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Pre-school children s experience of place

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Pre-School Children's Experience of Place

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Abstract

The experience of place has been the subject of attention by researchers from a variety of disciplines. However, despite a growing interest in the geographies of children there have been very few empirical studies investigating pre-school children's experience of place. To address this issue, this thesis seeks to gather understandings of this phenomenon that may inform educational research.

This study investigates the individual experiences of place of 12 pre-school children in 3 locations - Durham City, England; Drumlithie a village in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and Fraserburgh a town also in Aberdeenshire. The empirical work is set within an interpretive approach that is sensitive to the competencies of the children and which is in line with the author's philosophical assumptions. The strategies employed to generate data include an affective activity, research conversations, walking expeditions with cameras, semi-structured interviews and artwork.

The theoretical framework for this research is based on an extensive inter-disciplinary review of the literature and is informed by ecological and developmental psychology theories and recent concepts of childhood. It assumes a holistic approach to understanding the complex, multifaceted concept of place as experienced by pre-school children who are themselves viewed as active learners and experts in their own lives.

The analysis suggests that the pre-school children in this research experience place on highly personal and individual bases. It appears that the children employ the strategy of breaking a place down into component parts and use these components to structure their understandings. A tentative model is devised to show the workings of this process. The implications of the findings are discussed in relation to current understandings of pre-school children's learning, and suggestions are made for further research.

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DECLARATION

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Introduction

Lived place thrives – is felt and recognised – in the differentiated and disruptive corners, the "cuts" of my bodily being-in-the-world. This is why the child's experience of place is so poignantly remembered; in childhood we are plunged willy-nilly into a diverse (and sometimes frightening) array of places...The extraordinary sensitivity of the child's lived body opens onto and takes in a highly expressive place-world that reflects the discriminative and complex character of the particular places that compose the world.

Edward S. Casey (1997:237)

1.1 Starting place

This research is concerned with how pre-school children, that is children between the ages of three and five, view their world. More specifically, this is an investigation into pre-school children's experiences of place. These early geographical experiences, described so poignantly in the opening quote from Casey's review of the philosophy of place, are the central concern of this thesis. Casey implies that children are particularly sensitive to aspects of place and that they are bombarded by an enormous amount of complicated information. How the child copes with the particulars of place, how he or she sees, processes and understands it is an under-researched area of early childhood which this research attempts to address. This study aims, therefore, to capture the distinctive qualities in a young child's emerging world, specifically these experiences of place.

The pre-school child inhabits a world that is relatively unfamiliar to him or her, one that is ripe for exploring and discovering, and which is enhanced by a sense of wonder and openness to new experiences. Experiencing place is just one aspect of learning, yet it has the potential to inform us how children make sense of the physical world around them. The scale of place can, of course, be large or small and in this research it refers to the environs of the children's nursery or playgroup. Whilst the landscapes of the three selected field sites include rural, suburban and city perspectives on the macro-scale, within each there are also opportunities for the children to experience place on the micro-scale. It is the nature of these experiences, Casey's 'extraordinary

sensitivity' and the possible mechanisms or strategies the children employ to help them make sense of place, that are the focus of this research.

This opening chapter now proceeds to provide the reader with the essential concerns of this research. In 1.2, 'Objectives of the research', the purposes of this study are explained. This includes an outline of anticipated achievements, together with how these may be met in the research design and methodology. 1.3, 'Significance of the study', comprises a discussion concerning the number of research participants and field sites; the original contribution to knowledge that is anticipated, and deliberation on the limitations of this study. Following this, an account of the source of this study and the influence of personal interests and values is presented in 1.4 which is entitled 'Research origins'. Part 1.5, 'The scope of this study', provides the reader with a sense of the theoretical framework that supports this research, together with an outline of the nature of related studies that have been carried out in the past. The chapter is drawn together in 1.6, 'Concluding comments'.

1.2 Objectives of the research

The central focus of this research is pre-school children's experience of place. This was derived from personal interests and experience which are discussed further in 1.4, and concern that pre-school children's geographical competencies are both under-researched and underestimated, issues attended to in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis. At the heart of this study are the research objectives which express the anticipated achievements and which have determined the structure of the research endeavour.

The principal objectives of this research may be grouped into two thematic areas: a) experience of place and, b) research methodology. These objectives, not listed in order of any priority, are detailed below:

> a) The principal objectives within the research regarding experience of place are:
>> ➤ to add to existing knowledge concerning pre-school children's experience of place
>> ➤ to explore how the selected pre-school children experience place

> to describe the children's experiences

> to identify or discover important categories of meaning

> to attempt to explain any emergent patterns or commonalities related to the experience of place

> to offer explanations concerning how the selected pre-school children experience place

> to build rich descriptions of a complex phenomenon that is relatively unexplored in the literature

> to set this research within the context of existing research rather than extol its uniqueness (Pring 2004)

b) The principal objectives within the research regarding research methodology are:

> to enable the pre-school children to express their ideas about place through judicious choice of research techniques

> to employ an approach that preserves and respects the voice of the children

The research question – **what are pre-school children's experiences of place?** - evolved as the study progressed, once the focus, objectives and context became clear.

As this research took shape it became increasingly clear that in order to investigate pre-school children's experience of place, an approach was required that reflected the complexity, individuality and perhaps uniqueness of this phenomenon. Thus this study is situated within the interpretive paradigm, an approach that respects these qualities and one best suited to investigating the world of experience from the point of view of those who live it. Furthermore, it supports research in natural contexts and seeks the perspective of the research participant through a wide choice of methods that are sympathetic to the enquiry. The objective of the methods employed to generate data was to obtain multiple perspectives and rich, detailed descriptions of place from the child's point of view. The methods included research conversations, photographs taken by the children, semi-structured interviews and artwork. Each component of the fieldwork contributed to the building of a bank of data and, as far as possible, a comprehensive picture of each child's experience of place.

1.3 Significance of the study

This part of the chapter discusses the potential contribution this study has to make to research and the limitations or parameters of the research. Firstly, there is consideration of the field sites selected for the study and of the children who participated in the data generation stage.

1.3.1 The research sites and research participants

The empirical research described in Chapter 8, 'Data generation', was conducted with 12 children in 3 locations. These locations were early years educational establishments such as nurseries or playgroups. The actual choice of the three early years settings – one in England and two in Scotland – may, at first sight, seem arbitrary. With no existing research that exactly pertains to pre-school children's experience of place upon which to build, this research had, in effect, a blank canvas inasmuch as any place or location would suffice. After careful deliberation and mindful of practical issues such as ease of access and the time data generation would take, it was decided that three pre-school settings was an appropriate number. Three settings that offered degrees (rather than extremes) of geographical contrast were chosen as opposed to other variables such as socio-economic contrasts or differences in approach to teaching and learning about place. These settings were small city (Durham, north-east England), rural (Drumlithie, south-west Aberdeenshire) and town (Fraserburgh, north-east Aberdeenshire, Scotland). In each location personal contacts and knowledge of the area were also important selection criteria.

Twelve children – four from each centre - were selected from the research population of 65 to take part in the data generation phase of this research. Selection rather than sampling was required as it was essential that the children taking part were competent communicators, able to share their ideas and understandings effectively. The small number reflects the realism of providing appropriate equipment – disposable cameras and film development costs - to each participant, and the financial constraints this placed upon the process. Furthermore, it was anticipated that the amount of data generated by each child would be substantial and, in order to do them justice and maintain a high standard during data analysis, twelve sets of data were perceived to be an optimum quantity for this research.

There is no question that this research involves comparatively few participants, but it is believed that this decision is suitably justified. There is a full account of the selection process in Chapter 9, 'Selection of places and participants'.

1.3.2 The potential contribution to research

If we see place as where we are and where we go, then investigation into pre-school children's experience of place has the potential to inform us about an everyday aspect of life that we, as adults, may take for granted. It may also be anticipated that children of pre-school age have different perspectives and understandings that can reveal the abilities of young children, their dynamic engagement with learning and their continual acquisition of new concepts and skills.

The 12 children provided a bank of richly descriptive material from which themes of place emerged, themes that could possibly be used in further research with a wider research population. Bearing in mind the small number of participants, a tentative model of the strategies employed by the 12 children to make sense of place is suggested. This model, presented in 12.7, incorporates findings such as the children's recognition of specific components of place and uses these components to structure understanding. There is no reason to think that these children are atypical of the pre-school population and, as such, the findings could contribute to advancing understanding about pre-school children's personal geographies and their experience of place. In more general terms the findings of this research have the potential to contribute to our understandings of childhood and, perhaps, more so to heightening perceptions of the competencies and capabilities of some pre-school children.

1.3.3 The limitations of the study

This research is bounded and limited by several factors. As mentioned previously, the relatively small number of participants and the geographical nature of the settings precludes generalisation, so the findings and the representational model relate only to the 12 children engaged in this research. Of relevance too is the salient fact that it is impossible to 'get inside a child's head' or access thoughts. Using the spoken word, be it from an adult or a child, cannot be the source of complete understanding of the phenomenon in question and any analysis of data generated is subject to biases,

misunderstandings and subjectivity. The role of the researcher in research of this kind is to be honest, respectful and as true to the child's point of view as possible.

1.4 Research origins

The origins of this research stem from over 25 years of personal involvement in early years education. My career has included working in the pre-school voluntary sector, a private nursery, being employed as an early years officer by a local authority education department and running an early years training business. My work as a pre-school inspector for Aberdeenshire Council took me to many pre-school centres where it became clear that there were difficulties providing learning opportunities in certain aspects of the early years curriculum. In particular, the key aspect of knowledge and understanding of the world – a very broad area of learning – was problematic and sometimes tackled in ways that seemed inappropriate for very young children. This was especially true where teaching about place was concerned. Topic work or projects about other countries appeared to dominate this part of the curriculum and it was difficult to assess how much the children were learning. In fact it seemed to me that there was little evidence of how much the children knew about places in their own locality let alone whether they could understand the concept of other countries. What appeared to be happening was a discontinuity between real life and the early years curriculum.

Another major influence in my decision to research into children and place is an ongoing interest in geography, the subject of my first degree and the discipline in which I specialised during primary teacher training. Place as a concept in the mid-late 1970s when I was studying for my BA, was simply a location within spatial science – geometric nodes in effect - where particular functions and populations were concentrated. It was, to all intents and purposes, relegated to mere description whilst the notion of space was seen to be central to human geography and, importantly at the time, offered opportunities to predict human behaviour and develop theories. Ironically, this 'human' geography effectively dehumanised people and considered them as 'rational actors rather than as active, emotional or creative human beings' (Holloway and Hubbard 2001:12). Some years later, and something I discovered whilst researching, place became the central concept in geography and also attracted

increasing interest within other disciplines. The fact that place was, and is now, an interdisciplinary concept, that it has provoked much debate, and that it is now viewed as a fundamental way of being in the world reawakened my interest. This was further enhanced by place being seen by commentators as meaningful and multidimensional, and thinking becoming centred on the relationships between people and place as experienced on an everyday basis.

Based on this interest in this aspect of learning, the focus of my dissertation for the MA in Early Childhood Education (Sheffield University) was a pre-school child's feelings for place (Trees 2003). This study investigated one child's responses to places in and around a small village on the north-east coast of Scotland. This small-scale study involved explorations into existing research and relevant literature, revealing disciplines new to me such as environmental psychology and writers in the discipline such as Chris Spencer to whom I am indebted for originally introducing me to the work of Roger Hart. Of all the many texts consulted it was Hart's *Children's Experience of Place* (1979) that was to prove the most influential in both the MA dissertation and this thesis. Hart's work, based upon his doctoral studies, is an account of the two years he spent in 'Inavale', a town in New England where he studied children's behaviour in the physical environment, believing that 'much of a child's landscape is experienced in a highly personal way' (1979:5). What appeals so strongly about the research, which was so unconventional at the time, is Hart's firm sense of the child as individual and that the research had to take place in real place and real context. Furthermore, Hart writes as a reflexive researcher i.e. one who explains fully the reasons for his decisions and one who takes a flexible and, in his words, an eclectic approach to fieldwork. The high and enduring frequency with which Hart's work is cited in journals and books indicates the important effect his work has had on subsequent work on the topic of place as a whole.

The MA dissertation made, I believe, a small contribution towards my own understanding of a young child's feelings for place but it also threw up further questions that I felt warranted further study. The single case study was only one child's perspective on one place. Did his thoughts represent those of a wider cohort of children or were his thoughts unique and individual? The focus in the dissertation was on feelings such as like and dislike, fear and pleasure. Was this focus too narrow?

Could it be extended into a more general 'experience' of place? Would this then build a more holistic view of what it is for a child to experience place? Given more study time during the PhD, the notion of researching in several field sites became an exciting possibility. More questions arose. Are there commonalities between children's experiences so that several children in the same environment have similar experiences or are they markedly different? Do they use different strategies for making sense of place? Do children in different environments experience elements of place similarly? In the MA I had taken photographs of place and shared them with a child. What might happen if the children took photographs of place themselves? Questions such as these warranted further consideration and provided the launch pad for the thinking behind this thesis.

It is not possible to take myself out of this research or to remain detached from any part of it. Indeed, parts of the thesis -such as how an interpretive design came to be chosen- are very personal. My perspectives, beliefs and assumptions about the world have implications for the entire process from the research focus and the research question, to the methodology and methods I prefer, and to the style adopted to write this thesis. This work is reflective and reflexive and, as such, strives to inform the reader of both the academic and non-academic aspects of my own views of the world. Perhaps of most importance here is the value I place on children's perspectives and a desire to find out more about how they understand, interpret and feel about aspects of their daily lives. Thus my ontological assumptions – the nature of social reality and the extent to which it is constructed – and my epistemological assumptions whereby the nature and origin of knowledge is considered, are both integral to this study.

1.5 The scope of this study

In the early chapters of this thesis the concepts of place, childhood and experience are given thorough consideration as it is important to arrive at definitions that are used throughout this research. The search for straightforward definitions was challenging. The concept of place was, as Patterson and Williams (2005) describe, seemingly straightforward for many years with a consensus about its meaning. By the 1990s this unanimity had disappeared. This was largely due to different disciplines using different, sometimes markedly contrasting approaches. So, for example, geographers, who have radically changed their view of place in the last 30 years or so, define place

as a process rather than a static entity; sociologists define place as a centre of meaning based on human experiences, social relationships, emotions and thoughts; phenomenologists define place as space plus character and believe that it is central to human existence. This lack of conceptual clarity is due in part to different stances taken towards research into place, with a variety of research programmes working within a variety of paradigms. The central tenet for this thesis is that places are not only locations but, as Canter (1988:8) describes, 'categorisations of experience'. Thus place itself is a central category in conceptualising the transient ordinary nature of everyday life and is a focus for exploring the relationship between humans and the environment.

From this brief overview it may be assumed that the concept of place means different things to different people. Further, it can be assumed that to experience place attracts similar discussion. Thus it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the review of the existing literature incorporates literature from several disciplines. The body of knowledge constitutes ideas that cannot be attributed to just one or two disciplines and thus this research takes a multi-disciplinary approach that employs perspectives from education, geography, developmental psychology, phenomenology, sociology and environmental psychology. Bearing in mind that children's lives are complex and multi-faceted, then being informed by knowledge from several fields is appropriate and this thesis seeks to employ relevant and sufficient sources that provide a firm structure for the research.

The review of the literature in Chapter 4 traces the history of related research from the early 1970s. The little that is known about preschoolers' place experience is located within the domain of spatial awareness (see for example Spencer and Darvizeh (1981 & 1983) on route-finding; Blades and Spencer (1986 & 1987) on pre-school children's mapping abilities; and Blaut's (1997a) research involving children's understanding of aerial photographs). Such research reveals the complexity and the abilities of young children, their dynamic engagement with learning and their continual acquisition of new concepts, skills and frameworks. However, there is virtually no research that pertains to pre-school children engaging with place as an everyday experience. Research has been undertaken with older children as exemplified in Hart (1979); Moore (1986); Spencer, Blades and Morsley (1989);

Matthews (1992); and also Holloway and Valentine's (2000a) edited collection of writings. Whilst these works from the disciplines of geography, education and environmental psychology focus on children over 5, the writers' methodological approaches and their application, their ideas and work were considered in conjunction with those from other fields such as childhood studies and early years education. In this way key writing is identified, comparisons made and similarities sought gaps in the literature identified and the originality of the research confirmed.

The theoretical context for this study, described in full in Chapter 5, is partly situated within theories of child development and learning. Many theories are available to the researcher in the field of education including behavioural, developmental, schematic, ecological and constructivist models of learning, some isolated by their uniqueness and others sharing basic premises. This research is not grounded within any one particular theory; rather it draws on several that contribute to understanding this particular area of study. The other theoretical context is more directly concerned with the experience of place *per se*. This draws upon discourses in environmental psychology, ideas from the philosophers of place and some of the understandings of human geographers. By working in this interdisciplinary manner and using a range of systems of ideas, this study is located within a socially-constructed, ecological framework that incorporates ideas from schema and information-processing theories. This structure, it is believed, best serves to underline the role of context and transaction during a child's experience of place. It also indicates that no one existing theory or framework effectively supports the theoretical context of this research.

A final issue that warrants mention in this introduction is that of ethics. As this research requires the participation and active involvement of pre-school children - a particularly vulnerable age group - there is a full and honest consideration of the ethical issues pertinent to working with children of this age. Ethical guidelines were consulted and an ethical protocol constructed in which decisions made in response to moral considerations were charted. Most of the concerns relate to permission seeking, the involvement of the children in the research process and assuring anonymity and confidentiality. Ultimately this research seeks to have the best interest of the child at heart, to have respect for each child and for the adults also involved in the research endeavour.

1.6 Concluding comments

This introductory chapter has explained the essential character of this study. It introduced and justified the research question which is, 'what are pre-school children's experiences of place?' The nature of the methodology and the research settings have also been described, the latter including the thinking behind the selection of the three field sites. The origins for the research have been described in a way that indicates the rationale behind the investigation, including a consideration of personal experiences and influences. Although questions of place are, according to Adams et al (2001: xviii), 'firmly back on the scholarly agenda' and that 'place has re-emerged with an intellectual vigor (sic) that few would have predicted', it is intimated in this introduction to the thesis that very little is known about the experiences of place of children in their pre-school years.

The thesis proceeds with a detailed account of the research. Chapters 2 to 5 form the review of the literature; 6 to 7 the research design; the empirical part of the study is described in Chapters 8 to 11, and the findings of the research are presented in Chapter 12. The first chapter of the literature review now considers what is meant and inferred by 'experience of place', the concept that lies at the heart of this thesis.

Chapter 2
Place

If two authors use the words 'red', 'hard' or 'disappointed' no one doubts that they mean the same thing ... But in the case of words such as 'place' or 'space' whose relationship with psychological experience is less direct there exists a far-reaching uncertainty of interpretation.

Albert Einstein (Foreword to Jammer 1960: xiii)

2.1 Introduction

This first chapter in the literature review seeks to define one of the central issues of this thesis i.e. 'experience of place'. Section 2.2, 'Definitions and deconstructions', is concerned with the deconstruction of 'place' and 'experience', then proceeds to unite them as a single concept. This ensures that the reader is aware both of the complexity of the terms and the need to arrive at a clear, unambiguous definition of 'experience of place', the concept upon which this thesis is based. The quest to find definitions is wide-ranging and encompasses ideas and understandings from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. In the search for definitions of place that offer clear and workable descriptions there are some that have been particularly helpful and which have provided a basic understanding for this research. Cresswell (2004) emphasises the importance of place not just as a thing in the world, but a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world – 'it is as much about epistemology as it is about ontology' (p.12). This in itself is an indication of the broad spectrum of meaning associated with place.

The complexity of defining basic terms is further demonstrated in 2.3, entitled 'Disciplinary places'. Here there are reflections on the interdisciplinary nature of this research and the paradigmatic shifts that have changed understandings of place within certain disciplines. There then follow overviews of the study of place, firstly within geography and secondly from the perspective of environmental psychology. These two disciplines have a wide range of place-related literature but, as this section demonstrates, the approaches to place are markedly different. Finally in this part of the chapter, attention turns to phenomenology, a philosophy that has influenced thinking about the meaning of place. A summary of this chapter is provided in section 2.4, 'Concluding comments'.

2.2 Definitions and deconstructions

The opening quote of this chapter is an intimation of some of the problems encountered with defining concepts, particularly when dealing with a term like place that is a familiar and frequently used word, yet difficult to define beyond the common sense level. On the surface, dictionary definitions of experience and place appear straightforward:

> *Experience (verb): an encounter, to undergo; to feel (an emotion or sensation)*
>
> *Place (noun): a particular position, point or area in space; a location; a building or area used for a specified purpose or activity*

<div align="right">Oxford Dictionary of English (2003)</div>

If the terms are combined to produce *experience of place* then, using the dictionary descriptions, it can be interpreted as, say, sensitivity to a location; a reaction to a building; an intuitive understanding of a particular area. Again this seems unambiguous. However, writers and researchers within different disciplines instil sometimes subtle and sometimes widely divergent differences of interpretation. Meanings are also different for intellectual traditions such as positivism, Marxism, feminism and phenomenology, and opposed by researchers involved with post-structural, postcolonial and postmodern thinking. Such paradigmatic shifts have resulted in place being defined and theorized in a diversity of ways. In the next section the concept of place is looked at in detail with the objective of sharpening and clarifying it both theoretically and empirically. It begins with a general investigation into understandings and then looks at specific disciplinary understandings.

2.2.1 Interpretations of 'place'

There has been a renewal of research interest in the concept of place over the past twenty years or so, particularly in the disciplines and sub-disciplines of geography, psychology, sociology and also within the philosophies of meaning. With this multifariousness has come a rash of definitions. Rather than serve to delineate the concept clearly, this has resulted in inter-disciplinary tension and researchers working to different agendas. Discouragingly, Cresswell (2004:1) comments that 'no-one quite knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place'. Indeed, the search for a unifying definition or theory of place has led to an array of different

analyses and, for the purposes of this study, it has made it difficult to arrive at a definition that is unambiguous, yet portrays the complex interplay between the perceptual, cognitive and affective responses to the environment.

There is a certain sense of ambiguity that pervades many attempts to define place and several writers complain of the inability of researchers to arrive at a consensual understanding or, as Pred (1983:50) states, 'it is too frequently seen as a free floating phenomenon'. Indeed, some definitions are unhelpful if not cryptic. For example, place is variously described as having several multi-layered meanings (Loynes 2000); that it is dimensionless (Shamai 1991); for Preston (1999:211) that it is a construct of knowledge that exerts considerable influence on human development, 'given that the earth is literally the ground and horizon of all our knowing'.

The sociologist Gieryn (2000) offers a comprehensive definition of place. He proposes three features of place that are intertwined. Firstly, geographical location, secondly, its material form and, finally, investment in its meaning and value. In addition, Gieryn suggests that a place is only a place if it holds history, identity or memory for those who name or represent it. Its significance can shift or disappear when those values no longer exist. A further useful contribution comes from Hubbard et al (2004) in the introduction to *Key Thinkers on Space and Place,* a book which brings together writers from a wide range of backgrounds. Here place is defined as a particular form of space - it is created through acts of naming as well as the distinctive activities and imaginings associated with particular social spaces. As opposed to space, then, place implies an emotional tie which may be temporary or long-lasting. Such ties may reflect negative or positive experiences so, by implication, place can be understood as either an individually constructed reality that has been informed by personal experiences, histories and motives or as a socially constructed reality in that places are often shared and understood by communities.

Arguably, one of the clearest expositions of place comes from Stedman (2002) who, like Gieryn a sociologist, proposes that place is a centre of meaning based on human experiences, social relationships, emotions and thoughts. In this way place denotes humans' subjective and objective experiences, and meanings of the locations they inhabit. Stedman's definition, I believe, offers the closest approximation to my own

understanding of place in the context of this study and it is how it is defined in this thesis. This understanding is revisited in 2.2.3 where place is defined within the concept of experience of place.

One final point that requires addressing here is the issue of the scale of place. In this research there is no restriction with regards to the actual size of a place. A place may be as small as a patch of gravel on a path or as large as a city. The former may be regarded as place on the micro-scale and the latter, the macro-scale. Both, however, are definable as specific sites and contexts of human life.

2.2.2 Interpretations of 'experience'

Experience was defined earlier in this chapter as an encounter; to undergo; to feel an emotion or sensation. It is a general concept that comprises knowledge of, or skill in, or observation of some thing or some event, and the world of experiences may be viewed as the present moment as it manifests itself in time. Experience – usually contemporaneous - generally refers to know-how or procedural knowledge rather then propositional knowledge and can allude to both mentally unprocessed immediately perceived events as well as to the purported wisdom gained in subsequent reflection on those events or interpretation of them. There is an implication within the definition of a consciousness of being the subject of an event and that the experience itself comprises numerous responses that are possibly complex and interwoven. These responses may be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. An experience may evoke affective responses i.e. like or dislike, or it may result in emotions such as feelings of anger or pleasure. It can result in physical sensations, certain behaviours or it may stimulate the imagination. It may add to existing experiences and alter perspectives. It may contribute to learning and understanding. An experience may be incidental, perhaps taken for granted, or directed. It can be first hand in the real world or it may occur vicariously. From this deconstruction of the concept of experience the definition adhered to in this thesis is it is a physical and psychological response to an encounter that can contribute to learning and understandings.

Whilst a working definition has been arrived at, more needs to be addressed in relation to this concept particularly with reference to *how* an experience is experienced and to draw out some further common understandings. An in depth

consideration of the cognitive processes involved in the act of experiencing can be found in 5.4, whilst in this section there is a brief overview of the phenomenon that serves as an indicator of the complex nature of the issue. Firstly, it is important to reflect upon the researcher's perspective for whom accessing what is experienced is problematic. This is partly due to the complicatedness of what it is 'to experience', and also because it is a personal and individual activity. The relationship between what is experienced and the experience itself is crucial and is dependant upon the notion that reality is constructed. If this premise is accepted, then place is not constructed by experience but, rather, it exists separately from it; experience does not construct reality, reality gives rise to experience. This reality is the basis of understanding and these understandings may be objective – colours, noises, shapes etc – and subjective, such as feelings and emotions.

It should be understood that there is always part of an experience – for adult or child – that is inaccessible to the outsider due in part to this subjectivity. This inaccessibility is also caused by the impossibility of getting into another person's head, be they child or adult. Any experience has first to be interpreted and assimilated by the person who does the experiencing. In this way an individual tries to make sense of the encounter. Information is added, knowledge reaffirmed, views changed. Again, for the researcher exploring other people's experiences it is necessary to gain access and provide channels through which the experience can be relayed. It is then re-interpreted by the researcher who has his or her own way of looking at things and his or her own ideas, views and perceptions. These may influence the way in which a level of understanding is obtained. Furthermore, within the context of this research, what a child says may be interpreted by one researcher as 'X' and by another as 'Y'. There is, then, the potential – on many levels – to misinterpret or misrepresent experience and this is a major consideration in the empirical and analysis stages of this study.

From the above discussion of what is meant by place and what is meant by experience, it appears there are many issues to consider when attempting to define seemingly basic constructs. The next step is to extend these definitions in the context of this particular research endeavour. With 'experience' and 'place' linked in this thesis it is a requirement to attempt to define the phrase as a single concept and this is considered in the following sub-section.

2.2.3 Interpretations of 'experience of place'

Before arriving at a firm definition of this term it is useful to consider the term 'sense of place' (as opposed to making sense of place), a well known phenomenon in human society. This term is used widely in the literature and it is important to establish at this point that it is not perceived as wholly synonymous with experience of place as defined in this thesis.

Sense of place has become a cliché to describe an association with place, 'used to justify everything from a warm fuzzy appreciation of a natural landscape to the selling of homesites in urban sprawl' (Cross 2001:n/p). Moore (1986) writes that a sense of place is a multifaceted process that includes dimensions such as place behaviour and place learning, a view echoed by Xu (1995), Massey (1997), Russell (1997) and Haluza-Delay (1999). For some writers the term portrays a sense of belonging and there is an attempt to identify the very essence of a place, whilst others concentrate on the multiple identities a place offers and the multiple experiences that it affords.

Thus far it appears that to experience a place and the attribution of a sense of place are quite similar. There are, however, important differences mostly related to whether the person involved in the interaction with place is a child or an adult. If a sense of place implies the felt experience or a special engagement this is perhaps appropriate when describing adult interactions with places, but, arguably, not wholly applicable to young children. It suggests too that it develops over a period of time and, relevantly, Xu (1995) points out that the roots of the adult notion of sense of place are probably not established until middle childhood at the earliest. In this thesis the view taken is that a sense of place implicitly incorporates a wide range of concepts such as national identity, cultural mores, social influences and aesthetics that are beyond the experience of young children. This is further confirmed by Shamai's (1991) proposition that a sense of place consists of three phases – belonging to a place, attachment to a place and finally the most intense phase, commitment to a place. It could be said, conceivably, that young children do have a sense of belonging, perhaps attachment (see 5.6 for a discussion on place attachment), but whether they have a sense of the uniqueness or 'personality' of a place outside the home is debatable. Research into adult sense of place is extensive and a great deal relies upon adult memories. This is referred to in more depth in 3.6.1.

Without a wide range of experience of other places and the benefit of memories to recall, young children are unable to make true comparisons with other places in order to develop a sense of place. What is more accessible is children's experience of place, even if it is of transitory nature and even if there can never be a complete understanding of what that experience is like. So, based upon the definitions given thus far it may be surmised that the experience of place is a complex psychological phenomenon that involves a network of attitudes, emotions, memories, imagination and behaviour that are stimulated by an encounter with locations on the micro- and macro-scale. A more concise definition of experience of place is this: physical and psychological encounters with particular spaces that are charged with meaning. This is the definition of experience of place that is used in this research. On this basis alone it has the potential for intriguing and revealing insights into a young child's world particularly if undertaken in context i.e. real experiences in real places.

This section of Chapter 2 has examined definitions of place, experience and experience of place in order to provide the reader with understandings of some of the main concepts of this research. Definitions are various and sometimes contradictory so that seeking one that complements my own understandings has not been easy. Having arrived at a suitable definition as provided above, the issue of place as a research subject is now addressed. This focuses on contributions from geography, environmental psychology and the philosophical view of phenomenology.

2.3 Disciplinary places

Searches through the literature reveal research into place located in the disciplines (and some sub-disciplines or domains) of education, geography, anthropology, psychology, sociology and philosophy. Each of these disciplines operates within a particular set of paradigms or discourses which makes the review of the literature challenging, particularly so when research crosses disciplinary boundaries. This part of Chapter 2 is thus an attempt to map the edges and the overlaps between the various fields in order to present a contemporary picture of place research.

Existing research is somewhat disparate and also punctuated by periods of activity then quiescence as trends come and go. This has led to an overall lack of cohesion

and, arguably, an element of interdisciplinary tension. Almost twenty years ago Spencer et al (1989:255) believed there was 'a kind of consensus emerging' regarding place research, but it appears that although there may be some common ground between disciplines there is still a tendency to pursue individual agendas. And whilst there is some research – notably in environmental psychology - concerned more directly with the subject of this thesis, there is a marked paucity when it comes to pre-school children and their personal experiences of place. This space in the discourse is the focus of this research.

Much as there are debates about definitions of place and of experience, there is some dilemma concerning the disciplinary location of experience of place and this can blur understandings. There is a wide selection of journal articles and books with place as the topic of concern which can be located in any one of eight or so disciplines. According to Relph (1996) the concept of place was almost wholly a geographical concern until the 1960s when, as a result of shifts in academic attention, cultural relationships to environments, simultaneous changes in physical environments, and advances in communication and travel, it was seen as a valid area for research by other disciplines.

The multi-disciplinary nature of place study is further complicated by paradigmatic shifts over time that have changed the nature of disciplines in one way or another. For example geography, which could be perceived as the most relevant discipline regarding this study, has a descriptive, regional tradition that was supplemented by a quantitative revolution in the 1960s and challenged since then by humanistic studies, behavioural sciences and postmodernist geographies. Each shift has altered the way geographical research is approached and some have had a direct influence on the strategies employed in place-related research.

Problematic though it is in terms of locating related literature, it is suggested that a richer understanding of children's relationships with place is gained through an array of perspectives. Indeed, from the perspective of early years education, by looking more widely at the ideas and research from other fields we are better able to comprehend and respond to young children and, furthermore, have such work

recognised by other disciplines. Three fields are now discussed that have a particular interest in place – geography, environmental psychology and phenomenology.

2.3.1 The place of geography

The study of place is an integral part of geography, arguably its raison d'être, and has provided one of the building blocks of geographical intellectual enterprise for many years (Hubbard et al 2004). Geographers over the years have embarked on a wide range of empirical research concerning place such as meaning, construction and theories of place and, as demonstrated earlier, have played a part in the problems concerning the basic understandings of place itself. Previously in this chapter, definitions of place were considered and the problems of arriving at a satisfactory definition described. This is now further demonstrated by the various understandings and debate within the one discipline of geography for which place has been a matter of dispute as successive ways of thinking have come and gone. Geographers' definitions of place range from it being described as 'verbal rather than nounal' (Entrikin 1991:134); that it is a process rather than a static entity (Harvey 1989; Soja 1989; Lefebvre 1996; Doel 1999) or alternatively that 'if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause' (Tuan 1977:6).

There were elements of place geography that emerged strongly in the 1970s under the guise of humanistic geography and which saw the most prolific increase in literature on the subject. It attracted much criticism being regarded as esoteric, possibly due to the very different nature of the writing that was premised on meanings, values and intentionalities of life. This was a clear movement towards continental European philosophy and the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology became central. The influence of the latter is considered in more detail in 2.3.3. Writers within the humanistic geographical tradition such as Relph (1976), Tuan (1977), Seamon (1979), Buttimer (1980) and Entrikin (1991) interpreted place not just as a physical point in space but as a centre of meaning or a focus of human emotional attachment. Place to them was a concept that expressed an attitude to the world which included subjectivity and experience; it was a way of being-in-the-world and was far more than just a location. The focus of their writings tends to be the landscape and loss of a sense of place.

