# “What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up?” & Other Tales
## An Ethnography of Children in Greater London




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## Abstract

Aspiration has become a political buzzword, and the rhetoric surrounding ‘raising aspirations’ to improve futures has filtered down to primary school level. Some researchers have critiqued the rhetoric as vacuous without material investment, and at worst, detrimental to disadvantaged groups. Whilst engaging with these ideas, this research offers a radical rethink. Firstly, rather than approaching the issue from a policy-driven perspective, it presents an emic view of children’s aspirations. Instead of applying a categorisation of aspirations as ‘high’ or ‘low’ (and therefore able to be ‘raised’), it examines both the content and context of aspirational statements. Secondly, and more crucially, it does not just examine children’s elicited *representations* of their futures (or presents), but engages with children’s spontaneous *practices occurring in time*. This kind of engagement is rare, but is one of the possibilities and benefits of ethnography.

My fieldwork involved almost total immersion into children’s life-worlds. Using a method of ‘full participation’ with children, I took part in my participants’ practices for the greater part of each day over 15 to 18 months. In documenting both their everyday practices *and* their ‘in time’ narratives spontaneously embarked upon, I am able to reconcile the real-time ‘flow’ of life with the ‘fixings’ of meaning people everywhere construct in order to make meaning in and of their lives. In telling futures, my participants employed the flexibility of narrative in optimistic expressions of ideal competence, ownership and autonomy that asserted the teller’s personhood in the present – as able to act; effectual; recognisable by others; and worth knowing. In their telling, aspirations were not so much individually motivational, as they were an inter-subjective action in the world with productive power that could and did have ‘future’ effects.

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## Chapter 1 | Introduction

Aspiration has become a political buzzword, and the rhetoric surrounding 'raising aspirations' to improve futures has filtered down to primary school level. Some researchers have critiqued the rhetoric as vacuous without material investment, and at worst, detrimental to disadvantaged groups. Whilst engaging with these ideas, this research offers a radical rethink. Firstly, rather than approaching the issue from a policy-driven perspective, it presents an emic view of children's aspirations. Instead of applying a categorisation of aspirations as 'high' or 'low' (and therefore able to be 'raised'), it examines both the content and context of aspirational statements. Secondly, and more crucially, it does not just examine children's elicited *representations* of their futures (or presents), but engages with children's spontaneous *practices occurring in time*. This kind of engagement is rare, but is one of the possibilities and benefits of ethnography.

My fieldwork involved almost total immersion into children's life-worlds. Using a method of 'full participation' with children, I took part in my participants' practices for the greater part of each day over 15 to 18 months. In documenting both their everyday practices *and* their 'in time' narratives spontaneously embarked upon, I am able to reconcile the real-time 'flow' of life with the 'fixings' of meaning people everywhere construct in order to make meaning in and of their lives. In telling futures, my participants employed the flexibility of narrative in optimistic expressions of ideal competence, ownership and autonomy that asserted the teller's personhood in the present – as able to act; effectual; recognisable by others; and worth knowing. In their telling, aspirations were not so much individually motivational, as they were an inter-subjective action in the world with productive power that could and did have 'future' effects.

**Aspirational discourse, and its critique**

**"***The greater failure is not the child who doesn't reach for the stars, but the child who has no stars that they feel they are reaching for."* Gordon Brown (2007; quoted in Gutman and Akerman, 2008)

*"The driving mission … is to build an aspiration nation."* David Cameron (2012; quoted in The Guardian, 12th November 2012)

In political rhetoric and popular discourse, the notion of 'raising aspirations' has become something of a norm, equally leveraged by politicians of competing orientations, as the quotes above demonstrate. Further, it has been taken up by schools, utilised in names and mottoes (for example, the 'Aspiration Academies' chain), and, as Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) note, is central to the discourse of head teachers. Indeed, in my own fieldwork, the new head teacher at the school where I was based was keen to describe her vision for the school as one where children could aspire and be helped to reach their aspirations – something articulated to teachers, and to children in assembly[1].

As the opening quotes indicate, political rhetoric asserts that aspirations are for everyone. Further, according to former prime minister Gordon Brown, aspirational failure is more reprehensible than failures of effort or achievement. In their interviews with the middle-class head teachers of predominantly working-class schools, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) found that there was frequently despair that parents did not have 'high' aspirations for their children, framed in educational terms, and blamed variously on structural factors and/or cultural deficiency. This is not particularly surprising when much research on aspirations

[1] Daily whole school gatherings

(which I describe in the next section) links aspiration backwards to socioeconomic class background, and forwards to educational achievement and career outcomes.

Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) are critical, however, arguing that such discourses of aspiration have a moralising force based on particular middle-class norms, and shift blame from structural inequalities to working-class individuals, who come to be labelled as 'deficient' in their aspirations. For the heads, 'appropriate' aspirations would be an expectation to do well in education and future careers; by contrast, working-class parents are seen to have 'low' aspirations, being concerned only with their children's happiness, emotional security and good behaviour. Yet, the authors argue, why should these be such perverse aspirations? They highlight the individualising, anti-local nature of aspirational strategies, whereby 'success' for young people from disadvantaged areas is often defined in terms of leaving, 'getting out' or 'moving beyond' their home communities.

Notions of 'happiness' and 'living well' are also cited when people are asked more broadly about their aspirations – in interviews, rather than in narrowly focused surveys. For example, both Burke (2006) and Brown (2011) find that young people emphasise notions of happiness and fulfilment that encompass families, homes, material possessions, friends and leisure time, in addition to future careers. Discourses about happiness and wellbeing, as emic categories consistently invoked by people in many parts of the world, have recently begun to be examined by anthropologists (e.g. Thin, 2009; Mathews and Izquierdo, 2009). At a local level, then, 'aspirations' may be leveraged in competing moral discourses. On the other hand, as Brown (2011) notes, political discourse on aspiration also co-opts emotional wellbeing, on the basis that higher status careers coincide with greater happiness. Thus, a DfES report argues that increasing the age of compulsory education to 18 will make young people 'more likely to

achieve valuable qualifications, earn more and lead happier, healthier lives' (2007:3, quoted in Brown, 2011).

Tracing the political development of aspirational discourse in the U.K., Atkins (2011) argues that whilst its foundations lie in the notion of individualism and a repatriation of welfare from 'needs' to 'merit', promoted by the Thatcher government of the 1980s, its beginnings can largely be attributed to Blair's New Labour government, and the 'Third Way' ideology upon which it rested. This posited that social justice could and should be achieved in complement to economic growth, through 'workfare'-oriented economic policies based on 'reciprocal rights and responsibilities'. Thus, from 1997 onwards, and as endorsed by his speech on 'education, education, education', Blair set out the view that education (as a right provided by the state), combined with aspiration (as a responsibility on the part of parents and children), could satisfy both socialist and capitalist objectives by enabling social mobility and creating a productive, internationally competitive workforce. Aspiration and ambition are therefore assumed to be 'natural human emotions' (Hutton, 2008:1, quoted in Raco, 2009). Of course, this story is also part of wider political processes of neo-liberalisation occurring across the globe, which, coupled with the roll-out of universal education, have resulted in a widespread aspirational doxa that better lives may be achieved through educational attainment (e.g. Morrow, 2009; Zipin et al., 2015).

The supposed transformational power of education is highlighted in policy statements, such as former coalition leaders Cameron and Clegg's foreword to the 2010 Schools white paper, which reads:

> 'Throughout history, most individuals have been the victims of forces beyond their control… Horizons were narrow, hopes limited, happiness a matter of time and chance. But education provides a route to liberation from these imposed constraints.

> Education allows individuals to choose a fulfilling job, to shape the society around them, to enrich their inner life. It allows us all to become authors of our own life stories.' (Department for Education, 2010:6).

Echoing theories of 'individualisation' made popular by sociologists like Giddens (1991) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), the suggestion is that structural constraints are diminishing as education assumes an increasingly important role in outcomes. Yet, Brannen and Nilsen's (2005) cross-European study posits that structural constraints like social class and gender are still critical in shaping young people's life courses, and further, their time perspectives on their lives (in terms of whether futures are viewed as being deferred, adaptable, or predictable). Further, as Attwood et al. (2003) note, despite persistent structural inequalities, most young people have a strong sense of personal agency. If so, then as Holloway et al. (2011) suggest, working-class individuals will be made to bear the unevenly distributed burden of a 'failure' to achieve or aspire appropriately.

**Leveraging aspiration: aspirations, outcomes and social mobility**

The political rhetoric both draws on and has inspired much recent educational, psychological and sociological research into the links between a range of background factors, aspirations and outcomes. Mainly drawing on quantitative longitudinal data from which links can be statistically correlated, the studies tie in with prior research strands investigating the effect on educational achievement and occupational outcomes of class/socioeconomic background (UK) and ethnicity/race (US). The important difference with earlier research, however, is that they posit aspirations to be a highly significant mediating factor (e.g. Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Bandura et al., 2001), thus corroborating the view in political and popular discourse about aspirations being important to outcomes. As such, they are broadly supportive of the

notion that raising aspirations should be targeted as a means of improving outcomes, and are often policy driven (e.g. Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

Within longitudinal data sets, aspirations are usually ascertained by means of a survey question, from which they are differentiated from expectations – for example, 'What do you hope to be doing in […] years' time?', as set against 'And what do you expect to be doing?' Whilst noting that 'The notion of aspirations can be vague, from dreams and fantasies to concrete ambitions and goals' (pp.2), in their review article of the literature, Gutman and Akerman (2008) contend that aspirations 'usually connote the achievement of something high or great' (pp.2). Aspirations are thus inherently tied to achievement in this conceptualisation, and are viewed as positive. Without the suffix of 'high' or 'low' (which, as I explain, is frequently attached to aspirations), aspirations are assumed to be 'high'. Citing Quaglia and Cobb (1996), Gutman and Akerman (2008) further contend that 'aspirations can be defined as an individual's "*ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals*"' (pp.3). Here, then, aspirations are seen as a present capability for future goal setting that 'inspires' present work commitment. In my own research, I suggest that this definition of aspirations, reminiscent of economistic, rational choice theory, is somewhat problematic.

Such longitudinal studies then employ standard occupational classifications to rank aspirations and outcomes by prestige, which are then further categorised broadly as 'high' or 'low'. This is in line with Gottfredson's (1981) contention that 'studies of occupational images have found consistently that people perceive occupations similarly [in terms of prestige] no matter what their sex, social class, educational level, ethnic group, area of residence, occupational preferences or employment, age, type of school attended, political persuasion, and traditionality of beliefs, and regardless of the decade of the study or the specific way in

which questions were asked' (pp.550). Gutman and Akerman (2008) note that children/young people might not classify their own aspirations according to such scales – nevertheless, this classification is the basis of their analysis.

Findings across a range of studies generally posit that youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have parents with higher aspirations, and themselves have higher aspirations, resulting in correspondingly higher levels of educational attainment and career outcomes (e.g. Bandura et al. 2001; Schoon and Parsons, 2002; and see Gutman and Akerman, 2008, for a summary). Schoon and Parsons (2002), for example, find that parental social class has a large influence on teenage aspirations and educational attainment, which themselves are strongly correlated. And they contend that teenage aspirations are the best predictor of occupational status in adulthood. Bandura et al.'s (2001) study, based in an Italian school, similarly argues that parents' academic aspirations for their children feed into children's academic aspirations, and these are important to career choice. Additionally, they argue for the mediating effect of parents' and children's self-efficacy beliefs (beliefs that 'they can produce desired outcomes by their actions' (pp.187)). Using pathway analysis, Bandura et al. contend that aspirations and self-efficacy beliefs are vital in explaining the link between socioeconomic background and career choice.

As aforementioned, class/socioeconomic background has traditionally been the focus in the UK, with additional stratification by gender (since occupational choices have consistently appeared to be strongly gendered – e.g. Croll, 2008). However, more recent studies have examined ethnicity, in a similarly longitudinal way (e.g. Strand, 2007), as well as in studies inspired by Bourdieu's concepts of 'capital' and 'habitus' (e.g. Modood, 2004). Bourdieu's theories are also popular in class analyses, and more recently, with those linking class with aspirations (e.g. Archer et al., 2012), in spite of his criticism of the notion that aspirations have

independent effects, as I later describe. In general, ethnic minorities can be seen to aspire higher, and have higher educational attainment than their white British counterparts of a similar socioeconomic status, although there are also issues of aspiration exceeding attainment (the 'aspiration-achievement gap') for particular ethnic groups (e.g. Black-Caribbean followed by Pakistani and Bangladeshi students) (Strand, 2007; but see Modood, 2004). This mirrors patterns in gender difference, in which females, on average, can be seen to aspire higher than males, but also experience an aspiration-attainment gap (e.g. Schoon et al., 2007). As Gutman and Akerman (2008) note, there may be further issues to explore at the intersections of ethnicity, socioeconomic background and gender.

In other areas, research on aspirations has also been expanding: for example, in examining the effect of 'uncertain aspirations' – i.e. statements of not knowing what one wants to be (see Yates et al., 2010 and Gutman and Schoon, 2012 for contrasting results); and in the 'safety net' effect apparent for low-aspiring youth from better-off backgrounds (e.g. Croll, 2008). And, as the aspirational rhetoric has travelled down to the primary school level, there have also been concomitant studies addressing younger children's perceived aspirations. For example, Flouri and Panourgia (2012) explore whether aspirations mediate between family poverty and child outcomes (for which they posit that the link is 'well-established' (pp.4)) for British 7-year olds. In this case, however, the outcomes they test for are present focused – emotional and behavioural effects – rather than longer-term educational or occupational outcomes. The authors suggest that amongst their participants 'high' aspirations did mitigate emotional and behavioural problems at school, although they admit that establishing causality (i.e. from aspirations to reduced problem behaviour, rather than the reverse, or that the two are jointly caused by other factors) is problematic.

In terms of age, it is notable that many studies – and indeed policy – draw on the developmental 'theory of circumspection and compromise' set out by Gottfredson (1981), in which she describes how children match their self-concept to occupational images in order to come up with a 'zone of acceptable alternatives'. From viewing all known occupations as acceptable, between the ages of 3 and 5, children then cumulatively circumscribe the available alternatives, between the ages of 6 and 8 by sex roles (i.e. whether a job is deemed feminine or masculine); between 9 and 13 by class (i.e. a job's prestige, as linked to their own socioeconomic background); and from 14+, by an idea of themselves as a unique individual with particular interests. Compromise occurs according to the feedback from ability, and, according to Gottfredson, aspiration is the choice of one occupation from the zone of acceptable alternatives. Whilst I only studied one age group (9 to 11-year olds), my research is at odds with Gottfredson's influential theory, as my participants were centrally interested in understanding themselves as unique individuals, with their statements of occupational choice being expressive of themselves as unique individuals.

Various other models also claim an element of dynamism to aspiration and expectation (e.g. Eccles, 2009 – with regards to development of the self-concept; and Bandura et al., 2001 – with regards to self-efficacy beliefs). Interestingly, then, aspirations – or the precursors to aspirations – are seen to become more 'realistic' as the child grows up. Whilst developmental trajectories are usually co-opted to keep children on track, the suggestion here is that targeting younger children's less circumscribed aspirations is required in order to cultivate aspirations that have not yet been conditioned by experience.

There are numerous issues to consider with these studies, often noted by the researchers themselves. These include the categorisation of aspirations as simply 'high' or 'low'; the identification of class/socioeconomic background, as determined by various indices; the

datedness of the data (often based on participants from a number of generations ago); the synchronous 'snapshot' provided by asking about educational or occupational aspirations at one moment in time; and the limitations of surveys in allowing for more detailed or nuanced answers. Yet, the results of the studies are quite striking in the uniformity of their findings. But what are they telling us? According to the studies, structural factors and outcomes are tied, but mediated through aspirations. In other words, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have lower aspirations and poorer educational and career outcomes, but higher aspirations can and do result in better outcomes. It is no surprise then, that policy might try to target the raising of aspirations (not least in times of economic austerity).

However, according to critiques, it is no surprise that aspirations are in line with structural constraints and outcomes, even as they appear to function independently. For example, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011; and cf. Reay, 2008) argue that the aspirational rhetoric works by offering middle-class cultural capital to appropriately aspirational individuals, whilst obscuring the class-based nature of idealised subjectivities. The success of a small number of working-class individuals acts to legitimise the rhetoric, and individualises the nature of failure (to aspire and achieve), instead of addressing systemic failures. This argument closely resembles Bourdieu's (1990 (1970)) seminal treatise about the education system, in which he posits that:

> 'It is no accident that so many sociologists, victims of the ideological effect of the school, are inclined to isolate dispositions and pre-dispositions towards education – 'hopes', 'aspirations', 'motivations', 'willpower' – from their social conditions of production: forgetting that objective conditions determine both aspirations and the degree to which they can be satisfied, they think themselves entitled to proclaim the best of all possible worlds when, after a longitudinal study of school careers, they find

> that, as if by a pre-established harmony, individuals hoped for nothing they have not obtained and obtained nothing they did not hope for.' (pp.207).

Bourdieu (1990 (1970)) is sceptical about the education system – often lauded for its positive, transformational potential – arguing that whilst ostensibly neutral and even democratic in its stated aims, it serves the function of reproducing class relations through 'symbolic violence' – the 'imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (pp6). The system works through a 'dual objective truth', in that it has its own internal logic that gives it the guise of independence and neutrality from the value system of society or the dominant classes. There are individuals from working class origins who do gain scholastic success, giving credibility to the ideology of social mobility and school as 'a liberating force'. But in totality, there appears to be perfect harmony between the education and class systems because within the ostensibly free and meritocratic workings of the former, each is persuaded to know his place. This persuasion works not simply at an ideological level but at a practical one, through the cultivation of the 'habitus' that describes the 'dispositions' and 'pre-dispositions' towards education – including aspirations – and the practices that these generate. The system is reproducing in that for any individual, educational choice is made as a result of his cultivated habitus, which itself is based on the objective relations between his social class and the education system; meanwhile, his choice contributes towards the collective reproduction of the objective structures that initially informed his choice and inform future individuals' choices.

Despite Bourdieu's generally critical stance on the education system, various studies in education have taken on his theories about habitus (as well as 'capitals' – cf. Bourdieu, 1986) to sketch out notions of the formation of family habitus, and how this might be altered, through policy interventions, to raise aspirations (e.g. Archer et al., 2012). On the other hand,

other studies remain more critical, in particular, of the consequences of advocating that raising aspirations alone can improve outcomes. For example, a recent summary work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation argues that government interventions claiming to raise attainment through attitudinal change, including raising aspirations, self-efficacy and the value placed on school, are more likely to have a direct effect on attainment than through attitudinal change (Cummings et al., 2012). According to the authors, a focus on aspirations is misguided.

Various ethnographies have also attempted to document such 'educational failure' and the formation of apparently perverse aspirations. Willis' (1977) ethnography questions why white, working-class youth appear to freely choose to embark on careers in manual labour – i.e. why they seem to be complicit in their own class subordination and exploitation. Describing the school counter-culture of a group of non-conformist boys – the 'lads' – Willis draws out counter-culture themes, resonant with Bourdieu's dispositions, of opposition to authority, independence, style, humour, masculinity, sexism and racism. He suggests that the group culture's impetus derives from the conjunction of a rejection of the educational paradigm – essentially an exchange relation of knowledge in return for consent or obedience – with the wider working class culture of which they are a part, and from which they creatively appropriate an array of styles. Such crossovers mean that mental work is rejected as inferior and feminine. In rejecting the educational paradigm, Willis argues that the 'lads' are being rational in 'seeing beyond' the inconsistencies in the system: the false promise of the value of general attainment in an individualistic system; qualifications as mere representation of what they can demonstrate practically; and unfair exchange in which their consent to learn could result in a permanent loss of self, through subscribing to the time and space-constraining structures of the institutional timetable. In this 'seeing beyond', they seem to be overcoming the education system as a Foucauldian regime of power through 'creative' practices that

foreshadow what Scott (1985) nominally labels ‘practices of everyday resistance’. However, Willis argues that these are only ‘partial penetrations’ because in rejecting mental work, they are ultimately confined to a life of (lower paid) manual labour.

Similarly, Evans' more recent (2006) ethnography examines white, working-class children’s failure to achieve at primary school in Bermondsey, London. Taking a learning perspective (cf. Toren, 1999, and see also Stafford, 1995), she argues that working-class family relations of love and care are expressed in different ways from the task-focused activities through which middle-class parents express their love and care, and thereby ensure school success. Whilst middle-class children come to find gratification in performing such activities, and thus find the transition to school easy, working-class children may come to do so (at school), but may not (because they view school-type activities as incompatible with the values they have learnt at home or on the street). At home, participation revolves around female kinship, whilst on the streets, it centres on the reputations that males cultivate through competitive relations of toughness. However, observing the Pokémon craze of the late 1990s/early 2000s that gripped working and middle-class children alike, Evans argues that particular phenomena, like competitive exchanges of Pokémon cards, have transformative potential in resonating with practices that working-class boys value, whilst developing skills that may be useful off the streets.

Evans’ and Willis’ analyses reject the individualising notion that attitudinal change – a simple ‘raising’ of aspirations – can substantively improve outcomes. On the other hand, they are united in regarding the relation between socioeconomic class and educational and career aspirations and outcomes as problematic. Yet, others might argue that this, too, is a moralistic premise. Ranking jobs on socioeconomic prestige, or valuing mental work over manual, and more education as better, can be viewed as imposing a particular moral order on others’ lives.

And as is hinted at in the literature on aspirations, for example, by Croll (2008) and Yates et al. (2011), claiming that 'high prestige' jobs are more worthy aspirational targets when there are clearly insufficient numbers of these jobs for all who aspire to them, might be morally reprehensible in terms of creating unfulfilled desire and a sense of disappointment in life. This is particularly so given the uncertainty created by (the again, structural forces of) the global financial crisis, which is likely to disproportionately affect young people, as Morrow (2009) notes. Zipin et al. (2015), citing Berlant (2011), label this 'cruel optimism': a necessity for people to invest in optimistic strategies, even as these are consistently thwarted. Meanwhile, research from India notes the sense of 'waste' many young people have of failing in their educational aspirations (Jeffrey, 2010; Morrow, 2013). And Marrow (2013) examines cases of psychosomatic illness as apparent manifestation of the intense emotional demands required of aspiration, exhibited by girls who do not have the support of the informal group in which Jeffry's young men can find at least ambivalent meaning. On the other hand, as Froerer's (2012) work – and my own research – find, young people also actively adjust their aspirations depending on circumstances, in ways that might not be as problematic (to themselves) as they appear to outside observers.

Also questionable is Willis' suggestion that the lads will one day 'see beyond' the system and ultimately be disillusioned – which his own ethnography does not indicate. Indeed, history sheds new light on issues. As Dolby and Dimitriadis' (2004) update to Willis' work argues, whereas the lads could have expected to gain employment fairly easily and earn relatively 'good' wages from their work, the loss of 'good' manufacturing jobs means that this is no longer the case. In contrast, then, the authors lament that new working class jobs *no longer* reproduce working class culture. Evans' work suggests that the outcome for failing boys in contemporary Bermondsey is bleaker. Although refraining from drawing too many conclusions, it is apparent that Evans' own (reflected-upon) middle-class view is that

education is the answer, albeit with the need to accommodate alternative approaches to learning that take into account working-class children's out-of-school experiences. Yet, this view seems to go against that of her working-class mothers who seem to see the possibility of improved outcomes for boys as occurring not through school, but through the redemptive qualities of 'settling down' with a 'good girl', who will keep a boy off the dangerous streets.

In their model of aspirations, Zipin et al. (2015) propose a third 'type', as an alternative to doxic aspirations (essentially, the 'raising aspirations' discourse) and habituated aspirations (essentially, the notion of Bourdieu's habitus). This, they call 'emergent aspirations', based in part on Appadurai's (2004) notion of 'the capacity to aspire'. Zipin et al. (2015) argue that emergent aspirations are those not accounted for by the previous two types; as alternatives, they may exist only as feelings or thoughts, impossible to articulate verbally. And they propose that efforts should be made to bring out these emergent aspirations, as they could lead to alternative futures (although they note that these are not necessarily better futures vis-à-vis potential embedding in relations of power and hierarchy). The link to Appadurai (2004) is a tenuous one, however, since the context of Appadurai's 'capacity to aspire' is that of international development, and relates to a cultural capacity not an individual one. This is a crucial difference, since, in a case study of how such a capacity might be attained, Appadurai refers specifically to the interactions of community members, and their subsequent ability to cultivate a voice in wider debates. Applied at this level, Zipin et al.'s interventions are surely no different from those aimed at trying to map and change family habitus (e.g. Archer et al., 2012). That aspirations may be neither doxic nor habituated is important to note; yet, if emergent is the best way of describing them, this is surely because they emerge from people's improvised actions (cf. Hastrup, 2007) and the novel meanings they find in their life-worlds, which evade targeted elicitation.

**Children's perspectives: the anthropology of childhood and childhood studies**

Most work on aspiration to date examines the problematic of class/socioeconomic background (together with gender, and more recently, ethnicity). However, as discussed, this research often looks at aspiration in narrow terms, oriented towards policy objectives of achieving social mobility in occupational terms, addressing perceived 'problem' groups, or generally raising educational attainment – as a 'good' in its own right, and in terms of perceived international competitiveness. Drawing on work that explores aspirations more broadly, I wish to take a different tack in my research. In line with childhood studies and recent anthropology of childhood research, I aim to gain a children's perspective on aspiration, and, recalling the temporal value of aspiration (at least as defined in the literature), on the relation between future and present more generally in children's lives.

I suggest that this is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, as discussed, debates about aspiration and achievement often occur at a high level between competing ideologies, essentially excluding children from discussions; secondly, debates prefigure the meaning of aspiration, making assumptions about children's statements, and about the temporal workings of aspirations; thirdly, the meaningfulness of aspirations, or other apparent future orientations, is co-opted into adult agendas, without exploring how such meaningfulness occurs and is made through children's everyday practices outside of education. In other words, then, what might aspiring mean to children, and in what ways might it be meaningful to them?

Of course, as various authors note (e.g. Qvortrup, 1994), structural and institutional constraints may act upon children in ways that influence most of the conditions of their lives, and without their conscious knowledge. Nevertheless, engagement with how children make

meaning through everyday practices, however these are structurally determined, has value. Assumptions about how children think and act pervade adult discourses, but are frequently proved by ethnographic work to be founded in ideology rather than fact. Whilst some studies attempt to study local structural and institutional forces and children's practices in tandem, such as Evans' (2006) method of taking a learning focus, in this ethnography I focus more on children's peer practices – for the most part, because my access enabled me to do so, and because these are still much less documented than other practices (because of the difficulties of access). However, I do not intend these to be seen out of a wider context; rather, I see my work as complementary to studies that take a higher-level approach.

Within anthropology, the study of children and childhood appears to have been of vacillating interest. Whilst growing in legitimacy over the past few decades – see, for example, Froerer (2016) for an account of how children were not always regarded by established British anthropology departments as appropriate subjects for Ph.D. study some 20 years ago – the topic remains somewhat on the fringes of the discipline. There are growing numbers of anthropologists working on matters involving children, but unlike topics like gender or power, such study is not generally viewed as a core aspect of the discipline. Over the years, there have been continual calls for the study of children to move up the anthropological agenda (e.g. Hardman, 1973; Benthall, 1992; Hirschfeld, 2002), with varying responses. Some anthropologists who have long worked on the topic of childhood have argued against the idea of its having been 'neglected' (e.g. Lancy, 2008). However, others like Hirschfeld (2002) identify the research's niche status as a problem, arguing that children should be a concern for most, if not all, anthropologists, and not just the few – something with which I agree. On the other hand, Wulff (1995) interestingly posits that children and youth may have contributed more to the anthropological record than is recognised, due to anthropologists' novice status in the societies to which they acceded. For example, as hinted at in Evans-

Pritchard's (1940) and Rabinow's (1977) writings, it is possible that many anthropologists' key informants were children and youths simultaneously learning the terms of full group membership, rather than senior adult figures.

In the 1930s, Mead's hugely popular (1928) book on girls in Samoa shone a spotlight on children and youth as viable subjects for anthropological study. In the work, explicitly comparative with U.S. society, Mead argued that Samoan girls did not show signs of the anxiety, stress and strain usually associated with the teenage years, and usually attributed to the physiological changes that lead to mental and emotional maturity. In line with the aims of the culture and personality school, she posited that the difference was a result of cultural variation between the two societies, including contrasting attitudes towards the individual personality and capabilities, societal ethics and notions of choice, and openness and familiarity with matters of sex, birth and death. Whilst open to critique, the work was extremely influential, sparking a faithful following, particularly outside of anthropology. Nevertheless, as the appeal of the culture and personality school waned, so too did interest in children and youth.

In the U.S., this was arguably less the case, and research on childhood has had more continuity, particularly in the intersections between anthropology and psychology. However, as Levine (2007) notes, by tying themselves so closely to the psychological theories *du jour*, many studies became subject to the vagaries of those theories' rises and falls, and as such, much of what might have been useful ethnography has fallen by the wayside as the theories they referenced went out of fashion. Nevertheless, notable studies to have emerged include Whiting's (1963) 'Six Cultures' project; LeVine's continued work on Guusi children in Kenya (e.g. Levine and Levine, 1988), and on psychological theories and child-rearing more generally (e.g. LeVine, 2010); and Lancy's work on the Kpelle (Lancy, 1996). However, as Montgomery

(2009) notes, this research is directed more towards comparison of child-rearing practices than towards examination of children's emic life-worlds.

Additionally, researchers clustered around particular anthropology and sociology departments in the U.S. have, from the late 1980s, conducted similar types of studies to those of the 'new social studies' of childhood flourishing in Europe during this period, and that I go on to describe below. These include numerous studies of children's peer cultures (mainly based 'at home' in the U.S.), including Adler and Adler (1998) – cliques; Fine (1980) – boys' team sport; Corsaro (1985) – Italian and American pre-schoolers; Thorne (1993) – gender; and Goodwin (1990, 2006) – girls' friendships, using an ethnomethodology approach.

In the U.K. and Europe, there was greater neglect of the topic within anthropology, although substantial sections on children and child-rearing can be found in the ethnographies of Firth (1936), writing about the Tikopia, and Fortes (1949), about the Tallensi. However, increased topical specialisation and greater ethical bureaucracy surrounding working with children appear to have resulted in a decline in the inclusion of such sub-sections.

There may be other reasons for anthropological reticence towards the study of children, as noted by Hardman (1973) and Lesko (1996). Lesko describes how now-discredited evolutionary theories likened so-called 'primitives' to children, set in opposition to civilised 'man'. In its most far-reaching form, 'recapitulation theory' placed whole societies on an assumed 'natural' evolutionary scale that was deemed to precisely mirror the 'natural' development of the individual from infancy to seniority. Founded on an agenda of asserting the status quo of white adult male hierarchical dominance, this double naturalisation rendered primitives less than fully human, just as it did children and youth. Whilst the discrediting of such theories as racist ideology allowed anthropology to rebuild its reputation

with regards to the study of 'distant others', Lesko argues that the characterisation of youth as naturally inferior has been harder to shift, not least because of the continued dominance of universalising biological and psychological accounts of human maturation.

Another relevant area of research, again somewhat on the fringes of anthropology as a discipline, is the anthropology/ethnography of education. Again, there are transatlantic, and global, differences in approach and impact (see e.g. Anderson-Levitt, 2012, for a summary). In the U.S., the anthropology of education has generally focused on educational failure and underachievement by minority groups (First Nations, African-Americans, and later waves of migrants), although more recently, it has also examined notably successful migrant groups. Studies examine inequalities in schooling, as well as processes of cultural transmission. However, Delamont (2012) argues that whilst the anthropology of education has resulted in the production of many richly detailed portraits of school failure, it also suffers from 'parochial ethnocentricity' in its theorising, methods and outlook. In the U.K., on the other hand, anthropologists conducting ethnographic studies of schools (generally focused on gender and social class, but more recently, ethnicity and race) did not tend to find homes in anthropology departments (Anderson-Levitt, 2012).

The most significant development to occur in the anthropology of childhood, at least in the U.K. and Europe, was a movement begun in the late 1980s, and that gained momentum over the following two decades, variously termed the 'sociology of childhood' or 'new social studies of childhood', and which is now, in a mature, interdisciplinary context, generally known as 'childhood studies'. Taking its lead from feminist critique, the new sociology sought to reveal how childhood is not only a condition of the life phase all humans pass through, but a socially constructed category that renders a particular subsection of the population, nominally labelled children, subordinate to the rest of the (nominally adult) population (Qvortrup, 1994).

As a subordinate group, children are excluded from many aspects of society, including the economic sphere, thus rendering them voiceless and unable to act in a key area of social life that sets the terms for recognition and self-determination. This is despite their expected productivity in the compulsory activity of schoolwork – something that Wintersberger (1994) describes as a manifestation of the rational and efficient division of labour in late capitalism, whereby children's extensive training serves the future national interest. Qvortrup and Wintersberger advocate that children's contribution should be appropriately recognised, rather than being seen as economic burden and a privilege for which children should be grateful, as framed by much political rhetoric.

Jenks (1996, 1982) elaborates on the notion of childhood as social construction, the roots of which have commonly been attributed to historian Ariès' early (1962) work on the history of concepts of childhood. Highlighting the socio-historical situatedness of contemporary 'western' notions of childhood, Jenks claims that it is the deeply held but conflicting ideas – variously from Rousseau, Locke and Puritanical Christianity – which have led to contemporary ambivalences about children. Thus, children are generally conceptualised as 'innocent' – naturally good and in need of adult nurturance, pedagogy and protection (Rousseau). But they are sometimes conceived of as inherently base, prone to Dionysian self-gratification, and thus requiring firm discipline and privation (the Puritanical view) – as in the case of the Bulger killers (cf. James and Jenks, 1996), and in notions that 'children are [naturally] cruel'. Thirdly, as in the case of socialisation theory, children are commonly thought of as *tabula rasa*, or blank slates, to be inscribed accordingly (Locke).

With regards to research, in an influential article, Alanen (1988) argues that childhood had become trapped between family studies and socialisation research, such that children themselves had become largely absent. Collaborating with Mayall, the authors drew on Mannheim's concept of 'generation' to argue for the study of child-adult relations from the

point of view of different, interacting generational groups (Alanen and Mayall, 2001). Tracing the structural conditions of children's lives, sociologists have documented material changes that have followed the proliferation of discourses based on the ideas elaborated by Jenks. Thus, Zeiher (2003) notes the curtailment of children's access to space – a phenomenon she calls 'insularisation'. Children have become increasingly segregated from adults, she argues, through the assignation (by adults) of particular spaces as dedicated 'child-friendly' areas that, by contra-distinction, render other spaces as *not* for children. Children freely roaming the streets are thus seen as 'matter out of place' (cf. Douglas, 1966) – at risk through dangers to their own security, or the perceived threat they pose as 'feral youth'. And along similar lines, Zinnecker (1990) argues that children have become increasingly 'domesticated' – i.e. contained indoors. Yet, in popular discourses, there is also lament that children do not play outside as before; their reliance on consumer products and digital media is criticised; and fears are expressed about rising childhood obesity rates associated with excess consumption and lack of activity (see e.g. Buckingham (2000) for exposition of these discourses, and critique).

Whilst such debates about children show contemporary western societies to be generally child-centred or 'neontocratic', as authors such as Lancy (2008) argue, others contend that they also show these societies' deep ambivalences about children. This is 'an era marked by concern for children and a sustained assault on childhood', claim James et al. (1998:1). Or, as Scheper-Hughes and Sargent (1998) write, there exists a 'myth of child-centredness in modern industrialised democratic societies' in which child protection and children's rights discourses conceal 'the displacement of children to the margins of society' (pp.10). On the one hand, then, western societies have seen great improvements in children's standards of living, and of their valorisation in emotional terms (Lancy, 2008). Yet talking *about* children, including their rights, protections and participation, has also, ironically, been accompanied by

increasing spatial, vocal and symbolic segregation, and thus restriction, for many children. In many ways, this mirrors broader criticism of discourses of 'empowerment' (e.g. Cheater, 1999) whereby such 'empowerment' acts as a smokescreen for a broader loss of decision-making powers.

Particularly criticised by proponents of the 'new social studies' (e.g. James and Prout, 1990) was the dominant developmental psychology paradigm, seen as underlying much popular discourse and policy-making surrounding children. Central to this paradigm is a Piagetian theory of cognitive development that sees the child moving through stages of cognitive development on its way towards adulthood. According to critique from within development psychology itself, research building on the Piagetian model has frequently suffered from, amongst other things, a failure to theorise context, slippage from normative description to naturalised prescription, and a focus on interventions and impact that shifts focus from children to their caregivers (Burman, 2008). As such, and as previously noted, children themselves frequently disappear from such research, to be conceptualised instead as 'the child' – a universal, essential exemplar – to be acted upon for the production of better (adult) outcomes. This paradigm informs many of the frames within which children are situated, including the education system, which is organised around levels, testing, and producing standards of 'normal' attainment.

As an anthropologist, James' theoretical arguments were wedded to a methodological proposition to research children as active social actors, possessing agency, and involved in the making of their own lives. Although anthropologists have long been committed to gaining such emic understandings, this had not generally been applied to the children anthropologists met in the field. James' early (1979) research involved ethnographic fieldwork with children in the north of England, in which she described children's subversive practices of naming and eating

cheap confectionery called 'kets' – literally, 'rubbish' – in opposition to all of the qualities emphasised in adult representations of food. Although later criticising her own work for being overly structural, James' study nevertheless paved the way for much future ethnographic study that explores children's life-worlds from their own perspectives – in particular, emphasising children's competence, agency and active negotiation with adults about the terms structuring their lives. Later fieldwork also saw the development of 'sociometric methods' (James, 1996) that became widely accepted and promoted within childhood studies, variously as 'participatory' and/or 'ethnographic methods' (Christensen and James, 2000).

Altogether then, proponents of the 'sociology of childhood' and 'new social studies' promoted a strong political, theoretical and methodological case for policymakers, researchers and wider society: for the recognition of childhood as a socially-constructed category and children as a subordinated group in society; for the reassessment of children from 'incompetent becomings' or 'passive objects' to active agents in the construction of their own lives; and to demand children's greater participation in both society and research. Since then, as in the case of feminism, various critiques have emerged, mainly from within the discipline itself, which, after all, was not united on all fronts, and certainly more nuanced in its detail than is accounted for in the above summary. I go on to describe some of these critiques shortly. Nevertheless, just as anthropologists have largely taken on board the key insights of feminism into their research – about women's perspectives, and the discursive and performative production of gender – so the central tenets of childhood studies provide the frame for my research project. Although long established for those within 'childhood studies' (notwithstanding critique and revision), these have not become common currency in popular discourses about children and childhood, where developmental notions remain strong, and, from my own experience, are not even recognised by anthropologists working on other topics (who are also inclined to view children in developmental terms).

Over the past 20 to 30 years, the 'new' sociology of childhood has gathered proponents from geography, history and psychology, coalescing into the interdisciplinary 'childhood studies'. However, critique has also been gathering, mainly from within the field, both of earlier and later formulations of its key concepts – in particular, in terms of its promulgation of dualisms, and its tendency towards unreflexive paradigmatic thinking. Prout, for example, a leading figure in the development of the 'new social studies paradigm' (James and Prout, 1990) argues in later work (Prout, 2004) that childhood studies needs to move beyond narrow modernist dichotomies (like social versus biological, implied by the notion of social constructionism), to embrace the decentred subjectivity of assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), popular in other areas of sociology. This, he argues, will allow for research that is able to conceptualise variation between children ('childhoods' rather than 'childhood'), as well as the heterogeneous and ambiguous nature of 'adulthood', as the opposite against which childhood is constructed (something also examined by Lee, 2001). Meanwhile, James (2007), another pioneering figure in the field, posits that with an abundance of research on children's perspectives on their everyday life-worlds, such studies – if they are to take the discipline forward – need to move beyond simply restating that childhood is socially constructed and that children are active social agents in the construction of their own lives.

More specifically, researchers have critiqued the way in which early methodological propositions, such as a highlighting of the benefits of participatory research methods and reflexivity in fieldwork, have been institutionalised as doxa, and are, ironically, carried out unreflexively (Hunleth, 2011, and see chapter 2). And there has been similar critique of the way in which theoretical concepts have been brought into childhood studies and applied without careful theoretical exegesis. Valentine (2011), for example, critiques the 'naïve' way

in which concepts like agency are applied. A long line of studies emphasises children's competence and agency, as a contrast to popular and developmental notions that children are incompetent and acted upon. Yet, as Valentine notes, this relies on a liberal philosophical notion of individual agency that children would never be able to fulfil, and thus in fact reifies the association of adults with competence. By contrast, she suggests that agency be understood through social models, whereby agency is embedded in social relations and relations of power, and is politically inflected rather than neutral or necessarily positive.

I think that many of these critiques are valid. Thus, whilst the childhood studies' tenets of approaching children as viable subjects for research and of attempting to gain their own perspectives on their life-worlds are central to my study, I also draw more upon the anthropological canon to inform my research. Whilst what constitutes anthropological research is not tightly defined, this project embraces many of the features characterising anthropological studies – that is, a methodological premise of uncertain, open-ended, long term and immersive fieldwork; of being continuously reflexive throughout the research process; and of being equally critically reflexive in writing up. The anthropology of children and childhood appears to be gaining renewed interest, particularly given critique of childhood studies' focus on 'Minority World' children (e.g. Tisdall and Punch, 2012), and the anthropological tradition of conducting fieldwork in Majority World settings. Significant ethnographic work on children and childhoods from across the globe has recently been forthcoming (see, for example, Allerton, 2014; Froerer, 2012; Jeffrey and Dyson, 2008; Punch, 2012). My research follows a smaller but established line of anthropological work conducted 'at home'. Despite the volume of research already addressing 'Minority World' children, I believe detailed ethnographies of children's lives – that go beyond an argument for children's agency – are still missing, amidst work addressing 'problems' or prescribing interventions into children's lives.

**Children and time**

Popular discourses often position childhood/children in either the past or the future. As a life stage through which all adults have passed, childhood is often approached through the lens of looking back, and contemporary childhood then compared to childhoods remembered. This comparison is often unfavourable, because any form of difference implies loss for the person remembering, and nostalgia for one's own experiences. On the other hand, children are frequently referred to in terms of their futures. They are seen as 'investment for the future', the 'next generation', and even as 'the future' per se. Caught between past and future, children are regularly the objects of impassioned debate about perceived negative changes in morality, education and sociality, seen as representing the beginnings of wholesale moral, economic and social decline. And given contemporary concern with, and expenditure on, predicting, projecting and proofing against the future, it is little wonder that such discourses also pervade the political sphere. This was one of the key critiques made by new social studies proponents, who argued that in dominant theoretical paradigms, children are not 'present' in their own right (James and Prout, 1990). They argued that childhood needs to be 're-presented', both as a socio-historically specific construction (the 'time of childhood') requiring temporal and spatial contextualisation, and in terms of 'time for children', which requires representing children in their present lives. It is in the latter sense – in paying close attention to actual children's everyday present lives – that ethnography has particular impact.

Another temporal conceptualisation identified by James and Prout (1990), linked to the futurising of children, relates to the distinction between 'becoming' and 'being'. The authors argue that the dominant developmental psychology (and complementary socialisation)

paradigm emphasises children's 'becoming' (adult). Passing through linear cumulative stages – tied to agency and competence – children are in the process of becoming fully competent adults – the end point of the developmental/socialisation process. As Mayall (2013) notes, a great deal of the impetus for the new social studies came from researchers' own feelings that this conceptualisation did not adequately describe actual children. Children were not roundly incompetent, nor did they suddenly achieve competence upon adulthood, however defined. Further, children led lives that appeared to be intensely grounded in the present, rather than being directed towards the future. A sense of children as being and 'beings' in the present was thus required (James and Prout, 1990).

Over the intervening years, the binary distinction between 'being' and 'becoming', and likewise between developmental and 'child-centred' approaches, has come to be critiqued, not least because of the doctrinal status such distinctions took on within the new social studies. As discussed, Prout (2004) notes that such dualistic thinking in fact tends to reinforce categories like child, in opposition to adult. Instead, he and others argue that children (and adults) should be recognised as continuously being and becoming. Uprichard (2008) agrees, in her study about children's understandings of urban change. She contends that children see themselves as both being and becoming, with time as both extrinsic (marked in urban change) and intrinsic (marked through becoming older) – a linear, irreversible progression accompanied by an ageing subject position: 'I'm me now and later I'll still be me. I'll also be me when I'm old but just older, like I'll just be an older me' (6-year old participant (Uprichard, 2008)).

In anthropology, critique of dualisms has been around for longer than in childhood studies, and being-becoming is just one of the dualisms Toren (1999) tries to resolve in her work on autopoeisis (or self-creation), and the question of 'how we become who we are'. Toren

suggests that Piaget's (1971 (1968)) somewhat maligned notion of 'schemas' is in fact useful, in describing self-regulating transformational systems that can account for both structure and change (where structure is conceived of as a system of transformations). Toren's work offers a persuasive account of how we can conceive of people as acting to create their own lives, at the same time as the conditions of their lives have been structured by others: as Toren puts it, '…you made meanings out of the meanings they presented you with' (pp.8). However, from the perspective of research, I am less sure I agree with her advocacy of charting transformations in children's meanings as a way of working out how adults have come to know what they know. On the one hand, as childhood studies proponents have long discussed, this privileges adult meanings and suggests a linear and progressive learning of meaning. And on the other, simulating a longitudinal study through the selection of children of different ages at a single point in time (cf. Toren, 2011 - discussed shortly) surely ignores transformations in meanings over time, or would erroneously attribute this to issues of learning.

Recognising an overemphasis on 'being', then, numerous studies have demonstrated how children can and do reflect on the future – i.e. how 'becoming' is also how children view themselves. For example, James (2005) finds 9 to 10-year old pupils in northern England to be able to represent their futures using timelines – in other words, in linear representational form. Asking children to fill in timelines according to two scales, she finds those for the year ahead to be filled in with personal and known milestones and markers like birthdays, friends' parties, and starting a new school; and those for further ahead to display expected societal markers like starting work, getting married, having children and death. In conversation, James finds the girls to be more engaged with thinking about the future, drawing on typical gender stereotypes about marriage and domestic life, but countering these with examples from their own experiences of known others.

Based on qualitative interviews, Zartler (2015) finds a similar situation with regards to imagined future family form. Heteronormative ideals about marriage and children appear to be extremely resilient in children and young people's future imaginings, even where their current family form differs from the nuclear model. The latter was still perceived as ideal, described by children as being a 'normal' family. The only difference Zartler finds is a tendency amongst children from single or divorced parent backgrounds to speak more in terms of 'my' than 'our' children when describing imagined parenting, and to imagine future children as having more responsibility in contributing to the family's emotional cohesion – perhaps in recognition of their own responsibilities. As James (2005) suggests, then, children's images of future incorporate both general and personally situated knowledge – however, images of societal norms (involving expectations about work, marriage, children and family form) appear to dominate with regards to longer-term futures.

Zeitlyn (2014), meanwhile, examines the aspirations of a particular ethnic minority group – 8 to 11-year old British Bangladeshis – attempting to account for habitus formation (cf. Bourdieu, 1977) using a range of methods. He notes that his participants' occupational aspirations followed 'well-qualified, well-trodden career paths' (pp.185) typical of many ethnic minority groups – something that resonates with my findings about *school choices*, although not necessarily with career aspirations. However, in wider terms, his participants' aspirations reflected a sense of Britain as 'home'. For example, asking children to illustrate 'Mr/Ms Successful', children depicted pale-skinned/non-ethnically marked, gendered individuals, sporting clothes, styles and possessions synonymous with 'western' modernity (in contrast to some children's everyday dress, but in line with what parents made sure children wore on trips to Bangladesh, to differentiate themselves from locals). Meanwhile, in discussions, various markers of Britain, and not Bangladesh, as home emerged – in particular,

through notions of a sense of discomfort or disgust when describing smells in Bangladesh, which children found foreign. Zeitlyn argues therefore that 'pre-conscious stimuli' and bodily markers are central in notions of belonging, which underpin aspirations.

On the other hand, what the study could also be seen to show (again) is the strength of dominant societal norms and images in children's projections – like pale skin and 'western' clothes – even where personal experience denies this, as in the case of Zartler's children's imaginings of nuclear families. This is suggested, to an even greater degree, in Gillespie's (1995) ethnography of older youth of Punjabi origin in Southall. These youth felt little attachment to either the Punjab or Southall – instead, 'the cultural aspirations of young people in Southall are frequently expressed through the tropes of advertising, notably in terms of the American/global teenage dream of freedom, fun, beauty and love represented most forcefully perhaps by the Coca-Cola advertisements' (pp.14). In other words, imaginings of future are tied to images of everyday popular culture and the body, although these bodily projections are not necessarily specific to the bodies of oneself or proximate others. That aspirations are mediated through a general peer popular culture, within which children try to claim their individuality, resonates with my findings.

Elliott and Morrow's (2007) analysis of essays from the National Child Development Study written by 11-year olds in 1969, about imagined futures 'aged 25', finds significant relationships with parents, pets, future partners and children to be key to depictions of life – consistent with what children appear to find important in their present lives (e.g. Morrow, 2001). However, the authors also find aspirations to be broader than expected, with surprising themes including the style and layout of imagined future homes, car ownership, money and travel. In contrast to the class-based studies previously described, these wider aspirations did not significantly correlate with social class background – in other words, class appeared to

have little impact on imagined futures. Gender, by contrast, was highly significant in determining themes addressed (e.g. car ownership – boys; domestic labour – girls), and discussion within themes (e.g. expected future jobs were gendered in line with traditional stereotypes). This resonates with my findings, in which gender was a salient means of identification and basis for particular aspirations, but apparent socioeconomic background was not.

Employing a similar essay method, Toren (2011) finds that younger children's essays are more self-centred and indicative of the desire for individual gratification; the older the child, the more likely they were to speak from an established adult perspective, with older children adopting the voices of their elders, lamenting the loss of the traditional way of life. Thus, whilst elder Fijians regularly accused young people of not caring about the traditional way of life, these same youth imagined themselves doing the same when they were older. In doing so, they make manifest a paradox between perceptions of continuity and of change: in replicating such ideas, children can be seen to imagine continuity with the practices of their elders; yet the ideas of the elders that they repeat are ones of loss, and the expectation of a future that is radically different from the present and the past. Toren argues that this is suggestive of more continuity between the generations than is usually supposed, and evidence of a unique Fijian dualism that she writes of elsewhere (Toren, 1989) that allows for assimilation of the new whilst keeping 'the Fijian way'.

However, other studies suggest similar findings elsewhere. Vergara et al.'s (2014) 5$^{th}$ grade middle-class Chilean children discuss adulthood in terms of exhaustion and oppression, recognising the precarious employment situation of most adults. Looking back, they express nostalgia about the loss of their free time and play opportunities in relation to present responsibilities. Yet, they also view younger children presently as being subject to early

sexualisation, in line with adult discourses of generational change. Similarly, they are ambivalent about youth, noting the respect that youth get from adults, but also viewing them as debauched, in line with adult moral panics. In the U.K., Morrow (2008, unpublished paper), using the same data as Elliott and Morrow (2007), finds many children to show strong awareness of the work that adults do, through imaginings of themselves as adults, and also imagine their future children's contributions to domestic labour. And one 11-year old girl imagines herself, aged 25, nostalgically remembering her childhood as a time of carefree innocence. As Mayall (2001) suggests, children emerge as perceptive observers of adults' practices. Further, they can be seen to imagine occupying adult subject positions in the future, sympathetically and sophisticatedly replicating adult discourses about children and childhood, being and becoming, from these subject positions.

The studies described above all rely on children's reflections on their futures. Whilst they show that children *can* reflect on the future, they do not describe how children conceptualise and navigate ideas about the future in their day-to-day lives 'in time'. And whilst they do bring children's perspectives to the fore, their purposeful elicitation of ideas about future shifts the focus back to 'becoming', without really reconciling the tension, or alternative relation, between 'being' and 'becoming'. Equally, they take for granted particular notions of 'future', without exploring the possibility that there are other idioms and practices through which futures are imagined, outside of specifically targeted, researcher-elicited responses.

What can we learn from studies that engage with children's aspirations or imaginings of future in a non-elicited way? Very much in line with Toren's (1999) discussions of autopoeisis, Nielsen's (2016) observation-based, longitudinal study of children from age 7 to 19 addresses the issue of how to account for individual continuity and change. Using the case study of Astrid, she describes how individual children both appear to maintain something of their

'personal and unique way' (pp.4) of being in and approaching the world, at the same time as they change, often in line with others, as in notions of developmental stages. Thus, as a 7-year old, Astrid's forceful way of interacting with others is interpreted by teachers as problematic; later, aged 12, reacting to teasing by male peers, she refashions her identity according to the discourse of 'new, active girls' (pp.6), successfully combining her assertiveness with newfound skills in flirting, and energetic application to school work. According to Nielsen, notions of change as continuous process, or endlessly emergent, cannot account for the persistence of individuality and the coordination of change. Instead, Astrid is involved in a series of non-linear temporal 'resignifications' – in which she consciously refashions her self-narrative through available cultural discourses, which occur in conjunction with the evaluations of peers and teachers, and using skills honed through the accumulation of incidental practices (involving linear, incremental change).

The time-depth of Nielsen's work is impressive. I find particularly useful the way in which she notes the continuous, spontaneous flow of actions performed by individuals, as contrasted with those moments in which a person's sense of self in relation to others and the world is reconfigured, particularly at points where discourse and intense feeling (such as being teased) coincide. In my own participations with children, I was particularly struck by the experience of continuous change (e.g. the flux of groupings on the playground), lack of change (e.g. the prevalence of routines of play), and then, how significant changes (e.g. the replacement of one popular activity with another over time) occurred without it being possible to know when or how this had happened (in contrast with 'resignifications'). I explain that significant change can only be appreciated post hoc as the ceasing or starting of a repetition of practice. But I also contrast this with children's narrative practices, in which my participants variously laid claim to continuity or change in order to make sense of themselves and others, as persons enduring through time.

What is less clear from Nielsen's argument is whether her discussions about linear and non-linear time are invoked in children's own understandings of continuity and change, or whether – as seems more likely – this is an external observer's perspective. Yet, the latter is surely problematic, recalling Gell's (1992) critique of various anthropological confusions about the metaphysics of time. Whilst crediting Durkheim (1915) with initiating a view of collective representations of time that both derive from and dictate to society, and that can be analysed sociologically, he critiques Durkheim's subsequent elision of sociological analysis with metaphysical arguments about time. Examining subsequent anthropologists' propositions about time in different societies, such as those of Leach (1961) on alternating time and Barnes (1974) on cyclical time, he finds similar logical confusions at a metaphysical level. He proposes that in order for anthropologists not to confuse observations of temporal epistemologies and practices with those underlying their analyses, explicit commitment to a specific epistemology of time is required. Expounding on philosophical arguments about A and B-series time, Gell concludes that B-series time-maps (the categorisation of events according to whether they occur before or after each other) are held internally by all humans, whilst A-series experiences (the categorisation of events as past, present or future) mediate between the B-series and occurrences in the real world. Essentially, Gell argues that time is always one and the same; the work of anthropologists should be to represent the multiple ways in which it becomes salient in human affairs.

Bear (2014) concurs, but argues for a 'thickening' of Gell's notion of time-maps, proposing the addition of a Marxist notion of labour that is material, bodily and coordinated – recognition that beyond the 'shaping' of space-time (Munn, 1992), the action of working in/on time is mediated by institutions through hierarchy and conflict. Individual phenomenological experiences can only be understood in relation to these institutional mediations. Bear argues

for more research into 'modern time', as a historical product and object of inquiry. Whilst dominated by the abstract time reckoning of capitalism that universalises its value, actual experiences of time frequently deny this unitary value through alternative representations, technologies and rhythms. In this sense, and as advocated by many childhood studies researchers, we can understand children's representations and practices involving time as not being in opposition to adults' ones, but rather, in terms of the multiple means of navigating time based on their particular circumstances. This eviscerates the sense of children and adults as being opposed; rather, it recognises that both are subject to capitalist clock time, even as other kinds of time, with other qualities, are also differentially of relevance.

Another study examining approaches to 'future' occurring through practices situated 'in time' is Helgesen's (2016) study of children's spontaneous video-making play. Helgesen describes how in the online game MovieStarWorld, children playfully navigated and experimented with future selves through the creation of avatars. Having an ambiguous relationship with their avatars enabled enactments of imagined futures that were ordinarily out of bounds in offline play. Children created multiple avatars, consistently changed their appearance, and engaged their avatars in storylines that played out both actual fears and fantasies (e.g. of being left out by peers) alongside stereotypical, but apparently undesired, futures (e.g. of romance). Helgesen argues that in facilitating the ability for rapid change, as well as for pausing, rewinding and repeating filmic sequences, the technological capacities of MovieStarWorld mediated children's actions to both accelerate and decelerate time beyond human capacities. Children thus engaged in 'time-tricking' – a concept devised by Moroşanu and Ringel (2016) to describe improvised actions that intervene in potential or foreclosed futures. Yet, there were limitations to the possibilities afforded by this temporal play: existing conventions of what was considered 'cool', overlapping with racialised identities (where white was associated with cool), continued to be reinforced in the projected futures of avatars. Helgesen

concludes that whilst children used MovieStarWorld to enact their own representations of future, they remained subject to historically produced constraints involving power and hierarchy, as Bear (2014) suggests.

Nielsen's (2016) and Helgesen's (2016) studies, as well as others described in this section, explicitly discuss time, but they also tangentially raise, although do not fully explore, the notion of personhood – how those involved in being and/or becoming are conceived of. This was a central aspect of James and Prout's (1990) 'being'/'becoming' argument, whereby 'beings' are conceived of as fully (adult, competent) persons, and 'becomings' as not quite/not yet persons. Anthropologists' discussions of 'personhood' (cf. Mauss' (1985 (1918)) suggest that at least in terms of certain legal rights like 'the right to life', children are recognised in 'western' contexts as moral and juridical persons even before birth (as based in particular scientific understandings of independent functioning), in contrast with other conceptualisations of children's personhood as tenuous, subject to loss, or conferred only through naming rituals (e.g. Lancy, 2008; Vilaça, 2002; although see also W. James, 2000). Yet, we can also see that whilst children may be recognised as persons to a degree, they are also denied certain moral and juridical rights on the basis of age, including those relating to autonomy, access, and responsibility for particular actions (e.g. James and James, 2011). I suggest that my participants were aware of this, and consequently endeavoured to claim for themselves forms of ownership, knowledge, competence and autonomy through their statements and narratives, especially with regards to future.

The different ways in which persons are conceived of has been the subject of much debate in anthropology, particularly with regards to 'western' 'individual' and Melanesian 'dividual' personhood (e.g. Strathern, 1988; LiPuma, 1998). More recently, anthropologists have proposed alternative ways of conceptualising personhood, and a distinction that I find useful

with regards to my research is Lambek's (2013) notion of 'forensic' and 'mimetic' personhood, which specifically addresses the relation between personhood and time. 'Forensic' persons are constituted by practice, and are continuous in time – therefore able to be held responsible for past actions; 'mimetic' persons are constituted by performance, and are discontinuous in time. Lambek argues that, whilst both are aspects of persons, and only one way of trying to understand them, we can apprehend the dominance of 'forensic' personhood in 'western' contexts, whilst 'mimetic' personhood can be seen to be dominant in practices like Mayotte and Madagascan spirit possession.

In my own research, I suggest that the notion of persons as continuous was indeed how children understood personhood, and that they therefore tried to express themselves as persons through a notion of their enduring character through time. However, I disagree with the notion of continuous persons as being constituted by practice, and discontinuous persons by performance, as Lambek suggests. In their playful and dramatic talk and actions, my participants were always simultaneously 'performing' and 'practising'. Performance therefore cannot be disentangled from practice, and both together were constitutive of the continuous person.

The recent proliferation of interest in time, and the future in particular, offers useful suggestions into how it might be possible to study 'the future' in children's everyday lives. Whilst children may recognise themselves as both 'being' and 'becoming', in this research I aim to go beyond a simple restatement of this premise to engage with how this occurs in everyday practice. Accounting for the occurrence of such 'future' orientations 'in time' engages with issues of 'being' and 'becoming' simultaneously. Of course, in not eliciting notions of 'aspiration' or 'future', there are difficulties involved in identifying what my participants might understand by these terms, and whether my attributions of 'aspiring' and

'future' orientation are indeed a children's perspective. In addressing this issue, I explore both how my participants might use such terms, and how their practices that they didn't classify in such a way might coincide with the notions of 'aspiration' and 'future' invoked by the discourses described in this chapter. I suggest that children were centrally concerned with becoming accepted as full persons, and I suggest that they strove for this through expressing the knowledge, competence, ownership and autonomy they associated with adult personhood. I contend that it is 'telling' – about actions performed and intended, and about themselves and others – that marks the key tension between being and becoming: through telling, children 'fixed' their personhood and constituted themselves as persons enduring in time, thereby partially becoming what they claimed to be.

**Thesis outline**

My fieldwork involved almost total immersion into children's life-worlds. Based in two field-sites on the outskirts of Greater London, I saw one or the other set of my participants for the greater part of each day, almost every day, over the course of 15 to 18 months. I contend that my methodology has been essential to my findings, and this is what I explore in the next chapter. In order to achieve a non-elicited understanding of children's practices as occurring in time, I argue that it was essential to employ a method of (real time) participant-observation, rather than interviews or 'participatory/ethnographic methods'. Further, in order to gain access to these 'in time' practices, it was essential to become a 'full participant' with children, as advocated by Mandell (1988). Such participation involves a raft of ethical issues, which I

reflect upon, explaining the ethical considerations driving my research; the need to respond flexibly and reflexively in the field; and associated limitations. I document the practices involved in 'learning to be a child', which included, amongst other things, first-hand experience of the movement and momentum of peer practices. And I describe my method of field note-taking, which involved writing up talk in as verbatim a way as possible, from memory, at the end of each day; something which was also crucial to representing children's practices 'in time'. Whilst my fieldnotes approach a sense of action in time, the subsequent write-up has inevitably involved further temporal manipulations, which I also discuss.

