children knowing each other, being aware of each other and
having connections between each other demonstrates acquaintances which were not always recognised within the adult and institutional accounts. As the process of acknowledging friendships is problematic within many of the groups observed, due to language and communication difficulties in relating this to a researcher, the importance and significance of acquaintances increases. In providing evidence of acquaintances among the children, particularly those perceived to be ‘in a world of their own’ this thesis challenges service providers to review their perception of the children and most importantly their booking systems, to take into account the children’s connections with one another.

This comparison of the adult and institutional accounts with the perspectives of the children was an important opening in the analysis as it provided the reader with insights into the context within which the children are relating to one another. It also provided a clear picture of the social mechanisms within the groups, illustrating the diversity and complexity of the numerous peer groups which were observed.

Identifying Peer Culture

Analysis progressed to consider the evidence of peer culture within the observations, beginning with a reflection on the routines and rituals observed in children’s activities; something which Corsaro identifies as a key feature within peer culture (1997). Through examples of games such as the wall game, cooking and hide and seek it is possible to see how the children adapt games so that they reflect local variations, shape their own rules about how a game is to be carried out, use material artefacts to create their own activities and adopt adult-defined rules as their own.

Relating this to the Opies (1959,1969,1991) and Corsaro’s research, both of which identified the transmission of cultural practices between children, it is possible to see that the observed children’s activities did feature elements of this process. The children guided and directed others within the games ensuring the stability of the local rules and variations. This perhaps is most evident in the allocation of social roles which tend to focus on protecting the continuity of a game, for examples leaders, protectors and border guards, whose combined efforts produced the routine activities which were observed. This therefore increases the significance of the evidence of social order presented in chapter 8 as it is no longer an indication of complex roles but is also an integral element in the production of cultural activity.

At a superficial level it would be possible to claim that the observations within this research present evidence of a peer culture which is similar to that described by Corsaro (1997),
which was outlined in chapter 2. The children demonstrated an understanding of activities and adult society in the way in which they have adopted adult activity as their own. Perhaps this is seen most clearly in the example of cooking – the children replicated the social processes within gastronomy within their own interactions. This is in many ways similar to interpretive reproduction as the children are engaging in the social world, applying their own interpretation to it and then reproducing the activity in their own way.

The routine games played by the children provide evidence of cultural activity engaged in by the children. The regularity of the wall game, hide and seek and chase and of the way in which they were played were such that it would be possible to say that some form of peer culture is present. However, as I demonstrated in chapter 8, activity was varied, with interactions which were unpredictable, occurring at varying speeds, sometimes flowing freely and other times faltering, there were also times of complete inaction. There was a point at which it became clear that this aspect of peer interaction could not be ignored and that to only present the predictable would be equivalent to asking the reader to complete a dot-to-dot picture without numbers!

In the same way consideration of the shared concerns and values of the children which were predominantly focused on caring for each other, indicated that the culture(s) of these children did not wholly reflect Corsaro’s definition. This is not to say that children were not concerned with gaining and sharing control as is demonstrated in chapter 11 and as Corsaro identifies as the main theme of peer culture (1997): rather this was not the principle concern of the children observed.

The exploration of the evidence of culture within peer interactions highlighted two specific issues, one was the apparent role of context in shaping the culture which was observed and the second was that in the absence of language (which Corsaro uses as his primary source of data) the significance of other forms of communication surfaced. In acknowledging these two dimensions chapters 10 and 11 reveal that there is more to the children’s activities than peer culture as defined by Corsaro and colleagues (1985, 1992, 1997).

The significance of Context

The analysis led to exploration of the contextual significance within the interactions which became apparent in the thick descriptions within the data, a direct product of observation, which revealed that the interactions emerged from the general chaos and melee within both settings. As mentioned in chapter 2, Corsaro’s conceptualisation of peer culture recognises the general context in which his research has been carried out, yet there has been little
exploration of the importance of this in the evolution of the peer cultures he identified. Chapter 10 therefore takes the acknowledgement of context further by asking the questions: why is context so important and what does it contribute to our understanding of peer culture and children’s interactions?

In referring to Gibson’s (1979) theory of affordance it was possible to explore this further. It was evident within the data that interaction emerged when opportunities presented themselves, when the children perceived those opportunities and subsequently acted upon them. Analysis revealed that these opportunities or affordances were created by any number of factors. Most significant within this research were the material design of the settings (the overall design and the individual pieces of equipment), the ecology of each setting and the human affordances, in other words staff behaviours and presence.

Detailed reflection on each of these factors began to answer emerging questions about why it seemed that there was more interaction among the children within the play setting than the care setting. As outlined in chapter 7 the two settings had significant differences in their philosophies, structure, design, space available and staffing practices. Analysis also showed that there were differences between the two settings in the degrees and intensity of peer interaction. In the play setting there was significantly more evidence of peer interactions which were fluid, moving from one activity to another, more intense and fast paced. The children visiting the care setting however engaged in peer interaction less often, which sometimes remained focussed on one activity, occurred at a slower pace and would falter and stop following the intervention of staff.

This led to the conclusion that the peer interactions observed were interconnected with the contextual nature of their environment in such a way that the peer activity could not be extracted from the wider context of the settings. This leads to the conclusion that peer culture does not exist autonomously, rather that the children engage in local cultural practices which are related to and interwoven with the contextual nature of each setting.

The Embodiment of Peer Interactions

The final analysis chapter presented the embodied experiences of the children which had become foregrounded in the absence of reliance on language. This chapter was the result of consistent evidence within the data which indicated that within the settings the children’s position and situation had a corporeality worth exploring and that the children’s interactions indicated that their cultural activities were embodied. This evolved into the realisation that in the absence of language the body was an important form of communication; both in the
way the adults conveyed the institutional structural practices and in the peer interactions between the children.

