

**PLAY IN THE NURSERY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON  
THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR  
SIGNIFICANT ADULTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Play in the nursery: An ethnographic study on the constructions of young children and their significant adults.**

**Maria Stamatoglou**

This thesis examines young children's and adult constructions of play and learning in the nursery. It does so through a yearlong ethnographic study of a single setting in the North of England. One hundred and twenty young children aged 3:6 to 4:6 years old, 24 parents, and 9 nursery staff participated in this study. This thesis is distinct because it researches young children's perspectives by using a range of 'child-centred' research methods with particular consideration to the need for involving young children as active informants in early childhood educational research. The theoretical framework used to analyse the data of this study is based on the developmental as well as the socio-cultural views on play. On the one hand, the Hutt *et al.* (1989) taxonomy of play is used as a framework for data analysis and a revised taxonomy is being suggested. On the other, data are analysed based on the six areas of learning provided by the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000). Data are finally conceptualized through thematic analysis and are examined for continuities and discontinuities between the three groups.

This thesis argues that:

- a) young children's views on play differ from those of adults as children do not elaborate on what play is but rather provide explanations about their play behaviour;
- b) learning features strongly in children's nursery play as they extend on previous knowledge and develop cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills;
- c) parents and nursery staff share similar views on play and their roles prove important in forming the play identity for young children by showing respect for their preferences and supporting their needs.

Overall, young children's responses provide a ground for further research on involving children when planning play activities in an early childhood settings.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **Introduction: Research questions, structure of the study and contribution to knowledge**

**T**his thesis explores young children's experiences and views of their play activities and the perceptions of their parents and early years educators within a nursery setting. It reports a longitudinal ethnographic study that developed ways of enabling young children to express their views on and experiences of nursery play and of giving young children the opportunity to become participants and informants in this process.

This chapter reports the context of the thesis. The research questions are discussed, its rationale and research design are presented, an overview of the structure of the thesis is given and the contribution of this study to knowledge is highlighted. This chapter is in three parts:

- i) the research questions;
- ii) the rationale of the study and research design,
- iii) an overview of the thesis, and
- iv) the contribution of the study to knowledge.

## **i. Research questions**

This study tries to explore the following research questions:

1. How do children view their nursery play practices? How do children experience learning through nursery play?
2. How do parents view nursery play? Are their views similar or different to these of the children?
3. How do early educators view nursery play? Are their views similar or different to the views of the children and the parents?
4. What is the adult role in children's nursery play? How do children view this role?

Existing literature in the field of early childhood research has identified similar questions (such as these of Garvey, 1977; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Hutt *et al*, 1989) mainly drawing on the perceptions of the adults – either these were parents or nursery practitioners. Such research studies will be extensively discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Young children's play within the nursery and home setting has been the focus of several studies in the field (Tizard *et al*. 1976; Manning and Sharp, 1977; Dunn and Wooding, 1977; Nutbrown, 1994; Bennett *et al*, 1997). However, only a small number of studies placed young children's views on nursery play at the centre of attention (Paley 1984, Corsaro, 1993; Kelly-Burne, 1989; Sawyer, 1997; MacNaughton, 1999). Later in this chapter (1) a justification



to how this study contributes to the literature will be given. Firstly, the rationale of the study and an overview of this thesis will be presented.

## **ii. Rationale of the study and research design**

‘Why did the children take their play so seriously? What was it that produced such concentration and emotional commitment? Somewhere in this play lay deeper explanations that could be described by the grown ups, who may have forgotten the questions’.

(Vivian Gussin Paley, 1999; p. 61)

Similarly to Paley (1999), I, as an early educator, was always fascinated by the nature of play and young children’s initiation, imagination and commitment to their play activities. And I, as an adult, did not always understand what young children were doing when they played in the nursery setting.

I thus felt that through this study I could provide young children with the opportunity to become active participants and informants. I felt that this would enable me, as the researcher, to understand how children view play, to make their implicit play behaviours explicit (as will be discussed in chapter 4) and to compare children’s views with those of the adults.

In my view this could be achieved by:

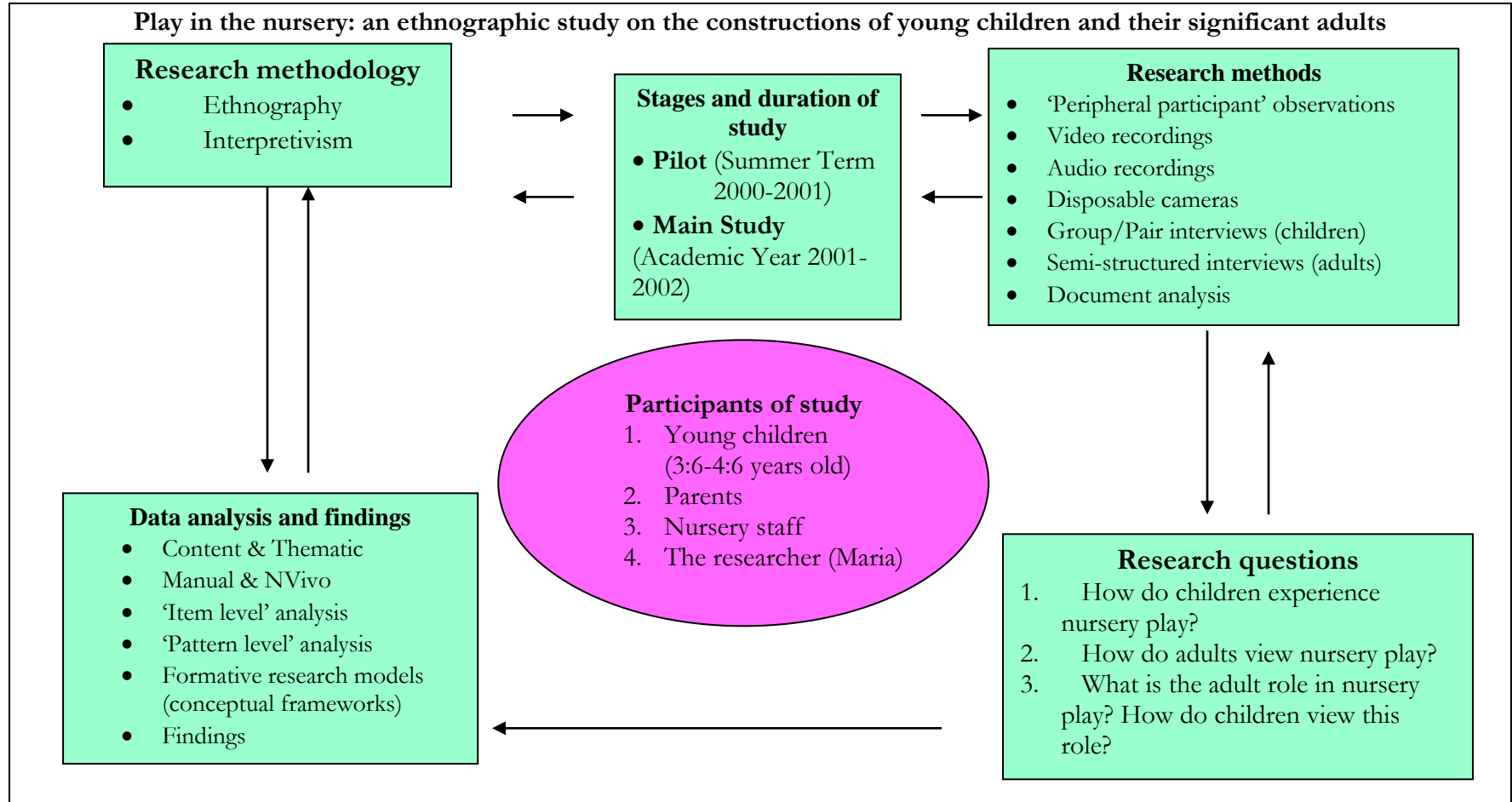
- the use of multiple ‘child-centred’ methodological approaches,
  - allowing young children time to become familiar with me as the researcher
- and

- carrying out the research in a familiar environment the study has shown that young children can become participants and informants in research.

Through this process, I wanted to highlight that children's views should be our main priority when it comes to provision and practice within the early years settings. In my personal view, children can be a reliable source of information and can in their way assess and evaluate our practices and provision. Only then could researchers and practitioners claim that young children can reach their full potential and get the most out of their nursery play experiences before they enter formal schooling.

One of the first steps of this research process, however was to create the research design of this study. This is given below in a diagrammatic form (Figure 1.1, page 6).

**Figure 1.1: Research design of the study**



As it can be seen in figure 1.1 (page 6), the main participants of this research study were young children of nursery school age (between 3:6 to 4:6 years), their parents and early years practitioners<sup>1</sup>. As has already been discussed this study was ethnographic and therefore I, as the researcher, followed the ‘intepretivist’ paradigm (Erickson, 1986). Based on the fact that the research questions were formed not before but after entering the field (bottom-up approach) – hence they are not positioned at the beginning of this diagram – it could be argued that this study also shows characteristics of grounded theory research.

The overall stages of this study were two: this of the pilot (summer term 2000) and this of the main study (academic year 2001-2002). Subsequently, the main study was also divided in three smaller stages according to the needs of the study (this will be further discussed in chapter 7). The research questions were ‘funnelled’ and formed during the course of the study, as it was explained earlier (also see chapter 7).

Finally, the data followed different levels of qualitative analysis (thematic) and was carried out both manually and through the use of the qualitative computer package NVivo. It is also evident that all the different phases of this research design are interconnected and interrelated to each other and thus were not treated as distinct and/or separate stages.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the terms ‘early years educators’ and ‘early years practitioners’ are interchangeable throughout this thesis. Also note that all names of people and places have been changed for confidentiality.

The reader finds that this diagram follows a circular pattern by the use of the arrows with the main participants and recipients of this study lying at the centre.

### **iii. Overview of the thesis**

This chapter (1) presents the research questions, the rationale of this study and the research design and also gives an overview of the thesis and a justification for the contribution of this study to knowledge. Chapter 2 defines play and discusses theories of play that formed the theoretical framework of this study (developmental and social constructivism). In addition, it presents past and contemporary views on the role of play in early childhood education and discusses the relationship between learning and play the early years setting. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion on the role of play in the early years settings from the Greek perspective; this is based on the assumption that my nationality and my early childhood experiences are bound to influence my perception of play.

Chapter 3 reviews research studies on play in the early years from the adult perspective. It also discusses the adult role in creating opportunities for children's play in the early years. Research studies on play that have included children's views are also reported in chapter 3. Chapter 4 is on voice, participation and ethnography in early childhood educational research. It also presents the ethical and methodological guidelines that underpinned this study as well as the UN

Convention for the right of the children and its implication for research on and with children. Finally, it acknowledges the importance of the researcher's role in qualitative research. Chapter 5 sets the scene for the research setting and the study in general by providing information about the policy and practice on Early Childhood Education and Care in England and Wales, as well as information about the setting that this study took place and the participants that informed this research.

Chapter 6 mainly discusses the pilot period (summer term 2000 – 2001) methodological and ethical dimensions; design of the pilot study; key thematic categories and preliminary analysis. Pilot study research methods are evaluated to inform the practices of the main part of this research. Limitations and outcomes are considered and core research questions are revised, to inform the main study. Chapter 7 focuses on the research design (methods, methodology, theoretical framework and data analysis) of the main study. A pictorial representation of the conceptual frameworks generated by the data of the main study is given together with an interpretation of this representation.

Chapter 8 presents and analyses data related to young children's nursery play and how all participants (young children, parents and nursery staff) view and define play. In an attempt to create categories of play based on the conceptual frameworks developed in this study, these will be compared to the 'taxonomy of play' proposed by Hutt *et al.* (1989) resulting to the emergence of a revised play taxonomy. Chapter 9 discusses young children's constructions of learning in the

different learning areas as these are identified in the policy document ‘Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage’ (QCA, 2000) and were generated during the main part of the study. These learning stories are also related to the terms ‘epistemic’ and ‘ludic’ play from the Hutt *et al.* (1989) taxonomy of play. Chapter 10 examines adult (parents and nursery staff) constructions of learning through nursery play also according to policy document, such as the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000), as it was the case for chapter 9. This chapter is in two parts – first the data collected from the parents and the second the data collected from the nursery staff.

Chapter 11 reviews findings from children, nursery staff and parents; identifying and discussing similarities and differences between and within the groups. This chapter also examines the findings in the light of relevant literature. It concludes with the limitations and an evaluation of the study, an identification of the contribution of this study to the field of research. Finally it highlights recommendations for further research.

#### iv.     **The contribution of this study to knowledge**

As it will be presented later in this thesis, there is limited literature on young children's constructions of nursery play. Previous studies of children's perceptions of nursery play have mainly used observations over a short period of time and mostly interviews with significant adults and young children in some cases. As the need for involving the views of all interesting parties (children, parents, early educators) in ethnographic research is nowadays becoming apparent (Buchbinder, 2006), this study seeks to contribute to knowledge in the field by closing a gap in current work (see chapters 2, and 3 for a literature review) both in terms of *methodological approaches* and in terms of *empirical results*.

So it could be claimed that the contribution of this study is twofold; *methodologically* it acknowledges and highlights the need for research studies to be conducted by those who have worked in the field as educators; such research needs to concentrate on young children's perspectives. This thesis is distinct because it researches young children's perspectives by using a range of research methods to enable them not only to be involved in the study but also to participate in the research process as main informants. It is my understanding that by recognizing the voices of young children we provide them with opportunities for '*empowerment*'. By engaging young children in a research dialogue, not only adult researchers but also educators and practitioners will begin to understand the way young children perceive and reason about their daily



activities – and for the purposes of this thesis, how they perceive and reason about nursery play and learning.

*Empirically*, it provides information on:

- how young children, parents and nursery staff make sense of their nursery play experiences – in the case of adult participants efforts were made to define and categorize play from the children's perspective;
- how young children's and adult constructions of play fit into the terms 'epistemic' and 'ludic' play (Hutt *et al.* 1989) but also how these constructions formed a basis for a revised taxonomy of play;
- how young children experience learning through their daily nursery play experiences and how these experiences are influenced by their out-of-school experiences and
- how different in some occasions the views of adult participants are.

In specific, most children mainly referred to their activities in a literal way, but some commented that they were 'playing' and later gave more specific information as to what they had been doing. Children did not elaborate on their views of what play is, something that I interpreted as meaning that, for children, play is a natural activity which is part of their daily lives and that probably children do not concern themselves about its differentiation from 'non-play' or 'work'. Data presented in chapter 8 were related to the taxonomy of play by Hutt *et al.* (1989) creating new subcategories under the epistemic and ludic play terms. The

learning stories in chapter 9 have shown young children as competent in all areas of learning according to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) with levels of *metacognition* and *attention* apparent when it came to the play activities that children were involved with.

As this study considered children's views alongside the views of their parents and early educators as equally important, some differences in approaches and views were inevitably found. A main difference was that parents and early educators could more easily define and determine the play criteria but they had difficulty identifying the reasons behind which a child was involved in a play activity. On the other hand, children did not define play and talked about play as such, but they were in a position to provide their reasoning for each play activity they were involved in.

Overall, it could be claimed that this thesis not only presents new insight into young children's and adult views on play and learning within the nursery setting, but also creates opportunities for future research studies to explore the issues that this thesis deals with further.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Theories on play: Defining and positioning play in the early years curriculum

«Τα παιδιά παίζουν»

(Ancient Greek Proverb: ‘Children are born to play’)

The previous chapter (1) outlined the theme of this study, the rationale behind it, the research questions that underpin it as well as this study’s contribution to research. Chapter 2 will now define and discuss the many meanings of young children’s play; it is in three parts:

- i. Defining play and identifying existing theories on play;
- ii. Past and contemporary views on the role of play in the Early Childhood Education;
- iii. The role of play in the early years setting: the Greek perspective.

### **i. Defining play and identifying existing theories of play**

In order to define play many of the writers mentioned in this chapter have made attempts to provide a coherent and inclusive account of one of young children's most natural yet enigmatic daily activities. To start with the definitions that have influenced the course of this research and have provided the basis for a working definition for this study.

In such attempt, Ailwood (2002) identified not only the presence of various definitions of play but also various discourses of play that currently exist in the literature. These discourses consist of the following four:

- Romantic/nostalgic discourse – Sutton - Smith (1995) discussed about 'play as progress' and Moyles (1994) talked about children's need for play;
- Play characteristics discourse – various scholars in the field tried to define and locate play within certain boundaries and criteria (more extensive refers will follow later in this chapter);
- Developmental discourse of play – with reference to the work of researchers and scholars like Piaget, Vygotsky which follows below (chapters 2 and 3);
- and Contextual and Relational discourses of play – with a move towards a more socio-cultural contextualisation of play, the view of play as work and the importance of gender in play (King, 1979; MacNaughton, 1999; and Marsh, 2000 amongst others).

For the purposes of this study (see chapter 7 for a detailed account for the analytical framework of this study), the developmental discourses of play as well as the contextual and relational discourses of play have proven most suitable to create the theoretical framework for analysing the data of this study. This is the reason why a more extended reference on these two discourses will take place throughout this thesis. As the other two discourses (romantic/nostalgic and play characteristics discourse) have been considered as important, and in order to provide balance and breadth to this thesis a reference will also be given, but this reference will not be equally extensive.

#### *Providing the grounds for a definition of play*

When it comes to defining play for the purposes of a dictionary it seems that this is quite straightforward – play is something that most young children do and usually it is an activity that is underpinned by a voluntary and joyful nature. Jenkinson (2001), however, argues that ‘no one theory provides a comprehensive rationale of play but all of them express part of the truth about it and contribute enormously to our understanding of its many mysteries’ (p. 12).

As previously suggested, there have been many attempts for the purposes of education, psychology, biology and sociology as well as research to define play (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Smith, 1994; Rubin et al, 1983; Huizinga, 1950; Garvey, 1977). This chapter aims to provide such definitions that are neither universally accepted nor consist of the same characteristics in an attempt to show

the complexity that surrounds the word play and the difficulties that researchers have to come to an agreement of what play is.

More than a century ago, Gross (1898; 1901) suggested that play was the very ‘stuff’ of childhood and that the period of childhood existed in order that the organism might play. Gross (*ibid.*) considered play to be not a simple discharge of surplus energy but rather as extremely important for the survival of the species. For this matter, play allowed children to exercise, elaborate and perfect their behaviours before they reached the age of adulthood. Finally, Gross amongst other psychologists (Vygotsky, 1978) and educators (Bruner *et al.* 1976), believed that a direct consequence of children’s play was the development of intelligent behaviour.

Similarly, Froebel (1906) regarded play as a unifying force between children, adults and the environment. He strongly advocated play as the main medium through which learning could become meaningful for young children. McMillan (1860-1931) viewed play as having a significant place within education by placing equal importance between indoors and outdoors play and at the same time she regarded play as a way through which children developed and experimented with their skills. Isaacs (1933) in line with Froebel and McMillan also recognised the importance of play within the early years settings and she argued that play was essential not only for children’s cognitive development, like Froebel did, but also for children’s emotional development and well-being.

In the 1950's Huizinga defined play as a vehicle for creating culture. He argued that children play because they enjoy playing and that such play goes beyond the bounds of all biological activities (Huizinga, 1950). He wrote that play has:

‘ its aims in itself and [is] accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is not “ordinary life” or “real life”; it is rather a stepping out of “real life” into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition out of its own’ (p. 28).

So, for Huizinga (*ibid.*) play is an activity different from all other everyday activities as it provides children with the opportunity to engage in various imaginary situations that may have nothing to do with “real life”.

Following Gross and Huizinga, many researchers (Garvey, 1977; Rubin *et al.* 1983; Fromberg, 1992) have also tried to define play. The search for the value of play in children's learning and development features strongly in the literature, along with the biological and therapeutic element of it. Piaget (1962) argued that play was the vehicle through which children interact with their environment and construct their knowledge, while Erickson (1963) suggested that play prepares children for the practicalities of adult life and also enables children to overcome any disappointments they might encounter during childhood. Vygotsky (1978) on the other hand described play as a “leading activity” and believed that play allowed children to learn to “self-regulate” their behaviour and to raise their own learning above a previous acquired level.

Garvey (1977) acknowledged a certain degree of difficulty when she came to define play; she thought that ‘it is generally unfair and provoking to ask for precise definitions of familiar words’ and she continued that ‘in everyday use of the term, the central notion seems clear enough, but the fringes of the concept are fuzzy’ (p.8). And this happens because ‘play like Proteus, keeps changing shape’ (*ibid.*). Bearing in mind what Garvey stated earlier, it is worthy of attention that indeed not in everyday life or our daily encounter with the children in nurseries and school setting do we question of need to be more specific when talking about play. Most of children’s activities at the nursery are considered to be play and we very often find ourselves commenting that a group of children are play or we might say to a child ‘*You can go and find something to play with, if you want*’ without any further elaboration. However Garvey argued that most students would accept the following characteristics (1977, p. 10):

- Play is pleasurable, enjoyable. Even when not actually accompanied by signs of mirth, it is still positively valued by the player.
- Play has no extrinsic goals. Its motivations are intrinsic and serve no other objectives. In fact, it is more an enjoyment of means than an effort devoted to some particular end. In utilitarian terms, it is inherently unproductive.
- Play is spontaneous and voluntary. It is not obligatory but is freely chosen by the player.
- Play involves some active engagement on the part of the player.

Rubin *et al.* (1983) also made an attempt to provide a coherent and detailed definition that was based on the following criteria:



- Play is personally motivated by the satisfaction embedded in the activity and not governed either by basic needs and drives or by social demands;
- Players are concerned with activities more than with goals. Goals are self-imposed, and the behaviour of the players is spontaneous;
- Play occurs with familiar objects, or following the exploration of unfamiliar objects. Children supply their own meanings to play activities and control the activities themselves;
- Play activities can be nonliteral;
- Play is free from rules imposed from outside, and the rules that do exist can be modified by the players;
- Play requires the active engagement of the players.

In their effort to define play, Johnson and Ershler (1982) argued that play can be defined as a lawful behaviour that is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, process-oriented, and pleasurable. Similarly, Fromberg (1992) stated that young children's play is:

- Symbolic, in that it represents reality in 'as-if' or 'what-if' terms
- Meaningful, in that it connects or relates experiences
- Active, in that children are doing things (including imagining)
- Pleasurable, even when children are engaged seriously in an activity
- Voluntary and intrinsically motivated whether the motives are curiosity, mastery, affiliation, or others
- Rule-governed, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed
- Episodic, characterized by emerging and shifting goals that the children develop spontaneously.

Bruce (1991; 1999) identified the 12 features of play, which were based on the previous criteria by Rubin *et al.* (1983) as well as Atkin (1988). These features are listed in box 2.1, page 22 below.

It is clear from the features in the box given below, that play is a voluntary activity, and is a serious activity for the children who will often play on their own or with their peers or other adults. However, the role of the adult is somewhat minimized as their views are not considered important; for play to be of quality children need to initiate their own agenda and rules while at the same time they might have some support by significant adults, parents or early educators.

As it could be derived from the definitions listed earlier, there is no single, simple definition of play. Existing definitions share common characteristics and support the belief that the more characteristics are present the more playful the behaviour is likely to be. This is why Bruner (1980) commented that play is an activity that everyone is in a position to recognize but nevertheless no one can actually put this activity into the boundaries of a single definition.

### Box 2.1: The twelve features of play

1. Children cannot play at a quality level unless they have had previous first-hand experiences of people, objects and materials. Then they can use these experiences in their play. Some of these experiences will have been enjoyable. Some might have been frightening, or painful.
2. When children play, they make up their own rules. These help them to keep control as they play. When the play fades, the rules fade too. Feeling in control is an important part of play.
3. When children represent (keep hold of) their experiences, they might do so by drawing a cat or making a model of a bus. Sometimes what they make becomes a play prop, which is used in their play.
4. No-one can *make* a child play. A child has to *want* to play.
5. During play, children often release what they will be able to do without any help from adults later on. This is often called role-play: they pretend to be other people, and take on adult roles.
6. Children can pretend when they play. They can pretend a lump of dough is a cake. They can pretend they are someone else.
7. Children sometimes play alone.
8. Children sometimes play in a pair, in parallel or in a group with other children.
9. Adults who join children in their play need to remember that each person playing has their own play ideas. The adult's play ideas are not more important than the child's play ideas. Play ideas are sometimes called the play agenda or play script.
10. When children play, they wallow in their feelings, ideas and relationships. They move about and are physically active. They are deeply involved in their play.
11. When children play, they try out what they have been learning. They show their skills and competencies.
12. Play helps children to coordinate what they learn. This means that play brings together all the different aspects of the child's development. The result is that the child is a grounded, centred, together and whole person. Play is thus a *holistic* kind of learning.

Source: Bruce and Meggitt (1999)

My review of the definitions of play and play criteria leads me to use words like **satisfaction, enjoyment, pleasure, 'player' rules-governed activity, exploration, freedom, empowerment** and **active engagement** in my own definition. Similarly, when Abbott (1994; p.38) refers to play she writes that during a play episode children 'can be required to collaborate, negotiate, make

choices, organize, explain, lead, communicate, share, take responsibility, ask and answer questions, record, interpret, predict, recall and reflect’.

Most of these criteria are either repeated in various forms or rephrased from one definition to another, with none of the definitions referring to the presence or participation of an adult. However, according to Vandenberg (1982)

‘the failure to define play is not a fatal flaw, and is as much a comment on our epistemological assumptions and methodologies as it is a comment on play. This realization should force us to be clear about what we expect from a definition, to explore new methodologies for defining play, and to value play as much as other, more ‘important’ psychological phenomena’ (p. 20).

It seems, thus, that existing definitions do not qualify as sufficient enough when it comes to an activity as complex and natural as play. But this should not necessarily be regarded as a disadvantage but rather as a challenge to researchers who should on their part find new ways of exploring and ‘looking into’ play; an activity so natural yet so intriguing and rewarding to the players themselves. This review of play definitions demonstrates that play is difficult to define but that it is possible for play to be attributed with various elements, styles, characteristics and stages according to the children’s developmental age. Researchers listed above, have found the need to define the boundaries of each type of play in order to make sense of the activity. Since this study took place in a nursery setting the next section will discuss the role of play in Early Childhood Education throughout the years.

The literature does not only present views on the definitions on play, but also on the different styles and developmental stages of children's play which are discussed below.

*Developmental theories on play: learning styles and developmental stages of young children's play*

As the children grow older their play patterns become more complex and require more advanced cognitive skills from the player (Piaget, 1962); the child becomes more competent of solving problems, manipulating objects and forming social relationships through of play.

Parten (1932) suggested the following stages regarding social play: unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative (*ibid.*). Parten viewed 3-year-old children to be engaged in primarily 'unoccupied' or 'onlooker' activities or solitary play, 4-year-old children in primarily parallel play and 5-year-old children mainly in associative or cooperative play. However, it was suggested that these categories or stages of play did apply to all children of the same age. For example, Smith's study (1978) showed 2-year-old and 3-year-old children moving directly from 'solitary' play to 'group' play without showing a tendency for 'parallel' play.

For Piaget (1962) three processes were important in learning- assimilation, accommodation and equilibration. Accommodation is the child's ability to adapt to the environment, whilst assimilation is the child's ability to change the

environment to suit the imagination. This involves transforming experiences within the mind, whereas accommodation involves adjusting the mind to new experiences. When children encounter new schemata they have to adjust, causing a state of disequilibrium or cognitive conflict. Piaget (*ibid.*) argued that children's play tended to promote assimilation rather than accommodation, and that it led to consolidation of newly learned behaviours. Therefore playing was not the same as learning but could facilitate learning as it exposed the child to new experiences and new possibilities for dealing with the world (Hughes, 1991).

Piaget's (1962) stages and categories of play have been used as a framework for research and have influenced the play research in general. After observing his own children Piaget (*ibid.*) suggested that children progress through four stages:

- 1) The sensorimotor period (from birth to 2 years old) when the child's cognitive system is limited to motor reflexes at birth, but the child builds on these reflexes to develop more sophisticated procedures - children learn to generalize their activities to a wider range of situations and coordinate them into increasingly lengthy chains of behaviour;

- 2) The preoperational thought (from 2 years old to 6 or 7 years old) when children acquire representational skills in the areas mental imagery, and especially language - they are very self-oriented, and have an egocentric view; that is, preoperational children can use these representational skills only to view the world from their own perspective;

3) The concrete operations period (from 6 or 7 years old to 11- or 12-years-old), in this stage children are able to take another's point of view and take into account more than one perspective simultaneously and they can represent transformations as well as static situations;

4) Finally, the formal operations period (from 11 or 12 years old to adulthood) when the children who attain the formal operation stage are capable of thinking logically and abstractly and they can reason theoretically. Similarly, according to Piaget (*ibid.*) there were three stages of play behaviour, as the children grow older; these are:

- a. Practice play (6 months to 2 years old);
- b. Symbolic play (2 to 6 years old);
- c. Games with rules, (6 or 7 years old onwards).

These categories have been challenged, refined and extended by other researchers (Smilansky, 1968). Smilansky (1968) adapted Piaget's stages of play for studying the play of young children, especially in the preschool. She defined functional play as the routine and stereotypic use of play materials or simple motoric activity, constructive play as sequential and purposeful behaviour resulting in a finished product, and dramatic play as thematic role play entailing the transformation of situations or objects (*ibid.*). Smilansky (1968) also found that constructive play was a very common practice in preschool classrooms and she viewed this behaviour as a transitional form of play preceding dramatic play.

Other categories or types of play available as discussed in the literature are: ‘structured’ play and ‘free-flow’ play (Isaacs, 1932; Garvey, 1977; Bruce, 1991); ‘educational’ play and ‘non-educational’ play (Spodek and Saracho, 1987) and ‘dramatic’ play (Spodek, 1985; Saracho, 1991). Spodek and Saracho (1987) made the distinction between educational and non-educational play. For Spodek and Saracho (*ibid.*) educational play is designed to further children’s learning; it may be used to help children explore and gain information to create meaning. Also educational play can further physical, social, and intellectual goals to help children better understand and cope with feelings. According to Spodek (1985) there are several kinds of educational play: dramatic play, physical play, manipulative play, and games. Dramatic play, however, has cognitive, creative, language, and social dimensions to it (Saracho, 1991).

Garner (1998) also attempted to categorise play; her study of children aged between 3 to 5 years highlights the following categories: object play, motor play, social play and symbolic/pretend play. Finally, Bruce (1991) distinguished between two types of play: ‘structured play’, which is adult-led and the children are being taught how to play, and ‘free-flow’ play, which is the type of play that provides children with more opportunities for learning. In the latter type Bruce (*ibid.*) argue that children learn by using ideas, feelings and relationships that have been experienced, and apply these to what they know and understand with control, mastery and competence; it also involves the twelve features of play stated earlier (see Box 2.1, page 22).



### *Socio-cultural theories of play*

At this section of chapter 2, specific reference will be made on researchers that have contributed with their work to the relationship between play and learning and how this relationship is shaped by the socio-cultural environment of the children. Particular reference will be made to Vygotsky and Bruner, who also referred extensively to the role of the adult in shaping and ‘scaffolding’ children’s play.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that play promotes language and thought development; children play with meanings and objects. When children use signs and tools during play, they construct mental patterns. Through pretend play children gain higher-order thought processes. In addition, pretend play liberates children from the boundaries of the real world that surround them. Thus, children can manage a difficult situation more effectively through pretend play than they could in reality.

Through play children are motivated to learn, so the learning that occurs in meaningful contexts becomes a spur to further motivation and hence to further learning (Vygotsky, 1978; p. 102-103):

Through the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives-all appear in play and make it the highest level of pre-school development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only

in this sense can play be considered the leading activity that determines a child's development.

Vygotsky challenged Piaget's notions about play. In particular, he believed that a characteristic of play is the ability to dissociate the meanings of objects and actions from the real objects and actions. This fact creates early experiences of complex, abstract thinking in which action increasingly arises from ideas rather than from things. In contrast to Piaget, who distinguished between practice play, symbolic play and games with rules, Vygotsky linked play and imagination with rules in terms of gradual, qualitative shifts from an emphasis on the imaginary situation to the dominance of rules: 'where there is an imaginary situation in play there are rules. Not rules which are formulated in advance and which change during the course of the game but rules stemming from the imaginary situation' (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976; p.123).

Jerome Bruner believed that play is crucial for the development of intellectual skills (Bruner, Jolly, and Sylva, 1976). In play children can experiment the world around them without interference, and in doing so they may build complex abilities. He was influenced by Vygotsky and like him, placed great emphasis on the importance of play and language in children's social and cognitive development. He thought that adults were in a position to support children's play and thus developed the idea of 'scaffolding' (Bruner, 1966).

Like Vygotsky (1978), Bruner argued that children need support by skillful adults as they grow and develop in the same way that a building needs to be

supported while being built; a support that must match children's level of development. Particular aspects of scaffolding may be: a. directing children's attention to relevant aspects of the situation, b. helping children break a task down into a sequence of smaller tasks, which they can manage, and c. helping them orchestrate the sequence of steps correctly. Bruner (*ibid.*) also felt that children learn more easily through play. As he suggested 'learning is figuring out how to use what you already know in order to go beyond what you currently think' (p.183).

In addition, Vygotsky and Bruner both stressed the importance for adults in supporting and extending children's play. Vygotsky (1978) believed that the adult has a key role in helping children to learn. He suggested that children have two developmental levels, their actual developmental level - what they could actually do independently - and a higher level - this that they may next be able to do with the help (Vygotsky, 1978). He identified the interchange between those two levels as the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). The 'zone of proximal development' is the area of the children's development that they can cope with and understand with adult help (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Nutbrown (1999) this notion emphasises the important role of the adult in fostering progression in children's thinking: helping children to move forward in, and develop their ideas through, positive and interactive learning encounters between children and adults.

The significance of the adult role in children's play will further be discussed in chapter 3. A reference and critique to past and contemporary views on the role of play in Early Childhood Education now follows.

## **ii. Past and contemporary views on the role of play in Early Childhood Education**

However inconclusive the attempts to define play have been, many researchers and practitioners in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care have recognized the centrality and value of play in children's learning and development (Froebel, 1906; Isaacs, 1932; Manning and Sharp, 1977; Moyles, 1989; Authey, 1990; Bruce, 1991). A strong tradition that regards play as essential to young children's learning and development exists in the Early Childhood Education (Wood and Attfield 1996; David, 2003), but, Abbott (2001; p.10) denotes that '...struggles to define, provide and justify it as central to the lives of young children, both in and outside nursery settings and schools, continue...'

### *Past views on play*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is acknowledged as the first to advocate a curriculum for the young based on nature and discovery learning. Philosophers, writers, and educators like Comenius (1592-1670), Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) have contributed enormously in creating a preschool education movement by introducing the idea of the child as naturally 'good' and thus stressed the importance of play in his/her development and learning. Froebel (1782-1852) equally valued the educational purpose of children's play whilst he rejected the view that one of the functions of play is children's as preparation for adult life (Cohen 1987).

Other pioneers have followed this preschool tradition and have influenced the way young children experience their preschool reality nowadays - John Dewey (1859-1952), Margaret McMillan (1860-1931), Susan Isaacs (1885-1948) and Maria Montessori (1870-1952).

Montessori (1870-1952) identified the value of play through real life situations that were introduced to the child according to his/her skills and interests. However, she didn't see any value in pretend play as such, since pretend play was regarded to help children escape from real life rather than enabling them to learn. Isaacs (1885-1948) argued the importance of play for the emotional and social development of children and this was also supported by Margaret McMillan (1860-1931) who believed that play had a significant role in education. Finally, Dewey (1859-1952) equally supported the value of play and 'helped teachers find

a responsible voice for play and to take it into their primary school classrooms’ (Bruce, 1991; p.53).

### *Contemporary views on play*

This section will refer to the work of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky, whereas the work of other researchers that have contributed with their contemporary views on play to the field will be presented in chapter 3. Chapter 3 will make specific reference to the work of Sylva *et al.* (1980), Kelly-Byrne (1989) Bennett *et al.* (1997), Hutt *et al.* (1989), Sylva *et al.* (1999), Paley (1984), Corsaro (1993), MacNaughton, (1999), Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002), Marsh (2000) amongst others.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Jerome Bruner (1915 -), have all contributed to the establishment of play as essential in preschool education. They have set out their studies by observing children in various early years settings and their homes and by making direct links between play and children’s cognitive, physical, emotional and social development. Yet, according to Smith (1994) ‘play was not seen as educationally valuable when nursery and infant schools began to be introduced in Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ (p. 17).

Although Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner did not always agree, their contribution to research in the field is considered to be as equally important as

they all highlighted the connection of play and learning and the value of play for children's cognitive and social development in the early years.

Athey (1990) also referred to the importance of play and how it is linked with young children's development of concentration and their ability to build on existing knowledge and experiences through their daily encounters with other children and adults.

One could not help but imagine how different life could be without time spent playing as a young child. Could we claim that play is the main medium of learning? Evidence from the literature suggests that there is a strong relationship between play and learning and this is the theme of discussion that follows.

### **iii. Learning through play in early years settings**

The place of play in the English early years curriculum went through various phases until its place was 'secured' with the introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage in 2000. In 1967 the Plowden Report (Department of Education and Science 1967, paragraph. 523) made clear that:

‘Adults who criticize teachers for allowing children to play are unaware that play is the principal means of learning in early childhood. It is the way through which children reconcile their inner lives with external reality. In play, children gradually develop concepts of causal relationships, the power to discriminate, to make judgements, to analyse and synthesise, to imagine and to formulate. Children become absorbed in their play and the satisfaction of bringing it to satisfactory conclusion fixes habits of concentration, which can be transferred to other learning’.

So, teachers in a sense should provide children with the time and space for children's play to develop and therefore for active learning to take place. According to Bruce (1991) this report attracted mixed feelings and reactions as it was both welcomed and attacked. However, its major contribution has been that it situated play as central in the status of education of young children; a place that still remains unchanged (*ibid.*).

Children's need for appropriate resources/materials, physical space and ample time to 'master' their play was stressed by Manning and Sharp (1977). They argued that only if early years practitioners and teachers seriously considered these elements, would children's play flourish. Four elements of play were defined when a discussion about the structure of play was made:

- Space: when teachers allocate certain areas within the classroom or school to specific forms of play, they are imposing a form of structure on that play.
- Time: the amount of time children are given to play imposes another form of structure.
- Materials: children's play in school is dependent to certain extent on the materials and equipment available.
- Rules: teachers make rules about play for many reasons: sometimes the reasons are within their control and sometimes they are not.

(Manning and Sharp, 1977; p.19-20)

In my view, the above study has been influential and although it took place almost 30 years ago, issues of space, time, materials and rules are even nowadays the first priority of early childhood educators, yet still challenging. Since then various studies (Sylva *et al.* 1980; Bruner, 1980; Hutt *et al.* 1989) have focused on the role of play in children's exploration and learning, (as it will be presented in



chapter 3), through detailed observations of children's play activities within early childhood settings and their home environment.

### *Prioritizing play in preschool settings*

The centrality of play was stressed by an HMI report on the education of children under 5 (DES, 1989), which outlined the importance of designing a broad and balanced curriculum in which play featured strongly.

This centrality was also recognised by Hurst and Joseph (1998) who view this role as:

‘one which also relates to all-round emotional, social and physical development. Play, along with other forms of active learning, is normally a natural point of access to the curriculum for each child at his or her particular stage and level of understanding. It is therefore an essential force in making for equal opportunities in learning, intrinsic as it is to all areas of development’ (p, x).

However Moyles (1994), Nutbrown (1998), David (2003) and more recently Anning and Ring (2004) below identified the difficulty in prioritising play within early childhood settings and placing play in the early childhood education agenda.

Moyles (1994; p.4) notes that the National Curriculum stressed the importance of involving children in their own learning but ‘rarely mention the word ‘play’ *per se*’, and play was hardly mentioned in the *Desirable Learning Outcomes on Entering Compulsory Education* (SCAA, 1996) as well. It was only mentioned in

this document that children should be involved in ‘imaginative play’ under the subject ‘creative development’ (*ibid.*).

Nutbrown (1998) points out that although researchers had advocated the importance of play in the preschool education, during the 1990’s the place of play was somewhat marginalized. Similarly, David (2003; p.11) suggests that ‘play, in practice, in education settings is problematic’ and recently Anning and Ring (2004) highlighted that ‘at policy level ‘play’, like ‘scribbling’, became demonized within the discourse of the standards agenda over the last wearisome two decades’ (p.122).

Nevertheless, before the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage was introduced in 2000, the *Early Learning Goals* (1996) stressed the importance of structured play in children’s learning within the early childhood setting. Thus, ‘well-planned play both indoors and outdoors, is a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge’ (DfEE/QCA, 2000; p. 10). So, play was re-instated on the agenda and when the *Desirable Outcomes* document was reviewed it was highlighted that ‘play was not mentioned, which led to learning that becomes formal too quickly ... there has often been overemphasis on adult-led learning experiences, with the result that spontaneity and play are lost’ (DfEE/QCA, 2000; p.1-2).

Further, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage described play as **‘a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge’** and ‘the role of the adult is crucial in providing an effective support and a secure

environment for children' (*ibid.* pp. 25-26). The benefits of play that are outlined in the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE/QCA, 2000) provide evidence for the need to plan a curriculum where play is the main medium of learning – although this reference takes up only half-a-page from the 128-pages of the document. Through play, in a secure environment with effective adult support, children can:

- Explore, develop and represent learning experiences that help them make sense of the world;
- Practice, and build up ideas, concepts and skills;
- Learn how to control impulses and understand the needs for rules;
- Be alone, be alongside others or cooperate as they talk or rehearse their feelings;
- Take risks and make mistakes;
- Think creatively and imaginatively;
- Communicate with others as they investigate or solve problems;
- Express fears or relive anxious experiences in controlled and safe situations.

(Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA 2000; p.25)

According to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000), play enables children to 'explore, develop, represent, practice, think, make mistakes, learn, control, understand, communicate, express, cooperate, rehearse' amongst other. It is due to the overall development, engagement and practice with these emotions, feelings, activities, and negotiations that children learn everything they need to know as part of their everyday reality and fantasy.

What this document summarises is neither unique nor newly founded. However, it provides a starting point and a basis for early years workers, practitioners and teachers for 'building-up' on play for children's learning

experiences followed by the Planning for learning in the foundation stage document (QCA, 2001). For the purposes of this study, children's play behaviours in all 6 areas of learning (a) personal, social and emotional, b) communication, language and literacy, c) mathematical development, d) knowledge and understanding of the world, e) creative development, f) physical development) will be researched in an attempt to identify the existence of the above elements and how each group perceives this play-learning relationship.

Further guidance for early years practitioners on play has been provided in the form of a more recent document entitled *Planning for Learning in the Foundation Stage* (QCA/DfES, 2001). The section on play is more specific, stating that 'spontaneous play is often based on important events in young children's lives' and that teachers should **'encourage play that is emotionally, intellectually, physically and socially challenging...'** (p.5). It also recommends the provision of appropriate equipment, the use of which 'can encourage children to engage in role-play that is based on a story you have read to them or on one of their own' (p.5). In the sample lesson plans for one week, out of twelve 'themed activities', two are devoted to play: 'imaginative play' and 'role play'.

No details are provided however, about how these are different, although one might assume from the key words that the former (imaginative play) uses real objects such as toy cars, dolls and zoo animals while the latter (role play) involves the child acting out the part of a bus driver, supermarket shopper or customer at a travel agency. Wood and Attfield (1996) earlier had denoted that there is

evidence to suggest that learning and development depend on cognitive structures, which are complex both in their origins and subsequent evolution.

Processes such as exploration, practice, repetition, mastery and revision are important in forming, extending and connecting cognitive structures. Play can be seen as a means whereby children try to impose some structure or organisation on a task and make sense of their world, and as a continuous rehearsal of these cognitive processes (*ibid.*; p.34). Such processes were identified as elements of epistemic and ludic play behaviour existing in various preschool settings according to Hutt *et al.* (1989); these terms are further discussed in the next section.

So, the role of play in relation to children's cognitive development in early years has been debated during the past decades. However, many of the research studies of children's play within nursery settings that have been discussed here so far provided the basis for play to maintain a primary role on the early education agenda and hold its place in young children's education.

### *Play, work or non-play?*

As the early part of this chapter has shown there is inconsistency between various definitions and discourses of play. Play sometimes is regarded to be the opposite of work and could not therefore lead to serious learning situations (Cortazzi, 1993). Strandell (2000) states that 'play has been marginalized and locked into itself in a world of its own' as it 'separates children from the real, adult world' (p.147).

But how do children view play? When I first entered the field, I tried to approach a pair of children involved in a play situation in the home corner; when I have asked the children what they were doing, they replied naturally *'We're playing!'*

It sounds so simple. They seem to be confident of what they are doing. If children were asked about what they do and why they do it, provided that they are on good terms with the adult who is asking (are familiar with and feel comfortable being around them) why is it that they will not necessarily refer to their activity as play, as one might expect? Most of them will try to find ways of explaining what they are doing with every single detail; and their memory competence might surprise the most experienced early years worker. How is it that children remember every single detail of an activity that is just fun and not serious? Could this imply that children do not perceive play as fun but even if they do enjoy

themselves, they invest so much into it that it becomes a way of expression and of dealing with daily life?

As it was denoted earlier, there is controversy in the literature between play, work and, therefore learning, because the word play itself is enigmatic (Smith, 1994).

Very early on, Mead (1897/7) made an attempt to distinguish between play from work and the arts by stating that play is spontaneous, whereas work and the arts are not. He also pointed out that work and art can sometimes become play with the difference being that both work and the art usually have definite end products.

Isaacs (1932), on the other hand, strongly supported the idea that play is the ‘child’s work’. Susan Isaacs valued ‘free-flow’ play because it provided children with freedom of actions, thoughts and emotional expression, while it also helped children to begin processes of inquiry. So, children are not engaged in a play situation without benefits; ‘playing’ for them means ‘working’ and ‘finding out’ about the world around them.

Similarly, Manning and Sharp (1977) stated with regard to the work and play distinction/relationship that:

“There is no division between play and work in the infant mind: whatever he is doing, he is learning. His so-called playing is in fact working; he concentrates all his faculties on the one activity in which he is whole-heartedly engaged. It is this concentration that ‘teaching – play’ can exploit’ (*ibid.*, p.12).

However, Anning (1991) stated there are two contrasting views about play and its status. The first lies within early childhood education where there are various ideological, theoretical and practical justifications for its centrality to the curriculum. On the other hand, outside the early childhood curriculum play tends to be regarded as trivial by male-dominated society, which emphasises the power of rational thought and sees work as being serious, rational business of life and play as leisure and fun.

In contrast to Manning and Sharp (1977), King (1979), Wing (1995) and Keating *et al.* (2000) thought that children could clearly make a distinction between play and non-play activities, especially when it came to who had ownership over play. But if I was to see the statement of Manning and Sharp (*ibid*) differently - that literally children *do* make distinctions between play and work but they *do not* have any concept of work as being more valuable than play, then it would be possible to agree with Denzin (1971/92; p.192) who described play as the work of young children:

When they are left on their own, young children do not play, they work at constructing social orders. 'Play' is a fiction from the adult world. Children's work involves such serious matters as developing languages for communications; defining and processing deviance; and construction rules of entry and exit into emergent social groups. Children see these as serious concerns and often make a clear distinction between their play and their work. This fact is best grasped by entering those situations where children are naturally thrown together and forced to take account of one another'.



So, the problematic discussion about whether play is or is not the child's work could be deriving from what is described in the literature as play and which are the characteristics that are attributed to it. Thus Pellegrini (1987) argues:

‘A child's playful behaviours can be categorized according to the number of dispositional criteria met. As a result, play can be categorized as ‘more or less play’, not dichotomously as ‘play or not play’ ...acts should not be categorized as ‘play’ or ‘not play’; they should be rated along a continuum from ‘pure play’ to ‘non-play’ (p. 201).

This chapter began with a discussion of these definitions but it is now important to add the following definitions, as they relate to the discussion of the ‘play’ versus ‘work’ belief.

According to Saracho (1991), play is generally regarded as a pleasurable activity; an activity that is ‘fun’ and ‘fanciful’. Adults, thus, see play, as an activity that children probably use to ‘fill in’ time and is by some scholars (for instance, O'Connor, 1991). Often ‘play’ and ‘work’ are presented as a set of bipolar constructs with a great degree of overlapping within the curriculum (Bennett *et al.* 1997).

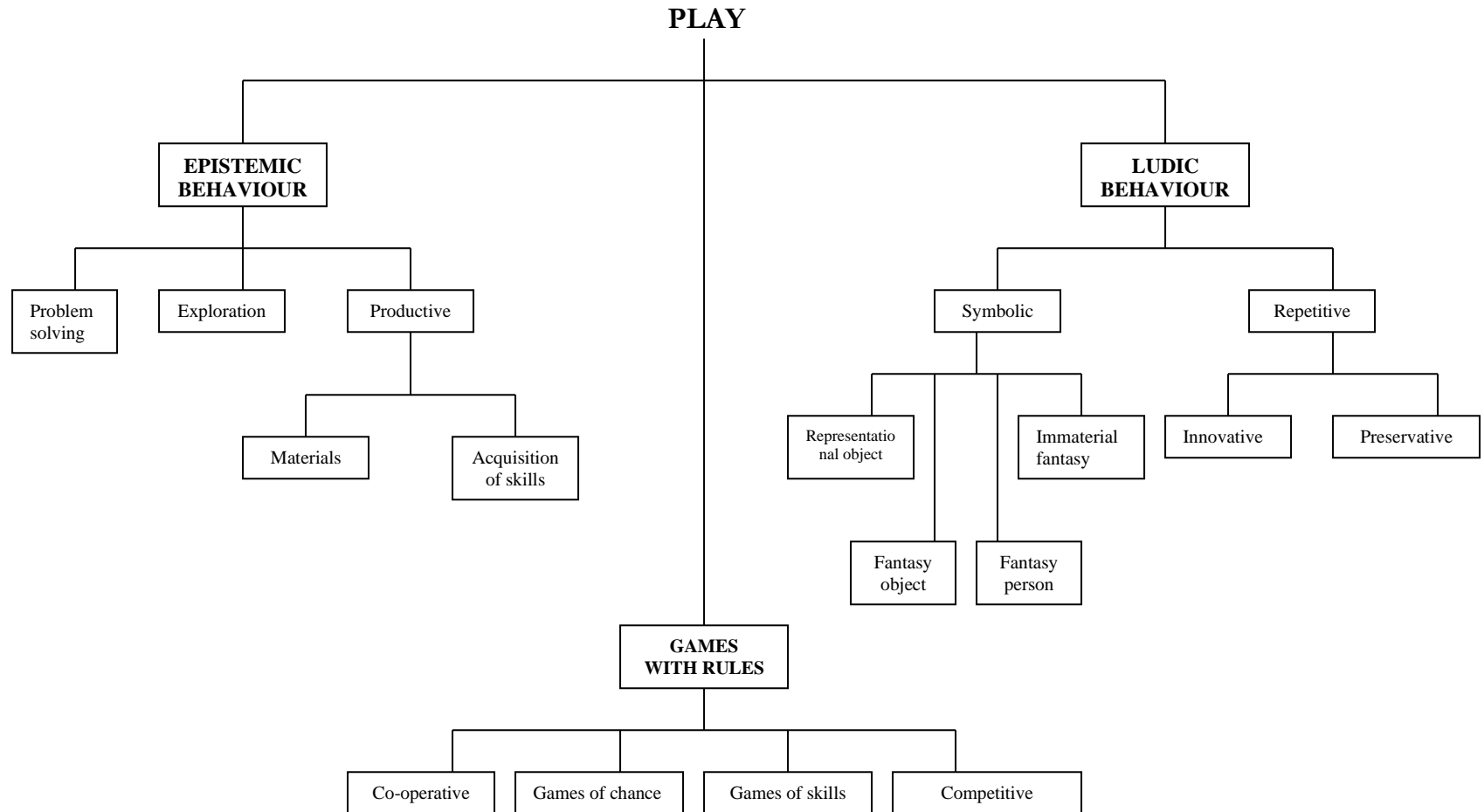
Hutt *et al* earlier in (1989), suggested a taxonomy of play based on two accounts. Firstly, their study of play, exploration and learning in various early years settings in the UK and secondly, on previous work by Berlyne (1960) who categorised play as either ‘*epistemic*’ or ‘*ludic*’ according to the types of behaviours children were exhibiting. Details about the nature and the findings of Hutt's *et al.*

(1989) study are going to be given in chapter 3, however at this point their taxonomy of play will now be presented.

According to Corrine Hutt and her colleagues, when young children were involved in different activities they either exhibited '*epistemic*' behaviour – through which young children were engaged in play incidents that led them to acquire new skills, knowledge and information – or they exhibited '*ludic*' behaviour where play activities were not geared towards acquisition of knowledge and new skills as it was the case with 'epistemic' behaviour, but on the contrary activities were more pleasurable, fun and self-amusing. In that sense, play activities for young children were considered to 'occupy' two contrasting territories, where young children will either play and consequently learn or they would just have fun. However, there was a third category that will not be discussed as it refers to older children's play behaviour, which is the so-called 'games with rules' (Hutt et al. 1989).

As it will be presented in figure 2.1 (page 46), this taxonomy had similar characteristics with the 'play/work' debate discussed earlier in this chapter.

Figure 2.1 A proposed taxonomy of children's play (according to Hutt et al. 1989, p. 223)



So, according to Figure 2.1 (page 46) Hutt *et al.* (1989) identified two main categories of behaviour for young children that differed in several ways. First, in the *level of attention*, secondly, in that ‘epistemic’ behaviour is *mood dependant*, whereas for a child to exhibit ‘ludic’ behaviour s/he has to have fun, so children who are not happy can not actually have fun and thirdly, there are *restrictions and constraints* that are related to ‘epistemic’ but not to ‘ludic’ behaviour, as the former is more structured, organised and with a specific focus and outcome. (Please refer for further details to Hutt *et al.*, 1989; pp. 221-227).

Nevertheless, as it will be presented later in this thesis, observations and video recordings of children’s daily nursery play activities showed that there are also instances where children are neither playing nor working. For the purposes of this thesis, I will also include the term **non-play**, for children who are not engaged in a play situation but who are involved in another activity within the nursery setting – like reading a book, being on the computer or walking outdoors – activities that could not be listed under the category of work either.

Later in the thesis, particularly in chapter 8, I will attempt to discuss this *play/work* dilemma from the point of the adult and well as the children themselves and will present any *non-play* situation that was recorded.

#### iv. The role of play in the early years setting: the Greek perspective

My review of the literature would not have been complete if a consideration of how Greek society perceives young children's play was not included. This is because my Greek nationality and my early childhood experiences in Greece are bound to influence my perceptions and experiences of play. I first make a reference to the etymological meaning of the word *play* and discuss how this has informed my practices as a researcher of play.

In the Greek language, the words **children**, **toys** and **play** share the same root, suggesting that **play** is inextricably linked to children's – especially young children's - occupation and behaviour. It is also defined as 'every object or way used for children's enjoyment and entertainment' (Tegopoulos–Fytrakis, 2001). More generally, in Greek culture, enjoyment is the major element of play and this is linked directly with the first years of a child's life. The Ancient Greek proverb «Τα παιδιά παίζει», which can be translated in different ways as: "Children are playing", "Children are born to play" or "All children do is play". This carries with it the belief that young children are expected to get involved in 'play-full' situations during their childhood and they are encouraged to do so.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato regarded play as an extremely important activity of the young child / person. Children in ancient Greece were seen as naturally playful, were allowed and even encouraged to participate in play

activities. Young children were also seen as naturally more unformed, unruly, helpless, fearful, cheerful, and affectionate than adults (Hughes, 1999). Plato (794 BC) stated that ‘a future architect needs to learn how to use measurements; a future soldier needs to learn how to ride a horse ... the child learns all this through play’ (own translation in English). According to Jenkinson (2001) he therefore:

‘recognized the role of play in culture, ritual, and the sacred in human societies’ and believed that ‘free movement and self-determined expression are the characteristics of play in the young’ (p. 8).

