

**PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSITION:
PERSONAL AND CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ARISING
FROM CO-RESEARCH**

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Abstract

The thesis starts by presenting an ostensibly straightforward question about how the transition from primary school to secondary school is experienced from a gendered perspective. This question was explored through a research project which involved 4 girls, in their second year of secondary schooling, as co-researchers. What ultimately transpires is a personal and critical account of the research and, importantly, the research process. Implications for practice, which encompass three main areas, are deliberated upon. Firstly, themes relating to the original research question of how girls experience the transition are debated. The findings offer some support to the hypotheses that boys and girls experience friendships and peer pressure differently. In general, girls tend to place greater value on relationships within school. It is suggested that further research is needed to clarify how aspects of the secondary school system can inhibit and facilitate the fostering of positive relationships. Secondly, implications for educational psychology practice are debated. In particular, the importance of adopting a reflexive stance, where the researcher or practitioner's values and assumptions are made as explicit as possible, is emphasised. Finally, the discussion also exposes a number of challenges arising from the research process. It is suggested that these challenges offer important implications for researchers seeking to undertake co-research. In particular, it is suggested that a careful consideration of who is most likely to benefit from the research is required prior to undertaking co-research. Furthermore, reflections on peer dynamics throughout the process raise questions about utilising children as co-researchers and situating them as pseudo-adults.

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Introduction

At the inception of this project, an ostensibly straightforward question about how girls experience the transition from primary to secondary school was presented.

In order to explore this question, the research was undertaken in conjunction with four girls in their second year at a Scottish secondary school. The girls assumed the role of co-researchers and they were involved at each stage of the research process. Whilst my understanding of the topic of transition has, undoubtedly, been enhanced, limiting the discussion to this narrow focus would, in the first instance, do my personal learning a dis-service. What transpired was, from my perspective, unexpected and allowed me to explore a wide range of issues encompassing epistemology and the nature of truth, feminism, essentialism, individualism, children's rights and 21st century class issues.

Additionally, the research process was beset by an array of methodological challenges which pose difficulties in terms of drawing meaningful conclusions in relation to the original research question. However, the positive side of this is that these difficulties provoked an increased level of reflection and criticality on my part – on a range of issues and particularly in relation to how and why we involve children in research. Importantly, a number of reflections on the role of the adult within co-research are made – many of which have wider implications for those seeking to utilise such an approach.

It is these reflections that are the basis of what has, arguably, been the 'real' learning. Consequently, the format of this thesis moves beyond a 'traditional' academic presentation. This process has been, above all else, a personal journey and the discussion will give precedence to this narrative.

Chapter 1. Gender and Education: About the boys?

Chapter overview

This chapter documents my engagement with the academic literature as I sought to develop a better understanding of observations arising from professional practice. The observations related to a group of girls who were causing professionals a number of concerns. These observations arose against a backdrop of widespread concern about the academic achievement of boys. Many academic commentators have been critical of this emphasis on boys, arguing that it renders girls 'invisible' from discourse about so called 'underachievement'.

Woven throughout this chapter is a personal account of how I moved from a largely essentialist position to a greater understanding of the socially constructed nature of gendered behaviour.

The discussion begins with a description of the practice-based scenario which stimulated my interest in exploring education from a gendered perspective. In the early part of my career as an Educational Psychologist, I was linked to a school where a group of girls (consisting of approximately 10 pupils in their second and third years of secondary schooling) were causing significant concern among professionals. The presenting issues included challenging behaviour in school, truancy, substance and alcohol mis-use, underage sexual activity and absconding overnight. Two of these young women were ultimately placed in secure residential placements out of the local authority area.

This scenario was interesting to me on two levels. Firstly, these girls were posing the concerns at a time when the rhetoric in education, with regard to gender, was very much focused on the educational experience and the 'underachievement' of boys. Secondly and, anecdotally, it seemed that these girls had 'appeared' on the radar of specialist services in a short period around concerns presenting themselves. This, I felt, was in contrast to boys who were in receipt of similar services (e.g. social work; off-site educational provision;

youth justice team). Many of the boys were known to these specialist services whilst still in primary school.

Debates relating to gender and education are not a 21st century phenomenon. Authors such as Jones (2005) explain that, in the 1970s and 80s, the debate about gender and education focused on girls' 'under-achievement'. Numerous authors including Ringrose (2007), Hutchison (2004) and Warrington & Younger (2008) note that, during the 1990's and in this early part of the new millennium the emphasis switched and the issue of boys 'underachievement' then warranted considerable attention in political, educational and media domains.

Given the very public nature of this debate, and its subsequent impact on policy and practice, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that it would have been very difficult for practitioners within education to escape the discussion in its entirety and, by extension, to extricate them completely from a stance in relation to this issue. As a practitioner, I was no exception. When I began my career as an Educational Psychologist (EP), I entered the profession with a set of assumptions about gender and education. These views were, in large part, formed over a six year teaching career. I remember having conversations with colleagues and parents that included statements like, 'boys are always 'alright on the night'' and 'boys are difficult to motivate unless they see the relevance of the task or unless the subject matter is of interest to them'. In effect, I was exerting a view that boys tend to 'drift' in class but then tend to perform when, by my definition, it is 'needed' (e.g. in tests). At that time, I held the view that boys were more subject to peer pressure and that being 'cool' in the school context often ran contrary to being good academically. The learning and teaching opportunities I offered were symptomatic of this view as I remember making a conscious effort to plan activities which I perceived were boy friendly (e.g. writing activities with a sporting theme). Retrospectively, I am able to acknowledge that these attributions and resultant actions were characterised by a lack of critical reflection and that I, at no point, remember actively considering the impact this might have on the girls in my class.

I carried these assumptions into my first year as an Educational Psychologist (EP). In one of the first pieces of systemic work I undertook as an EP, I worked with a class teacher and a teacher of Support for Learning in a primary school

to develop strategies to re-engage a group of boys who were deemed to be lacking interest in relation to literacy. Assessment data demonstrated that these boys were beginning to lose ground academically relative to the other children in the class. This was a class that comprised 21 boys and only 8 girls.

The detail in relation to this piece of work is not directly relevant to this discussion but, noticeably, what the process served to do was reinforce my established views about boys' learning. Indeed, reading more widely about boys' attainment resulted in me forming more explicit assumptions – particularly about the 'essential' nature of being a boy. I now understand that these assumptions reflected significant elements of popular discourse prevalent at that time. To illustrate this point, I will draw on the work of Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw (1998). They identify three themes which characterised the popular debate about boys' underachievement. I will focus on two of these. These are what Epstein et al (1998) termed the 'poor boys' and 'boys will be boys' discourses.

Within the 'poor boys' discourse, boys are constructed as victims of a feminised education system. Epstein et al (1998) and others such as Raphael Reed (1998) and Francis & Skelton (2005) argue that this line of argument is predicated on a view that schools are places heavily dominated by females and that the teaching and learning opportunities on offer tend to favour what are assumed to be the language oriented strengths of girls. Modes of assessment (e.g. continuous assessment practices), according to Francis & Skelton (2005), are also seen to favour girls.

At the time of the boys' literacy project, I prepared a leaflet which was designed to support teachers working with 'disengaged' boys. Two statements in particular resonate with the 'poor boys' narrative. The following statements are quoted verbatim from the leaflet:

- *In their early years, boys tend to spend most of their time in female company (mums, playgroup leaders, teachers, grannies etc). It could be argued that, as such, early education is biased in favour of girls.*
- *'Boys tend to be less independent when they come to school (mums do more for them!).'*

Francis & Skelton (2005) explain that this line of argument implies there is an essential nature to maleness and that the predominance of women represses that maleness. In viewing boys as the victims of feminism, the antidote is to reward what Francis & Skelton term 'conventional manifestations of 'boyiness'.

Epstein et al (1998) also describe the 'boys will be boys' discourse. It is argued that boys' behaviour is characterised by an inevitable aggression, immaturity and need for competition. Again, these statements, made in my leaflet, highlight how my practice was laden with assumptions reflecting this type of stance:

- *Boys see many activities as irrelevant*
- *Boys tend to find it difficult to multi-task and like to deal with tasks one at a time*
- *Boys are less able to concentrate than girls*
- *Boys do not always view learning as "cool" and tend to be more subject to peer pressure*

Again, these statements reflect the type of essentialist positioning described previously. The leaflet implies that boys are born with particular traits. Epstein et al (1998) and Raphael Reed (1998) explain that assuming this type of position is problematic. They argue that the solution is, almost inevitably, to adjust the school system to re-address the balance to suit boys. Common strategies included the deployment of more male teachers, greater emphasis on the need for strong discipline, the provision of more structured teaching opportunities and the tailoring the curriculum in a manner perceived to play to boys' strengths.

This masculinisation of the education system is heavily critiqued by Epstein et al (1998). They express particular concern about how these types of strategies serve to legitimise hegemonic masculinity rather than challenge it.

Other authors such as Mahony, Hextall & Menter (2004) and Francis, Skelton & Read (2012) contest the notion that schools are feminised. They take the view that, in recent years, there has been a masculinisation rather than feminisation of school systems. Francis et al (2012) argue that schools have been marketised in a manner which is reflective of business. They also argue that a narrow view of 'achievement', which focuses almost solely on academic

success, means that teachers are focused on ensuring pupils perform well in public tests. Mac an Ghail & Haywood (2011) also cite inspection regimes and disciplinary codes as symptomatic of a masculinised system.

Osler and Vincent (2003) also contest any assumption that the answer to boys' 'under-achievement' is to masculinise the school system. They cite research which suggests that systems with the highest achieving boys tend to have a preponderance of female teachers. They also contend that harsh discipline systems are associated with higher levels of violence in schools.

There is no attempt in this discussion to suggest that the issue of boys' underachievement is not important. However, several commentators including Jackson (2006), Osler & Vincent (2003) Jackson & Tinkler (2007) and Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody (2001) express concern about both boys and girls being treated as homogeneous groups. This, it is suggested, can lead to an assumption that all girls are succeeding - with no explicit acknowledgement that both boys and girls underachieve. This is viewed by these authors as problematic because any assumption that 'all girls are doing fine' will potentially mean that the needs of girls are at risk of being ignored or hidden.

My investment in the boys' literacy project referred to in the previous section is, perhaps, an example of how the needs of girls can be marginalised by such an overt focus on the needs of boys. The project was an apparent success. Causality is impossible to establish but the evaluation showed increased engagement and motivation among the boys – both in context of the literacy group and, more generally, in the classroom setting. The boys also showed an improvement in their perception of themselves as learners. Buoyed by the positivity of the evaluation, I delivered training sessions to various schools about boys' engagement. These training sessions would only have served to reinforce the already commonly held views about boys and learning. At no point, however, did I adopt a critical stance in relation to the messages I was conveying. I lacked any real understanding of what implicit messages my training was carrying about the nature of masculinity. Importantly, I failed to ask a fundamental question – so what about girls? In making assumptions about boys and their learning I was, by default, also making assumptions about girls and their learning styles. In the leaflet previously referred to, I made a

number of comparative statements (e.g. 'boys tend to benefit more from experiential learning'; 'boys tend to have poorer linguistic skills'; 'boys tend to have lower self-esteem'). In effect, I was not only commenting on the 'essential' nature of boys but also of girls. In the leaflet, I also made suggestions designed to improve practice. I will draw on one particular statement by means of illustration. This statement read, 'boys respond better to instant feedback'. As a psychologist, I understand that specific and instant feedback is potentially powerful and is a feature of a good classroom. Influenced by the work of Dweck (e.g. 2007), I have many conversations with teachers about how to foster 'growth mindsets' among pupils. At no point, in my reading or in my practice, has there been anything to suggest that boys benefit more from this than girls do! Utilising specific feedback is not a gender issue yet it is a feature of that boys' leaflet.

Given the focus on boys' engagement in the media and within education, my interest in this topic was, perhaps, understandable. However, the emergence of the observations around the group of girls, previously referred to, brought my thinking around boys and their learning into question for the first time. The concerns posed by these girls offered a fundamental challenge to any notion that 'all girls are doing fine' in school.

Prior to embarking on the next part of the discussion, it is important to offer some provisos. Firstly, using inverted commas around the word 'achievement' is, in my view, necessary. Achievement is a highly contested concept. Francis & Skelton (2005) argue that it is very narrowly conceived and has an almost exclusive focus on performance in exams. When achievement is discussed, especially in the media, there is a failure to recognise wider achievements beyond the academic. Achievement in areas such as citizenship is marginalised. Additionally, whether the academic success of girls in school is translating into career success is highly debatable (e.g. Hutchison, 2004; Osler, 2006).

As a second proviso, it is important to acknowledge the academic success of a majority of girls in school. Statistics relating to attainment across the UK are testimony to this. Consequently, there is no attempt to suggest that the following observations should be applied to all girls or indeed to all girls who we, as

professionals, might deem vulnerable. Girls are not a homogenous group and there is no attempt to portray them as such.

Thirdly, I make no argument to suggest that the issue of boys' underachievement is unimportant. In terms of academic achievement, the exam statistics offer evidence that a significant minority of boys are failing to meet benchmark examination figures. Francis & Skelton (2005) also argue that the individualisation agenda, which is an increasing feature of our public services, means that boys are no longer seen merely as victims of the school system – 'problem' boys are also constructed as posing a risk to the success of other pupils in their classes. This discussion does not seek to minimise or dismiss the issues encountered by boys.

The next section documents the themes which emerged from an initial wave of engagement with the academic literature. Additionally, it was these themes that helped expose my often essentialist standpoint with relation to gender in the school context and began to support the development of my understanding of its socially constructed nature.

The question of how gender and class interacts is a strong and prevalent theme in many discussions of the needs of girls. This will be discussed later in this chapter. Another prominent theme relates to how teachers attribute ability and learning for both boys and girls. Jones (2005) explains that, in the 1970s and 80s, the debate about gender focused on girls' rather than boys' 'under-achievement'. She explains that a series of beliefs informed assumptions about girls 'failure'. At that time, girls were regarded as being passive and un-inquiring. Their achievements were viewed as being the result of hard work and diligence rather than ability. Boys, in contrast, were viewed as challenging and as having natural flair and talent.

Jones (2005) and Jones & Myhill (2004) report on Project JUDE, a commissioned study investigating the underachievement of boys. Observations arising from this study suggest that the types of attributions, described in the previous paragraph, still endure. They report that the teachers who were interviewed principally saw 'underachievement' as a construct associated with boys. Indeed, some girls were actually seen to be 'over-achieving' (i.e. doing better than teachers expected given their apparent ability). The poor academic

achievement of boys was explained in terms of underachievement. In contrast, the poor academic performance of girls was largely seen as a result of low ability. The 'underachieving' boy and the 'high achieving' girl were viewed as typical of their gender. Girls' 'underachievement' was explained by a lack of confidence whereas boys' 'underachievement' was associated with poor concentration, immaturity and poor behaviour.

Given these descriptions, Jones & Myhill (2004) conclude that the underachieving girl is largely invisible from teacher descriptions. They go on to argue that teachers are more pre-disposed to see the potential in boys. Consistent with the earlier work of Walkerdine & Lucey (1989), Jones & Myhill also suggest that girls are often cast as passive, procedural learners who lack criticality.

These reports have a resonance with my own attributions and anecdotal observations. On reflecting on the observations of Jones & Myhill (2004) and Jones (2005), I realised I held implicit notions about girls being passive, hard-working, sensible, compliant and well behaved. I also had a view that girls were working to potential whereas some boys were, somehow, a source of untapped potential. As a woman, and as an apparently reflective practitioner, these realisations were a little uncomfortable. In retrospect, I recognise that I was asserting a view that girls can somehow rise above poor teaching whereas boys tend to be the victim of it.

Several commentators (e.g. Jones & Myhill, 2004; Jones, 2005; Walkerdine et al, 2001) argue that there are wider ramifications to these kinds of attributions. Jones (2005) argues that holding any notion that girls are working to 'potential' may lead to an assumption that they are in less need of additional support to maximise their learning. Such attributions may also lead to teachers having lower expectations of girls. In schools where setting is used, these lower expectations may also lead to girls being placed in lower sets which could, in turn, re-inforce their own and others notions of their 'ability'.

A further pervasive theme arising from the literature is a strong critique of any assumption that all girls achieve. Academics such as Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody (2001), Raphael Reed (1998) and Jones (2005) argue that the 'success' of girls is relative to that of boys and is not absolute. By way of illustration, when

I first considered this issue, I consulted the provisional 2008 English GCSE statistics. These statistics showed that 68.2% of girls achieved the benchmark figure of 5 or more A* to C passes at GCSE level. These figures indicate that almost 1/3 of girls are not achieving this benchmark – a significant proportion.

In simplistic terms - not all boys 'fail' and not all girls 'achieve'. Consequently, commentators including Epstein et al (1998), Walkerdine et al (2001) and Ringrose (2007) argue that there is a need to ask the question of 'Which boys?' and 'Which girls?'. They all make strong arguments suggesting that utilising a gender only framework obscures other differences such as class, culture, race and economic dimensions – all of which, it is argued, are stronger indicators of performance in school.

Continuing on this theme, it is argued that the academic success of girls is primarily a story of the success of middle class girls. Walkerdine et al (2001) offer a comprehensive discussion of the interaction of class and gender factors in their book 'Growing up Girl'. Like many other authors they express concern at how the boys' underachievement debate has tended to mute the debate around what they describe as 'deep and enduring' class inequalities – inequalities which, they argue, exist across Europe.

Before progressing with a description of the challenges that may be encountered by girls from a working class background, it is important to be clear that there is no assumption that middle class girls are a homogenous group who necessarily 'achieve' or who 'achieve' without effort or cost. For example, Walkerdine et al (2001) argue that, for many middle class girls, outstanding academic performance can be perceived as ordinary. As a result, academically successful, middle class girls can be left with a sense of never quite feeling good enough. Walkerdine et al (2001) go on to suggest that this is partly explained by how girls' success is attributed. Their success is seen as a result of hard work and diligence and is at risk of being minimised because it was not achieved in the 'right way'.

Skelton, Francis & Read (2010) also caution against any assumption that pressures experienced by girls are experienced by 'low achieving' girls or working class girls. They draw on a range of literature to make a link between

the anxiety and stress encountered in the pursuit of academic success and increased levels of self-harm and the increased prevalence of eating disorders.

Skelton et al (2010) also report on a study which suggests that, for many young people, managing 'cleverness' can be problematic. This management, for girls, is deemed to be easier if they have the following characteristics:

- Being well connected socially
- Having physical good looks
- Presenting with 'typical' gender characteristics (i.e. co-operative, diligent, care and concern for teachers and friends, heterosexual interest in boys)

It is argued that for girls who don't naturally have these skills and attributes, their 'cleverness' needs to be minimised whilst efforts to fit in are maximised. Feelings of pride at academic achievement are tempered with feelings of anxiety and rejection. Skelton et al (2010) align academic achievement with a masculine perspective and they suggest that girls often need to play this down so that precedence can be given to situating themselves within what they term 'appropriate gendered subjectivities'.

Given these arguments, there is a need to avoid any implication that the path negotiated by middle class girls is straightforward.

The more detailed discussion in relation to the experience of working class girls begins with reference to attainment results. Within the English GCSE figures, there is no explicit reference to the results of pupils working and middle class backgrounds. However, the results of young people who are and are not entitled to free school meals (FSM) are compared. Use of these figures is problematic in that being working class and entitlement to free school meals is, by no means, the same thing. However, in the absence of a more robust measure, the use of FSM figures seems to highlight some kind of socio-economic difference fairly neatly. An analysis of the 2011 figures, published in February 2012, show marked differences. The percentage of girls entitled to free school meals who achieved 5 or more A* to C passes (including English and mathematics) was 37.9% compared to 65.8% of those not entitled. The figures for boys are 31.4% and 58.3% respectively.

What also emerged from my reading was that the attainment gap between middle and working class cohorts is only one illustration of how their educational experiences differ. Commentators such as Walkerdine et al (2001), Reay (1998) and Archer and Yamashita (2003) argue that the school experience for working class girls and their families is very different from that of their middle class counterparts.

Firstly, the theme of how teachers attribute achievement re-emerges in discussions of class. It seems that the types of attributions discussed earlier, and illuminated by the work of Jones (2005) and Jones & Myhill (2004), may be heightened for girls from working class backgrounds. Walkerdine et al (2001) argue, for example, that teachers are more likely to attribute low ability to working class girls and tend to label them as unconfident or sensitive. In contrast, lower achievement on the part of middle class girls is, not, they argue, constructed as a consequence of low ability.

Walkerdine et al (2001) suggest that the needs of girls from working class backgrounds are denied by schools due to lack of parental access to schools and the education system more broadly. Working class parents, it is argued, can lack the certainty and confidence of their middle class counterparts and are more likely to accept the views of professionals. This lack of confidence, Walkerdine et al (2001) argue, is often attributable to their own educational experience and a sense of having 'failed' at school. Reay (1998) argues that, in contrast, middle class parents are more emotionally and materially equipped to advocate on their daughters' behalf. Reay (1998) also suggests that middle class parents have useful social capital (e.g. social access to teachers) which means that negotiating the school system is less challenging.

The differing experiences, as determined by class, extend to the transition from school. Archer & Yamashita (2003) draw on interview data from around 20 girls, enrolled at schools in special measures, who found difficulty in attending school. Archer & Yamashita (2003) also note that there was no lack of aspiration per se on the part of the girls. High status jobs were listed but there was a sense of these pupils knowing their limits. University and college were seen as distant and unrealistic options. This is attributed, by the authors, to a number of factors including the girls having a fear of further educational failure;

the girls viewing themselves as 'dumb' – even when teachers reported differently; and their 'failure' being internalised. The authors also talk of 'social capital' and of how some working class youngsters don't have a sense of what university is. They may not have known anyone who has been to university.

As part of their commentary, Archer & Yamashita (2003) argue that staying on at school is a natural path for the middle class cohort. What is 'natural' for the working class cohort, Archer & Yamashita (2003) argue, is less clear. This chimes with the reports of Walkerdine et al (2001) who report that, at age 21, 22% of working class girls in their study were in higher education compared to 93% of the middle class group. Indeed, 44% of working class girls had left education altogether compared to only 7% of middle class girls.

Thus far, the key messages arising from my reading centre around two distinct but related themes. The first theme relates to how notions of 'success', 'underachievement' and 'failure' are constructed in relation to girls. Girls are often viewed as diligent and as achieving in line with their ability. Indeed, 'underachievement' and 'girls' are not concepts which, according to the research of Jones (2005), are readily associated. These kinds of attributions are difficult for all girls as this 'diligence not brilliance' discourse and can serve to belittle their achievements. Secondly, the success of girls compared to boys is relative and is, by and large, a story of the academic success of many middle class girls.

In relating this reading back to the original practice-based scenario which instigated the project, there appeared to be a fundamental contradiction. The group of girls described did not fit this quiet, diligent stereotype. The girls in the so-called problem group were, by no means, quietly disengaging. Instead, the behaviours that were causing concern were overt and disruptive. Jackson (2006) writes about 'ladettes' and although the term is, in my view uncomfortable, the behaviours of the group of girls tended to fit more with this kind of depiction of adolescent girls. Jackson (2006) describes a study which drew on questionnaire data from 1000 pupils and interview data from 150 pupils and 30 teachers. Jackson (2006) argues that teachers view 'ladette' behaviours as emerging in adolescence and she also explains that these girls are characterised as being brash and 'gobby', as being very open about

(heterosexual) sex and as being heavy drinkers. The teachers interviewed held the view that 'ladette' behaviour was on the increase and, for some teachers, the challenging behaviour of girls posed a greater challenge than that of boys.

Jackson argues that the 'ladette' is rarely depicted positively and there is a tendency to describe these girls in unfavourable and unsympathetic terms. There is no female equivalent, it is argued, of the 'lovable rogue'. Jackson contends that such overt behaviours from girls tend to challenge society's notion of what it is to be feminine. Jackson explains that one potential ramification of this is that, the threshold at which behaviour becomes problematic may well be different for boys than for girls as teachers may tolerate less from a girl. These arguments from Jackson have resonance with the writings of Archer et al (2007) who argue that quiet and submissive forms of femininity are rewarded in schools and are perhaps more valued in society. Archer et al (2007) also suggest that the dominant discourse regarding the 'ideal' female pupil can, in some circumstances, be constraining for girls and sometimes at odds with the girls' own notion of an assertive, strong femininity.

The work of Jackson was challenging from my personal point of view given that my previously held attributions were strikingly consistent with the observations of Jackson. Both as a teacher and as an Educational Psychologist, I had a genuine fondness for boys who posed behavioural problems and I was generally able to build constructive relationships with them. As such, there was, perhaps, an acceptance on my part that being a little challenging was part of being a boy. When I encountered a girl with challenging behaviour, I found myself using the type of language, reported by Jackson, to describe girls. This realisation was difficult in that it implied my 'loveable rogues' were more worthy of support than my 'difficult' girls.

Osler & Vincent (2003) offer further suggestions as to why me, and other professionals, might hold less regard for girls who pose challenging behaviour. Osler & Vincent (2003) report on a study which was specifically focused on girls. The aim was to identify factors and challenges for girls in schools – factors which may be associated with disaffection. There were six sample areas across 3 local education authorities. The population was mixed in terms of socio-economic status and race. Eighty-one girls were interviewed via individual and

group interviews. The cohort included a mix of those who had been excluded, some deemed at risk of exclusion and some girls who were posing no concerns. Fifty five service providers were also interviewed.

Osler & Vincent (2003) argue that girls are viewed as more intentional in their actions (e.g. using apologies strategically; talking their way out of things) and as more likely to think through the consequences of their behaviour. Professionals also view girls as being more covert in their actions. This covertness appears to manifest itself in the type 'bullying' often experienced by girls, which Osler & Vincent (2003) argue, tends to be verbal or psychological rather than physical in nature. This perceived intentionality is problematic as it casts girls as underhand and as sneaky.

Our notion of an 'ideal' female pupil may also be limiting for girls in another sense. Although the following suggestion can only be made tentatively, there is, perhaps, reason to suggest that overtly challenging behaviour on the part of girls may be difficult for professionals due to a propensity for greater risk-averseness in comparison to boys. This line of argument was prompted by my attendance at a conference organised by the Scottish Youth Justice Forum in 2009 where it was argued that girls, more so than boys, can be placed in secure residential placements in order to keep themselves safe (rather than the girls posing a danger to others). They attributed this to the risk-averseness of professionals.

The above suggestion raised questions in my mind as to whether we, as professionals had different thresholds for the girls' group (who provided the original scenario for the project) than we would have done for boys who may have been presenting with similar difficulties. Would this scenario have prompted such alarm among professionals? The answer to this question is not straightforward but it is, arguably, important to pose the question of whether two of these girls were placed in residential placements because they posed a level of risk to themselves that we, as professionals, deemed intolerable?

