Competing constructions of children’s participation in social care: analysing text and talk

Thesis

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COMPETING CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL CARE: ANALYSING TEXT AND TALK

SHARON PINKNEY BA (HONS), CQSW, MA
SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL POLICY

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This thesis is about how the concept of participation constructs children as subjects within social welfare formations. It is the result of a qualitative and interpretive research project using narrative and discourse analysis as key methodologies. The research is theoretically framed within the social constructionist, post-structuralist, feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives. By using these the thesis explores the competing constructions of children’s participation within social/legal policy texts and the discourses of social care. The focus is on children within contemporary UK welfare contexts who are either identified as being ‘at risk’ of significant harm or who are Looked After by the local authority. I examine the way that children’s participation is framed by the Children Act, 1989 (England and Wales), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and *Quality Protects*.

I analyse the policy and interview texts to show how the discourses of protectionism, developmentalism, rights and managerialism compete unevenly across them. I argue that there is a new configuration of welfare developing around children’s services where managerialism is dominant and children’s rights are collapsed into the customer discourse. Children’s voices are either absent or mediated by adult/professionals in most of the formal policy texts.

This thesis explores the affective and emotional aspects of performing participation with children. My data shows how individual professionals as well as the institutions of welfare experience anxiety and strain about how to enable and manage the participation of children. I show how professionals and welfare institutions develop various coping strategies, whose effects include the avoidance of the difficulties of listening to children.
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Abbreviations

AAR Assessment and Action Records

ACPC Area Child protection Committee

ADSS Association of Directors of Social Services

CRC (United Nations) Convention on the Rights of the Child

CRO Children’s Rights Officer

CSCI The Commission for Social Care Inspection

FGC Family Group Conference

LAC Looked After Children

NSM New Social Movement

SSD Social Services Department

SSI Social Services Inspectorate
Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank SSDs for providing me generous access to their policy texts. In particular I would like to thank the research participants for giving up precious time for reflecting on participation.

Needless to say, the analysis I have offered here is inevitably partial, unfinished and incomplete. In addition I would like to acknowledge the contingent and situated nature of the findings which ultimately represent my own interpretations of the texts.
Introduction

I recall an early conversation with a colleague (who became one of supervisors) about my interest in registering for a PhD. This particular conversation was about whether my choice of topic would be something that would sustain my interest for the time it would take to complete the research. Would it be a topic I could eat, sleep, talk, think and possibly dream about for several years? As I complete this thesis I reflect back to this early and important conversation and am delighted and relieved to write that it has maintained my interest throughout and I still feel passionate, inspired and motivated in continuing the conversations as well as thinking, talking and writing about it. My hope is that my enthusiasm, passion and commitment are captured adequately within the analysis and writing of the thesis.

Participation is an area I have felt passionate about for most of my life and this is reflected in the various campaigns, organisations and professional work I have been involved in for many years. My interest in issues relating to children, equality, rights and participation involves personal as well as professional commitments. For example, as a youth and community worker I had used the idea of ‘participation’ to explore ways of involving children in decision-making about their play facilities. This concept was attractive to me because it held and carried within it the possibilities of thinking and engaging with children in a way that enhanced their understanding and involvement in issues that affected them. I had also been actively engaged in the idea of participatory politics as a community worker during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Later in this chapter I explore further what I bring to the research as part of a reflexive project. At this stage it is important to acknowledge that it was this interest and commitment which led me to this area of research. The implication of all this for my research is that I chose the topic first and the analytical and methodological approaches followed on from this choice.

The research was also shaped by developments within the field of social welfare as well as within the legislative and policy frameworks. Active social participation by adults has become a major social and political theme since the 1960s. It has been connected to wider processes of democratisation and the New Social Movements (NSMs) which claimed a greater ‘voice’ in decision-making processes for excluded or marginalised individuals and collectivities. The NSMs represent a loose alliance of feminists, disability groups and anti-racist organisations,
who organised as groups of people around a ‘we’ involving a shared identity. A range of new political constituencies created new understandings and claims during the period from the 1970s onwards. Discursive space was opened up where new forms of advocacy and democratic participation were promoted. These understandings and challenges emerged, in particular, from the formation of solidarities around identities and social divisions such as class, gender, ‘race’, sexuality and disability. The idea of age as a social division emerged around both the children’s rights movement and organisations such as Age Concern campaigning on behalf of older people. Concerns about the level of participation in decision-making can be seen as paralleling an attempted move towards greater institutional openness and accountability of public agencies to ‘consumers’. Over a decade ago developments such as the Citizen’s Charter were viewed as a way of improving quality of services and increasing citizen participation (Cloke and Davies, 1995).

Since the early 1990s there has been mounting concern that Looked After children have been denied a ‘voice’ in decision-making about their lives. Attending to children’s rights takes on a particular significance when children are positioned within public care settings. There was evidence of the relationship between poor quality care and a failure to protect children’s rights (Kahan, 1994). The Children Act, 1989 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) both significantly advanced the idea that it is essential that children participate in decision-making about their own lives and increasing their participation has been the focus of legislation, guidance and policy. For example, in 1998 the New Labour government ensured that children’s participation rights were on every Social Services Department (SSD) agenda by introducing the Quality Protects framework. It was this fit between my own areas of interest as well as wider attention to issues of participation and children’s rights that inspired me to embark upon this research project.

This thesis is therefore concerned with the concept of participation and how it constructs, produces and reproduces children as subjects within social welfare formations. It is a qualitative research project using narrative and discourse analysis as key methodologies. The research is theoretically framed within social constructionist, post-structuralist, feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives in social welfare. In this study I am particularly interested in the competing constructions of children’s participation within social/legal policy texts and the discourses of social care.
The focus of this thesis is on children within specific English and Welsh contemporary welfare contexts. These are children who are either deemed to be ‘at risk’ of significant harm or who are Looked After by the local authority in either residential or foster care. I chose these children as the focus because they are the constituency of children for whom there has been the greatest concerns about lack of ‘voice’. In addition, they are the children and young people I have experience of working with professionally.

In the rest of this Introduction I will outline the framework for the thesis and also start to situate myself within the research process. First I want to start to untangle something about the two key terms of ‘children’ and ‘participation’ which are critical to reading the rest of the research and establish the way I am using terminology throughout the thesis. Williams argued that:

Yet just because ‘meaning’, in any active sense, is more than the general process of ‘signification’, and because ‘norms’ and ‘rules’ are more than the properties of any abstract process or system, other kinds of analysis remain necessary. The emphasis of my own analyses is deliberately social and historical. In the matters of reference and applicability, which analytically underlie any particular use, it is necessary to insist that the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual relationships, and that both the meaning and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change (Williams, 1983, pp21-22).

This insistence that meanings are relational, diverse and variable is significant for this study. There are always definitional concerns when we talk of ‘the child’ and ‘children’. As I am using social constructionist frameworks the idea that children are constructed within historically and culturally specific ways is embedded within the research. I acknowledge that there is no one simple universal definition of ‘a child’ and that definitions of when a child becomes a young person or an adult are often arbitrary. Particular ages convey certain rights in a legal sense and this is often used as a way of differentiating between children and adults. The important point with respect to this is that the ages that children can legally drive, buy alcohol, vote or get married, for example, are all subject to variation internationally and historically. I know from previous professional work that teenagers often prefer to be called ‘young people’ rather than ‘children’ and the term ‘young people’ is used as a way of indicating respect and acknowledging that they are different from younger children. This takes us into the related areas of maturity and competence, which are analysed within my research as contested arenas. Throughout the research I have been attentive to the complexity around issues of competence, assessment, representation, the ‘best interests of the child’ and age and maturity. The problem I encountered is that whatever I settled upon in relation to terminology throughout the thesis it felt unsatisfactory. In the earlier drafts of the thesis I used the
term ‘children and young people’ throughout, but the external factors of word-length led me towards a shorthand version which I settled on uneasily in the final drafting. When referring to a wide range of ages I use ‘children’ rather than ‘children and young people’. When I am referring to a particular teenager as opposed to a younger child I use the term young person.

‘Participation’ is of course also a social construction. In order to consider my use of the term it is helpful to consider a study which is widely quoted in the literature relating to children’s rights and participation. Roger Hart (1992) carried out an international study on behalf of UNICEF regarding children’s participation and in this he defined participation as one of the fundamental rights of citizenship. The pedagogic perspective at the basis of this approach to power derives from the work of Paulo Freire (1972) who viewed young people as one of the oppressed groups in capitalist society; participation was viewed as a form of liberation, where obtaining insight into and power over one’s own reality was the starting point. Hart, based upon the earlier work by Arnstein (1969), devised a ladder of participation to differentiate the idea of participation. Hart’s classification identified eight levels of participation. The first level was manipulation where children are being used by adults in a way which might further adult interests. Secondly there was decoration where children are used to embellish adult actions, for instance by song, dance and other affecting activities. The third level was tokenism where children appear to be given a ‘voice’, but this serves to advance the ‘child-friendly’ image that the adult wants to portray. Fourthly there was the assigned but informed level where adults take the initiative to call in children, but the children are informed how the process works. The fifth level was consulted and informed when children are extensively consulted on a project designed and run by adults. The sixth level was adult-initiated with shared decisions with children. Here children are consulted along with other groups about a particular development or project. The seventh level was child-initiated and directed where children conceive, organize and direct a project themselves, without any adult interference. The eighth level was child-initiated with shared decisions with adults. Hart considered this the highest rung on the ladder of participation because influence being shared between adults and children was viewed as the final goal of participation (Hart, 1992).

More general work on participation followed. For example, Flekkoy and Kaufman (1997) pointed out that levels of participation may be dependent upon the age of the children. They went on to argue that children, like anyone else, need to be clearly told when they can actually make a decision and when their views and opinions will be subject to a decision through democratic or other processes. In this way they warn against leading children to
believe their opinions carry more weight than they actually do. This could be interpreted as a warning against raising expectations that children will be listened to and can make a difference when this is unlikely to be the outcome. This is different from children participating but being clearly told that their views and opinions will be listened to but that the outcome may be different than they would wish it to be. There are arguments around whether children’s participation can be viewed as a panacea or a moral claim that is applied universally or needs to be a differentiated and relative concept (e.g. Archard, 2002).

This attempt to codify children’s rights is significant as a way of analysing children’s rights and as a way of comparing various projects working with children. Although Hart’s classification is used extensively within children’s rights literature, I would want to problematise the ladder of participation because it attempts to codify participation as a sequential concept which obscures the overlap and slide between different levels of participation. In this research I want to live with a contested, complex and shifting idea of participation which resists ‘tidy’ neat definitions. I also want to capture the way that a child may participate differently in different settings, with different people, and on different days. This discussion helps to situate the concept of participation within a differentiated field and signify that it is problematic as a concept. Throughout my research I analyse and problematise the ways that participation is understood within contemporary welfare contexts for children.

I will now outline the thesis structure. Chapter 1 explores the theoretical orientations of the research. The theoretical resources that inform the thesis are post-structuralism, social constructionism, feminism and psychoanalytic theory. These theoretical orientations are explored in relation to how they are relevant to my study within the next chapter.

Chapter 2 explores the relevant legislation and policy that provides the framework for participation policy and practice with children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Children Act, 1989 (England and Wales) have added impetus to the arguments that children should participate in decision-making. In this chapter I also analyse the contestations arising from the legislation and policy. These include contestations around understandings of ‘the best interests of the child’, children and competence, representations of, and listening to, children.
In chapter 3 I discuss the reflective and interpretive methodologies I have used during the research. I explain the use of narrative and discourse analysis to explore and interrogate the policy and interview texts that were part of my research. I also describe the data collection process used throughout the study and the issues around selection of extracts from the policy and interview texts. Within chapter 3 there is also a discussion on the instability of terms such as text, narrative and discourse and the difficulties this creates.

Chapter 4 analyses the data to discover the competing discourses about children and participation within them. I identify four main discourses at work within the data: protectionism, child development, rights and managerialism. The chapter uses extracts from the policy and interview texts to illustrate the way these come into view and are played through, albeit unevenly, within and across the data. I was interested to discover the tensions, strain and overlaps as well as the competition between these discourses. In this chapter I also use the New Labour initiative of Quality Protects where the issues of children’s consultation and participation are explicitly discussed. I analyse the way that the discourses compete within the policy framework.

In chapter 5 I analyse the policy and interview texts to trace the appearance of the ‘voice’ of the child within the texts. The relationship between children and agency is central throughout the analysis. In this chapter I develop the active/passive distinction to a more complex formulation which includes subject positions for children including ‘normalised absence and pathologised presence’ (following the work of Phoenix, 1990). I am interested in representations of children and the way that they are sometimes pathologised within the texts. I use the idea of children as active and creative moral agents to analyse the ways they are able to refuse, resist, challenge, rework and sometimes accept and succumb to such normative and pathologised imagery. The issues raised by children through participation are discussed and the chapter ends with a discussion of the problem for these children and young people in producing normalised narratives of self.

The last substantive chapter (6) uses extracts from the policy and interview texts to explore aspects of emotionality and anxiety within participation work with children. The chapter analyses the complexity involved in listening to and hearing what children have to say. I use examples to illustrate the various coping, distancing and avoiding strategies used in work with children. The chapter then uses a case study to illustrate some of the ways that listening and involving children is often experienced as difficult, anxiety-raising and complex by professionals involved in work with children.
I conclude the thesis in chapter 7 by drawing out the main findings and discoveries I have made within this research. I also consider the implications of my research findings for analysis, for social policy and social care practice with children. Lastly I consider further research possibilities arising from this study.

Since my research is interpretive and reflective it is relevant and appropriate to include a further discussion here, to help situate and position myself within the research. The structure, topic and methodologies of the thesis implicate me in complicated ways. I grew up in a working class family in Bradford. I was the fourth child (and only girl) in a family of five. I was the first person in my family to stay on in school beyond sixteen and the only one out of a generation of eighteen children. My mother has always been a Labour and trade union supporter and through her low-paid work in mills in Bradford and later as a home carer was engaged in various struggles for equal pay for women. She encouraged and supported my involvement in a local youth group. From the age of 9 years to being a teenager I was involved in a youth organisation which undoubtedly helped shape my politics and socialisation in my formative years. As a result of these influences I have since childhood been actively involved in various organisations and campaigns for social justice and equality. During the late 1970s I became increasingly involved in some of what are conventionally described as New Social Movements, such as those that were challenging the basis and rationale upon which health and social care services were being shaped and delivered. I have campaigned on women’s health issues and worked on service user issues within health, education, social services and childcare provision.

I have worked professionally with children in several different contexts over a period of twelve years. In the early 1980s I worked in community, play and youth work settings for two years. Following social work training I worked within children’s residential services and children and families teams in London and Bradford for a period of ten years. Most of these years were spent as a social worker, with the last four years as a social work team manager. During this time I mostly worked with children who were considered at risk of significant harm or Looked After by the Local Authority.

This sketch of my background demonstrates that I have experience and knowledge of different organisational settings, the complexity of the work and the wide range of perspectives professionals bring into their work with children. I have always had a keen interest in, enthusiasm for and commitment to developing rights-based
perspectives in work with children. These experiences have provided me with the basis for some insight into the
different competing discourses and perspectives which are in play in a study of participation within social welfare
contexts.

In addition to my professional concerns for children, I have two teenagers as well as being part of a large
extended family. The experience of ‘mothering’ and raising children has necessarily involved me in negotiations
with organisations such as health, advisory and education services as a parent. The experience of raising my sons
has challenged, broadened and enriched my thinking on issues of children’s rights, participation and decision-
making in interesting ways, particularly as they mature into young adults. While I feel ambivalent about using
personal experience to somehow justify and privilege my own perspectives and want to note a level of discomfort
as well as potential problems with this approach in a reflexive study it is important to situate myself. The
dilemma is that while I am clear that we do not need to have our own children to have perspectives about
children, it is absolutely the case that my sons’ responses to issues of participation and involvement in school and
health issues, for example, has further extended and deepened my own perspectives.