The brief reflection on the physical presence of children within the settings indicates the nature of inaction which was observed. Whilst the focus in the thesis is on the activity and movement of the children it is also important to acknowledge moments when nothing was happening. On investigation it seemed that the predominant characteristic of physicality at times of inaction within both settings were very different. Whilst inaction in the care setting seemed tense and had a sense of anticipation, moments of non-activity in the play setting had a stillness and comfortable acceptance.

Consideration of the body then progressed to an exploration of the structural and situational practices within both of the settings which organised the children’s bodies in time and space. This description is significant in providing evidence of the context within which the children are interacting; it is also against this background that the children responded to and resisted the adult organisation and management of their bodies. Within the data it became apparent that the children were generally accepting of certain regulatory practices, especially relating to their impairment needs and health and safety.

However, at mealtimes in particular there was evidence of the shared understandings of the children in their persistent attempts to disrupt the adult defined order and subvert it. This was a group activity, involving children shouting and distracting staff whilst others physically removed themselves as far as possible from the dining area. It was therefore evident that the body, its positioning within the settings in relation to time and space, was a significant factor in children’s peer interactions which cannot be overlooked.

This evidence of the peer interactions of the children being embodied as opposed to solely dependent on language, challenges Corsaro’s epistemology of peer culture as language based (Corsaro & Eder 1990). It adds a new dimension which has a universality to it which has the potential to transcend ability/disability: that of the body. What would be interesting in future research would be to explore whether this also has the potential to enhance understandings of mainstream peer cultures.

Re-defining Peer Culture(s)

It is the cumulative evidence within the analysis chapters which leads me to propose that sociological understandings of peer culture need to be somewhat broader and more inclusive.
than that initially suggested by Corsaro (1997). There needs to be an acceptance of the interconnections of peer groups with their wider context, and a recognition of the significance of this in the emergence of interactions and subsequent generation of cultural knowledge. In doing this peer culture becomes something which is both unpredictable and stable. It involves children perceiving and interpreting their environment, which is structured by an adult defined social order. This produces a dynamic and somewhat capricious set of activities and concerns shared and understood by multiple groups of children who find themselves bodily situated together in a very specific time and space. Thus peer culture needs to be referred to in the multiple, as there is evidence of different culture(s) which are shaped by a number of factors.

In appreciating that there are general cultural indicators, such as ‘routines, rituals and artefacts’ as Corsaro identifies (1988a: 3), childhood sociologists need also to recognise the external influences and contexts of children’s cultural activity. In doing this the concept of peer culture(s) begins to include children whose childhoods vary from the mainstream, as the context of their lives are also taken into consideration. In the same way the inclusion of multiple communication methods encourages the inclusion of children who do not use language or those for whom English is not their first language.

**Reviewing the Theory**

Interwoven throughout this thesis the reader will have witnessed my progress through theoretical certainly, its subsequent collapse and gradual re-emergence in a different form. This next section of this chapter reflects on the potential contribution of this to sociological understandings not only in childhood and disability studies, but also in the wider field of sociology.

**Understanding Agency**

The understanding of the concept of agency within this thesis is especially significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, in developing an appreciation of the peer interactions of the children and young people who were observed. Secondly, it has also overcome the dilemma outlined in chapter 2 concerning the analytic biases which can result from privileging independence, competence, maturity and completeness (Lee 1998). Thirdly it has explored the concept of agency responding to Prout's belief that,
The observation that children can exercise agency should be a point of analytical embarkation not a terminus (Prout 2000:16).

As explained within chapter 2 there were conceptual difficulties in working with the constructivist focus of the social model of disability and the tendency to prioritise essentialist understandings of agency in childhood sociology. Therefore I chose to suspend certainty about the ontology of agency, preferring to allow the data to inform my understanding.

The findings and analysis justified the decision to suspend agency in the subsequent identification of agentic action within the data. What is significant is the way in which agency was embedded in the contextual affordances present within the settings, something which has been previously highlighted in the work of Hutchby & Moran-Ellis (1998). Agency was not always visible, rather its presence and use by the children was intertwined with the affordances and contextual nature of each setting. The different structures within the settings appeared to have a varying impact on the amount of agency demonstrated by the children. Consistently throughout the data there was evidence that agency was less in the care setting where structure was more rigid and inflexible, as opposed to the play setting where agentic action appeared regularly and was at times sustained through a flow of different activities.

Reviewing Agency and Structure

Whilst both structural and agentic approaches have advanced sociological knowledge relating to disabled children, it seems that they have also limited the scope of exploration open to researchers. These differing stances perhaps identify why it is only recently that disability studies and childhood sociology have attempted collaboration within research (Watson et al 1999); as explained in chapter 3, the 'Life as a Disabled Child' project embraced both essentialist notions of agency and the social model of disability (Davis and Watson 2002). The resulting data whilst providing new insights into the experiences of disabled children do not reflect the presence of interdependencies within children's lives. However, this research through its ontological and epistemological positioning provides understanding not only of both agency and structure but also their relationship to one another which is evident in the interdependencies between them.

The recognition that agency and structure exist interdependently resulted in an avoidance of focus on either children's dependence or independence; allowing perceptions of disabled children and their settings to be balanced without privileging one over the other. Instead the focus rests on the mutuality, flexibility and relationships within the interaction between
the children and their contextual environment. This also provides a theoretical bridge to cross the divide between the structural focus of the social model of disability and the agency focus of childhood sociology.