In chapter 3, I explore my participants' discussions of career aspirations. I suggest that from a children's perspective, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" – essentially, the notion of career aspirations – is a familiar trope for the stating of known jobs in line with present interests, preferences and affiliations. Told in this way, such 'aspirations' were less about setting goals in order to inspire present action (as the dominant discourse posits), than they were present expressions of self. Such expression was a means of bringing oneself into being and a statement of one's enduring personhood, as characterised by one's individuality and ability to assert preferences. Paradoxically, then, whilst understood as a familiar trope for discussing 'the future', statements of 'aspiration' had a present basis. This is not to say that they did not have forward influences: in their telling, as an action in the world, they had productive effects in their inter-subjective power. As such, 'aspirations' need to be understood as active 'tellings' that are told in particular ways relative to particular social relations, as much as they are individualistic imaginings, residing in the mind and guiding action.

In chapter 3, I also learnt that 'the future' did not exist as an abstract category, but rather, was understood *through* the trope of "what you want to be", as well as sci-fi or environmental

scenarios occurring “in the future”. This was not to say that my participants did not engage in anticipating, planning for, or imagining ‘future’ events – they did so on an everyday and spontaneous basis. However, this was not directly accessible through the idiom of ‘future’. Rather, these apparent ‘future’ orientations were practical engagements with knowledge, competence, autonomy, and ownership, and occurred through the optimistic telling of oneself as this kind of person. This is what I explore in the following three chapters, in which I examine in detail some concrete practices important to my participants. Of course, there were many significant and/or everyday practices I could have focused on, like playground games; clapping and dance routines; football games and related talk; anticipation and celebration of birthdays and trips; talk of ‘liking’ members of the opposite sex; and fads like the making and wearing of ‘loom band’ bracelets. I write about ‘going out’ in the neighbourhood, and playing video games, because these were the two activities in which I spent the most time outside of school; and I focus on the out-of-school environment because of my privileged access in this regard, and the fact that most previous research focuses on school lives, despite this being the most constrained by adult supervision.

In chapter 4, I discuss my participants’ practice of ‘going out’ in the neighbourhood. What I find is the importance of ‘telling’ as a means of ‘fixing’ the landscape. In contrast to the experience of the landscape’s presently unfolding uncertainty, which children approached in a tentative and ad hoc manner, in their ‘tellings’ they rendered the landscape as a social and familiar environment, thereby simultaneously producing themselves as knowing, competent and autonomous persons. Through telling the landscape in an ‘ideal’ way, they exacted control over it, at the same time as they made manifest their knowledge – proving competence and demanding further autonomy. Aspiring, as an optimistic kind of telling about oneself, can therefore be seen to be a more general practice my participants engaged in. It afforded present pleasure, at the same time as it provided an effective means of control over

environmental 'risks'. And as an inter-subjective action, it had productive power, in its constitution of the teller as a knowledgeable, competent person worth knowing.

In chapter 5, I discuss video gaming, describing the multiple ways in which the boys played – to fill time; take time out; be 'co-present' with others online; and enjoy the social exuberance of group play with others physically present. Being owned and controlled by the boys, the games console was central to their practices of autonomous time management, and it became ideologically central in making sense of themselves and others. In telling of their lives through the ownership of the console and games, and through progressive levels of competence marked by in-game statistics, the boys were able to chart their biographies over time and in relation to others. In the telling of themselves through gaming, we can see how the everyday of play becomes linked to the momentousness of the life course, and how children marked both their own 'being and 'becoming'.

If statements of aspiration were made in expression of one's present individuality and claims to personhood, as I have suggested in previous chapters, this invokes a notion of personhood as being continuous over time. In chapter 6, I argue that this is indeed how children represented themselves in privately told narratives of friendship and, more importantly, non-friendship. In these narratives, my participants 'fixed' a sense of others', and thereby their own, actions and characters, invoking friendship as a moral relation between enduring individuals. These narratives were at odds with the ambiguity that characterised everyday participations, in which children were generally inclusive and open to others. Whilst private narratives were premised on the continuity of persons, ironically, they also precipitated change. Thus, we can see, again, how 'telling' things has a 'fixing' power in relation to the development of self-other and biographical understanding, at the same time as it has a

productive, inter-subjective power, in being a present action carried out between people in the world.

Chapter 7 examines my participants' imminent transition to secondary school. I explore the process of making secondary school choices through the discussions children and their parents had with friends and each other. A central difference between children's repertoires of choice was that of applying to grammar schools or not – something that required the taking of selective examinations early in Year 6, and appeared to be a decision made by parents long in advance. Thus, there was a singular (and foregone) difference in children's repertoires of choice, even as bureaucratic requirements prompted children's discussions, and expressions of specific preferences came to be expressed through a common language of 'good schools'. Transition also implies leaving primary school, and the end of Year 6 was marked by various school-leaving rituals. I compare children's apparent experiences of these events with their prior anticipation, suggesting that a sense of momentousness was incurred in their anticipation as being the 'last' events they would take part in at school. In their playing out, I suggest that in contrast to less formal rituals like shirt-signing, school-organised rituals that comprised a strong narrative largely succeeded in bypassing the ambiguities of present action to produce the desired effect of a sense of momentousness.

Finally, chapter 8 sets out my conclusions, in which I discuss what an ethnographic engagement with children's everyday practices might tell us about the meanings of aspiration for children. Whilst 'aspiring' was not a term children used, 'future' was, but nearly always in the context of "what do you want to be?". Contrastively, concrete engagements with material things and environments were not understood in relation to the idiom of 'future', however my participants frequently and spontaneously told of their optimistic plans, anticipations and intended actions with regards to these. As such, I suggest that children were frequently and

broadly aspirational, telling of desired states of competence, ownership and autonomy, and in ways that elided intentions with outcomes. In doing so, they told of themselves as fully competent persons, worth knowing. Summarising the main points of my thesis, I move on to a more detailed description of the ethnographic chapters, before returning to discussion of 'aspirations', and possible wider implications. Finally, I note the future directions in which I intend to take my research.

## Chapter 2 | Methodology; Or, how to be a child?

*"I'm going to push you!" says Lena. It is a threat and a boast. I catch the wicked glint in her eye and throw back a look of defiance tempered with real and mock terror. "Noo!" I say, exaggerating the 'o', holding out my arms in front of me as a protective barrier, and edging back along the ledge we're balanced on. And then, when there is distance: "I'm going to push you!" I retort, my smile widening to a grin. Spurred on, Lena darts forward. I step back. And then suddenly I feel a shove at my back. It is only slight but I'm caught off guard and let out an inadvertent shriek of surprise. I raise my arms to balance, but I can see Lena's self-satisfied smirk, can hear Laila's whoop of delight behind me, and I know that I want to fall. My feet teeter on the edge of the slope, and then I take a leap. I am flying through the air. For the briefest of moments, I feel my inadequate ballet pumps clinging on tenuously and I raise my toes to keep hold of them. And then I am falling; a butterfly and a scream I hadn't known were there escape into the warm summer air. Abruptly, my feet collide with the dusty earth. My knees buckle and I propel myself downwards in rapid steps to stay upright. I keep on running, long leaps, accelerating as I near the foot of the slope. I want to prolong this moment – the exhilaration of my flight – for as long as I can. But then, it is gone. All has been absorbed into the soft grass of the field, and I turn around.*

*"That was soo scary!"*

*"You went really far!"*

*"Laila pushed me! I thought I was going to fall!"*

*"Yeah, she pushed me too! We should get her this time!"*

*"Let's do it again!"*

*"I'm going to go backwards this time!"*

*"It's even scarier backwards, 'cause you can't see where you're going!"*

*The very first time I try "running down the slope" – a favourite activity, for a time, of the girls at school with whom I spend break and lunchtimes – I make it down the slope in two paces. It's barely more than half a metre high. I'm not that much bigger than the others, and I know that many enjoy the same rollercoasters and theme park rides that I do. So, as the girls scramble to the top to go again, I realise that I'm not doing it right. It isn't just about the slope – this gently inclined ridge hemming in the sports field from the fence. Rather, the appeal of "running down the slope" is the drama that is created by those present, in conjunction with the slope that helps to sweep one up (or in this case, down) in the drama. As I learn to run down the slope properly, I discover that an adult emphasis on whether things are real or made up is misplaced, because it is neither and both at once. I feign and exaggerate my pushing, falling and running, and my before and after narratives of my feats of bravado and experiences of fear. And in doing so – in this very creative act of implicating myself and creating a reaction in others – my moving body experiences, perpetuates and intentionally prolongs the thrill and excitement of its own performance, as I leap, fly, fall and accelerate my way down to the field and back up the slope again.*

In this chapter, I describe the fieldwork that underpins my research: the year and a half in which I spent nearly every day in the company of children, playing PlayStation, and chasing and clapping games; chatting and Skyping; eating lunch and sweets; going shopping, to the park and to the cinema; sitting through lessons; pulling pranks; laughing; and celebrating birthdays together. Although I couldn't guarantee its feasibility from the start, my aim with this research was to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork, across a range of environments in which children spend their daily lives, and in as immersive a way as possible. To me, the key benefits of anthropological fieldwork are in gaining an emic understanding of the world; of learning about practices and knowledge that cannot or would not ever be

verbalised; and of discovering the unspoken and unremarked-upon assumptions underpinning everyday life. And this applies just as much, if not even more so, to children, for whom situated knowledge and non-verbal action appear so important, even if they are capable of 'actively interpreting and reflecting on the research they take part in' (Christensen and James, 2000: 176). Further, given that my interest is in issues of 'time', it was crucially important whether my participants' representations of time were ones occurring 'in time', as they acted and spoke, or whether such representations involved distanced (in space and time) reflection, which adds a further layer of temporal conjuring (cf. James and Mills, 2005).

Although anthropology usually involves a period of long-term, immersive fieldwork, this is not always the case, particularly in urban, industrialised environments, where meetings are often shorter, periodic, and/or more structured. Ethical issues in research with children compound these difficulties, and although not generally made clear, this is the likely reason for the popularity of school and institution-based 'ethnographic methods', involving focus groups and 'participatory' techniques like craft activities, object elicitation and theatre (cf. Christensen and James, 2000; O'Kane, 2000; Punch, 2002), over fully participatory fieldwork that spans a range of environments. Access issues may therefore be significant in framing what knowledge we have about children, and, whilst this usually cannot be helped, due recognition might promote attempts at broadening our knowledge. For example, James (2007) comments that 'We now have considerable information about children's experiences of their everyday lives at home…' (pp.264). Yet, such 'home' studies have often been interview based only (e.g. Mayall, 1996; Christensen, 1999), meaning the information garnered is children's reflections on their home lives, rather than observation of what they do at home. Beyond the particularities of researching children, the nature of fieldwork has never been tightly defined in any case. Ethnographies in 'traditional' fieldwork settings sometimes reveal similar access issues, and also typically include a mixture of survey and interview data in addition to

participant-observation. Although I believe that the ad hoc and multiple fieldwork methods that anthropologists typically employ are hugely beneficial, I think that the lack of clarity over which methods are being used and when can be problematic, particularly with regards to issues of representation, including those involving time.

My fieldwork involved almost total immersion into children's life-worlds. Whilst I did not reach the absolute ideal – seeing participants continuously across home, school and in-between – I managed to gain something of an approximation to it, involving two distinct sets of participants in the home/neighbourhood and school/after-school environments respectively. And whilst I didn't live *with* my participants, I lived nearby to one set, and saw my participants for the greater part of each day, almost every day over 15 to 18 months. During this time, my relations with them came to be *my* central social relations, such that I came to care deeply about whether I was accepted, liked and included. This care meant learning how to fit in was critical, and through this learning, I came to understand how to speak, act and perform – how to 'be' a child. To argue that this is an ethnography of everyday practice is not to say that my participants didn't themselves embark on narratives about their lives, or about others, at various points. Indeed, they did, and I document this (e.g. in chapter 6, on friendship). But the point is that these reflected-upon narrations occurred at specific moments and for specific reasons, as practices in themselves. It is these reasons for, and ways of, telling that I am able to describe, through 'being there' *in time*, rather than asking participants to recall incidents later. In this way, it is possible to try to reconcile the real-time 'flow' of life with the moments or points of change that people themselves remark upon, and make meaning from, in their everyday lives.

**Access, ethics and 'full participation'**

Whilst 'being there' (i.e. a present participant-observer) was my prime objective, how precisely I would carry out participant-observation was less clear. Whether the researcher should be more 'observer' or more 'participant' has been the topic of much debate within childhood studies, alongside entangled notions of access and ethics. Firstly, as well as issues of what 'informed consent' for minors might entail (see e.g. Alderson and Morrow, 2011), there is the more general problem of 'consent' privileging the access stage of research. As Thorne (1980) notes, this is wholly unsuited to longer term processes of ethnographic fieldwork, in which the researcher's roles and relations with participants change. In their summary of 'best practice', Alderson and Morrow (2011) – whilst acknowledging that practices will vary depending on researcher and participants – advocate reflecting on ethics throughout the research process, rather than just at the access stage, and, in particular, thinking through power relations between researcher and researched that are exacerbated by the unequal power relations between adults and children. It is this ethical concern with power relations that has provided much fodder for discussions surrounding the 'role' of the researcher.

In the late 1980s, several researchers set out their ideas for the 'membership roles' (cf. Adler and Adler, 1987) adults can take in participant-observation with children (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Mandell, 1988). Noting the specific issues of age and authority involved, Fine and Sandstrom (1988) categorise possible roles as supervisor, leader, observer and friend, themselves advocating 'adult-as-friend'. This involves minimising adult authority and having a 'positive relationship' with children (Fine, 1987), which Fine describes in his own research with preadolescent boys in (U.S.) Little League baseball teams as involving 'hanging out' and, in the boys' words, 'doing nothing'. Here, he was a privileged eavesdropper to their sexual joking and aggressive bravado, although 'a fine line existed between what I was permitted to see, hear, and hear about, and that which was inappropriate. I was a 'friend', of a sort, but

without all the privileges (and responsibilities) that being a peer entails' (pp.225). Thus, incidents of practical joking that Fine reports are in fact reports from the boys, rather than first-hand experience. In fact, the 'adult friend' role seems to vary significantly across researchers. The Adlers' (1998) research, for example, has them positioned as friendly parents-as-researchers, a role which I think inflects their findings to a substantial degree, despite stated aims to be taking a 'children's perspective'. Meanwhile, others (e.g. Christensen, 1999; James, 1993) have combined an adult friend role with occasional participation, embracing either or both of the 'peripheral' and 'active' membership roles (but not 'complete membership') that the Adlers (1987) identify.

Mandell's (1988) approach of 'full participation' (or 'the least-adult role') argues that despite physical differences, ontological notions of 'adult' and 'child' can be suspended through joint action and meaning-making with children. Whilst there are many differences between Mandell's research and my own – most notably, the age of her participants, who were between 2 and 4 and thus relied much more on non-verbal action for meaning-making – this is the fundamental premise that I adopted in my fieldwork. Mandell's methods of trying to gain acceptance into children's peer relations closely resemble those of Corsaro (2003), in his multiple fieldworks with pre-school children, in which he describes avoiding adult authority; letting children come to him; and observing their entry strategies into activities and following suit. However, Mandell suggests that whereas Corsaro (1981) remained a peripheral (passive/reactive) participant, being a full (active) participant is possible.

Although I take inspiration from this notion of 'full participation', I think the line between 'active' and 'passive/reactive' is in fact difficult to draw, particularly when one is trying to be sensitive to one's participants' interests – something I describe later. Meanwhile, in later research than that upon which Mandell draws, Corsaro (2003) notes not just his entry

strategies but on-going relations between himself and his participants, which surely involve him being both passive *and* active, in co-constructing his identity with his participants. Thus, in fieldwork in Italy, he enters the field as a purposefully atypical adult with no adult authority. But his limited language skills further ally him with his 3 to 4-year old participants who feel they can communicate with him better than adults can, and thus rapidly accept him into their practices. Despite his size and beard marking him out as evidently not a child, he is perceived by the children as something of an out-of-category other: an incompetent adult (something of an oxymoron given associations of adulthood with competence) or a 'big kid' (as attested to when a younger researcher who turns up is asked if she is his mum). Meanwhile, Corsaro himself notes being glad to be part of the action.

Studies involving participation-observation of a similar kind that I draw upon include Wulff's (1988) research with 11 to 15-year old girls in south London; and Lærke's (1998) research with 5 to 6-year olds at school in an English village. Although again with younger participants, Laerke explains how she dressed similarly, sat on the floor, and made sure she didn't use capabilities or privileges her participants did not have access to. In so doing, she found that children began accepting her as something of a peer – telling her secrets, bullying her and including her in bullying others. And through these actions and reactions, she experienced feelings of hurt, happiness and embarrassment, thereby '[catching] glimpses of what it might be like to be a child' (pp.5). She describes how her body was 'reinscribed with sensations, perspectives and movements' (pp. 3) that she associated with her childhood, and even how family and friends noticed her voice changing, to become 'strangely tiny and weak' (pp. 4). Many of Laerke's experiences, including the apparent peer acceptance, co-created emotions and bodily changes described, were things I too experienced, although there were also differences. I didn't have the 'many and vivid memories' (pp.3) that she did of her own childhood, perhaps because I was consciously trying not to draw parallels that, as Laerke

notes, are illusory. And whereas she found that the initial embarrassment and confusion of staff and parents dissipated as they began to overlook or forget her presence, I did not find this at school. I also encountered other ethical dilemmas and anxieties that Laerke didn't, or doesn't mention, as I go on to describe.

Meanwhile, like Wulff (1988), I found acceptance amongst children to be fleeting, fluctuating and ambiguous. Wulff describes a high point as being an escapade involving entering a swimming pool out of hours, in which she experienced both the same exhilaration as her participants seemingly did, and a feeling of being the same and accepted by them. Yet, unlike other ethnographers' experiences of a cumulatively staged acceptance into the worlds of their participants, in Wulff's fieldwork and my own, brief moments of epiphany were swiftly followed by apparent regressions; fleeting victories thus constantly gave way to a sense of failure in not having made real (which is to say, in adult terms, *lasting*) progress. Yet, with hindsight, what I have realised is that whilst I have wished for, and been frustrated at the lack of, a neat narrative, these up and down days, or even just moments, were also part of children's experiences and understandings – of changing friendships and learning to change.

For the most part, however, 'full participation' has been somewhat maligned. Some describe it as inappropriate – something that would have had adult gatekeepers slightly horrified (e.g. James, 1993). Others have questioned the viability and ethical validity of the method. In Christensen's (1999) ethnography on the health practices of 6 to 12-year olds in Denmark, she argues that trying to pass as a child is 'dubious' and 'a ploy' that children will see through. By contrast, whilst taking on an unfamiliar adult role, she sticks to the 'rules' of the environment she is working in: not participating but using school-like participatory methods at school; participating in children's practices at after-school clubs, since participation is acceptable there; and conducting interviews with parents and children in their homes. More recently,

Raffety (2015) develops these ideas, arguing that a 'least-adult' strategy of 'minimising social difference' presumes the researcher's total control over her identity, and 'tends to place ethical concerns and decisions beyond the scope of the research relationship' (pp.413). She argues that it also emphasises observable or physical differences that are based on relatively static, universal ideas that reify the adult-child binary that researchers are simultaneously trying to deconstruct. In its place, she advocates a method of 'minimising social distance' – that is, minimising adult authority whilst learning from acknowledgements of difference – as the 'adult friend' approaches suggest.

Given these critiques, 'full participation' was not something I embarked on intentionally – rather, a general notion of 'friend' was all I had in mind. However, it was the method that came to govern my project – initially *emerging* through my participants' reactions to me, and then, as I came to want to be treated not just as an adult friend but as something of a peer, guiding my actions so that I was effectively *trying* and *learning* how to be a child (although, of course, I do not purport to be or have been one). This, I would argue, is much the same as many other anthropologists' experiences of fieldwork, often described as an 'apprenticeship' through which one gains practical mastery (e.g. Jenkins, 1994). With regards to Raffety's critique, I would argue that her conceptualisation of a 'least-adult' *strategy*, apparently conceived of before field entry and issued from above, rather than a method that might be based on participants' reactions to the researcher, is problematic – I'm not sure any researcher would or could necessarily impose such a method without their participants' mutual engagement. Further, whilst size and physical capabilities are by no means absolute identifiers, age does have a physical and bodily bearing that *should* be incorporated into understandings of adult and child (e.g. Prout, 2005). It affects both perceptions of the researcher and the researcher's participatory actions, and thus requires paying attention to as a practical issue. Based on my experiences, I argue that, although difficult and by no means

wholly successful, full participation with children was a possible and ethical method, yielding insights that would have been otherwise impossible.

**Locating the field: negotiations with adult gatekeepers**

In April 2013, I began a dual-pronged approach of obtaining access: making formal enquiries to after-school clubs and schools; and appealing via email and social media for parents of 9 to 11-year old children, or for teachers/after-school club workers. At this stage, my research title was *"What do you want to be when you grow up?": exploring children's perspectives on 'aspiration' and 'the future'*[2]. Although I had anticipated taking something of a critical perspective on the 'raising aspirations' rhetoric, in hindsight I can see that this certainly wasn't obvious from my research title. Nor was my intended long-term and holistic ethnographic methodology particularly evident, given the privileging of the interview-style question "What do you want to be..?" As a result, I think it led many potential gatekeepers and participants to believe that I was simply aiming to document all of the job titles children might give in response to the question, despite further elaboration stating that this was not the case. Unsurprisingly then, some of the initially positive responses I received to my email appeals turned negative upon explanation of the longer-term scope of the study – most cited anticipated time commitments as problematic, although some also sounded nervous about the style of research.

I was therefore happily surprised when Liz, the sister of one of my mother's former work colleagues[3], said that she would be happy for her son, Alex, to take part, and seemed to

[2] See Appendix A for examples of the information I sent to potential participants.
[3] For context, this work was at office administration level

understand precisely what I meant when I described the participant-observation I hoped to employ. In a preliminary phone call, Liz, a community mental health worker, said, "He's read your stuff and he's really looking forward to meeting you. I think he's going to show you his school, and the park, and his friends." Liz seemed incredibly relaxed about the research and much more than other adults I met, promoted Alex's involvement in choosing to take part – in line with the ethical stance I aimed to take. Thus, the texted replies to my initial enquiries addressed to Liz were signed back with "Alex and Liz", and when I mentioned specific texts, she would say, "Oh, that was Alex!" This chimed with how Liz later described the family: "We're very easy-going round here… we speak really openly." In order to allay any potential anxieties that I might be reporting on parenting or teaching practices, I emphasised that my interest was only in children's practices and the more general relationships children have with adults. Nevertheless, the parents I encountered expounded strong and encompassing narratives on how their family and parenting practices stood in relation to what they perceived as the norm, suggesting how important these expressions are to personal identities. Children themselves would sometimes interject points of assent or disagreement, although often they simply got bored with listening.

I first meet Alex in May 2013, when he is 10-years old (in Year 5 at school) and living in a small town, which I call Firsby, in a Surrey borough on the outskirts of south-west London. Over the course of the next 18 months, until his 12th birthday in October 2014, I visit Alex at his home once every few weeks, usually spending most of a Saturday or Sunday with him. During these times, we play PlayStation[4] in Alex's room; walk and cycle around the neighbourhood; spend time with his friends Ethan and Charlie; go to the park, the shops and the cinema; play football; discuss birthday plans; and many other things besides. In between visiting, I also chat to Alex, and sometimes Charlie, by phone and Skype, sometimes for a few hours at a time. I also attend

[4] A video gaming console

Alex's 11th birthday sleepover, in which I spend over 20 hours together with Alex and his friends, and his 12th birthday party, another social event with multiple friends present. My initial thoughts were that seeing Alex at his home would be participation-observation of the 'home' environment. Yet, whilst I certainly gained insight into aspects of Alex's home life, my presence as a 'friend' automatically altered the situation from more mundane 'at home' time to more eventful time that is looked forward to, planned and talked about. Alex would text and phone me to arrange our meetings and discuss what we were going to do during them. Much of my data and analysis therefore discusses children's peer practices, because this is what I was involved in, rather than time that children might spend alone or only with family members. Having said this, the extended periods of time I spent at Alex's, as well as the low-level interaction that Skype engenders, did enable me to observe and listen to the 'backstage' practices that families engage in. Equally, the (majority) time that I spent with Alex one-to-one ought to be distinguished from time spent with multiple others; the former tends to inspire greater sharing of confidences, reflection and narration, while the latter privileges moment-to-moment exuberance and joking.

A further positive response to my enquiries came from another of my mother's former colleagues, Roger, whose daughter Leah (also in Year 5), I was able to spend a day with. Rather different to my time spent with Alex, Leah and I were accompanied by her dad on an organised day out to a country house. Nevertheless, whilst the structure of the day was different, there were many practices that bore similarities to those I engaged in with Alex – from Leah pointing out places of interest to me in the car, to her naming of the 'slope' in her back garden that we played 'It' (Tag) around, after returning home. We were meant to keep the meet-ups going, but this didn't happen. Leah stayed in touch by Skype messenger for quite a while afterwards, and kept asking me to come over, but arrangements with Roger never got off the ground because of Leah's impending 11+ exams and busy schedule. What this usefully shows us is the

self-selection bias in such participant recruitment. Of course, in focusing on just a small number of children, I am not necessarily concerned with gaining a 'representative sample', but it is worthwhile considering how the practices I write about might in some part be constituted by Alex and his family's amenability to my coming over and spending entire days with Alex at a time.

Meanwhile, after not hearing back or receiving negative responses from some of the institutions I tried (with whom I had no prior connections, but selected on the basis of material presented on their websites that specifically discussed 'aspirations'), I approached Lowell, my old primary school, which I attended between 1992 and 1995. Lowell is a leafy 60s-built private housing estate of terraced houses and low-rise flats close to the centre of a large urban town, itself situated on the outskirts of Greater London. After discussions with the deputy head, Mrs Clark, whom I hadn't previously met, it was agreed that I could have access to the two Year 5 classes, 'moving up' with them into Year 6 at the start of the next academic year. I would spend alternate days in each class as a volunteer Teaching Assistant (two days a week to start with, and then four days a week from September 2013) – a role that involved helping children with their work, as well as general classroom administration. I also had access to the children in the more relaxed (as it was largely unspecified) role of 'playground buddy' at break and lunchtimes.

Although my previous connections with the school were vital in securing access, they did not have a greatly significant bearing on my data gathering. Mr Brown, the head teacher at the start of my research, had been my old head teacher, and I think that he was influential in my inclusion on the Year 5 trip to Wales, a fantastically immersive experience that occurred two weeks into my arrival. I spent a full week with over 20 of the children, and in particular got to know the 13 girls quite well, as I stayed in the girls' dormitory for the duration of the trip.

However, plans were already in place for Mr Brown to retire that July and, as such, I generally liaised with Mrs Clark, who became acting and then permanent head. What *did* have an impact was that I was upfront with my participants about having attended the school when I was their age, and, as well as initial questions about what the school was like when I was there, who my teachers were, and so on, other points of comparison sometimes came up in the course of everyday conversation, as I describe in the next section.

Following this, I was able to gain access to other environments. I joined as a volunteer at the school's breakfast and after-school clubs, a wraparound care service separately administered but taking place at the school site. I attended three mornings and one afternoon per week. There tended to be around 15 to 30 children in attendance, with most being regular attendees either on specific days or throughout the week. They ranged in age from 4 to 11, although at after-school club there was a large drop-off in Year 6s, as many were allowed to stay at home without a parent/go home by themselves at this age. As such, at after-school club I spent most of my time with a group of girls in the year below my school-focused year group (i.e. Year 4 when I joined, and Year 5 when I left – whom I call 'the Year 5 girls', just as I call my year group girls 'the Year 6 girls', for expediency[5]). These girls, as a group, were quite loud and boisterous (more so than my Year 6 friends) – a probable resultant combination of their younger age, individual characters and the greater proportion of girls in their year, where girls slightly outnumbered boys. By contrast, in my chosen year group, there was a considerable anomaly in the girl: boy ratio. Out of just under 60 children in the year, only 15 or so[6] were girls. This seemed to result in the girls being relatively close, and thus despite apparent friendship groupings, they all talked with each other, which perhaps wouldn't have been the case with greater numbers.

[5] If events I write of took place when they were in the year below, I make this clear

[6] The precise number fluctuated slightly due to pupils leaving and joining over the course of fieldwork

Occasionally, a few of the boys from my school year group attended after-school club, and when they did, I often ended up engaging with them, where I might not have in school-time. For example, when Matthew was the only Year 6 in attendance, he spent time with me as a first resort, followed by a Year 2 boy, and then the Year 5 girls. Equally, despite my friendship with the Year 5 girls, we rarely spent time together at school break and lunchtimes. This resonates with other researchers' reports of the mixing of gender and age groups outside of school, where in school they are sharply delineated (e.g. Goodwin, 1990; Thorne, 1993).

I was also keen to join an after-school club that didn't have any school associations, and that catered for an older age range. Thus, when Kelsey and Lena, two of the Year 6 girls, told me in October 2013 that they were about to 'move up' to Guides[7] – the girls-only equivalent of Scouts, for 10 to 15-year olds, that met on Wednesday evenings at the local Anglican church – I was keen to get involved. Kelsey introduced me to Hayley, the Guides leader, and I began attending fortnightly. At both breakfast/after-school club and Guides, my 'volunteer' role was relatively unspecified and completely non-disciplinary, and I was able to participate in children's activities as much as I wanted.

I had also hoped to see some of the Year 6 girls outside of the school environment, in an attempt to achieve greater contextual holism than the approximation of continuation I was getting by seeing different participants in and out of school (attending Alex's school would have been unfeasible given my commitments at Lowell). Although two of my friends – Laila, a number of times, and Shivani, for her birthday – invited me to their respective houses for parties, these never ended up being followed through. This could have been for any number of reasons, including that the invitations were expressions of in-the-moment desires that were

[7] From 'Brownies', the 'younger' Guides group for 7 to 10-year olds.

later forgotten or became too difficult to undertake; parents deciding against it; and/or the logistical issues caused by my not always being present at school and not being contactable out of school.

Whilst worrying about the effects of taking on a position of authority, in December I decided to ask some of my participants if they would like (free) child-minding or tutoring. Kelsey and Hazel both responded positively to the idea of tutoring. However, I didn't see either of them at home after all: Kelsey suggested meeting in the town's library, because of her noisy younger sister, whilst Hazel's parents volunteered to drop her at my place, since they lived relatively far from Lowell. Soon after, however, I was told by the school that, as a 'teaching assistant', it wasn't permissible for me to see children outside of the school environment anyway, and I was therefore 'lent' a classroom in which to take tutoring sessions. So, in the end, I didn't manage to bridge the gap between school and home, at least with the same participants. But I did gain a little more insight into these children's relationships with their families. Although I was worried tutoring would change our relationships, these were continuously changing anyway, so that it wasn't possible to discern particular 'effects'. On the one hand, I was their 'tutor', but on the other, we often chatted together in tutoring sessions, in ways that replaced the fact that, for example, Hazel had stopped attending breakfast club and we'd begun speaking less.

**What kinds of children?**

Early work in childhood studies has been criticised for treating childhood as if it were a unitary phenomenon – a shared section of the population and/or stage in the life course. In part, this

relates to the singular message being promoted: of children's subordinated position in society, and critique of a research focus on 'problems' and long-term outcomes. Since then, the notion of 'childhood' in the singular has been critiqued, in favour of 'childhoods' plural (e.g. Prout, 2004; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). In European contexts, researchers have begun to take more account of traditional sociological stratifications of class and gender; increasingly, ethnicity/race, religion and sexuality; and, as noted in chapter 1, have problematized the childhood-adulthood binary, with regards to being/becoming. Further, as Alanen (2016) notes, following a trend in other social science research, closer attention is being paid to intersectionality – from the perspective of how intersections of gender, class and ethnicity might both constitute particular social positions (e.g. of subordination) and be themselves constituted through practice and performance. In this section, I describe my fieldsites, and explain why classifying my participants according to their class and ethnicity is not a defining feature of my analysis.

The group classification central to my study was that of age: my participants were 9 to 10-years old at the start of my fieldwork, and 11 to 12 by its completion[8]. Year groups (or age-sets) segregate children in much of their everyday lives, and are constitutive of their accesses and privileges, friendships, schoolwork and other activities. Researching children in Year 5 until the end of Year 6, where they 'transition' from primary to secondary school, seemed an apt focal point for a study investigating ideas about the future. As this was to be research conducted 'at home', I chose to base my fieldwork in London to facilitate securing access (through existing social networks), and because of its ethnic diversity, where my own racial appearance (my parents are 'from' Malaysia, as children at Lowell might say) would not be unusual. I purposely chose mixed gender state primaries as a point of access, as I felt that

[8] However, a few were either in the year below (e.g. the 'Year 5 girls' at after-school club) or the year above (e.g. Charlie and Luke, Alex's friends in Firsby).

single sex and/or private schools might be too particular, unless I wanted to study these particularities. However, there was otherwise a large amount of serendipity to the specificities of my eventual field-sites. In this sense, I did not 'choose' their specificities of ethnicity, class or gender, although I had a sense in which I did not want to problematize particular backgrounds in advance.

Perhaps this also has to do with my background: growing up in London during the 1980s and 1990s, I was not particularly conscious of ethnic and class background factors. Lowell was less ethnically diverse when I was growing up there, but I don't recall any racism, nor ethnicity being much remarked upon. My best friend was 'white British' and not well off (her dad's health issues meant he wasn't able to work), but she was 'tutored' by her mum, who was a teacher, as I was by mine (who has some 'A'-levels, but not a university education). For secondary, we both got scholarships to private girls' schools, mine in north London. This school was much more ethnically diverse, and I recall a political consciousness arising over the school's nominal Christian assembly, which resulted in separate assemblies for the Jewish and Hindu/Jain girls. However, friendship groups were mixed. It was only in sixth form, with an influx of girls from other schools, that an 'Indian' group consciousness arose[9], premised on different music preferences (r'n'b and garage) in contrast to the mainstream majority (who preferred indie/alternative), somewhat similar to Winkler-Reid's (2015) findings. Nevertheless, the defining feature of the school was its academic orientation (in this sense, it was deemed 'not [as] posh' as other private schools), and whilst perhaps most pupils were middle class, I think class consciousness was mostly subsumed by this notion. My interest in my research topic derived from previous voluntary work with children in various countries including the U.K., and from hearing about 'aspiration' in national policy rhetoric, including

[9] Which suggests that this ethnic group consciousness might have been present in other schools before mine.

the targeting of primary school age children. Perhaps it also had to do with feeling that I'd never known what I "wanted to be".

Having not chosen my fieldsites on the basis of ethnicity or class stratifications, I also contend that these factors were not central to my analysis, for three related reasons. Firstly, this was a small-scale ethnographic study, with my key participants being around 15 girls in Lowell, and 3 boys in Firsby, amongst the others making up the fabric of everyday life. My participants did differentiate on the basis of gender, in terms of classification (e.g. "girls and/or/versus boys"); perceived characteristics (e.g. "boys are mean to each other, whereas girls just want to be nice to each other" – Tanisha, Year 5); notions of interests (e.g. "girls like shopping" – Laila, Year 6); and participatory groupings on the playground, which were often single gender, although there were also cross-gender friendships. The 'going out' (in the neighbourhood) and 'video gaming' practices I describe in chapters 4 and 5 are therefore specific to boys, and to the Firsby fieldsite. I don't know about the going out practices of others, but I suspect that for many children, the practice and experience would be different due to greater parental restrictions. At Lowell, talk of video gaming, and of the same games as I played in Firsby, was ubiquitous amongst the boys, suggesting a similarity in practice across my two fieldsites. Overall, however, despite differences in interests and activities, and the continual constitution of gender differences, I found boys in Firsby and girls at Lowell to *approach* their everyday practices in remarkably similar ways – and it is this shared approach that this thesis mainly examines.

In addition to the small number of participants, I contend that there was such diversity at my fieldsites as to render intersections of gender, class, ethnicity and religion only specifiable at the individual level, and thus impossible to compare. This is not to say that I do not note the apparent influences of family background on aspects of aspiration and future orientation (see

e.g. chapters 3 and 7), but the point is that they are not central to my analysis. This is especially the case because this research is aimed at gaining an emic (children's) perspective on aspiration, future, and their everyday practices, and I contend that ethnicity and class were not central lenses through which my participants viewed their lives, or acted. This is something that Evans (2006) and Ali (2004) also find, with same-age children. For example, Evans (2006) notes that unlike the adults in her field who distinguished between 'posh' (middle and upper class) and various forms of 'common' (working class), her child participants did not appear to make evaluations in class terms. Focusing on working-class boys makes sense given that her research focus is *initially* class, and only *subsequently* gender and age (and nominally ethnicity/race). As her working-class participants themselves made distinctions of gender and age, examining intersections like working-class *boy* makes sense.

By contrast, where the research focus is children in the first instance, identifying such intersections would only be valid points of analysis if they were explicitly or implicitly recognised by children themselves. Starting with children's own identifications is James' (1993) point, where, using childhood (age) as the turning point of analysis, she sets out to recognise the ways in which her primary school-aged children differentiate between each other, noting important emic factors like size, and speed at running (essentially, differences between bodies and bodily competences, but not necessarily along typical adult lines of stratification). If James (1993) leaves ethnicity and class somewhat unacknowledged, Ali (2004) examines them directly, through their intersections with gender, but equally, finds children not to make distinctions along these lines, and for engagements to be complex. For example, finding a popular group who fit the (adult) stereotype of working-class Black girls in their love of music, loud confidence, and engagement with boys, she finds children's positive evaluations to instead be based on their confidence, looks and humour, exemplified through their competence at dancing and knowledge of popular music – especially 'Black' r'n'b, soul

and rap. Yet, whereas Winkler-Reid's (2015) older children *discussed* the overlapping of 'styles' and 'race', for Ali's children their only concern was a general notion of 'coolness'. It was therefore impossible to specify broad ethnic and class differences, which were instead worked out through 'the common cultural currency of popular culture' (pp.280) and necessary engagement with what 'doing girl' (i.e. performing gender) at school involved.

Again, this is not to say that notions of ethnicity or class were never engaged with by my participants. But they were not objects of everyday discourse as they were in, for example, Baumann's (1996) study of Southallian youth or Winkler-Reid's (2015) of sixth formers in a London secondary school. Nor were they pre-constituted and fixed categories, from an emic perspective. Rather, engagements with notions of ethnicity (and to an even lesser extent, class) were sporadic and ad hoc, mediated through engagements with peer popular culture, as Ali (2004) finds. In their accumulation, and matching with discourse, I do not doubt that, in complex ways, they became increasingly salient notions over the course of my year and a half in the field, which I briefly describe below. But whilst it would be *possible* to write an ethnography about these issues, in terms of my research focus, I believe there are other more significant issues at stake.

Lowell school was ethnically diverse: according to its Ofsted report, it had a large proportion of children of South Asian heritage, followed by Afro-Caribbean heritage, although this does not adequately describe the diversity present. Perhaps in relation to this diversity and the school's stance of visible multiculturalism (for example, 'International Week' was celebrated through the wearing of clothes 'from' different countries), the introductory question, "where are you from?" was very common at Lowell (compared with Firsby). Children employed differential schemas of parental origin, birth country and where they 'grew up', in their 'from' statements, with all claims apparently being taken as valid by others. For example, in an early

conversation with Tula and Holly, Tula says, "I'm…" Holly butts in: "Indian!" Tula says, "No – well – everyone says that but… I'm half Indian 'cause my mum is Indian. I'm a quarter Danish 'cause my dad is half Danish. It's complicated – his dad is Danish and his mum is Norwaygian [sic] – from Norway." Meanwhile, Holly says, "I speak French 'cause all my family do." "Why?" I ask. "My family are from Algeria," says Holly. "They live all over the world: Algeria, France, New York. My mum is French, so I'm half French too." On the other hand, in 'autobiographies' the children wrote in class, Liam writes, "My dad is from Israel, my mum is from Ireland, and I'm from Ingland [intentional misspelling] – all the happy 'I's together!" And Andrius writes, "My parents are from Lithuania. I was born in Lithuania, but I moved here when I was 2, so let's say I'm ¾ Lithuanian and ¼ English." It may be the case that having heard certain discourses, children wanted to hedge their bets about where they were 'from', or stake claims to places perceived as desirable, including England as one's home. But doubtless, such evaluations were complex, and involved manifold other elements, as seemingly unrelated as a desire to express things in terms of fractions and percentages. Importantly, all of the children spoke with a fluent English accent (even if they were born abroad, none were recent immigrants).

Firsby was located further on the outskirts of Greater London, and concomitantly less ethnically diverse. According to the Ofsted report of the primary school most of my participants attended (or had attended), pupils were predominantly white, although this also conceals white ethnic diversity: Ethan, Alex's neighbour, is white but 'from South Africa', where he was born; Tomas (who features briefly in a few chapters) is of eastern European origin; and at Alex's birthday I meet Brandon, whose family are Travellers. "Where are you from?" did not seem to be *immediately* asked in conversation, perhaps because of the lesser apparent diversity, but was occasionally raised, as when Ethan talks about South Africa. This

was equally so with race, as when Alex tells me, “Everyone in my class is white – there’s only one other black kid”.

In both areas, notions of race/ethnicity emerged (infrequently) in discussions of ‘racism’, in line with its formal treatment by schools. Interestingly, it was more often the behaviours of *teachers* that were discussed as racist (or sexist), rather than that of peers, in assessments of teachers’ ‘unfair’ and unexplainable actions. On the other hand, there were occasional peer incidents whereby, for those involved, feelings of intense emotion paired with known discourses of racism would have rendered notions of race/ethnicity increasingly salient. For example, one lunchtime, I find Tyler and Samuel in floods of tears because they haven’t been picked to play football[10]. Whilst the group playing is a mixed group, when I ask who gets to decide who plays, Tyler says, “Christoph and Jack… it’s always the white boys.” Samuel nods. On another occasion, Holly asks Amina, in the playground, “Do you have to wear those leggings ‘cause you’re Muslim?” Amina affirms this. “See?” whispers Holly loudly to some of the other girls. “I told you – Muslims have to wear them. I’m so glad my dad married my mum, or I’d have to wear them.” Here, then, in acknowledging that her dad is Muslim, Holly is not distancing herself from a Muslim identity per se, but from what she sees as a particular negative manifestation vis-à-vis style, as informed by images of desirable heteronormative femininity. Meanwhile, in Firsby, Alex and his friend Charlie are laughing at the sound of the word ‘bud bud ding ding’, which they tell me means ‘Indian’, when Charlie tells Alex, “You know Danny calls you ‘baboon’ [presumably because he is black]?” Alex says quietly, “I know”, before the boys quickly change the subject. Thus, through their occurrence alongside acute feelings of exclusion and unfairness, notions of racial difference and discrimination likely had stronger and more lasting resonances than their infrequency in talk suggests.

[10] At this point, football was limited to the multi-use games area, and numbers were restricted.

If ethnicity and race/racism were present, if infrequent, in discussions, class was harder to pin down. According to their Ofsted reports, pupils at Lowell school were generally better off, with a lower than average number of children on Free School Meals (FSM, a poverty indicator), whilst those at the Firsby school were less well off (higher than average FSM). However, according to Mrs Clark, socioeconomic background at Lowell was very mixed, with 'quite well off' and 'very poor' children. Accents in both fieldsites ranged from slightly more to slightly less 'south London' (generally thought of as a working/lower middle-class accent), with no one speaking appreciably differently, and accent varying by situation, in any case.

Children themselves rarely addressed class directly, except when I was asked about what secondary school I went to, and was told by numerous participants at Lowell that it [i.e. the name] "sounds posh". In Firsby, as noted in chapter 4, when Alex arranges a picnic for us, Charlie seems to consider this 'posh' and mocks the notion, saying, "This is *nice*!" Clearly, then, children did have a notion of 'posh', but people or things that would be marked as such rarely seemed to enter their environments. I thought that my accent might also be considered posh[11], but instead, the children who commented upon it thought I sounded "a bit American", and over time, it became more 'south London' again. In conversation, children occasionally talked about parents' occupations, but didn't seem to judge these except perhaps on the basis of stating an interest in particular careers.

Money and possessions were more often topics of conversation. Children generally boasted of having money and possessions, but this was about *personal* ownership. In terms of family background, it was frequently the other way around, with children more likely to flag up *not* having money. At Lowell, I heard two Year 6 boys, Owen and Danny, having a competitive discussion about whose mum was 'poorer'. Meanwhile, not having enough money to go on

[11] When young, I had a south London accent, but my current accent could be deemed fairly 'posh'.

school trips, or to be able to buy certain things, was openly cited by various children (e.g. Amina, Hazel and Kelsey at Lowell; Brandon in Firsby), but in response to this, other children showed sympathy and understanding. For example, at his birthday party, Alex is making a list of his presents. “Brandon - £5” he says aloud, as he writes it down. As some others have given £10, Brandon says, “That’s all my mum had”, to which Alex replies, “I know, don’t worry.” And despite the general socioeconomic differences between Lowell and Firsby, interests, hobbies, and ownership of things like phones and games consoles were largely similar.

The central point is that whilst ethnicity/race and class may have had complex intersecting influences on peer cultural engagements and sexual identities, which became more important as my participants moved through Year 6, they did not influence peer participations or friendship groupings in any clear-cut ways (unlike gender). Participations and friendships, and likewise practices and interests, were largely socially mixed. As such, whilst it has become less fashionable not to focus on ethnic and class stratifications, these are not the identifications guiding this research, because, for the most part, they were not the central issues of relevance. As such, this thesis deconstructs the notion that aspiration is essentially linked to class or ethnicity, and suggests that we instead look to emic understandings in order to rethink our ideas.

**In the field: negotiating participant-observation with children**

Whilst negotiations with adults determined the existence and location of my project, and largely occurred prior to starting fieldwork (additional negotiations and the constant

unspoken threat of removal of access notwithstanding), my access was really a continuous process of making and maintaining friendships in the field, as it is for most anthropologists. Being based in inter-subjective relations, the researcher does not have total control over the research process; participants also shape it through their constructions of the researcher. In my first meetings with my participants – with Alex at his home in Firsby, and with my two Year 5 classes at Lowell – I had no clear idea of how relations would turn out. With so much uncertainty, my main objectives were to minimise harm and not impose into my participants' lives (because adults *can* impose where they aren't welcome, because of adult authority). As I was in *their* home and school, like Corsaro (2003), I let children approach me, and reacted to them in response to their reactions to me.

Arriving for the first time at Alex's house, Alex's mum Liz gives Alex and I pizzas, which we eat off trays in the living room, and Alex turns on the TV and asks what I want to watch from a list of his pre-recorded favourites. "I've got Family Guy…The Simpsons…Regular Show…" Alex asks me about my favourite things – TV programmes, football team, food, colour, car – and I ask him back. Then Alex tells his mum that we're going outside – which she's been expecting – and he shows me around, pointing out where his friends live. We buy sweets, return home to play video games, meet his friend Ethan to play football, then get ice-creams, and walk around some more. Meanwhile, at Lowell, my first encounters begin in a classroom, where I loiter at the back, being glanced at, stared at or ignored, before being briefly introduced by the teacher. When the buzzer finally goes for the end of the lesson and the children file out for break-time, I follow them onto the school field. Soon, I'm accosted by various Year 5s running over, and am bombarded with a cacophony of questions: "What's your name, again?" "We got your letter – are you writing a book about us?" "How old are you?" "What will the book be about?" "How long are you here for?" "Are you staying 'til next year?" "Do you want to ask us about the future?" "Do you want to race me?" "Do you want to play with us?" As I try to

answer the questions in turn, some children wander off, some stay and others join. Other year groups are told about me: “Yeah, she’s in our year! She’s in our class!” “She’s writing a book about us!” I’m invited to play by various children and despite notions of appropriate ‘adult behaviour’, I immediately find myself joining in. I’m not sure how I wouldn’t: to do so would be to draw divisions that must be adult constructs, since the children themselves aren’t discriminating against me in their invitations. Further, it would be a rejection of their attempts at befriending me. And on the vast expanse of the school field I don’t feel overly subject to the scrutinising gaze and potential disapproval of staff.

As such, ‘full participation’ was not simply *my choice* of research methodology, but one that emerged through inter-subjective relations with my participants. I was invited into ‘joint action and meaning-making’ and so I joined in. But how exactly did my participants see me? It has been argued that if childhood is an age-based social structural category, adults *cannot*, in view of their age and related physical development, ‘become’ children. Yet, I think that the category of ‘adult’ is perhaps not as monolithic and the boundaries defined by age not as clear-cut as researchers tend to suggest. Although recent sociological writings (e.g. Lee, 2001) discuss adulthood as an uncertain and blurry category, debate about research methods still tends to rely on an adult: child dichotomy. In the field, however, adulthood/childhood was not a given but was situationally assessed (and not assessed) on the basis of multiple factors that included physical appearance and style, behaviour, numerical age, lived experiences and formal role. Of course, it is difficult to know precisely how my participants viewed me, but it seemed as though I was accepted as something of a peer, at least at times – even if at other times, I clearly wasn’t, or I was more than one thing, or something beyond definition.

My openness to being included was clearly important in perceptions, but perhaps prior to this, my appearance, including dress and bodily practices, was also crucial. Whilst I don’t look, or

always manage to act, quite like my 9 to 11-year old participants, in appearance I look young and could be confused, age-wise, with teenage friends, siblings and cousins, with whom aspects of peer culture are shared. Equally, familiarity with people who do not fit the stereotypical images of adult/child, such as 'adult' siblings living at home, and teenage friends who 'look like' adults but are still subject to adult authority, means that categories are not clear-cut. For example, out walking with Alex, I feel self-conscious about what people might think about my hanging around with children, and am surprised to find that his friends and even adult neighbours often assume me to be a child too. "Do you go to school with Alex?" I am asked, or, "What school are you at?" When I say that I don't attend his school, Alex usually tells people that he know me because his aunt works with my mum (which I worry about in relation to informed consent – but decide that this is Alex's choice, and to profess otherwise would be to undermine his view of our friendship). It is only when we encounter some 'bullies' in the park with his friend Charlie that Alex says of me, defiantly, "She's writing a book about me! She's 30!" "No, she ain't," Charlie and the bullies reply. When Alex later explains to Charlie that I really am 30 and a research student, Charlie says, "Oh, I thought you two were related! You *should* be related!" Equally, when my age and research status are revealed amongst Alex's friends at his birthday party, there is a momentary "Oh!", before the information seems to recede behind the more immediate factors of behaviour and appearance, and I am treated largely as before: given shares in sweets and game-playing, competed with, fought with and heckled, as the others are. And although age is a constant talking point and point of comparison (down to the detail of who is older by whose birthday comes first), this comes up situationally. Thus, I am constantly asked, and have to constantly remind children of my age, and each time that I do, they proffer incredulity, suggesting that their imagination of a necessary 'adult' of my age does not fit with their perception of me at that time. Hence, when I tell some friends at after-school club that I am 30, one girl says, "You're 13." "No, 30," I say. "You mean 13," she says. "You're not 30," another girl says. "My mum's 30."

In school, the situation is more confusing, since my introduction as a volunteer teaching assistant (TA) – to be known as 'Miss Sim' rather than 'Anne-Marie' – has framed me from the start as an adult *par excellence*. I don't realise beforehand that the TA role is almost entirely disciplinary – at least in the everyday overseeing, shushing and harrying of children into doing work, and in reporting back to the teacher – such that children usually conflate 'TA' with 'teacher'. In this sense, although I had said that I didn't want to engage in any disciplinary action (something that not all the children found desirable[12]), the label turns out to be an immutable one anyway. Thus, there are numerous occasions when I hear, "Shh, there's a teacher!" I frequently rebuff the label, claiming that I am 'just a volunteer, and a student, really', and my friends also vouch for my non-teacher status: "Miss Sim's not going to tell you off!"; "It's just Miss Sim!". However, since I couldn't possibly get to know all the children in the year really well, there may be some who viewed me only in this light. Equally, those with whom I was most 'friends' might, by self-selection, be those more amenable to 'adults'. Kelsey, for example, suggests that I am included, but in something of a friendly adult capacity, when she exclaims one day, "Miss Sim knows all the gossip! Do you remember how Danny said he likes Holly in Wales, Miss Sim? You're not really a teacher, you're kind of more like our class counsellor or something!" Yet, at other times, my adult status is more ambiguous. For example, although complaining, "Why do you always wear grey jumpers?" Amina notes that, "You look like a pupil 'cause it's almost like school uniform! If I was over there [indicating a spot further away], I wouldn't know you weren't a pupil." And drawing in the library with Shivani and Annabel, Shivani says, "You're Miss Sim – a teacher – but you're also writing a

[12] Particularly towards the start of fieldwork, my TA label led children to call on me to tell others off, settle playground disputes, and generally act as a moral arbiter. In line with other researchers (e.g. Fine, 1980), I refrained from doing so, trying to extricate myself from such duties by keeping quiet or telling children to 'tell a teacher' instead. However, I think the situation is more difficult than others have attested to. It is not just adults who pass judgment, but children too. In refraining from exercising 'adult' authority, I feel that I am not sticking up for friends and not showing my own opinions – both of which are desirable peer attributes in dispute situations.

book. So you're a writer as well. What else are you? …And a student." Annabel says, "I don't think of her as a teacher really, I think of you as more of a friend – like, one of us, than a teacher." "Yeah, she *is*," says Shivani, "but she's also a teacher, *and* a writer, *and* a student." At breakfast club, when a 5-year old boy asks me, "Are you a pupil or are you a teacher? 'Cause you *look* like a pupil", I reply, "I'm not a pupil." "Are you a teacher then?" he asks. Hazel, from Year 6, says, "She's not really either." And getting school dinners with Emily one day, in response to my exclamations that my plate is really full, Emily says, "That's a lot of food. That's an adult portion – even though you're not really. Well, you're only sort of in between."

Of course, my identity *was* ambiguous – something that was thrown into awkward relief in particular situations. One was the persistence of my 'home community' of adults, whose expectations I knew, and whose small gestures like raised eyebrows and intonations of surprise I could acutely read. Indeed, this is what researchers refer to when suggesting that full participation may be 'inappropriate'. For example, when arriving at Alex's house, I'd frequently accept a cup of tea and chat to Liz, Alex's mum. I worried about this positioning me 'on the adults' side' (if there is one), but as it was with her permission that I was able to be there, I'd always accept. And although far less extreme than at school, I noticed the adjustments in speech, conversational style, bodily comportment and taste that I would make, almost unthinkingly, when moving between an adult-supervised area and a child-led one. With Liz, I'd want tea, with Alex, Fanta Orange. It was only when children and adults were present together that I felt an uncomfortable sense of hypocrisy, as if I'd been being fake with one or the other group, usually the children. Having said this, my behaviour was possibly not so extraordinary to children, since they were constantly engaging in these differential performances themselves when talking with different people – adult caretakers in particular.

Another juxtaposition that highlighted my conflicted identity was when conversation turned to life experiences. When asked, I was open with my participants that I lived in a house, with a boyfriend, and without parents. My participants often displayed interest in this, but I felt like it was a separating factor, and tended to downplay it, instead emphasising commonalities like my relationship with my mum, and school experiences. At school, referring to the fact that I'd also been a pupil at Lowell felt like a factor that both placed us together and marked us apart. For example, in discussions about preparations for the Wales trip 'talent show', I tell my participants that my best friend and I did a comedy show (as many others were doing this time around), which draws positive responses. On the other hand, things like all the teachers being different and 'house groups' not having existed during my time there, highlighted our temporal distance – that I was not just *a bit* but vastly older. Whilst always being truthful about my circumstances, in responding so as to play up similarities and downplay differences, I could be seen to be cultivating the notion of myself as a peer. Whilst my experience is researcher-specific, there is a sense in which this is something all children engage in to a degree – in promoting their shared experiences with peers, over distancing ones. Having suggested that my participants sometimes constructed and understood me as something of a peer, then, this is not to say that I didn't also consciously promote this sentiment. Why? Because, as Fine (1980) notes, there is a certain level of confidences that *only* peers can access, and which, having been let in, I was not prepared to relinquish. Standing on the side-lines and having events reported to me would not be the same as being in the midst of action, seeing, hearing and experiencing events unfold in real time. I thus had to *work* at peer competence, and at being a continually accepted and desirable friend.

**Learning to be a child: the benefits of participation**

As I join in with Alex and the other children I make friends with, I learn, in some senses, how to be a child. I learn that whilst children's advocates call for adults to listen to children (e.g. Christensen, 1999), as a participant, it is impossible to know whom to listen to or for how long, as children often speak at the same time, groups fragment if different children want to carry on different conversations, and then re-form or take off somewhere else if a drama or enjoyable performance seems to be taking place there. There is a constant looking around – an openness to things happening and to new dramas occurring elsewhere. Conversation darts around much more rapidly than that amongst adults, and in writing up fieldnotes, I sometimes find myself confused about what was said when, and despite copious notes, am sure I leave out many things. At the start, despite being bombarded with questions, I find my own questions awkwardly received, as they cut up the flow of talk. In response, I try to let my participants take the lead in talk, asking back questions I'm asked – such as, 'do *you* have phobia?' – and commenting on topics raised by others, rather than instigating topics of conversation myself. As such, I learn what types of questions are of interest, and when to ask them. As noted, children do ask questions, but at particular times – for example, to show interest in someone and in order to relay tantalising information to others (as the children do with me when I first join), as well as to demand 'secret' knowledge, stave off boredom and as part of guessing games. But in the flow of most conversations and events, questions of how to do something, what something is, or background information are not necessarily sought. It is far better to just join in and learn by doing or hearing, rather than share or reveal one's lack of knowledge – just as being able to show and tell one's knowledge to others is a skill to be revelled in. Thus, I try to act and speak in as close a way to the children as I can, going with the flow of talk and action rather than demanding knowledge of origin, context and causality.

Another thing I learn, albeit very slowly, is something of how time might be perceived and a sense of togetherness experienced by my participants. This learning occurs as a result of

changing my hours of attendance at Lowell school. Between May and July 2013, I attend two days a week, spending a full day in each of the two Year 5 classes. From September, I decide to attend four half-days a week. I felt that by attending only two days a week I was missing out on many occurrences taking place throughout the week and, as noted, continually asking questions about past events was not appropriate. Coming in for four days a week helped me to stay more in the loop with school and peer events, and attending break and lunchtimes each day seemed like the main point – after all, this was when I actually got to participate with my participants, rather than having to sit through lessons where interaction was limited and, when it occurred, required me to be in something of a TA role. Yet, I frequently received comments and complaints from both the girls with whom I spent break and lunchtimes, and others, that I was there *less* than before and should stay for longer; this was particularly the case with class 6J, whose class I attended on Mondays and Fridays, rather than 6L, whose class I attended on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. This was despite slightly increasing my overall weekly hours. Evidently, spending a longer period *in one go* was experienced as more significant than more frequent but shorter periods. Equally, my presence in class – even if not directly communicating – was appreciated as time spent together, akin to the unmarked time that girls and boys frequently spend together, which Thorne (1993) notes is under-reported and undervalued by researchers. And it is similar to the notion of 'co-presence', used by Miller and Sinanan (2014) to describe the state of 'being together' on webcam without necessarily actively interacting, which they suggest is beneficial to long-distance relationships. Further, enduring the rigours of a full day put me in the same category as a pupil, as compared with my subsequent perceived ability to breeze in and out of school as I pleased[13].

[13] Meanwhile, my earlier practice of being 'absent' for whole days wasn't so remarkable in the school context.

I also learn a great deal from the 'moments of enchantment' that I experience when full participation occurs. In these moments, such as the one documented at the start of this chapter, without realising it, I find myself being 'carried away' by the affective changes and momentum that the requisite bodily movements, performative practices and imaginative leaps demand. Being thus caught up *makes* me an 'active participant' in children's practices, as Mandell (1988) describes it. This experiential level of engagement is, I think, one of the key benefits of participation. Whilst my bodily experience of an activity may vary significantly from a child's experience because of my different habitus and range of embodied experiences, not to engage with these experiences risks neglecting significant aspects of the life-worlds of my participants (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011). Meanwhile, like Lærke (1998) and Wulff (1988), there were many times when I experienced first-hand what I believe were communally created sensations such as delight, approbation, fear and hilarity that can only be felt through bodily motion. Whilst these might not constitute 'enchantment' for the children in quite the same way as they did for me, their outward expressions at least suggested that they were experiencing some similar sensations. What participation allows for is an understanding of the impelling force of momentum in movement and narrative that occurs in a connection with peers and material objects, and in combination with a desire to create, prolong and maximise pleasant or exciting affective sensations. If, as has been discussed, embodied, situated knowledge is hugely important to children, then developing a 'feeling' for how such knowledge might come to be created, in combination with movement, the material environment and peers, is crucial.