Tuan has been described as one of the foremost contributors – if not an idiosyncratic one – to humanistic geography (Monaghan 2001). Tuan's book, *Topophilia* (1974) is an extraordinary account of the aesthetic, tactile and emotional responses people have towards the environment and by focusing on this aspect effectively broke away from traditional geography approaches. Humanistic geography is not a major force within geography currently due, perhaps, as Peet (1998) points out with some irony, it is too busy collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions.

Thus for geography, perhaps more so than other disciplines, there have been times of radical transformation in response to new concepts and theories that include structuralist, feminist, postmodern and critical approaches. This has impacted on the study of place. Traditionally, geography focused on objective knowing about places – essentially facts and features – but, once place became largely the domain of human geography, it took to investigating the power of place in the constitution and description of society. In essence place became a world of meaning (Hubbard et al 2004). For most contemporary geographers place is described as a type of space that is defined by – and constructed in terms of – the lived experiences of people. There is further consensus that place is involved with the relationships between the human body and meaningful places enabled by multi-sensory experiences. Places are thus seen as fundamental in expressing a sense of belonging for those who live in them. Massey (1994) also adds the variables of multiple political, social and economic relations as integral to place meaning. What emerges as a common thread in the writings is that place is experienced and understood differently by different people which, by inference, can be extrapolated to include the individuality of the pre-school child and his or her experiences and understandings.

There is further consideration of geography in Chapter 4 where the discipline is discussed both in relation to research with children and as a curricular subject.

2.3.2 The place of environmental psychology

The sub-discipline of environmental psychology has flourished since the 1970s. Its research interests overlap with elements of geography, particularly behavioural geography, and also incorporate aspects of developmental and cognitive psychology. Spencer (1995) identifies two main strands of environmental psychology. Firstly,

there is the individual's understanding of the environment and, secondly, the shaping of individual behaviour by the physico-social environment. Environmental psychology has made significant contributions to the understanding of the human experience of the environment and, in relation to this study, includes work on children and their relationship with place. Research areas of environmental psychology include children's experience of place, place perception and place attachment. It is generally acknowledged that each of these elements of place understanding is integral to a child's personal development and well-being in terms of social integration, self-identity and civic participation. Spencer and Blades (1993) call for educationalists to take heed of the links between environment and children's development. They go on to emphasise the need not just to focus on learning about distant places, but the 'directly known locale' (p. 367).

In its early days environmental psychology concentrated on the applicability of Piaget's developmental theories to children's environmental understanding and has, in fact, challenged the orthodoxy of the developmental psychology tradition. This tradition has tended to rely on laboratory-based investigations whilst environmental psychology has sought to use research in the field. However, it should be noted that Piaget's (1929) pioneering work on children's conception of the world was the forerunner to much environmental research with children today. To a greater or lesser extent, he has influenced writers such as Hart, Spencer, Blades, Matthews and Moore all of whom have made invaluable contributions to the sub-discipline. Research by Hart (1979) and Moore (1986) in particular offers highly descriptive accounts of places in children's lives. A more detailed consideration of their contribution and of others in the field is discussed in Chapter 4.

Whilst most environmental psychology research has been undertaken with children over the age of five, there has been a reappraisal of pre-school children's spatial and environmental competencies through a range of research such as route learning and mapping. It should also be stated that some of the research with older children into environmental cognition is of interest in that the methodologies may be used when working with younger children. Although Spencer (1995:3) regrets the lack of research with children of all ages –'one could well go further in subdividing

childhood into different periods of interests and needs' – to date the absence of work with very young children is particularly marked.

2.3.3 The place of phenomenology

Phenomenology is a complex philosophy and warrants inclusion in this thesis because it offers a different way of seeing and, as stated earlier, has been of particular significance to those working within the discourse of humanistic geography (see, for example Relph 1976; Tuan 1977: Seamon 1979: Casey 1997). Phenomenology emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters and describe phenomena as manifested to the consciousness of the individual who has had the experience (Moran 2000). There is a rich history of the phenomenon of place within phenomenology and, for those writing on the subject, many are influenced by the works of the German existential philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). His essays on the concept of dwelling and the seminal notion that to dwell is the essence of human existence, led subsequent writers to examine further the concept of place. If place is central to human existence then the essence of place and the experience of place require exploration in order to understand something of this relationship.

A phenomenologist may argue that the true value – the essence or spirit of a place, the *genius loci* (Norberg-Schultz 1980) – cannot be obtained through the methodology associated with geography or environmental psychology. To say a place has *genius loci* is to assume that there is certain constancy through time so that the essential nature of place changes only slowly, outlasting people. From a phenomenological perspective and drawing upon the writings of Heidegger, Norberg-Schultz espouses a theory of place that emphasises the quality of a person's existential existence or 'being in the world'. Norberg-Schultz's definition of place is one of 'space plus character'. Phenomenologically, place is inhabited intentionally by people who seek to find meaning in settings. Each person has a range of subjective experiences in place and the phenomenologist's task is to find universality in these experiences.

Norberg-Schultz further proposes that sensory impressions help communicate the experience of place, but they are not always verbally accessible and thus can be difficult to communicate to others. This is clearly very different from the conventional approach where place is seen to be the sum of variables such as culture, politics and

economics which, for Malpas (1999), is a narrow view that ignores the complex interweaving of personal meaning that may be invested in a place. It is also different from the views of other phenomenologists, such as Relph, who do not agree that the essence of place is found within itself or that it has an essential character independent of the human observer. Relph (1985) stresses the experiential bonds that people establish with place and that places are interpreted differently by different people so that there is an infinity of meanings. From this phenomenological point of view, a place is 'what it is' and phenomenology is a way in which the meanings of places can be addressed through subjective meanings and intuitive descriptions of environmental experiences.

The phenomenology of place, described by Hay (2003:153) as a 'robust North American tradition of nature writing', is characterised by an unselfconscious immersion in place which involves all the senses. Descriptions are often personal, sometimes lyrical and poetic but the intention is always the same – to convey the intimate relationship with place (see for example Langeveld's (1953) description of the secret places of children). Place phenomenology has generated its own vocabulary in order to describe the hard to define aspects of place experience. Thus we have, for example, 'topophilia', 'geopiety', 'placelessness' and 'insideness'. Such words describe the lived and felt experience of place, the character or atmosphere of a place that an objective description could not reveal (Bott et al 2003).

In Chapter 4 (4.4.1) there is a discussion concerning phenomenological research into place and an exploration into the involvement of children in such research.

2.4 Concluding comments

This chapter has sought to define 'experience of place' within the context of this thesis because it establishes part of the foundations upon which the research is constructed. Initially, the separate concepts of place and experience were deconstructed before the two were united to form the actual phrase which is used as the basis of research for this thesis. Defining place led to an inter-disciplinary exploration where it was found that there was a wide range of meaning attributed to the concept. There is, however, some agreement in that there are several elements that make up place. These include locational, conceptual, physical and psychical

characteristics or, put another way, place is the intersection between its physical characteristics, a person's individual perceptions and the uses of that particular place. In this thesis place is defined as a centre of meaning based on human experiences, social relationships, emotions and thoughts. Experience is defined as a physical and psychological response to an encounter that can contribute to learning and understandings. When the two concepts are combined to form 'experience of place', the definition to which this research adheres to is: physical and psychological encounters with particular spaces that are charged with meaning.

The literature has revealed many and various interpretations and approaches to this complex psychological phenomenon, including a glimpse into the phenomenology of place. Indeed, the unravelling of interpretations has involved exploring literature from a variety of disciplines and it can be seen that each offers its own understandings. There has also been an attempt to emphasise the difference between a 'sense of place' and 'experience of place', on the grounds that one might be exchanged for the other when, in fact, they mean quite different things. In this thesis a sense of place is not thought to be an appropriate concept to apply to very young children in that it refers to a more nationalistic and committed relationship with place.

Chapter 3 addresses childhood and its constructions. How children are viewed in society, the origins of ideas about childhood, the geographies of children and childhood memories all contribute to adult conceptions of the child. These issues are considered in the next chapter as they have implications for the design of this research into pre-school children's experience of place.

Chapter 3
The Place of Childhood and Childhood Places

Childhood is a treasure whose geography you never clearly reveal.

Patrick Chamoiseau (1999:3)

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2 the concept of experience of place was defined. This detailed exposition was undertaken as it is the object of research in this thesis. In Chapter 3 there is a comprehensive consideration of childhood and children – the participatory subjects of this research – and an exploration of children's geographies. The associated literature search was a wide-ranging enterprise and this chapter aims to review that which is most relevant to this research and that which has had greatest influence on the thinking behind this study.

The concept of childhood, like that of place, is not straightforward and this is exemplified by Chamoiseau's quote at the start of this chapter which has implications on different levels. It may mean that adults cannot re-access a place left behind in childhood; it could imply that there are things associated with childhood that should remain sacrosanct; it may refer to spaces and places that only a child knows. Unravelling such multi-faceted concepts of childhood and childhood places are what concerns this second chapter in the review of the literature.

The children who participated in this research were of pre-school age i.e. between the ages of 3 and 5. If we accept that childhood extends from birth to late teens then pre-school age can be viewed as early childhood. Section 3.2, 'Defining childhood', deconstructs meanings of the phenomenon of childhood and also considers how childhood is instilled with personal meaning. There then follows in section 3.3, entitled 'The pre-school child in the 21st Century', a reflection on the nature of the pre-school child today, how children in this age-group are perceived and the implications of such perceptions for this study. Section 3.4, 'Childhood geographies

and childhood places' considers the effects society and culture are having on pre-school children in terms of their interactions with places. Section 3.5, 'Other childhoods', offers a comparison of lives of pre-school children in countries outside the UK. In the next section attention turns to the relevance of adult memories of childhood, so Section 3.6, 'Childhood revisited' questions the value and also the accuracy of adult memories of childhood places and their significance in terms of self-identity and a sense of belonging. The chapter is summarised in section 3.7, 'Concluding comments'.

3.2 Defining childhood

This section of Chapter 3 considers what is meant by the term childhood. It seeks to examine the origin of the concept, trace its history and reflect on current thinking. The inclusion of this section on childhood is valid because how the researcher perceives childhood impacts on the choices and decisions regarding the methodological and theoretical aspects of the study.

Childhood, although a familiar term, resists easy definition with Matthews, for one, claiming it to be characterised by complexities, ironies and '(mis)conceptions conveniently perpetrated by the selective adult lens' (Matthews 2003a:147). These misapprehensions and perpetrations have had, as will be demonstrated, significant effects on how children are viewed.

As with the concept of place, the various approaches to childhood through different disciplines means there is a lack of consensus over a definitive explanation of what constitutes childhood and what it means to be a child. It was not until the end of the Nineteenth Century that education and the development of the child were regarded with particular interest and it was then that the first theories of child development began to take shape and constructions of childhood studied. Approaches to childhood vary according to the background discipline, personal beliefs and current trends. It can be approached, for example, historically or through developmental psychology. The latter focuses on the processes in which children change from having the physical, social and intellectual competencies of newborn babies to being full and active members of a culture with all the competencies that implies.

Childhood is a relatively recent construct – mainly a minority world phenomenon – and this reflects the changed status of children in that rather than being seen as 'extras' on a societal stage, children are viewed as frames of reference in their own right (Matthews 2003b). The history of childhood reveals the different orientations to childhood in the past. Ariès' seminal book, *Centuries of Childhood* (1960) is one of the best known works on the subject. Ariès traces the emergence of childhood across history and examines how children were perceived through the centuries. In the Middle Ages a child was seen as a miniature adult and by the Sixteenth Century as an object of play. The Eighteenth Century saw childhood as a phase of life distinct from other stages and children were viewed as individuals in their own right. The philosopher John Locke was attributed with this new way of thinking and the result was a more positive attitude to the understanding and treatment of children. However, this did not mean that children were believed to be able to make reasonable judgements; this was not credible until the teenage years. Young children were regarded as empty vessels, as passive and inexpert, ways of thinking that prevented children from being a potentially powerful group in society. Thus children have been seen variously from adults-in-waiting, defective adults and a part of society that is taken for granted, to agents who both shape and are shaped by their worlds (James et al 1998). There is consensus, however, that childhood is a phase in the life course of everyone, one of the few absolutely universal experiences, one in which there is rapid and common physiological and psychological development, and arguably the most formative in terms of character development. Childhoods may be universal but worldwide they differ substantially, some being so appalling that to term it 'childhood' seems disrespectful of the suffering endured. Furthermore, the nature of childhood also changes from one generation to another, 'tempered by the peculiarities of their social circumstances' (James and James 2004:22). This is discussed further in 3.5, 'Other childhoods'.

Childhood seems to invite definitions of extremes. Childhood has never experienced uniformity and this is borne out by a plethora of descriptions. It is a 'period of fantastic freedom' (Goldson 1997:1), a nightmare (de Mause 1976), a 'sacred period' (Marcus 1992:89) or a 'moribund state' (Goldson 2001:38). Some writers feel childhood today is in crisis or even lost (Postman 1994; Foley et al 2001). This 'disappearance' of childhood suggests that children not so long ago revelled in the

right to childhood and enjoyed all that it had to offer within the safe confines of a happy family life. I do not agree with this, nor do I adhere to the belief that childhood is on the verge of extinction, put as it is in near apocalyptic terms. Postman is especially negative and feels that our entrapment with technology dooms childhood as a social structure. Foley et al (2001) argue that childhood has indeed changed and, on the whole, for the better though perhaps with fuzzier boundaries than once it had. This 'disappearance' is, perhaps, more of a disruption in our beliefs that the boundary between child and adult, childhood and adulthood has become less and less refined. For Porteous (1990:146) we are well on the way to a 'neo-medieval concept of the child ... as a small adult'. What *has* happened, it seems, is a reappraisal of childhood and a shattering of the image of the traditional image of the child. Important for this study is the suggestion that wonder and curiosity are diminishing in very young children, and that their freedom of movement curtails experiences in the outside world. This is discussed further in 3.3 where perceptions of today's pre-school child are discussed.

For many contemporary commentators childhood is commonly defined as a social construct - that is one defined by society and compatible with visions of life at any one time and place (James and Prout 1990: Qvortrup 1994; Jenks 1996). But others still question these understandings, perhaps because some of the literature is conceptually vague. For example Qvortrup, whilst recognised as an authority on the construction of childhood, uses the term 'generation' to describe childhood yet does not distinguish it from similar terms such as age category or life phase also used within his texts. Consequently, it is not clear whether the terms are interchangeable or quite different. There are, however, some commonalities in the various definitions of childhood available, notably that this period of life is different and that it comprises a series of processes of integration into adulthood. There is also a pervasive view from some commentators that childhood is a state where children know less, are less serious and less important than adults. Childhood studies – an established research domain - has sought to pull disciplines together. However, its own boundaries are blurred and to date there has not been an effective way taken to unravel the multiple perspectives on childhood. Attempts to own the subject are best exemplified by Aitken who describes childhood as 'the theoretical property of structural development psychology' (Aitken 2001a:119) in order to fix it once and for all within one domain.

That childhood should be 'owned' by any one discipline is of concern. Surely to work in an effective interdisciplinary manner can only benefit our understanding of childhood? As it is, childhood could be described as a 'pick-and-mix' concept so one can opt for a romantic discourse where childhood is a time of innocence or, if one takes a puritanical view, an immoral time where the concept of original sin invades the perception of the child. All this tension removes childhood further and further from reality so that the construct of childhood clearly belongs to adults rather than children (Mayall 1994).

Corsaro (1997) and James et al (1998) offer an alternative theory which they term the 'new sociology of childhood'. Here children are viewed as a social category, as actors who interpret their world, reflect and create meaning. Thus childhood (the phase of being a child) is fluid and diverse, continually in the process of being constructed through differing social relations and contexts. By implication, children are entitled to have their views listened to and, with regards to research, they should be presented as actors in their own right with opinions and views about their everyday worlds. Furthermore, this sociological perspective focuses on what it means to be a child in an adult-dominated and oriented society (Penn 2005). Taking a different approach, Woodhead (1999) calls for a new *psychology* of childhood that pays more attention to the cultural dimensions of childhood and one that is more reflexive and inclusive. More recently postmodernism has been absorbed into the social construction of childhood and offers discourses such as feminism and postcolonialism (Rogers 2001).

In Britain and most of the minority world, childhood is defined by being enclosed or bounded. These boundaries are established by the use of institutions such as health care and education which then produce a formal category. Indeed, some writers regard childhood as an institutionalised creation mostly driven by adults on children's behalf (Qvortrup 1994; Jenks 1996: Aitken 2001a; James and James 2004). This makes for a neat package, made neater by sub-categorising children into toddlers, pre-schoolers and school-age. Childhood is thus made to sound like a series of routine stages. It does not take into account the wide variance and divergence of children within any one of these stages. On a more positive note, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) and the Children Act (1989), have both heightened awareness about children's rights and the ethical issues of working with children.

These documents have legitimised children's right to be recognised for their own worth and that their capabilities and competencies deserve to be seen outside adult assumptions. This way of looking at childhood receives further attention in 7.4, 'Ethical considerations'.

It is important to think about one's own understanding of childhood when researching with children as this reflection impacts upon the manner in which the researcher approaches the design of the study. There is not the space to detail my own childhood, so it must be sufficient to say that my own experiences as a child, my home background, a mother of two grown-up children and a nursery teacher have influenced my perceptions of this era in life. My definition of childhood is certainly influenced by these experiences and is a personal position, but I believe this is valid as long as it is stated that this is so. Thus my understanding of childhood is this: it is an individually experienced phase of life characterised by rapid physical and intellectual change, and influenced by social relations and society. This construction of childhood, in particular the individuality of experience, is one that comes under scrutiny in this research and is considered as an important factor in the findings.

The contribution of place to childhood is yet to be discussed in any detail, but firstly there is a consideration of the pre-school child of today. Thus the next part of this chapter provides a contemporary view of these young children and the nature of the world they inhabit, then leads on to a consideration of the importance of childhood memories of place.

3.3 The pre-school child in the 21st Century

It should be stated at the outset that the term 'pre-school child' is an age-group construction brought about by cultural and historical beliefs, and assumptions that dictate social organisation. I do not view this as a natural category or sub-category of childhood, but employ it for practical reasons inasmuch as the British education system uses it to define children between the ages of 3 and 5; the pre-school stage. This age-range encompasses the children who are participants in this research and thus this section of the chapter reflects on the pre-school child of the 21st Century. With this understood, how is the pre-school child viewed in present day society?

Picture a young child and imagine a similar child a decade ago, two or three decades ago. Maybe more. Has the pre-school child *changed*? Intrinsically, no. The essence of the young child is the same. What has changed is society, the structure of the family (the UK has the highest percentage of single parents in the European Union and the fastest increase of maternal employment outside the home), our expectations of the young child and with it our vision of early childhood. It is argued that even the youngest children are the subject of intense commercialisation and more open to new forms of exploitation than ever before, so a common perception is one of spoilt, over-indulged and materialistic youngsters (Robb 2001). Paradoxically, there has been a rise in UK child poverty in the last twenty years with reports of some children enduring extreme hardship. Early childhood, like any part of life, can thus be seen as two extremes – the child who has everything and the child who has nothing.

Arguably, the strongest view of the pre-school child in the UK is still predicated on out-dated theories and beliefs. Perhaps the most negative and damaging beliefs relate to early years education in that it is not viewed as 'proper' education, something that is only offered once a child starts at primary school. This maybe due to perceptions that pre-school education is relatively unstructured, informal and play-oriented and such notions are often associated with the capabilities of very young children being downplayed, particularly so if development is linked to stage-based theories whereby stages of development are thought to unfold in some sort of natural process. The assumptions and accepted notions that pre-school children are at the start of this process engendered negative images of the competencies of these children for several decades. This partly explains why there has been a gross underestimation of these competencies and reaction by governments to expand early childhood services that aim to foster learning and development in supportive environments. Early years education is now firmly on the political agenda, with the realisation that this part of life is a time when a child forms his or her learning attitudes and has a conception of him or herself as a learner and as a social being.

The pre-school child is probably protected far more now than at any previous time in history. This refers not only to child rights and the protection of the law, but protection in the outside world. According to Penn (2005:115), 'children are protected against every eventuality', a reaction Penn believes to the perception that risk has

increased and changed dramatically over the years. Certainly, young children are vulnerable but their lives are increasingly prescribed by warnings and restricted by adult perceptions of what is or could be dangerous. Whether or not this has implications for this study is discussed in 3.4 where there is a discussion about the pre-school child's freedom to explore and investigate his or her surroundings.

Another factor that has the potential to influence the findings of this thesis is to consider where pre-school children spend most of their time. This refers to time spent outdoors in the wider environment as well as where they are cared for and looked after. Current UK government policy towards children of pre-school age is directed at providing day care whilst mothers are encouraged to return to work. Where once early childhood was largely experienced in the home, now children are spending increasing amounts of time in settings outside the home be it playgroups, nurseries, with childminders or with other members of the family. The rapid expansion of nursery education and a wider range of pre-school provision have increased educational opportunities for pre-school children, yet this is received with mixed reactions particularly regarding the quality of provision. The media has also picked up on recent evidence that suggests children away from home so much are unable to bond with their parents and, consequently, may develop anti-social behaviour by the age of four. Waiton (2004) feels this is a reflection more on the state of society than the state of childhood and is an example of the blame culture. Contrary to this depiction of the apparently negative effects of pre-school education is a recent report that finds clear evidence that children who have access to pre-school education do better at the age of seven than children who stay at home (Department of Education and Skills 2004).

However we see pre-school children it is important not to generalise and view them as a uniform category. Each child comes from a unique background influenced by family circumstances and wider social issues. The lives of pre-school children today are very different to their predecessors' lives in terms of life experiences and this includes personal childhood geographies, the subject of the following section of this chapter concerning childhood.

3.4 Childhood geographies and childhood places

Firstly, a distinction should be made between childhood geographies and the geographies of childhood. The latter equates with research on what children actually *do* in the environment or landscape – their interactions and patterns of spatial activity in an external world. It also comprises the spatial distribution of factors that influence the lives of children such as the incidence of poverty, health, housing and education. Childhood geographies are concerned with *how* children experience and perceive their surroundings so that there are internal realms of cognition, interpretation and meaning (Philo 2000). This is an expanding area of research and includes examinations of the importance of place, personal understandings of place and the everyday lives of children. Within the literature it is also termed 'personal geographies', a concept that begins at the moment of birth when a baby begins the journey of making sense of the surrounding environment.

For Hart (1984), childhood is the time of the greatest period of geographical learning and exploration, a time when there is gradual engagement with the physical world. Nabhan and Trimble call for children to be allowed to explore wild places so that they may develop their own feelings - a new place 'sings different songs to each of us, and what we hear changes in accordance with our years' (Nabhan and Trimble 1994:3). This engagement with places and the environment is the subject of some discussion, the theme of which is the encouragement of children to experience the natural world in ways that connect them with nature as a reality rather than an abstraction. Louv (2005) argues forcibly for children to become more aware of their physical surroundings, citing numerous causes why children today are alienated from the real world. This alienation, Louv believes, has led to emotional and mental problems that hinder development. This call to permit children more freedom to explore and experience is appealing, but children's movements in public spaces, let alone 'wild' places, have become restricted to the extent that place is more likely to be experienced from the car which acts like a protective capsule (Sibley 1995). This is well summed up in the following;

> *It may be that we have failed to catch up with the realities of primary children's environmental experience: a world perhaps seen more from the car or bus window than experienced on foot.*
>
> Wiegand (1999:66)

There was a time, perhaps 40 years ago or so in the UK, when even very young children could be seen playing outside their homes, perhaps alone or in the company of other children. There has been a huge shift in perception since then, with Foucault writing in 1977 that the child's world was so restricted it was comparable to a prison or monastic cell. With the significant increase in traffic, fear of crime and the panic caused by paedophile scandals (although thankfully very rare), there is severe restriction placed upon children by ideologies of care and protection so they are habitually tucked away in gardens and parks, always accompanied by adults when outdoors or when in the street (Davis and Jones 1997). Fear, believes Louv (2005:123), 'is the most potent force that prevents parents from allowing their children the freedom they themselves enjoyed when they were young'. What effect has this had? Have we created an artificial world, one which is geared to young children's needs yet removed from the real world? In the United States researchers have found that children have more material objects and perhaps better long-range opportunities in terms of travelling, but they are often confined in spaces because of the dangers of violence on the streets, gangs and drugs. This is paradoxical when we live in a time of incredible technological progress and yet there are more and more limits upon children. Experiences of place, those real life personal interactions with place, must surely be occurring less and less.

The younger child is confined to the home which is now seen as the appropriate place to be raised with physical and moral protection. An editorial in *Childhood* (2000:7) views this as spatial control so that 'the diminished spatial autonomy of kids ... has become a matter of concern'. Due to these restrictions children have penetrated places that were once regarded as the domain of adults. This invasion of adult spaces and places means that 'childhood...is that status of personhood which is by definition often in the wrong place' (James et al 1998:37). This has implications on two levels. Firstly, with respect to how we understand childhood it suggests that childhood has infiltrated adult space and that it has no distinct qualities to distinguish it from other life stages. Secondly, it implies the loss of children's places, the geographical, physical places which children investigate, explore and make sense of. In terms of pre-school children, this divorce from place, be it from adult prevention or lack of places to go, could signal that they enter primary school with little knowledge of

place. With regards to this research, this issue could be an influential factor during the empirical stage of the study.

3.5 Other childhoods

I am aware whilst writing this, and on consulting the literature, of the huge disparity of childhood, or rather childhoods. UNICEF (2005:4) refers to childhood as 'the state and condition of a child's life: to the quality of those years', but in many instances childhood 'is an empty word and a broken promise' (page 2). In this same UNICEF report, *Childhood under Threat,* examples of childhoods include the child soldiers of the Congo, the children scavenging amongst rubbish piles in Manila and those orphaned by AIDS in Botswana. These demonstrate the ways childhood is being undermined if not destroyed. Childhood should, by implication, mean a safe space, in which children are loved, can grow, play and develop. Tragically, this is not true for over one billion children. The following statistics from UNICEF indicate the desperate plight of many of today's children:

➢ number of children in the world: 2.2 billion
➢ number of children living in poverty: 1 billion
➢ 640 million children in developing countries live without adequate shelter
➢ more than 121 million primary-age children are out of school
➢ total number of children in the world who died in 2003 before they were five: 10.6 million

(Figures from UNICEF, 2005)

Natural disasters account for some of the statistics. On December 26th 2004, 80,000 children were killed by the tsunami that struck the coastline from Indonesia to Sri Lanka to Somalia. It is not known how many thousands of children were orphaned or lost one parent, their siblings and other relatives, friends and classmates. For the surviving children the long-term effect of this devastating childhood event can only be speculated upon and, in relation to the object of this thesis, their experience of place deeply and traumatically affected.

Meanwhile, in the UK we may postulate on the effects of commercialisation upon children as being the most we have to worry about, conscious (or otherwise) that in many countries childhood is a phase of struggle for survival rather than a lifestyle. In the developed world childhood is viewed as a formal category and as a social status; a 'singular and mono-dimensional status' (Jenks 1996:6). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, children in Western communities are increasingly isolated from the real world. This way of child-rearing and the view of childhood are in stark contrast with childhoods in other cultures. In some societies children are integrated more into adult activities and are by necessity more involved, more central to the community although that is not to say that their lives are easier. Kakar (quoted in Nutbrown 1996: xiv) describes the view of childhood in some Indian and African cultures 'as a fully meaningful world-in-itself with its own way of being, seeing and feeling'. There is also a strong sense that the adult should enter the child's world of experiences and not just 'bring up' the child. Children are, in essence, included or embedded within the everyday of the adult world which is in stark contrast to the ambivalence about the nature of childhood that seems to be prevalent in many developed countries.

It was Kessen's 1979 journal article, 'The American child and other cultural inventions', that first drew attention to the fact that childhood is defined by a particular society at a particular time in a particular way. Kessen, who based the article on his visit to educational settings in communist China, feels there is no one correct version of childhood and there is much to learn and share with other cultures and societies. Another example of childhoods in different countries comes from Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989) who compiled a compelling cross-cultural study of young children in Japan, China and the USA. The book introduces the concept of the child-like child which is the Japanese approach to early years education, one quite alien to the Chinese and the Americans and it highlights the very different approach to the education of young children. It also begs the salient question, what is it we want for our young, child-like child? In northern Italy the well-researched Reggio Emilia pre-schools take the children's power of communication as the principle at the heart of the approach. The children are encouraged to explore their relationships with the world around them from the earliest age and childhood is constructed as rich, strong and powerful rather than weak, ignorant and incompetent (Edwards et al 1993). The philosophy of the schools emerged as a direct response to past and present history and

culture, and the hugely damaging effects of the Second World War on the community. The result is an education system that aims to value childhood and cultivate and guide potentials, and where place is seen as an integral part of child development. There is further discussion of approaches to early childhood education in 5.9.

The developed world may be guilty of projecting a romanticised view of childhood and of failing to understand the diversity of global childhoods. Applying developmental ideas of childhood that are derived from Western concepts to children in other cultures is wholly inappropriate yet it does happen. Some children in Kenya and India for example, have suffered and *are* suffering the application of textbook child development which extends to how they are taught. In Kenya the prevailing pedagogy is the transmission of facts through question and answer where, according to Ackers and Hardman (2001) both teachers and children appear both bored and disinterested. This style of teaching, once dominant in the developed world, is singularly inappropriate to the lives of these East African children as, indeed, are many of the textbooks which show inaccurate pictures of a child's 'lived culture'. Such books still exhibit the continuing legacy of colonialism with little if any relationship to reality and it is almost certain that a Kenyan child would struggle to recognise his or her own locality as described or pictured in some of these texts. There is, then, an urgent demand for a cultural psychology which will take into account specific cultural, economic and social processes in childhood, thus acknowledging that Western expectations about childhood cannot be applied universally (Soto & Swadener 2002).

3.6 Childhood revisited

Memories of childhood are episodic and haphazard, linked perhaps to extreme emotions triggered by specific events rather than the humdrum routine of everyday life. Ask any adult in this country about their memories of childhood and the chances are they will come up with anecdotes and stories, then usually categorise it as one that was happy, if not idealistic, or unhappy, if not downright miserable. Such views are also to be found in literary heritages which are full of rich accounts of childhood. For example, the writers Laurie Lee, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf have all provided us with their first impressions of the outside world as a rich source of experience.

Some reminiscences are difficult to read – Maya Angelou's (1984) abusive childhood or Danilo Kis' (1965) largely autobiographical account of being a young child in Hungary during the Second World War are particular examples. These memories are termed 'significant life experiences' a body of research in which positive or negative experiences are thought to influence perceptions and attitudes in adult life. In terms of experience of place, adults are described as having pro-environmental behaviours and attitudes if they had favourable experiences in early childhood (see, for example, Tanner 1980; Chawla 1998; Palmer et al 1998 for related literature).

Further depictions of childhood can be seen in a huge bank of pictures that tell us much about how childhood has been perceived in past eras. Holland (2004) has constructed a narrative using images to explore attitudes and ideas about childhood, emphasising that they are constantly changing. They range from ideologies such as innocence, victimisation and bad behaviour to education and playfulness. Holland argues in her narrative that the imagery of childhood provokes nostalgia for the past, but is countered by the adult fear of today's children that threaten comfort and security. Holland includes the grainy CCTV shot of two-year-old Jamie Bulger being led away from a shopping mall by the two boys who later killed him. This image did much to spark media frenzy against children adding to the feeling that childhood in the 1990s was characterised by violence. However much one may argue that this was atypical of children, there still remains a traditional image of childhood innocence albeit as a form of kitsch, and any transgression is taken as an indication of a further disintegration of society.

According to developmental psychologists, our earliest recollections of childhood do not go much below five years of age as very young children cannot reconstruct early experiences due to the mismatch between his or her cognition and that of an older child. But it does seem that re-experiencing certain feelings or sensations can jolt the memory, especially if taken in the company of children as demonstrated by Nabhan and Trimble (1994). For Gary Nabhan came the realisation that adults spend more time seeking out picturesque panoramas, whilst young children tend to focus on what is immediately in front of them. He empathises with their intrigue for stones, for rocks and for plants; for the close at hand. Some writers write with astonishing clarity of being three or four, but questions should be asked with regards to their reliability and

validity. For many of us memories are coloured in and modified over the years. Are these reminiscences imaginative reconstructions? Ward (1978) believes we all have an image of what an ideal childhood is and that it was acquired during our own childhood. He says (p.1), 'it sifts through our selective and self-censored memory as a myth and idyll of the way things ought to be, the lost paradise to be regained'. If we have difficulty remembering childhood experiences accurately can we experience what a child experiences? Can we even *imagine* what a child experiences? This point has important implications for this design of the empirical stage of this research – accessing a child's experience is central to this research endeavour.

3.6.1 Memories of childhood places

Marcus (1992) claims that some of the most powerful personal memories revolve around places such as the house where one grew up and the secret places of childhood. Adult memories of childhood places have been the subject of research, for example Sobel (1990), Sebba (1991), Smith (1997), and the inspiration for many poets and novelists. Marcus' (1992:89) reasoning for the clarity of memories linked to specific places is because childhood is 'the time when we begin to be conscious of self, when we begin to see ourselves as unique entities'. He claims that memories of childhood places are held onto as a kind of 'psychic anchor', a particularly apposite term if such memories remind us, perhaps ground us, of where we came from and how we were as children.