Situating myself within the research process provides a context for my interest in the subject as well as my
interest in and commitment to participation, children, NSMs and social constructionism. These experiences took
me to a position where I wished to explore the possibilities for future welfare contexts where children are taken
seriously as active and creative moral agents and listened to as part of the wider social and political project for
emancipation and social justice. I discuss the idea of situating myself and reflective practice further within
chapter 3 on the research methods. This research, therefore, is a continuation of my long-standing commitment to
thinking about and engaging with, social policies relating to children.
The term Looked After is used throughout the thesis to refer the children who are accommodated in either Local Authority residential or foster care. The term is used in the Children Act, 1989 (England and Wales).

93,200 children were Looked After at any time during the year ending 31 March 2002 (DOH, 2003a). It is estimated that 70,000 children were the subject of section 47 enquiries during the year, of whom 34,800 to registrations on child protection registers. There were 25,700 children on child protection registers at 31 March 2002 (DOH, 2003b).

Woodcraft Folk are a children’s organisation set up in the 1930s which was an alternative to more traditional organisations like Scouts and Guides. It had embedded within it anti-war, peace and cooperative movement ideals. It included work on citizenship, trade unionism, cooperatives, international alliances and organisations and government.
Chapter 1

The Theoretical Orientations

1.0: Introduction

Several intellectual currents shape this thesis and I am going to address them within this chapter by outlining four complementary, overlapping and sometimes competing perspectives, which together form the theoretical orientations for the thesis. The perspectives used within the thesis are post-structuralism, social constructionism, feminism and psychoanalytic perspectives. Each of the perspectives has different positions, lenses and standpoints within them. What I present in this chapter are the parts of the perspectives which have been significant and instructive in relation to my research.

In addition to the four perspectives above, the New Social Movements (NSMs) will be discussed throughout the chapter as these represent movements associated with the theorising within the four perspectives above. In this way they are intertwined with the perspectives and will be discussed alongside and throughout, where relevant. Taken together the perspectives form part of the intellectual terrain that helps enhance understanding of the developments
within welfare. In addition the perspectives and the NSMs form the basis for further challenges to the organisation of, and thinking around, social policy for children.

For the purpose of clarity of analysis I am listing the perspectives here although mindful of the potential pitfalls of this approach - presenting the perspectives as though they were separate when they are more usually complementary, intertwined and overlapping. As a result the discussion that follows will reflect this and will sometimes range across several perspectives. This fluidity of the approaches needs to be kept in mind when reading this brief account.

Within chapter 3 there is a discussion on the instability of the terms used throughout the thesis and the difficulties this creates for positioning myself.

The theoretical framework within this research ranges across and within these perspectives. Each of the perspectives itself covers diverse arguments and strands as they intersect in complicated ways with each other. Following the discussion in the introduction about the concept of participation, children’s participation is produced from discourses about childhood and the relationships between children, parents, welfare professionals, the state and society. It is also productive of a particular construction of ‘the child’ and specific practices of welfare. The perspectives developed here assist in ‘stepping back’ from normative and essentialist assumptions about both ‘the child’ and ‘participation’.

In establishing this framework for analysing welfare and children’s participation, I am identifying with other theorists who have proposed a welfare politics based upon the principle of recognition. ‘The term ‘the politics of recognition’ has been used by some theorists to capture the nature of struggles by subaltern, marginalized and excluded groups to assert their equal moral worth’ (Williams, 2000. p340). Taylor (1994) describes how recognition is not
just a courtesy but a vital human need. Fraser (1995, 2000) explored the tensions between recognition and redistribution as well as the role of recognition within identity politics. Honneth (1995) identified the pursuit of love, rights and solidarity as part of the struggle for recognition. Williams (2000) attempted to identify and establish the principles for ‘good enough’ welfare. The themes of recognition and the role of the psychosocial aspects of welfare have also been developed within work by Froggett (2002).

2.0: Post-structuralism

Generally most of the perspectives used within this research fall loosely within the wider umbrella term of post-structuralism and have been the subject of intense debate and contestations. Post-structuralism has generally been credited with the disruption of earlier structuralist and materialist orthodoxies.

Post-structuralist approaches such as those developed by Michel Foucault and later work utilising his framework were critical of traditional Marxist perspectives. From the 1970s onwards the idea of grand or meta-narratives, such as Marxism, started to lose favour within social sciences more widely as well as within critical social policy. The idea of a natural, objective and a verifiable reality, which formed the basis of positivist social science, was increasingly questioned and challenged. Grand narratives, such as Marxism, were criticised for being over-deterministic and reductionist in the analyses they produced. They tended to privilege class above other forms of social divisions.
Post-structuralist theorists helped to shape this ‘turn’ in theorising welfare and challenged this notion of ‘truth’ embedded in earlier theorising. Arguments were developed that we can only ever partially understand the world in specific and local ways. The development of feminism and postcolonial perspectives are two examples where criticism of Marxism was fierce for the way it marginalised gender and ‘race’. As the 1980s progressed increasing number of claims were made that social divisions were wider than those created by the economic divisions of class alone. Post-structuralist theorising exposed the idea of the universal subject, a white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, adult and western subject around which welfare had been built. This universal subject meant that anyone who fell outside these categories became identified as ‘other’, different, pathologised and inferior subjects. Being an adult was part of this universal subject construction, whereas children were not and in this way were ‘othered’ alongside women and ‘black’ or ethnic minority people. The multiple challenges to ‘universal subjects’ were also a feature of the NSMs critiques of welfare, which were intertwined with post-structuralist perspectives (Lewis, 1998a; Saraga, 1998a; Hughes, 1998).

2.1: Power and Knowledge

One of the key issues raised within the post-structuralist debates was about understandings of power. Post-structuralists claim that within traditional Marxist theories power is viewed as repressive and negative. It was held by individuals, organisations or by classes. Repression is viewed as arising from inequalities in power, largely derived from economic and class divisions. Foucault (1977a) fundamentally challenged this notion of power, instead arguing that power was a mechanism with positive and productive effects. For Foucault therefore, power was viewed as exercised rather than possessed. Power was also viewed as involving a multiplicity of relations not just the dynamics of domination and repression.
When I think of the mechanics of power, I think of its capillary forms of existence, of the extent to which power seeps into the very grain of individuals, reaches right into their bodies, permeates their gestures, their position, what they say, how they learn to live and work with other people (Foucault, 1977a, p10).

Here we can see how power is viewed as fluid and constituted in all social relations. It was the relational understanding of power which proved most useful for theorising further about the relationships between individuals, families, organisations, institutions and the state for example. Power relations were viewed as present in all exchanges and encounters between individuals, groups and institutions (Watson, 2000).

Resistance to power was also a key feature of Foucauldian understandings of power relations. The points of contestation, challenge, contradiction and instability were made visible. This in turn created the possibilities and spaces for articulation of new ways of theorising difference and inequality. Power and knowledge were linked together in that all fields of knowledge were constituted within power relations and all power relations conversely constituted a field of knowledge. For Foucault power produced knowledge and knowledge sustained power, lending it authority and justification as well as the means to discipline and punish (Moss and Petrie, 2004). This reconfiguration of the power-knowledge nexus provided new insights and possibilities within social sciences, cultural studies, law, medicine, arts and humanities subject knowledges. For critical social policy the possibilities for rethinking welfare beyond the previous constraints produced a whole wealth of new theorising and insights. In relation to social policy what this means is viewing social policy as contradictory and complex (Watson, 2000). In the context of my research this is significant because it allows for the conception of
power as being constituted within relations between a children’s rights officer and a young person; a parent or social worker and a child; or a teacher and the child for example. I am interested in the ways that children are constructed as categories of subject as well as the organisational practice of relations between them. The idea of resistance is useful for my research because it helps capture the idea of children as active and dynamic agents rather than merely passive recipients of welfare.

In addition to the power-knowledge nexus assisting our understanding and analysis, there were three other key insights initially developed by Foucault that have been useful within this research. The first is the idea of the ‘eye’ or ‘gaze’. Second is the idea of the ‘confessional’. The third is the theorising around ‘the body’ which has developed within post-structural analyses. Foucault analysed the way that disciplinary power was institutionalised within such settings as prisons or asylums, for example. He was particularly interested in the development of new forms of technique and surveillance used to subtly control inmates (Foucault, 1977b). The idea of the eye or ‘gaze’, which regulated the behaviour of inmates without using force, has been useful in understanding the way surveillance becomes a form of control. Contemporary examples would be increased use of CCTV (used in most High Streets, city centres, hospitals and increasingly in schools) and speed cameras. These regulate behaviour and discipline the population as they become widely used. What is relevant to this research is the idea that the organisation of adult/child positions and relationships ‘normalises’ the adult gaze. This normalisation means that the adult gaze is everywhere in relationships between adults and children. In addition to this there are institutional specificities involving the adult gaze within families, schools or children’s homes for example. Within my research the issue of the adult gaze emerged as significant for children and is discussed further within Chapter 5.
In some areas of work with children the adult gaze is experienced negatively. A ChildLine study found, for example, that young people in care had particular difficulty with access to telephones. They complained of lack of privacy and restricted access to telephones including having to ask a member of staff to make a call or use the telephone in the staff office. Within foster care telephones are likely to be in located in a lounge or public part of the house. Many callers preferred to use public telephones but again other people waiting to make calls often interrupted them. Carers or other children interrupted thirteen percent of calls to ChildLine Counsellors. Children were found to be more likely to be teased or bullied because they were known to have telephoned ChildLine. The other relevant point is that children also liked the absence of the physical gaze in accessing help through ChildLine (Morris and Wheatley, 1994). These examples demonstrate the specific significance of the adult gaze for children.

The idea of the confessional is linked to that of the ‘gaze’ in terms of regulation. Whereas the ‘gaze’ is about regulation by others, Foucault used the confessional to describe how individuals became self-policing and self-regulating subjects. Foucault traced the idea of the confessional back to seventeenth century Catholic practices where sex became a privileged theme of confession. Confession became the procedure where subjects were incited to produce a discourse of truth about their sexuality (Sarup, 1993). What Foucault demonstrated was how this practice, originally developed within religious practices, became a tactic used by secular institutions such as those involved in medicine, psychiatry, medicine and law during the late nineteenth century. Within confession ‘individuals are solicited and encouraged to divulge their innermost feelings in the presence or virtual presence of an authority that has the power to ‘judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile’ (Foucault (1965, p182) in McNay, 1994, p97).
Foucault analysed the way that the confessional became part of the disciplinary power of the state and organisations. The idea of the confessional has been used extensively within social work and social policy administration, as well as within psychotherapy. Examples within social work include the use of extensive assessments where questions about intimate spheres of personal lives became part of the casework model developed from the nineteenth century onwards.

In my research, it was clear that children often experience difficulties about the sense that their private lives become public once they are Looked After within residential care settings. Details of their lives become reviewed, assessed and reported on within formal meetings such as child protection conferences and review meetings. This is a critical point which links the practice of the adult ‘gaze’ to the ‘confessional’ for this group of children.

The idea of the body as a site of resistance, contestation and challenge has also been developed within post-structuralist analysis. Within his work on sexuality Foucault developed the idea that the body is the key site for the production, reproduction, legitimation and transmission of knowledge (Foucault, 1979). For Foucault the body was at the centre of the struggle between different power formations. ‘The body is both shaped and reshaped by the warring forces acting upon it. The body, then, is conceived in radically anti-essentialist terms’ (McNay, 1994, p90). The body was viewed as bearing the marks and stigmata of past experiences on its surface. It was also viewed as the place where the micro-strategies of power could be observed.

‘The body’ has been important within this research. The idea of children’s bodies as abused bodies, sexual bodies, ‘disabled’ bodies is set up in contrast to the normative images of
children as ‘innocent’ bodies. Feminist and disability groups, for example, used the insights developed within post-structuralist analyses to highlight the way that the body was increasingly central to their campaigns and to further challenge the organisation of welfare. The idea of bodily integrity has been discussed more recently (Williams, 2000) as part of the principles for welfare at the beginning of a new century. Williams’ view is that the history of welfare intervention is, in part, the history of the identification and classification of healthy/productive and unhealthy/unproductive bodies. Similar classifications were made of fit and unfit minds, fit and unfit parenting and so on. Welfare professionals like doctors and social workers were increasingly required to assess the bodies and minds of their ‘patients’ or ‘clients’.

From the 1960s onwards a wide number of campaigns started to challenge the medical and social work classifications of bodies. Women’s groups had campaigned about abortion rights, rape, domestic violence, childbirth and so forth. Within mental health there were campaigns against invasive treatments such as ECT. ‘Black’, lesbian, gay, women’s movements all challenged the dominant meanings attributed to bodies (Gilroy, 1987). Twigg argued that ‘the body’ had been largely ignored within social policy academic literature, though this is slowly changing as a social policy of the body emerges (Twigg, 2000).

Campaigns about child abuse and sexual abuse in particular were fought throughout the 1970s and onwards. These campaigns, largely feminist in orientation, were partly about the issue of bodily integrity and protecting children’s and particularly girl’s bodies from harm, abuse and so on. For Williams respect for bodily integrity is a fundamental part of being an autonomous citizen. These campaigns linked issues of ‘voice’ and the body together in complex and subtle
ways. The National Abortion Campaign slogan ‘the woman’s right to chose’ illustrates this link between women’s rights in relation to their bodies and pregnancy (Fairweather, 1982).

2.2: The Critique of Essentialism

One of the important ideas to emerge out of post-structuralist analyses was the critique of essentialism. Essentialism has been described as ‘the belief that social behaviour is determined by some underlying process or “essence” which works itself out in social contexts’ (Clarke and Cochrane, 1998, p28). This would mean talking about children, women, or ‘black people’ in ways which emphasise their essential ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’. Examples of this are normative talk where ‘boys are aggressive’ or ‘girls are sensitive’, ‘black people make good athletes’ and so on. The underlying assumptions of these kinds of statements assume some predetermined behaviour of an individual based on their gender, ‘race’, and class and so on. Another feature of essentialism was the way it linked to homogenisation which led to differences of experiences, outlook or attitudes within groups being overlooked, so boys will be boys, women are naturally more caring, and so forth. The NSMs developed the critique of essentialism further by taking these arguments into welfare arenas to question the basis of service provision for people with disabilities, for example.

In the attempt to challenge and dislodge the forms of inequality connected to social differences, new social identities and political constituencies have been convened around
dimensions of difference. In this sense, we can say that social differences also emerge from the challenges to domination and inequality and the struggle for self-defined identities. Thus social differences are formed in the dynamic interplay between domination and the struggle against it; between the attempt to establish the boundaries of the normal and attempts to limit the criteria of access to resources (including those of welfare) and the struggle to breach or replace those criteria. The result of all this is that previously unrecognized social divisions and identities, such as those formed around subordinations or exclusions attached to race, disability, age and gender difference, have reconfigured the social policy agenda (Lewis, 2003, p98).

In terms of my research it is assumed throughout that there can be no universal definition of ‘the child’ or ‘childhood’ as fixing definitions would involve essentialising, reducing and universalising the experiences of children. Instead childhood is viewed here as a cultural, historical and social construct. Within this framework diversity and different experiences of childhood are emphasised.

2.3: Discourses

Discourse is another core idea which comes out of post-structuralism. The term discourse is used in many different ways and there is much slippage in levels of meaning between them. Often one meaning can be overlaid with another. While it is important to note the variety of definitions and the competing emphasis within each different definition of discourse, it is fair to acknowledge that it created some difficulty for my thesis, which is about children’s participation rather than discourse. In order to overcome the difficulties I selected the
understandings of discourse I found most relevant to analysis of data produced within this research.

Mills (1997) summarised three uses of the term discourse as used by Foucault. Firstly there was the broad and more general definition of discourse as all utterances or texts that have meaning. The second usage was about discourses as groups of utterances that have coherence, such as a discourse of femininity or imperialism. The third use is the most relevant for my research and involves the idea of a regulated practice where the concern is with the rules and structures which produce particular utterances and texts thereby focusing attention on the rule-governed nature of discourse. Another view of discourse which falls within this broad remit is to view it as the analysis of specific ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and where meaning is given to physical and social realities (Hajer, 1997). This is a broad Foucauldian idea of discourse, which is similar to Mills above.