*It's a Friday morning in October 2013 and I have just entered the school refectory for 'breakfast club'. Beyond a scattering of mostly younger children eating breakfast or playing, I spot Hazel and Mia from Year 6 and head over to them with some Year 5 friends, Kim, Tanisha and Lani. Hazel has a small whiteboard propped up against the wall. 'We're just doing factfiles of books*

*we've finished recently,' she explains. 'Have you read anything recently?' I tell her I'm reading 'Moonwailer'[14] and after asking me for various bits of information about the main character Billy Hardacre, Hazel writes up the following:*

*Name: Billy Hardacre*

*Age: 11/12*

*Hobby: Sees spirits*

*Best friend: Callum Truelove*

*Lives: Lives with mum*

*'That's 1…2…3…4…5 facts we know about him!' she says, counting them off in front of everyone. ''Cause, we're doing this thing, like – do you watch any police dramas? You know, like, CSI*[15] *and stuff? I love them, and we're doing this thing where we – you know they do, like, profiles of the people they're looking for? Well, that's what we're doing.' She continues: 'Next we need to work out where he is. What do we know about him? He sees spirits. So, you have a choice of two places: he's either in the yoga studio or in an old building with candles. What do you think?'*

*We all adopt 'agent' names, and then Hazel dispatches half of us to 'the old building' and the other half to 'the yoga studio'. This involves physically getting up and going somewhere else. I'm in Hazel's group, and we head off to the opposite side of the room. At this point, I don't know what we're supposed to be doing, but Hazel picks up various bits and pieces, such as a toy pram wheel and spade, and I join in. 'Oh, that could be the old building,' I say, pointing to a toy house that opens. 'And inside the wardrobe, we find loads of money!' Hazel opens the*

[14] By Peter J. Murray – recommended to me by Kelsey, who told me "It's soo scary!"
[15] Crime Scene Investigation – an American television drama series

*little wardrobe inside the house and pulls open a tiny drawer. Hidden inside are some bits of Lego. 'Did you know that was going to be there?!' I ask incredulously. Hazel shakes her head. 'No!' she exclaims. 'But it went exactly like I said!' We head back and compare evidence with the other group. 'We found… a blood-stained cloth,' Mia says, producing a reddish-soiled tissue, 'a doll…' 'Ooh, a cursing doll!' interrupts Hazel, excitedly. 'And this clue,' says Mia, pulling out a piece of paper. 'It says: double this number and add 16, makes 37.'*

*I suppose that looking back on this, it isn't so strange that a scrap of paper with a maths puzzle should be found in a school refectory. Yet with the preceding events that have unfolded, all overlaid with the emergent, open-ended, yet bizarrely coherent narrative that Hazel has fashioned, with help from the rest of us – the money in the wardrobe, the blood-stained cloth – this maths puzzle really does seem like a clue, or a taunt, left by a dangerous serial killer. From not knowing what's going on, the game is actually starting to feel quite 'real' and scary. Like being absorbed into a television crime drama, the bright and noisy refectory has taken on an eerie glow; the background hubbub has faded into a blanket of white noise behind the propelling force of the storyline.*

*Hazel says: 'So, what can we work out from this information?' We look to the board.*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Billy Hardacre*<br>*11/12*<br>*Sees spirits*<br>*Callum Truelove*<br>*Lives with mum* | *<u>Office</u>*<br>*Agent K* | *Old*<br>*building*<br>*Candles*<br>*IIIII* | *Yoga*<br>*studio*<br>*Dark and empty*<br>*II* |

| | *Evidence* |
|---|---|
| *Agent K – office* | *piece of paper* |
| *Agent A – yoga studio* | *doll* |
| *Agent M – yoga studio* | *cloth with blood* |
| *Agent L – old building* | |
| *Agent T – old building* | *car wheel* |
| *Agent E – old building* | *shovel - graves* |
| *Agent H – wait outside in car* | *£2,000,000,000* |

*Hazel says: 'So, he's killing all the people who… Wait, how many people have been killed?' 'Eight,' is ventured. 'Okay, so what are their names and what are their jobs? Hazel writes up the suggestions. 'What about the £2 billion?' I say, referring to the money we found in the wardrobe. Hazel replies: 'He's actually working with Peter Rocky… what's his name?' 'Rockefeller,' says Mia. 'Yeah, Peter Rockefeller,' says Hazel. 'And so they go round together and Billy kills the people; they're business partners.' 'Maybe the clue you found can tell us something,' I say to Mia. 'What's the clue?' Mia reads it aloud again. 'It's 10½,' I say to Hazel. 'So what does this tell us?' she asks.*

*Now, not because I'm trying to think of a narrative, but rather, without thinking, but simply by being so caught up in the narrative, I feel like I know what the clue means. With the intuition of a detective agent, I say: 'Ooh, I only know one address with 10½. It's 10½ Vicarage Road – 'cause it was number 10 – it was a big house, and it got split into two, so one half got called 10½.' 'Okay, so we need to move!' barks Hazel. 'Let's get down there – go, go! I'll stay here. You're all going to the same place.' We scuffle off. Mia searches, picking something up. I'm looking with her when Lani and Tanisha come towards us, shrieking: 'We saw the cupboard*

*door open!' Lani pulls us over to the door of the cupboard. 'It opened and the broom moved!' 'Did it?!' I ask rhetorically, half for real, half in the game. We stare at the slightly ajar door for a while, spooked, before tentatively getting back to 'work', grabbing a handful of things.*

*'We found loads of stuff!' exclaims Mia, when we return. But the plot thickens, as Hazel says: 'I worked out that it's not 10½ Vicarage Road – that was a trap! Vicarage has 'vicar' in it. So he's actually gone to kill the vicar! At number 9, Rose Lane!' She points to where she's written it on the board. I feel a searing chill run through my spine – a trap! How could we have been so stupid?! But then, Gina is at the refectory door. Breakfast club is over and we need to go. We pick up our coats and bags from off of plastic chairs and formica tables, and line up next to the food counter.*

**Limitations and learning**

Many of the limitations to/of 'full participation' derive from conflicts with 'ethics'. For example, my attempts to not implicate any power imbalances by being a follower rather than a leader in the peer environment (which I could easily have changed by bringing into talk experiences or knowledge that I knew was desirable to my participants) meant that I eschewed the easy social success that I might have gained by being a desirable adult or older child/teenager with whom many of the children thought it 'cool' to talk. The children were interested in my different experiences, and especially those tied up with being older, such as having a boyfriend. Exploring this social difference could have been a fruitful avenue for research, as Raffety (2015) points out; not doing so represents some lost potential. Yet, to

draw on resources unavailable to my participants felt unethical, even whilst to *not* do so was inherently contradictory to peer culture. Desire for a certain kind of interpersonal power is part of children's sociality – the power to gain attention and have people look at and listen to you. For example, at Guide Camp[16], whilst at times friendships between the elder and younger girls occurred on an even-handed, peer basis, at others, bonding seemed clearly related to the benefits afforded by the age differential. The elder girls told the younger ones desirable information about their imminent futures in secondary school, with the younger ones reciprocating with a certain level of awe and respect. At times, the elder girls 'mothered' the younger ones – doing their hair, giving them piggybacks and calling them "my mini-me!" –, practices that at Guide Camp I followed in taking part in; whilst at others, they excluded the younger ones, declaring them "too young to listen to this sort of stuff!" when, for example, Hayley, the Guide leader, began explaining the meanings of various sexual terms. Similarly, the Year 6 girls at Lowell took up this sometimes nurturing, sometimes seemingly patronising attitude towards children in Year 3 and below (4 to 7-year olds), emphasising their elder status. The protective/dismissive (care/control) attitude I assumed to be unique to the adult: child relationship was in fact occurring between older and younger children at various ages, which I think accounts for why by adulthood, one can be so dismissive of the full personhood of the young child that everyone once was – there is not simply one schism that occurs upon adulthood (whenever this might be), but a continual revising downwards of the agency experienced at prior times. If, then, there is an attraction to being, and presenting oneself as older, in trying to be like a child – in trying to be younger than I actually was – I was, paradoxically, *not* being like a child.

[16] A group weekend away in which the girls sleep in dorms and/or tents and take part in various activities together

Another contributory factor to my at times limited 'voice' was my hesitation to pass judgment. This occurred in matters of dispute – as previously noted – and also in conversations involving the popular topic of 'likes' and 'dislikes', when it came to be about peers and teachers. I was concerned that if my opinions got back to teachers, I would be deemed irresponsible, with access curtailed. Yet, not doing so limited certain bonding experiences, and I frequently felt bland, uninteresting, and frustrated by the impression that sharing my true opinions could have promoted and extended conversations. There was also an ethical concern about 'fairness', since conversations should surely be about sharing information and opinions. Being constantly wary of what I could and couldn't say, and being unable to confide in my 'peers', whilst simultaneously caring desperately about peer social success, was tiring and stressful; it also meant that my temporal horizons were at odds with my participants – participation was always with an eye on other matters – arguably making it not 'full' at all. Not being fully 'in the moment' was due to multiple other factors, as I describe, and is arguably something all researchers face. Nevertheless, the situation felt severely limiting, and towards the end of my fieldwork I did end up offering up my opinions to a few participants.

Two even greater concerns were a constant presence in my fieldwork. The first was a nagging worry about whether my participants really did want me around, or if I might be imposing without realising it. The second was a worry about perceptions of inappropriateness with regards to child protection, and a concomitant anxiety about potential loss of access (if not even more serious consequences) should things 'go wrong' at any point. If these concerns seem excessive, explanation must be sought in the extreme uncertainty that such fieldwork involves – an uncertainty that pervades every aspect of the research process. Without a predefined methodology, with the researcher personally implicated as research tool and embedded in a field of social relations that also constitutes the vast majority of her social relations for a considerable period of time, and with the notion that there are no fundamental

*rights* to research, this uncertainty is experienced relative to the research as a whole, the research choices being made, and at a day-to-day, moment-to-moment level. As various authors note, this uncertainty, and concomitant personal experiences and emotions, are very often, and unfortunately, written out of ethnographies (e.g. Lareau and Shultz, 1996; Okely and Callaway, 1992). In explaining my worries, below, I show how they brought both limitations and learning.

Throughout my fieldwork I was plagued with doubt about the form my participant-observation was taking, whether my participants might get bored of me, and whether I might end up imposing where at first I was welcome. For example, in holding back somewhat, in order to learn from Alex rather than lead activities and conversation, I had the impression that I was perhaps not as fun to be around as his other friends. But Liz tells me at his birthday that I'm his "guest of honour" and that Alex is really looking forward to my being there. "He's been waiting all day for you: 'What time's Anne-Marie coming? When will she be here?'" Liz says this repeatedly, which always takes me by surprise, because Alex never says it to me himself, and the time we spend together one-to-one seems so much less riotous than when we are with Alex's other friends. In questioning what it is that Alex enjoys about my company, I wonder if it's the presents I sometimes bring, the access I provide to enjoyable shopping experiences, and the fact that I sometimes end up paying for things. In fact, I realise that these are integral aspects of our friendship, alongside my availability to come and visit regularly. But this does not render the friendship instrumental, and therefore less valid, as a 'western' adult characterisation would have it (see e.g. Bell and Coleman, 1999). Rather, such possibilities for doing enjoyable things together are constitutive aspects of friendship. Equally valued, it seems, are that I listen to Alex's narratives, and am usually always on his side.

At school, the ambiguity over whether my participants want me around is even more acute. Things were relatively easy when the group I usually spent time with – Hazel, Shivani, Laila and Amina – or others, ran over to me when I arrived at break-times, and indeed this happened for the most part. Yet, at times, they didn't. Should I go over to them, or hold back? Further, there were times when it felt like more pronounced shifts were happening. For example, for a period of time, it felt as though Hazel was consciously leaving me out of conversations with Mia about boys, at breakfast club and sometimes whilst eating lunch. This made me worry that I was being perceived as an adult with whom she didn't want to share this information, although she also left out others. I equally wondered if I was placing too much of an adult reading on this by associating talk about boys with a more 'real' friendship than talk about other things, or playing together. When such slights occurred, I would worry about friendships and also feel like my notions of being a peer had been false. Of course, the difficulty was in differentiating between changing *friendship relations* and the particular relations between participants and me as a researcher. I cared deeply about both, but was especially anxious about the latter. Trying to work out causality felt necessary in determining my behaviour, because if it were a question of friendship, I would need to *show* my interest in wanting to be involved in dramas about boys and secrets. As I learnt, as a peer I would need to put *effort* into making myself involved: I would be pleading, cajoling, bargaining and teasing her to be included. But if I were being viewed as an intruding adult, I obviously wouldn't want to further pry into topics deemed inappropriate for adult ears. Of course, the fact is that these relations are often impossible to disentangle, because the researcher is multiple things at once, as I have described. These difficulties – caused by my entanglements in situations of friendship and caring, but also research ethics – brought a great deal of worry that should not be undermined in the research context – after all, in many senses, it again acted to separate me from my participants, as I dwelt on this rather than on the experiences my participants

were facing. Yet, on the other hand, it brought certain insights that I could not otherwise have gained.

Through continuous experience of, and reflection on, the issue, what I came to realise is that, contrary to popular imagination perhaps, children did not often delineate friendships – something I explore further in chapter 6. Use of the word 'friend' – for example, as mentioned earlier in the conversation with Shivani and Annabel – was not frequent, and when it was used, was often applied in a very inclusive sense. Thus, Annabel's application of the term 'friend' to include me does not mean that we spent a great deal of time together, but only that, like most of the girls and a fair number of boys in the year, I would be someone she generally liked and probably hoped to be liked by. In terms of the issue with Hazel and discussion of boys, the situation for me improved seemingly randomly, through my becoming better friends with Lena, through attendance at Guides. Before October 2013, Lena and I hadn't spoken much at school, in contrast to my relationship with Kelsey, who'd introduced me to Guides. But with Kelsey, our conversations mainly revolved around books and school – something I felt might be related to my teacher status, but was probably more due to her interests and apparent distancing from her supposed best friends Lena and Mia at this particular period of time (although things later improved for her). Through meeting in an out-of-school environment, or perhaps for other reasons, Lena and I became friends, and at school, she included me in conversations about boys, in which she was often at the centre. In all likelihood, the situation with Hazel may have involved *some* trepidation with regards to my being affiliated with the teaching staff/adulthood, but it was also to do with which friends she saw in particular lights – expressed through a movement away from Amina and others, and towards Mia and Su, for a time. Negotiating through these issues involved reflecting on both my experiences and the apparent experiences and practices of my participants, in order to understand how friendships were made and understood in practice. As such, my method and

experiences are intrinsically tied up with my 'findings', and I posit therefore that the benefits to 'full participation' are hopefully to be found in the ethnographic chapters to follow.

My other great concern had been formed before I even got to the field. Through a reading of both the anthropological literature and ethical guidelines, I was apprehensive about how my practices might be perceived, by both adults and the children themselves. Whether directly invited to participate or not, I found myself sometimes holding back, for fear my intrusion might be regarded with suspicion. For example, although I knew that Alex and his parents trusted me, when Alex went to friends' houses to ask them out to play, I found myself hanging a few paces back, concerned that parents might scrutinise me. Yet, my worries in the out-of-school environment turned out to be misplaced, for the 'strange adult' that lurks on street corners does not resemble me. In the popular press, rather than the more generalised pages of ethics and disclosure forms, the threat is visualised as characteristically male and older-looking. However, in the school environment, which operated within the same institutional paradigm in which I had been immersed, it was indeed the out-of-place adult (as an absolute category, in opposition to the child) who was the threat. Loitering and chatting with John and Sachin in the school atrium (we are supposed to be going to the field), a teacher passes and asks them if they are okay; in the playground, Mr Lawrence calls out, "Are you alright, Sophie?" as she puts her face close to mine to tell me a story; and Amina, one of the girls I chat with most at school, tells me that she's been told by Ms Jameson that she shouldn't spend so much time with me. Needless to say, whilst I don't feel as though I'm doing anything wrong, these apparent suspicions exert a checking effect upon my ability to fully, or perhaps successfully, participate, and, although this never appears to be the case, I particularly worry about children themselves feeling uncomfortable about my presence. The scrutinising gaze and threat of removal of access are both real factors and something I direct upon myself,

panopticon-like, even with permissions in place, and even in the absence, outside school, of any actual scrutiny or suspicion occurring.

At school, matters come to a head towards the end of the school year. Despite trying to perform certain aspects of the TA role as well as I can, I can see that in refraining from exercising adult authority, I am *just* being tolerated by staff. Further, I am probably not proving to be the 'aspirational' figure Mrs Clark perhaps hoped I would be, in relation to my research title. And where out of school, my acceptance by children themselves is positively received by surrounding adults, in school it seems to be viewed with suspicion. I feel increasingly distanced from staff, although to my face, relations remain coolly cordial. I feel caught in multiple traps of knowledge and silence, the result of which, outside of moments of fun and enchantment, means being in a state of continuous tension and exhaustion. As noted with regards to tutoring, my attempts to connect with children outside of school were swiftly curtailed by staff. And the final straw occurs a week before the end of term, when I'm added to a WhatsApp chat group by Shivani[17]. From feelings of excitement at being included and participating in the chat, as well as the typical worry that accompanies all of my acceptance into children's life-worlds, I am swiftly plunged into terror, as information gets back to me that a class teacher has found out, some of my friends have got into trouble, and I face being 'spoken to' at school. Being backed by the parents of the girls in trouble consoles me somewhat; then, resentment at the school kicks in as I'm told that, as a 'sort of' member of staff, contact with children outside of school is strictly not allowed, and I must delete myself from all groups. I'm angry because I'm treated like 'a member of staff' when it suits the school's objectives, yet at other times I'm marginalised – it just doesn't seem fair. As usual, however, amidst the spectre of losing access, I'm polite and tow the line: perhaps to the adults

[17] Use of mobile phone-based social media like WhatsApp appeared to only become widespread at Lowell late in Year 6.

too, then, I'm the epitome of the 'good', 'does what she is told' child. And, like a child who has had their phone confiscated, I feel suddenly excluded and alone, unable even to see if I have the support of others because I'm out of the loop. It's almost the end of the year, yet it feels ruined for me, because everything is happening around me, now, and I'm left out, and maybe it's my own fault. In the face of my powerlessness, I take to writing in my notebook: 'I HATE SCHOOL'. I scratch it in deep-set capitals, with daggers doodled around it. Perhaps this, too, then, is something akin to the experience of being a child.

**Participatory 'interviews'**

In line with what I'd read about the benefits of participatory (or ethnographic/sociometric) methods (e.g. O'Kane, 2000; Christensen and James, 2000; Clark and Moss, 2011) – especially those developed through a prior immersion in the field – I had decided that I would conduct some more focused data elicitation 'interviews' using participatory methods midway through my fieldwork, as well as at the end, to allow my participants to voice anything they wanted that they might not otherwise have been able to. In the school setting, I mentioned these to my participants, who were mostly keen and enthusiastic to do them, even in lieu of break-time – "to help you out" and because "they sound fun". Unfortunately, however, despite a year of asking the head about being able to conduct them, and being strung along with "Yes, but later" responses[18], permission was only finally, and suddenly, given on the last day of school (the rest of the year continually being cited as too busy, and break-times being vetoed on account of it being children's "rest"/"playtime"). As such, I only managed to do two sets,

[18] Additionally, like Laerke (1998), as I aligned myself with pupils I felt increasingly subordinate and deferential with school staff, and this (alongside sympathy for the new head due to the large organisational changes the school was undergoing) perhaps accounts for why I was unable to demand an imminent date for 'interviews'.

with four children altogether, despite over 25 informally signing up – something I was concerned about with regards to ethics, and disappointing those who didn't get to take part when I had said that they would. It also meant missing some parts of the last day – something I had hoped to observe 'in time'. Nevertheless, those interviews that I conducted were well received, since they represented an opportunity to chat and voice opinions about oneself and the school within the school setting.

Meanwhile, out of school, Alex also agreed to being 'interviewed', although the way in which this panned out could not have been more different. Although Liz says that he's excited about doing it, when it occurs (in his room), Alex answers me monosyllabically and with shrugs – something he never usually does as he is always keen to chat. I wonder if he's reacting like he might do to authority at school, putting on something of a 'cool' teenage-style front. It is not just style involved, however, but actual boredom as midway through he asks if he can play on his PlayStation "while you ask me questions", having given up on the participatory techniques of drawing and filling in charts that went down so well at school. However, receiving a phone call from his friend midway through, he is keen to tell the friend that he is "doing an interview" (although at first, as a prank, he says that it is "for the police" and then "for a job"). After this, though, he continues to seem bored and cagey, and when he asks me if I'm done, I say yes and he seems to 'revert' back to his normal self, asking if I want to play too. Clearly, by being labelled an 'interview', the event represents to Alex something official, which he associates with other aspects of life where he's heard the word before – police interview, job interview. That it is marked as something important therefore makes it an exciting event to tell others about, even as it is also approached as an institutional, stressful experience to be endured. My initial instructions, about it being a chance for him to say anything he wants to say, far from making this the case actually renders the process more official and more opposite to everyday life. I am less friend-like and more adult researcher-like. Of course, at school, this

transition is easier because this is already an aspect of my TA position. Meanwhile, the activities that at school seemed more fun than normal, feel like something school-like that have invaded Alex's room, to be dispensed with, like homework, as quickly as possible.

**From fieldnotes to write-up**

Approaches to taking fieldnotes vary, in ways that are often written out of ethnographic texts. What I realised, from my first days in the field, was that if I took to summarising what 'happened' in particular incidents, or over the course of a day, these would inevitably read like a list of the same 'behaviour' issues that teachers at school commented upon. Being 'at home' in the field, everything seemed so mundane, and yet I knew that it *was* somehow different, even as it was similar, to life amongst my contemporaries. The only way in which it seemed like I might be able to get a handle on it was by writing down everything that I saw and heard in as close to the words I was hearing as I could manage. Thus, rather than noting down, in summary form, only what I thought might be relevant or interesting, I attempted to record as much as I could remember, putting down speech in the first person in order to gain a sense of children's voices, in a manner akin to a play script. For example, a short excerpt from my fieldnotes, chosen entirely at random, reads:

> *I go with Shivani to refectory to fill water bottle. Shivani: Will you come with me to fill my water bottle? / Me: Yeah – in there? / S: There's also one in the refectory. And I need to empty mine out too. Let's go! / Me: (I ask about her birthday) / S: Yeah, it was really good! / Me: Did you do the can-can dancing when you got to the Parklands* [shopping] *centre then?* [they had previously talked about doing so] */ S: No, 'cause people would've thought we were crazy! / Oh. (As we're filling bottles, I remark on earrings Amina and Shivani are wearing) / S: Yeah, I got them from Claire's* [an

accessories shop]. *And we also went to Accessorize* [another shop] *and they were having a sale on! I love Accessorize! / Amina (later): Yeah, I bought these, and another pair of earrings, and some lip-gloss! Wait… (she shows me).*

As is evident, although I write mainly with a chronological bent, certain things trigger the writing of related situations in a non-chronological way. Thus, in the limited excerpt above, I include talking with Amina about her earrings, which occurs at a later point in the day. In the notes following this excerpt, I then return to Shivani in the refectory where we continue our conversation about her birthday shopping trip.

At the start, I took my field notebook with me to school, and began writing down things that I noted being said or done as they happened, as other researchers have documented doing (e.g. Corsaro, 2003). However, this felt somewhat intrusive and distancing. It seemed to emphasise my researcher status; unfairly allowed me to be involved in something rather than the lesson at hand; and when some participants naturally wanted to see what I had written, felt awkward since it again highlighted my difference. Thus, I took to writing fieldnotes after each limited period 'in the field', usually at the end of each day, unless I'd had a break in the day. With Alex, this would usually be after spending seven or eight hours together, and would sometimes take me several days to write up afterwards. At school, I would spend around three to four hours in the classroom and playground in one stretch, although I didn't write down everything occurring in class, since this was generally teacher-led. By not taking fieldnotes in the field, I 'maintain[ed] the illusion of active/complete membership' (Adler and Adler, 1987), so to speak. Of course, there are questions of ethical integrity here: in concealing the research process in order to be more engaged in present activities, yet in not really being entirely 'present' by storing up memories for future use, was I not deceiving my participants? In hoping that they wouldn't continuously 'remember' that I was a researcher, was I not avoiding issues of consent? Compounding the deceptions listed above, although less researcher-specific,

there were also times when I feigned interest when I was in fact bored and times when I vocally agreed with my participants in order to just get along. Ultimately, I think that such deceptions are necessary to allowing the flow of social life to occur, to learn and indeed to change one's mind. Since in anthropology the researcher herself is the methodological tool, efforts to maintain the illusion of being a present, interested and sympathetic party, notwithstanding being open to questions about one's research aims and methods, may be kindest to one's participants. Given the speed of action and interaction, and the need to join in, it was necessary to *not* write, to suspend all judgment and to 'go with the flow' despite scepticism, trepidation or boredom.

As well as not writing notes 'in the field', I also refrained from much audio recording. I did not think it ethically appropriate to record without (verbal) consent from participants at the start of each discrete audio recording, and felt as though this would again render situations different from everyday life. For example, asking Alex if I could record when walking around or playing PlayStation would have seemed odd in everyday friendship terms, I think, and would also have been problematic when we spontaneously met his friends. Similarly, in the school playground, it would have been difficult and awkward to have gained consent from all the children I encountered as groups moved about and as social groupings recomposed themselves. Of course, the disadvantage of not doing any such recording, and of relying on my perception and memory, is a huge loss of detail in capturing body language and interaction, movement, action and performance, as well as the actions of all those present to whom my attention was not being turned. Nevertheless, I think that by being able to note only what I was able to perceive in real time, as an ordinary human actor in situations, was a useful exercise in itself because it approaches the experience of other human actors in the field. Particularly with children, perhaps, it is through the experience of having one's attention drawn in competing directions, of keeping an eye out for drama and of becoming distracted

by events elsewhere that one recognises the importance of the abilities and limitations of the human body and senses in social life.

A potential ethical problem with my field note-taking is that by presenting talk by particular individuals in quotation marks as if this was exactly what they said, I am misrepresenting my participants. Talk is not so much recorded verbatim, as it is the researcher 'mak[ing] our informants sound like we think they sound' (Fine, 2010: 259; cf. Atkinson, 1992). This is especially pertinent with regards to children as a subordinated group, whose voices have been silenced, or represented by others claiming to speak for them, for so long (e.g. James and Prout, 1990). Yet, there are other potential problems with representing 'children's voices' even if they are recorded verbatim (e.g. James, 2007). My feeling on this is that since I am representing everyday talk – rather than particularly purposeful messages by children – if I get some of the exact wording and order of speech wrong, I don't think my participants would terribly mind, and they remain anonymous after all. Further, I believe that the benefits to be gained by capturing at least an *impression* of children's talk and interactions with each other, in something of the words and rhythms of everyday life, and with individual children differentiated by their speech rather than written over en masse as children in general, outweigh the risks of misrepresentation.

I don't mean to claim that I wrote down every conversation I was involved in, or heard – time limitations rendered this impossible. However, on most days, I did do a lot of this verbatim-style recording. Similarly, I certainly do not claim to have remembered everything that was said, and how it was said, accurately, and I realise that what I am likely to remember is influenced by my interests, familiarity with speech patterns, prior mental representations, and so on. Nevertheless, attempting to write in this way was itself helpful in counteracting certain biases. For example, given the way in which talk darted around rapidly between points of

interest and speakers, was subject to external influences, and generally did not follow the narrative and persuasive conventions of adult conversation, I found that in trying to locate things I could remember within their context, I would remember things that I'd forgotten, or would realise that I'd initially got the order of things wrong.

By avoiding summarising content, my field notes thus document not just *what* children talk about in the course of their everyday lives, but *how* they talk about things. In fieldwork 'at home', it may be difficult to make 'strange' what appear to be familiar events or talk. This is where the temporal dislocation created through the process of writing things down helped by allowing me to later reassess what in the moment I took at face value. Recording talk in as verbatim a way as possible foregrounded the patterns of and reasons for talk, which, for this age group was a large part of their interactions, even as talk flowed into, out of and occurred within play. Further, whilst researchers often talk of 'saturation point' – when they feel there is nothing 'new' to be noted or sufficient data has been gathered (e.g. Marsh, 2012) – my continuous noting of the minutiae of daily practices that constantly repeat and cease to repeat, mutate and resurrect present a more dynamic picture of practices that are inherently temporally situated. In their entirety, they describe how processes of continuity and change occur over a year and a half of children's lives.

A drawback to the approach, however, was the constant need, in the field, to be acutely aware of what was going on – of trying to commit things to memory whilst also trying to participate. And this was then amplified by the time-slowing nature of writing. In both of these aspects of 'note taking', I felt as though my temporal orientation was at odds with that of my participants, and in trying to learn to be like them, I desperately coveted 'letting go'. Over the course of my fieldwork, my temporal outlook *did* alter, much like Goffman (2014) describes. Thus, writing notes felt more and more burdensome relative to the speed and excitement of

talk and action as it occurred in the field, and to the fast-paced, action-laden talk and media – music videos, children's books and video games – that I was becoming accustomed to. In any case, it took a great deal of what felt like excruciating self-discipline and effort to write them, in this slow, painstaking style, when it seemed that my concentration span and desire to write anything more than a text message had rapidly diminished.

Relatedly, I was also concerned about the opportunity costs involved, relative to other practices I could have been engaging in – writing was simply so time-consuming. Were I not writing what often seemed like pages and pages of repetition, I could have been spending more time 'in the field' (for example, attending school for longer hours, as my participants requested, or seeing more children outside of school), or learning how to be a more socially successful child – investing more time in watching YouTube and television, listening to music, learning dances, and playing video games – all of which I knew I was barely keeping up with. This was exacerbated by the fact that I was friends with both boys and girls, who tended to display different interests. Alex and Charlie would chastise me for not having played on my PlayStation in between seeing them (the 'online' aspect of the console meaning that my last login dates were visible to all): "You haven't been online for three months!" says Alex. "Yeah, what's the point in having a PlayStation if you aren't gonna play it?" says Charlie. Meanwhile, my lack of knowledge about particular pop songs, TV programmes, adverts and toys sometimes made it difficult to join in or follow conversations, and I'm sure I didn't even register the names of some things that had no meaning to me, and which are thus absent from my fieldnotes.

Sometimes I would ask children to repeat if I didn't know what something was; at other times, I would quietly nod or feign greater knowledge in the hope of learning more without exposing my ineptitude. These are all practices employed by my participants too. For example, one day

nearer the end of my fieldwork, Hazel is singing 'Fancy', a song by Iggy Azalea popular at the time, and tells us, "The music video's really good!" In this case, I actually look it up, and realise that the video is a parody of the 1990's film 'Clueless'. The next time I see Hazel, I tell her this, to which she simply nods, apparently not that interested. By contrast, Shivani, who has heard of Clueless, says, "I really want to see that! What rating is it? Maybe we can watch it at my sleepover!" The following day, however, Hazel rushes over to me at break announcing that she's watched the parallel clip of Clueless on YouTube, and rapturously enthuses about it. Contrary to my assumption that bringing up previously discussed content would seem passé after the event, Hazel's actions demonstrate that whilst seeming blasé in the moment, she took pains to remember what she didn't know, and joyously resurrected the conversation when she had gained knowledge of it herself. Late on, then, I realised that I could and should have returned to discussions I had missed out on, after having researched them further.

In any case, I persevered with the writing of these detailed notes, not least because having decided to stop at one point (when it seemed they were getting decidedly repetitive), I realised that I couldn't suddenly discard my participants' voices – *their* different takes on events, which were not consistent, but emerged through conversation, as Maybin (2006) notes. And in hindsight, I believe it is only *in their entirety* that it is possible to gain an understanding of the minute ways in which wholesale shifts in social life occur, not through any extraordinary events, but in the mundane, everyday conversations that repeat, but also mutate, become less frequent, and cease to repeat, even when one cannot pinpoint exactly when they do so. What I see as most problematic are the temporal manipulations engendered by writing-up. This is line with Mayall's (1994) view that it is in the interpretation of data rather than its collection that issues of power and ethics are at their most salient. Whilst inaccuracies and biases undoubtedly exist in my field notes, I do believe that they capture a sense of everyday life, and the temporality of life occurring as it is lived. Including in the write-up

everyday talk and action, as they play out in real time, helps to give a sense of the experience of 'being there', but ultimately over-emphasises whatever is chosen relative to its ephemeral passing. Situations flow into and out of other situations, and thus choosing where to start and end the snippets that I have included seems to create a false sense of reality. Selecting certain events to feature, which are more often than not *events* rather than non-events, the write-up reads like a series of meaningful happenings, when most of what happened on a day-to-day basis was not hugely significant, even though in constituting everyday life, it was. On the other hand, summarising 'practice' overwrites the uncertain, fragile and yet definitive experience of the present with a foregone narrative. A write-up that must account for a long period of time necessarily excludes the accumulation of repetition, and small but meaningful acts lose importance to the grand narrative. These temporal manipulations are, of course, well-documented in the academic literature (e.g. Hastrup and Hervik, 2003), but for children – for whom the everyday practices of life can be incredibly repetitious (and boring) yet also incredibly powerfully felt (and meaningful in the moment) – they are particularly pertinent, and worth reflecting on.

## Chapter 3 | “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Career aspirations in context

I begin with the question of my project title: "what do you want to be when you grow up?” This was written on the information leaflets and consent forms I sent out to participants in advance of my fieldwork (see Appendix A), and at the start of my project, and at various, intermittent points, children remembered about my project and asked how my ‘book’ was going. In this regard, whilst I didn’t formally attempt to elicit answers from my participants about what they wanted to be, this was implicitly occurring at these points, in the same instant as children recalled my position as adult researcher. This connection was both a help and hindrance. On the one hand, my researcher presence clearly sometimes brought up the topic where it wouldn’t otherwise have been spoken about – although this was, in fact, a part of children’s everyday life-worlds too, in being asked the question by adults from time to time. On the other hand, it has, in retrospect, helped me to work out the relations between ‘aspirations’, ‘the future’ and the question “what do you want to be?”. It is to this point of clarification that I turn to first.

Through discussions initiated by my project title, and some awkward questioning, I found that ‘aspiration’ was not a term that children used or were familiar with, but the topic of “what you want to be” was – and in fact, this was the central way in which children understood ‘the future’, in addition to sci-fi and environmental fantasies. For example, with respect to the latter, when I mention that I want to interview children about the future, Sophie tells me, mystically, “In the future, the oceans are crying! It’s true, they’re trying to get their revenge!” Meanwhile, arising spontaneously from a discussion about birthdays and age, with Amir, John says, “You know, girls are smarter than boys, but boys used to be smarter than girls, so girls have been getting smarter. A friend of Alexander the Great wrote a long time ago that girls weren’t really smart – only boys were. Imagine, if you went back to, like, B.C. times, maybe if

you asked a girl what 1 + 1 was, she wouldn't know! She might probably say 11 or something! In the future, we're going to have massive brains, like this…" he puts his hands out in front of his head, "…because our brains are growing. Like in 2319 we'll maybe look like this!"

However, 'the future' was not often raised as a topic of discussion. When the term was used, it was mostly in reference to their own futures, and specifically to the question of "what you want to be". Thus, discussing what he wants to be, John says, "I can't wait to be in the future." Similarly, when the topic of my 'book' comes up, and I try to explain that it's about 'the future', Shelton immediately associates this with "what we want to be".

> Shelton says to Ali, "She's writing a book. Did you not read the letter?"
>
> I try to explain, incompetently, "It's about what children think of the future, like, long term and short term."
>
> Shelton asks, "What does long term mean? Like, what we want to be?"
>
> "Yeah, that," I say, "But also short term – like, your plans for tomorrow, or later, or something…"

I expect Shelton, Ali and Amina, with whom I'm walking, to tell me about their plans, or about tomorrow, or later – all concepts with which they're familiar – but they don't. I suggest that this was not because they didn't make such plans, or think about upcoming events, but because they did so in ways that were tied to concrete practices, material objects and uncertain environments – as I describe in the following chapters. By contrast, I contend that the *abstract* notion of 'future' was understood in relation to tropes, of which "what you want to be" was the central one.

This can similarly be seen in an example with Ethan, in Firsby. Asking me about my 'book', he tells me that he wants to be a footballer. Again, I try to explain that my project is not just about what children want to be when they grow up, but also "like, what you're doing

tomorrow?" Yet, Ethan still responds to this in the context of "what you want to be". He says to me:

> "Oh, alright. Like, there's some kids, 11-year olds, working already."
>
> "Where?" I ask.
>
> "In Tesco's. They say they're 16, but really they're 11."
>
> "Are they?"
>
> "Yeah. When I'm 11, I'm going to get a job… One of them delivering newspaper jobs. Get a start on the careers ladder."

Here, Ethan relates a story he has heard about older kids in the neighbourhood. Although it is unlikely they were actually 11, older neighbourhood kids were imagined with trepidation, particularly with regards to illicit activities, as I describe in the next chapter. Meanwhile, they were often rendered 'younger' in order to be imaginable in continuity with oneself, as I note later in this chapter, with regards to a pretend game the girls at Lowell played, in which they imagined being young teenagers, with jobs. In making the comparison, Ethan also states his own intentions to work, although in an apparently legal way (newspaper delivery being one of the few jobs available to under-16s, although the minimum age is actually 13), re-voicing adult notions of the 'careers ladder'.

In the following sections, I discuss the ways in which "what you want to be" acted as a well-known trope involved in getting to know others. Whilst inspired by adults' positing of the question, I suggest that children's own usage of the trope was both continuous with and divergent from popular adult understandings of career aspirations. Thus, as with other aspects of children's peer cultures, there are borrowings from the proximate adult world, at the same time as children make their own meanings from the ideas they are presented with (cf. Corsaro, 1997). On the one hand, children's responses linked aspirations with their current interests and competences, in line with adult responses of "you've got to be good at […]". Yet, in

leveraging in their conversations career aspirations that emphasised their current sense of self, 'aspirations' were less about future goals inspiring action in the present, than they were a narrative capturing of 'the future' to serve present goals of expressing and securing their individuality and enduring personhood.

**Expressing, being, and knowing oneself and others**

On my first day at Lowell, in a 'Microsociety' lesson[19], subject teacher Mrs Evans asked pupils, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Whether or not for my benefit[20], the topic fitted with the Microsociety themes, which seemed to presage futurity in general, in terms of addressing children's future citizenship as voters, taxpayers and possible business owners. Mrs Evans' question had been preceded by keen discussion about the paying of tax and provision of services. Meanwhile, the practical trading aspect of the class, in which children traded actual items for a currency they had created, was by far one of the most popular activities at school.

> "Yes?" says Mrs Evans, choosing from the large number of raised hands.
>
> "I want to be a veterinarian," says Lewis.
>
> Mrs Evans says patiently, "I think I spoke to you about this before – it's one of the hardest professions. So if you want to be a vet you've got to study really hard, get 4 As at A-level. My niece – she had to get 4 As."
>
> Lewis says, "Ohh."
>
> Mrs Evans asks various others, before getting to Shivani: "Yes?"
>
> "A dentist," says Shivani.

[19] Microsociety was the name of a series of lessons for the Year 5s only, on citizenship and business.
[20] I am inclined to think it wasn't, since the class was being taken by a subject teacher and not the two class teachers who had been informed more directly about my project.

“That’s another fantastic job!” says Mrs Evans.

Other answers include footballer, teacher, RAF pilot, engineer and scientist, and follow a similar pattern of counter response (as positive sounding – "I can see, Hazel, you’re probably going to be a teacher because I can see you’ve got that desire”, or less so, as in Lewis’ case above). And children themselves temper their responses appropriately. Daisy, for example, also vaunts “vet” but, given the response to Lewis, quickly adds, "but if not, something working with animals". Meanwhile, to Kyle’s answer of "professional skateboarder”, when Kyle replies that the skills needed are "you’ve got to practice every day", Mrs Evans adds, "you probably have to be a good role model, because you’re probably going to have to give demonstrations. So there are other skills involved too."

As such, we can see how Mrs Evans’ conception of "what you want to be" is envisaged according to the following of a single career path – something that may not fully match the current jobs market, but which nevertheless is the way in which children are used to understanding the question, and providing appropriate responses. Whilst none of these responses are rejected outright, Mrs Evans’ tone of voice in her counter-responses signals whether or not aspirations are deemed appropriate and plausible, based on children's perceived current abilities – in line with what children are used to hearing when providing answers to other questions from teachers, with right/wrong answers. And children are asked to think through, with help from Mrs Evans, the pathways through which they might reach their aspirations – "you need to do […]" and “you’ve got to be good at […]” Thus, in line with the dominant discourse, aspirations are envisioned as future-oriented dispositions that will motivate children to action in pursuit of them, when given knowledge of what work the achievement of such aspirations might entail. Adults are seen as having a responsibility to guide children to appropriate aspirations through getting them to think through the linkages between their current skills and the skills required of different professions.

Yet, as well as the linear, progressive reckoning of time that such future orientation entails, adult notions of aspiration also suggest an immanent view of time, in which past, present and future coincide (cf. Briggs, 1992; Hodges, 2014). In private conversations with other adults, teachers expressed the notion of knowing what would become of certain 'types' of children when older (for example, one teacher told me that she "wasn't surprised at all" to find out a particular girl had become pregnant as a teenager some years after leaving). Although this was not told to children themselves, what *was* frequently expressed was the view that children had differential levels of (academic) 'potential', to be 'unlocked'. Children were told to "do the best you can do", and whilst the purpose of this was to stress the importance of effort rather than overall attainment, it also implied the immanence of the future in the present, which itself was an accumulation of the past. In other words, a teacher could tell whether a child had 'tried' based on their 'ability', expressed as a timeless quality, but marked by past attainment. Potential future outcomes thus appeared to be innately held inside the child, ready to be unlocked with the help of teachers, and by children themselves.

What did children's responses suggest? Firstly, it can be seen that my participants were evidently familiar with the question, and responded to Mrs Evans in the expected way. This was a question that they had an answer to, irrespective of whether or not the stated occupation was a long-held 'aspiration'. Most seemed to want to share "what they wanted to be", and those chosen seemed to enjoy telling Mrs Evans and the rest of the class of this. The question was a means of engaging with teachers on meaningful terms, about something pleasurable to discuss that adults took seriously (something that wasn't often the case). In a pilot study with three younger children, I enquired if they were asked what they wanted to be, and was told by Millie (8-years old), Robin (8), and Amy (7) that they were, but not as frequently as they would have liked, and that as a result, they "sometimes asked each other".

Amongst my older participants, and in the context of spending much of their everyday lives with them, such talk was in fact rare amidst other topics of more immediate interest. This was particularly the case in Firsby, where Alex and Ethan only discussed it in relation to my project. I suggest that this was likely due to the more materially rich out-of-school environment, in which there were more interesting activities to hand, and because, like many of my Lowell participants too, their stated career aspirations were long held, known to each other, and therefore of little novel interest. At Lowell, the topic came up spontaneously amongst particular children, especially Jafar and John who posed the question to each other almost as if in a game. Otherwise, the topic arose in certain situations, and I try to make sense of when and why this was.

I begin with the way in which the question seemed to arise in peer conversation: in the context of talk involving getting to know others. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” appeared to be part of a standard repertoire of questions associated with identification and preferences. In initial conversations with ‘new’ people, questions appeared to follow a set order: about name and age, school and school class, teacher, where one was ‘from’ (see chapter 2), and then, questions about preferences – what one liked and disliked, and one’s ‘favourite’ things on a range of topics. Thus, when first chatting with Alex, he asks me about my favourite television programmes and types of film, foods, colours, animals/pets, phobias, (pop) songs, cars, football teams, and video games/consoles; whilst with the girls at school, the latter three categories are eschewed in favour of books, singers and other celebrities, and clothes/style. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" was asked seemingly *as part of* this means of getting to know others’ preferences, and as I go on to describe, answers were invariably in line with these other preferences.

These interactions set out what it was to know another person – as a locus of belongings, likes, dislikes and desires (including what one wanted to be), coalescing behind one's name. Getting to know others (and oneself) in this way was not limited to initial conversations but continued in talk and material practice on a daily basis. Questions were often repeated over relatively long periods of time, even those whose answers one wouldn't expect to be subject to intrinsic change, like how old a person was or where they were from; or else questions were repeated to deepen knowledge, such as through knowing middle names or countries a person had visited. Meanwhile, the trope of 'likes', 'dislikes' and 'favourites' could be applied to almost any category, and as such, were a constant presence, if not a driving force, in conversation, framed through statements such as "I like your dress!" and "I don't like him!" and questions of "What's your favourite […]?" Such statements seemed to pre-empt widespread social media use, and thus I do not think that the notion of 'likes' and 'favourites' was inspired by social media. Rather, I suggest that this functionality of social media was 'obvious' to children when they began using it, and coterminous with their prior practices. Contrary to popular adult discourses that social media is shallow (cf. Hebdige's (1988) 'flattening' to image), self-expression through appearance and possessions, and by categories of 'likes' and 'favourites' was how children meaningfully engaged in self-other understanding.

Expressions of preferences seemed to be the way in which my participants brought themselves into being, so to speak. Whilst this sounds extreme, I suggest that the notion of being forgotten was a real risk, and worry, for children. This could occur in many ways, such as being 'forgotten' at school, as occurs when (generally confident) Tanisha begs me to stay at after-school club so she isn't "the last one here – and I might be left here!" More often, the risk was of having one's name forgotten, as when Oluwa gets upset in class when a teacher calls him Ade. "I'm Oluwa, not Ade!" he states crossly, under his breath. As in other parts of the world where children are viewed as 'changelings', with their personhood seen as

precarious (cf. Lancy, 2008), here, my participants seemed to view their own personhood as in need of securing, not from becoming another animal or spirit, but from becoming a non-entity – not recognised by others; having one's name forgotten; being 'invisible'. I think this is what explains a comment made by Ellie (Year 8), when she suggests at Guides, "We've got to express yourself." Guide leaders Hayley and Jess are concerned that "people should be how they want to be" – what if they're shy or enjoy being quiet? But Ellie tries to explain that it's not about a person's shyness, and nor is it about being loudly expressive. Rather, it is about an inter-subjectivity that enables others to know a person, and for that person to come into being. Thus, when Jess suggests, "Be yourself" as an alternative, Ellie agrees *because* 'expressing' and 'being' are essentially the same thing. The continuous asking and stating (and wearing, making and owning of things that were expressive) of preferences were all part of continuously making oneself into existence.

Thus, children made and decorated name labels, practised signatures, and compiled lists of their 'favourite' things. As variety in the material environment at school was limited through the banning of personal items like own clothes, jewellery, toys and phones, exceptional circumstances were exciting, with all of the girls at Lowell eagerly discussing what clothes they were going to wear in the days leading up to mufti days[21] and school discos. Occasional lessons where one could express one's preferences were also enjoyed. For example, at breakfast club one morning, Hazel tells me they have Microsociety later, asking:

> "Do you want to see my stuff?"
>
> She unfurls three large pieces of coloured sugar paper on which have been pasted cut-out pictures from magazines, saying, "I made these posters. That's celebrities." She points to another: "This one's cute pets – Mia made that." She brings it to the top and points at one of the pictures, which is of a family of fluffy dogs. "I like those dogs

[21] One day a term where pupils could wear their own clothes

best." She places another poster on top. "This is clothes. We choose what outfits we like best. So that's my favourite top, with those jeans and those shoes."

"Mine's that one, and that, and that bag," I say, pointing to a variety of clothes and accessories.

"Yeah, I would've picked that bag for you!"

Hazel pulls the poster of celebrities to the front. "I don't like One Direction," she says, going through the pictures one by one. "I like Lindsay Lohan in Herbie and Freaky Friday but... she's a bit weird." She squints at a picture of some scrawled writing. "That signature is…that could be Lily? Amelia Lily, yeah! And that's Perrie from Little Mix – I like Little Mix!"

"That's Katy Perry," I say.

"Yeah. That's Miley Cyrus. She's now got really different hair!"

"Short, right?"

"Yeah. When she was in Hannah Montana – that was the song we did for the talent show – it was long, down to here…"

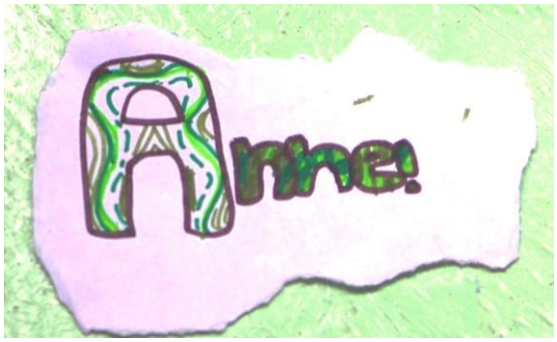
Likes, dislikes and favourites were thus a standard means of expressing affiliation to things and people, and their great power derived from their recognisable trope; applicability to almost all topics; elicitation of rapid and comparable responses; and common means of sorting information. It was a means by which children got to know others, and also one through which they could express their knowledge of others, as when Hazel says, "Yeah, I would've picked that bag for you," indicating that she knows me well enough to match me to a style.







*Above: 'Microsociety' things that boys made and/or traded.*
*Left: Back of the 'Pele' bookmark, above, showing the importance of marking ownership of possessions through one's name*
*Below: Name label that Annabel makes for me, coloured in green, my 'favourite' colour*



In taking 'evaluative positions' (cf. Maybin, 2006), my participants expressed a sense of themselves – but their evaluations, of themselves and others, were mostly at the individual level. In other words, children did not appear to classify themselves or others into groups, except by age (e.g. "the Infants[22] are so crazy!") or gender (e.g. "girls like shopping" – as previously noted). Unlike other studies, mostly of older children, but occasionally of same-age children, in which various group 'styles' were recognised, such as 'black' and 'white' racial styles (e.g. Winkler-Reid, 2015); 'cheerleader' and 'football' groups (e.g. Adler and Adler (1998); socioeconomic status (e.g. Goodwin, 2006); and 'goodies', 'jokers' and 'gangs' (Pollard, 1985); both at Lowell and Firsby, children identified others at the level of the individual rather than the group[23]. For example, one lunchtime in Year 6, Shivani is annoyed because Hazel is playing with Kelsey. She tells Amina and me, "Me and Hazel have been best friends since Reception, but now, I don't know – she's over there with her *new* best friend!" Shivani and Amina begin discussing people, not for the first time. Amina says that the new girl, Caroline, is the most annoying. However, Shivani disputes this, saying, "Caroline and Su are the same – they're both annoying." She says, "I'm moody, I know. I know I'm moody and grumpy and [numerous other words to this effect]!"

"Why do you think that?" I ask.

"That's what Tula says. But it's true! I know I am. I *am* moody! *I'm* moody. And Su and Caroline are annoying. And Hannah's quiet – no, Hannah's weird. And Hazel's bossy. And…"

They go through all the girls, giving a one-word descriptor for each.

"Laila's spoilt," says Amina.

"Laila's not spoilt – Laila's the kindest person ever!" Shivani exclaims.

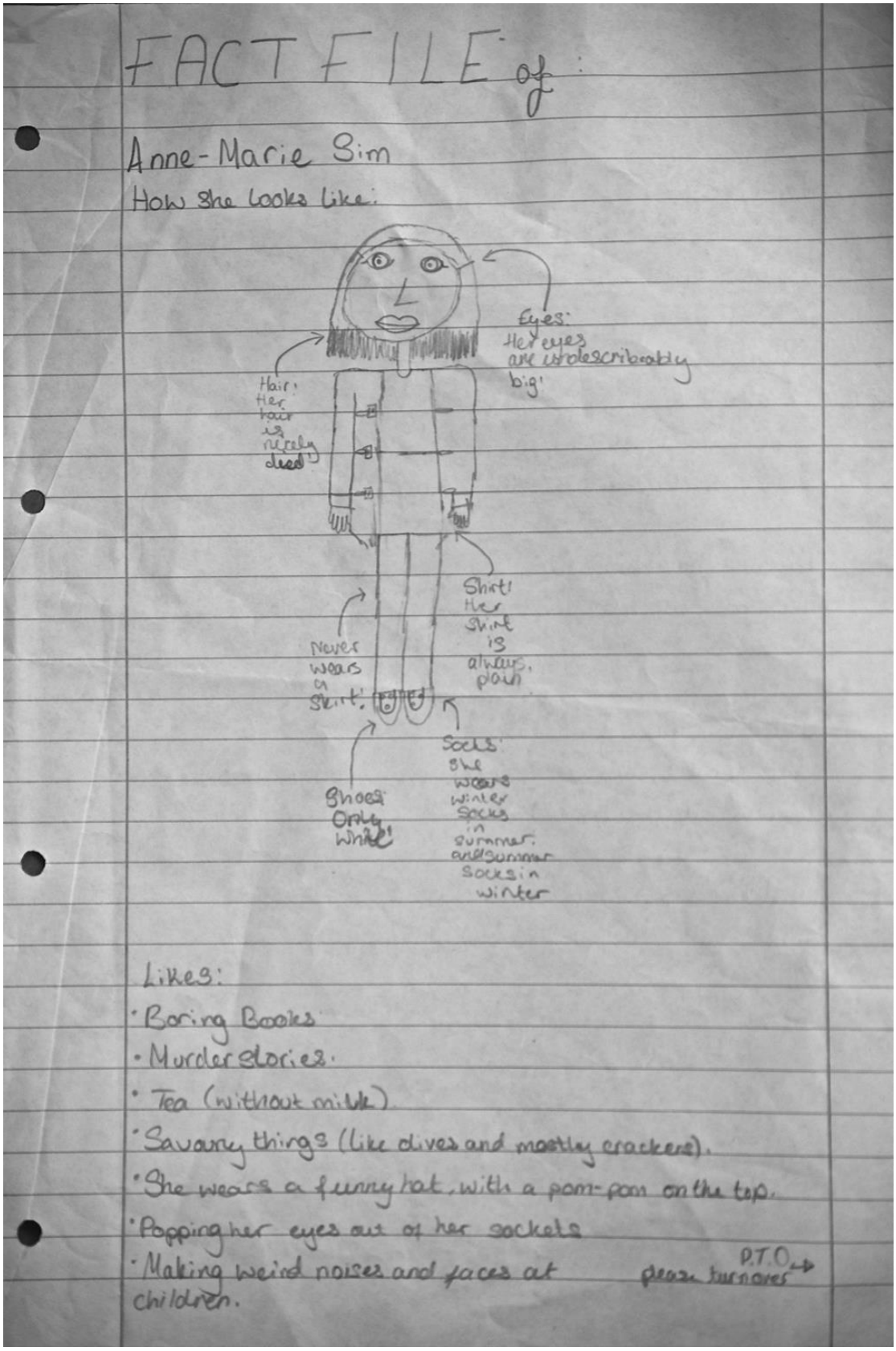
[22] Children aged 4 to 7

[23] At Guides, Ellie (Year 8, secondary school) comments that at her school there are the 'geeks,' 'nerds' and 'neeks'. This suggests that my findings are age-related, and that such group identifications were prevalent after transition to secondary school.

Here, then, irrespective of the negativity of the labels prompted by her bad mood, making such a statement allows Shivani to assert her existence alongside others, in spite of and because of the snub by Hazel. And identifying a distinguishing character trait for others then becomes something fun to do.

That individuals could be defined, labelled and understood as a composition of attributes was also made manifest in material creations like 'factfiles'. Like those Hazel created for her 'CSI' game (chapter 2), or the one Amina made about me (overleaf), 'facts' about a person could be assembled into a list that demonstrated knowledge. Amina gives the factfile to me spontaneously one break-time, having made it at home. It presents a description of me that incorporates physical appearance, clothes style, and my apparent 'likes' and 'dislikes'[24]. The focus on a visual depiction and on hair and clothes shows how important these attributes were, especially to girls, alongside the framing of likes and dislikes. This was evident in everyday talk, such as when, in Year 5, Emily tells me of a Year 6 whom I don't know: "She's *really* nice! *And* she's got really nice hair!" Whilst two separate clauses, Emily's intonation suggests an obvious relation between looking and being nice. Indeed, that what one 'likes' will be made manifest on the body can be seen in the overlap in Amina's factfile between my 'liking' a particular hat and wearing it. All of these facts, including how one looks and what one wears, thus support each other, and are equally as important in presenting an overall picture of the person.

[24] For context, 'boring books', which I question Amina about in a show of mock indignation, refers to the thick, 'adult' books that I carried in my bag at the start of fieldwork, and which Amina and others examined (critically). The latter two points about 'popping her eyes' and 'making weird noises and faces at children' relate to the telling of ghost/horror stories, which Amina refers to here as 'murder stories', and which occupied many break and lunchtimes at the time. The reference to 'children' suggests that Amina sees me here as *not* a child (cf. chapter 2).



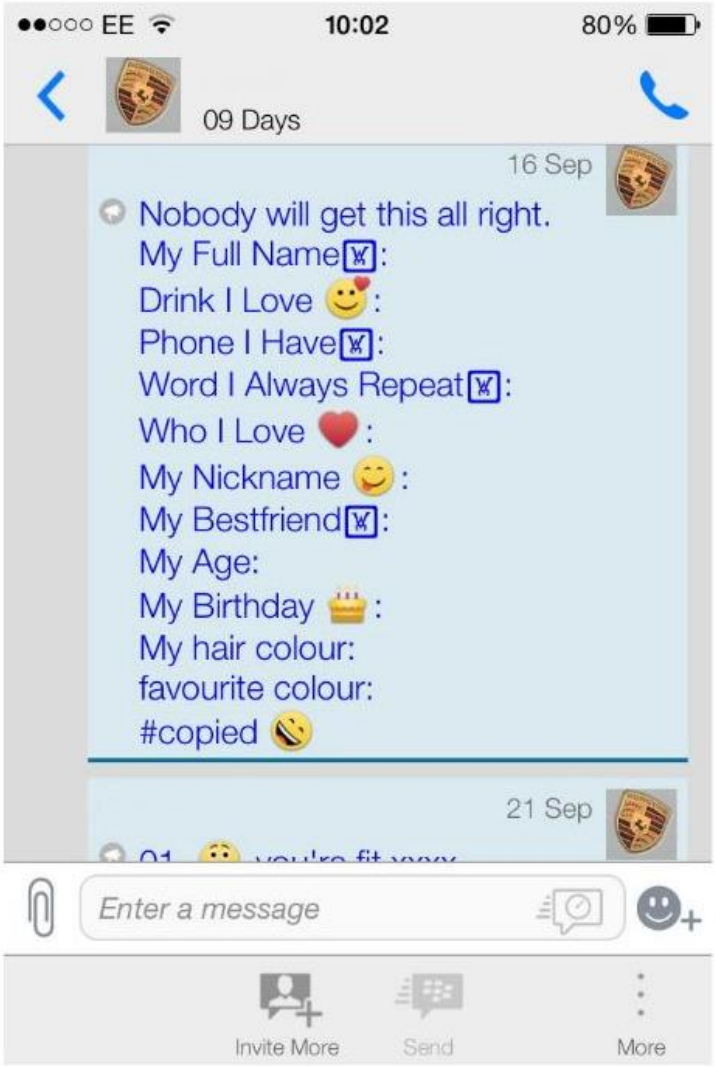

*Amina's factfile of me*

In constituting exchangeable knowledge about a person, such 'facts' could be materialised, traded, and made into games. For example, in the BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) forwarded message (overleaf) that Alex posts, friends are challenged to see how well they know him. Important knowledge is seen to be constituted by one's name ('full name' and 'nickname'); standard attributes like age and birthday; appearance and possessions (hair colour and phone); and likes/favourites (drink, word, friend, crush, and colour). Meanwhile, at Lowell, Jafar devises a game one lunchtime to "see who's better friends with me", out of Amir and Lewis. Posing questions like "what's my favourite TV programme?" and "where would I most like to go in the world?", Amir and Lewis shout out their answers, with Jafar giving hints when they can't guess the answer. Here, then, Jafar posits friendship not as a matter of his own choosing but as objective fact, determined by ostensible knowledge along the parameters of individuality expressed by one's preferences and desires across a range of standard categories.

Whilst the notion of 'favourites' is not unusual in adult terms, I found such talk surprisingly difficult to get right. For example, when asked about favourite films, songs or TV programmes, I would often pause to think, confess that I wasn't sure or had too many favourites to list, or list things my participants hadn't heard of – all inappropriate answers. Take the following conversation, occurring in the playground one lunchtime.

> Laila says to me wistfully, looking in the direction of town: "The other teachers go over there for lunch."
>
> "Yeah, they get McDonald's!" exclaims Hazel, her tone insinuating that it isn't fair.
>
> "Mr Powell only goes once a week," Laila relents, excusing their class teacher.
>
> "Or meal deals from Tesco," says Hazel, "I love those! You get a sandwich and crisps and a drink…"
>
> "Mmm, a lovely Coke!" says Amina, closing her eyes dreamily.

*Alex's forwarded BBM game*




Laila says, "I don't like Coke, I like Diet Coke."

I say, "I don't like Coke, I like Fanta," at the same time as Amina. We laugh. "Mmm," I say.

"I'm not drinking Coke or Diet Coke for the rest of my life!" exclaims Laila. "'Cause I promised my mum. I don't really like it anymore anyway!"

"I like Rubicon too," I say, thinking of what I recently had with Alex.

"Yeah, me too!" says Shivani.

"What's Rubicon?" asks Hazel.

"It's like tropical flavoured stuff," Shivani replies. "My mum buys it for me. Have you tried the lychee?"

"No. I like the mango," I say.

"I don't like mango [Rubicon] but I like mango juice!" says Amina.

"I like Yellow Fanta," says Hazel.

"Is that lemon?" asks Shivani.

"Cloudy lemonade."

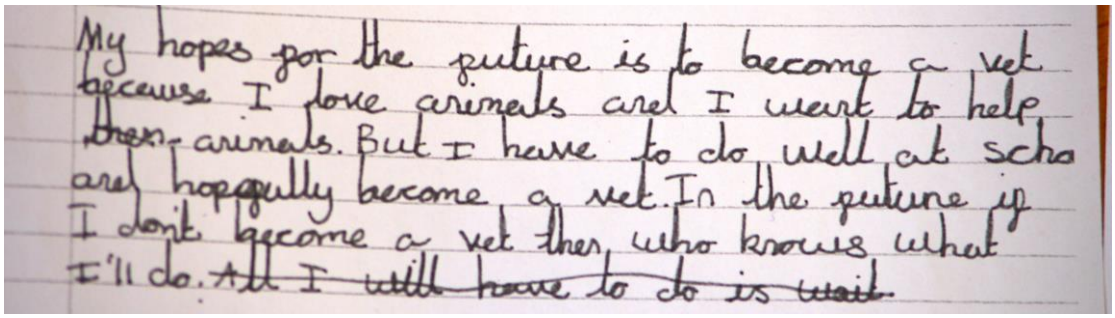
"Oh, that's my favourite!" I say.

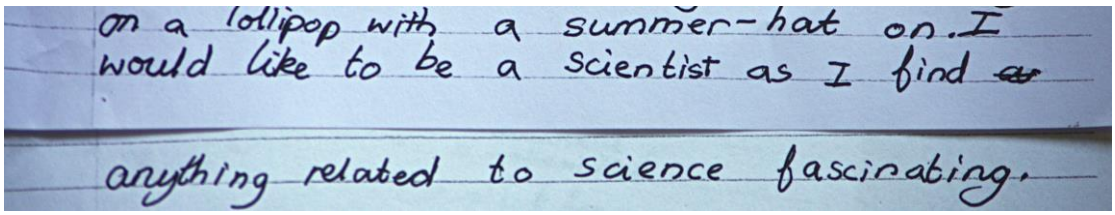
"Everything's your favourite!" says Hazel.