The same elements presented by Plato, such as the freedom of choice and the ‘self-determined expression’ could also be identified in recent efforts to define play, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

It is evident that from the ancient Greek times the common belief and effort was to make use of the educational value of play so that the child can be prepared for his/her adult life. However, current perceptions on young children’s play and childhood in Greece are extending the views of Plato but have also resulted from the socio-economic events of the Western Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time these perceptions were strongly influenced by the ideological renovations and scientific innovations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly by the development of ‘child-centred’ disciplines (Gougouli and Couria, 2000). Thus, most recent play theories in Greece have resulted from the amalgamation of ancient Greek play traditions with western European views on play.

As play is considered, universally, to be important for the development of the youngest members of the society, and is also culturally and historically driven - ever changing even within the same societal boundaries - it is reasonable to believe that a person is strongly influenced by their play experiences, limitations and excellences. However, there is also the underlining impression that play is not as serious or constructive when it comes to fully educating children, especially of primary school age and beyond. This is why play is appropriately placed within the preschool and nursery curriculum but tends to 'evaporate', as children grow older, when their chances and time to play are limited between the subject sessions and during break-time (*ibid.*).

Makrinioti (2000; p.85) denotes:

‘the presence of play in the nursery school, as a part of the curriculum, is legalized by the unique nature of the nursery school in relation to the other levels of formal schooling and by the theoretical approaches as a whole, that provide scientific facts for the importance of play in the educational process’ (own translation in English).

Thus, unlike older children, preschool children (birth to 6 years old) are in an environment where they are expected and encouraged to be involved in play activities. Although the Greek preschool curriculum could not be described as particularly ‘play-centred’, it allows young children more time to engage in unstructured play activities – both indoors and outdoors - and places less emphasis on structured and formal activities.

This practice might be due to the non-statutory nature of preschool education in Greece. Children, before they reach their 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, do not necessarily have to attend a preschool or nursery setting, but when they do so their places are free. Similarly, the preschool and nursery curriculum is designed to reflect this non- compulsory attendance and promotes the holistic development of children's personality. Learning derives from these unstructured activities, however, when the summative assessment of children's cognitive development is concerned, nursery staff are more likely to resort to more formal learning activities, mostly pre-writing and pre-reading skills and activities in a more structured environment.

On this basis, the broad and specific educational aims are being set out, children's interpersonal relationships are supported, a notion of the school's educational role is created and children become accustomed to the way teachers interact with pupils and how knowledge is transmitted. The majority of these activities are being performed through the medium of play.

The Greek Curriculum for the early years published in 1990, values play as it:

- Is synonymous with young children's nature;
- Guarantees freedom of choice;
- Promotes implicit experiences and learning through exploration;
- Creates opportunities for the child to engage in trial and error situations;
- Deals with actions and capabilities that reflect children's specific level of development;



- Adjusts with each individual child's pace and personal mobilization;
- Relies on fantasy and spontaneity;
- Takes place only when conditions of interaction exist and also influences the interaction between equal parts;
- Through play the meaning of the classroom appears as a result of self-discipline and self-control;
- Entrusts adults with two roles: this of the instructor and this of the assistant; the adult is not imposing ideas to the children, he rather contributes to the creation of knowledge by introducing problems so that observation, exploration, creativity are being promoted and inferences gathered;
- Finally, through play the 'unified day' derives; play abolishes the dividing boundaries between cognitive objects and allows them to mix with each other and become inter-dependent.

(Greek Ministry of National Education and Religion,

Book of activities, 1990; p.311)

A characteristic difference between the Greek preschool setting and one in England or Wales is the layout of the classroom and the activities available for children's use, based on their interest and their needs on their own pace. Whereas, children in Greece are expected to perform most of the tasks whilst sitting on chairs and practice an activity with the rest of the class, children in many settings in England and Wales would be moving around the room and between the sand and water tray, the construction or the creative areas. Thus, although both preschool educational systems state that play is the main medium of learning for this young age, play is provided for in different forms and with different aims and outcomes.

In the context of the differences and similarities that lie within the early childhood traditions of Greece and the UK it becomes necessary to develop a

definition of play. Such definition need not be universal but rather one, which can be applied to the socio-cultural and educational context of the present study and to me as the researcher.

*Towards a working definition of play in the early years setting*

I have shown that play is difficult to define. Researchers of young children playing have identified different stages, styles of play (Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968, 1990; Spodek and Saracho 1987) mainly through the use of observations. However, it is important to ask what types of play occur within the nursery setting. It could be argued that young children within nursery settings are engaged in play activities for very long periods of time, but this assumption should be questioned whilst discussion of play can prompt images of enjoyment and laughter (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000); something that does not apply to all children at all times.

The above characteristics have been discussed over many decades. Mellor in the 1950's stated that:

‘The irresistible urge in young children to be active, to investigate and discover, to imitate and pretend, to plan and construct, finds its outlets in what we call play. Play means those activities which are not connected with our work, and which should perhaps be termed recreation. Some of the children’s actions are in this category, for example, when he ‘lets off steam’, and abandons himself to the sheer delight of movement after a period of concentration, but if we watch children ‘at play’ we shall see that much of their activity is of a very serious nature, requiring their attention, thought and experiment, and should more truly be termed work, even though it may have no economic value. It is during this so-called play that children learn to work, to concentrate and to persevere until achievement is reached; to discover the nature of their surroundings

and of people in their community, to acquire skills of body and mind, and to express their thoughts and feelings in a great variety of ways' (1950; p. 50).

For the purposes of this study, I have derived at the following working definition of play. I have developed this set of descriptors of play from my understanding of the literature and my assumptions as an early educator and researcher of play in an early years' setting. This set of descriptors aim to emphasize the fact that children's play activities are neither static nor distant from children's social environment. In fact, children are greatly influenced by other children or adults around them. Play, thus:

- Is voluntarily;
- Is self-initiated but not necessarily without the presence of adults;
- Is enjoyable but sometimes children find it strenuous;
- Challenges and extends children's thinking and cognitive abilities;
- Helps to develop negotiation skills;
- Enables children to become aware of and acquire social norms;
- Enables children to develop rules of engagement;
- Is representative of children's individual preferences and needs;
- Enables children to develop a sense of ownership;
- Makes sense to children;
- Can be recalled and talked about later in time.

My observations of children's play behaviour throughout the course of this study and my interpretations of the literature provide the grounds of this discussion and the analysis of the data that will follow in the empirical part.

## Summary of chapter 2

This chapter has explored issues related to play, its definition, stages, and styles. It discussed the debate in the field about the status of play. The discussion included the play/work dilemma and the taxonomy of play suggested by Hutt et al. (1989). It was suggested that apart from the fact that young children's play can be viewed as play ('ludic' behaviour) or work ('epistemic' behaviour), it could also take the form of 'non-play' like reading or being on the computer.

It has discussed play within the Greek society and the pre school curriculum. It has arrived at a working set of descriptors of play for the purposes of this study.

This chapter has suggested that play, although socially and culturally constructed, is a difficult notion to grasp, having led researchers to produce numerous but not universal or unique definitions. Most of the play definitions are based on the criteria that each author establishes resulting in an overlap between various definitions presented throughout the previous years, decades and even the past century. Before any definition is considered as useful, several other parameters need to be taken into account. If definitions are based on empirical evidence, these are likely to change in the context of differences in background information, culture, societal boundaries, age and individual attributes of children under observation or discussion, the researchers' personal experiences and so forth. In this way, the criteria for a working definition of play behaviour within the limits of this study were established.

This chapter has also shown that although there is an assumption within early years settings that play and learning are strongly related, the place of play in most settings has been problematic and this relationship has been questionable, until the introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) in particular. Finally, in an attempt to clarify my own biases and influences as a researcher and an early educator, I have also referred to the way play is viewed by the Greek society generally and in early year's setting in Greece in particular.

Chapter 3 will provide a review of relevant research studies on play in educational settings from adult as well as the children's perspective.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Researching play in the early years: the role of adults and the views of children

‘But because with play you can’t say ‘Ah! Yeah, they’re on page 6 of the playbook!’ you know, it’s very difficult to know how much they’ve actually learned. It doesn’t mean to say they’re not learning...’

(Mrs Higgins, research participant, Head teacher, 01/05/2002)

Play is a key activity (as chapter 2 previously has shown) in every preschool setting yet its role has always been controversial and so has people’s view about it (Atkin, 1991). From my own experience in preschool settings, most of children’s nursery free time is regarded to be playtime, since they are involved in various play situations from role-play at the home corner to building blocks and playing with sand or water. When children are involved in more structured and teacher-initiated activities, play seems to be sidelined for children’s work to commence. In some cases, especially in Reception classes, play is seen as an incentive for children to finish their ‘work’ first – such as pre-reading and or writing activities (Keating *et al.*, 2000) – before choosing what they want to play with and in effect play is devalued.

Having explored the literature on the definitions, different stages and style of play in chapter 2, this chapter will review the literature on young children’s play

from adult's and children's perspectives by identifying and discussing key studies in the field that are in nature similar to the study reported in this thesis. This chapter will address the following issues:

- i. A review of the literature on play: the adult perspective;
- ii. Creating opportunities for play: the adult role;
- iii. Researching play in the early years from the children's perspective.

#### **i. A review of the literature on play: the adult perspective**

The term play has been used so extensively to refer to young children's activities in and out of nursery (Piaget, 1962; Garvey, 1977; Wood and Dunning, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978; Smilansky, 1968). At times during this study I have wondered if this word is appropriate for what young children actually do and how they use play in comparison to their older siblings, or themselves when they grow older. I wanted to study play from the children's perspectives in order to find out whether children use the word in the same way as adults do or in a different way. It is important to consider existing research which presents both children's and adult's perspectives. This chapter presents a chronological review of studies on play in early years settings and identifies two stances: studies that have approached play from the adult perspective and studies that have included children's views on play in the early years.

Researchers from the fields of psychology, education and sociology have studied play within nursery settings including Isaacs (1932), Bruner (1980), Sylva *et*

*al* (1980), Hutt *et al* (1989); play has also been studied in children's own homes, for example Piaget, (1962), Dunn and Wooding (1977). All these studies research play from adult perspectives as will be discussed later in this chapter. Although the focus of this thesis is play within an early years educational setting, a brief account of other influential studies in the field will also be given.

Piaget (1962) observed his own children at home, which resulted in his development of different stages (discussed in chapter 2) in young children's development and play behaviour, in particular, as well as the development of concepts like 'accommodation' and 'assimilation' that, are strongly related to how children perceive, learn and make use of their environment. Dunn and Wooding (1977) also studied young children's play in the home setting and mainly concentrated on the learning interactions between young children and their parents, and how this interaction had an effect on children's cognitive development. These two studies influenced other recent studies of play activities and behaviour of children aged between 3 to 5 years that have taken place outside nursery or preschool settings, some of which are presented below.



### *Observing children's play in early years settings*

Some studies have examined issues of exploration, problem solving, learning and the role of play within early years settings (Isaacs, 1932; Montessori, 1964; Manning and Sharp, 1977; Sylva, *et al.* 1980; Hutt *et al.*, 1989; Athey, 1990; Bruce, 1991; Drummond, 1999; Bennett *et al.*, 1997) with and without adult involvement. I will now discuss them in detail.

Isaacs (1932) studied play in her own Malting House School in an attempt to use these records of children's play behaviours to explore (amongst other things) issues of social relations and cognitive development. Her observations of play are very detailed as they are systematically recorded on a daily basis to depict as much as possible from the children's nursery play experiences. According to Bruce (1991), Isaacs:

‘gave play priority in the school, and helped to move Froebelian philosophy on from the rather stagnant and romantic view of play that had begun to develop, by bringing her psychoanalytic approach to bear on Froebelian theory. Children became real again – with tempers, at times being rude; with moods and with interest in their bodies. She stressed the importance to observe what children do’ (p. 51).

The following extract illustrates Bruce's point:

‘3.7.25 Priscilla and Christopher had a struggle for the rake, in which Christopher won.

Frank took one of the rugs, which Duncan had been using on the swing earlier in the morning, and Duncan tried to get it from Frank, saying, “It's *my* rug”. There was a struggle. Mrs. I. intervened, pointing out that the rugs were for ‘all the boys’ to use, and that if Frank was using it now, Duncan could not do so, but

would perhaps get another; after a time he accepted this, but then seeing that Dan had in the meantime taken the second rug, he tried to get that from Dan and Mrs. I. had to intervene again. Then Mrs. I. said, 'There is another rug, will you find that and use it?' He said, 'No' in a very sullen voice, 'there is *not* another.' Mrs I. said, 'There is, will you come with me and look for it?' He went with her, but repeated all the time, 'There's *not* another.'

(Isaacs, 1932; p.36-37).

In this extract, all the boys are seeking 'their rug' and as it is usually the case in most early years settings nowadays, when the number of children does not correspond to the number of objects or play props there is bound to be a conflict of who will get what. There is tension between the children in Isaacs' observation and the teacher's need to intervene many times stressing the need for sharing, cooperation and taking turns is evident and inevitable. However, Duncan found it difficult to understand why he could not have something that he wanted at the time he wanted it. Therefore he insists on what he believes; that there are no other rugs and this is the one, which is his.

The children in this extract are just being children; they know what they want and they expect to have it immediately and not wait for their turn. They have tantrums and are not necessarily happy when rules are imposed on them; it seems that social norms have not necessarily found their place into these children's lives yet. Through this observation Isaacs has provided us with a detailed and rich account of children's behaviours and social interactions that still remains familiar to parents and early years workers, even though this account is more than 70 years old.

Sylva *et al.* (1980) studied children in various forms of pre-school provision. In total of 120 children aged 3:6 to 5:6 were observed through 'target child' observations on action codes, social codes and play bouts. The categories that were developed through this study aimed to consider the complexity within the social and cognitive dimensions of children's play experiences within the early years settings by looking into the social setting and the task setting. Sylva *et al.* (*ibid.*) revealed that construction materials of all kinds, structured tasks and art activities in addition to pretend play and small-world play as well as settings in which children interact with a peer or an adult led to intellectual benefits. Based on these findings they recommended that: a) activities should have clear goal structure, b) adults should have the role of the tutor and c) children should work in pairs.

Hutt *et al.* (1989) studied play through various single studies based on young children's - aged 6 weeks to 4:6 years old - observations of play (checklists with categories of available play activities) within different early years settings. The observations were made at 20-minute-intervals on two separate mornings using a checklist of predetermined play categories and during this scan number of children and adults in each activity were recorded. Interviews about the views of nursery staff and parents on the pre-school provision and experience were also conducted. The studies were carried out in two different areas and in total 30 settings participated including nursery schools and nursery classes, playgroups and day nurseries. Ninety-six children (12 boys and 12 girls from each setting) formed

the subjects of these studies. In particular, the focuses of these studies were the aims, objectives and organization of different pre-school provision, which included the views and experiences of parents and nursery staff, what activities do take place in every different preschool setting, the nature of interaction between children and adults, how language is used and how children learn from their preschool experiences and from play in specific.

According to Hutt *et al.* (1989) 'the study revealed comparatively little organized activity in any of the four types of nursery, the emphasis being overwhelmingly on 'free-play' in each type' (*ibid.* p.24). And also that there were more activities available at the same time to the children in playgroups rather than in day nurseries, where activities were set out to follow one another. Also the study revealed three important benefits with regard the children's attendance to these pre-school provisions. These were: '(i) the opportunity for children to mix with others; (ii) the enhancement of language development; and (iii) the opportunity to discover and employ their potential' (Hutt et al. 1989; p.209). Findings like these given above provided new insight on how early years settings operated in a period when no official policy document - like the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) - was available to early years practitioners.

A decade later the influential study by Hutt *et al.* (1989), Sylva *et al.* (1999) followed the developmental progress of over 3,000 children in 141 preschool settings, 12 of which were chosen for in-depth qualitative case study, across

England for five years (1997-2003) on a larger scale longitudinal DfEE-funded study called the 'Effective Provision of Preschool Education' (EPPE) project. The developmental progress of children on various intellectual, social and behavioural measures was assessed. This was done in an attempt to identify the settings that offered high quality provision and how this was affecting children's progress and development. The results of this study are still emerging from the extensive databases that are still being analyzed and reported on.

In the steps of the EPPE study, the 'Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years' (REPEY) project, (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) using case studies of 14 chosen Foundation Stage settings from the sample of the EPPE study, revealed that children who were offered play-based learning opportunities with emphasis on the curriculum and social learning developed 'sustained shared thinking' and made more progress in their schooling. The REPEY project has shown that the preschool settings that combine activities, which equally include teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen (yet potentially instructive) play activities (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004) provide the most effective provision.

Strandell (2000) also conducted an ethnographic study of 3 municipal daycare centres in Finland where children's social interactions (both verbal and non-verbal communication was recorded) were observed over an 8-week-period. Three groups of 18-20 children each participated in this study between the ages of 3 years to 6 years old. Findings from Strandell's study highlighted the children's use of narrative in pretend play to negotiate on social participations and also that

children's actions while playing were wider than consisting of just one separate activity (*ibid.*). According to Strandell (2000; p.156) her study stresses that:

‘it is not whether children are dependants or competent actors, autonomous subjects or social problems. It is more about not placing them in fixed categories that can be labeled ... children often seem to be more attracted by acting on a narrative level than acting in already created and fixed roles’.

In addition to these influential studies in the field of early childhood research various other researchers have concentrated on play in relation to storytelling, literacy, numeracy, creativity, ICT and these will now be briefly discussed.

Play in relation to storytelling (Paley, 1984; 1988; 1990), where Paley presents excellent accounts of children's stories and of the acting out of stories each day at the nursery setting, which formed the basis for discussion with the children. Play and emergent literacy (Clay, 1967; Christie. 1991; Nutbrown, 1994; Jordan, 1995; Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2001; Brooker, 2002; Williams and Rask, 2003; Marsh, 2004; Miller and Smith, 2004); young children's play and its contribution to the acquisition of literacy has been the focus of many studies, a few of which are reported, mainly those that are close to this study methodological. Experiences of children's literacy encounters taking place at home or at the nursery setting have been reported in these studies. The importance of preschool home influences on the emergence of literacy has been highlighted as well as the possible link between their ability to plan imaginative play and their ability to learn aspects of literacy

systematically when they enter formal schooling (Brooker, 2002; Williams and Rask, 2003). Children's computer activities have been studied in connection to literacy practices (Marsh, 2004) and also to children's need for producing scripts in relation to popular culture (Dyson, 1997; Marsh 2000).

Play and numeracy (Aubrey, 1997; Holton *et al.* 1999; Gifford, 2004) where it is suggested that mathematical play with the direction of the teacher and through multisensory learning can lead children from real-world problem solving to more abstract mathematical properties. Play and creativity (Dyson, 1986; Athey, 1990; Edwards, 1995; Hallam, 2001; Fawcett and Hay, 2004; Anning and Ring, 2004), where it has been suggested that children use their imagination while involved in creative activities and arts to present not only events or people that they have encountered or met but also to give life to their fantasies and also that there are gender differences in the topics that children choose to draw; these studies have advocated the importance of including drawing within the curriculum. Play and Information Computer Technology – ICT - (Walkerdine, 1998; Brooker and Siraj-Blatchford 2002; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2002; Marsh and Thompson, 2001; Marsh 2002; Marsh, 2004), where children nowadays are using the computers more widely to explore literacy and numeracy, solve problems and negotiate with their peers and their teachers; children who share the same interests in computer-based activities can also develop friendships through playful situations.

Of the above, those of Paley (1984; 1988; 1990) consist of longitudinal ethnographic encounters in early years settings. Paley (*ibid.*) finds ways through encouraging children to create their own stories and share them with their peers to uncover children's views of their nursery play experiences and their involvement in incidents where fantasy and reality bare a close resemblance. This practice followed in Paley's work is important to my study, as the aim is to encourage young children to become active participants in the research process by discovering their views and experiences of play.

## **ii. Creating opportunities for play: The adult role**

The role of adults in creating opportunities for play has also been a topic of much research interests. Adults are not viewed as passive when it comes to children's development, learning and subsequently play, but rather they are considered to be the key figures that influence children's play experiences either directly or indirectly. Bordova and Leong (1998) in their study suggested that adults influence play both in an indirect and a direct way; indirectly by setting up the environment, choosing toys and props and encouraging children to play together and directly in the case of toddlers and young pre-schoolers who may lack necessary skills: for example, they may show the child how to play with a toy, take turns and settle disputes.

Piaget (1962) believed that the educators should create environments in which children could be active learners, free to explore, experiment, combine



materials, create and solve problems through their self-chosen and self-directed initiatives. In this framework, the role of the educator has been characterized as that of the enabler and facilitator, someone who responds to children's initiatives and values the latter's thinking process and ongoing cognitive concerns.

Children need the freedom to play and learn, and educators need to create opportunities which provide this freedom to learn in a protected environment which, as far as possible, removes the inhibiting restriction which arises from fear for children's safety (Nutbrown, 1999). A nursery classroom could ideally be such an environment where the children are exposed to a plethora of stimuli and different play situations and early years educators could be the key persons that would provide children with the freedom to learn through enriching opportunities. This is often the case where studies report quality play incidents from classrooms with young children playing the key role and also where parents are involved in their children's nursery play experiences (Athey, 1981).

Similarly, Abbott (1994) presents her observations of a quality play incident with some children who had previously visited a building site and where now 'reliving' the experience with the help of the nursery practitioners. Play incidents like these presented by Abbott (*ibid.*) can be found in many nursery or reception classes where practitioners are sensitized in the value of play. However, as Abbott (1994) found out in another study on the parents' views on play, they are not always aware of the importance of play and its relationship with learning.

Children as ‘players’ are challenged to get involved in various play activities, to trial and error, explore, expand their imagination, be involved in role-play situations and explore new feelings and ideas without the risk of getting hurt, explore their capabilities and limits, develop their fine and gross motor skills, negotiate access, share feelings, roles and materials, develop social skills, position themselves within their classrooms, stimulate their senses by playing with different textured materials, create their own masterpieces either by drawing or collage activities and many more. The list is endless!

‘Respectful’ adults (Nutbrown, 1999) spend a considerable amount of time planning and refining the purpose behind nursery play activities. Activities should not be placed within the nursery classroom without prior careful consideration. Staff meticulously converse about the provision of a certain activity and the way it is presented to the children in an effort to be as attractive to and ‘successful’ for the children as possible. The ‘success’ of each activity lies with the interest that it attracts in the children; the amount of time children had spent with it and the learning outcomes of this activity.

The adults’ role in children’s play varies considerably in the literature and it is considered to be multi-dimensional. The role of the facilitator, earlier suggested by Piaget (1962), is also identified in the work of Saracho (1991), where the teacher selects, organizes, and presents objects, materials, props, and conceives experiences regarding designated concepts or themes. Teachers intervene to

supplement any critical elements of play that are scant. The intervention should revitalise, clarify, and expand the play, but it should not manage the activities.

Jones and Reynolds (1992) revealed and talked about a variety of roles such as the stage manager, planner, scribe, mediator, role model, player and assessor and communicator. These roles do not apply simultaneously to the educators and parents. At the same time, these roles change between the home and nursery environment, as does the child's play behaviour, most of the times. Kontos (1999) similarly focused on describing pre-school teachers' involvement in activity settings, their roles, and their talks during free playtime. Such roles were namely: stage manager, play enhancer/playmate, interviewer, safety/behaviour monitor and uninvolved. The most frequently adapted teacher role was Stage manager, second was Play enhancer/playmate. The other three roles were each adapted less than ten percent.

Thus there are studies in the literature that are focused on the early educators' role (Saracho, 1991; Smilansky, 1968; Bennett *et al.* 1997; Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Piaget, 1962; Kontos, 1999) and there are other studies that have concentrated on the parents' role (some of the studies are: Dunn and Wooding, 1977; Swadener and Johnson, 1989; Power and Parke, 1982).

McLean (1991) studied the lives of four early childhood teachers in the interactive contexts of preschool settings of Australia. The focus of the study was to draw on teachers' involvement in children's peer interactions by setting out to reflect on their own teaching. By doing so, teachers would be able to broaden

and deepen their own insights through interaction with their colleagues. The study was unraveled through the case studies of the early childhood teachers and the observations of 4- to 5- year-old children over a period of approximately 3 weeks. According to McLean (1991; p. 204) the study:

‘managed to bring to the surface some of the complexities and paradoxes of early childhood teaching, and suggested that teaching might be described as a never-ending series of on-the-spot decisions, involving and impossibly large number of constantly-changing contextual factors and often conflicting concerns. Yet these teachers were able to make sense of it and function within their settings, with considerable skill’.

Reception teacher’s theories of play and their role in children’s play were also studied by Bennett *et al.* (1997) but in a different context – the U.K. These teachers appeared to have similar views about the nature of play and their role in it. In particular, three roles were identified as more commonly adapted: the teacher as provider; the teacher as observer and the teacher as participant. According to Bennett *et al* (*ibid.*) the teachers believed that it is far more valuable for the child to persist with a task and investigate alternative ways of doing things on his own, as such learning is likely to be more meaningful rather than the teacher direct the child in the answer without prior investigation on behalf of the child him/herself.

The wealth of studies on teachers and early educators could not imply that the parents’ roles are not regarded as equally or even more important, but it has probably to do with the fact that the nursery and school environments are more

easily approached by researchers for different reasons – the most important might be access. Although Froebel was the first to recognize the premium position of parents in their children's learning, few studies have researched play in the home environment. Parents' roles in their child's development of play behaviour and skills are particularly critical during the early years (Swadener and Johnson, 1989).

Power and Parke (1982) believed that through play, caretaking, restriction and encouragement of infant exploration, parents undoubtedly played an important role in influencing the course of early learning. Therefore, they conducted a laboratory and home analysis to compare parent-infant interaction in the play, caretaking, housekeeping, and adult leisure contexts in order to generate some hypotheses concerning the influence of these interactions on infant social and cognitive development. The results shown that parent-infant interactions were first identified in the play context were also found to take place in other naturally occurring contexts in the home, and many of these interactions appear to be the contexts in which much of the early learning may result. Mothers were more likely than fathers to play the managerial role indicating that mothers might influence their infants' learning in a wider variety of ways than the fathers would.

In the Oxford Pre-School Project (OPRP) (Bruner, 1980), interactions between adults and children were analyzed for 'quality': quality of dialogue and quality of play. The findings of the OPRP indicated the importance of the presence of parents in early education. It was found that even passive parents

increased the time a child stayed with an activity and increased the likelihood of dialogue.

This increasing awareness which might have derived from the official recognition of the parental role in their children's education and the home – school relationship stated in the Education Acts. The Elton Report (Great Britain Committee of Enquiry into Discipline in Schools 1989) focused on the importance of parental involvement as a useful mechanism to improve the home - school relationship, recommending that parents should grasp the opportunity to communicate with the schools by using all routes (formal and informal). Parents can give practical help in classrooms, but perhaps the greatest benefit to teachers in working with parents is the spur towards making their own pedagogy more conscious and explicit (Athey, 1990).

### **iii. Researching play in the early years from the children's perspectives**

Studies of early years play using observations or interviews with significant adults seem to dominate the field unlike other that place the children's views in the centre of attention. It is evident from the summary table 3.1, (page 75-76) below, that apart from a few examples of similar studies in the late 1970's (King, 1979) and mid- to late- 1980's (Kaarby, 1988; Paley, 1988; Kelly-Byrne, 1989), there is an increase in studies that are seeking the children's perspectives on early years play increased during the 1990's and beyond (Paley, 1990; Gura, 1992;

Corsaro, 1993; Wing, 1995; Pollard and Filer, 1996; Nutbrown, 1997; Sawyer, 1997; MacNaughton, 1999; Keating, *et al.* 2000).

The majority of these studies used participant or non-participant observations, field notes, interviews or discussions with children and collection of relevant play material. More recently, audiovisual techniques were used to record data in ethnographic studies (Reynolds and Jones, 1997; Pink, 2001) and to analyse children's play (MacNaughton, 1999).

In more details, Nancy King (1979) researched children's perspectives on play in four kindergarten classrooms; children's play was observed and children were interviewed. Boys and girls were asked to talk about their play and work experience within the setting and according to King (*ibid.*) no child had difficulty in labeling each activity as either play or work. However, children's comments revealed that they considered most of their kindergarten activities as "work" rather than "play" and the children identified the voluntary nature of play as its most salient characteristic. King (*ibid.*) concludes that:

'children in the kindergarten learn their play does not hold a significant place in the important business of school and by using play as a reward for children who have finished their work, or regarding play to recess, an activity apart from the classroom schedule and often outside the school building, further separates play from the central concerns of the school' (p.86).

**Summary Table 3.1: Researching play in early years settings including children's perspectives**

Study	Period	Numbers	Non participant and/or participant observations	Collection of relevant play material	Interview/ discussion with children	Audio/visual data collection of play incidents
Abbott 1994	?	? primary school	✓	✓	✓	✗
Brodin, 1999	(n/a)	52 (4-12 year olds)	✓	✗	✓	✗
Corsaro, 1994	4-year-old segment	(n/a) 3-6 year olds	✓	✗	✓	✓ (audio/visual)
Dockett, 1998	10 weeks	33 (mean age 50 months)	✓	✓	✓	✗
Falkstrom, 1999	(n/a)	80 children(6-8 year olds)	✓	✗	✓	✗
Gura, 1992	2 years	3-6 year- olds	✓	✓	✓	✓ (visual/audio)
Howard <i>et al.</i> 2002	?	111 (2-6 year olds)	✗	✗	✓	✗
Hutt <i>et al.</i> 1989	?	96 children (3:6-5:6 year olds)	✓	✓	✗	✗
Kaarby, 1989	(n/a)	15 (5-6 year olds)	✓	✗	✓	✗
Keating <i>et al.</i> 2000	(n/a)	5 stakeholders in 10 primary schools	✓	✗	✓ (teachers & children)	✗
Kelly-Byrne, 1989	1 year	1 child (4-years old)	✓	✓	✓	✗



**Summary Table 3.1 con't: Researching play in early years settings including children's perspectives**

Study	Period	Numbers	Non participant and/or participant observations	Collection of relevant play material	Interview with children	Audio/visual data collection of play incidents
King, 1979	(n/a)	3-5 year olds	✓	✗	✓	✗
MacNaughton, 1999	(n/a)	3-5 year olds	✓	✓	✓ (teachers & children)	✓ (visual)
Marsh, 2001	10 days	57 (6-7 year olds)	✓	✓	✓	✓ (visual)
McLean 1991	3 weeks	4 early childhood educators ? young children	✓	✓	✓ (teachers)	✗
Paley 1984, 1988 & 1990	?	3-5 year olds	✓	✓	✓	✓ (audio)
Rothlein and Brett (1987)	?	103 (2-6 year olds)	✗	✗	✓	✗
Strandell 2000	8 weeks	60 (3-6 year olds)	✓	✓	✗	✗
Wing, 1995	(n/a)	(n/a) primary school	✓	✗	✓	✗

**Note on table:**

✓ = Evidence of such approach being used.

✗ = No evidence of such approach being used.

? = Inadequate information given.

(n/a) = Not specified.

- = Not clear whether such methods were used

Kelly-Byrne (1989) in her ethnographic study of a single child at the child's home, tried to explore the child's perceptions of play. Most of the times the researcher was following the child's agenda. Kelly-Byrne (*ibid.*) revealed that the child's play was complex and at times difficult for the researcher to follow, but gradually the child seemed to acknowledge and recognize the researcher's position. Finally, she became the child's playmate and companion, sharing the same fantasies and enabling thus the child to flourish.

Kaarby (1989) interviewed 15 children aged 5 to 6 years old and found that children's perceptions of play are related to classroom experience. Thus, children from a play-oriented environment appeared to have a more diverse perception of learning, where opportunities to learn were described in a number of classroom activities including play. Children in a more teacher-directed and structured setting separated play from learning, describing teacher directed activities as learning and self-initiated activity as play and consequently not learning.

In 1995, Wing used participant observations and in-depth interviews to explore young children's perceptions of classroom activities and also the perception of their early educators. By concentrating on children's views on to play and work, the researcher found out that children were very skilled at distinguishing between activities that are related to work and these related to play; a distinction of which teachers are unaware of. Children did not perceive work negatively; although they could recognize that play was a voluntary activity, while work was teacher initiated (Wing, 1995).

More recently, Keating *et al.* (2000) researched the views of five stakeholders (Headteachers of nurseries, teachers and parents) and children in ten primary schools in the UK about the role of play in the Reception Class with very diverse findings due to the heterogeneity of the participants. The interviews with the adults revealed that there is ‘pressure on the teachers to provide evidence of learning and attainment, which can be recorded and reported to parents and other professionals’ (p. 441) something that is extremely difficult to be accomplished in settings where play is the main ‘vehicle for learning’, but despite this tension teachers believe that play is a ‘powerful and productive learning medium’ (*ibid.* p.441). On the other hand, children thought that play is inferior to ‘work and for them work meant sitting on a table with a pencil and a pen’, while play was self initiated and consisted of the ‘home corner, painting, Lego, the writing station, paper, crayons, clock, books, the wooden bricks, the sand’ and so forth (*ibid.* p. 444).

Also Howard *et al.* (2002) in their study suggested that children’s perceptions of play, work and learning are influenced by early classroom experience. Through the Activity Apperception Story Procedure (a photographic sorting task) on 111 children aged 2-6 years old from 6 different early years settings, they indicated that children responded to cues when making decisions about play, work and learning. These cues were categorized into: space and constraint, positive affect, the nature of the activity and teacher presence. Based on the experiences they encountered in their classroom (primary school or day nursery), children also attended to school context, free choice and skill development. This study also demonstrated how the

characteristics used to define activities became more complex with age, suggesting the elaboration of schema with time and experience.

From the studies reported above, those of King, (1979), Wing (1995) and Keating *et al.* (2000) had taken place more than 25 years apart, however, they identify the difficulty of placing play within the early years setting without having to prove its value for learning and development. In these studies play seems to be less important than work and teachers seem to have difficulty in providing evidence of children's learning through play, while the children themselves seem to be aware of the differences between play and work, although they learn from early on that play is not equally as important as work.

The work of Paley (1984; 1988, 1990) on the other hand, consists of extensive and systematic inquiry of young children's perceptions and experiences of play within their nursery setting through storytelling. Children's play incidents are recorded either by hand written notes or by the use of tape recorder and later on in Paley's research children are asked to present their own version (stories) of their play lived experiences. Issues that are being explored through Paley's work vary from children who are experiencing emotional difficulties (1990) and children's use of pretend play to explore the importance of rules and social competence (1984; 1988).

In his ethnographic studies, Corsaro researched children's play experiences in nursery settings of the US and Italy with the aim to examine children's everyday discourse processes within the children's peer culture and how these reflected the general school culture as well as the local communities. Corsaro (1993; p. 23) argues that:

‘friendships are constituted in the everyday routines of peer cultures that are influenced by and contribute to the reproduction of the adult world... friendship is a complex phenomenon... friendship processes are seen as deeply embedded in children’s collective, interpretive reproduction of their culture’.

Table 3.1 (pages 75-76) showed the ways in which the studies discussed in this chapter have provided information on children’s play behaviours and experiences within preschool educational settings. Although in this chapter a broad reference was given to studies on children’s play from the adult perceptive. In these studies most researchers based their accounts on detailed observations of children’s play experiences while only a few have also included the views of significant adults in children’s lives to compliment these observations. As is stated by Woodhead and Faulkner (2000), much of the research into children’s play is observational, involving but not necessarily engaging children. Therefore, this thesis is distinct because it aims to research children’s perspectives by using a range of research methods to enable the children not only to be involved in the research but also to participate in the research process as the main informants. This study also considers children’s views alongside the views of their parents and early educators

Apart from a few noticeable exceptions (King, 1979; Paley, 1984; 1988; 1990; Rothlein and Brett, 1987; MacNaughton, 1999; Kaarby, 1989; Kelly-Byrne, 1989; Marsh, 2000; Brodin, 1999; Dockett, 1998; Keating, *et al.* 2000; Howard *et al.* 2002; Wing, 1995) there has been little attempt to incorporate young children’s voices in these accounts; which also have limited children’s participation. All studies have used a wide range of methods to collect data but

only a small number of studies (referenced above) directly seek the perceptions of young children in relation to their play in the early years. If a chronological analysis of these studies were made, it will become immediately apparent that most studies that have incorporated children's views as part of their studies appear from the late 1990's onwards.

During the last 10 years there has been an increase in seeking the views of young children themselves and the use of different child-friendly research methods to bring about this participation. Chapter 4 will discuss studies, which follow the new trend in involving young children as participants and main informants in research that is directly linked to their overall development and learning. This is also the aim of the study, which is the basis of this thesis.

### **Summary of chapter 3**

This review of the literature on play has identified and discussed a plethora of studies of play within early years settings. The place of play in the early years settings has been researched in relation to children's learning and overall development. The studies discussed in this chapter have provided extensive observations of children's nursery play (either directly or using audiovisual technology) and of data collected by interviewing children but they use interviews mostly with significant adults.

Finally, studies of the role of the adults in young children's play have been outlined; these included the roles of the early educators and of parents. These studies have been presented according to the stance they have taken in researching play in the early years – research of play from the adult perspective

and research of play from the children's perspective. Table 3.1 (pp. 75-76) highlighted that some studies have involved children in the research as participants and main informants, this being a key feature of the study reported in this thesis.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Voice, participation and ethnography in Early Childhood Educational Research

‘The beginning of every task is the most crucial part, especially when our concern is with those who are young and vulnerable’.

**Plato**, The Republic

**H**aving reviewed the literature on play, definitions of play and issues of, gender and power, in the early years, this chapter will critically examine the literature on listening to young children’s voices; ethics and methods in early childhood educational research, children’s rights, and ethnographic studies on young children’s play.

This chapter is in three sections:

- i. Listening to young children: (a) ‘voices’ (b) ‘children’s rights’;
- ii. Participatory research with young children: (a) ethics (b) methods;
- iii. Ethnography in early childhood educational research.

As Plato denoted thousands of years ago, early childhood is considered by most to be the most significant period in a person’s life. Research has recognised this importance and has shown a great interest in how young children develop (Piaget, 1962; Hughes, 1999), think (Donaldson, 1978; Wood, 1998), learn (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1980; Athey, 1990; Nutbrown, 1994; Wood, 1998), play (Partner, 1932; Isaacs, 1932; Hutt *et al.* 1989; Smith,



1978; Pellegrini, 1982, Bruce, 1991) and acquire language, numerical, and social skills (Isaacs, 1932; Paley, 1990; Corsaro, 1993). Despite the plethora of studies in the early years, Aubrey *et al.* (2000) argues that much evidence on early childhood development and learning comes from developmental psychology research, rather than educational settings or work conducted by those who have themselves worked in the field as educators. Nevertheless, early childhood research is equally important whether research is psychologically or educationally orientated.

This thesis acknowledges the need for some research studies to be conducted by those who have worked in the field as educators and which concentrate on young children's perspectives (see introduction for further details on contribution of this study to knowledge). Chapter 3 discussed studies on play that have taken place within educational settings, the majority being studies of children's play from adult perspectives and focusing on observations of children's play and on interviewing *proxy* raters – such as parents, carers, older siblings and early educators. This study is located in the field of educational research studies and so conforms to the OECD definition of such research, which is:

‘...systematic, original investigation or inquiry and associated development activities concerning the social, cultural, economic and political contexts within which education systems operate and learning and personal development of children, youth and adults; the work of educators; the resources and organizational arrangements to support educational work; the policies and strategies to achieve educational objectives; and the social, cultural, political and economic outcomes of education’.

(OECD 1995, p.37)

## **i. Listening to young children's voices**

Involving children as participants and informants in various types of research has increased dramatically during the past decades. Such practice would have previously been unthinkable, due to the bulk of ethical implications (for example, is it ethical to seek young children's consent?) and methodological challenges (for instance, can young children be seen as active participants in the research?) that this type of research originates. The Society of Research in Child Development (2001) states that children as research subjects present ethical problems for the investigator different from those presented by adult subjects. Children are often viewed as more vulnerable to stress and having less knowledge and experience, are less able to evaluate what their participation in research might mean (*ibid*).

In relation to this, Morrow and Richards (1996) consider that 'the biggest ethical challenge for researchers working with children is the discrepancies in power and status between adults and children' (p.98), whilst Taylor (1998) argues in relation to the methodological challenges:

‘...the researcher who wishes to study children particularly during the early years, is faced with a wealth of potential, as well as a few methodological ‘headaches’! For example, traditional methods of collecting data may be inappropriate or even impossible because of the child's stage of development’ (p.265).

In the past, research processes and existing guidelines (British Educational Research Association, BERA, 1992) made no reference to directly obtaining children's consent but rather to seek for the consent of the school and/or parents for children up to school leaving age. This practice

possibly implies that children were mainly seen as unable to participate in a research project even when this was concerned with aspects of their feelings, practices, and views or even if they did participate that the parental consent was more important than the consent of the child. The British Psychological Society (BPS) (2000) stressed that was important that the participants should be protected from physical and mental harm and when testing children avoidance of the testing situation may be taken as failure to consent to the procedure and should be acknowledged.

Could this mean that young children were seen as immature and that lacked the cognitive skills that would enable them to understand the purposes of the research or even that young children were perceived as unable to express themselves in an adult ‘appropriate’ language? However, during recent years previous ethical guidelines have been revisited and amended to comply with practices that want children to be actively involved in research. Thus, the BERA (2004) revised ethical guidelines acknowledge previous misconceptions and clearly state that educational researchers have the responsibility to: the participants (inform and obtain informed consent, take special care in dealing with children, have honest and open relationships with participants, maintain the right to withdraw, be mindful of cultural, religious, gender and other significant differences in research population.

Psychological, educational and sociological research studies on young children have helped us become aware of the developmental and cognitive milestones of childhood in various contexts (for instance, Piaget, 1962; Hutt *et al.*, 1989 and Corsaro, 1993; Pollard and Filler, 1996). For instance, we are

now aware of the **different developmental stages of play** – practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules - according to the children's developmental age (Partner, 1932; Piaget, 1962) as discussed in chapter 1. Knowledge of the nature of childhood has increased immensely and not only adults but also the children themselves have benefited from the theories that have derived from that research. The findings of studies have helped us build on previous knowledge and move further improving the way the children are treated within the family and the society in general.

Studies involve children being observed while developing, playing and interacting with the people around them, and the records of these observations are being used to examine the behavioural patterns of the children along with the developmental characteristics of each age group. Data are also used to develop theories that aim to explain the patterns and to promote opportunities for children to reach their potential. In the same line, Evans and Fuller (1998) argue there is much information in the literature about young children's experiences of their nursery education (as perceived by adults) and few reports focus on children's own perceptions of their experiences.

### *Listening to or hearing children's voices?*

The Children Act of 1989 established the right of the child to be listened to and promoted the concept of social agencies working in partnership with parents (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000). A movement that promotes this necessity for children to be listened to has been developed (Weithorn and Scherer, 1994; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998), although Roberts (2000) believes that listening to children has a longer history than hearing and taking full account of what children are telling us as part of their interviews. She suggests that, although more listening does not automatically mean more hearing, listening is crucial because, it means that we recognize and respect their worth as human beings.

This stance has influenced awareness of the need to hear children's voices (Rinaldi, 1993; Filippini and Vecchi, 1996; Nutbrown, 1998; 2000; Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003; Mortimer, 2004). Listening to what children have to say, however, may not always be easy either due to their chronological age or different means of expression and various limitations and barriers. This is probably why Lansdown (1994) stressed that 'we do not have a culture of listening to children' (p. 38).

Hearing and listening to what the children tell the researcher are two separate and distinct activities. In my view, hearing is the process through which children's views are recorded through everyday practices within and out of school settings; such process is generally passive and automatic in some cases. Whereas listening, employs more active ways of actually taking into

account children's views, especially when it comes to informing current research and educational practices.

Distinguishing between the two stances that early childhood researchers take towards what children are saying may not prove to be too difficult for those who are experienced in the field, especially those who have prior experience in working with children in the early years. According to MacNaughton (2003; p.170):

A 'pedagogy of listening' requires educators to make themselves readily available to children and to document their understanding as a basis for further interaction with them. In this way the educator can be influenced by the child as they plan their curriculum'.

While reflecting on my own practices as an early educator I realized that, due to the workload and various other commitments in the workplace, I was more frequently occupied with hearing children than actually listening – paying serious attention and informing my practices and planning - to what they were saying in the classroom or at the playground, a practice that was bound to change during the course of this research.

#### *Voice in social and educational research*

Few young children participate in research, even though the main aim is often for the former to benefit from research. Studies on nursery play discussed in chapter 3 showed that the direct reference to young children was considerably less than the reference to the views of their significant adults. According to Lloyd – Smith and Tarr (2000) this is due to the fact that children are perceived as subjects:

‘in need of protection by adults. In this respect the child does hold rights in terms of provision of basic welfare and protection but these are decided by adults and enforced by adults ... children are perceived as dependent and incompetent, and therefore requiring protection from and within the adult world’ (p.65).

Thus, young children are usually being treated as objects rather than subjects or informants. Mayall (2000) and Alderson (1995) have stressed that research is more likely to be *on* children rather than *with* them, (this will be discussed in chapter 7). Roberts (2000) maintains that ‘there are some groups of children literally or metaphorically without a voice’ (p.236); such groups are children on the street, children in residential homes, disabled children. To this list I would like to add young children; as Alldred (1998) denotes:

‘children are another socially silenced group: their opinions are not heard in the public sphere and they wield little power as a social group. Adults are generally more powerful relative to, and specifically over, children’ (p.148).

But what is actually considered to be ‘voice’? The notion of voice is considered to be problematic (Ballard, 1999). Voice for Clough (2000) is ‘a medium of narrative expression and a function of power’. So, voice is considered to be the characteristic of both someone who is capable of expressing their views and also someone who is in a position to present their views even if they are a part of a larger group. In that sense ‘voice’ entails the notion of power and politics in education and in social science research (Shakespeare 1994), and it is mainly the researcher’s voice that is dominant in research accounts (Ballard, 1999). Thus, Clough (2002) suggests that ‘the task

for research is largely one of ‘turning up the volume’ on the depressed or inaudible voice’ (p.68).

In an attempt to present the participants’ voices rather than those of the researcher, Barton (2000) often referred to the insider perspective of the person. He argued that the insider perspective is not only about the ability to express and represent one’s position, but it is also about the content of the voices. In order for the researcher to present or re-present the voices of the participants, she or he needs to be aware of the experiences of the participants as well as their views of the world around them. It is the researchers’ responsibility to overcome these barriers and promote more effective research practices for such groups.

My understanding was that by recognizing the voices of young children we provide to them opportunities for empowerment. By engaging children in a research dialogue, adult researchers, educators and practitioners only begin to understand the way young children perceive and reason about their daily activities. The challenge rests with the researcher to provide this opportunity for empowerment and to give the participants a voice in the research that are not exploitative and that meet with their wishes (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994). This could be further elaborated by the fact that researchers have a research agenda of their own with certain questions in mind that need to be addressed and answered, does not qualify them to involve children in research processes without caring for the needs of the children themselves. This might consequently mean that deadlines might be missed, research questions might be rephrased and methodological approaches might be



adapted to meet these needs and create an environment where children would feel safe and most importantly would benefit from, as it was evidently the case of the study reported in this thesis.

Despite the view that some young children might have difficulty in expressing their views, such views should be included in the research rather than be excluded. Only if young children are included in early childhood research will researchers find better ways of communication and the former will enhance their way of learning, living, respecting and sharing their views. Engel (1994; p.8) identifies this flaw in the research arena when she states that:

‘research on children’s development has often directed our attention to what children do rather than what they say (researchers typically observe, record and code behaviours, their gestures, performance on various tasks, solutions of problems)...’

Good examples of practice when it comes to involving children in their education and decision-making in particular can also be found in the nurseries of Reggio Emilia, in Italy. The founder of the Reggio Emilia approach very eloquently informs us that children have ‘a hundred languages’ (Malaguzzi, 1996). According to the nursery practitioners of this Italian region, children, and in particular young children, should be enabled to express their views in any way possible whether this is practiced through the medium of talk or through children’s activities and overall behaviour. In this way it could replace the word ‘language’ with what Clough (2000) calls ‘voice’,

could it be that listening to children's voices is less complicated than it seems provided that the researchers have '*wide eyes and open minds*' (Nutbrown, 1996)?

If there is a need for justification in giving voice to children this justification can be made from an educational as well as a sociological point of view (Lloyd – Smith and Tarr, 2000). Davie and Galloway (1996) point out the practical benefits of giving children a say in their education. They believe that by doing so we could provide a desirable model of cooperative working and we will give a sense of ownership over what goes on in school, adding also that it is effective because children who have been involved in decision making will find it harder to complain later about what goes on in their schools. From a sociological point of view on the other hand:

‘the practical justification for giving children a voice in educational policy making, in monitoring and quality assurance as well as in research is epistemological. The reality experienced by children and young people in educational settings cannot be fully comprehended by inference and assumption. The meanings they attach to their experiences are not necessarily the meanings that their teachers or parents would ascribe; the subcultures that children inhabit in classrooms and schools are not always visible or accessible to adults’ (Lloyd – Smith and Tarr, 2000; p. 61).

Whilst similar practices might be equally important for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and disabled children, this research focuses on voice in young children with no identified learning difficulties. Given this young children are not necessarily in an inferior position in relation to the researcher or those around them. In my view, it is more likely that young children will have greater difficulty in communicating their views than older children or adults to the researchers, if we are to take into account the adult-child power relations and adult expectations of children's responses. This

does not imply that children cannot present or explain their views; as Donaldson (1978) has argued children can demonstrate sophisticated levels of comprehension provided that they have understood the context of complex questions set by adults.

Research with young children can pose a challenge for researchers to create new ways of communication and new research methods. However, it has been argued (Christensen and James, 2000; Aubrey *et al.* 2000) that it is not necessary to create new methods for research with children. What is required is respect for participants, research competence and help from other researchers if needed. Aubrey *et al.* (2000) believed that informed consent is essential and that children are included in decision-making. Awareness of relevant ethical guidelines and codes of practice is also essential (Lindsay, 2000).

### *Children's rights: the UN Convention and its implication for research*

This study recognizes that children need to be included in decision-making about their lives and issues that affect them; a principle stressed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). The UN Convention represents a turning point in the international movement on behalf of children's rights in providing a framework relating rights to children's needs for care, protection, adequate provision and participation in decisions that affect their lives and well being, (Lansdown 1994). The following UN Articles are particularly relevant to children's access to play and their experiences of

their local environment (Adams & Ingham, 1998; David, 1999; Petrie *et al.* 2000 and National Playing Fields Association, 2000):

**Article 3** stating that all actions taken concerning the child should take account of his or her interests:

‘1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

3. States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision’.

**Article 12** states that children have the right to express an opinion on all matters which concern them and their views should be taken into account in any matter or procedure that affects them:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

**Article 13** provides children with the right to obtain and make known information and to express his or her views unless this would violate the rights of others:

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

2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

(a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or

(b) For the protection of national security or of public order (order public), or of public health or morals.

**Article 15** sets out the right of children to meet with others and to join or set up associations, unless doing so violates the rights of others:

1. States Parties recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.

2. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (order public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

**Article 24** stresses that the child's right should be to the highest level of health possible:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.

and the last article referred at this point which however makes the most explicit reference to play and recreational activities:

**Article 31** sets out the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The implications of the UN Convention through the above Articles highlight children's rights in general and specifically in relation to play and form the justification for the methodological approaches of this study (which will be discussed in chapter 8). Children should be given the opportunity to express their views, as it was suggested earlier. After all, children could have additional information to that of *proxy* raters, such as their parents/carers, older siblings and early educators (Christensen and James, 2000; Greig and Taylor, 1999; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; MacNaughton *et al.*, 2001).

Similarly, James and Prout (1997) suggested that children ought to be deemed as being actively involved and constructing their own social lives, the lives around them and the societies in which they live and not simply research their lives in respect to their social construction by adults. Thus, children should definitely be invited and participate as active informants in the research. In this way it could be claimed that the accounts are actually a valid representation of young children's daily experiences.

In this section I have addressed the issues of listening to young children's voices, former practices when researching young children's lives as well their rights according to the UN Convention and how these rights should inform research when young children are involved. In the next section I will discuss examples of participatory research with young children and the ethics and methodological issues that underpin such research.

## **ii. Participatory research with young children: ethics and methods**

Having discussed issues of listening to children's voices and the role of voice within educational research, I will now concentrate on ethics and methods, in relation to the present research.

### *Ethics and ethical guidelines in research with young children*

In my view, many ethical implications and methodological challenges arise in relation to research with young children. Ethical guidelines for research with human participants are often inadequate when children are involved in the research process, especially when these are of young age. Interviews with significant adults in children's lives, such as parents/carers, early educators, older siblings or/and observations of children while playing or developing are common in early childhood research (see chapter 2). But the inclusion of children's voices in such research has become apparent only relatively recently.

As Sieber (1993) states, ethics in research relates to 'the application of a system of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to

promote good, to be respectful, and to be fair'. What might seem appropriate for the adult researcher might not be so for the participants and vice versa. Thus, every researcher has to spend considerable time throughout the research process considering the ethics and morals related to project.

Organizations like BERA (British Educational Research Association), BPS (British Psychological Society), and the EFPPA (European Federation of Professional Psychologists Association) have set clear ethical guidelines for researchers. The revised ethical guidelines of BERA (2004) suggest that the researcher should show 'responsibility' to the research profession and the participants. This guideline might seem vague – what does 'responsibility' mean and how can we make certain that researchers act in a responsible way towards research in general and the participants in particular? The BERA (2004) ethical guidelines also make a reference to the need for the 'informed consent' of the school and the parents when children and students up to school leaving age are being interviewed and the public. This means that seeking children's consent is not necessarily the main priority for the researcher, especially in the early years; greater importance is given to the consent of 'gatekeepers' like parents and the school itself. Finally, researchers need to make sure to preserve the informants' anonymity and confidentiality of the data by altering the names of people and places and by not revealing participants' responses to one another.

The BPS (2000) 'Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles and Guidelines' stresses the researchers' need for the consideration of the ethical implications and the psychological consequences for the participants in their research.



Thus, researchers need to be aware of the implications of their actions and their research to the participants. Arguably, all research projects have an effect of some kind on the participants and this factor should be taken seriously. It is more important that effects are positive rather than negative. The BPS Code of Conduct stresses that the participants should be protected from physical and mental harm and they should have the right to withdraw at any time, and when testing children, avoidance of the testing situation may be taken as evidence of failure to consent to the procedure and should be acknowledged.

With children or participants with impairments that will limit understanding and/or communication such that they are unable to give their real consent requires special safeguarding procedure and where possible their consent should be obtained along with the consent of their parents', teachers' or from those in *loco parentis*.

As it is the case with the BERA (1992/2004) guidelines, parental consent is primarily important for the researcher but this should be obtained alongside the consent of the children themselves, to ensure that all parties involved agree on involvement. Finally, like BERA, all information is confidential and if published, will not be identifiable to individuals.

Little reference is made to research with children in the most common codes of practice or ethical guidelines and as Roberts (2000) notes no formal ethical procedures exist for children and young people involved in social interventions or social research.

Alderson (1995) also suggested that the existing guidelines can help us answer some questions when researching young children and we need to search for and create the appropriate research tools, because in some research questions children's voices are far more important than the perceptions of the adults around them. Alderson (*ibid.*, p.35) recommends ten issues for consideration in carrying out social research for children are:

- a. purpose of the research;
- b. costs;
- c. hoped-for benefits for children;
- d. privacy of participants;
- e. confidentiality of information;
- f. selection of the participants, inclusion and exclusion;
- g. funding;
- h. information for the children, their parents and other carers;
- i. consent of the participants; and
- j. impact of the research to the children.