Potter and Wetherell (1987), who are not Foucauldian, produced an alternative and wider definition of discourse involving all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and all written texts. They talked about ‘interpretive repertoires’ which they defined as ‘a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987 p138). They use the concept of interpretive repertoires rather than discourses to capture the sense of active agency within the construction of texts and utterances from a set of cultural resources. ‘In discourse analytical terms, they are the ‘building blocks of conversation’, a range of linguistic resources that can be drawn upon and utilised in the course of everyday social interaction’ (Edley, 2001, p198). Subject positions are not fixed and stable
in this perspective, rather they change over time and people sometimes occupy a subject position for a short space of time as well as combining different subject positions.

The Potter and Wetherell understanding of the transient and dynamic nature of subject positions and human agency is useful for my research. One of the criticisms of Foucault’s work was his tendency to treat people as passive victims rather than active agents within discourse. Smith (1990) has argued, for example, that the concept of discourse has some of the same limitations as structuralism in displacing the subject. This is important in relation to my research where I am viewing children as active and dynamic subjects. This involves an optimistic view of the subject who actively engages with discourses, and in doing so sometimes produces, reproduces and transforms them. Smith, like a number of theorists working within feminist and neo-Marxist discourse analytic perspectives, has developed an approach which makes the political, negotiated, intertextual and dynamic nature of discourses more explicit (Mills, 1997; Lemke, 1995 and Pratt, 1992).

Some discourse theorists take an extreme cultural relativist view emphasising disintegration, fragmentation and meaninglessness. Rosenau (1992) termed this ‘sceptical postmodernism’. The emphasis here is on the idea that there is no truth so all that is left is a play on words and meaning. Some have called this the ‘strong’ or ‘hard’ form of postmodernism where the subject is merely another position in language (Squires, 1993). In contrast to this, the ‘affirmative’, ‘resistance’, ‘soft’ or ‘weak’ strand of postmodernism emphasises instead the way discursive practices operate, are embedded and the social effects of discourse.

Post-structuralism has been significant in constructing alternative, democratic, emancipatory models of social welfare (for example see Mills, 1997; Lemke, 1995; Bacchi, 1999; Burr,
1995). These theorists suggest that there is a practical use of discourse theory for practitioners, service-users and policy makers for example.

Most discourse theorists would agree that discourses are socially embedded within organisational practices, policies and legislation, for example. Social embeddedness turns our attention to the consequences of discourses. Foucault used 'the notion of discourse as a framework of meanings which are historically produced in a particular culture at a particular time. Discourses or discursive practices, for Foucault, have profound effects, and it is the effects of the discourses that matter' (Watson, 2000, p70). Within my research discourses are viewed as having six key characteristics (following Gewirtz, 2000a).

Firstly I see language as actively constructing social reality and I understand it as a social practice that has social effects. I will elaborate on this point about language in the next section of the chapter. Secondly, I used pre-existing knowledge about discourses to make sense of policy and interview texts about children and participation.

Thirdly, discourses are organised around the principle of intertextuality referring to the way we draw on other texts to make sense of the one we are reading. Fairclough (2001) makes use of the idea of intertextuality saying that ‘any text is a link in a chain of texts, reacting to, drawing in, and transforming other texts’ (Fairclough, 2001, p233). Lemke suggests that each community has its own system of intertextuality, its own preferred discourses, and its own way of deciding which texts should be read in the context of which others (Lemke, 1995). Lemke draws attention to the way we read texts in relation to others although this position was criticised for appearing to suggest that there were hard boundaries around ‘discursive communities’. The important point that Lemke reminds us about is that each text inevitably
contains traces of other texts. Sometimes this borrowing or reworking from other texts will be made explicit and sometimes they are implicit, unacknowledged and unintended echoes that shape, influence or affect the way the text is understood and constructed. This understanding of texts has been important in my reading and analysis of the policy texts within the later chapters.

Fourthly different social contexts give rise to different discursive practices. Discursive practices not only affect and shape the social context they emerge from, but also the other way around too. For example, within social policy frameworks, the connections between methodological approaches to studying poverty and the interventions by health, social welfare institutions and social security agencies are one illustration. An understanding of explanatory frameworks for poverty therefore gives rise to particular discursive practices.

Fifthly the notion of exclusionary practices is a way of understanding how discourse privilege certain forms of practices and understanding of social problems over others. Certain categories of subject or groups can be rendered invisible while others are made visible. Similarly discourses can normalise certain sets of relations or ways of behaving and organising families, for example, while constructing other ways of being a family pathological or deviant.

The sixth characteristic of discourses concerns their social effects. Discourses are viewed as mapping out particular subject positions and shaping not only how we made sense of the world but also how we constructed our own identities and subjectivities. Burr (1995) identifies how once we take up a particular subject position within discourse, we have available to us a particular set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking and self-narratives which we take on as our own. In this way we develop a sense of belonging and attachment to particular
subject positions. We develop a sense of what is appropriate and right for us to do based on our occupation of these subject positions within discourse.

Finally, in this study, I am examining the co-existence of multiple discourses in a particular site where they compete and overlap with one another in complex ways. Participation of children is a field of policy and practice shaped by the intersection of legal, professional and scientific discourses.

The discussion above outlines some of the characteristics of discourses which link to later analysis within the substantive chapters where I will make the link between discourses and their consequences in relation to children. The points above show the ways that discourses are constitutive and bring about effects, produce and reproduce different categories of people as well as constructing different ways of thinking and behaving.

2.4: The Role of Language

The role of language is central to all the perspectives discussed and utilised in my research. In particular post-structuralism, feminism and social constructionism all highlighted the importance of language. Similarly for the NSMs, struggles and contestations over language became significant.

Within the post-structuralist framework various writers were drawing on the earlier work of structural linguists and semiology. Briefly, Saussure (1916) argued that meanings represented by words were the result of an internal relation between the signified (idea or object) and the
signifier (spoken or written word) and this led to an understanding of language as relational.

This work represented a significant shift in thinking away from viewing difference, for example, as intrinsic and natural and towards the social and relational aspects of language and meaning.

Critical linguistics is a description of the combination of analytical tools derived from discourse theory and analysis, which emphasised the practical ways of analysing texts. The focus here was on the details of structure and language within texts. Attention was paid to the way experiences were ‘lexicalized’ or described in words; at the syntactic style (Van Dijk, 2001; Fowler and Gunther Kress, 1979; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Belsey, 1980, Eagleton, 1983). These theorists focussed on the way that vocabulary was used ideologically to categorise people or groups in specific ways. Critical linguistic theorists therefore helped to identify the linguistic or rhetorical manoeuvres within texts. Critical discourse analysts were interested in examining the construction of sentences, the choice of vocabulary and the construction of the subject in particular ways, often specifically in relation to inequalities and social divisions. The interest for Van Dijk (2001) for example, was to focus on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of relations of dominance and inequality.

Speech act theory (Austin, 1962) emphasised the performative dimensions of speech and ‘stories’. Generally within narrative analysis less emphasis was given to motives and more to the effects of ‘stories’. It was possible to examine the ways different genres of storytelling drew on pre-existing narratives or made connections to ‘discourse registers’. This involved the connections between utterances in texts and wider discourses. One way to understand this is to think of the way a phrase or word can sometimes conjure up something, or situate and place a piece of text within a wider theoretical tradition or framework. These registers were a
way of drawing upon readers’ pre-existing knowledge or conceptions, such as therapy, social work, pre-conceptions about ‘race’ or difference, ‘children’ and so forth. It is important to note how powerful discourse registers can be but also how they are also resisted, refused, challenged and occasionally backfire.

Foucault traced the networks and operations of discursive power that brought into being ‘the criminal’, ‘the homosexual’, ‘the lunatic’ and so forth. Derrida (1976) similarly utilised this framework to develop the work of Saussure and show how the relational quality of meanings made them ‘slippery’ or not settled in meaning or fixed. Derrida’s deconstruction of texts helped to reveal the ways they carry unstable, ambiguous and relational meanings and hence cannot contain ‘truths’. He was interested in the way that signs can also refer to what is absent. His work led to an understanding of the way texts carry ‘traces’ of meanings and ideologies or discourses, some of which they seek to reject or replace. Derrida used the French meaning of ‘trace’ which carries a sense of footprints, tracks and imprints (Sarup, 1993).

Lacan (1977) similarly placed emphasis on language to deepen understanding of the psychic and symbolic processes where subjects were formed. For Lacan the subject was formed in and through the symbolic as well as in language. Lacan’s main concern was with the psychoanalytic implications of this for the individual. He gave prominence to the centrality of difference in the subject formation of ‘the other’. The concept of ‘the other’ is important within discourse analysis as it alerts us to the marginalised excluded subordinated category of ‘other’ used to identify particular groups or individuals, who fall outside of the non-problematic, undefined, normative and dominant groupings (Saraga, 1998b). Both Lacan and Foucault point to the double meaning of ‘subject’ as in being ‘subject to’ and ‘subject of’.
Within the later chapters these themes and concepts are significant in interrogating the texts in relation to children.

Fairclough (1992) argues that ‘text producers’ actively set up cohesive relations of particular sorts. Cohesion is viewed in dynamic terms in his framework; readers are recruited to accept the credibility of the version of reality established within the text and this is the ideological work of the text. When viewed in this way, the texts in my research are implicated in such ideological work. Hastings (1998) argues that the distinction can be made between constructionist and Foucauldian accounts. In constructionist accounts language can be made to perform ideological work by (constrained) agents who are involved in negotiating a complex web of social, cultural and historical relations. Whereas Foucauldian analysis has been criticised by Fairclough, among others, for the conception of language as driven by, shaped by and reflective of, power (Fairclough, 1992, Hastings, 1998, Lemke, 1995). Fairclough argues that ‘people make choices about the design and structure of their clauses which amount to choices about how to signify (and construct) knowledge and belief’ (Fairclough, 1992, p77). In his later work Fairclough (2001) talks about critical discourse analysis as involving texts, interactions and semiotic practices as well as social theory. ‘It seeks to discern connections between language and other elements in social life which are often quite opaque’ (Fairclough 2001, p230). Critical discourse theory is significant to this research in the way that it gives a sense of language as constructive as well as constructed and the sense of the practices of making meaning. Critical discourse analysis has been significant in analysing specific sites of welfare practice such as housing (Marston, 2004), the environment (Hastings, 1998) or central government Green Papers (Fairclough, 2001).
Despite their slightly different emphases and nuances, what these approaches show is that the social policy process can be investigated in a linguistically sensitive manner to enrich our understandings of the discourses which underpin social policies. The close attention to the detail, lexis (language, terms and expressions) and narrative of texts can reveal how discourses are enacted, reproduced, sustained and modified within them. It can also show how subjects are constructed within texts as agents.

To summarise, within my research it is the effects or consequences of discourse that I am most interested. An understanding of discourse as a way of organising social knowledge is helpful in that it assists us viewing the production, reproduction and reconstitution of social knowledge. The way discourses become embedded within institutions is of specific relevance here because of the way it takes discourse beyond the level of language and narrative and into the policy arena. Discourses at this level are also concerned with relations of power between individuals, groups and institutions. It is this aspect that is so significant within the analysis of the texts in later chapters.

3.0: Social Constructionism

Social constructionism was formed out of a number of different strands which were developed since the 1960s and should be viewed within the broad framework of post-structuralism discussed above. Social constructionism was a response to earlier structuralist functionalist approaches that saw social problems as readily identifiable and needing resolution. The first strand came out of the methodological tradition of symbolic interactionism and included an interest in the process of ‘labelling’ or how some behaviours or groups of people become
marked out as ‘problems’ requiring intervention (Becker, 1967, Becker et al, 1990). The second strand was developed out of the phenomenological tradition and identified constructions as a form of social energy saving device, a kind of shorthand for understanding roles and relationships (Berger and Luckman, 1967). The third strand came from the tradition of ethnomethodology and continued to shift the focus of analysis away from understanding social problems as objective conditions and towards viewing them instead as the result of interpretive processes (Kitsuse and Spector, 1977). The extent to which social problems and public policy are viewed as competing framings has generated considerable debate. On the one hand there are ‘strict constructionists’ who argue that social construction never leaves language (see for example, Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993) and on the other ‘contextual constructionists’ who remain focused on the claims making process while acknowledging some assumptions about social contexts and problems (see for example, Best, 1989). Although each had a different emphasis and focus, what these three strands have in common is that they all identified language as central to shaping how we define, think of and identify social problems.

Bacchi (1999) developed a feminist social constructionist perspective. She argued that viewing social problems and policy simply as competing framings, constructions or representations was a form of pluralism that supported the status quo. She suggested that the assumption in much strict constructionist literature that all legitimate claims would be heard and that the system is open to new claims was over-optimistic and naïve. Following Becker (1967), Bacchi developed the ‘What’s the Problem? Approach’ which started with deconstructing the competing claims about social problems but not limiting the analysis to only those claims which are articulated. This approach is useful in this research because it
helps discover absences and silences within the constitution of social problems. She also considered how the organisation of power, knowledge and discourse precluded the conceptualisation and expression of some social problem claims and thus showed that exclusionary practices were discursive at root and had consequences that were ‘real’, rather than merely rhetorical.

We have discussed how post-structuralist analysis has emphasised the fluidity and polyvalence of social arrangements as well as how this was reworked to acknowledge how some constructions became solidified, weighty and massive and some norms become embedded as ‘truths and ‘common sense’ (Clarke in Carter, 1998). Developing Gramsci’s (1971) geological metaphors Clarke argued for a cultural geology, involving ideas of sedimented deposits and traces, which assist in recovering a sense of solidity by acknowledging different densities of constructions. This view produces a richer, multi-faceted approach to social policy which redresses some of the tendency to ‘weightlessness’ sometimes produced by social constructionism.

Social constructionism helps us consider the way some social ills and troubles fail to be defined as ‘social problems’ or only achieve the status of a problem at certain times whereas others quickly acquire the status of ‘social problems’ (Edelman, 1988). Similarly the argumentative discourses developed by Hajer (1997) focused on how language was used to advance and legitimise selective accounts. Again this takes us beyond acknowledging that social problems are socially constructed and into understanding the possible ways particular constructions of social problems are used for particular purposes. In doing this instrumentality is highlighted and constructions have a sense of weighting. A relevant example for this
research is the issue of child abuse, which received varying degrees of attention at different
times historically. In the 1970s the main concerns were about the physical abuse of children.
In the 1980s concern shifted towards sexual abuse of children within their own families and
communities. During the 1990s concern shifted again towards institutional abuse of children
in residential and foster care. The Inquiry Reports reflected these shifting concerns (London

Clarke and Cochrane (1998) developed a similar approach to analyse the ways social
constructions of disability, ‘race’ or sexuality for example were contested. The language used
to describe and define social problems was viewed as a site of struggle. Similarly the
explanations used to understand causation and the proposed solutions of social problems were
viewed as sites of intense struggle in which power relations were acted out. ‘Systematic
scepticism’ was used to unravel the competing perspectives attempting to make claims and
establish themselves as ‘true’. The idea of making the familiar strange (Fendler, 2001; Moss
and Petrie, 2004) has been used to problematise concepts such as ‘the child’, child
development or other truth claims as constructed, contestable and contingent. In common
with other post-structuralist approaches social constructionist approaches were critical of
essentialism.

Social constructionism was increasingly influential in the 1990s and 2000s within social
sciences and in relation to my research, in the fields of social policy and childhood studies.
This shift emphasised diversity, so rather than ‘the child’ or ‘childhood’ as essential and
universal concepts there was growing acknowledgement of many childhoods, which may
relate to specific temporal or spatial contexts. Whilst childhood as a biological fact was
acknowledged, the significance and implications of this was the subject of intense debate. Increasingly attention was focused on the understanding of childhood as socially constructed.

This perspective has been significant and has led me to critically question approaches, perspectives or policies about children, which fall back on essentialising assumptions or have them embedded within their analytic framework. Children are viewed within my research as active subjects within a sphere of complex and actively negotiated social relations. Images of what children are, can be and should be are multi-faceted, shifting and constantly renegotiated. This idea of imagery of children is explored further in Chapter 5.