The possibility of interdependence as a way of viewing the lives and experiences of people with learning impairments was raised in chapter 3 in a review of the work of Goodley and Rapley (2002) who suggested that this might overcome difficulties in common definitions and discourses of (in)dependence which are problematic within the sociology of learning disability. This thesis expands the scope of their argument by suggesting that exploring interdependence also provides researchers with a method of addressing the wider sociological debate relating to the relationship between agency and structure.

On initial examination the essential components of interdependence appear to parallel the dynamics between agency and structure which are identified by Giddens within structuration theory. This arose from Giddens' attempts to resolve the 'explanatory priority in either individuals or structures' (Shilling 1999:544) which existed within sociology. Rather than focus on the polarity of the two concepts he considered the interplay between agency and structure. In order to do this he firstly considered the nature of both agency and structure, providing detailed definitions of each.

Essential within Giddens' view is his description of the duality of structure. As he explains;

By the duality of structure I mean that social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution (Giddens 1976:121)

Structure therefore is not necessarily physical or material; rather it is the reinforcement of societies and social systems through the actions of the people within them (Giddens & Pierson 1998). This occurs not only through discourse but also in the organisation of time and space. This is epistemologically evident in the 'things that people do in a regularized and institutional way' (Giddens & Pierson 1998:78).

Giddens', definition of agency is directly related to action which he perceives is a response to structure whilst simultaneously remaining a part of that structure (Thompson 1989). Intertwined with this is the actor's knowledge of the social structures within which they are acting. This knowledge is the characteristic which defines and identifies agency within social structure, therefore it is an important factor in understanding the role of the agent within structuration.
Thus Giddens’ view of agency and structure is of two concepts which are inseparable due to their mutual dependence. This in turn is seen to blur their differentiation; an aspect of this theory considered untenable by some (Thompson 1989). Critical within this thesis however is the way in which this conceptualisation also renders problematic any attempt to favour either agency or structure within the analytic process.

In many ways the difficulties which were described in the first two chapters of the literature review are not dissimilar to those which Giddens was attempting to resolve. The analytic biases between the disciplines of childhood and disability studies were problematic in finding an appropriate way of collaboration between the two areas research. The lack of contextual significance within Corsaro’s conceptualisation of peer culture was also of concern as the settings within this research had distinctive non-mainstream features. The priority allocated essentialist notions of agency within previous research clouded the picture further by focusing on independence, maturity and competence.

In accepting an uncertain and ambiguous ontology this thesis has successfully opened perception to observe, not only the emergence of children’s peer culture, but the shared role of agency and structure in its production. During the process of data collection and analysis it became clear that it was not possible to identify or describe in isolation the children’s peer interactions from the structures within the specialist settings. The possibility of interdependence between structure and agency appeared to be mirrored in the observed relationship between the children and the context of this research. Perceiving that structure and agency existed in a dialectical relationship where the two might possibly synthesise to produce the phenomenon peer culture represents a critical turning point within this thesis. This would not have occurred without a true appreciation of Giddens’ theoretical developments.

Giddens’ definitions of agency and structure correlate to the findings presented within this thesis, in three specific areas. Firstly, in relation to the children’s knowledgeable and subsequent agentic action. Secondly, in positioning the children as agents within the structures identified. Thirdly, in the significance of the temporal and spatial implications of the structures in relation to the children’s actions.

In chapter 8 I demonstrated the knowledge the children have of each other and of their shared understandings of the each other. This knowledge was not based on disability rather it reflected shared interests and history. Their perceptions of the activity of others differ from that of adults. This was clearly demonstrated in the acceptance of the sand-catching game as a recognised peer activity, as opposed to adult perceptions of stereotypical
repetitive behaviour. This was expanded in chapter 10 where the emergence of peer interaction demonstrated a knowledge not only of each other but also of the settings, the adults within them and of appropriate opportunities to interact with one another.

An important point here is the way in which children’s interactions are indicative of a knowledge base or not. The use of participant observation provided detailed evidence of children acting on their knowledge, sharing it with one another and reproducing it within their cultural activities. It also situated the evidence of agency related to the structures within which it was employed thus situating children’s interactions within their environment, not autonomous from it.

However, it is importance to also recognise the limited nature of the children’s knowledge about the structures around them. They demonstrated a knowledge of each other and their actions; to a lesser extent they also showed that they understood some of the adult defined structures within the settings, such as mealtimes. Although to claim that the children had a knowledge of the settings which was equal to that of the adults around them would be misleading.

Another corroboration of the findings with Giddens’ definitions of structure and agency relates to time and space which is considered to be an embodied experience. It was not possible to eliminate the two without losing a sense of the dynamism of peer interaction which was observed. This corresponds with the argument to raise the profile of time and space in empirical research with children as James, Jenks and Prout state ‘children’s time is inextricably linked with the social space of childhood’ (1998:75).

In acknowledging time and space this research and subsequent definition of peer culture gains a dimension omitted in Corsaro’s empirical evidence which primarily draws on examples of individual instances of peer activity such as ‘La Bufana’ and ‘arriva la Banca’ (Corsaro 1997). What has been presented throughout this thesis is the continual flow of observed activity, such as the one presented at the beginning of chapter 10, which is indivisible and irreducible due to the continual flow of interwoven interaction.

Within structuration theory this is acknowledged in Giddens’ explanation of agentic action that

It is important to see that all agency unfolds in time and therefore is a flow, not just an aggregate of individual actions. Therefore temporality is bound up with human agency and so also is spatiality; because you can’t be a human agent without having a body and a body occupies a physical space and it orients itself towards others in a
physical context. In that sense time and space are theorised as part of structuration theory (Giddens and Pierson 1998:90).