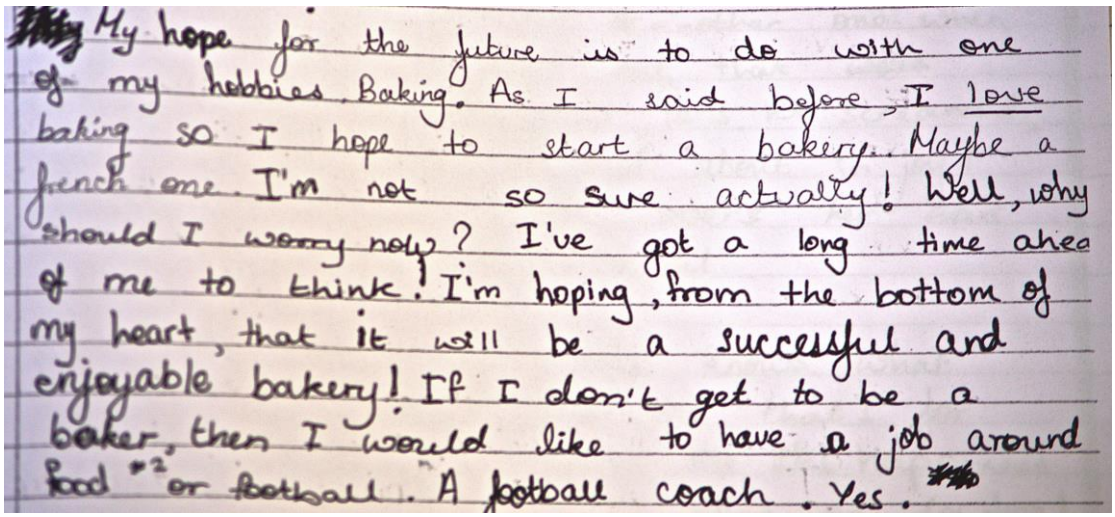
As Hazel's mild chastisement suggests, my profligate use of the term 'favourite' makes it meaningless – preferences must be limited in order to become associated with that person and to constitute knowledge about them.

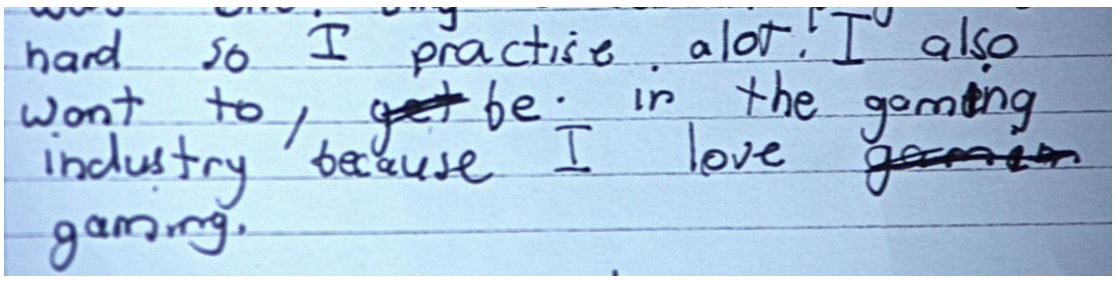
In this way, the notion of "what you want to be" as expressing one or two 'future' occupations with which one could be associated resonated with children's expectations surrounding the stating of preferences more generally. Although, as aforementioned, not necessarily reflecting the current jobs market, adult inculcation of an expectation that a single occupation, or at most, a small selection of occupations, be proposed aligns perfectly with how my participants expected statements of individual personhood to be made. Thus, in Firsby, Alex's long-stated aspirations are to be a train driver or paramedic, occupations that tie in with his obvious love of vehicles and desire to drive, as well as his favourite television programme, Casualty, which he watched (often by recording it) every week. In comparison with the adult humour cartoons (like Family Guy, American Dad and The Simpsons) that Alex professed to liking and indeed spent a great deal of time watching, Casualty was not a common favourite amongst boys, and

was thus something of an expression of Alex's individuality. Meanwhile, at Lowell, children consistently posited career aspirations on the basis of interests, hobbies and favourite school subjects – as the excerpts from children's 'autobiographies', which they wrote in class in Year 6, show (below).


My hopes for the future is to become a vet because I love animals and I want to help them animals. But I have to do well at scho and hopefully become a vet. In the future if I don't become a vet then, who knows what I'll do. ~~All I will have to do is wait.~~


on a lollipop with a summer-hat on. I would like to be a scientist as I find ~~as~~ anything related to science fascinating.


My hope for the future is to do with one of my hobbies. Baking. As I said before, I love baking so I hope to start a bakery. Maybe a french one. I'm not so sure actually! Well, why should I worry now? I've got a long time ahea of me to think. I'm hoping, from the bottom of my heart, that it will be a successful and enjoyable bakery! If I don't get to be a baker, then I would like to have a job around food *2 or football. A football coach. Yes.


hard so I practise alot. I also wont to, ~~get~~ be in the gaming industry because I love ~~gaming~~ gaming.

Meanwhile, in conversation at breakfast club, Yusuf tells me, "I'm going to be a football player." This is also what he told Mrs Evans. He says, "School's boring. I already play for Crystal Palace [a premier league football club]."

"Do you?" I ask, impressed.

"Yeah, the under-10s."

And asking Ali what he wants to be, he tells me, "Architect." I say, "Oh yeah, I remember your drawing of that building for the St Lucia posters!" Some weeks before, making 'holiday brochures' in class, Ali had drawn a detailed, accurate drawing of a modernist building. As I marvelled at it, Ali had told me that he liked drawing, and especially buildings. "Yeah!" he says.

As well as expressing a sense of individuality, aspirations were also expressed to posit affiliation between oneself and others – in other words, to express a sense of self-other connection through shared interests. This can be seen in Amina's shifting propositions of what she wanted to be, in the different contexts through which this notion became meaningful. For example, in July of Year 5, Amina borrows a piece of paper to write a story about 'Finn Sim', a character she has devised to feature in a series of stories. "Do you think I can be an author?" she asks me.

"Yeah, why not?" I say. "Is that what you want to be?"

"A doctor," Amina says.

"You could be both?" I suggest.

"A doctor and an author!"

Here, borrowing a page from my notebook, Amina's suggestion of 'author' aligns herself with me, since I am 'writing a book', at the same time as she places recognition on her interest in writing stories ("I like creative writing," she tells me another time, after a lesson). But by asking me if I think it's possible, she is also asking for my opinion on her (present) writing – as she

does more directly with many of the stories she produced. In other words, she is hoping for present affirmation – for me to say that what she has written is 'good'. Yet, when I ask if 'author' is "what you want to be?", Amina replies with 'doctor'. Here, then, we can see *both* how 'author' relates to the specifics of her present writing and my 'job', and how "what you want to be" is a *trope* responded to with recognisably 'good' answers. By this I mean that I expect Amina has heard of 'doctor' being a 'good' career, and has fixed upon this answer in response to "what do you want to be?", even though she has just asked about being an author, and never mentions 'doctor' at any other point, nor states an interest in any apparently related activity.

Some weeks later, discussing my 'book' with Shelton, Ali and Amina (as noted earlier), I ask Shelton what he wants to be, but Amina interjects with, "I want to draw dresses!"

Shelton says, "So, like, a designer?"

"Yeah!" says Amina.

Again, I posit that this expression of what she "wants to be" is both an expression of affiliation to others, as well as of interest. Crucially, the context of the statement is the directly preceding conversation, in which Ali states that he want to be 'an architect'. Recalling an interest in fashion (which she has stated on other occasions), Amina affiliates herself with Ali's and my enthusiasm for drawing through her gendered take on this activity.

Later, in September of Year 6, on the field with Amina and Sophie, Amina asks me when my 'book' will be finished, telling me, "I'm going to write about *you*, Miss Sim! When I'm older, and I'm an author, I'm going to write a scary story and the character in it will be called Miss Sim and she'll be like you!"

Sophie says, "Me too, me too! I'm going to write about you!"

Amina says, "I'm going to be an author when I'm older!"

Sophie says, " Yeah, I want to too."

Amina says to me, "Yeah, and in the story, you tell scary stories!"

Sophie says to Amina, "Yeah, it can be a story about Miss Sim telling stories. Like, a story within a story… I'm going to write a story about you writing a story about Miss Sim."

"Yeah, I'm going to […]" As in many other conversations of this ilk, the momentum of imagining further and further derivative possibilities (a story of a story of a story of a story, etc.) takes over, shifting the purpose of talk towards the fun of the ludicrous.

Here, Amina once again asserts 'author' – this time in the context of the 'scary stories' that we've been telling at break and lunchtimes. And like Amina, in the previous examples, Sophie expresses a desire to be an author too, emphasising the alignment in our interests, and therefore of our selves as being similar.

In Gottfredson's (1981) model, described in chapter 1, children's occupational aspirations can be seen to show a selection by gender, and then by class, before only becoming expressive of a 'unique' self in the early teenage years. My findings dispute this: the prime concern of my 9 to 11-year old participants in expressing their occupational aspirations was to state their individual uniqueness. Whilst the individualisation thesis might posit this to be a recent change, I believe the idea of establishing one's uniqueness as a person, including through an imagined future occupation, was well established. The idea seemed to penetrate various aspects of children's everyday lives, like the not necessarily recent books my participants read, which tended to be centred on a key protagonist and their unique skills, character and sometimes destiny. Whilst interests, and therefore stated career aspirations, were somewhat gendered, I suggest that this was mainly due to gendered interests, rather than to notions of gendered occupations. For example, whilst more boys stated aspirations associated with vehicles, like "aeronautical engineer" or "pilot", I suggest that this had more to do with the

idea of wanting to work with these vehicles (as objects that came up in their everyday talk), rather than with necessarily connecting these occupations with being male. As such, I suggest that Gottfredson's model of developmental stages, in which occupational types are ruled out on the basis of gender and then class, before being thought of in individual terms, was not consistent with my findings about how children actually described their occupational aspirations.

The picture with regards to class (and ethnic) background is more complex. Given the multiple intersections of class and ethnicity at Lowell, discussed in chapter 2, and the individuality of stated aspirations, it was difficult to discern any consistent variation on this basis – there was certainly no *obvious* picture. It may well be the case that at a wider level, there were correlations between social class background and educational/occupational aspirations, as Croll et al., (2010) find through survey data for Year 7 children. Yet, as the authors also note, these correlations are only probabilistic, and in interviews, more individual variation than group similarity was found. Of notable interest was that my participants didn't talk of any jobs as being 'not for them', and there didn't seem to be much talk of following their parents' occupations. This stands in contrast to the findings of a number of other studies, where a sense of history, family habitus, and therefore predictability, are noted as being important. For example, in Pimlott-Wilson's (2011) study with Year 1 and 4 children in Cumbria, children talked of futures in terms of family practices, and their own aspirations as a desire to keep up traditions and/or as a common sense expectation. By contrast, my participants looked more to present preoccupations like school subjects, hobbies and the media to define themselves, in line with Gillespie's (1995) young Southallians – something that likely has to do with locale, as Bright (2011) posits. For many of my participants, their life-worlds would not have been characterised by a sense of upholding tradition, as their own families, or else friends' families that they knew, had likely not been in the area for a great length of time. And as the next

chapter, with Alex in Firsby, makes clear, their sense of belonging to an area was formed more through their present actions than through a sense of history.

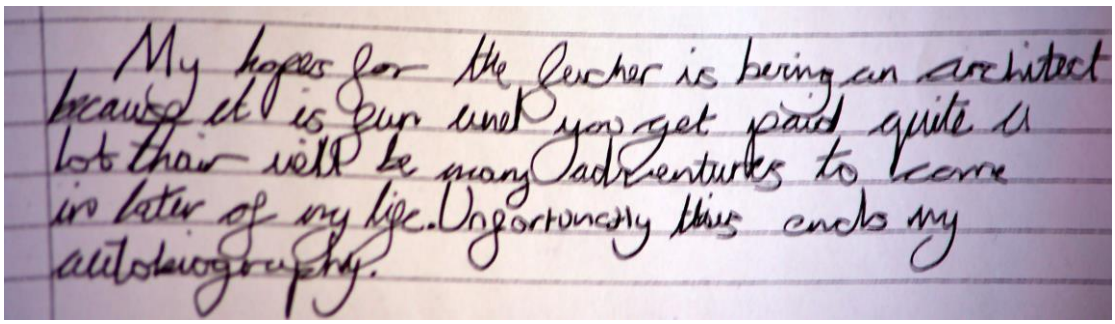
Whilst children's aspirations did not appear to be tied to family background, there was a sense in which my participants did appear to classify particular jobs as 'good', or at least sense that particular jobs were generally more desirable than others. This can be seen in Shivani's and Lewis' aspirations proposed to Mrs Evans, as described earlier, which contradicted what I knew from elsewhere. In Lewis' case, I am surprised when he proposes "veterinarian" in class, because just earlier in the day, at lunchtime, he has told me, "I want to be a comedian" – something that in retrospect appears to involve wanting to tell me that he is 'funny'. And whilst Shivani tells Mrs Evans "dentist", in later peer talk, and in her Year 6 'autobiography' (which although written in class was addressed to an imagined 'reader' rather than to the teacher), she states, "baker or football coach", in line with her professed hobbies of baking and football. Shivani often stated these hobbies, and always the two of them together, as if to define her individuality through their unusual combination.

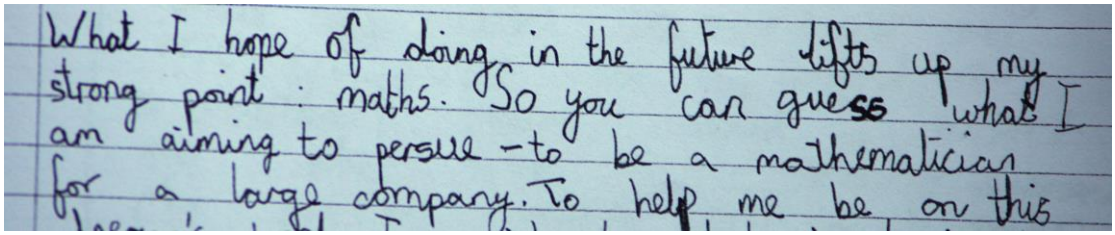
Like in the example of Amina, the context of telling aspirations matters. As with Amina's positing of 'doctor', I suggest that through conversations with teachers or adult others, children had gained a sense of what was a 'good' answer, and those who were oriented positively towards school, like Shivani and Lewis[25], attempted to please or impress the teacher by giving 'good' answers. This seemed less the case for those less orientated towards school, whose answers were more consistent with what they stated at other times – like Yusuf's response to Mrs Evans of wanting to be a footballer, or Kyle's of wanting to be a skateboarder. And indeed, Shivani is rewarded by Mrs Evans' lauding of dentist as being "another fantastic

[25] I would describe Lewis as school-oriented as he was keen to chat to teachers, hold open doors, and engage in class discussions, despite frequently getting into trouble for 'calling out' (rather than putting his hand up to speak), and finding it difficult to concentrate on self-directed class-work

career!" Thus, although there was one mode of thinking about aspirations that tied occupations to interests and skills, and which was how children generally discussed career aspirations with each other, there was also another, in which teachers' or others' responses made it clear that some occupations might be seen as 'better'. Lewis and Shivani recognised vet and dentist as 'better' answers, in the context of the school classroom, than comedian or baker/football coach, suggesting a contradiction in the aspirational discourse between 'doing what you love' (e.g. Aimhigher publication, 2007; quoted in Brown, 2011) and doing something that children understood adults (whom they respect and care about) to view as 'better'.

As well as through alignment with school or adults' sensibilities, children's linking of jobs with money, and knowledge that some occupations paid more than others, could make particular jobs seem more desirable. For example, in the autobiography extracts below, we can see Mohamed suggesting 'architect' both because it is 'fun', but also because of knowledge that it pays well. And Aarvan suggests 'mathematician' because he is good at maths, but he also specifies "for a large company" – suggestive of possible prestige or monetary benefits.

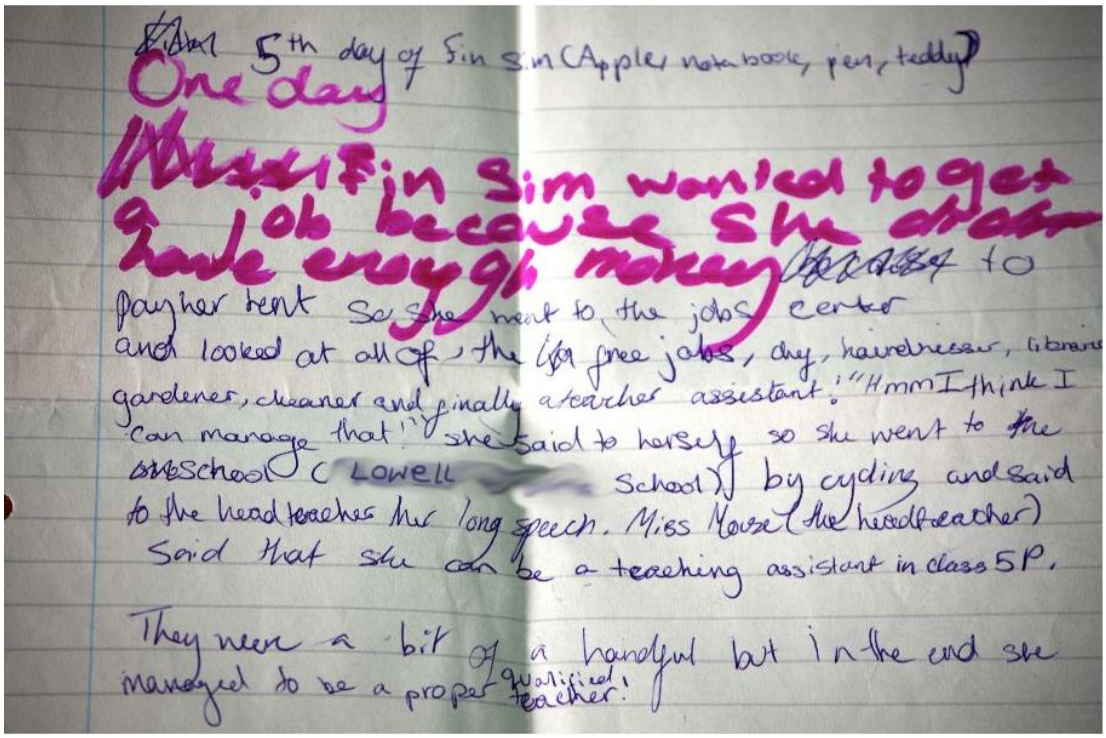



What I hope of doing in the future lifts up my strong point : maths. So you can guess what I am aiming to persue - to be a mathematician for a large company. To help me be on this

Yet, more often than not, jobs were linked to money only in the sense that money was a requirement, or desirable in itself, but not with regards to how much a job paid. Thus, in Firsby, when Ethan tells me that he wants to be a footballer, and I ask what team he'd like to play for, he replies, "Well, anywhere that will pay me a salary. It doesn't have to be somewhere really good; I just want to be able to play football for a job." Contrary to the notion that careers like 'footballer' might be attractive as unattainable 'fantasies', Ethan's remarks evoke a sense of 'realism', emphasising the value he places on earning money, but also on being paid to do what he loves.

This is similarly the case in Amina's 'Finn Sim' story (overleaf), the fifth and last in the series, which, unlike the others, is more directly based upon me (in that I am a TA in class 5P at Lowell, and cycle to school). Consistent with the fact that, at the start of my fieldwork, children often asked me either what I wanted to be, or what I had wanted to be when I was their age, just as much as they stated their own career aspirations, the narrative resembles a "how the [something] became" story. But here, in contrast with children's aspirational statements, but in likelihood based on Amina's personal observation and knowledge, deciding to get a job is precipitated by needing to pay rent; selecting a job occurs on the basis of what is available at the job centre; and 'choice' occurs on the basis of feeling adequately (rather than exceptionally) qualified for the role. In the linking of bills, money, jobs, institutions and qualifications, Amina posits an alternative rendering of 'finding a job' to the trope of "what you want to be". As such, I suggest that children may possess knowledge of the demands of

actual adults' work/life experiences that differ from the trope of "what you want to be" – yet, I contend that such ideas sat alongside each other, without being seen as linked, contradictory, or altering the trope of "what do you want to be?". What all of these examples show, then, is the complexity of children's aspirational statements. There were certainly occasional notions of particular careers being 'better' than others, however, for the most part, 'aspirations' were posited on the basis of interests. Most clearly, though, the notion of "what you want to be" can be seen as a familiar idiom of telling 'futures'.



*Amina's story. I had previously talked about past jobs that included 'gardener' and 'librarian', but the other occupations listed are not ones I have done, or talked about.*

As well as not according with the developmental model, I suggest that children's occupational aspirations, whilst ostensibly following the notion that aspirations should ideally build on existing skills and interests, did not operate in the temporal manner assumed by the 'raising aspirations' discourse. This discourse assumes that aspirations provide a goal towards which existing skills and interests can be directed. By contrast, I suggest that my participants'

aspirational statements were not goal setting, but rather, were made to emphasise timeless understandings of themselves. As part of a repertoire of questions for getting to know each other, the emphasis was on expressing a sense of oneself in the here and now. But the power of aspirational statements was that they emphasised a sense of seriousness and endurance, in the same way in which my participants emphasised theirs and others' enduring characters in narrations of friendship. This is something I explore in more detail in chapter 6. Suffice to say, here, that when Shivani states that she wants to be a baker or football coach, this emphasises the significance of baking and football to her identity, through the expected endurance of these interests through time.

Reinforcing the 'enduring' time facet of aspirational statements was the fact that many career aspirations were long held – perhaps unsurprisingly, since individual interests often didn't undergo significant changes either. Through repetition and familiarisation, stated aspirations became synonymous with the person, and a means of identifying and understanding them. And in fact, it seemed as though the longer an aspiration was held – and repeated and familiarised as a statement – the more it became an intrinsic part of the person. This is also similar to statements made about friendship, in chapter 6, where the length of time over which a relationship has endured is seen as indicating the significance of the friendship. That being 'serious' about something is tied to being able to prove its endurance in time is something inculcated through everyday interactions with adults, such as in illness events, as Christensen (1999) describes. Here, in the event of non-visible symptoms, children's expressions of feeling ill must be persistent over a period of time, to be taken seriously by adults. In Firsby, when I ask Alex which of the two, train driver or paramedic, he'd "more" like to be, he says "I've wanted to be a train driver for longer. I've always said train driver, since I first went in a train."

In this way, whilst I suggest that aspirational statements were co-opted to express a sense of oneself in the present, this does not mean that they had no effect going forward. As Ellie notes, and as practised by my participants, it was people's own responsibility to secure their personhood through expression. If they had to work at 'being' through 'expressing', then we can also see how there is no great distinction between what might be deemed 'ideal' and 'actual' selves, as distinguished by some psychologists with regards to producing a dynamic model of aspirations (e.g. Eccles, 2009). Expressions of self were optimistically stated, whether to do with proposed careers, or game purchases (as I describe in chapter 5), but such expressions were not goal oriented, so much as attempts at constituting oneself *as* the person being expressed. As I describe further in chapter 5, children often made positive statements about future action that seemed to foreclose uncertainty. Thus, they would say 'I'm going to' rather than 'I'm thinking of' or 'I might', in order to emphasise the lack of doubt in their intentionality, despite the fact that outcomes might not ensue because of other constraints. The point was an emphasis on expressing oneself as a desiring, acting subject. Thus, at after-school club, leader Louise asks Year 5s, Matthew and Yusuf, "Will you come back and volunteer [here]?" rhetorically adding, "I think *you* will, Yusuf." Yusuf retorts, "I won't!" before adding, "I mean, I might just *pass through*." Louise laughs. Although just joking, adults' commonplace speculations about what children will or will not do are suggestive that children are not fully in control of their own actions and futures. I suggest that in response, children assert their future agency – thus, Yusuf denies he will do as Louise says, before suggesting that he might, but on his own terms.

Yet, positive future-oriented statements like 'going to' often had further desirable effects. Thus, in the example posited earlier, where Lewis tells me, early into my fieldwork, that he wants to be a comedian, he is both (optimistically) asserting that he is one of the funniest people in his class (a desirable position to be in), and, as a result, secures my friendship, at

least for a time. Similarly, Alex's long-stated aspirations to be a train driver or paramedic tied in with a family game of counting Eddy Stobart trucks when on long road trips, and with Alex's practice of pointing out the makes and models of parked cars when out in the neighbourhood. Further, asking if I know how to drive, Alex tells me "I'm going to learn to drive in October."[26]. There is thus a sense in which Alex's career aspirations emphasise the seriousness of his present desires and perhaps in some way contribute towards their facilitation, as he suggests – perhaps wishfully – that his parents will gift him special lessons. The same could be said when, at Lowell, Hazel tells me about her sister going to Fairlees [Academy] in Westbridge, which is also where her mum went to school. I ask, "Will you go there too?" Hazel responds with, "I think so. My dad wants me to 'cause it's only a five-minute walk up the hill from our house… But I'll see whichever has the biggest library 'cause I like reading!" Here, Hazel does two things: firstly, she underscores her own agency by positing that it is her decision irrespective of her dad's will; and secondly, whilst ostensibly a statement about the future – choosing a future school to go to –, Hazel uses what hasn't yet been decided upon to emphasise her oft-stated love of reading. Her statement is thus an in-the-moment emphasis of her present preferences *and* may precipitate this being a factor in later discussions and negotiations with parents.

In sum, then, whereas adults assume that aspirations are at least somewhat independent of preferences, and therefore useful in goal setting and raising achievement levels, for children they seem to be subservient to present desires. In being predicated on 'the future', children co-opt a notion of aspirations to emphasise their present desires with the ramification that these are enduring, and thereby serious. 'Work' to 'raise achievement' would then be better targeted at cultivating these present desires directly, rather than via the expression of

[26] The lesson(s) take place on private land, allowing children under the legal driving age to try out driving. As I also did this when I was younger, I was able to engage with Alex on the topic.

'aspirations', as Cummings et al., (2012) suggest. Yet, statements *were* productive, but not in way envisaged by the aspirational discourse. Rather than operating according to the individualistic terms of the aspirational discourse, in which a projected ideal inspires the aspiring individual's present action, the productivity of such statements rested on their *inter-subjective power* – in terms of how my participants' statements influenced how they were understood by others, and the productivity created by these others' ensuing actions.

**Transformation, play, and becoming other**

In the above section, I have suggested that in order to express the endurance of particular preferences, children's aspirations were stated according to a notion of the 'continuous' person – something I explore further in chapter 6. However, there were other ways (not necessarily mutually exclusive) in which children engaged with the idea of what they wanted to be, and these sometimes leveraged different concepts of future, time and personhood. One of these involved ideas and acts of transformation, coterminous with fantasy play. In fantasy play, such as a pretend game that the girls at Lowell[27] played in Year 5, a frame for transformation was decided upon – in this case, playing at being teenaged sisters. The girls then decided upon their 'names', 'ages' and 'jobs' (invariably showbiz ones that included celebrity, model, actress and fashion designer), following which they were transformed, acting out their daily lives, involving (pretend) dressing up for public occasions like award ceremonies. Whilst completely imagined fantasy play like this became relatively uncommon as my participants moved into Year 6, talk and action involving imagination, pretence and performance continued to be woven into the everyday fabric of life.

[27] Hazel, Shivani, Laila, Amina, Jaina and Daisy

For example, in the spring of Year 6, I meet Hazel and Kelsey for a tutoring session in Kelsey's classroom (6L) after school. Seeing the teacher's swivel chair vacant, Hazel asks, "Do you think we can sit in that?!" And then, sitting in it, she says, "Okay, I'm going to be the teacher!"

Kelsey says, "Okay, and I'll be the teacher for when we do English!"

"Yeah!" says Hazel, adding, "I'm going to be a teacher when I'm older!"

"Me too!" exclaims Kelsey.

They take it in turns to 'be' the teacher.

When it's Kelsey's turn, Hazel says, "Okay, what's your name? Miss Walton? No, you're married… Mrs Walton?"

"No!" exclaims Kelsey in horror.

"Ms, then. …Ms Chair."

"No!"

"Ms…" Hazel starts listing objects as potential surnames, to Kelsey's "No!"s.

Eventually, Hazel suggests, "Ms Book?" to which Kelsey – who frequently exclaims that she loves books – says, "Yeah, okay." But as Hazel continues to call her Ms Book, Kelsey says, "No, not Ms Book."

Frustrated, Hazel says, "Well, what then?!"

"I dunno – just something that isn't an object in this room!" replies Kelsey.

"Alright… Ms Evans!"

"Er," says Kelsey, confused. "No – why?"

"Alright, Ms Green."

"No! Then I'd be married to Annabel!"

"*I* don't know!" exclaims Hazel. "Miss Sim, what do you think?"

"Miss…Star?" I suggest.

"Yeah!" says Kelsey.

"You can be American and spell it S-T-A-R-R. Or S-T-A-R-R-E!" suggests Hazel.

Kelsey starts writing a question on the board.

Hazel says, “No, you’ve got to ask me questions – *pupil engagement*!”

Here, a semi-fantasy situation arises through our interaction with the familiar environment and ‘props’ of the classroom, where the roles of teacher and pupil are expected, but controverted by the absence of the teacher. The teacher’s obviously vacant chair, hovering a distance away from its desk and facing towards the class, immediately catches the attention of the girls, who both imaginatively conflate sitting in the chair with performing the role of teacher. In this imagining, aspects of fantasy play blend with Hazel’s and Kelsey’s stated, and long-held, aspirations to be teachers – aspirations which are only brought up because of the situational context of the play.

By noting the impetus of play practices in aspirational statements or actions, I think we can better understand two aspects of them. Firstly, it becomes possible to understand how they are simultaneously fun and serious. Secondly, we can observe how the temporal framework of expression is one of instantaneous transformation into an imagined other, even as a playing at being other enables a proposed future to occur in the present. For example, in Goldman's (1998) study of Huli (Papua New Guinea) fantasy play, he contends that the core action of pretence – that is, acting *as if* one thing were another – can tell us about the human imagination and its capacity to engage in subjunctive thought (i.e. new possibilities). This is not to say that this is the purpose or function of play – in this regard, Goldman (1998) agrees with Sutton-Smith (1997) and Schwartzman (1978) who argue that play should be understood as being *about play* itself, rather than simply supportive of cognitive and emotional development, or as preparation for adulthood, as it is often written about. Nevertheless, Goldman contends that Huli children’s play moves between mimesis (itself part reproduction, part fantasy) and ‘muthoi’, the Huli mythological register employed in the (adult) recounting

of myths, folktales and legends. In linking the ordinary and the exceptional, pretend play is less about being in *another* world than it is a transformative state of being in the world. Rather than creating an alternative reality, play can reveal truths about the world, insofar as 'the real is what is etched on the landscape, the pretend is what fails to make a lasting impression' (pp.259).

In the above example, we can see how play elements create this transformative state of being in the world. As with the girls' 'sisters' game, performing a role must be preceded by a transformation of personhood, which itself is premised on the transformation of one's name. By becoming Ms Star (or Starr), Kelsey instantly becomes the teacher. This is the case because firstly, as mentioned in the previous discussion about expressing oneself as a person, names were crucially important as the unique identifier by which a person could be known. Secondly, I suggest that performing a job role involved the idea of 'being' another (and adult) person, and therefore could only occur by transformation – something most obviously exacted by transforming one's name. Hazel at first suggests that Kelsey be "Miss Walton", in line with teachers being known by their title and surname. But immediately after suggesting it, she realises that this is Kelsey's current name, as she is, even if it is one by which she is rarely addressed. Hazel then conflates the twin notions of job role/adulthood and adulthood/marriage to suggest the teacher would be married – hence Mrs Walton. This is in line with those studies mentioned in chapter 1 (e.g. Zartler, 2015), which show that children's ideas about 'futures' are based in hard-to-shift societal markers (like adulthood-marriage), despite children's everyday experience of known others who contravened such stereotypes. However Kelsey finds Mrs Walton weird, since her imagination of this name is premised on that of her parents. Thus, a completely new name must be decided upon. It is only when this has been completed that Kelsey can perform the action of being the teacher.

Performing the role of teacher involves not just teaching, but enacting changes in voice and bodily comportment, as Hazel does when signalling that she will "be a strict teacher now" and begins telling us off, using a repertoire of phrases I frequently heard used by teachers in class. Equally, the girls *play at* being pupils, in order to complete the fantasy teacher-pupil performance. Despite not themselves acting like this in class, the girls pretend they don't understand, call out answers, get their phones out, and swing back and forth in their chairs. Essentially, then, they play at imagined pupil stereotypes deriving from fictionalised and media accounts of pupil-teacher relations, and from an exaggerated version of observation of known others.

In fact, I would contend that this is where the play episode diverges slightly from the 'sisters' game. In that game, although the girls did transform themselves, they all chose to be ages (between 13 and 19) that I suggest were 'imaginable' to them as being at least partially continuous with their everyday lives. Thus, one of the pleasures of the game seemed to be in pretending to dress up in fantasy clothes – something that was coterminous with their actual practices, in terms of anticipating, talking about and dressing up for mufti days and discos. This is in contrast to becoming teacher, and therefore adult, where the fun is in acting out *others'* observed ways of being, and discourses surrounding exemplary role behaviours – as Hazel makes clear when she remonstrates with Kelsey about performing 'pupil engagement'. In terms of how 'futures' were imagined, then, I would suggest that near futures were understood as occurring in a kind of continuity with the present, whilst distant futures were premised on *being other*, even as children recognised that they would 'one day' (i.e. instantly transform into) be(ing) adult. This occurred in something of a mirror image to 'the past', as was evident when children came to write their autobiographies. In more recent 'past' memories, talk and actions were seen as continuous with their personhood in the here-and-now. But items from further back in time, including their own birth, were based in others'

stories and assumed something of a mythic nature, like the distinction Barnes (1995) makes between history and myth. At various points, these shade into each other – the remembered or understandable shading into imaginings of the remembered or understandable, which at some level also become evidently fantasy.

That Hazel and Kelsey were able to enact transformation into 'being' teachers brings us to an important point about the types of occupation stated by my participants: either occupations were directly premised on school subjects and hobbies with which children had experience *doing*, like Mia's suggestion of mathematician, and Tyler's of scientist[28]; or else they were premised on observation of others in known occupations. For example, discussing careers, Tula says, "My uncle's an architect. He digs things up… And my mum trained as a sort of architect – an engineer. My mum also paints. But her friend does loads of paintings. She's, like, an artist, but she's also a […] and she was a doctor as well." However, children's aspirations were not constrained to knowledge of proximate others' occupations. For example, when I ask Alex if he knows any paramedics, he tells me, "Well, I sat in that ambulance last year at the [school] fair" – something he had previously told me about. And in discussing, later, why he *no longer* wants to be a paramedic, he tells me the storyline from a recent Casualty episode: "So, basically, there's this man in prison, and they want to move him, but he doesn't want to move, so the prison officers try to grab him, and he goes like this," Alex demonstrates a head butt, "And the guy's head gets smashed open!" He tells me that the paramedics are called, and have to take the man away. Slightly confused, I ask, "The paramedic gets hurt?" "No, the officer," says Alex. He tells me, "I don't want to have to go into prisons", and when I ask if this a frequent occurrence, he says, "Not all the time – probably 50-50."

[28] There were also occupations that children seemed to 'obviously' link to school subjects, presumably because such connections were suggested by adults – like 'architect' with 'art', and 'computer programmer' with 'I.T.'.

What this suggests is the importance of both 'wow' moments and more prolonged contact in fostering aspirations, as noted by the 'widening participation' practitioners in Brown (2011); but also the significance of the media in generating such familiarity beyond a person's immediate experiences, as occurs with Alex's watching of Casualty and Jafar's aspiration of being a 'paralympian'. Nevertheless, those occupations children are likely to encounter, and those presented by the media, often tend to be 'traditional' public-facing ones, which are not particularly representative of the actual jobs market where behind-closed-doors jobs in offices and industry proliferate. In this sense, there is the possibility of 'broadening' aspirations by increasing the visibility of different occupations, and widening access to activities that might lead to viable jobs.

Similarly, Hazel's aspiration to be a teacher tied in with her generally favourable outlook on school and school work, but also with her favourable evaluations of teachers, especially her class teacher Miss Jameson, who ran after-school singing society, Glee Club. This 'liking' was not just based on her role as a teacher, even though this was partly the case (for example, Ms Jameson was thought of by many others as strict in a negative sense, but Hazel thought this was a good thing), but also because of apparently personal attributes. For example, when doing impressions of other people, Hazel does one of Miss Jameson: "Get on with your work! Why have you done it like that? I've told you to do it *this* way. How many times?!" she barks, making those of us watching laugh. "But that's just how she is in class – she's not like that out of school," Hazel continues. Hazel's mum, who works as a school cook, gives Miss Jameson lifts to or from school sometimes, so Hazel is privy to this out-of-school knowledge. "She's like [affecting a cooing voice] 'Oh, hi, how are you? I'm so worried Isla's [her young daughter] ill again, and I've been running around taking her to the doctor's!'" Equally, that Miss Jameson knows how to sing and dance to pop songs – something she teaches at Glee Club – is a positive

attribute for Hazel, and when I ask what she would like to teach, Hazel responds with, "History, English, music, art… All except maths – I'm not teaching maths! And doing productions[29], like musicals and dances and stuff – that would be fun!"

Just as children's understandings of themselves and others comprised all of the 'facts' that constituted themselves as individuals, I suggest that children's observations of adults involved evaluation of the 'whole' person, as a similar composition of attributes including name, approximate age, appearance, and preferences. Such 'facts' were mutually constitutive, such that a teacher could, for example, be "really cool – his name is Mr 'G' like the letter, even though it's actually spelt G-E-E! *And* he's from Canada and speaks in a really funny accent, like, 'Hiii!'" In other words, despite framing adults' roles in terms of career only, my participants did not abstract the career element in their observations and evaluations. Viewing others as more than the roles they performed could also be seen in children's assessments of celebrities. In the earlier example with Hazel's poster, her comment that she "… like[s] Lindsay Lohan in Herbie and Freaky Friday but... she's a bit weird" shows her evaluation to be based both on the characters Lohan played in two of her films, and subsequent stories involving personal problems and a changing appearance. Others expressed similar evaluations, keen to emphasise their altered opinion in light of new knowledge, such as when allegations about drugs (generally seen as 'bad' and 'wrong' amongst my participants) were made against X-Factor judge and singer Tulisa, and singer Justin Bieber. Caitlin (Year 5) says, "I *used to* like Justin Bieber! I'm only saying this because I *really* liked him. 'Cause I even had a Justin Bieber pencil case!" She grins, in mock horror and embarrassment. "But now I hate him! 'Cause he's a druggie." In contrast, then, to popular pathological views of 'celebrity culture', which posit the creation of unattainable fantasies of materialism and fame, I argue that the people my

[29] This was a musical performed by the Year 6s each year at Lowell, which Ms Jameson was involved in.

participants admired were generally those they deemed nice and nice-looking, friendly and popular, and competent at things like singing and dancing – i.e. attributes they valued in proximate others. And, as with Alex's revised opinion about being a paramedic, children's identifications with celebrities or media characters involved continuous evaluations made on the basis of others' on-going actions.

In the example with Hazel and Kelsey, we see the blurring of the real and the pretend, the imaginary and the exaggerated, as Schwartzman (1978) and Goldman (1998) contend. In playing at being both a 'naughty' pupil and a teacher, I experienced both vicarious pleasure and actual frustration, respectively – something Hazel and Kelsey appeared to feel too. As Goldman (1998) notes, then, we can see how the 'real' emerges in tandem with the 'pretend', as we 'really' experience being other through our bodily and mental engagements. The emphasis was less on learning *about* a role, than it was playful. Yet, through imagining being, or trying to embody, another person, children did express their knowledge, learn what it meant to be, and gain vicarious pleasure in becoming, particular desirable others, at least in a temporary suspension of disbelief. In doing so, they experienced something of the reality of being other, even as they recognised the pretence, and saw it as being just for fun. If this was a common aspect of children's spontaneous play, then I suggest that this playful *approach* is also what we see in children's verbal practices involving the telling of what they wanted to be.

For example, one lunchtime on the field, Jafar and John spontaneously begin asking each other what they want to be.

"What do you want to be, John?" Jafar asks.

"I don't know."

"I thought you wanted to be a computer specialist?"

"But I think there are too many people doing that now."

"That's okay – you can run your own business, so you can give yourself a job," says Jafar, whose dad runs his own business. "You can decide what to do."

"But how do I make money?" asks John.

"So, if you're running your own business, you can make products to sell that people want to buy, and that's how you can make money."

"Oh, okay! Yeah. I can't wait to be in the future!" exclaims John.

"Yeah, I want to be a paralympian and a computer games designer," says Jafar. "'Cause a paralympian's only a part-time job."

"What's your favourite computer game?" I ask.

"I like Sonic," says Jafar. "I would want to work for Sega if I could."

"Mine's Roadblock!" says John.

"Is that on the computer?" I ask.

"Yeah!"

"Yours is always Roadblock!" says Jafar.

Here, we can again see the boys expressing career aspirations based on their interests. For example, Jafar's statement of 'paralympian' can be seen as a positive expression of disability combined with sporting success and recognition, whilst 'computer games designer' expresses an affiliation to computers and gaming. But in their spontaneous asking and stating of answers, the boys are also demonstrating another reason for 'telling' things: the fun and enjoyment to be derived from imagining optimistic future possibilities. Hence, Jafar asks John "what do you want to be?" even though he thinks he already knows the answer (and is therefore surprised when John says he doesn't know). However, whilst the emphasis was on the fun and pleasure to be derived from stating imagined futures, these imaginings had to be consistent with reality, as John makes clear, when he decides that he can't want to be a computer programmer because he doesn't think he'll be able to get a job or earn money from

it. Imaginative possibilities thus take place within the existing world, populated by other people known to be "going into" I.T. But Jafar counters this with reasoning derived from his personal experience with known others. Having had his fears of not being able to earn money allayed, John exclaims that he "can't wait to be in the future!"

Thus, although playful, this does not mean serious reflection doesn't occur – as can be seen with John's rather sombre initial pronouncement, something he reiterates to me a few weeks later, when he says, "I don't think I can be a computer programmer anymore 'cause too many people are going into it." I ask, "Is that what you want to be?" and he replies, "I did, but I don't think I will anymore." I try to say that despite more people going into the industry, there might also be more jobs in I.T. in the future, but John isn't convinced, instead saying, "Anyway, I might try to be a computer programmer first, then an architect, if I can't get a job, then an artist, if that doesn't work out." Here, then, John takes an unusually externally oriented perspective, as he seriously engages with the prospect of a future lack of jobs, which he premises on an observation of increasing competition from others. Yet, at the same time, the possibility of engaging in different careers as backup provides a solution, with this solution premised on the imagination of a series of instantaneous transformations, as in the fantasy play and mythic registers described above.

In this chapter, I have argued that children's engagements with the question "what do you want to be when you grow up?" simultaneously occur through interactions with adults; through their own posing of the question and stating of answers, premised on expressing as being; and through telling and performing practices that have a basis in fantasy play. These interactions and practices continuously inform each other, such that whilst I have tried to disentangle the answers children provide in different contexts, and playful approaches from those involving an apparently more instrumental telling, in the everyday flow of life these

practices are neither mutually exclusive nor bounded. The distinctions I make are therefore only *possible* ways of understanding how and why career 'aspirations' were practised and understood by my participants.

Despite these caveats, I think there are several conclusions worth emphasising. The first is that in understanding the stating of aspirations as practices in *telling*, we can see why and how statements were made. Children told about their aspirations in order to express themselves, and aspirations were stated to emphasise the unique selection of preferences and desires that in combination with their name, comprised their individual and recognisable personhood, although sometimes based in affiliation with others. For children positively oriented towards school, this could involve different statements being made towards adults, based on knowledge of what was recognised as 'good' occupations. Thus, whilst I suggest aspirations were told to emphasise individuality, and were not obviously premised on social stratifications other than gender, attitude to school could be seen to influence the aspirations stated in a classroom context – rather than aspirations influencing attitude, as Flouri and Panourgia (2012) suggest (see chapter 1).

Secondly, I argue that the timeframe involved in practices of telling aspirations was different from that proposed by the 'raising aspirations' discourse. In the latter, aspirations are seen as setting future goals that inspire present action. By contrast, I suggest that for my participants, the action of telling aspirations involved a narrative capturing of the notion of 'the future' to serve present goals. In premising aspirations on present interests, children emphasised the notion of these interests' longevity and thus seriousness, and in constituting themselves through statements of interest, they suggested an enduring notion of themselves through their aspirational statements. Whilst I reject the idea that they were goal-setting at the individual level, I suggest that in being *told*, aspirations had an inter-subjective power. This

inter-subjective power could give aspirational statements a productive potentiality, thus having future 'effectiveness' (although being based in inter-subjective relations, this effectiveness was not necessarily determinable in advance).

Thirdly, in adopting a playful approach (something that permeated all of children's practices), the stating or playing out of aspirations was enjoyed as a pleasurable and fun activity, even as it could involve 'real' experiences in being other, and/or 'serious' reflection on alternative possibilities. Unlike the anticipation of near futures, imagining being adult was premised on transforming into another person, with my participants drawing on their understandings of observed others in their imaginings. In general, however, telling career aspirations was not an *everyday* practice, but an occasional one. The observations I have made here thus ought to be situated within the wider context of my participants' lives, in order to engage with apparent 'future' orientations that were not spoken of as such by my participants, but were nevertheless practised in substantive ways within the landscape (chapter 4), with a particular material object (chapter 5), and in inter-subjective relations with peers (chapter 6). It is to these chapters, based on the detailed rendering of particular everyday practices, that I now turn.

## Chapter 4 | Going out: 'Telling' and 'fixing'

*August 2013:*

*We're in the van, on the way back from the cinema, where we've been watching Smurfs 2. Alex's dad James has come to pick us up.*

*Alex says, "We're going for a cycle now."*

*James says, "Are you?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"Where you gonna go?"*

*"Just around."*

*"Alright."*

*We arrive home, pick up our bikes and cycle down the road. It's a typical suburban street lined with 1930s semi-detached houses, with cars lining the street and in driveways. As usual, we stop at his school friend and neighbour Ethan's house, near the corner, where Alex goes on weekdays after school before his mum returns home from work. I hang on the pavement, on my bike, as Alex walks up to the door. He doesn't ring the bell, but tentatively raps on the glass. A woman, Ethan's nan, answers. She has glasses, mousey hair with grey running through, and a South African accent: "Yes?" Behind her is a little girl who, seeing Alex, slips outside between her nan and the open door.*

*"Is Ethan in?"*

*Ethan's nan turns around to call for Ethan and disappears.*

*"Do you want to come for a cycle?" asks Alex when Ethan appears.*

*"Where are you going?"*

*"Just around."*

*"Shall I bring my ball and we can go to the park?"*

*"No… Just your bike."*

*"Okay, let me just ask." He disappears into the house.*

*Outside, Alex is talking to Rachel, Ethan's little sister. "I like your car!" he says.*

*"Thanks! It's new!"*

*"What are you doing with the old one?"*

*"We're selling it. Someone's already bought it."*

*"Is that your nightdress?" Alex suddenly remarks, of what Rachel's wearing.*

*Rachel laughs, "Yeah!"*

*"Why are you wearing your nightdress? Gawd!" Alex pulls a funny face.*

*Rachel bursts into fits of laughter.*

*"My mum says I can come for half an hour," says Ethan, returning.*

*"Okay."*

*Ethan says, "I like your bike." Alex is on a bike that we haven't seen before – a 'GT'.*

*"Thanks," says Alex, and they discuss Alex's bike, going on to argue about its price.*

*Then Rachel asks, "Isn't it too big for you, Alex?"*

*"No! Look, it's just right, see?" says Alex, getting on the bike.*

*"Okay, let's go!" says Ethan, cycling off down the pavement as it turns right into the next road. Alex and I set off after him, Alex yelling, "Don't know which way* you're *going!" as he takes the opposite turn, so that Ethan has to double back to join us.*

*"Where are we going?" asks Ethan.*

*Alex says, "Nowhere," and we cycle around the block, the boys mainly on the pavement, but sometimes dropping off the kerb onto the road. I start off on the road, but Alex says, "Come up onto the pavement!" As we cycle, the boys point out parked cars, noting their models and features, and saying whether they like them or not. Ethan also starts berating cars that he thinks are going too quickly, racing after them and shouting, after one car whizzes past as they're about to cross the road.*

*Alex says, "You're going to do that to the wrong person one day!"*

*Nonetheless, we share in regaling each other with stories of being "almost run over!"*

*We speed through the park without stopping, ending up back on Alex and Ethan's road, having made a loop. Alex says, "Let's go Jasmine's!"*

*"Why?" asks Ethan, who tells me he doesn't really know Alex's friends, because they're in different classes at school.*

*"So I can annoy her!"*

*"Why?"*

*"'Cause it's fun. 'Cause she's so annoying."*

*As we pass a beaten-up car, Ethan tells me, "That car got smashed up by a load of kids. They always do that. Not us lot – the older kids." He tells me that he doesn't know their names, but he knows who they are – 13-year olds, living in the area. He tells me that "They just go round smashing things up," and "'Cause they like to." He says, "They could do other things but they like it. Like, there's some people who are our age but are like that. They don't smash up cars, but… like on a school trip, Joe wrote something on a wall."*

*"How?" I ask.*

*"In pencil," says Ethan. "He got sent home. But, like, for no reason."*

*We catch up with Alex, ahead, arriving at Jasmine's house, which is at the far end of the road, in the opposite direction from Ethan's. Alex goes to knock, whilst Ethan and I stay on our bikes. There's no answer. "Oh, she's not in," says Alex.*

*"Come on, let's go," says Ethan. "I bet I can beat you even on your GT!"*

*We race down the road, but Alex suddenly turns off, saying, "Don't know where* you're *going!"*

*"I thought we were going down here," shouts Ethan from where he's slowing down, ahead.*

*"Nah," says Alex, "We're going down here. Then we can go by Mike and Pete's to see if they want to come out."*

*Ethan catches up, saying, "I don't think they're in."*

*But Alex says, "I* know *they are 'cause that's their car."*

*"Which one?"*

*"That one – the red Vauxhall Astra."*

*"How do you know that's their car?"*

*"'Cause I've seen them in it before."*

*Alex goes to knock, but the woman who answers the door says, "Sorry Alex, they're at their dad's today."*

*"See?" says Ethan.*

*"Let's go to the shop!" Alex suggests.*

In this chapter, I discuss the multiple ways in which my participants approached the practice of 'going out' in the neighbourhood. In doing so, I explain in detail how 'telling' – as raised in the last chapter with respect to the telling of career aspirations – was used to 'fix' the landscape according to ideal notions of themselves as knowing, competent and autonomous persons. In this way, we can understand how aspiring as an optimistic kind of telling about oneself was a more general practice my participants engaged in, which was pleasurable in itself, at the same time as it enabled an effective means of control over environmental 'risks'. Safety, knowledge and friendship were key to navigating the landscape, but most important was 'telling' it, in order for children to *realise* their knowledge and control. Through such 'tellings', knowledge of the landscape and of themselves emerged in tandem, and foreshadowed greater knowledge, competence and autonomy.

'Going out' – whether by bike or on foot – was something Alex and I did on each and every occasion that I visited. Such forays into the neighbourhood were often anticipated and planned in advance of my visits, with Alex phoning me to arrange meeting times, to make excursion proposals, and to tell me of things that he'd prepared, like sweets and drinks for the cinema, or things that I ought to bring, like if I'd need my bike. In suggesting we call round at

friends' houses and go to the shops and the park, the neighbourhood seemed to present great excitement. Given the centrality of these excursions to both the anticipatory imagination and to practice, what struck me was how Alex often didn't *seem* to be that *excited* when actually outside. He was chatty, congenial and the perfect host in showing me around. Yet, he often wasn't exuberant in the way that he was when playing PlayStation together in his room, or indeed, in the planning of trips. In comparison with the evident enjoyment of these other practices, why was it that going out remained a central activity, and what was its appeal? Was going out actually enjoyed and, if so, in what ways?

What it took me a long time to realise was that the world outside the home also presented perceived threats and risks, like that portended by the smashed-up car Ethan tells me about. Here, we are presented with evidence of others who populate the landscape – older children who enjoy breaking things for fun, and who live 'around here', known of, but not known. Yet, despite being told this by Ethan, I failed to register the notion of threat or risk, because the sentiment being conveyed by his tone of voice in the telling was not one of fear or worry – the attitudes I was used to hearing amongst my adult counterparts to express or convey these ideas. Rather, like Alex when showing me around, Ethan is calm and matter-of-fact, as if asserting his knowledge and moral authority in the situation. The emphasis is more on the fact that he knows boys, even now, who are 'like that', but *he* is not like that, because smashing things up for fun is wrong.

The way in which narrative was employed to assert one's moral authority could be seen in other situations, such as when Alex would tell me on the phone of teachers' unfair actions, and the ensuing comeuppance they received. For example, one day, he tells me, "I got a new teacher – Mr Afil who takes us on a Friday. I hate 'im."

"Why?" I ask.

"'Cause 'e shouts at me for no reason! Like, the other day I stood up 'cause another teacher told me to help her with something, so I got up and he goes, 'Why have you got up? Sit down! You can't get up without asking me first.' And I said, 'Well, I got up 'cause that teacher told me to help her with something.' And he goes, 'Oh, right, right, that's okay then.' And I'm like, 'Well, you should've asked me first, instead of just assuming, right?!"

"Did you say that to him?!"

"No, but it's true, isn't it?"

"So then what happened?"

"Well, nothing, 'cause he was wrong and he knew it. But he just shouts at everyone for no reason. When our other teacher's in the room, he acts like he's all nice to us, but when she isn't there, he just starts shouting. He doesn't know, though, that there's a camera in the room that goes straight to the head's office, so she can see exactly what he's doing, so she'll be able to see that he's shouting at us and he'll get into trouble!"

I ask, "Has he [got into trouble]?"

"No, not yet. But he might."

"But surely he knows about the camera?"

"No, he don't know!"

In this narrative, Alex, like Ethan telling me about the car, states his moral position relative to others who are deemed unreasonable. And just like Ethan does in telling me about the car, Alex's telling wrests back control of the situation, such that it is no longer a situation in which one must unfairly suffer from the fear or effects of others' immoral actions. Instead, the flexibility of narrative allows the boys to express their knowledge and control to me. When I ask Alex whether what he said actually occurred, he admits that this wasn't quite what

happened, but certainly what *should* have happened. In other words, whilst I was concerned with establishing 'what actually happened', what Alex was trying to emphasise was a sense of moral rectitude, stating as fact both the real and imaginary without distinguishing between the two, even if, when pressed, he could do so.

These 'tellings' give an impression of the way in which narratives were employed by my participants in their everyday lives, and their importance in establishing a sense of self-other understanding amidst the flow of continuous talk and action. In their going-out practices, we can see the ideal 'fixing' enabled by narrative in my participants' forging of plans, and in post hoc narratives of daring behaviour, like those of Alex, Ethan and I in relation to speeding cars, above. In these, my participants described the landscape and themselves in ideal terms – the former as knowable, controllable and exciting, the latter as knowing, competent and courageous. This stands in contrast to situations when confronting immediate threats to one's security, such as in encountering bullies, as I later describe. In the here-and-now of social interactions, my participants seemed to cultivate ambiguity, with encounters playing out tentatively. In between these two extremes, my participants employed 'telling' practices as we walked, expressing their knowledge in their ambivalent calmness, and bringing the uncertain, unfolding landscape under their control in so doing.

**Outdoor risk, and the temporal unfolding of landscape**

That the world outside the home would be unfamiliar and potentially threatening to 10-year olds should perhaps have been obvious, but it was obfuscated by my participants' demeanours, as discussed, and by the fact that going out seemed to be a commonplace practice, at least on my visits. Alex and I went out in the neighbourhood every time I came to visit, often for several hours at a time, with Alex leading the way, as he does in the excerpt above. Prior to my arrival in the field, Alex's mum Liz had told me, "He's quite independent for a 10-year old – he goes round by himself" and reassured me that there was no need for me to 'look after' him. Yet, whilst this was true, outside of my visits, wandering around the neighbourhood was probably a much more rare activity than it seemed. On weekdays, Alex went to Ethan's house until Liz returned from work[30], and at weekends when I didn't visit, he often went to his grandma's or cousins' houses in nearby suburbs. Similarly, as the above excerpt shows, neighbourhood friends were, more often than not, unavailable to go out – except for Ethan and, later, another friend called Charlie. Indeed, this, and his familiarity with going to Ethan's, explains our calling round there first of all, even though Alex finds Ethan 'annoying' and believes that Ethan's family don't like him (see chapter 6). It also explains Alex's great excitement in my visits, and in having someone to go out with[31]. These findings are consistent with the notion that children's home-range has decreased over recent successive generations (Woolley and Griffin, 2015), but that at least some primary school-age children still walk about a great deal (e.g. Freeman, 2010; Christensen et al., 2011).

The threats and risks my participants perceived were both continuous with, and different from, those espoused in adult discourses. At Lowell, Laila says, "I don't like being out of the house after dark. It's full of gangs and people hanging around. I don't like it." I ask, "Where

[30] Until his 11th birthday, in October 2013, when he is allowed to go and stay at home by himself

[31] Another possible advantage to going out with me was in negotiating greater home range, as when Alex lets slip that we have gone to a road called 'The Ring'. Liz tells Alex she doesn't like him going there, to which Alex responds, "Not even with an adult?" (one of the few occasions he labels me as such). Liz rejects this argument, however.

you live?" Laila says, "No, where we live is quiet, but where my cousins live. It's really rough round there!" And Owen says of his street, "There's always drunk people sitting outside and broken glass and stuff." In Firsby, Alex and Cara, his friend Charlie's girlfriend, note that the park near Tesco's is "rough" and "for the estates". The landscape is thus not only physical, but social and moral, populated by different kinds of people and with places identified as 'good' or 'bad' accordingly, as Christensen (2003) posits. Children's descriptions appear to reflect collective class- and age-inflected narratives (involving youth gangs and estates), possibly entwined with personal experiences, as Christensen (2003) and Harju (2013) contend, and Boholm (2003) argues with regards to knowledge about risks more generally. However, the 'outside' seemed more generally threatening than in Christensen's study, as when Alex says to his mum, as we return home one day, that "you know I don't like it when you leave my window open!" and when, passing their school, Alex and Ethan complain that "some idiot's left the school gate open!" and "anyone could just walk in!" Children thus seemed to be at least as risk-averse as adults, vis-à-vis threats from strangers.

Children also noted threats less commonly discussed by adults, including getting lost, and encountering adult informants, bullies, and other children with whom relations were ambiguous. For example, Alex, Ethan and Charlie frequently talked of others watching them, with various reasons posited, including that others were calling the police on them. Sitting in McDonald's, me eating McDonald's, he KFC, Alex tells me, "That guy in the corner said, 'Why are you dissing me? Eating your KFC in here!' What are they gonna do about it anyway? They're not gonna say, 'Just get out!'" Then, "That woman's staring at me now! She's looking right at me now." Similarly, waiting for her dad in the bank, Leah whispers to me, "That woman's staring at us!" Of course, children *were* often being watched and reported on in institutional environments, and the notion that it was strangers or the police who monitored public environments made sense to my participants. Equally, however, such narrative

renderings of situations should be understood from the point of view of eliciting drama, as I later describe.

Unlike in Christensen's (2003) study, where the social landscape seemed more permanently fixed, there was uncertainty over where threats might be encountered. Like Ethan's immoral youths, ambiguous others could be anywhere and everywhere – they simply "live around here", or else on the streets. For example, walking down the road one day, Alex whispers to me, "He's a paedophile. He raped a little girl."

> "What?" I ask, as an old, dishevelled-looking man meanders past us on a bike, a couple of supermarket bags dangling from the handlebars.
>
> "Yeah, he got put into prison for two months, but then they let him out."
>
> "Two months – did they say he didn't do it?"
>
> "No, he did," insists Alex. "He got let out for raping and murdering a little girl. He's homeless now. 'Cause he *was* living in a council flat, but then when he was in prison, all these bills came and he couldn't answer 'cause he was in prison, so then they took his house away, and then when he got let out, he had no home."

As such, the landscape contained a temporal element, in that its social character only emerged as we proceeded through it. Thus, as Bender (2002) posits, neither the landscape nor time are simply 'out there' and immutable, but rather, are always subjective. It is in the uncertain unfolding of the landscape, tied to our movements through it, that Alex's demeanour, when out walking, can be understood. For example, continuing from the opening excerpt, later in the day, we see a couple of boys up ahead and Alex goes off to talk to them. Ethan and I stay back.

> "I don't really know them," Ethan says.
>
> "Are they from your school?"

"Yeah, but they're not in my class. I don't really know that many people 'cause I haven't been there that long."[32]

The group disbands and the boys cycle off, Alex saying, "We're going that way too!"

We arrive at a patch of grass outside Jasmine's house where the boys are sitting with their bikes, under a tree. They call Alex over. Again, Ethan and I keep our distance, and we discuss them.

"I don't really know them. One of them goes to our school – Connor – he's in the year above. And I don't know the other one."

"I think that's Jake," I say.

"Do you know them?" Ethan asks, surprised.

"'Cause they were here – well, Jake was here the last time we came here," I say. That time, Alex and I had been knocking for Jasmine. Jake had called out, "Are you Alex?" and Alex had nodded, before Jasmine answered the door to say that she wasn't allowed out "because Jake's out there".

"So are you and Alex friends with different people?" I ask Ethan. "Are most of your friends in your class?"[33]

"Yeah, I don't really know his friends that well."

The boys have called Alex over to "have a go" on his bike (the GT Alex and Ethan were arguing about) and Connor is doing a wheelie on it when the chain comes off. He's flipped the bike over to try to fix the chain, as Ethan and I approach.

"You've broken it, Connor," says Jake.

"Nah, I just need to put this back on. Like that…see!"

Connor gets back on the bike but the chain falls off again. "This bike's crap!" he exclaims, going off.

[32] Ethan moved to Alex's school only at the start of Year 5.

[33] Alex and Ethan were in different Year 5 classes at the same school. As most authors note, and as was the case at Lowell, friendships tend to be school-class centred.

Jake picks up the bike and takes on trying to fix it. After a fair while fiddling, he says, "It's like this." He turns the wheel but the chain falls off.

"No look, I'll do it," says Alex.

"You done yet?" says Jake after a few moments. "Come on, come on, we ain't got all day! No, forwards, not backwards!" he says in a disparaging tone – the kind used by harangued teachers to pupils – as Alex spins the wheel. "Don't you know nothing?!"

"No, you do it backwards – that's what my dad taught me," says Alex, whose dad used to be a BMX champion. He spins the wheel, but the chain falls off again.

Jake laughs. "I told ya! Hey Connor," he calls out, "He don't even know how to fix his bike!" He's spinning the chain backwards! Are you *stu*pid?! *For*wards."

Alex manages to get the chain to stay on, and says, "Yeah, that's what you do," in his usual tone, although a shade more quiet than usual.

"Okay, can I have my go now?" asks Jake.

"No," says Alex.

"Why?"

"'Cause I don't want you to."

"But you said I could, earlier."

"Well, I've changed my mind."