An alternative and / or further explanation as to why these two girls were placed out of area could relate to the suitability and capability of local services to meet need. This argument is influenced by the work of Osler & Vincent (2003) who

suggest that local services tend to be geared towards boys' needs and interests and may not be sufficiently well set-up to meet the needs of vulnerable girls.

Any attempt to distil Osler & Vincent's (2003) book into a few sentences is fraught with difficulty but a recurring line of argument, offered by the authors, relates to how the needs of boys and girls tend to manifest themselves in different ways. Boys' behaviour, in general terms, tends to be more overt and therefore more immediately challenging for schools and teachers. They argue that, in contrast, girls' difficulties are more likely to be internalised and that they are more susceptible to anxiety, depression, self-harm and eating disorders. They are also more likely, it is argued, not to attend school making them susceptible to informal modes of exclusion. The consequences of this are clear, according to Osler & Vincent (2003). Not only can these difficulties be difficult for teachers to detect but those whose behaviour challenges the system most, and whose behaviour most detrimentally impacts on the learning of others, will tend to be more on the radar of schools. The needs of the quieter pupil – whether male or female – will often fail to trigger mechanisms which will allow access to what are limited resources.

Despite an acknowledgement by the professionals interviewed that girls and boys tend to be 'needy', Osler & Vincent (2003) remain concerned that specialist supports and provision, such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), tend to be set up in a manner which suits the needs and interests of boys. This, it is argued, perpetuates a scenario whereby professionals become less reluctant to refer girls to such services. This reluctance to refer is despite positive reports from girls who attended PRUs - having been non-attenders at school. In contrast, high levels of attendance were noted at the PRU. The girls who were interviewed suggested that low adult / pupil ratios offer a number of benefits - including support with motivation and attention and more time to cover missed work. Social and emotional support – or 'someone to talk things through with' – was also cited as important. The girls also valued the less formal relationships. There was a perceived culture of mutual respect and being treated in grown up ways.

Until now, this chapter has served to both highlight the key themes arising from my engagement with the academic literature and to document my reflections

and learning. As has been discussed, much of my early thinking reflected, what I now recognise to be, an essentialist position with regard to gender in that I tended to portray the view that boys and girls exhibited pre-determined and fixed characteristics within the school setting. My thinking reflected key elements of popular discourse at that time which, for example, cast boys as victims of a feminised education system and which constructed girls as compliant and diligent.

As a result of my active engagement with the academic literature, I became more explicitly aware of the socially constructed nature of gender. As Francis & Skelton (2005) explain, social constructionist theory views meaning, including identities, as being socially situated and constructed through social interaction. Consequently, gendered behaviour is produced from social factors rather than biological programming.

Burr (2003) outlines four assumptions of social constructionism. These are:

- A critical stance is adopted towards 'taken for granted knowledge'
- 'Knowledge' is historically and culturally determined
- 'Knowledge' is sustained as part of a social process
- There are various social constructions of the world

The statement about 'taken for granted knowledge' is interesting from my perspective as I now recognise that I, as a practitioner, drew heavily on lay explanations about gendered behaviour. Whilst I am not arguing that all gendered behaviour can be accounted for through the provision of social explanations, I now have a better understanding of how my attributions, and the potential attributions of others, may have been constraining and may have served to re-inforce stereotypical behaviour.

This essentialist position now seems difficult to rationalise. When I was at school, I was very much a tomboy. Even now, I don't fit with what might be regarded as stereotypical female traits. Therefore, I should know and understand that being a girl or a boy isn't confined to a narrow set of characteristics. I have a first-hand understanding of feeling pressures to conform and re-model my behaviours into what could be deemed more

recognisable or acceptable forms of femininity. The following argument may appear paradoxical but what is most interesting on reflection is that it is, perhaps, my non-stereotypical presentation that caused me to think in such essentialist terms. Until much later in life, I had never thought of myself as particularly feminine. Feeling different from other females perhaps re-inforced my sense that there was something inherent about being female – something I couldn't live up to.

Chapter 2. Girls and transition

Chapter overview

Posing the question of how girls experience the transition from primary to secondary school appears ostensibly simple. Examining this question also appears legitimate given that a) the transition to secondary school is an important rite of passage for the vast majority of young people and b) there is an apparent absence of gendered accounts of the transition experience.

Arriving at this question involved a process of detailed reflection supported by a high level of engagement with the academic literature. Affording a focus on transition was not, by any means, the starting point. Rather, this question was the culmination of an involved and complex process and it is this that forms the basis of discussion in this second chapter.

The title cited in my research proposal related to girls and their experience of the transition from primary to secondary school. However, thus far, the discussion has largely focused on broader themes which emerged from my reading and resultant reflections.

As has already been intimated, transition was not an area of focus at the outset of the process. However, what I did have in my mind throughout my engagement with the literature was the anecdotal observation I made earlier. This relates to how the girls, who were causing concern, were not known to specialist services (e.g. social work, off-site educational provision, youth justice services) prior to adolescence. This, I felt was in contrast to boys, who were often in receipt of support in the early stages of primary. This was borne out, to an extent, by data from the local authority where I work. In 2009, none of the 4 girls who attended the local authority's off-site educational provision (for secondary aged pupils) had attended the primary equivalent. A number of the boys, in contrast, had accessed this primary support (4 of 9).

The next section focuses on reading and reflections which allowed me to form a tentative working hypothesis that the 'disengagement' of some girls from education emerges as their school career progressed - and at a later stage in their school career than it does for many of their male counterparts.

The reports of Jones & Myhill (2004) on Project JUDE were alluded to in Chapter 1 and this work is the starting point for this section of the discussion.

A feature of the Project JUDE study was that teachers from all stages in the school system were interviewed. Jones & Myhill (2004) argue that this allowed a range of potentially interesting patterns to be identified.

Most notably in respect of the current discussion, teachers were asked to identify what they felt were a high and low achieving pupil of each gender. Teachers were asked, as part of the interview process, to reflect on each of these pupils. What is reported by Jones & Myhill (2004) is that teacher descriptions of the behaviour and application of both the 'high achieving' girl and the 'low achieving' boy remained generally constant over time. Specifically, teachers suggested that the engagement of the 'high achieving' girl is consistently high throughout their school career, whilst 'low achieving' boys begin and continue with low levels of engagement throughout school. In contrast, the behaviour of the 'high achieving' boy and the 'low achieving' girl appeared, according to teacher descriptions, to change over time - with both becoming increasingly disengaged as they became older.

The description of the 'low achieving' girl is most pertinent to this discussion. In interviews, teachers describe a pattern of girls who are reasonably engaged in Year 1 of primary school, who are then less engaged by middle school and who are disengaged, sometimes disruptively, by secondary school. This study was primarily about boys' underachievement and this could, arguably, have skewed the interview process. Nonetheless, an overt focus on boys does little to explain why this pattern relating to the 'underachieving' girl might emerge. Consequently, this observation is worthy of some consideration.

Disciplinary exclusion figures, cited by Osler and Vincent (2003), provide further evidence to suggest that difficulties may emerge for girls as they move through the school system. Osler & Vincent acknowledge that exclusion from school is a

problem that disproportionately affects boys. However, they also explain that although very few girls are formally excluded in primary school, by age 14 and 15 (the peak age for exclusions), girls comprise one quarter of all formal exclusions from school – a significant rise proportionate to boys. These observations are, in themselves, interesting but, if Osler and Vincent are correct in asserting that girls are more likely to be subject to ‘informal’ modes of exclusion and to self-exclusion (e.g. non-attendance), these figures may well underestimate the complexity of the pattern of girls’ exclusion.

Further evidence for a change, over time, in relation to girls’ ‘achievement’ and levels of ‘engagement’ comes from the work of Archer et al (2007). They conducted a wide ranging study looking at the identities and aspirations of ‘at risk’ pupils. As part of this work, they found that a substantial proportion of the girls who were interviewed were above average, academically, at Key Stage 3 but then ‘underperformed’ at GCSE level. Archer et al (2007) also note that, for some, a further shift was noted around the time of their GCSEs with many expressing regret at their earlier disengagement. Some girls talked about ‘wanting to change’ and ‘wanting to become a good pupil’.

This line of thinking, which suggested that the disengagement of some girls emerged later in their school career compared to boys, as has been intimated, was tentative and not clearly formulated. I understood the potential contributing factors were numerous and that these factors were likely to interact in complex ways. An explanation of this apparent pattern would not be easy to achieve. This complexity, in part, prompted a change in emphasis and the next section describes how the focus shifted away from ‘at risk’ girls to something centred on the experience of all girls around the time of transition.

Before beginning that discussion, it is important to offer a number of provisos. Firstly, there is an inherent danger in offering any suggestion that all girls have a difficult experience of transition and that somehow, secondary schools are ‘anti-girl’ in the way they are constituted. I know from my professional experience that girls, who primary teachers have assumed would find difficulty with the primary / secondary transition, have thrived following this move. Indeed, these girls have benefitted from some of the factors which will be framed as being potentially problematic later in the discussion. I can think of

one girl in particular who responded positively to the higher expectations and the greater freedom afforded in secondary school. There was less scrutiny and emphasis on her dyslexia. The labelling and potentially stifling effects of being heavily supported in primary school were diminished and this seemed to impact positively on her friendships. In addition, the practical nature of much of the secondary curriculum allowed her other skills to be show-cased. It is clear that transition is an important and ultimately successful rite of passage for a great number of our young people. There are a number of marked differences between primary and secondary schools and these differences have the potential to impact both positively and negatively on those making the transition.

It would also be dangerous to postulate that the type of difficulties that young women can experience in adolescence is directly linked to their experiences in secondary school. Adolescence, notwithstanding the school experience, is complex and to suggest that their secondary school experience alone is the key factor in determining outcomes would, at best, be foolish.

A further note of caution is required. The research was conducted in Scotland and therefore the practice-based observations, which formed the starting point for discussion in Chapter 1, relate to the Scottish education system. However, I have relied, almost exclusively, on studies and commentaries drawn from an English perspective. Scotland and England may be near neighbours but the education systems are quite distinct. The market forces prevalent in English schools are not a feature of the Scottish system to the same extent. There is no publication of league tables. The new Curriculum for Excellence emphasises the need to develop well-rounded individuals with the skills and the capacity to adapt to future demands. Successive governments in Scotland have always advocated policies which lie to the left of Westminster's policies. Given this, the arguments made in justification of this research question may well not apply as strongly in the Scottish context.

The process of formulating the research question around the transition experience of girls was heavily influenced by the work of Osler & Vincent (2003), Osler (2006), Tobbell (2003) and O'Brien (2003). Between them, these academics offer a range of evidence and commentary which lends some

cautious support to the notion that some aspects of the secondary school system may be disadvantageous to some girls.

Firstly, I will draw on the account of Osler (2006) who focuses on the potential impact of structural and organisational features of secondary schools. In commenting on the large scale study, outlined by Osler & Vincent (2003) and alluded to in the last chapter, she firstly asserts that ability setting is problematic. This leads to low expectations on the part of teachers and the girls own notions of their 'ability' being reinforced. Large class sizes and inflexible curricular arrangements are also cited by Osler (2006) as being particularly problematic. She also asserts that a lack of access to marketable exams is difficult for girls as they will tend to select subjects which will lead them into low socio-economic status professions.

Osler (2006) and Osler & Vincent (2003) also describe how girls in their study make reference to how the apparently formal nature of teacher / pupils relationships in secondary school can be difficult. A lack of personal contact was noted by some of the girls who were interviewed. Disciplinary procedures, if applied inconsistently, were also considered problematic. When asked about the qualities of a 'good teacher', the girls in Osler and Vincent's study emphasised the need for good management but they also talked of the need for good interpersonal and relational qualities (e.g. a culture of mutual respect; being relaxed; offering praise and encouragement).

Osler & Vincent (2003) argue that teacher / pupil relationships can have a significant impact on some girls and, if negative, can result in self-exclusion.

This observation about the formality of teacher / pupil relationships has resonance with the work of Tobbell (2003). Tobbell reports on the contributions of a focus group of girls who were in their first year of secondary school. These girls expressed concern that teachers 'were not at their level' and used too much language. Tobbell (2003) goes on to suggest that the relationship between teachers and pupils in secondary is, perhaps, more distant than in primary.

The Tobbell paper was the first I had encountered which specifically looked at the issue of transition from a gendered perspective. I was struck by this

observation because transition from primary to secondary is an area which receives considerable attention. The focus on transition has been given additional impetus in Scotland. The Additional Support for Learning (ASfL) Code of Practice, which was published in 2010 and reflects the preceding ASfL 2004 & 2009 Acts, offers a statutory basis to transition planning. Work, undertaken by Evangelou et al (2008) and published by EPPSE on good practice in relation to primary to secondary transition, is one example of a significant piece of work. This report, whilst extensive, said little about gender and, although it was suggested that children from low socio-economic status (SES) families found the transition more difficult than children from higher SES families, the reasons for this were not explored in any meaningful detail.

From a UK perspective, there appeared to be an absence of studies which explored transition in relation to gender. However, I did encounter a paper by O'Brien (2003). Her research was conducted in the Republic of Ireland and looked at the experience of girls around the transition from primary to secondary school. It is important to note that the secondary school system in the Republic is very different to the system in the UK and in Scotland but O'Brien makes a number of points which influenced the shape of the research process. One important suggestion, in terms of my thinking, was that working class girls tend to be more closely attached to their primary school than their middle class counterparts. It was argued that the working class girls seemed to value the what was suggested to be the homely and relatively safe feel of primary.

Reading O'Brien's paper was, as has been intimated, integral to how the rest of the project unfolded and led to the narrower focus on transition. To my mind, bringing the transition from primary to secondary into focus was justifiable on a number of levels. Firstly, the lack of commentary on how transition is mediated by gender is an important factor. Secondly, the work of Osler (2006) and Osler & Vincent (2003) highlights how structural aspects of secondary schools may impact disproportionately on girls. Finally, the nature of teacher / pupil and peer relationships in secondary school is very different compared to primary school – offering up potential explanations as to why transition may be difficult for some pupils – but especially for girls for whom relationships seem to take on additional significance.

Given this rationale, the question underpinning the research began to emerge. This question was:

‘The Transition from Primary School to Secondary School: An exploration of the experiences of girls?’

Up until a late stage in my engagement with the academic literature, my reading had focused on a significant minority of girls who might be deemed vulnerable or at risk. However, the question about transition is framed in relation to a much wider group of girls – and not just the at risk group. The rationale for this shift in emphasis has several strands. Firstly, there is a significant difficulty with defining vulnerability or risk. Had I focused on a more vulnerable group, how could I identify such pupils without raising concerns about false positives or labelling?

In chapter one, I also suggested that girls who may be in need of support can be difficult to detect and may fall ‘under the radar’ of teachers and schools. Even where concerns are raised, this level of concern is often not sufficiently high in terms of priority to trigger support mechanisms. Consequently, any focus on a narrow group of girls would have been problematic because, if you accept the argument that we aren’t good at detecting need, how can we predict who might be ‘at risk’ or ‘in need’ at the point of transition? There is no way of knowing who the so-called needy group are. In addition, O’Brien (2003) offered a view that primary schools are, perhaps, better equipped to meet the needs of a quiet, under-confident girl. As a result, there is no reliable way of telling who might be benefitting from a more nurturing ethos until they are no longer subject to that environment.

Affording a focus to all girls is also helpful in that it allowed the research to draw on the positive experiences of transition – consequently highlighting those factors which might help facilitate a successful transition. This focus on the more positive aspects of transition, I felt, would help avoid getting drawn into a negative commentary about the transition process - facilitating a balanced perspective on the subject.

Much of the thinking outlined in this chapter was documented as part of the initial research proposal. As part of this, a number of specific aims and

objectives were identified. Reflected in these aims was an aspiration to explore how particular features of the secondary system might influence levels of 'engagement' among girls following transition from primary.

The following broad objectives were outlined, verbatim, in the original proposal:

- To begin to identify issues / factors that may enhance or detract from girls' transition experience
- To explore how any identified issues regarding transition might contribute to later disaffection
- To begin to identify issues / factors around the transition experience that may relate to particular groups of girls – especially those from families with a lower socio-economic status and those at risk of being in the lowest attaining 20% of pupils.
- To begin to explore how the transition experience (or broader school experience) might be improved for girls.

Chapter 3. Co-research: a justification

Chapter Overview

A decision was taken to undertake the research project in conjunction with young people, involving them at each stage of the research process. This chapter offers a justification for the use of 'co-research'.

What this chapter reflects is my thinking as it stood at the time I was preparing the research proposal. In effect, this chapter offers a baseline from which a greater criticality and understanding about research with children and the concept of 'voice' emerged. This 'journey' will be touched upon in this chapter and re-visited in subsequent chapters.

The previous chapter outlines how the focus on girls' experience of the transition from primary to secondary school evolved over a substantial period of time – emerging from initial reflections around my work with a group of young girls whom professionals deemed to be 'at risk'. The more specific aims of the research were also documented in Chapter 2.

The first part of this current chapter offers, briefly, the rationale for the epistemological basis of the research. My strong preference for the utilisation of research based on interpretivist principles is discussed. The decision to conduct this research by working in conjunction with a group of young people is partly premised on this epistemological standpoint. The latter part of the chapter builds on this and offers justification for utilising this co-research methodology.

A further theme, which will be reflected upon in this and subsequent chapters, is that the account largely reflects my thought processes as they stood at the time. It was only as I worked through the research that a deeper level of critical reflection occurred.

When discussing research methodology, there can be a tendency to characterise the debate as a straightforward choice between the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches. That choice is often seen to be a question of pragmatics in that the ultimate choice of method is determined by the research question that is being posed. It is perhaps helpful to acknowledge that, up until undertaking the Doctorate in Educational Psychology programme, I would have positioned myself as this type of research pragmatist. Questions of epistemology would not have been an overt feature of thinking as I worked through research tasks.

Bryman (1984) cautions against this type of pragmatic approach by arguing that, although there is something intuitively appealing about basing the choice of method purely on the questions and aims of the research, accepting this kind of approach can, potentially, perpetuate a view that qualitative methods are less valid and only have legitimacy if used alongside quantitative methods. More importantly in the context of this discussion, Bryman (1984) goes on to make a clear distinction between method (the technique used to collect the data) and methodology (the philosophical or epistemological basis of the research). He argues that adopting a pragmatic approach diminishes key epistemological differences. Epistemology is concerned with the nature of truth or knowledge and, more specifically, how this knowledge is acquired. Asking epistemological questions will also explore the extent to which it is possible for a subject to be knowable.

My stated preference for using interpretivist methodology is reflective of a shift, which has occurred in research with children and young people over recent years. Woodhead & Faulkner (2008) acknowledge that developmental research with children has, traditionally, been strongly influenced by the predominant positivist methods typically used within the biological and physical sciences. Positivism is very closely aligned with the use of quantitative methods and reflects an epistemological stance which assumes that there is a truth which exists independent of people's perceptions. There is a supposition that straightforward relationships exist between objects, events, perceptions and the meanings people construct and, therefore, this reality can be explained in terms of universal laws. Snape & Spencer (2003) explain that, around the 1970's, the legitimacy of social research based around positivist methods began to be more

extensively debated. Woodhead & Faulkner (2008) argue that, although scientific principles still endure in clinical and educational research, the study of child development has evolved in recent years. They are that there has been an increase in what Woodhead & Faulkner call ecologically valid research.

In countering positivism, interpretivist writers such as Finlay (2006) and Greig, Taylor & MacKay (2007) argue that the real world is too messy to be explained in unambiguous ways and framed in terms of universal laws. Context is deemed to be important and it is argued that human behaviour cannot be explained without reference to the situation in which that behaviour occurs. Human behaviour can have many different meanings and interpretations depending on the context and, crucially, the perspective which is held by those observing the behaviour. Consequently, truth is not something that can be captured – truth is something that is socially, culturally and historically constructed.

Bryman (1984) explains that this emphasis on context is integral to any description of interpretivist research. He also outlines a number of additional tenets that are prevalent in these descriptions. He argues that an essential element is a commitment to see the world from the view of the actor or the participant in the research. Consequently, the close involvement of the participant is advocated. There is an acknowledgement within qualitative research that people are conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about the world.

A further feature of interpretivist research is that the research design is fluid and flexible. Often, the research design emerges and evolves as the process progresses. Greig et al (2007) explain that in qualitative research, theory is grounded in the data and that theory emerges from that data. Greig et al (2007) term this an inductive approach.

A final feature of qualitative research is the emphasis that is placed on the depth and richness of the data gathered. The data which is produced tends to focus on a small number of cases but the description is highly detailed.

The question of how girls experience the transition from primary school to secondary school, I would argue, lends itself well to the use of qualitative

methods, underpinned by interpretivist principles. In the next part of the discussion, I will draw on the points made by Bryman (2004) and Greig et al (2007) to justify this choice.

The first, important point is that primary / secondary transition represents a time of significant change for young people. Research by Evangelou et al (2008), as part of a large-scale EPPSE project, indicated that this transition is a time where children have to make huge adjustments socially. They also have to adjust to a myriad of elements in a new and very different institution (e.g. in relation to the curriculum, the timetable, the nature of teacher / pupil relationships, assessment processes). The transition also coincides with the onset of adolescence and the many challenges that arise during this time.

At the outset of the project, there could have been a temptation to replicate the kind of survey which was undertaken by Evangelou et al (2008) but with a narrower focus on gender. This would, arguably, have been a legitimate choice given that little is said in that report which references gender differences at primary / secondary transition. However, it is this complexity at transition time which, to my mind, gave rise to two separate arguments which support the use of an interpretivist approach.

Firstly, I wanted to utilise a method which would look beyond broad trends and a method that would help illuminate the stories of individuals. I was as interested in the 'exception' as I was the 'rule'. I felt the use of qualitative methods would allow for a more in-depth exploration of these many contextual factors. It was important to recognise that the experience of every girl in relation to transition would be very different.

Secondly, and in as much as was possible, I wanted the 'theory' to emerge from the data. I wanted to enter the research process with as few pre-conceived ideas about the potential outcome as possible. It was essential not to be overly specific in relation to the questions posed because it was important that these questions did not constrain, any more than necessary, the possible responses that might be offered. Any attempt to pre-determine hypotheses in an overly rigorous way ran the risk of restricting the nature of data to be gathered (i.e. reducing the possibility that something new and unexpected might emerge from the research).

Having established the broad rationale for the use of qualitative methods on both an epistemological and practical basis, the next section will seek to develop the rationale for undertaking a co-research project. As has been referred to, the use of co-research is arguably a consistent and coherent choice given the epistemological basis outlined already. The use of co-research advocates the active involvement of participants and recognises them as conscious and purposive actors in their own lives. The next section elaborates upon this line of thinking.

A natural starting point for such a section would, ordinarily, centre on a definition of co-research. For just now, it is perhaps sufficient to acknowledge that, at the stage when I was developing the research proposal, I viewed co-research as a process which involves young people at every stage of the research process – from the generation of aims through to the interpretation and analysis of results. In Chapter 6, I will discuss how a lack of clarity, about what co-research was, led to numerous difficulties as the research progressed. The question of how to define co-research will, consequently, be re-visited during later discussion.

In the last three decades, there has been a keen interest in the status, role and rights of children in all aspects of society. This interest has been, in large part, driven by the introduction, in 1989, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The intervening time has seen an increase in legislation and policy which increasingly recognises the child as the principal stakeholder in matters that relate to them.

Whitty & Wisby (2007) explain that The Children Act (2004) stipulates that services should reflect the needs of the child. This Act also places an onus on local authorities to encourage participation of young people in the design and delivery of services. The Education Act (2002) and the advice arising from this Act emphasises the benefits of pupil voice and there is an expectation from OFSTED that schools will systematically collect the views of children.

The Scottish Government also states its intention to confer to Article 12 of the UNCRC. This is reflected in various pieces of legislation. The Children (Scotland) Act (1995), gives each child who can form his or her views on matters affecting them the right to express those views’.

The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act (2002) places a duty on schools to consult pupils and to involve them in decisions concerning the everyday running of the school. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 strengthened the rights of children with additional support needs to have their views taken into account. The Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach is now well embedded in Scotland. The programme has strong parallels with the Every Child Matters programme in England. Within the GIRFEC components it is stated that children (and their families) are integral in the process of assessment, planning and intervention.

I stated three explicit aims in my research proposal. I wanted to undertake research that:

- 1) Allowed for the 'voice' of the child to be heard.
- 2) Reduced the chances of the research feeling tokenistic.
- 3) Reduced the potential for my views and assumptions to obscure or distort the narrative offered by participants.

I previously alluded to 'a lack of criticality' and a 'lack of clarity' regarding my understanding of what co-research was. I would also argue that this lack of criticality extended to how I understood and constructed the concept of children's voice. This issue will be re-visited in Chapter 6.

In addition to drawing on the children's rights and legislative agendas, the choice of co-research was predicated on the increased interest in research methods which promote participation on the part of the children who are being researched. Where research is rooted in positivist principles, there tends to be a focus on 'measuring' aspects of behaviour (e.g. competence; cognitive processes; memory processes etc). As Woodhead & Faulkner (2008) explain, there has been an emphasis on normality and on deviation from that norm.

Whilst studies of development drawing on positivist principles remain influential (e.g. Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008), there is an increasing amount of research with regard to children which reflects a wider range of disciplines, frameworks and perspectives. As Woodhead & Faulkner explain, this change has stemmed from a developing critique about how developmental research constructs children and from greater scrutiny of the ethics of social research when working

with children and young people. To illustrate, Christensen & Prout (2002) outline the ways in which research and researchers can conceptualise children. They argue that positivist research has tended to objectify children. In effect, the child is seen as an 'object' which is acted upon by others. As a result, the lives of children are very much investigated from an adult's perspective. Commentators such as Christensen & Prout (2002) and Greig et al (2007) would argue that this view largely neglects the understanding that children are social persons in their own right. The result of this is children's perspectives being filtered through interpretations by adults (e.g. Coad & Evans, 2008).

As a result of these debates, a continuum of research practices began to emerge which conceptualise children in different ways. Christensen & Prout (2002) explain that, even within positivist research, the child is increasingly recognised as a person with subjectivity. However, Christensen & Prout argue that this 'child as a subject' standpoint is often conditioned by judgements regarding children's social and cognitive capabilities (e.g. through the use of exclusion / inclusion criteria in research).

In contrast, interpretivist approaches view children differently. According to Greig et al (2007), the child is viewed as the following:

- A subjective being (as someone who has their own views and perspectives)
- A contextual being (as someone who is an active part of society at a number of ecological levels)
- A self-determining being (as someone who is a conscious actor in the world)
- A dynamic being (as someone who evolves and changes and has an impact on the world around them)

Children are not seen as a relatively passive part of an institution (e.g. a school or a family). Instead they are viewed as active and conscious participants in the institutions of which they are part (e.g. Christensen & Prout, 2002).