In terms of childhood memories of place there is a wealth of literature available to consult. In fact it is difficult to select just a few to represent these particular memories. One that stands out is Hunter Diack's (1962) *Boy in a Village*, an account of his early childhood during the 1900s in the small Aberdeenshire village of Kemnay. This book is mentioned here as Diack's evocations are extraordinarily detailed and he is able to recall minute details of places in his childhood from the 'dark woods on Leschangie Hill' (p.15) to the 'place of dim mystery, the Roman Catholic Church' (p.143). Similarly, Laurie Lee (1959) is held in esteem for his depiction of Cotswold life and the idyllic images of country life although Ward (1988), who brings together a rich diversity of materials about the countryside, feels that portraits of country childhoods are often of a sentimentalised rural idyll. The reality is often very different - modern childhood in the country can still be perceived

as potentially dangerous with what Valentine (1997:141) calls 'global dangers and local demons'. Ward's earlier book, *The Child in the City* (1978), suggests that just as there are romantic images of rural places, there is also an urban myth. Most of this, he feels, is down to photography which 'is the most poignantly nostalgic of all arts' (Ward 1978:5). This can distort the truth of conditions in cities, although as Ward points out the major difference between conditions then and conditions now is that the modern child survives while his or her predecessor frequently did not. Even so, he believes something is lost in urban childhood. In the intervening years since Ward wrote the book, urban life has become increasingly difficult for some children, notably those who are not part of the fairly affluent majority. It seems unlikely that childhood memories for the present poorer child living in city sink estates will be one of a golden age.

3.7 Concluding comments

How childhood is perceived is an important component of this research in that it impacts upon the entire thesis and, in particular, the approaches taken to working with children as research participants. Childhood is common to all children, but also fragmented by the diversity of children's lives. This is the social construction of childhood; a complex interweaving of society, culture, the everyday. Childhood can be seen also as a time of conflicts between the image and the lived experience. There is a battle to protect childhood versus an inclination to label it as destructive and aggressive; there is a battle between looking forward to what is often seen as a frightening future and back to a more comfortable past; there is a struggle between romanticising and reality. It is, then, a concept that has been the outcome of academic debate and a consequence of political action (Matthews et al 1998).

My interpretation of childhood will be different from others', based as it is on my own experiences as child, teacher and parent, together with my cultural views and the influence of current trends or fashions. My personal definition of childhood is that it is an individually experienced phase of life characterised by rapid physical and intellectual growth and one that is profoundly influenced by a variety of variables such as social relations, society and environment. It is not, then, purely a relational term grounded in its relationship with 'adulthood'. Memories of place present adult

attitudes to childhood places, rather than children's direct experience. Whilst these can be unreliable they can give insights into what makes us, *us*; our sense of belonging and our sense of identity. And, of course, as adults we have the vocabulary to describe feelings that we may not have been able to articulate when very young.

One effect of the rigorous debate about childhood has been to raise the status of and increase attention in research with children across disciplines. Challenges have been made regarding the absence of children in research, more particularly research that investigates their experiences. The view of childhood as a social rather than a biological phenomenon means there is vast scope for research that takes into account children's individual views, perceptions, understandings and ideas. Children are now seen as competent practitioners in the world and research that involves them must respect their skills and abilities. This view has a direct impact upon the ethical issues of working with children, an issue addressed fully in 7.4, 'Ethical considerations'.

The following quote effectively summarises the theme of this chapter; that of memories and childhood places, and the difficulties of accessing a child's real experience of place in real time:

> *There is ... a great deal of difference between the adult who is able to recall rich and memorable experiences of childhood and the young child encountering a place or an environmental experience for the first time. How can we ever step back...? Are adults inevitably to be cast as outsiders able to gain only the most meagre of glimpses of the magical world of the very young?*
>
> Matthews (1992: 1)

With understandings and definitions of experience of place and childhood achieved in Chapters 2 and 3, the next chapter that comprises the review of the literature attends to existing research in the field. Chapter 4, 'Children and Place: The State of Research', examines research from the fields of geography and environmental psychology, and considers why there is so little existing research concerned with pre-school children's experience of place.

Chapter 4
Children and Place: The State of Research

4.1 Introduction

Thus far in the literature review there have been thorough explorations into two concepts central to this thesis; firstly, the experience of place and, secondly, the meaning of childhood. This chapter connects these two concepts with a review of the research associated with pre-school children's experience of place. This has involved the consultation of a wide range of literature which has provided a broad picture of related research. This has been narrowed to focus on work that is more analogous to this thesis.

The first part of this chapter, 4.2 'Geography and children: developments in research', provides a brief overview of research that involves children and the discipline of geography. Within this section there is also discussion concerning geographical education research. Although geography is not a discrete area of learning in the pre-school years, what is taught in primary schools is of relevance - in particular, what the children themselves have to say about the natural and physical environment. Since the early 1970s two main strands of work on children's geographies have developed. The first is concerned with the development of spatial cognition and the other with the social geographies of children which includes space and place and the meanings children attribute to them. 4.3, 'Children and place: spatial development and graphicacy', provides the reader with an overview of research that could be perceived as the forerunner to studies investigating experience of place. It finds that there is a significant bank of research concerned with spatial abilities such as map reading and route finding, with the interesting concomitance that children's environmental competence has been persistently underestimated. Examples of research in this area are presented in Table 4.1. Section 4.4, entitled 'Children's experience of place: specific research', deals with research that is most closely affiliated to this thesis. Most of this research is found in the domain of environmental psychology and the contributions of specific writers in this field are discussed. Emanating from these two sections, section 4.5 'No place for pre-school children?' reflects on why there is

relatively little research involving the age group with which this thesis is concerned. This section suggests that researching with very young children is seen as problematic, particularly for disciplines outside education and psychology. The main themes of the chapter are drawn together in section 4.6, 'Concluding comments'.

4.2 Geography and children: developments in research

The status of children in geography has, as Holloway and Valentine (2000a:7) point out, 'not been a traditional focus of concern' and there is indeed a marked lack of empirical research involving children (Matthews and Limb 1999). This has provoked James (1990:278) to enquire, 'Is there a place for children in geography?' and then state that 'we might be forgiven for thinking that children simply do not exist in the spatial world'. Meanwhile, from Matthews (1992:238) comes the accusation that the absence of children in geographical research suggests that geographers are 'guilty of losing sight of the roots of their subject'. Six years later in 1998, Matthews, Limb and Taylor reported that children had been '(re)discovered as a group apart (largely from adults), with their own cultural lenses and so deserving of attention in their own right' (1998:311).

In sharp contrast to this thinking, Aitken (1994:27) contends that 'research on children's geographies had a fairly robust intellectual history spanning at least two decades', and Barker and Wellman (2003) are certain that children's geographies are reaching critical mass in the new Millennium. It is certainly the case that in the last seven years or so there has been an upturn in the quantity of geographical research that has seen children as subjects (and participative subjects at that). This is evidenced by collections of writings such as *Children's Geographies* by Holloway and Valentine (2000a); a special childhood issue of the geographical journal *Area* (2001); the launch of the journal *Children's Geographies* in 2003; the growing number of seminars and thematic streams by the Geographical Association and the Royal Geographic Society.

4.2.1 Geographical education research

Recently, there has been much criticism of the teaching of geography throughout schools in the UK, from the earliest years of primary to the syllabus at 'A' level. The content and quality of curricula is thought to be inappropriate and the quality of

teaching has received particular criticism. Curtis reported in *The Guardian* (November 2004) that, according to Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education), geography has become 'neglected and marginalised' and the picture is 'particularly stark in primary schools'. The problem had in fact been identified in the 1990s by Wiegand (1992) as one that required immediate attention. Catling (1999) feels that geography should be better recognised in schools, rationalising its place in the curriculum as it is based on key elements of human experience and has a role in developing children's spatial and environmental understanding. Significantly, Catling says, 'what geography brings uniquely to the primary curriculum is a focus on the study of places' (1999:60). Geography education texts aimed at early years practitioners are not numerous by any means, but mention should be made of Palmer and Birch (2004), and Cooper (2004) who encourage geographical and environmental learning for the youngest children in the UK educational system.

What of the current state of geographical education research? Compared to other areas of learning such as mathematics, science and literacy there is little research on primary geography education. This may be simply a question of locating material as it is not necessarily found within education texts and journals, but across a broad range of professional publications. Contrary to Catling's optimism, geography is still regarded with some ambivalence as a curricular subject and arguably this has meant little research and fewer opportunities for funding. The research that is undertaken tends to be small-scale and spread thinly. A further problem is the division between children's geographies and geographical education; both could inform the other but currently remain quite separate. Or it could be, as Catling said in 2005(a), that geography education is simply not a 'sexy' topic. Catling is a strong advocate of research in this area and calls for greater research activity into the geographical perspectives of younger children. He believes more evidence is required to prove that they come into primary school with a range of experiences that should be supported and enhanced and, in turn, that can extend and deepen their experiences of places and environments (Catling 2005a & 2005b). However, Owens (2004) is of a different opinion and expresses the view that children starting primary school actually have a *lack* of geographical and environmental experiences upon which to draw which emerges through limited vocabulary and knowledge of the outdoor world.

There are a few geographical education research texts that have been useful to this research. For example, Scoffham's (1998) *Primary Sources* presents twenty brief research studies in primary geography ranging from children's ideas about the world, mapping competence and knowledge of large-scale known localities, whilst the more recent *Researching Primary Geography* edited by Catling and Martin (2004) includes a range of papers that comprise children's geographical understanding, the processes of learning in geography, and mapwork and spatial cognition.

4.3 Children and place: spatial development and graphicacy

This section traces the history of research into children's spatial development which may be seen as both a forerunner to interest in experience of place, and also as a research area that ran in parallel with developments in this field. It is not easy to say definitively when interest in a specific area of related research started, particularly when this area of study interweaves a wide range of topics within a variety of disciplines.

Firstly, it is useful to define what is meant by spatial knowledge, and for this Spencer et al's explanation is used as an effective summary. They say that spatial knowledge is 'about the location of self with respect to the world, and about the interrelationships between places and objects' (Spencer et al 1989: xi). Spatial knowledge is the subject of a wealth of research that has been undertaken in the fields of child development, environmental psychology, education and behavioural geography. It includes spatial awareness, skills such as route-finding and map-reading, navigation through large-scale environments, cognitive maps, and knowledge and understanding of distant places.

Jean Piaget's research into children's spatial development is seen here as a starting point in this review of related literature. Whilst it is concerned primarily with space – sensorimotor space, visual space and postural space - rather than place, Piaget's work is well known outside child psychology and his writings and theories have influenced and inspired researchers in many other disciplines. Piaget and Inhelder's clinical experiments in 1956 into children's spatial development can be viewed as the precursor to subsequent interest and empirical work in this aspect of cognitive

development. The clinical experiments, reported in *The Child's Conception of Space* (1956), examined children's understanding of topological and Euclidean concepts of space using a scientific approach. The criticism these experiments attracted (Canter 1977; Donaldson 1978; Hart 1984; Walkerdine 1984; Aitken and Herman 1997) has effectively detracted from the significance of the work and the inspiration it had, and still has, on many writers. However, Piaget and Inhelder's contribution is a landmark towards understanding children's spatial awareness even if Piaget's normalised sequence of development is now seen to be flawed (see 5.2 for an extended discussion). Indeed, the research has provided a base for many subsequent research projects.

It was not until the 1970s that interest in children's spatial cognition began to emerge as a significant area of research. The focus of this largely geography-based research was spatial development in large-scale settings, in particular way-finding and graphicacy or map-reading skills, and children's recall memory for places they had experienced. Approaches to data collection and analysis were largely quantitative by design and quite diverse in nature. A summary of research that involved the mapping skills of children is presented in Table 4.1. This presents an example of how a particular aspect of environmental knowledge and skills has been researched over the years. It includes several well-known works including Blaut's (1991) argument that all children from all cultures have an innate ability to understand maps and he suggests this ability may be as basic a skill as language. It should be noted from this summary of mapping skills that the quantity of work in this area of research was particularly high between the 1970s and 90s; since then there has been a reduction in the number of studies.

If the literature is summarised, one issue that becomes clear is that children's spatial abilities – especially those in the younger age groups – have been vastly underestimated. This area of learning has been regarded as conceptually too advanced for children under 6 or 7. In addition, the capacity children have for learning geographical concepts, understandings and language has been shown to surpass expectations and this is of interest to this thesis inasmuch as it may impact upon suppositions about pre-school children's ability to share their experiences of place.

Area of research	Author(s)	Age of children studied	Comments
Mapping and modelling	Piaget and Inhelder (1956)	Primary	Shaped Piaget's claims that young children possess only topological concepts of space
Mapping skills	Blaut & Stea (1971)	Pre-school/early primary	Young children's ability to read maps and understanding of macro-spatial concepts
Development of map skills	Bluestein and Acredolo (1979)	3-5 years	Researched development of skills in very young children
Mapping skills	Catling (1979)	Early years – upper primary	Map skills present from very young age, influenced by context
Mapping skills	Gerber (1981)	Primary	Piagetian view of stage-based development
Development of mapping skills	Presson (1982)	4-6 years	Young children can extract information from maps
Development of mapping skills and aerial photograph recognition	Blades & Spencer (1986 and 1987)	Early years -primary	Young children's abilities at spatial skills underestimated by previous researchers
Criticism of previous research claiming mapping skills of children	Liben & Downs (1989)	Primary	Reservations over children's ability to read maps and aerial photos
Young children's representation of spatial information acquired from maps	Uttal and Wellman (1989)	4-7years	Development of the ability to acquire integrated knowledge of a space from a map
Theory of mapping behaviour as an innate skill – map acquisition device	Blaut (1991)	Pre-school and elementary	Aim to improve methods of teaching mapping and geography
Mapping behaviour as universal skill and impulse	Blaut (1997a)		Takes issue with Liben & Downs – young children *can read maps*
Use of maps and models to find routes	Bremner & Andreason (1998)	Young children	Contribute to growing consensus of child ability to use maps
Children's use of maps	Uttal (2000)	Primary	Discussion of relationship between spatial cognition and children's use of maps
Mapping as a cultural and cognitive universal	Blaut et al (2003)	3-5 years	Proposal for a general ecological theory of development of mapping abilities

Table 4.1: *Examples of studies that demonstrate the development of children's mapping skills as an area of geographical research*

Having established the wider realm of place research which focuses on developmental approaches, attention now turns to research that is most closely related to this thesis; that of children's experience of place. This section attends to the emergence of this research and writers who have made significant contributions to the field.

4.4 Children's experience of place: specific research

At roughly the same time, so almost in parallel with spatial research in the 1970s and 80s, there was an increasing interest in children and the environment. Once it had emerged as a valid area of study, a wide range of related research topics developed and, whereas previously research was almost wholly geography-based, there was a move from other disciplines including environmental psychology. These studies encompassed different aspects of children's environmental learning including landscape preference, place affordance, environmental attitudes and sense of place. Again, a problem besetting this review of the literature has been locating related research. This is due, in part, to the absence of cross-referencing in journals between adult and child studies. Furthermore, some research was isolated and not related in any particular way to previous or existing research. One method of accessing research has involved using search engines and keywords such as 'children', 'place', 'understanding' and 'experience'. A result that was especially useful was the discovery of Bruce Janz's website, *Research on Place and Space* in which research into place has been pulled together from a wide range of disciplines.

In 1971 Jim Blaut suggested that environmental education was a neglected area of the educational curriculum and that learning about the environment should be a distinct subject in schools. Working with David Stea, Blaut founded the 'Place Perception Project' at Clark University, Massachusetts and an agenda was established for research into children's environmental learning (Blaut and Stea 1971). Their approach to learning suggests that personal responses to the world are the key to understanding and that the environment is understood by the use of sensory modalities – notably sight and sound. Furthermore, place learning has its own cathexis or charge of mental energy so that places may be seen, for example, as secret or spooky places but rarely as angry or tasty. This was taken further by Downs and Stea (1973) who claim that representation of the environment is achieved through an integration of visual, tactile,

olfactory and kinaesthetic modalities with feelings *per se* the way the environment is simplified and structured around us. These feelings, suggest the authors, are shaped by direct and non-direct experience, but occur mainly within a social context. With the humanistic geographer Tuan (1974) also emphasising the role of the senses in making sense of the environment, interest in experience of place was gathering momentum. This interest was based, in part, on Bunge's (1975) expeditions in Detroit and Toronto which focussed on the spatial oppression of children. Bunge proposed that children are the ultimate victims of the social, political and economic forces that create the geography of our built environment. Initially, Bunge observed children at play in inner city neighbourhoods and then set out on expeditions to further his theory. Four years later Roger Hart produced his landmark work which was the first notable, comprehensive investigation into children's experience of place and which was a conceptual point of departure.

Hart's *Children's Experience of Place* (1979) details 4-11 year old children's interaction with their local environment, including their experience of specific places. The research was carried out in natural contexts and provides an extraordinarily detailed account of children living and playing in their local environment. This was a significant departure from so-called laboratory procedures. Hart took the role of ethnographer whereby he built relationships between himself and the children whom he regarded as experts in their own lives. Arguably this work did not receive the attention it deserved at the time (the book is actually produced in what can only be described as an economy format), and it is only comparatively recently that it has become a common source of reference and, in my case inspiration, for research on child-place transactions.

Hart describes his study of children in a New England town as employing an 'eclectic-ecological-field-approach'. This he feels is the most effective strategy to elicit the local environment as known, felt and experienced by children. His investigation examines the 'home range' of children and their interaction with spaces and places which leads to his proposal that there are four related themes. These are: spatial activity, place knowledge, place use and place values. Hart explored place values by asking the children in his study to describe and then show him their favourite places. He found that the highest frequency of favourite places was

categorised by what they offered the children and this equated to the affordance of some quality of well-being and development.

With respect to feelings about a place, Hart does concede that they are difficult to investigate saying that 'it is easier to re-think a thought ...than to re-feel a feeling' (op. cit. p.11). Nevertheless, Hart provides a fascinating insight into the understandings of children's immediate physical world expressed through likes, dislikes, fear and perceived danger. Hart does not believe that all feelings for place are born out of social interaction. He suggests there are exceptions as 'many places have meanings known only to one child' and these 'carry a personally as well as a socially determined meaning for that child' (op. cit. p. 12). He proposes that places perceived as dangerous and scary (such as abandoned buildings) can be linked to the archetypal scary places of children's literature and perhaps passed on to us as part of place mythology. What they share are common features that are understandably fear-provoking and offer 'unlimited opportunities for imagination' (op. cit. p.334). There is, then, room for a unique feeling for a particular or special place that does not emerge from what a child has heard or seen from others. The origins of a four year olds feeling for, say, a ruined castle, a park or a tree in the back garden are not simply arrived at through social interaction. Hart suggests that there are other elements at work that contribute to the richness of a child's inner perception of place, and these elements and influences are taken into account in the empirical stage of this thesis.

In the twenty-five years or so since Hart's work there has been ongoing interest in children's experience of place, but it has been somewhat sporadic, sometimes isolated and sometimes driven by specific trends. This tendency for trends in environmental development research can be seen clearly in the 1980s when a major focus was the links between environment and gender and genetics. The 1990s saw a renewed interest in relationships between adult memories, actual childhood experiences and place attachment which was termed environment-behaviour research. This became one of the main movements in place-related research (see, for example, Sebba 1991: Chawla 1992, 1994: Cooper Marcus 1992). The new century has seen growing recognition of the variation of children's environmental experiences and how this shapes their learning and social development. A consequence of this is that place and

childhood are now contextualised both locally and globally (Holloway and Valentine 2000a & 2000b; Punch 2000).

Another research thread that is particularly noteworthy is that of affective responses to the environment. Porteous (1985 and 1990) revived earlier work concerning use of the senses in environmental understanding, coining the phrase 'sensuous geography'. Porteous believes children possess much sharper senses than adults, that they learn about local places incrementally and that they are more open to impressions having 'not yet developed the moral and perceptual filters that so often render the adult's world a dull landscape' (1990:148). Using Porteous' term as a title for his book, Rodaway's (1994) *Sensuous Geographies* delves deeper into the nature of senses and how they inform human experiences of the environment in what Rodaway terms 'hidden geography' (p.x).

In *Making Sense of Place,* Matthews (1992) takes a psychological view of the geography of place. He presents an extensive account of how children acquire an understanding of place on the outdoor, macro-scale level and explores the richness of their view of the world. Like Porteous, Matthews acknowledges that children have a strong affective sense of the world around them that gives rise to 'powerful environmental pulls and pushes' (p.203). Further to this, Matthews writes that even at a very young age children develop feelings and emotions about their environments that evoke positive and negative images. In common with several other writers Matthews expresses the belief that the environmental capability of children needs to be reassessed as their environmental skills and competencies have been persistently underestimated. Matthews' book provides a thorough overview of children's place and environmental learning (albeit excluding pre-school children to a large extent), with sources drawn from environmental psychology, cognitive, behavioural and phenomenological geography so demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of this area of study.

Other literature that concerns children's experience of place includes Moore's *Childhood Domain* (1986). This informative and detailed research takes the children's point of view about local environments, capturing the words and images of children. The children, aged between 8 and 12, share their urban spaces with Moore in a way

that, like Hart's work in the US, reveals their special interactions with the local environment. Moore finds that children's favourite places are most commonly found within natural habitats which he believes has important implications for environmental planners. Such research is a rich, rigorous record and enhances our understanding of children's experiences so it is regrettable that similar projects have not been undertaken. Smaller investigations include research into place preference of secondary aged children by Malinowski and Thurber (1996), favoured types of landscape from Scott and Canter (1997) and the feelings, amongst other responses, people have for place by Hay (1998a), and also Stefanovic (1998). Hay's work is of interest in that he briefly reflects that 'early childhood is characterised by feelings of security and by being unselfconscious about one's place' (Hay 1998a:17), although it should be said that this claim is based upon adult memories of place rather than direct research with young children.

In 1989 Spencer, Blades and Morsley alerted environmental psychologists to the relevance of feelings and attitudes concerning place as a justifiable area of investigation. Spencer and colleagues emphasise that knowledge about a place is built up through direct experience and a set of attitudes, acknowledging that these attitudes and feelings are subjective and individual in nature. They state that places can repel or attract or felt to be friendly or hostile; that response to place is often intuitive rather than learned. However, identifying feelings for place is problematic in that it is an abstract, symbolic possibly elusive premise, but the authors are categorical that we ignore this affective side of place at our peril. Spencer and Blades (2006) edited a book that contributes further to thinking about environments for children. This book, *Children and their Environments*, brings together perspectives on children and their experiences of place, emphasising what children gain from these experiences. They cite immediate effects of an experience on long-term cognitive and emotional development, the involvement of the imagination and a sense of personal control and freedom. Most of the evidence cited relates to children over 5 years of age.

Work by Rachel Bowles (1995, 1998 & 2004) has produced interesting findings amongst primary children and their understanding of locality. She has focused on how far they appreciate the features of an area familiar to them through everyday activities. Once again this involves older children, but it is pertinent in relation to this study as it

reveals different perceptions of place amongst the children, perceptions that stem from social, cultural and community factors. One thought-provoking conclusion from Bowles is that 'children appear to be more observant than adults' (2004:41). Whether this applies to pre-school children too is one of the aspects this thesis attempts to investigate.

Roger Hart, whose work has been so influential, is now regarded as a champion both of children's rights and of the environment. He actively supports the work of organisations such as ACTIONAID, UNICEF and Save the Children, propounding the belief that the voices of children everywhere should be heard since they are experts on local environments and deserve to have their views respected and to be empowered (Hart 1997). Young children are certainly capable of forming opinions about their environment (Palmer 1994; Littledyke 2004). Researching in Bolivia, Punch (2000) takes this further and feels that children themselves play a significant role in shaping their own experiences. Even when children live in similar physical, social and cultural environments experiences are personal and individual. This claim is confirmed by other pieces of research such as Matthews in Kenya (1995a) and Derr in New Mexico (2002). However much of the research be it concerned with urban, rural or different cultural contexts involves the participation of older children. Pre-school children are seldom included in the investigations.

What emerges from the main studies cited above is children's close affinity to the natural world. Hart (1979), Moore (1986), Spencer et al (1989) and Matthews (1992) found that children respond to place in a variety of ways and their work has had a significant influence on this thesis. From Hart and Moore there is information regarding the way children feel about, value and use their near environment; from Matthews how place attachment develops; from Spencer et al the manner in which children develop their own private geographies through interaction with the environment. All these authors agree that children's abilities have been underestimated on many fronts; they can and do experience place on a personal level, and they can and do express their feelings and opinions about these experiences. What is still lacking, however, is a body of work that includes the views and voices of pre-school children. Before this is discussed in 4.5, there is a consideration of the

contribution of phenomenology to place research and whether it offers possible directions for this study.

4.4.1 Phenomenological research into place

Searches into the literature regarding a phenomenological approach to place research have revealed a substantial bank of material. Studies involve the importance of place to the elderly and an increasing number examining the relationship between people and remote places in North America. The most prolific writing is concerned with place attachment (see Bachelard 1958; Relph 1976; Tuan 1974 & 1977; Seamon 1979; Altman and Low 1982 for example, with Buttimer 1980, and Chawla 1990 & 1992 taking a less phenomenological stance) and this is a specific area of research in its own right involving aspects of place-bonding. There is also a growing phenomenological literature on the importance of home. As with place, home as an experience presupposes and sustains a taken-for-granted involvement between person and world. This bond is mostly unselfconscious and phenomenology aims to make that tacit relationship explicit and thereby aid understandings.

Langeveld's article, 'The secret places in the life of the child' (1953) reflects on special places children create such as dens, but it is largely contingent on Langeveld's imagination – how *he* sees it. The writing is charming and poetic, employing poems, fairy tales and contemporary children's literature. For example, he describes a closet thus, 'one barely opens the door to see a gaping dark space, whose emptiness strengthens the sense of determinacy' (n/p). Whilst as an adult one can empathise with Langeveld's views, they do not represent what the children themselves really think and feel. Barritt et al (1982) offer research into children and place that insists that nothing can substitute research that involves direct contact with children to illicit their views or, to use their phrase, 'to enter the personal-social topography of a child's world' (n/p) through joint participation, questioning and listening. The authors describe the child's world as 'pre-conventional' (n/p) by which they mean that, unlike adults, they do not view the world through a theoretical lens. Places for children are not seen as adults see and, whilst this is encouraging, the authors do not go further in promoting empirical research with children.

Although there is little research concerning a phenomenological approach to children and place, one that is of particular relevance is a Danish project that investigates places that are created by adults for children – places *for* children, as opposed to children's places. Rasmussen's (2004) research takes place to be a central category in conceptualising the transient, ordinary nature of everyday life. Children between the ages of 5 and 12 took part in the study and shared the places they spent time in with the author. Rasmussen's study is reflective and sympathetic, and draws upon Hart (1979), Matthews (1992) and Chawla (2002), so that a variety of approaches are considered, although phenomenology is clearly the dominant perspective. Like Hart, Rasmussen reports that many children's places have a subjective significance known only to the child. They are shaped in different cultures for social reasons and also, perhaps, for more individually determined purposes. Children's views are considered paramount in the study and in conclusion the author states that, 'the concept of place should not be underestimated in theorizing children's everyday life and the empirical sociology of childhood' (Rasmussen 2004:171).

From all the literature cited in this section of Chapter 4, the range of related research is clearly multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary (if not interdisciplinary), dealing as it does with such aspects as place use, place preference and place attachment. Research has broadened from a comparatively narrow base concerned with spatial cognition in the main to focus more on children's experiences. There is, however, room within these discourses for research that involves the younger children in society. Their omission is the subject of the following part of this chapter.

4.5 No place for pre-school children?

Although research into children's experience of place can be seen to have evolved in the 1970s, the research was by no means cumulative nor did it include children representing all ages. Children under the age of five were rarely included in studies. Indeed, it is still not the norm to involve pre-school children in this aspect of environmental experience. This is particularly surprising as it has been argued for many years that children's geographical awareness and learning develops during and from the earliest years of life. Thus, by the time a child enters primary school in the UK at the age of five, he or she will have what Matthews (1992), Cooper (2004), and

Palmer and Birch (2004) term 'embryonic geography' derived from experiences of the world. Admittedly, there is advice on teaching some aspects of geography in the early years, but it is not often substantiated by reference to its research background. Exceptions to this include work by Palmer et al (1996) and Palmer and Birch (2004). The latter is an international study of very young children's awareness of the world, physical environments and environmental care and it illustrates the extent to which children's early geographical knowledge and understanding has been constantly underestimated. The implications of this research support the contention that by the time children start school many of them already possess an awareness of geographical and environmental concepts.

Part of the problem regarding research-based evidence of children's experiences in general is a pervasive view outside education and psychology that researching with very young children is unreliable, risky and ethically challenging. This belief is closely tied to assumptions and accepted notions about young children and so competence, autonomy and interdependence of young children have been continually underestimated. However, there is research available that shows that pre-school children can make valuable contributions to research whether in group situations, single case-studies, in quantitative or qualitative studies (Hogan 2005). Even very young children have the capacity to tell us a great deal about themselves and can give accurate accounts of personal experiences; they are experts in their own right. As one researcher comments,

> *If communication is done well, if situations make sense to children and if there is a presumption of competence rather than incompetence, children often turn out to be more capable and sophisticated than they are given credit for.*
> Thomas (2001:110)

As mentioned previously, the conception of children's age-related competencies stems from the work of Jean Piaget and it has had a far-reaching and enduring influence (see also 5.2, 'Theories of child development and theories of learning'). Piaget's reasoning that children had to reach certain age-related stages before they could be expected to be competent had a huge impact on expectations of children especially through the 1960s and into the 70s, to the extent that research with small children was, to use an expression of David and Powell's (1999:209), 'doomed to

show them as fairly incompetent'. The title of a paper by Blaut entitled *Piaget's Pessimism* (1997b), emphasises the problems of the 'go-slow' view of child development and the pervasive nature of the theory. For many years, then, young children were not thought to have the powers psychologists now acknowledge, indeed developmental psychology failed to access these powers due to its underlying assumptions and methods.

According to Spencer et al (1989), young children are difficult to study due to their linguistic restrictions and also because of concerns regarding their reliability; just how much do they understand of what they are being asked? Spencer (1995:13) elaborates further by expressing concern that 'developing tools and approaches appropriate to the expressive capabilities of younger children' is problematic. It is also clear from consulting environmental psychology research that researchers find the attention span of pre-schoolers difficult to maintain. Stea et al (2004:342) even admit that some of the children 'wandered aimlessly' whilst they were carrying out the data collection. Pre-school children have also been described as the most suggestible age-group so that data collected from them should be regarded with caution (Bruck et al 1998). With such negative traits attributed to pre-school children by professional researchers, perhaps it is not surprising that researchers approach them with caution or not at all. Whilst such perceptions may have deterred researchers from working with preschoolers there is a realisation that something is missing by not addressing them. Aitken and Herman (1997), for example, believe that it is important to understand *all* children's experiences of the local environment as without this it is not possible to establish agendas on their behalf – 'children can see things in environments that we may have forgotten how to see, let alone understand' (p. 64). Whilst this refers to environmental issues in a broader sense, there is also a call from those in the field of environmental psychology to strive to understand children's experiences of place from their own perspectives. Surely this must include even the youngest children whose views are equally as important?

4.6 Concluding comments

This chapter has traced the path of research into children's experiences of place and sought to locate research directly related to this thesis. One of the challenges of

research into children's interactions with their environment is the interdisciplinary nature of this area of study. It is not possible to receive an adequate view of this subject from any one domain so the literature has been reviewed in such a way that includes research from the fields of geography, environmental psychology and phenomenology. A substantial amount of research is concerned with spatial knowledge and includes navigation, route-finding and mapping skills. The latter was presented in tabular form to demonstrate how this aspect of research has developed over the years. Clearly, spatial knowledge involves place and places inasmuch as they are integral to maps and routes, but what it does not do is examine places *per se* and children's responses to them. Whilst spatial investigations were gaining momentum in the 1970s and 80s there was also interest, albeit limited, in affective responses to the environment. Roger Hart's research with children has been the inspiration for researchers inquiring into children's responses and feelings for place. One aspect that has caused, and still seems to cause, problems is the difficulty of accessing children's feelings, attitudes and imagination that are linked to experiences of place, arguably far more challenging than the more tangible, objective and measurable areas of research such as route-finding and knowledge of distant places.

There is a consensus that emerges from the literature surveyed and that is there has been a sustained underestimation of children's environmental competencies. Their knowledge and skills surpass what has traditionally been expected of them. This chapter has also reflected on the reason pre-school children are a neglected age-group in terms of research outside education and psychology. It would appear that the main concerns include reliability, not understanding the task and a pervasive view that children under five are not capable of participating in research due to linguistic restrictions and a short span of attention. This will, of course, be considered further as part of the research design.

With definitions of the central concepts of this research achieved – experience of place, childhood and the pre-school child – and considerations of related research and the current state of research in the field, a substantial part of the framework that supports this research has been constructed. Of particular significance thus far is the perceived gap in the research; the underestimation of children's environmental competencies and the lack of research with pre-school children. The next chapter,

'Theoretical Perspectives: Theories of Learning and Learning about Place', turns its attention to positioning this research within a theoretical context.

Chapter 5

Theoretical Perspectives: Theories of Learning and Learning about Place

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is sub-divided into four main topics:

1. Parts 5.2 and 5.3 are concerned with theories of development and learning, and the theoretical framework for this thesis. The objective here is to set the study within a theoretical context that supports the exploration of pre-school children's experience of place.

2. Part 5.4 considers the cognitive processes that are involved with experiencing place, such as perception and memory. Awareness of these processes assists understandings of how children make sense of place.

3. Parts 5.5 - 5.8 discuss the relevance of the concepts of place affordance, place attachment, place preference and influences that effect responses to place. Together, these concepts and ideas help in the formulation of understandings about children's relationships with place.

4. Part 5.9 pays attention to place as an area of learning in pre-school curricula and provides examples of different approaches to teaching and learning about place. This effectively gives an overview of what a pre-school child might be expected to encounter in terms of learning about place in an educational environment.

The first objective of this chapter is to locate ideas, concepts and theories of children's learning that underpin and help conceptualise this investigation into pre-school children's experience of place. There is no single theory into which this research 'fits' and, furthermore, to operate within hegemonic theoretical perspectives could be construed as limiting and constraining. Nor is there one theory that embraces the specific nature of this research and which is in full accordance with my personal

views of early childhood, and my ontological and epistemological beliefs[1]. The search, then, was directed at locating conceptual notions that could be used to build a suitable and workable theoretical context which emphasised the individuality of learning, the child as an active learner and the importance of children learning and experiencing phenomena in real contexts.