These issues were taken into consideration throughout the study reported here and will be further discussed in chapters 7 and 8. Some ethical issues that need to be addressed before conducting research with young children:

- a. power imbalance between the researcher and the participants;
- b. the extent to which the researcher should explain the nature and purpose of the research;
- c. the age at which children should be asked to give their own consent to participation, in addition to their parents and
- d. the extend of the researcher's responsibility to participants where projects involves sensitive personal disclosures.

(Aubrey *et al.* 2000, p.50)

In particular, in the U.K. the children's consent is not considered enough by researchers (Mayall, 2000). However, researchers are learning how to work with children on use of space, for example, research is taking place in

a familiar environment for children preserving the ‘ecological niche’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), and research proceeds according to the needs and pace of the children - in ways acceptable to the adults.

Consequently, the children are, most of the time, treated as the objects of the research and not the subjects, who are in a position to speak ‘in their own right’ and report valid views and experiences; such participation involves a changing emphasis in research methods and topics (Alderson 2000). Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, practice has shown that in the case of child abuse, children that have been interviewed, with the appropriate adjustment of the questions, are able to express themselves and to help the interviewer, even children as young as 3 years old.

#### *The role of the researcher*

The issue of power relationship is important – due to the children’s young age – issues of power must be taken into consideration while formulating ethical practices of any research. Power relationship usually underpins research, as the researcher is the one who controls and organizes the research and the participants are the ones that oblige the researcher in the process (Alldred, 1998; Ballard, 1999). Researchers have two roles – that of researcher, where they have the power to interpret and represent, and that of the adult, regarding their position in the society (Burman, 1992) - is considered to be influential on the outcomes of the research process itself. This is usually the case because our ‘knowledge’ of adult-child difference is so fundamental that it is difficult to imagine research in which participants are

both adults and children where between-groups comparison is being made (Alldred, 1998).

Corsaro (1981) also notes, when he considers his power as a researcher, that adults are much bigger and are perceived as being socially more powerful than children. Similarly, David (1992) and Evans and Fuller (1998), provide evidence that young children can prove quite powerful because they will move away, where possible, if they are bored or uninterested. After all, according to Begley (2000), it is how children feel about themselves that will directly affect their behaviour and happiness, not how others presume they should feel.

This might mean, as it was the case in my own study that there should be an overall plan but that this type of research should not be pressured in any way by deadlines that the researcher needs to meet. Instead, the research should follow the children's pace and their daily routine – because only then can the researcher hope that he / she will collect the information needed. However, such practice is difficult to achieve especially under the pressure of meeting deadlines and collection of data.

Corsaro and Molinari (2000) suggest that in order to establish membership status and an insider's perspective when involved in research with young children, researchers need to depend on:

‘dealing with and developing trust of a range of adult gatekeepers; acquiring working knowledge of social structure, nature of interpersonal relations, and daily routines in the setting and gaining the acceptance of the teachers and children’ (p.182).

So, ‘entering young children’s world’ or ‘getting on the inside’ can be a very difficult and complicated procedure, if indeed it is possible at all. Researchers have to be constantly aware of young children’s needs, abilities and feelings. The adoption of practices that are in accordance with children’s beliefs, concepts and routines is essential (Christensen and James, 2000; Greig and Taylor, 1999). Methods of research with young children will be discussed later in this chapter.

*Methods in research with children that apply to the nature of this study*

The vast majority of the studies presented in the literature, are concentrate on observing and intervening with children within familiar and non-familiar settings, but few studies address any research questions directly to the children. Sayeed and Guerin (2000) note that ‘research is largely based on observations of players (children) and non-players (adults) as the players are not generally expected to be able to describe what they are/were doing while they are/were engaging in play’ (p.2).

Research involving children is unlikely and arguably should not take place unless the parents’ / carers’ and educators’ (those two groups are known as gatekeepers) consent is being secured. In some cases children, especially pre-school children do not even know that they are part / focus of the study, let alone being asked for their consent.

### Qualitative studies in educational research

Qualitative studies involve an interpretive research paradigm; such paradigm will be adapted for the purposes of this thesis and will be further discussed in the final section of this chapter. Qualitative researchers working within this paradigm attach importance to symbolic interaction. Research findings represent the researchers' interpretation of the events that have been observed and the research also represent the researchers' negotiations with the participants' experiences (through words, symbols, and actions) in the field (Goodman 1998). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005):

‘the word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quality, amount, intensity or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry’ (p.10).

Case studies of a single child, school or setting, ethnographies of institutions, action research practiced by the teachers themselves, aim to examine in-depth educational practices and experiences which will inform educationalists, policy makers, and also to those directly affected by any educational reform such as the children and their parents. But as Sylva (1999) proposes:

‘some research is not fit for certain purposes ... few studies are robust enough if they stand alone, for drawing sound conclusions on which to base policy. Research must be cumulative, each researcher stands on the shoulders of those who laboured earlier using the same or neighbouring traditions’ (p.176 - 177).

So, each research project is unique in a way but still depends on the practices of previous projects and how the latter have informed the particular field of research. Also when it comes to qualitative inquiry, the role of the researcher is equally important and so are the views that the researcher brings to the study itself (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Charmaz, 2005). In the quest of finding the most appropriate ways for researching the topic of this thesis, I, as the researcher, had gone through the painstaking task of reviewing and critiquing the relevant literature on methods and methodology, which follows.

#### Finding new ways of collecting data from young children: evidence from research

New ways of collecting data are being developed so that the views of young children themselves can be uncovered. Mortimer (2004) suggests that young children can be consulted and included when planning for their education and needs with approaches that include observation, interpretation, talk-through approaches, play-based assessment and intervention, use of artwork, role play and stories, welcome profiles and personal records.

Video and audio techniques have been used to enable children to express their views (Paley, 1989; Sawyer, 1997; MacNaughton, 1999; Clark and Moss, 2001; Fasoli, 2003). Children's play and daily activities have been video and tape-recorded (Paley, 1989; Reynolds and Jones, 1997; Sawyer, 1997) and in some cases the incidents are played back to the children for their comments (MacNaughton, 1999 – personal communication). In some studies children are being given 'ownership' of the project by taking their own

photographs with disposable cameras (Clark and Moss, 2001; Fasoli, 2003). Studies which value children's viewpoints as central (Corsaro, 1993; James, 2001; Nutbrown, 1999) provide evidence that it is important and possible to include young children's voices in research related to children's development, well-being and learning.

According to Hughes (2002) there are some techniques that illuminate children's perspectives. These include the following techniques that will be later analysed as they formed the basis for the research tools of this study:

- narrative observations;
- journal writing;
- video/audio-taping;
- learning stories;
- narrative observations;
- collecting artefacts.

### Narrative Observations

The most common method that early childhood researchers use is **observation** of the children in their homes, nurseries, schools, and playgrounds. There are many types of observations (Schensul *et al.* 1999) that allow the researchers to participate (*participant observation*-complete participation) or just to stand uninvolved (*non-participant observation*-passive participation). Other types of observation suggest that researchers either keep some short distance from the children, i.e. in forms of *moderate participation* (observing and participating but not in all the activities) or to be involved in



*active participation* (where the researchers do what the others are doing but try to blend in completely). The observer-effect (the presence of an unfamiliar adult in their classroom) is problematic (Taylor 1998). However, young children have the ability to adjust very easily to a new situation when they believe that they have control of the situation, i.e. the presence of a stranger in *their* classroom with *their* teacher present. In the majority of the cases the observations take place so that the researcher can draw information for a specific checklist of for example, behaviour, development, or play pattern and other.

The role of ‘peripheral participant’ (Corsaro 1993) allows the researcher to be involved in most of the children’s activities most of the times, but with no involvement in settling disputes, intervening and altering the course of their play. Such a role can be extremely useful; although the children will develop their own views of who that person is and why he/she is there.

A wide range of observation techniques observation have been developed in research projects with young children, such as: visual stimuli (pictures), memory aids, simple modification format of the questions, pretest techniques (where the child is asked to think aloud), coding of verbal behaviours, video analysis of the interview interactions, computer assisted personal interviewing methods, Scott (2000).

## Interviews

An increasingly popular technique used in children's research is the **interview**; according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p.643) 'interview is a conversation – the art of asking questions and listening'. A familiar adult, i.e. their teacher, or a skilled adult who is used to working with children, is usually the one who interviews the children. Adults, however skilful they are, need time not only to familiarize themselves with the children but also to become aware of their capability so that they can use that as a way to inform the interview techniques. Because, as Fontana and Frey (2005) denote:

'interviewers are increasingly seen as active participants in an interaction with respondents, and interviews are seen as negotiated accomplishments of both interviewers and respondents that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place' (p.716).

Moore and Sixsmith (2000) identify several forms of interviews, where the primary purpose is to gain insight into the children's perspectives; playing with children, using prompts to establish joint referencing and shared meaning, gleaning information through laughing and chatting, alongside more formal interview techniques are some of the forms that are mentioned.

Due to the fact that children find it difficult sometimes (especially in the younger ages) to make a distinction between what is said and what is meant and therefore almost any question of hypothetical nature becomes problematic, (Robson, 1993).

### Other forms of data collection

Hill (1997) highlights additional methods of data collection such as group discussions, standard scales, vignettes<sup>2</sup>, written reports, role-play, invitations to draw and the use of technical aids<sup>3</sup>. Although sometimes, some children regard video as a novelty to see themselves on the television, nevertheless, if the appropriate amount of time is given its use is extremely attractive for the children and rewarding for the researcher.

To conclude, doing research with children is one only way of establishing a good communication with the children and their world. Although, young children can express their views and have a say in every situation that directly or indirectly involves them.

### Methodological guidelines of present study

Given this conviction, and having reviewed the relevant literature I have developed the following guidelines for my study:

- Children are vulnerable and therefore the researcher has a responsibility to adopt a sensitive, flexible and well-organized research project.
- The consent of the parents / carers must always be obtained and the consent of the children should be of importance.
- Children are free to withdraw from the project at any time and they must be allowed to express their feelings without fear.

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<sup>2</sup> **Vignettes** are short scenarios in written or pictorial forms, intended to elicit responses to typical situations (Hill, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> **Videos, camcorders and audio-tapes** also give scope for young people to provide their own accounts uninhibited by the direct presence of the adults- role play can be recorded on video to widen its impact (Freeman *et al.* 1996).

- Children are not obliged to participate and since researchers are intruding on their space, they must make their presence as harmless and a pleasant expense for the children.
- Research with children should take place in a familiar environment to minimize any discomfort.
- When the research question deals with a topic involving the children's view, it is their views that have to be searched for.
- Children involved in the research must feel that they want to participate throughout the research and must feel that they have control of the research (Christensen, 2000), by making the research child-friendly and by giving children the opportunity to have their own say in the research.
- The researcher needs to taken into account the need to follow the children's pace in their research.

### **iii. Ethnography in early childhood educational research**

‘by entering into firsthand interaction with people in their everyday lives, ethnographers can reach a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations and behaviours of their subjects than they can by using any other method’ (Tedlock 2000).

In this section of chapter 4, it is acknowledged that there are other studies, mainly sociological, that have studied children and childhood through an ethnographic perspective; however, a full reference on these studies lies outside the scope of this research.

The methodology of any research study is a personal decision deriving mainly from how a researcher views the world. It is also a matter of suitability, as researchers might realize that a particular methodology might prove more informative than another for the specific topic under investigation – sometimes it is a combination of both, as Sylva (1999) suggested earlier. Research paradigms vary according to how researchers perceive their ‘theatre’ of research. Similarly, according to Clough and Nutbrown (2002; p.38) ‘a broader view of methodology as the very seat of justification of any claims which might follow’.

### *Why ethnography?*

First, it is important to justify the ethnographic route chosen for this study. After having reviewed the literature on ethnography and its characteristics I became increasingly aware that an ethnography would be the best way of providing answers to my research questions bearing in mind the participants of my study, the context and my own position in the field. The following statements by Brown and Dowling (1998) and Tedlock (2000) also came to support my decision:

‘For the educational researcher the adoption of an ethnographic approach makes the exploration of the processes of teaching and learning in the classroom, the ‘lore’ of the playground, power relations amongst school staff, the relationship between the home culture and of the school and so on’ (Brown and Dowling 1998; p.43).

Statements like the one given above, as well as my own position could also be supported by newly presented arguments that through ethnographic

research our understandings of early childhood settings have been enhanced not only for researchers but for practitioners too (Buchbinder, *et al.* 2006).

But how could we define ethnography? Ethnography can be defined as:

‘... the kind of research, which takes seriously the perspectives and the interactions of the members of the social groups being studied and it is based on the premise that social reality cannot be understood except through the rules, which structure the relations between members of the group and which make it possible for each to interpret the actions, gestures and words of the others’ (Pring 2000, p.104).

Ethnography has an established place in the social sciences and humanities, (Alldred 1998) and because ‘children are another socially silent group: their opinions are not heard in the public sphere and they wield little power as a social group’ (*ibid.*), such approach seemed to me as the most appropriate for the purposes of this study.

Having in mind the above and also the characteristics of ethnography provided by Pole and Morrison (2003) my research fell under the umbrella of ethnographic research in general:

- A focus on a discrete location, event(s) or setting.
  - A concern with the full range of social behaviour within the location, event or setting.
  - The use of a range of different research methods, which combine qualitative and quantitative approaches but where the emphasis is upon understanding social behaviour from inside the discrete location, event or setting.
  - An emphasis on data and analysis which moves from detailed description to the identification of concepts and theories which are grounded in the data collected within the location, event or setting.
  - An emphasis on rigorous or thorough research, where the complexities of the discrete event, location or setting are of greater importance than overarching trends or generalizations.
- (p.3)

Thus, it became obvious that for the purposes of this study and the nature of my research questions, following an ethnographic encounter would provide me as much information as possible, by also allowing both young children and their significant adults to contribute to the research as much as possible.

### *Interpretivism and ethnography*

Erickson (1986) prefers the term interpretive research when he makes a reference to qualitative research; his argument is based, firstly on the fact that interpretive research is a broader term than qualitative research as it involves approaches based on participant observation (such as qualitative, phenomenological, ethnographic, case studies and constructivist). Secondly, he argues that interpretive research does not exclude quantitative research and lastly, he suggests that interpretive research places an emphasis on interpretation by focusing on the actions of the participants and the meaning that lies behind these actions as well as how the researcher interprets these meanings.

According to Erickson (1986; p. 129) one of the main aims of interpretive research is to ‘discover the specific ways in which local and non-local forms of social organization and culture relate to the activities of specific persons in making choices and conducting social action together’.

The ethnographic method is mainly based on observation and note taking. Geertz (1973; p.105) referred to this practice as *thick description*. It is common the researcher to be overwhelmed by note-taking as it might be

possible for approximately half hour of observation, to write notes for about two hours. The content of these notes is rich, detailed descriptions of everything that happened in the field without the researcher trying to summarizing, generalizing, or hypothesizing. By capturing the actual everyday events the notes would permit the researcher to make multiple interpretations, and to also deduce cultural meaning. Content and thematic analysis would deal with the actual analysis of the recorded events at a latter stage, but not necessary when the researcher leave the field, as in cases like this study, the researcher attempted to analyse the events while still in the field.

Corsaro (1997) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in nursery settings in Italy and the United States to study children's socialization, through a process of 'interpretive reproduction'. As he explains, children:

'do not simply imitate or internalize the world around them. They strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and to participate in it. In attempting to make sense of the adult world, children come to *collectively produce* their own peer worlds and cultures' (*ibid.* p. 24 – original emphasis).

Thus in a similar attempt the present study, through the use of ethnography is aimed not only to discover what children think of their nursery play activities but mainly how they experience these activities on a daily basis.

For ethnography:

'first ... assumes that an understanding of how children learn, not simply what they learn is central to the comprehension of processes of cultural learning. A second, and closely linked assumption is that it is not sufficient simply to observe adults' behaviour towards children; it is important also to see children as social actors in their own right, to observe and understand what it is that children do with one another as well as with their



adult care-takers and, most importantly, to canvass children's own views and opinions directly'

(James, 2001; p. 250)

The reflexive nature of ethnography is a characteristic, which implies that the researcher is part of the world that is under study and is consequently affected by it (Boyle, 1994). Boyle (*ibid.*) continues by stating that the emic perspective is at the heart of ethnography, while the etic perspective is the researcher's abstractions or scientific explanations of reality. Thus, through ethnographic research, 'cultures' are being studied in a macro or micro level, and the researcher is not only trying to create a meaning from the observed behaviours of the participants and the discussions or interviews he/she is having with them, but he/she is also trying to explain data in a scientific and rigorous way. For the purposes of this thesis, the 'culture' that is being studied is the nursery setting and in particular the children that attend this setting, their parents and early childhood educators and practitioners and how they experience play within this setting.

Ethnographic studies of children in preschool settings are common, when the need to explore the lives of young children in their daily encounters is recognised. Previously, in chapter 3, some studies that relate to the topic of the study being reported in this thesis were presented. Having reviewed the literature and having in mind the research questions and aims of this study I decided to develop the practices of previous studies especially those of Paley (1988; 1990) Corsaro (1993) - in an attempt to address the core research questions and aims of this study (these will be discussed in chapters 7 and 8).

However, there are other seminal ethnographic studies with the aim to explore issues of power, and cultural diversity that have created a sound foundation for more recent studies to take place. To name but a few, a brief account now follows.

In 1985 Sally Lubeck studied two separate preschool classrooms from two distinct American societal groups – a black African-American Head Start classroom and a ‘mainstream’ white American middle-class setting. The study was based on first-hand observations over a period of time (the researcher was present in each preschool on alternative days for two-and-a-half months). This resulted in 480 typed pages of fieldnotes, schedules, maps and flow charts (*ibid.*, p. 55). According to Lubeck (1985) the study has:

‘had two major dimensions: first to compare the child rearing strategies of women in two early education settings and to demonstrate how they differ and, secondly, to explain how these differences arise within different social contexts. In both cases, the teachers live in families very like those of the children they teach, and, in both cases, they structure an environment that is consonant with their experiences outside of school’ (p. 133-134).

Similarly, Swadener (1988) through her ethnographic case study of peer interactions and implicit and explicit curriculum in two inclusive, culturally diverse childcare programs, called for an education that is multicultural in early childhood settings. Swadener (*ibid.*) concluded that ‘interactions with racially and culturally diverse peers and teachers remain one of the best early childhood strategies for creating education that is multicultural’ (p. 26).

More recently, Cummins (1996) conducted a research study with linguistically and culturally diverse learners, which has helped us to gain insights about young children's educational needs. The issue of power is also highlighted by Cummins's study, where distinction is being made between collaborative and coercive power; the latter is imposed to the detriment of a subordinate group while the former is generated in interpersonal and inter-group relations.

Studies like these mentioned above do not only present valid evidence that ethnographic studies of early childhood settings can be proven beneficial in unwinding complex and delicate issues, but also constitute such methodology as being invaluable and of outmost significance.

#### **Summary of chapter 4**

This chapter has explored issues on 'voice' in research with young children; children's rights; ethics and methods; the role of the early childhood researcher and the place of ethnography in researching children's play. Ethnographic studies on early childhood education settings have also been presented by giving emphasis on the importance of such studies in understanding the complex nature of young children's daily encounters and the influences upon these encounters that derive either from the family or from the greater sociocultural environment. Studies that relate to this study (Corsaro, 1992; Paley, 1988) have also been presented alongside other studies that have been carried out by using ethnographic methods to study more

complex and varied issues like power and equality (Cummins, 1995; Swadener, 1989; Lubeck, 1985).

By drawing on examples of previous well-established research studies in the field, this chapter argues that early childhood researchers need to provide young children with the opportunity of expressing their views, respect their willingness or not to participate and be engaged with the fieldwork before, during and after the research project has come to an end. The next chapter outlines the context of the study (chapter 5) and discusses methodological issues that have taken place of the pilot (chapter 6) and later the main study (chapter 7).

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### The context of the study

‘This is a large, inner city nursery school with 120 children aged between three and five attending for full or half day sessions. The school is surrounded by very varied housing, which includes high-rise flats, private housing and rented accommodation.’

(OfSTED inspection report of the nursery, 2000; p.6).

Each educational setting is unique, in location, organization, members of staff, the registered children and their families. Thus, it is important to include this chapter, which presents information about the participants and the setting and sets the context of the national policies and practices that influenced the study. It should be highlighted at this point that every effort has been made to ensure that neither the setting nor the participants could be identified by the use of pseudonyms and by omitting any information that is directly linked with them.

This chapter is in four parts:

- i. Early Childhood Education and Care in England and Wales;
- ii. The nursery setting – organization of the setting (rooms and planning);
- iii. The children – the ‘main’ players;
- iv. The significant adults – nursery staff and parents.

## **i. Early Childhood Education and Care in England and Wales**

‘Children’s experiences in their earliest years of their life are critical to their subsequent development. They have a significant impact on their future performance at school and the extent to which they are able to take advantage of opportunities later in life. That is why we have invested heavily in early years education and why our programmes from birth onwards support children and their parents and continue to support them right through to the start of formal education and beyond’.

(Green Paper proposal for the Early Years, DfES 2001; p.18)

An understanding of national policies in relation to pre-school education in England and Wales is essential to this study because this was the broad context in which the study took place. This reference will start with a historical overview of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England and Wales, and an outline of the ECEC forms of services up to 2002 (the time which the study was carried out) will follow. It should be noted that policies in England and Wales have developed since 2002 and the Assembly of Wales has changed.

I will focus on what is relevant to this study, for example, state sector nursery provision and alternative pre-school experiences for children under the age of 5, as children in England and Wales (at the time of the study) enter formal schooling before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. However, initiatives such as Sure Start (Barnes *et al.*, 2004) – a government initiative – which promoted the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of young children through a range of education, parent support and health services so that they are ready to succeed when they start school; the Children’s Centres – the government’s plans to re-brand Early Excellence Centres, Neighbourhood Nurseries (Green Paper

proposal for the Early Years, 2001); and the PEEP project – an Oxfordshire study which was set up to improve life chances of children in disadvantaged areas and aimed to help improve children’s educational attainment, especially in literacy, by supporting parents and carers in their role as first educators; the PEEP project revealed that participating children made significant improvements in the areas of language, literacy, numeracy and self-esteem (Evangelou and Sylva, 2003). Other initiatives are also available for preschool children in the England but are beyond the scope of this research for an extensive reference to be given.

#### *Historical overview of ECEC policies, provision and the role of play*

“The Institution has been devised to afford the means of receiving your children at an early age, as soon almost as they can walk. By this means many of you, mothers of families, will be able to earn a better maintenance or support for your children; you will have less care and anxiety about them; while the children will be prevented from acquiring any bad habits, and gradually prepared to learn the best”.

(Owen, 1927; p.98)

Although, the first ever UK Government grant made for free education provision was by the republican puritans who set up 60 primary schools in Wales ‘for better propagation and preaching of the Gospel’ in 1649, it was not until ‘The Institution for Formation of Character’ was established in 1816 by Robert Owen that the origins of state-funded childcare and early childhood education systems can be traced. Owen identified the need for family support along with the necessity for children’s quality care and education.

The first free kindergarten in England was established in 1873 by a local authority in Salford, influenced by Froebel's ideas and was offering nursery education, baths, meals, rest, play and parental training. Other educational authorities followed in industrial cities like Birmingham in 1904 (Bertram and Pascal 2000, p.8). It was not until the First World War (1914-18) that a separate provision of care, health and education in preschool services that still affects the integration of today's UK services took place (Cohen, 1987). At that time 100 day care centres were developed across the country forming a system discreet from formal schooling. In the years between the World Wars the McMillan sisters in Yorkshire and Deptford and the psychologist Susan Isaacs and her husband in Cambridgeshire defended the concept of nursery education as separate and distinct from schooling. By the end of the Second World War there were 62,000 nursery places in England and Wales; a number that would increase in the following forty years (*ibid.*).

In later years, as in the 1960's, only a third of the number of nurseries existing at the end of the War still remained open. This was mainly because the purpose of nursery education had somewhat shifted towards other 'needs' of the population. The Plowden Report on primary and nursery education (DES, 1964), stated that nursery provision should not be made available to women who simply wanted to go out to work but should be reserved for those who were most in need of interventionist support and the children of teachers as there was a crisis in teacher recruitment at that time. Part time provision, either morning



or afternoon, became the predominant form of state preschool settings and increased the debate about whether provision should meet the child's needs or those of the child's parents and carers and their employers, where these needs were seen to be in conflict (Bertram and Pascal, 2000; p. 10).

In the following years successive UK Governments were increasingly becoming aware of ECEC issues but it was only in the 1988 that a memorandum submitted by the Department of Health and Social Security to the House of Commons Education, Science and Arts Committee highlighted and prioritized the parental responsibility for arrangements that had to do with their children's day care (*ibid.*).

For many years early years practitioners in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland had their own approaches to curricula and sometimes Local Education Authorities presented their own curriculum guidance, since there was no shared curriculum framework for the under 5s. As a result, different settings provided different and diverse approaches of learning and teaching children of this young age. Sir Christopher Ball (1994/2003) identified diversity as the 'hallmark of pre-school provision for the under 5s in the UK'. This diversity did not only have to do with the preschool provision but also with the qualifications held by those working in this provision. During the 1990's all four countries of the United Kingdom introduced published curriculum frameworks or guidance documents for children aged 3 to 5 (Miller *et al.* 2003). Finally, in September 2000 the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) was

introduced with the aim to provide a national framework for teaching and learning in the early years.

The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage promoted key principles and aims through examples from real life settings. These principles emphasize the need for ‘all children to feel included, secure and valued and to be successful and develop a positive disposition to learning by building on what they already know’ through ‘well-planned and organized learning environment within which children can explore, experiment, plan and make decisions for themselves’ (Miller *et al.* 2003, p.109). It is thus obvious that ‘these principles require practitioners ‘who understand well planned play, who do not make a distinction between ‘play and ‘work’ and who observe and respond appropriately to children, engaging with them in their learning and building positive relationships with children and parents’ (*ibid.*).

Before the introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage research revealed (DES, 1989) that in many early childhood settings the quality of play was undermined and the need for evaluation and improvement of the quality of play provision was stressed by the Rumbold Committee of Inquiry (DES, 1989; paragraph 91) when they argued ‘we believe that it is vital for all adults with responsibility for young children to recognize that for them play is a great deal more than recreation’. Thus, as discussed in chapter 3, although the place of play was somewhat marginalized during the 1990s (Nutbrown, 1998), it is increasingly becoming central to early childhood practices.

For the purposes of this study, a state nursery in the North of England was selected, for its established good practice in ‘learning through play’. Thus, a review of the existing forms of ECEC in England and Wales is necessary to give appropriate contextual background. Though parallel development in voluntary, community and independent sectors (and in Northern Ireland and Scotland) are important, they live outside the scope of this study.

### *Existing Forms of ECEC provision in England and Wales*

Throughout this study ECEC in England and Wales refers (unless otherwise stated) to provision for children from birth to five years – when they begin compulsory schooling. Young children in England and Wales experience various forms of services, before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, when it is time for them to enter formal schooling. For the majority of the children, according to the OECD review (Bertram and Pascal 2000), attend a publicly funded primary school (approximately 90%), and only 6% of young children attend independent, fee-paying schools. The primary school system offers provision for children between the ages of 4+ to 11, which is full time during the academic year. In England and Wales, at the time of the study, children’s admission to primary schools varies between local authorities and schools; children born between March and August must start school in the year which they become five, while children born between September and February start school at age 4+ but can defer entry into primary school by one year (*ibid*; p.22).

Pre-school or pre-primary provision takes place for children from birth to 4+ years. There used to be historically a split, until recently, between education and care in the England and Wales based on their differences in nature and take up. Thus these services were usually divided as follows: a) services for the birth to 3 year olds and b) services for the 3 – 5 year olds. As Bertram and Pascal (2000) note:

‘defining the terminology attached to the various forms of early education and care provision in the UK is very difficult; one term may embrace a variety of different types of provision, one provider may embrace a range of types of provision and all providers are currently going through an evolution of services they provide’ (p.24).

For the 3 to 4:6 year olds, who are the focus of this study, the currently available early education provision includes: Nursery classes, Early Years Units, Reception Classes or Classes R, Special Schools, Opportunity Groups, Preschools/Playgroups, Private Nursery Schools and Pre-preparatory Schools, Independent Schools and Private Day Nurseries (Ball, 1994/2003; RSA, 1994; Bertram and Pascal 2000). Broadly speaking as Bertram and Pascal (2000) denote:

‘from birth to 3 years, the private sector and child minders predominate; at 3 years the preschool/playgroup is the most common provider; older 3s tend to be in state nursery schools or classes; 4 year olds tend to be in state primary and infant school Reception classes with a smaller number in nursery classes; and most 5 year olds will be in state primary or infant school year 1 classes’ (p.24).

The following table (Table 5.1, page 128) gives a detailed breakdown of the nature of the existing forms of ECEC provision in England and Wales.

**Table 5.1: Existing Forms of ECEC provision in England and Wales at the time of the study**

<b>Provider</b>	Local Education Authority	Local Authority Social Services	Voluntary Sector	Private Sector	Joint LEA/ Social Services Department
<b>Types of Setting</b>	Nursery School Nursery Class in Primary School Early Years Units in Primary School (not Scotland) Reception Class in First, Infant, Primary School (not Scotland) Special School Opportunity Groups Before/After School Club Holiday Club	State Day Nursery	Voluntary Preschools or Playgroups Parent & Toddlers Friends, neighbours, relatives Community Nursery	<b>Center Based:</b> Private Day Nursery Nursery School Pre-Preparatory School Preschool or Playgroup Workplace Nursery Independent Schools <b>Family Based:</b> Childminder Au Pair / Nanny	Combined Centre Family Centre Early Excellence Centre

(Source Bertram and Pascal 2000; p. 25)

Although until recently pre-compulsory education for the 3 – 5 year olds has been provided at the discretion of the Local Educational Authorities (LEA), resulting in an uneven provision across the UK, since September 1998, all Early Years Development and Care Partnerships (EYDCP) through their local plans, have been required to provide universal early education provision for all 4 year olds, and have also been given targets to ensure increasing part time, early education provision for all 3 year olds whose parents want it (Bertram and Pascal 2000; p.29).

## **ii. The nursery school setting for the study**

**Nursery Schools and Nursery classes** run by Local Education Authorities provide free education for children between ages of two-and-a-half and five. They are staffed by specially trained teachers and nursery nurses. (Trained) adult:child ratios stand at about 1:13. Availability of places varies significantly by locality, ranging from 0% to 80%+ of three- and four-year-olds. About four-fifths of enrolled children attend part-time, usually for five half-days a week. Nursery education provides for about a quarter of three- and four-year old children (about 4% in nursery schools and some 21% in nursery classes)

(Ball, 1994/2003; p. 7).

This ethnographic study took place in an inner-city nursery school in the North of England during the summer term of school year 2000-2001 (pilot) until the middle of summer term of school year 2001-2002 (main study).

The nursery is described in an inspection report (Ofsted, 2000). Although it is acknowledged that the population of the children was somewhat different by the time of the research.

On entering the gate of the nursery school one is amazed by the spacious outdoor area, where the children spend most of their time, provided that the weather is good. As many of the nursery teachers and nursery nurses believe this garden is a real advantage for the children. This view was also shared by the parents of the children; the grounds of the nursery were seen as extremely important and a distinctive characteristic of the setting. The main building of the nursery school is well-preserved with many rooms that are appropriately equipped for the children's daily play activities. The nursery school is one of the first nurseries in the region. In 1999 the nursery school achieved an award for teaching excellence.

When I spent time at the nursery school I felt there was a spirit of continuity. The majority of staff had been at this nursery for a long time – some as much as 20 years – and some of the children who were attending the nursery had older siblings who had been there before moving to primary schools. So, some families experienced nursery education in this setting for quite a long time building long-term relationships with the head of the nursery and the members of staff.

According to the inspection report (2000):

‘the school has a very strong partnership with parents. They are kept well informed and involved and are encouraged to take an active part in their children's education...the school works very closely with parents and as a result enjoys full confidence of the majority...many parents actively involve themselves in the work of the school. Several help each day and they are well briefed by staff. They clearly enjoy helping and feel valued. Parents of children from ethnic minorities come into school to talk about

their cultures and festivals. Staff initiate fund-raising and then parents willingly take on its organization and support events to raise additional revenue to buy extra resources and subsidize educational visits' (OfSTED, 2000; p.16-17).

### *Organisation of the nursery: the classrooms*

Three different classrooms worked as autonomous units. The adult – child ratio was 1:10 - 15 in the morning sessions and the numbers dropped considerably to around 1:6 in the afternoon. The morning session started at 09:00 am and ended at 11:30 am, the afternoon session started at 12:45 pm and ended at 15:15 pm. There was also the provision of breakfast clubs, every morning from 08:00 am to 09:00 am and lunch clubs, every afternoon from 11:45 am to 12:45 pm. There was a library operating for the children where they could borrow books to share with their families at home whenever they wanted. Parents were welcome to help with any work available at the nursery from cutting paper and wrapping presents at Christmas time to gardening, making story sacks and baking cookies with the children.

The daily programme was broadly similar for every room: the children played freely from the time they arrived with their parents until 10:00 am, when they either had a story or song. After 'story time' the children were given some apple and could then decide whether they wanted to go outside and play or whether they wanted to stay in the room. There was always one member of staff in each room to supervise the children who had chosen to stay inside. At around 11 o'clock children came into their rooms to have another 'group time', where



they either sang or were told a story until they were collected by their parents/carers at 11:30 am. A similar routine followed in the afternoon sessions.

The arrangement of the rooms is shown in figures 5.1a (page 133) and 5.1b (page 134). Downstairs there were two rooms that the children could move freely around: the big main room was in the front of the house (figure 5.1a) with most of the play equipment and nursery staff allocated in there. Children would arrive at the start of a session and find their nametags to put in a specific place and start by following their chosen activity for the first part of the session. At 'story time' all the children would gather there for register but only the younger children would stay in the front room for story. The rest of the children -the older group (4 – 4:6 years old) – would move to the back room to have their story. The back room (figure 5.1b) was smaller with fewer play opportunities and with only one member of staff at a time. Children were used to moving between rooms and find whatever interested them there. Children were aware of what was expected from them: to get involved in play activities and to spend their time productively. They were also given the freedom of choice to move around and between the two rooms.

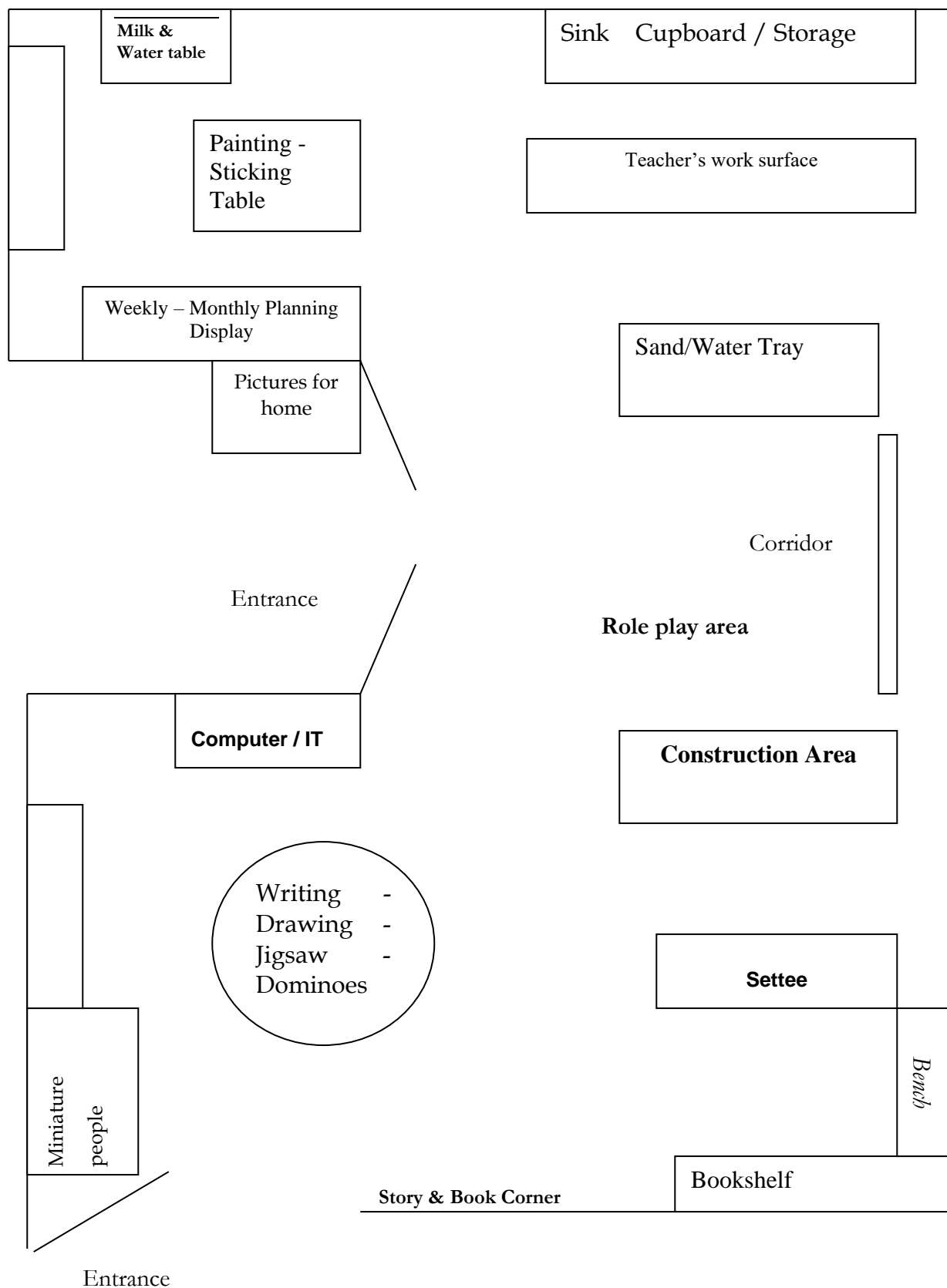


Figure 5.1a: Downstairs layout (front room)

They had additionally learned what was the most appropriate thing to do and that it was not acceptable to spend time doing nothing, especially in the corridor. The appropriateness of children's behaviour is also reflected at the nursery school's inspection report, which suggests that this might be the result of an effective behaviour policy operating in the school. The report states that:

'the school's behaviour policy is effective in promoting the high standards of behaviour. It includes rewards and sanctions that are entirely appropriate for young children. There are clear expectations of how children will behave and children rise to them well. There are very good strategies to modify inappropriate behaviour when it does occur. A very few children who exhibit difficult behavioural problems are exceptionally well managed within their groups without detracting from provision for all the other children'

(OfSTED, 2000; p.16).

Generally speaking, the way all the bases were organized and operating was both unusual and interesting. In addition, the same room (5.1b) was used for acting out stories, having birthday and other parties and other similar occasions. Most of the books and stories were kept in this room along with play equipment, a room that was generally considered to be quieter, as fewer children used it. The back room (5.1b) was a favourite place for children who wanted to play in the home corner or others who wanted to be engaged in small imaginative play, (animals of the woods of jungle, bears, and small people, houses and furniture). Sometimes, writing activities were provided, which resulted in more girls going to the back room. On occasions children were invited to bake and make food either with one of their teachers or with mothers who would be invited to spend some time with the children. If only a few children were left in the front room that meant that something really interesting was going on at the back room!

Corridor (way to base 1)

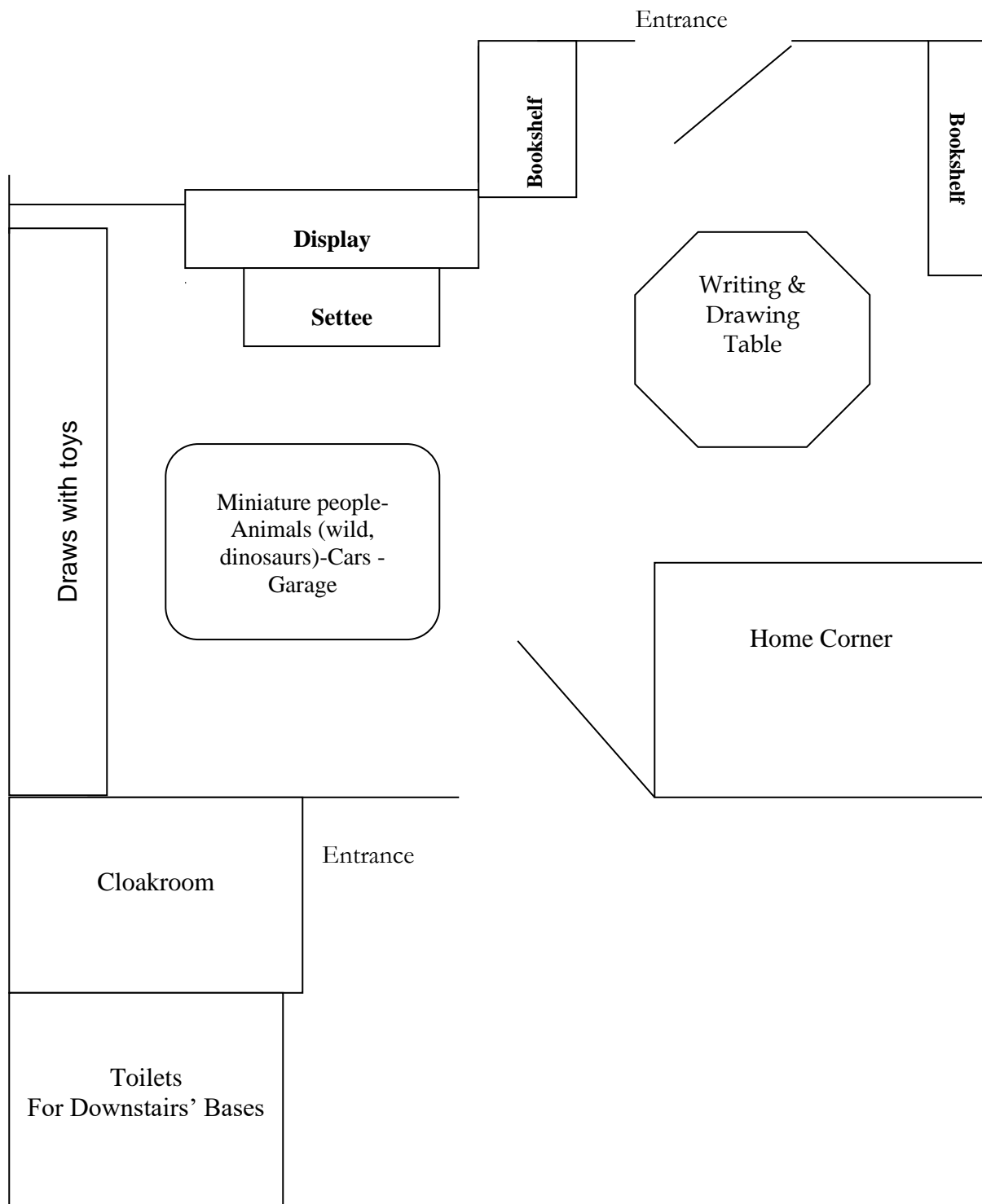
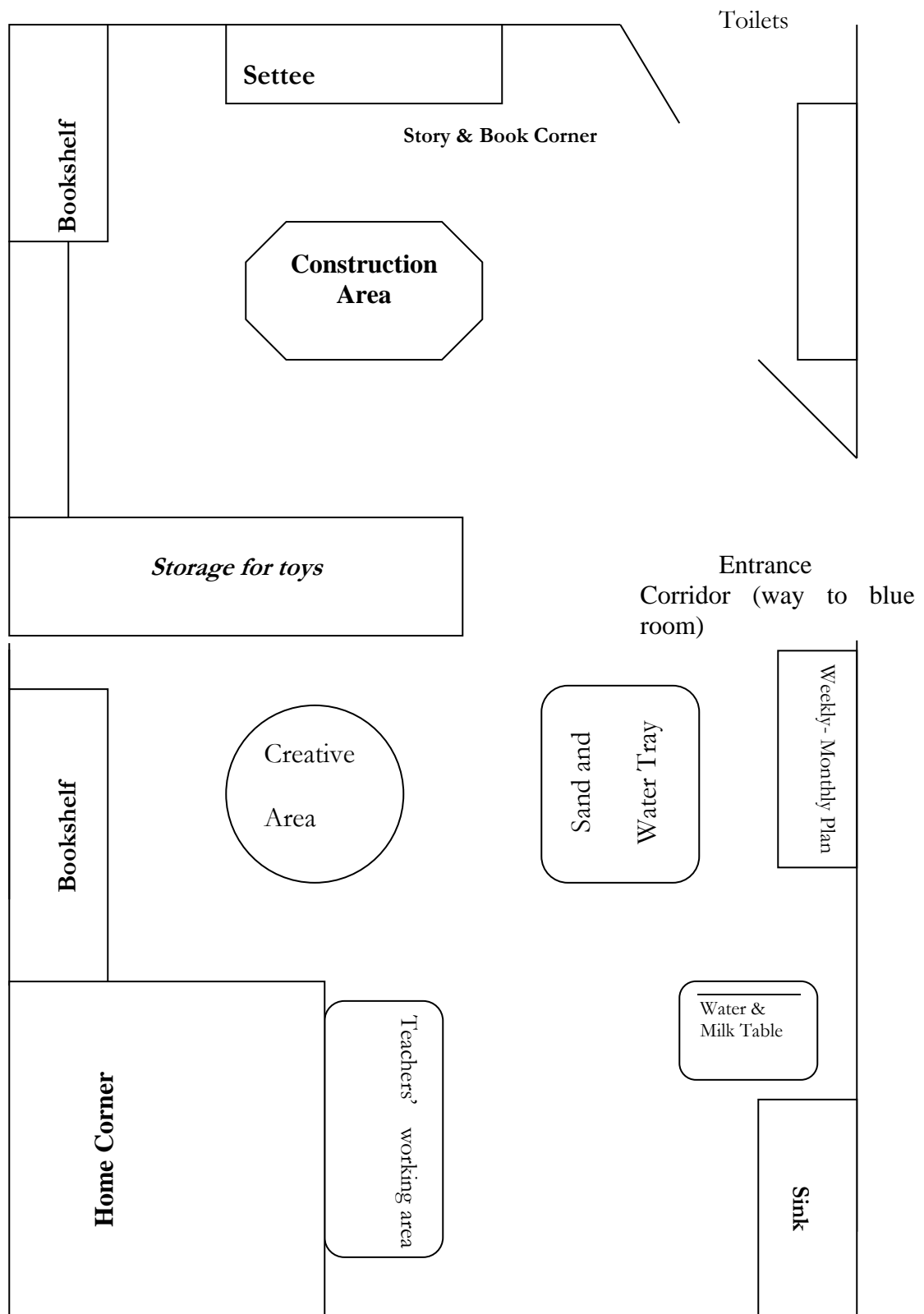


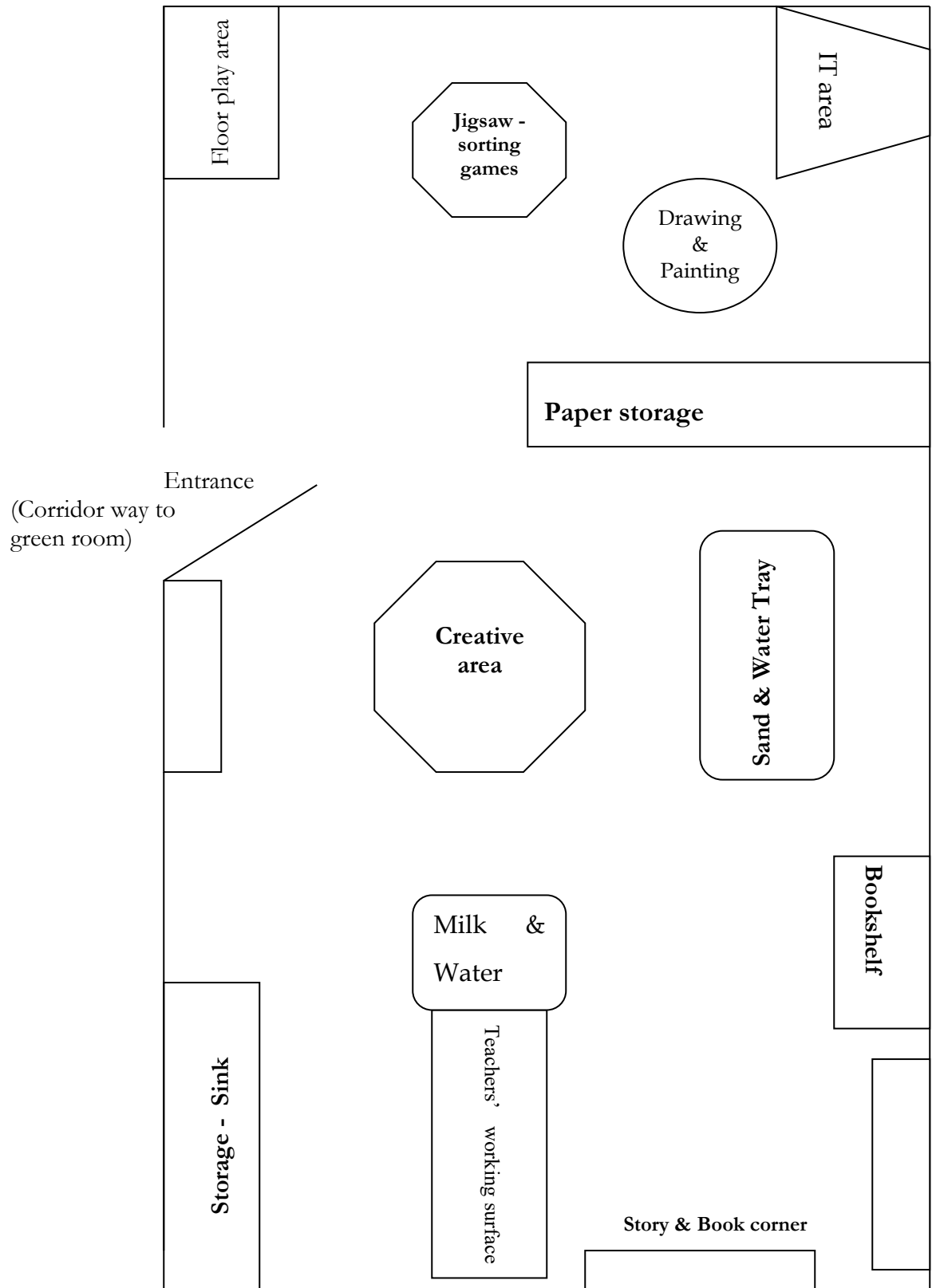
Figure 5.1b: Downstairs layout (back room)

The upstairs' rooms were similarly organized (figure 5.2; p.137 and figure 5.3; p.138). The pilot focused on one room where the children could play and a spare room, where they occasionally had a story or song, but during the main study focused on two rooms with two separate groups and members of staff that worked between these rooms. Children were allocated to a particular room, mainly for registration and 'story time', usually based on age.

Each room had a name: the 'green' room was the room for the older children (figure 5.2) and the 'blue' room was the room for the younger children (figure 5.3). Both rooms were named according to the colour of the carpets, displays, wallpapers and kitchen units. In the green room, green was the dominant colour and blue was the dominant colour of the blue room. Again, at the beginning of the day, the children would go to one of the rooms to find their nametags, according to which story group they were in. After that, they were free to move in and out of the rooms. The two rooms were not completely independent, children would freely choose where to play; the weekly and monthly planning was prepared for both rooms; and there would be occasions when all the children would gather in either of the rooms-such as birthdays, singing and leaving parties.



**Figure 5.2: Green Room layout (Upstairs)**



**Figure 5.3: Blue Room layout (Upstairs)**

As shown in figures 5.2 and 5.3 above, the two rooms complemented each other. Few activities were repeated in both rooms; the home corner was located in the green room and the computer area was situated in the blue room, but even this changed from time to time to provide variety to the children and also encourage them to move about. After a period of time, it became clear that each child followed a pattern of behaviour based on his or her interests. Thus, there were children who spent most of their time using the computer or children who spent most of their time in the home corner. Some children would spend most of their day at the nursery drawing and painting pictures. However, the teachers' monitoring sheets indicated when a child needed encouragement to get engaged with a different activity and the teachers would ensure that the child would be supported to explore a different area of either room.

#### *Organization of the nursery: the daily and monthly planning*

Although, there was clear planning of provision in both rooms for each week (short-term) and month (long-term, see figure 5.4, p.140), everything seemed very relaxed, making the children's daily experiences look natural and some times causal. This could be mainly attributed to the experienced staff and the co-operation between members of staff, children and their families. However, there were instances that the children would be asked to do an activity because there was a sense that the child had not been involved in this activity for a long period of time there were concerns for his/her progress.



Figure 5.4: Nursery long term planning, June/July 2001.

### Knowledge and Understanding of the World

**Science:** Floating & Sinking (Natural Science- pond life)

Dissolving Water for cooking sea life

Freezing Water for cleaning

Absorption Water for growing

Reflection

Canal

Water Wheels Pipes, tubes and funnels

Oasis

Siphoning Bubbles and Whisks

Movement of water – ripples, waves etc.

### **Design and Technology**

Making boats & Lighthouses

Bridges Pipes and joints

Pipes and joints Dams & waterfalls

Canal system Water construction

### **Information and Communication Technology**

poems

Use of P.C. Flags

Ship to shore radio (Walkie Talkies)

equipment,

### **Humanities**

Weather Travel by sea

Climates – hot / cold / wet / dry

Stories,

Maps – Atlas – Globe

Pirates

plumber,

### **Personal and Social**

canal

(Developing Values) Noah's Ark story

Conservation, Pollution

Water for hygiene

Water for ceremonies

### **Visits / Visitors**

Baby in bath

Local Park, Botanical Gardens

### **Maths** Measuring & painting

Volume & capacity

Patterns – waves, spirals

Estimation Displacement

Comparison – graded containers

Counting – sorting shells, transport shapes

Magnetic fishing game



### Aesthetic and Creative Development

**Art** Bubble Pictures Pastels

Blow Painting Clay & water

Painting on wet paper

Paint mixing obs. Drawings

Brushes Splatter paintings

Sponge Painting

**Music** Bottles & water

Debassy – 'La Mer' 'En Bateau'

Handel – Water Music

Yellow Submarine 5 Little ducks

A sailor went to sea 5 little speckled frogs

I hear thunder Who built the Ark boat

Row, row, row your boat, My ship sails

### **Drama / Dance**

Sea Shanties, Sailors Hornpipe

Movements to music

### Language and Literacy

#### **Role play / imaginative**

Laundry, window cleaners, seaside play

Pirates. Lighthouse Keeper, Fire Brigade

Fishermen, Bathroom, Hairdressers

#### **Imaginative**

Doll Bathing, Ferry, Harbour,

Icebergs, Pirate Island, Sea life,

Pond Life, Playmobile Fire Engine

#### **Language**

**Vocabulary** Geographical - stream, river,

sea, ocean, storm, rain, shower

Scientific – splash, drip, wave,

ripple, flow, float, sink absorb, freeze, melt

**Listening / speaking** Role play situations, plop splash

onomatopoeia words story tapes & books,

**Writing** Postcards, tickets, letters, tracing

booking holidays, reference books,

writing patterns, writing

making books, 'My holiday'

**Books** Lucy & Tom at seaside,

Noah's Ark, Lighthouse Keeper

Landscapes / Seascapes

Rain Puddle, Mrs Plag the

An evening at Alfies, Cow who fell in the

Alfie's Feet, Mr. Gumpy's Outing,

#### **Physical Development**

**Gross Motor** Boats - rowing

Ladders – climbing & balancing

Summer sports – tennis, cricket

**Fine Motor** Jigsaws, Tracing, Scissors, crayons, pens, pencils

Jugs & bottles – pouring & filling, Cornflour & water

The bimonthly long-term plan (figure 5.4) is an example from one of the classrooms during the pilot study. The main theme of the plan is the ‘Water’, so, activities were organized in a way that linked with the 6 areas of learning: 1) personal, social and emotional development; 2) communication, language and literacy; 3) mathematical development, 4) knowledge and understanding of the world; 5) physical development and 6) creative development (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA, 2000, p.26). Each week a short-term plan was devised based on the prearranged activities for both indoors and outdoors.