Despite these arguments, it would be futile to argue that the use of qualitative methods, in itself, offers a definitive response to the challenge of how children are conceptualised in positivist research. Whilst qualitative research (e.g.

through the use of interviews or observational techniques) offers a potential response to the critique aimed at the traditional scientific paradigm, qualitative research is not immune from reflecting a 'child as a subject' view. For example, it is adult researchers who tend to determine the nature of the questions we pose children in qualitative research. Furthermore, the choice of qualitative methods does not, by extension, render the researcher immune from making assumptions about children's capabilities or from excluding particular groups from the research process. Adult researchers, utilising qualitative methods, may also be prone to offering interpretations and analysis of children's responses based on their own adult-centric perspective.

These points, perhaps, illustrate the difficulties in neutralising the influence of the adult – even in research which draws heavily on children's perspectives. Consequently, I became interested in research methods which would, in as much as possible, allow for the perspective of children to be drawn out and which would serve to minimise adult influence. This, in turn, led me to decide to undertake a project which involved young people as active researchers.

Kellett (2005 & 2010) has been prolific in her writings about child-led research. As a strong advocate of such an approach, she is critical of any notion that the use of adult-led research is defensible on grounds that we have all, at some point, been a child. Kellett (2010) argues that there may be some similarities in terms of rites of passage but children now encounter very different challenges. She cites increasing risk aversion (on the part of adults), an erosion of neighbourhood and the use of the internet as a means of social communication as examples of how growing up in the 21st century differs from much of the last century.

Kellett (2010) argues that methods which allow for the active participation of children should be seen as a primary means of eliciting children's perspectives. She and other commentators such as Coad & Evans (2008) describe a shift away from doing research 'about' children to research 'with' children and, increasingly, 'by' children. Kellett (2010) makes the clear distinction between participatory research ('with' children) and co-research ('by' children) and is critical of the tendency for the terms to be used interchangeably. She explains that participatory research can involve differing degrees of participation but,

essentially, the process is still very much adult-led. In contrast, co-research involves a genuine partnership between adults and children and the research process is shared. Children are involved at all stages of the research process ranging from the generation of the initial aims, the design of the project, the data gathering through to the analysis of the findings. The research is largely or exclusively child-led and is a co-construction between the researcher and the young people taking part in the research.

Kellett (2010) offers a number of arguments in support of using co-research. In addition to the points already made, she explains that children observe the world with different eyes to adults and will ask different questions. Their concerns are different to adults and, as a result, the research questions and the data that is collected are very different. She argues that, as a result of this, children can offer 'valuable insights and original contributions to knowledge'. Children, she argues, also have immediate access to peer culture. As a result, children are able to get responses from their peers in ways which may not be possible for adults.

The arguments that have been made throughout this section are the basis for the choice to undertake co-research. From the outset, I wanted to be clear about the conceptualisation I held about children. It was important that the research acknowledged the abilities of children to undertake research of this nature and their ability to grapple with complex questions about the transition process and the associated factors. It was also important to me that the co-researchers were viewed as active and purposeful – both in the research process and in the context that was being researched. Going into the co-research process, I had read widely and had formed some views about the factors that might influence the transition process for all pupils and girls in particular. I was aware that I needed to be careful to reflect on some of these assumptions. I felt that utilising co-research offered a means of checking and testing these assumptions with a group who were more 'expert' in relation to girls and their experience of transition.

The choice of co-research is also justified on a deeper, ideological level. Frankham (2009) explains that the interest in children being active participants in research has been informed and influenced by methods used in research

relating to gender, race and disability. Frankham discusses the work of disabled activists. It is explained that, within the social model of disability, it is not the disability in itself which dominates the experience of people with disabilities but how people and society (including institutional aspects of society) respond to that disability. It is argued that the focus of research shouldn't be the disabled person but the 'disablism' which is said to prevail across society. Frankham (2009) explains that this model and the related arguments have been taken and applied to many marginalised groups and, as such, provide the basis of an argument which seeks more participatory and emancipatory forms of research – including research by children.

Whilst Frankham (2009) emphasises the importance of disabled activists, authors such as Coppock (2011) and Kellett (2005) suggest that many of the arguments which support the use of children as researchers draw on feminist research. Feminist perspectives suggest that much research is based on a very masculine way of looking at the world and that the resulting knowledge is grounded in male experience. Consequently, research tends to obscure the social reality of the lives of women (Coppock, 2011). Kellett (2005) argues that there is a parallel between this feminist perspective and that of the position of children in research (i.e. research that is based on an adult way of looking at the world and where the resultant knowledge is filtered through adults' perspectives). Given this parallel, such an ideological critique would question the legitimacy of research into the lives of children which is conceived wholly from adults' perspectives. Coppock (2011) argues that constructing notions of childhood based on a very white, male, middle class perspective has had the effect of excluding children from the production of knowledge relating to their own lives.

Despite the rationale outlined in this section for choosing co-research, it is important to note that I did enter the process with some reservations. Most obviously, I was conscious of the fact that my project was being undertaken as part of a Doctorate in Educational Psychology programme. Consequently, I was conscious of being able to complete a project with sufficient depth and academic rigour to satisfy the demands of the course. I questioned the extent to which I could achieve this within a time frame that was fair to the co-research group and, more problematic from an empowerment perspective, I also

questioned whether a group of secondary aged pupils could offer the level of insight required to meet these academic demands. In this respect, there was lack of congruence in my thinking. On an intellectual level, I understood the arguments in favour of co-research but, I also retained a degree of scepticism. Again, Chapter 6 re-visits these points and what will emerge is that my concerns were not vindicated on a significant level. The influence of the co-researchers in the process was broadly very positive and, instead, it was varying adult influences which were most problematic in terms of the research process.

Chapter 4. Pre-project methods

Chapter overview

This chapter is the first of two describing the method used in the project. This chapter focuses on process of negotiating the project with the school and gaining the informed consent from the eventual co-research group.

4.1 The Research Context

The project was undertaken in a secondary school in a rural local authority area in Scotland.

Scotland retains a comprehensive education system, within which, children attend secondary school from the age of twelve. The statutory school leaving age is 16 (i.e. usually the end of Secondary (S)4) but many pupils exercise their right to stay on until they are 18 (typically the end of S6).

Within the local authority area, unemployment is lower than the Scottish and UK averages although the economy is heavily dependent on low paid and public sector jobs.

In the local context, the school was large, with a school roll which, over the last few years, has consistently been around 1000 pupils. The local authority has eight secondary schools in total. There are no special schools although there is one non-mainstream educational / behavioural provision which is designed to support those at risk of exclusion from school.

The premise of the project would, arguably, have relevance in any secondary school and there were no strong over-riding reasons why this school was approached. The following points are important in describing the research context:

- This is the school attended by the group of girls referred to in Chapter 1 – the girls who provided the impetus for the project.

- The school (in local terms) has a very mixed socio-economic profile. The school has 4 non-denominational feeder primaries. Two of these primary schools serve areas, which according to Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) published in 2009, are among the three most deprived areas in the local authority. This includes the only ward in the local authority which features in the most deprived 15% in Scotland. In contrast, the other feeder schools serve more affluent areas – areas which include several wards which feature among the top 10% nationally. The school retains a strong academic tradition.
- The school is situated in the administrative capital and largest town in the local area. It serves a largely urban population within a local authority which is predominantly rural in its composition.
- The local authority has, over a number of years, placed an emphasis on supporting the transition from primary to secondary school. This school has well-established transition arrangements for all pupils including:
 - reciprocal visits by staff to gather and share information
 - schools tours for prospective 1st year pupils
 - an opportunity for the new 1st year group to follow their timetable for a day and to meet their new teachers
 - a sports and activities afternoon
 - parent induction evenings
- For pupils who are deemed more vulnerable at transition time, enhanced transition arrangements are put in place. For the small number of children with the most complex support needs, these arrangements are often bespoke and tailored to individual needs. For others, there is the opportunity to join a transition group. This group is supported by colleagues from a range of agencies and activities are arranged which seek to build confidence, support the process of making friends and support a familiarisation process with the new school (including the building layout; lunch-time procedures; meeting staff).

As the named psychologist for the school at the time of the project being undertaken, I feel well placed to make a comment on the efficacy of the arrangements especially for more vulnerable children. What is noted above was evaluated and was deemed to be helpful and valuable. However, there were, in my view, problems with the dissemination of information within the secondary school relating to some of the pupils who had support needs. Consequently, this is a school which has good / effective transition arrangements, but arrangements which, I would argue, fall a little short of gold star.

4.2 The Co-Research Group

Section 4.3 goes on to describe the selection process for the co-research group. Ultimately, five girls were identified as co-researchers. One member of the group disengaged early in the process meaning that the vast majority of the process was conducted in collaboration with four co-researchers. The co-research group comprised girls in their second year of their secondary schooling (S2) and. They were aged around 13. The new Curriculum for Excellence has now been introduced in Scotland but, at the time of the project, pupils in S2 received a broad educational experience with accredited programmes beginning in S3.

The four girls attended three different primary schools and only one of the girls attended a school which serves the more affluent parts of the catchment area.

4.3 The Recruitment Process

The process of negotiating the parameters of the project with the school and subsequently gaining consent from the co-research group was, by necessity, lengthy.

In the initial research proposal, I outlined a number of ethical considerations. In specific relation to the process of gaining informed consent, I drew on the work of Cocks (2006). She explains that the accepted definition of 'informed consent' usually involves presentation of information that is understandable to the child. The recruitment phase was designed to ensure that, in as much as was possible, the potential co-researchers were well informed about what the expectations would be. I also wanted to ensure that the gaining of consent from the participants was not a one-off process but, instead, was something that was

continually re-visited (e.g. Smith, Monaghan & Broad, 2002). Re-visiting consent issues was seen as important because the research involved a substantial investment from each of the co-researchers. In line with the argument of Roberts (2008), there was an indisputable need for me to remain vigilant to the cost and 'hoped for' benefits of the research for the co-researchers. I was conscious that these 'costs' not only took the form of time and potential inconvenience but perhaps, too, could include intrusion of privacy, and anxiety. One obvious cost was missing out on class time in order to participate in the study.

Following a positive first contact with the school's head teacher, a meeting was arranged with one of the school's depute head teachers (DHT). At this meeting, the rationale behind the project was outlined and the school's involvement was agreed.

This meeting was important in terms of shaping the selection of co-researchers. The five Principal Teachers of Guidance (PTGs) (pastoral care) were seen as important in facilitating this stage of the process. It was agreed that the PTGs would identify a small number of 2nd year girls (n = 3 - 5) from their respective house groups who might want to take part in the project. A time to meet the PTGs was agreed to discuss this in more detail. This decision around selection was based on convenience and pragmatism in an effort to keep the process manageable for the school. In agreeing to this process, I was conscious that obtaining a representative sample may become more difficult and that this aspect would need to be considered when I met with the PTGs.

At this meeting, a discussion paper was presented to the team of PTGs. This paper is shown in Appendix A. This paper outlined the broad rationale for the project, including a brief overview of the research on girls and transition. The discussion also outlined the rationale for using co-research.

Much of the discussion centred on the role of the PTGs in selecting the co-research group. In an effort to address the concerns regarding the representativeness of the group, I explained that this was not merely an opportunity for the academically able to extend their skills. Below is a quote from this introductory paper:

'There will be no specific inclusion or exclusion criteria. Ideally, the opportunity to take part should initially be open to a relatively wide group of S1 or S2 girls (e.g. a range of abilities, socio-economic status, primary school attended).'

Whilst I was keen to promote the potential benefits for the group to the PTGs, I also wanted to acknowledge the potential disadvantages. For example, I wanted to make clear that this would involve class time and that it was difficult to predict the exact time that the project would demand of the girls. In addition, I was also very clear that the format and design of the project was not pre-determined in an attempt to highlight that the project may eventually involve a wider group of pupils (e.g. through the possible use of questionnaires or interviews).

Following this meeting, the PTGs presented a total of 13 names who they felt could make a contribution to the project. The next step for me was to write to the parents of the prospective participants. Writing to the parents in the first instance is a point which is worthy of further reflection later in the discussion as it illustrates that children are reliant on adults to facilitate their participation in research. However, the need to write to parents was, in my mind, straightforward. It was important to avoid a situation where a girl expressed an interest in taking part only for a parent to refuse consent. This raising of expectation would have been unfair on both the parent and the young person. The letter sent to parents is shown in Appendix B.

Subsequent to the letter, nine slips were returned giving consent to write to the prospective co-researchers and invite them along to a session to introduce the project. The letter to the girls is shown in Appendix C. All 9 consent forms were subsequently returned from the girls.

Appendix D shows the PowerPoint presentation that was offered to the girls during the introductory meeting. The presentation covered several areas:

- My professional and academic background and my reasons for undertaking the project
- The reasons why I was interested in the issue of girls and transition. I emphasised that most girls make a successful transition
- The aims for the research (and broad research questions)

- A detailed description of the co-research process
- The benefits and the potential disadvantages for them as individuals

Following this presentation, a further letter was written. This was addressed to the parents but including a consent slip to be signed by both the parent and the young person. This was designed to encourage the parents to have a further discussion with their daughter prior to giving consent to take part. The letter is shown in Appendix E.

Again, all 9 consent slips were returned. However, it was always my intention to restrict the co-research group to around 5 or 6, including myself. The group had been made aware that, in the event of the group being oversubscribed, participants would be randomly selected.

The final stage of the process was to write to the 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' volunteers. This letter is shown in Appendix F.

Chapter 5. The co-research process

Chapter overview

This chapter is the second of the two which describe the method used in the project. This chapter focuses on the process of undertaking the project with the co-research group.

There were several distinct phases to the project beginning with a training phase (i.e. an opportunity for the co-researchers to learn about methods) and ending with a process of analysing and disseminating the findings. As well as describing the concrete process, this chapter also begins to tease out some of the methodological considerations and challenges which arose over the course of the project.

The research comprised a number of distinct phases. In this chapter, these phases are described in turn. As indicated in the chapter overview, this chapter offer the beginning of a critical account of the research process. Evidence for many of the observations is provided by reference to my research diary. Following each session with the co-research group, I would write a brief account of the session. This encompassed the process followed during each session as well as my observations and reflections on the session. Reference to my research diary is made in both this chapter and in Chapter 6.

5.1 An introduction to research methods

The first phase of the research process involved a period of 'training' for my fellow co-researchers. Writers such as Kellett (2005) would argue that a lack of knowledge of research methods should not act as an impediment to a child taking part in research. She argues that teaching children about research methods is essential in terms of addressing some of the power inequalities which exist between children and adults within research. At that time, I tended to concur with this view. I believed that by offering explicit teaching on the methods, the knowledge of the co-research group would be expanded and that

this would enable them to make informed choices about the methods to be deployed.

During the first session, a brainstorm type activity took place. I tried to remain conscious of not being overly prescriptive in how these sessions were planned and I wanted to build on the knowledge and skills they already possessed. The group was, firstly, asked to comment on what they thought research was. At first, they talked of the type of research project commonly undertaken in schools – the type of activity where pupils are given a subject and they have to find out about it. They talked mainly about sources of information such as the internet or books.

Following initial discussion, one co-researcher introduced the idea of these sources being secondary sources. It transpired that they had talked about primary and secondary sources with their history teacher. This then led to a conversation about the advantages and nature of primary sources. Although the girls did not use the language of research (i.e. surveys; interviews; questionnaires) they were able to describe research of this type.

Subsequent sessions were focused on looking at specific types of research in a little more detail and to start to tease out the merits of using various research methods. As part of this process, three types of research were discussed:

- Observation
- Interviews and focus groups
- Questionnaires

This narrow focus was, largely, a result of my awareness of time constraints. I was conscious that this aspect of the process could be time consuming.

This awareness of time is reflected in my research diary and the decision to restrict discussion to three types of research is a typical example of the delicate balance required to maintain the integrity of the research. The decision to speed up the discussion is, perhaps, justifiable in an ethical sense but any decision by an adult, whether correctly intentioned or not, is problematic and restricts the process. Again, Chapter 6 offers a more detailed analysis of this type of issue.

As part of the process, the co-research group described some aspects of observational research but quickly and naturally came to a consensus that that this type of research would not lend itself to answering the research question.

In contrast, the co-researchers offered lots of rich ideas about interviews and focus groups. They were able to describe the key features of what an interview or focus group might look like and they were able to talk about the merits and potential disadvantages without significant prompting. Their ideas (which were captured on a flip-chart at the time of the session) are reflected in the copy of the PowerPoint slide shown in Appendix G :

This type of high quality discussion continued during discussion of questionnaires and surveys. The co-research group were able to articulate some key advantages - although they did need a little prompting when looking for potential disadvantages. The PowerPoint slide generated from this discussion is shown in Appendix H .

5.2 Exploring the research question

The purpose of this next phase was to allow the group to develop an understanding of the research question and to refine the aims and objectives for the research.

As part of this phase, I needed to actively consider the extent to which I was going to 'share' my knowledge of the 'girls and transition' subject matter with the wider co-research group. As Letherby (2002) explains, as someone who has had time to engage fairly extensively with the academic literature, I engaged in the process from a privileged position. I had access to possible theories and explanations regarding the topic. My initial instinct was to be transparent and offer the co-research group an extended explanation of some of the themes arising from the literature. However, I was also conscious of the potential for this sharing of information to become constraining. According to Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford (1997), sharing too much information about the research

increases the possibility that this 'script' will shape the responses of participants. After some deliberation, I concluded that starting a piece of co-research with an adult-generated presentation ran contrary to the principles of using co-research. I was concerned that the more research I shared, the more it would be my thoughts and ideas influencing proceedings thus enhancing rather than reducing power inequalities.

My research diary reflects how I attempted to achieve something of a middle ground in relation to this. I made a conscious choice not to enforce information on the group. Instead, I sought to allow the sessions to evolve naturally and to contribute only if my knowledge had resonance with the issues that the co-research group were raising.

The co-research group were, firstly asked to think about and discuss some reasons why some girls might find the transition difficult. The group's ideas were captured on a flipchart and an electronic representation of this is shown in appendix I. This question facilitated a lot of rich and interesting dialogue where the girls talked about a range of issues including teacher approaches and expectations, making new friends and peer pressure. They also talked about the differences between primary and secondary teachers.

The next session involved narrowing the focus so that the co-research group could start thinking about the types of questions that might be posed in any research. The themes which arose in the previous session were re-visited and the themes were categorised under two broad headings – teacher / class issues and social issues. The result of this discussion is shown in the PowerPoint slide in Appendix J .

This discussion did not lead to the generation of explicit aims, as was planned, but it did allow the group to begin to formulate questions they would want to pose as part of the research process.

Various sets of questions were generated. The wording reflects the words used by the co-research group. The first set of questions related to social issues. Questions such as those noted below were elicited:

- What do you do at break and lunch?
- Do you hang out with the same people every day?
- Is there more or less bullying in secondary school?
- Did you make friends straight away or did it take a long time?
- What do you have to do to be popular with your friends?

My research diary from this session highlights an interesting distinction in that the other members of the co-research group and I did not appear to put an equal weighting on the respective categories. They tended to put more emphasis on social issues. Although they did talk about the teacher and classroom based issues, this seemed to be a subject more on my radar.

This difference in focus was reflected as further questions were formulated. For example, I wanted there to be a comparative element in some of questions between primary and secondary. Following discussion, the following questions were generated:

- Is there anything you miss about primary school?
- How did you feel before and after you came to secondary school?

I was also eager to explore the nature of pupil / teacher relationships. This discussion led to the following questions being posed:

- Is there anything you would like to change about any teacher in secondary school?
- What are the good things about your teachers?
- How is the discipline and attitude of your teachers?
- What does a good teacher do well?

Other questions related broadly to work and workload. The discussion around this was generated, in large part, by the group:

- Do you have more or less time to do work in secondary school?
- Do you find the work easy or hard and why?

- What is the best and worst three things about secondary school?
- How did you get on with the new subjects at secondary school?

5.3 Selecting the method

The process of identifying these questions led, naturally, on to a discussion of the best methods for answering those questions.

In reality, this aspect of the dialogue was short as the co-research group made quick and decisive decisions about the preferred method.

Two of the group chose to undertake a questionnaire. Interestingly, the co-researchers who opted for the questionnaire appeared to make that choice for 'social' / 'confidence' reasons rather than for methodological reasons. They appeared to select this option so they did not have to come face to face with their peers. This reflection will be a further focus in Chapter 6.

The remaining two co-researchers stated a preference to undertake interviews. However, even within this choice, they had certain parameters they wanted to stay within. For example, they wanted to use a convenience sample (i.e. they wanted to interview friends and they also wanted to hand-select exactly who to interview). We discussed the need for a representative sample but the girls felt they could achieve this through a hand-picked selection.

The questions outlined previously reflect the ideas generated by the group rather than definitive questions so the next stage was for the respective groups to finalise the schedules and the specific arrangements for the data gathering phase.

The first group focused on the questionnaires. The questions generated during the previous session proved to be a good basis for the questionnaire design. The co-researchers showed an intuitive grasp of how a questionnaire might be laid out. They recognised the benefits of having a mixture of closed or multiple choice questions and slightly more open-ended questions. The group also made sure that the potential responses could capture all possible options (e.g. including 'unsure', 'don't know' and 'both the same' responses). The wording of the questions was carefully considered. A draft consent letter was also

prepared. The questionnaire schedule and the consent letter are shown in appendices K and L.

My role in this session was fairly limited although, again, I was keen for the questions to capture a comparative element between primary and secondary school. As such, I asked for one question to be included. This was 'Is there anything you would change about secondary school?'

The members of the co-research group were clear that all 180 pupils in their year group should be given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire.

At this point I made a conscious choice not to raise the question of piloting the questionnaire. This was indicative of the on-going dilemma regarding time-scales. The process was taking longer than I had anticipated and this was beginning to place demands on the group which were in excess of what had been outlined initially. Conducting a pilot would have extended the process further.

The session with the interview group also appeared constructive. The questions generated by the whole group in session six were, again, used as the basis for discussion and for the interview schedule. Once more, I asked for some questions to include a 'comparative' element between primary and secondary school.

The group suggested that 5 boys and 5 girls would be interviewed. They began to identify the names of some pupils who might take part. They felt it would be good to approach these people informally before sending letters to ask them if they would be prepared to participate. Draft letters to parents and pupils were prepared. The interview schedule and consent letters are shown in appendices M and N respectively.

Although the question of confidentiality and ethics was a recurring theme during many of the discussions, it was important to re-visit the issue of ethical research prior to entering the data gathering phase. This dedicated session was attended by all member of the co-research group.

The following was discussed and confirmed as being important:

- Consent: The research group understood that people completing the questionnaires and participating in the interviews should have a choice about whether to take part. The importance of honesty and being transparent about the research aims was also discussed
- Purpose of the project: The group acknowledged that the research should lead to something. The need to provide feedback was also discussed.
- Anonymity and confidentiality: The group had a clear understanding that participants would need to feel confident that what they said would remain confidential.

Each member of the co-research group contributed well to what was a respectful discussion. The girls also made useful comments about how the interviews, in particular, should be run. Interestingly, it was suggested that in order to make the interviews go well and to help everyone feel relaxed, there should be 'practice' interviews. This suggestion was made with the comfort of both the interviewer and interviewee in mind – rather than to test out the questions. However, it was interesting that they came up with the idea of a pilot when I had previously resisted it. The girls also suggested that the participants should be offered refreshments and that the room layout would also need to be considered.

5.4 The questionnaire

The questionnaires were distributed to 180 pupils (across 9 tutor classes) in their second year of secondary school. Following negotiation with school senior management, these pupils were asked to complete the questionnaires over two registration periods (each lasting 10 minutes). 130 questionnaires were returned. Sixty nine responses were from boys and sixty one from girls.

In retrospect, the short-time scales for completing the questionnaire, arguably, restricted the quality of responses. I also have some concerns about consent. The covering letter, which accompanied the questionnaire, made it clear that opting out was an option but whether the school context would have allowed that choice to be made is debatable. I wonder whether respondents may have

felt a compulsion to contribute given the expectations of pupils in the school context. Further concerns regarding the implementation of the research will be reflected upon in Chapter 8 as the findings of the research are analysed.

Around 130 questionnaire responses were received. Given the large number of responses, I enlisted the help of a colleague in the Educational Psychology department to work with me and the other researchers in the questionnaire group. To illustrate the size of the task, the process of collating the questionnaires was only partially completed by the end of the morning - despite setting aside almost three hours for the task.

The first task was to separate the forms into those returned by boys and by girls. Then, following negotiation with the group, we systematically worked through each question in order to collate the responses. The closed questions, where no follow up response was requested, were straightforward to collate as this simply involved counting the number of responses falling into each category.

In contrast, a significant amount of time was taken typing and then categorising the more open-ended or qualitative responses. The girls, however, quickly agreed on a key and a set of categories for each question which allowed them to work through this task. Responses were collated on master copies of the questionnaire schedule and the group colour-coded each of the categories.

The fact that this task was only partially completed by the end of the session led to a further dilemma. It seemed likely that it would take another session, amounting to a similar period of time, to complete the task. Given my aforementioned concern about the amount of time the process was taking, I made a decision to assume responsibility for completing the collation. I finished the relatively short process of categorising the remaining few responses for questions one to ten. I maintain that I was able to complete this part of the process without compromising the integrity of the co-research process as I felt the remaining few responses fell readily into the categories already identified by the group.

I also re-organised the responses on the master sheet in order to group all the responses under the already identified category headings. Simply, this was

done so the number of responses relating to each category could be more readily counted.

However, this process was not without compromise. I also collated the responses to questions 11 and 12. These questions were quite different in their scope to the earlier questions and, as such, the categories previously identified were unsuitable for this aspect of the process. What followed does pose a challenge to the integrity of the co-research principles because it was myself (alone) who worked through the categorisation process for these questions and the titles used to categorise the responses in questions 11 and 12 are much more 'adult' in their feel. I used headings such as 'avoiding negative appraisal' and 'embracing difference'.

What was described in the previous paragraph is, perhaps, justifiable given the ever present time pressures. What follows is less so. As part of the process of finishing the collation, I began the process of teasing out some of the key findings and I prepared a summary sheet of what I thought were the themes. This summary sheet is shown in Appendix O.

In retrospect, this seems an inexplicable decision which contradicted my views on the importance of being able to co-construct and interpret findings jointly. The rationale for this decision is not captured in my research diary in a precise way but what I do know is that my main justification was an attempt to speed up the research process. This quote is lifted directly from the diary:

'I tried to keep these observations quite factual. This was done in an attempt not to enforce my attributions and interpretations. My plan was to work through each question in turn with the co-research group to check they agreed with the observations and to see whether they wanted anything added or omitted'.