With these criteria in mind, there is engagement with various theories of development and of learning that offer a range of perspectives, ideas and concepts that can contribute to understanding how pre-school children learn in general and, more specifically, learn about places with which they come into contact. The fields from which these theories emanate are developmental and cognitive psychology, and in 5.2, 'Theories of child development and theories of learning', there is an account of the theories that contribute to the theoretical framework for this thesis. The development theories embraced include one that takes a social constructivist stance and two that are associated with systems theory. Following this there is a discussion of two theories of learning, namely schema theory and information-processing. Concepts and ideas from all these theories are utilised in this research to construct an ideological structure which is presented in 5.3, 'The theoretical framework for this study'. This construction is, perhaps, best described as an eclectic theoretical framework in that it is wide-ranging, transcends disciplinary boundaries and also provides flexibility within the research process.

The second part of Chapter 5 is concerned with conceptual notions that are more specific to the actual experience of place. Section 5.4, 'Cognitive processes', considers what it is to experience an experience, and assesses the cognitive processes involved and those that may be of relevance to this investigation. These include perception, attention, memory and emotion. The third part of the chapter gives an account of four place-related issues. These are the 'Concept of affordances' presented in 5.5, 'Children's place attachment', 5.6, and 'Children's place preference' in 5.7. The direct and indirect influences on children's experiences of place are considered in 5.8. These four issues are included in this chapter as they provide ways of looking at the relationships children may have with places and thus may offer ways in which the empirical findings can be considered. The fourth topic under consideration, and found

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[1] These views and beliefs are discussed fully in Chapter 6

in 5.9, is 'Learning in pre-school: place and early years curricula' in which there is a reflection upon the approaches taken in the UK and other countries to place education in the pre-school years. There is also an account of the role of play as a way of learning about place. These particular facets of place learning warrant consideration as the manner in which children learn about place in an educational setting may have some bearing on how place is perceived. The chapter is summarised in 5.10, 'Concluding comments'.

5.2 Theories of child development and theories of learning: the *how* of learning

This section of Chapter 5 considers some of the theories and models of learning, with an emphasis on how it is thought children learn about the physical environment. Learning has always been seen as central to childhood, although the study of learning has not always been of central concern to developmental psychology. Through the 1960s it was most certainly a major focus of developmental research with work by classic theorists such as Skinner, Dewey and Bandura particularly influential. By the mid-1970s, however, learning theories and the study of children's learning lost their prominence. The main reason behind this demise was, according to Siegler (1998), due to perceived deficiencies of learning theories whereby most tried to account for all learning, with the result that theories fit some cases of learning better than others. Certainly, the most rigorous theories can fit narrowly defined kinds of learning, but are not so appropriate when extended to other kinds. Equally, theories that cover all types of learning tend to be rather non-rigorous. This conundrum of the 70s resulted in a transfer of interest to theories of child development that do not place specific emphasis on learning, but which offer explanations for the complex process of a child changing from having the physical, social and intellectual competencies of newborn babies to being full and active members of a culture with all the skills that implies. Indeed, child development is a broad field, dealing as it does with the many psychological aspects of human life such as feelings, emotions, creativity, learning and physical energy. For one commentator this field embraces not only many aspects of development, but is plagued by 'contradictions and paradoxes' (Penn 2005:39). This is, presumably, due to the complexity of development coupled with the highly individual path it can take.

The difference between theories of learning and theories of development is a matter of some conjecture, ranging from belief that they are discrete to that they are indistinguishable or, at the very least, overlap. The emergence of theories of child development was largely based on the assumptions of positivism with the concomitant belief that there is a measurable, objective reality. However, over time theories became more diverse and more broadly based. Several theories of development have been consulted with regards to their potential to inform this thesis and, after due deliberation, it is ideas from Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner and Urie Bronfenbrenner that have emerged as the most influential and which are used in the construction of a theoretical framework. This is discussed in the next two sub-sections of this chapter, 5.2.1 and 5.2.2.

Of course there are theorists whose work has been excluded in the process of constructing a theoretical framework. These include, for example, those working within the fields of behaviourism and nativism. But perhaps most notable is the exclusion of the eminent child psychologist and genetic epistemologist Jean Piaget. It was felt that Piaget and Inhelder's (1969) constructivist, stage-based theory of development, whereby children possess age-related competencies, could not be employed in this empirical study. There are several reasons for this decision. The theory does not allow for pre-school children's ability to de-centre from their experiences, indeed they are regarded as egocentric and thus would be unlikely to have, let alone express, feelings and attitudes which are the basic premise of this thesis. For Hart (1979), Piaget does not include children's interests in or feelings for things because he was concerned purely with the structure of their knowledge. This, too, is of relevance to this study as it indicates the need to look elsewhere for a theory or a concept that incorporates the more subjective aspects of learning. A further problem is that Piaget neglects the roles of culture, thought, personal interests and emotional experiences in a child's developing knowledge and understanding of the world. Donaldson (1978) also feels Piaget and his colleagues fail to attend to what she calls the child's 'human sense', that meaningful understanding of the world the child constructs through his or her culturally mediated experience with it. Perhaps most significantly in terms of this research, Piaget's work does not place children within real contexts which result in 'real' experiences. From his research he draws generalised conclusions about children which have not stood up to scrutiny when

researchers have examined children doing meaningful tasks in familiar situations. For all these reasons this constructivist approach to development does not feature in the theoretical framework for this study.

Attention now turns to two social constructivists from whose work ideas are applied.

5.2.1 Vygotsky and Bruner: social constructivism

The Russian Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) transformed the study of developmental psychology. He gave prominence to the impact of children's social and cultural worlds on their development and the role of the adult in helping a child reach his or her potential. Like Piaget, Vygotsky was a stage-theorist and defined development in terms of abrupt shifts rather than steady, incremental change but, unlike Piaget, he placed emphasis on the social transmission of knowledge which he regarded as the key to learning (Vygotsky 1978). For Vygotsky, true education is the development of children's learning abilities – their capacity to think clearly and creatively and communicate their understanding in a variety of ways. The key to human intelligence is the use of tools or the symbolic systems used to communicate and analyse reality. These include signs, symbols, numbers, pictures, models, maps and, above all, language. Vygotsky placed language as the most universal of cultural tools and this premise is relevant to this thesis in that the pre-school child is still mastering its complexity. Some pre-school children may keep up a running commentary on what they are doing as they are not wholly competent at internalising language as thought. In turn, the development of thought is to a great extent determined by the linguistic ability of the child. The implication for this study is that careful consideration must be given to selecting children who are able to communicate effectively during the fieldwork phase of this research. The other aspect of relevance to this thesis is the emphasis social constructivists place upon learning as a process of constructing meaningful representations – of making sense of one's experiential world – and that there is an understanding that there are multiple truths, perspectives and realities. With reference to children's learning, Penn (2005:42) explains this well; 'Children respond to the reality they see and experience around them, and what they learn reflects this reality'. This ontological perspective has influenced my own practice in the past and is the lens through which experiencing place is viewed in this study.

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Jerome S. Bruner (1915 -), a social constructivist like Vygotsky, has also been of influence in this research. Bruner has not put forward a particular theory of his own, but has contributed towards education and curricula with his ideas about the effect upon learning of the cultural and educational contexts in which children are placed. In addition, Bruner looked to environmental and experiential factors in cognitive growth and has placed his work within a thorough appreciation of culture with which ... 'we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of our selves' (Bruner 1996: x). Culture does not so much determine development, but enables a child to become what he or she is capable of. There is no direct reference to the experience of place as a factor that contributes to learning, but what Bruner does offer is his belief that learning is a process in which the child is an active participant. If this is accepted then the direct experience of place can be categorised as what he describes as one of many 'knowledge-getting' processes where the child is a dynamic, apprentice learner (Bruner 1960:72).

5.2.2 Bronfenbrenner; Moore and Young: systems theory

The ecological systems theory was devised by the American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005). He had concerns about the circumstances in which children grow up and the influences upon their lives of the contexts of learning, including the geographical context. In Bronfenbrenner's view most developmental psychology studies focus on 'a child's strange behaviour in strange situations with strange adults in the shortest possible time' (1979:19). He did not believe that human development can be studied out of the multi-levelled, social, material and cultural contexts in which development takes place. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner wanted developmental psychologists to focus on the processes that have led to a certain state of being, rather than the results of development.

Bronfenbrenner's model suggests that children develop a complex relationship with the environment and that knowledge and understanding of the world is either advanced or restrained by social *and* physical settings (Bronfenbrenner 1979). If experiences are positive then development is accordingly stable; if negative, due to factors such as lack of space, conflict, poverty, and noise etc, then development can be inhibited. Although Bronfenbrenner's theory is non-testable due to its size,

complexity and its operation on many levels, it does place emphasis on the possible extent direct and indirect influences have upon a child's development.

In this theory a child is at the centre of four environmental systems categorised by their proximity and effects upon that child, and all of which guide development and interaction. These systems can either support or inhibit a child's environmental experience. On the inside of the nested hierarchy are the target predictor and outcome variables, referred to as the interaction of the socio-physical environment on development. Around the target variables are four rings of contextual variables that are termed – from inner to outer - the micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system. The micro-system, or micro-environment, refers to the immediate spatio-temporal-social surroundings of the target phenomenon. These include variables such as place and physical features and this is where there is relevance to this study. Children live within their immediate locale in their own unique system with the people who care for them and interact together in the course of day-to-day events. Places for the pre-school child can include home and nursery, and also more personal places like a bedroom or a quiet corner in the garden. The assumption is that young children have a small range of activity outside the home but, as they become older, the range increases and a complex relationship with the environment develops, characterised by increasingly sophisticated means of understanding. This range of activity is borne out by research by Coates and Bussard (1974) who found that children aged 4-5 live in what they refer to as a home-base bubble extending up to 50 feet from their front door. Hart (1979) also confirmed this finding, stating that the youngest children in the neighbourhood he studied were always within their mother's sight or hearing. The influence of neighbourhood and communities is central to the ecological perspective of child development, especially with regards to social and cultural development.

Bronfenbrenner did not detail the effects of experience of place upon the child as he concentrated more on the social ecology of childhood, but research happening elsewhere suggested that the physical environment could have a significant effect upon a child's development. Writing at almost the same time, Moore and Young (1978) devised a 'behaviour-environmental-ecological framework' where the effect of the physical environment in terms of use and experience is clearly acknowledged.

This framework, illustrated in Figure 5.1, suggests that a child lives simultaneously in three interdependent realms of experience. These are the physiological-psychological environment of the body-mind; the sociological environment of interpersonal relationships and, thirdly (and the realm of experience directly concerning this thesis) the physiographic landscape of spaces, places, objects, persons and natural and built elements. The interaction between the three realms controls children's use of the geographic environment and this leads to an image and understanding of place, the cumulative content of experience. The ideas here illustrate the way in which experiences of place are part of development and, as such, are important and relevant. This theory was superseded by Bronfenbrenner's the following year and, apparently, has never been given any credit towards increasing understanding children's developing relationship with place.

PHYSIOGRAPHIC SPACE

the landscape of objects, buildings, places, people and natural elements

Use
Memory
Image
Schemata

SOCIAL SPACE

human relationships and cultural values

INNER SPACE

physiological and psychological life of the individual
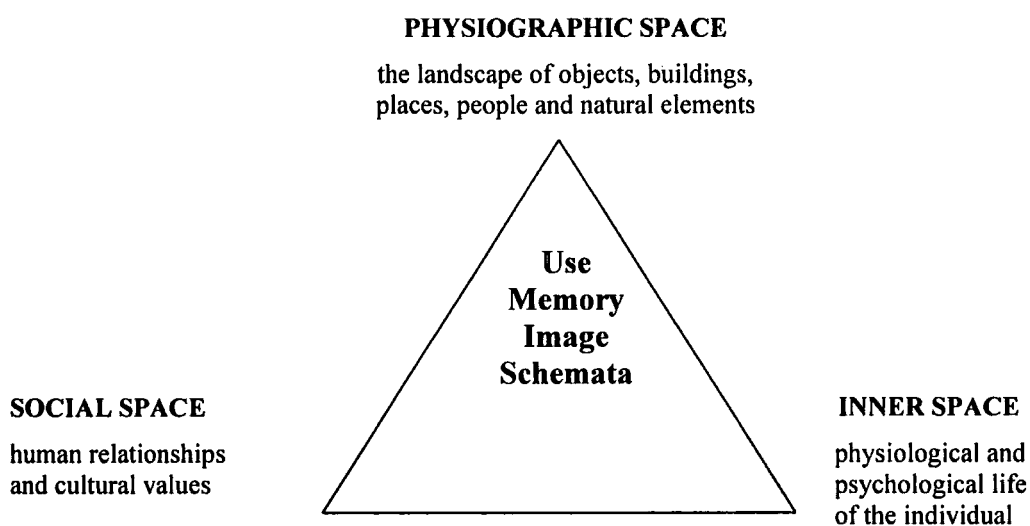
Figure 5.1: *Realms of environmental experience* (After Moore and Young 1978:84)

To return to Bronfenbrenner and work that is relevant to this thesis, he later extended his ideas to consider the developmentally instigative characteristics of individuals (Bronfenbrenner 1993). These are grouped into four categories:

Group 1: Personal instigative characteristics that either restrict or promote the reactions to the environment. These have positive or negative influences on psychological development processes.

Group 2: The factors in this group deal with an individual's selective sensitivity to the social and physical environment.

Group 3: The individual has the tendency to structuralise the environment i.e. shape, change and even re-create it.

Group 4: The factors included in this group refer to a person's guiding beliefs concerning the dynamic relationship between him or herself and the environment.

In terms of this study, it would seem that the second category is of potential relevance in that it is suggested that there is an individuality associated with response to the physical world, and also that there is some discrimination in what aspects of the environment are attended to. These considerations are incorporated into the theoretical framework for this research.

In the following sub-sections, 5.2.4 and 5.2.5, two models or theories of learning are considered. These two – schema theory and information-processing - have been selected because they include aspects or concepts that are of particular pertinence to this study of pre-school children's experience of place.

5.2.3 Schema theory

The term schema was first used by Piaget in 1926 when he employed the idea of interaction with the external environment through biological schema and, so whilst it is not a new concept, its meaning and application has been expanded. Basically, a schema is a knowledge structure that assimilates raw sensory data. It can be very simple, such as the action pattern involved by a child's sucking a thumb or it can be very complex as in the chain of acts required for starting a car and driving it down the road (Thomas 2000). There are certain characteristics of schemata that may be of relevance to this research, and which have been summarised by Anderson et al (1977:418-419):

> ➢ schemata are always organised meaningfully, can be added to and, as experience grows, develop to include more variables and more specificity
> ➢ each schema is embedded in another schemata
> ➢ schemata change moment by moment as information is received

- they may also be reorganised when incoming data reveals a need to restructure the concept
- the mental representations used during perception and comprehension, and which evolve as a result of these processes, combine to form a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts

In effect, what a schema does is help explain how information is processed, interpreted and understood and, as such, it can be helpful when applied to place learning. A schema enables the physical world to be organised, to be made sense of and allows us to function in what is an incredibly complicated world. If, then, a child encounters a novel place, by contrasting and comparing images new stimuli are matched against a range of existing schemata to select the ones that are most relevant. The ones elicited are used or operated to make sense of the place. If none seem to fit then the place may have no meaning or there may be information that can start the construction of a new schema. The child is actively learning the nature of physical objects in the environment and sorts them into categories on the basis of their characteristics – this is termed by Lee (2003) as the 'whatness' of objects. Lee goes on to describe the 'whereness' or locations of objects and how to navigate to reach them, and the 'whenness' of objects where not all objects are permanently available for scrutiny or use. These three 'Ws' are, Lee believes, crucial for environmental understanding.

The concept of schema may be able to provide insights into the ways children experience place as it has the potential to show how they construct meanings and understandings. Categorising place or elements of place involves giving it order and structure and the way in which this is done is unique and personal to each child. Lee also debates the involvement of feelings and attitudes in schemata of the environment so that there is 'evaluative loading or valency' (op. cit. p. 48). This refers to feelings of pleasure, fear etc, and attitudes such as ideas about the benefits or otherwise of, say, building a road near a place of outstanding natural beauty. Pre-school children are perhaps more likely to express their feelings about a place than voice opinions that reflect specific attitudes. What is not clear in the literature is whether this theory is usually applied in conjunction with stage-based development.

There is particular interest in schema theory from some of those in the field of environmental psychology of which it is true to say that there is a lack of strong theoretical models. According to Baroni (2003), this is due to the relative youth of the discipline and the challenge of its interdisciplinary status whereby it requires the collaboration of geographers, biologists, sociologists and other professional figures who make individual contributions to the complex intertwining of cognitive systems such as those that involve social, affective, emotional and motivational processes.

5.2.4 Information-processing

The basic premise for information-processing theories in relation to cognitive development is a comparison between the workings of the mind and the computer so that human beings possess a range of cognitive processes and strategies that help make use of information. The metaphor of mind-computer incorporates the similarity between the two in the manner in which information is processed through the application of logical rules and strategies and, like a computer, the mind is limited in that it can only process a certain amount of information. Further, if the brain and sensory system are analogous to computer hardware their performance can be improved by upgrades or changes, and the human use of rules and strategies or computer software likewise. It is suggested that structural changes in cognitive processing are brought about by changes in the strategies we use to learn about the world and not, as proposed by developmental and constructivist theories, the other way round (Hetherington and Parke 2003). The basic structures of the information-processing system do not change with development; rather it is the processes of information-handling that change. Information-processing can be applied to changes in a child's perception and attention, the development of memory and problem-solving, and a child's own knowledge of his or her own mental capabilities.

Information-processing theories have developed over the past four decades or so and they encompass a range of approaches so that a detailed exposition is beyond the scope of this study. However, there are elements of the theory that are of significance to this study, such as the role of change mechanisms in a child's cognitive skills. Change mechanisms include encoding, strategy construction, automatization and generalisation, all of which work together to produce change in cognition.

Can this aspect of information-processing theory be employed to the experience of place? There seems to be no reason why not. If applied to the experience of place, it would appear that a child has to encode critical information about the place and then use this encoded information and relevant prior knowledge to construct a strategy that enables him or her to make sense of the place. These new strategies are usually slow to construct and, according to Siegler (1998) the child must practice a strategy to make its execution automatic. Lastly, to facilitate this new strategy the child has to generalise or apply it to other situations or problems. It is these strategies that are of noteworthy interest to this thesis and, although they are more usually applied to children's mathematical development, it could be proposed that strategies, or conscious cognitive or behavioural activities, are used when experiencing place.

Another aspect of interest is the child's perception of the surrounding environment. This perception may be the same amongst a group of children but 'his or her *attention* may be focused on different aspects' and 'attention is meaningless unless we glean meaning from what we observe' (Hetherington and Parke 2003:377). In this way a child chooses which aspect(s) to attend to based on sights, sounds, smells, touches and sensations of movement – this individuality is particularly significant to this study. Indeed, information-processing pays particular attention to the sense modalities and the way in which they feed environmental information into the system. According to Mackworth (1976) children of pre-school age are beginning to show acquaintance with, or habituation to, patterns seen or heard before. Thomas (2000:335) additionally claims that such children 'select for study those patterns that exhibit novelty'. However, the child's responses to what he or she observes may be contradictory or fluctuating as his or her attention flits from one thing to another. It is suggested that older children have better cognitive control over attention, can select important details, alter their judgements and abstract a rule from a sequence of events.

5.3 The theoretical framework for this study

The chapter thus far has introduced concepts from both development theories and learning theories that are perceived as relevant to the construction of a theoretical framework in which to set this study. This framework, perhaps best described as eclectic, is based upon socially-constructed, ecological-systems concepts and

incorporates ideas from schema theory and information-processing. It is a structure that supports the child as an active, individual and selective learner who has unique experiences from which meanings are constructed through the use of different strategies. A more detailed explication of the framework is presented in Table 5.1 which shows the specific aspect of the theory or model employed. There is an assessment of its effectiveness and suggestions for modifications in Chapter 12.

Theory or model	Aspect used for constructing the theoretical framework
Social constructivism	The child is actively trying to make sense of the world; there are multiple truths and realities. Language has communicative, symbolic and pragmatic functions which construct meanings (Aiello & Bonaiuto 2003).
Systems theory	Studies development in environmental context. Moore & Young's (1978) interaction between social, inner and physiographic spaces results in experiences.
Schema theory	Emphasis on the unique nature of experience. Reflects human tendency to identify, classify, categorise and recognise phenomena
Information processing	Strategies used to make sense of situations. Selection of what to attend to. Sense modalities important

Table 5.1: *Constructing the theoretical framework: the use of elements of existing theories and models*

In the next part of this chapter there is a discussion concerning the role of cognitive processes that are involved in experiencing an experience.

5.4 Cognitive processes: experiencing an experience

Cognitive processes are the means by which sense is made of the world around us and are thus involved when events or phenomena are experienced. In the literature these processes are usually described as perception, attention, learning, memory, language and emotions. To this some writers, for example Baroni (2003), include further means of sense-making such as affective and social processes. It is not possible to give a full account and explanation of each of these processes here, so there has to be a selection made of the most relevant aspects. Perception, attention, memory and emotion are those chosen for inclusion.

Perception is the cognitive process through which sensations – sound, sight, smell, touch and taste - are interpreted in order to make them meaningful. Perception is an

individual process so, whilst the children who take part in this research will encounter the same places during the fieldwork, it does not necessarily mean that they will take in the same amounts and kinds of information. Each child's perception of a place will be different in some way as his or her attention will be focussed on different features or aspects of that place. So, by way of example, one child may focus on the smell of the flowers in a garden; another the sound of water from a stream and a third may find the shadows made by the plants intriguing. Of course this does not imply that the other senses are not operating during the experience of place, rather individuals respond differently to different stimuli. Another way to explain the selection of certain features, objects or phenomena upon which to focus is to appreciate that there is simply too much information in the world to take it in at any given time as there are limits to the brain's ability to process it. Even in what could be construed as 'simple' environments there is a constant stream of environmental information bombarding the senses. Ward (1978) suggests that children have the capacity for vivid, sensory experiences unlike many adults for whom 'there is an actual, measurable physical decline in sensitivity to taste, smells, to colour and sound' (p.21).

The connection between attention and perception is clearly close as perception is dependent upon the ability to attend. Equally, attention is meaningless unless meaning can be derived from what is observed. This selection of, or attendance to, certain stimuli and interpretation of the same is important for this research. Note must also be taken of the age of the children – for young children attention and perception are still developing. The attention span of some pre-school children can be very short so there is an onus on making any research activity with them interesting as then it is more likely that the stimuli will be processed and become meaningful. But, in addition to this, there needs to be awareness that finding something boring does not necessarily mean the task itself is dull. In this research it may indicate that it is the place *per se* that is boring.

Memory is of significance to this study in that prior memories of place may have an impact on current experience. The experience of place and a child's pre-exiting mental structures are related in that information is thought to be selected through schema pre-existing in the mind which directs the attention to some aspects rather than others. It could be suggested that prior experiences of, say a walk by a river, may

have a significant affect on the manner in which a different river is experienced. To take this further, if a child has been frightened by the proximity or the movement of the river water this encounter could trigger the same response. Equally, a pleasant memory of a picnic by the river may influence the next event of this kind.

The cognitive process of emotion can be defined as a subjective neural impulse-produced mental state that evokes either a positive or negative psychological response. Positive emotions include joy and pleasure; negative include fear and anger. Emotions create a response in the mind that arises spontaneously rather than through conscious effort (Harris 1989). Such reactions may be instant or inferred after some time and are often expressed in some form of visible behaviour. By pre-school age most children have a repertoire of emotions that include frustration, anger, petulance, fear and defiance, and delight, surprise, joy, and elation. Some children are able to articulate these emotions verbally, but facial expressions and body language are likely to be a vital line of communication.

The difference between emotion and feeling is important. A feeling can be described as emotion that is filtered through the cognitive brain centres to produce a physiological change in addition to the psychological change. A feeling in the context of this thesis refers to a subjective human response and is often defined as being more general or neutral compared to synonyms such as emotion, passion or sentiment. Nevertheless it is still a complex concept. One of the most appropriate definitions in terms of this study and my own conception comes from Heron (1992). For Heron feelings are resonance with being, the capacity by which we 'participate in and are compresent with our world' (p.1). Heron continues to say a feeling is, 'the most inclusive of all the mental words' in that it refers to physical touch, bodily sensations, wants, wishes, needs, thoughts, moods and opinions. Heron usefully differentiates between feelings and emotions by describing a feeling as a precognisant sense that is experienced by the body in the mind, whilst an emotion is the reaction of the mind generated by the match between this feeling and the individual's intention. Taking these various definitions and the context of this research into account, feelings are perhaps best defined as the links between prior experience, thinking and emotion.

The experience of place potentially involves a wide range of cognitive processes. Not all these processes can be employed at one time as there is a limit upon the amount of information that can be processed. This implies that one or two cognitive processes

may be dominant during an experience and this is pertinent to how pre-school children experience place during the empirical stage of this research. It is also certain that each child will experience a place individually. There may be subtle differences or complete contrasts between one child and another, but the process will be similar in that experiences are being built in terms of a specific theme or context. At the same time old themes are developed and new ones created.

5.5 The concept of affordances

It is possible to perceive place in terms of its functional significance. Known as the concept of affordances, this ecological approach that lies at the heart of perceptual psychology was devised by James J. Gibson. It is of particular relevance to this research as it is a way of experiencing place as a functionally active process. Gibson, and later Heft (1988), concentrate their studies on the interaction between an organism and the environment. In their view the person-environment relationship is immediate and based on practical activity rather than being analytical. Unlike information-processing where perception is treated as a form of cognition, this way of thinking emphasises a thorough description and study of the environmental information which involves the use of all the senses that constitute the perceptual system.

In ecological perceptual psychology meaning is inherently linked with perception, where meaning refers to the functional meaning of the perceived. It also includes intentions and emotions present in the perceptual process. Perception is viewed as an activity in an ecological reality and also as functional:

> *Perceiving is an achievement of the individual, not an appearance in the theatre of consciousness. It is a keeping-in-touch with the world, an experience of things rather than a having of experience*
>
> Gibson (1986:239)

Perception is thought to be oriented towards finding the affordances of an environment or, put another way and in the context of this thesis, the attributes of a place are perceived by children as affording certain uses. For example a tree is seen as offering multiple affordances in that it is somewhere to climb, to hide or to make a den rather than being an object independent of themselves. These different ways of

seeing contribute to a child's learning and also highlight the different and individual ways place can be perceived. The emphasis here is on the individual so that a child can have his or her own affordance preferences. Another pertinent consideration is that children of different ages perceive affordances that correspond to their physical development, the functional demands of ongoing activity and to their current intentions. That said, a significant number of affordances are common to everyone and, also, children and their parents or carers share many affordances whereby the adults see the way their children view the environment e.g. the danger of playing too close to water.

5.6 Children's place attachment

The study of place attachment is situated largely within the domains of psychology and environmental psychology. There is a degree of consensus that place attachment is defined as an affective bond or link between people and specific places. However, place attachment can be interpreted in several ways. For example, Riley (1992:13) sees place attachment as the 'affective relationship between people and the landscape that goes beyond cognition, preference of judgement'. Spencer (2005), writing from an environmental psychology perspective, feels that place attachment is about self-definition and individual and communal aspects of identity. For phenomenologists place attachment is one of the central themes of the philosophy and receives extensive coverage in the literature. The phenomenologically oriented human geographer Tuan (1974) suggests that place attachment is fundamental to human need, but in contemporary society attachments are less intense as they are increasingly based more on functional relationships rather than emotional bonds.

Altman and Low's book, *Place Attachment* (1992), is, arguably, the definitive text on this subject. It includes papers on children's attachment to places such as that by Louise Chawla, one of the foremost experts in this area. Chawla describes four traditions within the literature she reviews – psychoanalytic theory, environmental autobiographies, behavioural mapping and favourite place analysis. She has devised a model of place attachment development. This is in three stages; birth to 5 years; middle childhood (6 to 11 years) and adolescence (12 to 17 years). In the course of 'normal' or undisturbed development the child progresses from a close attachment to

home and close proximity to the home, through exploration of the local area to travel to distant places for purposes such as recreation. Healthy place attachments balance the inward hold of the home with the outward attractions of the expanding world. Chawla suggests that a pre-school child is most attached to a place where he or she is most secure; the home at the centre. This primary attachment offers both a stable physical base from where exploration takes place and a base for feelings for other places inasmuch they can be measured against the familiar centre. Of course if the home or centre is unstable then the developmental sequence breaks down and place attachment may follow a different course. Chawla suggests that an unstable home is likely to have a negative affect on how other places are viewed with further consequences being problems with self-identity and sense of belonging.

For Chawla feelings for place are near irrelevant for children of pre-school age. Firstly, they have limited access to places outside the home and secondly, she claims they are unable to express their feelings appropriately. It is not until a child is over 6, or in Chawla's 'middle childhood', that they begin to value places and imbue in them their own feelings. This coincides with the time when the strong social attachment to the family base lessens and the physical environment becomes more important. Effectively then, Chawla has dismissed any notion that pre-school children can develop feelings for place or indeed experience place outside the home in any real sense. This does, of course, have implications for this study which seeks to investigate precisely this domain of experience.

The place attachment theory is perhaps best considered as one of many possible relationships with place rather than as an exclusive view (Spencer 2005). More recently the possibility of place friendship has been discussed (Chatterjee 2005). This may be another valid form of place relationship that is not a developmental necessity but, rather, a developmental advantage for children. This is an area that may warrant further research.

5.7 Children's place preference

Whilst there is no research that deals specifically with the place preference of pre-school children, research into this area is an essential part of environmental

psychology and may have implications for this thesis. Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, and Roger Ulrich are the pioneers in this field and their work has stimulated a substantial number of related studies. One of the most important findings of their empirical studies is that reactions to the environment and place are shared in the main by everyone (Ulrich 1983; Kaplan 1987; Kaplan et al 1989). The inference that can be drawn from this is that there is some evolutional basis for these preferences, but it is also the case that preferences can be learned or are influenced by socio-cultural mores. It is believed, too, that preferences are direct and immediate, and that the variation in preferences is due to a variety of factors such as what a place affords. Interestingly, the mysteriousness offered by some places has been found to be one of the strongest indicators of environmental preference. An example of mysteriousness is a high wall obscuring what lies beyond. The more immediate nature of environmental preferences relates to characteristics of the environment that are, for example, interesting, scary, or attractive, and which promote an immediate emotional reaction and provoke either attraction or aversion (Ulrich 1983).

Korpela's (1992) article on adolescents' favourite places involves children of 17 and 18, and reports their emotional responses to place. Of course these responses are different to what may be expected from pre-school children but, nevertheless, the basic premise that favourite places 'may provide respite from daily pressures as well as feelings of well-being, peace and comfort' (p.249) are interesting and of potential significance to this study particularly if they are viewed as important to the 'development and sustenance of mental health' (p.250). Ten years later, Korpela co-authored another paper (Korpela, Kyattä and Hartig 2002), in which children between the ages of 8 and 13 were participants. Again, it seems that favourite places reflect positive feelings and what the authors term 'cognitive restoration'. Whether the pre-school children in this research have preferences for certain places is part of the empirical investigation. Whether these places offer some sort of emotional and mental therapy may not be so easy to discover.

5.8 Influences on experiences of place

The influences that may affect children's experience of place are many and various, and will vary according to the age of the child. For older children personal

transactions with place occur in very different circumstances to those of pre-school children. For example, the outdoor range of a 10-year-old is obviously far wider than a 3-year-old so that there are greater opportunities for exploration and play. There are, however, some influences that appear to be common to children of all ages and very often these effects are brought with the child into educational settings.

Children come into contact with place both directly by experiencing it themselves and indirectly via some sort of information. All these experiences can be accompanied by deliberate or passive learning. Children build up knowledge continually, absorbing impressions, ideas and attitudes be they experienced directly or indirectly. For some commentators such as Moore there is a perceived danger that children are not experiencing enough first hand experiences:

> *...children in the West are becoming the passive receivers of pre-digested*
> *messages from secondary sources instead of being agents for self-initiated*
> *interaction with the living world around them.*
>
> (Moore: 1986:21)

Twenty years on, with the concerns over child safety, different family structures and the influence of the mass media, it is probable that children are receiving far more indirect experiences of places than direct, but to date there is no research to confirm this viewpoint. This issue was considered previously in Chapter 3.

Figure 5.2 demonstrates the range of environmental information that a child may receive both directly and indirectly. Aspects of direct means of understanding places involves the child's own personal space around the home and the immediate locality, places visited and, at the furthest limit, visits to other countries. The amount a child experiences, or at least registers, depends on where she or he lives, the complexity of the local environment, modes of transport, the level of activity of the child in the locale, and social and economic factors. In the UK there will be wide variations of direct experience of place. The actual nature of the physical environment of home – be it rural or urban, suburban or inner city, island or wilderness – will impact on a child's understanding and his or her perceptions of place. Some pre-schoolers have already travelled quite extensively abroad and, arguably, any first hand experience develops some awareness of people in places, of features, routes, landmarks, place use

The diagram shows concentric circles representing influences on a child's experience of place.