In addition, the nursery had its own curriculum document, developed by the Head of the nursery with the contribution of the nursery staff. This document mainly informed teachers’ planning and teaching strategies and used alongside the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000).

The school’s inspection report highlighted the children’s ‘follow-up’ making the teachers practices clearer:

‘...for example, if a number of children do not take up a certain activity, the staff examine critically why this might be. The results of assessment are noted each term on individual children’s record sheets and these form a useful record of achievement, which is passed on to the schools to which children transfer’ (Ofsted 2000, p.16).

Finally, as far as the nursery’s ethos is concerned there is a strong emphasis on multi-cultural education. During this yearlong study I had the chance to become involved in various multi-cultural events, festivals, and other celebrations that the children simply loved. This is evident also in the school’s inspection report:

‘...the cultures and festivals of children from ethnic minorities are celebrated and children have participated in celebrations of the Chinese New Year and Eid. They experience music and dance from other countries...children are taken out on educational visits to extend their awareness of local culture. Visiting performers, particularly for the nursery’s children festival, delight children and develop their awareness of the performing arts’ (OfSTED, 2000; p.15).

This nursery was selected for the study being reported in this thesis is because it had a reputation for its established good practice in teaching through play. Thus there was every reason to expect that data gathered would be interesting and sufficient to answer my research questions.

### **iii. The children: the main players**

‘Children come from varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Although a large proportion of them have parents in professional occupations a significant number come from homes where there is some economic deprivation...although some of the children live locally many travel from surrounding suburbs...most of the children are of white origin and about 20 per cent are from several other ethnic backgrounds...children are admitted to the nursery and transfer to school twice yearly.’

(Ofsted 2000, p.6)

Children were between the ages of 3 and 4:6 years old. They could enrol at the nursery immediately after their 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday and usually left for school before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, usually September and January. Most children attended on a daily basis, though a small number attended two or three times per week. Children attended either morning or the afternoon sessions, according to their parents’ needs.

At the time this study was conducted there were approximately 100 children registered at the nursery school from various socio-economic and

cultural backgrounds. Ten per cent of the children spoke English as their second language, one child was being assessed for behavioural difficulties and one child had been identified as having learning difficulties along the Autistic spectrum.

#### **iv. The significant adults: parents and nursery staff**

Although more information about the participants will be presented in chapters 7 and 11 at this point an overview of the adult participants is important. As is mainly the case in early childhood education, most of the adult informants of this study were female. Penn (2000) reports that 99% of those working in early childhood services in the UK are women.

##### *The parents*

During the course of this study I regarded parental information on children's play as extremely important as they knew their children better than anybody else. Parents were treated as the mediators with regard this play information. Mostly mothers agreed to be interviewed, however, two fathers were also interviewed after becoming interested in the study. In total, 24 parents (22 mothers and 2 fathers) talked to me about their children's play experiences and their views on play; 3 parents during the pilot and 21 during the main part of the study. The majority of the parents represented middle class British families; one family had recently come to England from abroad, two mothers were of Asian origin brought up in the U.K, another mother was from Europe mainland. Semi-structured interviews with the parents took place within the nursery setting and during the nursery school's normal

working hours although the participants were given the opportunity to choose a place more convenient for them. All parents were invited to follow up the interview by reading the interview transcript and making comments on their responses but none of them chose to do so. On the other hand all parents showed interest on the report of the findings of the pilot and main study. Approximately 50 parents did not respond to my initial invitation and to the follow-up invitation; however, there were no negative responses to this invitation.

#### *Nursery Staff: teachers and nursery nurses*

There were 6 full-time and 5 part-time nursery nurses and teachers working at the nursery, all, apart from one, were women of British origin and she was of mixed African Caribbean origin. Most of the staff had several years of experience in work with young children, and had been working at this nursery for many years in their roles. Thus, the inspection report of the nursery in 2000 stated in accordance that:

‘the quality of teaching in all areas of learning is very good. Of the lessons observed, 40 per cent were good, 49 per cent were very good, nine per cent were excellent and two per cent were satisfactory. Of particular note are the teachers’ knowledge and understanding of how to meet the needs of young children. The staff is very creative, offering an excellent range of practical activities, which provide high quality learning in all areas of the curriculum. The contribution of the nursery nurses is very good and significantly complements the teaching’ (OfSTED, 2000; p.8).

There were regular staff meetings, where all members of staff and the Head of the Nursery were present. There were also weekly planning meetings

for every base to discuss the topic and the activities that would be provided the following week. At these meetings the teachers also discussed incidents that might have occurred during the children's play. All interviews took place during normal school times or during a staff's break. Interviews took place in the parents' room and staff were also invited to read the transcripts of the interviews and comment on them, but none of them followed this issue, as did the parents.

### *The researcher*

My role during this study will be discussed in chapter 7, however, I should highlight that, as is the case in every ethnographic study, my presence in the field and my appearance as well as my nationality and age was likely to have influenced how I was perceived by the participants, children and adults. My previous experience in working with young children in different contexts and countries enabled me to reflect on the practices of the adult participants of this study. The fact that I was a foreigner with English as my second language proved a challenge both to me and the adult participants; despite the fact that there was no barrier in our communication as I was fluent in English, there were times that I was unaware of customs and practices and needed further explanation for the purposes and reasons behind certain activities.

Parents also seemed to be willing to explain different aspects of their daily lives with me and some times they invited me to share my experiences and my views of being a foreigner in their country and in the setting. The children most of the time, due to the strangeness of my accent, spoke to me in a slower and clearer tone as if they wanted to make sure that I understood

what they were saying, I think they saw my nationality as ‘exotic’, which perhaps made me intriguing.

The children in great detail explained play practices to me not only during the group interviews but also throughout the course of the fieldwork. Children occasionally asked me where Greece was or what language Greek children speak or they would share their experiences of Greece while on holidays. Similarly, my appearance and age also enabled children to approach me in a different manner than they would their teachers and other nursery staff as I had the impression that I was regarded as more relaxed and for some children I was seen more as a ‘playmate’ rather than a teacher or a parent.

## **Summary of chapter 5**

In this chapter I have outlined the context of the study reported here. This included both the UK Policy and practice on Early Childhood Education and Care and information about the setting in which this study took place and the participants who informed this research including my role in the research process. I have detailed the organization of the nursery as well as the cultural, social and age consistency of the research participants. Chapter 6 will present more detailed information of the methodological and ethical issues encountered during the pilot study as well as the initial steps of analysis.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **The pilot study: entering the nursery**

**T**his chapter addresses the main methodological and ethical approaches and experiences during the pilot period, discusses the research questions and design of the pilot study and considers the limitations, outcomes and implications.

Chapter 4 discussed the methodological and ethical issues related to participatory research with young children and the role of the early childhood education researcher. It showed that although in the past young children were seen as the ‘objects’ rather than the ‘subjects’ and ‘participants’ of the research studies, efforts are now being made in some early childhood research to involve young children as participants and informants by engaging them in methods that are appropriate to their age and stage of development. I believe that such approaches could benefit both research and practice given that research methods and methodology take into consideration the needs and individuality of this age group, so that the voices of the youngest members of our society are being heard.

This chapter consists of the following:

- i. Rationale and research questions of the pilot study;
- ii. Methodological and ethical approaches and experiences of the pilot study;
- iii. Research design of the pilot study;
- iv. Thematic categories, preliminary data analysis, outcomes and limitations of the pilot study;



- v. Emerging issues and implications of the pilot study.

### **i. Rationale and research questions of the pilot study**

Chapter 1 stated that the aim of this study to 'give voice' to young children and their significant adults (parents and nursery staff) in relation to their nursery play experiences. Chapter 4 discussed the ethnographic nature of the study. I shall now discuss the aims, research questions and rationale for the study.

#### *Aims of the pilot study*

My four aims for the pilot study were to:

- a) '*Give voice*' to the young children in relation to their nursery play experiences;

I considered important to seek children's views and opinions regarding nursery play. I wanted to know: How do children experience their everyday nursery play experiences? How do they see play and what meaning do they give to their play actions? It was clear to me that children had their own views and feelings about nursery play and these could only become known if children were to contribute to the data generation and collection.

- b) *Understand why* young children were *doing* what they were doing during their nursery play?

To understand what the young children's actions and intentions mean is not an easy task. Time is needed to make sense of young children's behaviours by also allowing their interpretation within the specific context. Pring (2000) refers to the subjective meaning of those who are researched; the different

understandings and interpretations that the participants bring with them to the situation.

c) *Make* young children's *implicit* nursery play behaviours *explicit*;

I asked several questions, such as: Why do young children mostly engage in play activities during the early years? What is it about play that enables them to learn in every area of learning (i.e. language, personal, social and emotional development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development, creative development)? For some adults 'play is the children's work', (Isaacs, 1932), for others 'play' and 'work' are differentiated (Cortazzi, 1993). What did those adults and young children participating in the study think of play within the nursery setting?

d) *Understand myself* as a researcher and an early years' educator.

The research field was familiar to me in the sense that I was an early educator myself with experience in preschool settings. I therefore had certain assumptions regarding the children's overall development and learning through play. As a consequence I had to make the familiar environment strange (Shklovsky, 1917; 1965), as it is usually the case with most ethnographic studies. Shklovsky (*ibid*) stated that over time our perceptions of familiar, everyday situations become stale, blunted and 'automatized'. He explained that 'after we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it' (p.13). So, what I took for granted – that play is the main

activity of preschool children, that young children learn through play and that girls and boys engage in similar play activities within the nursery - now needed to be questioned in new terms and I also had to be both reflective and reflexive by allowing the participants to express their views and to be as open as possible to new ideas and challenges. All of the above points that were also the aims of this research study are considered to be the characteristics of ethnography by various researchers such as Aubrey *et al.* (2000).

In order to inform my aims, I entered the pilot phase with the following three core research questions in mind:

1. How do young children experience their nursery play? What are their reasons for choosing certain play activities?
2. How do parents perceive nursery play? Are their views similar or different to the views of the children?
3. How do early educators perceive nursery play? Do their views correspond to the views of the children and the parents?

The aim of the pilot, that took place during the summer term of 2000-2001, was mostly to 'test', assess and evaluate the most appropriate methods for this study and also to examine whether these three core questions could be answered. The pilot study research questions below, together with the three core questions formed a development and basis for other research questions to develop that will be presented in chapter 7.

Thus, during the pilot study period I concentrated on the following research questions:

- a. What forms of data could capture young children's play experiences?
- b. What is the best way to gather data about children's everyday nursery play activities without disrupting their usual environment?
- c. How could the children's group discussions and the adult interviews be structured to elicit the data needed?
- d. How could I include the children's perspectives on play?

I will next discuss the methodological and ethical approaches and experiences of the pilot study followed by discussion of the methods used and the outcomes of the pilot.

## **ii. Ethical considerations and the participants of the pilot study**

At the start of the pilot study I did not anticipate any difficulty in approaching and researching children, their parents and early educators; it seemed an easy task as I had experience working in preschool settings. However, working with young children is different from carrying out research with them. Thus, it was essential for me to formulate the ethical and methodological issues of the study drawing on the relevant literature discussed in Chapter 4.

### *Ethics and the role of the researcher prior to entering the field*

To begin with, I wanted the study to be research *with* children. The difference between doing research *with* children than research *on* children is stated by Mayall (2000) who argues that research is most probably to be *on* children meaning that the aim is to study the children's development and they are to be observed, measured and judged, rather than *with* children, where the researcher tries to enter children's worlds of understanding (Aubrey, 2000; Christensen and James, 2001 and Lewis and Lindsay, 2000), also support this view.

Though my intentions were to conduct a research study with young children that would be interesting and of some meaning and usefulness to them, their parents and the nursery staff, I was aware that I had to make this clear to the participants of my study, whom I had never met. Before I entered the nursery a proposal (see Appendix 1) was sent to the Head teacher of the Nursery School, which briefly highlighted the key points and stated the aims of my research study, the groups of people I would like to include, the methods that were going to be applied along with my commitments for the process itself.

In addition, I needed to consider how I was to introduce my self to the participants. My role was multidimensional, since I:

- was a foreigner, with English as my second language,
- had professional experience in preschool settings, both in my home country (Greece) and the place where I was about to conduct research (England),
- I was a research student, who was conducting a study for a PhD, and

- I was a visitor in the nursery school.

I wanted to reassure the adult participants that my experience in working with young children and my previous qualifications in this area, would help me to make my research project interesting and of value to them and the children. I wanted them to know that apart from aiming to successfully complete the research for my PhD thesis, I was there to learn from them and to share my knowledge as appropriate. I also stressed the participants' responses would be treated with strict confidence and anonymity and pseudonyms of the nursery and the participants of the study would be used.

Additionally, I wanted to present myself to the children such that they would not consider me to be another teacher in their class who was asking questions, which might have right or wrong answers. It was important for my study that I provided the participants, and mainly the young children, with the opportunity to find ways of expressing themselves and to participate in an experience that would interest them. I was not planning to be the children's playmate, as far as the purposes of this research were concerned, but I wanted to make the children feel comfortable in my company.

No specific agreement was made about how I would select a group of children when I negotiated access to the setting; such a decision was not yet formulated. Nevertheless, I hoped for a sample of children, both boys and girls, 3 to 4:6 years old who would be present throughout a full academic year 2001-2002 (the original planned period for my study).

### Ethical experiences and approaches of the pilot study

Parents and nursery staff were included in the study providing their own views, opinions and experiences of playing with children together with the young children's views and experiences of nursery play. My intentions for the research was to take a cooperative form, with the children sharing their opinions and the parents and nursery staff perhaps collaborating these opinions and providing more information if it was appropriate. I was aware however that the views of all three groups might be different.

According to the ethical guidelines (such as BERA, 1992/2004 and BPS, 2001), when children are involved in the research the consent of their parents or significant adults in their life is essential to be obtained. Significant adults tend to know what is best for children and which activity would stress them or is going to be of interest to them. Young children and children with difficulties are considered by many researchers unable to provide a consent of their own as they are viewed as lacking the cognitive skills to understand the purpose of the research either due to immaturity or due to a delay and are often excluded from research studies as main informants (Moore, 2000). However, the children that participated in the pilot did not have any learning difficulties to the best of my knowledge.

My experience of working with preschool children led me to believe that even the younger children, such as 3-year-olds, were able to say what they like doing and what they do not like doing when it came to general experiences or in

this case their nursery play experiences. Thus, it seemed fair to me to ask for their consent as well, before including them in the study. I could never really know whether a child would want to participate unless, I had asked her/ him. So, in this study I asked for the consent of parents and early educators and children.

To obtain children's consent I approached the children and explained to them simply the purpose of my presence at their nursery and what I wanted to do. Weithorn and Scherer (1994) suggested that involving children in decision-making processes about whether to take part in a research study can be viewed as a useful experience for the children as they would be given a sense of control over their own individuality, autonomy and privacy. This is the case in my study because the children were aware of my presence and my purpose and at the time some went on to introduce me to their parents, carers or other friends.

#### The participants of the pilot study

Chapter 5 explained that the number of children who took part in the study varied from time to time according to the circumstances.

When it comes to sample selection in ethnographic research it is not always possible for the researcher to achieve the 'ideal' number of participants. This number is usually pre-determined by factors like the positive responses from the participants to start with. Even when I tried to 'select' some children and their families in advance, there were instances where parents that did not return the letter of consent or some children that did not want to talk to me or even children who were initially included in the sample but at the time of the



discussions were absent. Another issue that arose during the sample selection process was that certain families were 'hard to reach'; these were mainly families of origin other than British. Although letters of consent were sent out to these families, these were never returned and as a result young children from different ethnic and racial origin – such as Somali, Asian, Indian and Bengali - did not participate apart from 2 girls, one of Indian and one of Asian origin.

Thirty-two children (18 girls and 14 boys), 2 nursery staff and 4 mothers took part in the pilot during the 3 months' period. Children's nursery play experiences were recorded by audio and video equipment and by field notes and I also took photographs. Approximately 2 hours of videotape was edited to 1.25 hours (once film irrelevant to the study was removed). In total, 5 discussion groups of 6 children in each group took place based on the video clips with 25 minutes approximate duration of each group discussion. In one group discussion the children's nursery teacher was present, a fact that might have affected the children's responses. Finally, one group discussion took place with 2 children present and lasted around 15 minutes.

The difference in duration of the video clips was mainly due to the activities that the children were involved with, the number of the children in the group and the age of the children. Group discussions lasted no more than 25 minutes and were mainly open ended, whilst the interviews with the parents and the nursery staff were semi-structured and between 30 to 50 minutes in duration. Participation in the group discussions was voluntarily and children were told that

they were free to leave at anytime they felt like they did not want to be part of the discussion. Group discussions were audio-recorded once all children had consented.

Although during the pilot study the time and place for the interviews in the nursery seemed appropriate and convenient for the nursery staff and the parents, I sensed that the participants did not have their full attention on the questions I asked because they were distracted by various incidents taking place around them. This was more evident in the cases of staff interviews that took place within the same room that the children were having a story read by the other member of staff.

As none of the nursery staff or the parents suggested an alternative meeting outside the nursery at another time of the day the interviews continued as such and so I must acknowledge the limitations of some responses. When the research methods of the main study were designed; I tried to choose a place of interview with care. Interviews were tape-recorded with parent or staff's consent; in two cases the participants did not want their interview to be recorded, so their responses were hand written.

### **iii. Methods, Methodology of the pilot study**

This section will describe the reasons behind the particular research methods used for the purposes of this research study as well as the methodological stance that was adopted by me as the researcher. In defining the difference between methods and methodology, Clough and Nutbrown (2002; p. 22) suggest that ‘at its simplest, this distinction can be seen in terms of methods as being some of the ingredients of research, whilst methodology provides the reasons for using a particular research recipe’.

#### *Methodology: research paradigm*

When formulating the research questions and deciding on the methods of my study I was planning a study that would be unobtrusive and within the children’s natural environment. Bronfenbrenner (1989) introduced the term of ‘ecological niche’ and the ecological approach that rests on the assumption that when the young child is removed from his/her natural setting valuable information relating to the determinants of his/her behaviour will be lost. Aubrey *et al.* (2000; p. 83) also agrees that

‘... children’s behaviour is most usefully examined in the context of the physical and social environment, which includes physical characteristics of the setting as well as reciprocal relationships between young children and significant adults in their environment’.

The interpretive paradigm mainly underpinned my study; interpretivists, as discussed in Chapter 4, place the emphasis on symbolic interaction and the researcher's work is to represent his/her interpretations of the observed and lived research experiences. As the main participants of this study were young children and the nature of this study was ethnographic, it was perceived that this paradigm would suit and inform the purpose of this research.

#### *Pilot research methods*

The methods that were explored during the pilot study were:

- a. *observations* – mainly in the classrooms throughout the whole pilot period,
- b. *video, audio recordings and children's photographs* of the children's nursery play activities - for use as a stimulus during the interviews with the children for 2 consecutive weeks,
- c. *group discussions* with the children,
- d. *semi-structured interviews* with their parents and the nursery nurses and teachers during the last 3 weeks of the pilot, and
- e. *collection of nursery documents*, including short- and long- term planning and the nursery's curriculum.

#### *a. Observing young children's play in the nursery*

I thought that direct and prolonged *observations* of the participants during their play would enable me to interpret their reasons for engaging in the play activity, the ways that they used nursery play for learning in various levels

(cognitive, social and so forth), and the ways that their nursery play behaviours were influenced by the early years curriculum.

During the course of the research I realised that I had become a 'peripheral participant' (Corsaro, 1993). Corsaro had stressed that his activity was peripheral in that he refrained from:

(a) initiating or terminating an episode, (b) repairing disrupted activity, (c) settling disputes, or (d) coordinating or directing activity (*ibid.*, p.66).

By settling into this role, I was involved in most of the children's activities, but not involved in resolving disputes, intervening and altering the course of their play. This role was initially clarified with the nursery staff who were in agreement with this; they also viewed that potential interference in resolving disputes could have an effect on children's attitude towards me. I found this role extremely effective; although the children perceived me as an adult or a teacher, they had a different relationship with me than they had with their nursery nurses and teachers.

Children's play conversations were recorded in the exemplary work of Paley (1988, 1990) and on some occasions a tape-recorder was used similarly to the study by Sawyer (1997), which was also focused on preschool children's play dialogues. Effective use of the dictaphone was restricted by the background noise making dialogue inaudible. Receiving microphones attached to the children and digital recording equipment would have provided better sound recording but that would have required a more intrusive use of technology.

*b. Video, audio and still photography of recording nursery play*

The data collected from my observations was enriched with the video recorded play incidents of the children and children's photographs while playing for 2 consecutive weeks.

Audiovisual techniques are nowadays widely employed in ethnographic studies (Pink, 2001) and given the children's young age I considered this to be essential. Aubrey *et al.* (2000) suggest that while the use of audiotapes for recording people is becoming established practice, the use of video-recordings, which can provide a much richer account of human behaviour, is less widely used in ethnography. They continue that on a practical note, video recording is not easy to conceal and hence can render the ethnographer obtrusive in the task of data gathering and on a practical level, video-recordings cannot offer the participants the limited confidentiality of audiotapes. So they suggest that a researcher should answer the following question: Which recorder to use and how to overcome the difficulties inherent in collecting high-quality recordings in noisy public places like classrooms and playgrounds? (*ibid.*).

Having the above in mind, I decided to try out which was the most appropriate and less obtrusive way to use the video camera and the tape recorder. Unlike other studies that used video as the main focus of the researcher to transcribe and use the information for further analysis (for example, Reynold and Jones, 1997), in the case of this research study the video footage was used mainly

as a stimulus for the children's group open-ended discussions during the last 3 weeks of the pilot study.

Similar practice is rarely recorded in the play research related literature. MacNaughton (1999) similarly used video footage to trigger open-ended discussions with 4-6 year old children regarding their play incidents in an action research project; she explored issues on gender and power by talking to children on the basis of the video recorded information. However, no written account of the methodological aspects of this work had been published (MacNaughton: personal communication).

Another study that used video to record children's play but was not shown back to the children for comments is this of Reynolds and Jones (1997). They commented that because they did not introduce themselves or the equipment to the children:

'The children's responses to the video camera were so varied! I remembered to get permission from all the parents before I began filming, but it wasn't until we analysed the videotapes that I realized I had been pretty cavalier in not talking with the children about who I was and why I wanted to film their play...in hindsight, it would have been friendly to invite the children to ask me questions about the video camera...' (p. 22-23).

Whilst taking video footage for the pilot study I realised that the majority of the children did not seem to pay a lot of attention to the camera except during the first two days when I allowed them to experiment with it. I videoed children's nursery play for 2 weeks and edited the footage before it was shown back to them. For the pilot study the basis for the editing was the number of children

involved in the activity and the duration of the activity. Groups of children (4 groups of 5-6 children in each group) were asked to comment on the footage. It is important to note at this point that the way the video camera was introduced to the children in the main study reflected my experiences of the pilot study.

*c. Group discussions with young children*

Use of observation alone does not provide explanations from the participants for their actions nor how they felt while playing. Therefore, use of group discussions with children. There took place in the nursery during the last 3 weeks of the pilot study. I thought that children needed to become accustomed with me before being involved in a group discussion. Not only that but I needed time to record children's play behaviours and form groups of children that were friendly with each other. These group discussions with children took place during 'outside' time and lasted not more than 20 minutes for each group; a practice that was not welcomed by all children as there were children that were missing out from the outside play activities.

*d. Semi-structured interviews with significant adults*

Semi-structured interviews with adults were carried out to elicit their views. These also took place in the nursery during the last 3 weeks of the pilot and an appointment was made with parents at the time of convenience for them. Interviews with nursery staff were arranged at a time when they were less busy – usually in between the morning and afternoon sessions or at the end of the day.



On one occasion, an interview took place within the classroom while another member of staff was telling the children a story. Adults were invited to read and comment on the interview transcripts after these interviews had taken place and have been transcribed by me as the researcher. Although the adults showed interest on the outcome of this research, they did not take up the invitation to comment on the transcripts.

*e. Other forms of data collection*

For the purposes of the pilot study data was collected through various forms such as short and long term planning of the classrooms' activities, as well as the OfSTED inspection document during the whole pilot period. These additional forms of data were used in conjunction with the data derived from the group discussions and interviews to create the context of the study. By doing so, I could understand the children's responses and play behaviours as being influenced by the available play material most of the times (through the long-term and short-term planning) and also the way the nursery was operating and the standards of the setting (through the OfSTED inspection copy).

The original research plan discussed above was followed throughout the course of the study. There were times that this plan undertook alterations, revisions and reforms in order to best suit the needs of the fieldwork and these of the participants and the pilot period was very helpful in informing practices of the main study (to be discussed later).

#### **iv. Thematic categories, preliminary data analysis, outcomes and limitations of pilot study**

The preliminary data analysis for the pilot study was carried out manually in order to highlight the main categories that were evident in young children's nursery play. This approach to analysis was inductive rather than deductive, by following this 'bottom up' approach, themes were allowed to emerge or arise from the fieldnotes, observations, interviews and discussions and were subsequently linked with theory.

##### *Thematic categories*

Data were divided into thematic categories based on the field notes, observations, play conversations, video footage, group discussions and semi-structured interviews. These categories were: 'The Child as a Player'; 'The Parent as a Mediator'; 'The Nursery Staff as Facilitators'. Under the 'Child as a Player' category, which was the major category, a small number of categories emerged like 'individual traits and differences', 'competence', 'play and learning' and 'play recall'. Children's detailed play characters can also be found in appendix 3. 'The Parent as a Mediator' had four subcategories: 'involvement', 'family play', 'play and learning', 'encouragement'. And finally, the third category 'The Nursery Staff as Facilitators' was subdivided into the following: 'personal factors', 'teaching strategies', 'history of setting', 'play and learning', 'time, space and nursery activities'.

### *Preliminary data analysis*

As discussed earlier, the core research questions were underpinned by research questions on the methods used and the need to ‘trial’ the appropriateness of these research methods.

Video footage, group discussions and semi-structured interviews were transcribed and later analysed in search of thematic categories. The reason for doing so was that I could discover the main issues underlying young children’s nursery play experiences between the three main groups of this research: the children, their parents and the nursery staff. These are now presented below in three separate groups: the children, the parents and the nursery staff, along with my reflections on the pilot study.

#### The Child as a Player

As it was mentioned earlier, this was the major category and included information about the children’s individual traits, characteristics and differences in relation to nursery play patterns, information about children’s learning through play, children’s competence in play negotiations and also children ability to recall past nursery play events. In this section information is also given about the children’s initial reactions of my presence at the nursery, as well as information about video recording and tape recording children’s nursery play incidents.

*Initial reactions during the first weeks at the nursery*

When I first entered the nursery children asked me questions such as:

'Are you somebody's mummy?' or 'You're a teacher, aren't you?'

Children seemed to believe that for someone to be allowed in their room they either had to be a parent or a teacher. Some children were shy and did not approach me straight away, although they showed an interest by watching what I was doing from a 'safe distance' – close enough to observe but not to participate. Other approached me immediately and introduced themselves before they asked me who I was. I was accepted in children's nursery play within the first couple of days and several days after my arrival and while in the outside play area, a 4-year-old boy said: 'It's you again!'

The teachers made the initial introductions; they told the children that I came from Greece and that I would be in their room for the next few weeks. I taught the children how to say 'hello' and 'yes' in Greek and some practiced it at registration. I also printed out the Greek alphabet and wrote every child's name both in Greek and in English to see the difference. When Jack (4:3) heard that I came from Greece he said: 'Wow, there are warriors in Greece!' Other children had visited Greece for their holidays or were about to go there for summer, as the pilot took place during the summer term of 2000-2001.

The first two weeks enabled me to learn the routine of the classrooms and children's play activities. During the 10 weeks that followed I had the opportunity to find more about children's play preferences and the way they spent

their time at the nursery. I recorded children's play activities by hand written field notes, a tape recorder and both a video and a still camera creating an account of several children's play characteristics that will follow later in this chapter.

*Some difficulties in keeping notes*

As well as videoing children's play incidents I kept written notes of their activities. On occasion I tried, without success, to keep notes while sitting close to some children in the room. This was mainly because I was distracting the children as it is shown in my research diary:

‘... as Tim was playing with the flexi straws he explained to me that he was making a garden, with trees, flowers and a patio. He asked me to make a garden as well and he started asking me, which are: the patio, the trees and the flowers. Then he said that the trees were falling down because some men came and cut them down, at his house. I found the story very interesting and I thought I could write it down. But Tim started asking me what I was writing and why and stopped playing; instead he was looking at my notebook. I realized I had been the cause for Tim stopping playing and I decided not to write anything down again in front of the children. What else could I do? And how could I best capture their dialogues?’

(Research diary, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2001)

I decided to keep notes during breaks. Then I realized that I was missing some very rich discussions; it was difficult to remember every detail by the time I was able to write things down. So, the next step was to use the tape recorder in the room. It proved more successful, although there was a lot of background noise and at times it was difficult to transcribe anything at all.

### *Observing and recording young children's nursery play*

One of the main forms of data collection was the observation of children's play within the nursery school. These observations after 2-3 weeks resulted in the creation of each child's 'play character'; a character that proved very informative throughout the whole duration of the pilot (and were later used in the main study). After several days of observations and discussion with some children in both the morning and afternoon sessions the picture of each 'player' emerged to me; there seemed to be a regular and distinct play pattern that most children followed.

As a result, I drew on the observations and all the relevant information to create some interesting descriptions of children's 'play characters'. As stated earlier in chapter 5 all names used for both the pilot and main study are pseudonyms and every effort was made to ensure the participants' confidentiality.

Children's play characters were based on my classroom observations but were later informed by the children's play conversations as well as by the parents' and nursery staff interview data. The video footage also provided a thorough opportunity for observation and record of children's play behaviours and contributed to the development of these characters. Some characters will be presented in this chapter to provide some information of the play interests and play relationships of the children that took part in the pilot study.

**Box 6.1: Fineas and Mick**

**'Fineas (4:6) and Mick (4:8)** (The Thunderbirds<sup>4</sup>): Mick will occasionally be Virgil<sup>5</sup> and will not respond to the teachers or the other children that call him by his real name; usually that happens when he has his Thunderbird costume on. Fineas often says 'Cabinet, blast off!' by also making the appropriate sound. Fineas and Mick always play together both outdoors and in the classroom. Their main play activities are building blocks and playing with Lego. They always follow each other, mainly it is Mick that follows Fineas and they say to each other 'You're my friend!' They have a close friendship and they quite often visit each other's home. While in the garden they like hide and seek, rolling over the grass, pretending to be Thunderbird, and running around than actually being on a tricycle.

*Video recording children's play*

In the first two weeks that the video camera was presented to the children it was placed in different areas every day; the aim being to capture as many children's play experiences as possible within a wide range of play opportunities. So, on the first day children could familiarize themselves with the camera; see how it worked, and how things looked like through the lenses. On the second day, the camera was set up in the home corner; originally, the plan was to film in different areas the first 45 minutes of the day.

No child entered the home corner area during the first day, as they chose other activities that they probably have found more interesting; activities, such as the clay were not available on a daily basis to them. As a result, it was not until the following day that I managed to capture some children's play in the home corner. From that day onwards, I moved the camera around the room to capture

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<sup>4</sup> 'Thunderbirds and the Tracey Island is a Carlton children's space programme with puppet-animation: the story is set in the year 2065 on an island in the South Pacific, where the headquarters of the top secret organization International Rescue are and their mission is to save the world from disaster'.

<sup>5</sup> Virgil is one of the main characters in Thunderbirds and he is the pilot of Thunderbird 2.

children's play activities in different areas. Video footage of children's play was taken in five areas:

1. home corner,
2. creative area,
3. sand and water area,
4. construction area and
5. role-play area.

An interesting conversation came from a video footage from three girls (aged between 4 and 4:5 years old) painting with toothbrushes at the creative area, whose play characters are first presented.

**Box 6.2: Gill and Elsa**

**Gill (3.7):** Is one of the children that plays almost everywhere in the room. She will go and play at the home-corner, she will be happily involved in a painting or craft activity, she will go to the sand and water area or she will spend quite a considerable time at the computer. However, she was hardly ever seen playing with at the construction area. While being outside she likes playing with the other girls of her group, pushing prams and bathing dollies.

**Elsa (4.6):** Elsa also likes sitting at the book corner looking at books or photo albums of the children that used to be in the room or more recent photos of the children that are still in the room. She is always involved in a painting or craft activity or other activities, such as clay. For the whole period that I was in the room, she was never seen at the home corner or the role-play area. She sometimes played at the sand and water tray for a while, and she also found playing with the Brio Mec™, or the building blocks interesting. She likes staying in the room rather than playing in the garden.

The activity originally aimed to let the children experience a different medium of painting. However, the fact that the children used toothbrushes instead of paintbrushes inspired them to create an interesting discussion about



hygiene and how they should clean their teeth after eating sweets and the different flavour toothpastes. I wondered if it was not for Katie would the children have developed their story like they did? It seemed to me that her comment triggered the creation of this story.

Gill : “We are painting with toothbrush today”.

Katie: “No, we are cleaning our teeth”.

Gill: “I am scrubbing my teeth”.

Gill: “Scrub, scrub, scrub”.

Katie: “We are cleaning our teeth because we had chocolate”.

Gill: “And sweets and chewing gum. Everything that is bad for us. We have to clean our teeth. My mummy says that the tooth fairy will come when I sleep and she will leave some money at my pillow and when I wake I will find them”.

Elsa: “Mine is flavour lemon [yellow paint], this is raspberry ribbon [pink paint], that’s lime [green paint], and that’s blueberry [blue paint].”

Gill: “Mine is lime”.

Michele: “Mine is raspberry”.

Elsa: “No, raspberry ribbon. My toothpaste is all gone, I am going to buy some more”.

Gill: “My mummy let me clean my teeth with a real toothbrush because I do it very properly”.

(Video data, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2001)

So, it seemed that by the use of video I had found a way to record children’s play conversations and children did not seem to pay any attention to the camera being in different places within the room, as they had time to become accustomed to it.

#### **Box 6.3: Susan and Sue**

**Susan (4.8):** Susan likes a lot talking to her teachers about various incidents that happened either at home or at school. She is more likely to be engaged in a conversation with one of the teachers than in a play activity. However, when she is playing she likes drawing, painting and playing at the sand and water area. She sometimes plays at the construction area with the building blocks. She is more likely to be the leader in a play activity than follow what the other children are doing. When it is time to play outside, she almost always goes to play with her little sister that is based in a different room.

**Sue (4.1):** She is very talkative with a well-developed language. She plays almost everywhere and she is very imaginative that she will start making up a whole story while playing with the rest of the children. She likes to play alongside Chris and Sheila but she is not always mixing in their play. She also likes talking to the teachers about various incidents. While outside she likes being on a tricycle or playing with the prams and the dolls.

*Tape recording children's play conversations*

The following dialogue from the pilot study is an example from the tapes of conversations about play as the children are playing at the sand pit:

Terry: "I am making a bowl of porridge. Ghedi put the cement in the tray. It's not good for eat it. It's for making walls. It's dangerous." [Ghedi does not reply and continues pouring sand in a small box].

Sue: "More cement."

Chris: "More cement."

Teacher: "Oh! No, it's overflowing. It's so full."

Paul: "Maybe we have to take some out."

Paul: "Cement is coming for you Aziza."

Paul: "Can I have the bowl? [Ghedi does not respond to Paul's request and he continues taking the sand out of the box]

Put it back Ghedi. I'll catch it."

Sue: "I'll put some more."

Chris: "I'm putting pepper in here. Would you like to help me? Now we need some powder, no, flour."

Cathy: "I just put some flour in."

Sue: "We've already got flour."

Chris: "I just put some sugar."

Cathy: "You have to pour it very carefully."

Sue: "We are making some washing powder."

Paul: "Take a picture of this!" [to me while I was sitting near by as he was holding a bowl full of sand].

M.S.: "What is it?"

Paul: "Cement."

Cathy: "I got the most. This is different cement it looks like yellow."

Chris: "Yellow and pink too."

Sue: "No more spreading, only sprinkling. We're covering the bits off. Take all that sand away first. Put it up. Put some in mine. Put some in yours."

Chris: "This looks like sand, isn't it?"

Cathy: "It is sand!"

(Taped play conversation, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2001)

Much learning and negotiation between the players took place in the conversation above. The children creatively transformed the sand into other substances of similar texture, while at the same time they negotiated and positioned themselves amongst other children and they are exploring mathematical concepts (more, less, full) as well as scientific notions (substances with same texture grains as the sand). There is a sense of movement in this vivid conversation, a rapid circular movement as the sand becomes porridge, cement, washing powder, flour, and pepper back into sand. However for the onlooker, there is limited action during this play incident as there were too many children at the sand tray and there was no free space for them to move.

By the end of the fifth week of the pilot I had collected some interesting observation data about each individual child; I was involved in some of their play, and I took around 20 still photographs of them playing within the classroom. The photos together with the video footage were used to elicit discussions with the children in a form of a stimulus. I then needed to devise ways to obtain feedback from the children themselves.

#### *Replaying the 'play incidents' to the children*

The discussions with several children took place in the nursery during 'outside time'. I said that children who wanted to come and have a look 'What's on the TV' were welcome to do so. My aim, primarily, was to talk to children whose play had been recorded, but other children were free to join in. Some children were asking me if I had the 'Bob the Builder' tape while others were

talking about the movies they had at home. When I showed the children films of themselves they were at first amazed and then laughter and giggles filled the room. During the pilot study I talked with 32 children. The children's group discussions were open ended. However, the main issues that these discussions were focused on:

- what the children themselves were doing;
- what children thought other children were doing.
- when the play incident took place.

Younger children's first reactions were: 'These are my friends!', pointing at themselves playing or 'This is Charles!' instead of 'This is me' etc. Older children were saying: 'That's me. That's not today, that was another day. I am wearing different clothes today', or 'We didn't have the Lego out today, that was yesterday'.

Other children's comments were: 'That's cool!', "Can we see it again? It's interesting!" or "Where is me? Why am I not on the TV?" Some children seemed to remember the exact details of their play, even if that play took place several days before. For example, they would say: "Me, Anne and the baby are going to be on..." or "I am going to put the baby in the basket" – and they were correct.

When another girl, Naomi (4:3), saw the tape, she explained why she left the construction area: 'My ladders keep falling down. That is why I leave'. This helped me understand why she had left the construction area although she had been playing there for around 10 minutes. When children talk about their play,

adults are better placed to understand their thinking (Nutbrown, 1997). Naomi's comment seemed to be an early example of feedback from the children to the graphic data.

**Box 6.4: Naomi**

**Naomi (4.3):** Loves making all sorts of crafts and paintings, most of which are made for her mummy, as she will state. She seems to like also being involved in role-play activities, where she is very talented in ironing, folding cloths and sharing toys with other children. She doesn't seem to have a preference to whom she will play with. Rarely she will also be involved at the construction area. She prefers staying in the room and play than going outside in the garden.

In the case of the girls that were involved in the creative activity with the toothbrushes presented earlier when this was shown back to the girls they insisted that they were 'Brushing their teeth' and giggled looking at each other. Only when I asked them if they were really 'brushing their teeth' did they respond that they were 'just pretending!'

All 4 girls showed that they are capable of distinguishing between fiction and reality by stating that they were 'just pretending!'; they were negotiating between different views:

Sue (4:4): "We are painting with toothbrushes today".

Cathy(4:2): "No, we are cleaning our teeth".

And yet, they seemed to be using the activity in a clever way turning a different painting activity into an imaginary situation inspired from real life. Many early childhood educators will have experienced being told by children 'Don't be

silly – it's only pretend!' when they have taken a step too far into the realm of the unreal.

When it came to the photographs children were used to having photo albums in the room, at the book corner that could look at any time; so they were more easily engaged in this sort of discussion with me. Finally, the tape recorder proved to be important for recording live conversations that were taking place that neither the photographs nor the camera could capture.

### The Parent as a Mediator

This section of chapter 6 refers to information related to parents, which was another category that appeared from the data collection. Four subcategories were listed under this category; these were: 'involvement', 'family play', 'play and learning' and 'encouragement'. Another theme that derived was 'children's 'gendered' favourite play activities'. However, further analysis of this theme is beyond the scope of this study. The interviews with the parents proved very informative and enabled me to link some of the issues raised by the mothers to the profiles I was creating of the children's 'play characters' (see appendix 3).

Fifty of the parents at the nursery were immediately interested and an interest in participating in the study. Fifty out of the fifty-five parents returned the letter of consent and agreed to take part. Ten parents made comments: 'It's fine with me. Do whatever you want with him / her'. Twenty-five parents asked me about the purpose of the study and what I would be doing in their child's room; they also expressed interest in learning the outcomes.

For the pilot I conducted informal semi-structured interviews with 4 mothers. Each interview took place at the nursery at a time convenient to the parents. Two interviews were tape-recorded and two were not at the parents' request. As stated in chapter 5, none of the parents chose to read and comment on the transcript of their interview.

### *Family play and involvement*

In one interview with a mother who had recently arrived in the UK from South America her child, Adam (3:6), a boy was also present. In this case as well as talking with his mother, I also asked him what he liked playing with and his mother translated. He said that he liked playing with his roller skates and she added that:

‘Adam likes playing a lot with his older brother; he is like an idol to him. We bought Alexandro a roller and he wanted one as well, so we had to buy him one. He would not share toys with other children but he shares all his toys with Alexandro’.

It was as a result of interviewing the parents that I began to think of parents as the mediators, by knowing their child so well that they can provide us with some valuable information about their children's play practices. For example, in the case of Naomi (4:3), an Indian girl born in the UK, I found out that she liked socio-dramatic play but during her visit in India, several months ago, her play changed dramatically because of the different weather and the

different culture; in India she was mainly involved in social, outdoor play. Her mother said:

‘I think it is because of the weather in England that children feel so lonely. Naomi likes pretending play a lot, she pretends she is a Princess and most of her play seems to revolve around food. When we went to India she was more involved in playing with other children’.

### *Play and learning*

Michelle’s (4:6) mother, mentioned that her daughter’s play was highly influenced by the nursery:

‘Yesterday, she [Michelle] went up in her bedroom, got every doll, teddy she could get, went in the dining room, put them all sitting down, got a chair at the front and pretended to do the register. Then she said “Good girl, Gill. Thank you for bringing that”, “What does this begin with?” She was holding things up and I know because they are doing sounds at the moment, this is what the teachers are doing and she imitates, copies’.

#### **Box 6.5: Michelle**

**Michelle (4.6):** She is a very happy child that is always engaged in some form of pretend play. She actually likes to be a mum and she will always carry a baby, either from home or borrow one from the nursery and she will lead the way for the other children who play with her. She is very independent with great initiative and she is also good at sharing toys and play equipment with the rest of the children. Her language is very well developed, with a very rich vocabulary. While outside she will also either pretend to go to the supermarket to buy some food or she will find prams to push her dolls with. She really likes involving other children in her play and her favourite playmates seem to be Zoe and Jackie.

Finally, Thomas (4:4), according to his mother, had been influenced in his creative play. She said that the nursery had helped him become more competent and independent when it came to choosing craft and collage activities. For



example, he would go and select the paper, the materials, and he would then very carefully use the scissors without any adult intervention.

**Box 6.6: Thomas**

**Thomas (4.4):** Likes drawing and painting; he will always write his name on the top of his drawing or painting. He also likes playing with the Lego, and he has a couple of very close friends Jack and Jeremy. He will play with them at the pretend travel agent, with the Lego, or the pretend aeroplane and he will share with them all the toys and roles. While outside you always see them three play together either with the tricycles, or with trolleys or at the sand pit making sandcastles. When Thomas is alone he likes climbing at the frames, and the swinging rope and other physical play activities.

Overall, the interviews with the parents provided me with a further perspective about the children's play practices at home. The parents talked extensively about their children's play, and two of them asked me, about their children's play patterns at the nursery. Although my field notes suggested that there seemed to be a strong home-school partnership it became clear in the interviews that the parents did not discuss their children's play with any member of the nursery, unless they felt that there was a problem. The most important thing for parents seemed to be their children's happiness; as long as they had a good time at nursery school seemed fine with them. As Michelle's mother stated '...everything else is a bonus'.

### The Nursery Staff as Facilitators

The third category of themes that emerged from the data collection was that of the nursery staff as facilitators. This category contained subcategories related to 'history of the setting', 'personal factors', 'teaching strategies', 'play and learning'. 'time, space and nursery activities'.

#### *History of the setting*

Nursery staff provided data about their daily practices and the nursery's policies, the hidden curriculum and the home- school partnership. During the pilot I had informal conversations with every member of staff, and I interviewed two members of staff: Chloe, a full time nursery teacher and Carol, a part time nursery nurse. The staff told me they were accustomed to visitors and had several students at the school. As was the case with the parents, none of the staff who was interviewed chose to read the transcripts and discuss their responses, although this option was given to them.

#### *Personal factors and teaching strategies*

There were 6 full time and 5 part-time nursery teachers working at the nursery. Most of them had an average of 10 years working experience with young children and all had been working at this nursery for more than 5 years. All members of staff and the Headteacher of the nursery attended regular staff meetings. Weekly planning meetings were held in each classroom/base to discuss the topic and the activities to be provided for the following week.

Chloe, a full-time nursery teacher, explained that they had a plan for every week, which was flexible and could change at any time, according to the children's interests. This flexibility to plan according to the children's needs, is based on the teacher's experience, as Carol, a part-time nursery nurse argued:

'...because we are quite an experienced staff and we've worked here quite a while we know what we're doing that when outsiders come we don't feel threatened and think "You've got to change this because somebody is coming and might think that we don't have control of the children" you know what I mean being whipped up. And we are alright to say that now and we all know that we are alright with it, and I think the children do as well, you can get them really excited have lots of fun and a laugh and then you can also get them the other way'.

On such occasions members of staff followed an unplanned activity that have derived from children's interests. An example was the search for the "Last Noo-Noo Tree". This is a story by Gill Murphy that the children really liked.

Below is an extract from my notes:

'...the story is about a young boy that he still likes having his dummy, despite the fact that his grandma thinks he is getting to old for it and that his teeth are going to have a funny shape. His mother insists that he will start not needing it when he goes to school. But, some of this little boy's friends keep teasing him for still needing his dummy, or 'noo-noo', so mum decides to throw all the dummies away, as he had more than one. However, the boy manages to hide one and he thought it would be a good idea to plant it so that he would get a 'noo-noo tree'. Eventually, the tree grows up to have lots of dummies that the boy can't pick, because he needs to wait until they are mature and fall off the tree, and then he could pick them from the ground. The children really like this story, and the teachers thought they could make it more interesting for the children. So, they bought many dummies of different colours and they put them up on the tree before the children came to the nursery. I forgot to say that the children usually have story before going outside to play and straight after

the register. After having read the story and the children discussed it, the teachers asked the children whether they thought there was a 'noo-noo tree' at the nursery and they said they would have a look. Unlike other days that some children preferred staying in the room, this time all the children went to the garden to search for the 'noo-noo tree'. And actually, there was a 'noo-noo tree', at the back of the garden and the children were delighted to see a tree full of dummies:

Cathy: 'Look, there is the 'noo-noo tree!'

Sheila: 'Lots of noo-noos'

Chris: 'There is a blue one...'

Cathy: 'and a green one...'

Paul: 'I can see the pink ones.'

Chris: 'I am going to tell the teachers to come.'

Pam: 'There must be a fairy that put them on the tree in the morning, because I don't come in the mornings'.

Cathy: 'I'll ask the teachers to pick one up'.

Paul: 'You can't pick them up, you have to wait for them to fall off, and they are not ready yet.'

(Field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2001)

So the subject of that day and the day after was the mystery of a 'noo-noo tree' growing at the nursery garden; the story that children enjoyed listening was brought to life and children's imagination was successfully fed.

### *Play and learning*

My observations of the nursery staff practices and my interviews with them indicated that nursery staff did not intervene in children's play unless the children asked them for some help or unless, as Chloe planned they wanted to 'reinforce [children's] previous learning in order to consolidate and use what they already know well'. The staff would monitor and keep records of children's play activities so that they could find the strengths and weaknesses of each individual child. Then they would encourage the child to practice the activity, so that s/he became more competent at it. Play was highly valued by all teachers, as Chloe

explained and they saw it as ‘a vehicle for learning’ and it was implicit that ‘play and learning can not be disconnected’.

These views seemed to have been highly influenced by the notions of learning through play of Piaget (1962), who argued that play is the vehicle through which children interact with their environment and construct their knowledge placing a symbiotic relationship between play and learning, and those of Vygotsky (1978), who described play as a ‘leading activity’ and believed that play allows children to learn to ‘self-regulate’ their behaviour – follow rules – and to raise their own learning above a previously acquired level.

#### *Time, space and nursery activities*

Carol argued that although ‘children’s activities are nowadays’ [since the introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage] ‘are more structured than ever’, the nursery has a hidden curriculum that prioritizes play and especially learning through it. So, it seemed that nursery activities were play-directed and were not as formal as they might be for older children (children who attend primary school), according to Carol. Chloe explained that the nursery teachers believed that ‘if the children generalize and take home what happens at the nursery’ their aim was achieved. Providing opportunities that influence children’s play is what they hoped and aimed for, since it was evidence that children enjoyed and had been taught effectively through play.

In summary, nursery staff in the pilot provided me with valuable insight on the nursery’s ‘play practices’. They were willing to talk about their practice

within the nursery and they also provided other documentary data, such as the weekly and monthly plans, leaflets, available for parents and newsletters and allowed me to attend and make notes at several planning meetings.

### Limitations of the pilot study

I used the pilot study to try out different methods of data collection: video camera, still photographs, tape recorder, group discussions, semi-structured interviews and field notes. The limitations and reflections on the pilot outcomes presented below provided a starting point for the development of methods and methodology for the main study.

#### *Audio Recordings*

Despite the fact that the original plan was to use various media to record children's play and to stimulate children's conversations, it became increasingly apparent that the tape recorder could not provide the quality of sound needed to record children's conversations. However in some cases, the tape recorder was useful in recording live conversations that took place, which photographs or video recordings could not capture.

#### *Field notes*

Field notes could not always be taken *in situ*, as this distracted some children from continuing their play. So, I had to develop skills of noting down as much as possible without distracting the children from their play.

### *Video Recording*

Children seemed to need time to adjust to the video footage, especially when it came to discussing it as a group. The pilot study enabled me to refine these research methods and forms of collecting and analyzing the data. I will discuss these issues in chapter 7.

Seeing themselves on the television was a novelty for the children; I realised that I should have given them the chance to do this before talking to them about the film-clips, another factor to adapt for the main study. On the final day of the pilot I tried this, I connected the camera to the television so that all children could see themselves on the screen. If I had done this before the group discussions with the children, I may have reduced the novelty factor and achieved more data from them when they were watching themselves in the film extracts.

During the pilot I found that the video footage and the group discussions could work well with children under the following circumstances:

- i. The clips with the play incidents were short (5-10 minutes) - to keep children's attention;
- ii. There were no more than 3 children at the discussion at the time- to ensure all could participate;
- iii. The children discuss video footage which featured themselves – to keep their interest;

- iv. The children were asked to focus on what was actually happening on the tape and to ‘talk about it’ – this helped them focus on a specific task.

These limitations of the pilot study, that were in line with the suggestions by Mac Naughton *et al.* (2003), led me to question the value of the methods being discussed but helped me to develop and adapt these research methods for the main study.

#### **v. Evaluation of pilot study and issues for consideration for the main study**

As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, four methodological questions underpinned the pilot study:

1. What forms of data could capture young children’s play experiences?
2. What is the best way to gather data about children’s everyday play activities without disrupting their usual environment?
3. How could the group discussions with children and the interviews with parents and nursery staff be structured to elicit the data needed?
4. How could I include the children’s perspectives on play?

In the following section I shall reflect on these four questions and the issues raised, as well as the implications for the main study.



*1. What forms of data could capture the young children's play experiences?*

Doing research with children is different from working with them as an early years practitioner. When I planned the pilot I had allocated days to explore different themes and issues, but I realised that the research had to follow the children's pace. I was not always aware of the relevance of data as these were gathered. For example when Niham talked about her leaving the construction areas because her ladders kept falling, I realised that, if I asked some children could actually give a reason for doing something they have seen on the videotape. I also found it interesting that children often remembered a play incident with great detail, even if that incident had happened several days before.

Children's conversations about their nursery play were very rich and provided valuable data; this confirmed the importance of reporting and presenting such data to them. Pilot data suggested that the players' implicit behaviours were made explicit by the videotape and that children were given voice to explain their play practices when the video was shown to them in small groups. Video seemed an appropriate way to record children's play video could prove to be very effective in recording and analyzing play data given the following:

- i. the video was introduced to the children,
- ii. the number of children in the groups was small,

- iii. the duration and context of the video clips together with the questions that would structure the group discussions were carefully throughout.

This gave me a clear answer to my first methodological question.

*2. What is the best way to gather data about children's everyday play activities without disrupting their usual environment?*

The study was ethnographic and I wanted to retain the children's 'ecological niche'. The children knew that either a teacher or a parent could be in their room and play with them. I told the children that I was indeed a teacher but I was in their room because I was interested in their play – I was not a teacher there. On a daily basis, during the first two weeks, I played with the children for most of the time, and so I did not have the opportunity to record these sessions as data; this period however, was an important part of entering the field. I was getting to know the children during this time and it was important that children felt comfortable playing with me. This time also allowed me to reflect on the setting and plan the best way to manage data collection. The idea of being 'a fly on the wall' did not appeal to me and was unrealistic; this is why I chose to become a 'peripheral participant' instead. Field notes, video and audio recorders seemed to be complementary methods. However during the pilot, children's participation was limited and I wanted to involve them more in the research process in the main study.

*3. How could I structure the group discussions (with children) and interviews (with parents and nursery staff) to elicit the information I needed?*

Group discussions with children, took place in the nursery during “outside play time” and were open ended with around 5 children in most groups – fewer children could have been more informative and less distractive for the children. This was so because children spent more time enjoying the video footage than talking about it. These issues helped me to reconsider the time and place of the group discussions, type of the discussions to encourage the number of children in each group when carrying out the main study.

Interviews with parents and staff during the pilot were conversation-like and proved to be more effective than formal interviews. The fact that I had spent a considerable amount of time with the children prior to the interviews proved to have been helpful for such a dialogue to develop. Daily contact with the parents and the nursery staff provided some ground for the discussions, as I had already observed and established rapport with the children at the nursery. I could follow their views and ideas and give them some feedback on their children’s play practices.

#### *4. How could I include the children's perspectives on play?*

In order to include children's perspectives on nursery play I needed a considerable amount of time familiarizing myself with the setting, their play opportunities and their play preferences. It was also important to develop a good relationship with their parents and nursery staff. The use of audiovisual techniques proved beneficial in most of the cases.

There were times when using audio-visual technology conflicted with children's needs and as a result I had to postpone the video and audio recording for another day. It became apparent that children need to do things at their own time and pace and this pace I needed to follow in the pilot and I would need to bear this in mind during the main the study. In order to secure children's participation, I needed to develop additional data collection techniques for the main study; this will be the focus of chapter 7.

Finally, the pilot confirmed that it was possible for children to participate and the core research questions could be answered, provided that I planned appropriately with consideration of children's age and developmental stage while using the research methods.

### *Revisiting and reforming the core research questions*

The pilot yielded much data: videotapes and audiotapes, observations of children, development of play characters, fieldwork notes, interviews with parents, interviews with nursery staff and group discussions with children. I used the pilot to ascertain advantages and disadvantages of the methods I planned to use in the main study. I also narrowed the focus of the main study to ensure that I allowed sufficient time for children's greater participation in the study.