As will become apparent in the description of the next phase of the process, this was a time that the research felt vulnerable in terms of maintaining the commitment of the group to completing the process. I now recognise that this decision was, more likely, a consequence of my sensing this vulnerability.

During the next session, the summary sheet was used as a basis for discussion. As this discussion progressed, the girls said little to contradict the themes that I had identified. However, it became clear that the girls did

emphasise different elements in the questionnaire and were able to comment on results which were unexpected or surprising. This was most evident when it came to the issue of the 'time out' system.

5.5 From interviews to focus groups

As alluded to in the previous section, this implementation period coincided with a time when I perceived that the research felt vulnerable. Attendance at the sessions was inconsistent and one member of the co-research group (who had been keen to undertake interviews) intimated that she was moving to a new school with immediate effect. At this time, I tried to contact the other potential interviewer in order to confirm names for the interviews but she did not respond to my usual correspondence. I became concerned that she was disengaging from the process. Given the practical difficulties and the potential ethical issues around conducting interviews, I began to question whether interviews were still a viable option.

Given the amount of work that had been invested in the questionnaires and the amount of data that had been collated, I wondered whether this should constitute an end to the data gathering process.

I considered different options at this point including:

- Ending the data gathering process and then drawing solely on the questionnaire findings
- Continuing with the interviews (with or without a co-researcher present)
- Conducting focus groups, drawing on both the questionnaire findings and the questions that had been generated in respect of the proposed interviews.

After considerable thought, I decided to proceed with the focus group option. This served to re-unite the two sub-groups. I was conscious that because I made this decision the process was undemocratic and problematic from a co-research perspective and was a clear example of how I exerted 'power' as an adult. However, this shift in emphasis was justified, in my research diary:

'The questionnaire responses had generated more questions than answers - given that the findings were subject to so many different interpretations. In what

was an opportunistic move, I felt that going back to the people who generated the data to seek their interpretations of the results had a methodological coherence'.

Opting for focus groups was an opportunity to not only utilise the interview questions but also to re-visit some of the key themes which arose from the questionnaire. It was an opportunity to look beyond the trends arising from the questionnaire and to try to illuminate the story behind some of the observations. I also felt that the use of focus groups offered a potential means of challenging some of my adult assumptions and interpretations.

Irrespective of the undemocratic nature of the process for deciding on pursuing focus groups, this decision, albeit unintentionally, seemed to re-focus the group. The remaining 'interviewer' re-engaged in the process and the girls who had been working on the questionnaire seemed motivated because I believe that, in part, they saw how the focus groups linked to their work.

During the first meeting of the re-united group, the schedule was finalised for the focus groups. It was decided to have separate boys' and girls' focus groups. In order to recruit potential participants, it was decided to write to the parents of pupils in three registration classes. The letter and the schedule are shown in appendices P and Q.

Part of this discussion focused on the roles and responsibilities in the focus group. The group seemed reluctant to assert a view on this but, at one point, a comment was made about me 'being the adult'. This comment will be the basis for important reflection in Chapter 6. It was decided that I should facilitate the focus group process and that I would be supported by the remaining interviewer and one of the questionnaire group. The other co-researcher did not want to take part in this aspect of the process.

Eight responses were received from the 60 letters which were distributed. Five of these were girls and three were boys. Times were agreed with the school for both the groups. All eight participants who had indicated they would attend came along to the focus groups. Sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Although I did most of the facilitation, one of the girls became more confident and began to pose a range of supplementary questions as the focus groups progressed.

Each focus group was transcribed and, subsequently, an abridged version of the combined transcripts was prepared for the co-research group to support the data analysis process. In this condensed version, only the verbatim responses made in relation to each question were supplied. The responses were colour coded according to gender.

5.6: Interpretation and data analysis

A session was dedicated to the interpretation and analysis of the findings. As part of this process, the group were provided with the collated questionnaires for boys and girls and the abridged transcript from the focus groups. I imposed a fairly clear structure on this session. The group was firstly, asked to discuss the similarities and differences between the boys and girls in relation to their experiences of transition. The group were encouraged to draw on the data in making such suggestions.

The next part of the discussion focused on the potential implications of the research and around ideas about how to improve transition.

5.7: Presentation and dissemination of findings

The findings presented in the slides in the previous section provided the basis for a presentation offered by myself and my fellow co-researchers. The presentation was given to a group consisting of educational psychologists, behaviour support teachers and a literacy development officer. We took a session to prepare the scope of the presentation which, ultimately, consisted of a description of the process and then a discussion of the key findings.

Given this was an unfamiliar audience to the group, it was agreed that I should begin the discussion (by describing the process) and then one of the other members of the group would talk about the findings. The other co-researchers did not want to lead an aspect of the presentation but said they were happy to answer questions.

The PowerPoint presentation for this session is shown in appendix R.

In addition to offering a description of the research process, this chapter begins to highlight some of the dilemmas, challenges and issues which were encountered. As the project developed and evolved, I became conscious of reflecting as much on the process of the research as I was on the content of the research. In essence, I felt that two separate projects were emerging – the second of which, in broad terms, was a commentary on some of the challenges of undertaking co-research. Whilst I make no attempt to diminish the validity of the subject matter of transition, much of the real learning and reflection arose from my engagement in the co-research process.

This recognition was instrumental in determining the scope of the write-up and prompted the decision to shift the emphasis away from purely transition and on to what was a more personal and reflexive account of the research process.

Chapter 6. Challenges in the research process

Chapter overview

This chapter is integral to the thesis and begins with reflections on how my motives and intentions impacted on the research process. Consequently, it was my 'voice' as an adult that often took precedence. 'Authenticity of voice' and the capacity to empower are often cited as reasons for the use of co-research. A number of other challenges are reported which call into question the extent to which the use of co-research was truly empowering or derived 'authentic' findings. Woven throughout this chapter is a narrative which relates to how I moved away from a relatively naïve view of the benefits of co-research to a more critical standpoint.

In Chapter 3, justification was offered for using co-research. This rationale had several strands and focused on the expanding interest in the rights of children and the resulting attention devoted to hearing the 'voice' of the child / children.

This chapter drew on the work of commentators such as Christensen & Prout (2002) and Woodhead & Faulkner (2008) who offer a critique of how developmental research has tended to conceptualise children. These authors argue for research that recognises children as purposive and dynamic actors in their own lives. The work of Kellett (2005; 2010) was also prominent. As a strong advocate of co-research, she offers a number of theoretical and practical arguments to support its utilisation.

I recognise, retrospectively, that in outlining this original rationale I failed to adopt a critical standpoint and that this lack of criticality manifested itself in numerous ways as the research progressed. My standpoint was, most likely, reflective of what Spyrou (2011) describes as an 'understandable and justifiable pre-occupation' with children's voice and I now recognise that I was seduced by the intuitive appeal of the children's rights agenda. Spyrou (2011) argues the field, in general, is characterised by a lack of scrutiny. She does not advocate

for an abandonment of these participatory methods but she, and others such as James (2007) and Todd (2012), highlight the need for greater criticality and reflexivity in such work.

To a lay person observing the process, it might have appeared that we, as a co-research group, were able to stay true to many of the principles of the co-research process and that my originally stated aims for using co-research (noted in Chapter 3) were met. Whilst not claiming this was a perfect process, the co-research group, for example, were actively involved at all possible stages in the co-research process - from the shaping of the aims and method through to the dissemination of the findings. The 'voice' of the young people was prominent throughout. However, in getting the method aspect just about right, it allowed my reflections on the process to be deeper and to look beyond the obvious. What was exposed was a catalogue of more subtle influences which, to my mind, highlight a number of difficulties with adopting this initially superficial standpoint.

In this chapter, I will attempt to illuminate some of these more intricate challenges. James (2007), in calling for greater reflexivity and criticality when using co-research, argues that opening up spaces for children to speak is not, in itself, sufficient for their 'voices' to be heard. She questions whether the use of co-research, without the necessary reflection, replaces one form of exploitation with another. This question is legitimate and has significant relevance in relation to my reflections. There appears to have been a number of factors which, over the course of the research, may well have served to disempower the co-researchers. These factors encompass a range of areas. The discussion will begin with an analysis of how my motivations for undertaking the research project impacted on the process.

6.1 Motives and intentions

Research does not happen in a vacuum. Research questions arise from a range of sources but the impetus often comes from a starting point that is adult-generated. As Hill et al (2004) explain, children's voices can be central in research but these initiatives are often instigated by adults and undertaken to serve the needs of adults (James, 2007). These points are pertinent to this discussion. The primary purpose of the research was to explore how girls

experience transition to secondary school. However, the research was also conducted as part of a Doctoral Programme and therefore another purpose of the research was to enable me to complete this programme – and to a standard which would meet rigorous academic standards.

These two aims need not be mutually exclusive but undertaking research as part of a Doctoral programme (or, perhaps, any academic course) brings with it a whole set of motives, values and intentions. These elements, almost by necessity, will impact on the research process. Within interpretivist research, there is an acceptance that value-free research is impossible, and no research is, in Ball's (1990) terms, 'researcher proof'. Commentators such as Burr (2003) argue the task of the researcher is to work out how their values, beliefs and constructs interact with and influence both the research process *and* the results that are produced. The process of explicitly acknowledging these values is termed reflexivity.

Greenbank (2003) draws on the work of Rokeach (1973) in an attempt to highlight and analyse the values which influence the research process. He argues that Rokeach's framework provides a clear conceptual framework to explain the multi-dimensional nature of values. I found Greenbank's reflections useful as I attempted to reflect on how my values were impinging on the research process.

Rokeach argues that each person has a value system which influences their actions and behaviours. He categorises values in two ways. The first category is termed 'instrumental values'. These include moral values (views on what is right and wrong) and competency values (views about the best way to approach / undertake a task or activity). Rokeach also identifies values which he termed 'terminal values'. These include personal values (what the individual hopes to achieve / their reasons & motives for undertaking a task) and social values (views about how society should operate – including political beliefs and motives).

As will be explained, my motives – particularly in relation to meeting the demands of the DEdPsy programme – had a significant impact on my decision making (both conscious and sub-conscious) at various stages. The use of co-research was justified on the basis that it offered potential for greater

'authenticity of voice' and that adult influence would be minimised. However, my motivation to complete the programme took precedence at times. In Greenbank terms, personal values (my motives and what I hoped to gain from the research) conflicted, to greater or lesser degrees, with all the other sets of values - competency, social and moral values. In the next part of the discussion, I will outline two key instances which illustrate this type of incongruence.

The first example is drawn from early in the process when the group was exploring the question of what research was. The purpose of these sessions was to elicit what the group already knew about research and to begin to explore the relative merits of different types of methods. In my research diary, I emphasised how 'I wanted to build on the knowledge of the co-researchers' and how my role was largely as a facilitator. This diary reflects my desire not to be overly prescriptive so as not to constrain discussion too much.

Despite these conscious efforts, as the adult, I was still able to exert a notable level of control. For example, I planned each session and I entered each of these with a clear sense of what the broad focus would be. I also controlled the questions asked within each session – questions which dictated the direction of the respective sessions. The nature of the control and the influence that is exerted may be more subtle but it was, nonetheless, present. Importantly, the sessions evolved in a way which reflected my strong preference for qualitative methods. Given the rationale offered in Chapter 3 for the epistemological basis for the research, there was an almost ingrained assumption on my part that qualitative methods were most appropriate. I had a strongly held view that only detailed, in-depth, qualitative data would allow for the kind of discussion and reflection which would meet the stated aims of the research and the required academic standard.

To exemplify this, I remember being eager to explore how open questions could help shape the responses made by potential respondents in questionnaires. I wanted the co-researchers to understand that more open ended questions would be more helpful in generating data which would provide a more detailed description of the experience of transition. Such questions are legitimate and are worthy of consideration as part of any design process. However, if you consider the main arguments which support the use of co-research projects,

any process which constrains possibilities is problematic. Alderson (2008) is critical of any research that 'infantilises' children or implies that children are somehow incapable of understanding the research process. It could be argued that my promotion of qualitative approaches suggests I had doubt about the capability of the co-research group to draw out these conclusions for themselves. This realisation is, in retrospect, difficult to rationalise because I was impressed with the quality of dialogue and the insight offered by the research group in the first two sessions. My research diary from session 1 reflects this. I report how I thought 'it would take longer for us to reach this point' (meaning the group having an understanding of what research is). Essentially, the early evidence contradicted any view that the group were incapable of making these kinds of decisions autonomously.

It is perhaps important to consider the extent to which my approach would have been different if the research had been conducted under a different guise – and not as part of a Doctoral programme. Even with hindsight, it is difficult to offer a definitive answer. I may have been more confident about allowing the process to evolve in a more organic fashion. I am, by no means, suggesting that motivations and intent on my part could have been eliminated entirely but I feel that I would have allowed the group greater influence to shape the process.

My use of the word 'allow' is interesting in itself in that it reinforces the idea that I exerted control over the process and it was me who allowed or enabled certain actions to be taken. The issue of children requiring adults to enable research and to be empowered will be re-visited as this chapter progresses.

Another example of where my motivations with regard to the Doctoral programme seemed incongruent with the principles of co-research came around the mid-point of the research. In Chapter 5, I describe a time when the research felt a little vulnerable. The questionnaire had just been completed. The return rate had been good and it generated some interesting themes. However, the questionnaires were supposed to be undertaken alongside a series of one to one interviews. My anxieties around the project were acute for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the questions on the questionnaire were, in large part, closed and quantitative in nature, and even where more open-ended questions were used, the quality and depth of the responses were, I perceived, fairly limited in

terms of generating significant analysis and discussion. Indeed, the findings generated further questions to my mind. My anxieties also stemmed from the fact that the planned interviews were looking unlikely to happen. At this time, one of the group members – a girl who would have undertaken the interviews - moved to a new school. In addition, I had a sense that the other girl undertaking the interviews was getting a little nervous about the prospect. I was also concerned about the group's motivation levels in general.

Up until this point, I had been very conscious of trying not to be overtly controlling and I deferred to the wider group on a number of issues in relation to the research design. However, at this stage I made some unilateral decisions about the direction of the project. I decided to abandon the idea of interviews and to use the work done in preparation for those interviews to be used in focus groups. I was concerned about the practical demands of conducting ten interviews and I was also worried about the anxieties that may be provoked – on the part of the co-researcher / interviewer. The use of focus groups was an opportunity to bring the two sub-groups back together as well as an opportunity to build on the work undertaken by the questionnaire group. However, this change in emphasis was forced by me. I did consult with the co-research group about the changes and they seemed happy. However, whether this was a truly consultative process is debatable and, given the many power dynamic issues that exist between adults and children, it would have been very difficult for any member of the group to present or assert an alternative view.

I acknowledge that undertaking real world research is, almost inevitably, going to be constrained by logistical and practical challenges and perhaps this decision making process was symptomatic of these types of challenges. However, I would still contend that, if this research was not undertaken as part of a Doctoral programme, the decisions I made at this point may well have been different. I may have acknowledged and discussed the issues with the group and sought ideas from them about how to proceed. It is also possible that I would have ended the research process following the questionnaires. However, my explicit preference for using qualitative methodology meant that I felt a compulsion to continue with the research.

In my view these actions are indicative of me being conscious of the demands of the doctoral programme. I found it hard to shed the perception that the research was not sufficiently rigorous and this prompted me to exert a higher level of control over the process. My need to finish the programme also had a bearing. I had devoted four years and a substantial sum of money to completing the course and, sub-consciously, I think I exerted this control in an attempt to ensure the process could be completed. On reflection, it feels at times as if I exploited the vulnerability in the process to my own end.

In relating these two sets of observations back to the writing of Greenbank (2003), different sets of values were highlighted. As previously discussed, my competency values (beliefs in the right or wrong way to do the task) were exposed through my strong preference for using methods with a strong interpretivist basis. This preference was strengthened by my participation in the Doctorate - by the perceived need to retain a strong epistemological coherence throughout the project and by my strong preference to yield qualitative data. My competency values were also apparent because I wanted to undertake the research in a manner that felt empowering to young people. However, these two sets of competency values, I felt, often came in to conflict. Whenever the co-research group strayed towards research with more positivist leanings, my preference for using qualitative methods would over-ride this. I would then begin to exert more control over the process – albeit not always consciously.

My motives and intentions for undertaking this research were also strongly influenced by my desire to complete the Doctoral programme and, as previously discussed, this tended to over-ride all other considerations at times when the research process felt under threat. Ultimately these personal values associated with the completion of the course (and the associated benefits for me) had the biggest bearing therefore placing personal values at odds with the aforementioned competency values.

Given these reflections, I began to question the legitimacy of using co-research to undertake this or perhaps any Doctoral study – especially when the completion of the Doctorate becomes an end in itself. I had questions about whether I exploited both my professional position, and in the words of Gallacher & Gallagher (2008), the ‘docility’ of children in the school context.

These challenges illustrate how research which involves children cannot be rendered immune from adult influences. The challenges also offer an illustration of the importance of adult researchers retaining a reflexive stance and attempting to make their values and motives as explicit as possible.

As I worked through the process, I also questioned whether using co-research to undertake exploratory research was appropriate. Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) explain that the use of participatory methods (including co-research) tends to focus on situations in which children are service users - in an attempt to inform and improve policy and practice. Whilst an argument could be made that these children were service users in that they access schools and have all experienced transition, the research in this case felt more traditionally academic rather than it did an evaluation of service provision. The potential for this project to have an immediate impact on policy was always questionable and, in my view, I was always going to derive the primary benefits of undertaking the research. In the initial presentation to the potential researchers, I presented some of the benefits of taking part in the project. These focused on the skills the group might learn (team work, research skills, thinking skills). However, these benefits were, arguably, secondary and / or indirect.

6.2 Training of children in research methods: Empowering or constraining?

In the previous section, the focus of the discussion was on how my motives for completion of the DEdPsy programme took precedence at key times in the research and how these motives may have inhibited co-researchers' involvement. There are also a number of other discussion points arising from the research which highlight further challenges and cast doubt on the extent to which this co-research was truly empowering.

A prominent dilemma was the extent to which 'training' on research methods should have been offered to the co-research group.

At the outset of the process, I was strongly influenced by Kellett (2005; 2010) who argues that a lack of knowledge of research methods should not serve as a barrier to children taking part in research. She argues that offering children access to knowledge about potential methods reduces the privileged position

held by the adult. Sharing information about research methods is aimed at reducing power imbalances and increasing autonomy on the part of the co-researchers. Increased knowledge also, Kellett (2010) argues, increases the possibility of undertaking more meaningful and robust research.

These arguments are, on an immediate level, difficult to contest. However, there is also a flip-side to such a position. To my mind, offering training was also potentially disadvantageous and, arguably, led to a piece of research that felt very adult in its scope. It was me who decided on which methods should be introduced and on the general structure and content of each of the sessions. I made the decisions about what the group needed to know so they could undertake research. As the process progressed, I became conscious of an inherent danger. For example, the more I offered training and asked questions, the greater my influence and the more my values potentially shaped the ideas of the co-research group. The work of Schafer & Yarwood (2008) offers support to this type of position and they make a number of points in relation to the use of training with co-researchers. For example, they suggest that training can increase the feeling of tokenism if it is adults who determine what appropriate training constitutes. They further argue that professionals can be quite conservative in their view of how research should be conducted and that this can prevent young people from finding their own way through research questions. Consequently, and despite the best of intentions, training can actually serve to re-inforce existing hierarchies and can create new power relations and forms of control. Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) also adopt this kind of stance, arguing that methods used in participatory research tend to be set up in a way that's constraining. They argue that, even where consensus can be reached among participants, the very idea of rules and parameters is adult in nature. They further argue that genuine participation and empowerment would allow the space for children to act in unexpected ways. I would argue that the co-research process was reflective of this. In my view, I held this type of adult-oriented and relatively narrow view of research. This meant the focus was on 'traditional' research methods such as questionnaires and interviews. This nudged the process in a clear direction and restricted the potential for undertaking a piece of research which was innovative and / or more child-centred in its scope.

This is reflective of a similar kind of quandary which was discussed in Chapter 5. This related to how much of the research evidence-base I should share with the group. I cited the work of Letherby (2002) who argued that I was engaging in the process from a privileged position because I had access to possible theories and explanations regarding the topic. An alternative view was also offered. I drew on the work of Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford (1997) who suggest that sharing too much information about the research topic increases the possibility that the research script will begin to shape the responses of participants. I reflected on how this was something I wanted to avoid and how I attempted to achieve something of a middle ground – feeding in information about the research evidence if there was a clear sense that it would be helpful to the research process.

In relation to both the provision of training and the sharing of knowledge, I would question whether adopting an extreme position would have been helpful. Assuming a position somewhere in the middle may be more helpful but is not without difficulty. Any decision an adult makes about the sharing of information, is, in itself, a further demonstration of adult control.

6.3 Reflections on the ownership of the research

In Chapter 3, I drew on the work of Frankham (2009), Coppock (2011) and Kellett (2005) who question the legitimacy of research into the lives of children which is conceived wholly from adults' perspectives. In making this type of argument, these authors drew on the perspectives of feminists and disabled activists.

Interesting and legitimate points were made but, to my mind, the position of children is, in important respects, different. Feminists, disabled activists and race activists are in positions where they can have their perspectives heard. For example, they can be part of the political system, they can join interest or lobby groups and they are part of institutions such as universities. This is different for children. Children are not in a position where they can conceive of and generate their own research. The ideas and the impetus for research, almost by necessity, will come from adults. As Schafer & Yarwood (2008) explain, co-research is a process that is highly governed by adult gatekeepers. Children need adults to be empowered and, as Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) argue, this

opens up questions about the whole notion of empowerment. Without adults, there is a strong implication that children can't fully exercise their agency in the research process. In an exemplification of children depending on adults to exercise their agency, I felt compelled to write to parents before inviting any children to become part of the co-research group.

I believe this point is fundamentally important in my research. To my mind, there is a clear link between ownership of a piece of work and its ability to 'empower'. The sense of 'ownership' felt by me was, I believe, quite distinct from the 'ownership' felt by the rest of the research group. Despite the unquestionable commitment and hard work of the wider co-research group, my motives, intentions and level of investment were always going to be different and, in all likelihood, stronger than any of the others. I had the interest in the research question. I had invested time in formulating the ideas and enabling the process to begin. Illuminating issues relating to the subject of girls and transition had direct relevance to my day job and, therefore, offered the potential to enhance my practice. It was me that stood to gain the title of 'Dr', potentially impacting on my personal status and reputation. It is less clear how engaging in this process could offer direct and immediate benefits to the girls involved in this research. They, perhaps, had the satisfaction of knowing that the research was likely to be shared and disseminated in a way that might improve the experience for other young people. In addition, in the feedback session to the professional group, the girls reflected on how they had enjoyed the process and about how they felt more confident. However, the research question was never theirs so how could the process ever truly be?

Furthermore, and in my view, there were times when a casual observer to the research process might have seen research being done to children, times when the research was being done by children and other times when the research was being done with children. This was never consistent and I now recognise there was a lack of clarity about whether I was undertaking research with children or whether I was part of a process of enabling research by children. This lack of clarity may have contributed to some of the inconsistent decision making outlined earlier in this chapter whereby, at times, I acted as facilitator and, at other times, I exerted more control over the research. I will return to this topic later in the chapter.

Subsequent to the research, I encountered a paper by McLaughlin (2006). He describes three levels of participation of service-users in the research process. The first is consultation. Essentially, this involves the seeking of views to inform the decision-making process. The second level is collaboration. This, McLaughlin explains, is a wide ranging notion but would include the active involvement of service users in a kind of research steering group. The group could be involved in all or at particular stages of the research process. Unlike consultation, the adult researcher needs to be willing to share ownership of the process. The final level is termed 'user-controlled' research. In contrast to the consultation and collaborative processes, this approach means that the power and decision-making responsibilities lie with the service-user. Whilst the need for adult researchers in this process is not denied, these adults become accountable to the service-users who are driving the research.

What this reading does expose is that this work is an amalgam of a collaborative approach and user-controlled research. McLaughlin (2006) acknowledges that the practice within these broad approaches will vary and, as such, a degree of overlap may be expected. However, my position in relation to the research was always ambiguous. My initial research proposal offered only a brief justification for utilising co-research. The proposal describes the process to be undertaken and it also covers a range of ethical concerns. However, there was limited discussion of my role as an adult researcher. Reading the proposal retrospectively, I seemed to position myself as one of the co-research group and as having a stake in the research equal to that of my fellow co-researchers. This positioning suggests I had only a rudimentary understanding of how my position as an adult might shape the responses and the participation of my fellow researchers. At other times, especially at the outset of the research process, my research diary suggests that I positioned myself as the facilitator and as someone who was enabling research by children. I now realise that I tended to flit between the two positions. On reflection, this flitting was often determined by my view of how the research was progressing. If the decisions made by the co-research group fitted with my broad thinking, I was able to take a step back and the facilitator role was utilised. However, my intervention at other times was justified on the basis that this was my research too. It was my position as the adult researcher that allowed this shifting standpoint to happen.

This provides a further illustration of how, as adults, we are able to exert control over a process, albeit in subtle ways.

On further reflection, I also feel a third type of positioning was evident in my thinking. In Chapter 3, where the arguments in support of co-research are teased out in more detail, I also commented on using the co-research group to 'neutralise' my influence as an adult and about challenging my assumptions. I feel this third position implies this is my research and I was using the group to my own ends. Initially, I cited 'authenticity' as a key reason for utilising co-research. The group were the means to achieve this aim.

6.4 Further reflections on the adult / child dynamics

Much of this chapter has focused on the difficulty in 'adult-proofing' the research process and on how a variety of subtle influences can, potentially, impact on the research process. Any reflexive account will consider the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the subjects of the research. According to Ball (1990), even the mere presence of the researcher can act as a constraint. He also argues that the participants can be expected to react in some way not only to the presence of the researcher but also to their designation. Similarly, Burr (2003) argues that, within social constructivist research, the relationship between the researcher and the subject is active and dynamic. It is acknowledged that the response of the subject cannot be unaffected or uncontaminated by the presence and role of the researcher. Therefore, there is a need to consider issues such as the respective roles and status of the researcher and those who are researched and, crucially, how this all impinges on the research process. Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford (1997) also explain that the structural effects of class, adult, race and gender can be grossly underestimated within research and therefore it is important to take account of how these features may influence any research.