The evidence of children's bodies presented within this research therefore has an empirical contribution to make to current understandings of the embodied experiences of children within a particular structural setting. It confirms Giddens' belief that there are connections between the body, time, space, structure and agency which are irreducible.

There is however an added dimension present within the findings of this thesis which is not accountable for within Giddens' definition of structure and agency – that is the role of adults as structuring agents. The mediating presence of the adults between structure and agency, which is both visible and invisible cannot be overlooked as it represents a significant and influential element which is a part of the emergence of peer interactions and subsequently peer culture.

The role of the staff within the settings is multi-faceted which in turn impacts on their agentic activity. They are agents who represent the interests of the settings and wider society, implementing the structures defined by the setting's philosophies and aims. They are also asked to act as facilitators of children's agentic interactions, this being more the situation in the play setting. In addition the staff are individual agents.

The adults' knowledge base is also significantly broader than that of the children as a result of age, position, status, experience and level of understanding. They have access to information not shared with the children which relates to the philosophy and operation of the setting. The combination of adults acting as structuring agents who have access to privileged information means that the potential outcome of their mediation with structure is highly significant. In the care setting where the staff roles are particularly rigid and intertwined with the structural direction of the setting their mediation as representatives of the organisation is especially apparent. Within this there is an imbalance of power between the children as agents and the staff as agents. The difficulties faced by children in successfully challenging or influencing the structures present was evident in the empirical evidence. However, in the play setting where the roles of the staff were perhaps more complex, incorporating their role as mediating agents in the children's interaction with their peers, the power balance (whilst still present) was not so extreme, allowing the children opportunity to challenge and alter certain structures which were in place.
Therefore this research demonstrates that whilst agency and structure are a useful way of exploring the interactions observed the evidence is that, within peer interactions in such structured settings, the agentic activity of adults is a significant third dimension. Within the settings the primary shaping and maintenance of structure is the product of adult activity, however, evidence from the play setting demonstrates that there is potential for children to positively contribute to and alter the structures in place.

**Peer Culture: a product of a synthesis of Agency and Structure.**

So far this chapter has outlined the reconceptualisation of agency based on ontological and epistemological reconstitution. This has led to an insight into the relationship between agency and structure. There is however another element which is missing in the theoretical discussion and that is the energy within the dynamic changeable flow of the peer culture observed, which seems to be the product of the synthesis of the varying concepts and theories.

Particularly challenging within the presentation of empirical research is the production of accurate, clear and concise descriptions of the interdependencies observed. This is due to the multi-layered, dynamic properties which require intellectual acrobatics in order to perceive them. By envisaging the interaction between agent and environment as something similar to the yin and yang concept within oriental philosophy it is possible to identify the inseparable nature of this relationship (see figure 12.1). Where agent is in the dominant position it has the greater influence on the environment, the reverse being the case when the environment is dominant thus possessing the greater influence. Onto this relationship is imposed a continuum reflecting micro (individual) and macro (constructionist) influences on the relationship status quo. When the focus is on the macro issues the environment tends to be in the forefront whilst the actor becomes a minor consideration. This balance is then on a sliding scale with the extreme micro level being where the agent is the focus and the structure is less important (although still in existence). By looking at this it is then possible to identify why it is that peer culture was observed more in the play setting as opposed to the care setting. In other words peer culture is evident when structural influences are weaker than the children’s agentic actions.
Figure 12.1.
The Synthesis of Agency and Structure.

Macro level influences
Eg. Legislation, politics,
Social systems, agency agendas

Micro level influences.
Eg. Local culture, policies,
Provisions, staff.

The potential for agency and structure
is always present

The agent is stronger when
the micro level influences
are stronger.
Structure and agency are situated centrally in this understanding of their relationship which represents a synthesis of the two creating the outer ring, the social system. When structure is in the more dominant position then the potential for agency is limited as the actions of agents are constrained by that structure. This portrayal of the relationships between the two overcomes Thompson’s critique of Giddens’ failure to acknowledge the extent of the constraining elements of structure (Thompson 1989:57).

The other aspect of this view of the relationship between the two is the possibility that there may be occasions where agency dominates structure rendering it weak, unsustainable or problematic. Although not evident in this thesis an example would be the exploration of the potential for this in William Golding’s classic novel ‘Lord of the Flies’. Following a plane crash onto a deserted island a group of boys embark on a feat of survival. Their efforts in creating an organised social system fails as the independent agentic actions of the boys override their attempted enforcement of structural processes. Chaos ensues, only to be reinstated when rescuers arrive bringing with them familiar cultural, social and historic structures.

Agentic action in the form of emerging peer interaction has the potential to occur at any point along the central curve. The strength, impact and duration of that action is indicated by the position it reflects along the continuum of influences. Influences on the balance between structure and agency and thus the emergent interaction range from the micro to the macro.

At the micro level is the local culture of the settings which directly involves the children, the staff and the communities in which they are based. Their perceptions and beliefs relating to autonomy, roles, responsibilities and identities are critical factors within this. As I discussed earlier in this thesis the two settings had very different local cultures, within which varying degrees of peer culture were observed.

The macro level influences are related to legislative, policy and provision issues regarding the provision of specialist services for disabled children. Whilst these related to both settings there was a significant difference in their translation by the providers. Therefore the individual agency agenda, aims and philosophies need to be appreciated as influential on the degree of macro level influence on the potential emergence of peer interaction. This leads to the conclusion that the highly regulated and at times constraining structures are not the outcome of individual staff interactions, rather they are part of a wider societal picture which shapes the philosophies and operations of the settings.
Within this conceptualisation of peer culture the potential for its occurrence is continually present. The issue however is whether the balance between agency and structure provides sufficient levels of affordances for the emergence of peer interactions. It is these which in turn become recognisable as peer culture, albeit slightly quirky, erratic and changeable.