- I found it interesting that children could remember much detail of their play;
- Children could provide the reasons for what they did while playing and provided evidence of metacognition – they were able to tell what other children were doing;
- Shy children could express themselves easily while using the video footage or the photographs as a stimulus and so could some children with English as their second language;
- I also had a sense that children's nursery play was influenced by the curriculum, but it was also influenced by everything that was happening around them; even the camera that they seemed not to pay any attention to inspired some children to making their own video camera with building blocks;

- Much learning through play was evident from children's conversations and group discussions on the video footage;
- Adults provided appropriate play opportunities for the children; they valued play and they thought that there was a strong play-learning relationship.

Most of the adult roles discussed in the review of the literature in Chapter 3, from the facilitator to the playmate and from the interviewer to the uninvolved, seemed to be adopted by the parents and the nursery staff, but they also provided children with the opportunity to be responsible for their play, what could be regarded as 'play ownership'.

So, the revised core research questions that have emerged from the pilot are:

1. How do children view their nursery play practices? How do children experience nursery play? (In particular with regard to learning)
2. How do parents view nursery play? Are their views similar or different from those of the children?
3. How do early educators view nursery play? Are their views similar to or different from the views of the children and the parents?
4. What is the adult role in children's nursery play? How do children view this role?

Especially useful was the pilot period where I tried out different methods of researching children's perspectives on nursery play. I had a clear timetable and

framework that I followed throughout the pilot, often consulting my research questions but frequently diverting as appropriate for the needs of the research participants.

## **Summary of chapter 6**

Chapter 6 has discussed issues regarding the initial coding categories, the main methodological and ethical dimensions during the pilot period (summer term 2000- 2001). Preliminary data were presented and analysed and three key themes ‘The Child as a Player’, ‘The Parent as a Mediator’ and ‘The Nursery Staff as Facilitators’ were identified along with the subcategories that fell under each theme. Research methods were trialled and evaluated to inform the research practices of the main part of this research. Finally, this chapter has examined the limitations and outcomes of has revisited and revised the study and the core research questions. This created the platform for the main study.

Chapter 7 critically discusses the methods and methodology of the main study and identifies the challenges faced during the fieldwork.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **The main study: methods, methodology, theoretical framework and data analysis**

Chapter 6 discussed methodological and ethical issues of the pilot study. This chapter reports on how reflections on the pilot study informed the methodological and ethical decisions of the main study. This chapter presents the revised research questions, the research design, the participants, forms of data collection, analysis and analytical frameworks used in the main study.

These themes of this chapter are:

- i. Research questions, research design and stages of the main study;
- ii. Theoretical framework of the study;
- iii. Participants of the main study;
- iv. Data analysis of the main study.



## **i. Research questions, research design and stages of the main study**

Chapter 6 showed how the research questions of the study were refined and became more focused as the study progressed from the pilot to the main study.

Schensul *et al* (1999) state that

‘Ethnographic theory is constructed recursively ... it begins with a set of connected ideas that undergoes continuous redefinition throughout the life of the study until the ideas are finalized and interpreted at the end ... theory development is the first step in the research process. Formative theory serves as a map that guides the research, providing an opportunity for generating initial hypotheses against which observations are made. Modifying theory is an ongoing process throughout the duration of the research. The research concluded with an interpretation of research results or findings and a revisiting of the initial theory, which provide starting points for the next study’ (p. 2).

Similarly, for the purposes of this study, the set of connected ideas was this of the relationship between learning and play within an early years setting from a developmental and a sociocultural perspective (see chapter 2 for further discussion). These theories also formed a map for the research by providing the opportunity for generating the three research questions that underpinned the study:

1. How do young children experience their nursery play? What are their reasons for choosing certain play activities?
2. How do parents perceive nursery play? Are their views similar or different to the views of the children?

3. How do early educators perceive nursery play? Do their views correspond to the views of the children and the parents?

As Schensul *et al* (1999) the modification of the theory is an ongoing process throughout the duration of the study. In the same way, as a result of the pilot, the research methods were evaluated and the data collected provided responses to my methodological questions. Thus, the initial three core questions were revisited and refined to form the following research questions. These formed the basis for the main study:

1. How do children view their nursery play practices? How do children experience nursery play? (In particular with regard to learning)
2. How do parents view nursery play? Are their views similar to or different to those of the children?
3. How do early educators view nursery play? Are their views similar or different to the views of the children and the parents?
4. What is the adult role in children's nursery play? How do children view this role?

The methods used in the pilot study were amended for the main study. These methods were used in three different stages during the yearlong enquiry; this was mainly to assist my management of the study and enabled me to collect a wealth of data by using a pre-set timetable (see table 7.1; p.199):

- *Peripheral participant observations* – in the classrooms – during the first stage of the main study,
- *Video and some audio recordings of the children's nursery play* for use as a stimulus during the group discussions with the children and the semi-structured interviews with the adult participants, during the second stage of the main study;
- *Group discussions with the children, and semi-structured interviews with their parents and the nursery staff*, during the second and third stage of the main study;
- *Children's play photographs* – photographs were taken by the children with disposable cameras during the third and final stage of the study; some children used these photographs to create 'play stories';
- *Collection of nursery documents*, including short- and long- term planning, OfSTED report of the nursery school, written information about play by the parents, throughout all three stages of the main study.

	<b>Table 7.1: Stages of the main study</b>		
<i>Stages Dates</i>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Nursery Staff</b>
<u>Stage One</u> September – December 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory period: getting to know the children, asking children to take part in the study;</li> <li>• Identifying the children that will take part at the research (children that will be attending the nursery throughout the school year 2001 - 2002);</li> <li>• Developing the children's 'play characters' by observation – confirming information from observations with the children;</li> <li>• Use of tape recorder for children's play conversations;</li> <li>• Invite the children to draw pictures with their favourite 'play theme';</li> <li>• Create list of toy requests from Father Christmas</li> <li>• First conversations with the children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory period: getting to know the parents;</li> <li>• Distributing the letters of consent to the parents;</li> <li>• Collection of relevant play material from the parents (lists with favourite play activities, likes and dislikes, etc)</li> <li>• Informal conversations with the parents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work together with the nursery staff;</li> <li>• Familiarizing myself with the nursery practices;</li> <li>• Collection of relevant play material from nursery (term / weekly planning, etc);</li> <li>• First informal conversations with the nursery staff.</li> </ul>
<u>Stage Two</u> January - March 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducing the video camera to the children;</li> <li>• Familiarize the children with the video camera in their rooms;</li> <li>• Video recording of children's free play;</li> <li>• Showing back to the children the 'play incidents';</li> <li>• Discussions with children based on the video footage.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First discussions with parents;</li> <li>• Collection of relevant play material from the parents (possible changes in their play behaviours, significant play developments, etc).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First discussions with the nursery staff;</li> <li>• Collection of relevant play material (term / weekly planning, and information for children's play individually etc).</li> </ul>
<u>Stage Three</u> April - June 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking photos of children's free - play;</li> <li>• Giving the camera to the children to take their own pictures;</li> <li>• Discussions with the children based on the pictures;</li> <li>• Identifying the key issues and making the connections.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional interviews with the parents (feedback on the information that has been collected so far);</li> <li>• Identifying the key issues and making the connections.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional interviews with the nursery staff (feedback on the information that has been collected so far);</li> <li>• Identifying the key issues and making the connections.</li> </ul>

### *Amendments of the pilot research methods for the main study*

Most of the research methods of the pilot were carried forward for use in the main part of the study. Alterations in the original plan are as follows:

#### a) Observations and audio recordings

The use of audio recordings was limited because the classrooms were now busier during the main study, with more children attending as it was the beginning of the school year and the background noise prohibited the transcription of any conversations. Because of this, my field note taking became more systematic and, on a daily basis, I recorded children's play observations along with my reflections of the incidents that occurred during the day. Children became more accustomed to having me around 'scribbling' things down, although at some points children asked me what I was doing or what I was 'drawing'. Occasionally, children asked me to write down certain things that they wanted me to write (see chapter 9). The bulk of observations of children's play were made during the first stage of the main study (see table 7.1 above, p. 199).

#### b) Video recording, group discussions and semi-structured interviews

During the second stage of the study, the video camera was re-introduced to the children. Based on the pilot, and because 'being on the television' was such a novel experience for most of the children, I decided on a 3-day introductory period where no recordings were made. The camera was in the class and the children could have a closer look at it, look through the lenses and ask me questions about its usage and so forth. Before filming any events, I brought a

television to the class and connected the camera to it; instantly the children could see themselves on the television. I did this so that the children would become accustomed to their images on the television and, thus, be less excited about it and therefore less distracted at the time of the group discussions.

The opportunity to familiarise themselves with the video camera provided an advantage when it came to filming the play events as the children did not seem interested in the camera. Reynolds and Jones (1997) reported a negative effect due to the lack of familiarisation with the equipment resulting in children being more interested in the camera rather than continuing their play.

In the main study the majority of children did not seem to pay a lot of attention to the camera except from the first three days when they could come and experiment with it. I recorded children's play incidents on video and then edited the video footage before it was shown to the children to remove films where nothing occurred and ensure that I knew what was in each clip. Groups of children, and later their parents and nursery staff viewed and commented on the film.

The rationale behind the video footage (taken in February 2002) of how many children would be interviewed about the video and why; what would be the nature of the group interviews and my questions are summarised in table 7.2 below, p.202.

Questions were informed by my critical review of the existing literature previously discussed in chapters 2 and 3 and according to the observations and

discussions with the participants during fieldwork. Questions concerned with ‘favourite play activity’ and ‘best friends’ derived from the informal conversations with the children and their significant adults, as both terms seemed to reoccur in our conversations.

**Table 7.2: Notes on the video footage**

	<b>Notes on video footage – February 2002</b>
<b>Who?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Thirty-eight children</b> (21 girls and 17 boys) have been identified for the group discussions.</li> <li>• Their <b>parents</b> were contacted in writing for their consent to be interviewed.</li> <li>• The <b>nursery staff</b> was approached for interviews – especially those who are in the video.</li> </ul>
<b>Why?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Children</b> whose play has been recorded more than once by the video camera.</li> <li>• <b>Parents</b> whose children are in the video.</li> <li>• <b>Nursery staff</b> who are in the video or work and know the children in the video well.</li> </ul>
<b>How?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The children are going to be divided into <b>friendship groups of 2 or 3</b>.</li> <li>• The group discussions will take place at the nursery and will be tape-recorded.</li> <li>• Each group discussion will last approximately <b>10 – 15 minutes</b>.</li> <li>• In addition, those children whose parents will agree to be interviewed will also be interviewed at the nursery or at their home, if they wished to.</li> </ul>
<b>What?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children’s questions: What they are doing and why? What is their favourite play activity and why? Do they have a best friend? Who? Why do they come to the nursery? Do they like coming to the nursery and why?</li> <li>• Some of the parents’ and nursery teachers’ questions: What are the children on the video doing? What do they think play is? What do they think is the difference, if any, between play and work? What is their child’s favourite play activity? Does their child’s have a best friend? Who? Does play have an educational value? Why do they send their children to their nursery?</li> </ul>

During the pilot study it became clear that asking children to participate in the group discussions during outside time was not appropriate as the children felt that they were missing their play time. So, I asked the children to be involved in the interviews during their normal classroom time. As a result more children were willing to talk to me about their play and the children concentrated more fully on our discussion.

The semi-structured interviews with the parents and nursery staff all took place at the nursery during normal school time. Parents were asked to suggest their preferred time for the interview and return the consent slip (appendix 2). Most interviews took place in the parents' room, and one took place in the garden of the nursery. Nursery staff were also interviewed during normal school time in various rooms of the nursery, depending on the availability.

All participants were given a copy of the questions I wanted to ask (appendix 2) and were asked to respond to those questions that they wanted to – it should be noted that none of the participants found any of the questions offending or difficult to answer. All but 6 interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed giving a total of 18 interviews. The six interviews that were not taped were interviews with parents; reasons included an interview that took place at the outside area)

As discussed in chapters 5 and 6 all participants were offered the opportunity to read and comment on the interview transcript but no one chose



this option. I also offered parents a copy of the film of their children's play and a copy of the videotapes were given to the nursery for their records.

c) Children taking 'play' photographs

In this nursery the practice of using photographs to capture children's everyday nursery life has become more and more familiar, influenced by the nurseries of Reggio Emilia, in northern Italy, where practitioners and educators place great importance on photography. This is used as a link between home and pre-school as a way of providing challenging and stimulating images for the children, and as a method of documenting children's learning (Thornton and Telfer-Brunton, 2001).

I extended the practice of the adults taking photos by asking the children to take photographs, after obtaining the consent of both parents and children. During the third stage of the main study I gave children disposable cameras to take pictures related to their nursery play. I asked the children to take photographs of what they liked playing with and some of them also took pictures of what they thought was 'work'. They were given coloured single use cameras with flash (one pink, one blue and one purple) and I showed them how to take pictures and how to avoid putting their hands in front of the lenses. Children who wanted to participate were left to take up to 3 photos each, then they returned the camera to me and I invited someone else to take pictures.

The children very much enjoyed taking pictures and most did as they were asked, taking the maximum of 3 pictures each, though there were some exceptions. At a later stage some of the children also agreed to make up a story based on their photographs. In total 31 children took 81 pictures; those children who did not want to take any pictures were not required to do so.

The cameras provided children with the opportunity to participate more in the research process itself and also seemed to reinforce my assumptions about the strong gender perceptions of the preschool children. This choice of camera colour seemed to conform to gender stereotypes. Mostly girls used the pink camera and mostly boys used the blue. Both girls and boys used the purple camera (but only when the shots from the other two cameras were finished!).

Some parents later told me that they liked the idea and their children were asking for a camera of their own especially since the day for their summer holidays was close. This indicated that this method of involving children in data collection was appropriate to those young research participants. Most of the pictures were very well taken and I could easily deduce the child's focus, apart from a few instances where a child deliberately excluded a vital part such as a head of a friend of theirs! Similarly, Moss and Clark (2001) used photographs successfully in their study in which children participated and stated their views about their nursery care. All children were given copies of their photographs to take home together with a 'Thank you' letter. Parents were also informed that children's photographs and stills from the video footage would be used for the

purposes of this thesis. However, although permission to use the children's photographs was granted by all parties involved (parents, children and nursery staff) I decided to blur children's faces to further ensure confidentiality.

#### d) Other forms of data on play

Chapter 7 discussed the various forms of collecting information about play (observational field notes and reflection notes, play documents, short and long term planning documents, the nursery's OFSTED report and the children's play characters) in the pilot study. In the main study additional forms of data were used including children's drawings, often used by early childhood researchers, (Nutbrown, 1999), written information by the parents about the children's play likes and dislikes, notes taken from the children's play records, children's play photographs and children's toy requests from Father Christmas. These forms of data were collected throughout the three stages of the main study and used mainly to support (or corroborate) analysis of the group discussion and interview data.

### **ii. Theoretical framework of the main study**

I acknowledge the fact that during the inductive approach that was followed for the purposes of this study, the data could have been analysed using a variety of frameworks following for example the work of Piaget (1962), Athey (1990) and Nutbrown (1997) on schemas.

However, my theoretical framework is conceptualized through the developmental as well as the social constructivist views on play (see chapter 2 for

detailed discussion). Having carried out the preliminary data analysis of the pilot study (see chapter 6), it appeared that participants were not only referring to the *processes* of play (Hutt *et al.* 1989) but also to the *content* of these play activities (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA 2000). This is the reason why I have chosen to analyse the data for the main study by alluding to the work of both Hutt *et al.* (1989) about the *processes* of play and their taxonomy of play in chapter 8, as well as the work of Carr (1998) on learning stories and on government policy with regard to the six areas of learning from the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) in chapters 9 and 10.

Chapters 2 and 3 considered children's age as important when it came for them to be engaged with a play activity or most importantly master this activity (Piaget, 1962). It is acknowledged that children proceed through various stages or categories of play depending on their developmental stage as well as cognitive ability (Parten, 1932; Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968; Hutt *et al.*, 1989). Categories that seem to become more complex the older the children become.

According to Hutt *et al.* (1989) most children were expected to exhibit both the epistemic and ludic play behaviour based on their knowledge of the purpose of the activity and the play object. Thus, data are analysed alongside the play taxonomy of Hutt *et al.* (1989) who identified the terms of 'epistemic' or 'ludic' play behaviour (chapter 8 for both children and their significant adults). This was considered as participants were providing their own constructions and definitions of play. By analyzing the data, my aim was to identify how these definitions and

categorizations could fit within the existing taxonomy. These two terms (epistemic and ludic play) also seemed to be focusing on the developmental age of the children as well as their familiarization with the play activity itself. In relation to the children, the *processes* of play were evident through observations of young children's development through play and negotiation that was taking place during each play episode. These processes were also evident through children's metacognitive abilities to reason for each play activity that had previously taken place and to provide a sense of ownership for their play. In relation to the adult participants, the *processes* of play were evident through their discussions on how they observed children while playing and how they facilitated the appropriate environment for quality play and intervened in children's play situations as seen appropriate.

The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage provides certain 'Stepping Stones' that children of certain ages should reach while attending a pre-school setting and before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday (QCA, 2000). To my personal view, these 'Stepping Stones' are alike in nature with the categories that previous scholars and researchers had provided for play, as they show a progression in children's play or learning patterns and their complexity becomes evident, as children grow older. The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) has also identified six areas of learning for young children:

- a) Personal, social and emotional;
- b) Communication, language and literacy;
- c) Mathematical development;
- d) Knowledge and understanding of the world;
- e) Creative development, and
- f) Physical development.

Learning through play was apparent not only through the fieldwork observations and video footage but also through the discussions with the young children and their significant adults. Learning seemed to feature in all areas suggested by the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000), although it was evident that children were likely to ‘take the play situation further’ by allowing space for their own needs, skills and interests thus manipulating the planning that what was provided by the nursery staff.

Adult participants, especially the nursery staff, enabled this by allowing flexibility so that planned activities gave way, at times, to children’s imagination supported by responsible and skilful adults (Nutbrown, 1994). It should be noted at this point, and will be further discussed in chapter 10, that adult participants, unlike young children, explicitly referred to the relationship between learning and play. The areas of learning were considered for analysing part of the data collected for the purposes of this study as they provide grounds not only for the developmental element of children’s play but also for the social element of play, as children negotiate their play space and place with other children and adults

within the setting. The data of this study are analysed based on the taxonomy of play by Hutt et al. (1989) (chapter 8, for children and adults) and on the six areas of learning take place at chapter 9 (for children) and 10 (for their significant adults). The aim was not only to provide a coherent and structured way of data analysis, but also to see whether children's daily nursery play activities could fit into these categories.

Learning through play is a notion that derives by both stances (developmental psychologists and social constructivists). The importance of enhancing children's learning through play, where children can build on existing knowledge and experiences via their daily encounters with other children and adults has been emphasized throughout the years (Authey, 1990).

As this study was carried out within a nursery setting, I personally believed that the developmental aspect of play solely could not have captured the essence of the setting and the children's play behaviour. Children were most likely to go through the stages proposed by previous researchers and scholars, but also their play activities were highly influenced, and most of the times stimulated, by their social environments and were not engaged in play activities 'in a vacuum'. This was based on my own personal experiences both as an early educator and a researcher. Thus, the social constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1983) was also taken into consideration.

The two theoretical stances listed above would provide the theoretical framework for the analysis of the data collected for the purposes of this thesis.

### **iii. Participants of the main study**

This section presents information about the people that participated in this study. As in the pilot study, the children were considered central to this study, therefore are presented first and are occupying the main part of this thesis. Parents and their views follow for as the pilot study showed they acted as the ‘mediator’, knowing their child(ren) best and by being able to inform the nursery staff about their child(ren)’s preferences and personal traits. Finally, nursery staff are discussed, whose views are considered as equally important as those of the parents. The nursery staff spent a significant amount of time involved in play activities with the children and were responsible for providing children with meaningful play activities which were fun and pleasurable. These activities aimed to enrich children’s development and skills in all Foundation Stage areas of learning (QCA, 2000).

#### *The Children*

Children in the main study came predominantly, from middle class white British families; two girls were of Asian origin with parents being brought up in the UK; another girl had mixed British and other European origin; one girl had mixed British and black Caribbean origin and one boy had just arrived in the city from South America. During the main study 50 children (21 boys and 29 girls) were surveyed about their toy requests from Father Christmas; an additional 33 children (20 girls and 13 boys) were involved in group discussions based on the



video footage and 31 of these children (15 girls and 16 boys) took photographs, while 18 of them chose to make stories based on these photographs.

As far as the video based group discussions are concerned, initially, 38 children – with 33 of them taking part - were identified. The total time of unedited video footage was 6 hours. The edited video compromised approximately 4 hours. Seventeen groups of children, each watched video clips between 6 and 15 minutes. This difference in duration mainly had to do with the activities that the children were involved in, the number of the children in the group and the age of the children.

Group discussions that took place with the young children did not have the form of a focus group as in the case of the children's group discussions there was no interaction between children nor did children expressed opposite ideas to each other's views. So, the groups discussions could not be regarded as a focus group, based on the definition given below by Moulton and Roberts (1993) despite the fact that the group discussions provided valuable insight to children's views.

“A focus group is a carefully planned discussion held in a permissive, non threatening environment that is designed to provide in-depth information about how a certain group of people perceive a certain area of interest. Focus group members are led to interact with each other so that they respond to opposing ideas and comments and reveal many facets of a given issue ... [focus group] ... gives decision makers valuable insights into the target audience's perspectives without providing statistical data” (Moulton and Roberts, 1993; p.35).

It soon became apparent that the above characteristics of an adult oriented focus group were not present in the interviews I had with the children. The pair/group interviews took place in a non-threatening environment and the aim was to collect information about how this particular group of young children perceived their nursery play or whatever they were interested at in relation to the video footage. Also, I had a set agenda of questions that I wanted to ask the children, but they were free to explore other issues as well. The main difference though was that there was limited, if any at all, interaction between the children during the whole discussion. Children concentrated on the video footage and on what I was asking them but in most cases seemed oblivious to what the other children in the group were saying, apart from certain instances where there was limited interaction between the children triggered by one of the children's comments on the video. Chapters 9 and 10 will deal with these in detail.

### *The parents*

In addition to the children and the nursery staff, 20 parents (18 mothers and 2 fathers) were interviewed in the main study so that the opinions of all three groups could be compared for similarities and differences (see table 7.3, page 215). These interviews took place at the nursery; most of the parents who agreed to be interviewed also watched and commented on a video clip of their children playing. Two interviews took place with both the mother and the father. This provided an opportunity for interaction and exchange of opinions between the

two parents; their views seemed to be complimentary to each other. Seven other interviews took place with the mother and their younger child present, since they did not have anybody to provide childcare for their children. This posed certain difficulties as the mother's attention was obstructed by something the child was doing. In one case the interview took place at the outside area with the child playing around the various equipment and the mother and I walking at a close distance, something that prohibited the use of the dictaphone, although the mother had consented in principle for the interview to be tape recorded and for children's photographs to be used for the purposes of this research.

**Table 7.3: Parents' interview information**

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age present</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>No of children</i>	<i>Date of interview</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Other people</i>
<b>Adam's mother</b>	25-35	Full-time mother	2	11/03/2002	Nursery	35'	relatives
<b>Adam's father</b>	35-45	Research student	2	11/03/2002	Nursery	35'	relatives
<b>Audrey's mother</b>	25-35	Full-time mother	2	07/03/2002	Nursery	30'	none
<b>Amira's mother</b>	25-35	Part-time teacher	2	14/05/2002	Nursery	40'	younger child
<b>Darlene's &amp; Michaela's mother</b>	25-35	Social worker	2	08/03/2002	Nursery	50'	husband
<b>Darlene's &amp; Michaela's father</b>	25-35	Office worker	2	08/03/2002	Nursery	50'	wife
<b>Ella's mother</b>	25-35	Part-time teacher	2	05/03/2002	Nursery	50'	none
<b>Gleda's mother</b>	35-45	Part-time student	2	04/03/2002	Nursery	30'	child
<b>Helen's mother</b>	35-45	Social worker	3	19/03/2002	Nursery	20'	child
<b>Jagger's mother</b>	25-35	Full-time mother	1	05/03/2002	Nursery	50'	none
<b>Jefferson's mother</b>	35-45	?	2	03/05/2002	Nursery	30'	none
<b>Justin's &amp; Maurice's mother</b>	25-35	Self-employed	3	02/05/2002	Nursery	20'	none
<b>Ida's mother</b>	25-35	Social worker	3	14/05/2002	Nursery	35'	younger child
<b>Lizzie's mother</b>	35-45	Full-time mother	2	06/03/2002	Nursery	30'	none
<b>Merry's mother</b>	35-45	Full-time mother	3	09/05/2002	Nursery garden	25'	younger child
<b>Patricia's mother</b>	25-35	Full-time mother	3	07/03/2002	Nursery	25'	younger child
<b>Travis' mother</b>	35-45	Social worker	2	06/03/2002	Nursery	25'	child
<b>Terris' mother</b>	25-35	Full-time mother	3	07/03/2002	Nursery	45'	none

Table 7.3 above (page 215) gives information about each parental semi-structured interview including age, occupation, number of children, date, place and duration of interview and people present. The participants of this study were not a representative of the children's population within the nursery with regard to race, ethnicity and occupation. In chapter 6 I encountered some problems in reaching families of different occupation, race and ethnicity, consequently the amalgamation of the research population could be considered as a weakness of the study as it is arguably, biased towards a more 'Westernized' view of play and learning and closer to current government policy documentation. This biased sample was not because other families were excluded from the study, but because members of other cultural communities never gave consent to participate. As a result they and their children were excluded from the study. This raised a question for future research as to how such study could successfully involve a wide range of families and thus generate a less biased set of culturally defined responses and viewpoints (see also limitations in chapter 11).

### *The Staff*

Nine members of the nursery staff took part in the study. Interviews took place at the nursery and lasted around 30 minutes; these interviews were conducted during the normal school time and various rooms were used according to the time of the day and availability when the interview was taking place. Although at that point the time and place seemed appropriate and convenient for the nursery staff, I felt that they did not have their full attention on the questions

asked because they were distracted by various incidents taking place around them. For instance, where interviews took place in the same room that the children were having a story read by the other member of staff this was distracting. During the pilot study this was a concern for me so I kept such distractions to a minimum during the main study by suggesting use of a quite space away from children whenever possible but was not always possible to achieve this. All staff were happy for the interviews to take place at the nursery during school time.

#### **iv. Data analysis of the main study**

Analysis of interviews and group discussions was carried out by using the computer package for qualitative analysis (QSR, NVivo) and by manually searching for key themes in the texts so that they could be later inserted manually into a certain category that represented this theme.

To start with, all interviews were meticulously transcribed and word-processed. I used the transcripts to look for ‘main themes’ across the interviews and group discussions and for similarities or differences between the responses of the participants within and between the groups (children, parents and nursery staff). The qualitative package (QSR, NVivo) was chosen because I believed it would provide me with the opportunity to compare between my manual analysis and the computer’s abilities to search key themes and words with more accuracy. This dual process allowed me to guard against the possibility of computer analysis creating unrelated categories and me missing important categories through

manual handling of the data. The two methods together provided greater rigour, reliability and validity of analysis.

Initially the data were coded. Themes on the characteristics of play (epistemic or ludic, according to Hutt *et al.* 1989) as well as the relationship between play and learning (according to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA, 2000) were searched through the interviews with the participants and the observations during the fieldwork.

Through this process it became apparent that play was discussed at various levels (micro, meso and macro). At a micro level all participants talked about play and discussed its processes (Hutt *et al.* 1989), although the adult participants rather than the children themselves did this more explicitly. At a meso level, nursery play and the participants' experiences formed the main basis for discussion throughout this study. The content of play, play opportunities and play props that were extensively referred to with particular significance being that nursery play was rich in opportunities and experiences for children based on policy documents and government recommendations (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA 2000). Finally, play was discussed at a macro level with particular references not only to nursery play, but also to home play and children's out-of-school activities and play experiences.

How these experiences were influencing nursery play and the management of play by the various people at stake was also central to this discussion. Of particular importance at this point is the fact that the closer to the nursery the

play experiences were the more formal and structured these were; the more complicated play became as emphasis was given to play and learning, especially by the nursery staff.

For the present study, the main rationale for my approach was that through these processes I would not influence the outcome of the study. I could also guard against manipulation of the data received from the participants. The nature of the children's group discussions and their difference in perception as well as the way of talking about issues in comparison to the adult participants of the study also needed careful analysis. Thematic analysis proved useful for the purpose of this study as it drew on 'voices' which specify versions of the world and the 'individual' subjects who are supposed to live in it. Participants' responses were examined as to how they viewed the issues under research and how they made sense of their daily play experiences. All responses were also researched for continuities and discontinuities.

It could be claimed that although this was an ethnographic study elements in its analysis drew on grounded theory research. But, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest:

'Ethnographic research has a characteristic 'funnel' structure, being progressively focused over its course. Progressive focusing has two analytically distinct components. First over time the research problem is developed or transformed, and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited and its internal structure explored. In this sense, it is frequently only over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really 'about', and it is not uncommon for it to turn out to be about something quite remote from the initially foreshadowed problems' (p.175).



Thus, the analytical processes being presented could also be described as inductive rather than deductive. I tried to apply rigour to my understanding of the participants' experiences and views. Similar practices are employed by researchers engaged in 'grounded theory' research, when an attempt is made to identify categories and concepts as they emerge from texts and related these concepts into substantive and formal theories (Ryan and Bernard, 2000; p. 782).

Data analysis went through various phases. Although data were being interpreted from the first steps into the field, after having completed the fieldwork period I needed to make sense of the data collected as a whole or as separate parts of the research and also position the findings alongside the literature and a theoretical framework. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) argue that:

'data analysis means figuring out what to do with the mountains of data that ethnographic research projects generate – drawers full of fieldnotes; boxes of interviews and tests; stacks of documents, maps, logs, artefacts, drawings, and charts; photographs; video-and audiotapes; survey data; and other kinds of material' (p.147).

Most of the data referred to above – fieldnotes, interview transcripts, documents, drawings, photographs, video- and audiotapes – were generated during this study and I now needed to make sense, sort, code, reduce and pattern into a 'story' as it is suggested by LeCompte and Schensul (1999). Every method has its own biases, which can be overcome by using a diversity of methods (Freudenberger and Gueye, 1990). The various methods, if they are put together:

“provide different information which is mutually enriching. Thus, when possible, it is better to select techniques that are complementary in that they provide crosschecks and new information” (Whyte, 1977).

Some of the methods used for this study (such as drawings, photographs, and OfSTED inspection report) are for information only. Others, however, (such as the group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the video recordings and the written play information provided by the parents) work as analytical tools at the same time; they set up a simple analytical framework while gathering information.

Additionally, through content analysis, the research process generated these themes through the data collected from the group discussions and semi-structured interviews. By the term content analysis one means the systematic, replicable method of compressing many words of text into fewer coding categories (Weber 1990; Krippendorff, 1980). According to Weber (1990) this method enable researchers to discover and describe the focus of individuals, groups or society as a whole. Finally, the following six questions were considered before and during the analysis of the data for the purposes of this study, as according to Krippendorff (1980) these must be addressed in every study that carries out content analysis:

- 1) Which data are analyzed?
- 2) How are they defined?
- 3) What is the population from which they are drawn?

- 4) What is the context relative to which the data are analyzed?
- 5) What are the boundaries of the analysis?
- 6) What is the target of the inferences?

The responses to the above questions can be found throughout the empirical part of this thesis where data are being presented and analysed. However, the brief response to these questions could be found below:

- 1) All interviews, observations and video footage along with nursery documents, drawings and photographs are analysed.
- 2) Data are defined through figures, tables and further analysis of themes for the identification of continuity or discontinuity of patterns emerging from each group.
- 3) The population is a nursery school setting and the three groups are the young children, their parents and the nursery staff.
- 4) The context is the developmental (Partner, 1932; Piaget, 1962; Hutt et al. 1989; Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA, 2000) as well and the socio-cultural/socioconstructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1980; Athey 1990; Sylva, 1980; Nutbrown, 1997) of play.
- 5) The boundaries of the analysis lay within the suggested theoretical framework (based on the developmental and socio-cultural discourses on play, and especially on the Hutt *et al* (1989) taxonomy of play and the six areas of Learning of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, 2000). This study also tries to make additions to the Hutt *et al.* (1989) framework by suggesting additional terms.

It also attempts to show that the six areas of learning according to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) could be challenged through child-centred research methodologies (see empirical chapters for more information).

6) The target of the inferences is the identification of each group of participants' constructions on play as a process and the participants' perceptions on the relationship between play and learning by drawing particular emphasis on the need to give voice to children participants.

Thus, data from each group was treated discreetly so that it was possible for me carefully to look into, sort and match – what LeCompte and Schensul (*ibid.*) call 'item level analysis' groups of items that fitted together and later explore a particular theme to create patterns – 'pattern level analysis' (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). In this way, I was able to work through data, clarify some of my thoughts and 'see the story' unfold as all the pieces were coming together. The next step was to move on to create a research model or models that would be based on the data itself.

In particular, I 'tried to make judgements about the meanings of contiguous chunks of text' (Ryan and Bernard, 2000; p.780). The participants' responses were divided into three categories: main themes (tree nodes), sub-themes (child nodes or sibling nodes based on their relationship as the names suggest) and free nodes, the data could be entered neither under a 'tree' node nor under a 'child' or 'sibling' node (see next section of chapter 7). After the main themes (a. the

definitions and characteristics of play and b. play in relation to learning) were identified, the codes were organised into lists and information was provided for each individual code along with the exclusion and inclusion criteria. Finally, conceptual models (see figures 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 briefly explained later in the chapter) were designed in which sets of views, responses and behaviours of each group of participant were presented separately.

The models created from the data of this study were being drawn in the computer package NVivo and were based on my assignment of each data set into 'tree', 'child' / 'sibling' or 'free' nodes. As the titles assume the 'tree' nodes were main categories and the 'child' and 'sibling' nodes were dependant on the 'tree' nodes; whereas the 'free' nodes were independent domains and could not directly be associated with 'tree', 'child' or 'sibling' nodes.

#### *Providing an explanation for the conceptual frameworks*

Three different models (conceptual frameworks – figures 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 above, p.228 - 230) were thus, created in NVivo, one for each group of participants (children, parents and nursery staff). These models show the association between different concepts and themes and also convey the way data were organized. In brief, these diagrams represent the participants' views on play in general and on nursery play in specific. These frameworks formed the initial analytical step in order for the researcher to make sense of the data. Due to the wealth of data gathered through the course of this study, these frameworks seemed important as they organised the participants' responses into coherent

categories creating a basis for discussing the theoretical framework in-depth. It should be noted at this point that although the three conceptual frameworks are being presented and explained below, the analysis that follows in the empirical parts varies slightly as it follows other analytical patterns – this of the play taxonomy (Hutt *et al.*, 1989) for chapter 8 and this of the six areas of learning (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA, 2000) for chapters 9 and 10 based on the chosen theoretical framework.

When it comes to *young children*, it is obvious that children could distinguish between nursery play and home play, although they could not provide any information regarding their concept or definitions of play. For children play varied according to the activities available (tree node – nursery play), and specific reference was made to the following child nodes: creative, construction, water, computer, role-play, book corner, writing areas. No distinction was made between the above activities of whether these were play (ludic) or work (epistemic) behaviour. Discussions with children also revealed issues on initiative, ownership, metacognition, friendships, rationale, and preference of activities according to gender. Regarding nursery play (tree node), children also talked about the role of their teachers and their feelings about attending nursery (child nodes). Finally, children made some reference to home play (tree node) and their interaction with their siblings or their favourite play props and toys.

The *Parents'* diagram revealed a more complicated picture regarding their perceptions of play in relation to the children's perceptions, which came as no

surprise. Parents discussed their experiences of home play (tree node) in relation to their role (parents-carers sibling node) and in particular to the role of the mother (sibling node). All these themes were considered to be equally important for parents when referring to home play. Particular activities that were provided to children at home were these of role-play, writing, books, and constructions. It should be highlighted that the roles of each members of the family differed, especially based on the time available at home or the gender of both parents and children – dynamics between parents changed according to their children's gender. Parents, however, talked about nursery play (tree node) and the reason why they bring their children to the nursery (purpose of attendance – sibling node). For parents, nursery provided a transition phase between home and school and an environment where more opportunities were available to their children by well-trained members of staff. Last, but not least, parents expanded on their children's personal traits and characteristics in relation to play (children tree node) and also what their children were achieving through play: social competence, independence, individuality, practice, enjoyment amongst others (child nodes).

Finally, the *nursery staff* responses have proven to be even more complicated than these of parents and obviously these of children. Nursery staff had chosen to talk about four key themes (tree nodes): nursery play, nursery staff and their roles, nursery characteristics and children while playing. Not only staff were providing a wealth of play activities to the children: construction, writing,

sand and water, home corner, outdoor activities, role play, book corner, creative and imaginative play (child nodes), but they also considered these activities based on their appropriateness, characteristics and social elements. Nursery staff could easily define play and provide examples of the benefits of play for children, such as: enjoyment, self-esteem, experience, independence, individuality, development, learning, dominance as well as ownership (child nodes). Finally, nursery staff provided a lengthy account of their own roles and practices within the nursery as well as the characteristics of the nursery and how these influenced children's nursery play activities. These characteristics were namely: philosophy, policy, diversity, environment, accessibility, home-school partnership, awareness of socio-cultural differences and overall indoors and outdoors environment.



Figure 7.1: Young children's constructions of play

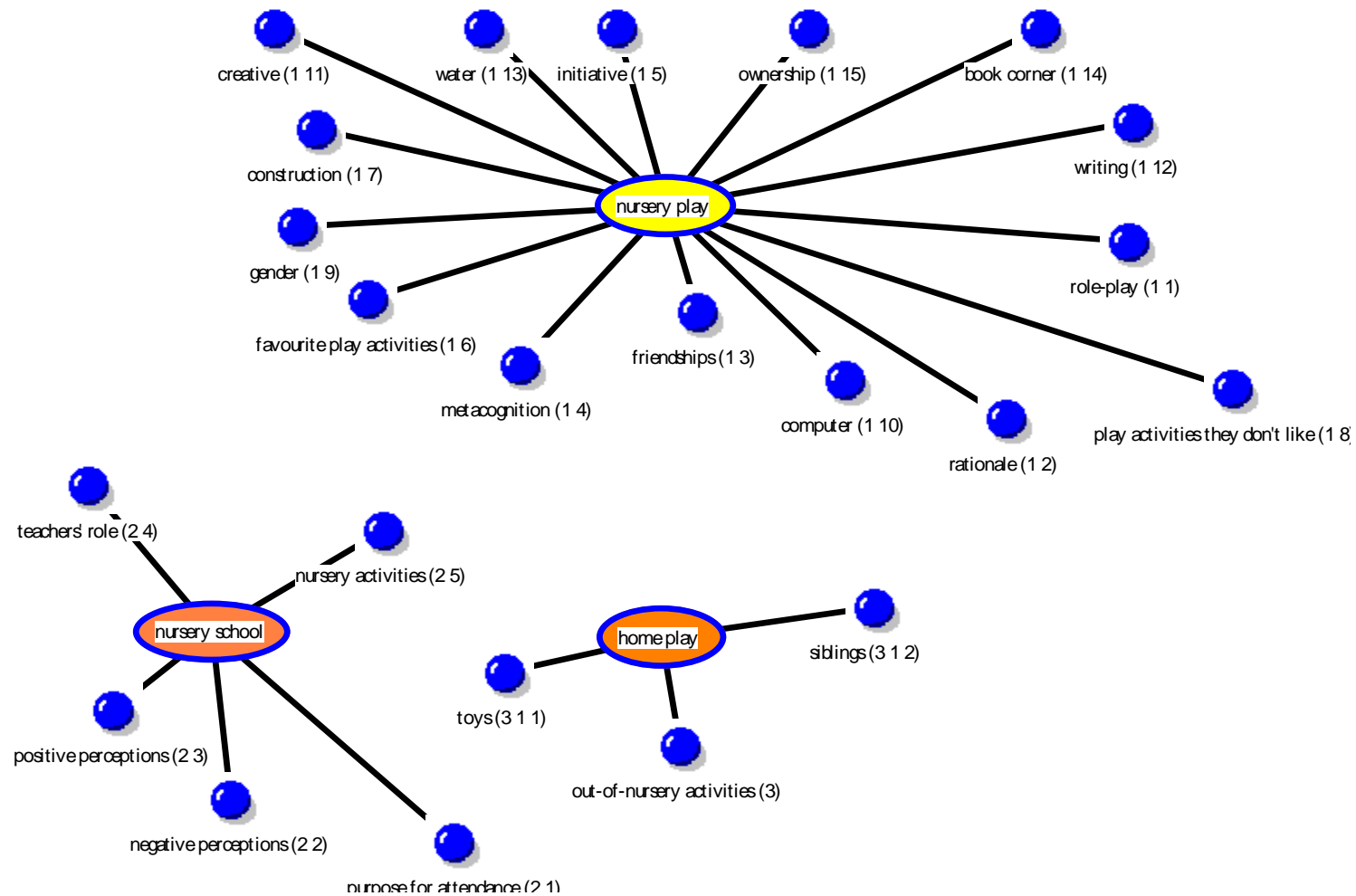


Figure 7.2: Parents' constructions of children's play

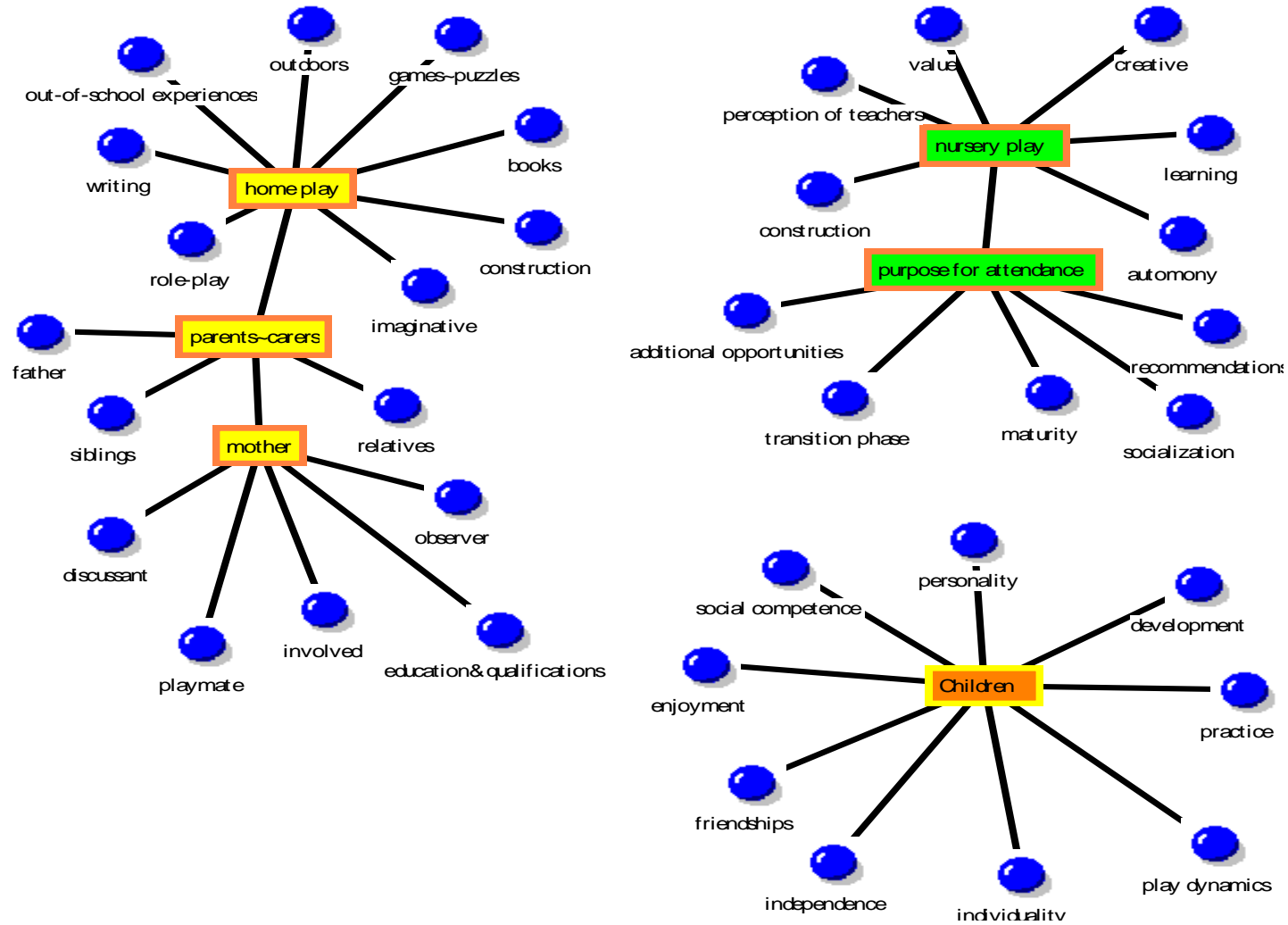
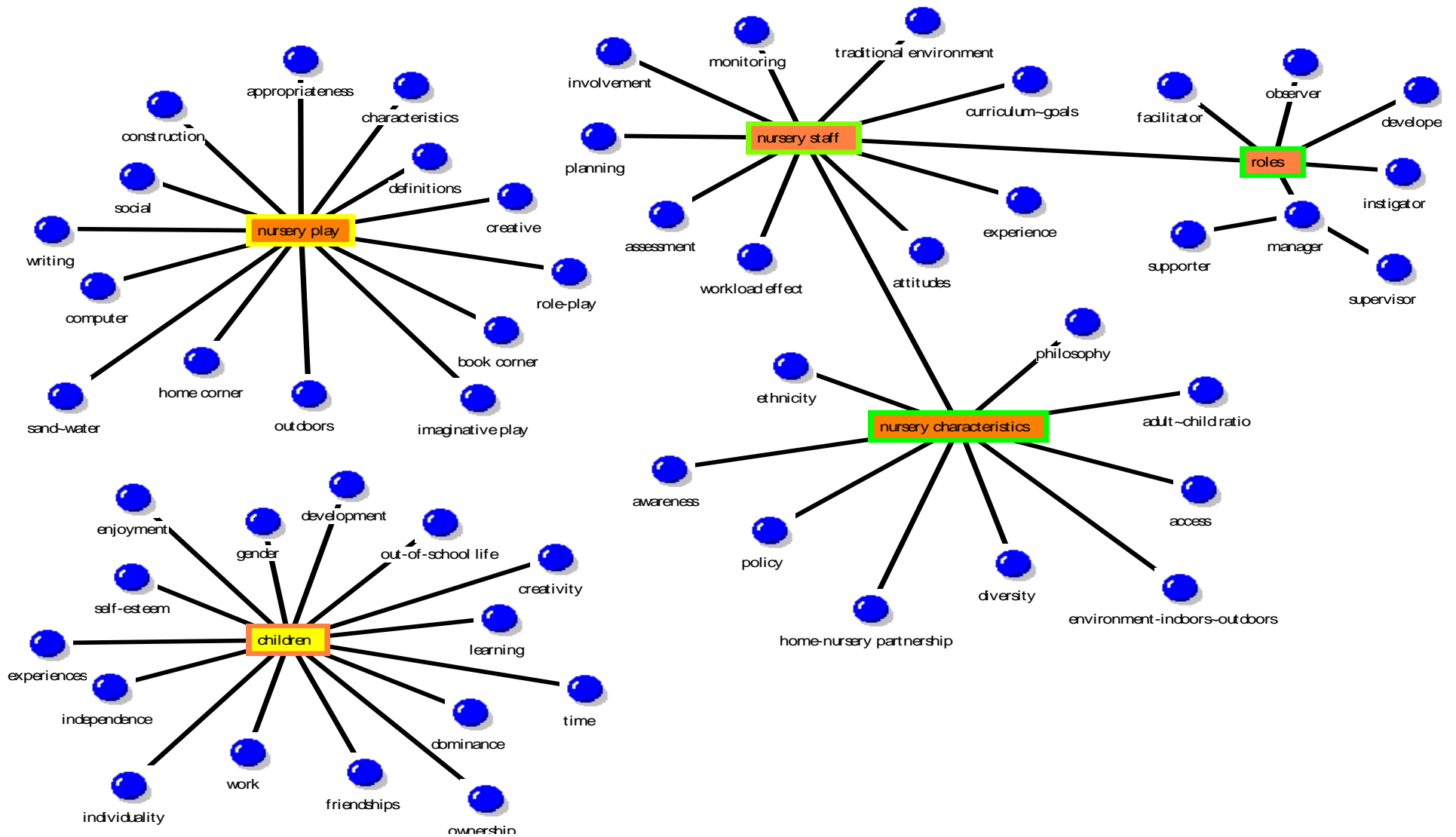


Figure 7.3: Nursery Staff constructions of children's play



## Summary of chapter 7

This chapter has addressed the issues of methods and methodology, including analysis of the main study. The revised research methods were explained, followed by the amendments to the research methods. Discussion of methodology – including the theoretical framework of analysis, data analysis and the conceptual frameworks that were generated from the data were presented. Their analysis will follow in chapters 8, 9 and 10.

The next 3 chapters provide a full discussion of the findings from the main study – chapters 8 concentrates on the children's and adult constructions of nursery play as these were framed throughout this research in relation to Hutt's *et al.* (1989) taxonomy of play; chapter 9 presents children's constructions of learning in relation to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000); chapter 10 reports the adult constructions of nursery play in relation to learning and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000).

In summary, it could be claimed that play changed forms and shapes according to who was engaged in the activities. Play had a more formal role within the nursery setting and a more relaxed role within the home setting. Similarly, the roles of parents and staff varied, probably because of their responsibility within each setting. Children's views however simple provided the grounds for discussion of many interesting issues regarding perceptions and also development, rationale, achievement and progression.

This chapter has shown the relationship between the analytical steps and the data generated by the interviews and group discussions. Other forms of data were analyzed in a different and less systematic way and were mainly used to verify and exemplify data that have derived from the interviews and group discussions.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Defining and categorizing play: Young children's and adult perceptions

This is the first of the three empirical chapters of this study. The aim of this chapter is to provide the grounds for discussion in relation to the participants' (young children, their parents and nursery staff) views on play in general. The theoretical framework for analyzing the data of this chapter (see chapter 7 for further details) will be the taxonomy of play proposed and developed by Hutt *et al.* (1989) with particular reference to the terms 'epistemic' and 'ludic' play. This chapter thus is in three parts:

- i. Defining play: young children and adult constructions of play;
- ii. Epistemic or ludic play? Young children and adult categorisations of play.
- iii. The role of parents and nursery staff in young children's play.

**i) Defining play: young children and adult constructions of play**

This first section of chapter 8 will concentrate on young children's and adult definitions of play. As it will be presented, the main difference between children and adults was that children did not explicitly defined play within or out of the nursery. Adults provided various definitions, some of which differed, but generally the parents' definitions were similar to those given by the nursery staff. This fact is represented in table 8.1 below.

Table 8.1 Participant's definitions of play		
<i>Young Children</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Nursery Staff</i>
x	Child-Initiated	Inherent
x	Self-Chosen	Natural
x	Work	Work
x	Fun	Fun
x	Imaginative	Learning
x	Everything	Important

Further analysis of the participants' definitions of play is given below. First the definitions of young children will be discussed, followed by the definitions of their parents and their nursery staff.

### *Young children's definitions of play*

It was presented in earlier chapters that detailed narrative and focused observations were made throughout this study as it was the case with other studies that researched play within nursery settings such as Hutt *et al.* (1989), Sylva *et al.* (1980) and Nutbrown (1994). This chapter will approach the analysis from a different angle as it will mainly draw its data from the video footage and children's responses from the *open-ended interviews* based on this footage (MacNaughton, personal communication).

By doing so, I believe that children's perceptions are better represented; these perceptions are not simply presented by me as the researcher who would draw inferences solely on their observed behaviour. However, some additional comments based on observations will occasionally be used to support the evidence being presented in this chapter, as it usually happens in interpretive studies with the researcher playing a significant role in data analysis (see chapter 4 for references on methods and methodology).

Through the open-ended pair/group interviews with the children it became clear that they talked about both nursery play as well as home play in particular and out-of-school play in general. Some children also commented on the management of play and the role of the adults, mainly with reference to the nursery staff, although this was not extensive. Children's comments were informed, in the majority of the cases, but not always, by what they had previously seen on the video.



Whenever asked, children regarded all play activities depicted on the video as *play* – building blocks and Lego, miniature people and animals, playing at the water tray, drawing pictures, dressing-up. Exceptions were the computer and the book corner, areas that were considered by most of the children as *work*. Helen and Michaela offer an example of this when they talk to me (Maria):

**Maria:** When you are on the computer are you playing or working?

**Helen:** Working.

**Michaela:** I'm working.

**Maria:** Why do you think you are working?

**Helen:** Because I have to.

(Interview with Helen, Michaela and Darlene, 18/02/2002)

So, for Helen and Michaela being at the computer was work, not play, and there was also the sense from Helen's response that having to work was not a voluntary activity. She said that she worked because she 'had to' implying that being on the computer was more of a necessity and a work-like activity.

It was common amongst the older children (4-5 year olds) to hear that they were engaged in activities within the nursery setting because *they had to*, like Jason who commented that he plays at the nursery because this is what you have to do while at nursery:

**Maria:** What happens in the school?

**Jason:** You have to play with things.

(Interview with Jason and Lizzie, 19/02/2002)

Even when the children could tell whether they were playing or working, they had difficulty in making more elaborate remarks on their behaviour. Similarly, Jagger below commented that he played, but he didn't say why he thought he was playing:

Maria: Is it work what you are doing there or play?

Jagger: Play.

Maria: Why do you think it's play?

Jagger: I don't know.

(Interview with Jagger and Jeff, 05/03/2002)

None of the children gave explicit replies when asked **‘what do they do when they are playing’** or **‘why did they think they were playing’**, providing perhaps evidence about the complexity in identifying the meaning of play and its inherent nature. For children, play seemed to be an activity that was integrated into their daily routine, which came out naturally. Yet, when it came to describing or defining it, children were not in a position to give explicit accounts of this behaviour; it was as if children were competent players without them realizing the complexity and importance of their play behaviour. This might have been a suggestion that I was asking them to apply adult ‘constructs’ to what children wanted to say.

Only when children were asked to identify whether they were *playing* or *working* were they likely to refer to their activities as play or work accordingly, although this was not done extensively because of the nature and focus of the interview questions (see appendix two). Children’s comments were mainly restricted to what they had previously seen on the video, however there were some children who commented on their play activities outside the nursery setting, especially when it came to talking about their siblings or closest friends.

Thus, despite the fact that not all children referred to their activities as play, when they were specifically asked whether they were playing or working,

they replied according to what they thought they were doing on the video. So, there were children who responded that they are playing while others said they were working.

Manning and Sharp (1977) and Denzin (1971; 1992) similarly argue that for young children there is no distinction between play and work since through play infants are learning and that they do not play but they construct social orders. This position made it difficult to categorize play (epistemic or ludic play) according to young children's accounts. It seemed that this categorisation could more easily be made by taking into consideration the researcher's play observations instead, as it was the case with the study by Hutt *et al.* (1989). However, their responses provided grounds for additions to this play taxonomy, which will be given later in this chapter when a further discussion on the revised taxonomy of play will take place.

### *Parents' definitions of play*

Parents' definitions of play were deduced solely through interviews. As it will later be presented, parents like nursery staff were in a position to define play with some ease, unlike children who did not explicitly talk about play. Adult constructions, and in this case parents' constructions, could more easily fit under the taxonomy of play proposed by Hutt *et al.* (1989). Parents seemed to be placing more emphasis on the 'ludic' rather than the 'epistemic' nature of their children's play, without dismissing play's educational value. This meant that

parents were more interested in their children's well-being and the fun element of play rather than the learning aspect of it. Although parents suggested that their children were learning and developing various skills through play, their main purpose for choosing a play activity was whether their children would like the activity or not.