Although I was conscious of these issues to an extent as I worked through the research process with the co-researchers, there was one point where this sort of reflection was brought into sharp focus. During discussion about how the focus groups should run and who should lead the questioning, one of the group said 'You should because you're the adult'. This comment was as much sobering as it was interesting. Despite my efforts to involve the girls and to

clearly express to them that this was a joint piece of research, this comment, to my mind, seemed to imply that the girls in the wider co-research group saw themselves as subservient, as junior partners in this process. Despite building what I felt were positive relationships, the girls remained deferential.

The fact that the research was undertaken in a school context added extra complexity to the process. This context exerts a whole set of expectations and demands on both myself, as the adult, and on my co-researchers, who are pupils within this context. Greig et al (2007) argue that children are vulnerable to the social demands of the research setting. Within the school context, children tend to have certain expectations and may give rote responses or responses they think constitute the 'right answer'. Children may also be concerned that their answers may be accessed by people in authority. Despite my attempts to address this and to be clear that this wasn't a school project, my role, inevitably felt very adult. I signed all correspondence with my job designation and it was clear to the group that I had working relationships with a number of staff in the school. My own work commitments meant it was myself who determined where and when the group met, it was myself who negotiated with senior management within the school about the practical aspects of the process (e.g. about access to participants for the questionnaire and the focus group). It was also myself who made important decisions about the direction of the research at key times in the process.

In summary, I had to adopt a very adult role in order to enable the research. Consequently, any attempt to step back from this position was only ever going to be partially successful.

6.5 Reflections of the influence of peer dynamics

Until now, this chapter has focused on the potentially disempowering nature of the adult role within this project. However, I would also contend that the disempowering effects within this research also extend to the dynamics that exist between young people.

As Schafer & Yarwood (2008) explain, a number of arguments are generally offered in support of co-research. Of importance to this part of the discussion is a suggestion children can gain access to their peers and peer culture in a way

that would be difficult for adults. This assumes that young people will discuss issues more openly with peers. Consequently, it is argued that there is greater 'authenticity' in terms of the narrative that emerges from the research. The use of children to undertake research is also seen as a way to reduce difficulties arising from the kind of hierarchical, child / adult power dynamics described in previous sections.

However, Schafer & Yarwood (2008) argue that scant attention is given to the power relationships that exist between young people. They argue the power issues in these relationships may be as significant as those between young people and adults and / or the statutory agencies they represent.

I would suggest that the issue of peer dynamics manifested itself in various ways throughout the project. If we, firstly, consider the preference expressed by two members of the co-research group to undertake questionnaires, an interesting anomaly emerges. Both these girls had contributed invaluable throughout the process and had both offered insightful arguments in support of using more open-ended forms of questioning. I felt that this would lead them to express a preference for interviews or focus groups. However, both expressed a clear preference for undertaking questionnaires. Although this was never articulated in an overt way, I believe that this decision was motivated by social concerns and by a lack of confidence to undertake a process which would bring them face to face with their peers rather than by a more logical process where they drew on their knowledge of research methods or the subject matter. I also feel that this was part of the reason why the third co-researcher disengaged from the process of planning for and conducting the interviews that were originally planned.

Schafer & Yarwood (2008) explain that this type of co-research re-positions the child researcher somewhere between an adult and a child. Therefore, one form of hierarchy is replaced with another. When the 'you're the adult' statement was previously discussed, I offered an explanation based on the group's sense of ownership of the process. However, another valid explanation of this comment might relate to the fact that the position between adult and child is a very difficult, and arguably uncomfortable, space for young teenagers to occupy.

This difficulty is potentially enhanced when asked to assume that role in front of their peers.

In accepting this line of argument, the 'you're the adult' comment is perhaps symptomatic of the co-research group being comfortable in portraying this as my research – something they were helping me with rather than something that they were integral to. Retracting to a position where the research was 'mine' is likely to have felt safer for the group. The adult / child relationship may well appear oppressive and constraining – especially in the context of an institution such as a school – but at least it is a relationship / hierarchy which is recognised and tacitly understood (at least on a superficial level) by those participating. Asking children to assume that middle ground – somewhere between child and adult – is not familiar territory and that brings with it the potential for discomfort, anxiety and for embarrassment.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that this line of argument – around embarrassment and risk to reputation - formed an overt part of the rationale to shift from interviews to focus groups. However, in retrospect, it seems that my exerting that type of control offered a layer of protection and restored something approaching a natural order where adults are expected to control and lead this sort of process. As Schafer & Yarwood (2008) explain, using this type of participatory method is not necessarily the answer to issues of empowerment. They further argue that there is a strong need to ensure that, in undertaking co-research, existing hierarchies are not reproduced.

McLaughlin (2006), in describing the benefits of user-involvement, claims that young people will raise issues with other young people that they would not raise with an adult. This comment is not substantiated and the converse could also be argued. Power relationships and the potential for saying something that appears uncool may actually prevent issues from being raised. Although ethical considerations will be important in any research, young interviewees or participants may also be concerned about confidentiality issues – fearing what is said may be passed on. In effect, using peer researchers could act as a constraint to the quest to allow children to offer their perspectives.

The issue of peer dynamics also came to prominence during the focus group sessions. There has to be an acknowledgement that this was an unusual

situation. Alongside myself, as the adult researcher, were two more of the co-research group who, as has just been explained, occupied the space between the adult and the child. The focus groups themselves consisted of participants who were familiar with one another to varying degrees. The participants in the focus group were also familiar (again to varying degrees) with my two fellow co-researchers.

The boys' focus group was very different in feel to the girls' group. There was a clear hierarchy in terms of the number of contributions offered by the participants. There was one apparently confident and charismatic character who was quick to offer ideas and insight. The second participant was often deliberately drawn into discussion by participant 1 (i.e. by using questions such as 'do you agree, X?'). Participant 2 also contributed confidently and he was able to express an alternative or novel perspective when sought. The third boy was entirely different and there was no point when he volunteered something without being prompted. His responses tend to be concise and he tended not to elaborate.

The girls' group was quieter. The transcript of the focus group is illuminating as the first half of the discussion is characterised by my seemingly clumsy attempts to elicit responses from the girls to the questions posed. The transcripts indicate that the girls did open up as the session progressed. Analysis of the number of contributions made suggests the girls contributed fairly equally although one girl was quiet in comparison to the other four.

I am not able to offer a definitive assessment of the impact of group dynamics on the dialogue on each of the focus groups but a number of factors are potentially at play. Schafer & Yarwood (2008) argue that power relationships among children impact on their everyday lives so, by extension, it would be futile to suggest that these relationships did not impact on the research process. The familiarity of the participants to one another is likely to be an issue. Pre-existing hierarchies, reputations, relationships and dynamics would have been brought into the focus group sessions. I do not have the means to deconstruct the complex dynamics in a meaningful way. However, just because the peer / peer dynamics are not well understood by myself does not mean the dynamics can be denied. These peer dynamics (whether this is between the participants

or between the participants and the co-researchers) have the potential to 'constrain' the perspectives of those participating in ways which may be less obvious to an adult researcher. Consequently, involving children as researchers may, in part, reduce the influence of the adult but, in doing so, one set of dynamics are replaced with another.

6.6 Reflections on the authenticity of the research

Authors such as Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) explain that arguments in support of participatory methods are, in part, premised on the fact that the data derived is likely to be more authentic and that these methods have the potential to access neglected knowledge. However, Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) begin to challenge this view. They argue that this type of assumption is based on the view that children are experts in their own lives and that people, in general, are transparently knowable to themselves. It also assumes that children are stable rather than dynamic and changing beings. Furthermore, James (2007) argues that the very conceptualisation of 'children's voice' risks glossing over the diversity of children's lives. She argues that, within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the emphasis is on the singular – the individual child. Despite this, there can be a tendency to 'clump' children together and treat them as a single category and as a homogenous group (e.g. Todd, 2012; James, 2007). Consequently, there can be an assumption that *some* children speak on behalf of *all* children. This, James (2007) argues, runs the risk of further disempowering children rather than presenting them as social actors who occupy a variety of social worlds.

The authenticity of the current research has already been questioned. For example, given the peer dynamics in the focus groups, it is difficult to argue that the views expressed are reflective of all children and young people. The co-research group consisted of three pupils so they were, in no way, representative of the wider S2 cohort.

There is a further, and perhaps fundamental, challenge to any claim of authenticity in relation to the findings. One of the most significant challenges in the whole process was in supporting the co-research group to use the data and the themes arising from that data in order to draw out conclusions and to generate implications and ideas. I expressed a wish to neutralise the view of the

adult in this process. However, as will be explained, my involvement in the interpretative aspects of the process was very apparent.

Appendix S shows the themes drawn out by the co-research group – arising from the session which focused upon interpretation of the findings. This appendix also shows the ideas to improve transition that were suggested as part of that discussion. For the most part, the themes elicited had foundation and could be evidenced from the data. Consequently, what follows is not an attempt to undermine the group’s commentary. However, what was missing from the process was an opportunity for the group to offer explanation and their own interpretations. As a means of illustration, one theme arising from discussion was that girls, perhaps more so than boys, appeared a little more attached to their primary school and there was a suggestion that some girls saw their primary schools as a little community. At no point did we discuss, in depth, or capture thoughts as to why this might be the case. Nor was there an opportunity offered to counter that view and offer an alternative perspective. Consequently, it was me who, largely, undertook the process of interpreting and giving meaning to the findings and the comments. This is reflected when the findings are reported in Chapter 8.

James (2007) argues that there is a difference between ‘children’s voice’ and ‘authenticity of voice’. Throughout Chapter 8, I will draw on verbatim quotes and phrases offered by the child participants. However, consistent with the argument made by James (2007), I chose the phrases to support certain lines of argument and, importantly, I offered interpreted the comments to add meaning and explanation to what I was writing. Consequently, I assumed, in James’ words, the executive editorial position and it is my ‘voice’ that is given prominence.

The issue noted in the previous paragraph could have been addressed, to some degree, by offering the co-research group space and time to explore possible explanations. Offering one session to cover the findings and the implications of the research, retrospectively, seems disproportionately low compared to the time offered to other aspects of the research. However, this would not have offered a definitive solution. Given what has already been argued, we could not

assume that the co-research group's explanations could be taken as representative of the views of all young people. They would have offered a perspective but any claims about the 'authenticity' of their voice would also have been premature.

The research process exposed a number of factors which impacted on the co-research process. The implications of these observations are potentially important and will be re-visited in Chapter 10.

Chapter 7. Reflections on the absence of class from the research

Chapter Overview

Despite being an explicit focus in Chapter 1, class did not feature as a theme in the research. This chapter reflects on three main reasons for this absence. The first relates to how to define class. The second reason stems from my sense that the term 'working-class' can be used pejoratively. The third strand focuses on my sense that there was potential for any study of those from working class backgrounds to feel oppressive.

In exploring the issue of girls' 'underachievement' in Chapter 1, there was one theme that pervaded much of the literature. There is a strong and seemingly valid contention that girls are not a homogeneous group and that the relative success of girls should not be taken to mean 'all girls' are succeeding. What is argued is that there is a need to pose the question of 'Which boys?' or 'Which girls?' underachieve. The commentary of writers such as Jones (2005), Jones & Myhill (2004) and Archer et al (2007) builds on the earlier work of Walkerdine et al (2001) and Epstein et al (1998). Central to these arguments is that considering gender in isolation is, in many respects, a red herring. It is deemed problematic because it de-classes and de-racialises questions about achievement.

At the outset of the research process, and in the research proposal, class was identified as an important 'factor' which would be considered as part of the design process with the co-research group. This rationale for including class has already been covered in Chapter 1 where a number of references were made to how class mediates the school experience. Despite the pervasiveness and persuasiveness of this debate, the issue of class did not feature in any part of the work of the co-research group – either implicitly or explicitly. This outcome formed the basis of important reflection on my part. Consequently, the

next part of the discussion will focus on how varying factors meant dealing with 'class' was challenging to negotiate.

In the first instance, the question of how to define class proved problematic. Although the terms working class, middle class and upper class are still commonly used in modern discourse, they are, largely, artefacts of Britain's industrial revolution. Whilst class is still broadly accepted as an important issue, the relevance of these terms in the new millennium is questioned – in part because this classification is too simplistic to reflect society as it exists today. Definitions have, historically, focussed on occupation as the key determinant of class. However, more recent attempts, influenced by the work of Bourdieu in the 1960's and 70's have tended to focus on cultural and social capital as being central to class. Social capital is influenced by an individual's social connections and relationships, group membership and networks of influence. Cultural capital is more difficult to define but essentially relates to non-financial assets. Walkerdine et al (2001) explains that these assets can be both material and abstract and encompass aspects such as 'taste, education, lifestyle, accent and cuisine' (p38). The dynamic nature of class is emphasised. It's not viewed as a fixed entity.

My own personal experience arguably illustrates this complexity. I come from a working class background. My parents left school at statutory leaving age. They married at 17 years old and were settled with three children by the time they were 21. Both remain in what might be termed as blue collar jobs. Like many people in the 1980's they exercised the right to buy their ex-council house. Materially, things were never difficult as I grew up.

I was the first person from either of my parents' families to attend university and I now occupy a profession dominated by those from middle class backgrounds. My parents remain financially secure but the social and cultural capital afforded to me by way of my occupational position allows me access to activities that seem alien to my parents. On the other hand, I remain conscious of my working class background and, at times, I feel the need to emphasise or remind people of my working class credentials. My social and cultural capital is, in many ways, inconsistent and can't readily be classified as working or middle class.

This inability to define class is the first reason for the absence of any meaningful discussion of 'class' in the research project. I found it difficult to envisage a way in which the notion of class could be introduced to the co-research group and doubted whether we (collectively) could arrive at a shared understanding of what 'class' is.

Over the last few years, and more particularly since engaging with the writings of authors such as Walkerdine et al (2001) and Reay (2007), I have become increasingly sensitive to how working class people can be depicted. This sense impacted on my thinking and compounded my reticence about even tentatively introducing class as a key variable. I am sensitive to the potential for the term 'working class' to be seen as pejorative and to the notion that being working class can be viewed as something to be aspired away from. Walkerdine et al (2001) argue that the latter point can be a source of conflict for working class girls. It is suggested that, for middle class parents, the motivation is for their daughters to be like them. For working class parents, the motivation can be the opposite. They want their daughters to have something different or better than they had. This kind of notion is difficult for girls to negotiate because it implies that there is something wrong with their parents and their background. This type of conflict is also reflected in the work of Archer (2007). A shift was noted in the reflections of girl interviewees as they approached their GCSEs. Many expressed regret at their earlier 'disengagement' and they talked about 'wanting to change' and 'becoming a good pupil'. Although the girls, broadly, expressed a wish to retain their working class roots, their narrative also involved expressing aspirations to move away from their working class background (e.g. associating with middle class girls; going to university; social mobility). It is argued that the girls perceived there is something materially better to aspire to.

The potential for negative attributions towards schools in working class areas is highlighted by Reay (2007). As part of a comprehensive study involving focus groups with 454 children and interviews with 45 others - at the point of transition to secondary school, Reay (2007) reports how all children (irrespective of background) were conscious of the reputations and stereotypes in different schools. As part of her discussion, Reay contends that most middle class parents exert the right for their child to attend 'good' schools out of the local community whereas those from working class background tend to attend local

schools – schools which have, in many cases, developed negative reputations. She describes how middle class children construct these schools as being ‘unruly’ and how they describe those attending such schools in highly pejorative terms.

Whilst engaging with the academic literature, I simultaneously encountered the work of Owen Jones. Jones is a political commentator and not an academic. However, his work was important in helping me reflect on how class is constructed. In his 2011 book, he raises a number of issues about how working class people are portrayed in the media. He argues that the term working class is seen as a slur. He offers several examples of how the popular press and web-sites have sought to depict the working class people negatively. He also offers a substantial discussion of how the press chose to depict the estate of Dewsbury, North Yorkshire, in the wake of Shannon Matthew’s staged abduction in 2009. Jones in no way defends the actions of Shannon’s mother but he is critical of how this one, highly unusual case somehow served to define a whole community. In contrast, Jones talks of the community spirit that Shannon’s disappearance engendered. This led to a campaign which was orchestrated in and by the community on limited funds. This side of Dewsbury was not reflected in the media commentary that followed. Some TV programmes such as the ‘The Secret Millionaire’ depict local people as devoted, often in a very selfless manner, to enhancing the lives of others in their community. However, this type of portrayal is not, in my view, commonplace.

Taking all this together, raising and defining class with the co-research group was not only intellectually difficult but also potentially emotive. Ascribing class based attributes is difficult because of the connotations that are associated with the respective class groups. To my mind, this raises ethical concerns rendered the inclusion of class as a meaningful variable as difficult and unwieldy.

The final reason for the absence of class from the research was less pervasive in my thinking but was, nonetheless, present. It relates to my sense that focusing on working class pupils was, to some, extent, oppressive. In Chapter 3, I drew on the writing of Coppock (2011) and Frankham (2009). It is argued that children are a marginalised group so an argument is made for the use of more emancipatory forms of research as a means of empowerment. My use of

the word 'oppressive' is strong but I felt that having class as an overt focus would have had the feeling of research being done 'on' or 'to' a group – rather than 'by' that group. This would have run contrary to the rationale for undertaking co-research. This is also borne from a sense that had I been looking to study a question about the experiences of middle class children (e.g. the pressures experienced by middle class children at exam time), there would, I believe, have been some resistance to this. In essence, I was concerned that I would be using my middle class professional position to undertake research on a group who, ordinarily, would have limited agency in terms of facilitating their own research.

As a means of concluding this chapter, it is, perhaps, also important to reflect on whether this lack of an overt focus on class was as problematic as I have constructed it to be – especially given the research took place in a Scottish school. Some of the differences between the Scottish and English contexts were discussed in Chapter 2 and these points are, arguably, relevant to this part of the discussion. As was acknowledged in Chapter 2, much of the literature referred to in this thesis is drawn from English studies. Scotland, as a country, is more egalitarian in its outlook than England. Politically, Scotland is distinct. Even in the 2010 general election, and in the face of a popular Scottish National Party led Scottish government, Labour increased their share of the popular vote across Scotland. Scotland retains a strong and socialist character. The Scottish school system is comprehensive and local authorities retain a large degree of control over the business of individual schools. The market forces and the consumerist approach which defines large parts of the English system are less prevalent in Scotland.

More specifically, the study was conducted in an area which is not characterised by deprivation or particularly high unemployment. Although, the local economy is dependent on low-paid jobs, this is not an area that has been characterised by large-scale de-industrialisation.

The school which was the focus of the study is unique in the local authority context. As explained in Chapter 4, the catchment area was characterised by what were, by local standards, economic extremes. The primary school attended by each pupil is viewed as a reliable predictor of future academic

attainment. Retrospectively, asking pupils to identify their primary school in the questionnaire would, arguably, have been highly illuminating. This would have offered a simple and relatively valid measure of class given the SIMD data, as explained in Chapter 4. However, from an ethical and practical perspective, the issue is more complicated. Most difficult to reconcile is how, in the name of transparency and fairness to the participants, this aspect of the research could have been explained without labelling the respective schools and, by extension, those who attended them.

Chapter 8. Themes arising from the research

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I return to the original research question of how girls experience the transition to secondary school. The chapter begins with an overview of some of the methodological concerns. Subsequently, key themes arising from the research will be teased out, covering issues such as peer pressure, friendships and discipline structures in schools. The implications of the research are also discussed.

8.1 Challenges in the Research Process

The main focus of this chapter will be discussion and analysis of the data derived from the research process.

However, throughout Chapters 5 and 6, I reflected on the numerous challenges that were experienced as the research progressed. Even at this early stage in the chapter, it is important to acknowledge these challenges and a number of other factors so that the reader can reflect on what will be written with these key provisos in mind.

Firstly, there were a number of methodological concerns. These, in the first instance, relate to questions of representativeness. The four girls who formed the co-research group were articulate and there were no overt presenting reasons why they might have found transition difficult. It would be difficult to argue that they represented the wider S2 cohort.

The representativeness of the questionnaire responses was also a concern. The questionnaires were completed within two tutor periods each lasting 10 minutes. Children with literacy difficulties or other additional support needs did not have access to support which would have enabled them to complete the questionnaires. This is important given the findings of the Evangelou et al (2008) / EPPSE project which suggests that pupils with special needs can find the transition to secondary school difficult. This would mean that the perspective of an important group may be missing.

Finally, only two focus groups were undertaken. This, again, raises questions about representativeness. Additionally, the issue of peer dynamics, discussed in Chapter 6, may have constrained the dialogue in these focus groups, restricting the potential for all participants to offer genuine insight.

Secondly, I have a number of concerns about the reliance on questionnaire data. Given the critique of positivist methodology outlined in Chapter 3, relying, predominantly, on data which presents trends and uses percentages is, arguably, problematic. These trends could, potentially, serve to obscure the experience of individuals and runs the risk of 'presenting girls as a homogenous group.

Furthermore, the data analysis process undertaken by the co-research group lacked the type of 'scientific' rigour that might ordinarily be applied to such a process. During the session devoted to data analysis, the group were provided with the summaries of the questionnaires and the condensed version of the transcripts. The researchers, at times, referred back to these documents but, in reality, the discussion was open-ended and informal and consisted of the girls talking about their own thoughts about the research outcomes. There was, in my view, insufficient opportunity for the group to elaborate on their ideas by offering supporting evidence drawn from the data. Consequently, what follows in this chapter is an amalgam of the girls' ideas around the findings and my interpretations and analysis of those themes. Given what has been discussed in previous chapters about being clear about the delineation of adult and children's roles in the research process, I will attempt, in as far as it is possible, to distinguish the thoughts of the wider group from my own personal analysis. The hybrid approach is, from an empowerment perspective, problematic. However, presenting the findings as the group's or as being a genuine co-construction is, to my mind, fraught with even more difficulty.

On a different note, this research process has also highlighted a difficulty with using children to undertake research which is academic in its outlook. Part of a typical academic process involves linking the current research to the wider academic literature. My knowledge of the academic literature in relation to girls and transition afforded me a different perspective and allowed me to reflect in a

different way to the other members of the group. This distinction could never be fully overcome.

Given what has been documented in the last few paragraphs, it would be futile to claim what is written in this chapter represents a genuine co-construction of the findings and their implications generated between me and the co-research group. In effect, the group generated many of the findings and the broad themes and then I generated much of the analysis - based on my, more detailed scrutiny of the data, my knowledge of academic literature and my own observations of the research process.

8.2 Transition as a positive experience

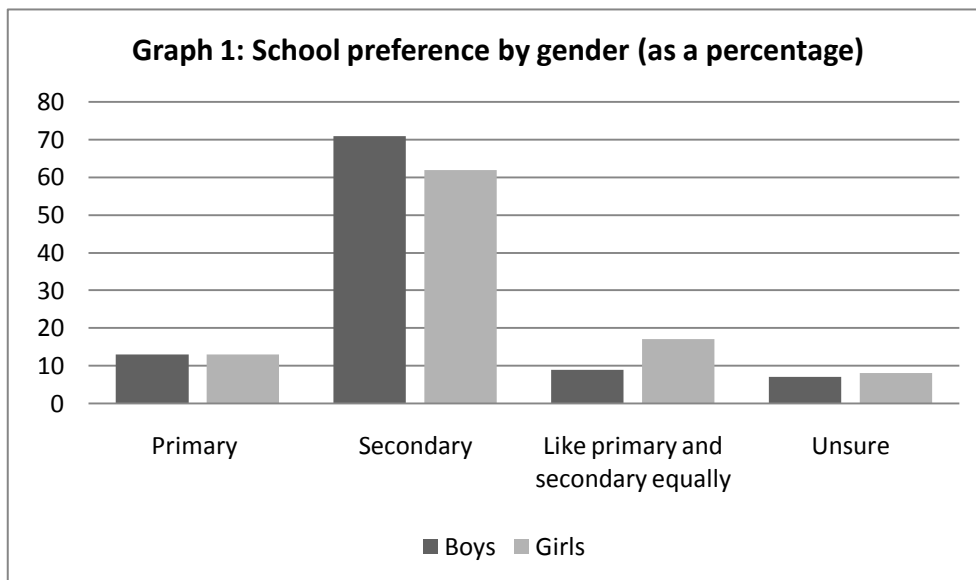
The starting point for this aspect of the discussion is to re-iterate that transition is not an issue that needs to be problematised. It is important to avoid any notion that transition is difficult for all children and that secondary schools are, necessarily, difficult places for children.

Transition can be challenging but this challenge need not be negative. Lucey & Reay (2000), for example, acknowledge that transition to secondary school is something which provokes anxiety but they contend that the anxiety is coupled with optimism and excitement. They further argue that the on-going development of self is inevitably ridden with a degree of anxiety. Dealing with this is a natural part of growing up.

The questionnaire results support the view that transition from primary to secondary school is a positive experience for a substantial proportion of young people – irrespective of gender.

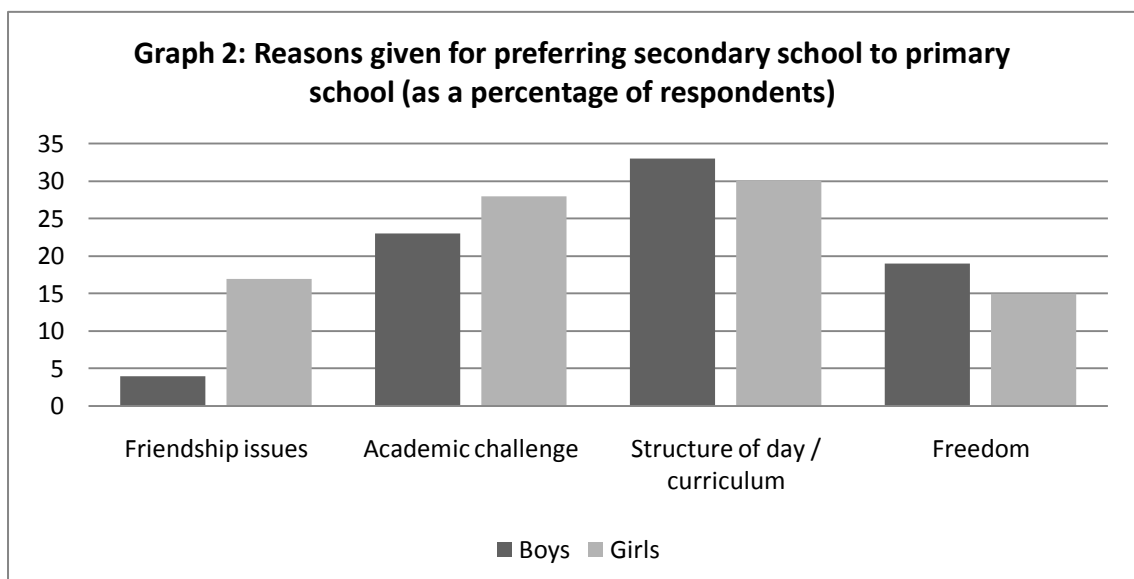
A total of 130 questionnaires were returned. Sixty-nine questionnaires were completed by boys and sixty-one by girls.