Where the macro level influences are strong there is a notable domino effect on the emergence of observable agentic action. This was witnessed in the care setting, where the structural processes were clearly defined by the provider, the staff and the material design. Agentic action was observed, however often as a single action which did not flow into another or which faltered when staff intervened. Many of the interactions between the children occurred beneath the adult defined social order and went by unnoticed by them.

This contrasted with the play setting where actions flowed continually in a dynamic form, changing direction within and beneath the gaze of the adults. The adults were often aware of the children's affiliations and interactions. They intervened less often adopting a periphery position away from the hub of activity. At other times they would allow themselves to be drawn into activity becoming objects, as outlined in chapter 10.

Thus the potential for peer culture is continually present. However, it relies on the emergence of affordances for peer interactions to occur. It is vulnerable to the balance of social systems which are influenced by a wide range of issues from the macro down to the micro. This results in a dynamic flow of activity, identities, rules and artefacts, which occur within a variety of spatial and temporal situational practices.

**Implications**

The findings within this thesis have a number of implications for service providers and those working directly with children and young people in settings such as those who featured in the research and for academics. This concluding section of the thesis therefore begins to look at the potential this work has to effect change.

**Potential for Change at a Local Level**

This research has highlighted the significance of the potential within the settings to either constrain or nurture peer interactions. This not only contributes to our current knowledge but also has implications for the development of policies relating to future provision of
specialist out of school breaks for children with learning disabilities. These implications are at three levels: policy makers, service providers, and professional practice.

On a policy level the concern about the appropriateness of specialist segregated services remains unanswered (Jack 1998), although the findings will inform and contribute to the ongoing debate. This research has illustrated the wide range of age, disability, culture and interests held by the children. This is not a group which would naturally form in normal circumstances rather it is a group created by a social response to a perceived problem – impairment. This research therefore highlights the need for policy makers to consider how the provision of services positions people within a social and community context.

For service providers the main implications relate to three aspects within the operation of specialist provision. Firstly the way in which settings are designed and organised impacts on the affordances within the settings, second the operation of booking systems impacts on the formation of connections between children and emergence of sub-groups, and finally their policies relating to the role of staff impacts on the way in which the adults respond to and look after the children. Let me elaborate on each in turn.

The findings indicate that within the design of the environment and subsequent ways in which space is allocated for use there must be consideration of the affordances provided for the children to interact. Whilst it would not be possible for adults to predict all the affordances perceived by children within their environment attention could be directed toward designing spaces which allow children to withdraw from the setting, to limit direct adult supervision without endangering the children and to partake in group activity.

It has to be recognised though that problematic within this is space, especially for those settings where agencies are struggling to operate within confines which were considered adequate in previous years. The reader is reminded that within the literature review there was discussion of the evolution of respite services from long stay units and the change in expectations for these children. The result is seen in the care setting which originated as a hospital for disabled children where the building size and design limits scope for change.

The second key implication for service providers relates to the way in which booking systems are organised. The findings within this research strengthens and adds to the concerns raised by Robinson (1996) about the prioritising within settings which places the organisational concerns of the setting ahead of parental requests for visits which is ahead of the wishes of the children (Cocks 2000). The evidence of connections between the children indicates the importance of their shared histories and experiences and subsequently their

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shared knowledge. If peer interactions are to remain and strengthen then settings need to nurture the connections currently existing between children. Within this there is also opportunity for children to participate in new peer relations if attention is given to who might mix well with whom. The potential to achieve this appears to lie partly in the way booking systems operate and partly in the way children arrive and leave the settings.

During term-time in particular, but also for many children in the holidays, travel to and from the settings is by bus or taxi. The result of this is that perhaps parents do not have the opportunity to get to know each other, or indeed learn who in particular are their children’s friends. This potential result of this is a lack of contact between friends across the boundaries of the different environments in which they spend their time. The settings could be more proactive in encouraging friendships which cross between different locations.

The third and final implication for service providers relates to the development of policy and practice, especially relating to the staff within the settings and how they perceive the connections between the children. It was evident within chapter 10 that adult supervision had a direct impact on the strength of and degrees of peer interaction observed. Staff, through their perception of the children, can either suppress or encourage peer interaction. Where staff recognised the connections between the children, primarily among the play staff although some care staff too, the emerging peer interactions tended to be more complex, dynamic and persistent.

This is not to say that certain staff purposely set out to suppress peer interaction, rather I want to highlight here the role which is played by the agency providing the service. From the differing philosophies of the settings outlined in chapter 7 and evidence of interaction within each setting it appears that if the possibilities for and thus perception of peer interaction are acknowledged at an organisational level then it filters down to the staff. This was evident in the play setting where staff reported when I met with them that one of their primary roles is as ‘facilitators of play’. Within this there is a recognition that children play among themselves and that within this staff have a role to play in nurturing the interaction between the children.

A more general implication for service providers is in many ways at the root of the previous points I have raised and that is recognition of the connections between the children. If this is achieved within specialist settings such as the ones within this study – especially for children I have referred to as solo, one to one and watchers, service providers will change their perception of the overarching peer groups so that it reflects that held by the children. This seems the best starting point from which to plan and design the shape of future
services, from the level of policy makers downwards. In this way the findings of this study have the potential to contribute to current understandings of specialist services, in relation to the children’s experiences, their connections with one another and the shape of future policy and provision.