The literature offers many definitions of play either by parents or early educators and practitioners (Rubin *et al.* 1983; Garvey, 1977; Piaget, 1962; Erickson, 1963). For the purposes of this study, however, adults were not asked to define play as such; instead, they were asked to define play from their children's perceptive. I asked the parents *'What do you think children think play is?'* After searching the interview data for key themes the following definitions were identified. Thus, according to these parents:

- Play is a child-initiated and self-chosen activity;
- Play at school is the child's work;
- Play is having fun;
- Every opportunity is an opportunity for children to play;
- Play happens all the time;
- Play is every imaginative situation.

I will now discuss each of these views and definitions of play in turn.

#### *Play is free-play*

Four mothers (Jagger's, Lizzie's, Idony's and Travis') were surprised when asked what they thought children 'think' play is; they seemed amazed and then puzzled, as this was a question they had never asked their children.

Jagger's mother tried to distinguish between the activities that her son considered as play – free play, playing with building blocks and playmobile – and non-play, which she said were structured activities like board games and puzzles. She was noticeably puzzled as she thought about the difference between home play activities and nursery play activities. Yet, when she asked her son what he had been doing at the nursery, his reply was 'We just play'. If Jagger "just played" at the nursery, and not all activities are free play, how could she be certain that Jagger only considered what she thought of as "free play"?

Maria: What do you think Jagger thinks play is?

Jagger's mother: (Laughs)...that's a difficult one! ... I've got no idea!!!

Emm, well, ...there are certain things at home, like if we are playing a game or.... doing a puzzle or something...almost more structured, then ...play in terms of building blocks, or playing with his playmobile or whatever, ... is almost as if it's not play. You know, even though...'Let's play Snakes and Ladders' emm, I don't think he interprets that as play. So, I think is much more free play, I think he thinks play is, I'm a little bit confused about it...(laughs)

Jagger's mother

### Nursery play is work

Contrary to Jagger's mother views of what her son regarded as play - (mainly free play activities both at home and the nursery) - Adam's mother was the only parent who thought her son regarded his time at the nursery as 'work' not 'play'. She based her argument on the fact that Adam saw being at the nursery as a serious and grown up activity:

Play? Here in school? Work! He knows that here in school he works.

He doesn't play here, he works.

Adam's mother

In fact, Adam's mother was the only one that thought her son regarded play within the nursery as work. She made a distinction between playing at home and playing at the nursery. According to her, Adam viewed play at home differently from the way he viewed play at the nursery – just like his older brother was going to school to work, he said he was coming to the nursery also to work.

### Play is fun

While Adam's mother said that nursery play for her son was work, on the other hand, Justin's and Maurice's mother and Sheila's mother maintained that 'Play is having fun!' According to both mothers if their children are enjoying themselves that is what play is to them. They said their children would go out to play on their own but they would like them involved as well. All three children were quite capable playing on their own, as they also showed independence and enjoyment while playing; they were also capable of choosing their play activity on their own and having fun.

Play is everything

For four parents, like Darlene's and Michaela's – the twins' father, Ella's mother and Terris's mother, it was difficult to distinguish play from their children's other activities. According to them play was everything their children did in and out of nursery, this included board games, role-play and pretend situations as well as outdoor play.

I think play is everything...any opportunity is an opportunity for play, wherever they are whatever they're doing...throughout the day. I suppose if they're actually playing a board game, they'll know that they're playing a game.

Darlene's and Michaela's father

What was emerging from some of the parents' statements or definitions of their children's play was that play, as Justin's and Maurice's mother had denoted, was mainly a self-initiated activity; something that their children chose to do on their own. If children had ownership over any situation they were involved in, according these parents, then it was more likely that they would regard this situation as play rather than anything else. The extracts from two parents illustrate this:

Emm...for him is something that happens all the time. I think he just thinks that's what he's here for (laughs)...you know, because he's playing all the time ... that's one way of getting to know things. But he does play all the time.

Terris's mother

I think Ella seems to think that play is something she does on her own. She often seems to play on her own ... She enters her own world, imaginative world. She almost cuts herself off from everybody else, talks to the animals that she's playing with and ... I think that's her concept of play.

Ella's mother

So, according to these parents, children's play was something they did at their own pace and time and most importantly an activity that was happening all the time and with every opportunity. Parents reported that most of the time they could not follow the pace or meaning of such an activity, as they were not familiar with the rules their child had set. All children would find every opportunity to engage in play situations either at home or outside. For most parents play was a natural activity for their children to get involved in, both important and essential for their child's overall development and learning.

*Play is imaginative and role play situations*

For the majority of the parents (15 out of the 21), play was closely associated with imaginative play situations, role-play and pretend situations in general. As for example for Audrey's and Patricia's mothers below:

Emm, yeah I think she's got a very strong idea of what play is...cause she goes away and as I've said she amuses herself quite happily and she goes into her own little world very quickly and easily, you know imaginative play and she will say 'Well this is this...'. She sets things up and she will play for ages whatever role she chooses.

Audrey's mother



What she thinks play is?... emm, yeah, I think she probably thinks that it's, you know, playing imaginative games...

Patricia's mother

These two mothers viewed play as every opportunity for their children to pretend and enter 'a world of their own', where adult rules did not apply. This was the view of all parents of both boys and girls, although there was a difference in how boys and girls approached imaginative situations.

Yeah, I mean a lot of his play is imaginative play really, that you know he becomes Buzzlightyear ... a lot of his play is imaginative play...he can differentiate. He knows when it's time to relax and play he does seem to know that you know, when I ask him to do a different job or a task, that isn't play... I think that he has the notion that it's for him to relax and to have a time out.

Blake's mother

And as Lizzie's and Helen's mothers showed it was very difficult for the parent to know what their child was doing:

Emm,...(pause)...I don't know really. (long pause)...different things, if...I mean if she's ...got something like cups and saucers and a teapot....then I think she sort of emulating and adult, some adult activities....so, she's sort of copying...emm, you know what she'd seen, emm....but with something like a jigsaw or blocks, I don't know cause that's not ...that's not actually copying an adult's activity....is... I don't know...

Lizzie's mother

Play is very important and she says 'I'm playing. I need to play!'... make believe is playing, or the books. I think play is by herself. Or play with her biggest sister, physical play, racing that sort of thing.

Helen's mother

Thus, 'pretend' and 'make-believe' was a major element of play as far as young children are concerned according to these mothers. While pretending, children would be on their own or with siblings, as a reference to the involvement of adults was rare in parents' definitions and role-play accounts. Travis' mother explained her difficulty in engaging in her son's imaginary situations. She said:

'I just can't quite relate to it. It's interesting, 'cos I never really thought about it! Well, I've always wondered actually, have thought about it but I just don't know! (laughs) ... I don't know ... he just uses his imagination with things, trains and cars...

Travis' mother

From the above statements of what parents thought their children considered play to be, it is evident that views varied and sometimes were contradictory. Initially, most parents thought they were not in a position to answer such a question, as they didn't feel confident about the response. Although parents were familiar with their children's play activities and behaviour, they felt they lacked information about how their children saw play from their perspective. After further elaboration, however, most parents stated that play according to their children, was something that children had chosen to do in their own time and pace, mainly activities that involved role-play and imaginary situations; activities that adults could not easily get involved with.

### *Nursery staff definitions of play*

Previously in the chapter, parents were asked to comment on what they thought their children thought play was. Similarly, nursery staff was invited to respond to the same question. Most nursery staff members (5 out of 9) regarded play as having fun and enjoying oneself, while others (4 out of 9) referred both to the fun element of play as well as to the fact that children learn through play. Some regarded play as a natural activity, which is inherent to children, and two commended that play is not ‘play’ within the nursery setting but ‘work’. Thus, their responses provided the following definitions:

- Play is fun;
- Play is learning;
- Play is children’s work;
- Nursery play is work;
- Play is a natural thing for children;
- Play is an important part of children’s lives;
- Play is inherent.

### *Play is fun – Play is learning*

Although the words ‘fun’ and ‘learning’ do not seem to coincide in the play literature, it seemed only natural for the purposes of this thesis to be given the same degree of importance during the data analysis based on the fact the nursery staff in particular suggested that children were learning through play only when the play situations were adapted to their needs and had an element of fun present.

For the majority of the nursery staff, play was considered to be fun and enjoyable by the children themselves. Children enjoyed themselves through play and they did not necessarily regard play as a medium of learning. However, learning was evident in children's learning the majority of the times; play was for children to enjoy themselves and as Annette denoted '**everything else is a bonus**'. According to the staff, it was essential for the children to enjoy themselves while playing; as a result children were more inclined to learn through activities that they considered to be fun.

Emmm, oh!... I think children would think play is enjoyment

Jill – Nursery Teacher

... play is having fun. Well, I think the children think play is having fun, which is nothing wrong with that thought when you're a child, but they're all learning at the same time.

Diana – Nursery Nurse

... if they're enjoying themselves, then that's sort of how they define play really.

Jane – Nursery Nurse

... play is where you could provide the toys or the situation to enjoy themselves...

Annette – Nursery Nurse

... play is enjoying yourself, doing something that's fun! Something that you like doing. They don't see it as you see it, just as a way of learning sort of thing.

Sarah – Nursery Teacher

So, according to Sarah and her colleagues play and learning co-existed but children did not usually think about it as such.

*Play is children's work – Nursery play for children is work*

Similar to some parents' views, nursery staff considered play to be the children's work (Isaacs, 1932). For Christine below play was children's work, a way through which children reinforce and consolidate their learning, because for children, play is what they know to do best:

**Play is children's work. How they learn, how they reinforce their previous learning, consolidate and use what they know well.**

Christine – Nursery Nurse

Unlike Christine who regarded play as being children's work in the sense that play enables children to build on previous knowledge and support their learning, Annette below regarded that children perceive nursery play as work.

According to Annette, children had different expectations and concept of play within the home and play at the nursery setting. This was based on the argument that children come to the nursery like their parents go to work; therefore children regard nursery play as work:

**...play is work. I think they come to nursery like their parents go to work and they come here to work. And primarily if they work through the activities then that's how they see it, work in a child-centred place.**

Annette – Nursery Teacher

*Play is a natural thing for children – Play is inherent*

As most nursery staff regarded play as being fun, one also suggested that play comes naturally to children, as it is one activity they know how to perform. For children play is a natural thing; children know how to play, who to play with and what to get out of each play situation. As the Head teacher explained, children know how to play without being taught about it; when playing children do not

consciously think about what they are doing – they know that play is there for them to get involved in:

Err... I don't think they think about it. I think they just get on and do it, because it's a natural thing for them to do...(long pause)... I mean obviously they think about it when they're doing it, but I think they just think 'it's there and it's theirs!' and ...(pause)...it's an important part of their life ... (pause) and if it wasn't there, I mean you've got children who are not stimulated and if it's not developmental then you get a lot of problems cause they're not been stretched but I don't think they think about it if you see what I mean. I think ...(pause) because it's there they access it, they enjoy it, they learn a lot but they don't know what they're learning and they won't know what they've learned until they think about it or it comes back ...you know...

Mrs Higgins – Head teacher

Nursery staff definitions of children's perceptions of play were similar as it derives from the definitions given above. Most nursery staff thought that play is both fun and enjoyable by children – identifying the 'ludic' element of young children's play behaviour, while at the same time it enables them to build on previous experiences and expand their learning – acknowledging the 'epistemic' nature of play Hutt *et al.* (1989). In that sense play was also considered as children's work, which enables them to learn during the early years (Isaacs, 1932).

There was also reference to play as being a natural activity for the children; an activity that no-one taught them how to get engaged in, nevertheless, children are considered to be 'master players' (Jones and Reynolds, 1997) – or 'world weavers' according to Cohen and MacKeith (1991) by knowing what is required by them, what to expect from play and how to learn from it. Finally, only one member of staff regarded nursery play as children's work. According to Annette, children have different concepts of play within and out of the nursery setting:

children regard play within the nursery setting as work. Whereas the parents go to work, similarly children come to nursery to do some work. This definition stands out, as it is the only definition that views play within the nursery as play and makes a distinction between play in different settings.

## **ii) Epistemic or ludic play? Young children and adult categorisations of play**

As it was discussed in chapter 2 (pages 44-47), Hutt *et al.* (1989) through their various studies in different early years settings, proposed a taxonomy of play. This taxonomy highlighted three different categories of play; these were ‘epistemic’ play, ‘ludic’ play and ‘games with rules’. According to Hutt and her colleagues (*ibid.*), young children’s play behaviour changed from exploration to learning depending on how familiar they were with the play prop. So, when children’s play behaviour was considered to be depending on their mood (they liked or they did not like the play activity), Hutt *et al.* (1989) suggested that children were exhibiting ‘ludic’ behaviour. On the other hand, when children were acquiring new knowledge and skills through a play activity, they regarded children to be presenting ‘epistemic’ behaviour. It should be noted at this point that references to the third category of ‘games with rules’ will not be made in this thesis because no data were collected through the course of this study despite my understanding that this category applies not only to older children and also to some children in the age group that was researched for this study. Similarly, other

scholars in the field have tried to differentiate the two terms by stating that children were moving from the ‘what this object can do’ (epistemic behaviour) to the ‘what I can do with this object’ (ludic behaviour)? (Wood and Attfield, 2005; p.85).

In chapter 9 that follows, vignettes of young children’s play are presented in the form of learning stories (Carr, 1998). These learning stories are live examples of how young children were experiencing nursery play in general and were acquiring new knowledge while practicing existing or newly found skills at the same time.

If these learning stories could be fitted under the terms of the Hutt *et al.* (1989) taxonomy in the form of a table this could have the following form.

<b>Table 8.2 Categorisation of learning stories based on the Hutt <i>et al.</i> (1989) play taxonomy</b>		
<i>Epistemic play</i>	Problem solving	9.5, 9.6 9.7, 9.10, 9.13
	Exploration	9.6, 9.8, 9.11, 9.12, 9.13, 9.14
	Productive	Materials – N/A Acquisition of skills - 9.6, 9.7, 9.11, 9.13
<i>Ludic play</i>	Symbolic	Representational Object – 9.1, 9.2, 9.10 Fantasy Object – 9.4, 9.11, 9.12 Fantasy Person – 9.2, 9.4, 9.10 Immaterial fantasy – N/A
	Repetitive	Innovative - N/A Preservative – N/A

According to table 8.2 above, it could be suggested that children’s observed play incidents were more likely to be placed under the epistemic play term rather than the ludic play term with 8 out of 14 listed under this term. On



the other hand, the remaining 6 learning stories were positioned under the ludic play term. Learning stories that were positioned under the epistemic play and these under the ludic play term could be listed under two or more subcategories, based on the complexity of the learning story itself and the involvement of the children in this play incident.

Although, chapter 9 will present a full analysis and discussion of the learning stories listed in table 8.2, an example of how these learning stories are brought to life in chapter 9 is now given, by presenting the following learning story where Maurice is making a figure by using the shapes in the correct order. The person was complete when Maurice approached the game, but he took all the pieces out, and he found it difficult to start putting them back together. Instead of starting the puzzle by inserting the head of the person, which was the most apparent part of the body, he chose to start with the triangle, which was placed as the body rather than the legs. After a few attempts, Maurice used the knowledge gained from this to judge from the pieces left which order was necessary to complete the puzzle appropriately.

Learning story 8.1: Sorting shapes game table
---

Both Justin and Maurice are sitting at the table where there are three sets of sorting wooden games available. Maurice takes all the pieces of the human figure out - circle is the head, rectangles are the arms, triangles is the body and square are the legs. He starts by putting the triangles for the body, and then tries to put the rectangles for the legs, not the arms. After having inserted all the rectangles for the legs, he's left with the squares, which are not fit for the arms. He takes all rectangles out, replaces them with the squares and finishes off the body by putting the arms in their place. As he leaves the table, Justin picks up the same puzzle and tries to make the person himself.
--

Throughout this footage, Maurice showed a high degree of concentration and persistence while working on the person and which pieces needed to be placed where. He co-ordinated the colours – so for every yellow part of the body he continued with the remaining ones – and he pursued the completion the puzzle on his own rather than ask for the assistance of the teacher who was nearby. In this way, it might be argued that Maurice was assured that he could accomplish the task of finishing the figure on his own rather, that asking for help; a challenge that he posed to himself.

So, Maurice showed an awareness of the value of counting, probably in order to see whether he had all the pieces in the puzzle, and also an awareness of all the shapes. Finally, Maurice said that this activity was of value to him, as he knew how to do it and complete the task. Similarly, Maurice's twin brother, Justin, who was also present in the interview commented that this activity was not difficult for him:

**Maria: What about you Justin?**

**Is it difficult what you do there?**

**Justin: No.**

**Maria: Do you remember what you have to do?**

**Justin: That wasn't difficult.**

(Interview with Maurice and Justin, 21/02/2002)

Although this learning story showed that the activity was not too easy for both Maurice and Justin to complete, it is interesting to hear from the boys that they found it easy and of value to them. Could this suggest that the activity was stretching children's imagination and skills in an appropriate level rather than discouraging either or them?

Finally, it should be highlighted that none of the learning stories presented in chapter 9 was of children involved in repetitive play behaviour. This does not mean that there might not have been children that were engaged in repetitive play, but rather that due to the careful planning from the staff and the organization of the play props within the nursery, this behaviour was very limited (see chapter 7 on the pilot for comments on such behaviour). Similarly, adult interviews provided no information on children's repetitive ludic behaviour.

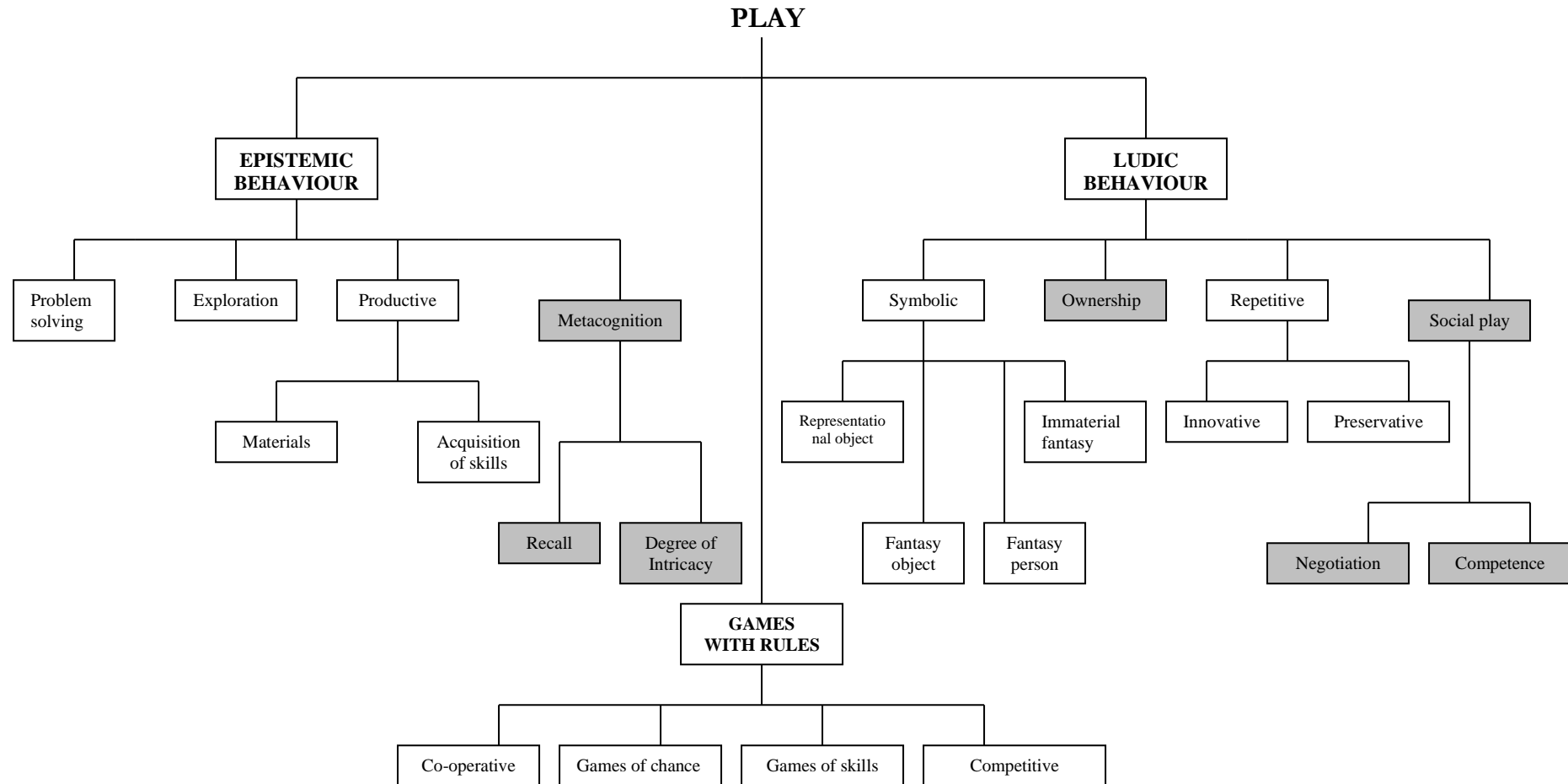
#### *Proposing a revised taxonomy of play*

However, the data collected (especially based on the children's constructions) for the purposes of this study, indicated that the subcategories of play by Hutt *et al.* (1989) could be informed by the addition of new subcategories. One of these subcategories could be listed under the epistemic behaviour term and they were: metacognition (with two further subcategories of recall and degree of intricacy). Other subcategories were ownership and social play (with further subcategories of negotiation and competence). These categories will appear to the revised taxonomy at the section below.

As it was discussed earlier, I have chosen not to discuss the games with rules category, because no data were collected for this category for the purposes of this study. However, as it was explained earlier, not enough data were collected for this category, so this was not included in the analysis.

These new subcategories are highlighted in grey at figure 8.1 in page 255 below.

Figure 8.1 A revised taxonomy of children's play



The reader should be reminded that these subcategories emerged mainly from the interpretation of young children's constructions of play through the video footage and the group discussions. Adult constructions came to support and confirmed young children's views most of the time, but it was the children who showed to have mastery of play at all times by providing explanation for their play incidents; by commenting on why they were involved in each play activity; who was engaged in this activity and what was the outcome of the activity (if any).

To start with, the term '**metacognition**' was based on the fact that children were able to provide the reasons behind each activity that was taking place or had previously taken place.

#### Metacognitive ability

Children could identify their play behaviours either as play or non-play when asked to comment on it. This ability of the children to declare whether an episode was play or not was not only limited to their own activities but was also extended to the activities of other children or adults in the setting, particularly those of their teachers, when they said that teachers are here to do some work.

An element of *metacognition* was apparent in children when they were asked to briefly comment on what other children on the video were doing; in these cases, most children commented that their peers 'were playing'. Garvey (1977) defined play metacognition as the regulatory actions children perform during play that maintain, negotiate, and direct the play activity. Although what Garvey (1977) suggested as metacognition applies to explicit references, it was apparent in this

study from the observations and children's interviews that implicit metacognitive communications were present in children's play. In other cases, as it will be shown later, children commented that their teachers were working rather than playing. Such judgments were based on what they had previously seen on the video or probably on children's views that children play and adults work. This subcategory included two further subcategories: 'recall' – referring to their ability or disability to provide accurate details of past play events, and 'degree of intricacy' – when children were suggesting the level of difficulty of each play activity that they were involved in.

#### Accuracy in recalling events

Most children showed great levels of accuracy when recalling the events that were shown on the video and what was their reason behind these play behaviours. In some instances, children recalled events that were not shown on the video, but were related to the play sequence that they had seen. When Helen, for instance, saw the video clip where she, Michaela and Darlene were in the role-play area, she remembered that Honora was pretending to be the teacher, although Honora could not be seen on the video clip that the three girls had just watched:

**Maria:** Do you remember what you were doing there?

**Helen:** Old school.

**Maria:** Where you in an old school?

**Michaela:** Yes.

**Maria:** Were you a teacher or a child?

**Who was the teacher? Do you remember?**

**Michaela:** Honora.

**Maria:** So, was Honora the teacher then?

Helen: Yeah. That's Lona. That's you Darlene there.

(Interview with Helen, Michaela and Darlene, 18/02/2002)

Children's accuracy in recalling the play sequences on the video is also apparent in the children's conversations on their constructions of learning that follows.

### Difficulty in recalling play events

Although most of the children could accurately recall their play events, a few children that found it difficult, initially, to associate themselves with their image on the video without being prompted. These children initially seemed to base their arguments of whether it was themselves or not on the television mainly on the clothes they were wearing, the children they were playing with or the play materials that were available in the room in the film and the day of the interview. Paying attention at the types of clothes children wore on the video footage and comparing them with the clothes that they were wearing on the day that the interview took place was confusing for some children. Jeff who was present in the interview, was confused since he happened to be wearing a similar colour jumper to the one that Jagger was wearing on the television; this is the conversation that followed:

Maria: Who's that again?

Jagger: Me.

Maria: Do you remember what you were doing there? (Jagger at the computer)

Jagger: I didn't do anything there!!

Maria: Were you just sitting then?

Jagger: No!

I didn't do that!

I wasn't doing that!

Maria: Were you just watching then at the computer?  
 Jagger: No. I wasn't there!!! (Looking at the jumper he is wearing on the TV and the one he has on - not the same colour)  
 Maria: Who's that then?  
 Jeff: Me. (Co-incidentally Jeff is wearing the same colour jumper as Jagger was on the TV and thinks it was him)  
 Maria: Is it you? I thought it was Jagger.  
 What are you doing there?  
 Do you remember?  
 Jeff: No.  
 Maria: And who's that?  
 Jagger: Jeff.  
 Maria: Is that Jeff are you sure?  
 Jeff: No, Jagger.  
 Jagger: I've got blue top on, I have.  
 (Interview with Jagger and Jeff, 05/03/2002)

Jagger initially found it very difficult to tell that it was himself on the video at the beginning and so did Jeff. But after being prompted he recalled that he was helping another child, Terry, with the shorting shapes game, an event that had taken place not the same day that he was watching the video but another day:

Maria: Let's see what you were doing there.  
 Do you remember what you were doing there with Terry?  
 Jagger: Helping Terry.  
 Maria: Were you showing Terry how to do it?  
 Jagger: Yeah. Oh, that was from another day!  
 Maria: Yeah. That's from another day.  
 (Interview with Jagger and Jeff, 05/03/2002)

Both these new subcategories were listed under the '*epistemic behaviour*' based on the fact that in order for these abilities to exist children needed to apply their cognitive skills and were not mood dependant.

#### Degree of intricacy of certain play activities

Children commented on the degree of intricacy of their play activities. They suggested that some activities were easy for them to complete and other were



quite difficult. For instance, Maurice, when talking about the sorting shapes games, commented that these were easy for him as he is quite old now and that they are 'difficult for babies':

Maria: Have you been playing with these toys upstairs?

What are you doing here Maurice?

Maurice: I am trying to count. I am trying to put them on and off.

Maria: Is it difficult to do it?

Maurice: Yes. Difficult for babies.

Maria: Is it difficult for you?

Maurice: No, it's good for me.

Maria: Why is it good?

Maurice: Because I know how to do it.

(Interview with Maurice and Justin, 21/02/2002)

Such comments could challenge the views of researchers who argue that play is a pleasurable activity (Mead, 1896/7; Saracho, 1991 and Cortazzi, 1993). This play activity that Michael was involved in could be regarded as *epistemic* rather than *ludic* play according to Hutt's *et al.* (1989) categorisation of play based on Michael's account, as he explicitly stated that the activity was good for him, which could be translated that Michael was learning something from the activity rather than just having fun.

Other children like Nimah, commented that she liked books, but she could not read because she was still young, again providing evidence of epistemic behaviour (Hutt *et al.* 1989):

Maria: Do you like reading stories?

Neala: Yes. I can't read stories. But I can look at pictures.

Missy: I like stories.

Maria: Why can't you read stories?

Neala: I am quite little.

(Interview with Missy and Neala, 19/02/2002)

These children seemed to be aware of their abilities as well as limitations, with a possible reference to the different stages and styles of play (Parten, 1932, Piaget, 1962, Hutt *et al.* 1989) as well as the complexities that are involved with play (Piaget, 1962) that children go through as they grow older. Thus, children's age was a contributing factor in how they were approaching certain tasks – approaches similar to the different play stages provided by Parten (1932) and Piaget (1962).

They also provided evidence that their cognitive skills were employed in completing these challenging activities (Gross, 1898/1901; Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner *et al.* 1980). Thus, Glenda, when faced with a difficulty while playing with a sorting shape game, told me that she did not seek the teacher's assistance; she would rather try to figure it out herself and she managed to complete the task on her own:

Maria: When you put all these shapes together, what does it look like?

Glenda: Triangles....

Ida: That's Sue.

Maria: Did you find out how to do it?

Glenda: I had to figure out.

Maria: Did you have to figure out?

Glenda: Yes.

(Interview with Glenda and Ida, 21/02/2002)

All children's responses showed that without adult intervention they were using their initiative to solve problems in various play situations either by building on previous experiences or by a trial and error approach. Children, especially the older children, would often comment that they were old enough to be able to

solve a problem on their own, even if, as in the case of Maurice, they had difficulties with a certain task to start with.

The term **'ownership'** listed under the category of *'ludic behaviour'* was mood dependant and suggested that children, based on their interests, skills and abilities. Children showed that were able not only to choose their play activities but also to extend their play incidents according to their skills and abilities. Children also, mainly talked about themselves in relation to play experiences and why they acted in a certain way while playing – their 'management' of play. Some children also commented on the role of the teachers during their play. For instance, when asked about whether their teachers were playing or working, all children said that they were not playing but working. Children mainly thought that their nursery teachers were working or were at the nursery to help children carry out the activities, like Jeff for example:

Maria: And why do you think the teachers come here?  
Do they come here to do some work or do they come here to play?  
Jeff: To help you.  
Maria: What are they helping you to do?  
Jeff: Do things.  
Maria: To do things. Like what?  
Jeff: Make a pattern....  
Maria: Yes.  
Jeff: Painting...

(Interview with Jagger and Jeff, 05/03/2002)

According to Jeff, his teachers came to the setting to provide him with extra support and an opportunity to engage with activities that he wasn't too familiar with or he needed assistance with and to help children out with activities rather than play with them.

Children were not always able to say why they were playing or what they thought play was, nevertheless they commented that their teachers were working rather than playing, posing a different notion to their own activities and their teachers' activities in the setting.

Finally, the term of **'social play'** included the subcategories of 'negotiation' and 'competence' and was listed under the term of *'ludic play'*. According to the children's accounts and the views of adults, the former's involvement in social play activities were mainly mood dependent. Children would negotiate their access to other children's play incidents, and would also show a great degree of competence when it came to applying social skills of acceptance and approval or disapproval of certain play behaviours of other children. Social play is further explored in chapter 9, where examples of children's social play situations are given in a form of learning stories and seem to be underpinning all areas of learning (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA, 2000).

It should be highlighted at this point that by suggesting the term **'metacognition'** I wanted to give emphasis on children's ability to identify their play behaviours as either play or non-play. This ability, as it was stated earlier in this chapter, was extended not only to their own activities but also to the activities of other children. However, the taxonomy of play does not provide grounds for activities that were considered by the researcher as non-play (such as being on the computer or reading a book) and were therefore left unexplored. Perhaps further

research will attempt to create a new taxonomy where elements of non-play activities could also be positioned alongside the elements of play activities.

To conclude, children exhibited high levels of metacognitive ability, and accuracy in recalling the play events, their views of play and its difference from work, their sense of ownership, as well as the rationale for being involved in a certain play activity.

### **iii) The role of parents and nursery staff in young children's play**

This last section of chapter 8 examines the roles of adults in relation to your children's play within and out of the nursery. Through the course of the study, their roles seemed to be significant in how children were engaged with the play activities within the nursery and out of the nursery, while at home or during out-of-school experiences in general. As it will be presented most of the roles were similar between the groups, while other roles were dependant on the 'authority' of the person involved, for example the Head of the nursery or a member of staff.

#### *Parents' role in young children's play*

Parents discussed issues around their children's play activities and experiences within the home setting. They talked about the role of other family members – mothers, fathers, siblings and extended family, however, it was clear that mothers had the lead role in all cases, as they spent more time with their children than other members of the family.

According to both mothers and fathers, children were involved in mostly imaginative and role-play situations at home (ludic play) and also engaged in outdoor activities with members of their families or their friends. Some parents also talked about the provision of writing activities, drawing and books at home as well as play material for constructive play (epistemic play). Table 8.3 below, summarises the adult roles in young children's play.

<b>Table 8.3 Adult roles in young children's play</b>	
<i><b>Parents</b></i>	<i><b>Nursery Staff</b></i>
Discussant	Discussant
Observer	Observer
Involved	Facilitator
Playmate	Instigator
	Developer
	Assessor
	Supporter
	Manager
	Supervisor

According to the table, parents' roles were identified through analysis of interview as the following:

- *discussant* - where mothers talked with their children about the activity that they were involved in and the reason behind their play behaviour (Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Kontos, 1999),

- *observer* - where mothers and fathers were mainly interested to 'check' on the child, especially their behaviour- (Saracho, 1991; Swadener and Johnson, 1989),
- *involved* and *playmate* with active participation in children's play (Power and Parke, 1992).

Unlike mothers, the two fathers who were interviewed reported that they were more physically active and involved in their children's play, especially with boys (Tarullo, 1994). Fathers said they usually became involved in 'rough and tumble' games and outdoors activities such as chasing and hide-and-seek. A father of twin girls also suggested that he was involved in outdoor activities with them and rarely in role-play situations. Where children had siblings, parents reported their *secondary role*; children would get mainly involved in play activities with their siblings and their parents would occasionally get involved or would mainly hold themselves back taking the role of observer.

There was some reference, though limited – only 2 out of the 21 parents, to other members of the extended family such as grandmothers and aunts and their roles in children's play. According to most of the parents, their children had the opportunity to see their relatives frequently and regularly and to engage with them in various play activities. On such occasions, parents reported that they were able to distinguish and differentiate between the play roles and behaviours that their children were adopting. The fact that their children would choose to take the leading position in play or they would allow others to become leaders was

identified explicitly by parents as a variation in play dynamics. When involved in play situations with different members of the family children would choose either to allow the grandmother to have the leading role in play, as in the case of Audrey aged 4:2, or they would create a scenario to base an imaginary situation together with the aunt, as in the case of Jagger aged 4:2.

### *Nursery staff roles in young children's play*

These play activities varied in nature and form and were based on a certain topic introduced in short-, medium- and long-term planning. In the same lines, a reference also took place about the appropriateness of each play activity both with regards to children's development and with regards to the topic under discussion. All activities were in accordance to the learning outcomes and overall requirements of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (2000) and were aiming to cover children's development in all six areas of learning, as identified in the curriculum guidance (see chapter 10).

Children's ethnic, racial and religious background and the awareness of children's individual needs were also taken into consideration while planning and providing for children's play activities. Finally, equally important in this conscious attempt of the nursery staff to cater for all children's previous experiences was the importance of parental involvement and home-school partnership in children's nursery play activities in and out-of-nursery during the academic year.

As far as the *management* of play within the nursery setting is concerned, nursery staff identified many of their roles to be these that were also identified in



the literature (Kontos, 1999; Saracho, 1991; Jones and Reynolds, 1992) and used for parents earlier in this chapter- these were:

- *discussant and facilitator;*
- *observer;*
- *instigator and developer;*
- *assessor;*
- *supporter, manager and supervisor* – roles that were specifically attributed to the Head teacher.

To begin with, the role of the Head teacher in relation to children's play was different from the role of the other members of staff. This mainly had to do with the fact that the Head teacher was there to support the nursery staff and also to manage and coordinate their efforts and practices. She was there to provide ideas when needed and also to give feedback in relation to the planning. According to the Head teacher, staff was responsible for the planning of the monthly activities, as the latter were familiar with the children in their groups, but she would provide her ideas if needed. With regards to the roles of the nursery staff in relation to these of the parents, it is apparent that the nursery staffs' roles were more complex than these of the parents. This might have to do with the different aspirations of the roles of these two groups, as well as parental expectations with regards to their children's educational – 'quality' time spent at the nursery.

A difference in this role of the nursery staff and the parents was evident at this point. Previously parents had suggested that they adapted the role of the observer with regards to children's play. They observed children's playtime mainly to make sure that their children were behaving well and did not experience any anxiety or were not involved in any dispute. However, the role of the observer was different when it came to the nursery staff; they observed children's play in order to inform themselves about the individual characteristics of the child and were also using these observations to inform their practices, including the planning of the activities. Jane talked about her role as an observer when she denoted that:

**I observe them and I also intervene in their play. It is important to know when to step in and when to step back. I also provide them with opportunities to build on their play.**

Jane – Nursery Nurse

In addition, nursery staff assessed children's play through these observations and records were created for each child separately. Jill and Dina talked specifically how they monitored children's play to inform their planning and practices; both gave an example of how this was performed. To begin with, Jenny used her observations of the construction area and the computer area to identify which children were usually in these areas, so that she could encourage other children, girls in specific, to also use them:

We monitor what the children are doing. And, that is quite interesting, because we know, I mean we're all aware that children play with the construction by monitoring, you know when you do that it comes up in your face sometimes that, certain times, not always (laughs), that maybe girls could do with being drawn over to the construction area from time to time. Like this morning, I've made, at the end of the session, I made at the computer, mainly boys had been on it, I just told the boys that is was 'girls' time' (laughs).

Jill – Nursery Teacher

However, there were cases when nursery staff, like Annette, found it difficult to get involved in certain play activities mainly because she was not drawn to them. This did not mean that Annette was avoiding these activities altogether, rather that she was forcing herself into them as she explicitly declared. This was an interesting comment as it provided evidence that nursery staff had their own preferences, as children did with regards to certain play activities but this however was acknowledged and was not hindering their play practices as such.

To me it depends what play is it that they're doing. If it's imaginary play or imitative play in the house corner that is something I really like doing. I do like lots of role-play so I'm very happy to slip into that and I don't mind being the child's mother or the child's granny or the child's daughter. And I always slip into that role. What I find difficult is an activity like the construction, which I'm not very comfortable with, I tend to let the children lead that and the best thing I can do is show the children plans of it and hopefully we can work together on it. But unfortunately, I haven't got great deal of imagination when it comes to construction.... You know, but anything like cookery, art, making things, I'm really happy with that but construction, I don't really like doing it, I have to **force** myself (laughs)...

Annette – Nursery Nurse

So, from the responses given above, nursery staff seemed to employ a variety of roles according to their personal attributes or needs of the children and learning outcomes based on the nursery's curriculum and the curriculum guidance

for the foundation stage. Six of the nine members of the nursery staff made reference to similar approaches to children's play planning and provision; approaches that might have been influenced by the nursery's:

- a) philosophy – that young children are learning through play
- b) policy – the additional curriculum that was developed by the Head of the nursery and the nursery staff, as well as
- c) environment and
- d) historical background – as it was a well established nursery with long tradition and high reputation in early childhood education provision.

Finally, of importance was the profile of each and every teacher, nursery nurse and classroom assistant, who had experience working in various early years settings, while most of them have been working at the nursery for more than 10 - 15 years time.

## **Summary of chapter 8**

This chapter aimed to present the nursery play constructions of young children and their significant adults. It begun by presenting young children's views and tried to analyse the proposed framework of this study alongside the taxonomy of play by Hutt *et al.* (1989). Then the views of parents and nursery staff followed in this order. This chapter dealt with the following questions:

1. How do children define and construct play?
2. How do adults (parents and nursery staff) define and construct play?
3. What additions can be made to the Hutt *et al.* (1989) taxonomy of play?

#### 4. What is the adult role in young children's play?

##### 1) **How do children define and construct play?**

When children talked about their nursery play experiences, they provided with detailed accounts of the play episodes they saw on video. Most children mainly referred to their activities in a literal way, but some commented that they were 'playing' and later gave more specific information as to what they had been doing. Children did not elaborate on their views of what play is, something that I interpreted as meaning that, for children, play is a natural activity which is part of their daily lives and that probably children do not concern themselves about its differentiation from 'non-play' or 'work'. Some children said that 'work' rather than 'play' happened when they were on the computer and there was a sense from the children that there was a need for them to be involved with the computer when they were at the nursery.

This chapter has shown that the majority of children quite easily recalled the play events shown on the video and made additional comments about related play incidents (not necessarily on the video), but which children considered to be important. Some children, however, found it difficult to recall play events or even associate themselves with their images on the television without being prompted but prompted most children understood that it was themselves they could see on the video.

Children also commented on the difficulty of certain play activities and the role of the adults (mainly the members of staff). These according to some children were present at the nursery to provide their help and assistance to the children when needed. Finally, children's metacognitive skills were apparent; during such discussions children were more likely to refer to the play incidents as 'play' rather than anything more specific.

## **2) How do adults define and construct nursery play?**

Parents commented on the processes and properties of play both at home and at the nursery. They talked about the management of children's play when parents talked about their own role in their children's play. This role varied from parent to parent and according to gender. Parents also provided definitions of what they thought their child considered play to be. Their definitions varied and in some cases contradicted one another. Parents said that *'play is fun'*, *'everything children do is play'* and *'play is imaginary situations'* and others suggested that for their children *'nursery play is work'* thus recognising their children's distinction between home and nursery play.

Nursery staff also referred to the processes, properties and management of play mainly in the nursery setting. They talked about the provision of various types of play such as creative, imaginative, constructions, sand and water, social play, outdoors play and the computer and book corner. This provision being

influenced by the national curriculum as well as the nursery's curriculum, tradition, philosophy, and policy.

When members of nursery staff were asked to provide children's definitions of play, they thought that play for children is *'fun'*, *'children's work'*, *'a natural thing to do'*, *'important part of their lives'*, *'inherent'*. One member of staff commented that nursery play is different than home play; nursery play is work for the children (Isaacs, 1932).

### **3) What additions can be made to the Hutt et al. (1989) taxonomy of play?**

Both terms 'epistemic' and 'ludic' were seen as complimentary rather than oppositional to each other and three new subcategories that could be included to the Hutt's *et al.* (1989) play taxonomy have been proposed. The proposed revised taxonomy of play based on the constructions of young children and their significant adults provided grounds for three further subcategories to emerge. These were the term of **metacognition** (recall and degree of intricacy) listed under the 'epistemic behaviour' category and **ownership** and **social play** (negotiation and competence) listed under the 'ludic play' behaviour. This revision will need to be tested through further research but is proposed as an important outcome of this thesis.

#### **4) What is the adult role in young children's play?**

Each group of participants seemed to express both similar and different roles when it came to children's play. One reason for the differences in their roles might be considered to be difference in their responsibilities; parents were relying on nursery staff to provide children with additional play opportunities that would enhance their social competence, cognitive and overall educational skills. Parents felt the opportunities that were provided to their children at home were limited in relation to the opportunities that their children had at the nursery.

However, parents talked about their roles as these of the discussant, observer, involved and playmate, as well as a secondary role when their children were playing with their siblings. It was mainly mothers that were adapting to these roles, as they were those spending more time with their children. Two fathers that were interviewed stated that they were involved in their children's play. Nevertheless, their involvement was different to these of the mothers; it was considered to be more physical, including running, chasing, rough and tumble, and varied according to the gender of the children. Some mothers finally, talked about their inability to get involved in their children's imaginative situations and therefore remained observers.

With regard to the nursery staff roles, it appeared that some of their roles were similar with these of the parents. Nursery staff also talked about the role of the discussant and the observer. Nevertheless, there was a difference in the second role – whilst parents would observe children to ensure their children's



well-being and good behaviour, nursery staff would observe children to monitor, assess and record children's play behaviour. Other additional roles were these of the facilitator, instigator, assessor, developer, supporter, manager and supervisor. Again these roles varied and became more complicated according to the role and responsibilities of the educator within the setting. Nursery staff particularly encouraged parental involvement at their children's nursery play (Athey, 1990).

After having discussed in this chapter the play constructions of young children, their parents and nursery staff and also the proposed additions to the Hutt *et al.* (1989) play taxonomy in this chapter, chapter 9 will concentrate on the young children's constructions of learning through nursery play.

## CHAPTER NINE:

### Young children's nursery play constructions of learning

This chapter will present and analyze young children's constructions of nursery play in general and, more specifically, of learning. Young children's perceptions of learning in the nursery setting are the main strand of this study. The key concept of 'learning through play' has influenced the experiences and practices of early years practitioners in the UK (Abbott, 1994; Abbott, 2001; Nutbrown, 1994) and throughout the world (Abbott and Nutbrown, 2001; Makrinioti, 2000; Filippini and Vecchi, 1996); children's play, as discussed in chapter 2, has been observed for patterns of learning behaviours by various researchers. Chapter 8 also presented how the Hutt *et al.* (1989) taxonomy could be linked to the learning stories that are analysed in the present chapter (see table 8.2 for full account). The key research questions that will be addressed in this chapter are:

- i. How do young children view play?
- ii. How do young children experience nursery play in relation to learning?
- iii. Is there evidence to support that children learn through play within the nursery setting?

To assist with the report, the data will be presented as 'learning stories', eluding the work of Carr (1998), drawn from the video footage and children's play observations in the nursery setting during fieldwork. The 'learning stories' will

then be supported by children's conversations and comments during the pair/group interviews (MacNaughton, 1999 – personal communication). For analysis purposes, data will be structured and presented within the 6 areas of learning adapted from the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) as the setting that the study was carried out was situated in the North of England (chapter 5).

I acknowledge the difficulty in defining each area of learning when it comes to children's nursery play behaviour, as well as the fact that children's developmental and learning processes should be viewed holistically (Bruce, 1991). It is evident from the data presented in this chapter, as well as chapters 8 and 10, that children's play behaviour is interweaved by more than one area of learning and such 'labelling' is not particularly successful or straightforward.

However, by presenting the data, where possible, within these six areas of learning, I hope to achieve a coherent structure for analysis. This chapter consists of the following themes:

Young children's nursery play constructions of learning:

- g) Personal, social and emotional;
- h) Communication, language and literacy;
- i) Mathematical development;
- j) Knowledge and understanding of the world;
- k) Creative development, and
- l) Physical development.

### *Young children's nursery play constructions of learning*

While at nursery, children were involved in a variety of play activities that had previously been planned and set out by the nursery staff. These activities aimed to cover all 6 areas of children's learning based on the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000).

Throughout this study, observations and video footage (Forman, 2001) of all areas of the nursery were carried out with particular attention paid to indoor play activities. Children were observed and filmed at the home corner and role-play area, the construction area, the computer, the creative and writing areas as well as the sand and water and the small imaginative play areas. No direct reference can be made to children's outdoor activities since for practical reasons the video footage was limited to the indoor activities. Outdoor play has been researched in other studies including this of Bilton (1998) and also remains an area for future research.

#### **a. Personal, social and emotional**

The nursery was an opportunity for most young children to get involved in play activities with other children of similar age, some of whom they knew prior to attending the nursery and others they had never met before. Through this process children were developing both personally and socially (Corsaro, 1981); they were becoming familiar with their personal preferences, their positioning amongst other children and were also trying out negotiation and communication skills as well as extending their imagination (Atkin, 1988).

Commonly seen in the setting were pairs or groups of children engaged in various activities such as: role-play and dressing-up situations to drawing, painting and building at the construction area (MacNaughton, 2000). Interaction between children varied according to how familiar children felt with each other and mainly the age of children (Corsaro, 1997; Cummins, 1996); younger children tended to get involved in solitary activities (Piaget, 1962). It was mostly the case for children who had known each other for a long time or children who often met each other outside the setting that a greater degree of acceptance, participation and familiarity were present.

### **Saving the monkey**

Children involved in the following learning story (9.1), Terry and Patricia had known each other for a long time and this is evident in both the observation and the discussion that follows.

This learning story is characterized as 'ludic' play behaviour, under the 'fantasy object' subcategory according to the Hutt *et al.* (1989; p.224 - 225) taxonomy of play, which is the 'commonest form of such pretence' and – may involve a change in the 'character of an article or object'. The above video extract involves an activity set out by the nursery staff under the 'knowledge and understanding of the world' learning area with the aim 'children to become competent constructors' (Short term planning, Downstairs room, February 2002).

At the same time the staff had included animals in the area in an attempt to make the area attractive for both girls and boys (Gura, 1992).

#### Learning story 9.1: Construction area

Terry and Patricia are at the construction area where the big wooden building blocks are being set up along with some wild animals (an elephant, a giraffe, a monkey, a lion and a crocodile). Patricia is playing with the animals rather than the blocks. Terry joins Patricia and he takes the monkey from her hands without asking her. Patricia does not seem disturbed by Terry's action. She picks up the giraffe, which was laying next to her and moves closer to Terry, who has now started building a tall wall with the rectangle blocks; each move is thought of carefully before placing more blocks on top of each other and Terry seems to calculate how to add more blocks to create a symmetric building. The structure looks like a house with two windows on either side. Patricia looks closely at Terry's construction and then hands the giraffe over to Terry and Terry gives her the monkey back, she also tries to build something on her own by placing two blocks close to each other. At that point Terry and Patricia start to make a plot about how they would help the monkey get out of the house, which is now on fire. Terry initiates the story; Patricia seems to be willingly following Terry's suggestions, while Madeline who joined the children on the other side of the table is only observing them.

The presence of the toy animals allowed Terry and Patricia to create a complex and elaborate structure and to participate in a pretend situation using available animals. Both children were involved in with Terry initiating and Patricia taking an interest and participating.

When the children were asked what they were doing on the video, their responses initially were restricted to the animals and who had which:

Terry: ... I had the monkey.

Maria: Yes, you had the monkey. And what were you doing with the monkey?

Terry: And Patricia.... Pretending to [inaudible] ... and Patricia had the baraf (giraffe).

Maria: What did you have Patricia?

Patricia: The giraffe.  
 Maria: Ah, the giraffe.  
 Terry: There's the giraffe.  
 Maria: And what do you have now?  
 Terry: Crocodile.  
 Terry: The other morning [inaudible]  
 Maria: Yes, the other morning we could ask the teachers to get them out.  
 Terry: Don't get the same things out.  
 Maria: What would you like to get out?  
 Terry: A baby monkey ... [inaudible]  
 Patricia: That's a lion with me now.  
 Maria: Yes, that's a lion with you.  
 Terry: That's me.  
 Maria: What are you doing there with the animals? Do you remember?  
 Terry: No, Patricia has the monkey.  
 Maria: And what have you got, you've got the giraffe. What is the giraffe doing?  
 Terry: Dombing (jumping).  
 Maria: Is the giraffe jumping?  
 Terry nods yes.

(Interview with Terry and Patricia, 18/02/2002)

Terry and Patricia each had an animal according to 'learning story' 9.1, shows as soon as Terry entered the area that Patricia was preoccupied in, he decided to take the animal from Patricia's hand. This gesture did not seem to upset Patricia either at that time or later when both children were watching the video footage. The fact that children were friendly with each other allowed space for negotiation and openness amongst each other. As a result they were both intrigued by the story line that followed, where they have experienced the fear of an animal being eaten by a stronger one, the anxiety of an animal being trapped in a house that was on fire, the rescue attempts and the feeling of relief when the monkey was saved.

Maria: Do you remember what you are going to make?  
 Terry: A tower.  
 Maria: Why do you have to make a tower?

Terry: For the monkey to climb at. There is Patricia and there's me [pointing at the TV]

Maria: What does Patricia have to do there? [Patricia is holding the giraffe]

Terry: Climb up there.

Maria: Does she have to climb up?

Terry: A lion might eat her.

Maria: You think so?

Look, you're making something.

Terry: Yeah. That's a house.

Maria: Is that a house? Who do you make the house for? Is it for the lion?

Terry and Patricia: No, the monkey.

Terry: The monkey is in.

Maria: What is Patricia doing there?

Terry: She's making a house for the giraffe.

Patricia: I am making a wall...

Terry: Patricia is on my wall. I did it on my own.

Maria: Did Patricia help as well?

[Patricia nods yes]

Maria: Is that house for the monkey?

Patricia: The monkey is on the top.

Terry: That is cause I am building it.

Maria: Oh, look he's in the house now.

[Patricia laughs]

Patricia: Look there it is [pointing at the monkey].

Maria: So do you like playing with the blocks?

[Node yes]

Maria: Why do you like playing with the blocks?

Terry: I can build things.

Maria: You're saying something there. Is the monkey stuck and can't get out?

Terry: There's fire. He's trying to get out the window.

Maria: Where is the window then?

Terry: There where I am putting me hand in.

Maria: And what is the giraffe doing?

Patricia: Trying to save it.

(Interview with Patricia and Terry, 18/02/2002)

The above extract is an example of what Wood and Attfield (2005) are referring to when they talk about children playing 'with strong emotions such as fear, grief, anger, jealousy, love, hatred, guilt, anxiety, betrayal, rejections and injustice' (p.81). Such feelings can be practiced in safe contexts (*ibid.*) in order for



children to be able to play, learn and interact with other children or adults around them. Similarly, the nursery that this study took place seemed a safe environment according to the previous learning story.

To support this, a still photograph<sup>6</sup> from the video footage that was shown to the children during the interview is included at this point. Both children showed a degree of competence in building with the big blocks, although Terry's structure was more complex and advanced compared to that of Patricia's.

**Picture 9.1: 'Saving the monkey'**



Both Terry and Patricia that were present in the discussion wanted to show me which structure they did by claiming that they did it 'on their own'. A sense of ownership and the need to show to other people what they were each capable of is evident in the conversation above (Bennett *et al.* 1997). Terry, commented that he can 'build things' showing his awareness of his capabilities and that his ability to get involved and create complex structures that was not

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that all children's photographs have been blurred to ensure confidentiality.

limited to single incident on the video. Similarly, Patricia stated that she made the wall on her own, showing that she was also capable of building. As discussed earlier, Patricia and Terry were building structures and involved in a role play situation where emotions were at the forefront and they needed to negotiate and show social competence.

Terry was the older child and seemed to be leading the story for the majority of the time, but Patricia also followed Terry's suggestion, and shared his story, trying hard to play a significant role in this pretend play situation. When the children saw the video footage a few weeks after the incident took place, both could recollect the roles they had taken and talked about their confidence in their ability to create structures unaided. Both children also showed social skills and positive self-esteem that enabled them to explore and act out feelings of anxiety, fear and security (Winnicott, 1971; Roberts, 2002) in a safe environment and amongst children who they were comfortable playing with.

### **The birthday cake**

Children's opportunities for discussions with their friends, other children or adults in the setting arose in most of the areas within the classroom. During these discussions children were often involved in a pretend world and their roles varied from time to time according to the situation that was set out by one or more children (Paley, 1984; 1988). Usually, one of the children would invent a story and other children nearby would take an interest and either accept the role offered or not participate (Paley, 1993). In learning story 9.2 Madeline suggested

that they should make a birthday cake and Ella volunteered to help Madeline and then make a birthday cake of her own.

In the video footage and learning story 9.2 below (ludic play; symbolic, representational object according to Hutt *et al*, 1989), it is evident that both girls enjoyed whisking the water and pouring the water with the bubbles in the small and large bowls. At times the behaviour seemed repetitive – with water being poured in and out of the bowls – but both girls demonstrated their fine motor skills by whisking carefully so that no water was thrown out of the bowls. Ella was investigating the properties of water, allowing it to fall between the metal strings of the whisk into the bowl.

#### Learning Story 9.2: Water tray

Madeline and Ella are at the water tray; soap flakes had been added to the water to create bubbles. There are several bowls and pots in the water and also some whisks. The two girls are wearing aprons and are positioned opposite to each other. Madeline is pouring water on the bowl with one hand, while carefully whisking the water with the other. Her bowl is overflowing, but that does not stop her from adding more and more water. Ella has also a small bowl which is full of bubbles. She brings the pot over the bowl and pours it through the gaps of the whisker; she then whisks the water in the bowl, looks at Madeline and pours some water in Madeline's bowl. Madeline empties the bowl and starts filling it in again.