"You let Connor have a go – that ain't fair!"

"So. It's *my* bike."

Connor, sitting under the tree again, shouts over, "Oi, c'mon Jake, leave 'em." Laughing, he says, "It ain't a good bike anyway."

Jake is holding onto Alex's bike. "Get off," says Alex.

"No."

This carries on until Connor comes over. "Oi, Jake, c'mon. Get off! Leave him alone." He coaxes Jake off, and laughs, "Yeah, it's broken anyway. The chain's just gonna

break when he gets on!" However, he suddenly seems to feel bad, and says, "Let me have a look", proceeding to try and fix the chain again. He gets back on the bike, asking Alex, "What gears do you have?" He tries them all out before giving the bike back, saying, "Okay, it doesn't work in gear one, Alex. Be careful of gear one. The rest is okay. There you go."

Alex replies with a muffled "thanks".

Meanwhile, Jake has picked up Ethan's bike and is cycling around in circles doing brake spins.

"Can I have my bike, please?" Ethan asks, continually repeating the question, as he's ignored.

"Oi, come on Jake, give him his bike," says Connor.

"He can take mine – mine's just over there!" says Jake.

But Ethan doesn't want to, and he runs after Jake. Eventually Jake is again persuaded off by Connor, and Alex, Ethan and I cycle off.

When we're sufficiently far, Ethan says, " They basically broke your bike, Alex."

"I know."

"That's why I don't like those boys," continues Ethan. "They take your stuff and they break it. And then it's you who gets into trouble for letting them use it… Are you going to tell your dad, Alex?"

In this spontaneous encounter, in which relations with Connor and Jake are ambiguous, interactions play out tentatively, with Alex's tone of voice, responses, and actions being calm, measured, and adjustable according to unfolding events. In order to prevent situations from becoming threatening, and to save face, conversations were carried out with a certain degree of ambivalence, such that their meaning was open to interpretation. It was this same ambivalence that infused the entire practice of going out, particularly towards the start of my

visits, when Alex was younger and less familiar with the neighbourhood, and which I had found so strange in relation to going out being so looked forward to.

In fact, I often found it difficult to tell whether other children whom we encountered in the street or park were friends, enemies, mere strangers, or something in between – sometimes only realising when their status was signposted to me. For example, one day, Alex has organised a picnic for Charlie, his friend from Scouts[34], Charlie's girlfriend Cara, himself and me, carefully preparing and bringing to the park wrapped sandwiches, fizzy drinks, chocolates and sweets. On the way there, however, Charlie says to Alex, "Oh, guess who I saw on the way here?" "Who?" "Ryan and his gang." They discuss where precisely Charlie saw them, and then Charlie asks me if I'm any good at fighting. Alex has previously told me about "Ryan and his gang", who are "bullies", when on our first ever visit to the park, he spots them sitting atop one of the sheds. I ask why they're bullies, to which Alex responds, "'Cause they just beat you up for no reason". However, on that occasion, we don't encounter them. This time, however, we're halfway through our picnic when Ryan and a friend appear on the scene. As they're a distance away, I only realise after a while that they've been chucking gobstoppers [sweets] towards us. "Why are they wasting their *own* sweets?" I ask. Alex chuckles. "Yeah, 'cause they're dumb, innit?" Ryan and his friend come over.

> "What's this we have? Is it a picnic? Well, isn't that *nice*?" Ryan assumes a slightly derogatory tone, although not greatly different from Charlie's, who'd also earlier commented in a mock posh voice, "This is *nice*!"
>
> Ryan's friend says, "Can *I* join in?"
>
> Alex replies quietly but firmly, "No."
>
> "Why?"

[34] Charlie was only a few months older than Alex but in the school year above him, and therefore in Year 7 of secondary school when I first came to know him in October 2013. Cara was also in Year 7.

"'Cause you weren't invited."

Ryan says, "Is your name Alex?"

"Yes."

The friend says, "I'm gonna join in."

He sits down, and I expect him to take food, but he doesn't. Conversation continues awkwardly, before Ryan says, "Oi, come on, Craig, let's go", and the boys depart. Later, however, I'm surprised when, at Charlie's house, Charlie and Alex describe the incident to Charlie's dad (and later to Alex's mum), saying, "Yeah, we were sitting all nice, eating sandwiches, until *Ryan* turned up and ruined it. So then we went to Tesco's to get Anne-Marie a headset for her PS3 [PlayStation 3], 'cause she has one too."

It hadn't seemed to me that the picnic was cut short, and if I hadn't known in advance that Ryan and his friend were 'bullies', I wouldn't have known so from the encounter, so ambiguously did it play out. This was similar to situations in which we encountered 'friends' and unknown others on the street. For example, seeing his friend Nathan and a group of other boys near Nathan's home off Larkspur Road one day, Alex calls out "Nathan!" and we head over. Alex and I have just been to the school fair, but when Alex says this, Nathan says, "It was boring." Another boy says, "No, it was good." Alex says, "Yeah, it was good", and they chat about it briefly. Afterwards, I ask Alex who the boys were, and he tells me, "The one on the bike – that's Nathan. The other boys – I don't know. I only just met them."

As we moved through the temporally and spatially unfolding landscape, Alex's ambivalent and tentative approach to unfolding uncertainty, and to the landscape's potential threats, can be seen as consistent with Ingold's (2011) notion of 'wayfaring', and the gaining of skilled practice through an embodied responsiveness to one's environment. In a similar way to that noted by Dyson (2015) of youth herders in India, being cognisant of potential dangers means that

although sometimes playing and sometimes getting bored, children's spontaneous and improvised wanderings involve an intensity of alertness, learning and memory-formation. As Dyson further notes, critiquing Ingold's generalised, apolitical approach, wayfaring does not occur consistently across the life course. For her participants, age and gender were important factors, in that patriarchal relations made wayfaring difficult for older girls. Whilst there is also a gendered aspect to children's wanderings in contemporary 'western' societies (e.g. Matthews, 2003), what is more relevant to my practices with Alex is the relation between accumulated experience and 'wayfaring'. Over the course of a year and a half, the more immediate area around Alex's home became less cagily approached, less remarked upon, whilst, as our scope of movement increased, 'wayfaring' came to characterise our approach to the peripheral reaches of our explorations. In this sense, we can observe how there is a gradual transformation of movement from 'wayfaring' to 'transport' – that is, a focus on getting from one place to another (cf. Ingold, 2011) – as knowledge and familiarity are gained, and perceptions of risk diminish.

**Maps and plans: ideal imaginings**

Later, I describe how children 'told' the landscape as we walked. First, however, I consider how the landscape appeared as conjured up in the imagination. Through children's imaginings, we can see how temporal and spatial separation from its immediate experience allowed the landscape to be represented in ideal form, just as post hoc narratives and aspirational statements were often optimistically told, as discussed. I begin with a map Alex drew for me, after an outing in which I had become confused. We had set out from Alex's house in the 'wrong' direction to the usual route we took, but as we were about to turn back, Alex says, "Actually, we can go this way to the park too." I don't understand how this can be

the case, but sure enough, we end up at the park, albeit entering through a different entrance. Returning home, I ask Alex to help me make a map (overleaf)[35].

What the map presents, in idealised form, is the neighbourhood as a landscape of exciting destinations, linked together through known paths, and always with the possibility for returning home, a place that represents safety and rest. That it was the destinations, rather than movement, that was central to going out could be seen in the boys' frequent questions of "Where are we going?" or "Where shall we go next?" Thus, whilst Ingold's (2011) discussion of 'wayfaring', and Christensen's (2003) of children's movement through the landscape, emphasise the action of walking, for my participants, this was not what was important at all. In the opening excerpt, Alex proposes going cycling, something that could be regarded as an activity in itself. Thus, when Ethan asks where we're going, Alex says, "nowhere" – cycling around the block and experiencing the exhilaration of informally racing, of the daring involved in dropping down from pavement to road, and of the speed at which places flash by, provided its own drama. By contrast, when walking, and in planning trips on foot, the action of walking was never specified, and indeed I make a mistake one day, in highlighting it. Alex asks what I would prefer to do: "We could go to the shop… or we could go to Larkspur first. Which do you prefer?"

[35] Of course, this map represents the boundaries of our movements at this particular time. Later in the year, we go further afield – to Marlowe Park, and to Charlie's house, a 15-minute cycle ride away.




*Alex's map (names edited)*

"I don't mind."

"It's your choice," says Alex.

"Erm," I say, and then thinking that we usually spend most of the time walking about, suggest, "We could just walk?"

Alex looks at me with something like bafflement and annoyance, as if questioning why on earth we would want to 'just walk'. "Let's go to the shop," he decides. Walking was the default option, but it was never the point of the exercise.

Ironically, the only time the term 'walking' was verbally privileged was when, at the start of Year 6, the phrase "let's walk!" became popular amongst the girls at Lowell to signify private *talking*. "Let's walk!" would be followed by grabbing the arm of a friend, and marching away from wider group goings-on or play, and whilst it *did* involve walking (around the perimeter of the field or back and forth over a patch of playground), what really mattered was that it signalled that one had something important, exclusive and secret to be discussed, with a chosen other. In its purposiveness, it suggested excitement, drama and maturity – and in line with the notion of it being something older girls did, seemed to be precipitated by an imagination of "what Year 6s do" (cf. Alexander's (2010) 'age imaginaries'), perhaps in opposition to group play, although it didn't replace this.

Rather than use the term 'walk', then, Alex would suggest "going out" or, more specifically, "going to" somewhere, like the shop, the park, Tesco, The Cross, Larkspur, or to "knock for [a friend]" (i.e. knock on their door to see if they wanted to come out to play). And, even when cycling, after a while, a destination had to be proposed, as when Alex decides, "Let's go to the shop!" If it was destinations that my participants emphasised, then it is appropriate that we start with these. Broadly speaking, destinations included friends' houses, shops and parks,

and I describe each of these in turn, explaining how they were *ideally portrayed*, and how they were *actually approached* when going out.

On each of my visits, we would often attempt to call round at friends' houses, including Jasmine's, Mike and Pete's, Ella's, Ben's, Ollie's and Jessica's. Wulff (1988) describes how her youth club girls' actions were driven by a desire for 'excitement', in particular that to be derived from hanging out on the street, going to discos and interacting with members of the opposite sex. For my younger participants, seeking out friends was a search for 'happenings' in which one might get caught up. This was equally something that took place in the playground at school, where children flitted around between the conversations and games of different groups so that group compositions were constantly changing, at the same time as groups themselves moved around in search of happenings. Children seemed to be adept at spotting friends through the bustle of moving crowds, where I always had problems doing so. The landscape for children thus appeared to be one populated by others to whom one might gravitate, in the hope of finding fun, excitement and drama.

Yet, frequently, on our actual excursions, these places didn't live up to expectations. For a start, in the vast majority of cases, our attempts to 'knock for' friends proved futile: they were not at home or weren't allowed out. Further, friends' houses often turned out to be uncertain places, as when the door was answered by unfamiliar others (like the unknown dog-sitter we meet at Mike and Pete's one day, who tells us "They're all out") or less-than-friendly ones, like Ethan's nan (who Alex says "doesn't like me"). This uncertainty perhaps explains why having proposed the destination in the first place, Alex is tentative when we actually arrive outside a door. Looking about for clues, he frequently says, "Nah, the car's not there so I don't think they're in" or "The gate's locked so they won't be in". Or going to Jessica's, he says, "Its

number 1-1-7". Counting down the numbers, we pass 119, and then 115. Alex says, "I think it's this one," of the house in between, asking me, "Shall I knock?"

"Yeah."

Alex says, "But I'm not sure. Where's the number? Are you sure it's 1-1-7?"

The ownership of mobile phones[36] made it possible to arrange meeting in a park or just outside friends' houses (for example, Charlie would sometimes phone to say that he'd arrived outside Alex's, and we would go out to meet him rather than Charlie come inside). However, when going out, knocking was still the most common means of seeking out friends, with Alex frequently telling me that friends' mobiles were off, lost, broken or confiscated.

Equally, having invited friends to come outside, their company could become tiresome. For example, soon after the passage in the opening excerpt, Alex gets annoyed with Ethan after he and I have a long one-to-one conversation. Referencing Ethan's curfew, he says, "Don't you have to go now? It's definitely been half an hour." Similarly, another time, we've been at Charlie's house playing 'South Park: Stick of Truth' on the PlayStation, and Charlie and I have been conversing about the characters with whom Alex isn't familiar. As such, whilst the buoyant sociality of a bigger crowd is usually attractive, here, Alex seems to get bored, and makes our excuses to leave. "Come on Black Ops later – when we get back, yeah?" he says. We're on our way back when Alex's phone rings. "Bet I know who *this* is!" says Alex. "Yep, it is."

"Charlie?"

[36] According to Alex, from the start of my fieldwork, nearly all of his friends possessed their own mobile phone (although this may have been an optimistic representation). At Lowell, mobile phone ownership seemed low to start with, but increased over the course of Years 5 and 6. Nevertheless, as this point makes clear, phones were frequently out of use, even if they were owned – at least at this age.

"Yep. See?" Here, he references an incident earlier in the day when Charlie asks me, "Will you add me on Minecraft?" Alex mouths, "No!" and later tells me, "Don't add Charlie, 'cause he'll call you *all* the time!"

Alex continues, "He phones me non-stop! 'Are you on Black Ops? Are you on Black Ops?' I'm like, 'No!' and I put the phone down. I jut told him a lie. I said we was going home and I'd call him when we got there. I'm not telling him we're going to the park 'cause otherwise he's gonna say, 'See you there!' and I've had enough of him for the day!"

However, this did not *only* occur in situations of feeling left out. Alex often found friends 'annoying' after a while, and made conscious efforts to move away from them. Yet, soon after, looking for something to do, we would call round on them again. In other words, friends become tiresome, even though their sociality is often desperately sought and desired, and our walking circles track this movement.

The map is therefore an idealisation in that it marks potential excitement and security that is not in any way guaranteed. Yet, in drawing it, and on other occasions when listing all the friends we've knocked for, Alex always seemed satisfied, saying proudly, "I think that's everywhere! I've taken you *everywhere* in Firsby!" Here, then, Alex represents his friends' houses as all of the places worth visiting in the neighbourhood, and is pleased to have shown me all of them, in the enjoyable expression and sharing of his knowledge. Further, in drawing on the map the routes connecting friends' houses with other places and his own home, he claims an ability to control for himself his participation and autonomy. The paths offer a route to excitement, as well as a route back to the less consciously stated desire for distance and respite.

The shops, meanwhile, were unambiguously exciting destinations, and every time I came to visit, Alex and I frequented "the shop", the Londis convenience store closest to his home. For example, inside Londis for the first time, Alex takes me to the chocolate section. "Here are the M&M's!" he says, "I like the brown ones."

"Yeah," I agree, "I don't like the peanut ones. What're the blue?" I ask, of the blue bags.

"They're 'crispy shells'. They do big packs round here!" he says proudly.

"Do you want one of those then?"

"Yeah. And I think I'll get something for my mum and dad too."

"What does your mum like?

"My mum likes this, I think," Alex says, picking up a Wispa, "And my dad likes Yorkie."

He searches for the Yorkies. I'm looking at a particular bar of chocolate I haven't seen before ('Cadbury's Marvellous Creations'). "They're chocolate," says Alex. "They're really nice! You should get those!"

"Nah, I'm okay. I might get some sweets though."

Alex follows me to the sweets section. "You can get mini hamburgers! Down there!" He points to a plastic barrel in which swim hundreds of tiny, individually boxed sweet-hamburgers. I laugh.

"What's your favourite sweets?" I ask.

"Erm," says Alex, contemplating the shelves. "Millions," he decides, "But they don't have the flavour I like."

"What flavour's that?" I ask, rummaging through the packs of Millions – tiny pink chewy balls.

"Bubblegum."

"I might get this," I say, picking up a sherbet 'Dip Dab' pouch. "Actually, I don't know what to get – a Refresher [chewy] bar, or a Dip Dab."

“Why don't you get both?” suggests Alex.

“Yeah, I don't know if I want both.”

“That's only 40p and that's only 20p. Actually, that one’s only 14p.”

“Yeah, I think I prefer this. Oh, I'll get both. You done?”

We move away from the sweets towards the front of the shop where the till is, but Alex wanders over to the chiller cabinet, pondering over the drinks. “I don’t know what to get…”

“What's your favourite?” I ask.

“It's that one there,” he says, pointing to the Volvic Juice, “But it's £1 here. It's cheaper in the supermarket. I think… I'll get this,” he says, picking up a bottle of Oasis, “’Cause it's only a pound. It says £1.19 there,” he says pointing to the shelf label, “But if it says £1 here,” he indicates the label on the bottle that says ‘Special offer, £1’, “They can only charge you a pound.”

We go to the till, piling our things onto the counter, and Alex asks, “Excuse me, is this £1?”

“Yes, yes,” says the man, checking the items through the till. Alex looks pleased. Outside, we stand in the sunshine and open our bag, deciding what to eat first.

“I’m going to have this,” says Alex, opening a chocolate bar, “And a drink.”

“I’m going to have the crisps,” I say.

We wander back down the road, Alex swinging the bag that he’s volunteered to carry, as we gleefully discuss how each of the things we’ve bought tastes. Then Alex remembers, “Shall we see if my other friends are in then?”

“Yeah. Larkspur Road, right?”

“Yeah,” says Alex, passing me the M&M’s. “It's just down here.”

The shops delighted in their offerings of food, and fantasies of video game acquisition. I

describe the latter in the next chapter, including the window-shopping and purchasing trips we made to the large Tesco Extra in Firsby Cross, and to video game shops in neighbouring towns, towards the latter end of my fieldwork. On these trips, my participants seemed happy simply to imagine owning particular video games, and to tell others about what they liked, wanted or were 'going to' get. Sharing in gaming desires and dreams created a sense of bonding and togetherness, but so too did sharing in the (sometimes illicit[37]) consumption of confectionery and fast food: chocolate, crisps, sweets, soft drinks and ice cream; plus food from KFC, McDonalds, Subway and Greggs. Unlike in James' (1979) findings, my participants often bought regular chocolates, rather than the 'rubbish' sweets her participants ate in subversion of adult food practices. Given contemporary adult ambivalences around food, my participants' practices seemed to be more a subversion of adult control over timing. Further, though, they were enjoyed for the sensations they produced and intensity of their tastes: "Mmm – this is so nice!" Eating confectionery as we walked down the street was a performance of our autonomy from the adult timetable, but it also propelled us on our movements through the neighbourhood as, buoyed by the sugar rush produced, we went on our way with newfound energy.

The eating of extreme-tasting items, like the intensely sour 'Toxic Waste' sweets Lena (at Lowell) distributed to friends at Guides, was also revelled in for the reactions produced, which created a sense of drama and humour. The appeal of turning mundane foodstuffs into dramatic acts of humour could be seen in the popularity of 'reaction videos' on YouTube, like that of comedian GloZell[38], whose videos Lena and Alex had saved onto their MP4 player/tablet, and showed to me. In GloZell's posts, she films herself doing various

[37] For example, at one point, Liz told me of a diet Alex was on, which involved not eating sweets, and that he'd been very good about it. When we go to buy sweets, I ask Alex about this, but he tells me he's allowed them on weekends – something that seemed unlikely, although I didn't question it.
[38] An American YouTuber. As of August 2014, her 'cinnamon challenge' video had 40 million views.

'challenges', mostly involving food and drink, and including, most famously, the 'cinnamon challenge', which involves trying to swallow a spoonful of ground cinnamon in under 60 seconds. What evidently appealed about GloZell's performance was her hugely exaggerated reaction, replete with coughing, gagging and screaming, in an ensuing melee of drama. As with their dramatic stories, children recognised that there was no dividing line between reality and drama in performance, and that it was possible to wilfully create drama that was simultaneously real. Further, this was DIY humour that children could replicate themselves[39], as with Lena's Toxic Wastes and when Alex, Charlie and I engaged in the Doritos Roulette[40] challenge a little while after my fieldwork ended, which Charlie filmed for YouTube. As has been shown in many instances (e.g. Carsten, 1995), sharing food is an important means of sustaining sociality; for my participants, such practices came to be meaningful through a sharing in both bodily gratification and desires for fun, drama and excitement.

[39] This applied not just to humour, but to other practices that could be 'learnt' online, such as how to make loom-bands (elastic band bracelets) or build things on the computer/video game, Minecraft.
[40] Doritos Roulette is a version of Doritos brand tortilla chips, in which one crisp in every handful is supposed to be extra spicy; the rest are cheese flavoured.



*Watching GloZell's 'cinnamon challenge'*

A notable omission from Alex's map is the park – surprisingly so, given that this was the default destination and place we frequented the most, such that "Shall we go to the park?" was tantamount to code for going out per se. The park was the place to meet or go to with friends, to play football, and to eat food. Shops could only entertain for limited periods, and when in possession of money. Meanwhile, the difficulties of getting parental consent for friends (particularly more than one at a time) to come round to one's house meant that the park was the obvious place to meet – one of the few places in which children could hang out without censure. As such, the park often acted as justification and smokescreen for indulging in other activities, with Alex telling his mum that we were *just* going to the park, omitting mention of the shops. Moreover, it was probably just seen to have been the main place we went to – a focal point around which we pivoted, between seeking out friends or food. In fact, there was something of a moral etiquette around eating, in which Alex and his friends saw the park as the proper place to consume food that wasn't just confectionary. Thus, on one occasion, when

I purchase some lunch from Londis, Alex and Ethan give me inquisitorial looks when I start eating outside the shop. “Do you not want to eat it in the park?” I am asked. Equally, on another occasion, after purchasing chicken wraps from KFC, Alex tells me, “I’m gonna wait ‘til we get to the park.”

> I say, “I might eat mine now, before it gets cold.”
>
> “Nah, it won’t get cold – this bag’s warm, feel it!” Alex puts his hand on the special wrapper. “Look!”

Yet, the park was a chameleon-like destination, its desirability fluctuating with changes in the social landscape. Thus, whilst going there with friends could be fun, at other times, it didn’t seem to hold much interest, and frequently, we would arrive only to set off again moments later. And at other times still, the park, like the streets that we negotiated to get to various destinations, could be wholly less than desirable – populated with ‘bullies’ like Ryan, and other ambiguous characters. As such, I suggest that the park’s omission from Alex’s map is understandable because the park was *not* an ideal place, but simply representative of the ambiguous outside.

Imagining the neighbourhood in an ideal way was similarly the case with planning trips, in anticipation of their occurrence. Alex would frequently phone me to discuss forthcoming visits, telling me of the places we could or would be going to, and in what order. Whether or not this schedule came to pass seemed to matter less than the anticipatory excitement generated by planning. In other words, my participants seemed to implicitly understand that telling things in a certain way *was* truth: excitement was *already present* in planning, irrespective of the later panning out of events. The telling of plans was thus enjoyed as an activity in itself, and for the things it expressed about the teller: their knowledge in being able to list desirable destinations; their agency in being able to make such actions a possibility; and

their popularity (or inter-subjective power), in being able to gather multiple friends around one. And of course, as with the optimistic telling of career aspirations, such 'tellings' had an inter-subjective power in themselves, in their 'effect' on me, as listener, in my understandings of who Alex was, and in wanting to be his friend.

That the telling of plans was more important than their coming to pass can be seen in the following example. It's a couple of day before we're meant to be meeting, when Alex phones, saying, "Can you come before 2, 'cause I think we're going to meet my friend at The Cross." On the day, Alex asks Liz to drop us at Firsby Cross, as she's going there anyway. In the car, she tells Alex, "No sweets!" We go into a few of the shops, which I assume is to bide time before meeting Tomas, and then Alex suggests going to Londis

> "What for?" I ask.
>
> Alex says, "You can get sandwiches there as well," and then, "Wait, what's the time? We're supposed to be meeting Tomas there at 2, remember?"
>
> I say that it's 1.30, and ask if we're knocking for Tomas.
>
> "No, he's meeting us here," Alex says.
>
> "At Londis or The Cross?"
>
> Alex shrugs, saying, "Either" and then "I think Londis."
>
> We head to Londis and buy some food. Outside, we eat, and wander, when I remember, "Wait, aren't we meeting Tomas?"
>
> Alex says, "No, it's okay, we'll go back to mine first, and I'll get my wallet and my phone, and we can call him, 'cause I don't know if he's coming."

So we head back, and later, Alex calls Tomas and finds out that he's grounded and can't come out. Alex doesn't seem too bothered, appearing understanding of Tomas's plight.

There are two contexts in which this planning should be understood. The first relates to the last occasion we met Tomas, which was when Tomas was visiting Ethan. On this occasion, Alex and I meet Ethan and Tomas at the school fair, following which Alex and I return home to offload some of the prizes Alex has won at the fair's tombola stall. I hadn't realised that Ethan and Tomas were waiting for us back at the fair, and when Liz offers me a cup of tea, I accept and we sit and chat for a while. Upon returning to the fair, we find out that Ethan and Tomas have left, something they apparently weren't supposed to do without Alex and I. Alex phones his mum to tell her, and when we later meet Ethan and Tomas in the park, a huge argument ensues. Alex berates Ethan for not waiting for us, whilst Ethan reprimands Alex for 'telling' and that "friends don't tell on each other". He also contends that he and Tomas had been "looking for you for ages, and it was pouring with rain!" Tomas and I don't get much involved, but as their respective guests, I am nominally supporting Alex in my body language (standing beside him), and Tomas Ethan. However, Alex tries to gain Tomas' support, asking if he wants to come to his house after. Tomas eschews a direct answer, saying, "I don't know what I'm doing. I'll see okay?" Thus, when Alex phones me with plans to meet Tomas on my subsequent visit, such plans can be seen as claims to, and shows of, friendship, as much as concrete arrangements for action.

The other, more general context is that children's plans were frequently subject to unpredictable curtailment by adults. I suggest that this significantly affects the way in which 'present' and 'future' were conceived of in speech. Whereas adults often speak of 'the future' as more unknown and uncertain than 'the present', I suggest that it was the other way around for my participants. In the telling of plans, children leveraged the flexibility of narrative to claim autonomy over their future action, in contrast to the uncertainty of their autonomy in presently unfolding time, where one could suddenly be grounded or told to stop one's activities and pack up. As with the telling of career aspirations, discussed in the previous

chapter, such 'tellings' – of ideal maps and plans – seemed to rely on notions of both continuity and disjuncture. On the one hand, claims were made in imagination of the continuous self; yet, on the other, their imagination was necessarily discontinuous in space and time from the actually uncertain and risky landscape from which they were freed.

**Telling and the foreclosure of uncertainty**

Earlier, I mentioned children's alert and responsive approach to the unfolding landscape as a kind of 'wayfaring' through it. One important aspect of this wayfaring that served to effectively foreclose the uncertainty present in the landscape was that of showing and telling places as we encountered them. For example, on the very first occasion I visit, Alex tells his mum we're going to Ethan's and to the park, and we head outside.

> "It's not very far," says Alex. As we walk along the pavement, he points to a house opposite. "That's where I went for child minding, but then the lady died."
>
> "When you were little?" I ask.
>
> "From when I was six 'til when I was nine," Alex replies.
>
> "Okay, not so long ago."
>
> "Yeah, but then she died. Cancer… I think it was a tumour."
>
> "This year some time?"
>
> "Yeah. No, last year. Now I go to Ethan's house after school." And he tells me again about how it'll be okay if Ethan's not in – we can just ask for the football.
>
> We pass another house. "Jack – Mr Gordon – is my teacher. He lives there."
>
> "Are you allowed to call him by his first name?!" I ask incredulously.
>
> "It depends. Sometimes. Not in front of the head!"

We pass a few more houses, and then Alex starts counting down, reading the house numbers out as we catch sight of each door. “It's number 13,” he says, as we pull up in front of a brick driveway.

After calling round at Ethan’s, Alex suggests knocking for Mike and Pete, and we turn right at the end of the road, crossing over, and then passing a narrow alleyway between two houses. “That's one entrance to my school,” says Alex. “Mr Jones opens this gate at quarter past. It’s much bigger around the other side though – that's only, like, a quarter of it that you can see! And that house is where Mr Jones lives.”

“Is he the caretaker?”

“Yeah… Round here…”

As can be seen from comparison with later goings-out, such as the opening excerpt, or excursions with Charlie the following year, Alex’s ‘tellings’ in this example are more thorough and detailed. Alex takes care to name, show and tell me about all of the places and people he knows of in the neighbourhood. Christensen (2003) contends that showing and telling about local places is a means by which children gain self-understanding, since their emplaced knowledge of their locality means that it cannot be separated from their personal biographies. This was certainly the case in Alex’s initial telling of the neighbourhood, as can be seen with his description of where he used to go for child minding after school. But on later excursions, talking about the neighbourhood was more about a shared biography of our friendship than it was about his own biography, as Alex pointed out places and asked if I remembered us having previously gone there.

Further, I contend that as with children’s other engagements with the landscape, the practice can be understood as another means of managing risk. This is why it was most prevalent at the start of my fieldwork, when the world outside the home was most unfamiliar. In making

the unfamiliar familiar, telling was a means to knowledge. This has parallels with the argument I made in chapter 3 about 'expressing identity', when Ellie from Guides advocates that people have a duty to 'express yourself' – so that others can know you. Just as expressing and being, i.e. action and state, were intertwined, so too were telling and knowing. In telling about places, my participants were simultaneously claiming and *realising* (as in, giving actual form to) their knowledge, thus rendering the landscape less uncertain, at the same time as they rendered themselves as knowing and competent people.

A more vicarious, dramatic form of this telling occurred when, in the apparent safety of a larger group, my participants talked up risks, only to embrace and overcome them. In the following example, which takes place on the morning after Alex's 11th birthday sleepover, Alex, Charlie and Luke decide to play 'knockdown ginger'[41] "just on Ethan", whom everyone had found 'annoying' at Alex's party. Here, in the presence of multiple others, and against a targeted 'enemy', risk is embraced as exciting, rather than threatening. Very much like the futures traders staking their reputations and sense of self on the risk-taking nature of their trading actions (cf. Zaloom, 2004), as well as the Bermondsey boys in Evans' (2010) study, the boys' embracing of risk is productive, allowing them to create a sense of mastery – but less a competitive one than a collective one. There are two timeframes involved in the process of embracing risk: in the first, some kind of action involving a perceived risk – here, of getting caught – must occur; in the second, events are told of in order to 'fix' their productivity – i.e. to create the desired effects of mastery and reputation. Thus, Luke describes to us almost getting caught (as Alex, Ethan and I described our near misses with cars to each other, in the opening excerpt). With his newfound authority, he then confers on us the desirable status of gangsters.

[41] A pranking game involving knocking on a door and running away before it is answered

"One of us should do it, and the rest should hide around the corner," says Luke. "Who's the fastest?"

Charlie and Luke have a race to the end of the road, with Alex and I continuing walking. "Lucky I have this on me!" says Alex, referring to his wheelie suitcase in which is stashed a football and some drinks. Evidently, Alex, like me, isn't keen on actually performing the deed. When we catch up with the others at the end of the road, it turns out that Luke has won the race, so it is he who goes back and runs up to Ethan's door, as the rest of us watch from behind a tree. When we see him bounding back towards us, we all flee down the next road.

"I definitely heard footsteps coming down the stairs!" yells out Luke to us gleefully. We all laugh and whoop along with the release of fear and surge of adrenalin that has accompanied both the successful act and subsequent fleeing. "It went like this: dumh…dumh…dumh!" Luke continues, revelling in the attention, as we look on with laughter and admiration. As we slow to a walk, the four of us abreast on the pavement, Luke says: "We're like gangsters: a female footballer, me with my tattoo, you with your gun, you with your Avengers suitcase thing[42]!"

We laugh. Along with the positive imagery of being 'hard' gangsters, both in our actions and in our style, it feels good to be included, to be part of an in-group.

The way in which Luke tells the tale emphasises another reason for *why* things were told, which was to create a sense of drama. Like Wulff's (1988) youth club girls, my participants had a general desire for excitement, and one way in which children generated this was through a kind of theatricality of movement, voice and expression that rendered 'tellings' of drama both performative and a performance (cf. Turner, 1986). Given that children spent much of their

[42] I play football; Luke's tattoo is a removable transfer; the gun is a toy one; Avengers is a popular American superhero film/franchise.

time in densely crowded environments, with a ready audience, there was little 'front-stage' or 'back-stage' distinction (cf. Goffman, 1959); rather, telling things dramatically was practice as much as it was performance, as noted in chapter 1.

Just one of many such 'tellings' occurred one day at after-school club, when Caitlin comes over to tell me about an incident that she has just witnessed up on the field, at football practice.

> "We heard a man and a woman arguing. I think he might have been her son or something." She pauses and then to establish her authority on the subject, she says: "Yeah, 'cause we was near the fence and we could hear them arguing. I think he might have been asking her for money or something, and then after that we heard a 'bang!'" She looks me directly in the eye, gives a little smile and says, "I think he killed her!"
>
> "Really?!" I say, in an excited and believing way. "Why do you think that?"
>
> "'Cause there was a 'bang!' It was so loud! Wasn't it, Tanisha?"
>
> She turns to Tanisha who has been nodding, and who now gives her affirmation. "Yeah."
>
> Caitlin continues, "He probably shot her 'cause I think I saw him holding a knife, and he was threatening her." She pauses to think. "Maybe the 'bang' was when her head hit against the car, 'cause they was arguing next to a car. So I think he killed her!"

Whilst Caitlin's smile spoke of a knowing sense that this was unlikely, sometimes events were told in more serious ways, whilst still emphasising their drama. In any case, the point was that things should be told to provoke a reaction in others; my participants seemed to implicitly realise that in doing so, they could catalyse a chain reaction of excitement and drama that mitigated potential boredom, and drew others towards oneself.

A series of examples, taking place later in the day after the 'spoilt' picnic involving the 'bullies', provides for further snapshots of this approach. The first is a 'telling' that occurs as Alex, Charlie, Cara and I are cycling back from Tesco. Alex tells me, "Me and Charlie played this prank on Cara yesterday. I phoned her and I was like, 'Cara, Cara, Charlie's had an accident!' And she was like, 'What? Can I speak to him?' And I was like, 'No, he can't get to the phone. Wait, the ambulance is arriving.'"

I say, "She didn't *believe* you?"

"*Yeah*, she *did*!"

"What happened *then*?"

"We never called her! So she only found out when we just saw her today!"

'Pranking' became increasingly popular as children moved through Year 6, inspired by older children and YouTube videos. In this subversive genre of humour, fun and excitement derived from the 'real' reactions of those seen as having been 'pranked' (i.e. had) by those 'in the know'.

We get to the park, and Cara leaves, as she has to go home. The children's playground only has a couple of younger children playing around the base of it, and we climb up to stake a spot in the covered hut at the top. Here, in this covert and untouchable position, Alex and Charlie chuck down empty sweet wrappers and drinks cartons, spray lemonade everywhere, and mock the younger kids below. "Come on, *children*! Free crisps!" Charlie yells, in the style of a circus master. "And *granddad*!" Then, revelling our daring, Charlie makes a YouTube video, as if to 'fix' our invulnerability. "This is Alex," he says, filming Alex swinging back from the safety bar and making crazed noises. "This is Anne-Marie," he says. I pull a face. "And this is me," he points the camera at himself.

Some time later, we're spinning on the roundabout in the playground, when Alex notices a woman nearby, talking on her phone.

"That woman's calling the police on us!" he whispers.

"No, she isn't," says Charlie.

"Yeah she is, 'cause she was looking at us as she was dialling!" insists Alex. "Look at her face! She's butters [ugly]! Bud bud, ding ding[43]!"

In these examples of closely knitted action and narrative, my participants constituted the notion of risk only to prove themselves masters of it. In telling of their pranking antics, Alex tells of his and Charlie's collusion, of their superior knowledge (relative to be person being 'pranked') and of their daring in carrying it out. In the apparent safety of the high-up hut, Alex and Charlie show their daring vis-à-vis the younger children and parents below, writing over the earlier encounter with Ryan through assertions of control. Meanwhile, in telling of an ambiguous adult stranger in the children's play area as being a police informant, the boys simultaneously constitute her as enemy (like Ethan in knockdown ginger), at the same time as they show themselves capable of overcoming her threat. Through their derision of her in visual and racist terms, they gain control of the situation and ridicule any notion of her as being potentially threatening. In telling of risk, embracing it, and overcoming it through action and narrative, my participants thus constituted themselves as knowledgeable, competent, courageous and effectual.

Further, telling was not restricted to present or post hoc encounters, but was used to predict the landscape going forward. Here, knowledge of the future (in terms of the landscape yet to unfold) was predicated on past experience, and thus appeared to be an extreme demonstration of knowledge, and thus control. For example, as we walk down Avondale Road

[43] Earlier, Charlie and Alex had told me that this term "means Indian".

one day, Alex says, “I predict that that’s Larkspur!” Indeed, it *is* Larkspur, and Alex is pleased, saying, “Yes! I predicted that this would be Larkspur and it was!” On another occasion, we have chained up our bikes at Alex’s school, and go to retrieve them before 4pm, as this is the time the school gates will be closed. Later in the day, passing the locked school gates, Alex says, “Phew! Lucky we picked up our bikes earlier!” as if surprised that the gates are locked, even though it was always in our plans to pick them up earlier. And another time, Alex says, “I predicted it would rain when we came out! It stops when we go in and starts when we come out. I said that it would!”

Of course, the last example contains a familiar noting of irony, in the way in which the weather seems to change to spite one’s plans. Yet the former two appear somewhat odd. Predicting that something will be the case when it is a knowable fact (even if one doesn’t know it) is not something usually intoned by adults. For Alex, however, whether a road will be where he thinks it is, or whether the school gates will be shut when they are supposed to be, are all matters of uncertainty equal to the unpredictability of the weather. Rather than dividing external objects into things of which one can be certain (where a road is located) and uncertain (the weather), as separate from one’s knowledge set, Alex suggests that it is the external landscape that is uncertain, but able to be known by him through his telling (or ‘predictions’ – a kind of magical knowledge of the future). Of course, the difference could be semantic – a particular use of the terms ‘prediction’ and ‘lucky’ – but I suggest that they can tell us something about the place of knowledge, uncertainty and future for children. This is that differentiation between the self as a locus of knowledge and the landscape as external is not so acute as adults understand it to be; and thus, that the landscape shares responsibility in being uncertain, even as one claims some control over it through practices of knowing and telling.

This strikes a chord with notions of Aboriginal knowledge of the landscape, as examined by anthropologists, such as Munn (1970). Writing about the Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara, Munn explores a complex contemporary understanding of the objective world as being a reversal of the process by which the ancestors created the country. The land is an inalienable aspect of contemporary humans, since they are brought into being through the country, which consists of the atemporal objectifications of the ancestors, created through their movement and dreaming in mythic times. For children, there is also a sense in which the landscape is already constituted of named features created by all-powerful adults in an unknowable (atemporal) period. And, as in Christensen's (2003) point, children effectively come into being through the country: their local environment often really is an inalienable aspect of their lives, through which they learn about themselves. Munn argues that understanding the country to be objectifications of the ancestors is not derived from a failure to distinguish subject-object relations, but is an institutionalised means of understanding 'the separation of self from external reality and the reincorporation of self into the external world' – in other words, how each person's understanding of the world is infused with their subjective life experiences (something 'western' adults struggle to understand, as Bender (2002) notes). For the Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara, then, there is perhaps not the same deep-seated folk notion of knowledge as residing in one's (the subject's) mind, separate from the (subjective) action of divulging this knowledge (of the objective world) that so characterises contemporary 'western' adult ideas about knowledge.

For my participants, this makes sense when one thinks about two contexts that frame children's everyday lives. The first is the ostensibly external power of adults to decree things as fact or knowledge, even when these things are not necessarily objective facts (as adults would define them). A simple example would be the telling of an arbitrary time as the time at which one ought to go to bed "because otherwise I *know* you'll be tired tomorrow". The

second is the notion that there is a power to telling also available to children – in its most obvious sense, when 'telling on' others to a teacher or authority (something that features strongly in children's imaginations). For children, then, I would argue that predictions like the ones made by Alex were less the product of subject-object confusion than the purposeful bringing of external uncertainty under one's subjective control that children practically (if not consciously) recognise to be possible through the optimistic telling of the future, in which uncertainty is written out through their autonomous actions. Because telling is knowing, and knowing has power, Alex is not wrong in assuming that he has control over the environment by telling it – as his predictions show. He is able to control – to a degree – the uncertainty of the outside, through telling.

Further, as noted in the previous chapter, optimistic tellings had a productive, inter-subjective power. With regards to the landscape, telling of one's knowledge was the means by which one could gain further knowledge and autonomy, since adults tended to require proof of competence in making allowances for further movement and independence. Thus, in successfully communicating his competence to Liz, Alex is able to extend the locus of his knowledge and control (over his own movement) by being allowed further afield. And, in relation to friends, having superior knowledge and skill in negotiating a particular landscape enabled one to exhibit authority over, as well as care for, others in certain situations – constituting oneself as a person worth knowing. Thus, in the opening excerpt, and as occurred on numerous occasions, Alex's shouts of "Don't know where *you're* going!" or "*This* way!" allowed him to subvert the desirability of speed, through his authority on the route. Telling of/as knowledge thus had productive potential.

In this chapter, then, I have tried to demonstrate the ways in which my participants constituted themselves through their tellings of the landscape outside the home. I have

argued that in their encounters with the unfolding landscape, they were tentative, maintaining a calm ambivalence in order to control potential threats as they arose. This stands in contrast to the ideal representations of landscape and selves imagined in maps and advance planning. Meanwhile, in order to mitigate risk on a more ad hoc basis, my participants engaged in telling the landscape as it unfolded. Further, through summoning risks only to overcome them, and through predicting the landscape before it arose, they foreclosed temporal uncertainty and simulated their mastery of space and time. In doing so, they exacted control over the landscape, whilst simultaneously producing themselves as knowledgeable, competent and courageous persons.

## Chapter 5 | Playing video games: Biographies in construction

*"I'm playing this sick[44] game!" says Charlie. We're on Skype and I can see his eyes darting about in the flickering glow of my little phone screen. Although I'm seeing him square on, Charlie isn't looking at me: his rapt attention is on the flashes of gunfire that I see lighting up his face. And then: "Do you want to see?" he asks excitedly, turning his camera around so that snippets of Charlie, his chair, desk and screen flash by in a pixelated blur of technological lag. "Can you see? Wait… Is that better? Can you see the screen?" He adjusts the angle of the camera up and down until it's fully centred, and then, suddenly, I'm seeing what he's seeing: a rain-lashed gun-metal grey landscape that abruptly dives towards us as Charlie un-pauses and the gameplay rushes forward.*

*"Have you played zombies?" he asks. He means Call of Duty: Black Ops II, zombies mode. I first hear the term used at school, in a Maths lesson in my first week, and talk of 'zombies' or 'Black Ops' peppers the entirety of my fieldwork, at least amongst the boys I know.*

> *"Yeah," I say, "but I'm rubbish. I played with Alex and I killed three, and he killed 61!" I'm referring to the last time I played it, on my most recent visit to Alex's house.*
>
> *"Do you have a PS3[45]?" asks Charlie.*
>
> *"No," but quickly add, "But my brother has."*
>
> *"Okay, cool," says Charlie, "Does he have zombies?"*
>
> *"I'm not sure – I think so."*
>
> *"This map is sick! Get him to get this map pack!" exhorts Charlie. "It's the best so far – it's got so many areas!" He explains: "It's set in the First World War. It's the oldest in time because all the others are set in the future, but it's the newest one. I've got all*

[44] I.e. great

[45] PlayStation 3. Amongst my participants, the PS3 appeared to be the most widely owned and played console, followed by the Xbox 360 and then the Wii. The PlayStation Portable (PSP) was also popular. Computers, and later tablets and phones, were also used to access and play games.

*the map packs, but this is the best. There's… six of them, I think. There's the original – the one that comes with the game – and this one, and…"*

*He describes the other 'map packs' – add-ons you can buy. They're different terrains in which you can play the game, all set in different periods of time, in different wars. "Some of them aren't that good," he qualifies. And then, referring to the one he's playing again, "It's just come out. It's good isn't it?"*

*I concur. He's still playing all the while, his chirrupy voice incongruous against the rip-roar of gunfire, explosions and the unearthly howls of the goggling, gangly-limbed zombies. I'm listening as I watch the view on the screen arc around to scout out danger and then lurch forward through a nightmare vision of trench warfare, all mud and gloom and claustrophobic darkness.*

*"It's well scary, especially no-man's-land!"*

*"Oh, is that beyond the fence?" I ask uncertainly.*

*"Err, it's through a door," replies Charlie. "You basically go through a door and you're in no-man's-land. Wait, I'll show you – I just have to…" he cuts off as zombies appear from all crevices of the screen, closing in rapidly. "Oh, there's so many zombies! Ohh, everyone else died! It's just me!"*

*"Oh, you're playing with other people?" I say, realising this for the first time.*

*"Yeah," replies Charlie, as he blasts out a torrent of bullets before turning and fleeing.*

*"Friends or just random people online?" I ask, as he reaches a calm spot. Signing on to the PlayStation Network (PSN) allows you to play with friends or anyone else online in multiplayer co-op mode.*

*"Yeah," says Charlie, indicating the latter. "I don't know them. It's better playing with friends 'cause most of these people aren't very good. When I play with my friends, we get really far. We've been all over, basically."*

*"Everywhere?!" I marvel, impressed.*

*"Yeah… Okay," he says, commentating on the action, "This is no-man's-land – see this door… and I go through it… and…"*

*The landscape has expanded from the dank sandbagged enclosure of the trenches to the vast expanse of no-man's-land. Instead of emerging from disused wooden sheds, or looming from around corners, zombies materialize like wil o wisps from the thick, close fog. "It's got these wooden boards you can walk on," says Charlie, navigating swiftly along the paths that emerge from the gloom. "I like following these 'cause you can get about easily."*

*"The mud looks really realistic," I say, imagining falling off the narrow boards and into the choking grey-brown liquid all about, from which zombies periodically rise without warning.*

*"Yeah it is," says Charlie, "and it's harder to walk on it – you get stuck… Oh," he says suddenly, "See these? Did you see that? There's these giant robots that walk around and if they land on you, you get crushed." I've missed them, so Charlie says, "When I die, I'll show you the beginning and you'll see it then."*

*He ploughs on, dispatching scores of zombies before finally succumbing to a mass appearing from everywhere. The view flashes crimson then greys out. Charlie restarts and we watch the title sequence: we're in Northern France, 1918. German scientists looking for a breakthrough in the war unwittingly unleash zombies for the first time…*




*Playing 'zombies' (title screen, and the zombies and giant robot from Charlie's map-pack)*





The second everyday practice through which I explore the tension between children's 'being' and 'becoming' is video gaming. Video games were a huge part of the lives of the boys in my field, both practically and ideologically. Practically, video gaming constituted one of the key activities they engaged in[46], whether with friends or by themselves. Ideologically, the console was fetishised, and ownership and competence became central aspects of their biographies. This gives us insight into the way in which temporality was represented and experienced by my participants. Firstly, I discuss my participants' various ways of playing, with regards to the practice of leisure-time management and the temporal orientation of gaming. Secondly, as in previous chapters, I show how telling one's knowledge and one's aspirations implicated biographical time, and notions of continuity and change. This occurred through key events like the acquisition of a console, and particular games. It was also noted through the reaching of particular milestones in the practice of gaming, as tracked by game statistics. In this way, I argue that although gaming is often viewed in opposition to education, in fact, the 'progress' markers employed by many games are similar to those used in the school system, through which children also monitor their progress. These numerical forms of accounting, encountered on a daily basis in their play and work, are what children often employ in accounting for themselves – relative to others, and over time.

[46] This appeared to cut across other interests – thus, video games were apparently enjoyed irrespective of sportiness, academic interest, etc. At primary school, it was boys who were seen (by both boys and girls) as being interested in video gaming, despite Lena confessing to me (but telling me not to tell others) that she enjoyed playing PlayStation. Cara (Year 7) openly enjoyed gaming – although apparently FIFA (football), more than first-person shooters like Call of Duty. Both boys and girls enjoyed playing the Wii game 'Just Dance' at school, and games on handheld consoles and phones were also universally popular.

**Ways of playing: everyday approaches to time management**

Every time I went to Alex's home, we would play PlayStation, although whether or not this was anticipated as a significant activity depended on the situation. On some occasions, such as when Alex had recently acquired a new game, play would be planned and looked forward too: "We can try out my new game later!" As I later describe with respect to children's biographical narrations, the notion of playing a *new* game, recently acquired, had special meaning. Similarly, at Alex's birthday parties, video game play would be regarded as central to the occasion, not least because it allowed for a type of play that was unusual – social group play between a large number of friends[47]. Thus, Alex would exclaim, excitedly, "My friend's going to bring his controllers, so we'll have four, and then we can all play zombies at the same time!" By contrast, on most of my visits, going out in the neighbourhood, as described in the previous chapter, would be seen as the main thing we did, with video gaming filling in the gaps between our multiple excursions.

Jenkins (1998) argues that open-ended video 'game-worlds', like that of Call of Duty, allow for boys' continuing enjoyment of exploration, mapping and mastery given declining opportunities for 'traditional' outdoor play. I would agree that this certainly seemed to be the case on the frequent occasions when children had no friends around to meet up with outside. Yet, to qualify this, for Alex and his friends, explorative gameplay did not *replace* exploration of the outside so much as provide for a safe *respite* from it, and for the opportunity to rest and recuperate before going out again, as I describe below. Whilst the outside was exciting, children also perceived it to be risky, as described in chapter 4. In contrast, games benefitted from the 'save' feature and an avatar's ability to 'respawn' (i.e. come back to life) easily (as noted by Juul, 2004), which allowed for exploration at minimal risk. Game-worlds thus

[47] Having more than one or two friends round outside of birthday parties was rare, which is (one reason) why birthdays were so special

afforded advantages of autonomy, action, excitement and control – but this was enjoyed in complement to going outside, whenever this was possible.

Playing games to fill time resonates with several researchers' findings that a significant reason for play is 'something to do when bored' (e.g. Olson, 2010). Providing a typology of levels of engagement with gaming, Itō and Bittanti (2010) suggest children differentially play in order to 'kill time'; 'hang out' socially; play 'recreationally' (by which they mean in a more invested way in the gameplay); 'organise and mobilise' committed gaming groups; and 'augment' play (using cheats or 'modding'). However, boredom alleviation and 'killing time' somewhat overstate a sense of negation, I think. For my participants, playing video games was *always* a desirable activity to engage in, rather than a last resort. And it would always be suggested *as an activity*, even if filling time between other activities. Thus, when outside, Alex might suggest, "Shall we go back and play 'zombies'?" Or, in response to, "Dinner will be ready in 15 minutes, Alex!" the suggestion, "Shall we play FIFA?" This contrasts with the even more micro-level time filling that occurred when, for example, waiting for video games to load. Here, as the screen said 'loading', Alex would switch on music, or get out his tablet or laptop to play a quick game or check Facebook. This kind of activity was not proposed in advance but appeared almost like a reflex action to waiting, often resulting in a complex series of multitasking as platforms became ready at different moments.

In proposing video gaming to fill time, children seemed to be actively managing externally imposed temporal schedules, which were often set according to clock-time, by eschewing waiting in favour of playing. Games could roughly be matched to the time duration available, as different games could be played over longer or shorter durations (e.g. exploring a map on Call of Duty or playing a FIFA (football) match, whose time could be set as short as three minutes, respectively). But once playing, the game generated a different temporal mode –

one of anticipation and excitement that was in direct contrast to the time-dragging experience of waiting. A key aspect of this is to do with the way in which the player becomes tethered to the action occurring on the screen, in an anticipatory aspect. Atkins (2006) describes this as 'the game gaze', centred on the player 'within a matrix of future possibilities' that act as a 'prompt to action'. This contrasts with watching someone else play, something that could be enjoyed for limited periods of time, for fun and to learn – as when Alex watches instructional or humorous YouTube videos of others' play (for example, "they show you how to make buildings on Minecraft"). Yet, after a while it was easy to lose attention. In play, by contrast, the player becomes caught up in a dynamic world of his own creation, in which he is at the heart of the action.

*Watching a YouTube video of how to build a house in Minecraft*



There was an even more disengaged way in which the boys played, often by themselves, which Alex described as 'chilling out' or 'relaxing', and which I suggest involves a literal 'time

out' from ordinary time. This is how Alex described most of his play, when I interview him towards the end of my research. Asking him to fill in a pie chart of what he does each day and week, he lists his favourite pastime as 'just chilling', and when I ask what this involves, he replies, "Playing on my PS3."

"Playing by yourself or with other people?" I ask.

"By myself," says Alex. "Relaxing."

Not far into the 'interview', Alex gets bored, asking if he can play on his PlayStation whilst answering my questions. Here, he demonstrates precisely what 'just chilling' means. In contrast to how we usually play together, he plays 'Call of Duty: Ghosts' on single player mode with the sound turned off, moving almost unidirectionally through the terrain, his face expressionless. Although, of course, the 'interview' setting – and Alex's apparent boredom with it (see chapter 2) – rendered this a special circumstance, the way in which Alex played during this time appeared to resonate with his description of playing as 'relaxing'. This was similar to when the boys Skyped me whilst playing PlayStation after school or on weekend mornings, often in their rooms and out of the gaze of parents, who would themselves be relaxing in front of the television in the living room, or having a lie-in. On these occasions, the calm form that their single player play took seemed to be a means for the boys to indulge in time to themselves, allowing them a break from the demands of school and family life. In contrast to its provision for dynamism in social situations, the forward pull of the gameplay (cf. Juul, 2005) can be seen here as gently sweeping the boys along without excessive concentration or exertion.

I suggest that in a lot of their other activities children were aware of the constraints of external abstract clock-time, such as at school in lessons, where constant reference was made to how long children had in which to complete a task. At lunchtimes too, children would sometimes ask me to tell them the time, as they needed to go to a meeting or scheduled activity. Out of

school, scheduling was more relaxed, but was still a factor in various activities, such as making it to the cinema or to after-school clubs on time, or in terms of how long children were allowed outside for (see, for example, the opening excerpt of chapter 4). In contrast to the everyday experience of the schedule, in which time was represented as external, and came to 'unnaturally' govern activities vis-à-vis their internal temporal rhythms, in playing video games as 'time out', time could be made to disappear from view as it became an implicit aspect of the game's built-in momentum. Thus, the momentum of anticipatory gameplay had a dual nature and power, in being able to provide both for excitement or relaxation as the situation required.

Similarly, the first time we play 'zombies', Alex asks, as he switches on the PlayStation, "Do you want to watch Family Guy while we play? I always watch stuff when I play PlayStation." Over lunch, Alex has been telling me about his favourite television programmes that include the 'adult humour' cartoons Family Guy and American Dad. Access to these programmes is sometimes restricted by parents, leading Alex to tell me proudly that he has watched *all* of the series of Family Guy on his laptop. As the game loads, he chats about the computer programme he uses to download the episodes and about how his PSN account "got hacked". We start on 'zombies', and having expected it to be somewhat frightening, I find it isn't at all. Whereas Charlie, in the opening excerpt, revels in the apparent 'scariness' of the world on his screen, playing 'zombies' with Alex could not be more different. With the sound turned down and Family Guy playing in the background, the zombies appear almost comical – simply a moving target for exercising one's skill at shooting.

Contra a popular adult perception that children will watch things that may be 'too scary' for them, then, Alex can be seen to regulate the level of scariness he exposes himself to, in addition to enhancing his enjoyment through the noise and action-filled multi-tasking he is

engaging in. The interludes between game play when the PlayStation is loading are filled not with scary music that builds suspense for the play ahead, but with the bright, brash jokes of Family Guy. Alex is concerned with getting a high number of zombie 'kills' and 'getting far' (i.e. to higher levels), like Charlie, and thus exercising, developing and exhibiting skill are still important. But excitement is based less on the sensation of danger and fear Charlie describes, and more on the vitality of action wrought by the fast gameplay and sensory stimulation of the game and the multitasking he's engaging in. As many authors have discussed, and indeed I found, the ways in which children engaged with media such as video games was not necessarily in line with the intentions of the producers of such games; in other words, children 'appropriated' the games for their own enjoyment.

Of course, the great advantage to video gaming for children was that it didn't require seeking permissions for every play occasion, as going out or having friends over would. Most seemed to have a console located in their own room – either directly owned or shared with a sibling – which offered a further level of control. Nevertheless, despite apparent 'ownership', parents restricted children's access to their consoles. For example, on the Lowell trip to Wales, a group of boys compared how much they were 'allowed' to play per day: "You're so lucky you can play four hours… I'm only allowed one hour before school and one hour after!" Access could also be curtailed by parents confiscating games/consoles as a means of punishment. Many children apparently tried to circumvent restrictions on access – for example, waking up extra early before school to play, although this could backfire (like when Liz tells me Alex's console has been confiscated after he'd been caught getting up at 5am to play). At other times, children managed to persuade parents to allow them more playing time through the performance of good deeds, or by inviting friends over in the hope that this would restore access (it did on several occasions that I went to visit Alex, no doubt cementing our friendship).

In contrast to the simple pleasure of relaxing that was often carried out by oneself, or as downtime with friends, playing video games was also enjoyed and anticipated as a social activity. The social nature of gaming, in contrast to the popular stereotype of the lone male gamer, has been highlighted by numerous researchers (Corliss, 2011). However, how that sociality is enabled, and what forms it takes, have not been given much attention. Here, I expand on existing research to describe the different forms of sociality gaming both built on and enabled, with boys physically present together, and through their coordinated social media use. Whilst having friends over was looked forward to and enjoyed as something of a special occasion, the boys played online on a regular basis – something that allowed them to spend time together whilst physically apart, extending the otherwise limited time they had in which to do enjoyable activities together. This was easy to do by means of the PlayStation Network (PSN) together with a dedicated PSN Bluetooth headset or a webcam or phone with Skype, from the privacy of their own room, as evidenced by Charlie above. As Charlie is playing 'with strangers' with whom he isn't speaking, he is keen to communicate with me over Skype, as he would do with friends who, if they had the same game, would be participating as well. Similarly to when moving through the physical landscape outside the home, Charlie shows and tells me of things that are of interest in the game landscape: no-man's-land; the giant robots that can stamp you down but which you can control, skill-permitting; the jigsaw pieces you can collect to gain new weapons; and stories of interest – where we are and how the zombies came to be there.

Being connected in this way, the boys had access to the same visual and action stimuli on their screens, but could also chat together, both in and out of the game. Sociality took the form of an enjoyable co-presence in which the focus was on doing together, acting upon objects in a shared environment, with meta-game commentary able to further align players: "This game's well good, isn't it?!"; or "I'm just going to pause – wait a minute!"; or "Shall we play a different

game now?" The games played in this way tended to be played in exploratory mode – for example, roaming around in Call of Duty, or freely building on the block building game Minecraft. Thus, each player had a degree of autonomy and independence to move about and engage in activities by themselves.

For example, in a Minecraft world that Alex and I jointly create online, we both begin by building ourselves houses – largely independently, although he (in the game) comes over to give me assistance, since I am a novice. In this way, although we are playing online and Skyping together, we are each absorbed in our own work, conversation mainly limited to commenting on things it is and isn't possible to do, with many long but not awkward silences. (Incidentally, Alex has acquired the game only a week or two before I have, but has become extremely skilled in that time.) As it takes me far longer to build my house, he proceeds to lay out the rest of the town, building a fire station, hospital replete with front enquiry desk and wards ("This is how it is on Casualty[48]," he says), and roads linking these buildings and our houses together. Between his house and mine, he uses paving stones, whilst in front of the hospital he lays a straight wide road "for the ambulances to be able to get in quickly". A small tree I've placed in the centre of my house suddenly grows to enormous proportions, so I attempt to break down the 'blocks' comprising it. "Wait, I know a better way of doing that!" Alex exclaims, before bringing over his avatar and setting fire to the tree. This does indeed bring the tree down quickly, but unfortunately the wool carpet I've laid in the house catches fire. "Wait," says Alex again, and swiftly puts up glass blocks to contain the fire. Without consternation he says, "See – you've got yourself a fireplace now. I might make one for myself too!" The glass-contained fire does indeed look like a modern luxury fireplace.

[48] A hospital-based drama series, which Alex cites as one of his favourite television programmes

The boys thus took advantage of being able to exercise their personal autonomy, at the same time as they enjoyed showing and telling others of their skills, and sharing in mutual aid. Playing together in this way, children appeared to value a co-presence (as well as potential for mutual aid) similar to that of being in class together – something I had previously underappreciated, as noted in chapter 2. It was also redolent of other Skype calls I had with Alex, where we might each be engaging in our own activity, with the video and sound on only as a reminder of the other's continuous presence and their availability as audience to whom exclamations and comments could be directed and shared, as Miller and Sinanan (2014) found. Compared with speaking on the phone, where we conversed in continuous interchange, on Skype, talk was more intermittent. If focused, it was usually through a *dual* media use, in which attention could be drawn and joint action directed towards concrete, shareable objects – gameworlds, YouTube videos and Facebook pages.




*Minecraft title cover*

Having others physically present seemed to add to the excitement of play in a greater way than that of online communication, perhaps because of the three-way interaction, which Alex had mastered, of turning between the PlayStation and me or other friends in quick succession, to ensure of our reactions whilst continuing to play. With his “oohs!” and other ‘response cries’, Alex orientates us to the highlights of the game, as Aarsand (2010) and Aarsand and Aronsson (2009) and cf. Goffman (1981) note, and our responses spur him on to further excitement, frenetic action, and exclamation. Showing and telling is therefore the frame for describing one’s personal explorations and skills achievements that parallel the notion of creating one’s biography through walking about (cf. Christensen, 2003). Thus, in the following example, when playing the single-player car chase game ‘Need for Speed’, Alex draws attention to his skills and knowledge and indexes these against the trophies he has won and types of car he has ‘unlocked’ by doing well. First, however, he needs to grab my attention since I‘m preoccupied with playing JetPack, a game on his Kindle [tablet], which he’s given me to play whilst he switches on his PS3.

> I'm in the middle of the game when Alex exclaims, "Look at this car! Aw, this car is sick!"
>
> He turns around to look at me, so I have to pause. Then, "Look at my cars – I've got… Lamborghini, Ferrari, Porsche, BMW. And I can change the colour – what colour shall I pick?”
>
> “Err, grey or blue?”
>
> “Okay, blue,” says Alex. “I love that colour – like my jacket outside!” He motions towards the landing.
>
> I return to JetPack.
>
> “Oi, watch, watch!” shouts Alex suddenly. “I can get through this roadblock… Haha! Did you see that? Watch, the police are after us now! …I know this trick that no one

else knows – if you press […], you put down these things that stop the other car – see!" A strip of nails with which to puncture the other car's tyres appears.