This has wider reaching consequences beyond individual agencies and policy makers as it also has implications for the formal processes of professional development. How future and present care, play, development workers perceive the children is also influenced in how they are trained and how they learn about children with learning disabilities. Within social work training for example this is usually addressed in the teaching of anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson 1993, 1998). Within this there is a potential for this research to contribute to discussions and understandings of disability and disabled childhood(s) at a much wider level. The precise impact of this is yet to be explored over the coming months as the dissemination of the findings evolves and develops. It is however an important outcome of this research which will be taken further after the academic processes are complete.

Understanding Disabled Childhood(s)

In some ways this work has been very focussed, in considering the peer culture of children with learning disabilities only and in gathering data from one particular type of provision. This was a purposeful decision in order to narrow the field. As outlined in the literature review much of the previous research involving disabled people (Morris 1998a, b, Watson et al 1999) has a tendency to reflect a general overview and draws primarily on informants who use formally recognised communication. The empirical uniqueness of this research therefore lies in its concentration on one group in one type of setting. This has resulted in detailed data which provides evidence of the impact of segregated specialist settings on the interactions among a marginalised group of children.

The development of agency within this thesis is especially significant for understandings of the experiences of these disabled children. It has also overcome the dilemma outlined in chapter 2 concerning analytic biases that result from privileging independence, competence, maturity and completeness. It was important to seek a solution to this because for those within this research dependence is an important and undeniable part of their lives. They rely on other children, adults and society in the playing out of the trajectory of their lives. Whilst I could have, and have previously (Cocks unpublished) focussed on the agency demonstrated by disabled children I was concerned that this approach was potentially limiting. The suspension of agency, defended in theoretical terms, was therefore a pivotal decision and somewhat radical in proposing disembarkation from the recent acceptance of
essentialist notions of agency within research with disabled children (Davis and Watson 2002).

At a wider level this research has two particular interrelated contributions to make to the development of disability studies. Firstly, in using theories of the body within a social context in a positive way to demonstrate the spatial and temporal experiences of a group of disabled people whose lives are so tightly regulated. Secondly, in the recognition of the irreducible connection between children and the structures of their lives, thus building on Goodley and Rapley’s (2002) discussion about impairment and interdependence which was described in the literature review.

As explained in chapter 10 disability studies has struggled to engage with the ‘thorny issue’ (Barnes and Mercer 2003:65) of theories of impairment which draw on the body and society (Thomas 2000). However the presence of consistent and significant degrees of evidence within the data justified and warranted the inclusion of the body in order to present a complete picture of peer interactions. The focus on the body took the lead from recent research, primarily in relation to mainstream children, which positions the body in a social context. Whilst recognising the irreducible biological aspects of a child’s body the focus is on the child’s ‘body work’ in situating and engaging with the environment around them (James 2000). This therefore overcomes some of the fears described by Thomas (2002) and Hughes (2002) which exist within factions of the disability movement that a focus on the body is a return to biological reductionism.

Analysis of the data revealed that the interactions between the children were experienced at a physical level. Observations were rich with children touching, pushing, pulling, withdrawing from others, holding hands and seeking physical contact with each other. This evidence is indicative of the children working with their bodies to build connections with one another and find mutual ways of coming together as a group. The data also provided evidence of the body work which staff engage in, particularly in shaping the temporal and spatial structures within which they then situate the children. This provided a clear picture of the translation of policy and agency philosophies into practices directly related to the children. This description provides an understanding of the material and physical practices which shape this type of specialist provision. Thus providing an appreciation of the nuances of specialist provision which are an element of the cultural practices that shape disabled children’s lives. This approach has much to offer within disability studies and demonstrates how deeper levels of understanding can be achieved, whilst including groups of disabled people who are marginalised within disability studies itself due to difficulties in seeking ways to address communication difficulties.
These findings which relate to the body demonstrate the value of this theoretical approach and its uses in empirical work in identifying the experiences of people who do not use language as their primary form of communication. Within disability studies this includes a number of groups, adults and children, whose lives could be better understood through an appreciation of their embodiment. This work builds upon the work of Coenen (1986) and Goode (1991) who both sought methodologies and theories which would provide researchers with a way of understanding of the lives of deaf children and deaf/mute children respectively. The demonstration that children with varying degrees of diagnosed intellectual and social impairment work with their bodies in collective interaction and communication with each other, and within a specific context, offers researchers a new insight.

The recognition of the relationship of the body, its interactions and situation with the structural context of specialist provision elaborates the second contribution this work makes to disability studies, which is an increase in understanding and appreciation of the significance of interdependencies in the lives of disabled children. This again returns to the commentary within chapter 3 about the recent developments in relation to learning disability, especially Goodley and Rapley's (2002) prioritising of the interdependencies in everyday life.

Goodley and Rapley's (2002) theoretical discussion suggests a deconstruction of discourses of dependence which tend to focus on the incompetencies of people with learning disabilities. In doing this they suggest it is then possible to focus on the interrelationships which are continually present which support and enable disabled people's participation in society and an exploration of the mutuality of these relationships. Whilst this research has not engaged with the discourses of incompetence it did suspend its dichotomous relationship with competence. The direct result of which has resulted in rich evidence of the nature, impact and significance of the interdependencies which exist for one particular group of children within one particular context. This thesis thus provides empirical evidence which supports their proposed direction of future research with adults to perceive with sensitivity the contextual nature of the lives of people with learning disabilities.

**Childhood Sociology**

I have already detailed the role of agency and its relationship with structure throughout this chapter so I will not repeat what has gone before. Suffice it to say that this research has indicated that agency cannot be viewed in isolation of structure, nor is it a predicable or stable concept. Rather it responds to and interacts with the context within which it
emerges. This view of agency which is both empirically and theoretically grounded therefore has a significant contribution to make to the further development of childhood sociology.