Respondents were asked, if after a year in secondary school, they liked primary or secondary school better. Graph 1 indicates that a substantial majority of respondents – both girls and boys – expressed a preference for secondary school over primary.



As a means of reinforcing the generally positive trend, the respondents in the questionnaire offered a range of reasons as to why they preferred secondary.

Graph 2 offers an overview of the responses offered by respondents according to 4 main categories.



A significant number of respondents talked about friendships – primarily ‘having more people to mix with’ and ‘having made new friends’. This is consistent with the EPPSE research undertaken by Evangelou et al (2008) which identified that one important indicator contributing to a successful transition was the extent to which children have more and new friendships. The issue of friendship will be

re-visited later in this chapter as the question of gender differences at transition is explored in greater detail.

A greater number of children talked about issues which were grouped under the heading of 'learning / academic' issues. Respondents in the questionnaire talked of 'learning more' and of the subjects being 'more interesting'. The respondents also talked positively of the range of subjects on offer. Those responding under this banner also talked of the work being 'more challenging'.

A third reason for expressing a preference for secondary school over primary related to the overall structure of the school day. Respondents reported that they preferred moving from class to class, having different subjects and having different teachers to teach those subjects.

The final resonant theme relates to the freedom and responsibility afforded to pupils in secondary school. The ability to leave the school grounds at lunch-times and the accompanying choice that this offers is important. A smaller number of respondents also talked about being 'more mature' and 'being treated as an adult'.

This increased sense of responsibility and being 'freer' are identified, by Lucey & Reay (2000), as being prominent in children's descriptions of why they are looking forward to secondary school. They suggest the transition to secondary school represents a number of 'firsts' (e.g. travelling to school independently on public transport; the ability to make choices about how break-times and lunch-times are spent). In contrast, adults (both teachers and parents) tend to minimise or trivialise this aspect of the transition.

8.3 Reflections on potential differences according to gender

Thus far, this chapter has focused on the generally positive experience of transition to secondary school and gender as a mediating factor has not featured in the discussion.

The next section offers a more detailed analysis of the data and focuses on potential differences according to gender. For reasons previously discussed, any attempt to attach any practical significance to the findings is problematic but observations, worthy of some consideration, were made.

8.3.1 Friendships

The first observation relates to the importance which is attached to social issues and friendships following transition. The issue of friendship was important to scrutinise given the weight afforded to this issue in the questionnaire findings. Additionally, the issue of girls' friendships is prominent in the academic literature. Osler (2006), for example, argues that girls tend to place a greater value on friendships and social networks. Tobbell (2003) also reports that social relationships featured prominently in the discussions of girls who were approaching the end of their 1st year at secondary school. In the Tobbell (2003) focus group study, girls commented on the changing composition of friendship groups and mention was made of girls experiencing increased pressure to conform in order to fit in to certain groups. Consequently, Osler (2006) goes on to argue that the impact on girls - if they are excluded or isolated from friendship groups - is significant.

An important theme identified by the co-research group related to how 'girls look more closely' at their friends. The co-research group talked of how girls are more selective in choosing their friends. In drawing on comments made in the focus group and from their own experience, they argued that girls tended to have 'best friends' who they spent lots of time with. In contrast, they argued that boys tended to have big groups of friends and were less likely to have close or best friends.

As previously explained, forming new and more friendships were cited by both boys and girls as a reason for preferring secondary school to primary. However, in the current research the girls did, generally speaking, tend to place a stronger emphasis on this than boys did.

In their questionnaire responses, boys tended to emphasise the freedom afforded to them in secondary education. When asked to offer an explanation as to why they preferred primary or secondary school, only 2 of 50 boys (4%) who preferred secondary mentioned friendship related issues. This figure compares to 9 out of 36 girls (25%). This difference is illustrated in Graph 1.

There are many reasons to be cautious about these trends – not least because the boys' responses tended to be brief and less lucid and also because of the

relatively small numbers. However, the focus group discussions illuminated this issue further. A number of questions were included which were designed to elicit the participants views about the (potentially) differing nature of friendships between boys and girls.

Consistent with the views of the co-research group, Osler & Vincent (2003) suggest that girls tend to invest more in a smaller number of friendships and, consequently, have more to lose if there is some kind of breakdown in the relationship. This kind of view is also reflected in a number of observations made by participants during the focus groups. Paula, for example, said:

‘You’re more careful to pick who you want to be with and share all your stuff to. You really don’t want them going round like telling everyone’.

During the boys’ focus group, a recurring theme was that the boys felt that girls tend to have ‘best friends’ whereas boys are more inclined to go around in bigger groups. One boy acknowledged that he had closer friends who he would ‘share secrets with’ but rejected the idea that he had a best friend. He also rejected my suggestion that he might have some closer friends within a bigger group by saying, ‘it’s not like they’re better friends because I’m friends with all of them’.

These types of comments may explain some of the other questionnaire findings. 70% of boys reported it was easy for them to make friends. This compares to 57% of girls. If girls and boys truly construct and experience friendships in the manner described above, then it is perhaps unsurprising that girls find the process of developing friendships more difficult.

The responses of the focus groups also suggest that there may be some differences in how boys and girls negotiate the process of making friends in the period after transition.

Angie comments:

‘My friends are completely different from my friends that I had in primary. I was in the middle of two groups. I didn’t want to ditch my primary friends but I wanted to be friends with the new group. It was quite hard because the new group didn’t really want me to be having two groups. And the primary group –

they wanted to be friends. So it was quite hard. I still talk to my primary friends but I'm not as close'.

As well as illustrating the changing composition of groups, this comment, perhaps, illustrates the complexity of forming new friendships whilst staying loyal to old friendships. Whilst a comment to this effect was not made explicitly, there is maybe reason to suggest that type of dissonance and conflicting loyalties might be more of an issue for girls.

In contrast, the boys in this research painted a more 'laid back' picture of forming friendships. The boys in the focus group claimed that it was fairly easy for them to make friends.

Alex noted the following:

'I think it's quite easy for boys to make friends because all you really need to do is say 'hi, my name is...' And pretty much, if you have a small conversation, that's it'

These observations raise questions over the extent to which friendships established in primary actually endure following transition to secondary school. As an Educational Psychologist, supporting transition for children with varying support needs, I tend to invest time in establishing existing friendship groups (or situations where difficulties exist). In conjunction with primary school staff, I often advocate for particular children to be kept together (or indeed apart!). In my experience, maintaining established friendships is also given high priority by parents. Given the evolving nature of friendships on transition, it could be argued that this offers only short-term benefits and that, consequently, the emphasis around transition should, perhaps, be on the building social skills and confidence in relation to making friends rather than trying to, necessarily, retain old friendships.

On a related point, Lucey & Reay (2000) draw attention to an alternative perspective. Although they acknowledge research that supports the view that making the transition with familiar peers contributes to a successful experience, they also argue that this neglects the perspective of children who actively look forward to the new social opportunities that the secondary transition will afford.

They specifically mention children who want to leave friends behind and those who want to 'escape' enemies or bullying. They suggest that a notable group of children invest in transition as a 'new start'. Additionally, children who are socially 'successful' often value the opportunity to experience new friendship groups.

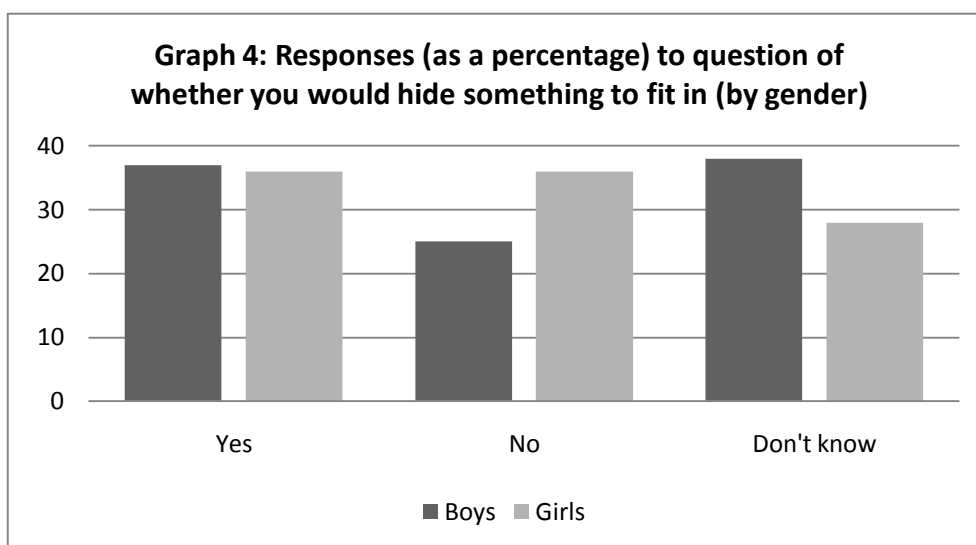
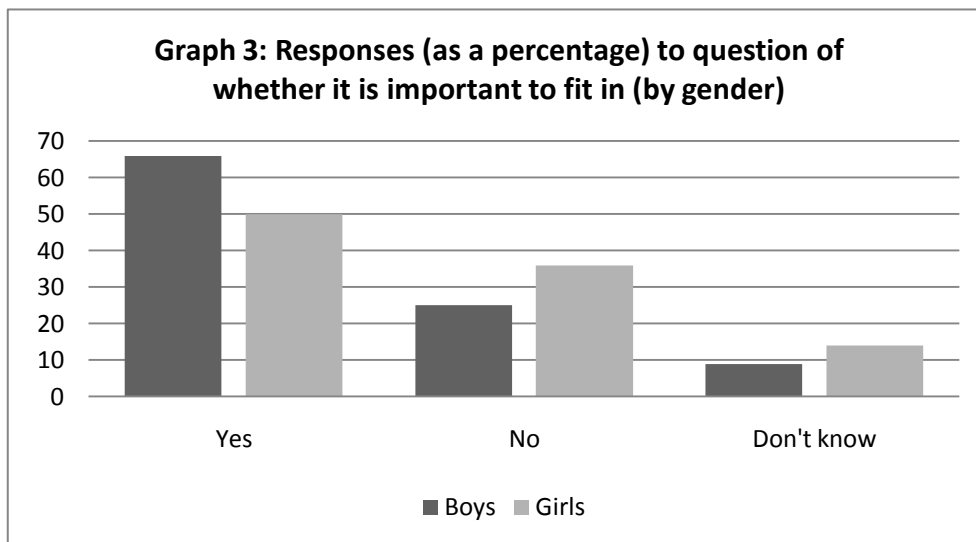
8.3.2 Peer pressure

Although the issue of peer pressure has not been a discrete focus thus far, the topic did manifest itself at various stages of the research process. One co-researcher, in particular, (Rachel) seemed acutely aware of pressures to conform. This was first evident when we began to narrow the focus of the research – when the group were thinking of the types of issues that might be explored via the research. At this time, Rachel posed the following question: 'What do you have to do to be popular with your friends?'

This theme re-emerged as the process progressed. Rachel was instrumental in the design of the questionnaires and again, at her instigation, the following questions were included:

- Would you hide something if you thought other people wouldn't like it (like a problem at home or something you like that is not cool)?
- Do you feel it is important to fit in with everyone else? Why?

In respect of these questions, 50% of girls compared to 66% of boys felt it was important to 'fit in', with broadly equal proportions of boys and girls (36% and 37% respectively) stating they would 'hide something'. The full results to both questions are shown in Graphs 3 and 4 respectively.



In their elaborated responses, a range of reasons were offered in support of their original answers. For the boys and girls who felt fitting in was important, the main themes related to making and maintaining friendships and the avoidance of being judged or bullied. For those who were less concerned about 'fitting in', the reasons offered centred around a few linked themes. Some respondents (both boys and girls) talked of the importance of 'being yourself'. Others talked of how individuality is important. Some girls (specifically) offered responses which suggested that it was other people who had the problem. Responses included 'people should accept me for who I am' and 'it's not my problem if they don't like it, it's theirs'. Overall, the individuality theme was a little more prominent in girls' responses although this is, perhaps, unsurprising given that more girls expressed that they didn't feel the need to fit in and that girls, in general, were more likely to respond to the more open-ended questions.

When the co-research group met to discuss the questionnaire findings, Rachel offered an interesting perspective. She felt that girls, in particular, were more likely to 'say one thing and do another'. Rachel felt that girls tend to talk about the need to be an individual but, ultimately, peer pressure tends to prevail and girls will, as a result, conform.

This issue of peer pressure was re-visited – albeit to a limited extent - during the focus group sessions. There appeared to be a strong feeling among both the girls' and boys' groups that peer pressure was more pervasive in secondary school. Pressure around appearance was central to both dialogues. Interestingly, the girls talked about 'having to work hard' and of there being a hierarchy among groups of girls.

One boy also suggested that boys' responses (to other boys) for not wearing the right clothes were more likely to be jokey and more upfront whereas he felt girls would be more likely to say something behind the other's back.

Alex commented:

'Boys would probably say it as a kind of joke 'why are you wearing those' but I don't know because I'm obviously not a girl but I'd probably think that if a girl was not wearing something they maybe wouldn't say it to their face, they might say it behind their back'

During the data analysis session, Rachel re-iterated her ideas about girls feeling the competing demands of being 'individual' and 'conforming'. The following comment is taken from the notes from that session:

'Girls don't want to think they are conforming, but are still under the same pressure to look good, wear the right clothes etc. They say one thing, do another'

As I reflected on Rachel's perspective, I questioned whether girls, more so than boys, are more likely to experience some kind of dissonance. Intellectually, they understand and can articulate the need for 'individuality' and being 'true to oneself'. These types of thoughts may be prevalent during adolescence, when young people will be developing their own unique identity. However, the

competing pressure to conform may impede this process. This pressure to conform may, in many cases, over-ride the need to be an individual.

Retrospectively, I also find Rachel's viewpoint interesting because, to my mind, she is archetypal of the pupils described by Skelton et al (2010) and referred to in Chapter 1. She was very articulate and, I would imagine, academically able. However, she may not have had the attributes, which Skelton et al (2010) suggest, are needed to manage their 'cleverness' (i.e. being well connected socially; having physical good looks and presenting with 'typical' gender characteristics). Perhaps Rachel's persistence in commenting on the seemingly incongruent perspective offered by the girls is indicative of her own attempts to manage her cleverness.

8.3.3. Differences in the experience of primary and secondary schools

In Chapter 2, I cited the work of O'Brien (2003) who suggested that working class girls were more attached to their primary schools than their middle class peers – seemingly valuing the often 'homely' and 'nurturing' ethos. I also drew on the work of Osler & Vincent (2003) who argued that certain structural features of secondary schools can impact detrimentally on some girls. Consequently, I (more so than the other co-research group members) was eager to explore pupils' perceptions of the different merits of primary and secondary school.

The following themes were elicited during the data analysis session. The flip-chart sheet from that session notes the following:

- 'Both boys and girls tend to have strong relationships with their primary teachers. In secondary, most of the relationships are good but this is more mixed'
- 'In primary school, the closeness of the class seemed more important to girls. Girls see primary teachers and schools like a little community'
- 'Possibly – girls are more attached to their primary teacher.'

It should be acknowledged, once again, that this comparative element between primary and secondary was very much my agenda and that I would have instigated and facilitated the discussion around this particular topic. I now

wonder if I exerted subtle pressures on the group to include such themes because, in reality, the findings of the questionnaire offer only tentative support to the idea that girls are more attached to their primary schools and that they valued, more than boys, the 'small community feel'. When asked if they liked secondary school better, 71% of boys answered affirmatively. This compares to 62% of girls. However, this does not necessarily equate to girls asserting a preference for primary school. 13% of boys and 13% girls said they preferred primary. The difference between boys and girls in the earlier question was accounted for by the fact that 17% of girls said they like primary and secondary school 'both the same'. These figures were illustrated in Table 1.

The most commonly stated reasons for preferring primary were broadly similar for the boys and girls and encompassed the idea that primary school was friendlier and that everyone played together. There was also a sense that primary school was more 'fun'.

This theme was followed up in the focus group. Each group was told that, based on the questionnaire findings, girls seemed to like their primary school a little better than the boys did. They were asked if they agreed with this and if it made sense to them.

I will firstly focus on statements made by the girls' group. Their responses did tend to suggest that they valued the more intimate nature of primary school but I also acknowledge that this does not equate necessarily to a preference for primary school. Some of the girls' comments were as follows:

'I think its coz girls connect better with their primary 7 teachers'

'You feel more comfortable in primary because you're in the same classroom and you're used to it;

'All the people in your class, you're all kinda closer so you're more used to each other'

In contrast, the boys tended to focus on how this kind of 'nurturing' environment could, actually, become restrictive.

There was an interesting interchange between two of the boys which focussed on how the extra responsibility in secondary school enables the process of, in their words, 'progressing into an adult'. They talked of how being treated as a child was 'demeaning'. When the group was asked about the main differences between primary and secondary schools, they tended to focus on the positive attributes of (some) secondary teachers and talked of how 'you learn more from them because the teachers are specialist in their subjects'. The boys group was less inclined to talk about the relationships aspect. However, this appeared different for the girls. In returning to their dialogue, Holly said:

'I think that the primary teachers are so much nicer than the secondary. There are teachers that you do like but there are teachers that are too strict and you think – 'ah, I've got this next'. You don't really enjoy the subject as much as you would because of the teacher.

Speaking about primary teachers, she said,

'They make you want to do the subject a little more. They find a way of doing it'.

Lucy offered a similar explanation.

'In primary school, you felt closer to your teachers but in secondary school, some teachers don't even remember your name. It's like sometimes – 'And you....' And they're like, 'what's your name again?'. We've been here for two years and they still haven't bothered to...' She did follow this up by saying, 'Most of the teachers are fine. It's just some'.

Lucy also made reference to a fellow pupil. She seemed to equate non-attendance with a difficult teacher / pupil relationship.

'I kind of thought that about this person in my class because every day we had that subject, they were off. They might not have been. It's maybe just a coincidence. You know, because they didn't like the teacher'.

This emphasis on relationships was echoed by many of the girls who were interviewed as part of the study reported by Osler & Vincent (2003). Some of the girls who were interviewed were critical of large class sizes and what were perceived as impersonal relationships.

The issue of trust was a recurring theme in the Osler & Vincent study and this was seen as a key barrier to girls accessing support. Additionally, when girls were asked their views on the attributes of a good teacher, they cited a range of ideas, many incorporating relationship aspects. Mutually respectful and trusting relationships, being strict but relaxed in style, being fair and consistent, the ability to offer support when needed and offering praise and encouragement were all cited. Boys were not interviewed as part of this large scale study so it is difficult to make comparative statements. However, the responses from the boys' focus group struck me as quite matter of fact and focused on teaching and learning rather than the relationship with the teacher. They talked about the variability in teaching and about how it was difficult to get help in some subjects – especially if the teacher wasn't so good.

If we return, briefly, to Epstein's 'boys will be boys' discourse, which was first discussed in Chapter 1, and link it to the observations made in this chapter, an interesting anomaly is, potentially, exposed. This discourse is, in part, premised on boys being more immature than girls. This view ties in with popular ideas about how girls mature quicker than boys. However, these observations lend some support to a view that boys may, actually, be more ready to make the transition from primary than some of their female counterparts.

8.4 Experience of disciplinary systems

Thus far, this chapter has articulated some factors which may differentially impact on the transition process for boys and for girls. However, it is also important to reflect on the similarities. Some of these have already been touched upon. For example, most girls and boys expressed a view that the transition to secondary had been a success. Friendships were seen by both groups as being key in helping facilitate a successful transition. Both boys and girls perceive peer pressure as a greater issue on transition to secondary school.

A number of other themes and discussion points emerged from the process. As the co-research group worked to refine the methods and the questions to be posed, much of the discussion focused on the time-out system (i.e. the system which saw pupils posing disciplinary concerns removed from the class). This

group felt a strong sense that the time out system was unfair and was inconsistently applied. This was a general point and, despite my questions, they did not articulate any view that the system was unfair to boys or girls in particular. A question on the fairness of the time-out was included in both the questionnaire and the focus groups. I felt that it was a helpful question in relation to the broad research question. In Chapter 1, space is devoted to differing perspectives on how disciplinary processes may impact on girls. One line of reasoning, offered by Jackson (2006), is that 'acting out' behaviour on the part of girls would make them more vulnerable to processes such as 'time out' because that behaviour is likely to challenge popular notions of what it is to be feminine in a school context. An alternative view is that girls tend to fall under the radar of teachers because the focus is on more overtly challenging behaviour which tends to be perpetrated by boys.

In the questionnaire, fewer boys than girls felt the time-out system was fair (46% of boys v 55% of girls). Although this small percentage difference in terms of gender was noted, in the focus group, discussion tended to reflect the initial ideas and attributions of the co-research group in that any 'unfairness' was put down to how individual teachers applied the process and to the inconsistencies arising from this. Like the co-research group, there was no suggestion that this was a gender specific issue. Individuals within both the groups refer to how, in their view, those who are deemed to constantly misbehave are seen to get away with more.

Graham said:

'I think the more misbehaviour, the more lenient they are on you. First time they're really harsh, like I got a warning just like that but if it's someone that the teacher knows will misbehave, they just dinna bother. It's pointless'.

This kind of point was echoed by Angela:

'Well there's this boy in my class and he does a lot of, like, bad things and he doesn't really get a lot of warnings but when we just shout out by accident or something we get a warning so it's really quite unfair. The amount of things he does compared to accidentally shouting out'

There is a view that children who are quieter, or who normally comply, are the subject of greater scrutiny when issues arise. As one girl explained,

'If one of us or a really quiet person, we'd be straight out of the classroom coz that's what's expected of them. It's still not fair coz they shouldn't be straight out of the classroom. They should at least get one warning'.

In summary, a significant number of respondents and participants talked of the unfairness of the time-out system but offered little to support any notion that this unfairness is a gender issue. Consistent with the co-research group's initial views, there is concern about how different teachers apply the processes. There is also a sense that pupils who are expected to be 'rowdy' get away with more and quieter pupils can, at times, get treated more harshly.

8.5 Implications of the research

As part of the data analysis process, the co-research group were asked to generate ideas about how to improve the transition. They contributed enthusiastically during this aspect of the discussion and what is noted what follows is, largely, a reflection of their ideas. In my view, they tended to draw on their own ideas rather than necessarily being led by the data.

Underpinning much of the discussion was a sense that transition activities should be extended for everyone. The group were aware of the 'enhanced transition' arrangements that existed for children who were deemed, by professionals, to be more vulnerable at transition time. However, they took issue to this type of arrangement for two main reasons. Firstly, it tends to 'single out' individuals. Secondly, there was some concern that some children, who might need the support, would miss out. They seemed to be posing the question of how teachers know who might struggle with the transition process.

The following are notes taken from the session. These reflect the ideas generated:

- Work should take place with a wider group of people (for enhanced arrangements)

- There should be more whole class work. More activities / lessons in primary school to prepare for transition. For example: P7s to get a chance to talk to current first years
- There should a longer build up to transition. There should be earlier opportunities for everyone. The visits in the last couple of weeks of term are quite good but take place quite late.

On first consideration, it would seem that extending transition activities for all is unnecessary given what has been said about the transition being a positive experience for most young people. However, I felt that the co-research group had a good notion of what these extra activities might add. For example, they felt that it would have been beneficial for the secondary school to offer a wider range of activities both pre and post transition. They felt these activities should not just be centred on sport and they felt the activities should be 'opt in'. It was argued that this would increase the opportunity to meet others, from across the year group, who shared similar interests.

This type of view made me reflect on my teaching career. When I taught primary 7 classes, I asked the cohort to prepare a 'year book' in the weeks leading up to transition. This involved pupils contributing 'pen pictures', writing accounts of their favourite memories of primary school and writing about what they were looking forward to in secondary school. Photos from their time throughout nursery and primary school were included. At the time, I saw it as a 'nice' activity to keep potentially restless primary 7s more focussed. I also wanted them to have a 'keepsake' of their primary school years. However, reflecting back and drawing on the knowledge and experience gained as an Educational Psychologist (EP), I have a better understanding of why this type of activity would have broader value. In my practice as an EP, I draw extensively on the principles of nurture and attachment. I have been strongly influenced by the work of Gilligan (2000) who argues that schools and teachers are vitally important in providing children and young people with a 'secure base' and a range of opportunities which help build capacity and resilience. Space precludes a detailed description of Gilligan's writing but, to illustrate, he argues that school provides opportunities for supportive and mentoring relationships

with adults and for young people to build confidence and self-efficacy (Gilligan, 2000).

For those children who have a strong attachment to their primary school and their teachers, or for those children for whom school is the primary source of stability and routine, the transition to secondary school has the potential to be challenging. Being forward-facing and preparing children positively for the prospect of secondary school is, undoubtedly, important. However, providing the opportunity to re-visit or celebrate a child's time at primary school may also serve a purpose. Undertaking this kind of work can provide children with a means of acknowledging and consolidating the positive relationships and memories. It's an opportunity to build on their sense of self-worth and to promote a healthy sense of identity. This type of activity also provides a bridge between the past, present and the future and opens up opportunities for children to talk about their worries and aspirations for the future.

Another key theme arising from the discussion related to access to guidance teachers. In Scotland, there is a strong focus on pastoral support. Each child is assigned a Principal Teacher of Guidance who fulfils a broad remit. As well as delivering teaching on personal and social development, they are the main contact for the pupil in the event of any concern. However, the co-research group felt that the set-up, whereby the five guidance teachers shared an office, was a barrier to accessing support. They cited privacy and confidentiality as key concerns. Confidential conversations could be arranged but the busy and public nature of the guidance office made it difficult for pupils to raise issues and concerns in the first instance. The group also thought the provision of a school counsellor might be useful.

This type of perspective was also highlighted by Osler & Vincent (2003) who cite lack of access to professionals such as counsellors and education social workers as problematic. Even where this type of support is available the girls in their study saw concerns about confidentiality as being important and as a barrier to accessing that support.

There is no data from this current research which suggests that the concern about confidentiality is an issue that would impact disproportionately on girls. However, given Osler & Vincent's (2003) argument that girls can internalise

their difficulties more there may be some tentative reason to suggest that any barrier to accessing support may impact on girls – or indeed, boys who are quieter in nature.

Chapter 9. Reflections on implications for my own professional practice

Chapter Overview

The thesis began with an explanation of how the learning and reflections in this research process have extended beyond what was originally anticipated. This chapter focuses on some of the areas where my practice as an Educational Psychologist has developed as a result of undertaking this work.