Madeline to Ella: I'm the mummy.

Pretend we're mixing it.

Ella: All this?

Madeline: Yes, we need more!

Madeline: Pretend it was making cake.

Ella: Well, I'm making a cake.

Madeline: It's ready now. Take the bowl. And she hands the bowl to Ella.

As with learning story 9.1, the girls moved further than just ‘using’ the water tray to see the different effects of adding water to dry substances according to the nursery planning. According to the planning the activity that the girls were involved in was listed under the ‘Knowledge and understanding of the world’ learning area with the aim to ‘show the different effects of adding water to dry substances’ (Short term planning, Downstairs, February 2002). The girls however, used the activity to create an imaginary situation and give a whole new meaning to their actions instead (Riley, 2003).

When this video footage was taken, the children had been discussing the theme ‘Long time ago’ (Long term planning, Downstairs, January/February 2002). Children had discussed what had happened in the past and were invited to bring their baby photographs to the nursery, for display. This might be one of the reasons what Madeline had chosen to talk about baking a birthday cake, she might have been influenced by the fact that she had been discussing with her peers and teachers about herself being born, other people’s lives and birthdays.

In the following conversation, Madeline and Ella tried to explain to me what they had been doing on the video:

**Maria:** Whose that?

**Madeline:** Me and Ella.

**Ella:** Both.

**Maria:** What are you doing?

**Ella:** We’re making a cake.

**Maria:** That’s a strange cake.

**Madeline:** That’s me. I am making a birthday cake.

**Maria:** What do you need to make a birthday cake, what have you got there?

**Madeline:** Some water to mix around.

Maria: Are these bubbles?  
 Madeline: Yes.  
 Maria: Have we got bubbles in birthday cakes?  
 Madeline: No. [Laughing] Pretend.  
 Ella: Yes.  
 Maria: Are you also making a cake Ella?  
 Ella: We both got a bowl.  
 Maria: Yes, you've both got a bowl and some whiskers.  
 Look, is that cake ready now?  
 Ella: No.  
 Madeline: You're putting that in the oven.  
 Maria: Where is the oven, is it somewhere else or there?  
 Madeline: No, the oven is the ups one. [Pointing at the top end of the water tray].

(Interview with Madeline and Ella, 18/02/2002)

This extract of the conversation that took place during the interview with both girls indicates that they both girls were aware of the difference between a real and a pretend cake. Their discussion also revolved around how to prepare and bake birthday cakes with Madeline initiating the baking of the cake and Ella participating and adding to the story, by trying to add some flavourings into Madeline's cake, who then moved to bake the cake in the 'ups one' side of the water tray.

During this conversation the girls show negotiation and social skills, and discussed their own personal experiences of making and baking cakes with their mothers at home (Paley, 1984; Nutbrown, 1994). That Madeline was aware of the fact that in order to make a cake you need 'some water to mix around' which you then have to 'put in the oven', provided additional evidence that she had helped someone baking a cake. Children were 'reliving' out-of-school experiences through this activity (Abbott, 1994).

Madeline made a comment about her Eid clothes, which she was wearing in the video footage. I wondered if this attempt to show that she belonged to a particular group of people or was she simply pleased with her new clothes? Ella agreed with Madeline's comment about her clothes, and she later talked about her clothes on the video.

In both learning stories (9.1 and 9.2) children engaged in meaningful activities with other children, initiating or showing interest and participating in imaginative activities with other children (Strandell, 2000; Corsaro, 1992; Smith, 1978). They were also practicing various fine motor skills and were emotionally engaged in pretend situations of anxiety, fear, security and pleasure – what Bruce (1999) refers to as play feature 1.

Nursery staff provided for both events that took place in learning stories 9.1 and 9.2 on the basis of learning goals, which mainly included physical and scientific skills. However, the children used the situations not only to practice those skills but also to create meaningful storylines that they found of interest. They used their imagination, shared, communicated and practiced social skills which enabled them either to attach an individual stamp on these activities or to re-enact past events (such as the girls who baked birthday cakes) and put themselves into unknown and fearful situations (when two children attempted to save the monkey from the fire) which they have mastered with empathy, patience, resourcefulness and cooperation (Pollard and Filler, 1996).

**b. Communication, language and literacy**

At the nursery, children were often involved in conversations with each other or with their teachers and nursery nurses (nursery staff). These took place in many different areas and children exchanged ideas, feelings, and anxieties or simply related experiences as they explored the range of activities available (Nutbrown, 1994; Abbott, 1994, Bennett *et al.* 1997). Children's discussions or conversations seemed to thrive in the writing and creative areas, the book and the home corner – especially for girls (Gura, 1992).

In the book corner children could choose a book and read it with the help of an adult or on their own. While reading alone children mainly chose books that they were familiar with, thus associating previous information/recollections of the story with what they were 'reading' from the illustrations of the books.

**Shared reading: the Snow Lady**

In rare instances, children would share a book with another child and together they would make an attempt to read it, as did Glenda and Meg in learning story 9.3. This observation took place at a time where most activities available to the children were related to Christmas and other festivals, such as Divali, Hanukah and Eid.

According to the medium term planning for the classroom the books were set out as a reference for children 'to find out about Divali, Eid, Hanukah and Christmas and the cultures they are part of' as part of the 'knowledge and understanding of the world' learning area and under the 'language, listening and

speaking' areas of learning (Medium term planning, Green room, November/December 2001).

Learning story 9.3: Book corner
<p><i>Glenda and Meg are in the book corner reading the book 'The Snow Lady' by Shirley Hughes. Glenda is holding the book and Meg is sitting next to her at the settee holding a teddy bear she brought from home.</i></p> <p><b>Glenda:</b> Once upon a time there a Father Christmas in the present with no clothes on. Well, the ghost and the cat and they took Father Christmas' clothes.</p> <p><b>Glenda:</b> That's not drawing; the dog did that. [pointing at a pen line on the text]</p> <p><b>Meg:</b> Can dogs draw?</p> <p><b>Glenda:</b> It's mock...Then, she made a [inaudible] and there was a dog there she watched television and then grandma was sitting with her cat. And there was a dog but grandma had a cat not a dog. Grandma was happy. A dog was a bad dog, so...</p> <p><b>Meg:</b> No, when they left a party...</p> <p><b>Glenda:</b> ... and then they went to a party and then they went home...</p> <p><b>Meg:</b> ...and they went to a dancing club...</p> <p><b>Glenda:</b> ... and they were dancing and the grandma was there and then 'Stop' said the mother. So, Look [showing Meg the pictures of the book]... and then they put the cat and a hat and a scarf...</p> <p><b>Meg:</b> The teddy wants to sit on your knees to see the pictures [showing the teddy she was holding to Glenda]</p> <p><b>Glenda:</b> And then Father Christmas came but to let her go. She woke up, put her clothes on, went out and then Father Christmas still came. He was in the present and then, then a stamp and that's the end.</p> <p><b>Meg:</b> End of story.</p>

Glenda and Meg seemed familiar with the story of the Snow Lady, but relying mainly on the pictures to 'tell the story'. They added the possibility of the main characters of the story having visited a 'dancing club', using their previous experiences of having heard the book and their imagination in 'reading' the pictures of the book (Wood and Attfield, 2005). Glenda had the book at her hands and seemed to set the pace, for the reading. Meg was paying close



attention to what Glenda was reading and made suggestions along the way; that Glenda incorporated in her 'reading'. In some instances, Meg's suggestions seemed to interrupt the flow of Glenda's reading, but Glenda seemed to acknowledge Meg's efforts to have her own telling of the story; she respected her suggestions, and added them to the plot. Glenda perhaps knew that in order to maintain the interest of her co-reader and her audience -Meg and Meg's teddy bear- she had to show the pictures of the book to them. Simialr actions were carried out by staff in the setting showing the importance of adult involvement and role modelling in children's play behaviour (Bordova and Leong, 1998).

The girls seemed to acknowledge the importance of the links between text and pictures when reading a book (Clay, 1967; Dyson, 1986; Riley, 2003), which was almost treated as a ritual where Glenda turned the book closer to Meg and her teddy for them to have a closer look. Finally, after starting and finishing the story with the appropriate or more commonly used phrases 'once upon a time' and 'the end', the two competent readers looked at each other and smiled as if satisfied by their achievement. The children did not comment on this clip but nevertheless, it provides me with an interesting insight into the communication, language and literacy skills of both girls. Elements such as concentration, ability to use script and pictures in combination to each other and at the same time memory skills, listening, literacy skills and imagination are apparent in this learning story (Nutbrown, 1994; Dyson, 1997).

## **The shopkeeper of a Chinese restaurant**

Communication through writing mainly took place in the home corner or the writing and creative areas that such activities were available to all children. Pens, pencils, felt pens, pads and books were available throughout the nursery classrooms and children would occasionally choose to ‘scribble’ something down depending on the activity they had been involved in on that particular day that the video footage was taken.

Honora, (in learning story 9.4 – ludic play, symbolic, fantasy object – Hutt et al. 1989) wrote that the restaurant (of which she was the ‘shopkeeper’) was closed in order to inform the customers. The following extract suggests that Honora might have been influenced her teacher, Diana, and Ella were already ‘writing’ the menu, while Honora was preparing the food for the costumers.

After Honora had finished cooking (while the menu was being prepared by Ella and Diana) Honora thought she could write the notice that the restaurant was closed, since earlier on she had suggested that she should be the ‘shopkeeper’.

Honora was aware of the importance of script (Abbott, 1994), especially when she had to leave the restaurant; this meant that she had to let the costumers know that the restaurant will be closed, according to her this was done by leaving a note for them in written form. She did not just go to Diana and Ella to tell them that the restaurant was about to close, she had chosen instead to write it down in a piece of paper that had already been prepared by the teachers as a

chequebook rather than notice paper. Her notice, looked like two different marks close to each other in different colour felt pens.

Learning story 9.4: Home corner
<p>Honora, Ella and their teacher Diana are setting-up the Chinese restaurant at the home corner. There are two tables with Chinese tablecloths; small bowls with noodles in them and shapes of mushrooms prawns and peppers. There are also several sets of chopsticks available on the table. On one side of the tables is the kitchen with the frying pans and some extra bigger bowls, while on the other there is a desk with a till and some chequebooks and pencils. There is also a tape playing Chinese music. Diana brings some paper folded in two for Ella and Honora to prepare the menu. Honora is cooking in the kitchen using the frying pan, while Ella sits next to Diana with a pen.</p> <p>Honora to Ella: Ella I'm the shopkeeper, aren't I?</p> <p>Ella nods affirmatively and then turns to Diana: Noodles £2.</p> <p>Diana suggests the prices of food and drinks while Ella is making marks on the paper. When more clients approach the shop, Honora serves them food from the frying pan. Then she goes to the one side of the shop where there is a till and some pieces of paper in a form of chequebook and she writes something down. After having finished she turns to Mollie and says: 'This one says it's closed'. And she leaves the restaurant to go to the other room.</p>

When later Honora was shown the video footage she remembered that she was the shopkeeper and she was also positive about on what the note was all about:

Maria: What is Honora doing here? [Honora is writing in a chequebook at the restaurant]

Honora: I am writing a note.

Maria: Why do you write a note?

Honora: To say it's shut.

Maria: Is the restaurant shut?

Honora: Yeah.

(Group discussion with Honora and Mollie, 18/02/2002)

The activity was planned part of children's understanding of the Chinese New Year in the teachers' planning during the January/February 2002. Children

were given the opportunity to hear Chinese music and to talk with their teacher about Chinese food and customs. Honora, when interviewed, remembered that the activity was about the Chinese New Year and she commented that this was a long time ago and that she was using a pan for cooking and that Chinese people eat noodles. Children's discussion of the Chinese restaurant will also be considered later, but this extract is included here to stress illustrate this particular girl's understanding of the importance of script and the meaning she could attribute to the marks she had written herself (Dyson, 1986).

### **'Working' on the computer**

With currently available information and communication technology children do not restrict themselves solely into using pen and paper to communicate in a written form (Marsh, 2002; Brooker and Siraj-Blatchford, 2002) as the following learning story (9.5, epistemic play, problem solving according to Hutt et al. 1989) and discussion show. The use of information technology allows children, in this case Darlene, to become familiar with letters, sounds and rhymes and to be engaged in activities of writing, even if they have not yet acquired hand-writing skills. Both girls seemed to be able to recognise and distinguish between letters and sounds that were associated with their names by using the keyboard of the computer to 'write' their names.

### Learning Story 9.5: Computer

It is outside time and most of the children from the downstairs room are outside, since the weather is nice. Darlene and Helen are sitting in front of the computer. Helen chooses to sit on the chair where she can have control over the mouse; Darlene is sitting next to her. They are both very close to the computer screen and seem to be paying close attention to what is on the screen. They spend most of the time listening to the songs and rhymes rather than being actively engaged. Then Darlene tries to press some keys on the keyboard with the letters that correspond to her name. However, there is no success as there is still the CD-Rom on the computer with the rhymes and the songs. Lizzie comes to have a look at the computer and leaves the scene a few seconds after, while Darlene spent the entire 'outside' time on the computer, but this time they only hear the songs and try to follow the rhymes.

As the conversation below shows, Darlene and Michela (twins) could write their names – it should be noted here that although there were two girls at the learning story 9.5, a third girl participated in the group discussion. This was being practiced at home with their father, and while at nursery Darlene tried to repeat the same activity with no success this time since it seemed she was not aware of the fact that she can not write when there is a programme on the computer.

It is equally important to realise that for these girls, and in particular for Helen and Michaela, being on the computer means working, as it is explicitly referred to below:

Maria: What are you doing here?

Darlene: I am on the computer.

Maria: Do you like going on the computer? Have you got one at home?

Darlene: Yes.

Michaela: Daddy lets me type on the computer.

Maria: When you are on the computer are you playing or working?

Helen: Working.

Michaela: I'm working.

Maria: Why do you think you are working?

Helen: Because I have to.

Maria: What about you Michaela, when you go on the computer what do you do?

Michaela: Type my name.

Maria: Can you type your name? Can you type your name Darlene?

Darlene: Yeah.

Maria: What about you Helen? Have you got a computer at home?

Helen: Yes.

Maria: What do you do on the computer?

Helen: Play and dance.

(Group interview with Helen, Darlene and Michaela, 18/02/2002)

All the girls liked using at the computer and it seemed that they had frequent experiences of computers both at the nursery and at home (Abbott, 1994). Michaela and Darlene were proud of the fact that they could type their names on the computer with the assistance of the twin's father. Having supportive adults around, these girls did not only work towards mastering hand-eye coordination skills on the computer but they were also practicing early writing skills as they became familiar with scripts and the use of letters to create meaning – in this case their own names (Bruner, 1980; Vygotsky, 1978; Swadener and Johnson, 1989). This could be seen as an early step in becoming literate and using more traditional means to create meaning – either is their names or more complicated and words (Dunn *et al.* 2000).

### **c. Developing mathematical understanding**

During their daily nursery play activities children often encountered various problems that contributed to their understanding of mathematical concepts such as counting, sorting, measuring and appreciating space (Scott, 2003; Gifford, 2004; Peters, 1998).

For example, children discussed their age with their peers and counted to find out who was older and which number came before or after another. Occasionally, children at the sand tray or water tray would fill different containers and compare them to see who had more or less. Children would sometimes be occupied with geometrical shape games and puzzles in an attempt to create an image or compare similar shapes with each other. Computer programmes were used by children to sort out, compare and become familiar with numbers, figures and quantities (Brooker and Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). Such activities were not necessarily teacher-initiated, although staff clearly providing the resources and the presentation of the activities.

The following extract show how some children used activities that were originally planned to contribute to children's understanding of mathematical concepts (Gifford, 2004; Nutbrown, 1997). Such activities attracted some children more than others with some showing confidence in using the activities independently and others other needed assistance by older children or staff.

### Using shapes to form a person

The learning story that follow come from the video extract where Justin, Maurice and Glenda are sitting at a table where there are three wooden games with geometrical shapes; one consists of a box with various shapes which children are asked to match with pictures of the same shapes, the other forms a person with circles for the head, rectangles for the arms, squares for the body and triangle for the legs in the four basic colours (red, green, blue and yellow); the last game involves three big triangles each formed by three smaller triangles.

As with Maurice and Justin in learning activity 8.1, presented in chapter 8, Glenda (learning story 9.6 – epistemic play, problem solving, Hutt *et al.* 1989), was also engaged with the sorting games made of the geometrical games. She used the activity independently, spending sufficient time with all three games; with no assistance from staff.

Learning story 9.6: Sorting shapes game table
Glenda sits on the table where there are three different types of sorting games with shapes; one forms a person, another has a series of different shapes that the children match by inserting them into holes and the last on has three triangles each formed by three smaller triangles of different colours. Glenda starts by matching the shapes and placing them into the holes. After she has completed the matching, she lifts the lid and places all the smaller shapes into the basket, where she originally found them. She moves on to form the person with the different shapes as parts of the body and she leaves the games with the triangles for last. Throughout the whole activity, she looks calm and confident; only at the final game, she seems to hesitate for a minute and then continues by finishing off the games without having asked for the assistant of the teacher who was nearby.



In the previous learning story, Glenda, showed the competence of being able to complete these games without the assistance of staff, although she commented later that she had to 'figure it out'. This attempt to 'figure it out' was also carried out by the twins (Maurice and Justin), who nevertheless, seemed pleased with the end result, which was to complete the set of geometrical games.

The pace of completing the activities was not the same for all three games; Glenda seemed to have found the activity where she had to match the shapes with the pictures the easiest, (completing this immediately). She moved on to forming the person - taking longer as Glenda investigated each piece closely before adding it to the puzzle. The last activity where triangle shapes were formed by smaller triangles seemed to have somewhat troubled Glenda. She seemed to hesitate and to take more time to think about which triangle went where. Glenda's use of her cognitive skills is also apparent below:

Maria: When you put all these shapes together, what does it look like?

Glenda: Triangles....

Ida: That's Sue.

Maria: How did you know how to do it?

Glenda: I had to figure out.

Maria: Did you have to figure out?

Glenda: Yes.

Maria: Was that difficult to do it?

Glenda: No.

Maria: Is that circle his leg or his arm?

Glenda: That's his head.

Ida: Two, three heads

Glenda: Loads of heads. A sad one as well.

Maria: Has he got a sad face as well?

Glenda: Yes.

I am putting them back on.

I am doing this.

Now I've done them.

I had to do it again cause it braked up.

(Interview with Glenda and Ida, 21/02/2002)

Glenda explained that although she had to figure out how to complete the puzzle, she did not find the process particularly difficult. She talked which part of the body where which shapes, but also she remembered that there were different expressions in the face (circle shape) of the person that she was trying to put together (as did Ida), who remembered that there was more one circle for the face.

In addition to the mathematical concepts that children in learning story 9.6 were developing through the use of shapes in a particular context children seemed to sustain an interest in the activity that challenged their previous knowledge and skills (Abbott, 1994). This challenge was welcomed by all children concerned, who seemed to become more aware of their capabilities of individual problem solving, concentration and persistence (Bruner *et al.* 1980; Hutt *et al.* 1989). None of the children asked for help from staff perhaps indicating that the nursery provided a safe environment where children had sufficient time to try unfamiliar activities until they succeeded (Nutbrown, 1998). This finding came in discordance with findings from the study by Hughes (2002), in which children teachers were involved in activities together.

### Wizard's number workshop

The use of information technology to enable children to become familiar with pre-writing and pre-reading activities was discussed earlier in this chapter. The next learning story 9.7 shows how the computer also seemed to support children's understanding of mathematical concepts (which could be regarded an epistemic play activity under the problem solving, exploration and productive activity, Hutt *et al.* 1989):

#### Learning story 9.7: Computer

Glenda is sitting next to Jagger in front of the computer. The CD-Rom 'Wizard's number workshop' is on. 'Wizard's number workshop, choose a game' is heard from the computer when Glenda enters the menu screen. She is moving the mouse with her right hand and closely looks on the screen. 'You have clicked on wizard's basket' says the computer, while Glenda chooses a game. This is the one showing Wizard with a big basket of onions on the one side of the screen, while on the other there are three smaller baskets with 1, 8 and 4 onions in each of them: 'Wizard has a big basket of onions. Which little basket has the same number of onions as Wizard's big basket?' asks the computer. Glenda brings the mouse over the small basket with the 4 onions. 'Yes, there are 4 onions in it. Well done!' says the computer and Glenda is now looking at Jagger with a big smile on her face. Glenda continues the counting game this time by trying to find the basket, which has the same amount of pears in it. She is successful again, and she plays 2 more games until she passes the mouse over to Jagger for his turn.

In learning story 9.7 Glenda is using activities from the 'Wizard's number workshop' CD-Rom. She was asked to identify the baskets that had the same amount of fruits or vegetables as the one that the wizard held. She had to count, compare and come to a decision – the computer rewarded correct responses. Glenda seemed confident in her decisions and carried out the activity several times before she let the child sitting next to her have a turn.

There were elements of concentration, when Glenda was asked to observe all baskets before she came to a decision; hand-eye coordination, as she held the mouse competently and moved the cursor around with great success; cognitive skills, especially in relation to mathematical concepts, when she was asked to observe, count and compare the quantity in each basket (Brooker and Siraj-Blatchford, 2002; Wood and Attfield, 2005). Glenda seemed very familiar with the game, it seemed as if she was sometimes responding automatically to the computer. Finally she showed another child how to play the game before she moved to another activity.

When I invited Glenda to comment on the video footage of this incident, she said that she was trying to ‘match the things in the big basket and in the little basket’, showing that Glenda was not only involved in the activity out of interest, but she also understood the purpose and value of the activity, which was to ‘match’ the contents of each basket:

*Glenda: Me in the computer.*

*Maria: What are you doing at the computer?*

*Glenda: Trying to match the things in the big basket and in the little basket.*

*(Interview with Glenda and Ida, 21/02/2002)*

By doing this activity, Glenda had to deal with a problem-solving situation; using a computer. Although working independently, Glenda interacted with the computer throughout, and with the child sitting next to her, whom she showed how to do the activity at the end. Glenda seemed to know that she had to perform the activity in certain steps: she first needed to listen to the computer’s

instructions; then compared and later matched the baskets before putting the cursor over the basket that she thought was the correct one.

Glenda showed interest in the computer game, and awareness of different quantities and numbers. She also practiced early mathematical skills with a great degree of confidence and self-esteem in her abilities.

**d. Knowledge and understanding of the world**

Throughout the learning stories so far children's development in knowledge and understanding of the world, was also evident. This section deals specifically with knowledge and understanding of the world. Previous examples have been child-initiated, however the next learning story 9.8 shows an activity where children were given the opportunity to discuss and explore beliefs, feelings, their place within the setting and the overall culture, as well as make choices, observe, share, explain and talk and communicate (Hughes, 2002). All these process skills are commonly seen in all learning areas and are equally important to developing children's 'knowledge and understanding of the world'.

Three examples are given for this learning area: the first and second are teacher-initiated activities, and the third is a child-initiated activity. All activities aimed for children to understand different cultures and customs and at the same time to understand nature and its processes.

**The rice grains**

A teacher carried out the activity in learning story 9.8 with groups of children. The children were invited to the table to discuss with a member of staff

the properties of rice and if they wanted to taste some cooked rice. The activity was part of the 'Special days' long term plan theme (Green room, February/March 2002) with one of the aims for children to become familiar with Chinese costumes and culture by making particular reference to the Chinese New Year.

Four children participated and were given the opportunity to feel and hear the sound of uncooked rice grains and later compare these with cooked rice grains that they were encouraged to try taste it if they wanted (epistemic play, productive – acquisition of skills, Hutt *et al.* 1989).

Learning story 9.8: Testing the properties of rice grains

Sue (Teacher), Glenda, Amira, Maurice and Justin are sitting at the table. There are two large bowls on the table; one with cooked and one with uncooked rice. Also there are smaller porcelain bowls and spoons next to Sue. Sue brings the bowl with the cooked rice in the middle of the table, so that all children can reach it. Sue: This is some rice before I cooked it. Have a feel. All the children put their hands in the bowl at once. They look at Sue and at each other. Sue: How does it feel? Glenda: A bit sandy. Sue: Does it feel sandy? Justin: It's sandy. Sue: Is it hard or soft? Justin: Hard. Sue: Listen! She now shakes the bowl and children can hear the grains of rice pushing at each other against the bowl. Then Sue brings over the cooked rice and let children compare the sounds of both cooked and uncooked rice grains. She allows time for the children to feel and smell the cooked rice and then some children (Glenda and Amira) have a taste of the cooked rice while the boys (Maurice and Justin) do not want to taste it, as they declare that they don't like the taste of rice.

The children seemed very interested to what the member of staff was saying. They were willing to touch and listen as well as smell (and some of them tasted) the rice grains. Glenda seemed to respond to her teacher's questions more than the other children. She seemed interested in the activity, staying at the table

for a long time. When later she was invited to comment on the video footage, although at first she needed a prompt to start off the conversation, she seemed to have retained the information about the rice and its properties when and cooked,:

Maria: Do you remember what you were talking about with Sue?

Glenda: Hmm. No.

Maria: I think you were talking about rice grains.

Glenda: Yes. We were.

Maria: And was the rice the same before you cooked it and after?

Glenda: Well, was hard and then we cooked it and it was all soft and it didn't make any noise.

(Interview with Glenda and Ida, 21/02/2002)

This activity was described in the long term planning of the Green room under the scientific aspect of 'knowledge and understanding of the world' area of learning, where children were invited to 'describe changes in materials, e.g. wet/dry' (Green room, February/March 2002). Glenda seemed to have grasped the idea of changes in materials and could describe these changes although not necessarily the cause of change – of water being added to the rice grains and the cooking.

### **The Chopsticks and the Chinese restaurant**

Learning story 9.9 (epistemic play, exploration, Hutt et al. 1989) comes from the same activity that was discussed earlier when Honora was pretending to be the shopkeeper (learning story 9.3). This time more children joined the group in the Chinese restaurant - Selia among them. Selia was one of the older children in the classroom and, as can be seen in learning story 9.9, she is one of the costumers trying to eat her noodles with the chopsticks provided.

### Learning story 9.9: Home corner

Honora, Selia and Mollie are at the Chinese restaurant together with Michaela, Darlene, Helen and Diana (teacher). Mollie is sitting on the table with Honora, while Selia is cooking some pretend noodles (threads of yellow wool) at the corner where the kitchen is. After a few minutes, Selia brings some food to Honora and Mollie and then serves her own bowl with noodles and sits down next to Honora. She picks the pair of chopsticks that are laid next to her and starts eating the noodles that are on the plate by using the chopsticks with both hands. Michaela, Darlene and Helen are sitting at the other table where there are also bowls with noodles, chopsticks, and the menu catalogues. Diana is sitting at the same table with Michaela, Darlene and Helen and discusses with them about Chinese food and music.

This learning story shows Selia's interest in trying to handle the chopsticks in order to eat the pretend noodles in her bowl. She was involved in the preparation of the pretend food in the kitchen not only for herself but also for two of her friends, Mollie and Honora. After serving all three girls with the noodles, she sat down and started 'eating' the noodles both with the chopsticks, but this was impossible, as it seemed that Selia did not have previous experience of using chopsticks, she used her hands instead. When Selia talked about this video footage with me, she said that the noodles were pretend noodles made of 'string'. She also said the sticks that she was using to eat her noodles were called 'Chopsticks' and not 'Chinese sticks' as I had suggested:

Selia: Err, Err... err... noodles!

Maria: Are these real noodles?

Selia: No pretend, string.

Maria: Can you eat them then?

Selia: No.

Maria: Do you remember what these sticks are called - I think they're called Chinese sticks.

Selia: They're called chopsticks.



(Interview with Felicite and Selia, 19/02/2002)

None of the children participating in this activity knew in advance what the chopsticks were called. The member of staff who supervised the activity provided information about traditional Chinese food and music. Although it was not initially apparent that children were paying close attention to what their teacher was talking about, the interview with the children and with Selia in particular, showed that there was an association between the terms and words that they had heard from their teacher and also their own out-of-school experiences (Abbott, 1994). In the dialogue below, Michaela and Darlene talk about their own experience of visiting a Chinese restaurant with their parents:

Michaela: That's Diana (teacher)

Maria: What is Diana doing?

Michaela: I don't know.

Maria: Do you remember what Diana was talking about?

Darlene: Chinese food.

Michaela: I've been to a Chinese restaurant.

Maria: Was it like this?

Michaela: It was a real one. It had proper food.

Maria: Look, what is Helen eating? Is she eating those noodles there?

[All three nod yes]

(Interview with Helen, Darlene and Michaela, 18/02/2002)

The video footage triggered both girls' memory (Darlene's and Michaela's – twins) when they started talking about the Chinese restaurant that they had visited themselves. Children's own personal experiences were brought back to life from the Chinese restaurant in the home corner of the nursery. They recalled that they were discussed about Chinese food with a member of staff, and noted a difference between the restaurant in learning story 9.10 (ludic play, symbolic,

fantasy object, Hutt et al. 1989) and the one they had been to - one was 'a real one' according to Michaela and had 'proper food'; the children had clear views about what was 'real' and 'pretend'. Michaela made links between this video footage of nursery play activity and her real life experiences. She described visiting a Chinese restaurant conveying a sense of time (the visit took place sometime in the past) and a sense of place. All these skills could be identified as part of the early learning goals of 'knowledge and understanding of the world' (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, QCA, 2000).

### **Feeding the pandas**

#### Learning story 9.10: Small imaginative play area

Audrey, Sima and Jeff (boy) are sitting on the carpet. In front of them there is a tray with a white sheet, a big piece of wood, a bamboo plant in a pot and several miniature panda bear animals. There are also some pebbles spread between the piece of wood and the plant. Audrey and Sima are sitting from the left side of the tray while Jeff is sitting opposite them. Each child holds at least one mother panda bear animal and one baby panda bear animal. Jeff is making some growling noise towards Audrey's baby animals, which she is not pleased about and she asks him to stop it. Jeff: This baby leaves here - and he places the baby panda between the pebbles and the wood. Audrey's and Sima's baby pandas are also placed next to Jeff's. Jeff: Pretend the baby needs food. Pretend the baby needs food. Audrey: I know! And she moves close to the bamboo plant. She pretends she is feeding the baby with leaves from the plant. She also pretends that she gives some leaves to Jeff and Sima for their babies. Jeff and Sima are pretending to feed their panda bears, while Audrey moves closer again to the plant and this time starts pulling leaves from the plant and places them next to the panda's cave, where she has kept the mother panda bear and the two little ones.

Another activity linked with the Chinese New Year and customs is seen in learning story 9.10. Unlike the previous two learning stories; this activity was a child-initiated activity and no adults were involved.

The scene was created so that the children could imagine how pandas live like in the cold places of China. All three children seemed engrossed in the activity and created a story about each of their pandas. The fact that there were both big and small panda bears available provided children with the opportunity to form relationships between mother and baby bears. Although initially Audrey and Jeff did not share the same story, they later on talked about how they could feed the animals. This was after Audrey realised that the plant placed next to the big tray had a purpose to serve – it was a bamboo plant and the pandas needed bamboo to eat and grow bigger. When Audrey and Sima were interviewed, Audrey commented that these leaves that the pandas needed to survive were called bamboos:

**Maria:** Do you remember what you were doing here with the pandas?

**Sima:** Yes.

**Audrey:** I don't.

**Maria:** Are the pandas eating?

**Audrey:** The leaves are called bamboos.

**Maria:** Are the leaves called bamboos?

**Audrey:** Yeah.

**Maria:** Do pandas eat something else or only bamboos?

**Audrey:** Bamboos.

(Interview with Sima and Audrey, 21/02/2002)

As it was previously the case with Selia (learning story 9.9), Audrey also retained the information given by a member of staff when they talked about the food of panda bears and she used it when it seemed appropriate to her in her

imaginative play – when it was time for the pandas to eat. Audrey used her understanding of different cultures, place and space to give life to her story that was not only about the relationships between mother and child but also about the use of our natural environment to support our basic needs such as food.

All three learning stories (9.8, 9.9 and 9.10) related to the ‘knowledge and understanding of the world’ learning area, provided various accounts of children’s use of their play props to link their own experience and acquired knowledge within the nursery. All the children used their own understanding of the situation and various skills to become familiar with the topic under investigation. They also sustained this information and retrieved it when prompted during the interview.

#### **e. Creative development**

The learning stories so far have included elements of children’s creativity. This section makes a specific reference to children’s use of materials such as paint and paper to represent reality and imaginary things. These materials were provided by the staff as part of their provision for ‘creative development’.

Throughout this study I noticed children, mainly girls, spending considerable amounts of time in the creative area, (this gender issue will be discussed in chapter 10). On a daily basis, there was a variety of materials available to children including: paint, chalks, crayons, felt pens, paintbrushes, toothbrushes (for abstract or observational drawings), sponges and vegetables for making patterns and 3D objects, collage or other malleable materials such as clay and playdough (to create different objects of their interest) – (Nutbrown, 1994;

Pahl, 1999; Kress, 1997; Fawcett and Hay, 2004). It was often the case that all of the materials mentioned above were used on a certain table in the room that the children could visit at any time. At other times easels were also available to the children for a bigger size drawing or painting, (as is the case in both learning stories that follow). Children's use of the creative area featured in the staff's planning and was linked to the teaching theme for that period of time (Chapter 11 takes up this theme further).

Children were given many opportunities to draw pictures of their choice as well as to draw objects under the direction of their teachers. Most children seemed confident in their drawing and representational activities - this was evident when I asked the children to draw, paint or photograph their favourite play activity, object or friend (Dyson, 1986; Anning and Ring, 2004). Children, thus, made a variety of drawings and photographs of their favourite play related activity or person.

### **Observational painting**

The opportunity to observe an object – usually an animal, a pattern or a flower – and then to represent this object in their painting was familiar to children. Usually the object was placed in the centre of a table and children could choose from a variety of colours related to the objects under observation.

In learning story 9.11, children were invited to observe and draw a spring flower, categorised in the medium term planning under the 'aesthetic and creative

development' (Blue room, February/March 2002). When analysed according to the Hutt *et al.* (1989) taxonomy this category could be regarded as an epistemic play, problem solving activity and a ludic play, symbolic – representational object and fantasy person activity.

Learning story 9.11 shows how each girl treated the same activity very differently, although it might be suggested that if it was not for the support assistant, Izy might not have paid any attention to the flower. Intervention from the adult could have influenced Izy's picture to be more flower-like than Amira's!

#### Learning story: 9.11: Flower painting

Izy and Amira are at the creative area. There are four easels with black drawing paper (two facing on the front and two on the rear of the room), paintbrushes, golden and red paints as well as a flower with red long petals and golden centre in the middle for the children to observe. Izy starts by making some golden lines on the black paper. A support assistant comes to write her name on the paper and then suggests that Izy could observe that pot with the flower in the middle and draw that in her paper. Izy looks at the flower for a couple of seconds, continues a similar golden line parallel to the one she drew previously and gets hold of the paintbrush with the red colour. She looks at the flower again and then makes a circle with the red colour in between the two golden lines and then two smaller circles on the top of each line. She looks at the flower for the last time and then finishes off her drawing by adding some more golden paint on the bottom of the paper. At the same time, Amira, who is positioned next to Izy, makes a couple of golden circles and red circles close to each other and only adds a long straight horizontal line at the bottom of her paper. Unlike Izy, Amira did not look at the flower placed between the two girls. Both girls finished their drawing at the same time and let their drawings dry before heading on to different areas of the room.

This activity provided children with the opportunity to create a drawing with an individual stamp, despite the fact that the same materials were available to both girls, red and gold paint and paper black. Neither picture was a direct

representation of the flower, but each was unique in the use of colours and the patterns. Each girl used a certain colour more than the other – Izy used more golden paint than red and Amira used more red paint than gold. They both used pincer grip to hold their paintbrushes and combined straight lines and circles. They concentrated hard on their paintings at all times and seemed proud to show their finished creations to the members of staff who were close by.

When the girls saw the video footage, Izy and Amira both said that they were painting something, but neither girl told me that had painted flowers; they were not specific about what they had painted:

Izy: I can see some flowers and Izy.

Maria: Can you see some flowers?

Izy: Yes.

Maria: Are these the flowers you're painting?

Izy: No.

Amira: Is green and red.

Maria: Is green and red what Izy is painting?

Amira: No, gold and red.

Maria: Did you do one of these paintings?

Amira: No.

Maria: Who's that?

Amira: Me.

I'm painting now?

Maria: Are you painting the flowers?

Amira: Something else.

(Interview with Izy and Amira, 21/02/2002)

Izy commented on flowers next to the easels girls were painting at but she did accept that she was drawing these flowers. Izy said she did not paint the flowers and Amira commented on the colours used and said that she had painted 'something else', which was not specified.

The activity was planned as an observational activity but neither of the girls observed the flowers to create their pictures. They used the colours to make patterns and each girl used more of the colour that she liked best. Perhaps the girls did not represent the flower in their picture; but instead explored the different colours on the paper and used different shapes and lines to create a picture of their own by using their imagination by painting a picture alongside another child. These skills are all considered important when it comes to creative development but the girls did not use the activity as the teachers originally planned and did not elaborate when asked about their drawings.

### **Creating a picture with many faces**

Learning story 9.12 (epistemic play, exploration and productive – acquisition of skills – Hutt *et al.*, 1989) comes from the video footage of the creative area, where children were invited to do a painting using big paintbrushes and easels. Although most children would choose to draw a painting on their own, this observation includes a boy, Steven, and a girl, Neala, who were painting together (see picture 9.2 below).



Picture 9.2: Creating a picture with many faces



Both children were in the creative area during this study, although Neala seemed to use the area more than Steven. In learning story 9.12 both children showed competence in handling the painting materials and they chose carefully the colours they wanted from the range provided. Steven and Neala mixed colours to create another colour that they have added to their picture.

#### Learning story 9.12: Free painting

Steven and Neala are at the creative area during outside time. They both have their aprons on and they choose one of the easels that has a white piece of paper on it. A variety of colours are placed on the table next to the easel together with some thin and thick paintbrushes. Neala starts off the painting by making a big round circle with some lines on the top by using red and then Steven makes green brushes all around the bottom end of the paper.

Neala: Pretend it's a princess! [Pointing at the red circle]

Steven: Yeah. And pretend it is a dragon [Pointing at the green line]

Neala: Then the prince will come. She now adds some blue dots in the middle of the paper, between where the red and green paints were.

Steven: The prince will save the princess. Smiles and looks at Neala before he adds some black and then yellow paint at the top of the paper this time, mixing both colours within the red circle that Neala had previously made.

Neala: This is a strange colour. [Pointing at the colour than had resulted by mixing yellow and black].

Steven: It's like brown. [Steven now moves back to have a look at the drawing, before taking his apron off and leaving the room].

Neala finishes off the picture by adding some more red over the yellow and black paint, she takes her apron off and leaves the picture next to the radiator to dry.

What is also interesting from this learning story is that each child seemed to respect the ideas of the other. For instance, when Neala drew the red circle and the lines Steven added his own colour at the bottom of the paper making sure that he did not draw over what Neala had drawn. They also seemed aware of borders and how to use their lines to fill in 'empty space'.

Both children made a step further and created an imaginary situation based on what they had drawn (Dyson, 1986). They decided that the picture had more than one face, those of a princess, a prince and a dragon. By doing so, they gave a different meaning to their painting and they created a short but meaningful story. At the same time they respected each other's preferences and worked together to complete the picture by using a variety of shapes, lines and colours.

When asked about this event, both children commented that they liked painting, and also referred to all the persons (the princess, prince and dragon) that they depicted in their picture.

#### **f. Physical development**

As stated in chapter 8 due to practical reasons, for the purposes of this thesis video footage was only collected in the classrooms and no outside play activities were recorded. As a result the final section of this chapter focuses on two learning stories linked to children's physical development; specifically on fine gross motor and hand-eye co-ordination skills, rather than on gross motor and locomotor skills (more likely to be observed outdoors) (QCA, 2000; Wood and Attfield, 2005).

## Filling bottles with water

The water tray attracted many children, mainly boys. Various objects and play props were introduced at different times to the water tray to make it appealing to many children. Such objects included: scoops, bottles, cans, bowls, whisks, watermills, small pots, buckets, boats, canoes, animals, dolls and so forth.

In learning story 9.13 (epistemic play, exploration and ludic play, fantasy object activity, Hutt et al. 1989) different sized bottles were available to the children for example: milk bottles, shampoo bottles, perfume bottles. Blue colour was added to the water, which made water more visible through the transparent bottles. Jeff was one of the boys at the water tray area who was filling and emptying the water from one bottle to the other, showing very good hand-eye coordination and fine gross motor skills.

### Learning story 9.13: Experimenting with water

Jeff and Mohamed are at the water tray. Each child wears an apron and is situated at the either side of the water tray. There are eight bottles of different sizes in the water and Jeff holds a jar with his right hand and a 2-pint milk bottle with his left hand. He carefully fills in the jar with water and then pours the water into the milk bottle. When the bottle is full, he empties it and repeats the same action once more. Then after he fills the milk bottle, he leaves it next to the bottles that Mohamed is playing with and takes a small shampoo bottle. When he tries to fill the shampoo bottle he realized that there is more water going out than in the bottle so he slows his pace and tries carefully this time to fill the bottle. There is still water coming out of the edges of the bottleneck, but this time this amount of water is less than before. It takes Jeff more time to fill this first shampoo bottle, than it took him to fill the milk bottle. The second time he tries to fill the same bottle, he takes more time and pours less water at the time, which leads to no leaks from the bottleneck.

Throughout this observation, Jeff did not communicate with Mohamed who was sitting at the other side of the water tray. He looked totally absorbed in his own play and he used his patience and persistence to fill both bottles. By trial and error and by experimenting with the best way to fill both bottles, and especially the second and smaller one, Jeff became more competent of regulating his own movements and concentrating on the activity.

When Jeff was asked to comment on the video, he explained that this activity was difficult, because some bottles have ‘some small circles’:

Maria: What are you doing with the water, do you remember?

Jeff: Fill the bottles up.

Maria: Is it difficult to do it?

Jeff: Yeah. There some very difficult.

Maria: Are they? Why do you think it's difficult then?

Jeff: Cause they have some small circles. (Making a circle with his fingers)

That is why it difficult.

Maria: And you are trying to put the water in the circles?

Jeff: I just do it like this... whoosh!

(Interview with Jagger and Jeff, 05/03/2002)

So, for Jeff, this activity was challenging but at the same time provided him with the information that not all bottles can be filled up the same way and at the same pace. Some bottles were more difficult to fill than others and this was where he needed to be patient and adjust his movements accordingly. Jeff did not need the assistance of his teachers to find his way through the activity and he seems to have learned the best way to fill the small bottle.

### **Building up to the ceiling**

The classroom observations and the video footage showed that boys rather than girls favoured the construction area (see chapter 10). The learning story 9.14 (epistemic play, productive – acquisition of skills activity, Hutt *et al.* 1989) that follows is an exception to what seemed to be the norm. It took place during outside time at the construction area where coloured wooden building blocks were set out together with some miniature wooden people. According to the teachers (see chapter 11), the introduction of additional play props alongside the construction material, such as animals and miniature people, attracted more girls at the construction area, although this is not apparent in the learning story that follows (Gura, 1992).

#### **Pictures 9.3 and 9.4: Building up to the ceiling**



Ella had chosen to spend time at the construction area when most of the children were playing outside. She seemed to be on her way to another activity when the model that one member of staff had prepared caught her attention (photograph 9.3). After having a look at the model she decided to make a replica

of it. Although she used the model as a guide to start with, her own construction was even more complicated and elaborate; it was higher, making it more difficult to add and balance extra blocks (photograph 9.4).

Ella concentrated on her work for a long period of time, making sure that her structure was both symmetrical and sound. Her observational skills gave her the opportunity to make a good start on her building, that was later extended due to her fine gross motor skills and her competence in balancing one block after the other (Gura, 1992).

#### Learning story 9.14: Building at the construction area

Ella is at the construction area on her own. She sits on her knees in front of a construction that was made by one of the teachers as a model when the children went outside. This model looks like a bridge with two rectangular blocks on either side and one at the top. More blocks, six in number, have been added at the top rectangular piece one on top of the other making a high-rise building. Ella seems interested in this piece of construction and starts to make a replica of it. She chooses the same colour blocks and tries to arrange it in the same order. At first she finds it difficult to balance the block on top of the other two to form the bridge as she has placed these two blocks far away from each other. After a second attempt she brings the blocks closer and then starts balancing on block on top of the other by looking at the model in short intervals. As the building gets higher, her movements become more focused and more careful and she also has to stand up now, as her building is much higher than the model itself. She adds the last block, which shakes the building a little, she carefully makes sure that the block is securely placed, she then smiles and goes to the book corner.

Ella both in the video and later in the interview seemed very proud of her achievement. She had created a high building ‘up to the ceiling’ as she told me:

**Maria:** What are you doing?

**Ella:** I am building. I am building something.

*Maria: Do you like building?*

*Ella: Yeah. Look at that building.*

*Maria: It's very high.*

*Ella: Yes. It is very high. I like doing that. Up to the ceiling!*

(Interview with Madeline and Ella, 18/02/2002)

Ella in this activity developed and used her fine gross motor skills and hand-eye co-ordination and she also demonstrated her spatial awareness. She commented that her building was high enough to reach the ceiling, perhaps a boost to her confidence in being involved with the construction play props.

## **Summary of chapter 9**

This chapter has addressed the children's perceptions of nursery play in general and their nursery play experiences in relation to specific areas of learning.

As it was previously stated the questions this chapter aimed to address were:

- 1) How do young children experience nursery play in relation to learning?
- 2) Is there evidence to support that children learn through play within the nursery setting?

Video recordings of children's nursery play and classroom observations were used to create learning stories, which then formed basis for the group and pair interviews with the children. During these interviews children were asked to comment on their play that they saw on the video. The interviews had the form of open to semi-structured interviews (as discussed in chapter 7). I will conclude this chapter by summarising the evidence discussed as it relates to each of the three key research questions.

1) How do young children experience nursery play in relation to learning?

Interviews with the children based on the video footage provided valuable responses to this research question. This chapter has included many examples where children were observed and videoed in various activities and shown how observations and video footage was used to stimulate interviews with the children.

The interviews have shown evidence of learning taking place during play activities, although these learning processes were necessarily not apparent to the children as none commented specifically that they learned from the activity. Children were more likely to comment that they were or were not familiar with the activities or that they were ‘old enough’ or ‘young enough’ to do something. For instance, one boy (Maurice, page) suggested that some activities are ‘good for’ him because he knows how to complete the activity.

Analysis of children’s observed play behaviour and interviews demonstrate that they were employing a wealth of social, personal, cognitive and imaginative skills in their play either independently or with others.

2) Is there evidence of children learning through play within the nursery setting?

Observations and the video footage were analysed and discussed according to the six areas of learning adapted from the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000). I believed that by doing so, the structure of the data would become more coherent in terms of current policy and provide evidence of learning as defined by this policy. Analysis according to this framework shows evidence of learning in the six different areas, thus suggesting



that children's learning (as described in current English policy) does occur through engagement in play activities. Most of the learning stories presented in this chapter emanate from child-initiated rather than teacher-initiated activities (although, clearly, the staff created the play environment). This suggests that although adults are considered to influence children's play both directly and indirectly; children are in a position to step out of such influences and create their play according to their own interests. Children seemed to choose play incidents according to their preferences and skills and showed a great degree of competence in dealing with complexities, anxieties and controversies.

The learning stories in this chapter have shown young children as competent both personally (by exploring their skills and boundaries in learning stories 8.1, 9.6, and 9.14) and socially (learning story 9.1, 9.2 and 9.12) in imaginary situation where feelings were explored and negotiation skills were being developed. Children also showed interest for literacy and numeracy through their play becoming involved in these activities and learning from them.

This chapter has shown that children made use of the information provided to them by the teachers to inform their own play patterns and also made links between their personal experiences and nursery experiences (Abbott, 1994). Though some activities were initially planned to cover a certain area of learning, children often took the activity in a different direction according to their own needs, skills and interests thus manipulating what was provided. The nursery enabled this by allowing flexibility so that planned activities gave way, at times, to

children's imagination supported by responsible and skilful adults (Nutbrown, 1994). The learning stories lead me to conclude that learning was present in children's play within the nursery setting and that children were using (most of the time without being aware) these activities to practice, perform and refine their personal, social, cognitive, emotional skills (Dockett, 1998).

This chapter has focused on young children's experiences of nursery play in relation to learning, as defined by current policy (QAA 2000). It has: demonstrated how young children view play; shown how children experience play in relation to learning and examined the data to identify examples of children learning through play. Chapter 10 will now address adult constructions of nursery play learning.

## CHAPTER TEN:

### Adult constructions of learning in children's nursery play

Chapter 8 has presented and analysed the perceptions of young children and their significant adults in defining and categorising play, while chapter 9 has presented the perceptions of young children in relation to nursery play learning. Adult's constructions of learning in relation to children's nursery play are now analysed, described and presented and discussed in this chapter. This chapter is in two parts:

- i. Parents' constructions of their children's nursery play and learning,
- ii. Nursery staffs' constructions of children's nursery play and learning.

The research questions that underpin this chapter are:

1. How do parents view nursery play with regard to learning?
2. How do nursery staff view nursery play regard to learning?

Examining the perceptions of parents will develop answers to these questions and staff as derived from interviews them. Following separate analysis of interviews with parents and staff in this chapter, the views of both will be compared to identify similarities and differences (chapter 11).

### **i. Parents' constructions of their children's nursery play and learning**

Early in this study the roles and views of the parents were considered important. Chapter 6 (reporting the pilot) refers to *parents as the mediators* (Jones and Reynolds, 1992), a view based initially on the assumption that parents brought their own distinct ideas and views about their child's play behaviour and patterns to this study. This study has shown that parents' ideas were often different to those of the nursery staff but also sometimes their ideas were different from their children. My belief was later confirmed through analysis of interviews and informal discussions with the parents. Data from interviews and discussions with both groups of adults were very informative when it came to discussing about children's favourite play activities, play behaviour and play experiences outside the nursery school in general (analysed in chapter 8). At this point parents' perceptions of learning through play are in order.

#### *Play at the home setting*

All parents who were interviewed regarded play as important and central in their children's development and learning (Dunn and Wooding, 1977), but in some cases, additional factors influenced their perceptions. These findings do not concur with Abbott's (1993) suggestion that parents were not always aware of the importance of play and its relationship to learning. Mothers' occupation was perhaps one of the influential factors here, especially in relation to play provision. Mothers in this study who worked in the education sector – primary and

secondary school teachers - or had a first degree in education-related subjects, talked of making conscious decisions about providing play props and play behaviour to ensure that their children were engaged in education-oriented and purposeful play (see chapter 7, page 208 for information).

According to both mothers and fathers, children were involved in mostly imaginative and role-play situations (ludic play) at home and also engaged in outdoor activities with members of their families or their friends. Some parents also talked about the provision of writing activities, drawing and books at home as well as play material for constructive play.

Most parents not only express their views and experiences of play within the home setting, but also gave their views of the properties and processes of nursery play. To start with, all parents commented on the learning value of play within the nursery setting and the difference in play approaches, especially play resources between home and nursery. Parents reported these to be the main reasons that they chose a preschool education for their children; but most said, the choice of the particular nursery was twofold. Eight out of the 21 parents interviewed had previously sent one of their older children at this nursery and five parents took into account the recommendations of their childminders, friends or relatives for the child-centred and play-based approach to learning. One of these parents, was Honora's mother, who said that she would even consider bringing her daughter at this nursery, even if she did not work:

Even if I didn't work, I'd still bring her here. I'd probably take her to any nursery but this nursery hasn't changed in the last 15 years, it's just wonderful, absolutely wonderful. So, I like the fact that nothing has changed and it offers more, things that I ... so they offer so many more and she sees other children and emm...she needs, she needs to be with others for her behaviour.

All parents said that they believed that they were giving their children additional play opportunities for learning and socialization processes by sending them to nursery. For instance, Darlene's and Moira's parents commented that although they had twins they thought that bringing them to the nursery would allow them to be involved with more children, although they had arrangements for alternative childcare:

No, cause we had childcare and we wouldn't have had to bring them...particularly them being twins as well...we wanted them to play with other children and not just get engrossed with each other give them the chance to play with others...that's another factor...but yes, have a wider experience really, different people, different place, different play situations...

Seven out of twenty-one parents talked about enabling their children to become accustomed to the school environment; these parents said that they saw the nursery school as key to a transition phase that would lead towards their children's maturity before children entered formal schooling, findings that agree with these from the EPPE project (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; 2004). Ella's mother was one of the parents that discussed the benefits of her daughter's attendance at the nursery, especially since her son had previously experienced the same provision:

and I suppose when I came here I was quite aware that this was more of an institutions than playgroups and that it was more professional and therefore ... and my son has been through this school as well, so, I like the way that they progress, so I can see them getting quite interested in numbers, I can see what she's learning from here. Although she doesn't discuss it, you feel that she is very very slowly being [inaudible] towards school without her realizing it, without me realizing it. As if she was at playgroup she wouldn't get that...

The majority of parents perceived the role of early educators as extremely important in relation to learning through play; nine of the parents reported that such learning was evident in children's play at home or their play conversations. Like it has been for Michelle, according to her mother:

And she talks to the dolls like nursery and it is like she has come from nursery, she's remembering what the teachers had done in her group and she was saying to the dolls "Good girl, Grace. Thank you for bringing that", "What does this begin with?" She was holding things up and I know because they are doing sounds at the moment, this is what the teachers are doing and she imitates, copies.

Some parents (5 mothers and 1 father) said that children hardly ever discussed their nursery play with them. When these parents asked their children what they had been doing at the nursery, children often responded 'We played', without further elaboration.

In general, parents' comments showed a great respect for the nursery staff and the work they were carrying out with their children – specific references were also made to the play approaches of some members of the nursery staff, as in the case of Jagger's mother below:

Well, the way it was approached by Misha (nursery staff) was 10 out of 10, because we were just waiting outside the classroom before the session and she says 'Oh, Jagger! I'm glad you're here. Got garage to build this afternoon. ARE YOU gonna help me?' 'Will we need screwdrivers?', 'Might do' 'Might need hammers as well' and she goes 'Might do, well wait till we'll get...' and SHE just instigated it wonderfully and you know he was excited by that initial conversation, so.. yes, I did...he showed me, you know, I've asked him when I came to pick him up...'Where's this garage, you're supposed to have made?' and he showed me and explained about all the screws that they'd used and ... yes he had loved that! Because I thing because Misha had asked for his help, he'd thought that that was what he'd given. He didn't probably seen it at all as play or...it was a job that he was helping to do. She'd come to him for EXPERT ADVICE and made him feel very, VERY privileged ...

Parents discussed issues around their children's play activities and experiences within the home setting. They talked about the role of other family members – mothers, fathers, siblings and extended family, however, it was clear that mothers had the lead role in all cases, as they spent more time with their children than other members of the family.

### *Play and learning*

All parents who were interviewed in this study regarded play as important and central in their children's development and learning (Dunn and Wooding, 1977), but in some cases, additional factors influenced their perceptions. These findings do not concur with Abbott's (1993) suggestion that parents were not always aware of the importance of play and its relationship to learning.

Mothers' occupation was perhaps one of the influential factors here, especially in relation to play provision. Mothers in this study who worked in the



education sector – primary and secondary school teachers - or had a first degree in education-related subjects, talked of making conscious decisions about providing play props and play behaviour to ensure that their children were engaged in education-oriented and purposeful play (see chapter 8, for information of parents' group).