He reaches the end: "Oh, what?! I got gold!" He turns to see if I'm watching. I have given up on JetPack by this point. Back on the screen, a new car has flashed up. "Ohh!" he says gleefully, rubbing his hands together, "I got a new car! Oh, the Audi TT or the BMW Z4! I was just *talking* about that!"

In a similar vein to that described above, Alex's key concern in the single player action-adventure game 'Saints Row: The Third' was to acquire and own desirable cars. Alex had a general passion for vehicles – something that was noticeable in the way he pointed out the makes of cars as we walked around the neighbourhood. Yet, discussing 'favourite' cars, I am surprised when Alex lists the Bugatti and Vauxhall Insignia. I ask why the Vauxhall, and he tells me, "Because it's got a massive boot. It looks like *that* [using his arms to indicate dimensions] from the outside, but it's *that* big [widening his arms] when you open the boot." This was similarly the case with Amir at Lowell, who listed his favourite car as the Citroen DS4, just ahead of a Ferrari. Aspirational car ownership was therefore not just premised on 'supercars', but ordinary ones whose ownership was tied to the people (adults) one knew.

Loading 'Saints Row', Alex asks me, "Do you want to see my cars?" He shows me around the fictional landscape, saying, "This is my garage", showing off all of the desirable cars that he owns and listing the different models.

I ask what the aim of the game is, and he shrugs, saying, "You can do what you like really".

The game can indeed be played in a non-linear open-world format, in which the ability to customize vehicles is a key component of the game, however Alex's focus on this over completing missions, engaging in shoot-outs or driving around recklessly is notable.

"Look at this one – this is sick!" he exclaims, showing me his prized car. He takes it for

a very measured drive around the block (in order not to damage the car in any way), but at the last minute, when parking it, accidentally scratches it. “Oh no!” he says. “Never mind. I can get a new one. Wait…” He proceeds to magic up a new car using a ‘cheat’ (a code he types in). He then drives the car to a ‘chop shop’, showing me how he can get it ‘done up’ – sprayed a different colour, and ‘pimped’ with stickers and lights, before driving it carefully back to his garage.

The way in which Alex collected and looked after his cars in the game was similar to how he collected and looked after ‘real’ toy/model cars. I find out about Alex’s car collecting when accompanying him to his school fair one day. Alex takes me to a stall that sells model vehicles, saying, “I really want this one.” He indicates a model fire engine. “How much is this?” he asks the stall owner.

“£10 but I’ll do it for 7 for you.”

Alex picks up the box, looks it over and puts it down. He doesn’t end up buying this, but later buys a model police van for £5. At home in his room, he removes the van from its box (discarding the box, contrary to serious collectors’ practices) and handles the vehicle, moving all of the moving parts.

“Does the back open?” I ask, referring to the trailer box that the van pulls.

“No, just these doors. It’s not that good.”

“No, the fire engine looked better,” I concur. “It had a siren that flashed.”

“Yeah, but it needed batteries – they didn’t come with it. And I’ve got a fire engine. This one’s better,” he says, defending his purchase.

“How many have you got?” I ask, referring to the model vehicles.

“Loads,” replies Alex, pointing to a box full of them, by the door. He brings the box over and drops the van inside.

“Do you play with them?” I ask, since he hasn’t done much beyond checking out its

moving parts.

"Yeah!" says Alex earnestly, as if the answer were obvious.

Despite the dominance of video game play, toy objects were still of interest. Alex and his friends played with Tech Decks (miniature toy skateboards with which one can perform tricks); Lego Star Wars; Transformers; and Rubix Cubes. During my fieldwork, loom bands (bracelets made out of small, colourful elastic bands) became a huge craze engaged with by girls and boys alike, throughout primary and some of secondary school. Children made loom bands whilst chatting with friends, and in waiting for video games to load; they showed off their skills in looming or colour-matching, gifted bracelets to friends, and embarked on bracelet-selling enterprises, as Alex does. And, as became evident during 'Show and Tell' sessions at Lowell, many children kept collections of things, whether photos from when they were younger, or souvenirs and other small physical objects.

Loom band bracelets



Alex's collecting and keeping of cars on Saints Row and Grand Theft Auto coincides with this

practice, although it might seem strange when in the game-world environment it was so easy to create new vehicles using cheats. Yet, what it shows is the importance placed on ownership – on possessing and keeping safe one's own things, and what this means with regards to self-understanding. Ownership and care for one's own things was something that was constantly emphasized to children at school and at home, with regards to naming and looking after schoolwork or possessions, and protecting these from others. Thus, parents and schools tended to be in agreement that children should not bring in to school personal (and especially expensive) items, as these 'might get damaged' and because it would be 'difficult to establish responsibility' in the event of loss or damage. Given this backdrop, being able to show off one's possessions was even more desirable. Bringing in and showing off one's things drew others towards one and made one known; it commanded attention, and it afforded control. And it had potentially accumulative effects going forward, in that in effecting social alliances, these alliances could be drawn upon in the future – such as when Kim, showing off her toy alien at breakfast club, is petitioned with, "I always show you my stuff, Kim!" In a different vein, keeping small collections also enabled a degree of autonomy and privacy from the scrutiny of others, where enduring objects could be pleasurably looked at, handled and arranged without the interference of others.

What Alex's care and control also demonstrate is his competence – his skills and knowledge (such as that of cheats) that can be tracked by his accumulation of nice cars. The honing of one's skills again had social benefits, and productive effects going forwards. Thus, with others present, Alex commands attention in the showing off of feats, and draws others towards him, as they desire to be within close proximity in the hope of sharing in his triumphs. And going forwards, being a skillful player could allow one more playing time on the console when there weren't enough controllers to go round, just as being good at football allowed one more time on the ball. Yet, a caveat to this is that such power was not unlimited: in children's group play,

there were usually always checks on the exercise of power, levied through accusations of selfish play. In football, those deemed to think so much of their own skills that they did not pass the ball were accused of being a 'ball-hogger', and far from being a desirable person to play with, were isolated as they were seen to curtail the enjoyment of others. Thus, playing football with the boys at Lowell one day, almost all of my team defected to the other side after accusing Toby of ball-hogging. This was paralleled in games mainly played by girls, whereby starting up and organizing games was generally an attractive skill, up until a point where being 'bossy' was the negative label applied. In video game play, the situation was no different: competent players attracted positive attention and this yielded certain privileges, but there were checks on any potential imbalances in power. For example, at Alex's twelfth birthday party, George proposes a 'loser stays on' method of allocating play in FIFA (a two player game), between the four of us playing, such that the weakest player was in fact allowed to play the most.

What can be seen, then, is that children's ways of playing do not necessarily match the ways of playing envisaged by game developers and outlined by game theorists, who tend to focus on play as experienced by competent, technically oriented (adult) gamers, playing games in the manner in which they were designed[49]. As my findings, and other ethnographic and 'audience studies' research show, user engagements and experiences vary, as consumer objects and media are appropriated into people's life-worlds (e.g. Buckingham, 2011, and cf. Miller, 1987). But, despite their wide-ranging ways of playing, we can nonetheless see the emergence of ownership and competence as key in boys' practices. Ownership and competence were important to the in-the-moment enjoyment of play, and of drawing others' attention. But we can also begin to see how they were important in tracking boys' biographies,

[49] Juul (2005), for example, suggests that researchers should 'obviously' be proficient gamers, which I disagree with.

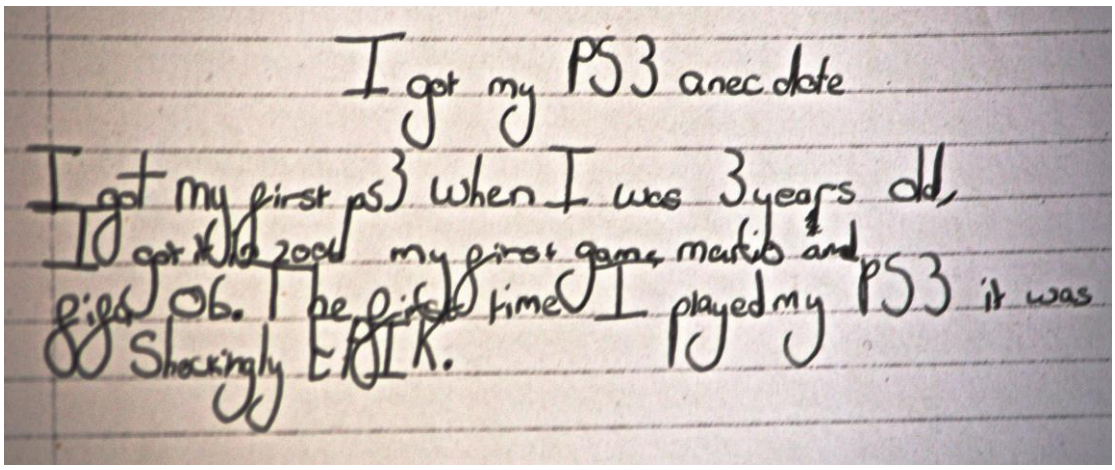
relative to each other, and over time – something I develop further in the next section.

**Console fetishism, game objects, and statistics: biographical and self-other understanding**

If video gaming was an important everyday practice, the games console itself was also of ideological import to boys. 'Killing time' and 'hanging out' speak of the PlayStation's taken-for-granted everydayness, and even in descriptions of more committed 'geeking out' gaming practices (Itō and Bittanti, 2010), the console does not receive much attention. Yet, for my participants, the games console and particular games held a kind of 'magic' in their materiality, which anthropologists have perhaps downplayed in attempts to reassert the sociality of gaming practice. For example, Woodfall and Zezulkova (2016), emphasizing the importance of play as lived experience, as well as the 'remixing' children engage in in their practices, argue that children are 'platform agnostic' – i.e. that they have little interest in the platform per se, and that researchers, likewise, should focus on play practices in a platform agnostic way. I wonder if this finding is not tied to their methodology – asking school pupils to design a new media concept, which they duly did in a platform agnostic way. For my participants, such agnosticism could not be said to be true: the console itself was ideologically important, revered, like money (as I later describe), by possession. Thus, whilst video game consoles were everyday objects and part of the mundane fabric of everyday life, when associated with acquisition and ownership, they became somewhat fetishised.

For example, on Christmas Eve, Alex phones to tell me, "Tomorrow at 9.58 a.m. I'm going to be celebrating." He pauses. "You're going to think it's stupid but… it's the anniversary of getting my PS3!" Alex's parents celebrate their anniversary, and thus Alex is well aware of the

etymological associations of the word with marriage. Celebrating the anniversary of acquiring his PlayStation, he is thus playing up the transformative nature of acquisition, in which a desirable but mundane object becomes *his* PlayStation – something almost living, that in their relationship together is capable of being formative in his biography. This was by no means unusual: in autobiographical work the children at Lowell completed in Year 6, many boys incorporated games console acquisition into their timelines of 'significant events', alongside birth, walking and starting school for the first time – as the example by Akil, below, shows. The memory of acquiring a console and of playing video games for the first time thus loomed large in the boys' imaginations.




The PlayStation's symbolic importance can also be seen in the power it seemingly exerted over physical space. In Alex's bedroom, the most significant item of furniture was a large desk, opposite the door, on which sat the PlayStation and screen, a scattering of PS3 games, small toys, bits of paper, wires and controllers. Above the desk was a shelf on which stood his dad's bike trophies, from when he used to race professionally, and by the door was a large corkboard on which were pinned some certificates, old schoolwork and photos of Alex from when he was younger. Alex had a large swiveling armchair, which he offered me on my first visit, although I didn't quite realize its significance at the time.

"You can have the chair if you like," he says.

"Anywhere, I don't mind," I say.

"I'll go get another chair," says Alex, running to fetch one from another room.

What I later discovered was that the swivel chair was Alex's, and the only time I sat in it was when playing a one-person PS3 game. That there was a hierarchy of seating positions revolving around the PS3 became most visible at Alex's twelfth birthday.

"No one sit in my seat!" declares George, gingerly rising from the padded stool that occupies the space next to the swivel chair. He's been commissioned by Liz to get the PS3 controllers, which Alex's dad James has confiscated. Some time ago, Alex changed the position of his bed, which was parallel with the desk, to perpendicular – a significant event, which he tells me about both by Skype and when I next visit in person, after making the change. As such, the end of the bed is now quite close to the stool and desk, and there is a hierarchy of positions along the bed, from closest to furthest from Alex and the PS3. Jack, also from Alex's secondary school, quieter than the others and talking mainly with George, sits on the corner of the bed next to George, and I sit next to Jack – having arrived last to the party. Charlie, who has been somewhat marginalized so far, sits at the far end of the bed playing on his own tablet; with his back against the wall, he is spatially furthest from the action, reinforcing his marginal social position.

When George returns, I make a bid for his seat.

"Nooo!" shouts George, and we bundle for the stool. I almost claim it, but am shoved off at the last moment and end up on the floor in dramatic fashion, to some consternation – after all, I'm a girl and older than them – but mostly laughter. George retains his seat and, as such, a central position in the action.

What does this mean, then, for children without, or before acquiring, a console? In line with

Willett's (2014) data on Internet games, I suggest that the downsides to non-ownership are perhaps not symmetrical with the joys of ownership. Although seeming to temper her conclusions somewhat, Willett's data from interviews and sociographs with Year 1-6 pupils suggest that lack of access to Internet games does not result in exclusion by peers at school. Both those with and without access do not seem to consider those without as missing out, and it did not seem to affect choice of friends in playground play. I would concur with these findings with respect to video gaming, based on my own experiences. As noted in the last chapter, I didn't own a PlayStation to start with, but did eventually buy one, relatively late on, in May 2014, having felt for some time that not having one was holding back my participation in conversations. In this sense, I did often feel frustrated by my lack of knowledge that came from not having a console, but, as other children did in all manner of practices, I carried on participating with whatever knowledge I had, emphasizing my interest and my (very limited) knowledge acquired through playing on my brother's consoles.

Expressing interest and, further, being keen to listen and learn from friends in some ways heightened my *in*clusion. Thus, although I was a pretty useless ally in 'zombies', the fact that I showed interest and was willing to listen and follow Alex allowed him to take the lead and express care and control. In fact, on my first time playing, Alex takes my controller, explaining:

> "Okay, so to shoot is that, to aim is that, to change weapon is that, to launch a grenade is that. Hold this down to run – can you hear a click? And this is to move. If you just want to walk, press that. 'X' is to jump, 'circle' to duck…" Alex passes the controller back to me. "Okay so follow me… You stay here, I'll go ahead…" Then, "Okay, I'll shoot the zombies, you stay there, it's safe there… Oh no, I've run out of ammo! Phew, okay you come into this room and I'll go back and shoot the zombies."
>
> "Oh no," I say, as a zombie approaches, "How do I…? Oh no, I died!"
>
> "It's okay, I can come and revive you." Alex brings his avatar over to mine and 'gives

me energy' so I can get back up. As long as another player is still alive, others can be 'revived' from the brink of death. "See that red number? When you kill a zombie, the number goes up – like that," he says as he dispatches a zombie. "…Oh no!" he exclaims as we both die.

"We got to Level 5," smiles Alex. "That tells you how many zombies you killed," he says, pointing to a tally on the screen. "I killed 61 zombies!"

"I killed 1!" I exclaim.

"That's alright," says Alex. "That's not bad for your first go."

As Aarsand and Aronsson (2009) note, in particular of the relation between adults and children, joint video game play can be one of the only opportunities for children to display their superior competence, and this is likely to be an enjoyable experience. Having less competent friends can thus be desirable, as looking after others is an aspect of creating and marking friendship, as well as showing off one's own competence. This can be seen even more overtly when Alex and I play 'zombies' in multiplayer mode online with Ethan and Tomas, us at Alex's house and they at Ethan's house down the road. When we meet Ethan and Tomas later in the day to see if they'll come out to play football with us, Ethan and Alex compare how many zombies they killed, but also how many 'revives' they got:

"Who was the player with the white score?" says Ethan, looking between Alex and me.

"That was Alex – not me!" I say.

"You had, like, 100,000 points, Alex," says Ethan.

"Yeah, I know!" says Alex.

Tomas says to me: "You killed two zombies only!"

"I know!" I say.

Alex defends my play, saying, "It's only her third time playing!"

Tomas says, “It’s my second time but I killed five!”

Ethan says, “I got the most ‘revives’.” And to me, he says, “I revived you three times.”

“No, I was reviving her,” says Alex.

“Yeah, I was too,” says Ethan. “And him,” indicating Tomas. “I got the most ‘revives’. I got 18. You got 13 or something.”

In their reviving actions, then, Ethan and Alex both show off their skills in reviving others, and claim a show of care and friendship towards Tomas and me.

In the above example, we can also see the boys leveraging games’ numerical system of scoring and levels to track both their own ‘progress’ and competence relative to others. Thus, as a relatively new player like me, Tomas compares our ‘kills’ number, whilst Ethan compares his and Alex’s points and ‘revives’. In the playing of other games, Alex also tracks the levels we get up to, or the car type he has newly ‘unlocked’ (as noted earlier), and important numbers like getting ‘100,000 points’. This resonates with a point made by Burn and Richards (2014), in their study of playground ‘remixing’ practices. They suggest that whilst media mixing practices are nothing new, ‘specific features’ from video games – namely levels, avatars, stealth modes, and health points – can be isolated as ‘new’ features that have migrated into playground games. As I discuss shortly, I didn’t find many ‘remixed’ games involving video games in the playground. But what *was* notable was the way in which the boys took great interest in noting and marking their accomplishments through the games’ built-in numerical and statistical features. Of course, numbers and statistics are not unique to video games – for example, they are key in card trading games – but they are certainly prevalent throughout gaming, and something boys continuously engaged with.

This was coterminous with an interest in numbers outside of gaming – for example, many children at Lowell seemed to enjoy reading books of ‘facts and figures’; and coincidences in

numbers and dates were always deemed auspicious – such as when Hazel and Mia find out on Friday 13th February that the France trip will be happening on Friday 13th June, or when Alex discovers his mum's birthday is 10 days before mine, making her "Ten years older but 10 days younger!" I suggest that this interest in numbers and statistics may be a recent phenomenon. However, I contend that it is not *only* through video games that children learnt to track their progress in this way, but through school practices too. At Lowell, children's termly assessment work was marked according to standard academic Key Stage levels[50], which children themselves were encouraged to, and did, monitor – in particular, noting moving 'up' or 'down' levels. Thus, at the start of Year 6, receiving their latest assessed work back, Kelsey says, "I'm so happy – I moved up a level! I moved from a 5c to a 5b over the summer, even though I didn't do any work! But I read a lot." Meanwhile, Tyler says crossly, "What?! I got a 4 last year, and now I've got a 3c [a lower level]. How can I not have improved?"

Children generally enjoyed looking back on their lives, including looking at photos from when they were younger, and in thinking about starting points and "how far [they had] come". For example, in the library one day, Lena, Laila and Annabel find they can use the library system to look up all the books they've ever borrowed. Scrolling back to when they first joined the school, they laugh at what they had been reading: "Oh, I remember that! I loved that!" "That was so easy! I wish we still got to read books like that!" However, the use of numbers and statistics, which can be abstracted from their contexts of production (i.e. from gameplay or from the writing of an essay), is a phenomenon particular to both video gaming and school practice. Thus, in contrast to the notion that video gaming and education are generally opposed (for example, in terms of hindering concentration span or replacing more 'beneficial' activities like reading), I suggest that in their similarity, the two are in fact reinforcing of a

[50] A standard means of tracking attainment across primary schools in England.

particular means of constituting one's biography and self-other understanding.

Also of significance to knowledge and self-understanding were games' storylines. Having always played with Alex, Charlie or Ethan in exploratory mode, it was only when I acquired my own PlayStation that I discovered games' 'campaign' (or narrative) mode – in Call of Duty, a (human) war narrative; in Minecraft, 'survival' mode, where the emphasis is on staying alive rather than building freely; and in Saints Row, the possibility of customizing my own avatar with which to battle aliens, rather than the car driving game I'd assumed it to be based on Alex's play. When discussing this with Alex, he is bemused at my surprise. Of course, it was unsurprising that we used an exploratory mode when playing together, since 'campaign' mode is usually single player and therefore unsuitable for play with friends. Yet, as could be seen from Charlie's comments in the opening excerpt, the storylines were meaningful to the boys.

That the boys were familiar with, and wanted to demonstrate their knowledge of, games' storylines became evident when the new Call of Duty title, Ghosts, was released. I was corrected on my inept perception that ghosts would replace zombies as the enemy, and was told that the 'ghost' was the main character whom everyone had thought dead. This is not quite the 'official' version, but is certainly a simplified, workable explanation that is not wholly untrue. Popular games, like books, seemed inevitably to be part of series, and successful series tended to be not merely action-based, but in possession of storylines that developed with each new release; stories the boys were somewhat invested in. These stories seemed to be taken in during the initial stages of acquiring a game (unsurprisingly, perhaps, since this is what ordinarily loads upon starting), after which exploration became preferable.

Knowledge of games' backstories was valuable both in relations with others and in

understanding and connecting with the alternative world settings and characters. The horror and fantasy-horror genre, like that of 'zombies', was popular beyond video gaming, spanning popular fiction choices and the Lowell girls' telling of 'horror' and 'ghost' stories in the playground. The fantastical nature of the undead, the blood sucking, the hideous and the monstrous, and a heightened sense of moral rectitude in ridding the world of them, seemed to generate a particular sense of fear, curiosity and enjoyment. Meanwhile, in line with Ip's (2011) textual survey of various popular action games, which he finds to follow the age-old trope of 'The Hero's Journey', backstories like the one Charlie describes pit the hero against an evident 'evil'. This hero is typically an anti-authoritarian or subculture figure, acting under the radar of the authorities for a higher purpose, with desirable powers including those of stealth, trickery and subterfuge, running fast, fighting well, destroying and winning. In being allied with one's avatar through play, these competences – that one was able to exhibit through one's gaming competence – were evidently appealing to obtain.

Just as an avatar was an extension of oneself within a game-world, so boys referenced, and occasionally imagined and acted out, video game characters in the physical world. In contrast to reports of widespread 'remixing' practices, involving the 'hybridisation' of video games and playground games (e.g. Ito, 2008; Aarsand, 2010; Burn and Richards, 2013; Willett, 2014), I found this to be limited, perhaps due to the age of my participants (which was generally older than in other studies). Rather than engaging in wholesale 'hybrid' games, the boys at Lowell frequently chatted about video games when they were able to in class; and many often drew on game themes in school work they produced, much to the chagrin of their teachers, who often failed to be enthused by themes of guns, robbery, car jacking and escaping from the police. And in playful actions, specific game characters and actions were sometimes referenced – as when Reuben performs a stealth move from 'Assassins Creed' on his younger brother at breakfast club (creeping up from behind and locking his brother's neck under the

crook of his elbow).

In referencing a character's move in his physical actions, Reuben is conjuring up a whole realm of imagery embedded within this, positioning himself as a particular actor in relation to others. This is in line with Itō's (2008) notion of 'hypersociality', in which 'elements of a collective imagination and shared language referents are drawn upon, thereby heightening the meaningfulness of social interaction'. Like Hazel's 'CSI' story (in chapter 2), the action, through its reference to a particular video game, becomes somewhat transformational – transporting those implicated from the mundane real world to the exciting setting of the game. At breakfast club, Reuben is told, "Don't do that", as it might be dangerous. That teachers sanction these practices if seen, amplifies the sense that danger exists, stealth must be exercised and 'getting away with it' – without the authorities seeing – involves exercising real skill. Thus, when Kyle and Max slide down the stair bannisters, like in the 'free running' style of the game 'Mirrors Edge', and Kyle and Jack creep around the school buildings, in their words, "on a stealth mission", every gesture and comment is amplified because it is not just one's private imagined sphere but a shared one that is being conjured up.

As Burn and Richards (2014) note, citing a point made by the Opies (1988), 'all media material is grist to the mill of children's play' (pp. 25). What my findings show is perhaps less of an interest in developing extended fantasy play based on gaming material, but the salience in the imagination of games' evocative names and storylines, and hero characters' desirable attributes and signature moves. I suggest that these are powerfully held memories because of the way in which the player creates the action, whilst simultaneously being enveloped in the striking imagery and sounds, and unfolding narrative, marked and fixed through moving up 'levels'. This marking of milestones in the memory perhaps occurs in a similar way to that described by Whitehouse (1996), through the imprinting action effected by strong imagery in

combination with clear ideology (here, of narrative 'progress'). As researchers of digital media have long taken pains to point out, there is no binary distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' worlds: 'real' console ownership and development of the physical competences required for gaming overlap with the 'virtual' tracking of achievements, whether through ownership of desirable cars, or the attainment of vital numbers, both of which contribute to constituting boys' self-narrated biographies and self-other understandings.

**Dreams and desires: shopping and ownership**

*June 2014:*

*We park our bikes outside Tesco, next to the trolleys. We don't have bike locks with us, and Cara (Charlie's girlfriend) and I are worried about our bikes. However, Alex and Charlie insist it'll be fine to use the trolley chains to secure the bikes. We head inside, racing up the moving walkway to the second floor, where the phones and video games are.*

*Alex takes me straight over to look at PlayStation headsets*[51]*. He picks up a box. "It's…like this but this one has a controller with it. That's £26."*

*"What're you guys doing?" asks Charlie.*

*"Looking for a headset for Anne-Marie so she can talk online."*

*"Oh, have you seen? They've got GTA5* [Grand Theft Auto V] *for £35!"*

*"No! That's bare* [so] *cheap, man!" We wander round. "Ohhh!" croons Alex. "Look at that!"*

*"That's for the Xbox," I say.*

*"Yeah, but it'll be the same for the PS3."*

[51] A Bluetooth headset enables a player to speak to another over the PlayStation Network (online). Alex has been persuading me to get one so that we can communicate in this way, rather than over Skype

*"Ohh! They got South Park: Stick of Truth!" whoops Charlie. "This game is sick! It's only £20! And that came out this year as well. You get all the songs and episodes too – look!" Charlie has the game, and he and I have been recalling our favourite episodes and singing the songs on the cycle to Tesco's. He takes the box and places it in my hands.*

*"Oh, I want that!" says Alex.*

*"You should get it!" says Charlie.*

*"Yeah, I will. It's only £20. I'm gonna get it," Alex declares.*

*"FIFA 15!" Cara exclaims from a little way down the aisle. "I really want that!"*

*We all go to look.*

*"It's on pre-order*[52]*," I say.*

*"Yeah," says Cara. "I want FIFA 14 too. But I'll probably wait to get it."*

*Alex moves around the aisle to look at a Skylanders set*[53]*. "Ohh, I really want this!" he says. "Can I get it?" It's unclear whether his question is rhetorical or aimed at me. In fact, I think the ambiguity is purposeful, as I sometimes buy things for him, so the question is a prompt without being so deliberate as to create awkwardness.*

*"Which one?" I say. "That?"*

*"No, the multipack."*

*"How much is it?" I ask.*

*Alex picks up the box. "£15," he says, "It's too much. Better off getting that for £20!" he laughs, pointing to the South Park game.*

*"Oi, come on," he says, motioning me to ask an assistant in the mobile phone section about headsets. "Here, I'll show you," he says to the man. "This, but without the controller."*

[52] I.e. isn't currently available, but can be reserved in advance
[53] Toy-like models that plug into the PS3

*The man returns with a box.*

*"How much is it?" asks Alex.*

*"£10."*

*"You should get it," Alex says. "It's only a tenner; it's a bargain!"*

*"I've got a Tesco's," I say, "And an Asda."*

*"It'll be more there – 'cause it'll be more elsewhere," says Alex.*

*I persist with my protests; Alex doesn't look too happy but says okay.*

*The boys start talking about their birthdays. "Mine's sooner!" says Alex. To me, he asks, "Do you want to come for pizza? And PlayStation? In October."*

*"Yeah, sure!" I say.*

*Charlie, whose talk has been full of sexual bravado all day, says with innuendo, "I know what* I *want for my birthday!"*

As noted in the previous chapter, visiting the shops were almost always exciting, due to their displays of desirable things. Even in the absence of any actual purchasing, it was enough simply to enjoy being in their presence, to state one's ownership intentions, and to thus enjoy an imagination of their identification with one's personhood. In fact, these desires and dreams were often stated in terms of certain future action, as when Alex says of the South Park game, "I'm gonna get it". Expressions of 'going to' appeared to be exuberant statements of desire and selfhood, in which present and future were elided in a construction of unconstrained agency. As previously noted, being malleable, the future could be represented as unshackled from the constraints and uncertainties of the present.

This point became most clear just before I bought my own PlayStation. Discussing my potential purchase with Alex, I say, "I *think* I'm going to buy it" – in acknowledgement of the fact that it would depend on available prices and my budgetary constraints. Yet, to Alex, my phrasing

suggests that I'm not quite convinced, and he tries to persuade me (again) of why I ought to get one. "Yeah, it just depends on the price!" I say. What I *should* have said was "I'm *going* to buy it", thus implying my total conviction in desire. For Alex and his friends, such a statement did not mean that it necessarily *would* follow through, due to parental restrictions, lack of money, and so on. However, introducing doubt into my statement implied that I wasn't fully committed in mind, and not just practice. As with my participants' prediction practices discussed in the previous chapter, there were subject-object differences in our representations, then. Contrary to the adult representations of future I was familiar with, in which uncertainty and risk prevailed never to be wholly managed, children's expressions of 'going to' involved their recognition that it was in the present that their actions were constrained and uncertain – subject to sudden adult curtailment. It was only in narratives of futures that motives, actions and outcomes could become aligned, and 'fixed' as certainties.

In this way, the talk preceding events, such as plans for shopping trips and purchases, often seemed so enjoyable as to eclipse enjoyment of events themselves. For example, in the run-up to one of my visits, prior to which Alex has persuaded me to buy a particular game, along with the headset that I deferred buying in the excerpt above, Alex phones me numerous times to relay to me the plan of action, which involves going by bus to one of the nearby suburbs where there are more shops. On the day of my visit, Alex tells his mum the plan: "We're gonna go Greendale and get some games for Anne-Marie, and then we can go cinema in Fordham. 'Cause in Greendale, there's a Game[54] as well, and the CEX in Greendale is bigger." Here, Alex is excited to tell his mum of our plans, both showing off his knowledge and competence, whilst also proving to her that it is not his money that he is spending (nor my money on him), but my autonomous purchases.

[54] Game and CEX (Computer Exchange) are video game shops

Shopping trips were also important for gaining knowledge of prices. Despite the boys' keen interest and heavy consumption of video games, most of my participants were not at the forefront of new game ownership, unsurprisingly given that new releases retail at £40-60 per game. Thus, they usually had to wait until prices dropped to around £10-25[55]. As such, they actively sought knowledge of prices and were keenly engaged in price comparison, not least so that they could justify potential purchases to parents. Hence, on my first visit to Alex's house, Liz tells me about buying 'zombies' for him that morning: "He's been doing well at school so I thought I'd get it for him. He really wanted that game, and it was only twenty quid in Asda, so I said he could have it." Later, Alex emphasizes his knowledge, and the notion that they got a 'good deal', saying, "I saw it in the shops today. We were quite lucky 'cause there was an offer on Black Ops – it's usually £20 but we got it for £15 today!" As with the PSN headset, Alex would often tell me the prices of particular games or accessories in different retail and online stores in order to tell me where to buy things. A favourite shop of many of the boys in Firsby and Lowell was the second hand game retailer CEX, a place they talked about going to in their free time, and when meeting others. Evidently, there wasn't a stigma attached to buying or owning pre-owned games, although there was, of course, value in owning games before others.

Knowledge of game prices was thus one of the aspects of knowledge that boys leveraged competitively in peer conversations. Knowing how much something was, or where one could buy something cheaper, was a sign of one's social aptitude. Sometimes, having paid more money for something was employed in a competitive way, with the implication that the more expensive product was better. For example, at Alex's birthday, Charlie says to George, of his

[55] With regards to debates about children's consumption, I would suggest that amongst my participants, children were aware of, and exercised care in respect of, parents' financial limitations, in contrast to popular notions of 'pester power'. Equally, however, parents cared about their children's dreams and desires, and tried to fulfill these where they could, as Seiter (1993) notes.

Hudl tablet, “Be careful with that – that cost me a hundred quid!” to which Jack interjects, “Well my iPad cost me £250!” And when Alex tells me he’s been playing on his new Kindle Fire HD, he tells me, “It’s the latest one – it just came out. It cost £129.99!“ When I ask, “From Tesco’s?” he looks offended, saying, “No, Curry’s PC World. *And* I got a case for it as well.” Mostly, however, where like was being compared with like, the boys denigrated those who had not been price savvy. For example, for his birthday, I have given Alex PlayStation points (which can be used to download games from the online store), as requested. At his party, he goes online in the hope of downloading Grand Theft Auto V, but doesn’t have enough points because he only has £25 and it is £45. Charlie says, “I got mine for £20 from Tesco!” Alex says, “I could still get it, another day – I think I’m getting more points from someone else.” “Yeah, but it’s a rip-off!” laughs Charlie. On another occasion, in proving himself more savvy than a friend, Alex tells me gleefully, “Oh yeah, I got Minecraft! For free! And my friend Mark just *bought* it! He didn’t realize you could get it for free!”

In comparisons of competence, although boys could enjoy guiding less competent friends, lacking knowledge or skill was not necessarily unproblematic in social interaction. To some extent, I perhaps ‘got away with’ my incompetence being both a girl and somewhat older. As a central activity amongst their peers, video gaming practices framed boys’ relations with each other – at the level of playing together, as well as in peer conversations, where knowledge about console specifications and release dates, new games, characters, moves, storylines, levels and cheats were key to participation. For example, in a maths lesson, Kamil, Ali and Matthew seem keen to exhibit, show off and test each others’ knowledge in discussions of when the new PlayStation (the PS4) and a new game will be released.

Kamil challenges Ali: “You don’t know what the latest release is!”

“I do, it’s Revolution!”

“No!”

Matthew volunteers another name I don't catch: "Isn't it […]?"

"No, that's on the PSP," says Kamil.

Ali persists, "It *is* Revolution, isn't it?"

Kamil makes a face. "No, you wouldn't know it. It's Resurrection. I'm going to get it!"

Matthew says: "When's the PS4 coming out again?" and "Yeah, next month. My birthday's next month. I'm going to get it for my birthday! I'm going to ask for it!"

The boys display their knowledge as a means of gaining authority and respect relative to others. By allying themselves with these coveted objects, they categorise themselves as particular types of people, and thereby also set the parameters for desirable and acceptable performances by others. Much later, after the PS4 *is* released, I discover Ali had acquired it (relatively early, it seemed) – so perhaps this was also a spur to Kamil's challenge. Similarly, on the day he acquires 'zombies', Alex tells me, "People used to bully me 'cause I didn't have Black Ops, 'cause everyone had Black Ops except me". He tells me about someone from Scouts – "He's my friend 'cause he doesn't play Black Ops either". Although I can't be sure, I wonder if Alex is slightly overstating things at this particular time to justify acquisition of the game. When we play it for the first time, later that day, it turns out that Alex is highly competent, having played many times before on his cousin's console. Nevertheless, it again shows how important ownership is to children. Video gaming and talking about video gaming are thus a means of communicating and understanding the self. Given the value placed on gaming, it is therefore little wonder that the acquisition of a console would be a memorable event etched into many boys' self narrative as an intrinsic aspect of, or else formative in, their personhood. Nor is it surprising that the consoles themselves come to take on the magical symbolism that such a collective imagination of them produces.

In the previous excerpt, Alex is hoping to download Grand Theft Auto V because his mum

doesn't want to get it for him due to its notoriety ("That's the one with boobies in it, isn't it? No, you're not having that one!" says Liz). Alex has also previously asked me to buy it when we've been in Tesco: "I've got £35 in my wallet! I just need you to buy it 'cause you're over 18" he says, explaining about the game's 18+ rating. As I've heard his mum previously saying that she doesn't want to get it for him, I dither, asking why he doesn't get his cousin Anthony to get it for him, as he previously told me he would. "I dunno why – he isn't getting it anymore," says Alex despondently.

Access to games and the means to buy games can be limited for children, meaning that developing skills in persuasion and concealment are important. As well as trying to persuade his mum that the game is no different from others, and encouraging Anthony and I to get it for him, Alex, like other children, takes care over his 'own' money and the potential for autonomy that it affords. As Tyler, from school, tells me in an interview, "When it's your dad's money, you just want to spend it, but when it's your own money, you want to save it!" Money is recognised as a commodity or vehicle for exchange, at the same time as one's *own* money is fetishised for its powers over other objects and in drawing people towards one. Thus, at his birthday party, Alex takes great care in recording his presents and especially the gifts of money he receives.

> "Michaela - £10. Auntie Kay - £20…" he writes. "Adam, how comes you never got me anything?"
>
> "'Cause… I didn't have anything and I didn't have time, but I'll give you something on Monday," says Adam.
>
> He shows his mum, saying, "Yeah, I've written it all down and I'll give it to you later, mum!"
>
> The next day, Luke says to me: "I can't believe Alex got £190 for his birthday!"
>
> "I thought he got £55?" I say, although I knew there'd been more than that counted.

> "Nah, he got £190 – he told his mum he got something different so he could keep the rest!"

In keeping a private stash of money, Alex gains the autonomy to buy what he wants, when he wants (although there may be access problems, as noted with GTA5). If children use narratives of future action to gain a sense of autonomy, they also do so through other practices, including concealment and ruse.

Practices involving video games resonate with a wider set of everyday practices that boys engage in, both observing and creating the general cultural and moral framework of their lives. At the centre of this is the games console. Being owned and controlled by the boys (subject to parental limits), it is central to their everyday practices of autonomous time management – filling time, taking time out, being co-present with others online, and, in the exuberance of social play, which marks special occasions like birthdays. As such, it is ideologically central to the telling of their biographies, which they also tell according to the tracking of game levels and statistics. In this way, the everyday of play becomes linked to the momentousness of the life course. Whilst in their play, boys showed and told of their competences, demonstrated care of possessions, and competed against each other, it is the particular numerical features of games (like school levels), which allow milestones to be abstracted from their production, that makes them so powerful in marking both personal progress and relative success. In the telling of themselves through gaming, we can see how children marked both their own 'being and 'becoming', reconciling a tension that has characterized childhood studies.

## Chapter 6 | Participation and friendship: Public ethics and narratives of the continuous person

In chapter 3, I suggested that aspirational statements were made to enhance a sense of one's present individuality and claims to personhood – something that relies on a notion of personhood being continuous over time. In this chapter, I make the case that this is how children represented themselves in narrative, by showing how in privately told tales, my participants interpreted others' past actions as indicative of a moral character enduring through time. These narratives 'fixed' a sense of oneself in relation to others, in ways that denied the ambiguity of everyday participation, in which children were generally inclusive. Yet, in affording the possibility for clarifying their evaluative positions about others, such narratives often led to children's public actions becoming less ambiguous going forwards. Ironically, then, tales were premised on the continuity of persons, at the same time as they precipitated change. As such, we can see how 'telling' things has a 'fixing' power in relation to the development of self-other and biographical understanding; and it also has a productive, inter-subjective power, in being a present action carried out between people in the world.

Children and friendship are assumed to go together in the public and literary imagination. With responsibilities to work and family often meaning time spent with friends is squeezed, adults nostalgically reminisce about the pleasures and pains of childhood friendships – their ready availability and their intensity, as well as their vulnerability to breakups, bullying and exclusion. The importance of friendship seems obvious when observing children separating out into groups on the playground; their self-arrangement into cliques or pairs; the competitive camaraderie in a game of football; and the anticipatory excitement of an organised shopping trip. Outside of relations with their families, it appears that friendships are the quintessential childhood relationship. It is perhaps for this reason that childhood

researchers so often examine friendship, and yet leave the concept unexamined. Whereas friendship as a feature of adult societies has tended to be 'neglected' in anthropology (Coleman, 2010; but see Santos-Granero, 2007; Bell and Coleman, 1999), in studies of children, friendship is almost invariably present, whether as backdrop (e.g. Wulff, 1988) or locus of analysis (e.g. Goodwin, 2006).

Yet, despite this centrality, the meanings of 'friendship' have often been taken for granted (although a little later I discuss more recent work that addresses this point). Thus, in the Adlers' (1998) work, friendships are taken to be the dyadic relations of affection between children of middling popularity, seen as relatively uninteresting compared with the politics of popular cliques, their constitution and maintenance. In this sense, the study somewhat mirrors functionalist anthropological accounts of kinship, with a focus on social structures that assume private ties of affect to be outside of the researcher's interest. In Fine's (1980) study of Little League baseball teams, friendship structures are usefully compared. Fine describes friendships on the basis of asking children to name their five closest friends, contrasting Sharpstone – with an 'elite group' of friends whom the other boys list as desired friends and team leaders – with TI – which has more evenly dispersed friendships with no dominantly popular boys nor equivocally accepted leaders. What this usefully shows is how friendship structures and norms can vary so much even within the same general 'culture' (American Little League baseball) – warning us against drawing too strong conclusions from our own limited studies often carried out in just one locale.

Yet, from a methodological viewpoint, relatively little attention is paid to what effect asking participants to *state* their friendships might have. James' (1993) account employs a similar survey method, but in being present during the exercise, what she ends up writing about is the strange way in which some girls negotiated the imperative to list their friends.

Encountering problems to do with reciprocating their inclusion in others' lists, one girl – copied by several others – took to writing only the initials of her friends, leaving the exact names open to ambiguity. Whilst James doesn't extend the analysis further, her findings foreshadow my analysis in this chapter.

I chose not to employ such methods, both in terms of possible effects on my relationships with participants (as something of a peer) and ethical considerations (as a topic fraught with potentially negative implications, like the triggering of arguments and exclusions, and often involving intensely felt emotions, as indeed James (1993) discovered). Instead, through everyday participation with children, what I discovered was that 'friendships' appeared to be not so ubiquitous after all – children barely talked about friends at all. In fact, this was not *quite* the case, as I discovered slowly. Children did express who was and wasn't a friend, in ways that defied everyday observations and experiences of who they played with. But, contrary to my expectations, this only occurred in private, one-to-one narratives, told in confidence, on an occasional basis. Amidst the everyday group chat and play that dominated in the playground, after school, and in the park, such talk was non-existent. Further, the arguments and exclusions that I had read about (e.g. Goodwin, 1990; Svahn and Evaldsson, 2011), and anticipated witnessing, rarely occurred. For the most part, children seemed to get on, and even when arguments occurred, they appeared to be quickly resolved. Yet, this is not to say that the experience was necessarily wholly positive. As something of a 'peer', invested in having friends and people with whom to do things together, I found the everyday experience of participation ambiguous and confusing. Could I call the people I thought were my friends 'friends'?

As aforementioned, in much of childhood research, friendship has been assumed to be an objective unit of analysis, such that what (adult) researchers think it is will be the same as

what participants think it is. Yet what anthropological studies of friendship show is that commonplace notions of friendship – as relations of spontaneous affection outside of obligation – are a 'western' ideal, neither true of 'western' friendships in general, nor instructive about friendships elsewhere (Bell and Coleman, 1999). As Desai and Killick (2010) contend, the category of friendship, if it can be labelled as such, is nebulous and constituent free; yet, whilst it cannot be defined in advance of its manifestation in particular localities, it can still be a useful concept for thinking through social relations that fall outside those of kinship.

More recent studies, including those centring on children's friendships, attempt to map out its specific instantiations, critically exploring the meanings of friendship through emic understandings. Thus, Evans (2010) suggests that friendships amongst her 9 to 11-year old working class boys in Bermondsey, south-east London, might be based not on mutual affection but on the admiration for each other, and self-recognition, elicited through competence, commonality, conflict and creative destruction. Engaging in similar activities in a competitive way, the boys make sense of their social field, including popularity and friendship, through shows of 'toughness' and skill. Meanwhile, Froerer (2010) shows that issues of kinship, caste and class, usually considered to be dominant in Indian social relationships, were largely irrelevant to children's friendships in her rural central Indian village. Instead, non-institutionalised social relations were centred on their *para* (neighbourhood), and predicated firstly on doing together and later a competitive rivalry with other *paras*, together with loyalty to their own *para*.

What recent studies of friendship also examine are the relations between concepts of friendship and those of personhood. Carrier (1999), for example, suggests that friendship as spoken of in terms of a relation of spontaneous affection unconstrained by self-interest or

bonds of kinship or trade can only occur between selves conceived of as autonomous and able to dispense such affection freely. Thus, he suggests, western notions of friendship developed in historical conjunction with the development of this 'self' concept. The proposition is perhaps somewhat tautological. However, Carrier also contends that in places where people do not conceive of themselves in such ways, friendship will not be present – instead, people will talk in situational, positional or kin terms in order to mark affection. Various authors disagree, arguing that emic terms akin to the 'friendship' relation exist in various societies where persons are not necessarily seen as autonomous selves (e.g. Course, 2010), and equally, that friendship may be spoken of without reference to affection (e.g. Evans, 2010 – as above).

On the other hand, Winkler-Reid's (2016) study of secondary pupils' friendships in London suggests that an ideology of 'authentic', individual selves was essential to girls' understandings of friendship, in line with Carrier (1999). Winkler-Reid uses a notion of Lambek's (2013) distinction between 'forensic' and 'mimetic' personhood, whereby 'forensic' personhood infers the legal continuity of individuals (and their moral responsibility) as practiced *over time*, whilst 'mimetic' personhood infers a temporal discontinuity (but relationality) between 'personnages' (or roles) being performed. For Winkler-Reid's participants, only authentic, individual selves could make friends, where friendship was predicated on similarity, and the spontaneous affection seen to arise from the matching of 'true' selves. However, in practices of 'bitching', exclusion and breaking up, the girls also enacted the 'mimetic' dimension of the self. By instantiating the criteria by which they and others were subsequently judged, as a 'good person' and 'good friend', the girls could be seen to iteratively shape selves, in spite of notions of their pre-constitution.

Taking inspiration from these studies, I explore participation and friendship in my own fieldwork to see what these can tell us about friends, persons and time for children in

contemporary Greater London. As a starting-point, I note the apparently distinct way of acting in public that involved *not* articulating lines of friendship, which stood in contrast to the delineations of friendship made in private narratives. In public, children showed preferences for particular others, but otherwise acted in largely inclusive ways. Here, participation was key, and by not being exclusive, children seemed to be reaping the benefits of an ability to flit to wherever exciting happenings were occurring, as well as showing that one was a 'kind', and not 'mean', person – a good person to be friends with.

By contrast, in private, children expressed friendships in the negative, by emphasising those whom they *weren't* friends with. They characterised others as 'mean', 'bossy', 'tag-alongs' and 'snitches' (i.e. informants), justifying their dislikes and positioning themselves, by default, as 'nice' people in opposition to these non-friends. In narrating friendships in this way, they expressed a common ideology of 'western' friendship as a matter of choice, together with a sense of their individuated, biographical, moral selves as loci of intentionality and action. In their dual practices in private and public, then, they seemed to be negotiating various apparently conflicting discourses, including notions of friendship as predicated on kindness but also individual free choice. A differentiation between 'private' and 'public' then became a key means to navigating difficulties, perhaps suggesting this as an important concept in British children's, and wider, society.

**Fluidity and ambiguity**

Amongst my participants, there was no evidence for the clearly delineated, self-named and thus reified 'groups' other researchers have written of (e.g. Adler and Adler, 1998; Pollard, 1985). Whilst, for the most part, my participants spent time with others in groupings that

often appeared to be relatively stable over time, these groups were constantly changing. For example, I spent the most time with a grouping consisting of Hazel, Shivani, Laila and Amina, together with Daisy and Jaina (who both left at the end of Year 5) and Caroline (who joined in January of the following year) – all in the same class. I use the word 'grouping' in an attempt to indicate a certain sense of fluidity, rather than referring to them in the fixed sense of a 'group'. We played a multitude of games together most break and lunchtimes, for most of the 15 months I spent at school. Yet, the group wasn't fixed as such, nor reified in talk as 'a group', and nor did we call each other 'friends'.

Rather, we seemed to spontaneously come together at break and lunchtimes, to chat and play. But this chat and play could also include others, especially the other girls in the year, and sometimes some of the boys too. And in other cases, the grouping might not come together at all, with members dispersed across different groupings. Thus, at the same time as there was a persistence to groupings on the playground, there was also a constant flux to them, as people joined and left, and groupings merged and disintegrated. Everyday practice was characterised by a constant looking around for drama and happenings; openness to others was ubiquitous. To most outside observers, however, Hazel et al. were 'a group'. "You get on well with Hazel's group, don't you?" a teaching assistant at school said to me one day. In the other class, there was a persistent grouping consisting of Kelsey, Lena and Mia, and a pairing consisting of Sophie and Deepa. Tula, Annabel, Holly and Su, together with Emily (who left at the end of Year 5), and occasionally joined by Hannah, formed another grouping (all in the same class, except for Su and Hannah).

To describe in further detail the everyday experience of ambiguity amongst apparent friends, I take the example of Sophie and Deepa. As an outside observer, at first, I thought of them as 'best friends', since they always appeared to spend time together. Yet, spending more time

with them, either singly or together, I found their friendship to be not as exclusive as I once thought. They rarely labelled themselves or each other as 'best friends', or even friends. However, they spent a great deal of time together (more than with any other person), and they both seemed to hold something of an expectation of spending their free time with the other. For example, at lunchtime, Sophie might say glumly, "Deepa's on library duty today", whilst Deepa might join us, saying, "Sophie's at her piano lesson!" or "I don't know where Sophie's gone! I can't find her." Yet, this wasn't a definitive expectation: both in class and at lunchtime, they did not automatically expect to work or play with the other, not least because so much of children's experience is outside of their control – as, for example, with Sophie's piano lessons, which sometimes occurred during lessons and sometimes during break and lunchtimes. A part of getting by was therefore adapting to the circumstances, even when it appeared that greater choice might be available. Thus, when asked to find a work partner in lessons, most children seemed to find the least undesirable person sitting closest to them, rather than risk waiting for their apparent best friend on the other side of the room, who might already have been engaged by someone else.

Whilst having lunch, Sophie and Deepa would chat together one to one, discussing a whole range of topics, but in particular their family experiences and the naughty or 'crazy' things their younger siblings did. However, there were also occasions when they joined a larger group, or when others, like myself, joined them. After eating, they would usually play together, sometimes with the other girls; sometimes with some of the boys – John, Jafar and Lewis, in particular; and occasionally with some of the younger children. But Sophie would sometimes "run off" (in Deepa's words), apparently seeking more excitement elsewhere. And Deepa, who was keener on running games than Sophie, would sometimes join larger mixed gender games like Manhunt[56], leaving Sophie to try to persuade me, and others, not to

[56] A regressive variant of Tag, hugely popular amongst the Year 6 boys and girls for a number of months

participate. And as Amina didn't like running either, we sometimes spent time chatting together instead. Meanwhile, towards the end of Year 6, Deepa and Mia found out that they'd been accepted to the same secondary school, and would be in the same class. As well as conversing about imminent secondary school issues, they seemed to spend more time together in general, although like all apparent 'changes', this wasn't necessarily obvious, nor even a definitive change as such: after all, conversations were joined as and when someone had something to say, and Deepa and Mia simply had much to discuss.

Thus, everyday life was characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty. Friendships were not a given, and this is what allowed change to occur without the occurrence of the disputes, breakups and exclusions other writers have talked of with respect to children's friendships (e.g. Goodwin, 1990; Winkler-Reid, 2016). Public arguments were rare, except in the anomalous case of football (which was frequently banned at school because of the fierce arguments and sometimes physical fights it precipitated), and in infrequent episodes of 'snitching' (i.e. telling to an adult authority), which seemed to be condemned through peer-based public trial and punishment. Such ambiguity meant that total marginalisation seemed impossible because there was usually always the possibility of joining in with activities somewhere. And in being able to engage with a wide range of others and join in with activities that they desired participating in, whether implicating friendship or not, the potential for excitement was maintained, in a context where the greatest risk was perhaps boredom. Yet, of course, ambiguity and uncertainty were not *all* good, as attested to by Deepa's complaints that "Sophie's run off again", and Sophie's worries that she might not have a place to sit in hall when returning from her piano lesson.

**Everyday participation and the benefits of inclusion**

*March, 2014 [Year 6, Lowell]:*

*Lunchtime in the hall. The girls and I are sitting either strung out along a long, low bench, or on chairs or on the floor opposite, so that we face each other in small, but not entirely enclosed circles. I'm sitting next to Amina, who has been telling me earlier about a diary in which Caroline has apparently written the name of the boy whom she (romantically) 'likes'. Caroline has brought the diary, a medium-sized ring-bound notebook, to the lunch hall, where it sits beside her.*

> *Amina tilts her head to view a photo of Caroline, positioned beside the swirly decorated script of her name that's visible through the translucent cover. "She looks so cute in that picture!"*
>
> *"Let's see!" I say.*
>
> *Caroline holds it up. "That's such a nice picture!" says Laila.*
>
> *Tula, who's sitting adjacent to me on the bench, but facing towards another group that comprises Holly, Su and Annabel, overhears and says, holding out her arm, "Let's see!"*
>
> *"Okay," says Caroline, "but don't read it." She leans over and passes the book to Tula. Tula turns over the cover to see the photo of Caroline, before turning the page. "Is that you too?" she asks, holding up the diary towards Caroline and pointing at another picture.*
>
> *"No, that's Taylor Swift[57]!" laughs Hazel knowingly. "I was the only person to get that!"*
>
> *"Pass me my diary back."*
>
> *There is a squeal from Tula. "Oh my god! Is that true?!"*

[57] A popular American singer-songwriter

*There is a look of feigned horror, but also pleasure, in Caroline's face. "Don't! Did you read it? Give me my book back!" She shuffles over and snatches it back, grinning at Tula, who is grinning back. Tula, who is still saying, "I can't believe it? Do you really?!", gets up and comes around the outside of the two circles of girls, holding her hands out to Caroline. Caroline also rises, smiling, and they circle each other around the metal trolley that holds people's lunchboxes.*

*"Go on, pleeease!" says Tula. "Is it true? I can't believe it!"*

*Caroline relinquishes, saying with a serious look, "Okay then, but you can't tell anyone!"*

*"Pinky promise," says Tula, proffering her little finger.*

*They lock and shake pinkies, and Caroline hands over the diary, which Tula reads with much oohing and aahing, to Caroline's embarrassed smiles. They both go and sit back down. Caroline puts the diary down beside her, but eventually has to grab it as Kyle and Max come into the hall and make dramatic moves of stealth towards it.*

*Meanwhile, Holly says to Tula, "What did it say?"*

*"Can I tell my friends what it said?" asks Tula to Caroline.*

*"No!"*

*"Sorry, I can't tell you," says Tula, matter-of-factly, but with a knowing grin. "Pinky promise," she shrugs as Holly gives an imploring look.*

*Holly says, "Your* best *friends."*

*"Can I tell my* best *friends what it said?" says Tula to Caroline.*

*"No!"*

*"Sorry guys!" Tula announces dismissively.*

*However, after much pleading, Caroline allows just Holly, Su and Hazel to read the diary, with pinky promises all round that they won't tell either.*

*"You can't say what it says though, okay? Promise!" says Caroline.*

*Kyle and Max make another to attempt to grab the diary, and Caroline sits on it jubilantly. Tula says, "But you shouldn't bring it to school, you know, 'cause if Ms Jameson finds it, she'll read it – that's what happened last time with Tyler's in Wales…"*

*"And with Hannah's," Su interjects.*

*"Yeah, and she reads it and then sends it home to your parents."*

*"Do your parents know you keep a diary?" Holly asks.*

*Caroline nods. "Yeah."*

In this example, drama centres on new girl Caroline's 'diary', and in particular on the page where she has written who she 'likes' – a topic that had always been popular, but which became talked about more and more by the girls as they moved through Year 6. The material form of the secret knowledge drew attention and gave concrete object to people's desires for knowledge. In the situation that played out, drama was heightened by the incorporation of the object into proto-games, in which stylised movements could be exaggerated and desired ideas about oneself performed for a watching audience. Thus, Tula, an ordinarily fast reader, lingers on the fateful page and squeals in a manner that demands attention; having read it, she demands to see (and hold) the diary again, and Caroline and Tula embrace the attention elicited by chasing each other around the lunch trolley in something approaching a comedic cartoon chase. Meanwhile, Kyle and Max exaggerate video game-like moves of stealth towards the diary by signalling to audience members to keep quiet – putting their fingers to their mouths, and over-emphasising the effect of creeping – which Caroline reacts to by triumphantly and tauntingly sitting on the diary. The performances of those involved thus imbued the object with an almost magical desirability at the same time as they appeared compelled by it.

As owner of the magical object, at least for the duration of its powers, Caroline both revels in the affective pleasures of being at the centre of attention and participation, and prolongs its experience through the toing and froing of withholding and divulging information. I would suggest that this is done instinctually and navigated from moment to moment, in a manner akin to processes of improvisation, described by Hastrup (2007), in which action is also anticipatory – based on perception of a social pattern and vision of a plot – rather than simply reactionary. In other words, actions are predicated on imaginative possibilities that themselves are based on a distillation of past experience. Yet, occurring in the moment-to-moment of the present, they are tactical adjustments (de Certeau, 2002), rather than strategic. Caroline thus draws out the drama for as long as possible, in response to the continual pleading for and withholding of information, which must eventually be divulged – but slowly – to keep others' interest. During this period of attention and power, Caroline has some degree of choice over whom to tell and when. Both friendship lines and hierarchies are thus premised on the order of telling. Expressing such choices, at least implicitly through the order of telling, both expresses new girl Caroline's perception of the social hierarchy and enacts such a hierarchy simultaneously. In this sense, Caroline's power is also in making the social order, even as her expression is simultaneously an interpretation of it.

There is thus a performative aspect to the action (cf. Butler, 1990), wherein the action is not simply representative but constitutive of reality. By apparently *choosing* Tula, Holly, Su and Hazel (over Laila, Amina, Shivani or I), individuals in the watching audience perhaps gain a sense (perhaps one they already had) that this is the peer hierarchy. Nevertheless, there is also ambiguity: Tula gained access somewhat stealthily, and Holly and Su invoked Tula's friendship in their demands. At any point, one could interpret events as a flow of action without necessary statement of intent. On the other hand, Holly's invocation of 'best friendship' with Tula is a risky action, as there is the potential for conflict and/or loss of face

for Holly, Tula and Caroline depending on the choice invoked. Yet, Tula manages to overcome this through a public performance that sees her both acquiesce to her friend's demands at the same time as she withholds knowledge through an emphasis on the moral bind of a 'pinky promise'. By nonchalantly re-voicing Holly's use of the term '*best* friends', she fulfils the invoked friendship duty, at the same time as her tone implies a mocking of the notion of such a duty. There is thus a playful ambiguity to her actions through which she successfully navigates conflicting moral imperatives.

In its isolation, this example overstates the sense of a peer hierarchy, which was not played out on a continuous basis (although perhaps felt particularly salient at this point in time – a third of the way through Year 6). However, in the general everyday flow of action and participation, there was far more ambiguity, even in implicit actions like whom to show and tell to, and share and play with. I include it to show that there *was* a *sense* of differentiation between individuals, and that more desirable people could be treated differently (e.g. welcomed in and accommodated to a greater degree than less desirable people). However, unlike in Goodwin's (2006) and the Adlers' (1998) studies, there was little direct exclusion on an everyday basis, and no open, public discussion and reification of the notion of 'popular' groups or individuals, even if one might have a sense of this being the case.

The only time I heard such an identification occurring was when Amina says, "You know the new girl, Caroline? She's one of the Tula, Holly, Annabel, Su types. She's different from us. Today I asked if she wanted to come to the library with me and she said that she needed to go stretch her legs. So she doesn't like reading, and she's into sport and stuff like that." This was the first (and only) time I heard reference to a 'type' of others as such, rather than individual evaluations of particular others, aside from the terms 'the girls' or 'the boys', used by both teachers and pupils. I don't point out to Amina that many of the other girls, like Tula,

also frequent the library, and that Shivani likes running and football too. Later, I press her about what she means by 'different', but she shrugs and says, "I don't know". The awkwardness of the comment, which she seems to later realise and attempts to dismiss, is suggestive of Amina's general perceptiveness, but social ineptitude with others sometimes. In drawing strong lines around groups that others might try to downplay, she seems to be violating an unspoken peer social norm – perhaps in one small way contributing to Hazel and Laila's distancing from her towards the end of the year, as I go on to discuss.