What has been documented in the preceding chapters is an account of a research process which was beset by a number of challenges. From a personal perspective, the process has often felt frustrating and, at times, I have questioned both the value of the work that has been undertaken and whether the outcome warranted the investment by me and, importantly, by the co-research group.

As has been acknowledged, the question of how girls experience the primary to secondary school transition is outwardly simple. At the outset, I envisaged engaging in a process which felt traditionally academic in terms of the approach, method and write up. I anticipated expanding my research knowledge and developing a more in-depth understanding of issues such as gender in the school context and, specifically, around transition.

Perhaps paradoxically, I now feel fortunate that the journey transpired in the way that it did. I feel that my learning was more fundamental and impacts on many areas of my professional practice. My learning was not confined to a narrow set of skills or knowledge but is, I would argue, generalisable across my work.

Much earlier in the discussion, I described myself as having been a 'research pragmatist' – as someone who previously based decisions about research methods on the demands of the research task. This type of pragmatism was also reflected in my professional practice and this was often recognised by colleagues. Whilst there is still room for a level of pragmatism, I now have a much better sense of how I could, in some circumstances, rely on common-sense views of situations – often drawn from my own classroom experience. I

viewed myself as a reflective practitioner but I now feel that my practice was, at times, characterised by a lack of criticality in terms how my views and attributions impacted on my practice and interactions with people. My reflections, detailed in Chapter 1, about how I moved from a lay and essentialist understanding about how gender manifests itself in the classroom context to having a greater understanding of the socially constructed nature of gender, is evidence of this shift. As a small example of change, I am now far less inclined to make generalisations about boys and girls and, where this does happen, I tend to qualify my statements carefully. This greater care is also reflected in my general practice. I am less certain in what I say. I am clearer about stating what would be commonly agreed as being 'factual' and what, in contrast, is conjecture on my part.

The original research question related to transition and perhaps what has transpired reflects a different type of transition – my transition to a more reflexive, critical, and hopefully better, practitioner.

In the first part of this chapter, I will focus on three areas where my practice has developed and how a more explicit rather than intuitive understanding of issues has benefitted my approach.

9.1 Individualism

Authors such as Francis et al (2012) and Francis & Skelton (2005) are critical of the marketised nature of the school system in England. Ball (2013) suggests that these quasi-market forces encourage self-interest within schools. Francis et al (2012) explain that New Labour and subsequent Coalition policy is underpinned by the idea of a meritocracy where the emphasis is on success being a result of individual effort. Both Ball (2013) and Francis et al (2012) refer to the 'something for something' rhetoric perpetuated by Tony Blair. Francis et al (2012) are critical of this marketization on a number of levels but make the point that situating blame with individuals absolves the government and individual schools of the responsibility to tackle systemic and societal issues which serve as barriers to equality.

The many differences between the Scottish and English education systems have already been alluded to. Consequently, care needs to be taken in

presenting what is to follow. Marketisation is not a predominant feature of the Scottish system. However, and in my view, the ideas that underpin individualism and meritocracy are not entirely absent from the narrative offered by some teachers. This emphasis is not helped, to my mind, by the 'strivers not skivers' discourse which emanates from the Coalition government's attempts to reform welfare. The government is actively casting people as 'deserving' or 'undeserving'.

As I engaged with the academic literature, I became interested in individualism. Although not common, I have conversations with teachers where the blame for behaviour is attributed to the individual child. As an educational psychologist, this type of perspective is something I have always sought to counter as I attempt to understand behaviour using an ecological framework. However, in retrospect, there were areas where this type of standpoint, based on a form of individualism, did come to the fore in my practice. Professionals can, at times, be quick to attribute the behaviour of children to parenting or parenting style – therefore labelling and blaming parents. What my reading and reflections have allowed me to do is be more conscious of how the approaches of parents are attributed. I have increased awareness of how professionals can be quite conservative in their views of parents and how they can conceive parenting narrowly. More specifically, I became more conscious of the need to avoid conversations which reinforced that parents are necessarily to blame for their child's difficulties. These reflections were most pertinent in my thinking around how conversations about nurture and attachment were undertaken. The purpose of this section is not to de-construct the evidence base around nurture and attachment. My professional experience is that approaching cases from an 'attachment' perspective can be valid and illuminating. These conversations can also be helpful in terms of helping teachers to re-attribute the behaviour of young people and it can also be powerful in terms of informing intervention. However, my concern has been that holding conversations explicitly around nurture can lead to behaviour being equated with poor parenting. This situates blame with parents and, problematic from a feminist point of view, it is often the mother who is blamed. From a school perspective, it can re-inforce notions about parental competence and externalises the cause of behavioural problems – potentially absolving the school of the need to address environmental factors

within that context. There is also a danger of negating a view that the parent or parents, themselves, may be in need of support or it may obscure positive aspects to their parenting.

I am also more conscious of how parents and mothers (more particularly but not exclusively) tend to feel competing pressures in order to be the 'perfect parent'. They are bombarded with messages about, for example, their child's diet, health, happiness, behaviour and education. As a result, parents can adopt this kind of 'individualist' stance in relation to themselves. Parents can absorb these messages and, consequently, they feel a significant sense of guilt and responsibility if they don't live up to societal expectations. Recently, I worked with a parent whose 5 year old child has significant health concerns and related developmental and behavioural issues. She explained that her husband has mental health problems and what she described as 'anger management' issues. During the meeting, she talked of how she had 'tried everything' to manage her son's behaviour. She said that she had talked to a friend who had 'perfect children' to get advice. In doing so, she compared herself to the other mum - without any real acknowledgement that her situation is complex and challenging. She felt a responsibility to manage the situation but she also felt a strong sense of responsibility that things were still 'going wrong'. Having this kind of awareness, I believe, led me to be more supportive and empathic and it helped me to highlight to her, the numerous challenges she was facing and the aspects of her approach that were working well.

9.2 Class

Despite not featuring in the research process, the opportunity to explore issues in relation to class has been particularly illuminating in terms of my learning and reflections. Prior to engaging with the work of academics such as Walkerdine et al (2001) and Reay (2007), I had never explicitly considered on my own views and attributions in relation to class. My learning in this area has been broad so I will focus on two particular areas during this aspect of the discussion.

Firstly, I was particularly struck by observations made by Walkerdine et al (2001) relating to how some working class families can find it difficult to navigate the education system should they feel their daughters / children are in need of support. They argue that working class parents lack the social capital

(e.g. access to teachers) of their middle class counterparts. It is also argued that they are less certain of their rights. This, coupled with a lack of confidence, means that working class families may be more inclined to give up in the face of difficulties. Walkerdine et al (2001) also suggest that professionals can be inclined to treat working class parents as if they were children. These statements exemplify fairly broad generalisations relating to both working class parents and to professionals. Nonetheless, these comments were an important basis for reflection. Over time, I became conscious of instances where my practice, in relation to working and middle class families, felt quite different. This could be seen as defensible in that, if families are encountering situations from different perspectives, then it is important that professionals make adjustments to suit their contexts. However, I believe there was sometimes a tendency for me to 'prioritise' work relating to middle class children and, generally speaking, I believe I was better at keeping their parents 'informed'. I was also, in some instances, conscious of more actively seeking and then reflecting the views of middle class parents. I think, at times, I fell into a pattern of 'working with' middle class parents - even though they were already largely enabled - and 'doing things to' working class parents.

I am not suggesting, by any means, that all my practice was oppressive in a manner described in the previous paragraph. I enjoy my work with parents and have invested heavily in those relationships. I would argue, however, that I am now more cognisant of how I engage with parents and about how I seek and reflect their views. I am more careful about keeping all parents informed and about offering feedback. I am more conscious of how school systems can, potentially, be difficult for parents to navigate and I am clearer in my view that part of my job is about helping parents to make sense of this system and to support them to articulate their views and wishes in respect of their child's education.

In reflecting such views, the class of the parent, in actuality, becomes less important. Being aware of the potential to treat people differentially according to their class has enabled me to focus on what is important in terms of working with parents. What is described in the previous paragraph is reflective of empowering, non-discriminatory and respectful practice – irrespective of background.

The second area where my reading on class has had an impact has been in relation to my views on the experience of middle class girls. When I talked initially of the debate on boys' underachievement in Chapter 1, I was critical of those perpetuating the notion of a gender battle where there were winners and losers. However, I fell into this kind of thinking when I initially read about class based issues. I became very interested in the writings of Walkerdine et al (2001) and I also engaged heavily in the work of Owen Jones, the socialist political commentator. The narrative which formed in my head, at that time, was that middle class girls were winners in some kind of 'class' battle. I do not seek, in this section, to de-construct previously made arguments about the importance of class in determining educational outcomes (in Chapters 1 and 7) but what I do seek to acknowledge is that, for a time, I failed to actively reflect on the experiences of middle class girls. I took academic 'success' as a measure of absolute success and failed to consider wider issues. This type of criticality began to emerge as I drew on the work of Skelton, Francis & Read (2010). A pendulum, perhaps, offers a useful analogy here. My journey started with a lack of any explicit perspective on class and education. I then moved to a position where my view was more political than critical or academic. This political standpoint was, quite possibly, compounded by my own sense of my working class background. I would now argue that I am able to hold a more balanced perspective which retains the essence of the importance of class but doesn't frame middle class girls in idealistic terms or assumes that their 'achievements' are necessarily without cost.

I believe that, in terms of my personal learning, this again reflects a shift away from essentialist thinking. I am now less inclined to think that there are pre-determined attributes of girls of particular backgrounds and less inclined to think in binary terms. I am more aware of my political views and potential prejudices. I tend to think that I am less judgemental and will approach situations in a more critical and open minded way – with fewer pre-conceived notions.

9.3 Voice

Chapter 6 offers an account of how the process with the co-research group was important in terms of shifting my thinking from a fairly naïve and simplistic view of how we capture the 'voice of the child' to a position that was more critical and

reflexive. The discussion in Chapter 6 focused on the implications for the research process. However, these reflections, in relation to children's rights, have also had wide-ranging ramifications for my professional practice.

Throughout my career as an Educational Psychologist, I have tended to be critical about how schools can involve children and young people in meetings. I have expressed concerns about how there is a tendency to consult with young people only before or during these meetings and, as such, seeking views is seen as a one-off process rather than something that is on-going. I have also been concerned about a child's ability to exert their views in front of adults - some of whom might be unfamiliar. I have also been concerned about the level of anxiety, I felt, attending such meetings could provoke. This issue of anxiety, I argued, would be compounded if children or young people were poorly prepared for the meeting.

What engaging in a critical process about 'voice' has enabled me to do is be more explicit and evidence-based when expressing concerns about involving children in meetings. Reflecting on the work of Christensen & Prout (2002), I now explicitly think in terms of agency and actively consider to what extent a child's agency is being exercised. I am more consciously aware of how my designation and the designation of others may inhibit the child from expressing their views and how children may come to say what adults expect them to - especially in highly governed situations like schools.

How I elicit the views of young people has also evolved. I am more careful in my questioning – trying, in as much as possible, to ensure questions are open-ended. I am also more conscious of trying not to filter a child's words via my own interpretations. I now purposively check my understanding of what I think the child is saying to me.

In my strategic work on a 'Looked After Children' strategy group, I have found myself drawing on my experience of the research process and on my reading by authors such as Todd (2012) and Whitty & Wisby (2007). I pose questions about how best to elicit views in a manner which does not treat those who are looked after as a homogenous group. I think more critically about forums such as school councils and I am more vigilant to consultation processes that may be tokenistic in their scope.

Chapter 10 Conclusion and ramifications for knowledge

Chapter Overview

This concluding chapter offers commentary on the aspects of this thesis which have wider ramification for knowledge. The learning arising from the research journey encompassed a number of areas which I have categorised under three main headings:

- *Themes relating to the original research question of how girls experience the transition from primary to secondary school*
- *Implications for educational psychology practice*
- *Implication for researchers seeking to undertake co-research with young people*

As has been acknowledge throughout this thesis, the learning from the research process has encompassed areas which extend beyond the original research question about how the transition between primary and secondary school might be mediated by gender.

The first part of this chapter draws on the narrative detailed in Chapter 6 relating to the original research question and focuses on the implications arising directly from the research. Questions for future research in this field will also be posed.

Chapter 9 focused on how my experience of undertaking the Doctoral programme and this research has impacted on my own professional practice. I would suggest that my personal reflections and learning are likely to have relevance for the profession of educational psychology more widely. This is discussed in section 10.2.

The reflections to be presented in the first two sections of this chapter are potentially important. However, the learning and reflections which arose from challenges encountered during the co-research process have, arguably, wider relevance and resonance. Much of the literature cited in Chapters 3 and 6, which discuss co-research and other participatory processes, (e.g. James, 2007; Spyrou, 2011 and Todd, 2012) offer a justifiable but largely theoretical

critique of taking an intuitive or lay view of 'hearing the voice of the child'. In contrast, the process described in this thesis offers a concrete exemplification of the challenges that can be encountered. The final part of this chapter will focus on the ramifications of this research process for others seeking to undertake co-research.

Some of the implications and the wider ramifications for knowledge have already been alluded to in Chapters 8, 9 and 6 respectively. However, this final chapter attempts to elicit these themes more clearly.

10.1 Reflections on how transition to secondary school is mediated by gender.

Chapter 8 offered a description of themes arising from the questionnaires, focus group discussion and narrative of the co-research group. At the outset of the chapter, significant emphasis was placed on the observation that the majority of respondents in the questionnaire reported a successful transition to secondary school and that, as a consequence, transition is not an area that needs, necessarily, to be problematised.

Whilst it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions from the research there were a number of points which are, in my view, worthy of reflection and further consideration.

In the first instance, I will return to the original working hypotheses which underpinned the research. In Chapter 2, it was suggested that the apparently safe and nurturing ethos in primary school is, perhaps, valued more so by girls. It was also postulated that the primary school environment was favourable to meeting the needs of 'quiet' or 'sensitive' pupils (including many girls) and that the bigger and less personal nature of the secondary school was less conducive to detecting the needs of such pupils.

The data generated as part of the research process offered only very tentative support to such hypotheses. However, there were some areas where differences between the reports of boys and girls seemed to emerge. Firstly, there appears to be a difference in how girls and boys negotiate the process of making new friends post-transition. Girls, in general terms, tend to invest in a small group of friends. They may also find it difficult to stay loyal to old friends.

In contrast, boys are more likely to have wider friendship groups. The level of investment that tends to be offered by girls has the potential to be problematic. In line with the argument of Osler & Vincent (2003), there is a greater risk should issues arise within friendship groups.

Reference was made in Chapter 8 to how one member of the co-research group felt that 'girls are likely to say one thing and do another' in relation to questions about peer pressure. In effect, Rachel was suggesting that girls are able to articulate a need and desire to be an individual and yet are quick to conform on issues such as clothes. This apparent incongruence around peer pressure perhaps exemplifies what can be directly competing needs - for individuality and for social acceptance. I feel that Rachel's observation has some basis and, as a consequence, would be worthy of further investigation and research.

Based on what has been said in Chapters 8 and thus far in Chapter 10, it would appear that social and friendship issues can impact significantly on how girls experience the transition to secondary school. My original hypotheses were more focused on relational issues (i.e. mainly the nature of teacher / pupil relationships) and what could be deemed 'structural issues' (e.g. class sizes; access to pastoral support; the curriculum; timetabling). The extent to which the research answered the question of how these factors impact on girls' experience of transition is questionable and an attempt to draw definitive conclusions would be problematic. However, I would argue that original hypotheses still have legitimacy. Work by authors such as Osler & Vincent (2003), Osler (2006) and Tobbell (2003) suggest that relationships and relational issues are important to girls. Where girls do not have trusting relationships with adults, their ability to access support where this is needed is potentially restricted. If this issue is coupled with the supposed insensitivity of the secondary school system to detect need in the first instance, the difficulty in accessing support may well be compounded. Consequently, the original question and premise of the study still has some basis and, is worthy of further research.

10.2 Wider ramifications for educational psychology practice

Chapter 9 offered some examples of how my professional practice has developed since undertaking this research process. The reflections in this section will, briefly, focus on some of the core themes arising from what was, at times, a personal journey that may have resonance with others.

The core theme running throughout this section relates to the concept of reflexivity. Within professional practice, terms such as 'self-reflection' and 'reflective practitioner' are widely used. The term 'reflexive' is often used when talking about interpretivist research but is, in my experience, less commonly heard in, or applied to, professional contexts. In talking about research, Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford (2007) caution against using the terms 'reflective' and 'reflexive' interchangeably and argue that the distinction between self-reflection and reflexivity is not always clearly made. Reflection, Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford (2007) argue, is a distant process which takes place after an event. This can qualify research findings but cannot correct them. Reflexivity, in contrast, is an active, immediate and on-going process and this continual process of reflection enables the research process to be adjusted.

I believe the goal, as educational psychologists, should be to move beyond merely self-reflecting to a position where we are actively seeking to be reflexive. We need to be actively and purposefully conscious of how various factors are impacting on our interactions with stakeholders. So what would this entail?

Be sceptical of 'taken for granted knowledge': I have found that an over-reliance on intuition and pragmatics is problematic. Therefore, it is important to beware of 'common sense' perspectives. Issues covered over the course of the thesis including gender, parenting and class are heavily loaded with assumptions and, given our exposure to media, it is easy to get drawn into accepting popular explanations of such issues. My understanding of boys' underachievement both as a teacher and in the early part of my career as a psychologist, reported widely in Chapter 1, is an obvious example of this. My standpoint was based on stereotypical depictions of boys in the school context and popular views of how schools are supposed to contribute to boys' underachievement. There is a need to be continually open to alternative perspectives.

Be aware of your designation and how others may perceive you: As an educational psychologist, there is a need to remain conscious of our designation. The job title in itself may impact on our interactions. In some circumstances, our designation may constrain conversation and dialogue. In other circumstances, people may view us as being an 'expert'. Holding such a view may mean that people place greater credibility in what we say. Therefore there may be an inherent danger in having conversations that re-inforce rather than challenge popular views. We need to be confident in what we are saying but, at the same time, avoid delivering our messages with certainty.

Actively scrutinise your motivations, assumptions and values: A substantial section of Chapter 6 was devoted to an analysis of my motives and values and how they impacted on this research. Greenbank's (2003) writing relates to research practice but his points could equally be applied to professional practice. Active consideration of our own moral, competency, personal and social values and how these impact on our practice is important. We all have political views, views about what is morally right or wrong and views about how certain tasks should be undertaken. Our motivations will vary according to any given task. In as much as possible, we should be explicit about these views and motivations. Having narrow views on any issue, whether this is parenting, gender or any other will limit our conversations and therefore the potential for positive change.

10.3 Reflections on the co-research process: Implications for researchers

This final section of the thesis is a commentary on how my learning and reflections from the co-research process may have relevance for fellow researchers seeking to undertake research in conjunction with children and young people. Whilst not invalidating what has been discussed in Sections 10.1 and 10.2, I believe that this is the area which offers the greatest in terms of ramifications for wider knowledge.

Some of the challenges exposed through the research process are a result of choices I made and, as such, it could be argued that these issues were unique to this research. However, in reflecting on these issues I have attempted to draw on the academic literature and have noted that these challenges are not

necessarily exclusive to this particular project and, as such, they are likely to have wider relevance for those seeking to undertake co-research.

Before progressing with this section it is important to be clear that, in writing what is to follow, there is no attempt to challenge the thinking or the rationale for utilising participatory methods - including co-research. Nor is this part of the discussion an attempt to deny the skills, insight and commitment of the child researchers. Instead, what is being argued is that co-research can only ever, in part, dilute the influence of the adult and, furthermore, partially resolving one issue creates or exposes other issues which serve to constrain the extent to which children's perspectives are elicited (e.g. using child interviewers instead of adults).

What has emerged from this process is a number of factors that require consideration when utilising co-research.

- Attention needs to be afforded to the purpose of the research and, more specifically, to who is likely to derive the greatest benefit from taking part in the process. Analysis is needed as to how these factors impact on the research process. Importantly, questions of ownership of the research need to be factored in. My experience is that empowerment becomes challenging if the sense of ownership on the part of the co-researchers is missing in the first instance.
- There is also an undoubted need to clarify the role of the adult in the co-research process. It seems inconceivable to me that any child-led research could take place without some adult influence – even if this is just to enable the process to happen. It would be naïve to assume that child and adult researchers can assume a parity of role and it's equally naïve to assume that adults can have a neutral role in the research process. Consequently, it's important to embrace the role of the adult and to acknowledge it – rather than try to deny the impact.
- An assessment of how peer dynamics could shape the process is also important as these peer dynamics can also dilute the authenticity of the messages elicited from the research. This seems especially important when the participants are familiar to one another and where relationships and hierarchies have already been established. This is important to

consider if utilising focus groups given that dominant voices can stop others from offering an alternative view. Posing such questions is also important if young people are used as interviewers.

- There is also a need to consider the potential risk to reputations arising from taking part in such a process. Asking child researchers to assume a pseudo-adult role may well be difficult territory to negotiate. It is important for the adult researcher to consider whether there is an inherent safety and security for the young researcher in preserving, to some extent, traditional adult / child roles.
- There is also a need to question to what extent those participating in the group can speak for others and the extent to which the themes mask the experience of individuals. Claims of representativeness in relation to the themes drawn from this research are undermined by the small numbers taking part in the focus group sessions. Undertaking further focus group sessions may have been beneficial but questions would remain about the constitution of such groups. Ethical research demands that consent is informed. Compulsion to take part in any such group is, rightly, not an option. This raises the question of who actually takes part. Is it, in many cases, the articulate, middle class child who has support from their parent to enable them to make a choice about participating?
- A final point for consideration relates to the data analysis process. As Nind (2011) explains, this aspect of the research process is challenging and it is often neglected in examples of participatory research with children. In line with the argument of Nind (2011), there should be acknowledgement that undertaking data analysis in a non-participatory way runs the risk of invalidating what, until that point, could have been an inclusive and empowering process.

My experience of co-research was complex. As previously acknowledged, I entered into the process with a naïve and idealistic view of what the process might entail and about its capacity to empower. As the research progressed, I became aware of an increasing number of issues which challenged my thinking about ownership and empowerment when researching with young people. As has already been noted, in attempting to address one issue, other issues were exposed. This process led me to question whether empowerment may actually

have been better served by other forms of participation which fall short of child-led research. Retrospectively, I believe it would have been more beneficial to have used my research colleagues more as a reference group than as a co-research group. I could then have used this group as a reference point at different stages of the process to ascertain views about research aims, questions, methods and interpretation of findings, for example. This idea has resonance with the type of collaborative process described by McLaughlin (2006).

This type of approach, to my mind, would have offered a number of benefits. The on-going dilemma about ownership would have been resolved and there would have been no pretence, inadvertent or otherwise, about whose research this was. This type of approach acknowledges the skills and knowledge of the group. It retains the assumption that children are capable of contributing in significant and meaningful ways to the research process. It preserves the tacitly understood 'space' of the adult and child and offers protection for the child researcher from assuming the role of a pseudo-adult. Utilising a reference group approach would also have addressed questions about time and the level of commitment required on the part of the co-researchers. In the context of this research, this final point is important as my awareness of the time consuming nature of the tasks was a recurring theme. As already alluded to, this awareness impacted on my decision-making at various points in the process.

The reference group would also have provided a forum through which the validity of my analysis could be scrutinised and would have opened up space for my adult interpretations to be challenged. The reference group would also have alleviated some of my perceived issues around preserving the quality of the research and to overcome my sense that I was making compromises about the methods and the depth and quality of the data emerging from the process.

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Appendices

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L		Letter to S2 pupils re questionnaire
M		Proposed Interview Schedule
N		Proposed letters to parents & young people re interviews
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Appendix A: Paper presented to Principal Teachers of Guidance

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

DOCTORATE IN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Research Proposal

The Transition from Primary School to Secondary School: An exploration of the experiences of girls

PAPER FOR EA STAFF

RATIONALE

Over recent years there has been a considerable focus on the under-achievement of boys in school.

However:

- A significant minority of girls are also underachieving in school
- “Class” is more important than gender in determining outcomes

Why the focus on transition?

- Many of the girls who cause concern in secondary cause little overt concern in primary
- The proportion of girls excluded (in relation to boys) increases dramatically as they move into secondary
- National research suggests that many girls who “underachieve” at GSCE level were actually attaining around average or above average in primary school
- This research also suggests that “low achieving” girls tend to become increasingly disengaged over time. In contrast, boys tend to show higher levels of disengagement earlier – they generally start off disengaged and stay disengaged.

There is likely to be a vast range of factors contributing to this disengagement (e.g. home factors, individual factors, societal factors, social factors). This study acknowledges these factors but will focus predominantly on school based factors and how girls experience the transition from primary to secondary school.

Overall, the research covers three important topics of interest to schools:

- Transition
- Lowest achieving 20%
- Pupil voice

METHODOLOGY

A form of co-research will be used. This basically means that a small group of girls will design and conduct the research jointly. Research with young people is often criticised because the views of the young people are interpreted / filtered through adults. Research is often “done to” these young people. Co-research attempts to re-address these concerns.

I hope to work with 3 or 4 girls. After an initial introduction period, the girls will work to design and conduct the research and then collate, interpret and present the findings.

Participants

Co-researchers: There will be no specific inclusion or exclusion criteria. Ideally, the opportunity to take part should initially be open to a relatively wide group of S1 or S2 girls (e.g. a range of abilities, socio-economic status, primary school attended).

I will then conduct a presentation to this group and, then, the group will be narrowed down to 3 or 4. I will work with this group to introduce them to basic research methods. These girls will then begin the process of designing the research.

It is proposed that the research will take place for 1 x school period each fortnight -although this is negotiable.

OTHER IMPORTANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER

- The girls may decide to open out the research to a wider group (e.g. they may decide to interview a number of girls coming towards the end of their S1 year) meaning that the research will have an impact on a greater number of children
- It is difficult to predict timescales and to quantify how much time this will take from the girls' school programmes

Appendix B: Letter written to parents outlining project and seeking consent to write to daughter

Dear Mr X

Girls and Transition: Research Project

My name is Susan Dean and I work as an Educational Psychologist for the Council. As part of my on-going professional development, I am undertaking a Doctorate in Educational Psychology with Newcastle University.

As part of this programme I would like to undertake a research project which explores how girls experience the transition from primary to secondary school. Many girls have a successful experience of transition but, for others, the transition is quite difficult. The aim of the research is to find out how schools can make the transition experience better for all girls.

I plan to write to a group of girls in S1 at (school) asking whether they might like to help me with this project by acting as a researcher. Jane was identified by Guidance staff at (school) as a girl who is likely to have the necessary skills to participate in such a project. I think it is also important to note that she has not been identified because there are any concerns about how she has managed the move to secondary school.