Another significant implication for future research within childhood sociology is the epistemological de-centring of language as the primary constituent of children’s social worlds. As this had a number of unforeseen positive repercussions within the research design and outcomes which are also relevant within mainstream research. It was necessary to seek an alternative method of generating knowledge about children’s activities which would include those children for whom language was not their primary method of communication. This led to the use of participant observation.

The decision to use participant observation as the primary method of data collection within this project opened the research to perceive not only the interactions between the children, but also the role of the settings in influencing the emergence of peer culture(s). The detail which emerged from the data provided a broader picture of the settings and interactions within them than expected, thus the findings touched on areas not anticipated at the outset: especially relating to the body. This added an unexpected dimension to the analysis which highlighted the importance of including context within explorations of children’s interactions. This might have been missed if the focus had remained on language alone.

The positive outcomes from using participant observation indicate that there is great potential in seeking methods which do not bias language as a source of knowledge. The implications of this for childhood sociology rest in encouraging researchers to be innovative in seeking alternative methods of data collection which are not orientated solely toward language but that would encompass the broader circumstance of childhood(s).

Collaboration – The Way Forward

In the opening chapters of the thesis it became clear that there is a lack of research which considers the childhood(s) of disabled children from a sociological perspective. Whilst it has been acknowledged that there is a lack of studies from the social model perspective (Priestly 2003), there is little awareness of this within childhood sociology. Disabled childhood(s) have been overlooked by disability studies and childhood sociology, and also those working within the narrower field of learning impairment research. I suggest that this may be due to the conceptual challenges of reconciling two very different theoretical approaches.
This research has not only provided valuable empirical evidence of one aspect of disabled childhood(s), it has also successfully taken on the challenge of seeking a balance between the two differing approaches. The theoretical route within this work was not straightforward, however it has resulted in evidence of the relationship between structure and agency which has the potential to inform future research considering the sociology of childhood, disability and learning impairment.

Each of the three areas of study which have informed this research has had a valuable and essential input. This therefore supports my firm belief that the only way forward which will ensure progress is collaboration between sociologists and researchers in childhood, disability and learning impairment.

Summary

This chapter has pulled together the various threads presented in the preceding chapters which represent the reconceptualisation of peer culture. Rather than remain a 'stable set of activities' (Corsaro 1997) the acceptance of an ambiguous ontology and subsequent shift in epistemology has led to a destabilisation and elaboration of Corsaro’s concept. In moving away from essentialist notions of agency this research opened perception to accept and explore the less stable aspects of peer interaction which were also observed in the process of field work. This resulted in a realisation that peer interactions and associated culture were affected by the settings, the level of surveillance, the material aspects of the environment and much more.

In the process of reflecting upon the findings it becomes apparent that this research has much to offer. It contributes to current understandings of the potential impact of specialist provision on the connections and interactions between the children visiting. It provides a detailed account of the nature of a particular experience within disabled childhood(s). It challenges Corsaro’s conceptualisation of peer culture proposing a broadening and elaboration of his initial ideas.

The empirical evidence also demonstrates the potential uses of particular research methods, especially relating to the uses of participant observation. The thesis informs and adds to the growing connection between the theories relating to both childhood and disability in a more general sense, hopefully encouraging further collaboration between the two arenas of study. The implications of the findings are far reaching with contributions to make to the
development of future services, to the theoretical evolution within childhood sociology and disability studies, and to the ongoing debates about agency and structure within sociology.

Rather than continue at length listing and repeating the research findings, their implications and contributions, or conclude with a complicated theoretical statement aimed at stunning the audience I want to leave the reader within the research context, with the children and the settings. The following extract from an observation early on in the fieldwork, for me, sums up the thesis and grounds the research within its context.

Sam ran past me, catching my hand as he went. He led me onto the climbing frame at a run. I followed his lead, then he began taking me to different parts of the climbing frame. As we ran we were joined first by James and then by Peter. At the varying parts Sam would point and direct me what to do. He did this with a mixture of sign and putting his hand on my shoulder pushing me forward toward the equipment. Sometimes Peter or James would be in front of me, so I copied whatever they did.

We went up the rope climb, along the wobbly bridge, across the monkey bars (James and I fell off). Eventually we came to the slide, which was wet as it had been raining the night before. He told me to go down the slide. Peter and I went down together then turned our backs to each other showing our wet/dirty trousers to each other, we were then followed by Sam. We all began to laugh simultaneously. I realised that a member of staff nearby was watching, I noticed her shaking her head and smiling before looking away (play setting).
Appendix
This was the agreement made between the research settings and myself. It set in place the procedures which would assist in safeguarding ethical practice.

**Research Protocol**

1. **Informing interested parties**

   Staff – Ali to attend a staff meeting and give a short presentation outlining the research and answering any questions or concerns the staff may have. This needs to be carried out before contact with parents and children so that if any queries are raised the staff will be able to respond.

   Parents – inform parents in writing of the project outlining who I am, the purpose of the research and the implications of participating for their children, exact format to be agreed.

   Children – when first meeting any child explain who I am and why I am at the centre. Ask them if they are happy for me to be there. Let the children know that they don’t have to take part and that they can ask any questions they have.

2. **Access within the building**

   Whilst on the premises I will ensure that the staff are always aware of my whereabouts. I will not go into bathrooms or bedrooms with a child unless there is a member of staff present and it is entirely appropriate to do so. It then follows that I will not be attending to any of the personal care needs of the children.

3. **Disclosure of bad practice or abuse**

   In the instance of witnessing issues of bad practice or abuse I will speak to the shift leader and inform the centre manager. It is then the responsibility and decision of the manager whether any subsequent action needs to be taken.