My point, then, is that there were cues in body language and speech acts about who was more or less admired, *but* in the absence of direct exclusion, it was possible to ignore these, and to participate anyway. In this sense, I have deep reservations about the labelling of particular individuals as 'marginal' or 'marginalised', as some authors have employed the term (e.g. Svahn and Evaldsson, 2011). For example, in a similar way to that in which an outside observer might suppose the existence of 'groups' of friends, one might also describe Lewis and Callum as somewhat 'marginalised' amongst the Year 6s. Yet, whilst the term might summarise how others, children and adults alike, might categorise them, I think that *their* everyday experiences frequently might not have been ones of marginalisation in the totalising form that such a label incurs. Take the following example, which was by no means uncommon:

*September, 2013 [Year 6, Lowell]:*

*We're sitting in the hall around an octagonal table, eating our packed lunches, and discussing scary stories.*

> *Amina says, "When we were in Germany, we had a holiday place, like, where we rented. I think the – what do you call the person who rents you the place? I think she wanted to scare us 'cause there was this clown – like a little one – dangling from off*

*of my parents' bed, and there was also a scarecrow! It was really scary – it had dead eyes! Do you think they're scary, scarecrows? I think they're really scary."*

*"Yeah, definitely!" I say.*

*"Yeah, 'cause they're meant to scare people!" says Lewis.*

*"Miss Sim," interjects Sophie, with urgency, "I need to tell you something."*

*"Oh yeah, and…" Lewis continues.*

*"Wait," says Sophie, "this is really important: So, my sister once saw a ghost! Yeah, 'cause she was asleep, and then she heard this noise, and then she opened her eyes and froze!"*

*"Of course you freeze!" says Lewis. "I go like this…" He freezes, motionless, for a second.*

*"Me too!" says Amina, demonstrating.*

*Sophie says, "I close my eyes!"*

*I say, demonstrating, "I put my hands over my eyes but look through!"*

*We all try out the different ways of reacting, and then carry on discussing ghosts and religion. Then Lewis leaves the hall, running. Amina and Sophie come with me to put my lunch tray away, and then we head to the door to leave the hall. As we pull it open, Lewis jumps out at us with a "Rargh!" We all shriek and look to each other. Sophie puts her hand on her chest, "Oh my god, that was soo scary!" Then Amina, peering into the dark library next door exclaims, "There's someone in the library!" We all scream, Lewis included, and run out into the atrium where we stop to catch our breath, laughing and recalling events.*

*Lewis explains, "I was waiting for you there 'cause I knew you'd think I'd gone!"*

*We head up to the field together, chatting.*

Sharing experiences on a topic all of these particular children enjoy talking about (scary stories) obviates the fact that on other occasions, Amina (along with many of the other girls)

purposefully moves away from Lewis "because he's gross", or that Sophie has told me one-to-one before that "I don't like Amina, 'cause she's mean like that", or that on some occasions she seems to tolerate and even enjoy Lewis's attention and company, whilst on others, she finds him 'annoying'. Although these are the kinds of 'facts' that get crystallised in narrative, they belie the everyday interactions, such as the ones above, which were the fabric of everyday life. In these conversations and acts of humour and play, enjoyment could be derived without grander implications for friendship, but also without evidently *not* being a form of friendship. Thus, whilst Lewis was, in occasional specific situations, acutely marginalised[58], for the most part he enjoyed participation in everyday talk and activities that rendered his cumulative everyday experiences far from marginal. Whether apparent bullying was more relentless and intense at Goodwin's (2006) and Svahn and Evaldsson's (2011) fieldsites is, of course, difficult to know. But, based on my everyday experiences, I find it difficult to see that marginalisation could be as complete as it is rendered in their accounts, and wonder if they don't draw too strong a narrative from what might not be experienced as such. By focusing on particular moments of exclusion, rather than the totality of social interaction, the notion of marginalisation is made more absolute than it might be experienced. Equally, by analysing every word and aspect of bodily positioning from video evidence, I wonder if the intentional slights, which I do not doubt exist, are not rendered to the reader more intense than they might actually be experienced by the 'victim', because of the vicissitudes in meaning that occur with continuous action and perception.

On the other hand, it may be the case that the school experiences I describe here *are* different from other cases documented. Amongst my participants, and especially the girls at Lowell, there was a notable ethic of not wanting to seem 'mean'. Thus, on the playground one day,

[58] For example, at sports day, when his house group team members voted down his attempts to participate in any of the more popular activities, citing his apparent/relative lack of competence.

I'm standing with Deepa and Sophie, when Amina runs up to us to give me my 'factfile' (see chapter 3). She runs off again to play with some others, and I read the factfile out loud. At various descriptions, Sophie exclaims, "That's not very nice. That's why I don't like Amina – 'cause she's mean like that." Whilst I feel like Amina is joking, Sophie takes offence on my behalf. On another occasion, Hazel chastises Amina directly, after she says, "That girl's hair is gross!" Hazel says, "That's not very nice." But Amina protests, "It is though – it looks like worms with those yellow things." Sophie says, "It does actually", and they laugh. Here, Amina manages to persuade Sophie that she isn't being mean (i.e. laughing at someone else for no reason), but is actually pointing out a fact, and an amusing observation. Further, making the observation privately, just between ourselves, the action has little consequence, and thus no implications of meanness to the girl herself.

Similarly, when the term 'friend' was used in public (which, as stated, was not very often), it was often employed in an inclusive manner, extending friendship as widely as possible so as not to appear mean. For example, as noted in chapter 2, Annabel describes me as a 'friend' in the library at school one day, which indeed I felt to be the case, although we didn't spend a great amount of time together. On the same occasion, another incident ensued, which showed how broadly inclusive the girls were. Shivani, Annabel and I are drawing name labels, and Annabel states, "This is for Lena!"

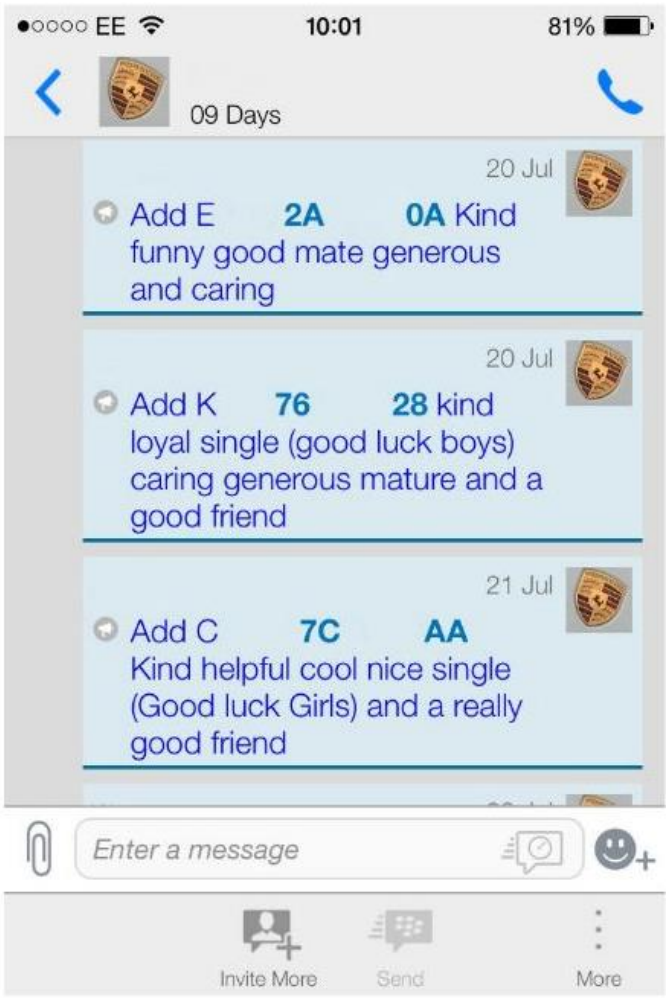
> Another girl sitting at our table, who is in Year 3 or 4, says, "Me?" (evidently her name is also Lena).
>
> "Oh no, my friend Lena over there!" says Annabel, pointing towards the book issuing desk where Lena is on library monitor duty, before adding quickly, "I mean, you're nice too." She whispers worriedly to Shivani and I, "Oh no, I hope she isn't offended – I think she might be."

Such incidences are sometimes read by feminist writers as evidence of a coercive 'nice girl' ideal (e.g. Walkerdine, 1990; Hey, 1997), and indeed, it could be argued that many of the girls in my study at Lowell could be seen in such a light, despite their different ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds (see chapter 2). Nevertheless, as previously stated, I think that such readings can be overstated. In this incident, Annabel shows a particular anxiety related to a desire to be perceived as both 'nice' and 'polite' that may bear relation to her habitus, developed as a middle-class, white female. But the desire to keep up a public show of politeness or 'getting on', whilst not necessarily characterised by anxiety, also occurred amongst the boys in Firsby.

In Firsby, similarly, negative private assessments of others as a frame for exclusion contrasted with positive public assessments of others as the basis for inclusion. For example, in the Blackberry Messenger (BBM) message overleaf, which Alex sends around 'advertising' particular friends to others, both boys and girls are described in positive terms. Friends are described as kind, caring, and a good mate/friend; other attributes listed are generous (which as I show in chapter 5 extends to a monetary accounting of reciprocity in gift giving), funny, loyal, mature, helpful, cool, nice and single (making this a dating advert too). The idea that desirable friends give generously, are kind and caring, and are 'a good friend' suggests a sense of reciprocity about friendship. And indeed, in sharing such messages (i.e. giving out his friends' 'PIN's to his social network), Alex is also showing himself to be a generous and good friend. Being inclusive about friendship, at least in public, thus seemed to reflect on the person doing the including.

Similarly, in their later use of the photo-sharing platform Instagram, children appeared to 'follow' others fairly openly, with the purpose of gaining 'followers' in return. For example, after 'liking' the photos of particular friends, I was followed by several of these friends' friends,

whom I didn't know personally. And when I met with and spoke on the phone with Alex, he told me to follow various people in order to add to their and my follower numbers. "Add Zoe and Chris," Alex said, "They'll add you back, it's okay!" Children were thus inclusive in their online friendships, and generally followed a social rule of reciprocity, friending those who friended them. This was similarly – and one could say *already* the case in their offline friendships, since the use of social media only really seemed to take off midway through Year 6. Thus, in the playground, the neighbourhood and online, children seemed to state friendships in as inclusive a sense as possible, reaping the benefits of having the widest possible social network, and of being a person who would be *involved* in happenings, with access to the fun, excitement and knowledge that participation promised. Participating was also *signalled* by showing that one had many followers or friends. Thus, Alex asks me, "How many friends do you have? I'm on…237! I'm trying to get to 250!" And in their profiles, Alex and others used the closed and open padlock emojis to indicate how many followers they had gained, as imaged by the unlocking of 'levels' (overleaf) – as described in the previous chapter, a means of self-other and biographical understanding.




*Alex's BBM message 'advertising' some of his friends to others, together with their private PINs, so that they can be added. The addition of 'single' shows that these are also advertisements for romance. My participants, and especially the girls, often expressed their 'liking' of members of the opposite sex, and enjoyed discussing 'relationships' (even if their actualisation – during my time in the field – was rare).*
*(Names and PINs partially removed.)*




*Alex's Instagram with 'levels' to be unlocked, based on number of 'followers'.*
*(Identifying information removed.)*

**Private narratives of non-friendship at school: Hazel and Amina**

In contrast to public displays of *inclusive* friendship were private tales of *exclusive* friendship. As discussed, at Lowell, for the longest duration, I spent my break and lunchtimes with an apparent grouping consisting of Hazel, Shivani, Laila and Amina. Yet, to call this a group would be to deny Hazel's narrative account (told to me in March 2014) that categorised only Shivani as a 'friend' and the others as people she spent time with by association.

*It's just after school, and I'm giving Hazel tuition in her classroom. We're sitting on the carpet by the radiator. Hazel has asked me when my birthday is, telling me, "I'm keeping a list of everyone's birthdays that I'm going to put in my big book that I've got, so that even after we leave, I'll have everyone's birthdays and I can send them a card. On the last day, I'm going to bring it in, so everyone can write their name and phone number in it. Well, everyone I like, anyway. And I can say to people I don't like, 'No! I don't* want you *to write in my book!' That will be good! I can finally say it, 'cause it'll be the last day of school, so I won't have to see them again, ever!"*

> *"Who don't you like?" I ask.*
>
> *"Mm," says Hazel, "Amina."*

*I've noticed of late that Amina has been becoming somewhat ostracized by some of the others, still spending time in the group, but being somehow pushed to the edges of seating and games, and listened to less. Still, I'm surprised by Hazel's statement.*

> *"I thought she was one of your friends – 'cause you hang out together?" I ask.*
>
> *"No!" declares Hazel. "She gives me weird looks sometimes, like, 'What, Hazel?!' and I know she doesn't like me. We only hang out together because she's linked to Laila and Laila's linked to Shivani, and Shivani's linked to me." She demonstrates using her fingers. "So it's like, we're on the ends really."*

*"It's Laila and Shivani in the middle?" I ask.*

*"Yeah, exactly. It's that pair in the middle, and us are only linked through them, but we're not really…" She tails off.*

*"That's interesting," I say. "It's the same with Daisy. I always thought you guys were all friends and I only found out after that you* [all] *didn't like her."*

*Lately, I'd been surprised to discover Amina and Laila saying they had an H.D. – 'Hate Daisy' – club, despite the fact that they spent many break and lunchtimes together last year. I don't know if the 'H.D. club' was something created during Daisy's time at school, or after she left, but I only heard it mentioned (in private) a long while after. Although I knew of a large public argument – a relatively rare occurrence – happening just after I joined in Year 5, in which Mr Powell had words with both Hazel and Daisy, after this, the girls were all playing together again, so I assumed it had been resolved.*

*"Yeah," says Hazel. "We only hung around with her 'cause she kept on coming to us. But no one really liked her. 'Cause she kept trying to tell us what to do. She always wanted to be the youngest* [in a pretend game they played]*, I don't know why. 'Cause she's the youngest in real life. But she wouldn't ever let anyone else be youngest, which isn't fair. And then there was this time, she said it was her birthday, so* she *should decide what we played, even though her birthday was actually yesterday, it wasn't even today, and she made us change all our rules, 'cause she cried about it. And I was standing there going, 'err, yeah, okay!'" Hazel rolls her eyes to the left, demonstrating. "So we had to change our whole game 'cause of her, so that we could do it her way. And it was all pointless anyway."*

*"What about Jaina?" I ask of the other girl who left at the end of Year 5. "Was she more in the middle?"*

*"Yeah. She could sometimes be great, and sometimes not so great. I'm still in touch with her, and actually, I'm better friends with her now than when she was here!" She*

*smiles. "I think there's that thing of seeing someone every day and you can find them annoying in little ways, but once you don't see them everyday – that distance makes you realise that you do like them more now, and you don't always have to see them. I saw her at Shiv's party – 'cause everyone went, and it was really cool. I think also 'cause she knows loads of people at her new school, so she has lots of friends, whereas when she was here, she only had us."*

*"So she's got more friends?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"She's happier there?"*

*"Yeah, I think so."*

Hazel's narrative expresses and reveals a number of things. Firstly, she emphasises where she stands with regards to people she ordinarily spends a great deal of time with, clarifying that it is only by association that she hangs out with most of them. Distinguishing playing together from being friends, she implies a notion of friendship as a volitional dyadic relation between two individuals, in line with 'western' ideology. Setting out her position on Daisy, she suggests negative aspects to Daisy's actions and character that justify a universal dislike of her, in particular her apparent bossiness and immorality (in unfairly claiming it to be her birthday). Finally, in describing her changing opinion of Jaina, Hazel indicates that Jaina's friendship is more desirable now that she has lots of friends, or is, in other words, more popular.

Eder's (1985) and the Adlers' (1998) writings about popularity cliques suggest that there are a number of pre-constituted factors that account for popularity (which for girls include participation in activities like cheerleading, and being considered pretty). Meanwhile, Eder suggests that in trying to maintain clique exclusivity, popular girls come across as mean to others, leading to their subsequent unpopularity and popularity's cyclical nature. For my

participants, the opposite appeared to be true. As well as a lack of clear-cut hierarchy and externally derived reasons for popularity (although things like style were evaluated favourably), popularity was attractive because it meant being someone around whom others flocked, and this in turn meant being someone around whom things might happen. As the example with Caroline's diary suggests, my participants' in-the-moment actions, as well as the cumulative effect of past actions, together constituted notions of popularity. Popularity was thus performative, but had productive potential, as popular people were desirable to hang around, as Hazel notes. The inverse of this were those who tried to 'tag along' – as Hazel notes of Daisy, when she says that "she kept coming to us". Alex, similarly, uses the term 'annoying' to complain about his friend Charlie who "keeps calling me". And, later in the year, when I ask Laila, at Amina's behest, why she keeps on running away from Amina, Laila says to me, "Because she keeps on following me around!" In this way, the sense of someone being a 'tag-along' is rooted in previous relations of friendship, as Goodwin (2006) notes, but is also part of a complex social field in which children negotiate the ethics of not being mean with attempts to express a sense of their individual selves and friendships, and in-the-moment desires to seek excitement and fun.

Hazel's narrative was by no means unique, as evidenced by Amina and Laila's 'H.D. Club'. Yet, nor was it common. Indeed, although I spent a great deal of my time with Hazel at school, including in other one-to-one situations, this was the first and only time she expostulated on these issues to me. Of course, as all of these narratives were told in private, I have no doubt that there were many dozens more that I wasn't privy to, such that behind the apparent fluidity, inclusiveness and ambiguity of everyday social life, individuals saw at least some of their own relations and actions in stark terms. Nevertheless, in their being told in confidence to particular others, and not even particularly frequently, they did not constitute an everyday practice in the sense that playing, talking and participating together did. On the other hand,

as I shortly describe, they did have particular resonances, both in terms of precipitating change and fixing memory.

For a long time, Amina didn't appear to know what Hazel really thought or felt about her, as indeed I didn't until Hazel told me. However, as Hazel's minute and mundane actions of exclusion towards her became somewhat more obvious, she began to confide to me in private about her and Hazel's relationship. At first, Amina seemed to try to cement the notion of their friendship through narrative. Leveraging the extended temporality of her and Hazel's social interaction, she tells me that she and Hazel have been friends "since Year 3" and that "we were best friends for a bit – when she was new". Here, she draws on the duration and intensity of their association, which stands in marked contrast to Hazel's claims. However, towards the end of the year, when Hazel starts to really freeze her out, the following conversation occurs:

*June, 2014. It's the start of lunch break, and we're wandering out of the refectory into the playground. Caroline says to Amina and me, sadly, "I don't know why Hazel left me out."*

> *"Of what?" I ask.*
>
> *"We were playing a game and then Hazel said she wanted to speak to just Shivani and Mia, so they went off, and I went over and she said, 'Not you, Caroline.' …I'm really hurt by that." And then, as if just deciding, she says, "I think I'm going to speak to her about it," and runs off.*
>
> *"Do you like Hazel?" Amina asks after Caroline's left.*
>
> *"Yeah," I reply shortly, in the typically non-committal way I have become used to, even as I hate doing so. This response is typical because I never know what or how much I can say of my true opinions, without difficult consequences arising.*
>
> *"She does that to me too," confides Amina, "I know she does. Like at lunch, if I sit down, she'll say, 'Someone's sitting there!' or she'll put her bag on it and say*

*someone's coming. One time, my lunchbox was there, and I went, and I saw her kick it under the bench, and then I came back, and I was like, 'Where's my lunchbox?' and she just shrugged."*

*We're walking up the steps, and then across the field to where Laila and Caroline are, following them as they move to the far corner of the field. They sit and we almost follow, but as Amina's still talking, we swerve and carry on walking and talking.*

*I say, "I've noticed she only talks to you when there's no one else to talk to, but she seems to want to hang out with people she thinks are 'cool' if possible."*

*"Yeah," agrees Amina. "And she's such a snitch! Last year, she wanted us to play this game, and none of us wanted to play, but I was like, 'Fine, whatever!' And so she told her mum that we were all being mean to her and her mum came and told us all off! Except for me… I don't know why Shivani's still friends with her. But they've been friends since Year 2 when they went to the same dance class."*

*"I think she's nicer to her too," I say, meaning Hazel towards Shivani. "She seems to want to hang out with Kelsey, Lena and Mia though," I add.*

*"Yeah, but you know how her and Mia do these [dance] routines? She was like, 'Let's do this one!' and Mia was like, 'Ohhhh!'" Amina rolls her eyes and sighs, emulating Mia. "But Hazel was just like, 'Yes, we're doing this!'" She puts her hands on her hips, emulating Hazel.*

Amina's narrative wrests back control of the situation to frame the relationship as one in which *she has chosen* not to like Hazel. Just like in Hazel's narrative, Amina sets out her dislike based on a moral position in which Hazel is characterised as mean (kicking her lunchbox away), a liar (shrugging about it), a snitch (telling her mum), and bossy (bossing Mia about, and not just Amina's but Mia's evident distaste for this) – all negative characteristics. In doing so, she sets up both a moral justification and persuasive case for not liking Hazel, and tries to evince

my support, at the same time as she implies others' witness to the same actions – vis-à-vis Caroline and Mia.

Just like with Hazel's narrative, where 'fixing' her ideas about Shivani, Laila and Amina seemed to precipitate an increasing public show of negative actions towards Amina (rather than action preceding narrative), so it seemed to be with Amina's narrative. In other words, such narratives do not necessarily express a pre-existing state of relations long-harboured internally, but a set of possible relations that become fixed through their expression. It is through being told that they become a powerful force for understanding relations in one particular way, and then for guiding (previously ambiguous) actions accordingly. Narrative expression thus turns what was hitherto somewhat ambiguous into a certainty. For Amina, the effect is dual edged. Although, of course, I don't tell anyone what she tells me, the action of crystallising her feelings towards Hazel seems to exacerbate their growing distance, and to some extent worsens Amina's relationships with others[59] too. Whilst it allows her to reclaim some agency, in making it her choice to 'hate' Hazel, and to stake out her moral authority in defiance of Hazel's actions, the everyday situation becomes one of fewer possibilities, and a curtailed social field. For me, too, whilst I felt as though I could see where Amina was coming from, and whilst I genuinely enjoyed her company – finding her jokes and dramatic actions funny (where sometimes others, like Sophie, found them mean) – the decrease in her popularity towards the end of Year 6 meant that when spending time with her, I could feel my social field shrinking too. At times, then, I, like others, hoped and tried to get away to other groups where more was happening.

[59] In particular, Laila and Caroline, whom she was closer to before. With the rest of the girls in the year, things stay largely the same. Shivani remains friendly with Amina.

Various authors have written about the gendered ways in which children become friends (e.g. Winkler-Reid, 2016; Renold, 2005; Ali, 2004). Whilst I don't disagree that gender is marked amongst children themselves, and that children's learning of gendered behaviour occurs in conjunction with and through processes of friendship, in this chapter I focus on the commonalities between boys' and girls' practices. In doing so, I suggest wider comparisons – between children and adults; and between the U.K. and other parts of the world. Whilst at school, I spent time mainly with girls, out of school, through friendship with Alex, I spent time mainly with boys. Despite their evidently gendered interests and affiliations, and sometimes their social interactions, I found friendship processes, and thereby processes of understanding personhood, to be similar in surprising ways.

**Private narratives of non-friendship out of school: Alex and Ethan**

In Firsby, the people I spent the most time with when round at Alex's were Ethan and Charlie. Yet, in private, Alex repeatedly told me that he was 'only pretending' to be friends with Ethan, and, frequently, that Charlie was 'annoying', in constantly calling him. Walking past Ethan's house at the end of his road, Alex often decides to 'knock for' (i.e. call on) Ethan, in spite of his continual assertions to me that he is "not really friends with Ethan". Liz tells me that Alex and Ethan "argue like an old married couple but they always make up in the end". Alex looks uncomfortable at this, suggestive of an awkwardness that sometimes occurs when adults discuss children's friendships in ways that either 'fix' notions of friendship that children have otherwise left fluid (e.g. spending time doing together, without stating friendship in fixed terms), or making public a narrative that a child might have told to an adult in private (e.g. concerning whom they admire and dislike, when such views ought not to be public knowledge). In private with me, Alex disputes his mother's rendering of the situation,

reiterating his dislike and his pretence. He explains: “He doesn’t know ‘cause I still pretend I’m his friend, but I’m not. He thinks we’re still mates.” He says that he “can’t wait ‘til I don’t have to go to Ethan’s anymore” because, in a few days’ time, at the start of the new academic year, he will be allowed to carry his own key and stay at home by himself[60].

Alex frequently brings up the topic of his dislike of Ethan over a period of many months, even though during this same period, we meet up with Ethan several times a day on each and every occasion that I visit. For example, after a big argument with Ethan in the park, Alex and I have returned home to play PlayStation. We then decide to go back outside, and upon passing Ethan’s house, Alex pauses to say, uncertainly, “Why is the side gate open? Do you think I should shut it?” It’s not unusual that Alex should comment on this, given the boys’ security fears, as noted in chapter 4. Yet, I’m surprised that Alex should be so concerned, given the recent argument and Alex’s assertions that Ethan isn’t his friend. Alex peers through the side alley. “I think I should shut it. Wait…” He heads back to rap on the front door. I’m hanging back on the street, unsure if this is a good idea. Ethan answers.

“Your side door’s open. Do you want me to shut it?”

“Yes, please. No, wait. We’re just going out.”

Ethan and his friend Tomas step outside, and I see Ethan and Alex shake hands. Then Ethan and Tomas get their bikes from the side alley, and Ethan asks Alex if he can shut the gate now, to save them getting off their bikes, saying “Thanks, Alex. I owe you a boost.”

However, after they’ve cycled off, Alex wipes his hand on his trousers. “Eurgh! I don’t want his hand on me!” he says, shaking it in disgust.

“Oh, I thought you were friends again,” I say.

“No!” says Alex. “His grandma made us shake hands!”

[60] Although this actually ends up being in October, after Alex’s 11th birthday.

This incident was typical of my visits to Alex, at least during the first half of my fieldwork when we met up with Ethan every time I visit, up until October 2013. Alex told me in private narratives that he was *not* friends with Ethan, and like Hazel and Amina, justified his dislike on the basis of Ethan's character. For example, the first time I ask why he doesn't like Ethan, Alex says, "'Cause he's annoying. He tries to beat me up for no reason. Like, he grabs my legs. But I just push him over, like this." Alex holds out his hand. "And he falls!" Alex suggests that Ethan is unreasonable, in starting fights for no reason. And (something not seen in the girls' narratives) he also suggests that Ethan is physically weak. In evaluating Ethan in these ways, Alex frames himself as morally opposite by default: he would not start fights for no reason; and in being able to fend off Ethan's punches simply by holding out an arm, he demonstrates an almost superhero-like (and in fact near non-violent) power.

Yet, of course, in public, although Alex and Ethan did sometimes publicly argue, they could always be seen to make up. From the point of view of an observer, then, it seemed that they were *really* friends, as Liz assumes when describing them not even just as friends but as an 'old married couple' – something which seems to insinuate surface level bickering, but a deeper underlying affection. Of course, Alex's narrative is directly opposed to this: a public display of friendship conceals Alex's *true* feelings of dislike for Ethan, and spending time together involves a pretence, on the part of Alex, of getting on. Alex's claims that he wasn't talking to Ethan seemed to be exaggerated, but I guess the point he was making in these narratives was that he hadn't *chosen* to be friends with Ethan; talking with him wasn't his choice, and thus in order to underscore this point, he claims that it wasn't *really him* talking – only a persona, which could have fun together with Ethan, even as his *real* self disliked Ethan.

Like in the case of Hazel and Amina, Alex's narrative seemed to precipitate a gradual change in their relationship. When I see him, Alex continues to tell me of Ethan's negative actions,

and he has managed to persuade Liz of his dislike of Ethan too. Citing an incident at school, Liz comments, “real friends don’t do that – they don’t take your friends away from you”. Here, Liz backs up Alex, whilst expostulating on the moral duties of friends to each other and how they should behave – something that children re-voice in their own narratives. But she also excuses Ethan by means of a folk psychology that leverages developmental ideas of children as not being fully responsible for their actions (and hence not fully persons), explaining that Ethan is jealous of Alex’s popularity, and that family issues are responsible for his behaviours.

At Alex’s 11th birthday in October 2013, Alex and his schoolfriend Brandon seem to make more of a public show of dislike towards Ethan, with Brandon repeatedly dragging Ethan out of Alex’s room, and Alex condoning this by telling Ethan to “get out of my room!” Alex’s two out-of-school friends, Charlie and Luke, criticise Brandon, saying, “Why are you being so mean to him? Why are you picking on him?”, to which Brandon replies, “’Cause he’s a shit. ‘Cause he won’t stand up for himself! When he can stand up for himself then I’ll stop, but look – he won’t even fight back! Why won’t you fight back?” Here, Brandon frames himself not as ‘mean’ but almost as a ‘teacher’ to Ethan. And Ethan seems to diffuse the situation and save face by introducing further ambiguity, giggling to Brandon, “’Cause I don’t want to [fight]! ’Cause you’re my friend!” Although he leverages the term ‘friend’, the meaning of it is rendered ambiguous by the fact that it is evidently being used in such a diffusely inclusive way. And Alex’s demands are also rendered a little more ambiguous as he tempers them with the excuse that “It stinks in here! Did you fart? Ethan, it was you, wasn’t it?”

However, after this event, and given that Alex no longer has to go to Ethan’s every day after school, most of my visits to Alex’s involve meeting up with Charlie, rather than Ethan. Charlie lives further (a 15-minute cycle ride) away, but our circle of movement has increased by this point, enabling this shift in sociality. Blending aspects of Froerer’s (2010) and Evans' (2010)

accounts, then, it can be seen that proximity and a desire to participate, rather than affection, perhaps constituted a large part of the reason why Alex and Ethan spent so much time together, at least according to Alex's narrative. However, in line with Carrier's (1999) notion of how friendships are *talked about*, children may choose not to recognise these as 'real' friendships, creating awkwardness where adults assume such interactions to be relations of choice.

**Concluding thoughts: narrative 'fixing'; public and private ethics; and the ambiguity of everyday experience and change**

In sum, then, we see children, in occasional private narratives, emphatically denying the existence of certain friendships – in particular, relations of spending time together that they realise outside observers might wrongly perceive to be relations of 'chosen' friendship. Telling of the perceived negative actions and characteristics of others, which can include being 'mean', 'bossy', 'weak', a 'tag-along' and a 'snitch', they are simultaneously setting out an ethical charter for friendship, justifying their dislike on the basis of this charter, and positioning themselves accordingly as moral people worth being friends with. In this sense, friendship is told of as being the individual choice of an autonomous moral self, but acting in accordance with a shared ethical agenda. Personhood is thus conceived of as inhering in autonomous, moral, individual selves, in line with modern 'western' rhetoric (Carrier, 1999; and cf. Mauss, 1985 (1938)), although friendship is understood in ethical terms, as Lambek (2013) contends, rather than in terms of spontaneous affection (Carrier, 1999), similitude (Winkler-Reid, 2016) or competence and competition (Evans, 2010).

By contrast, in public fora, children rarely articulated others' negative characteristics. Rather, they acted in at least ambiguously inclusive ways: allowing others to participate in on-going activities; emphasising others' positive characteristics (including being 'nice', 'kind', 'caring', 'funny', 'generous' and 'a good friend'); and not reifying exclusive friendship groups. In doing so, they appeared to navigate imperatives (set out in both adult discourses and their own ethical charters) to be kind to others, whilst reaping the benefits afforded by inclusion. This included the ability to seek out enjoyable activities and exciting happenings occurring anywhere, and a concomitant desire to be popular, which could be aided by being reciprocally open to others.

I suggest that this can inform us about two aspects of children's 'tellings'. The first relates to the distinction between 'public' and 'private' – something that has been addressed by anthropologists, although usually in relation to the distinction between the political and domestic spheres, or between public and private spaces. Here, I use the terms according to the folk classification used by those in my fieldsites, where it applies to talk. Private referred to the telling of things to a small number of people (usually one or two others), often in confidence; public referred to the telling of things where a larger audience might be present (and was characteristic of much playground talk and action). To clarify, when I discuss playground norms of inclusivity, I do not mean that my participants were nice (and not mean) in any objective kind of way, say, relative to the children described in other studies (such as that by the Adlers (1998), in which 'meanness' seems to be implied as an objective relation). Rather, what I describe is the constitution of a rhetoric of niceness that was defined by the practice of being inclusive and friendly to all, and not saying negative things about others, in public. In the often crowded and public places where children spent their time, 'public' action was thus guided by an 'ethic of conviviality' (Overing, 2000).

By contrast, talking about another in a negative or excluding manner in private was not considered mean, because that person was not present to hear and feel hurt, and nor was there a larger audience to bear witness to the telling. In private, then, there was no longer an imperative for this 'ethic of conviviality'. Instead, telling about others' actions, and evaluating their actions, was necessary in order to make sense of the flow of everyday life, and of others and oneself. More so as my participants moved through Year 6, it became an essential aspect of constituting themselves, relationally and biographically, as persons. Whilst somewhat speculative, I suggest that my participants' practices could perhaps be constitutive of the learning of a wider English societal distinction between public and private, as suggested by Miller (2016). Miller argues that English society is characterised by a desire to keep public and private separate, where the public sphere means keeping others at arm's length. I make this suggestion given the parallels between my findings and James' (1993), in which the stating of friendships publicly turned into something of a problem, as compared with accounts from the U.S., like Goodwin's (1990), where friendships were stated and argued over quite openly. My contention is that in practically navigating competing discourses about 'friendship' and 'friendliness', children learnt about friendship relations and concepts of self, *alongside* a learning of when and where it was appropriate to tell things, and thus, the importance of the distinction between public and private.

My second point relates to the temporal nature of children's practical navigations of sociality. Whilst everyday experience was characterised by participation, and 'friendship' was ambiguous, the practice of narrating non-friendships, and distinguishing these from friendships, suggests a desire for some fixity, amidst the flux of everyday talk and action. In fixing the characters of others and, relationally, themselves, my participants were able to articulate multiple understandings – about themselves as persons, about the constitution of ethical personhood, and about friendship as a relation concerning both choice and ethics.

Implicit in this representation is the notion of persons and friends as moral agents, as Lambek (2013) describes. But whereas Lambek describes 'forensic' persons as being constituted by practice, and 'mimetic' persons by performance, for my participants, practice and performance were always entwined. As can be seen through children's fantasy play, video gaming engagements, and dramatic acts of telling, everyday acts were always something of both a practice and a performance. By contrast, I suggest that the distinction for my participants was between the everyday flow of *action and participation*, and the specific acts of *telling* that stopped this flow by 'fixing' people's enduring characters through time.

Such 'fixings' manifested certain paradoxes. Firstly, they invoked a linear representation of time, through the notion of continuous persons who remain morally responsible for their past actions (cf. Lambek, 2013). Yet, in fixing people's characters with the premise that these have not and will not change, a certain immanence is suggested, because all knowledge is contained within the present telling. As mentioned in chapter 3, this is not unique to children's expressions of knowledge, but was also characteristic of teachers' assessments of pupils' 'potentials'. Secondly, although friendship narratives posited continuity over time, as actions in themselves they also provoked change. As alluded to in chapter 3, then, 'telling' has a productive power, in being an inter-subjective action in itself. There were many possible productive effects, including those on the person listening to the narrative, and the teller's experience of dissonance between their narrative and their everyday participations. Given the fluidity and ambiguity of participation, change was difficult to discern in practice, only observable post hoc as the eventual ceasing of repetition in a previously repeated interaction. Participations thus changed imperceptibly, unlike their crystallisation in memory by narrative. In its 'fixing' effect, I suspect that in the future my participants will look back and remember 'friendships' (at least, the ones that they narrated) as key. Thus, the ambiguity of everyday practice is ironed out in time. Given adults' idealisation of friendships as the social relations

that count, it is perhaps no surprise that children do so too, denying everyday experience through narrative.

## Chapter 7 | Transitioning: Making choices; Leaving school

The transition from primary to secondary school has been written about in relation to parental aspirations and choice of schools, as well as children's own anticipations and fears about transition. Less has been written about having to leave primary, although Amit-Talai (1995) discusses the notion of leaving in relation to older youth in a Canadian school, arguing that the inevitability of leaving leads youth to treat friendship as an expendable relationship, in contrast to its assumed intensity during adolescence. In this chapter, I examine both the 'going to' and 'leaving' aspects of transition, in the context of children's Year 6 year. 'Transition' suggests a single moment of change, and research on transition often makes it seem as such: survey data and interviews record thoughts and feelings about decisions and expectations at a single point either before or after the change of schools. However, this fails to capture the ways in which, prompted by the rhythms of bureaucratic requirements, children and their parents discussed school 'choices' with their friends and each other, sharing knowledge and changing their evaluations in so doing. The notion of 'transition' also augments its difference relative to the anticipation of other events. In Year 6, children did spend much time anticipating secondary transition, but this was coterminous with the anticipation of birthdays, and rituals tied to the year group structure and rhythms of the school year.

Passing from primary to secondary is a rite of passage (cf. van Gennep, 1960 (1908)) that most children in England go through. Although aspects of secondary school choice involve the opening up of uncertain horizons, like the 'vital conjunctures' described by Johnson-Hanks (2002), as a strictly ordered life-stage event, transition still resembles a rite of passage. Yet, the time period of transition itself is uncertain. Transition could be seen as the last day of primary and/or the first day of secondary, and/or the summer in between, during which time pupils are perhaps neither part of one school or another (e.g. Waerdahl, 2005; Nielsen, 2016).

However, schools also set up Year 6 as something of a liminal period in itself, in their separation of the Year 6s from the rest of the school (cf. Turner, 1969). For example, at Lowell, Year 6s took up positions of authority like house captains and library monitors; were able to eat in the hall instead of the refectory; were known to have 'important' SATS exams; and, in the summer term, spent many hours practising for the end-of-year musical production, whilst other year groups had lessons. Additionally, in the year I was there, Year 6s were given a separate break and assembly time. Yet, whilst leaving school was foreshadowed by a prior separation, it was the end-of-year rituals that really marked 'leaving'. And in reaffirming the year group's belonging to the (primary) school, just before actual severance occurred, these rituals confused the notion of prior liminality, according to Turner's tripartite structure.

Equally, it is important not to overemphasise the significance of transition. Throughout this ethnography, we have seen that children were continually anticipating future events and imagining or planning future actions, where these were tied to their concrete and at least somewhat familiar practices. For most of my participants, the most anticipated of all upcoming events was their own birthday – imagined and planned well in advance of its occurrence. For example, in May 2013, walking around the neighbourhood with Alex, he tells me about his upcoming birthday in October. I say that this is quite a long time off, but he disagrees with me, explaining that it is only a few weeks until the end of term, and that his birthday is only a few weeks after term restarts – showing how important this event is as a marker around which other aspects of the calendar revolve. He tells me of what he will be receiving as a present from his parents (driving lessons), deriving enjoyment from the telling and imagining of this (in fact speculative[61]) gift in relation to his interests and desires, as discussed in chapter 3. And in telling me about what he will be 'doing for it' (having a sleepover

[61] When I later ask about the driving lessons, it turns out this wasn't what Alex received as his present, highlighting the importance of telling in wanting, and hoping to make, things happen (even if not always successful).

party), and who will be invited, he expresses an element of control over friendship choice, as well as a notion of being popular, as discussed in chapter 6. Similarly, at Lowell, my participants talked of upcoming birthdays, such as Shivani's, which was to be a trip to the Parklands shopping centre in town. Over numerous break-times, the girls discussed elements of the trip such as how they would get there from Shivani's (by bus), how much money they had, what shops they would visit and what they intended to buy – telling of and imagining future competence and ownership through idealised plans, as noted in chapters 4 and 5.

At school, recurring events previously experienced, like termly mufti days and discos, were similarly eagerly anticipated as they approached, with the announcement of mufti themes precipitating discussions amongst the girls of what they would wear. Also anticipated were the events associated with each year group, which children knew about through hearing of events being talked about by older children. For example, at breakfast club early into my fieldwork, Hazel (then Year 5) exclaims, "There's loads of things coming up! Like, the Year 2s are coming over!" She turns to Maria, who is sitting nearby. "Are you in Year 2? Are you the ones coming over?" Maria shrugs, saying, "I don't know." Hazel continues, "Then, it's International Week next week. There's different workshops and food from different parts of the world. And Year 5 are doing a Brazilian samba dance one! And there's St Lucia Day where you get to dress up in beach clothes! Only the Year 5s get to do that! It's all day and it's really fun! Then there's the Year 6 leaving production, 'cause of their leaving. I'm singing in that and in the concert! Then there's sports day, and then the summer fair – that's on a Saturday so everyone can come –, and the disco."

Yet, although events were known *about*, participation in things of which children had no prior knowledge was not of interest (until they actually occurred, of course). For example, whilst the Wales trip was eagerly anticipated, when in Wales, the announcement of the dinner menu

for the week precipitated more excitement and discussion than that of the activity schedule. After all, food was familiar, whilst activities in which they had never previously taken part were simply unrecognised names. Nor was it usually known exactly *when* events would occur, until information was divulged through the announcements of teachers or letters sent home. Finding out information before others was therefore highly prized, as when Kelsey and Hazel overhear their two class teachers making lesson plans for the week ahead. "We just heard we've got a test next week!" "I can't wait to tell people!'" In this sense, knowledge – of the future, which adults constructed and controlled – really did seem to represent power, in the creation of drama that children prized so highly.

The importance of knowledge, its variable distribution, and its circulation through telling and discussion, can be seen in the events surrounding transition, which I explore in more detail in the following two sections. In the making of secondary school 'choices', parents and children told others of their intentions and plans, thereby circulating evaluations of schools, and knowledge of what were 'good schools'. 'Good' included multiple factors including perceived academic quality and anticipated peer relations, although a central difference was in earlier parental decisions to apply to selective grammar schools or not. Meanwhile, school-leaving rituals were understood and anticipated by children to be similar to other year group rituals, but especially momentous because of being the 'last ones' they would experience. Describing how they actually played out, I suggest that in possessing a strong narrative structure, school-organised events were experienced as anticipated, in contrast to less formal leaving events, which could be fun, but were unlikely to be momentous.

**Secondary school 'choices'**

This aspect of transition has generally been examined from the perspective of the social background factors affecting parental choice, in line with the aspirations research discussed in chapter 1. Some researchers have also examined children's perspectives, vis-à-vis their hopes and fears, usually with regards to friendship (e.g. Pratt and George, 2005; Weller, 2007). As an example of the former, Butler and Hamnett's (2011) work, taking place over 25 years, charts the changing nature of secondary school choices made by successive generations of middle-class parents in different areas of London. In the mid-1980s, in then-impoverished Islington, they find a pioneering generation of middle-class parents who express an optimistic belief that progressive educational practices and middle-class goodwill will bring up standards in predominantly working-class local schools. However, by the mid-1990s, this confidence and 'middle class consciousness' had been replaced with anxiety and an explicit moral narrative of 'doing the best for their children'. Parents were engaging in various strategies to compensate for perceived local educational shortfalls, including campaigning for a community school (Telegraph Hill); moving their children out of borough (Brixton); and going private (Barnsbury).

Most recently, in 2005, the authors focus on ethnic diversity in Newham, east London, finding aspirations and strategies to vary by ethnicity. Black African and Caribbean parents could be seen to be 'cashing in' their religious assets to access faith schools outside the borough; Asian aspirations were towards a suburban ideal, as represented by Redbridge's (outer London) interwar housing with private front driveways, and academically high-performing schools; conversely, white middle-class incomers were attracted by inner-city Victorian terraces and were optimistic about the social mixing in schools, although actively avoided what they perceived to be the 'worst' schools. Meanwhile, with parental 'choice' now enshrined in policy, the authors found a narrative of popularity surrounding the best-performing schools. Whilst the language of choice was intended to signal the opening up of educational privileges

to all, the authors argue it is acting as a rationing mechanism, whereby only a few popular schools come to be seen as desirable, with the others categorised as 'failing'. Further, 'choice' becomes operational through the housing market, whereby entry to popular schools is ensured through buying into 'catchment areas'.

Numerous other studies have linked parents' educational aspirations with class and ethnicity, as discussed in the Introduction (e.g. Gutman and Akerman, 2008). As noted by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011), these links are also posited by middle-class educators at a local level. I found this to be the case in my field, although staff also switched from generalised notions of ethnic/class difference to discourses of individuality and immanence when discussing particular cases. For example, in an initial meeting to discuss my project, Mrs Clark, then deputy head, immediately brought up secondary school choices, and in particular, the choice between selective (grammar) and non-selective schools. She linked the notion of 'aspiration' to parenting and, relatedly, to ethnicity, telling me that "the Indian parents" tend to be keen for their children to do well academically, signing them up to all of the grammar school exams, and sending them for tuition, some from as early as Year 3 (aged 7 to 8). She said that, on the other hand, some white British and Afro-Caribbean children were not afforded the opportunity to 'aspire highly' because of the limited horizons caused by family background. According to Mrs Clark, although not through any fault of their own, such parents often did not see the value of education, in part due to their own poor educational experiences. In turn, she contrasted these with a small number of parents (unspecified by ethnicity) who "don't even bother" to remember filling in the application form for a secondary school place.

Yet, contrasting with this emphasis on parental influence was a personal account she gave of her son's attendance at a 'bad' school, in which she explained that "he just wasn't interested in education – some people aren't". This was also often the way in which teaching assistants

(of mixed class background and ethnicity[62]) described experiences with their own children. For example, Tula's mum explains to another TA how Tula wants to go to Cavendish[63], a grammar school attended by her elder daughter Daria, rather than Grange, another grammar school. However, she also describes how Elmcroft, a comprehensive, is 'right' for her son Edward. "It's whatever's right for your child, I think. I mean, Daria loves Cavendish. She's had a fantastic time there – a really nice balance of work and play, which was right for her. But a friend's daughter – Grange is definitely right for her daughter, 'cause Cavendish is too relaxed, and she wouldn't get on there. And Edward – he's very happy at Elmcroft, and I don't think he would've got on in a grammar school at all, whereas Daria loves it."

As such, there was some ambiguity as to what aspirations were, and what they should be: between the notion of 'high' and 'low' (i.e. evaluated and ranked) aspirations as in Mrs Clark's earlier cited comments, and the notion that aspirations vary by individuals and are all equally valid – as evident in parental statements, as well as official school rhetoric that the school ought to help children to be whatever they want to be. As discussed in chapter 3, a popular variant on this theme was that it was the school's duty to help children to 'reach their potential'. Parents would describe the length of time over which a child had displayed a particular aptitude, attitude or interest in work or other type of activity, in order to justify why it was the *right choice* to attend a particular school as a consequence of the fit between its apparent culture and their child's individual character – although this was, notably, in post hoc narratives. As I go on to describe, children, similarly, realigned their statements of

[62] Being a TA is a low-paid job for which no formal qualifications are required. Most TAs were either mothers of current primary school-age children, or those who had initially taken on the job when they were, in order to fit in work around their children's schedules. At Lowell, there appeared to be roughly two generations of TAs (similar to Alexander's (2010) description of the divided staff room in his study), reflecting demographic changes in the area. The older generation appeared to be English and ostensibly working/lower middle class; the younger generation was ethnically mixed, with class background difficult to identify.

[63] All school and place names, bus numbers, etc. changed for anonymity

preference when earlier choices became foreclosed. Contra Butler and Hamnett's (2011) finding that those not obtaining their preferences felt disenfranchisement with the system, in Lowell and Firsby, parents' and children's post hoc narrations generally figured outcomes as a matter of choice and ultimately for the best[64].

When I began fieldwork, in May 2013, there was relatively little talk of secondary school choices amongst the Year 5s. However, for the many children who were being sent to private tuition to prepare for secondary selection tests, the notion of secondary choices was at least implicitly present over a long period of time. For example, asking Jaina, in Year 5, whether she goes to her friends' houses much, she replies, "No, not since Year 4, 'cause I have too much work, 'cause there are exams for grammar schools soon." When I ask when these are, she replies that she doesn't know, and when I ask which schools she wants to go to, she replies, "I don't really mind which – I'll take exams for three, and for some private schools as well, and then we'll see." Secondary transition is thus a concern, but not because of the imminence of the exams or a desire to go to a particular school. Rather, that her preference is for a grammar school, followed by private school (as back-up), is a taken-for-granted aspect of her everyday experiences of performing work that is tied to competing in selective examinations. In this sense, parental aspirations can be seen to have effect through the habituating effects of the everyday practice of 'extra' work children presently do; and children's aspirations for selective schooling generally appeared aligned with their parents' (even if ideas about why selective schooling is better varied, as I go on to describe).

This does not mean that tutoring itself was presently enjoyable. For example, in late July, at the end of Year 5, Amina and Laila complain, "It's just tuition, tuition, tuition at the moment.

[64] Although it is notable that there were no instances of children not receiving one of their top preferences, other than through selective examination.

I can't wait 'til it's over!" "Yeah, I used do [Laila lists a number of after-school clubs], but now I don't do anything. I go home and go to tuition and then I get back and do tuition homework. Sometimes schoolwork. We don't get hardly any homework from school though. Mr Powell doesn't give us anything!" Here, the girls complain about the amount of time tuition work takes up, although Laila also seems to suggest that school does not give *enough* homework – something that was told to me by a number of others.

Although a practical engagement with tutoring seemed to bring forward notions of secondary school choices, this is not to say that others did not engage with such ideas. In Year 5 one morning, before the teacher has arrived in class, Yusuf declares loudly, "I ain't going to no grammar school! Are you going to grammar school?" He looks around. "They give you loads of homework every day. I ain't gonna do their stupid work! Are you going?" he asks Marc.

> Marc shrugs.
>
> "Why would anyone want to go there?" Yusuf continues. "It's stupid."
>
> Hazel says, "It's not stupid," before looking up at the date on the board to add, "Who wrote that? That's my job!" She gets up to rub it off, and rewrites it.
>
> "I'm not going," says Toby, and he and Yusuf discuss whether Elmcroft is good.
>
> "I'm going Fairlees in Pulham [Fairlees is a chain of academies, with schools denoted by the area in which they are based]!" Yusuf declares emphatically.

Here, then, we can see contrasting views on schools, which align with children's attitudes to school and schoolwork. Yusuf declares it 'stupid' to want to go to grammar school and hence do *more* work, whilst Hazel, who generally likes school and schoolwork disagrees with him. Yet, Hazel *doesn't* end up applying to any grammar schools. Rather, although children generally framed school choices as *their* choice, the decision to apply for grammar schools appeared to have been made – by parents – well before selective exams took place early in

Year 6. Information about these schools would have had to have been gathered by parents in advance, as there are no grammar schools in the borough, so they do not appear on local informational sources. And, as noted by Mrs Clark, there appeared to be a strong ethnic and apparent class background dimension to this decision. Although I have noted the multiple intersections of background that make such conclusions difficult to draw from my limited number of participants, this certainly seemed to be apparent in a way in which it wasn't for career aspirations, which, as discussed in chapter 3, were premised on children's interests. Thus, of the 14 girls in Year 6 (at the start of term), only Hazel, Kelsey, Lena and Hannah[65] were not applying to grammar school[66]. I didn't know of any boys in Firsby applying to grammar schools. For these children (and presumably their parents), it seems like these were never part of the repertoire of choice.

That those engaging in tuition to apply to grammar schools view these schools as self-evidently better can be seen when Jafar asks Kelsey, one lunchtime after the grammar school exams are over, where she's applying.

> "St Saviour's, St Philip's… maybe Reach."
>
> "Reach is really rough," says Jafar.
>
> "Yeah, it used to be, but it's got loads better," says Kelsey.
>
> Jafar says to Kelsey, "But you're really smart, Kelsey!"

[65] Although friendly with me, Hannah generally remains on the fringes of the girls' conversations (seemingly by her own choice), and therefore I know less about her choices.

[66] Hazel, Kelsey and Lena are white British. All of the other girls are of different (including mixed) ethnic backgrounds, except for Annabel, who is white British, but whose father's occupation (publisher) would suggest a more middle class background relative to Hazel, Kelsey and Lena (based on parental occupation). Amongst the boys, there are more differences in terms of ethnic background and decision to apply to grammar school, but in general, those of Indian heritage (as Mrs Clark notes) appeared most likely to do so.

Here, he seems to be implying that she should have applied, because she would have passed the exams had she sat them. For Jafar, grammar schools are the obvious choice; the question of going is one of getting in.

Intrigued by how Kelsey might have interpreted Jafar's comments about not applying to grammar school, I ask Kelsey at a later point why she didn't apply to any (although, of course, this was after she would have been able to apply). She says, "Because you had to pay £50 to take the exam! £50!"

The link between grammar schools' selection processes and 'smartness' is also drawn by Tula. Whilst her mum framed the different outcomes between Tula's elder siblings as being what was 'right' for them, Tula links this to innate smartness. She says, "My brother applied to St Christopher's, which is a really good school, but he didn't get in."

> Su says, "Why not Grange and other places?"
>
> "He did. I'm *trying* not to state the obvious here?!" She pauses. "Okay, he wasn't smart enough!" She says, "It's funny 'cause he started revising for exams in Year 4, and my sister in Year 5! Maybe he learnt too much!"

For those applying to them, grammar schools were adjudged objectively better on the basis of their GCSE and A-level exam results (i.e. outcomes), relative to others. Thus, Rohan, whose family may be prepared to move areas on the basis of school choices, is applying to Longbridge, in north London, and St Christopher's in Kent, which he describes as "the two best secondary schools in the country" – an evaluation that is based on exam result league tables. Sachin also raises the notion of competitive selection, in the following conversation with John. However, John expresses alternative reasons for applying to grammar schools, showing that evaluations are not unitary. Discussing an exam the day after, Sachin asks John, "Do you think you'll get in?"

"I think I did okay. I think in Maths, 'cause if I get 1½ in Maths and ½ in English then they add it up so I might pass. My parents said if I pass this test I'll get anything I want! …But they don't mean, like, a new car or a weapon!"

Sachin says, "Yeah, but it depends on what other people get 'cause they just take the top 600. So there's a one in five chance of getting through, but even if you get through this test, it doesn't mean you'll get into a school…"

Sachin is referring to the fact that this is just the first of a two-tier examination procedure. I ask him lots of questions about how selection works, and he expresses a great deal of knowledge about it, including the notion that selection is highly competitive, with most people not getting a place.

Meanwhile, John says, "There are some people who are just going to Fairlees or something, but I want to go to Martin's [a grammar school] 'cause then I won't get bullied. 'Cause at grammar school, they don't bully you."

However, Sachin contests this, saying, "Martin's is full of bullies though – the older kids bully the younger ones – you see them."

John replies, "Well, 'cause in grammar school if you bully someone you get into detention."

"Yeah, on *Saturdays*!" says Sachin, as they look at each other, grinning in horror.

Whilst the boys eventually agree on a piece of information they've heard, what is interesting is that John's positive assessment of grammar schools (which Jafar also states on a different occasion) is not, in the first instance, based on academic performance. Rather, it is based on a perception that, through selection, there is less bullying – possibly a heuristic insight derived from a familiarity with the apparent *type* of boys applying, and not applying, to grammar schools[67] (namely, those who visibly get into trouble more, some of whom perform a more

[67] Bullying seemed rare at Lowell, and was associated more with imaginings of secondary, as Pratt and George (2005) also note.

aggressive style of masculinity, like Yusuf, and who were generally not applying to grammar schools). This assessment seems to coincide with Hazel's, when she discovers in March who else will be going to her new school, Fairlees – Pulham. "All the naughty ones!" she says disgruntledly.

Whilst there was some expression by parents of not knowing enough about which schools were 'good', all parents and children seemed to speak in a common language of 'good' schools. Thus, whilst Yusuf is against the idea of doing 'extra' work, he still discusses schools in terms of whether they are 'good' or not. This was similarly the case with Ethan, in Firsby. In the library one day, he tells me, "I hate school. Apart from seeing my friends. Otherwise I hate it. I hate the learning stuff." However, in discussing secondary school choices, he says that he wants to go to Christ Church because "it's got really good results – everyone says it's really good." This 'good' seems to involve a mixture of notions including perceptions of others at the school (friends, as well as less desirable others), good exam results, and good or 'cool' teachers and extra-curricular activities. In many ways, this ties in with official Ofsted reports, which include a range of measures upon which schools are assessed. For parents, a similar range of factors is taken into account, although with friendships perhaps valued a little less, and elements of 'moral' quality taken into account, as when Kelsey's nan Lynn suggests that church-affiliated schools would be better.

Although the repertoire of school choice, vis-à-vis applying to a selection of local schools or to out-of-borough, selective grammar schools, had probably been made by parents well in advance of the start of Year 6, the exact composition and ordering of choices was not a foregone conclusion for anyone. Precipitated by the institutional bureaucracy involved in applying for a place – the 'common application form', on which parents can write down up to six school 'preferences', as well as upcoming open days, and entrance exams – arriving back

from the summer holidays at the start of Year 6, disinterest in discussing secondary schools was replaced by frequent and spontaneous talk. On an almost daily basis, children had discussions about what schools they were applying to, and what exams they were taking. It turned out that those anticipating applying to selective schools had been engaged in extensive exam 'practice' over the summer.

"Did you have a good holiday?" I ask Amina.

"No, I just did loads of tests – boring."

Rohan also tells me his holidays were boring. "All I did was practice papers".

At breakfast club, Hazel asks Mia, "What school do you want to go to next year?"

Mia says quietly, "Charlebridge."

"Where?" asks Hazel.

"Charlebridge," repeats Mia.

"Oh, is it that in Sutton [a neighbouring borough]?"

"Yeah. I have a test for it on Saturday, *and* a wedding to go to!"

"I want to go to Fairlees," says Hazel. "I have to take an exam for it."

"For Fairlees?" asks Mia. " I didn't think you did."

"Yeah, verbal and non-verbal reasoning. I did a practice test yesterday!"

"I've been doing those tests all summer. All summer!" she repeats, thumping Hazel on the head with her book.

Hazel continues, "Yeah, we went to the shops and bought this test and my dad made me do it all yesterday. I only managed to finish half the questions! It was so hard. Like… 'Find the two words that are closest in meaning as possible: lift, heavy, weight, carry'."

"Wait," says Mia, "Lift, heavy, weight…"

Hazel repeats the question and they both puzzle over this, and further questions.

She says, “I’ve got another one [test] to do today. Everyone’s been really annoying about it, asking me, like, ‘Why haven’t you been doing them all summer? We’ve been doing it all summer! And I’ve been, like, ‘Err, clue’s in the name: summer *holidays*? So, I’ve been having a *holiday*!’”

“Yeah, like me,” says Mia. “I’ve been doing tests all summer. I’ve done all four tests, plus the whole book. It’s, like, a whole book, then test.”

“They’re £10 each!” exclaims Hazel. “It’s so expensive!”

Mia says, “Yeah, I bought all four.”

“Who makes you do them?” Hazel asks.

“I do them myself.”

“But, I mean, who starts the timer?”

“I do it myself! *I* start the timer!”

“Oh,” shrugs Hazel. “My dad did mine. He’s so strict! He’s like, ‘sit up straight, don’t look around!’”

I ask when the actual tests are.

Mia says, “Saturday. Then there’s another one the Friday after, and another one the Saturday after that, and after that another, and another.”

I ask Hazel when hers is, but she shrugs, saying, “I’m not sure, really.”

A couple of months later, in another discussion about exams, Shivani asks Hazel, “Are you just taking one?”

“Yeah, and what if I don’t get in, right?!” exclaims Hazel.

“Fairlees, right? I didn’t think they had exams before,” says Shivani.

“Yeah, December 13th,” says Hazel, looking both excited and nervous. “Eek! I don’t know where I’m going to go if I don’t get in there!”

What I didn't expect was that children would feel left out in *not* taking exams. But with the majority of girls, across a range of friendship groups, taking entrance exams, not doing so meant not being able to participate in everyday talk about this. In the example above, then, Hazel reframes herself to be a participant. Having found herself left out of test practice over the summer, she has bought and carried out a practice test, and can now compare her experiences with Mia. Further, she reframes the test she has to take for Fairlees to match the selective exams Mia and Shivani are taking, even though it is in fact a test to ensure a fully *comprehensive* intake, and there is therefore no means to pass or 'do well' in it (hence Mia and Shivani's confusion, because Fairlees is non-selective[68]). This was similar to when I offered (free) tuition (in January 2014). Despite the complaints of others about tuition, Hazel and Kelsey were keen to take up my offer, as the few amongst their friends to not be tutored. Both girls were already keenly aligned with school, and pleased to be receiving extra work – thus the idea of attending tutoring contributed to their expressed identities. But more than this, wanting to be tutored was about being able to participate with friends in talk of tutoring, and knowing what they were talking about. Thus, as they acquired this knowledge, interest waned.

Talk of exams, and of the differences between schools, continued amongst the girls at Lowell throughout the first few months of school, during which time children visited open days with their parents, and took grammar school exams. Alongside talk of 'liking' boys, which whilst also not a 'new' topic, had increased in frequency and intensity, school choices constituted a central topic of conversation. For example, Shivani says to Laila, Amina, Hazel and I, "You have

[68] The test presumably exists to avoid the parental 'strategies' like moving house to get their children a place, described by Butler and Hamnett (2011), since the school is deemed 'good' and is heavily oversubscribed. I heard only one allusion to the buying into a catchment area strategy, when Hazel tells me at the start of Year 6, "Did you know Daisy's left?" "Has she? Why?" I ask. "She went to Potters [primary school]." "Oh yeah, 'cause she moved." "Yeah, and 'cause she wants to have a better chance of getting into Elmcroft [for which Potters is a 'feeder school']."

maths and English in round 1, then verbal and non-verbal in round two. There's so many grammar schools – Charlebridge, Grange, Cavendish, Waterside…"

Laila says, "I'm not applying for Waterside, it's too far away, my parents say."

Shivani asks me what school I went to, and if I took the exams for schools here. I tell them about moving, and ask about where they want to go. They all give different answers. "Don't you want to go to the same place?" I ask, surprised.

"No! I want to go to a school that's *extraordinary*!" says Shivani. "Not one that's normal. Grange's just normal."

"What makes a school extraordinary?" I ask.

"Like, in Cavendish, they have a new maths and art block – it's really cool," says Shivani. "And also, they call teachers by their nicknames."

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah, I have a friend who goes there, in Year 11, and she said so, that they call their teachers by their nicknames."

Tula expresses a similar opinion at lunchtime, when the girls are doing 'impressions' (Hazel's of her sister, and Tula of hers), leading to discussion of their sisters' ages, and where they go to school.

"Cavendish," says Tula, "I want to go there!"

"Ohh! I want to go there!" says Shivani at the same time.

"Yeah, me too!" says Annabel.

I ask Tula why, and, as before, she says, "'Cause my sister goes there. And 'cause it's a fun and a good school. Like, they do really fun stuff there, not just work, work, work."

In Tula and Shivani's discussions, whilst grammar schools are taken as self-evidently the basis of choice, what they are keen to express is why a *particular* school is more desirable. Both girls leverage friendship with someone already in attendance at Cavendish to express their

superior knowledge about this school in relation to others, and with the authority of someone older. And in discussing their choices, both girls emphasise the school's, and likewise their own, characters as being fun, cool and not all about work.

Like talk involving getting to know each other, conversations about schools occurred over and over. Of course, with numerous friends, it was hard to remember what various people had said. It was thus through asking and re-asking and stating and re-stating one's ideas, that my participants established a sense of the landscape of school choices: of where most other people in the year would be going, or at least where they were hoping to go. As in many other aspects of family life, parents could be seen to take their children's views into account, and the overall process was one of a mutual developing of understanding and negotiation over time, in which each party learnt to speak in the common language of 'good schools'. This can be seen in the following example with Alex. In an initial conversation about schools at the end of July, which Alex brings up spontaneously when we're sitting in the park eating sweets, he tells me, "I don't want to go to Christ Church next year. I want to go to Turner's or Firsby Manor. But my mum wants me to go Christ Church."

"Why?" I ask.

"'Cause she says it's a good school. She doesn't like Turner's or Firsby Manor."

"Why don't you want to go there?"

"'Cause I don't want to go church every week. It's Catholic so you have to go."

I ask why he wants to go to Turner's.

"My friend Bradley goes to Turner's and he said he'll look after me if I go there."