Ultimately, I am looking for 3 or 4 girls in S1 to help me with the research. These girls will help me design and conduct the project as well as present the findings. This is a unique opportunity to get involved in a piece of research and a chance for the girls to develop a range of skills.

At this stage, I am hoping that you will give your consent for two things:

1. I would like your consent for me to write to Jane asking if she would like to attend an initial talk about the research.
2. I would then like consent for Jane to attend this initial presentation on (date) (should she wish to attend).

It is important to note that attendance at this talk does not mean the girls have to participate in the study. This will just give the girls more information about the project so they can decide if they would like to take part.

If Jane is still keen to participate following the presentation, I will write to you once more outlining next steps and to provide you with more information so you are able to make a final decision about whether you would like Jane to participate in the project. I would also be happy to meet you in person at this stage, should you require further information. I should also state that Jane's or your consent can be withdrawn at any time.

The time commitment is dependent on how the girls design the project but likely to involve around an hour per fortnight between May and July. Some of this will take place during school time although it may also involve some work at lunch-times.

As I'm sure you will appreciate, it is difficult to get all the main points across in a short letter. Therefore, if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to give me a call.

Yours sincerely

Susan Dean

Acting Principal Educational Psychologist

Girls' Transition Project

I give consent for Jane to receive a letter about the project

Yes

No

I would be happy for Jane to attend the talk to hear more about the girls' transition project.

Yes

No

Name: _____

Date: _____

Please return in the SAE by (date)

Appendix C: Letter written to potential co-researchers to invite them to presentation

Dear Jane

Girls' Transition Project

My name is Susan Dean and I work in (school) as an educational psychologist.

I am also a student at Newcastle University. As part of my work at university, I would like to do a project to find out how girls feel about their move from primary school to secondary school.

This transition (or move) from primary to secondary school can mean big changes for boys and girls. Some girls cope with the transition really well and others girls find the change more difficult. I want to find out how we can make transition better for those girls who can find it difficult.

To do this project, I am looking for 3-4 girls to work on the project with me. These girls will help decide on the questions to ask, design the methodology (how we are going to do the research) and then decide what we can learn from the project to make things better.

I have written to you because your Guidance teacher feels you have the skills to take part and to do well in the project.

If you think you might like to take part, I will be doing a short talk on (date / time) so you can find out more. If you do want to come to the talk, I will meet you at the Guidance Base.

Coming along to the talk doesn't mean you have to do the project - it will just give you a chance to hear more so you can think about whether you would like to take part.

I have already written a letter to your parents and they are happy for you to come along.

If you would like to come along to the talk to hear more about the project, please fill in the form below.

Yours sincerely

Susan Dean

Girls' Transition Project

I would like to attend the talk to hear about the girls' transition project.

Yes

No

Name: _____

Date: _____

Please return this to me in the envelope that is provided.

Appendix D: PowerPoint presentation to potential co-researchers

THE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY SCHOOL TO SECONDARY SCHOOL: AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS

Research Proposal

Introduction

- My name is Susan Dean
- I work as an Educational Psychologist.
- I am also a student at Newcastle University
- As part of my course, I have to do a major research project. I have to choose which project I want to do
- I am interested in how girls get on when they move to secondary school

Why am I interested in girls and transition?

- Research studies seem to tell us that girls do OK in primary school.
 - Their achievement is good – they do well in tests of reading, writing and maths
 - They don't often get excluded
 - They attend school regularly
 - They are keen to do well

Why?

Most girls get on OK when they move to secondary school but, some research suggests that, some girls do less well at secondary school than they do at primary

- Osler and Vincent say that hardly any girls are excluded in primary school but, in secondary school, ¼ of all exclusions are for girls (England)
- The number girls being excluded in Scotland is rising
- More girls than boys stay off school in secondary schools because they are worried or anxious about something (Osler)
- Archer says that lots of girls who “underachieve” at exam time were actually doing well when they were in primary
- Jones and Myhill think that girls are keen to do well in primary but then some become “disengaged” in secondary school. This means that they are less interested in school as they get older

The research

I'm interested in finding out about:

- What girls enjoy about secondary school
- Any bits of secondary school that aren't so good
- Whether the transition to secondary school is different for girls than for boys
- How the transition from primary to secondary can be improved

Co-research

- I am looking for 3, 4 or 5 girls to help me with the research by being co-researchers with me.
- Co-research means that everyone is an equal partner in the project. This means that we all decide how the project should be done and, after that, we conduct the research together.

What's involved?

- This will involve quite a big commitment. Some of the work will be done in class time but some of the work will probably need to be done at lunch-times.
- Most of the work will be done in the summer term but there might be some work needed after the summer holidays too.
- There are lots of stages to the research

Step 1: Learning about research

- The first thing we need to do is learn about different types of research so we can decide what's the best way of doing the project. We'll learn about methods like:
 - questionnaires and surveys
 - interviews
 - focus groups
 - visual research using pictures and video

This will probably take 2 sessions each lasting about 45 minutes.

Step 2: Deciding on the method

After we have learned about types of research (methods), we will have to decide on what, exactly, we are going to study. This is called deciding on the aims and objectives.

Once we have decided on the aims, we will decide how we are going to do the research.

This will probably take 2 sessions each lasting about 45 minutes.

Step 3: Conducting the research

- This means that we have to actually do the research. What this will look like and how long it takes will depend on what you decide the methods will be.
- It might mean sending out questionnaires or doing interviews – it all depends on you! You might come up with a more interesting way of doing the research

Step 4: Looking at the findings

- Once all the information is gathered, we have to look at the findings and decide what it all means. We need to decide whether there's anything we can learn about how to make transition better.
- After we've looked at the findings and decided what the results mean, we might have to write a report or do a presentation to people in the school.
- My colleagues in the Educational Psychology team will be very keen to hear about the project as they help lots of people at transition time.

What skills will you learn by doing the project?

Doing research helps people to learn lots of new skills like:

- Team work
- Thinking skills / Critical skills
- Presentation skills
- Research skills
- Working with people

It is still unusual for young people to be co-researchers with adult researchers.

What's next?

- If you think you might want to be a co-researcher, please go away and think it through. Talk things over with your parents. You and your parents need to be happy before you can take part
- If you or your parents want to ask any more questions, you can phone me or e-mail me. My work number is 550999. My e-mail is susan.dean@ or s.r.dean@newcastle.ac.uk
- Please remember that, although this is a big commitment, you can decide to stop at any time – even after the project has started
- If you want to take part (and your parents are happy), please complete the form on the letter I have given to you and return it in the envelope
- If more than 5 girls want to be co-researchers, there will probably need to be a ballot (names will be picked out of a hat) to decide on the final group.

Appendix E: Letter written to potential co-researchers and their parents following introductory talk

Dear Jane and Mr X

Girl and Transition: Research Project

Firstly, I would like to thank-you for your support so far with the project. I was encouraged to get such a positive response to my request to meet the girls at (school).

I have now met with the girls who might be involved in the project. The girls who were at the talk were given a handout and this outlines the work that will be involved in the project. I would be grateful if you could take some time to read this over.

If you are all happy to go ahead with taking part in the project, please complete the form below and return to me by (date). I will then write to you to confirm arrangements for the project.

I should also say that it is important to me that the girls are happy to participate in the project so consent (permission to take part) can be withdrawn at any time if they no longer wish to be part of the project.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have further questions or concerns.

Yours sincerely

Susan Dean

Girls Transition Project

Parent/Guardian

I give consent for Jane to be a co-researcher in the project

Yes

No

Signed: _____

Young person

I would like to take part in the transition project

Yes

No

Signed: _____

Appendix F: Letters to parents and young people who were 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' in being selected to take part in the project

Dear (girl)

Girls Transition Project

Firstly, I would like to thank you for coming along to the talk on the 17th March and listening to my ideas for the project.

I have been lucky that everyone has been so interested in the project.

However, all this interest has meant that too many girls would like to take part and I had to pick names out of the hat to decide who was going to be in the final group.

I am sorry to have to tell you that your name was not picked. I am disappointed that not everyone can take part.

I am sure that you will go on to do very well in the A and I wish you well for the future.

Thanks once again for giving up your time to help out.

Best wishes

Susan Dean

Dear (girl)

Girls Transition Project

Firstly, I would like to thank you for coming along to the talk on the 17th March and listening to my ideas for the project.

I have been lucky that everyone has been so interested in the project. All this interest has meant lots of girls wanted to be part of the co-research group and I had to pick names out of a hat to decide on the final group. I am happy to tell you that your name was chosen.

I was hoping to meet with you all during period 1 on Friday 30th April so we can make a start. I will meet you outside Mr Dhillon's office.

Thanks once again. I am really looking forward to working with you.

Best wishes

Susan Dean

Dear (parent)

Girls Transition Project

Firstly, I would like to thank you for co-operation and support so far.

I have been very lucky (and pleasantly surprised) that almost all the girls who attended the initial talk wanted to take part in the project.

This forced me to pick names out of a hat and I regret to tell you that (name's) name was not picked out. Ideally, I would have liked to involve all those who were interested but I think a bigger group could compromise the ultimate success of the project.

I was very impressed with the group of girls I met for the initial talk and felt they were a real credit to EA. I wish them all well in the future.

Dear (parent)

Girls Transition Project

Firstly, I would like to thank you for co-operation and support so far.

I have been very lucky (and pleasantly surprised) that almost all the girls who attended the initial talk wanted to take part in the project.

This forced me to pick names out of a hat and I am happy to tell you that (name's) name was picked out.

I hope to meet with the girls on the morning of April 30th for around 50 minutes. By that time, I will have some definite dates for the project which I will share with the girls.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that you or (name's) consent can be withdrawn at any point. I would also encourage you to get in touch with me if you have any concerns at any time in the project

Thank you once again

Susan Dean

Appendix G: Powerpoint slide reflecting ideas generated as part of discussion about interviews

Interviews	
Key features: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •People are talking; facing them; in the same place •It involves questions and answers •Interviewers need good eye contact; good skills; courteous •Often two people – a 1:1 interview •Sometimes – there's a conference or a "focus group" 	
Good points	Points to think about...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -You can get the other persons' feelings -Its direct – you don't have to go through lots of sources <p><u>Interview</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Nobody else knows what's being said – its private and confidential <p><u>Focus Group</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -You get more peoples' thoughts -Better at getting ideas and feelings -People wont feel singled out -Quicker than interviews 	<p><u>Interview</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Time -Building trust might be difficult <p><u>Focus group</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -There might be arguments -Hard to control -Not everyone will get their views heard -Its difficult to be open and honest

Appendix H: Powerpoint slide reflecting ideas generated as part of discussion about questionnaires and surveys

Questionnaires & Surveys

Key features

- A list of questions
- Could be face to face
- Could be anonymous
- Sometimes, there are multiple choice answers

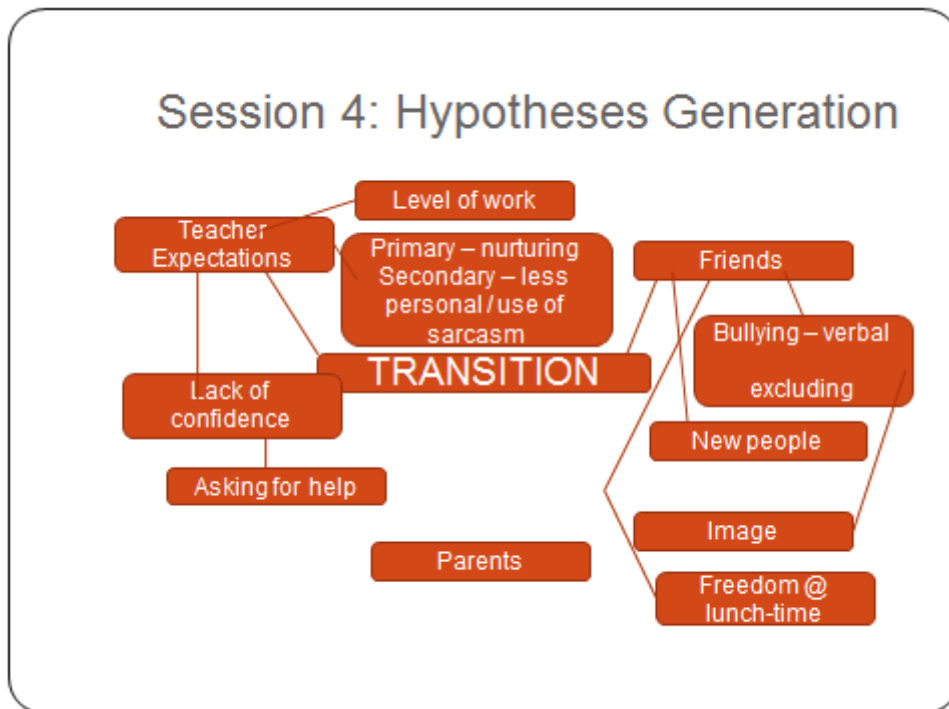
Good points

- You don't need to be with the person who is answering the question. This might mean there is less pressure and people might be more honest
- It's anonymous
- It's quicker and easier
- It's user-friendly
- The information is easier to handle
- They're simpler for everyone

Points to think about...

- Less room for detailed information
- If someone says something interesting, there's not a chance to ask them more about it
- Designing a questionnaire is hard

Appendix I: Representation of co-research groups ideas about why girls may find transition difficult



Appendix J: Categorisation of the Hypotheses generated by co-research group




Session 5: Narrowing the focus

Teachers & Class Issues	Social Issues
Areas to focus questions: -Amount of work -Level of work -Relationship with pupils -Teachers' attitude -Approach to discipline -Expectations re behaviour	-New friends -Confidence to make new friends -Number of friends - Break and lunch-times - Peer pressure -Bullying

Appendix K: Questionnaire Schedule

PRIMARY TO SECONDARY TRANSITION QUESTIONNAIRE

1.	Are you a boy or a girl?			
	Boy <input type="checkbox"/>	Girl <input type="checkbox"/>		
2.	What did you feel about moving up to secondary school before you came?			
	Worried		Not bothered	
	Excited		Unsure	
	Nervous		Looking forward to it	
	Scared		Other (please say how you felt)	
3a	After being in Secondary school for a year, do you like it better than Primary school?			
	Yes		No	
	Unsure		I like them both the same	
3b	Why did you make this choice?			
4	What are some of the best things about secondary?			
5	Is there anything you would change about secondary to make it better?			
6	Were you bullied at primary school?	Yes	No	

7	Are you / have you been bullied at secondary school?	Yes		No	
8	How easy was it for you to make friends (when you came to secondary school?)				
	 <input type="checkbox"/> Easy	 <input type="checkbox"/> OK	 <input type="checkbox"/> Hard		
9	Do you think having lots of different teachers is....				
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> OK	<input type="checkbox"/> Not so good	<input type="checkbox"/> Bad
10	Do you think that the warning system is fair?	Yes		No	Don't know
11	Do you feel it is important to fit in with everyone else?	Yes		No	Unsure
	Why?				
12	Would you hide something if you thought other people wouldn't like it (like a problem at home or something you like that is not cool?)	Yes		No	Don't know
	Why?				

Appendix L: Letter to S2 pupils re questionnaire

Dear S2s

Transition Project

We are part of a group of girls who are working on a project on girls and boys moving up to secondary school. We are working with Susan Dean who is doing this as part of her university project.

It would be helpful if you could fill in this survey. It is anonymous so we don't know who has said what. Please try to fill them in honestly. You don't have to answer the questions if you don't want to.

Once you have finished, please put the survey in the envelope provided.

Thanks

PRIMARY TO SECONDARY TRANSITION INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How did you feel before you came to secondary school?
2. Is it what you thought it would be like?
3. Do you think you have more or less time to do work in secondary? Why?
4. Have you noticed any difference between primary and secondary teachers? How?
5. Do you feel more pressure around your work?
6. Was it easy to make friends? Can you explain a little more?
7. Do you feel different pressures in secondary school and how? (work, appearance / image, social)
8. What do you spend your time doing at break and lunch? Why do you do this and how does this feel?
9. What has been your experience of bullies in secondary, how does this compare to primary?
10. Is there anything you miss about primary school?
11. Is there anything you find hard in secondary compared to primary?
12. Do you think things outside of school affect your life in school?
13. What are the 3 best and worst things about secondary?

Appendix N: Proposed letters to parents and young people re interviews

Dear parent

Our names are PT and KG and we working with Susan Dean (Educational Psychologist) to do a project. We are trying to find out what is what like for children after they move from primary to secondary.

We would like to ask if ----- can help us by taking part in an interview. This will probably take 15-20 minutes. The interview will be held by children the same age as --- ---- . The interview will be with one of us. It will take place in the school at a time agreed with the school so that important subjects won't be missed.

The information that ----- tells us will be kept confidential.

If you have any issues or questions, you can contact Susan. She is a psychologist, working for XCouncil and she is doing a Doctorate in Educational Psychology with Newcastle University. She will be nearby at the time of the interviews. Her contact number at work is 550999 or you can e-mail her on s.r.dean@newcastle.ac.uk.

Please circle:

I give permission / I do not give permission for ----- to take part in an interview.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Dear -----

Our names are PT and KG and we working with Susan Dean (Educational Psychologist) to do a project. We are trying to find out what it was like for you when you moved from primary to secondary.

We would like to ask if you can help us by taking part in an interview. This will probably take 15-20 minutes. The interview will be held by P or K. It will take place in the school.

The information that you tell us will be kept confidential. This means that the stuff that you tell us will be kept secret.

Please circle:

I would / I would not like to take part in an interview

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix O: Summary sheet of themes arising from questionnaire

Transition Questionnaire

Some themes and questions

1. Girls tended to have stronger feelings about coming to secondary school (mainly feeling excited and / or nervous). Boys were often 'not bothered'
2. Girls and boys were mainly enthusiastic about secondary school but some girls seemed to have slightly stronger attachments to their primary schools.
3. When asked why they preferred secondary school, girls tended to mention friendships more than boys.
4. When boys and girls who preferred primary were asked 'why?', they often said this was because of friendships and people being closer
5. When boys were asked what they like about secondary, they tended to talk more about freedom and independence (e.g. going to Tesco).
6. When asked what they would change about secondary, most people talked about physical features (e.g. the school building, the length of the school day). A few boys and girls made comment about teachers.
7. Girls seemed to find it harder to make friends than boys.
8. Boys felt it was more important to fit in.
9. A lot of girls – who didn't feel it was important to fit in – talked about being an individual and how other people should accept who you are.

Appendix P: Letter to parent and young people re focus group

Dear Parent

Transition: Research Project

My name is Susan Dean and I work as an Educational Psychologist for the Council. As part of my on-going professional development, I am undertaking a Doctorate in Educational Psychology with Newcastle University.

As part of this programme I am undertaking a research project which explores how girls and boys differ in their experience of the transition from primary to secondary school. I am working on this project with a group S2 pupil. In effect, the S2 pupils are co-researchers (i.e. doing the research with me).

The S2 pupils have already completed questionnaires but I'm hoping for the opportunity to find out views in more detail.

I am hoping to meet with small focus groups of S2 pupils on Friday 21st December. Each group will consist of between 4 and 6 pupils and I will lead the focus groups. Sessions will be voice recorded so I can transcribe them at a later date.

If you are happy for your son / daughter to take part, I would be grateful if you could take the time to discuss the focus group with them and then complete the consent form which is shown below.

Your support is greatly appreciated

Yours sincerely

Susan Dean

Acting Principal Educational Psychologist

Transition Project

I would be happy for my son / daughter to take part in a focus group:

Yes

No

Parents' Name: _____

Date: _____

I would like to take part in the focus group:

Yes

No

Pupils' Name: _____

Date: _____

Please return in the SAE by Friday 10th December.

Appendix Q: Focus Group Question Schedule

When boys were asked how they felt before coming to secondary school, they would often say 'not bothered'. Girls were different. They would say they were either 'excited' or 'nervous'. Why do you think there was this difference between girls and boys?

In the questionnaire, boys felt it was more important to fit in than girls did. Do you agree with this? Why?

Do you think boys and girls have different types of friendships?

Do you think people feel different pressures in secondary school compared to primary school? So are the pressures different in terms of your image, appearance, social things?

How many people do you know that have been bullied in secondary? Is this better or worse than in primary?

Lots of people talked about what they do at breaks and lunchtimes. What do you and your friends spend your time doing at break and lunch? Why do you do this and how does this feel?

Roughly the same number of girls and boys thought the 'warning' system was unfair. Does this sound right to you or would you expect there to be a difference between how boys and girls might feel about the 'warning' system?

A few people talked about the differences in teachers between primary and secondary school. Do you think there is any difference between primary and secondary teachers? How?

Only a few people said they liked primary better than secondary school but girls seemed to prefer primary a little bit more than boys. Does this make sense? Why?

What kind of things that happen out of school might affect your life in school?

Not that many people talked about the work that is done in secondary school so it would be interesting to know if you think people feel more pressure around their work? Why? Do you think people have more or less time to do work in secondary?

Appendix R: PowerPoint slides showing themes arising from data analysis session

Transition for boys and girls: Similarities

- People's experiences of bullying similar – type of, how much, who.....
- Warning system: depending on teachers; inconsistent; 'louder' pupils got away with more. Quieter pupils had behaviour focused on – often girls
- Boys and girls nervous before coming
- Pressures around appearance
- Boys and girls 'sit back' in subjects they don't enjoy or where they don't like the teacher
- Both had strong relationships with teachers in primary. In secondary, its more mixed

Transition for boys and girls: Differences

- Friendships – girls look more closely at their friends. More 'selective'
 - Girls have best friends and spend lots of time with them. Boys have big groups of friends
 - Boys more reluctant to admit feelings
 - Still girls probably more nervous / excited
 - Girls don't want to think of themselves as conforming but at same still under same pressures to look good, wear the right clothes etc. Thinking one, doing the other.
 - In primary school – the closeness of the class seemed more important to the girls
 - Possibly – girls more attached to primary teacher.
- Additional comment: Girls see primary teachers and schools as like a little community.

Ideas

- Transition to be tailored to needs – not everyone packaged together
- Work with a wider group of people
- More whole class work: Means you don't need to pick out individuals & it means that people who aren't identified can get support
- There should be a longer build up to transition. The visits in the last couple of weeks of term are good but are quite late
- Earlier opportunities for everyone
- Activities could be 'opt in' so people can mix with like-minded people – making it easier to make friends
- A range of activities should be offered and not just sport (before & after transition)
- More discussion about who might go together – can be more important for girls. Primary schools to make suggestions. A form or a checklist could be used

Ideas (cont)

- Use different people to run activities -people who you will see once you come to secondary (adults and young people). Maybe use younger people rather than 6th year
- P7s talk to current first years?
- More activities / lessons in the primary school to prepare for transition
-(e.g. memories of primary school; thoughts about secondary school; looking at 'changes' / how to deal with change; discussion about friendships)
- After transition:
 - Better mix of classes or more activities for different groups to mix (e.g. activities in the hall)
 - Privacy issues with Guidance
 - Accessibility with Guidance
 - Confidentiality & confidence issues
 - Counsellor might be useful

THE TRANSITION FROM
PRIMARY SCHOOL TO
SECONDARY SCHOOL: AN
EXPLORATION OF THE
EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS

Some themes from the questionnaire

- Girls tended to have stronger feelings about coming to secondary school (saying they felt excited and / or nervous). Boys were often 'not bothered'
- Girls and boys were mainly enthusiastic about secondary school but girls were slightly more likely to mention something about primary school (e.g. that they preferred or missed primary school)
- When asked why they preferred secondary school, girls tended to mention friendships more than boys.
- When boys were asked what they like about secondary, they tended to talk more about freedom and independence (e.g. going to Tesco).
- When boys and girls who preferred primary were asked 'why?', they often said this was because of friendships and people being closer
- When asked what they would change about secondary, most people talked about physical features (e.g. the school building, the length of the school day). A few boys and girls made comment about teachers.
- Girls seemed to find it harder to make friends than boys.
- Boys felt it was more important to fit in.
- A lot of girls talked about being an individual and how other people should accept who you are.

Focus Group

- Around the time of the questionnaires, it was decided to do 2 x focus groups rather than interviews (1 x boys group & 1 x girls group)
- The questions were based on the interview questions already made up and the results of the questionnaires
- Susan transcribed the focus groups. The transcripts were analysed by the all the group.
- Taking the focus groups and the questionnaires together, some key findings emerged.

Results: Similarities

- Boys & girls experiences of bullying were similar – in terms of the type of bullying, how much was going on.....
- Several boys and girls felt the warning system was unfair. A lot depended on teachers. Teachers are inconsistent in how they apply the system with 'louder' pupils getting away with more. Quieter pupils had behaviour focused on – boys and girls
- Both boys and girls feel pressures around appearance
- Boys and girls 'sit back' in subjects they don't enjoy or where they don't like the teacher. Its not a boy or girl thing
- Boys and girls had strong relationships with teachers in primary. In secondary, pupils views of teachers are more mixed.

Differences

- Girls find it harder to make friends. This may be because boys and girls have different types of friendships – girls are more 'selective'. Girls tend to have best friends and spend lots of time with them. Boys tend to have big groups of friends.
- Boys are more reluctant to admit feelings about coming to secondary
- Both boys and girls are nervous about coming to secondary but girls do seem more nervous
- In primary school – the closeness of the class seemed more important to the girls. Girls, are also (possibly), more attached to primary teacher.
- Girls don't want to think of themselves as conforming but at same still under same pressures to look good, wear the right clothes etc. They're thinking one thing, doing the other.

Some ideas to make transition better

WORKING WITH MORE PEOPLE

- Not everyone can be packaged together at transition time. People have different needs
- More whole class work could be done. This means you don't need to pick out individuals. It means that people who aren't identified can get support (as its not possible to predict who might have difficulty with the move)
- More activities / lessons in the primary school to prepare for transition
 - (e.g. memories of primary school; thoughts about secondary school; looking at 'changes' / how to deal with change; discussion about friendships)

Some ideas to make transition better

MORE ACTIVITIES - STARTING EARLIER

- Earlier opportunities for everyone. There should a longer build up to transition. The visits in the last couple of weeks of term are good but are quite late
- There could be a choice of activities so people can mix with like-minded people – making it easier to make friends. Use different people to run activities -people who you will see once you come to secondary (adults and young people). Maybe use younger people rather 6th years
- A range of activities should be offered and not just sport

Some ideas to make transition better

- There should be more discussion about who might go together in classes. Primary schools could make suggestions. A form or a checklist could be used

After transition:

- There could be more activities over S1 to bring all the S1 group together. More activities for different groups to mix (e.g. activities in the hall)
- Privacy, accessibility, confidentiality and confidence issues with Guidance
- A school counsellor might be useful

What's next?

- Meeting with Senior Leadership Team at E Academy
- Occasional Paper for Psychology web-site
- Prepare paper for publication in national journal (fingers crossed)