Social constructionism can be applied to analysis of public and social policy and practices. Social constructionism also helps expose personal subjectivities and subject positions such as in how people view themselves and others, and understand their experiences and choices. A significant aspect of the consequences of social constructions is that of the extent to which people are included, excluded or situated in the more complex subject position of ‘subordinate inclusion’ from a range of social relationships and activities or from imaginary groupings such as ‘the nation’ (Lewis, 1998). Here we see that exclusion arises not only from structural inequalities such as those produced by ‘race’, gender, disability and class, for example, but also from processes of representation that are viewed as ‘chains of meanings and associations which are attached to particular places, events, acts or people’ (Lewis, 1998a, p103). These understandings go beyond the structural and into the representational; the way things are talked about and described. This arena beyond what is ‘knowable’ and ‘sayable’ and its consequences is the area that has been most significant in relation to my research.
Second-wave feminism developed in the 1960s and, it could be argued, created the conditions for the development of post-structuralist approaches outlined above. Here I am interested in feminism as a theoretical perspective which grew out of a movement. The interplay between feminism and post-structuralism is complex. Within this research I am less concerned with the complexity of the feminist movement and its history; instead I am focusing on the particular aspects which are relevant to the study of children and participation in welfare services.

Feminist scholars have long exposed the fictional unities of ‘the family’ and the ideological and material consequences of the public-private divide. A rethinking of the positioning of women in relation to welfare, politics, the family and public life has led to a shift in the conceptual boundaries between public and private, including an acknowledgement of how slippery and fragile these boundaries can be. During the 1970s women began to challenge the basis of welfare, including their health care during childbirth (see Oakley, 1976; and later Savage, 1986), contraception, fertility treatment, abortion campaigns (see Rowbotham, 1977, for example). Further analysis involved criticism of the lack of provision of childcare and welfare benefits. Inequalities in housework and the division of caring responsibilities were challenged (see for example Oakley, 1974, Gavron, 1976). Feminist critics pointed out the relationship between women’s economic dependence and poverty (Lister, 1992; Graham, 1991; Pahl, 1989). They highlighted how the family was a site of unequal distribution of the family’s resources, resulting in the poverty of women being made invisible within some families. The normative idea that ‘women’ were homogenised as a group and assumed to be
‘naturally’ inferior to men, better homemakers, more caring than men and so forth came under fire. Women also campaigned about domestic violence and rape, making visible some of the previously invisible aspects of family life and relationships for some women through campaigns and voluntary organisations like Rape Crisis and Women’s Aid.

Importantly feminism also influenced the constructed and discursive view of ‘women’ as subjects. This included challenges against universalism of ‘women’. Language became the site of intense contestation for feminists (Spender, 1980, 1982, 1985). Early feminist approaches were specifically concerned with gender inequality and were later criticised for not acknowledging how other dimensions of inequalities, such as ‘race’ and class intersected with gender (Davis, 1982; Ramazanoglu, 1990). Criticisms also raged about the way ‘women’ were being universalised within the women’s movement as well as outside it. The idea of sisterhood as a universal alliance of women came under intense scrutiny for the way it obscured differences between women. As well as challenging universalism later feminism developed a critique of essentialism.

More recent analysis challenged traditional conceptions of citizenship on the basis of age. This included challenges from feminists in the late 1990s who argued that children were marginalised despite their proven capacity for responsibilities which were part of citizenship. The example of young carers is often cited as children and young people are shown to be capable of taking responsibility for the care of a parent, grandparent or carer (Lister, 1997; Roche, 1999; Fink, 2001).

Within this research feminism is viewed as a key intellectual current providing a critique of ‘the natural’. It also provided a lens for problematising and understanding inequalities within
families. For children, inequality within families has often been a lived experience. Feminism gave credibility to the personal stories and narratives of women and children within families, insisting that the personal was political. Significantly for my research second wave feminism was also about challenging unequal power relations within families and welfare. Within welfare work feminism challenged ‘victim blaming’ within family therapy interventions where it was often assumed that mothers were complicit in abuse or failed to protect their children. Feminists pointed out that gender inequality within families meant that woman and children were more likely to be victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. In relation to child sexual abuse feminists asserted that work with the non-abusing parent (usually the mother) was the way to ensure protection for the child (Saraga, 1993; Kelly et al, 1991; MacLeod and Saraga, 1988). These challenges and contestations were important in shaping intervention, policy and procedures in work with families during the 1980s. The Cleveland Inquiry (HMSO, 1988) led to a retrenchment of these policies as it was viewed that social workers had been too quick to intervene and identify sexual abuse within families. The contestations about the silencing of issues of sexual abuse were intense (see Campbell, 1988).

5.0: New Social Movements (NSMs)

As outlined earlier the developments in social theory outlined so far in this chapter had their counterparts in the theorising of welfare and politics. During the 1980s and 1990s the NSMs challenged the conception of citizenship developed by Marshall during the 1950s (Marshall, 1950, 1963). Marshall’s conception of expanding citizenship in the post-war years can be viewed as part of the post-war settlement. Briefly, the embedded assumption enshrined within the post-war welfare state was that of the universal white male able-bodied breadwinner and
an expectation of redistribution. The settlement around family, class and nation marked the
forging of a new identity in a reconstructed national community. A universal and familialised
system of health, education and income maintenance was established which aimed to provide
‘cradle to grave’ social protection for its citizens. Marshall’s post-war welfare settlement,
however, also concealed less egalitarian assumptions which set up a series of exclusions. This
model was significantly challenged because of the exclusions it created such as those around
gender, ‘race’ and disability. Children were also excluded from any of the earlier conceptions
of citizenship which were premised upon adult male citizens and their dependants.

In general, the NSMs were viewed as operating in four main areas of democratic movements
concerned with political rights; labour movements; ecological movements and peace
movements (Giddens, 1991). They were viewed as emerging from the collapse of the old
industrial order of capitalist societies in the West (Touraine, 1981). Although they represented
diverse constituencies they were viewed as articulating a new social, cultural and political
vision as they contested the basis of inequalities created from social divisions that were wider
than those arising from economic divisions in society.

Martin (2001) argued that NSMs raised issues about redistribution, material conditions and
recognition to varying degrees. He also reminded us that the term NSM was misleading since
movements around ‘race’ and gender have a long history and as such are not ‘new’. In relation
to social welfare, the NSMs are different in that they represent a loose political alliance (rather
than a theoretical perspective) of feminism, disability groups and anti-racist organisations,
who organised as groups of people around a ‘we’ involving a shared identity. Describing the
NSMs in this way should not understate the differences between some of the organisations and
groups as well as the conflict within the movements. This had parallels in feminist theorising
where the idea of sisterhood among women was criticised for the way it obscured differences and inequalities between women based on social divisions such as class, race or disability (Ramazanoglu, 1990). The convergence of some of these intellectual, political and social challenges to the orthodoxy of social policy frameworks and the social relations of welfare resulted in a rethinking of social policy which was disruptive of some of the earlier positivist meta-narratives and essentialist ways of theorising welfare (Lewis, 2000c). A range of new political constituencies created new understandings and claims during the period from the 1970s onwards. Discursive space was opened up where new forms of advocacy and democratic participation were promoted. These understandings and challenges emerged, in particular, from the formation of solidarities around identities and social divisions such as class, gender, ‘race’, sexuality and disability. The idea of age as a social division emerged around both the children’s rights movement and organisations such as Age Concern campaigning on behalf of older people.

The perspectives of the NSMs together represented a set of arguments and/or demands, some of which have since been variously incorporated and appropriated, in various ways, sometimes problematically, by social and welfare agencies as well as by New Labour in the late 1990s. An understanding of these challenges as well as the possibilities they created for further claims to be made about who was included and excluded or marginalised within welfare is essential here in understanding the space that was created for the voice of the child to be heard. The key arguments were about exclusion and marginalisation on the basis of gender, ‘race’, disability and sexuality (Lewis, 1998; Hughes, 1998; Saraga, 1998b). Significantly for my research, momentum was being gained within the children’s rights lobbies and movements who were running parallel to these developments and debates.
5.1: Finding ‘Voice’

One of the particular features of the NSMs was an expression of individuals and collectivities finding ‘voice’. The idea of ‘voice’ emerged from the 1960s civil rights movement, the New Left and feminism in the 1970s and the NSMs in the 1980s. The concept of ‘voice’ was significant as it exemplified the process of change by argument and protest. There are different aspects of ‘voice’ to explore here. One of the issues was about the authenticity of particular ‘voices’ and this led to a focus on issues of representation. This was particularly contested around gender, ‘race’ and disability, for example. Secondly there was the idea that people have ‘voices’ but are not always heard. The feminist and anti-racist movements can be viewed as examples of ‘voice’ being present but not always heard in terms of policy and legislation.

Thirdly there is the idea that people do not have ‘voice’ so use other symbolic forms to demonstrate. The idea of being ‘lost for words’ is about experiencing feelings and emotions that we have no way of symbolising or expressing (Iris Marion Young, 1996). For the young person in a care home this feeling of being ‘lost for words’ is common, in formal meetings, for example. Some people can find no words or expression and have to speak to the pain through actions or their body. An example of this is when young people self-harm by cutting their bodies and talk of this as a form of release of pain. This explosive and destructive pain is one that most back away from whereas for care professionals this is part of their everyday experience. In my research I am interested to know the consequences for professionals involved in listening to these expressions of pain, anger, frustration, hurt and distress of children and this is discussed further within chapter 6.
Fourthly ‘voice’ or experiences are sometimes appropriated and translated by others who have legitimate voices. Croft and Beresford (1998) have noted that one of the paradoxes of the post-structural turn in social policy is the way in which the experiences of services users are reinterpreted and restructured in academic debate so that service users find themselves represented in another’s privileged speech. One of the features of the NSMs is the way it has attempted to incorporate service-user movements and perspectives.

For bell hooks coming to voice is an act of resistance and is about finding words for experiences (Hooks, 1989). One of the ways we can see that oppression works is by denying people access to the words that would give meaning and expression to their experiences. Hooks argued that most people writing about pain and domination are distanced from the pain, the woundedness and the ugliness. In this way it becomes a subject or a discourse whereas ‘true’ resistance involves confronting pain and wanting to do something to change it. For bell hooks any emancipatory project must give vent and be in touch with the pain, the rage and the anguish of the excluded and the fear and despair of the vulnerable must be acknowledged and faced.

Within my research I am interested in analysing the ‘voices’ of professionals such as children’s rights officers, policy makers and academics. Furthermore I am also interested in the way that the ‘voices’ of children are heard or represented within the policy texts.

6.0: Psychoanalytic Perspectives in Social Policy

I added the psychoanalytic lens to the theoretical orientation of the research later in the research process. It became relevant because once I started to analyse the data it became clear
that I needed to explore the way professionals in organisations behave as embodied and psychic subjects who are actively involved in constructing and negotiating within their organisations. I am interested in the emotional labour involved in performing participation. The psychoanalytic perspective provided me with an opportunity to explore the affective aspects of welfare organisations unavailable within the earlier perspectives. I have used it in my research to help understand the ways social care professionals suppress, avoid, manage or negotiate a variety of complex emotions within participation work with children. I argue that there are various mechanisms involved in this negotiation relating to the different organisational and occupational structures as well as differences in the way individual professionals negotiate the emotional aspects of their work. This is part of a move away from what has been described as the over-socialised view of the subject within social constructionism and towards recognition of affective as well as cognitive aspects of discourse (Hoggett, 2000; Froggett, 2002; Shilling, 1997).

Questions arise as to why ‘emotions’ might be constructed as a problem that needs to be contained and managed by various organisations and occupational groupings. The emotional can be viewed as problematic to managerial, procedural and outcomes driven organisations where emotionality leads to claims of loss of productivity or effectiveness. Emotions are also viewed as weak/problematic in organisations which value empiricism, measurable and quantifiable results. The affective aspect of organisations is more difficult to quantify and measure. I argue that within social care there is ambivalence about the emotional because on the one hand social work was influenced heavily by psychoanalytic perspectives where affect became the object of intervention. Empathy with service users is also valued which can be argued to be a way that emotionality is valued. On the other hand service users are often constructed as being ‘emotional’ but professionals are viewed as ‘leaky’ or weak if they
display too much emotion. Visible emotions by professionals can be viewed as a sign that the situation is out of control, unmanageable or risky, either on an individual level or within the organisation or team. Containment of emotions is valued in organisations such as social work. Furthermore the importance of containing anxiety to allow for creative imaginative work environments and relationships is established within social work.

The demise of psychoanalytic perspectives in professional training has been noted and viewed as a retreat from the emotional aspects of the work (Froggett, 2002). In my research I want to go beyond this sense of loss at the retreat from the psychoanalytic perspective. I would firstly wish to acknowledge how during the 1970s and 1980s the radical social work movement challenged the psychoanalytic and individualistic framework for social work training and practice (Brake and Bailey, 1980, Corrigan and Leonard, 1978, Langan and Lee, 1989). This led to the destabilising that Froggett is referring to above where the psychoanalytic was retreated from. Secondly I argue that what I will term the second wave psychoanalytic, is useful in examining the institutions of welfare and professional relations rather than providing insights and explanatory frameworks for individual ‘clients’ as in the earlier versions. It is in this context that I argue that the reformulation of the psychoanalytic in the late 1990s adds another significant lens within which to read and interpret the texts from my research.

The work of Menzies Lyth carried out in the 1950s has been influential in this field of enquiry. Menzies Lyth conducted empirical research into nursing practices within a general teaching hospital in London during the 1950s (Menzies Lyth, 1960; Menzies Lyth, 1988). Her analysis suggested that socially structured defence systems were generated through the development of methods whereby practitioners avoided psychic experiences of anxiety, guilt, and uncertainty. These defence mechanisms served the purpose of creating distance between practitioner and
the ‘patient/client’. The research described how nurses avoided anxiety through the organisation of nurse and service user relations. The research showed how emotional contact between nurses and patients was avoided. Patients were depersonalised alongside active encouragement of professional detachment. Decision-making and delegation structures were such that individual nurses felt no attachment to individual patients or to the organisation. This study helped to show how the organisational environment can either contain and process aggression and anxiety, offer defence structures for it such as procedure and routine, or reinforce it through blaming systems. Although this work has been criticised more recently for neglecting the way ‘race’ and gender for example, affected nursing practice (Gunaratnam, 2001) it was nonetheless important in providing an early attempt to acknowledge and understand the way that welfare organisations and professionals within them actively avoided, constrained, repressed and deflected emotionality within welfare organisations.

If we accept the idea that the unconscious will play a role within the life of individuals as they seek to avoid anxiety in a variety of ways then it follows that we must also acknowledge the role of emotionality within organisations. The task is to unlock and understand the ways in which the complex dynamics of anxiety and emotionality are played through within organisations. The psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein (1975) has been important and the insights that follow from her work have been helpful within my research. Klein reflected upon how the self was organised with regard to unconscious defences against anxiety. By observing infants she noticed that the first and most fundamental defence mechanism was the process of ‘splitting’. She saw that the process of repressing by ‘splitting’ and marking off was the way individuals defended themselves against anxiety. This ‘splitting’ involved identification of people as good/bad, loved/hated, and positive/negative and worked as a defence against anxiety. She argued that ‘splitting’ created a kind of paranoid schizoid
position which worked as a way of avoiding aspects of the self (the ‘object’) and others which caused pain, anger, fear or hatred. It acts to keep the phantasy of the ‘good’ uncontaminated by the ‘bad’. This splitting remains a useful defence mechanism during times of crisis or turmoil.

In my research this is helpful because ‘splitting’ can be viewed as part of a wider framework of possible defence mechanisms that have developed within welfare organisations. These processes are neither conscious nor rational but for Kleinians these anxieties affect and come into play within all interpersonal relations. For Klein the route out of this state of ‘splitting’ and avoidance was through the process of integration. This meant acknowledgement and acceptance that the self and others contain ‘good’ and ‘bad’, positive and negative and that these can be held and contained within oneself or an object. For Froggett (2002) it is this state of mind which when linked with other cultural material creates polarised representations of reality into good/bad, black/white, male/female. This then gives rise to the distortions of thought and negative discriminations of sexism, racism and homophobia for example, where despised characteristics are located within different ‘others’.

The Kleinian framework deepens our understanding of how these processes of ‘splitting’ become a way of negotiating the external world, especially when it is threatening or difficult. This brief summary of the work of Klein together with the earlier research of Menzies Lyth illustrates the way the psychoanalytic lens leads to further insights into the way organisations and professionals deal with the emotional aspects of their work.