Later, at home, Alex says the same thing to his mum.

"Mum, I'm going to Turner's for secondary!"

"No, you're not! Why do you wanna go there? It's a crap school!"

"Yeah, Bradley goes there and he says he'll look after me."

"Alex, it's a rubbish school."

Here, the most important factor for Alex seems to be that he has a friend at Turner's – this renders the school a more familiar, friendly place, and less of an unknown. That his friend will 'look after' him indicates how secondary is thought of as potentially full of bullies and other undesirables, as Jafar and John express, and as Pratt and George (2005) and Weller (2007) note. Also important is avoiding religious activity, which the boys in Firsby evaluated negatively, in contrast to many of those at Lowell.

Meanwhile, we can see Liz talking in terms of 'good' and 'rubbish' schools, something Alex learns. Thus, the next time Alex, Liz and I speak of schools, in early October, Alex tells me that they'd visited some schools, and didn't like Christ Church, and would put down Turner's. I ask why Turner's, and this time, he says "'Cause it's a good school – it's got good Ofsted reports." He tells me, "It's in Holsworth [an adjacent town], so not that far." Here, then, we can see Alex adjusting his assessment to speak in the common language of 'good schools', whilst maintaining Turner's as his preference. Meanwhile, Alex seems to have persuaded Liz, to a degree. Talking through possible choices with her friend Val, Luke's mum, she says, "Turner's is all right. It's in Holsworth, so it's too far though. That's a nice school too. We didn't really like Christ Church."

Perhaps the clearest example of the way in which conversations such as these, with friends and peers, helped both children and parents come to common understandings about schools, is when Mr Powell, 6J's former class teacher, comes into class towards the end of the year and asks where everyone will be going to next year. He then asks Theresa – a girl who has just joined from abroad (she attends for only a month at the end of the year), and does not speak English as her first language – saying, "You probably don't know yet, do you?"

Amina says, "She does. She thinks she's going to St Jude's."

"Ohhh!" Reuben (one of Hazel's "naughty ones") exclaims dramatically, as quieter murmurs echo around the room. "She's going to get *bullied* there!"

"Reuben!" chides Mr Powell, although it seems as though Reuben is only stating what many others are thinking.

I had never even heard this school's name mentioned before, so out of the landscape of 'choice' it must have been. In fact, I knew where the majority of children were going, and all of these schools were rated 'Outstanding' or 'Good' by Ofsted, overall and across a range of measures including teaching and behaviour. In terms of the narrower measure of GCSE and A-level results alone, whilst all of the selective schools were academically top performing, the comprehensives nearly all had exam results above the national and borough average. As such, whilst I suggest that children and parents were subject to varying levels of knowledge and uncertainty, there was clearly also a usefully shared knowledge set. That only the new girl, not embedded within the conversational networks of the school and locality, was not party to this information of a seeming pariah school outside of choice shows how much knowledge is distributed, even if notions of what constitute 'good' vary to a degree, and 'choices' were subject to revision.

Throughout September, there were various absences at Lowell as children took entrance exams, and soon after that, results were received. Break-time discussions the day after could involve awkwardness (if not more acute, hidden feelings) for those having to reveal that they weren't successful; but this occurred alongside realigned expressions of intent. For example, at the start of October, standing in a group with Sophie, Deepa, Amina, Laila and Lewis, we're telling stories about encounters with giant spiders, when Hazel and Shivani come along. Shivani says to Deepa, "Did you get into Grange?"

"Yeah."

"'Course you did! Me too. Yay!"

Shivani turns to Sophie. “Did you?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Did you?” Shivani turns to me, as a joke, since she’s been asking everyone.

Sophie quickly resumes her spider story. But Deepa didn’t seem to have known about Sophie not getting in, and says, “Oh,” disappointedly.

Sophie says, in an official voice mimicking that of the results letters, “Yeah, ‘You did not pass…’”

Shivani adds, more accurately, “’We are sorry to inform you that your child did not pass…’”

She is cut off as Su, like Shivani, comes over to ask everyone, in turn, if they got into Grange.

Amina says to me, “I didn’t get in. Oh well, I didn’t like it and I didn’t want to go there anyway! I’m going to try for Hillview [a private school], I think. And St Agatha’s [a Catholic former grammar school].”

“Are you taking the Hillview exam?” Shivani asks Amina.

“Yeah.”

“Me too!” says Shivani.

This was similarly the case with the school-based national SATS tests, taken in May, and the KeyStage ‘levels’ children attained, which they asked each other about after. Whilst children managed their way through these difficult situations, it could cause private resentments. For example, at breaktime, Annabel is plaiting Sophie’s hair, when Tula approaches and asks Sophie what she got.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me,” says Sophie.

“I asked you first,” says Tula. “What did you get in maths? Did you get a level 6?”

“Yeah, did you?”

“Yeah, I got a level 6 in maths and GPS [grammar, punctuation, spelling].”

Annabel says, “I got a 5c in science and maths.”

Tula says, “Everyone applaud – I got a level 6 in everything except writing!”

As everyone claps, Annabel says, “I’m not.”

“Uh?!” exclaims Tula, feigning shock.

“Not really! I am,” says Annabel, politely clapping as she holds on to Sophie’s plait.

When I try to set up ‘interviews’, towards the end of my fieldwork, Annabel and Tula have signed up together. But Annabel says to me in private, “Can I not go with Tula please? She’s going to want to go with me but I really don’t want to go with her.”

“Why?” I ask.

“I don’t know. ‘Cause…she’s always trying to make out that I’m not as good as her at everything. I know she’s going to do that.”

At least in public, however, children weathered the news of not getting into selective schools well, and adjusted their statements accordingly: Jafar says, “I didn’t pass the grammar schools exam for Martin’s and Grange. I got the results. Oh well, I might go to Holmcroft, or Oak Grove [both private schools], where my brother goes, or Fairlees in Overton.” As Froerer (2012) found, vis-à-vis the changing aspirations of the adivasi village girls in India whom she researched, my participants seemed to adjust their aspirations in line with the changing reality of conditions. They mostly spoke in positive terms about where they would be going, although there were expressions of trepidation, especially from those going to new schools without friends. Finding friends discussing schools with others, Hazel complains that “no girls!” are going to Fairlees – Pulham, whilst Amina complains, “I’m going to be all alone in Westover!” Alex sounds similarly despondent (on the phone), upon finding out that he has a place at St Joseph’s.

“I don’t like it. It’s gonna be boring.”

“Are any of your friends going there?”

"No."

"Is anyone you know going?"

"Yeah, this boy and…[he describes two more people]"

"Are you not friends with them?"

"No."

"Where's everyone else going?"

"Firsby Manor. Christ Church. Turner's. Dylan's going Turner's. I don't know how he got in, 'cause he lives just round the corner. That's a bit weird, 'cause Turner's is in Holsworth."

"Maybe he put it as a higher choice?" I suggest. "What did you put it as?"

"I think second or third. Yeah, it could be."

However, there were constantly new discussions taking place, and by the time we next meet, Alex seems more equivocal. Walking outside, he tells me gleefully that he'll be getting the 986 bus there – "It goes right to my school! People say, 'You're gonna be late', but I'm like, 'No, I'm not – the bus goes literally *into* my school. How am I gonna be late?!'" Rohan tells me he'll be going to St Christopher's "'cause we found that there's a bus that goes from Parklands [a station], so I can get the bus if my mum drops me at Parklands in the morning." And Kelsey tells me, "[St Saviour's] is just round the corner from where I live, 'cause it's just over there," she points. "And I live on – you know Wicklow Road? Yeah, so I can walk to school! And I can walk home for lunch!" But she adds nervously, "I went there and it's huge! It's absolutely massive! It's like, what if I get lost? I'll be like…'Help! I don't know where I'm going!'" Common interest in the size and location of schools, and how one would travel there, underlines how important the notion of a significant new level of independence was for children, involving exciting new spheres of movement and knowledge. This was both in terms of travelling to school by themselves on public transport, often for the first time, and in negotiating their way

around a large new place.

The receipt of school places seemed to slowly precipitate some changes in friendship groupings, as Weller (2007) finds, although it is difficult to attribute change, since groupings were always in a degree of flux, as previously noted. Meanwhile, the avid discussion of 'liking' boys was also important in affecting groupings and those with whom others wanted to talk. However, it seemed to be the case that those going to the same school began spending more time together, as noted of Deepa and Mia, in chapter 6. Some professed that they had already made friends in their new schools following 'induction days', whilst others were less sure. For example, at lunchtime, Kelsey says dolefully, "Yeah, me and Lena are going to be in different classes [at St Saviour's]."

> Tula says, "Su's going to my school, but I already know loads of people. I've made loads of new friends already at the induction day, like this girl I sat next to. Are you going to still be friends at St Saviour's?"
>
> "We had this conversation actually!" says Kelsey. "I was like, 'Lena, when we're in St Saviour's, don't leave me!'"
>
> "I've already made friends there," says Lena.
>
> "Yeah, but don't move on and go off without me. As long as you're still friends with me and don't ditch me!"
>
> "You can be friends with my friends," says Lena in an appeasing way, before pausing and adding, "What if my friends don't like you?! Then what do I do?"
>
> "Ugh," exclaims Kelsey, "Are you saying I'm holding you back?!"
>
> "No, but…" Lena giggles in an embarrassed way.
>
> "You can make new friends," says Kelsey, "Just don't forget about me, okay?"

Looking to secondary school formed a key part of everyday conversations, not least because

of the events going on. For example, on one day, there were secondary school visitors from St Saviour's. At break, Lena and Kelsey, with Max hanging out alongside us, tell me about Callum. They're in stitches.

"Miss Sim, in our meeting, Callum went up to our new head teacher and said, 'Is it true that at secondary school you can bunk off lessons?'"

"He went right up to her and that was the first thing he said!"

"Are you serious?" I say.

"Yeah!"

"What did she say?" I ask.

They shrug. "She was just like, 'No, and I hope you aren't doing that now!'"

And Tyler says of his meeting with the head of Bishopsgate, the Catholic school that he and Marc will be attending, "They're well strict! If you're even one minute late… no, if you're late even by one minute, three times in a week, you get a one-hour detention after school! If they go like…" he raises his finger to his lips, "You've got to be quiet, or you get a detention!" In this way, knowledge about secondaries again circulates.

The girls also anticipated meeting (or not meeting) boys. For example, as the last ones in the changing room getting ready for the end-of-year production, Lena and Mia discuss the school disco before talk turns to future discos at secondary school.

"Shall I wear this to the school disco?" Lena asks, referring to the dress she's wearing for the production.

"When's the disco?" I ask.

"Monday," says Mia, "But they still haven't even given us the letter for it yet."

"Yeah," says Lena.

"What time does it start?" I ask. "6?"

Lena says, "7, I think."

“Yeah, 7 to 8 maybe,” says Mia. “I wish it was 7 to 9. They're making us stay until 9 for the production, so why not for the disco? In Grange, it's 6.30 ‘til 9."

"And you get to meet all the Martin's boys!" says Lena.

"Great. Suraj!” exclaims Mia, sarcastically. More seriously, she adds, “They’re not going to like me anyway."

"Oh, is Suraj going to Martin’s?" I ask.

"Yeah," says Mia, at the same time as Lena, who is laughing.

“I already know two boys at St Saviour’s who like me!" says Lena, blushing.

"What, Daniel…" says Mia.

"Daniel?! Darren!" corrects Lena. "Yeah, he sat next to me in class at the induction, and he was like, ‘Hey’ and I was like, ‘What *you* doin’, man?!’"

"There's a class in there!" We pull faces at the sudden realisation that the classroom next door is sectioned off only by some folding doors.

"What about Max?!" says Mia, more quietly.

Lena claps her hand to her face. "Oops! Oh yeah, I forgot about that!"

Mia says, "*And* Owen!”

Lena says, "Well, there's nothing I can do about that!"

"That boy is obsessed!" says Mia. "Never mind, he'll get over you at St Saviour’s."

The notion of being able to meet, or not meet, boys, was a serious consideration for the girls, for whom this had become a frequent topic of conversation. Thus, in the previous year, Alana, Lena’s cousin in the year above, complains that she wants to go to St Saviour’s or Elmcroft, and not Grange, the girls’ grammar school, she will be going to. Telling us about her new uniform, which her dad has already bought, she laments the school’s shin-length skirts that she envisages having to wear every day for the next five years, and which are an outward manifestation of the fact that the school affords no possibilities for meeting boys.

**School-leaving rituals: narrating memory and community**

Various events were organised at Lowell in order to mark the passing of a year group through the school. As discussed by teachers and TAs, these seemed to have been devised to foster a sense of belonging to the school and of memories children could "take away with them". In this talk, there was a sense that primary school was important for this, over and above any academic purpose. For my participants, leaving rituals with no prior reference points, like the 'year-book', were not much discussed, except (like most lessons) in the break-times immediately following work on them. For example, one of the year-book question prompts is "what's your life's ambition?", which Amina asks me at the start of one break-time.

> "Yeah, what's your life's ambition?" repeats Laila.
>
> "Mine is to travel the world!" exclaims Amina.
>
> "So is mine!"
>
> Deepa says, "Mine is to see the world, because I've already been to quite a lot of places. Like…"

She begins to list them, and the conversation turns to what countries they've visited. Yet, as the finished book was only circulated to children after they left school, it did not create any present dramas. On the other hand, events like the end-of-year disco and musical 'production' were recognised as familiar and yet different, and were therefore talked about long in advance. Thus, of the disco, Laila says, "It'll be really sad though – everyone will be crying!" Two 'leaving' events not formally organised by the school – shirt signing and a water-fight on the last day – were also anticipated and talked about because of children's prior participation in these, in terms of writing on previous Year 6 friends' shirts, and in attending the water-fight with older siblings or friends.

At Lowell, various 'productions' took place, but the Year 6 one was recognised as special in terms of its scale and timing. 'The production' involved the whole year group and was performed to parents on two evenings in the final week of school. However, outside of knowing *of* the production, most children were not familiar with what it would entail. As such, whilst nearly all children talked of their desperation to get a 'good part', this talk occurred *just before* or else *after* auditions had taken place. For example, the day before auditions, Deepa tells me that she'll audition for three parts "because we can audition for two main roles and one minor role. I feel like if I try for as many as possible, I'll probably get something. Because the Christmas production was the first time I had a really big part [she was Angel Gabriel] and I want a main role." And on the day the cast is announced, Jamie, who hasn't got a speaking part, is distraught. Through tears, he says, "I didn't get any of the parts I auditioned for in the production. I don't even have a speaking part." I try to console him, but he says, "I really wanted a good part. It's our last one. I wanted my parents to be proud."

By contrast, Hazel was anticipating the production from Year 5, due to her participation in the then Year 6's production through Glee Club, and her older sister's participation some years back[69]. By Year 6, she recognises the importance of preparation for the auditions, saying, "'Cause it's our last year, I really want to get the lead role. I *have* to get it! I need to, like, practice or something. That's why I want to know what it is. My sister was like, 'You better get an amazing part!' And I was like, 'Er, sure!' And my mum was like, 'You better get an amazing part!' And I was like, 'Er, sure!'" And she speculates (again) about what musical it might be. Although she doesn't manage to predict the musical, her eager anticipation, and then preparation no doubt help her to gain the part she desires. As she tells me, the moment 'Oliver!' is announced, she watches video clips on YouTube, knows what part she wants (Nancy, "because that's the only good female part") and, come the auditions, a while later,

[69] Hazel's sister, 13, also attended Lowell

has a cockney accent down to a tee. Tula, also in Glee Club and with two older siblings to have gone through Year 6, is the only other person to do so. Thus, prior knowledge precipitated anticipation, and this earlier engagement with aspiring for a good part perhaps helped children to achieve their ambitions.

The end of the school year was a strange time for me, characterised – when looking back through my notes – by days of euphoria interchanging with days of complete desolation. I mention this because although they were my experiences, they tinge my observation and interpretation of events. Further, I also wonder, in retrospect, if this was perhaps close to how days and moments might have been experienced by many of my participants themselves – as when Mia says, at breakfast club, "I *know* today's going to be a bad day… because my best friend Lena's away." Perhaps children's apparent 'presentism' is not a failure of memory or foresight, nor the lack of discussion of past and future (all of which practices my participants engaged in), but simply the power of present feelings to inflect children's interpretations of events – the power of feeling as though one has, and will, always feel a particular way. As such, I wonder if the sense of presentism adults notice about children is not so much a cognitive as an affective sensibility. After leaving the field, I came to realise that my feeling good or bad on particular days simply felt more total and enduring during my time there than they do in my usual adult life. Although this can, to some extent, be understood as being a result of the fieldwork situation, I think there were also continuities with my participants' experiences: with their own (and parents'/teachers') categorisation of days as 'good' or 'bad'; with their expressions of more absolute joy and desolation in particular moments; and with the rapid changeability of situations as being positively or negatively experienced.

However, lessons were occurring as normal, and break and lunchtimes, similarly, didn't seem to be marked by any great sense of occasion. In spite of the excitement surrounding discrete

aspects of the production – its announcement, auditions, casting and performance – the temporal realities of practice were somewhat different, especially for the majority of children who did not have a big part. Practice was characterised by sitting for long periods whilst having to listen to others repeat lines, and many commented on being 'bored', and that "Oliver's boring!" On the other hand, it was something the entire year group could converse about, and there were many occasions in the playground with the girls, or at after-school club with Matthew, where we spontaneously sang the songs everyone had to learn. When I asked various people if they were sad to be leaving, some said that they were, or else were worried about secondary, but mostly I was told, "No, not really" and "We're going to stay in touch anyway". Here, perhaps, there is a sense in which mobile phones and other technology have a role to play, since children's participation in WhatsApp, BBM and other forms of social media outside of school perhaps created a feeling that the only change would be not having to attend school, rather than a loss of sociality. Participating with Alex in this way, and briefly with the children at Lowell, I understood the feeling of on-going connection these engender, although whether this is actually played out after leaving is unclear. For example, Shivani's WhatsApp status update, some time after leaving, stated, "I miss Lowell!"

If leaving events were marked as momentous, and anticipated well in advance, their playing out over the last week both did and didn't match expectations. Despite increasing frustration with the repetitiveness of rehearsals, the performance of the production proved visibly exhilarating. Earlier, I noted the great pride and care expressed by Hazel and Jamie in performing for parents, and, with auditions long past, this applied to those with both large and small parts. Upon entering the hall, children searched the room for where their families were sitting, and on stage at the end, tried to gain eye contact or wave. Immediately after, animated discussions took place: "Did you see when I almost dropped the basket?!" "I was so nervous when it was my song!" In its playing out according to script and practice, the

performance was the embodied enactment, and narrative telling, of year-group unity, and of triumph. Of course, this is not to say that it simply played out by itself: as Howe (2000) argues, rituals achieve their great power through their associated risks and uncertainties, and the potential for failure. However, the structure of the event generally allowed for most difficulties to be overcome. For example, on one of the evenings, Matthew, playing Oliver, forgot his lines in the opening solo. Distraught, he had to be cajoled into getting back on stage. Nevertheless, the show went on, and by the end, the applause of the audience and Mrs Clark's closing speech fixed the event as a success. "Wasn't that fantastic?" she announced rhetorically, before attributing it to the togetherness of pupils and teachers ("They've all worked so hard together"), and emphasising the event's symbolism as the culmination of the year group's time at the school ("What a way to leave!").

However, the most momentous occasion of the last week was the leaving assembly for Mrs Marshall, the school secretary – a person with whom all children and parents had had contact throughout their time at the school, and who was clearly much loved and respected. Whenever teachers left, their leaving was ritualised in an assembly dedicated to them, during which the head teacher would give a speech, a gift would be presented, occasionally a song sung to them, and a video montage with clips of their time at the school shown, interspersed with children saying how special they were. Mrs Marshall's assembly followed this pattern, but was marked by its size, scale and length, which included parents being invited to attend. Owen, one of the Year 6 representatives chosen to present Mrs Marshall with a card, starts crying as he gives Mrs Marshall a hug, causing his mum to start crying too. When we leave the hall as well as back in class, half of Year 6 are crying.

"How can Lena cry that much?!"

"*I'm* not crying!"

"*I* am. It was so sad!"

"Stuff like that always makes me sad!"

The tissue box is passed around, and Mr Lawrence gives a talk to the class about it being okay to cry or not cry, as an individual matter. However, rather than in response to Mrs Marshall's leaving, he attributes the crying to Year 6 leaving. He says, "Usually it starts at the disco, but this time, it was this."

The contrast between the continuation of mundane school life and the outpouring of emotion at Mrs Marshall's assembly shows the importance of such rituals in framing memories and feelings. Through speech acts, and in the PowerPoint montage, in which photos from the past were strung together in a condensed narrative version of the passing of time, the story of a shared history was told. The appearance of the montage sparked a buzz of excitement as children tried to spot themselves and friends. However, by the end, they appeared to have the effect of inspiring mourning: accelerating through eventful moments rather than the mundaneness of everyday lessons, the narrative was one of a joyful, conflict-free, shared past, as object, that in its detachment was subject to loss. In fixing a sense of community through commemoration, it thus created a contrast between this sense of security and belonging, and notions of leaving as the dispersal of community, and uncertain future relations.

As Angé and Berliner (2014) note, whilst not 'new', 'nostalgia' appears to be becoming more and more popular in the 'west', vis-à-vis perceived threats to identity. Further, remembering, commemorating and revitalising the past can be strategically deployed – as in this case, to 'fix' a sense of identity and belonging, which can include marking thresholds and orientating participants towards the future (cf. Piot, 2010). I suggest that, as can be seen in their own later practices[70] on social media, children learnt of this as the definitive way in which important events *should* be marked. Using Instagram, children posted birthday messages to friends of

[70] During the years following the end of my fieldwork, when children were in Years 7 to 8.

photos from the past (including 'embarrassing' older photos[71]) either collaged together or set in video montage to tell a narrative of enjoyable shared experiences, and chronicling the friendship over time. This would often be accompanied by an extensive text, interspersed with emoticons, positing a similar narrative, like, "Can't believe we've been through so much together… Like when we went to town and did that dance and people thought we were crazy <3 laughed so much we fell on the floor ☺ when we stole Kieran's hat and he got bare [so] mad with us… [etc]"[72] The practice occurred through particular technologies that allowed for the easy proliferation, resurrection and curation of images from the past – a form of materiality important in mediating collective remembering, as Nora (1989) notes. In this way, children appeared to have taken on the form of remembrance by which the school intentionally created memories and posited belonging, 'fixing' notions of friendship through images of a shared past, as recalled on special occasions like birthdays.

This stands in contrast to leaving events with less of a narrative structure. I attend the first half of the disco, which starts with people buying crisps, sweets and drinks. As with Alex, shopping and consuming is something exciting to do, after which one has things to share, hold, talk about, and be talked about – as when Owen exclaims, "I bought 10 packets of Haribos!" Along with others, I go around saying 'hi' to everyone, which is fun. There is complementing on people's outfits: "I really like your skirt, Sophie!" "Thanks! It's really old though!" And groups of boys are cavorting around taking photos: Kyle, Owen and Jack bundle into Lena, Kelsey and me, saying, "We're getting selfies with everyone!" Standing at the side with Sophie, Deepa and Hazel, we watch for a bit, complaining about how hot it is and trying to fan

[71] Children's Instagram accounts differed significantly from those of adult friends', in that whereas the latter posted an accumulating selection of photos/videos, the former were constantly posting, but deleting older posts. In this way, their accounts did not chronicle change, but presented a current version of their identity.

[72] As this was from after my fieldwork ended, this is a made-up example but based on wording similar to actual posts.

ourselves. Then the others decide to dance, and I head off – it feels too scrutinised to join in, yet I also feel self-conscious about standing on the sidelines, watching like a teacher. The next day, I ask if anyone cried or if they were sad, to which I get adamant “No!”s, as if it definitely wasn’t that kind of event. Instead, there is lots of talk of Holly and Andrius, who were dancing together, and of Miss Jameson, the DJ, announcing that "this last dance is for Holly and Andrius!" and how ‘embarrassed’ they were. Although the mention of ‘last’ could have sparked a sense of sadness and nostalgia (as Mr Lawrence suggested had been the case in previous years), in this case, an apparent act of ‘remembrance’ instead precipitated present drama – as occurred the previous year, when Year 5-leaver Emily brought in a notebook for people to sign, which ended up with all the girls bringing in notebooks in which to get others to write messages and practise signatures.

The last day perhaps felt most dissonant with the notion that leaving should feel momentous. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that it isn’t ritualised. Lesson-time occurred as normal, in addition to which teachers’ usual rhetoric of ‘time-wasting’ had given way to a notion of simply waiting for the day to pass. At lunchtime, there was some excitement, as everyone raced to the field for shirt signing. This was enjoyable as an opportunity to go around talking to everyone, and in the act of leaving a material trace of oneself on school shirts – in all other contexts, completely forbidden. There is also joking involved: Tyler, for example, is signing "CODY" [another boy’s name] on everyone's shirt; and, as the whistle goes, there’s an exhilarating rush to finish. However, it turns out that the whole of the next lesson has been set aside for this anyway. With not much to do, some of the boys start to play football, and Hazel says, "I'm bored. I didn't know we would have a lesson to do this." The day thus drags on, and when the bell finally goes, it could just be the end of any other day.

Although the after-school water-fight has been talked about during the weeks before the end

of term, on the day itself, several children suggest last minute changes of plan. Matthew says, "Me and Caroline and other people are going to meet at six in the Parklands centre". And in class, earlier, Jayden says to Samuel, Tyler and others, "Let's not go to the water fight, let's just meet at CEX! The one in town."

"On Church Street?"

"Yeah."

"At 4.30."

That they all have permission to meet up after school as it is the last day means that ideas for alternative and more desirable things to do – in this case, going shopping – are suddenly decided upon. It is only at this late stage, that I come to realise how rare and valuable to children shopping trips such as the ones I made with Alex were, that they should be preferred to the much-anticipated water-fight.

In the park, I meet Shivani in the queue for water. She gives me a Hozelock bottle to hold, and when Aaliyah, a Year 5 girl from breakfast club, asks for it, I give it to her unthinkingly. Then Shivani comes back asking for the bottle, and I tell her I gave it to Aaliyah. Mia comes along looking really upset. She says to Shivani, "You don't look after anything properly! Ohhh! I knew it was a bad idea coming here! I knew I should've stayed at home. I'm going to get into so much trouble!" It turns out Mia hadn't told her parents she was coming, and was planning on going home before they got back.

"We need to find Aaliyah!" says Shivani. We run off to look for her, in different directions, before returning.

"Have you found it?" asks Mia.

"No," says Shivani.

"Ohh, where's Aaliyah??" Mia is on the verge of tears.

Various people, including Deepa and Tula, come over to ask what's wrong, making suggestions

as to what to do.

Tula says, "Oh, I saw that! You can have mine if you want? It's the same thing."

"No, it's not," replies Shivani, "Mia's isn't green, it's white."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," says Tula, "I saw it up there earlier! I'll help you look for it."

We run after Tula into the walled garden, but "Oh, it's not there any more!" she exclaims.

"Oh!" Shivani stamps her feet.

We search some more before the others drift off. I try to offer consolation and suggestions, although it doesn't seem to be working, and eventually Shivani walks off. I go back to the water fight, although it's tailing off by now. Back home, I message Shivani to ask if stuff was alright with Mia. She says she doesn't know, but the next day when I ask, she says it was okay – and after this, she sends me a joke message and things seem to be back to normal.

Of course, this is only one account of the water-fight, and no doubt many others enjoyed the event. Nevertheless, it shows how the moment-to-moment experience of events often fails to live up to prior anticipation.

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which children, together with parents and teachers, approached 'transition'. In the first part, I showed how all children aspired to 'good' schools, although evaluations of 'good' varied to a degree, as linked to ethnic and class background. Overall, however, there were common interests and evaluations in discussions of schools, and through sharing statements about intentions, parents and children usefully circulated knowledge. Whilst outcomes were uncertain due to selective examinations and restrictions on allocations irrespective of 'choice', most appeared satisfied with final outcomes, with both children and parents re-stating outcomes in terms of choice. Children's

anticipations then turned to further shared topics of interest like travel, strictness, friendship, uniforms, and (for girls) boys.

In the second part, I described how children anticipated school-leaving rituals. In accordance with the belief of staff that the passing of each year group should be marked by commemoration, formal rituals were designed to create good memories for the Year 6s, in order to bring a 'good end' to their time at the school, however tumultuous it might have been along the way. Unlike less formal events, school-organised rituals' strong narrative focus inculcated a sense of school community and belonging, setting up 'leaving' as rupture, and providing for maximal nostalgic effect. In their careful curation of a conflict-free past, such rituals seemed to perform the 'fixing' that children can be seen to strive for throughout their everyday lives.

## Chapter 8 | Conclusion

At the start of this thesis, I described the way in which children have been called upon to 'aspire', and to aspire 'highly'. Given the prevalence of this discourse, I set out to look at what aspiration might mean from a children's perspective, through a detailed focus on their everyday talk and practices. Aiming to do so through 'being there' *in time*, rather than eliciting answers or asking participants to recall incidents later, I spent over 15 months fully participating in children's practices across home, school, after-school and outdoor environments. As such, this is an ethnography of everyday practice, but one that also engages with children's spontaneous telling of things within practice. By examining the two in tandem, it is possible to try to reconcile the real-time 'flow' of life with the understandings of order that people themselves impose upon this 'flow', in making meaning of/in their everyday lives.

'Aspiring' was not a term that children used. However, in the sense of positing statements about future careers, as implied by the dominant discourse, my participants had aspirations. Statements about future occupations were made through the trope of "what do you want to be when you grow up?", which children were familiar with, as a question various adults posed to them from time to time. Through such questioning, children learnt how to answer appropriately, which for those hoping to please teachers, included a notion of 'better' career options. Otherwise, aspirations were stated on the basis of interests and hobbies, which was also in line with what teachers suggested aspirations should be about. (Here, we can see a contradiction in (adult) discourses of 'aspiring highly' and 'doing what you love'.)

More interestingly, I suggest that my participants understood the trope of "what you want to be" within the context of their own set of questioning and stating of preferences that was centred on expressing a sense of oneself, or eliciting knowledge about others. My participants

understood themselves and others as collections of attributes including name, age, affiliations and preferences. The discursive alignment between 'future occupation' and interests and hobbies meant that "what do you want to be?" fitted perfectly into this way of understanding and expressing self and other. As such, I posit that the notion of aspiration as goal setting to inspire present action inaccurately describes how and why children told aspirations. Children's aspirations were a means of telling of themselves in the here-and-now of talk, leveraging the trope of 'future' to emphasise the seriousness and endurance of the preferences they were expressing.

It is at this point that it is useful to look more broadly at 'aspirations', in order to flesh out these ideas through children's concrete practices. After all, discussions of what they wanted to be were not part of everyday talk, nor apparently as significant as other activities and preoccupations. I examined three key aspects of children's lives: practices of going out in the neighbourhood and video gaming, central to boys' out-of-school lives; and issues of participation and friendship, in and out of school. Whilst the term 'future' was not often employed (since it was centrally linked to the trope of "what do you want to be?"), children did anticipate upcoming events, make plans, engage in predictions, and tell about intended actions, in ways that are generally conceived of by adults as 'future' orientations.

As I tried to make sense of my observations and experiences of children's everyday practices, and of children's representations of their practices in spontaneous talk, the general theme to emerge from my research was that of the relation between fluidity and fixity. What I found, across the various practices in which we were engaged, was how the moment-to-moment fluidity and ambiguity of actions and participations sometimes didn't match the way in which children told about things. This was most obvious, perhaps, in discussions of friendship, where one's own and others' characters were narrated as fixed, and having *always* been so –

something that ties in with representations of biographical continuous personhood, and of ideal friendship as voluntary relations between these types of persons. But this 'fixing' of characters in narrative also occurred in other practices: in boys' constitution of themselves as competent and courageous through their foreclosing of outdoor risks; and in narrations of their biographies through video gaming, in which material or numerical manifestations of ownership and competence could be charted and compared with others'. These practices seemed to parallel the 'fixing' of themselves that children performed in expressing their career aspirations.

Whilst standing out as the way in which children themselves apparently 'viewed' things, these 'fixings' denied the flexibility of everyday participation and action, in which the focus was on seeking out fun, excitement and drama, and mitigating boredom. In their everyday actions, children appeared to be mostly present-oriented, in terms of directing attention to objects, people and environments in the here-and-now, and navigating the ambiguities of presently unfolding uncertainties and vicissitudes in meaning. But they also overlaid and denied present ambiguities by fixing notions of their own and others' personhood through recourse to past and future actions and a sense of continuity between these and the present[73]. Thus, they drew on narratives of past action and enduring acts of friendship, ownership and competence (often materialised in the present), and on future and forthcoming identifications and desires (often materialised verbally and in the imagination), to establish a present, continuous ('always') sense of themselves in relation to others.

In telling futures, the flexibility of narrative was employed in optimistic expressions of ideal competence, ownership and autonomy that asserted the teller's personhood in the present –

[73] By which I mean Gell's (1992) A-series past, present and future, rather than that these terms were employed by children

as able to act; effectual; recognisable by others; and worth knowing. This stands in contrast to popular adult conceptions of children as being incompetent and dependent, and to children's own experiences and/or fears of being forgotten, left behind, unknown, or paralysed by inaction and boredom. I argue that what children recognise is an 'individual' form of competence and agency as the benchmark of adulthood, largely in line with dominant discourses. It is aspects of this competence and agency that they claim for themselves through their 'tellings', especially in leveraging the narrative flexibility of future. In making claims to individual agency (and thereby adulthood), children emphasise their 'becoming' (as other studies have shown them capable of doing). Yet, as an action with inter-subjective power, 'tellings' also demonstrate a sense of children's agency and 'being' in the present. In its conceptualisation, then, agency is 'individual', whilst in its effectiveness, a social sense of agency, as Valentine (2011) contends, is more realistic.

In the broader sense of aspiration being 'a hope or an ambition' (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2009), comprising elements of expectation and desire, children's optimistic 'tellings' made in relation to particular states of competence, ownership and autonomy can be seen as 'aspirational'. Yet, they were not exercised in the rational and individualistic manner posited by the dominant discourse, where 'becoming' is a staged process involving cumulative actions, and 'aspiration' a source of motivation. Rather, in foreclosing uncertainty, my participants elided intentions with outcomes to emphasise the superiority of present intent. Thus, outside of the idioms of 'present' and 'future', it appears that 'future' was conceived of in terms of the linear continuity suggested by endurance, even as there was a present immanence to future – the future contained within the present – due to the eliding of future outcomes with present dreams, desires and intentions. This was a concept also invoked by teachers, in terms of the notion of 'potential' – a fixed capacity for achievement

foretold of in the present –, showing how the unproblematic co-existence of differential invocations of time was something children were familiar with hearing.

Whilst not goal setting, I suggest that in being an inter-subjective action in the world, 'tellings' could have a productive power that *did* have 'future' effects, such as in encouraging teachers to take seriously one's interests; drawing others towards one, and rendering oneself appealingly popular; and gaining greater home-range through parental concession. This was at least implicitly recognised by my participants, which rendered telling both enjoyable and consciously effectual. In optimistically telling of themselves, children expressed themselves as 'beings' and emphasised their personal agency; in so doing, they made the case for being recognised as competent and deserving of further autonomy (amongst other attributes of their personhood), thus simultaneously securing the means to achieving a fuller sense of personhood (or 'becoming'). Below, I document the findings of individual chapters in more detail.

**Representing time and navigating futures in children's practices**

In chapter 4, I examined the world beyond the home, arguing that 'the outside' is deemed both exciting and threatening. In its potential to be either, the landscape, as one moves through it, is experienced as ambiguous. Thus, on our forays into the neighbourhood, Alex is tentative, calm and ambivalent. And approaching others, social interactions play out tetchily, such that I was often unable to tell friend from foe. As I also note in chapter 6, this ambiguity appeared to be cultivated, so as to broaden options for sociality, and the possibility of being caught up in exciting happenings – essentially, keeping options for participation open.

But children also engaged in 'fixing' practices that foreclosed temporal uncertainty. This could be seen in Alex's map, in which only places of excitement and security were represented, with past knowledge and competence crystallised in an ideal representation of the paths linking desirable places. And it could be seen in the future-looking plans forged in advance of trips, in which children represented ideal scenarios of going to various places of excitement with friends. Indeed, telling of these plans was exciting in itself. In these optimistic imaginings, children gained a sense of complete autonomy over their actions, and represented themselves as they desired. I do not mean that children didn't perhaps imagine other, less optimistic, alternatives; only that the imagining they *told* was invariably an optimistic one. This, I posit, was similar to how they expressed career aspirations (chapter 3). These were tied to past competences and achievements, and to present interests and desires; but the flexibility of narrative representation meant that futures could be imagined as an idealisation of their identities and personhood.

In between immediate engagements with uncertainty and the distanced (in space and time) telling of ideal plans were more ad hoc means of bringing the landscape under control and constituting oneself as competent. Whilst especially towards the start of my visits, Alex engaged in showing and telling practices, he later also predicted the landscape, foreclosing spatial and temporal uncertainty, and producing himself as knowing and knowledgeable. This similarly occurred through the narratives of 'risk' Alex and his friends told, in which, through the security of the group, they confronted and overcame told-of risks and were therefore able to also tell of themselves as competent and courageous persons. Through these actions and narratives, demands for greater autonomy over one's movement and scheduling could be exercised – thus linking knowledge (that is told of) with a kind of power.

In their video gaming practices (chapter 5), children similarly enjoyed exploration of game-worlds and the excitement of competitive practice. However, in being practiced from the perceived safety of the home, risks were recognised to be negligible. As such, video games could be played for complete relaxation, as Alex does when 'just chilling' by himself, or when we return home from trips outside. With the forward pull of the gameplay allowing for minimal conscious effort, this form of gaming seemed to be as a kind of 'time out' from other demands, where time disappeared from view. By no means mutually exclusive, a second temporal approach, occurring in response to the constraints of a known schedule, involved play 'filling' pockets of waiting time. Replacing anticipation of a fixed abstract time with the continuous anticipatory aspect that gameplay requires, children practically managed their (real) time using the temporal qualities of games.

Gaming also allowed children to partially overcome the spatial and temporal constraints of not being able to frequently meet friends outside of school. Through multiple media use, children could inhabit game-worlds together, sharing in enjoyable meaning making through their joint actions in a shared, virtual (but object-filled) world. This was a 'partial' overcoming because nothing was more exhilarating than the intense sociality of competitive or collaborative play in the presence of numerous others. But such events were not common, and were enjoyed as special occasions.

As with going out in the neighbourhood, gaming involved valued shows of competence and ownership, including telling of one's knowledge of storylines, release dates and prices; gaming skills like expertly navigating a game-world's terrain; and ownership of desirable cars. This resonated with the importance of ownership of the console per se. Console ownership turned out to be an important life event for many of my participants, and in their relationship with their consoles, they narrated their personal biographies. In subsequent game ownership and

practice, further milestones were marked, whilst in telling of intended future purchases, boys derived enjoyment from imagining futures unshackled from present constraints. Further, the cataloguing of points, skills and levels meant that experiences were documented as a numerical progression, similarly to how children charted their 'progress' through school KeyStage levels. In both these practices, the way in which numbers could be abstracted from their means of production, and compared across time and persons, rendered them particularly salient in the formation of self-understanding.

In chapter 6, about children's participations and friendships, several practices previously described re-emerge. As in chapter 4, my participants cultivated ambiguity in their public actions in order to embrace the opportunities afforded by sociality. In the school playground, of course, there was less of a perception of dangers like strangers and cars, but there was a heightened social risk of being recognisably alone. In public, then, talk of exclusive or non-friendships (apart from 'best' friendships) was relatively rare, seemingly to avoid ruling out any participations. Yet, this practice appeared to contrast with private narratives, in which my participants fixed the meanings of past actions and thus the characters of others and themselves. In this way, as with their video gaming narratives, children gained self-understanding through narratives of friendship, positioning themselves in opposition to those they described as 'mean', 'annoying', 'bossy' or 'a snitch'.

In clarifying their dislikes, my participants' public actions seemed to change going forwards, aligning with their narratives. Although children generally attempted not to be openly 'mean', as this might be criticised and curtail their participations, they tried to enact shifts in participations. Given that participations were constantly shifting, these actions were difficult to read and were likely experienced by others as ambiguous. This ambiguity persisted up until a point where the repetition of particular actions, or ceasing of particular repetitions, became

understood by those present as change (although, ironically, they were represented by the original narrator as how things had *always* been).

Again, this has implications for 'aspirations', because it shows how narrative fixings of identity involve temporal navigations that both represent and influence action. Friendship narratives 'fixed' one's own and others' past actions to emphasise the continuity of biographical personhood over time (cf. Lambek, 2013), even as the expression of these narratives could precipitate changes in one's actions going forward. In this sense, narratives about friendship were aspirational, in that they fixed and idealised friendship and personhood as enduring over time, ironing out past and present ambiguities of participation, and directing future action in a more concerted way (even as this occurred through a narrative notion of continuity).

Throughout this ethnography, we have seen that children were continually anticipating future events and imagining or planning future actions, where these were tied to their concrete and at least somewhat familiar practices. This is evident in children's anticipations of school-leaving rituals, which I describe in chapter 7. The institutional structure of school inculcates an expectation of repeating events. Termly events like mufti days and discos were eagerly discussed in terms of plans. Meanwhile, events associated with particular year groups, like the Year 5 Wales trip, which older children talked about, and younger year groups looked forward to, were anticipated (by those able to participate) as milestones in one's school life – a means of narrating one's movement through the school, although they could be less concretely engaged with in advance.

Exploring how the anticipation of school-leaving rituals was or wasn't matched by their eventual playing out, I found that those events without a strong narrative focus could be variously fun/exciting or boring/disappointing, but were not experienced as particularly

momentous. By contrast, those rituals (generally devised by the school) guided by a narrative of memory creation and school belonging – and tied in with nostalgic imagery – provided a sense of momentous occasion expressed through children's tears and joy, even when events didn't go entirely to plan. Again, then, the 'fixing' effect provided by narrative worked to direct action and emotion. Children themselves seemed to recognise this power and later replicated it in their own commemorative actions.

**Aspirations, and implications**

Having discussed how children appeared to represent and navigate futures in their everyday lives, I return to 'aspirations', and the potential implications of my findings. In chapter 1, I described current political rhetoric, also prevalent in the discourses of head teachers at a local level, which employs a notion of 'high' and 'low' aspirations (linked to career prestige), with the aim of 'raising' aspirations in order to raise educational achievement and career outcomes, and effect social mobility. In this rhetoric, children are encouraged to have 'high' aspirations, or simply to 'be aspirational', although it turned out that in everyday discourses at school, (good/bad) 'behaviour' rather than 'aspirations' were central.

My research suggests that the way in which aspirations are conceived of as 'working' is not how they are practised by children. Contrary to Gottfredson's (1981) staged model, my participants' aspirations were for specific occupations, premised on a notion of individual uniqueness, or an individual's affiliation with preferential others, rather than being vague and indicative only of gender or class background. In fact, class and ethnic background were never consciously invoked in relation to career aspirations, and their relations with occupational choice and notions of prestige were complex (in contrast to school choice, where the

(parental) decision to apply to selective grammar schools or not was more obviously tied to ethnic and class background). Children's aspirational statements related to their hobbies, interests and preferences; and their statements reflected and bolstered present self-understandings. In fact, this sense of understanding self and other as individuals first and foremost seemed to precede a later (secondary school) understanding of people as being classifiable according to group 'types'.

As 'tellings', aspirations were sometimes differentially expressed in different contexts. Whilst focusing mainly on children's expressions outside of classroom contexts, the way in which certain children told specific types of career aspirations to teachers bears thinking about. Those positively oriented to school sometimes chose to express to teachers 'better' answers – linked to adult notions of prestige –, where they seemed to recognise that 'aspirations' usually posited outside of this context would be seen as inferior. Whilst this matches a notion in the dominant discourse that positive attitude to school might result in 'higher' aspirations, it is worth noting a possible opportunity cost for the child, in terms of subsuming an expression of preferences in order to state a 'better' answer.

Further, I have suggested that aspirations do not work in the rational goal setting and individualistically motivational way suggested by the dominant discourse. Yet, nor are they simply the product of habitus, or family habitus – the rational expectation of what will probabilistically occur – as suggested by Bourdieu (1990), and other critical studies in geography and education. Rather, as documented in the previous section, I have shown children's aspirations to be presently motivated 'tellings' of individuality, which *can* have forward 'effects' (including those recognised by the teller), but through their inter-subjective power, rather than internally motivating force. As such, I suggest that 'aspirations' can be effectual, even if I disagree in large part with existing notions of *how* this occurs.

In fact, given that many of my participants' 'aspirations' appeared to be long-held (in line with interests), it is likely that they will come to have further 'effects', when children come to make path-dependent choices (e.g. about school subject choices), *through* discussions with adult helpers. Relatedly, I suggest that 'aspirations', or "what do you want to be?", were important to children in that they enjoyed being asked to tell about something that was meaningful to them, and having their answers taken seriously. In fact, the engagement between adults and children in terms of career aspirations is a worthwhile model for adults' engagements with children on other matters, even if adult ideas about the purpose and functioning of aspirations were not always in line with children's.

Since career aspirations were often posited on the basis of hobbies, interests and favourite school subjects, I suggest that rather than aspirations *per se* being important, it is access to cultivating these hobbies and interests that should be the focus of policy (assuming children's present participations and enjoyment, and 'aspirations' and their breadth, to be desirable). This is similar to Cummings et al.'s (2012) suggestion that policies should directly target children's present lives, rather than simply aiming for 'attitudinal change'. An example already occurring at Lowell was provision of a 'code club', where interest in gaming was practically developed. There is further scope for this kind of initiative in relation to digital media use – for example, whereas video gaming largely appealed to boys only, both boys and girls were interested in taking photos, manipulating digital images, and making videos, and this interest could be fostered. At a higher level, policy makers could conceivably, with foresight, manipulate application shortfalls to particular industries by introducing related activities that children could meaningfully engage in. There is also the possibility of making clearer the multiplicity of possible occupations 'associated' with particular subjects, in order to meaningfully communicate the many unseen career roles comprising a modern services-

dominated economy. This is particularly the case where knowing the *name* of an occupation was important in lending legitimacy to 'tellings'.

This is not to say that identifications were only inwardly focused. For example, Hazel's desire to be a teacher appeared to be related to her positive assessment of her teachers as 'nice' and 'cool'; this was similarly the case with Amina's suggestion of 'author' in the context of my 'book', and Alex's of 'paramedic' given his watching of Casualty. Since aspirations were also expressions of affiliation with admired subject positions, in which careers did not appear to be abstracted from the people performing them, creating the possibility for meaningful engagements between children and adults in varying career positions could foster 'aspirations', in terms of inspiring desires to 'be' them. Popular media can also be seen as useful in this regard, in terms of broadening children's engagement with those beyond their immediate sphere of contact. Whilst there has been criticism of a 'celebrity culture' and the unattainable aspirations this apparently incurs, I suggest that in engaging with others' 'complete' personhood – their character, work, lifestyle, and relations with others – children's admiration for particular celebrities was not vacuous but continuous with the sense-making children engaged in with regards to proximate others. Finally, fantasy play engagements with ideas about occupations can be seen to be useful in providing a basis for engaging with the practice of 'being' other.

If policy interest is in matching people to jobs, there is a suggestion – from children themselves – that 'aspirations' may be of less relevance than the workings of the jobs market. In children's talk or writings involving 'jobs', they showed themselves to be insightful about the reality of gaining employment. Thus, John and Ethan's 'aspirations' were tempered by their apparent understandings of the availability of jobs, and the necessity of a salary – something researchers have noted as a revising of aspirations in line with expectations, especially as

children get older. Further, Amina's unprompted story about the character Finn Sim's attempts to get a job show both insight into how getting a job works in terms of process, and a dissonance with expressions of career aspirations (including her own, which made no mention of any kind of process). In other words, the aspirational discourse and the reality of 'getting a job' do not particularly line up in practical terms for many adults (like those whom Amina must have observed); there is thus a question of how relevant 'aspirations' are, and whether more attempt should be made to bridge these understandings.

Occupational aspirations are often examined alongside educational aspirations, since education is relevant in the distinction between 'high' and 'low' aspirations. Examining secondary school preferences, I found both children and parents actively engaging in discussing 'choices' – mainly from the start of Year 6, in line with bureaucratic requirements, although those engaging in supplementary tuition for selective grammar school examinations had the notion of school applications on the horizon earlier, because of the practical demands of extra lessons and work. The decision to apply to grammar school seemed to be a parental decision made well in advance of Year 6, and appeared to correlate with ethnic and class background, over and above children's interest and/or achievement in school/schoolwork. Given recent debates about grammar schools, I would suggest that this means that grammar schools are unlikely to effect social mobility, in that parents from less well off backgrounds are less likely to choose to apply (even if children might have passed the selective examinations); further, social mixing (at primary school) caused those with an interest in school/schoolwork, like Hazel and Kelsey, to seek out 'extra' work (like exam practice and tutoring) in line with their friends, showing positive 'network effects' from such social mixing (at least based on the assumption that more education is 'good'). Meanwhile, across all children's and parents' spontaneous evaluations, a similar language of 'good schools' abounded, with schools' reputations and results, notions of bullying and friendship, teaching,

and locations and sizes featuring. Given the apparent importance of conversational networks in coming to informed choices, I suggest that it may be helpful for schools to facilitate such conversations from earlier on, and to help those (like 'new' pupils/families) not embedded in ad hoc networks.

Beyond occupational and educational aspirations, I suggest there are broader implications to my research. Firstly, given children's enjoyment of 'telling', and its importance to the development of self and other understandings, I would suggest that there is scope for institutions, and adults more generally, to provide more possibility for, and recognition of, these 'tellings'. As many 'tellings' occur within the context of concrete activities, or within specific environments or using particular objects, I contend that provisioning for children to be able to engage more in telling whilst doing might be beneficial. Specifically, this might mean – for a school – more field trips or object handling, with more provision for children to discuss with each other on an ad hoc and continual basis, rather than in the short, specific segments of time usually set aside for group discussions.

Equally, children's 'tellings' that elide 'intention' and 'outcome' or blur 'reality' and 'fantasy' might suggest to adult authorities that children are incapable of conceiving of notions like 'future' – or at least, that they might be confused in certain circumstances. Yet, I have suggested that children might not be making these distinctions not because they are incapable of doing so, but because there is a purpose or enjoyment to be derived from telling things in particular ways. Recognition of this might help to improve adult-child understandings.

Finally, I suggest that children's apparent optimism ought to be noted. Whether discussing what they wanted to be in order to express their identities; anticipating upcoming events and their own future actions; or visiting the shops, and expressing desires for ownership, children

seemed to recognise the flexibility provided by narrative expressions of futures, and stated their aspirations optimistically. In this way, unlike current discourses of global economic uncertainty, in which the future is represented as inherently unstable and risky, for children, future representations involved the fulfilment of desire, and foreclosure of uncertainty. Whereas action in the present was often constrained and open-endedly ambiguous vis-à-vis restrictions on their autonomy and their ability to effect intentions, narrated futures could be imagined idealistically, as situations in which intentions could finally be realised. I suggest that this was neither a case of 'cruel optimism' (cf. Zipin et al., 2015) nor a lack of realism – rather, such expressions ought to be understood in the context of practices of *telling.* Telling one's aspirations was a way of expressing oneself into being, in order to know oneself and be known. Ironically, the context of these optimistic imaginings was a desire for competence, ownership and autonomy – for the full personhood denied to them in the present. This begs the question of how 'aspirations' would change were adults to treat children differently; although it also perhaps shows the importance of a known future and ideal state – recognition of the inevitability of 'becoming' adult – in rendering imaginings optimistic.

**Future directions**

Thus far, I have omitted to discuss my fieldwork methodology. Yet, as described in chapter 2, this was crucial to my findings – indeed, my findings and method were frequently one, because it was in participation (as method) that I learnt what children valued, and how they might experience their life-worlds, and this was an on-going process that constituted access itself. Of course, because my concerns (such as worries about ethics and access, and trying to note in my mind everything that was said and done) differed from those of my participants, there was a sense in which my learning was impeded. Nevertheless, being accepted by my

participants into their practices meant that I gained unparalleled access into their life-worlds, and into hidden aspects of children's lives, like private discussions of friendship and (romantic) relationships; use of media and social media within their own homes, including by themselves online; and subversive practices of humour and daring. I am not advocating this as the optimal method for conducting fieldwork with children in all situations; indeed, I believe it should only occur with children's full and on-going acceptance of the researcher as participant. Further, it requires continuous commitment to an ethical stance of doing no harm and being sensitive to children's concerns. But, in conducting fieldwork in this way, I have demonstrated that Mandell's (1988) method of 'full participation' with children *is* possible and can be very fruitful.

In this thesis, I have focused on what I set out to discover: what we might learn about aspiration and the future from a children's perspective[74]. This was what informed my thinking prior to and during fieldwork, and although I tried to note down everything I could remember, anything to do with time or future no doubt stood out in my mind. Nevertheless, in writing out the minutiae of everyday conversations and practices that I was privy to, my field notes constitute a rich data source from which I have only scratched the surface with this thesis. Five particular areas of everyday practice that I have not written about here, but which I would like to produce papers on are humour, romance, food, social media, and playground games and fads.

Humour was a hugely important aspect of children's lives, running through all of their practices; and being funny was highly prized (as noted with regards to Lewis in chapter 3).

[74] I say 'a' children's perspective, because although my participants were each unique, and doubtless had different perspectives on things, there were also many things that united them. This is therefore one children's perspective from contemporary children in Greater London; as set against children's perspectives from elsewhere in the world at various times.

Meanwhile, specific genres of humour became popular throughout my time in the field, such as parodies (of pop songs) and 'pranking' (i.e. practical joking – as briefly mentioned in chapter 4), particularly as inspired by social media. In these practices, humour was implicated alongside knowledge, subversion and style, meaning that that not only was it presently enjoyable, it also tied in with children's perceptions of growing up and 'becoming' knowledgeable. As one of the driving forces of action amongst my participants, and in tying in with notions of 'change' through shifting styles of humour, the topic deserves particular attention. More generally, within anthropology, humour has attracted some attention over recent years (e.g. Carty and Musharbash, 2008; Overing, 2000; Toren, 2005). However, I believe it remains under-researched relative to its importance to both people's everyday practices and experiences, and the interrelationships between people.

Talk of romance – the term 'relationships' was used amongst my participants – was another aspect of girls' interactions that was both everyday and hugely significant to their self and other understanding, and another topic that, like humour, I have not been able to cover in this thesis. In their talk, girls matched themselves and each other to boys based on a number of factors including expressions of 'liking' and preference; image and imagining how they would look together; and prior friendship and its duration. In talking of relationships, girls re-voiced discussions by older girls and women, especially common phrases from films, and television dramas and sitcoms, emphasising their 'maturity' in relation to boys (who generally appeared less interested in relationships until almost the end of Year 6). Yet, girls' relationship discussions did not replace other practices: in fact, to minimise the risk of loss of face, as well as playing on the common trope of 'destiny', my participants used existing games of fate and chance to express their 'likings', in ways that deferred agency to, and leveraged the legitimacy of, games' external and pre-written 'rules'.

Food has also risen up the anthropological agenda in recent years, and children's food practices have been the subject of some attention already (e.g. James et al., 2009; Loebenberg, 2011). Like humour and romance, food played a strong ideological role in children's lives. For example, in a grammar lesson at school, being asked to construct sentences about their favourite book, pop group or food, most chose food. In leisure talk and practices, food also featured strongly (as noted briefly in chapters 3 and 4). I believe my work could contribute to the existing literature by comparing food practices across different domains. Thus, rather than examining food practices in one environment, as most current research appears to do, I would explore the meanings and values of foods across school lunch practices; family dinnertimes; out-of-school peer consumption; the consumption/creation of YouTube food 'challenges'; and in the extensive talk about food in which it was imaginatively conjured.

Given the rapid rise of social media, and adult concerns about children's practices, ethnographic studies of actual children's social media practices are timely. Whilst there is a growing literature (e.g. boyd, 2008; Drotner and Livingstone, 2008; Ito et al., 2008; Miller, 2016), scope remains for expanding our knowledge of practices across the range of media platforms and sites, and in conjunction with children's other leisure practices. I have noted various social media practices within this ethnography, including the dual use of Skype and the PlayStation Network in video game play (chapter 5); the watching and making of YouTube videos (chapters 4 and 5); use of BlackBerry Messenger to forward around games (chapter 3); later use of Instagram to nostalgically recall friendship histories (chapter 7); and the school's view on my inclusion in a WhatsApp group (chapter 2). However, there are many further avenues that I could explore. As discussed, mobile phone ownership increased during Years 5 and 6, and over this time, use of social media also increased and changed. For example, as Miller (2016) also notes, BBM use was soon surpassed by Instagram, but further, the style of

profile pictures and content of chats also swiftly altered as platforms became familiar. I would chart in detail this history, and also explore how children's changing media posts might further inform notions of children's 'tellings' and 'fixings' going forwards.

Play remained a favourite or default activity for my participants throughout my time at primary school. I engaged in a myriad games with my participants, including chasing games, ball games, clapping games, dance routines, guessing games, and pretend games, not to mention those involving toys or other equipment. Further, during my time in the field, various fads took hold, such as 'the cup song' (inspired by the film 'Pitch Perfect' – amongst girls only) and the making of 'loom-bands' (both boys and girls), overtaking engagements in other activities for a time. Playground games have been extensively studied from various angles, including by folklorists, play theorists and anthropologists, but updates to this body of work are merited. Fads have equally been studied – in particular, the Pokémon craze of the 1990s/2000s (e.g. Allison, 2006; Evans, 2006). Nevertheless, in both their similarities and major differences with Pokémon, these new crazes merit attention; equally so does the way in which fads relate to other games and activities.

In addition to these proposed papers, I believe my data has further potential for engaging in novel methods of ethnographic writing – especially to deal with issues of temporal representation, noted in chapter 2. I think these issues characterise much anthropological writing, where despite arguments that ethnography is able to represent mundane experience, the focus of texts is often, in fact, on events and happenings. My concern in this thesis was, in particular, how to represent my participants' daily lives in a way that accurately conveyed the temporal experience of mundane activities, repeated practice, and change. I tried to describe how change was never a one-off occurrence but was only ever a post hoc realisation that some particular practice had ceased to be repeated, or that another had begun (at some

point) and was now commonly repeated. In this way, repetition was not expected, but nor was change. Yet, to explain this in the abstract, as above, only gives a brief impression of what this entailed. Meanwhile, the temporal rhythms implicit in coordinated action and/or conversation were the central experience of life for my participants and me, even as time was never consciously noted in them. As such, the only way to represent the importance of temporal experience would be through documentation of actions and conversations in a way that simulated to some extent the time and timings they incurred. Doing so would also help to explain why boredom was despised whilst drama and excitement were so highly prized. As such, I think that experimenting with a less academically structured style of writing that enables actions and events to be 'decompressed' from their teleological conclusion (cf. Bruner, 2001) would be profitable.

Childhood remains a somewhat niche area of anthropology. Like Hirschfeld (2002), I believe that studies of children are deserving of greater recognition within the discipline. Around the world, children make up around a third of the population, whilst in countries like the U.K. children are given high ideological import, variously argued over by politicians, the media, educationalists, interest groups, and so on. Whilst children's rights legislation has raised the notion of listening to children's voices, providing forums in which this can occur is only one end of a spectrum in terms of understanding children's concerns. A focus on voice privileges those who are politically engaged and who fit the demands of presentation that such forums require. And the issues engaged with are likely to be those whose terms have already been verbally articulated. By contrast, anthropological work can represent the everyday, unremarkable practices that are not discoursed about – of ordinary dreams, acts of care, and moments of fun that make up the lives of people everywhere. Given the extraordinary amount that children are talked *about*, a focus on actual children's lives, 'at home' and at a local level, is still necessary and relevant. To paraphrase the Opies (1959), one does not need to go far

away to discover life-worlds far removed from the everyday experiences of the researcher, and, one would suspect, of the policy-makers making decisions that affect various children's futures.

## Appendix A

An example informational leaflet (printed double-sided and fold into thirds) sent to participants in advance of my research. These were slightly different according to the environment (home, school, after-school), and were accompanied by further information for parents, and consent forms.

2

**Dear Child and Parent / Guardian,**

**My name is Anne-Marie Sim. I am a student at Oxford University. The topic I study is how children talk about and act out ideas about the future in their daily lives. I am going to be writing a book about this.**

**I would like to get your help with my project because I think the best way to find out what children think is to talk and spend time with them. This is why I am going to visit you and your family over the next year.**

**This leaflet will explain my project to you. If you have any questions, please get in touch with me.**



3



**Please read this leaflet together so that you know what the project is about. I hope you will agree to be part of my project when you have read it.**

**Please can parents / guardians also read the Additional Information sheet about ethics.**

**Thank you for your help.**

**Anne-Marie Sim**

4

**Who are you?**

**I am a PhD student at Oxford University, writing a book about children.**

**What will you be doing?**

**I will be visiting you at home or going with you to other places where you spend your free time. I can spend time with you alone or with other members of your family or your friends, as you prefer.**

**What will I have to do?**

**Just do what you normally do! I want to find out how children spend their time normally, and how they might talk about the future as part of daily life. But I will sometimes write things down in my notebook. This will be about conversations we have or things we do that I think tell me about how children think about the future.**

---

5

**How often will I see you?**

**If possible, I would like to spend at least a bit of time with you every week or so, for one year. But it is up to you and your parents / guardians to decide exactly how often I see you.**

**Do I have to do this?**

**No. You can choose whether you want to take part in this project. You can also change your mind later.**

**Who will be allowed to read the information?**

**Only my supervisor and I will be allowed to read the information I collect. When I write about my project, I will change the names of you, your parents / guardians, your friends, and any other names or places we talk about.**

6

**I will keep all the information securely locked. If I want to use the information for anything else, I will ask your permission.**

**When I've nearly finished my project, I will talk to you and your parents / guardians about what I found out.**

**What do I do now?**

**Please discuss together whether you are happy to take part.**

**I hope you will agree to be part of my project. The book I am writing will help us to understand how children think about the future.**

**Thanks for reading this. I hope I'll meet you soon!**

**Yours sincerely,**

**Anne-Marie Sim**

**"What do you want to be when you grow up?"**

**Exploring the meanings of 'aspiration' and 'the future' in children's everyday lives**



**Oxford University Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology**

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