Outer ring (grey): **PLACE: INDIRECT INFLUENCES**
- Television
- Nursery
- Print
- Computers

Inner ring (lighter): **PLACE: DIRECT INFLUENCES**
- Travel
- Exploration
- Recreation
- Social contact

Centre circle: **Child's personal space**

Arrows point outward to boxes reading:
- Child's world expands from near to distant places

Figure 5.2: *Direct and indirect influences on pre-school children's experience of place*
(After Goodey 1971 and Matthews 1992)

and variations between one place and another. In addition, the sensory stimuli afforded are many and various with different sights, sounds and smells offering new experiences. Equally, it is possible that the trip involves a flight, a hotel, a pool, familiar food and language so it is very similar to home in some ways; there is little sense of the diversity and variety in the world. Whatever their experiences, the young child is constantly developing new knowledge and new understandings so that a sophisticated set of geographical and environmental skills and concepts are being constructed. This is an individual and personal knowledge that Palmer and Birch describe as,

> *... a unique relationship with the world ... a relationship based on feelings, experiences and interactions with people, places, objects and events.*
>
> Palmer and Birch (2004:2)

Indirect experience of place derives from a variety of sources such as mass media, photographs and computer games, and through social interaction when children hear and talk about places. It is presumed rather than known that children absorb attitudes and prejudices from the media about other countries because, claims Matthews children are,

> *...highly receptive to socially communicated values and will actively seek, select, receive, sort and remember information in ways that are often supportive of pre-judged categories.*
>
> Matthews (1992:60)

Films, cartoons, television programmes and computer games can be biased and misleading for children, but isolating the effects of the media on lived experience is difficult because of its pervasive nature. However, the explosion of media culture in the last 10 years is such that it is possible that the balance has tipped 'in favour of the mediated world at the expense of first hand experience' (Owens 2004:64). Further sources of information about place come in the form of interpersonal communication which can be referred to as socially-constructed experience of place that may be local or distant in nature. Hearing the views of other children and adults is an important opinion-forming mechanism, but adults direct experiences of place by giving information that is constrained by their interests and preferences, views and values. Some of these opinions may be heard in the home, others in locations such as the

nursery or playgroup. Much of this information is filtered by adults from whom children receive judgements and opinions so the children are receiving secondary sources of information. These are used by children and linked to their own perceptions so it is, perhaps, not surprising that they are confused and misled by some of the information they receive via others.

Children's literature offers children a wealth of images of place and some of the first images a young child sees are mythical rather than realistic representations of the world. There is a strong emphasis on pastoral images and an absence of the reality of urban life. Meanwhile Porteous (1990) feels that fairy tales with their extreme portrayals of good and evil convey places that have the power to provoke positive and negative reactions in young children. He suggests that places in fairy tales are used to represent moods and emotions in a way that is beneficial to children. Without the benefit of research there is no evidence to back Porteous' suggestion and as he admits later, 'we know next to nothing about the long-term effects on their recipients of environmental images purveyed in children's books' (Porteous 1990:153). A glance through the picture books available to pre-school children gives a snapshot of what is available to them in terms of images of place. They can be from the everyday of home and daily activities, to the worlds of imaginary creatures; there is a huge range available representing secure places to frightening places, magical to mundane. Take, for example, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen and Oxenbury 1989) with its illustrations and clear text that provides a strong basis for developing and extending pre-schooler's awareness of place, together with locational language. There is, I believe, scope for research here as little is known about the impact images of place in books has on pre-school children.

The previous four sections of this chapter have considered different aspects of the experience of place. The next section appraises information about place that pre-school children may receive in a more formal and intentional sense.

5.9 Learning in pre-school: place and early years curricula

There is wide national and international variation in the approach to supporting pre-school children's knowledge and understanding of place. By its very nature place is a

cross-curricular concept. It has been demonstrated that there are different disciplinary approaches to place and equally it is difficult to slot it into any one area of learning, and indeed it is preferable not to do so. Learning and experiencing place is a way of knowing more about the world and from it stem linguistic skills, spatial thinking, graphic representations of place, appreciation of environmental issues, understandings about different places. From a personal development point of view, experience of place can contribute towards a sense of belonging, self-esteem and self expression. How far do the curricula in England and Scotland go towards achieving these goals?

In England and Scotland compulsory education for children starts at five years old but there is a prescribed curriculum for pre-school children who attend nursery or playgroup. The Foundation Stage in England (DfEE/QCA 2000) identifies six areas of children's learning. These are:

- ➢ language and literature
- ➢ mathematical development
- ➢ physical development
- ➢ personal, social and emotional development
- ➢ creative development
- ➢ knowledge and understanding of the world

In Scotland early years educators work with the Curriculum Framework (SCCC 1999) which has similar key aspects of children's development and learning, although mathematical development is incorporated into knowledge and understanding of the world. Neither curriculum places much emphasis on pre-school children's geographical or environmental experiences, let alone experience of place and there is little to indicate that place is a cross-curricular topic. It also seems that geography *per se* is a low priority and warrants only one mention (on page 82) in the English Foundation Stage. However, the guidance for this stage does refer to young children starting to make sense of place and provides examples of how this may be achieved. These include encouraging an interest in features of the environment around the nursery or identifying places the children have been on holiday. By Key Stage 1 children are expected to be able to identify and describe what places are like, how they have become that way and to be able to compare them with other places. There is little within the curriculum to encourage children to express their personal

experiences of place. Instead objective views are expected rather than subjective and there is, arguably, an overemphasis on distant places rather than those near at hand. Indeed, Wiegand (1992) is in favour of focussing on other countries and cultures that are in his words more stimulating and exciting. He grudgingly accepts that 'the child's immediate surroundings, the local environment and the home country are important too' (page 3).

The Scottish pre-school curriculum is less prescriptive than its English counterpart. Advice on how to include or develop place as a learning opportunity is brief, only recommending that young children should wonder at and appreciate the beauty and scale of their surroundings, and visit local places near the early years setting. Having worked in the Scottish pre-school system I venture that the guidance is ambiguous. As a consequence this area of the curriculum is covered (if it is at all) in diverse and largely unsatisfactory ways. This is borne out by reports from the Scottish schools inspectorate (HMIE 2002) in which concern is expressed over the lack of understanding of local places both as teaching and learning experiences.

5.9.1 Play and place

Play is widely seen to be central to enabling young children's learning (Bruce 2003). Thus, in the context of the subject of this thesis, it is appropriate to provide or facilitate play opportunities that give children the opportunity to experience place. By providing play contexts young children can draw on personal experiences and extend their imaginations. Almost incidental to this sort of play is the learning that is achieved. In geographical terms this can include descriptions of place, the use of geographical language, what can be done there and the personal opinions of the children regarding the nature of the place. Miniaturised worlds – playmats, Lego, railways, farms etc – are important play materials that provide children with opportunities to model the environment around them, shape it and modify it. By reproducing real and imaginary places through small-scale play a child is actively learning to make sense of place. Educational settings that follow prescribed curricula will include aspects of place knowledge in their planned activities. This will be tackled in a wide variety of ways from themed or topic work that may focus on local places or places abroad, to specific props provided in the 'home-corner' or role-play area to encourage exploration and understanding of other cultures and places. A good

example of this is using the role-play area as a travel agent with appropriate posters, travel books, guides and magazines.

Simon Catling, a long-term advocate of geographical education for children of all ages, argues that geography teaching starts from children's own geographies and has the potential to enhance personal well-being. He is one of few writers (see also Palmer and Birch 2004) to consider geographic learning in the early years of education, and describes the opportunities for geographically focussed play that should be available to young children. These are summarised in Table 5.2 and are based on Catling's 2006 article in the journal *Geography*.

Aspects of play	Geographic learning	Example
Sensory play	involvement of senses during encounters with place	• listen to sounds in the environment
Exploratory play	investigate places both large and small scale	• play outside in natural areas
Imitative play	understand use of places	• pretend play during role-play scenarios e.g. camping
Representational play	places can be symbolised through maps and drawings	• use of 'treasure' maps
Fantasy play	creation of imagined places – real or fantasy	• play with miniature world materials

Table 5.2: *Play and geographic learning in the early years*

(After Catling 2006)

Opportunities for play that include developing knowledge and understanding of place are many and various. Furthermore, these play based activities also utilise the existing knowledge of the children. The situation in Scotland and England regarding young children and place education is mixed, not only in terms of what curricula suggest but how it is put into practice in playgroups and nurseries. How does this compare to the situation abroad? This is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

5.9.2 Other places

In a broad sense, environmental awareness is regarded as integral to the early years

curriculum in several countries including Germany, Ireland, Japan, Italy and Sweden (Bertram and Pascal 2002), whilst it could be suggested that other countries have a more 'tacked on' approach. Table 5.3 summarises some of the approaches to learning about locality from different countries. Whilst this is not a comprehensive survey of international approaches it serves to identify the wide diversity of practices employed. Of particular note is the way the Reggio Emilia schools of northern Italy incorporate place knowledge into their curriculum. Here young children are encouraged to value place through first-hand experience by using their senses to build up what is described by Davoli and Ferri (2000:120) as a 'warm geography' that 'embraces the emotions and richness of the child's existence', with the result that very young children are highly aware of their surroundings in a unique and personal way.

Attention should also be drawn to the *Curriculum Whāriki* of New Zealand (1996 New Zealand Ministry of Education). This curriculum, influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, emphasises the exchange between children and their environments where the environments are a nested set of levels; the first level is the immediate environment of the centre, the second the child's own home and the locality and so on in ever increasing scales of environment. For young New Zealand children this way of learning facilitates understanding of place in a meaningful, constructive manner.

5.10 Concluding comments

This chapter has taken a wide-ranging view of place-related concepts that has incorporated theories of child development and of learning, and has sought to locate this study within a theoretical context. The second part of the chapter focussed on the cognitive processes that are involved in experiencing place and the manner in which sense is made of the experience. Following this, attention was paid to the way relationships with place can be established through affordance, attachment and preference, and the ways in which response to place can be affected by direct and indirect influences. This chapter also examined place-related learning as prescribed by early years curricula both in the UK and abroad.

Building a theoretical context in which to embed this study has been challenging due

Country	Curriculum/approach to early years education	Emphasis on place?
England	Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE/QCA 2000) Constructivist approach	Direct reference to sense of place but not from a child's personal standpoint
Scotland	A Curriculum Framework for Children 3-5 (SCCC 1999) Constructivist approach	Brief, non-specific. Places referred to in context of visits and no direct reference to developing sense of place
Italy	Regional system: Reggio Emilia schools (Davoli and Ferri 2000) Synthesis of various philosophies of learning and teaching	Active involvement in locality often through project approach. Use of senses to promote feelings for place
Iceland	Námskrá Leikskóla. (World Education Forum 2000) Curriculum influenced by Froebel and ideologies from wide range of countries	Strong emphasis on outdoor play and cultivation of use of senses to understand environment. Icelandic culture influential in place
United States	Regional/State system: High/Scope. (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 2002) Piagetian influenced. Structured educational programme with key experiences	Places not identified by use of senses. Investigate place through spatial viewpoints such as map work
Kenya	Child-centred approach preparing children for school (Njenga and Kabiru 2001)	Face basic problems such as poverty, absenteeism, lack of training consequently place has not received much attention
New Zealand	Curriculum Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education1996). Influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecology model	Imbue sense of belonging. Children encouraged to develop knowledge about place including spiritual significance
Hong Kong	Traditional, behaviourist approach with emphasis on literacy and numeracy (Bertram and Pascal 2002)	New curriculum approach being introduced that aims to incorporate wider learning and foster environmental awareness including locality
Japan	The 'Course of Study' follows a constructivist approach with an emphasis on instruction through play (O'Donnell 2001)	An important aim of the curriculum for the early years is to foster environmental values; no specific mention of place

Table 5.3: *International approaches to place education: a selected summary*

to the sprawling and complex nature of development and of learning theories. The omission of the effect of the physical environment and place factors in most of these theories and models has added to the complexity of the task. A theoretical framework has been developed and it is best summarised as a socially-constructed, ecological-systems framework which incorporates ideas from schema theory and information-processing. It is there to be utilised and tested during the empirical stage of this research.

From the literature it appears that the cognitive processes of most relevance in experiencing place include perception, attention, memory and emotions. Of particular significance is the implication that the experience of and response to place is an individual event, and that each child will perceive different aspects of place. This will be investigated in the research design and the findings of the fieldwork. Gibson's concept of affordances provides a way of looking at place as a phenomenon that offers further scope for individuality of place perception. How pre-school children view what places offer in terms of potentiality is another aspect that is to be considered later, as will place attachment and place preference. Feelings engendered for certain places, both positive and negative, is an important area of investigation in this research.

It is acknowledged in the literature that children's views on places are shaped by direct and indirect influences. Much depends on the child's lifestyle, their social and cultural backgrounds which affect his or her perception, values and behaviour. In the case of pre-school children it is assumed that they have not travelled much and that the constraints placed upon them when outside preclude any personal experiences of place. Of course, some three to five year olds are well-seasoned travellers already and the fact that they are protected outdoors does not mean that they are unresponsive to their environment. It is believed that many very young children already possess a wealth of knowledge and experience about the world some of which derives from the indirect influences of television, computers and books. The impact of such influences on children's views of place is assumed rather than known.

Early years curricula approach children's development of place learning in different ways. In the UK it is an aspect of the curriculum that receives mixed coverage with a

tendency to focus on places abroad rather than places closer at hand. A brief survey of place education in other countries indicates that there are lessons to be learned particularly from curricula that emphasise knowledge of place as a component of self-identity and belonging.

Thus far in the review of the literature, understandings of key terms, childhood places, the state of research and the development of place learning have been discussed. There is consideration within the literature of the developmental processes involved in how children learn to construct physical environments but, as Aitken points out, 'much less is known about children's dispositions towards the environment which are reflected as values, attitudes and beliefs' (Aitken 1994:69).

There are many aspects to a child's experience of place and perhaps this is best summarised with the words of the philosopher Edward S. Casey:

> *Lived place thrives – is felt and recognised – in the differentiated and disruptive corners, the "cuts", of my bodily being in the world. This is why the child's experience of place is so poignantly remembered; in childhood we are plunged willy-nilly into a diverse (and sometimes frightening) array of places ... The extraordinary sensitivity of the child's lived body opens onto and takes in a highly expressive place-world that reflects the discriminative and complex character of the particular places that compose this world.*
>
> Casey (1997:237)

The world of experiences is an internal matter and when talking about it – as is the case during the fieldwork – the child effectively transforms perceptions and feelings into external activities. It is accessing such activities that is the consideration for the next three chapters as the design of the research is explained. Chapter 6, 'Towards an Interpretive Design', utilises the literature review and the theoretical context to assist further in the formulation of the research design. In the chapter there is a description of three research paradigms, deliberation on the paradigmatic influence on educational research and the reasoning behind the choice of an interpretive design for this study.

CHAPTER 6
Towards an Interpretive Design

6.1 Introduction

Today, the social sciences present a wide range of research genres although, until comparatively recently, research techniques borrowed from the experimental sciences dominated research approaches. Ways of researching children's experiences have focussed on 'research on' rather than 'research with' children, whilst the possibility that children could contribute valuable knowledge and insights about their own lives has been largely ignored. There has been a growing awareness that, although positivist approaches can and do contribute to knowledge, they cannot by themselves provide sufficient information or deliver the complexity of children's experiences. Researching with very young children throws up a variety of issues and the literature reveals there is not a 'one size fits all' approach nor, indeed, an 'anything goes' approach (Darbyshire et al 2005). Rather, the researcher must endeavour to find approaches that are respectful, inclusive and relevant, and are most suited to the nature of the investigation. Above all, the design of any study has to strive to the answer to the research question.

Parts of this chapter, particularly 6.4, are personal accounts of my values or philosophical assumptions – moral, personal and social – that undoubtedly influenced the overall approach to this research and the choice of an interpretive design. The ontological and epistemological positions adopted were also influenced by personal values, hence the space given over in this chapter to a full consideration of the role of reflexivity in this research so that the reader is aware, whilst evaluating this thesis, of the values that influenced it. Of course, the value statements made are not complete or objective as they represent my own construction and, indeed, a charge of self-indulgence could be warranted, and even a perpetuation of the argument that states that interpretive research is value-laden and hence unscientific and invalid. However, by examining my stance as a researcher I believe this study gains credibility and situates it within the context of the everyday life of pre-school children. Indeed, one of the strengths of interpretive work is such reflexivity allows for a conscious

deliberation about what one does, how one interprets findings and how one relates to subjects.

In 6.2, 'Research paradigms' there is a consideration of three major research paradigms in order to explain the reasoning behind the final choice of working within the interpretive tradition. The three paradigms cover positive, interpretive and critical realist approaches with an emphasis on the ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies associated with each. In section 6.3, 'Educational research and paradigmatic traditions', there is a summary of the research traditions found in education with findings that indicate a diversity of approach, and there is also a more detailed paradigmatic exploration of research that is related to this study. Section 6.4, 'Justification for an interpretive design' examines the reasoning and rationale for employing this particular paradigmatic approach. This section also sets out personal perspectives and beliefs that influenced choices and decisions made with regards to the design of this research. The chapter finishes with 'Concluding comments', 6.5, which draws together the many research considerations expounded.

6.2 Research paradigms

A paradigm is a way of looking at and understanding the world, and comprises philosophical assumptions that direct thinking and action (Mertens 1998) and, as such, determines how problems are approached theoretically and methodically.

In the research community there are three major paradigms, although this number is a point of contention - if not vigorous debate - as indeed is the labelling of the paradigms. Some texts refer to two main paradigms whilst some cite four or more. Here, there is reference to positivism, interpretivism and critical realism as, arguably, these best reflect the diversity of approaches in common use. However, each is a large umbrella for a range of variations and perspectives within it. To clarify the nomenclature of the paradigms, commonly used alternative names are given in table 6.1. Distinctions between the paradigms are sometimes made solely on the type of data being gathered or the methods used to generate that data so that positive researchers gather numerical data, whilst interpretive researchers are concerned with textual data. Indeed, there are purists within the research community who propose that there are different mutually exclusive epistemological positions and that positive and interpretive research methodologies are tightly bound with them. This has the effect

of presenting the paradigms as a set of opposing camps in which differences are stereotyped and exaggerated. A more pragmatic position does not agree with this connection between paradigms and methodology, but accepts there is a mutual influence – even common elements - and that the integration of different standpoints is a more acceptable alternative.

Names associated with different paradigms		
Positivist	*Interpretive*	*Critical realist*
Quantitative	Qualitative	Critical theory
Experimental	Naturalistic	Post-structuralism
Correlational	Hermeneutic	Feminist
Causal comparative	Symbolic interaction	Participatory
Quasi-experimental	Ethnographic	Transformative
Scientific	Phenomenological	Emancipatory

Table 6.1: *Commonly used names for the major paradigms*

One way to distinguish one paradigm from another is to examine the basic orientations of each. Thus it can be viewed as a realist versus an idealist view of the world, where realists believe that the world can be perceived more or less directly, and idealists argue that our perceptions of it are mediated through a series of distorting lenses and can only be known subjectively. This stance is, perhaps, over-simplistic so Guba and Lincoln (2005) are referred to for a more sophisticated approach to working with the different paradigms. The authors identify three basic philosophical tenets that define the axiomatic nature of the paradigms – the associated ontology, epistemology and methodology. These tenets are referred to in the descriptive accounts that follow, 6.2.1 – 6.2.3, in a way that shows how researchers identify the worldview that most approximately equates to their own.

6.2.1 Positivism

Positivism is the traditional scientific way of seeing the world (Cohen et al 2000) and is, according to Ernest (1994:22) 'concerned with objectivity, prediction, replicability and the discovery of scientific generalisations or laws'. If applied to educational issues then, in theory, general laws to predict future educational outcomes will be found. The positivist approach, which uses the general to describe the particular, is

based on a hypothetico-deductive approach so that it adopts a systematic enquiry into hypotheses for the generation of knowledge. The underlying assumptions of positivism include the belief that the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world; that there is a value-free method for studying the social world; that causal explanations can be provided and that there are rational, scientific laws that are obeyed. Ontologically, positivists hold that one reality exists and the researcher's aim is to discover that reality. From the epistemological standpoint, objectivity, researcher neutrality and independence from the subject of the study are the standards striven for; indeed, researcher subjectivity and reflexivity are not issues. Quantitative methods such as experiments and statistical surveys tend to dominate this paradigm although qualitative methods may be combined with them. Positive research is characterised by well developed research questions, conceptual frameworks, tight designs and highly structured data.

Criticisms of this paradigm include that it neglects the understanding of human beings as individuals in their entirety and their proper context is neglected. This results in a partial and distorted picture of social reality. The critique against positivism reached its peak during the 1970s and 1980s when its dominance was challenged so extensively that this era became known as the 'paradigm wars'. From reviewing the methodological literature it appears that the debate still continues and there has been concern that the lack of consensus may have 'serious implications for the nature and function of educational research' (Hammersley 1993:xii).

6.2.2 Interpretive

> *The extent to which the 'qualitative revolution' is taking over the social*
> *sciences and related professional fields is nothing short of amazing*

<div align="right">Denzin and Lincoln (2005:ix)</div>

The preference to use the term 'interpretive' in this thesis, rather than the more popular 'qualitative', is because the former reflects its basic principle that the social world 'is not just waiting for us to interpret – it is already interpreted' (Hughes 2001:36) and, furthermore, it does not have the connotations that qualitative research has acquired as being *non*-quantitative. Researchers in this paradigm – and the opening quote indicates the proliferation in their numbers - attempt to understand the

world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live in it, and aim to elicit meaning from the diverse and complex interactions between people. The central concern thus understands human experiences at an holistic level i.e. truth in human terms. Interpretive research is often conducted in natural settings as human experiences are shaped in contexts and best understood as they are found. In natural settings, human behaviours are reflected most honestly. For Maykut and Morehouse (1994:45) the natural setting is where the researcher 'is most likely to discover, or uncover, what is to be known about the phenomenon of interest'. The implication for research that involves pre-school children is therefore that it should be undertaken in a place where human activities and relationships are interwoven and, for research that involves experience of place, should be context specific. Understanding for the reader arises through identification, empathy or a sense of entry into the lived reality of the phenomenon being researched.

The methodological work of the interpretive researcher is essentially a construction of the reality of any given phenomenon. The emphasis is upon research as a product of the values of the researcher and cannot be independent of them. From an ontological perspective then, with the understanding that reality is a social construct, the researcher aims to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge and rejects the idea that there is an objective reality that can be known. Hughes (2001:36) puts this succinctly: 'knowledge is valid if it is the authentic and true voice of the participants'. The epistemological assumptions of this paradigm include interaction between the researcher and the researched; researcher values are made explicit; the research is embedded in a particular context and the central focus of the study is not always pre-determined at the outset.

Tesch (1990) classifies interpretive research by examining the main research interest and her systematic overview is helpful to this study. The four main groups of interpretive methodological traditions Tesch recognises are: a) the characteristics of language; b) the discovery of regularities; c) the comprehension of the meaning of text or action; and d) reflection. For each of these groups Tesch allocates subgroups, as is presented in Table 6.2. In general terms the groups on the left include the most structured approaches to research and those on the right the least structured. Again, the terms used may have alternative names and meanings to researchers working

within different disciplines. This thesis endeavours to investigate pre-school children's experience of place and seeks to discover regularities and also what the experiences mean to each child. So, in effect, this research straddles the central two sub-groups. None of the labels Tesch ascribes are wholly analogous to this research which, it is suggested, can be termed a generic interpretive study. This is discussed further in 6.4.3.

Characteristics of language	The discovery of regularities	The comprehension of the meaning of text or action	Reflection
content analysis	naturalistic inquiry	phenomenological research	reflective phenomenology
discourse analysis	ethnographic structure analysis	case study	heuristic research
ethnoscience	ecological psychology	life history	
structural ethnography	grounded theory	hermeneutics	
symbolic interactionism	phenomenography		
ethnomethodology	qualitative evaluation		
	action research		

Table 6.2: *Types of interpretive research* (After Tesch 1990)

With the objective of obtaining multiple perspectives and rich and detailed descriptions, methods employed within this paradigm include those that involve interaction with the participants such as interviews and observations. The methods are more wide-ranging compared to positivism as more flexible approaches to data gathering are employed and a variety of strategies that allow the researcher to get close to this data are used (Williams and May 1996). Researchers working within this paradigm may use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

As with the other major research paradigms there are criticisms of this approach. That interpretive research lacks scientific rigour is, arguably, a worrying accusation that comes at a time when scientific knowledge is regarded as the highest form of knowing (Mays and Pope 1995), but it is a label that is sometimes attached to this way of researching and usually made by those working within the positivist paradigm. The

presumed lack of reliability and validity of the findings, the inability of any interpretive researcher, however experienced, to discover *everything* about a situation or phenomenon are the main criteria that contribute to this criticism.

Over-subjectivity, lack of transparency, inappropriate generalisation and difficulties in replication are further charges directed at interpretivism. The accusation that interpretive research is too subjective and unsystematic even misleading, derives from the claim that the researcher becomes too personally involved with the participants and is unable to present an objective and detached viewpoint. Furthermore, the interpretive researcher is charged with the imposition of his or her personal beliefs, biases and views, and that key choices such as why the subject of the research was chosen in the first place are not fully explained or justified. Related to this latter point is the suggestion that there is a lack of transparency pertaining to such issues as the selection of the research participants and the process of data analysis (Bryman 2004).

In terms of generalisation, the small sample sizes of some interpretive research and/or the informal nature of some of the methods employed, precludes consideration of the findings as being representative of a larger population. This can be viewed as restrictive and, for some commentators, render some interpretive findings meaningless if not pointless. Cohen et al (2000) express restriction in a different way wherein it pertains to the boundaries the researcher places around the participants when he or she focuses on the phenomenon under investigation – effectively it is akin to being 'hermetically sealed from the world outside the participants' theatre of activity' (p. 27).

There is no question that the issue of replicating an interpretive study is problematic; indeed true replication is virtually impossible. The relationship with the participants, the inherent subjectivity involved in some field methods such as observation and interviewing, and the interpretation of data are all instances where replication, for example in another setting, is unfeasible.

6.2.3 Critical realism

Although it has been established that this research is, by nature, interpretive it is still valid to consider the other main research paradigm so that the choice is fully justified.

The researchers who work within the critical realism paradigm include feminists, ethnic minorities, Marxists and critical theorists. In essence the critical realism paradigm addresses the politics in research by confronting oppression at whatever level it occurs and gives control of the research to the marginalised groups. The term 'critical' is employed because its practitioners aim to identify structures in order to change them so that inequalities and injustices are counteracted (Bryman 2004). This value-laden paradigm arose due to concern that the dominant theories did not encompass multicultural, ethnic minority, gender, class and disability issues in any meaningful way.

There is no one philosophical base in this paradigm as the diverse positions it represents mean it is a non-unified body of work. However, there are certain characteristics that distinguish it from positivist and interpretive research. These include examining how results of social enquiry on inequities are linked to political and social action; analysing the way in which inequities are reflected in power relationships; focussing on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups. Ontologically, the critical realism paradigm is similar to the interpretive paradigm in that both recognise multiple realities. The difference lies in the stress critical realism places upon the influence of social, political, cultural, ethnic, gender and disability values in the construction of reality. Epistemologically, there are emphases on the empowerment of the research participants and an interactive relationship with the researcher. In the field a researcher from this tradition uses a wide variety of methods such as interviews, observations and document review and may combine qualitative and quantitative methods. From the preceding description this paradigm is not suitable for this research. Although it is conceded that there are certain characteristics that are sympathetic to working with children, the emphasis on inequities and promoting change does not equate to my way of working in this particular study.

6.2.4 Summarising the three paradigms

Table 6.3 presents a summary of the three paradigms discussed above in a way that shows the salient philosophical beliefs or features of each. The three have different understandings of the creation of knowledge at their core. For positivists, truth is attainable and aspects of the world potentially understandable. In the other two paradigms the world is not something which can be known with certainty because

knowledge is constructed by individuals in an experiential world. The differences between the three paradigms appear to be very clear-cut, but this is not always the case in research writing. There are different shades of interpretivism in some work, whilst other researchers take ideas from more than one paradigm. There is now, it would seem, greater lassitude both within and between paradigms and a lessening of the tensions between them.

Salient premise	*Positivism*	*Interpretive*	*Critical realism*
Ontology (the nature of reality)	One reality that operates according to immutable natural laws	Multiple, socially constructed realities	Realities shaped by social, political, cultural, ethnic, gender and disability values
Epistemology (the relationship of the unknown to the known)	Objective Absolutist knowledge	Subjective Personal knowledge	Interactive Socially constructed knowledge
Methodology (the ways of finding out knowledge)	Primarily quantitative, leading to capability to predict and control	Primarily qualitative – leading to construction between researcher and participant(s)	Mixed quantitative and qualitative
Interest	Prediction and control	To understand and make sense of the world	Social justice and emancipation
Intended outcome	Objective knowledge and truth in the form of laws	Illuminative, subjective understandings	Intervention for social reform and social justice

Table 6.3: *The basic beliefs of the three major paradigms (After Ernest 1994)*

6.3 Educational research and paradigmatic traditions

The research tradition derived from positivism has dominated research in early childhood education, but recently a number of large- and small-scale studies have adopted other paradigms. For example, more researchers are employing ethnographic techniques and narrative approaches, and there is also evidence that feminist, critical and postmodern underpinnings are being used.

From a positivist perspective, education or schooling is 'considered the object, phenomenon or delivery system to be studied' (Merriam 1998:4), whilst in interpretive research education is seen as a process and school is a lived experience. For critical realists education is viewed as a social institution and within it power,

privilege and oppression are the bases of the problems addressed. Until the late 1960s and early 1970s educational research was largely experimental and primarily psychologically-based research that involved some sort of measurement such as psychometrics or surveys. This applied even more so to research that involved early childhood education. Essentially, this meant that research relied on measurable entities and the complex realities of children's lives were reduced to charts and numbers. These positivist approaches held sway until increasing doubts about the validity and ethics of such research changed the course of enquiry (Nisbet 2005). With the point of view of the participants becoming of greater interest, the very idea about the nature and purpose of educational research changed (Atkinson et al 1993) and with this has come division that has threatened the very existence of research in this discipline (Hammersley 2005).

Educational research has been in some difficulty in recent years due largely to this paradigmatic controversy. The positive approach has been accused of being too convinced of its own authority and validity, and of raising false expectations. Meanwhile Hodkinson (2004) voices the opinion that positive research is seen by some to be superior and 'safer' than interpretive research especially when the latter tends to employ small sample sizes. However, what is indisputable is the fact that government-funded agencies usually demand objective, evidence-based, outcome-oriented approaches to educational research that may (best) serve to inform education policies and reforms. In view of this it is perhaps surprising that interpretive research has taken such a strong hold of the discipline as it has, although Erickson and Gutierrez (2002) feel it is more grudging acceptance than a whole-hearted embrace. One explanation could be that education is not a unitary discipline, but is conducted by scholars from a range of other disciplines who bring with them paradigms from their own traditions.

So are the positive and interpretive approaches viewed as mutually exclusive in educational research today? Is there one that is more dominant than the other? To answer these questions accurately a large-scale content analysis of published research reports is required and this has not been undertaken to date. A small-scale survey by Niglas (1999) of articles in the *British Educational Research Journal* revealed that over one third of the studies surveyed over a period of 3 years combined qualitative

and quantitative aspects of inquiry and, furthermore, there was not a distinctive difference between them in terms of paradigmatic origin. With a move towards 'more overall philosophical and worldviews' of education-related issues (Niglas 1999:16), the boundaries between the approaches may become increasingly blurred and, at the very least, less antagonistic. Furthermore, the ongoing debate or crisis detracts from the job at hand. Educational research, whatever its paradigmatic orientation, should be and must be about the quality of interpretations of data and its contribution to better understanding. The alternative paradigms should be seen as complementary and different; not mutually distinctive and either right or wrong.

6.3.1 Related research

As there is little research which corresponds exactly to pre-school children's experience of place it has been necessary to cast a wider net with regards to making a paradigmatic choice for this study. A survey of some of the related research shows that it is characterised by diversity and heterogeneity and is dependant upon subject, perspective, audience and paradigmatic traditions of associated disciplines be it education, geography or environmental psychology.

Table 6.4 presents some research in related fields. The main links to this study are that the research involves child participants and that the main focus is on place and the environment i.e. spatial development, place attachment and environmental awareness. This brief summary echoes Niglas' (1999) findings which were mentioned previously, as whilst it is not appropriate to draw any firm conclusions from a limited survey, what becomes apparent is the diversity of approaches used. It is also possible to see evidence of paradigmatic trends in that the 1990s were seemingly dominated by interpretive approaches. Echoing Tilbury and Walford's (1996) view that researchers should be more prepared to engage with conceptually diverse frameworks of investigation, the turn of the century shows a tendency to employ more varied designs.

6.4 Justification for an interpretive design

In this part of the chapter the decision to work within the interpretive paradigm is justified. This includes personal reflections and perspectives as a researcher.

Author(s)	Focus	Paradigm
Piaget & Inhelder (1956)	spatial development	positive
Various during 1970s (see table 4.1 for list)	spatial development	predominately positive
Hart (1979)	environmental awareness	mixed
Moore (1986)	spatial development	interpretive
Bernaldez et al (1987)	landscape preference	positive
Wohlhill & Heft	place affiliation	interpretive
Aitken & Ginsberg (1988)	characterisation of place	positive
Chawla (1990s)	place attachment	interpretive
Matthews (1992 &1995b)	making sense of place	interpretive
Littledyke (1992)	environmental cognition	interpretive
Spencer & Blades (1993)	understanding places	interpretive
Palmer et al (1996)	environmental cognition	interpretive
Valentine (1997)	rural places	interpretive
Scott & Canter (1997)	landscape preference	positive
Hay (1998a & 1998b)	sense of place	mixed
Malinowski & Thurber (1999)	place preference	positive
Vaske & Kobin (2001)	place attachment	positive
Derr (2002)	place experience	interpretive
Rissotto & Tonucci (2002)	environmental knowledge	positive
Robertson, Walford & Fox (2003)	landscape meanings	mixed
Giddings and Yarwood (2005)	rural experiences	mixed

Table 6.4: *Examples of research paradigms in some related research*

6.4.1 The philosophical background

The epistemological stance of a researcher consists of assumptions concerning the nature of the knowledge regarded as valid in order to resolve the research question. The stance essentially provides a frame of reference for this research. The perspective taken in this study is that knowledge is experiential, personal, contextual, subjective and socially constructed. This is a subjectivist view and so, in accordance with this stance, it is believed that meaning is imposed on the object by the subject i.e. a place is imbued with meaning by the child. Thus, meaning is implicit in experience and is open to a multiplicity of interpretations. In this study the phenomena of place as such makes no contribution to the generation of meaning; meaning is imported from elsewhere such as conscious experience and experiential constructs, or imposed by our biology and socio-cultural diversity (Spinelli 2005). The ontological assumptions of this research – those that focus on humans in the world and whether a person sees social reality as either external, independent, given and objectively real or as socially constructed, subjectively experienced and the result of human thought expressed through language – are firmly in line with the latter course. With this in mind it was clear from the outset that subjective accounts and perceptions of the experience of place needed to be gathered.