6.1: Emotions and participation work with children
In this section I want to explore the specific insights the psychoanalytic lens brings into the analysis of participation work with children in social and welfare contexts. For Hoggett (2000) painful affects become mapped onto the body of the institution and become part of its fabric. Procedures and regulations then come to bear the scars of this suppressed affect. These different anxieties are all negotiated using various mechanisms within different organisations or occupational groupings. Strain and anxiety becomes evident on at least three levels, as discussed below.

Firstly we can see that the institutions of the post-war welfare state, such as the asylums, secure residential units, children’s homes and so on, serve to distance society from the pain and trouble of acknowledging that mental illness, child abuse and so forth exist and then of supporting the individuals who are ill or abused. When viewed in this way the development of welfare institutions can be seen as a means of insulating society from psychically, as well as physically and socially, difficult and dangerous populations. Some of the anxieties of opening up these institutions became evident during the 1980s with the advent of Community Care policies which led to the rehabilitation back into communities for some of these populations. This shift in policy and practices challenged normative held assumptions about the ‘dangerousness’ of those who were previously institutionalised and now housed within communities. Armstrong (1995) identified that there is a general ambivalence towards organisations managing vulnerability and dependency. A tension emerges between on the one hand acknowledging that we all may need support at some time in our lives and on the other delegating our obligations of compassion and care to welfare organisations. Furthermore, when welfare institutions fail to provide care and compassion we respond with moral indignation.
Secondly organisational and professional procedures serve to distance and insulate welfare workers from the difficult and disturbing work they are engaged in. The system of documentation and record writing within welfare has become a way of masking rather than revealing the social relations of welfare. Nurses and social workers for example, frequently complain that they spend more time form filling and reporting than they do providing services. Hoggett (2000) argues that a culture of audit, inspection, quality assurance, performance management and evaluation has become a central feature of welfare services since the 1990s. For Hoggett this form of practice is viewed as a ‘resistor’ and a way of avoiding contact between professionals and service user/patient.

The third area involves avoidance by individual professionals within welfare organisations who seek to defend themselves psychically against stress and distress. In the later chapters I will select some interview extracts to illustrate how this anxiety becomes evident. Froggett (2002) shows how professionalism itself can be used as part of a socially structured defence mechanism. It allows the individual worker, faced with difficult and stressful decisions and work, to disavow her/himself from it and retreat into a routine characterised by a rigid adherence to role.

I argue that despite all the various levels of avoidance and distancing, it does not work on either a societal, organisational or individual professional level. The data discussed in more detail in later chapters evidences the ways that stress, distress and anxieties manifest themselves within participation work with children. These tensions are negotiated and managed in complex ways within social welfare organisations that are unsuccessful in containing the emotions.
According to Hoggett (2000a) a social policy of the emotions would provide a way of theorising agency that is more concrete and embodied than either Foucauldian discourse analysis or conventional social policy traditionally allows. This leads to an acknowledgement that we are all emotional beings and that the body is one site of affect/emotions. Within the Kleinian and object relations tradition of psychotherapy ‘containment’ involves the capacity of the individual or institution, to receive and hold the disorganised or troubling psychic material of another. The holding of this material is viewed as healthy in helping to make it more bearable. Hoggett identifies how the concept of containment can be helpful as the process where potentially explosive thoughts and feelings such as fear, hate, love, envy and resentment can be contained and worked through. If the organisation is unable to perform this function then communication becomes fragmented and polarised.

One of the fundamental contradictions within welfare organisations is that around emotionality. As I argued earlier, part of the rationale and underpinning of the development of welfare services has been that they are represented as sites that deal with, intervene and support people suffering from emotional distress. This distress is usually related to intimate arenas within families and individuals’ personal lives. Within this research the area of childcare, rearing and abuse is often at the core of the services provided. Yet the organisations themselves often develop bureau-professional structures in terms of systems and practice which privilege rationality over emotionality.

The complex dynamics involved in negotiating, understanding, engaging, interpreting and implementing strategies of participation into both policies and practice are discussed within chapters 5 and 6. This ‘felt’ dimension is part of what structures the interpersonal dynamics between staff and service users, in this case children and families, as well as among staff and
between groups of professionals from different organisations who work together on these issues. Fineman (1993) termed this the ‘emotional architecture’ of organisations. Gunaratnam and Lewis (2001) show how attempts to recognise and value difference are mediated through this lens and in the course of this negotiation racialised anger, fear and shame are produced within Social Care organisations, which are premised upon the suppression, regulation and repression of emotions around racism on the part of both practitioners and service users. This creates the ‘defended organisation’ and ‘defended subjects’ and has specific repercussions within everyday racialised practices within social care and welfare. They go on to show how the realm of the emotions can be used productively to overcome the constraints of racialised thinking. These researchers provide a way of re-conceptualising emotional labour through the multiple axes of social difference and inequality.

Throughout the later substantive chapters we will see evidence of the capacity to be unsettled by participation work with children. The development of defences to manage this emotionality is discussed further within Chapter 6 where I use extracts and analysis to illustrate the ways in which participation work with children is often experienced as difficult and stressful emotional work. The theoretical frameworks above provide insights that are useful in reading and interpreting the texts from Social Care organisations and professionals.

7.0: Conclusions

In this chapter I established the analytical frameworks and intellectual currents I have found most useful in analysing the texts about participation of children within specific social care contexts. The discussion of the theoretical orientation has been illustrative of the way that the perspectives are linked, complementary and overlapping as well as competing and
contradictory at times. The points of intersection between post-structuralist, feminist, social
constructionist and psychoanalytic frameworks are the most productive for my research. An
understanding of essentialism, ‘voice’, agency and discourses as contested and unstable has
provided a framework for my analysis of the policy and interview texts. The NSMs were
analysed as a series of movements which emerged out of post-structuralist theorising and add
another lens through which to understand developments within participation and Children’s
Services. The discussion within the analytical chapters makes extensive use of these
perspectives and frameworks to help unravel and interpret the texts.

This destabilisation of the earlier orthodoxies that reigned between the mid 1940s and the
1970s created new tensions and possibilities for thinking about welfare. We saw how issues of
difference, identity, particularity and specificity were placed firmly onto the social policy
agenda. This led to an exploration of categories, practices and relations of welfare that were
previously assumed and taken for granted. This, together with a refusal of essentialism,
created an arena where difference and inequalities could be understood within social welfare.
This involved an active and dynamic engagement with the issues of discourse, post-
structuralism, feminism, psychoanalytic perspectives and with the NSMs within the context of
social welfare. These perspectives combined to widen the terms of the debate beyond the
issues of production, distribution and administration of welfare. The post-structuralist
analyses above have meant that new questions, new forms of analysis and new objects of
enquiry have emerged.

The excitement for my own research is the space the combination of these theoretical
orientations and perspectives create for rethinking specific policies of participation relating to
particular subject positions, such as children who are Looked After or assessed as being at risk of significant harm.
Chapter 2

Contemporary Welfare Contexts for Children’s Services: Framing Discourses of Participation

1.0: Introduction

In this chapter I will build upon the theoretical orientations outlined in chapter 1 by exploring the contemporary welfare contexts and framing discourses for children’s participation. The chapter is divided into five sections. Firstly it analyses the changing management of children’s services and managerialism is analysed as a way of understanding some of the developments within social welfare. Secondly the chapter examines the material context of depleted resources and child poverty for the way they impact upon participation in social welfare contexts. Thirdly the chapter outlines the legislative and policy guidance frameworks for children’s participation. The fourth section involves a shift in that it is not a context but examines the contestations arising from the legal and policy framework. The fifth section examines the contexts of citizenship and children’s rights discourses in relation to children’s participation. The chapter finishes by considering what would be the implications for social welfare policy and practices of viewing children as active and creative moral agents.

2.0: The Changing Management of Children’s Services

Managerialism has been viewed as a discourse that legitimises and extends the ‘right to manage’ and involves competing discourses of ‘how to manage’ (Clarke et al, 2000). The rise of management within public sector and welfare organisations since the late 1980s has been
well evidenced (see for example Clarke et al, 1994; Newman, 1998; Froggett, 2002).

Managerialism developed under Conservative regimes during the 1980s and continued to
develop with the New Labour administrations since 1997. Continuities between Thatcherism
and the New Right through to Blairism and New Labour have resulted in participation along
with ‘community’ and ‘partnership’ being enshrined within social policy legislation and
guidance since the late 1980s. The New Labour government developed their own versions of
these themes and used them to underpin a variety of initiatives.

Clarke and Newman (1998) argue that the notion of ‘modernisation’ was a key rhetorical
figure in the discursive strategy of the third way and became a key distinguishing feature of
the New Labour agenda for welfare. The modernisation of Social Services Departments (SSD)
was partly the Government response to two decades of scandals involving physical and sexual
abuse of children while under the supervision of SSDs. The public and media attention
surrounding each Inquiry (for example see East Sussex County Council, 1975, London
Borough of Brent, 1985; London Borough of Lambeth, 1987; HMSO, 1988) focused attention
on the defects and failings of SSDs. The discourse of failure became deeply embedded within
subsequent guidance and reports (Cochrane, 2000, Langan, 2000). The discourse of failure is
viewed within this thesis as operating at the institutional, group/team and also at personal
levels. Each of these levels is discussed further within this chapter but also in later chapters in
relation to the texts which bear the scars of this discourse.

The rise of an audit and inspection culture within social welfare is well documented (see for
eexample, Clarke, 2003, Pollitt et al, 1999). Bodies such as the Social Services Inspectorate
(SSI), the Audit Commission and more recently the Commission for Social Care Inspection
(CSCI) are vested with joint powers to inspect and scrutinise, evaluate and review the
performance of SSDs. The reviews undertaken by these bodies provided further evidence of the inefficiency, poor services and deep-rooted problems of many SSDs.

The New Labour government constructed a view that the pursuit of ‘excellence’ was made possible by continued scrutiny and criticism. Inspection processes became part of the way the relationship between the public, welfare, the family and the state were reconstructed (Humphrey et al, 1999). ‘Audit’ and ‘inspection’ are mobilised to describe differing organisational practices, performance and processes. Barnes and Prior (1995) argued that performance is difficult to define, measure and compare. They also demonstrated that performance management indicators were rarely used to enable service users to consider alternatives because the highly technical data was difficult to use and understand for anyone outside the organisation. This confirmed earlier research findings that performance information of public services raised more questions than it answered (Stewart and Walsh, 1994). The terrain of performance management information therefore, like other aspects of managerialism was highly contested. Clarke (2003) argued that ‘performance’ was a managerial response developed in the attempt to resolve problems, tensions and contradictions.

The culture of blame and the associated discourse of failure have resulted in the institutions of welfare being fearful and defensive about their services. This together with the continuous process of inspection, audit, performance management, greater accountability and the pursuit of ‘excellence’ and ‘success’ added to the perception of social care as a highly scrutinised environment. One of the consequences of these processes can be that an unfavourable or critical inspection or review results in staff within a team becoming demoralised, defensive
and individuals feeling ‘scapegoated’ for perceived failings. Social workers continued to be criticised for doing nothing as well as for doing the wrong thing (Pinkney, 1998).

2.1: Modernising Social Welfare

The discourse of managerialism was embedded within various reports during the 1990s. The Modernising Social Services White Paper (1998) provides an important example of the way these ideas were embedded within the ‘modernising’ agenda for social care by New Labour.

‘High quality and good value services can only be achieved if there are sound management, information and performance systems in place’ (HMSO, 1998, p108).

In its introduction the White Paper said that the government is determined to tackle the perceived failures of SSDs by arguing firstly that they failed to protect children and vulnerable adults and that abuse was sometimes perpetrated by people who were supposed to provide care. Secondly it was argued that SSDs failed to co-ordinate services with agencies sometimes putting more effort into arguing with one another about responsibility rather than looking after people in need. The third perceived failing was that SSDs failed to provide services appropriate to the person needing care or support, instead providing what suited the service and this was viewed as evidence of inflexibility. Fourthly, it was argued that there was a failure in clarity of role with SSD managers and staff unclear about which services should be provided as well as what standards could reasonably be expected. Fifthly, there was seen to be a lack of consistency in practice and standards across SSDs. Lastly it was argued that SSDs failed to deliver on efficiency and that the joint reviews had highlighted that many authorities could get more for what they spent on social services (HMSO, 1998).
The White Paper acknowledged briefly that there might be reasons for these failings although its proposals assumed that they were the exclusive responsibility of SSDs. Since the early 1970s child protection social workers have been at the centre of a controversy revolving around the relationship between individuals, the state and the family. The White Paper reinforced the demonization of social workers that had followed the Inquiry Reports of the previous three decades.

The White Paper reflected the New Labour view of how to modernise public and welfare services with management as the key agent for delivering improved services. Service standards, performance indicators, monitoring and inspection, best value, pursuit of excellence, audit and accountability became embedded within policy as the strategies for delivering improvement. This can be viewed as part of the general rise in processes and institutions that are concerned with evaluating, monitoring, scrutinising, reviewing and surveilling the performance of public services. The managerialism embedded within the White Paper was further strengthened by the introduction within two years of a series of official documents outlining specific detail for areas of welfare services. For children in care the Quality Protects document and for children in the community there was the Sure Start Programme which offered support to families with young children. Alongside these were various Best Value projects. Together these projects and initiatives represented New Labour’s commitment to modernising welfare services.

2.2: Managing ‘Risk’ and Uncertainty
Changing patterns of risk and uncertainty are part of the wider context within which social work with children and families operates. Beck (1992) argued more widely that a number of features were associated with increased uncertainty including the production of a ‘risk society’ and that attention would inevitably turn towards damage limitation and ways to make safe, regulate, and identify ‘dangerousness’. The idea of ‘risk’ leads to the proliferation of risk assessment and risk management within SSDs. The role of professionals within welfare therefore becomes to identify and manage risk and dangerousness. The difficulty with this is that welfare agencies and professionals are supposed to manage risk and dangerousness within an environment where hardly anyone has faith or trust in them being able to do this. Howe (1992) argued that as audit and inspection became a routine feature of welfare organisations and new systems of regulation were continuously introduced and implemented, the focus became that of making ‘defensible decisions’ rather than the ‘right decisions’. Douglas (1992) argued that refined blaming systems were part of the ‘risk society’ where nothing goes wrong without it being attributed to someone and him/her being held to account. The Inquiry Reports into child abuse during the 1980s were viewed as testimonies to the need to apportion blame to an individual, institution or organisation. Tunstill argued that the discourse of risk dominated the development of childcare policies during the 1980s and 1990s (Tunstill, 1999). During the 1990s institutions such as SSDs and other welfare organisations saw a flourishing of complaints procedures, disciplinary mechanisms and litigation.

3.0: Impoverished Children Meet Impoverished Departments

We have seen that the White Paper (1998) was clear that SSDs needed to change because they had failed to provide efficient, flexible and effective services. The issue of what is an appropriate level of resourcing for social care services was contested and there was no clear
agreement from either government or SSDs. At times of intense scrutiny each blamed the other for lack of resources or for inefficiency and poor management. The issue of ‘management’ critically blurs the implied link between resources and results and brings the promise that organisations could either do better or do ‘more with less’. During the 1980s and 1990s an argument developed that the institutions of care and welfare needed to move beyond systematic, organisational, collective and individual defence against professional anxieties. I will examine some of the arguments which construct an alternative framework to that involved in the discourse of failure above, involving instead a crisis of confidence, loss of morale and a continued crisis in resourcing welfare.

Time was considered one of the important resources in research on children’s participation and decision-making. Thomas and O’Kane (1998) argued that the environment in which social workers work left little space for creative work with children and that effective participation for children meant viewing it as part of a dynamic process, involving explanation, consultation, discussion and negotiation. Effective communication was viewed as key in enabling children to understand and take part. Other factors were honesty, creative use of activities, responding to the child’s agenda, active listening, personal style, ‘serious fun’, personal approach, fairness and partnership. SSDs were viewed as bureaucratic, over-controlling and under resourced. These findings are important because they reassert the view that the process of participation with children is complex and takes time. Resource shortfalls and heavy workloads undermine the individual and organisational capacity to use time in ways which would enhance children’s participation.
Parton (1998) argued that it is largely poor and economically marginalised populations, who make up the ‘client’ group of social care agencies. In 1999 Blair announced his government’s intention to end child poverty within 20 years. For many commentators this was seen variously as bold, blurring and bluff calling or naïve, optimistic or unrealistic (see for example Lister, 1999, Piachaud, 1999). End Child Poverty argue that 3.8 million children in the UK live in poverty, this represents 28% of all children. Since 1999 when the current government pledged to end child poverty 700,000 have been lifted out of poverty but the UK still has one of the worst rates of child poverty in the developed world.