All parents expressed their views of a strong relationship between learning and play in the following areas both within the nursery setting and also in children's out-of-school experiences:

- a) social interaction, moral values and dexterity; friendships; maturity, autonomy, independence (personal, social and emotional);
- b) literacy, numeracy skills and preparation for formal schooling (communication, language and literacy / developing mathematical understanding);
- c) development of variety of skills through enjoyable activities (personal, social and emotional / physical development);
- d) enhancement of children's imagination (creative development);
- e) ability to create complex structures, while developing mathematical and spatial concepts through imaginary situations (knowledge and understanding of the world / physical development / creative development).

This list was generated after analysing the interview data. The aim of these categories was not only to reflect what the parents had told me but also to be in

line with the way the Foundation Stage Curriculum (QCA/DfES, 2000) identifies the different areas of learning, also discussed in chapter 9. The connection of the areas discussed by the parents to the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) can be found in brackets.

a) Personal, social and emotional - *social interaction, moral values and dexterity*:

There are many theories that try to explain how children develop socially and emotionally. According to Wood and Attfield (2005) 'social cognition is defined as the process of thinking about emotions, feelings and how people interact with one another in social and cultural contexts' (p.81). Parents seemed to be aware of the importance of developing social cognition through their nursery play experience as it is shown below:

Social interaction, it is mainly learning about the world around them, they practice with the toys what they've seen going on and go over it again.

Audrey's mother

Educational in terms of social...moral...you know the whole educational spectrum.... It's, it is broadening every horizon... almost ... the developments he has made ... socially, personally

Jagger's mother

Emm... well, I think that....they're learning through play, the children are learning through play, aren't they? I mean I don't...I wouldn't sort of push her into ... force her into do something...'Oh, that's educational!' cause I think...she's learned with everything she's doing she's learning, whether it's social skills or ...dexterity or...emm, so, no, I think they're probably combined. I mean she doesn't realize she's learning from it probably, she's just having a good time playing. I mean she is learning just by having the experiences, emm....

Lizzie's mother

So, two mothers suggested that through play their children learn, but their gave different meaning to this learning – probably denoting their own preferences. Audrey’s and Jagger’s mothers said that play is enhancing social interaction (Corsaro, 1981; 1993, Paley, 1984), whereas Lizzie’s mother recognised the importance of play in the development of social skills but also referred to play and dexterity.

### *Friendships*

All parents referred to their children’s ability to form friendships through play during the interviews. Most parents commented that their children would either maintain a friendship with children they had met before entering the nursery – for instance, playgroups and other preschool settings and activity clubs – whereas other parents would refer to the friendships that developed within the nursery setting and extended beyond it; by children visiting each other homes, going out together and so forth. From these discussions it was evident that one of the main reasons for children to develop a friendship was their shared play interests and also the compatibility of the characters.

However, there were instances, as with Adam, that play formed the starting point for a friendship to develop Adam’s father for example, commented on the contribution of a certain child towards his son’s language and social skills development. Although, all parents acknowledged the importance of friendships in their children’s play, this particular extract assumes significance because it

involves two children who did not originally share the same language and the main form of communication was their playful interactions.

Adam joined the nursery in May 2001 when his parents came to the UK from South America. He had no previous knowledge of English and it was difficult for him to get involved in discussion with the nursery staff and the other children. Consequently, he was mainly involved in solitary play activities and was quite reserved. After a period of time, Carter became Adam's favourite playmate and through various play activities Carter was not only providing company for Adam but was also 'teaching' him the pronunciation of various words. This was recognised by both parents:

Mother: Carter, best friend he would say... Yeah, because Carter is the first time that he has come to our house invited by a friend, he wanted so to do that before that he didn't have a close friend and his brother does that a lot, he invites friends over, he goes to a lot of his friends' houses. But, so with Carter, it only started 2 or 3 months ago...

Maria: He likes being with Carter?

Father: Oh, yeah...

Mother: It has given him like self-esteem and...

Father: And confidence...making a bigger effort to talk and that's also the teachers keep telling me now they can understand much more what he's saying. Because last year, when we first arrived sometimes he was, he felt very frustrated because he couldn't say all things that he wanted...yeah...and he's always been happy coming here but lately, he's now, he feels even better...

Adam's parents

For Adam's parents play provided the opportunity to their child to develop a strong friendship with another child and also enabled Adam to feel 'better' within a setting that was initially strange to him because of his background, previous experience and lack of ability to share the same language and communicate with the other children at the nursery.

*Maturity, Autonomy, Independence*

Three mothers (Jagger's, Ella's, Darlene's and Michaela's) mentioned that through play their children seemed to have matured, especially since they first attended nursery. Jagger, according to his mother:

.... He's just done so much growing up, which ok he'd had done anyway, because we're all maturing all the time, but...it is the play experiences and it is the peers and...and just sort of that initial step into education ...and...school life. And...you know so far so good...

Jagger's mother

Ella's mother also talked how her daughter's play behaviour has changed especially as far as her concentration and interests are concerned. It seemed according to these parents that there was a relationship between children's attendance at the nursery and more mature play behaviour and also a change in their play preferences. As Ella's mother denoted:

Well she used to just fiddle around with lost of things and flip from thing to thing and for a while she quite liked dolls but she really didn't really know what to do with them. And she would like the doll's house and again didn't really know what to do with it... she had the dolls house out but she put dinosaurs in the house...

Ella's mother

While Darlene's and Michaela's mother explained how her daughter Darlene enjoyed drawing and painting and how 'she has got more structure to it now' as 'she draws pictures and you can tell what they are', something that became apparent over two weeks.

Other mothers (Audrey's, Lizzie's and Helen's) suggested that play provided their daughters with the opportunity to become independent and autonomous. Whereas previously their daughters would seek their involvement in play, as they

were getting older, through play they developed a sense of independence and autonomy – where they would spend most of their time playing on their own having set out their play agenda, or they would invite their mothers to play with them but with mothers following the child's 'rules', something that both mothers found difficult to do.

Audrey's mother suggested that play was enabling her to develop a sense of autonomy and ownership; she would set out her own play agenda and she transform any object into a play prop by using her imagination:

...just gets things out and starts on her own with anything - bricks, Lego she's playing with. Her dollies start having conversations, anything if she's bored she'll just pick up a bit of cotton, and she could turn it into a game.

Audrey's mother

b) Communication, language and literacy / Developing mathematical understanding - *literacy, numeracy skills and preparation for formal schooling:*

In chapter 3 many studies that have been focused on the relationship between young children's literacy and play were presented. The literature on literacy and language is broad and extensive (Christie, 1991; Nutbrown, 1994; Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2001; Brooker, 2002). It mainly provides evidence that even young children show an interest and awareness of script and print through their play engagements. Anning and Ring (2004) researched young children's drawing and argued that when children use a plethora of materials and tools while playing and drawing, they become actively involved with the society and develop an

ability not only to represent but also to communicate their emotions, feelings and anxieties. This seemed to be acknowledged by the parents in this study and can be seen below.

According to Michaela's and Darlene's parents and Ella's mother these activities took place at home and in the nursery setting. However, the parents made clear their view that their children were learning a lot while at nursery:

Steve: It's just everything from real life...

Sarah: They learn everything through play don't they?

Steve: There are lots of letters' games and numbers' games and all sort...

Sarah: And then there is, you know, interacting with other people during play...there's all the coordination stuff with drawing or moulding or whatever...with the turns taking...

Steve: Yeah, that's what we like about here...there's, there's such a wide variety and stuff going on around here...I mean we think we do quite a lot of stuff to back up that really...opportunities that are available...

Darlene's and Michaela's parents

Parents, like Ella's mother felt this learning would not have taken place if her child only was to attend playgroups:

I suppose when, when you're at home and they're small babies you're very aware of how limited your life is and how limited their life is as well. They've only got so many toys to play with and you know, they're in the same environment all the time. So, start going to playgroups, nursery groups, so that you could expand on... so, I like the way that they progress, so I can see them getting quite interested in numbers, I can see what she's learning from here. Although she doesn't discuss it, you

feel that she is very, very slowly being [inaudible] towards school without her realizing it, without me realizing it. And if she was at playgroup she wouldn't get that...

Ella's mother

Similarly Jagger's mother identified the links between play, numeracy and literacy, but she also highlighted the importance of play in preparing children for formal schooling (Sylva *et al.* 2004), as Patricia's mother did:

'educationally in terms of his ...the stimulation that's given to ... numbers, shapes, letters, within the environment ... so yes, in terms of preparing him for school ...in that educational context ... but socially, particularly, and educationally as well...it's very obvious...and I think that all the stimulation that... he has had here had just helped to enrich him so much....

Jagger's mother

I suppose ....I guess it is the foundation really for a lot of the education, the understanding about all the concepts. The world, yeah, work and things, yeah. Sort of ...I think it's completely essential I suppose in terms of education.

Patricia's mother

Those parents highlighted children's involvement in literacy and numeracy activities through play. This is particularly important as data analysed in chapter 9, also show a link between play and literacy and numeracy in children's learning stories.

c) Personal, social and emotional / Physical development - *development of a variety of skills through enjoyable activities:*

I think they can learn through play such as developing skills, then it's play as well. You know what I mean? Hmm, if you mean helping out I think you have to make it play to get them do it. (Laughs)... Play definitely has an educational value and children learn a lot when they are playing.



Glenda's mother

The element of fun (Garvey, 1977; Johnson and Ershler, 1982; Fromberg, 1992), which is attributed to play widely in the literature. Hutt *et al.* (1989) also acknowledged that element of fun and enjoyment present in children's play behaviour by referring to the term 'ludic' play. Parents have also considered this property of play as important. In particular, Glenda's mother is concerned in her daughter's cognitive development, although she was not the only mother who referred to enjoyment – she was the only one who directly linked play – enjoyment and learning.

In the same line, Justin's and Maurice's, the twins' mother also regarded play as having an educational value. According to her comments, her twins seemed to be engaged in play activities that were of interest to them and they seemed to be able to distinguish between play and non play activities, like tidying up, which they would not willingly do unless they were asked to.

d) Creative development - *enhancement of children's imagination:*

...'Cos it gets their imagination going, they learn colours, they learn shapes, they learn numbers, they learn how to interact social skills. Yeah, very much so....and they learn language skills.

Travis' mother

Travis' mother also identified how play contributes to the development of emergent literacy and numeracy as other parents previously have, but she also explicitly referred to the enhancement of imagination in children through play

(Paley, 1993). Parents seemed to recognise what the literature suggests that ‘creativity and imagination are important to lifelong learning and playing because they embody divergent forms of thinking and lead to novel, innovative combinations of ideas and experiences’ (Wood and Attfield, 2005; p.84).

Many parents referred to the power of play in imaginary situations. Children would create a certain play situation with their play props or friends that parents said they found difficult to engage with. This difficulty did not only apply to the rules that the children might have set but also to the difficulty of the parents in understanding what their role in specific situations was. Ella’s and Travis’ mothers claimed:

Well I suppose... (Smiles) I think... what surprises me is how difficult people actually find it to play with children. You know, you love your children but as something you’re not sure. And I think that’s why you bring them to nursery school because there are people her who could play with children (laughs). It seems as if you would think it’s you who, you know, finds playing with children boring and then you realize other mothers feel the same. So, that’s it really...in part you want to do something constructive, which is more interesting for you to be involved in and that’s the time when you try to enter a child’s imaginative world is ...it is more difficult and it is more tedious...

Ella’s mother

For Ella’s mother, ‘entering’ her daughter’s imaginary situations was a difficult task. She did not seem to understand what role she needed to adopt in order to be able to participate in these play situations. However, she knew that she was not the only parent who was facing this difficulty, as there were other parents that also not to be able to follow their children’s play pattern or story.

One of these mothers was Travis' mother, who commented that she could not relate to her son's play and therefore could not participate:

...because to me as well, I can understand my daughter better. I think it's a gender thing, because I like, I quite enjoy more the sort of things my daughter plays with. Whereas playing with trains and cars has absolutely no appeal to me (laughs) ...and I'm just try to like them, but to me it seems so long just he likes...he just uses his imagination with things, trains and cars, and they you know, you have to have more than one going together and they crash ...he makes noises with them. And I think he does go into a little world of trains and cars and a little imaginative world where just cars and trains going by... I just can't quite relate to it, (laughs) so...I don't know why he finds it so fascinating...(laughs)...

Travis' mother

For Travis' mother the difficulty did not only lay with her inability to follow her son's storyline; she thought that there must be a gender issue as well. This was based on the argument that she seemed to understand her daughter's play more than her son's, whereas in Ella's case, her mother, although of the same gender still could not enter her daughter's play. Although each parent found different reasons for their difficulty in following their children's play story they all said that their children had the power to create imaginary situations through play with great ease.

e) Knowledge and understanding of the world / Physical development / Creative development - *ability to create complex structures, while developing mathematical and spatial concepts through imaginary situations:*

Research has shown that children are becoming skilled mathematicians by engaging in problem solving experiences and

developing their own solutions to these problems (Peters, 1998). Similarly, parents showed an awareness of this by referring to their observations of their child(ren)'s play:

Just with absolutely anything they do, they're talking about it and they're watching all the different, you know building something that is symmetrical, and he then worked out four corners. To me play is part exploring, part enjoyment. All that, playing with the figures, making little stories, which you know, whether they'd come from his head. It can be something he'd seen or, you know. I just think that it is something really important for them.

Terri's mother

Similar to 'Travis' mother response was the response by Terri's mother who talked about the contribution of play towards children's construction building skills (Gura, 1992), mathematical reasoning (Riley, 2003) and in the development of imaginary situations (Paley, 1993; MacNaughton, 1999).

From the above interview extracts it is evident that a variety of responses was given by the parents about the value of play and its relationship to young children's learning. Parents also talked about the social values of play and well as children's cognitive development. Parents saw play as a medium through which their children became familiar with literacy and numeracy, came to understand the world around them and developed mathematical and scientific concepts, while at the same time they were also developing their social skills.

All of these areas that were identified through analysing the interview data and aimed to relate to the areas of learning in the Foundation Stage Curriculum

(QCA/DfES, 2000) were of importance to the parents, for the development of their children's later learning, starting from the time their children would be entering formal education. Such skills were being developed both through the play activities their children were involved in at the nursery and at home. The importance of the children's presence and involvement in nursery play activities was highly acknowledged by parents for its contribution to children's academic achievement.

As it derives from the above, parents made extensive reference to the properties of young children's play within and out of the nursery setting. All parents highlighted enjoyment and ownership as the main properties or characteristics of play. Parents reported that, for children, play is an activity that they choose to do on their own; an activity, which is characterized primarily by enjoyment (Fromberg, 1992).

Parents gave the clear view that through play children gain independence, develop skills of social competence and form strong friendships and relationships with their peers, siblings or significant adults (Corsaro, 1994; Paley, 1984; 1988). Play is considered to take the form of practice for children who experience feelings and dispositions of other people, mainly through role-play and pretend play situations.

Parents recognised the personal characteristics and preference of their children's play behaviour either in comparison to their older children they have or in comparison to their child's friends. These characteristics were influenced by

the gender of the children in most of the cases. Parents finally, implicitly recognised the existence of power within their children's play at home or at the nursery when they talked about the play dynamics and properties of play in general.

To summarize according to parents, children were using play not only to explore different situations and create their own friendships and storyline but also to develop a sense of autonomy, independence and self-esteem. Parental roles could not be underestimated, (as roles discussed at the beginning of this chapter) and were likely to influence children's play behaviour and play patterns. This parental influence was either direct or indirect and equally important.

## **ii. Nursery staff constructions of children's nursery play and learning**

Nursery staff responses with regards to their constructions of nursery play seemed to cover more aspects of children's play within the setting, although, at times, reference to children's play while out-of-school was made.

When it came for nursery staff to talk about play and learning within the nursery setting, it became apparent that all activities were in accordance to the learning outcomes and overall requirements of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (2000) and were aiming to cover children's development in all six areas of learning, as identified in the curriculum guidance. Planning was prepared by all members of staff on a weekly, a monthly or bimonthly basis (see

chapters 6 and 8 for reference). Reference was thus made to a plethora of play activities, such as:

- a) creative activities with additional reference to writing;
- b) imaginative play, role play and the home corner;
- c) play at the book corner;
- d) constructions;
- e) sand and water play;
- f) social play ;
- g) outdoors play and
- h) the computer.

In detail, the relationship between learning and young children's play formed the main part of the nursery staff interviews for the purposes of this study. Other factors also influenced children's play within the nursery setting.

According to the nursery staff, and especially the Head teacher, these factors were the philosophy of the nursery and the nursery's own policy and curriculum that was informing the National Curriculum for England. This was not a specific policy on play, however '**play is the underriding, overriding, be all, most important**' aspect of the nursery's policies and ethos as well as the nursery's own curriculum, according to the Head teacher (Bennett *et al.* 1997).

All activities were carried out bearing in mind that play is the way children learn, and as the nursery staff will comment later, this is the purpose and nature of

the nursery; to enable children to learn through play (Bruner, 1980; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Smilansky, 1968).

When it came to the properties of nursery play, nursery staff made a reference to children's enjoyment, creativity and learning. However, there were other elements that were identified within the properties of young children's nursery play by the nursery staff. These were: children's gender, individual characteristics and previous experiences as well as the development of self-esteem, self-confidence as well as ownership over their play. Faye, a part-time nursery teacher with experience in primary settings, gave a very interesting example of how she viewed play's contribution on self-esteem and self-confidence between children who had that experience at nurseries and others that didn't have similar experiences.

Children's play seemed to be influenced children's previous experiences. These experiences were acknowledged by the nursery staff, and children were encouraged to contribute as much as possible in various play situations by giving their own 'stamp' on the activity. In this way children established a form of *ownership* over their play and were given time to develop the play situations on their own pace. Most importantly however, according to members of staff, was the fact that children could form friendships through play. Most nursery staff highlighted the social aspect of play - this will be discussed later in terms of children's learning and its relationship to play.



*Personal, social and emotional*

According to Roberts (2002) positive self-concept, realistic self-esteem and inner confidence are usually the outcomes of the development of social skills, which can lead to effective learning experiences, and outcomes. Nursery staff, like parents, placed a particular emphasis on the personal, emotional and social aspects of play during their interviews. It seemed that these three elements with equally important and utterly significant in raising academic standards and achievement. Also it seemed that the personal, social and emotional aspects of play were underpinning all play situations and play props. So, according to Sarah, one of the part-time nursery teachers, and to Jill, they allowed time for discussion and provided the opportunities for children through this discussion and the play resources for development of children's social, cognitive, language and personal skills amongst other:

I think we talk to the children **all the time** about it, what they're doing, why they're doing it. That's perhaps what we're here for really isn't it? You're talking to the children about what they're doing and why they're doing it trying to develop whatever, you know their thinking skills, their social skills, or you know whatever you're doing. You're talking to them all the time trying to make sure that the children are making something out of the activity.... I think most of all you're sort of **providing** them the opportunities; you're providing all the materials and things they're going to use. But you're sort of also there, you're talking to them about what they're doing, you're hoping to develop, you know, skills in different areas depending what the activity is and socially, their social skills. So, you're providing them with the opportunities in the first place but also you're hoping to develop their thinking, the levels of thinking, and erm...you're observing what's happening and when it's appropriate you're intervening and extending and developing their play. Hopefully...

Sarah – Nursery Teacher

To enhance their play and obviously enhance their learning through play, yeah. But not just through play because you have group times where you'd be talking about things so, it's not all the learning in the nursery through play, but it is very important, very major element of what they're receiving in there....Oh, yeah. I suppose, providing language as well, language development, the language skills, and you know, you're talking to them, posing questions, which you could get, encouragement to extend their language...thinking, **thinking skills!** (laughs)...

Jill – Nursery Teacher

Sarah also identified that social element of children's play, which was also highlighted by other members of staff like Diana and Jill, who stressed that the social value of play is 'immeasurable' and important for the development of the individual:

... I think the basic thing is all about **making friends**, cause I think really, ....that's very important for everybody to be able to do, especially if the children will be going to school, and when they start playing and when they play with other children, sharing comes in, taking turns comes in but they do that naturally through play. But these are all things that you have to learn to be able to cope with the society. To know not everything that you want you can have straight away, or everything can be yours. So, **I do** think it has a lot of value, I think the social values are **immeasurable** through play. I just think... it's also mixing with other cultures, other religions, probably people you wouldn't mix with in your home environment, or where you live. So, it's all about getting to know other people, children who come from other families and cultures. So, it's all about sharing, learning, and taking it in turns and having fun. You know before you go to school. And then if you've got those basics there **hopefully** school will be easier.

Diana – Nursery Nurse

That they play as well, out of all play, there is a social element, of learning to share and get on with people, or you can play on your own. But, hopefully by the time they come out of nursery they can manage to play well with other children. I think role-play is an interesting thing to look at 'cause children tend to do small play initially so, they do small role-play maybe on their own and then with other children, but then I think you often find that the older children, you know the older children have more complex role play and sort of ...hospital and things, which involves a lot of negotiation with other children which is

very complex to be able to do, and they can't... well, when they're first come to nursery they often, you know, very often play with animals and bricks and things whereas, complex sort of social skills can develop 'Who's going to be the doctor?' 'Who's going to be the nurse?' or 'I want to be the doctor', you know. So, they're all interesting elements for them to, you know...Sorry (laughs)...that's another aspect of play isn't it?

Jill – Nursery Teacher

Once more that importance of play for children to learn the social norms and become accustomed to sharing, taking turns, and socializing was seen as important by nursery staff. This notion also forms a part of most staff responses, although Dina and Jill were the only two who specifically referred to social development.

### *Independence*

Most members of staff throughout the interviews referred to the children's ability to play independently within the setting (Meadows, 1993). Staff commented that children would occasionally look towards their peers when it came to seeking an advice on play rather than their teachers. Teachers would only intervene when there was a dispute that needed to be resolved. In that sense, staff commented that there was a difference between home play and nursery play – the latter was enabling children to become independent with minimum adult intervention.

In fact the Head teacher argued that they made every effort to ensure that they were providing children with the opportunity to become independent players and learners. In her own words:

...so, you know let's look at the whole picture and you know, go for as best as we can, give them as much independence as we can, give them the space to, and the time to do all sorts of things.

Mrs Higgins- Head teacher

Despite these constant efforts on behalf of the staff, Diana had observed that it was more likely children to be involved in independent play during the morning sessions, which were considered to be busier than in the afternoon sessions, where the adult: child ratio was higher:

...Because we've got a lot more children in the morning, a lot of the children actually **do** come in and they sort themselves out and get on with the activities... but we've found in the afternoon children are more demanding. Because there's few children and they've got more adult attention, but instead of making them get on with certain activities, they're drawing on attention, more and more than the morning children do.

Diana – Nursery Nurse

It thus seemed that play had the power to enable children to become independent but the role of the nursery staff was also deemed important towards this goal.

### *Maturity*

Finally, there was also reference to how children's play evolved while at nursery providing evidence that children had developed and matured. Like some parents, Annette commented on how some children became more focused during play and Faye referred to both Ella and an African boy whose English was his second language and yet was slowly becoming involved in the nursery's play activities alongside other children.

... when they first come they flick around the room but when they've been here a while they seem to consolidate their play. They'll start off and then they'll build on it and then they'll come back the next day to do some more...

Annette – Nursery Nurse

She's [Ella] very intent, she concentrates very hard and she's very very focused on what she does. And this is Ella as she's growing into, because Ella when she's started wasn't like that at all. So, she's developed that way, and it works, she really gets results.

...with Yahya, he's building but he also uses it as an imaginative set up because he is looking at the little people, he got the little people doing things and I've noticed Yahya before spending ages and ages and ages playing with ... spaceman for example and he wasn't communicating with other children, he was communicating and being the voice of the spaceman.

Faye – Nursery Teacher

### *Dominance and ownership*

Nursery staff were always in a position to identify issues related to children's dominance of certain play areas as well as their individual developmental process within the nursery over the period of time that the children were attending the setting. Also, play seemed to be very powerful indeed when it came to children whose home language was not English, as it enabled them to become involved and form friendships with other children in the setting and communicate in their own pace with both children and staff. This finding can relate to the image of the child at the Reggio Emilia settings as being 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all connected to adults and other children' (Malaguzzi, 1993, p.10).

*Creative development - Role play and imaginary situations*

Through role-play and imaginary situations children tend to understand the complex nature of human interaction. Skills that are considered to be of great importance for later stages in childhood and the adult life. Literature suggests that Not only that but according to Faye and Jane, play enables children to develop and learn, including language development and literacy skills as well as the development of creativity, mathematical and scientific concepts and also physical development:

... it's got social value, language value, it's got a sort of maths, numerical value, because they're counting and they're sorting and all that is going on. They also doing volume and all the rest of it, and just talking about, just thinking about this sort of play, there is a fair amount of geography there because they're building with little people there. And it think that, I mean I've read what they say that children who have the opportunity to play a lot work better, have a better understanding of science, maths and all the rest. And I'm sure that's right; I am sure that's right. Because if you understood first what's easier to know what you can do later...

Faye – Nursery Teacher

...because I think, you know the way you structure play, they're enjoying themselves but they don't always realize that they're learning that they're so much educational development that can come from it, from experiments really and from developing the fine motor skills, and developing their own creativity...you could say it's easier for them, you know they've got some physical to do and to move about rather than create it from their heads and that that by input of stories, listening and then acting things out, playing things out, I think it helps expand their own creativity...and it's also a way of being creative rather than have things specifically done on paper and...

Jane – Nursery Nurse

### *Assessing children's play*

The assessment of young children's play has always attracted the interest of researchers (Nutbrown, 1997; Sylva *et al.* 2003). The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) encourages adults to assess play within and out of the nursery. The Stepping Stones provide a framework that can enable practitioners to identify difficulties or competences. Not only the assessment of play is deemed important in order to identify these competences and difficulties, but also it is a way to identify quality play practices (Bruner, 1980) in terms of provision and resources. During this study, nursery staff provided children both with opportunities and play resources for development of cognitive and personal skills as well as social interaction, but they also discussed with children about their play activities and used them as a form of assessment for children's overall development and learning:

I think, that generally speaking I am a facilitator. It's to enable them to get the best out of their play and to extend their play. Not, that I am pushing them where they don't want to go, but sometimes just help them so that they can make the next step on. Or if there is something brand new they're doing and they are clearly not sure so make it so that they can repeat it perhaps in another way. So, they understand it ... I think that covers more or less everything that's down here. I suppose I haven't covered the sort of the planning and the setting up side but there is that as well. I mean I took that to mean when you're actually playing with the children. But there is also the planning and setting up side and ... And the recording, I mean you're helping children to develop so they move along. So facilitator and developer I suppose.

Faye – Nursery Teacher

### *Appropriate opportunities and resources*

Earlier in the literature a reference was made to the work of Vygotsky (1978), Bruner (1983), Nutbrown (1997) and others who talked extensively about the need to challenge children through play, to ‘scaffold’ their play experiences through providing additional opportunities and for adults to be ‘respectful’ of children’s nursery play experiences and create the appropriate environment for children to thrive. Similarly, nursery staff attributed many learning outcomes to play within the nursery in specific and as one of the members of staff suggested this is the *‘purpose of them being at the nursery’* – to provide children with the opportunities for learning through play:

I mean, the children **learn** through playing and that's the whole purpose of us being here. That you are providing specific situations and experiences with the children that they will enjoy **but** which you hope they will learn particular skills or they will gain a particular knowledge or they will help them to socialize with other children. So, although to them is **playing**, it's purposeful playing. You have an idea in mind of what you think the children are going to get out of the play and how the play is going to develop... children are benefiting from the play, although it's not always gone along the way you originally intended.

Sarah – Nursery Teacher

So, for Sarah their role was to enhance children’s learning through play by providing the appropriate play opportunities and resources. This role was also identified by most parents (earlier in this chapter), placing an extra responsibility to nursery staff with regard to children’s nursery play practices and the learning outcomes. In a way, children came to nursery to get involved in meaningful play activities and most of all to learn and develop through these activities, as opposed



to what was the play practice at home, where children were involved in play activities that were not necessarily structured by their parents or relatives.

### *Planning and flexibility*

While Dina, set an example of how she uses the planning of the activity to inform her practices and also the learning outcomes of a certain activity, firstly by leading the activity and then by allowing children time and space to develop and expand on the activity themselves:

You start off by being **in** their play and being a character and you lead them by asking questions .... And then you get out from them what they know about it, and then other children will expand on it... and then ... it's really good for them what to draw back and then just let them get on with it. And on occasions a kid would say 'Well, **I want to be** a post office person!' 'OK. It's **your** turn!'. So, you know, you do need on occasion, depend on what you're doing there's a need of direction and to lead the play into where you want it to go...with this learning process and then stand back and watch them doing it...

Dina – Nursery Nurse

Finally, it is essential at this point to present how the Head of the nursery responded to this question about the relationship between play and learning. She suggested that the way children learn through play is a fascinating process, which is both 'incidental', 'incremental' (Bruner, 1966) and difficult to assess because of play's complex nature.

It's different things built on other things ... but, it's just fascinating isn't it really? ... you know opens doors and you think 'I never would have thought of that!' (Laughs), you know? And then you think... You go with a mindset, and I'm sure you've had an idea of where you were going to go, but it doesn't always follow try, does it? ... you know what I mean it was just so **incidental**. And they, you know if it clicks it clicks, if it doesn't, well it doesn't matter. But because with play you can't say 'A! Yeah, they're on page 6 of the playbook!' you know it's

very difficult to know **how much** they've actually learned. **It doesn't mean** to say they're not learning but how you actually assess it, is **really really** difficult. And the only way I suppose we do it is by how they're developing and how they're progressing and how they're able to assimilate **more** difficult things as you go through. But, it's not easy, is it? Is like learning a language really, **it's so incremental**. You can't remember never speaking, you know. I suppose it's the same. You're trying to develop thinking skills and independence and creativity and it's not like on a ladder, it's sort of jots about a bit, isn't it?

Mrs Higgins – Head teacher

This finding comes in accordance with the findings of Bennett's *et al.* (1997) where teachers regarded play as more motivating and engaging than work because they provided a natural way for the children to learn.

From the extracts given above it becomes apparent that nursery staff clearly identified the relationship between learning and nursery play, although they acknowledged the complexity of the notion and nature of play (Garvey, 1977; Jenkinson, 2001). For children play was an activity that provided them with the opportunity to develop and perform a variety of skills in a safe and secure way. In this way children were becoming equipped for the challenges of the formal schooling and the adult life. Staff regarded their role as vital when it came to providing children with learning opportunities through play because they were responsible for planning, provision and assessing within the nursery setting.

Children's play was considered the main vehicle for learning; learning experiences that would prove fruitful only if play experiences were enjoyed by the children themselves (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983; Sylva *et al.* 1980;

Hutt *et al.* 1989). Every effort was made by the nursery staff to provide a stimulating and interesting environment (Nutbrown, 1997) for the children to learn, by organizing marathons and handing out trophies to all children involved, inviting parents for various activities like baking, bathing babies, gardening and so for and finally by inviting groups of people from different cultures like storytellers from Africa or people from the Caribbean to recreate local carnivals and so forth.

#### *Nursery attendance and future academic achievement*

Finally, according to this nursery teacher there was a correlation between nursery attendance and high levels of thinking and learning in later stages of children's development and education:

One of the things that we're doing from my view is giving them self-confidence so when they'll go to school and they'll face with new things then they'll say 'Yeah, I'll have a go'. Or just because I've done new things at nursery and it was great, nothing's bitten be, so, I'll have a go. They wouldn't, I am sure they wouldn't consciously think that but I've worked with children in KS1, who'd say 'Can't do it, can't do it'. Children who haven't been to nursery or preschool.... I mean I've seen that when I was working in Reception. Children who'd been to nursery do, I think they have a better idea of how things work, and you know the day structure. They're quite happy about that and they understand they're part of the whole and not THE whole, which is, I mean some of the little ones that are coming in are having difficulty understanding that they're not IT but by the time they move on, they understand, it makes it easier then. If you realize that sharing is part of it and all that.

Faye – Nursery Teacher

This could be paralleled to the efforts being made by many academics and researchers to provide appropriate grounds for supporting the existence of play in

early years settings however problematic this co-existence is (DES, 1989; Bruce, 1991; David, 2003; Sammons *et al.* 2004).

## **Summary of chapter 10**

This chapter set out to explore adult constructions on nursery play with regards to learning and aimed to address the following question:

- i) How do parents view learning through nursery play?
- ii) How do nursery staff view learning through nursery play?

Data derived from the interviews and the informal discussions with the participants were used to inform the content of this chapter and were analysed and presented for each group separately.

### **i) How do parents view learning through nursery play?**

Although parents emphasised the importance of fun in children's play, they also stressed the play-learning relationship and the need for children to have ownership over their play. Parents highlighted children's learning through play, such as social interaction, literacy and numeracy, personal skills, interest in environment, educational skills, and enhancement of imagination, mathematical and spatial concepts. The importance of teachers' approaches to learning through play was recognised by parents who stated that this was the main purpose their children attended nursery – to be provided with additional play opportunities and guided by people who are experienced and aware of the learning-play

relationships. In this way parents considered that children would be well equipped for formal schooling, with the nursery being a transition phase.

Some parents recognised the development of friendships in their children's play, a sense of independence, maturity and self-esteem, whereas they could also identify the change in their children's roles with different members of the family or friends.

## **ii) How do nursery staff view learning through nursery play?**

Most nursery staff identified the learning value of play in terms of social, educational, counting, sorting, creativity, as well as mathematical and scientific concepts and understanding of the world (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1962; Bruner, 1980; Nutbrown, 1994). However, most staff felt that this learning was taking place incidentally and without children realising it; the most important issue was for children to have fun while playing. In their views this element of fun would promote learning and enable children to face the challenges of formal schooling. Nursery play was once more considered an important step to children's formal schooling, and some nursery staff commented on the differences between children who had experienced nursery education and others who had not during their teaching practices in reception classes (Bennett *et al.* 1997).

Play was considered to be a way through which children formed or maintained strong friendships within the setting and outside of it. As it was with parents, staff recognised children's attempts to dominate different play areas within the setting; this was either being imposed to other children by their verbal

or physical behaviour. Finally, nursery staff talked about children's independence and maturity while being at the nursery setting (Paley, 1993; MacNaughton, 1999).

Having explored adult perceptions of nursery play in relation to learning chapter 11 will compare the views of all three groups (children, parents and staff) and identify connections with existing literature in the field of study.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN:**

### **Connecting constructions of young children's nursery play: research findings and future directions**

**I**n chapters 8, 9 and 10 I presented my analysis and discussion of nursery play experiences of young children the perceptions of parents and nursery staff in relation to learning.

This chapter reflects on key themes of the study and positions it in the literature. Continuities and discontinuities in the constructions of young children and their significant adults (parents and nursery staff) are now considered. The chapter concludes with my own reflections on possible future research directions.

This chapter is in three parts:

- i. Connecting young children's and adult constructions of nursery play;
- ii. Positioning the study in the literature;
- iii. Evaluation of the study and
- iv. Implications of study and future research directions.

### **i. Connecting young children's and adult constructions of nursery play**

In this section I will identify and discuss issues of concordance and discordance between the views of young children, parents and nursery staff.

#### *Play Definitions*

Chapter 8 has identified the ability of the children in this study to talk in detail about their nursery play experiences and to explain their nursery play. Perhaps predictably, no child was able to define play and this is a key difference between young children and their significant adults. Parents and nursery staff gave various (and similar – see table 11.1 below); some adults suggested that play was intrinsic and natural and also implicitly children's work, both parents and nursery staff specifically referring to nursery play as children's 'work'.

<b>Table 11.1 Participant's definitions of play</b>		
<i><b>Young Children</b></i>	<i><b>Parents</b></i>	<i><b>Nursery Staff</b></i>
x	Child-Initiated	Inherent
x	Self-Chosen	Natural
x	Work	Work
x	Fun	Fun
x	Imaginative	Learning
x	Everything	Important

As it can be seen on table 11.1, adults play definitions did not differ significantly – with the main difference being that parents did not make any explicit reference to play as learning, although they provided their accounts of



what levels of cognitive development are involved in their children's play activities. Another difference is that parents have chosen to refer to play as a 'self-chosen' and 'child-initiated' activity unlike nursery staff, perhaps showing the fact that play is less or not structured at home, although it is more structured and has a particular aim and purpose at the nursery, where nursery staff plan the activities in order to meet the requirements of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000). Finally, it is worth mentioning that although children did not explicitly define play, they showed levels of fun, involvement, imagination, strenuousness and learning through the play observations of the researcher as well as the video footage and the group discussions (see chapters 8 and 9 for further details).

### *Learning*

Participants' constructions of learning, observations of children's play incidents and their responses in open-ended/dialogic interviews, suggest that some children (for example, Maurice, Gleda, Jefferson) explained that certain play activities were 'good for them', 'too easy' or 'too difficult'. Learning featured strongly in children's observed and video-recorded play incidents. Through the play activities that were provided by the members of staff, children acquired new skills and built on previous knowledge to solve newly introduced problems. Through the learning stories presented in chapter 8, children in imaginary situations appeared to be competent; personally, emotionally, and socially and skilful in play situations such as construction, sand and water and creativity.

Parents and nursery staff, valued equally the power and significance of play in learning (chapter 9). Unlike children they were in a position to explicitly highlight this relationship with examples from their daily play encounters with the children.

#### *Adult roles*

Some children (like Jefferson, Jason and Lorna) identified adults as ‘assistants’ as well as playmates in their nursery play encounters. This was more likely to be the case in ‘single child’ families but less so where there were siblings. Parents reported that they adopted the roles that children suggested (see table 11.2, p.366).

Data analysis of the adult participants interview data revealed that adult participants were using the role of the ‘observer’ in a different way. The ‘observer’ role was mainly adopted when parents wanted to be sure of their children’s well-being and safety. Describing the role of the ‘observer’, nursery staff responded differently from parents as they gave emphasis to the need for assessment through observations. Nursery staff identified additional roles for themselves. Table 11.2 below proves to be an informative summary regarding the adult roles discussed earlier.

<b>Table 11.2 Adult roles in young children's play</b>	
<i>Parents</i>	<i>Nursery Staff</i>
Discussant	Discussant
Observer	Observer
Involved	Facilitator
Playmate	Instigator
	Developer
	Assessor
	Supporter
	Manager
	Supervisor

As it has been already discussed in chapter 8 parents in the study reported that they were actively involved in their children's play in order to support their learning (Dunn and Wooding, 1977; Power and Parke, 1982; Nutbrown, 1994). They saw this role as of major importance in the development of children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical skills. Parental roles seemed to be those of the 'playmate', 'discussant', 'involved', and 'observer' (with the intention of ensuring children's good behaviour and well-being). These roles varied according to the gender of the parent, depending on whether they were mothers or fathers and the presence in the family of older or younger siblings. Some parents were uninvolved in their children's play when their children were playing with siblings because they did not want to 'interfere' (Justin and Maurice's mother) and because

they felt that these were ‘quality’ play incidents – not to be interrupted (Terris’ mother and Patricia’s mother).

Nursery staff adopted similar roles of the ‘facilitator’, ‘assessor’, ‘supporter’, ‘instigator’ discussant’, ‘developer’, ‘supervisor’ and ‘manager’ of the play activities, and that of ‘observer’. Nursery staff however saw their ‘observer’ role as one of initiating the reporting, monitoring and assessing of children’s development and learning through play. It should be noted at this point that none of the nursery staff referred to their role as a ‘playmate’, perhaps assuming the difference in *formality* between the parents, who one might say that follow a more relaxed and natural approach, and nursery staff, who set some boundaries, when it comes to ‘playing with the children in their setting’. This could be either because of the overload that some nursery staff were referring to or to the need of staff to abide to the specifications of the government policy and to meet standards. As an effect this might create a different picture of play for children between the two settings and also between the roles of their significant adults.

In summary, the study:

- suggests that the responses of young children (perhaps predictably) did not concur entirely with the responses of their significant adults for most of the research questions.
- has shown that young children are able to explain their play and see play as intrinsic to their daily nursery or out-of-school life.

- indicates that children experience learning through their nursery play experiences and use play as ‘empowerment’.
- reveals that most parents and nursery staff agree on what play is and their roles in such play incidents.
- presents parents’ views of friendships that were more informative than these of nursery staff. This might be perhaps because parents spent more time with their children and had a more intimate knowledge of their children’s personal play preferences.

This study has shown that young children’s views of play are different from those of adults – future practice needs to take account of the importance of children’s perspectives. The thesis also identifies the detailed knowledge which parents have of their own children’s play – practitioners should be aware of the contribution parents can make to the development of their children’s play.

## **ii. Positioning the study in the literature**

Throughout this thesis I have emphasised the importance of considering children’s constructions of learning, gender and power in nursery play alongside those of their significant adults. Having analysed and discussed the constructions of each group (children, parents and nursery staff) discretely, I will now reflect on the findings of the study by bringing together the responses of all three groups and identifying continuities and discontinuities with the relevant literature in the field (previously critically reviewed in chapters 2 and 3).

A re-iteration of the research questions that guided this study is necessary at this point:

1. How do children view their nursery play practices? How do children experience nursery play? (In particular with regards to learning)
2. How do parents view nursery play? Are their views similar or different to these of the children?
3. How do early educators view nursery play? Are their views similar or different to the views of the children and the parents?
4. What is the adult role in children's nursery play? How do children view this role?

The above research questions were explored through an ethnographic study of young children's daily play activities within a single nursery setting in the North of England (during the academic year 2001-2002). The study reported in this thesis reflects as appropriate the approaches of other studies in the field of early childhood education and research (Paley, 1984, 1988 and 1993; Corsaro, 1993; Sawyer, 1997; Kelly-Byrne, 1989; Kaarby, 1988; Nutbrown, 1994; Howard *et al.* 2002; Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003). The need to listen to children's voices had been central to this thesis (Rinaldi, 1993; Filippini and Vecchi, 1996, Nutbrown, 1996 and 2000; Abbott and Nutbrown, 2001). This study sought to create an interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 1997) of children's nursery play experiences and their constructions of learning.

A range of child-centred research methods were used this study (Hill, 1997; Moore and Sixsmith, 2000), which aimed to assist young children in becoming the main informants and give them a sense of research participation (Hughes, 2002).

Research methods included video and audio recording of play incidents, 'peripheral' observations (Corsaro, 1993), collection of drawings (Dyson, 1986; Anning, 1997; Anning and Ring, 2004), use of disposable cameras (Clark and Moss, 2001; Thornton and Teifer-Brunton, 2001; Fasoli, 2003), open-ended and informal interviews/discussions with the children (MacNaughton, 1999; MacNaughton, personal communication) and the adults, and collection of play related documentation. Other recent studies (Marsh, 2001; Marsh, 2004; Fasoli, 2003) have used similar age appropriate research methods elicit information from young children (Paley, 1993; Clark and Moss, 2001; Thornton and Telfer-Brunton, 2001). Observations of children's play activities within the nursery setting (Isaacs, 1932; Bruner, 1980; Sylva et al. 1980; Tizard *et al.*, 1977; Hutt *et al.* 1989) were carried out throughout the course of this study. Interviews with the children were more like discussions (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003); they were open-ended (MacNaughton, personal communication); and took place in a familiar environment with no more than 3 children and with overall duration of 10-15 minutes each (MacNaughton *et al.* 2000).

This thesis has shown that young children can reflect on and discuss their play activities and the purposes for doing what they did (whilst watching a video

recording of their play) but they could not elaborate on what play 'is'. Unlike the studies of King (1979), Wing (1995) and Keating *et al* (2000), in which children seemed to have certain views of which activities were play-related and which were work-related, the children of this study did not seem to distinguish between the two. Only when it came to define the role of a teacher did a 4-year-old boy said that teachers were present at the nursery because they were 'working'. There seemed to be a 'flow' between work, play and non-play for children (Stevens, 1980). Play and work seemed to be interrelated and interconnected and were viewed as equally important. Children showed a great level of commitment, interest, and concentration while they demonstrated their ability to retain great detail related to their play, which was an integral part of their daily nursery experiences. These findings concurred with those of Manning and Sharp (1977) and Denzin (1971/1992).

### *Defining play*

Both parents and nursery staff provided a range of definitions of play with many similarities across and between groups, whereas young children did not elaborate on what play is (see table 11.1, page 362). Although adults initially found it difficult to define play (Jenkinson, 2001; Smith, 1994), they provided detailed definitions of play, which were continuous with existing ones (Huizinga, 1950; Piaget, 1962; Pellegrini, 1987; Garvey, 1977; Rubin *et al.* 1983).



Adults were mainly able to determine (from their observations and previous knowledge of their children's preferences) the nature of children's play and the purpose behind it. Initially, parents and nursery staff commented on the fact that play is fun and fanciful (Saracho, 1991). Different 'types' of play were identified by both parents and nursery staff, which seemed to depend on children's age (Piaget, 1962). Whether or not children were engaged in solitary play situations or were engaged in play activities with others (Parten, 1932), the way children were using play as a 'prop' to 'recreate' various incidents (Bruce, 1991; Garner, 1998) and the purpose of their play activities (Smilansky, 1968) were discussed by parents and staff.

Particular emphasis was given by the nursery staff to the types of the play activities (Bruce and Meggitt, 1999) and whether these were directly linked to 'structured play' (Manning and Sharp, 1977) or 'free-flow' (Bruce, 1991) and 'child-initiated' (Abbott, 1994) play. However, staff were not always successful in identifying the type or purpose of the play activity as they were basing their assumptions mainly on observations; and observations alone could not provide them with a clear and concise picture. In some cases though, where staff had the opportunity to discuss in detail a play incident with the child(ren), more information was revealed about children's play and their meanings.

This study shows that unlike children, adults appeared to have less insight into the reasons behind certain play behaviours, for example where the same

incident was shown on videotape to all three groups only the children themselves could provide a fully detailed account of, and rationale for, their play.

Adults regarded play as being important in young children's overall development and learning. The majority of parents and all nursery staff commented that play is the child's work (Isaacs, 1932). Some parents differentiated between play at the nursery and play outside the nursery; these perceived only play at the nursery to be their children's work. Both parents and nursery staff perceived play to be a contributing factor to children's development of language and thought (Vygotsky, 1978). For parents and nursery staff, play exposed children to new possibilities for dealing with and experiencing the world (Hughes, 1991) and encouraged children to formulate rules during imaginary play activity with which all players had to comply (Bruner, Jolly and Sylva, 1976; Paley, 1984).

### *Areas of learning*

A key feature of this thesis has been young children's play in relation to learning. Findings in this study were similar to other studies (Manning and Sharp, 1977; Athey, 1990; Bruce, 1991; Drummond, 1999; Bennett *et al.* 1997). This study shows that children used play effectively in their quest to promote their learning experiences although it must be acknowledged that the children would not have articulated what they did as a 'learning quest', not did they use the language of current government policy for England. Chapter 9 has shown that

learning occurred in all six areas of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000):

- personal, social and emotional (learning stories 9.1, page 281 and 9.2, page 286);
- communication, language and literacy (learning stories 9.3, page 291, 9.4, page 294 and 9.5, page 296);
- mathematical understanding (learning stories 9.6, page 299, and 8.1, page 252, 9.7, page 302);
- knowledge and understanding of the world (learning stories 9.8, page 305, 9.9, page 307 and 9.10, page 309);
- creative development (learning stories 9.11, page 313 and 9.12, page 316);
- physical development (learning stories 9.13, page 318 and 9.14, page 321).

Although children did not explicitly say that they learned something from the play activity they were involved in, it was apparent from their comments that the play activities:

- stretched their imagination (Paley, 1993),
- engaged them in literacy opportunities (Christie, 1991; Dyson, 1997),
- involved them in numeracy and discussions over popular culture figures like Action Man, Barbie, Thunderbirds, Buzz Lightyear (Marsh, 2001),
- allowed children to explore their gender identities and to cross gender boundaries (MacNaughton, 1999; Davies, 1989),

- developed their communication skills and enabled them to form important friendships (Paley, 1987; Corsaro, 1993) and also to perform acts of power (MacNaughton, 1999),
- created an environment of common interests (Holland, 2003),
- promoted children's sense of empathy (Paley, 1993) and need to resolve conflict and anxiety.

In addition, the play activities provided seemed to enhance previous learning experiences – especially out-of-school experiences – and enabled children to develop a sophisticated vocabulary, especially in activities that were adult-directed (Bennett *et al.* 1997; Manning and Sharp, 1977; Nutbrown, 1994). This finding came in opposition with findings from the study by Hutt *et al.* (1989) as the element of epistemic play was more apparent through the activities provided to the children. Hutt *et al.* (1989) on the other hand had suggested that 'pre-school environments are structured in such a way as to encourage primarily ludic rather than epistemic activity' (p.226). However, it should be highlighted at this point that although the present study found more activities to be placed under the epistemic behaviour category, the ludic behaviour seemed to underpin all activities presented to the children, providing evidence that these two terms could not be considered as oppositional but rather as complementary to each other. It was evident that once a play situation lost its ludic behaviour children found no interest in it and moved to another activity.

### *Adult roles in young children's nursery play*

In this study adult roles in relation to play varied according to their relationship with the children (see table 11.2 page 365). Parents and staff seemed *indirectly* to influence children's play, for example, the selection of play props, and provision of age appropriate play environment and *directly* by settling disputes, reinforcing a play behaviours or showing children how to use play equipment (Bordova and Leong, 1998).

The adult roles identified in this study were broadly concordant with findings from other studies (Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Bennett *et al*, 1997; Kontos, 1999; Saracho, 1991; Swadener and Johnson, 1989). What is different in the study reported in this thesis in comparison to other published literature in the field is the different meaning that parents gave to the role of the *observer*. For parents the role of the 'observer' would watch children's behaviour to ensure their well-being and appropriate behaviour. Nursery staff saw the 'observers' of play as a means of assessing the learning processes and monitoring children's play. Play interactions within the nursery setting studied involved quality interactions between adults and children (Bruner 1980). Children had opportunities to explore and extend their own ideas around certain play situations through dialogue with staff and their peers (Bennett *et al*. 1997). This thesis has shown that the nursery provided a secure and safe environment where adults respected children's needs (Nutbrown, 1999; Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; 2004) allowing children

to maximise their nursery experiences and develop their cognitive, physical and emotional skills, which included a sense of autonomy and ownership.

### **iii. Evaluation of the study**

Having summarized the research data and having positioned the study in the existing literature, it is worth evaluating the study before discussing the future research questions and directions.

I will start the evaluation of the study by making specific references to my reflections and what I have learned as a researcher through being engaged in this study and of writing this thesis.

When I embarked on this journey I tried to approach the field with as less interference as possible and I also tried not to be influenced by my own perceptions and biases. This proved possible most of the time but also challenging as it is only human nature to assume things before these take place or not to anticipate an event to take place at all. However, by being reflective and reflexive at all times, I believe that I kept these influences and biases to a minimum. Of course, my personality and appearance might have had an effect on the relationship with the participants, but this is the case with all qualitative researchers practicing ethnographic research.

When I question myself ‘What I have learned from this study?’ I believe that I came out ‘wealthier’ not only in knowledge but also in confidence and in experiences than when I first entered the field. Not only have I learned more

about play and children's cognitive development, the topic under investigation, but I have also learned enormously about the practices of other early childhood educators as well as the dynamics that exist in children's daily play encounters. I have not only mastered my interviewing techniques, especially when talking to children, but I have also practiced my analysing and critical thinking and ability to a great extent.

This study has, as most studies across the field of educational research, presented both strengths and weaknesses. It has proved that it is possible and very rewarding to involve young children in research practices as active informants and participants, but it has also showed that in such case, negotiating access and meeting deadlines is almost impossible. It has also shown that children's play is complicated, although the 'players' themselves did not understand this complexity. In addition it has presented play as having a certain degree of formality, by characterising play depending on the play environment itself and who is in control of play or manages play (either these are children, parents or early educators).

However, it has shown that additional or extra time and various resources (such as translating documents in different languages) are needed to include 'hard to reach' populations in research. For the purposes of this study, these populations proved to be families from various communities and ethnic backgrounds other than British working class families, rather than children as I initially anticipated.

Finally, this thesis has provided a stepping-stone into researching very young children's views of play and involving children in research for the benefits of both practice and research.

Nevertheless, if I were to do things differently, after having gained a great degree of confidence through this study, firstly, I would have allowed children time to become co-researchers and explore the issues of play in depth with them. Secondly, I would have made any possible attempt to involve an equal number of fathers to this of the mothers that participated in this study in order to create a more balanced picture of how both parents view and construct play. Thirdly, I would have involved more parents from other communities and ethnic backgrounds in an attempt to present a more holistic picture of how various communities experience play. Interpreting the letters of consent or inviting such parents to meetings that would explain the nature of the research in more depth and perhaps ease their possible fears could achieve this.

#### **iv. Implications of the study and future research directions.**

The aim of this study was to explore young children's perceptions of nursery play through giving them voice; a research strategy, which has gained in popularity in recent years with a developing literature (Christensen and James, 2001; Audrey *et al.* 2001; Adams and Ingham, 1998; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; NacNaughton *et al.* 2001).



To conclude this thesis, the implications of this study need to be presented and so is a discussion about the future research questions that have been raised from this study.

To start with the implications, according to the findings of this study, play is presented to be central to young children's learning and daily nursery encounters but is also influenced by the stances adults take towards it.

- a. Regarding *policy* and *practice* this study supports that nursery staff and parents should continue viewing play as important to their children's overall development and well-being, but they should also provide young children with the opportunity to participate actively in their play by allowing time and space for questioning and challenging children through play and within the Curriculum framework. The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) chooses to define six areas of learning for children's development. However, the findings of this study present that such categorization could be problematic when it comes to play, as children have competently shown that they could take each activity further and towards a different direction than originally proposed by nursery staff. Children's play behaviours were based on their own needs, skills and interests and so the need for flexibility from the adult perspectives is required and should be called upon.
- b. Another implication related to *practice* is that young children should be allowed to discuss in depth what they are doing and why. This research

has shown that children are the main players and therefore know better the rationale behind each activity. Adults were not always in a position to give reasons for a certain play activity. By discussing with children about their play, adults could become more tuned into children's play and children could enhance their 'ownership' over play, leading to more quality play incidents taking place within the nursery.

To continue with the future directions, this ethnographic study of young children's experiences and constructions of nursery play and the perspectives of their significant adults has raised new research questions. Increasingly, young children's perspectives are being introduced in studies that are directly linked to their experiences, development and learning. The study reported in this thesis suggests that young children's views can successfully be heard if researchers respect children's needs and build on those needs to provide the most appropriate research methodology. Because only when the adult perspectives are not viewed in isolation but in relation to the views of young children, we could create an understanding between the relationship of parents, early educators and young children and how this relationship shapes and influences young children's development (Buchbinder *et al.* 2006).

This study demonstrates the complex nature of play but recognizes the great potential of play in the development of children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills (Pollard and Filler, 1996). It also shows how a 'playful' environment can enable children to develop their cognitive skills,

construct meaning and explore issues around diversity, inclusion, participation, ownership, autonomy as well as respect for other people; further studies could develop these themes in more detail.

Dialogue with young children related to their play can inform adult practices both in and out of the nursery settings and so enhance curriculum and pedagogy. Flexible research agenda which acknowledge young children's needs and allow children to provide valuable insights on play can prove more valuable than perhaps more rigid research designs.

As it is shown in this thesis, the adult participants, based on the setting's ethos and views on the significance of play, tried most of the times to treat play as natural despite the workload or potential fears of an activity being labelled as non-educational. Participants, thus, have shown confidence in allowing children to move a step further from the 'prescribed' planning suggestions.

Further research into how children's views of play can be incorporated in daily and long-term planning of activities would be useful. Ethnographic accounts of young children's play can provide rich data on their preferences, constructions and anxieties. Because play seems to be such an intrinsic activity to most children it could be argued that adults should look beyond the apparent element of fun and explore its potential for learning.

To conclude, young children should be given more opportunities to become research participants and perhaps co-researchers, with due regard to their time, in research about the complex and enigmatic nature of play. Such practices

could reveal that play is a natural and valuable, yet challenging, activity that does not need to justify its place in early childhood educational settings, before children enter formal schooling and a more structured way of learning.

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