From the theoretical standpoint, this study is not bound to a distinct social science theory, but takes instead a more liberal and multi-faceted approach and engages with several bodies of theoretical literature which are used as flexible guides to help formulate ideas. This retreat from 'grand theories' has enabled greater latitude, contributed to the credibility and also enabled a clearer focus on the context and specifics of this particular piece of research. From early childhood studies, sociology, education and developmental psychology the view of childhood is seen as a constructive time for meaning making. Added to this, is a personal belief that children have a unique way of approaching and perceiving reality that is constantly developing and changing in ways that are different from an adult. From this premise this research undertakes a theoretical commitment to listening to young children who are reliable informants of their own experiences, a stance particularly influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach to early years education. This was mentioned previously in 5.9.2 with reference to how the approach tackles place learning with pre-school children. With respect to listening to children, the philosophy at the Reggio Emilia schools is

one of hearing and valuing the implied meanings of children's words (Edwards et al 1998). Thus the importance of paying attention to what children say is central and this is in line with the philosophy of this research.

The historical underestimation of pre-school children's competencies – notions that include inability to communicate effectively, and described by Greig and Taylor (1999) as myths - has also influenced the research design in that, as research subjects, it is felt that children are comparable to adults in many ways but have *different* not inferior competencies. Finally, a reminder of the concept of place. The understanding of place in this research is one of it being a centre of meaning, permeated with subjective, personal and sensual resonance and as such it can be successfully investigated using an interpretive design that is sympathetic to these qualities.

This type of research – exploratory and inductive – that lies within the interpretive tradition, facilitates a personal, interactive way of researching. The salient factors that support the use of an interpretive design for this research can be summarised by stating that it:

- ➤ takes the stance that multiple realities are socially constructed by and between humans in their expressive and interpretive practices (Lindlof and Taylor 2002)
- ➤ is committed to experience and social action
- ➤ employs primarily an inductive approach
- ➤ focuses on the meaning, especially the subjective meanings, of a phenomenon to the research participants and is suitable for little-known phenomena/lack of theory/existing theory that fails to explain adequately a phenomenon (Merriam 1998)
- ➤ takes individual responses and relates them to the real-life context in which they occurred
- ➤ allows for change of focus through a flexible approach and is not bound by methodological orthodoxy
- ➤ allows for expression of personal voice and preserves the subtleties and nuances of (children's) voices

> allows for detailed exploration and reveals deep understanding of human experiences, motives and feelings

> permits close interaction with research participants

> is aware of and considers the researcher's role and perspective

The above have effectively justified the interpretive design of this research. Attention now turns to a more personal investment of meaning, that of reflexivity.

6.4.2 On being reflexive

Whether we like it or not, researchers remain human beings complete with the usual assembly of feelings, failings and moods. All of these things influence how we feel and understand what is going on. Our consciousness is always the medium through which research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher

Stanley and Wise (1993:157)

This section is a personal reflection on the dilemmas faced at various stages in the research process and reflects the unavoidability of the researcher imbuing some sense of himself or herself in interpretive research as is made explicit in the above quote. It is included at this juncture to illuminate the influence of personal assumptions, preferences, prejudices and positioning on the decision-making process. Thus it seeks to provide the reader with a deeper sense of the how and why. Davis (1998) suggests there are two parts to a researcher's world view. Firstly, the so-called academic part which is influenced by theory, ethics and methods of the paradigms, and secondly the non-academic part which refers to life experiences that shape attitudes, beliefs and prejudices. Being a reflexive researcher entails being aware of both parts of one's world views.

The research process itself, reassuringly described by Lindlof and Taylor (2002:66) as 'well, somewhat unruly', is comprised of several components i.e. the research question, the objectives, the conceptual context, the methods and the findings. None of these components is a static entity, but is constantly changing or being modified in response to another component. In the course of this research it seemed, at times, that this state of flux was exacerbated by constant self-questioning and a strong awareness of personal construction of meanings, yet the benefits of reflexivity far outweighed

the agony of introspection by enhancing understandings of the very nature of what it was being explored.

Whilst reflexivity is widely regarded as a methodological necessity it is challenging to apply in practice, so much so that for Usher (1996:39), it is seen as a problem 'that must be avoided or overcome because it interferes with or 'contaminates' outcomes as truthful representation'. Bonner (2001:269) describes the problem of reflexivity succinctly as, 'like trying to stand back from one's own shadow'. For Aubrey et al (2000) the salient question is whether we can 'ever be totally aware of our own understandings of the world and how we think it works' (p.153). The main question faced was whether it is possible to know or recognise the forces that prompt particular courses of action. How, in essence, is reflexivity *done*?

One way to approach the *doing* of reflexivity is to identify different forms of reflexivity and then apply them (where appropriate) to the stages within the research process. Finlay (2003) suggests five variants of reflexivity that she sees as occurring in contemporary research; introspection; intersubjective reflection; mutual collaboration; social critique and ironic deconstruction. These are not mutually exclusive categories nor does the researcher necessarily employ only one of them. Here, an element of introspection threads through the entire research process together with 'intersubjective reflection' and 'reflexivity as a social critique' which has resulted in an appropriate and workable approach. In this way what was brought to the research encounter was an array of memories, experiences and subjective feelings such as biases and prejudices. One's inner world, if it may be called that, goes a long way to determining a range of decisions such as the choice of setting, behaviour in the field and the role(s) assumed.

Brought into this research was a particular package of feelings and attitudes constructed through, for example, a personal and contemporary perspective on childhood and personal childhood history. Such a perspective can be viewed as Finlay's 'reflexivity as social critique' (2003:17) which also has as a major concern the issue of the balance of power between researcher and participant. The power differential is discussed more fully in part 7.4.1 of this thesis.

The objectives regarding reflexivity were to examine personal perspectives and beliefs as a researcher and tease out the reasoning behind choices and decisions. Ultimately, it means taking responsibility for the research, of being aware of the contexts, relationships and power dynamics in the research settings. Responsibility also means defending one's choice and strategies. There is responsibility too for producing an account of a particular view of the world that has so much of my personality within it. This goes towards promoting the integrity of the research, although there is wariness about taking introspection too far as this can detract from the point of the research. It is, after all, the voices of the children, not one's own voice as researcher that this research seeks to present. Equally, to ignore or avoid reflexive analysis i.e. to take an *un*reflexive position invites comment that the research is incomplete (Bonner 2001; Gough 2003). There is, then, as Pels puts it, a middle path:

> *...it is both feasible and important to talk about something and simultaneously talk (at least a little) about the talking itself; and it is better for your epistemological health to be reflexive rather than non-reflexive.*

Pels (2003:3)

6.4.3 A generic interpretive study

This term, prescribed by Merriam (1998), best describes this research in that it has the characteristics of an interpretive study and that it seeks to understand a particular, experienced phenomenon. This research does not claim to have a distinct design in terms of a case study, an ethnographic approach or a phenomenological study so the term 'generic' is apt. Furthermore, it draws upon a range of theories in education, psychology, sociology and geography so, again, it is broad-based and the methods used to gather data are mixed and responsive to the participants and my requirements. The analysis of the data, described in Chapter 10, has resulted in the identification of recurring patterns in the form of themes which structure the data, but there is no claim that it leads to substantive theory. Rather, it seeks to understand what is happening with the 12 children in a speculative manner. The model devised in Chapter 12 to represent what appeared to happen during the children's experience of place, is described as tentative and representative only of the particular children involved.

6.4.4 Other variables

The views and perspectives of the pre-school children selected to take part were a central concern of the research agenda. Maintaining the 'purity' of their voices was regarded as key to the findings i.e. other influences that could, potentially, effect the results were excluded These influences or variables included the following:

- ➢ the family unit
- ➢ socio-economic background
- ➢ prior experiences

The place of a child within a family could have an effect on his or her experience of place. A single child, youngest child or a child with much older siblings are examples of variations of the place of a pre-school child within a family unit. Whilst it is acknowledged here that every child has his or her own characteristic way of approaching and perceiving reality, the influence of siblings as well as parents or carers may impact upon the preschooler's understandings.

The environment of the three pre-school settings where the field work took place offered not only geographical contrasts but also differences in the children's socio-economic background. So, for example, the parents of the majority of the children attending the Durham Nursery were involved in academic departments at the University and, by inference, were educated to a high level. In contrast single, unemployed parents were the predominant social group in Fraserburgh. Meanwhile in Drumlithie there was a wide range of backgrounds within the one setting that included unemployment, farming, education and medicine.

The prior experiences of the children in terms of places encountered or heard about were also not used during data analysis. Undoubtedly, each child would have had individual and personal experiences of place be they in terms of travel locally, nationally or internationally. Equally second-hand experiences would be different with children receiving their knowledge from a wide range of sources such as family, books or the media.

Whilst all these factors are acknowledged as possible determinants of how a child may respond to place, they are excluded from subsequent deliberation. This research works *with* the children, not *on* and this involves respecting individual voices and what the children themselves have to say about their experiences. They are seen as competent and capable sources of information who are not differentiated by external factors and who have a valuable contribution to make. Arguably, it is the most effective method of gaining an insight into the complex world of a child's subjective experiences – essentially an internal matter - although detractors could point out that listening to 'voice' in isolation provides only a partial picture (France 2004).

6.5 Concluding comments

This chapter has sought to ground the research within the interpretive paradigm, giving reasons and justification for this choice. This endeavour has included descriptions and a critical review of three major research paradigms which assisted in the decision-making process, and a brief outline of paradigmatic tradition within educational research. As this research involves the participation of very young children, the design strives to complement their competencies and, furthermore, aims at being culturally, developmentally and contextually sensitive. Epistemologically, personal views are that knowledge is experiential, personal, contextual, subjective and socially constructed. This position lies within the interpretive tradition as does the ontological stance whereby social reality is seen as subjectively experienced and socially constructed.

By engaging with interpretive research, certain commitments have been undertaken. These include viewing the phenomenon of place from the perspective of the children; the use of a flexible research strategy; the use of methods to generate data that are sensitive to the social context of this study; respect for the uniqueness of each child; the embracing of a mainly inductive rather than deductive analytical process. Much of this is informed by personal views on the meanings of place as a phenomenon, and understandings of childhood, which reflects what was established in Chapters 2 and 3. The generic interpretive design of this research allows for degrees of reflexivity and this issue was considered in terms of a flexible design and the inclusion of personal perspectives and beliefs.

In Chapter 7, 'Research directions', methodological aspects of the research are discussed with the objective of delineating the study, achieved by establishing its limitations. The chapter also presents the foci, objectives, the research question and the nature of the data sought. In addition, there are challenging issues that need to be addressed in this research. These include the appropriateness of a child-centred methodology and ethical issues. The latter considers confidentiality, informed consent, how a young child can indicate his or her discomfort during the research and the power differential that can exist between the researcher and the research participants.

Chapter 7
The Empirical Enquiry: Essence and Ethics

7.1 Introduction

Following on from the previous chapter in which the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm and its suitability for this research were considered, this chapter aims to establish the 'what' of this research. This refers to issues which lie at the heart of this endeavour and which have driven it forward.

Section 7.2, 'The essence of this research', discusses the context of the research including the research focus, the objectives, the research question, the boundaries and the data sought. The question of a child-centred approach and research with pre-school children is considered in 7.3, 'A child-centred methodology?' The participation of very young children in research has often been regarded with ambiguity. The difficulty of conducting research with pre-schoolers is, as Fine and Sandstrom (1988) express it, that adults appear to live in a different world from them - they struggle to understand us and equally we struggle to understand them. In order to manage or minimise these apparent problems there is a reiteration of my personal views of children and a consideration of the most effective ways of working with them.

Ethical issues permeate this research, being involved with every aspect of the study, and 7.4, 'Ethical considerations', details in particular the ethics concerning research with very young children. This involves a rather different relationship from the traditional one between researcher and researched and demands respect, trust and honesty which should not be expected but, rather, earned. In part 7.4.2 there is a consideration of the benefits to the children of involvement in the study. Each of these research elements has a role in the design of the study which seeks to generate the type of knowledge or data expected to answer the research question. From these aspects the methodological assumption emerges. 'Concluding comments', 7.5. summarises the main points made in this chapter.

7.2 The essence of this research

The essence of this research refers to the following set of key issues:

> ➤ the focus
> ➤ the objectives
> ➤ the research question
> ➤ the boundaries of the research
> ➤ the data required

These are dealt with in turn in the following sub-sections of this chapter.

7.2.1 The focus

The focus or central concept of this study is pre-school children's experience of place. This focus emerged from a combination of factors that can be summarised as follows:

> ➤ personal experience in pre-school education
> ➤ personal interest in how very young children make sense of their world
> ➤ concern that pre-school children's geographical competencies are underestimated
> ➤ extension of previous research by author (Trees 2003)
> ➤ wide-reaching and extensive inter-disciplinary literature review
> ➤ influences of specific research by authors such as Hart (1979), Moore (1986), Matthews (1992), Spencer et al (1989) and Clark and Moss (2001)
> ➤ potential contribution to early years research agenda

These factors were weighed in terms of how researchable the topic was; the sustainability of personal interest; originality; the likely interest to others in education and other disciplines.

7.2.2 The objectives of the research

> *...educational research can make education better. Otherwise why do it?*
> Wellington (2000:183)

The above quote succinctly summarises the objectives or anticipated achievements of educational research in general. Research in this domain is about making original contributions by generating knowledge and/or promoting educational practice, with this research endeavour aiming to add to existing knowledge concerning pre-school children's experience of place. According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1989:12), 'research and its products should facilitate reflection, criticism and a more informed view of the educational process which will in turn help to improve professional practice'. The worth of this research is one of generating data about the way pre-school children make sense of an aspect of the world, one about which little is known. It does not claim to bear direct influence on educational practice in early years education, but seeks to reflect upon and inform understandings about pre-school children's experience of place. Potentially, it may suggest that these early geographical experiences are significant learning experiences in themselves, and awareness and knowledge of them may influence thinking about the way pre-school children learn about places in their environments.

The objectives of this particular research endeavour are made tangible through grouping them into two thematic areas: 1) experience of place, and 2) research methodology. These are presented below and are not listed in any order of priority.

1) The principal objectives within the research regarding experience of place are:

> to add to existing knowledge concerning pre-school children's experience of place

> to explore how some pre-school children experience place

> to describe these children's experiences

> to identify or discover important categories of meaning

> to attempt to explain any emergent patterns related to the experience of place

> to offer explanations concerning how some pre-school children experience place

> to build rich descriptions of a complex phenomenon that is relatively unexplored in the literature

> to set this research within the context of existing research rather than extol its uniqueness (Pring 2004)

2) The principal objectives within this research regarding research methodology are:

> to enable the pre-school children involved to express their ideas about place through judicious choice of research techniques
> to employ an approach that preserves the voice of these children

The objectives given above have determined the structure of this research and, indeed, this thesis. The objectives are revisited later in Chapter 12, together with an appraisal on the extent to which they have been achieved.

7.2.3 Sub-questions and the research question

The research question evolved from various factors and influences that have been cited in 7.2.1, the focus of the research. This was a complex process and before the definitive research question was finalised, several research sub-questions emerged as the study developed. These included:

> What is *happening* when pre-school children have first-hand experience of places?
> Are these experiences different from indirect experiences?
> Are the experiences individual to the child and/or are there commonalities between children?
> What shapes the phenomenon of place in terms of attitudes, perceptions and beliefs?
> Do categories or patterns of meaning emerge from this experience?
> If there are categories or patterns, are they linked to one another?

The final version of the research question was not formulated until the focus, the objectives and context of the design were clarified. By focussing on a specific population i.e. a selection of pre-school children, and a specific phenomenon i.e. the experience of place, the research question was shaped by the identified problem. The emphasis of the question is on description and interpretation of the children's

perspective and leads to an understanding of what is going on in the child's world. The research question is, **What are pre-school children's experiences of place?** This is a straightforward question in itself, but it has sufficient breadth and depth to facilitate an interpretive investigation into an under-researched area.

7.2.4 The boundaries of the research

All research has its boundaries and it is important to acknowledge where the boundaries are set in terms of contributing to understanding. The selection of research sites and participants that defined the field of study and narrowed the focus warranted careful deliberation (Burgess 1984). This issue is fully discussed in Chapter 9, 'Selection and sampling' but, in brief, three pre-school centres were selected – two in Scotland and one in England - and a total of 12 child participants were involved in the research. The relatively small sample size was determined by the amount of data gathered from in-depth conversations and interviews which warranted detailed and careful analysis, and a substantial investment of time. This research could, in the light of the previous consideration, be regarded as small-scale and as such could be of concern amongst those in the research community who question the contribution of a modest study. In defence, small-scale research was deemed appropriate in this case as a wealth of detail concerning the understanding of a complex phenomenon was both anticipated and subsequently gathered. Furthermore, there were cost considerations of buying disposable cameras and developing film.

The research is further limited by my own capacity, as researcher, to access a child's experiences. In fact, it is impossible for anyone to get inside the mind of any person, adult or child, so the children's own accounts must be seen as only one source of information. As such the data generated, the findings and the analysis cannot claim to be a source of complete understanding. This research does not seek to find a single version of the 'truth', but to discover the multiple perspectives of reality and even then it will always be partial and imperfect. Realistically then, there is a limit to what can be achieved in such a study, but what can be claimed with assurity is that it is working towards an increased level of understanding of pre-school children's experience of place.

This research is then bounded by these factors. What is excluded by the scope of this research is a larger cohort of pre-school children from a broader range of settings in a wider range of places all of which could, potentially, be the subject of further investigation.

7.2.5 What data were required?

To obtain an individual representation of the experience of place, children's narratives that have been shaped by personal meanings of place were required. As mentioned previously, accessing the entirety of the children's experiences cannot be achieved, yet I believe one can enter the field of perception and gain an *understanding* of how children experience place.

The resolution of the research question required a set of objectives that needed to be met during the data collection phase. The objectives in the field were to achieve the following:

> to respect the individuality of children
> to be open to the child's world of experience
> to gain insight into what it is like for a child to experience place
> to encourage verbal and non-verbal communication about place
> to become fully involved with the phenomena in question
> to elicit data that could be used later in analysis

There was a further objective of the fieldwork not directly related to answering the research question, but important nevertheless in terms of the success of the fieldwork. Of this Walker (1985:46) states, 'the methods we choose are [...] there to be tested'. Thus the following objective was also considered:

> to assess the appropriateness of using certain research techniques with pre-school children

The search for the most appropriate design suitable for this study, and one that encompassed the above objectives, involved making judicious choices from a vast range of research methods. There was, then, a thorough study of the chosen

techniques in order to execute good research practice. By using a multi-method approach the hope was to construct as rich and detailed a picture as possible that would attempt to meet the objectives.

7.3 A child-centred methodology?

The problem facing those interested in studying children's understanding of place and space is to devise suitable methodologies which enable children's environmental competencies to be uncovered.

Matthews (1992:181)

A full and detailed account of the data gathering techniques is presented in Chapter 8, but it is appropriate to consider if this research is 'child-centred' at this point as it is indicative of how certain choices were made. Research with children has similarities to and differences from research with adults, and so it makes sense that the research methodology in this study reflects this. 'Child-centred' has different connotations for different researchers. It may mean relating a theoretical framework to a developmental theory such as stage development as predicted in child psychology, or it may equate to research that tries to negotiate situations that make sense to the child using data gathering methods such as drawings or using appropriate props. The latter acknowledges that children have different competencies and, although such techniques may be deemed to be appropriate, they should not be used unquestioningly – the inherent advantages and disadvantages should be considered together with any implications there may be for analysing the different kinds of data generated.

It should be stated that my experience in early years settings, my previous research (Trees 2003) and my understanding from the literature has resulted in an attempt to combine traditional research methods used with adults i.e. semi-structured interviews with techniques considered to be more suitable for use with children i.e. drawing. From a personal standpoint, the term 'child-centred' is construed as restrictive and patronising, emphasising the difference between adults and children in a negative manner. As Punch (2002:337) suggests, the methodology employed could be termed 'research-participant-centred' rather than 'child-centred' and in this way a balance is struck between recognising children's competencies in a non-patronising manner, and

respecting each child's competence and ability. Methods were developed and selected that were fit for the purpose and that facilitated working *with* the children rather than treating them as objects in research. This is described by Fraser (2004:25) as 'negotiated compromise' as it allows communication between the different conceptual outlooks of children and those of the researcher. Again, it should be restated that it is difficult if not impossible for an adult researcher ever to totally understand the world from a child's point of view:

> *Assumptions that might seem valid because we believe that we know and understand children, both because we were children once and because we see them so often, present a methodological problem.*
>
> Fine and Sandstrom (1988:35)

7.3.1 Pre-school children as research participants

Assumptions about the competencies of very young children as research participants shaped research for many years. The main assumption was that children of any age, not just the under-5s, were unable to contribute reliably towards discussions on their feelings, opinions and needs. Such was the strength of this presupposition that there has been a delay in the development of methods for speaking directly to children and eliciting their views (Greig and Taylor 1999). Research, particularly in the developmental psychology arena, was done *on* children rather than with children; they were regarded as objects rather than subjects; the children were usually studied out of their natural context. Indeed, until relatively recently there has been little interest in understanding the ordinary, everyday aspects of children's lives (Nutbrown and Hannon 2003). Even 10 years ago it was rare for pre-school children to be included in studies at all and, if their views were ever sought, it was usually to 'atomise and process them through the guise of adult designed research' (Alderson 1995:40). This has changed, and is changing, due to the move away from the perception of children as passive recipients of adult socialisation to recognising them as social actors in their own right (O'Kane 2000).

In Chapter 3, section 3.3, consideration was given to my thoughts about the pre-school child in terms of competencies and life experiences, and perceptions of childhood were discussed. These considerations are inextricably linked to how I view children as research participants. It goes without saying that ethical considerations are

a vital component of the research endeavour, but does working with children necessarily impact upon the choice of methodology?

The researcher who works with young children has to be open to the use of methods that are best-suited and fit for purpose. The developmental differences between children simply cannot be ignored as clearly treating a 4 year old the same as a 14 year old is ridiculous. However, neither should it be assumed that the pre-school child has a particular level of ability as this can lead to an underestimation or even an overestimation of their competences. Thus the challenge is to find a suitable medium that permits the exploration of the children's experiences that respects their competencies and enables each child to participate fully.

There is concern, notably amongst sociologists who advocate the new sociology of childhood, that using 'special' techniques to work with children perpetuates the belief that children are 'other' i.e. less than adult, incapable or particularly vulnerable. Like adults, children can and do participate in structured and unstructured interviews, and they complete questionnaires. Equally, there are a number of research techniques specially devised for researching with children – developmental tests and assessments, interviews, cognitive and emotional tasks, rating scales etc. As long as the methods are compatible theoretically and practically with the objectives of the research, and the child is respectfully and ethically treated then, arguably, I feel they are acceptable. The issue in this research is that the children are very young and thus unable to fill in questionnaires or write about their experiences. There is, however, a wide range of research techniques that do work and which result in rich descriptions of children's lives.

What is particularly challenging when researching with pre-school children is striking a balance between patronising the children and recognising their competencies, not least because children between the age of three and five vary so much in terms of variables such as linguistic aptitude, level of understanding and span of concentration. Such variables makes research with pre-school children unpredictable, but it is possible to minimise such a problem by employing a wide range of carefully selected research techniques that work to the children's strengths and enable them to be fully participant. Whether the methods, presented fully in Chapter 8 together with the issue

of integrity, are 'special' or simply adapted to suit is, perhaps, down to individual interpretation.

7.3.2 Bricolage

Amongst the various metaphors applied to the research enterprise, the one that has most resonance with my way of researching is that of 'bricolage' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Bricolage means adapting whatever comes to hand, and the choices as to which methods to use are not necessarily set in advance. Thus the interpretive researcher, the 'bricoleur', is basically a Jack-of-all-trade, taking on multiple roles and assuming a stance such as an interpretive, theoretical, methodological or narrative 'bricoleur'. Kincheloe and Berry (2004) take the idea of bricolage further seeing it as a multi-logical approach in which researchers 'struggle to connect the research act to the emotion and heart of lived human experience' (p. 22). It can instil a new form of rigour in research and one that leads to thick and useful descriptions. The authors acknowledge that this means a messier and more challenging approach, as opposed to the mono-logical reductionist stratagem that effectively sterilises information and inhibits creative engagement.

Roger Hart's (1979) research with children's experience of place seems to be an excellent example of bricolage. He says himself that his field approach is eclectic, that he tries new or relatively untried methodologies and uses a number of techniques for each category of data required. Apart from his main objective of discovering the landscape as it exists for children, a secondary objective was to develop methodologies that were suitable for the more general area of children's environmental behaviour. The 'mosaic approach' designed by Clark and Moss (2001) was similarly influential to this thesis. Like Hart they developed a multi-method approach including photographs and tours and places strong emphasis on recognising the different 'voices' or languages of children. Clark and Moss view research with pre-school children as warranting a framework or mosaic of different research techniques that are imaginative, adaptable and participatory. Whilst their research involves preschoolers, Hart worked with older children yet the objective of these authors is to listen to children's perspectives on their daily lives. The adaptation or development of new ways of working with young children in response to the data

required was an important part of this research and one that demanded having confidence as a bricoleur and to adopt a reflexive stance as discussed earlier.

7.4 Ethical considerations

To act ethically during research is to behave with respect and this attitude must be maintained throughout the enterprise. Ethical problems and dilemmas are a necessary part of research (de Laine 2000) that involves, in this instance, the participation and active involvement of children. Indeed, it has been suggested that educational researchers have a very different set of relationships with the field and these relationships are permeated by a set of value-laden concerns about individual, community and societal well-being (Edwards 2002). Before entering the field I had underlying knowledge and understanding of general ethics, and the general principles of undertaking research with children. The basic premises included the following considerations:

- autonomy
- beneficence
- adequate understanding of the research process by participants
- participant consent and choice
- anonymity
- confidentiality
- honesty and fairness in the enterprise
- the minimisation of risk

From an ethical standpoint this research was based upon informed consent, confidentiality, and protection and it aimed to benefit the children and contribute to knowledge. Being sensitive and demonstrating integrity with *all* those who came in direct contact with the research was essential. Respect for the children's competencies was central to the research endeavour which became, as (Morrow and Richards 1996:100) suggest, 'a methodological tool in itself'. In this study I hope that sensitivity, honesty and respect are conveyed to all involved in this endeavour, in particular for the young children who participated.

The relationship with both the children (and the adults) was defined by my role in the pre-school settings. Much has been written about the stance one can adopt when researching with children (see for example Waksler 1986; Mandell 1988; Fine and Sandstrom 1988; Graue and Walsh 1998), ranging from suspending one's adult role and 'being' a child, to clinical detachment. The issue of a power differential is dealt with further in 7.4.1 and building relationships with the children in 8.2.1.

To plan for every contingency relating to ethical issues is virtually impossible, but there were many aspects that were considered prior to entering the field. One issue – that of whether to intervene or not in a dispute involving children – arose during the pilot study when I was unsure of my role in the nursery. This led to the decision to obtain advice from the staff on my position as an arbitrator at each centre prior to the commencement of the fieldwork. Table 7.1 presents the ethical protocol for this research and details of decisions made in response to ethical considerations. Most of the concerns were related to permission seeking, the involvement of the children in the research process and assuring anonymity and confidentiality. The issue of protecting the identity of the pre-school setting where the fieldwork was carried out was clearly problematic as the identity would be easy to work out from the data. It was also necessary to describe the geographical setting of each centre. Thus an agreement was reached with the senior members of staff that identifying the nursery or playgroup was unavoidable and their consent was sought to name the settings. To respect anonymity the children's names have been changed and any photographs that featured children who could be recognised were excluded from the data set.

As very young children cannot give their consent in a formal manner, consent was sought from the parents by way of an opt-in form. This form (see Appendix 1) included personal details, the precise nature of the work with the children and assurances that participation was voluntary and confidentiality assured. Parents were also informed about the possible use of the findings. The children's best interests were always of paramount importance so it was vital that if a child displayed any signs of distress during the research then this would be addressed. Personal experience of working with pre-school children also heightened awareness that even very young children can deny their feelings and emotional expressions to correspond with adults' expectations, so I was conscious of any sign that could be masking a child's

Ethical consideration	Ethical decision
Gaining access to pre-school setting	Initial approach by phone and e-mail to senior staff. Followed by formal letter to staff outlining plans (see Appendix 6). Access considered to be continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation
Objections from gatekeepers – committee, parents, staff, children Intervention in behavioural issues at centre	Detailed explanation emphasising why children must be involved, the objectives of the research, that methods used are safe and fair. Opt-in parental consent (see Appendix 1). Contact with author encouraged. Full explanation to children of research involvement through conversation and use of props. Role in centre to be pre-determined and negotiated to establish intervention policy
Concern about personal credentials	Open access to author's details of background and previous experience. Enhanced disclosure (CRB) obtained. Reassurance of professional integrity and on-going review of relationships in field
Concern about research with very young children and ethical standards	Research to take place during session and within sight of other adults. Reference to NCB ethical guidelines (2003), BERA guidelines (1992) and Durham University guidelines. Approval of plans by DU School of Education Ethics Committee. Familiarity with child protection policy at each centre. Risk assessment carried out prior to fieldwork at each centre. Approved adult: child ratio on walks
Selection of children for research means some may be excluded	All children to be involved at some stage of research process. Selection of children for specific procedures in consultation with staff
Anxiety expressed by children (verbal/nonverbal) during research	Methods reviewed if unsuitable or not comprehended. Children have right to withdraw at any time. Awareness of author to span of attention and other factors influencing children
Confidentiality	All data gathered held in strictest confidence together with any other information that may be obtained outside the research process i.e. in casual conversation. Sensitive information to be dealt with according to centre's child protection policy
Anonymity	All children's names and identities withheld or altered in report
Concern over storage of data i.e. recordings and transcripts	All data held securely. Tapes and notes not to be used for any other purpose
Concern regarding future use of data	Data to be used for PhD research only and only when relevant to the research question. If published, all or part, consent will be obtained from all involved
Leaving the field	Feedback to be given to centre through presentation and/or written material. Feedback encouraged from centres. Gratitude to all involved

Table 7.1: *Ethical protocol: ethical considerations and ethical decisions*

discomfort. Gaining access to the three field sites was more time-consuming than anticipated due in part to key members of staff being absent, and awaiting the decision of the playgroup committee who meet infrequently. There is a more extended account of gaining access to the centres in 9.2.2.

The emotional, perhaps more elusive concerns, included roles, relationships and expectations together with my own values, morals, ideals and feelings, and these are visible throughout the research process. This personal stance is, it is believed, integral to this research and one that de Laine (2000) argues should be considered as a new ethic that takes into account the more human and moral approach to fieldwork. In essence this ethic must seek to answer, 'how will I be with these people?' (de Laine 2000:37). To answer this fundamental question past experience and knowledge of working in pre-school settings was called upon, together with new understandings from current literature.

Underpinning this study and providing constant ethical standards were the ethical guidelines of the School of Education, University of Durham, and those of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 1992) and the National Children's Bureau (NCB 2003). In addition, there was conversance with the rights of the child as laid down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) which, in a set of 54 articles, provides clear guidance concerning children's rights to protection, provision and participation. Further, the Children Act (1989) states that the wishes and feelings of children are paramount, that they have the right to have information on decisions that affect them and that they have the right to refuse.

7.4.1 The power differential
Power relations which exist between researchers and researched affect the process of research and, potentially, the outcomes. Of particular relevance is the way in which the researcher views children within the research process and the commonly held assumption that adults' knowledge is superior to that of children. A concern for any researcher with children is that adults' views are imposed and the children's views not heard. Associated with this is the problem that some children are not used to expressing their views freely or, indeed, being taken seriously by adults.

Christensen and Prout (2002) identify four ways that children can be viewed in research. Firstly, they discuss the child as object. In this case children are seen as dependent, incompetent, in need of protection and unable to express themselves appropriately. The adult becomes the dominant force of the research and the voice of the child rarely heard. If, alternatively, children are seen as subjects of the research whereby they are placed more in the foreground of the research process then they are naturally more involved in the study. However, there is still adult judgement concerning their social maturity and cognitive ability, and power exerted in terms of the exclusion of certain groups of children. The third perspective of how children are viewed in research is as social actors whereby children have an autonomous status and are not seen as part of a family or part of a nursery etc. This does not mean there is necessarily a distinction between adults and children, and methodologies are not tailored to suit different ages. Finally, Christensen and Prout describe the child as active research participant. This perspective recommends that children are informed, involved and consulted about the research in which they are to partake. The balance of power in this situation is negotiable, sometimes unpredictable, but it is one that actively engages children in the research process.

As this research involved working with very young children there was a consciousness of the disparity of power between researcher and researched, and how that power could be intrusive. Realistically, this inequality could not be eradicated. For Mandell (1988), adopting the 'least-adult' role is one way forward in reducing the power differential and to do this the researcher has to suspend all adult-like characteristics except physical size. This is extraordinarily difficult to achieve and I have concerns that reporting this sort of research from the point of view of the child is still harder. My preferred status as researcher is, as suggested by James et al (1998), the interested adult friend role and this attitude, whereby the adult persona and adult responsibility are maintained, seemed the most appropriate way forward. Thus I was willing to be a friend and join in activities with the children but not to impose myself upon them. The issue of intervention when a child was perceived to be at risk or was upset was one that warranted consideration and, with the well-being of the children of paramount importance, there was no question that I would be involved if necessary.

There was also awareness that there was the potential for a power differential or tension between myself and the staff at the nursery settings. In a sense the fact that this is *my* research – I developed the idea, formulated the research question and organised the format – provided me with the 'power'. It was also acknowledged that my very presence in the nurseries would have some sort of impact upon the data collected inasmuch that behaviour would alter i.e. the behaviour of both children and adults may deviate from the norm and affect the findings. My acceptance as an adult in the guise of teacher, researcher, friend etc in the pre-school settings was always going to be an issue in this research and involved negotiation and compromise.