Increased child poverty together with growing recognition of children’s rights prompted a review of anti-poverty strategies. Findings on child poverty are relevant to my research because I argue that poverty inhibits participation and leads to social exclusion, marginalisation and disempowerment of groups most affected. This view is supported by earlier research into the effect of poverty on social exclusion (Alcock, 1993; Cohen and Long, 1998). Oakley (1993) argued that the needs of children cannot be subsumed under those of their family or the community as children are often invisible in policy making so should be considered separately and specifically. A persuasive argument is made within most of the research that tackling poverty for children and their families would be one of the main preconditions for participation in care processes, politics and society.

The arguments above about working, living and raising children in a risk society, the context of economic scarcity and the evidence on child poverty all present alternative views which
challenge those embedded within New Labour modernising agendas. In this section I argue that competing constructions emerge, involving on the one hand, viewing social care as a failing institution requiring modernisation and improved management, or on the other hand, as a difficult and under-resourced arena to work in for few rewards.

4.0: Legal Contexts for Children’s Services

This section will examine the legal frameworks that set the context for children’s participation starting with a discussion of the relevant parts of The Children Act, 1989 (England and Wales) and the UN Convention on The Rights of The Child (CRC). Secondly I will discuss some of the key guidance and policy documents that have interpreted the legislation to social workers and allied professionals involved in work with children. These include Working Together (1991), Patterns and Outcomes (1991) and the Utting Report (1997). Thirdly Quality Protects developed within the Modernising Social Services White Paper, and Every Child Matters Green Paper (2003) will be outlined as they form a central part of the New Labour project for Social Care and work with children in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

I focus on the legal frameworks because they form part of the official context for social and welfare work with children and also part of the essential scaffolding for children’s participation. In the later analytical chapters I will consider the way that this common legislative and guidance context is negotiated across authorities and SSDs and the extent to which the existence of a clear and binding legislative framework produces or does not produce uniformity across the authorities.
4.1: The Children Act, 1989 (England and Wales)

The Children Act, 1989 was introduced after fierce criticism of social work since the early 1970s in the form of Inquiry Reports. There was also a growing unease within social work itself about its role and responsibilities in relation to work with children, and in particular about child protection. One of the key principles of this legislation (as opposed to earlier Acts) was that the interests and welfare of the child should be paramount. It has been argued that it went further than previous legislation in giving children the right to be involved in decisions that affect them, most notably, for this research, within family court proceedings and within social services (Sinclair, 1996).

The Act greatly increases the court’s ability to do what is best for the child. To begin with it contains a checklist of matters which are to be considered in most court hearings about whether to make an order and which order to make, focusing particularly on the needs of the child but also on his own views and on the options available to the court (DOH, 1989, S1.21, p4).

A major concern of the Act was to ensure that children were adequately protected and cared for and it aimed to do this by ensuring that the welfare of the child remained paramount throughout decision-making processes. The paramountcy principle was new in this Act and contained echoes of earlier criticisms of social work following the Jasmine Beckford Inquiry report about the child being ‘lost’ or overlooked in work with families/parents (London Borough of Brent, 1985).
Brandon et al (1998) argued that the Act’s provisions gave children different roles and statuses in relation to participation. This links to the ladder of participation discussed in the introduction to the thesis, although it is being applied specifically to children in relation to the Children Act. Firstly it made some children non-participants as in the case of divorce proceedings where the parents agreed about contact and residence. Secondly they were constructed as information receivers. The Act gave Local Authorities the duty to provide information about their services. Looked After children, for example, were to be provided with information about the outcome of meetings, be involved in developing their own care plans and so on. Thirdly the Act made some children consultees in that their opinion had to be identified, as in the welfare checklist. Generally this was a duty to ‘have regard’ to a child’s views although the weight given to those views would again depend on assessments about their ‘age and understanding’.

Fourthly children were constructed as consenters and given the right to determine the outcome of a decision. For example, children were able to refuse medical or psychiatric examination, assessment or treatment if they were deemed to be Gillick-competent which meant they needed to be assessed by a doctor as having sufficient understanding. This placed the responsibility on the professional to ensure that the value of any assessment or examination was clearly communicated to and understood by, the young person.

Fifthly children were constructed as initiators and could in some circumstances take independent legal action within Family Courts for residence or contact orders. Again they need to be deemed competent and the welfare principle remains paramount. This part of the Act was often misrepresented in the media as children being given the right to divorce their parents. In practice it only offered limited rights to children and has rarely been used.
Lastly children’s participation could be as complainants. SSDs were required to establish and make known by advertising leaflets and so forth the complaints procedures, including an independent representative and in a format which is accessible to all children. SSDs were advised that ‘the complaints procedures established by the responsible authority should be uncomplicated, accessible to those who might wish to use them, understood by all members of staff and should reflect the need for confidentiality at all stages’ (DOH, 1991 s5.36). In addition children were also given access to their own legal representative and the services of a Guardian ad litem which was recognition that children have their own specific views that may be different than that of their parents or families.

The Children Act was viewed by many as a step forward in promoting the participation rights of children and recognising them as independent subjects rather than objects of welfare (Lyon and Parton, 1995). However, the key factors in determining children’s participation within the Act were the age and understanding of the child. This usually meant that professionals mediated children’s participation through assessment of understanding and competence.

The Act was interpreted for practice within nine sets of Guidance issued by the Department of Health in which the principle of children’s participation was fully articulated. Examples included specific detailed guidance on children having a say, for example, in the décor and upkeep of the children’s residential home they lived in and being encouraged to participate in decision-making meetings while they are Looked After. Regulation 7(2) requires that ‘the responsible authority, where they consider it appropriate, should involve the child and his parents in review meetings. The involvement of the child will be subject to his understanding and welfare. The possibility of a child being accompanied to a review meeting by a person
who is able to provide friendly support should be considered’ (DOH, 1991, Volume 4. s1.35).

It is worth noting the term ‘involve the child’ could mean anything or nothing in relation to participation.

The evidence suggested that following the introduction of the Children Act children were increasingly invited to be involved in review meetings while they are Looked After (Sinclair and Grimshaw, 1995). In child protection case conferences it also became increasingly accepted that children should be involved (Lewis, 1992; Corby, Millar and Young, 1992). Questions about the appropriateness of review meetings for participation of children relates to my earlier discussions about levels of participation (Freeman et al, 1996). What was clear, however, was that decisions about age and understanding of children and who decides about their participation remained complex.

The Act was viewed positively by many social workers as a comprehensive and coherent piece of legislation that provided a legal framework for the protection and promotion of the interests and welfare of children. Some went further and argued that it amounted to a ‘children’s charter’ and should be seen as a major step forward in promoting the participation rights of children, favouring an inclusive and democratic style of decision-making, involving children and families (see for example Brandon et al, 1998). Both Fox Harding (1997) and Freeman (1995) agreed, however, that the Act contains a contradictory mix of principles, combining paternalism and partnership with children’s and parents’ rights.

In this study I treat the Children Act as containing some distinctive and significant ambiguities in relation to participation in decision-making for children. On the whole it provided a clear legislative framework for intervention, it also reasserted that children’s ‘needs’ should be
In practice, the construction of children’s ‘needs’, rights and risks were to be negotiated in complex ways, largely by adults. One of the problematic assumptions within the legislation was that children’s position could be safeguarded by a combination of welfare professionals and parents/carers. With the ‘no-order principle’ where an order could only be made when it was clear that it was beneficial to the child, the effect of the earlier criticisms that social workers had misused their powers and been too quick to seek legal orders emerged (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1988). This principle could be viewed as evidence that the parents’ rights perspective was also carried forward within the legislation, in that it challenged the authority of social workers and sought to curtail their powers. The continuing tension between children’s rights and parents’ rights perspectives was therefore reflected and carried within the Children Act. Despite claims therefore that the legislation represented a strengthening of the position of children it did not resolve the dilemma for social workers seeking to strike a delicate balance between promoting the rights of the child and protecting the rights of the parents (Pinkney, 1998).


The CRC was adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and ratified by the UK in December 1991. Although the CRC does not carry the same legal weight as national legislation it is binding on those states that ratify it. It represents more than an expression of good intent, in that it seeks to guide practice in relation to children. It has become a touchstone for research about children and for activism on behalf of children (Editorial, Childhood, 1999). It forms an important part of the legal discourses about participation of children.
The CRC sets out the state’s obligations to children within four broad categories of rights: survival, developmental, protection and participation. Survival rights include ‘the right to life’ as well as basic needs such as health and standard of living and can rightly be regarded as a prerequisite to the other rights. Developmental rights include the fostering and nurturing of the many dimensions of the child, including access to good health, education and social insurance. The child should also have access to the enjoyment of her/his own culture, language and religion. Protection rights include the right to be protected from economic exploitation, illicit use of drugs, sexual and physical abuse and from torture and abduction. The standard of living required by the convention is one that allows for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Importantly the grouping of rights under four categories does not mean they are mutually exclusive. ‘Children are most likely to thrive when societies respect the interrelated nature of their rights; isolating physical survival as a goal constitutes a fundamentally flawed approach’ (Flekkoy et al, 1997, p27).

It is the fourth area of rights within the CRC which is most relevant to my research. The child’s right to participation is new and has been more contested than the other three groups of rights. Increasingly the importance of the CRC within the legal landscape is being acknowledged. Article 12 of the CRC is the most significant in relation to participation:

‘State Parties assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child …’ [The child’s right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child’ (Article 12 (1) United Nations, 1989).
As with the Children Act the reference in Article 12 to age and maturity may be viewed as an escape clause for many professionals who will variously assess the maturity of the child. The treaty acknowledges that other people, such as parent/s and guardians also have rights and also seems to support the idea of the family as the most suitable environment for the growth and well being of the child. The emphasis on age has been viewed as unhelpful as it sets expectations of what children can and cannot do at certain defined ages and as such embodies a linear view of child development, which I will explore in more detail later in this chapter.

The CRC contained an emphasis on welfare and autonomy as well as protection and liberation and is seen as having major significance because it was the first international document to explicitly state that children have a right to ‘voice’ within processes that affect their lives (Freeman 1995). The CRC paved the way for increased participation of children within legal proceedings, such as divorce or separation, as well as in social policy frameworks such as Looked After and child protection arenas. Although the United Kingdom ratified the Convention in 1991, subsequent monitoring of the UK’s performance has been highly critical.

Eekelaar analysed the CRC stressing the connection between childhood and later development into adulthood, arguing for ‘dynamic self-determination’ (Eekelaar, 1992, p43) involving optimally positioning children so that they develop their own perceptions of their well-being as they enter adulthood. Flekkoy (1991), a former Norwegian Ombudsperson for children has pointed out that viewing children as both vulnerable and autonomous is a positive step forward. Some children’s rights activists have viewed the CRC as useful because it provides a means of applying moral pressure to Governments and raises the profile of the arguments in favour of children’s rights. Most would agree, however, that on its own it will not bring about
the dramatic changes which are required to create the possibilities for a politics of recognition which embraces children. Despite compelling and persuasive arguments in support of children’s participation, Lansdown (1995) argued that there was evidence during the 1990s of a backlash against children’s rights, particularly those within the CRC. Children’s participation was viewed as threatening adult hegemony (Hill and Tisdall, 1997).

The next part of the chapter outlines a series of important guidance reports that are relevant to the UK interpretation of participation as enshrined within the Children Act and the CRC.

4.3: Working Together

The Working Together guidelines, introduced in 1991, provided a framework for multi-agency cooperation in child protection and support services (HMSO, 1991a). The guidance stressed the importance of involving children in the child protection process:

‘In relation to any decisions taken, the authority has a duty to ascertain as far as it is practicable his or her wishes and feelings and give due consideration to them, having regard to his or her age and understanding’ (HMSO, 1991a, 6.13 p43).

The report presented participation as unproblematic. The complexity of the assessment and the potential for ambiguity in the role of the key worker were not discussed. Similarly representations of ‘the best interests of the child’ were assumed to be transparent. The other difficulty with multi-agency working is that different professional groupings have different
experience, background, training and perspectives with regard to children and participation. Research showed that health visitors, for example, were most resistant to children’s involvement in child protection meetings, often citing that it would affect their relationship with the child and their family (Calder and Horwath, 2000; Johnson, 1998). This created tensions and difficulties in negotiating participation within multi-agency frameworks. Again these difficulties were absent from the Working Together report.

Working Together was replaced in 1999 by Working together to Safeguard Children (DOH, 1999) which was introduced as part of the Quality Protects programme discussed below. It aimed to take into account the CRC and the European Convention on Human rights. It went further than the 1991 guidance in stating that:

‘Individuals should always be enabled to participate fully in the enquiry process’ S5.35 (DOH, 1999). The report goes on to discuss parents and children’s participation in the process.

‘Exceptionally, a joint enquiries/investigation team may need to speak to a suspected child victim without the knowledge of the parent or carer. Relevant circumstances would include the possibility that a child would be threatened or otherwise coerced into silence; a strong likelihood that important evidence would be destroyed; or that the child in question did not wish the parent to be involved at that stage, and is competent to take that decision’ (DOH, S5.37, 1999).

In this section we see some acknowledgement of complexity of participation being introduced, although the assessment of competence is not outlined fully.
'The child, subject to consideration about age and understanding, should be given the opportunity to attend if s/he wishes’ (DOH, S5.57, 1999). There is acknowledgement that sometimes the family members may be in conflict with one-another and it may be necessary to exclude some from the conference.

Children of sufficient age and understanding often have a clear perception of what needs to be done to ensure their safety and well-being. Listening to children and hearing their messages requires training and special skills, including the ability to win their trust and promote a sense of safety. Most children feel loyalty towards those who care for them, and have difficulty saying anything against them. Many do not wish to share confidences, or may not have the language or concepts to describe what has happened to them. Some may fear reprisals or their removal from home.

Children and young people need to understand the extent and nature of their involvement in decision-making and planning processes. They should be helped to understand how child protection processes work, how they can be involved, and that they can contribute to decisions about their future in accordance with their age and understanding. However, they should understand that ultimately, decisions will be taken in the light of all the available information contributed by themselves, professionals, their parents and other family members, and other significant adults. (DOH, 1999, S7.11-7.22, p77)

What is evident here is the similarity between the earlier report and this one in terms of children’s involvement being mediated by adult professionals, who assess whether a child is competent.
4.4: Patterns and Outcomes

The Patterns and Outcomes Report (DOH, 1991b) examined the issues of placement change for Looked After children and found that placement changes continued to be a serious problem. Changes in placement were sometimes due to crisis admissions or breakdown of placement, but also sometimes for administrative convenience. The negative effects of placement breakdown were acknowledged but the damage created by discontinuity of relationships due to administrative factors and staff changes were viewed as meriting further attention. This is discussed further within Chapter 5 where the texts are analysed to assess the ongoing difficulties with placements.

Interestingly this report focuses on partnership. The Report’s concern was about marginalising parents and carers within social work decision-making. My reading of the report shows that participation by children was still marginalised at this stage. What becomes clear is that working in partnership largely meant partnership with parents rather than children.

The report also focused on the issues around residential and fostering placements of Looked After children and considered various messages from research and their implications for social work within care planning. One of the areas it considered was that sibling relationships merited closer attention because their importance had been insufficiently recognised. The idea within the report was that children fare better when placed with their siblings. Children placed away from home like to be with their siblings although separation is a common experience. When they were separated children were noted to suffer from bereavement, loss, frustration
and bewilderment sometimes years after the separation took place. Siblings who were
separated sometimes experienced this as a punishment. Decisions about whether to place
siblings together or separately were often poorly recorded and sometimes not related to the
sibling relationships but to administrative factors and placement availability. Most worrying
in the light of this practice was the finding that sibling placements in either adoptive or long
term foster care break down less often than when children are separated. The main finding
therefore was that more attention needed to be paid to the role of siblings within placements.
These findings are relevant to chapter 6 where I discuss issues raised about sibling placement
and adoption in more detail.