   If a child tells me anything of concern I will explain to the child that I will be speaking to another adult about it, and explain that sometimes I cannot keep things confidential. Thus I hold responsibility for covering issues of breaking confidences with the child.
4. Health and safety procedures

I will abide by the health and safety procedures that are in place at the centre. Before beginning the project can I have been provided with the necessary information?

A copy of a clear police check is attached.

5. Insurance in case of incident

I am covered under each settings standard buildings insurance for accident or injury. In the instance of bad practice on my part my supervisor is responsible for my actions whilst carrying out fieldwork.

6. Confidentiality and Privacy

In order to secure their confidentiality the names of children will not be used in any written material or in my fieldnotes. The location of the centre will be referred to in general terms however the exact name will not be included in any final presentation of the work.

Paperwork and data files referring to the research will remain in my possession at all times and it is my responsibility to monitor their use.

I will also respect the privacy of the children and staff in the presentation of material.

7. Ethical Issues

I will uphold ethical integrity throughout the research. As the project progresses I will be exploring the ethical implications of this work in more depth.

8. Dissemination

When the research is finally complete feedback will be given to children, staff and parents. The format this will take will be decided nearer the time.

AJC 19/01/00
APPENDIX 2

Research study looking at the Peer culture of Disabled Children within specialist settings being carried out by Alison Cocks PhD Student at the University of Surrey

Consent to Partake in a Group Meeting to Discuss Peer Culture

Before this group meeting starts I want to ensure that you have sufficient information to feel comfortable with participating. I want to stress that you can withdraw at any point of the meeting without providing me with your reasons for doing so. As note taking can be slow and inaccurate I would like to tape-record this meeting. The recorder can be stopped at any point and if you wish we can return to the tape and erase anything you do not want to be included. The tape will remain in my possession, no one else will be allowed access to it without your permission. Your identity will remain confidential as will the children’s and that of the setting. The one instance where confidentiality might be breached is if issues regarding children’s health and safety are raised. You do not have to answer questions you are not happy with and you can withdraw anything you have said at any time.

I intend to publish the research findings and present them at conferences, I might wish to use things you have said to illustrate the peer culture of the children you work with. To do this I need your permission.

I will ask you to sign the section below after the meeting in order to confirm your agreement to partake in this research and to allow you the opportunity to review what you have said.

If you are happy with the meeting and it being tape-recorded please print and sign your name below.

1) I consent to taking part in this meeting to discuss children’s peer culture.

2) I consent to this meeting being tape-recorded.

3) I consent to my comments and views being included in published work and conference papers so long as my identity remains confidential.

4) I have been given the option of withdrawing comments made during the meeting without giving a reason.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Full Name: (block capitals please) ___________________________

Address: ___________________________

Thank you. Alison Cocks, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford.
e-mail a.cocks@surrey.ac.uk tel: 07885 05......
This outline acted as a prompt in the staff group interviews, they were not rigidly adhered to and staff were encouraged to direct the flow of conversation.

**Semi-Structured Outline for Staff Group Interviews**

1. What and who is the Peer Group?
   - Does it include all the children?
   - How does ‘disability’ affect membership?
   - What about autistic/social function disorder children?

2. What is Peer Culture?
   - Is it open to all children?
   - Is it seen by the staff?
   - Do adults have a role in it?
   - What are the routine activities of the peer groups?
   - What are the main values and concerns of the children?

3. What about conflict?
   - Who starts it and who resolves it?

4. What is important about friendships?
   - Ask the staff to define and describe friendships
     - with children & with adults

5. Staff Supervision
   - Do the levels of staff make a difference – if so how?

6. Ask staff how they view themselves in relation to the peer relations they have described.

7. Provide the staff with a brief summary of where you are at within the research at the moment.
APPENDIX 4

The well-formed outcomes sheet assisted my preparation for meeting with the managers of the settings for the first time.

**Well-Formed Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated in the Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I Want To Achieve?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Will Achieving This Do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Will Be Gained?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory Specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Will I Know When I Have Achieved It?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What will I see, hear, feel?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Can it be started &amp; maintained by me?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is stopping me from having this right now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the first thing I need to do, learn or find out about?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextualised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When, Where and With Whom do I want to achieve this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When, Where and With Whom do I not want to achieve this?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contains positive by-products of present behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I get from my present behaviour that I want to keep?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety Checks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What will be gained?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What will be lost?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it worth the time it will take?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it worth the cost it will take?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this outcome in keeping with what was planned?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 5

This letter was sent to parents before the observations began.

Letter to Parents

(on University headed paper)

Dear Parent

As a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of Surrey in Guildford, I am carrying out a three-year research project. I am exploring the nature of disabled children’s peer culture when they are in settings away from home and school. Mrs B....... has kindly agreed to allow me to locate part of the project at ‘the care setting’.

Basically this involves me spending time at the centre on a regular basis talking to and observing the children while they visit. I will be explaining to the children why I am there and positively welcome their input into the study. If any child does not want to be included in the research then this is ok, I can work around this.

In order to ensure confidentiality children will not be identified in any written work and I will use pseudonyms. At the end of the research everyone will have access to feedback about the project.

To explain a little about myself, I have been working with disabled children for the past six years in a number of roles: residential social worker, play co-ordinator and field social worker. I completed the MSc Degree in disability studies at King Alfred’s, Winchester a year ago where I researched the respite care experience of disabled children.

I am happy to be contacted if anyone has any queries or concerns about my proposed work.

Thank you
Yours sincerely

Ali Cocks
PhD Student
Department of Sociology

Tel : 01483 87.... or 01483 28....
e-mail A.Cocks@surrey.ac.uk
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