7.4.2 Reciprocity

> *The time children devote to our research agenda is a gift.*
>
> Roberts (2000: 238)

Researching in pre-school settings can be disruptive for staff, parents and children. To balance this more negative aspect of the fieldwork the potential benefits of the children's involvement in the research were elucidated. These included:

- ➤ the children being treated as experts in their own lives
- ➤ the children being empowered as research participants
- ➤ the methods chosen were aimed at enhancing their strengths
- ➤ the methods were enjoyable and engaging

Table 7.2 presents a view of the perceived benefits of this research to include not only the children but the wider community. This way of presenting the benefits was adapted from Sieber (1992) and was a useful tool that focused thinking. Leaving the field was a time to thank all the participants and this included giving each of the child participants copies of their photographs and, for the 3 pre-school settings, photo albums that featured aspects of the research. The parents of the 12 children were sent letters to express personal thanks and to indicate the contribution of their child (See Appendix 2 for an example of a letter).

	Subjects: pre-school children	Community: pre-school setting	Researcher	Durham University	Society
Relationships	Children develop relationships with researcher	Staff develop relationship with researcher. Development of new/extended links with Durham University	Develop relationships with pre-school members in order to conduct research	Links to pre-school setting	
Knowledge	Children given opportunities to talk about their experiences of local places	Staff gain knowledge about children's experience of place	Develop understanding of research on pre-school children's experience of place	Potential to expand research in early years education	Information may be gained about how experience of place can inform early years curriculum
Resources	Children get to use disposable cameras, receive copies of photographs	Photo albums made for each participant child and one for each centre. Gift for each centre of books	Major contribution towards completion of PhD thesis and perhaps academic papers	Perhaps refereed publications	Perhaps publication in professional journals/magazines
Empowerment	Children take active role in research process and are involved as fully as possible in design and data collection	Staff increase knowledge on aspect of curriculum and may choose to pursue research	May encourage further research in this field by author		

Table 7.2: *Perceived research benefits* (After Sieber 1992)

7.6 Concluding comments

The objective of this chapter has been to establish the direction of the research and then indicate how it has been guided forward. This was achieved by bounding the research – narrowing it down in terms of scope – and discussing the main focus, objectives, boundaries and the nature of the data required. As the research design emerged, consideration was given to a child-centred approach and, in particular, ways of working with very young children. To consider research with children as either the same as adults or different from adults is too simplistic and ethically unsound. There are many variables that enter this equation from competencies, age, gender, experience, preference, cultural background etc, so it is possible to combine research methods that may be more commonly used with adults with those that are designed specifically for children. The relationship between me as researcher and the children as research participants was described as one of interested adult friend.

The role of bricoleur, whereby a responsive, flexible and adaptive stance is assumed, was reflected upon and seen as an appropriate metaphor to describe the way in which this research was approached and then executed. An ethical protocol that best suited the nature of this research was constructed and used throughout the process. In conclusion, it is hoped that sensitivity, honesty and respect were conveyed to all involved in this endeavour, in particular to the young children who were involved. With the framework of this thesis now established it is time to attend to the work in the field and thus, in Chapter 8, there is a presentation of the data generating methods employed. Methods that both recognise and respect pre-school children's competencies were required, together with techniques that generate good quality data.

Chapter 8
Data Generation

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them.

<div align="right">Spradley (quoted in Kvale 1996:125)</div>

8.1 Introduction

This chapter is about the methods used to generate data. The intention of the fieldwork was to capture, in everyday language, pre-school children's experiences of place, to try and understand - as the opening quote states - the child's point of view. To obtain information about children's experiences of place the children themselves must be consulted as, after all, they are the best source of information. The material gathered from each child is unique and cannot be fully substituted by information from other sources such as parents and teachers. As the children who took part in this research were very young, data generating strategies were used that recognised their particular strengths and competencies. It should also be stressed that involvement in the research was a significant event in the children's lives so every effort was made during the data generation to make it an enjoyable and participative process that enabled them to convey their knowledge and understanding. In return, it was hoped that the children's self-esteem and confidence could be enhanced by their involvement.

This chapter presents the details of data generation – the techniques or the methods of investigation - that are consistent with the interpretive paradigm, personal understandings of young children and ones which are regarded as fit for purpose. Section 8.2 'Designing and developing the methods' gives a full description of each stage of data generation. These include an affective activity and research conversations, walking expeditions and photography, semi-structured interviews and artwork. Studies of children's perspectives can be addressed in a variety of ways so an important aspect of this section is justification for the choice of methods selected. Section 8.3, 'Pilot study', provides a brief account of the results of pre-testing some of

the methods, with supplementary information given in Appendix 5. The next section, 8.4 'Methodological integrity', is a discussion of the replicability, verifiability and honesty of the data generation procedures and this is followed by consideration of 'Data generation: strengths and weaknesses', and 'Alternative ways of generating data' in Sections 8.5 and 8.6 respectively. Concluding comments can be found in part 8.7.

8.2 Designing and developing the methods

There is a rich variety of research strategies within the interpretive paradigm that reflect the concern with how the world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced. The methods of data generation are characteristically flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced. Currently, there is an increasing interest in listening to and consulting with UK pre-school children about their views and experiences of education and childcare. Traditional methods such as interviews and questionnaires have been used, as well as participatory games and role-play activities. Unhelpfully, there does not appear to be a consensus about what is most suitable or successful with researchers or, indeed, what is most effective and enjoyable for the children themselves.

Generating data from very young children demands methods that encourage and stimulate conversation, that are enjoyable and meaningful to the children, and that can capture the different ways children express themselves. In addition, the methods have to be sympathetic to their wide range of competencies. As Spencer et al (1989:112) say of researching with young children, 'with a modicum of ingenuity we can offer children a much better chance of revealing their true level of competence'. Based on this premise this research employs data generation methods that, if not ingenious, could, perhaps, be seen as creative.

A multi-method approach was employed in this research and each of the methods was designed to maximise the potential for obtaining high quality data in terms of the research question. If more than one method is used, as Garbarino and Stott (1992:15) claim, 'the more sources of information an adult has about a child, the more likely that the adult is to receive the child's messages properly'. This involved generating

data in ways that were closely related to the children's meaningful experience of place and which preserved the freshness and richness of their voices. As the actual experience is central to the investigation, it was important to capture the 'nowness' or the immediacy of these experiences. Thus a range of methods was used – an activity, conversations, photographs, interviews and drawings – that were aimed at different facets of the experiences i.e. the emotional, physical and imaginative levels. An important influence in the approach to data generation has come from the Reggio Emilia early childhood centres in northern Italy which have been mentioned previously in section 5.9.2. The fundamental philosophy of these schools is that children have multiple modes of expression such as language, movement, drawing and music. These ways of expressing are known as the '100 languages' and it is a reminder to researchers working with very young children, that listening to a child does not necessarily need to be linked to the spoken word (Edwards et al 1993).

In this study the data generation process was planned in detail prior to entry into the selected pre-school centres. This was achieved by identifying specific issues or key objectives that were to be explored and the method by which data could best be generated. Five such objectives and the means by which they were to be achieved were determined:

> the children's existing understanding of place –
> *informal interaction*

> the children's affective responses to place through pictures –
> *research conversations*

> the children's experience of place in real-time and real-place –
> *walking expeditions with cameras*

> the children's verbal reflections on their real experiences –
> *semi-structured interviews*

> the children's non-verbal reflections on their real experiences –
> *artwork*

Although this was an exploratory study for which data generation tends to be less structured (Arthur and Nazroo 2003), the process was developed in stages that followed on from each other. This is presented in Figure 8.1. The approach was

Entry to selected pre-school centre

$\Downarrow$

Familiarisation with nursery setting; layout, procedures etc Familiarisation and relationship-building with children Use of *All About Me* book

$\Downarrow$

Affective activity Research conversations with children

$\Downarrow$

Walking expeditions with selected children Photographs

$\Downarrow$

Semi-structured interviews with selected children using photographs

$\Downarrow$

Artwork and conversations with selected children

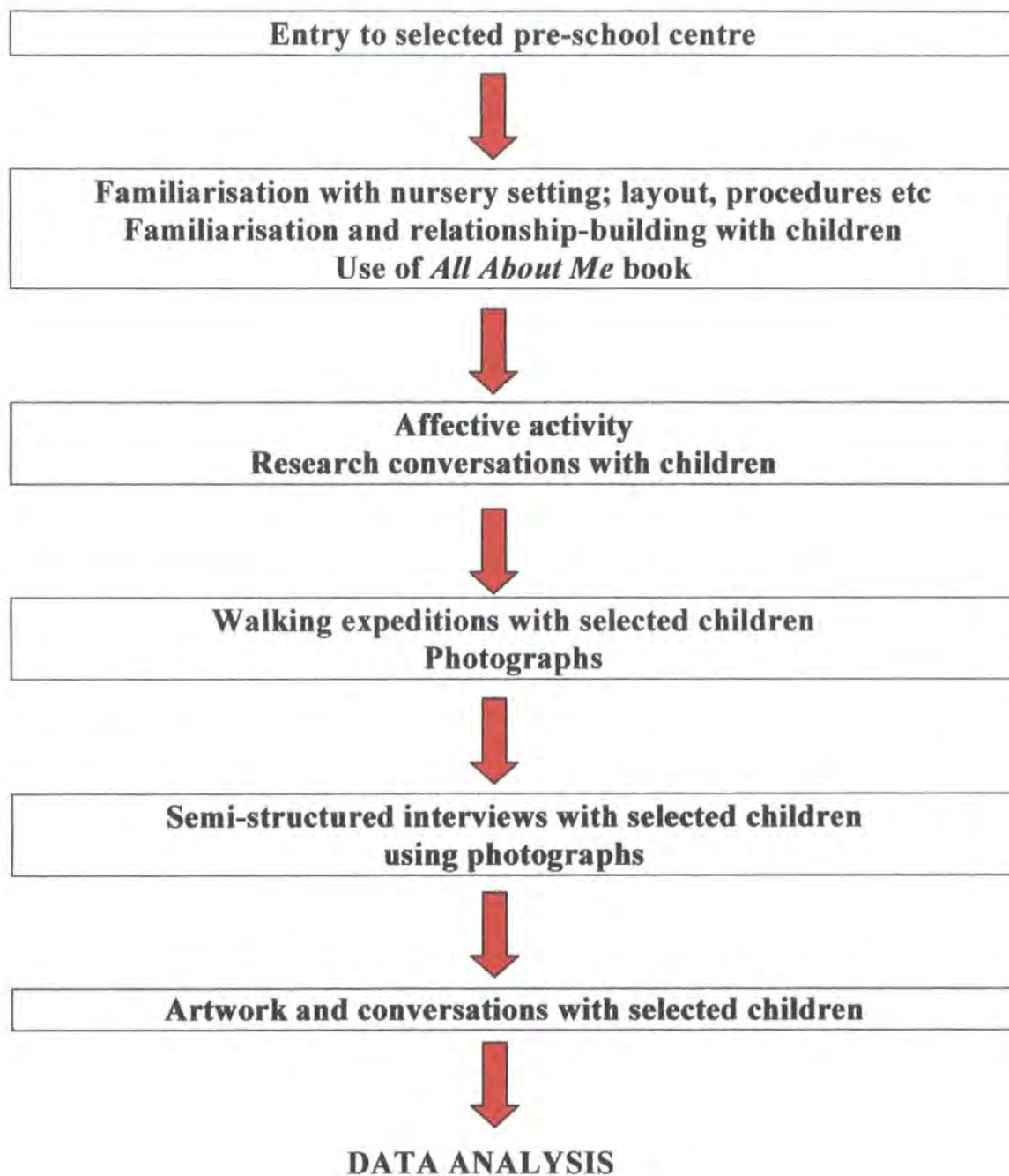$\Downarrow$

DATA ANALYSIS

Figure 8.1: *Data generating strategy*

largely influenced by previous experience of working with very young children in both non-research and research contexts, and it led me to believe that they respond particularly well to an agenda that progresses in steps that make sense to them or, at the very least, has some sort of meaning. So, for example, going for a walk and drawing pictures of what has been seen is more relevant to a child than simply being asked to draw a favourite place. This sequencing of methods does not imply that the design was inflexible. Each stage of the data generation process, such as the research conversations, had in-built flexibility and this is described in subsequent sections of this chapter. There was awareness, however, that the flexibility had to have constraints as the data generation techniques were to be used across three pre-school centres and there was a risk – if there was too much flexibility or leeway – of non-standardisation of approach and subsequently of results.

The description of data generation starts with the building of relationships which, although arguably not strictly speaking data generation, was the foundation upon which subsequent field activities were based.

8.2.1 Building relationships

Obviously gaining access to early years centres was one of the initial steps required and this is discussed fully in 9.2.2 as it is related to how the three centres were selected for inclusion in this research. In this part of Chapter 8, the issue of building relationships is attended to as this was regarded as the foundation of data generation. Indeed, the need to build rapport with the children was vital for the research endeavour and was a key to the success of the study. Good relationships also had to be established with all adults involved i.e. the staff, parents and carers. Much depended upon my prior knowledge and skill of working in nurseries. The general objective was to become a familiar figure in the early years setting so that the children did not behave in special ways and the adults did not feel threatened or pressured by the presence of a researcher. At each pre-school centre time was invested in order to achieve the above objectives as fully as possible in what was a delicate process of negotiation and trust building (Mauthner 1997). Only when it was felt that sound relationships were established, was the process of data generation *per se* embarked upon.

At this stage of the fieldwork there were a number of objectives. Some were practical considerations, others interpersonal. The main objectives were:

> - to check that parental consent forms and risk assessments were in place
> - to become familiar with the nursery layout, the routines, become oriented, and learn the 'culture' of the nursery
> - to start building relationships with the children
> - to establish a balance of power whereby the children were given some control over the research process
> - to take part in nursery activities when appropriate
> - to talk and listen to the children informally; to 'tune in' to their speech and local linguistic conventions
> - to share information about myself with the children
> - to initiate discussion about places the children know
> - to brief staff *in situ* about the fieldwork objectives
> - to check recording equipment

Part of the familiarisation process involved sharing a picture book, *All About Me*, which was written specifically for the research endeavour. The book had photographs of aspects of my life – my family, house, things I like/dislike and places I like/dislike. This was shared with the children as part of familiarising ourselves with each other, and also to encourage conversation about places in their lives.

At this stage field notes were taken as an aid in the selection of the children perceived as suitable to take part in subsequent fieldwork activities. These notes were derived from observation, interaction with the children and discussion with the staff. The selection of child participants is considered further in 9.4.

8.2.2 The affective activity and research conversations

Once rapport had been established with the children, the next stage was to focus more specifically on their response to place. This involved friendship pairings of children - recommended by the staff in each setting – which were arranged so the children would be more relaxed and comfortable, and that conversations might be stimulated by their interaction. As many of the children as possible were included, mindful to the

fact that permission had not been granted by all parents for their children to take part in the research process. The pairs of children were shown 11 pictures of places and given stickers – a smiley face or an unhappy face – which they applied to the pictures depending whether they liked or disliked the place. This, then, was an affective activity and it was anticipated that the children would see this more as a game rather than a task they had to complete. The 11 pictures were pre-selected from magazines and scanned from books as representing a range of places with which the children were likely to have had some degree of experience, be it firsthand or through indirect means. The pictures, which can be viewed in Appendix 3, covered a range of places from remote rural landscapes to busy urban streets. The results of this activity were noted on a chart drawn up for each child so that there was a record of which places they liked or disliked. The children were encouraged to talk about their choices and feelings towards the photographs. These sessions were recorded using an audio tape machine supplemented with notes that logged who was talking, body language and facial expressions.

These exchanges were not interviews as such, but informal and loosely structured; what Mayall calls 'research conversations' (2000:122). The purpose of the conversations was to obtain the children's perspectives on the different places in the photographs without recourse to a list of set questions, but rather to engage in a more spontaneous exchange. Any questions that were asked were probes to move the conversation forward, although generally it was the children's responses that guided the direction of the exchanges. If the children chose not to or were unable to comment, then this was recorded. This approach blended active listening with the children's narratives, thus shaping interpretation of what was happening during the conversations.

This method does invite children to talk about things that are unrelated to the task, but it is believed this is balanced by it being more relaxed and spontaneous than a more formal interview. Accessing children's knowledge cannot be restricted to the needs of the researcher and it is important to let the children have more control during exchanges and allow them to explore areas of their choosing.

8.2.3 Walking expeditions

The notion of gathering data by engaging children in conversation during walks in the local area was developed by Hart (1979) in his ethnographic study of children's experience of place in an American town. Hart saw this method as the most effective way of gathering the required data whilst the children experienced direct physical engagement with place. He termed them 'place-feeling expeditions'. Since then they have been replicated in similar forms (see Langsted 1994; Clark and Moss 2001; Lancaster and Broadbent 2003), so that children of various ages share their experiences in real time and real place. Research with very young children that employs walking and talking techniques tends to be situated within or in the immediate proximity to the home or nursery setting; it appears there is little or no research that involves pre-school children walking some distances from their base. Hart worked with children between the ages of 4 and 12 and the place expeditions were more or less directed and led by the children themselves. Whilst this element of child freedom within the research process is attractive, it was inappropriate for the pre-school children in this research to set off unguided from their nursery or playgroup. Instead, in consultation with staff, the walks were pre-planned with risk assessments carried out prior to the walks. Inevitably, this meant that the choice of places encountered during the walk was pre-selected, but each route offered a range of interesting places that offered choice of focus for the children. During the walk conversations with the children about place were recorded in note form.

The routes of the walks undertaken in the three field sites are presented in Figures 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4. These maps include the walk within the wider context of the area, and places and elements of place that were of significance.

8.2.3.1 The use of cameras

One of the objects of an interpretive approach to the experience of place is to employ methods of generating data that allows that subjective experience to be critically uncovered and understood. The use of photography, in which the photograph is self-directed, fits well with the assumptions of this paradigm as it reveals a sense of how the world is seen and interpreted, although it should be always acknowledged that photographs are not absolute representations of a given state. They are, in effect, tools

Durham
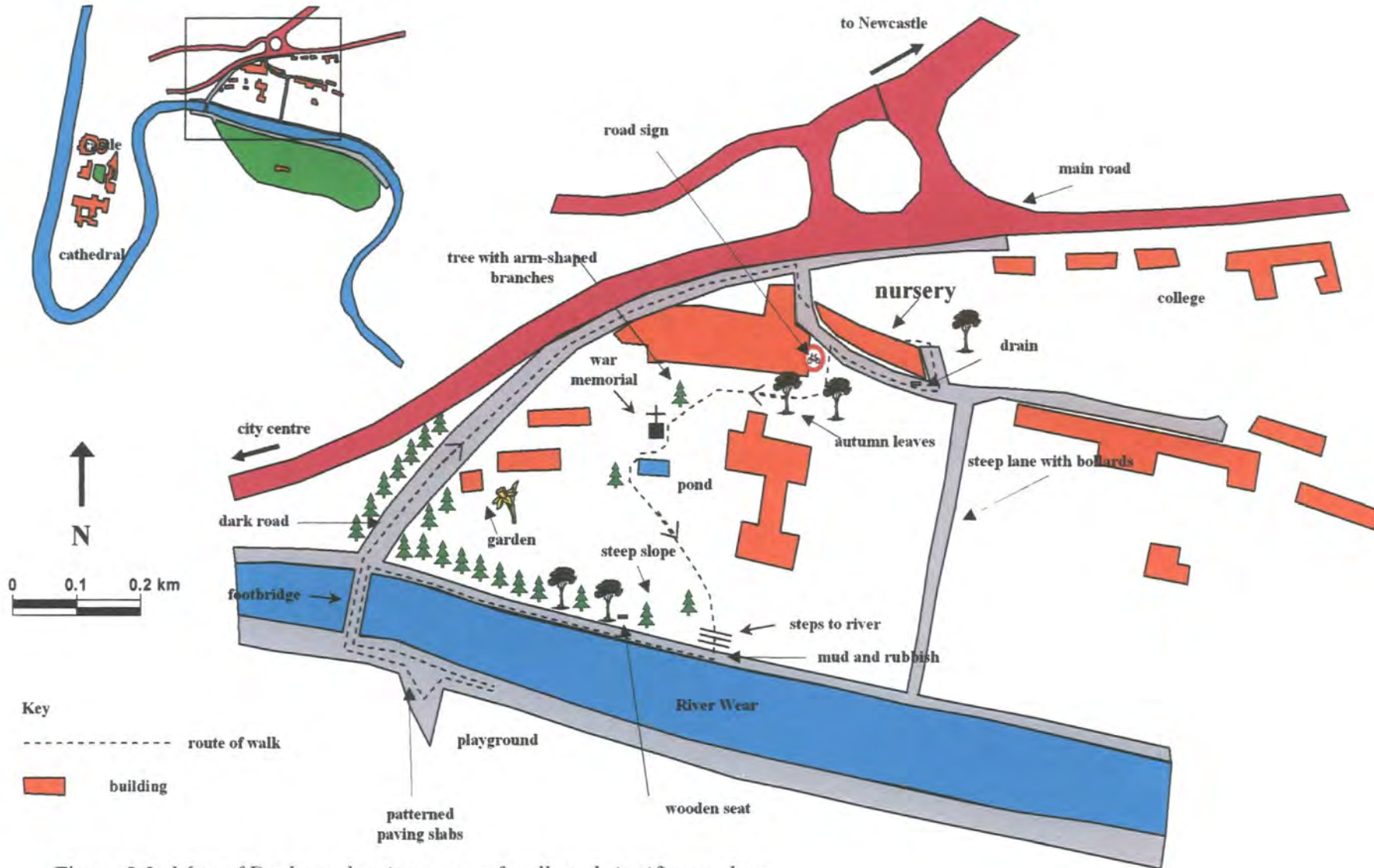
Figure 8.2: *Map of Durham showing route of walk and significant places*

Drumlithie
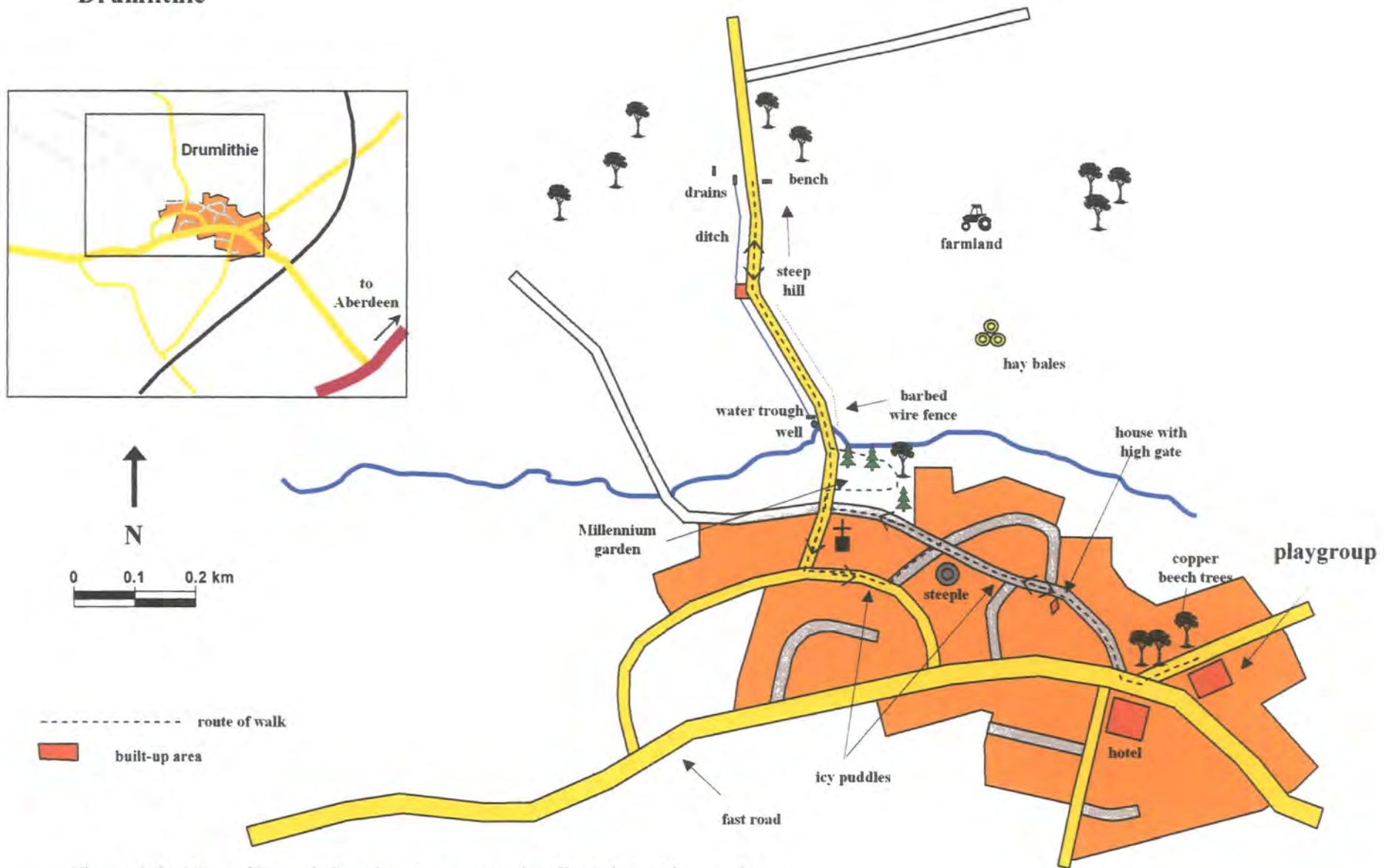
Figure 8.3: *Map of Drumlithie showing route of walk and significant places*

Fraserburgh

puddle

white van

yellow and
white road
markings

bare garden

drain

nursery

bus shelter

N

0   0.1   0.2 km

school

crossing

crossing lady

fire station

bus stop
and cat

houses with
zig-zag roofs

spiky plant
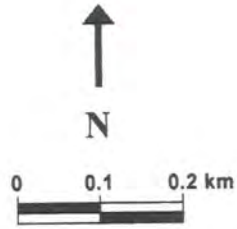
- - - - - - - route of walk

built-up area

ornamental
garden

Figure 8.4: *Map of Fraserburgh showing route of walk and significant places*

to help understandings develop. Further, the photographs offer a perspective from a given context at a given time so they are what they are – snap shots.

The use of photographs taken by children is still relatively new to educational research, but it is increasingly seen as a way of giving children some control of their involvement and a way of gaining insight into the context of their lived experiences. Research supports the premise that by 3 years of age children understand the symbol referent nature of photographs (Troseth and Deloache 1998), i.e. it is presumed that children understand that photographs represent actual events, places, people etc. However, it was not assumed that every child in this study would understand that a photograph taken by them was a source of information about a currently existing reality. Furthermore, a photograph is a static and confined object taken at a particular moment in a particular context so there is a risk that reality loses its significance once it is presented in 2D form (Baroni 2003).

Until comparatively recently, ethical concerns over the use of cameras with children as a research tool have precluded it as a data generation method, with confidentiality and interpretation cited as particularly problematic (Schratz and Steiner-Loffler 1998). However, the use of cameras *by* children in which they have control is becoming a recognised method that yields interesting and valid results. Self-directed photography allows a visual reference of places, people and elements which children deem significant to emerge (see for example Langsted 1994; Schratz and Steiner-Löffler 1998; Young and Barrett 2000; DeMarie 2001; Moss 2001; Rasmussen 2004; Ross 2005; Cook and Hess 2007). An example of a particularly effective use of cameras is a UNICEF project in which children were invited to use cameras for a 'photo essay' that was to be a visual account of the 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan (UNICEF 2005). Closer to home, research by Clark and Moss (2001) involved pre-school children using disposable cameras to take photographs of important places within their nursery, the method being part of their 'mosaic approach' (referred to earlier in 7.3.2), whereby visual and verbal data is collected through an integrated approach. Clark and Moss report that the use of cameras was an enjoyable activity and that the photographs offered a powerful new language for young children.

In this research four children at each centre – thus 12 children in total across 3 field sites - were selected to take part in the walking expedition. The reason for the walk had been discussed with the children earlier and reinforced through a book I compiled in which two children went for a walk and took pictures of places which they later talked about (*Tanya and Sam's Walk*). Each child was given a disposable camera with 24 frames. This type of camera was used because they are relatively inexpensive, lightweight and easy to use. The use of the camera was explained in terms of which button to press and how to wind on the film. I also had the use of a digital camera during the walks with which I took my own records of the experience and which, in one instance, was used by one of the children to supplement her own photographs.

The children were given no directions about what to photograph during the walks as the aim was to let the children explain the photographs later, thus precluding an adult interpretation of why they chose certain places or 'seeing' what is not really there.

The advantages of using photographs include the following:

- quick and easy, enjoyable and maintains interest
- focussed attention on the task
- triggering of memories
- production of new perspectives
- facilitation of dialogue
- combination of visual and verbal language
- production of unpredictable information
- conveyance of trust in children
- engendering of confidence and feeling of participation by children
- provision of choice and a sense of control and ownership

8.2.4 Semi-structured interviews

The photographs were developed overnight and were used over the following days as visual stimuli for semi-structured interviews that aimed to explore further the children's experience of place.

As a research method, interviews of any kind and with any research population are not easy, and the decision to use them was not taken lightly. Personal conceptions of young children as active subjects in the research, their competencies, ethical issues and my role as interviewer were considered, as was the manner in which interview data would be interpreted. Searching the literature revealed a wealth of material on interviewing as a research tool and interview techniques, but there was less concrete guidance in methodological texts that dealt specifically with interviewing children. In fact there is a suggestion by some writers that children of this age cannot manage interviews and, for Mauthner (1997), even at 6 years of age children tend to remain silent, answer in monosyllables and frequently with 'I don't know' responses. Other detractors of this method used with children view it as flawed in that children are very suggestible at this age and apt to respond in ways they feel are pleasing to the adult researcher.

Interviewing children is most prevalent in developmental psychology, cognitive development, nursing research and as eyewitness testimony in legal cases. In fact, some of most useful material was located in medical journals such as *Health Education Research* and *Research in Nursing and Health* where contributing researchers interview children on a regular and successful basis. It was reported in such journals that empathy, respect, patience and sensitivity were essential attributes for an interviewer. Being interested in what the child has to say is clearly vital. Ways of engaging young children in interview conversations is generating an increasing amount of interest in the research community due to children's views and perspectives being sought and valued. Whilst formal, structured interviews with pre-school children are generally thought to be ineffective, if not inappropriate, there is consensus that the comparative freedom and flexibility of a semi-structured interview is a more valuable technique, providing it is used befittingly.

In this study the purpose of these interviews was to understand shared meanings by encouraging each child to describe their lived experience of place i.e. what it was like for him or her. As the interviewer I had realistic expectations of the progress and outcomes of the interviews, and viewed them as opportunities for joint meaning-making whereby the child tries to make sense of the situation - which is very possibly a new experience - and myself as interviewer with a facilitative role in helping the

child construct his or her accounts. The interview can be seen, then, as a process of negotiation and re-negotiation of meaning (Westcott and Litteleton 2005), and seeks to give voice to the children's experiences. These meanings are a co-creation between the interviewer and the children and not just the researcher's interpretation (Wimpenny and Gass 2000). It was important that the interviews took place in a context that was meaningful to the children and thus they were undertaken as soon as possible after the walking expeditions and with complete sets of developed photographs. With the experience still fresh, the children were spoken with individually and the conversations were taped. Again, recordings were supplemented with field notes that recorded body language and facial expressions. At times, due to difficulties with sound levels, handwritten notes replaced audio recordings.

The linchpin of the interviews was each child's set of photographs which provided the stimulus for conversation and focus of interest. The interviews were constructed around a loose interview schedule of pre-determined questions to ensure that certain points were covered and that could be modified according to my perception of what seemed appropriate (see Appendix 4). Open-ended questions were used as they allowed the children to describe their views in their own words, thus eliciting their subjective frame of reference (Kortesluoma et al 2003). Probes, such as non-verbal encouragement or verbal comments such as 'anything else?' were used to encourage an expansion on an answer. The main advantage of this sort of interview is that it builds upon the children's responses and follows new leads if and when they arise. This flexibility within the interviews is in accordance with the interpretive paradigm as it facilitates reflexive responses to changes in the course of the research.

My stance during the interviews was reflective rather than dialogical and the conveyance of interest achieved through careful listening. Care was taken to ensure the children understood what was meant by the questions. Docherty and Sandelowski (1999) also highlight the difficulties children may have in ascertaining what the interviewer wants from them. Hypothetical questions were avoided on the grounds that very young children can find it difficult to distinguish between what is said and what is meant (Scott 2000). In addition, it was not taken for granted that children can see the obvious and respond accordingly. The communication skills of pre-school children are undoubtedly an issue in an interview situation. Some may be able to

assimilate abstract concepts such as 'why, when and how', some not; some may have problems understanding long sentences and/or multi-syllabic words whilst others are comparatively proficient. Again, this is where the skill, flexibility and adaptability of the interviewer is most important. Prior to the interviews there was no conception of the time they would take and, as it transpired, they took considerable time. This is discussed more fully in 12.9 in an assessment of the research design.

8.2.5 Artwork

Following on from the interviews, the next phase of data generation was to ask the selected children to draw pictures of the places they had seen, and talk about the picture during its execution. The children were invited to draw a picture of a place they had seen during the walking expeditions using coloured pencils and wax crayons. The photographs they took were available as stimuli for the artwork during which informal conversations took place. Interactions were recorded.

The use of drawing as a research tool is most commonly used to define developmental stages and to assist children's emotional issues. An example of the latter comes from Soto (2005) who describes children's artwork as a way of making sense of their experience of the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001. Drawings done in this way are then subject to scrutiny and interpretation that may help identify specific psychological issues. Drawings, according to some researchers in the field, are waiting to be interpreted because, suggest Coates (2002:23), 'what the child really wants to do is talk about himself in pictures'. Artwork can be, and is, interpreted on cognitive, affective and linguistic levels. From the cognitive level, drawing is a way of thinking about and exploring the world – 'thought in action' (Roberts-Holmes 2005:136). Through their drawings children can also learn about their feelings in an affective sense and linguistically they are developing their visual language. Indeed, Matthews (1992: 102) terms it 'affective imagery'. Artwork was also used to study the environmental perceptions of 7-9 year old children by Barraza (1999), who justified artwork as an activity that children enjoy, that it is a tension-free activity and a way of comparing groups of children with different abilities.