4.5: The Utting Report

‘People Like Us’, the Report of the Review of the Safeguards for Children Living Away From
Home (DOH, 1997), commonly referred to as the Utting Report, made further
recommendations on the protection of children in residential care, following investigations
into widespread child abuse within children’s residential homes. The summary of the report
says that looking after children would be easier and more effective if we were able to hear and
understand what children tell us. Local authorities were urged to make direct use of the
experience of the children they look after in developing policy, practice and training. This
reinforced earlier calls to involve children further in decision-making about services for them.
Utting also recommended that all authorities should establish a children’s rights service.

One of the clearest and most relevant outcomes of the report for my research was the
establishment of the relationship between abuse and lack of participation. The failure to listen
to the views of children was shown to be an element in the continuation of abusive cultures in residential care. This finding led to renewed vigour in promoting participation.

What is so striking in the implementation of the Act is the patchy way in which provisions bearing on rights have been addressed. One of the most fundamental was the participation of children looked after by the local authority in the periodic reviews of their progress. Nothing appears more reasonable to the Review than young people being consulted about major decisions in their lives and their considered views taken seriously into account (Department of Health, 1997, p109).

Parkin and Green (1997) found that issues of control and containment often took priority over issues of care and protection within residential environments and this in turn means an abusive culture easily takes hold. Within this environment individual identity is undermined and children as well as staff sometimes feel helpless and vulnerable, it also becomes less likely that abuse will be reported. In a parallel inquiry into residential care in Scotland it was noted that care often involved a climate where verbal abuse, bullying, threatening behaviour and intimidation were tolerated (Mitchell, 1997). There are also the contradictory arguments that residential staff feel they are disadvantaged by children who know too much at the same time as emphasising that children having a voice is a good thing (Berridge and Brodie, 1998). Other research indicated that staff were reluctant to encourage and facilitate participation because they felt children should not be allowed to have their own way (Sinclair, 1996). These findings reflect continued ambivalence about and resistance to children’s participation. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the issues lying behind this resistance are about power relationships between children and adults. Staff and women staff in particular, in residential units are generally described as ‘powerless’ (Parkin and Green, 1997). It is possible that this
powerlessness is mirrored in the powerlessness of the children they are caring for. Myers et al (1999) turned the argument around by saying that the implementation of a strong framework of participation would strengthen and empower both children and staff.

The next section interrogates New Labour government responses to the issues of children’s participation. Their policies on children can best be illustrated through the Quality Protects and Every Child Matters policy texts.

4.6: Quality Protects

Quality Protects was launched by the Government in 1998 as the key vehicle for delivering social services for children. It was contained within the broad framework of the Modernising Social Services White Paper (HMSO, 1998). It proposed that improving the quality of services would enhance protection for children. Quality Protects involved a review of services in the context of consultation with children, families, carers and staff. Objective 8 asked Local Authorities to actively involve users and carers in planning services and is the most relevant to this research.

Consistent with the Utting Report recommendations Quality Protects also provided resources to enable SSDs to set up a children’s rights service. The Children’s Rights Officers Association (CROA) together with funding from Nuffield Foundation, the NSPCC and Save the Children initiated a series of seminars and consultancies to promote children’s rights. Following these, SSDs either employed children’s rights professionals themselves or commissioned voluntary organisations like the Children’s Society to set up those services.
Fairclough (2001) in his work on critical discourse analysis (discussed earlier in chapter 1) developed a critique of the Green Paper (HMSO, 1998a) on modernising welfare and described it as being from a promotional rather than a dialogic genre. By this he meant that although the earlier Green Paper was constructed as a consultation and discussion paper, it was more of a one-way communication. The speed at which the Government developed Quality Protects as part of a wider modernising agenda suggests he was right to view it this way. The plans for children were already well underway when the Green Paper was published.

4.7: Every Child Matters

In 2003 the Labour Government launched its consultation paper Every Child Matters (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003). The Green Paper proposed further reorganisation of children’s services in England in response to the Laming Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbie (HMSO, 2003a). The Inquiry had called for greater efficiency within, and better coordination between, services for children. In addition national standards, training, resourcing and local leadership were also called into question and new national and local structures were recommended.

In his foreword to Every Child Matters Tony Blair said the names of abused children whose deaths triggered previous inquiries ‘echoing down the years, are a standing shame to us all’. The Green Paper argued that there were similarities between the findings of previous Inquiries and as a result concluded that the problems were long standing. For the government the threads running through each Inquiry included a failure to intervene early enough to protect the child, poor coordination of services, failure to share information, absence of anyone with a strong sense of accountability, frontline workers coping with staff vacancies, poor
management and lack of effective training. The continuities in relation to the discourse of failure from the Modernising Social Services White Paper discussed earlier are evident.

The report uses a series of declarative sentences to announce reform. These are presented as assertions for future action. Several areas are presented as targets for Government reform and action. These include early intervention (improved communication between agencies, with further proposals for multi-agency working in teams based in family centres or schools), greater accountability and integration (creating the post of director of children’s services including both social and education services and the formation of children’s trusts), workforce reform (review of pay, training and recruitment) and supporting parents and carers (providing further information and advice services as well as compulsory parenting orders to deal with truancy, anti-social behaviour or offending). Fairclough (2001) showed how New Labour used declarative sentences together with an absence of modality such as ‘in our opinion’ or ‘we believe’ and this combination meant that welfare was presented as simple, uncontroversial and the changes required as clear-cut.

At the time of writing the government has introduced the Children’s Bill and legislation is expected to follow in this parliamentary session. The Children’s Bill implemented the main proposals of the Green Paper Every Child Matters. The Children’s Bill was widely criticised nationally and internationally. The proposal for the Commissioner for children in England is particularly controversial because it is viewed as being the weakest commissioner in the UK. England has been slowest to implement this and proposals have moved from having a Children’s Minister to a Children’s Commissioner although controversially the power of investigation which is usually a central part of this role is removed, thereby making it a less powerful role than in other countries. The Children’s Rights Alliance for England argued that
the model being put forward is viewed as so deficient that they could be barred from joining the European Network of Ombudspeople for Children (CRAE, 2003). The Green Paper also proposed the establishment of children’s trusts bringing together children’s services in health, education and social services by 2006iii. The Bill is intended to improve coordination of child protection and introduce a tracking system for all children.

What is also interesting is the way that resource shortfalls and staffing are addressed as an area needing further attention within Every Child Matters, unlike in the Modernising Social Services White Paper.

We need to do more to ensure working with children is seen as an attractive career…[many of those who work with children and young people in vital frontline roles feel undervalued, and in some cases under siege. Problems are most acute in social work, where there is an 11 percent vacancy rate nationally (as high as 40-50 percent in some London boroughs) (HMSO, 2003 p22).

Training and retention of staff is highlighted as an area for improvement. This acknowledgement of a resource context which was largely absent in the White Paper may be the outcome of continued contestation about the crisis of recruitment and retention of staff in social work.

5.0: The contested ‘child’ in legal discourses

Up to now this chapter has focused on the legal, policy and guidance framework for children’s
participation. In this next section I shift the focus to analyse the contestations which arise from these frameworks including the competing constructions of the best interests of the child, different understandings arising from legal frameworks about children’s competence and the issues around representation of and for children. These areas require further unravelling to understand the complexities arising from the legal and policy frameworks. The Children Act and the CRC were generally acknowledged as creating a framework for the increased participation and involvement of children in decision-making about their lives. McLeod argued that the Children Act denied children agency because it assumed they were ‘passively waiting for their wishes and feelings to be elicited and for services to be provided’ (McLeod, 2000, p335). This analysis of law in the structuration of childhood as well as the ways in which practice, policy and procedures construct the child and participation is important within my research.

5.1: ‘The best interests of the child’

The concept of ‘the best interests of the child’ used within the Children Act needs to be problematised in several ways. Flekkoy et al (1997) argued that ‘the best interest of the child’ was a phrase that was widely accepted during the drafting of the CRC, although controversy about who represents the best interests of the child arose. Piper (2000) argued that assumptions based on abstract notions of childhood and fixed ideas about ‘the best interests of the child’ became incorporated into legal knowledge and once this happened the authority of these assumptions became ‘taken for granted’ and acquired the status of ‘truth’.
The legal discourse is difficult to challenge even with new evidence from research, theory or practice. In general it seems that the law has evolved towards a welfare-oriented view of children, where protectionist discourses are dominant. It is important to note, however, that there are exceptions to this view particularly in relation to young offenders.

Within this research ‘the best interests’ of the child are viewed as historically, socially and developmentally variable within given contexts. An illustration of the historical specificity of ‘the best interests of the child’ could be the shifts between protection and support in policy towards children. During the 1990s, official guidance (Social Services Inspectorate, 1996) and academics (Parton, ed. 1997) urged social services to use resources to provide support for children and families. It was argued that resources should be channelled away from protection and towards support and preventive work. Tracing the trajectory of the balance between protection and support back to the 1970s shows how the arguments have shifted between protection and support. During the 1970s preventive work was seen as the most useful way to use resources but this changed following the era of child abuse Inquiry reports during the 1980s where once again protection was emphasised (Pinkney, 1998). What this illustrates is the way that the construction of a policy or intervention as ‘the best interests of the child’ varies historically, within even short periods of time. The legislation and policy do not provide answers to the complexities involved in the debate about the appropriate balance between protection and support.

‘The best interests of the child’ may be socially variable in relation to the various contexts which shape ‘needs’ and interests. One area of controversy is about the relative importance of the child’s interests as opposed to parents’ interests, which may themselves be different. The application and interpretation of ‘the best interests of the child’ within the legislation is not
straightforward and can be used to justify very different actions in different situations or even different outcomes from similar situations.

‘The best interests of the child’ may also be developmentally variable. Of significance here is the way the principle invests great importance and credibility in child development ‘experts’ who interpret and advocate on behalf of children. Rose (1985) traced the development of expertise during the 1920s and 1930s in child development involving child guidance and child psychiatry. These ‘experts’ developed a repertoire of diagnosis, disorders and treatments for troubled, maladjusted and delinquent children. In his later work Rose (1991) argued that psychologists claimed particular expertise in childhood. He saw this as being linked to techniques of individualisation and the new scientific ‘gaze’ on children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This links with the Foucauldian ‘gaze’ discussed in chapter 1.

Developmental psychology was made possible by the growth of child health clinics and nursery schools. These institutions played a vital role in allowing observation, comparison and study of children by psychological experts. This data developed norms for particular ages and stages of childhood. This normalisation of childhood ages and stages meant that all children could be compared to the norm and judged as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ in terms of their development. Rose argues that these developmental scales were not just ways of assessing children; they also provided new ways of thinking about childhood and rapidly spread to teachers, health workers and to parents through baby books and popular literature.

All who had dealt with children in their professional or personal life could now have their mind instructed through the education of their gaze. In the space between behaviours of actual children and the ideals of the norm, new desires and expectations, and new fears and anxieties could be inspired in parents, new administrative and reformatory aspirations awakened in
professionals. With the rise of a normative expertise of childhood, family life and subjectivity could be governed in a new way (Rose, 1991 pp149-150).

Rose argued that it was mothers in particular, who were held responsible for their child’s development, sanity, well being and behaviour. Expert guidance in the area of ‘mother/child science’ and child development became an area of training for social workers, health visitors and child psychologists (Bowlby, 1944, Winnicott, 1975). Surveillance and monitoring of working class mothering and eventually of all mothering became widespread. ‘The Psychology complex’ has been used to refer to the network of ideas about human beings, their perfectibility or corrigibility, the reasons for their behaviour as well as the ways they can be classified, compared and controlled (Sapsford, 1993).

In a similar vein Mayall (2000) argued that the child development industry cornered the market in relation to knowledge about children. Child development discourse tends to construct children as immature, incomplete human beings at the beginning of a process of biologically determined development which consists of a universal series of stages leading them through to adulthood. Riley showed how this measuring of stages and milestones was problematic because ‘the individual is always already social, always there’ and that separating socialisation from development is a marker of the priority of the biological (Riley, 1983, p33). The influence of developmental psychology means that there is a belief that development can be objectively measured against a ‘norm’ and viewed as failing if they do not reach defined milestones at certain ages. In this way it offers a model for constructing normality. Conversely it also offers a way of classifying and identifying abnormal children. This deficit view of development has been heavily criticised (Moss et al, 2000).
Contemporary welfare policy is actively based upon this view of childhood as a series of universal stages. Health visitors, for example, routinely measure young children’s development in this way. Failure to reach a milestone is usually an indication of concern requiring further investigation and referral. It is also the way mothers in particular, are made to feel they are failing when their child is measured against a norm that allows for little variation in development amongst individual children.

Professionals who work with children, including social workers, lawyers, and teachers are trained within the child development and psychological perspectives of childhood. These theories tend to lend credibility to the idea of ‘experts’ in childhood derived from medical and psychological backgrounds. These perspectives are most likely to view childhood as a time of dependency, dominated by play and fantasy and free from responsibilities. Professionals trained within these perspectives are more likely to feel that protecting children from unnecessary burdens and responsibility is the best outcome in terms of intervention.

The ‘best interests of the child’ are sometimes constructed as individually specific. Kelly (1997) argues that ‘the best interest of the child’ represents a willingness of the law to consider children as individuals rather than as a homogenous group with unified needs. Again this individuality argument seems positive at first glance and recognises children have agency although further interrogation reveals that it tends to support the need for interpretation of the principle by ‘experts’. New Labour represents a shift in some respects as it contains within it a tendency to view parents’ as experts on their children’s welfare. It is in these ways that ‘the best interests of the child’ therefore requires translation, mediation and interpretation by professionals and adult or parents’ as ‘experts’ because it is not directly visible in either the
legislation or guidance. This arena of interpretation is where most of the contestations about ‘the best interests of the child’ are fought.

Alternative perspectives which foreground social and cultural perspectives challenged the dominance of medical, psychological and child development perspectives from the 1980s on as part of the NSMs discussed in the earlier chapter. These perspectives helped expose the way that there is often no specified action or outcome that is clearly ‘in the best interests’ of the child and that ‘expertise’ can be problematic. Indeed it is the location of the power/knowledge relationship identified by Foucault and discussed in Chapter 1.

In this research I view ‘the best interests of the child’ as complex and problematic. I argue that this complexity is not captured within the legislation or guidance, where it is often presented as clear, simple and easy to determine. This complexity then paves the way for the rise of ‘experts’ who interpret the complexity around ‘the best interests of the child’. I argue that representation is neither innocent nor transparent. The child’s ability to state opinions, make choices and participate in decision-making will be linked to and negotiated via the complex variables of difference and maturity of the individual child but also depend on professional interpretation of difference and maturity.

5.2: Children and ‘competence’

Disputes over questions about children’s competence have been a central issue in the debate over children’s rights. Earlier in this chapter we saw how participation is constructed within the Children Act as contingent upon assessments of children’s ‘age and understanding’. We
also saw how traditional child development theory based on psycho/biological explanations emphasised the way that development is a pathway from immature, irrational and incompetent to rational, competent and autonomous adulthood within a predetermined sequence of development. My research seeks to problematise this assumption of children’s incompetence and acknowledge that individual children develop in different ways and do not always follow the orderly and predictable line of development laid down in child development literature.

Secondly, childhood ‘incompetence’ is (implicitly) premised on an assumption of a norm of adult ‘competence’. Adult and child competence can be viewed as a binary involving invisible norms. Thirdly the child development perspectives have as their base the idea that socialisation is the way that children develop into rational competent adults. This undermines the idea that children are reflexive moral agents now, rather than simply developing as a future generation of adults. Lastly I would want to make a distinction between development (as in children develop, change and mature as they grow older) and developmentalism (which fixes development into linear, normative ages and stages). This distinction allows us to rescue some issues of children’s development while rejecting the essentialising assumptions built around developmentalism. Insisting on this distinction keeps the space open for acknowledging that young children cope with participation differently than many teenagers, for example.