It would appear that, potentially, a great deal is happening when a child puts pencil to paper, but there are warnings in the literature that using drawings to make inferences

about a child is a highly suspect process and should be undertaken with care. I also feel that whilst drawing is an everyday activity at playgroup or nursery, it should not be assumed that all children like drawing and painting. Drawing is a complex cognitive activity demanding a reconstruction of a 3D world in a 2D medium which some pre-school children find more difficult than others. In such circumstances the ability to draw may not be as developed as their ability to express their ideas in other ways which means that activity becomes frustrating rather than enjoyable. Furthermore, drawing demands specific skills, imagination and an ability to transfer knowledge gained in one context to another. Drawings are also significantly influenced by the manner in which children are asked to draw; whether it is a regular activity for them and how their artwork is received. This reinforces the decision in this research to employ drawing as a means to talk rather than as a means to an end.

The intention in this research was not to impute a personal interpretation upon the drawings by translating the lines and shapes into the lingua franca of meaningful words (Danaher and Briod 2005), but to gather further verbal data during the drawing process itself so that the children talked on task and with direct reference to a place. Thus the pictures *per se* were not a primary part of the data collection process (Holmes 1998). Nevertheless, the pictures were rich, visual illustrations which directly showed how the children see their world.

8.3 Pilot study

Prior to the fieldwork an opportunity arose to pilot study some of the intended data generating techniques. The pilot, carried out in a nursery in Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire was used to assess the affective activity, to check the appropriateness of questions in a semi-structured interview and to identify any procedural problems that might arise. These included ethical and access issues. It was not possible to take the children out on a walking expedition. Most importantly the pilot study provided an opportunity to become acclimatised to being in a nursery after an absence of a year or so and to check that the data generating methods tested were indeed aimed at the research objectives.

The data collected in the pilot study are excluded from the data set. Further details of the objectives and findings of the pilot study may be found in Appendix 5.

8.4 Methodological integrity

The integrity of this study was striven for by a rigorous approach to the research enterprise. In addition, more personal issues of academic integrity in terms of responsibility, honesty and self-reflection were also considered. Many elements contributed to this robustness including methodological and ethical considerations, definitions of key terms, the pilot study, the design of the data generating methods and the approach to data analysis. All of these have been considered in honest and transparent detail, thus offering the reader the opportunity to decide for him or herself as to the dependability and soundness of this research. In essence, this is as far as possible a true and honest representative of the children's perspectives.

Four specific criteria are employed with regards to the integrity of this research. These are credibility, replicability, trustworthiness and verifiability. The strategies for enhancing each of these criteria, some of which overlap, are now discussed. Firstly, credibility, the most important principle of integrity in an interpretive study, is considered. Credibility refers to authentic representations of experience so that it is recognisable to those who had the experience and is based on the assumption that there is no single reality but, rather, multiple realities. In this study credibility is enhanced by explication of participant selection procedures detailed in Chapter 9; the reflexive nature of the researcher as described in Chapter 6; selection and execution of data generating methods as presented in this chapter; strategies for analysis which are found in Chapter 10.

Replicability refers to the degree to which findings fit within contexts outside this study i.e. elements of this research produced in one context may be transferred to others. This is analogous with the concept of generalizability which is more usually associated with positive research. Within the interpretive paradigm, experiences and assumptions are assumed to be largely bound to the time, people and setting of the particular study and this is certainly the case here, especially when the small participant number is taken into consideration. Baxter and Eyles (1996:515) summarise this well by stating that for interpretive researchers 'statements will be idiographic rather than nomothetic'. However, this is not to say that interpretive research need pertain only to the cases under investigation. Meanings derived from

the data may be shared and it is possible they may be common to a larger group of people. This can only be achieved if there is a full and explicit account of the study context, and detailed, thick descriptions of how constructs are developed and what they mean. Only then is it possible to determine the degree to which they may be transferred to other contexts.

The trustworthiness or dependability of this research is bound up with the consistency with which the same constructs may be matched with the same phenomena over space and time (LeCompte and Goetz 1982). In many ways trustworthiness is similar to replicability. The main difference is that trustworthiness is concerned with the degree to which it is possible to deal with instability or changes that occur during the research endeavour. My personal interpretation of this is that due to the nature of interpretive research, change is an inevitable result if one adopts a reflexive attitude. Thus trustworthiness is used as a guide to the interpretation of the data whereby analytical constructs are clearly delineated and the strategies are then used consistently across all data.

The fourth criterion that constitutes the integrity of this research is verifiability which may also be termed confirmability or validity. This construct is the source of debate amongst writers of methodological texts. So, for Kvale (1996) the richness and power of the data gathered in descriptive and narrative form is such that it can 'carry the validation with them' (p. 252); for Wolcott (1990) any claim to validity is dismissed as a distraction from the true worth of the data; for Robson (2002) it is a statement on the accuracy and truthfulness of a piece of research. These three writers present very different positions, ranging from verification being an unnecessary concern to it being of integral importance. My own thought on the question of verifiability is that in order to stand up to external scrutiny, research data should be evaluated for sources of bias. If it offers as 'sound a representation of the field of study as the research methods allow' (Edwards 2001:124) then this can be construed as honest and valid research. In order to achieve this, potential threats to verification must be identified. In this research there was consideration of the following:

- ➢ inappropriate data generation methods
- ➢ inaccurate, incomplete or unjustified interpretation of data

- ➢ participant biases
- ➢ researcher biases
- ➢ small number of selected participants

Once identified, minimisation of these threats was achieved through several approaches, with reflexivity - in terms of awareness of personal assumptions and preconceptions - permeating the whole process. Firstly, appropriate methodology and data generation methods, appropriate use of time and resources, and careful planning were employed in the pursuit of answering the research question. Secondly, data triangulation was applied so that different methods were used with the same children in order to obtain a detailed picture of the complex phenomenon of experience of place and to contribute to the dependability of the research. Thirdly, detailed records were kept of all sources of information used and field notes were made of all communications and reflexive thinking. Fourthly, the interviews or research conversations with the children were carefully constructed and, although it has been suggested that very young children are unreliable interviewees, it is believed that there is an inherent trust on their part and they are unlikely to deceive. Fifthly, the reasoning behind the small number of participants in this research is described fully (Chapter 9). Briefly, this decision reflects the purpose of the study and the nature of the population under scrutiny (Cohen et al 2000). Finally, the transcriptions were as faithful as possible to the original spoken word and the interpretation of the data was thorough, plausible and carried out in what was deemed to preserve the richness of the phenomenon.

8.5 Data generation: strengths and weaknesses

This section reviews the strategies employed to generate data. The objective of this research was to obtain data that reflected selected pre-school children's experience of place and, upon reflection, to identify the strengths and weaknesses that emerged both during and after the fieldwork.

The strengths of the chosen strategies include the following:

- ➢ the strategies employed proved to be systematic, practical and feasible
- ➢ the flexible approach to data generation allowed for the physical and emotional needs of young children such as tiredness, disinterest and short span

of concentration, and also took into account the different times of attendance at the pre-school centre

➢ the multi-method approach reflected the competences and skills of the children

➢ time taken to become familiar with the children - and vice versa - prior to data collection proved highly beneficial in the long-term

➢ the children enjoyed and were motivated by the research process, were active participants and had ownership of part of the research process

➢ the fieldwork was carried out in environments familiar to the children

➢ the *voices* of the children were preserved through the data recording techniques and careful transcription

➢ the photographs taken by the children were in real context, personal and meaningful to each individual child

➢ the photographs provided the motivational basis for subsequent semi-structured interviews and brought a sense of 'the now'

➢ the semi-structured interview was an effective technique that both scaffolded the sessions and allowed the children to express themselves so that rich and illuminative data were gathered

➢ the artwork stage proved that young children respond well if directed conversations are embedded in an everyday activity

➢ the amount of data gathered for analysis was substantial, but manageable

Perceived weaknesses of the chosen strategies and specific problems that arose include:

➢ due to the necessity of including children with good communication skills, the selection of participants could be construed as being biased and exclusive (see Chapter 9 for a full account)

➢ the photographs used during the 'affective labelling' task were pre-selected and, although they were chosen to represent a range of places, some of them were beyond the understanding and experience of the children e.g. the scale or perspective of some of the photographs was confusing

➢ although difficult to quantify, the 'affective labelling' activity may have been skewed by the children's desire to please so they were more inclined to respond positively

- when choosing a favourite place from the 11 photographs there was evidence that the children thought there was a right and a wrong answer
- even though the photographs taken by the children were developed as quickly as possible the experience lost some of its freshness
- at times there were difficulties at the venues due to noise and other distractions so that data generation became disjointed and time-consuming
- some of the semi-structured interviews stretched over the course of several days due to a range of factors such as the child's attendance rate and span of concentration
- the quality of the recordings varied considerably and note-taking was increasingly favoured
- keeping the children on task was difficult at times and much depended on my ability to maintain the interaction (Kortesluoma et al 2003)

8.6 Alternative ways of generating data

An interpretive research design was employed in this research as it was deemed to most suit the focus, the objectives, the epistemological foundations, the nature of the data required and my own views and values. These issues were discussed fully in Chapters 6 and 7. With its focus on words and the search for perspectives and meanings, the design allowed an emphasis on the way pre-school children experience place. In this section of the chapter the focus is upon the choices made and alternatives to the research strategies or methods employed during data generation.

Any research method makes specific demands on the abilities and competencies of the participants, and researching with young children requires techniques that are sympathetic to such variables. With the objectives of the research clearly in mind, several alternative ways of generating data were considered and discounted. The most important of the objectives was the need to generate verbal responses to place in real time and real place. This could not have been achieved through observational methods or, in light of the age of the children, through questionnaires. Observation would have been appropriate if it was the *use* of place or how children *behave* in a place that was being investigated. However, depending on the children to say something relevant about a topic that does not occur regularly or predictably was not deemed to be an expedient way to gather the data sought.

An approach that is sometimes used when young children are involved in research is seeking the views of relevant adults i.e. parents and teachers. In this study it was felt that interviewing parents and carers of the children regarding experience of place would not provide the true feelings and thoughts of the children. This way of generating data could have been considered as an adjunct to the children's voices, but it was not felt that it would fulfil the aims of the research in that the *children's* experience of place is the key aim. In fact, obtaining adult views was more likely to distort rather than enhance the children's views. In line with this, a theoretical approach, whereby secondary sources are used i.e. adult memories of childhood places, was also deemed to be unfitting as the experiences of children appear to be unique and cannot be deduced by extracting information from adult experiences.

As an alternative to the walking expeditions, photographs could have been taken by myself of the area near the pre-school setting and then used during the semi-structured interviews. This was the approach used in my Masters dissertation (Trees 2003) and was relatively successful, largely as the fieldwork took place in a very small, compact village with well-known landmarks such as a castle and a harbour. Notwithstanding, this was an adult-selected range of photographs and it resulted in the child participant still unable to recognise several places – indeed it became more of a test of memory. For this current study, the children's own photographs were a vital component of data generation and could not be substituted in any way.

The fact that the walks were pre-planned is an issue that warrants consideration. Undoubtedly, this influenced the subject of the photographs and thus there was a certain restriction upon spontaneity. However, the age of the children, the health and safety guidelines of the early years centres, risk assessment and the logistics of letting the children take the lead precluded the walks from being unplanned. An alternative that could have solved this problem might have been to issue cameras to the children and let them take them home where photographs could have been taken locally and perhaps with more spontaneity. This approach has its appeal and perhaps lends itself to further research, but for this study the aim was to see how and what the children chose to photograph in a more controlled manner so that individualities, contrasts and differences between their experiences of place could be identified.

8.7 Concluding comments

Whilst there is no one research tool best suited to gaining understandings of pre-school children's experience of place, this chapter has sought to describe the methods employed to generate data that were, as I perceived, the best suited to answering the research question. What were required were techniques that encouraged children to express their perspectives and which engaged them in real experiences of place. A reflexive and creative multi-method approach was used to access these experiences and enhance the integrity of the study, each method recognising and respecting the particular strengths of very young children, and enabling children of different competencies to take part. The data generating methods included an affective activity with research conversations; the use of cameras on a walking expedition; semi-structured interviews stimulated by photographs; artwork that featured places the children had encountered on the walks. Each part of the data generation was discrete, but the strength of the approach used is that it built upon what went before and opened up different ways of communicating.

The methods selected were sensitive and respectful towards the children and engaged them in a variety of ways in the search for new understandings. Importantly, the approach also recognised that each child had his or her own individual, idiosyncratic experiences and this was respected. The creative nature of the approach hinged on being able to stimulate the children into engaging with the various stages of the fieldwork. The children were also given opportunities to participate in ways that gave them a sense of ownership of the research, for example through taking photographs with individual cameras. The data gathering strategies reflected personal preferences and ideas about researching with very young children.

The integrity of this study was an important consideration and contributed to the clarity of the design. Integrity was defined as credibility, replicability, trustworthiness and verifiability, together with personal attributes such as honesty and self-reflection. These criteria served as anchor points for this research. The strengths and weaknesses of data generation were discussed in an honest way that contributes to the robustness of the research, and alternatives to the chosen methods were presented together with

reasons for their non-inclusion. The methods resulted in a substantial bank of data that included field notes, taped conversations for transcribing, photographs and artwork.

The following chapter turns to the issue of selection - the where and with whom of this research. Chapter 9, 'Selection of place and participants', examines how three field sites were chosen for inclusion and how the twelve children were determined as participants for this study.

Chapter 9
Selection of Places and Participants

9.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and justifies the selection of field sites and participants that were made prior to and during the fieldwork. It was essential to select field sites before entering the fieldwork stage, but the selection of children was an evolutionary process and therefore not pre-specified (Miles and Huberman 1994). These procedures are considered in detail in order to enhance the credibility of this research. When deliberating upon who should take part in the research two questions were asked; what information is required, and from whom can this information be acquired? The focus of this inquiry and my personal judgment as to which approach to sampling or selection would yield the clearest understandings of pre-school children's experience of place, were thus the main criteria for this decision-making process.

Section 9.2, 'Selection of participant pre-school centres', focuses on the reasons behind the choice of three specific pre-school centres to take part in this research. This section also includes details of the research settings such as the geography, socio-economic background and catchment areas. Gaining access to the field sites is covered in 9.2.2. In section 9.3, 'Research population', there is a brief summary of the total population of the three pre-school centres and this is followed by a full account of the selection of the research participants in section 9.4. The 'Research timetable and schedule' – an account of the fieldwork timetable – comprises 9.5 and this is followed by 'Concluding comments' in 9.6.

9.2 Selection of participant pre-school centres

With the aim of eliciting pre-school children's experience of place there was, potentially, an enormous range of pre-school centres from which to choose – broadly speaking any one might be suitable. In England, for example, there are over 215,000 providers of either pre-school day-care or sessional care (Ofsted 2004), whilst in Scotland there are over 3,500 (Scottish Executive 2004). Despite the choice, the selection of pre-school settings in which to undertake the fieldwork warranted careful

consideration due to the demands to be placed on staff and children and the need to establish relationships that would enable the research to be carried out. What made the choice of setting for the fieldwork particularly significant was the focus on place in this research. Of course, each and every playgroup and nursery exists in its unique space and place so each one could offer an individual location be it in a city, a suburb or in the country. How then to make decisions about which pre-school centre to include?

In consultation with my PhD supervisor, the first aspect to decide was the number of pre-school centres to involve in the research. Three was deemed the optimum number, bearing in mind the anticipated amount of data that could be generated at each site. Further discussion revolved around the selection of the three centres. Due to local commitments and for close proximity, it made practical sense to include one setting in, or near, to where I live and study in Durham, north-east England. I was keen that the other two field sites were also familiar to me as this would ease access, and having prior knowledge of the early years centres would be an obvious advantage. With this in mind, Aberdeenshire in north-east Scotland was selected as the other centre for the fieldwork as I have spent considerable time there as an early years professional and I have a substantial number of contacts there. This still meant there were many pre-school settings where the research could be undertaken, so the field was narrowed further by concentrating on early years centres that between them could offer a range of geographical diversity and thus different aspects of place. Again, there was a wealth of choice ranging from inner city to remote, rural locations. Following further debate three different settings were chosen for inclusion – small city, rural and town. It should be stated clearly that the selection of a range of physical settings was not done so that a comparison between then three could be achieved. Rather, it was to generate unique, rich and interesting information about representative places that pre-school children encounter on a daily basis. Details of each setting in terms of geography and socio-economic background, facilities and size follow in sub-sections 9.2.1.1 - 9.2.1.3.

The first selection was relatively straightforward. I live in Durham City and this was deemed as appropriate and convenient as the location for one of the pre-school centres. Secondly, Drumlithie, a rural village some twenty miles south-west of
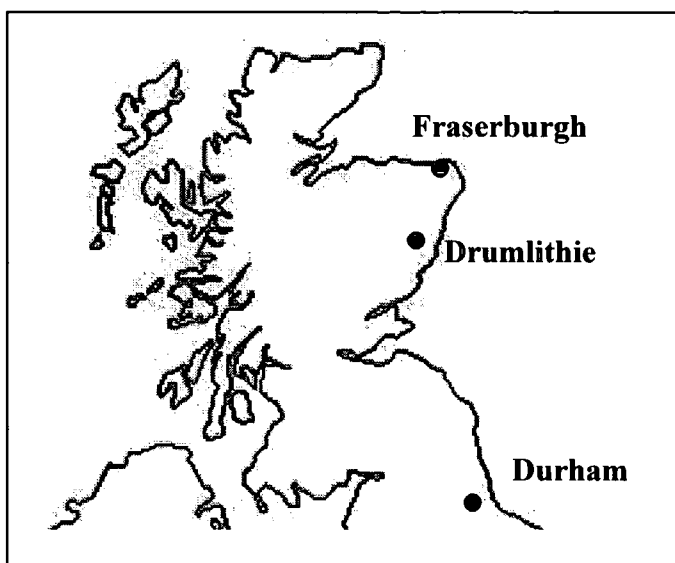
Figure 9.1: *Location map showing the three field sites*

Aberdeen was selected and for the third location Fraserburgh, a town on Aberdeenshire's north coast was chosen. The locations of these places can be seen in Figure 9.1. For the two Scottish locations the choice was discussed with Aberdeenshire local authority colleagues with whom I had worked previously. They were able to provide information about existing pre-school centres in each location and recommend ones which, in their opinion, were suitable for research purposes. I used my own knowledge and past working relationships with staff at pre-school centres to inform my final choices. This is discussed in further detail in sub-section 9.2.2 which considers the issue of gaining access to research sites.

The type of pre-school centre – voluntary, local authority or private – was not a criterion that was considered in a specified way as it was the children's experience of place that was being investigated and this was not felt to be in any way related to the sort of centre the children attended. That being stated, for information purposes, the three centres had the following status; the University Day Nursery in Durham City is a registered day-care provider; Drumlithie Playgroup is a voluntary, sessional pre-school centre; Kiddiwinks, is a private day nursery in Fraserburgh.

9.2.1 The research settings

An objective account of the research locations is presented here to give the reader an indication of the nature of each of the three pre-school centres in terms of facilities, size, catchment, geography and the socio-economic background of the families involved.

9.2.1.1 University Day Nursery, Durham

The small, compact city of Durham has a population of over 81,000 and is located 15 miles south of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The historic centre of Durham, which includes the cathedral and the castle (together designated a World Heritage Site), is enclosed by a narrow loop in the River Wear. The city offers a diverse range of scenery from the wooded banks of the river, parks and cobbled streets, to busy, major roads and modern housing.

The University Day Nursery provides care and education primarily for the children of Durham University staff and students, although non-university places are available. Many of the parents are employed by the University in academic and non-academic posts. Most of the children live within the city boundaries and the majority are driven to the nursery. The age-range is from a few months old to 5 years. The nursery is open from 8.00am to 6.00pm every weekday. Situated within the School of Education and Hild and Bede College complex just to the east of Durham City centre, the nursery building is divided into several units that cater for the different age ranges. There is a hard-surface outside play area. The immediate environs of the nursery include a network of small lanes and paths that interlink various parts of the university complex within a park-like landscape of grass and trees that go down to the banks of the River Wear. The busy A690 passes immediately in front of the nursery on its north side. From the nursery it is possible to walk around the university buildings and grounds, to the river and into the city centre.

9.2.1.2 Drumlithie Playgroup, Drumlithie

The village of Drumlithie has a population of less than 1000 and lies 15 miles south-west of Aberdeen City. The village is situated in a fertile farming area of rolling hills known as the Howe o' Mearns which is bounded to the east by the North Sea and to the west by forest and mountains. The original village buildings, including Drumlithie

steeple which is a local landmark, are clustered round two churches with new housing around the periphery. The village has a primary school and, like the playgroup, caters for children from a wide catchment area.

Drumlithie Playgroup is in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council and offers funded places for children over 3 years. The committee-run playgroup does not have a purpose-built building, and it meets in the village hall every weekday morning from 9.30am until 12pm. Equipment cannot be left out in the hall as other groups within the community also access it. The main hall and a small ante-room comprise the accommodation. There is a fenced, grassed area outside where the children can play. Some of the children live within the village and walk to the playgroup, the others living up to a distance of 6 miles away and come by car. The parents have a range of professions including farming, employment within the service industries including the oil industry, manual labour and teaching.

The playgroup hall is on the eastern edge of the village, at the apex of two roads which have fairly light traffic. The surrounding countryside is hilly and mostly farmland. From the playgroup it is possible to take the children into and through the rest of the village, and further into the countryside.

9.2.1.3 Kiddiwinks Day Nursery, Fraserburgh

Fraserburgh is a town on Aberdeenshire's north-east coast, some 40 miles north of Aberdeen City. The current population is over 12,000. The town is boarded by the sea on three sides with a mixture of industry, cliffs and sandy beaches fronting the sea whilst to the south there is undulating farmland. Fraserburgh owes its original prosperity to the North Sea fishing industry, but in the last three decades the industry has declined and nothing has moved in to replace it. The town has a relatively high unemployment rate compared to other parts of the shire, and social problems such as drug abuse and a high crime rate.

Kiddiwinks Day Nursery is to the west of the town centre in a built up area comprising mostly council houses. The nursery, situated in a converted shop, offers opening times of 8.30am to 5.00pm five days a week. The age range the nursery caters for is from 6 months to 5 years. There is no outside play area primarily due to

problems of vandalism. Nearly all the children live in Fraserburgh and either walk or are driven there, whilst the small number from outlying villages come in by car. There is a high percentage of single-parent families involved in the nursery and also a high rate of unemployment. I was informed whilst at the nursery that a number of the children had learning difficulties and/or emotional issues related to problems at home.

The area surrounding the nursery is of fairly uniform 1970s housing set in a network of roads. Opposite the nursery there is a primary school, its playing fields visible through the high fence. Other than this there is little green space near the nursery. The beach is quite close by but the staff rarely take the children there, having assessed it as a high risk outing.

9.2.2 Gaining access

Initial contact with the three pre-school centres was made through e-mail and phone calls to the senior member of staff. Subsequently, further details of the research were sent to each centre including a hard copy of *Information for Pre-school Centres* (see Appendix 6) and a sample of the parental consent form (see Appendix 1). These documents were shared with other members of staff and, in the case of the playgroup, with the committee. Although it took longer than anticipated due to the absence of key members of staff and the time scale of the playgroup committee meetings, the three centres granted consent to the research proposals and were encouraged to contact me at any time if they had concerns or queries.

Whilst I was not familiar with the setting or staff at the nursery within the Durham City location, there are strong links between the university and the nursery as researchers from a variety of disciplines visit quite frequently. In addition, my PhD supervisor has personal contacts at the nursery through previous research.
The relationships that exist between me and the staff at the centres in Scotland almost certainly eased access to the settings. In my previous capacity as either an officer in the early years section of Aberdeenshire Council's Education Department or as an early years trainer, I have met both senior members of staff at Fraserburgh and Drumlithie. I was very aware of my past status and made it clear that the onus on whether to grant me access to the centres was ultimately their decision and must not

reflect any sense of obligation. I felt that the positive reaction from them both was totally genuine.

9.3 The research population

This research drew on three pre-school centres with a total of 65 pre-school children. In this research a child of pre-school age is taken to be between the ages of 3 and 5. Table 9.1 presents the numbers of children at each centre during the time of the fieldwork.

Centre	Total no. of children aged 3-5
Drumlithie Playgroup	16
Kiddiwinks, Fraserburgh	15
Durham Nursery	34

Table 9.1: *Numbers of children at the three pre-school centres*

The variation in numbers between each centre reflected local geography i.e. small rural location, town or city; local demand; competition from other pre-school facilities and whether the centre offered sessional care or all-day care. The numbers attending each centre fluctuated on a daily basis according to how often a child was registered to attend. This latter point was to be a consideration during the research as it was necessary to plan some aspects of the fieldwork around the attendance of the children.

9.4 Selection of participants

One of the central objectives of this research was to increase understanding of what it is like for a child to experience place. It was not the intention to generalise the findings to a larger population. It was always intended that the number of participants would be small as it would be impossible to do justice to the richness of the data yielded if this was a large-scale survey. Thus the process of finding children to take part in the study was not one of sampling but, rather, one of selection of a small number of children who could contribute significant and rich data and who were 'nested in their context and studied in-depth' (Miles and Huberman 1994:27).

At the start of the work in the field the approach to participant involvement was one of inclusion whereby every child in the research population was involved i.e. all the pre-school children attending the nursery or playgroup. There was no intention to exclude any child at this stage as this was the familiarisation stage of the fieldwork and its aim was to get to know the children before resolving those who would take part in subsequent stages of data gathering. The decision to involve all the children in this initial stage of the fieldwork was relatively easy as the research design incorporated activities that everyone could join in and the aim to include as many children as possible was important. This included the sharing of my book *All About Me*, then taking part in the affective activity and research conversations. However, for this study the final number of children involved in the whole research process was determined at the outset to be small due to the logistics of taking the children on the walking expeditions; the amount of data that would require analysis; the costs incurred of purchasing cameras and developing sets of photographs. Thus the term 'sampling' is not applicable in this study as it is one of selection.

Of vital importance was that the children who participated in the walking expeditions could 'articulate their conscious experiences' (Creswell 1998:111). It was, of course, inappropriate to include children who were not able to communicate well as this was crucial to this study. One very practical aspect of not including all the pre-school children in the three centres in the walking expeditions was the cost of buying upwards of 60 disposable cameras and then developing the films. The sharing of the cameras between pairs of children or groups of children was considered, but it was felt that individuals would lose ownership of the photographs they had taken and it would not allow for in-depth discussion. This decision, however, was influenced most strongly by the amount of data that was realistic to handle in the analysis stage of the research. Another very practical point to consider was the regularity of attendance at the pre-school centre as some of the children, particularly at the two nurseries, attended different combinations of sessions. Other concerns pertinent to the selection of participants were the non-return of consent forms by a few parents, and the non-cooperation of child participants during the research process. If a parent refused to give consent this was respected, as was a child refusing at any time to participate or not wishing to continue with a procedure. Frustrating though this was, this was part of the challenge of working with young children and it was regarded as integral to the

research. To minimise the potentiality of a child dropping out of the research every effort was made to recognise negative signs such as fatigue, disinterest or non-comprehension and react accordingly.

For the walk and photography, and semi-structured interviews a sub-sample of 4 children was selected from each of the three settings. The children were selected purposefully or through 'criterion-based selection' (Le Compte and Preissle 1993:69) in that the requirement was children who could provide information needed to answer the research question. Within this interpretive framework the sampling was non-probable, purposive or judgemental as the participants were selected on the basis of the information required – as Greig and Taylor would have it, 'a sort of handpicking of people' (1999:59).The selection was based partly on the responses obtained from working with the children at the start of the fieldwork, and also the use of the following criteria:

> ➢ children's rapport with myself
> ➢ willingness to take part
> ➢ contribution in affective activity and research conversations
> ➢ interest in the research proceedings
> ➢ communication skills, particularly language
> ➢ cognitive development
> ➢ potentiality of providing significant data
> ➢ opinion of staff regarding suitability
> ➢ a balanced number of boys and girls if possible

This subjective, discretional and, perhaps, judgemental way of sampling is problematic as there is inherent bias in the selection, indeed Cohen et al (2000:104) describe purposive sampling as 'deliberately and unashamedly elective and biased'. However, for the purposes of this research, children were required who could and would share rich information about their lived experience of place. Random sampling would not have been suitable due to the relatively small research population and the risk of poor or inadequate data. The issue of typicality must be mentioned here. A sample is expected to mirror the population from which it comes. However, there is no guarantee that any sample will precisely represent that population. In any event I

would hesitate to describe any one child of pre-school age as 'typical' as the variables that one could use to describe a 'typical' preschooler are inexhaustible.

Naturally, there was concern for the children who were excluded from the main part of the fieldwork. It was decided that this issue would be discussed with the staff at each centre to elicit their opinions. The staff at the Durham nursery planned other activities with the children who did not come on the walk, whilst in Drumlithie it transpired that on the day of the walking expedition there were very few children present due to illness; fortunately the children selected for the walk were all present. Thus all the children at the playgroup that day – 7 in total - took part in the walk and the staff let the non-participants use the playgroup digital camera. After my departure the staff developed the experience of place in the village into a special theme which included all the children. At the Kiddiwinks Nursery in Fraserburgh the matter of exclusion was handled by taking two groups out for a walk, one the research group with disposable cameras and the other with the nursery camera. These attempts to minimise any sense of being left out worked well and it was felt that all the children benefited in one way or another.

9.4.1 Other studies

Prior to deciding the number of participants with whom to engage in the research process, other studies were consulted to check the procedures undertaken. The range of participant numbers in related research is wide as the following examples demonstrate. Matthews (1995a) worked with 40 children aged between 7 and 13 for his study of Kenyan children's views of place; Rissotto and Tonucci (2002) investigated environmental knowledge with 46 children; Bernáldez et al (1987) undertook multivariate analysis of landscape preference with 483 children; Bogner and Wiseman (1997) used factor analysis to monitor 2400 children's perception of rural and urban environments.

Details of sampling procedures do not appear to warrant much space in research literature and, where they do, one is still left wondering quite what the criteria for selection were and what impact it had upon the research findings. It is an accepted fact that the size of the sample/selection is related to the nature of the research and what it is that is being investigated, but in some cases the reasoning is less clear cut.

For example, Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) state that to exclude children during the interview stage of their research process was *un*ethical as the children found it 'very exciting to be interviewed' (p. 176). Taking a different approach, for Wilberg (2002) the way forward when selecting children for her study of preschool children's cognitive representations of their homeland was to ask the teachers to pre-select participants to ensure that their language and social competence were sufficient for verbal questioning. This aspect of preschool or young children's cognitive and verbal capacities or general 'ability' is mentioned by other researchers as the main selection criteria (see for example Conning and Byrne 1995; Littledyke 2004; Lahikainen et al 2003).

Hart (1979) explains the reasoning behind the size of his research sample in his study with children's experience of place. His ethnographic study involved nearly 90 children at the outset and then was reduced to a sub-sample of 20 largely due to pressure of time and a realisation that he 'could not work with all of the children on each of my planned methodologies' (op cit. p.25).

9.5 Research timetable and schedule

Whilst I was happy to have a flexible timetable for the fieldwork in terms of when the data were collected and the order in which I visited centres, I was aware that the pre-school centres required a more definitive timetable due to their own commitments and it was important to fit in with their plans. The length of time I planned to spend in the field also needed defining. With due consultation and negotiation with the senior member of staff at each setting it was decided that fieldwork in Durham would be carried out in October 2005; Drumlithie Playgroup in November/December and then Kiddiwinks, Fraserburgh in January 2006. Thus the fieldwork was planned to take place from autumn 2005 – mid-winter 2006.

The intention was to be at each centre for a maximum of 4 consecutive weeks. It should be noted that access to Drumlithie Playgroup was more restricted due to its sessional nature – it opens only in the morning - whilst at the nurseries the children could attend either morning or afternoon sessions or both. The first stage of the fieldwork involved becoming familiar with the setting, the routines, the staff and,

most importantly, the children. Subsequent data gathering methods have been described in Chapter 8. Appendix 7 shows the fieldwork schedule received by each centre prior to its commencement. It was explained to staff that the timetable was flexible and subject to alteration.

9.6 Concluding comments

Delineating the generation of data by selecting sites and participants is crucial for later data analysis and the claims that can be made. Thus this chapter has sought to provide the reader with a detailed account of the selection of pre-school centres and children in this research. In both cases selection warranted careful and balanced consideration that was in accordance with the purpose of this study, the resources available, the research question and the constraints imposed. Pragmatic concerns of cost, the time available to carry out the fieldwork and the quantity of data to be analysed were also included in the decision to involve a total of 12 children – 4 from each field site – in the walking expeditions and subsequent semi-structured interviews. This purposive approach to selecting the places and participants meant that the main focus was on obtaining the best information that is critical for this research, and thus offered the best opportunity for answering the research question. Inevitably, there is an element of subjectivity in selecting specific sites and specific children to take part in research, but with the presentation of detailed criteria used in the selection process it is hoped that the reasoning is explicit and justified.

The three field sites chosen were the University Day Nursery in Durham City; Drumlithie Playgroup in Aberdeenshire, Scotland and Kiddiwinks Nursery in Fraserburgh, also in Aberdeenshire. Gaining access was eased by personal contacts and by prior knowledge of the two Aberdeenshire pre-school centres. A fieldwork schedule was constructed and copies sent to each centre. Consideration was given to which children to include in the fieldwork both prior to the fieldwork and more particularly during it when purposive selection was used to find children who could contribute most effectively to the study. Due thought was given to those children who were not included in the main part of the research and it was ensured that they still had some level of involvement and benefit, although their contributions were excluded from this research.

Next, Chapter 10 addresses the analysis of the data including the management of the raw data and the analytic processes used to work the data generated.