Trinder (1997) suggested that when it was assumed children were rational and entitled to a view, they were more likely to express a view. Conversely when they were assumed to be vulnerable and in need of protection it was only the most assertive and articulate who managed to express a view. This research also showed how adults are often surprised by how articulate and sophisticated the views of children are. Vygotsky (1978) argues that children develop competence by being challenged and extended with help and the help being gradually withdrawn so the child is increasingly able to develop independently. This places the
emphasis on ‘scaffolding’ in the form of guidance and support, which permits the child to do so much themselves and be helped with tasks beyond their ability. This is described as the learning-leading-development process, requiring jointly creating an experience of making meaning together. These socio-cultural approaches offer an alternative view of development to the psychological and development model perspectives. Here development is viewed as occurring through social contexts including people, culture, language, institutions and activities rather than in a linear uniform form. These views challenge the psychological and child development models. Here children gradually come to know, understand and experience the world through their own activities and communication. Development is viewed as a continual and ongoing two-way process. The emphasis is on a reciprocal partnership between adult and child who are viewed as jointly constructing understanding and knowledge.

Research into children whose parents were separating claimed that children behave more competently in situations where they feel secure and comfortable with the people around them (Smith et al 2001). This seems obvious in many ways yet in social work and legal settings children are often expected to express a view to a professional or a group of professionals that they do not know. Children who attend child protection, review meetings and court hearings, for example, are often required to explain their views about living arrangements or relationships in their family to strangers.

The overwhelming evidence from the available research is that children (like many adults) do not want to make decisions alone. What most insist is that they want their views to be taken into account, respected and listened to. Participation in decision-making helps them understand the decisions and also develop competence, responsibility and maturity. A study of young people in residential care showed how realistic young people are when asked for
suggestions about the services they receive (Willow, 1995). Willow’s study also highlighted
the relationship between participation and self-esteem for young people. The research
evidence above offers an alternative model of children and ‘competence’ from that embedded
within legal discourse, where ‘competence’ can be viewed as an absolute, in that a child either
has or does not have it. One of the main arguments within this research thesis is that children
are often more competent than we have been led to believe by child development and
psychological experts. Furthermore the arguments that children are more likely to develop
competence when given the opportunity to participate in decision-making about their lives are
convincing. This points us towards a view of competence which is more complex and nuanced
and an acknowledgement that there are different kinds of competence. The traditional model
of linear development to competence allows for participation if the child is assessed as having
‘sufficient understanding’. In this research I am arguing instead that participation increases
competence and understanding which in turn enhances the capacity to participate.

5.3: Representations of ‘the child’

The issues raised by the theme of representation involve a shift in level of analysis between
two different meanings of representation. The first level of analysis involves the area of
representation of children’s interests either by children themselves or by professionals and
advocates acting on their behalf. The second level of analysis involves a shift to considering
representations of children in terms of imagery.

Firstly representation involves analysis of the issues involved when advocates or professionals
are speaking for and acting on behalf of children. Children may be represented by adults who
are employed by a specific service to act as a ‘voice’ for children. Within the social care field there are a wide range of professionals, invested with an advocacy role for children. These include social workers, guardians ad litem, children’s rights officers, and various voluntary agencies advocates such as the Who Cares? Trust and ChildLine. A central part of this research is to examine the ways some of these professionals experience and negotiate participation with children.

A second area raised by the idea of representation has a slightly different focus, which takes us into the symbolic level of analysis. ‘The child’ exists within the imagery of social policy, welfare, texts and stories. This aspect of representation of ‘the child’ is often de-contextualised in relation to history, place and so on. These imaginary images of ‘the child’ have ‘real’ consequences for children. The imaginary child of populist discourses is generally that of a white, able-bodied, heterosexual and middle-class child (Berlant, 1997). For Berlant, writing in a U.S. context, this child becomes a national icon, innocent of knowledge, agency and accountability. As a result the child will have claims on the adult political agents who write laws, make culture, administer and control things. The view is that this normative child will inherit the future. This links to a well worn metaphor of the child as an investment for the future (Riley, 1983). Furthermore Berlant argues that this child is a stand-in for a complex and contradictory set of anxieties and desires relating to national identity and citizenship. Imagery that holds this view of children tends to focus on their assumed innocence, creativity, imagination and play. The assumption here is of childhood as a golden age protected from the harshness of adult life. In the later chapters I interrogate the imagery of children within social care contexts to discover the contrasts between these normative images of childhood and the pathologised conceptions of them as victims or villains accompanied by a loss or lack of innocence.
5.4: Listening to Children

The legislation, guidance and Inquiries discussed earlier have all emphasised the importance of listening to children. Within the Children Act there was increasing recognition that principles, rules and guidance were not sufficient. Ascertaining the child’s wishes and feelings was firmly embedded within the Children Act and has been seen as a skill requiring sensitivity and listening skills. Alongside this was the need to balance the child’s own expressions of distress or hurt with the perspectives of parents and other professionals. Schofield and Thoburn (1996) argued that a betrayal of trust within a family is likely to prejudice the child’s capacity to make sense of their experiences. They were careful to point out that this is not an argument for not listening to children but more an argument for professionals developing skills and experience, as well as having the time, to listen and help children think through their situation. In chapter 1 I outlined the way the psychoanalytic lens helps us view the ways that individual professionals and the organisations of welfare avoid listening to and hearing children. This is part of a complex process of minimising the emotional impact of participation work with children. Not hearing also means being absolved of having to do anything to change the situation.

Contested meanings do not seem to be adequately captured within the Guidance and Legislation where it is assumed that ‘listening’ to children is important but also that it is simple. McLeod (2000) in her study of Looked After children and their social workers found that professionals and children have very different understandings of what is involved in listening. Interestingly the young people in her research had an active view of listening involving action, practical support and self-determination. The children felt strongly that their
personal feelings should remain private. The social workers by contrast generally saw
listening as a more receptive and passive activity involving having a respectful attitude,
offering emotional support and encouraging self-expression. ‘My research revealed a situation
where social workers felt that they were doing their best to listen to young people who often
refused to communicate, while those same young people felt that they wanted to be heard but
the social workers were not listening’ (McLeod, 2000, p307).

For McLeod the paradox that seemed to be built into the relationship between a social worker
and a young person could only be explained by concluding that they have different
understanding of the meaning of ‘listening’. McLeod’s findings concur with a growing body
of evidence that suggests that young people are not convinced that their social workers listen
to their views (Sinclair 1998; O’Quigley 2000; Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2000).

Jones and Myers (1997) showed how listening to children in care is easier to say than it is to
do. The difficulties of reporting concerns for either children or staff were not recognized
within the Utting Report. As they point out, previous literature on abuse frequently refers to
themes of powerlessness, secrecy, denial, control and the hidden nature of sexual abuse in
particular. Myers et al (1999) argued similarly that ‘powerlessness’ of the children themselves,
but also of some of the staff working in the residential homes, was a contributory factor in
understanding institutional abuse.

In another study of children experiencing their parents’ separation, Smart and Neale (2000)
considered that children’s views were increasingly listened to and sought, although they noted
that there was some filtering of information. As a result they warned against professionals
being deaf to what they might consider unpalatable views. Smart and Neale favour a principle
of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ where children’s views are respected but where adults take responsibility for difficult decisions. These themes will be returned to within Chapter 6 where the idea of listening to children is discussed again.

6.0: Children as Citizens

Within chapter 1 we saw how the concept of citizenship developed in the 1950s was significantly reworked in the latter part of the twentieth century (Lewis, 1998). I also argued in chapter 1 that the NSMs successfully challenged the post-war settlement of citizenship and these contestations forced a reworking of the concept. From the 1990s on citizenship became the political context for enhancing children’s participation.

Dahrendorf’s (1988) notion of citizenship involved a collection of entitlements common to all members of society and was similar to Marshall’s post-war framework in that entitlements were viewed as political, social and civil rights, protected by the state with children being excluded. Dahrendorf placed children alongside lunatics and criminals who were also excluded from active political rights. There was general agreement that children were not citizens in the political sense. For Dahrendorf civil rights included the right to be protected from abuse and exploitation. Set against these rights are duties, including paying taxes and being lawful. Here citizens played a dual role in being ‘loyal’ to the law but also being actively, critically and autonomously involved in the functioning of the community. The latter makes a strong demand on citizens to be ‘competent’ and for their repertoire to include reasonableness, debate and democracy. As well as this citizens should be responsible in handling authority and positions of power. Lastly citizens should be tolerant and respect
diversity of identities, opinions and behaviours. One of the main criticisms of this approach to

citizenship is the question of adults’ ‘sensibleness’ and ability to be ‘reasonable’. It can be
argued that respect for diversity and tolerance is beyond many adults, who, if measured
against these requirements, would not be deemed citizens. Conversely if these criteria were
applied to children many would pass the test of citizenship. Coles (1997) has argued that the
reasoning and moral capacities of 9-year-olds are as sophisticated as many adults. Alderson
(1992, in Roche 1999) challenges the presumption of incompetence by arguing that when
children are expected to be responsible, they cope well. The denial of children’s intelligence,
capacity for competence, responsibility and agency is a feature of the late twentieth century
understandings of citizenship. The main point for my research is that children are
problematically placed within the field of citizenship rights.

The arena of citizenship rights for adults involves high tension and is the focus of intense
struggle and contestation, for example, citizenship tests for ‘new citizens’. This unfinished and
incomplete field of rights and citizenship is sometimes overlooked in children’s rights
literature, where children are assumed to be ‘the last group’ being denied rights. I argue that
this is flawed because it assumes that the rights of other groups are unproblematic and the
ongoing struggles for recognition of many groups are overlooked or made invisible. It
typically pays no attention to the ‘national’ framing of citizenship.

Applying the concept of citizenship to children is problematic, largely because of the
unresolved issue about whether children are citizens. De Winter (1997) argues that it is
similar to asking if children are adults. A different set of questions arises when we ask
whether children desire citizen rights and status. Some may feel ambiguous about being
‘loyal’ and ‘lawful’. Others may not desire autonomy, preferring instead to be ‘protected’.
One of the difficulties of the children and citizenship debate is it often fails to acknowledge differentiation within the category ‘children’. A suggested pre-requisite for citizenship and participation suggested earlier in the chapter is that basic needs and rights are met. In areas of extreme poverty and lack of basic living essentials, the idea of citizenship may seem superfluous to some, whereas to others it may be a route to remedies.

Children’s citizenship in the social and legal arena is most relevant to my research. Veerman (1992) argued that major changes occurred since the beginning of the twentieth century about the social rights and position of children. Children have gone from being the object of rights (to protection) to persons vested as subjects of rights. Their opinions are often asked for, and sometimes respected, although this does not mean that children’s rights are ensured everywhere. Veerman criticised the children’s rights movement for being naïve in aiming to give children equal power and rights but ignoring their limited possibilities. The concern was that the right of children ‘to be a child’ could be eroded in this way. At first glance, this seems like an essentialist notion of a child and links to earlier discussions about normative childhood being a time of innocence and protection from adult responsibilities. The idea also links back to the balance discussed earlier about retaining a space for children while not fixing them into age/stage developmentalism. Sevenhuijsen (1993 in De Winter, 1997) argues for restraint when translating civil and political rights into children’s rights. Instead she focuses on creating social and political space where children can speak for themselves but warns against homogenisation and seeing this as a common children’s interest. An important arena of debate is that around the extent to which we can expect children to be autonomous, responsible and independent when age and development often presuppose dependence, inequality, trust, care and intimacy.
For children either in care or who have been abused the idea of children having trust in adults, being cared for and intimate with caregivers become potentially problematic. The underlying assumption is the presence of a benevolent adult who can be trusted and depended upon. This links back to issues about competence, ‘voice’ and listening to children.

In relation to civil citizenship we saw earlier that children now have direct access to legal procedures and new avenues of complaint and access to information have been opened up. This might be viewed as consistent within New Right frameworks developed during the 1980s and 1990s and the continuities within New Labour where social citizenship was downplayed in favour of individualistic forms of civil citizenship, especially in relation to judicial forms.

In the sections earlier on managerialism within social care and welfare settings we saw the increase in emphasis on complaints and grievance procedures. These can be interpreted as extending children’s rights as well as being part of a rise in consumer approaches within a managerialist framework of welfare which exactly understands individual difference in this way.

The specific context for Looked After children illustrates the way that basic and fundamental rights are often denied or obscured. For example, the expectation that children would be involved in individual shopping for personal hygiene products, choice of decoration and style of bedroom, access to ‘safe’ private space to keep personal possessions, choice of clothing and so on are often undermined by processes such as ‘bulk buying’ in residential units.

Flekkoy’s argument that respecting the child involves acknowledging the special vulnerabilities and strengths and the evolving capacities of the child is an important one. The idea here is that adults need to respect the child’s need for protection and development,
including the time to develop the capacity for exercising rights. In this way Flekkoy
acknowledges that children are different from adults in relation to maturity and experience.
She acknowledges the delicate balance between protecting the child from too much
responsibility and giving the child the opportunity to gain experience. Again this emphasises
that the conditions required for participation involve more than legislation, policy or guidance.

My research views children as a specific part within a wider constituency who are seeking to
redress injustices and inequalities within and through the field of citizenship and its associated
rights. I argue that citizenship needs to be linked to the wider political, geographic, social,
cultural and economic inequalities that determine the readiness of individuals, organisations
and nation states to embark upon a programme of citizenship rights for children. Approaches
that view children as adult citizens in the making, with rights now, as well as requiring
opportunities to develop into citizenship are most helpful.

This research therefore assumes that the concept of citizenship is contested and uneven and
problematises the linearity produced by some arguments that simplify the debate to one of
exclusion versus inclusion where the complexities of the trajectories of change are not
adequately captured. The idea of differentiated, subordinated or pathologised inclusion is used
to capture the difficulties and unevenness of the concept of inclusion in the field of rights for
adults and children. Participation is viewed as one of the means for developing competence,
which in turn enhances the ability to participate. This requires ‘space’ for practice and
articulation of needs. Care-ethics, solidarity, care and affection go alongside independent
judgement, responsibility, loyalty and autonomy within the conception of citizenship
developed here.
Thinking about children as active and creative moral agents presents a challenge for social care in the twenty first century. We saw earlier how there has been a tendency to essentialise children in ways which denies their differences. Much child development literature continues to treat children in undifferentiated ways. ‘An understanding of children’s and young people’s agency must, therefore, include analyses of differences among them. Thus while gender and ‘race’ are absent from many policy statements on children and young people, both are central to the construction of children as subjects of social policy’ (Phoenix, 2000, p95).

Another pitfall is the dynamic between pathologising some children as deviant or delinquent while portraying others as pathetic ‘victims’. In this last section of the chapter I examine some of the ways children can be viewed as active and creative moral agents. This section pulls together an alternative view of children from that developed within both the legislation and guidance discussed earlier. It also engages and takes forward the critique of the developmental model discussed earlier in the chapter. I present four sets of findings from various research projects, which are all relevant to the way that children’s participation is constructed and thought about.

The first finding is about children being wedded to the idea of fairness. Williams (2001) talked about an “energetic morality” of children and parents. By this she meant carefully weighing up the consequences of actions and considering others. This idea is based on the work of Smart and Neale (1999) and their work on children within divorcing couples. Williams asserts that this careful weighing up takes place in families in many situations, not just decisions
about separation or divorce and this gives a moral texture to people’s lives. The idea of fairness is another value that Williams identifies amongst children and parents.

Ribbens-McCarthy et al (2001) found that fairness had to be actively worked towards. It was also something that ‘had to be seen to be done’ and operated within the boundary of the family as defined by the parents. Fairness was viewed as a differentiated concept in that it could mean treating children differently according to their needs. Lastly in weighing up fairness for adults and children it was found that children’s needs generally came first. Within this research then there was a sense that adults sometimes have to hold back or give in to children’s needs over their own needs and families find a moral imperative to put children’s needs first.

A view of children as competent moral actors and not empty vessels, villains or victims is central to the research studies mentioned here. In their study of children’s experiences after divorce Neale and Smart (2001) found that the idea of fairness dominated within children’s accounts and that children have a very refined sense of what is fair and unfair, with fairness operating in tandem with care and respect. Children in the Smart, Neale and Wade (2001) study preferred openness, communication and shared understanding. They wanted to be listened to, trusted and taken seriously. Importantly for my own research they insisted they wanted to be kept informed and brought into decision-making.

The second finding relates to this idea that children want to be listened to and taken seriously in decision-making. Although the research studies above were within the context of decision-making in families around divorce and separation, children consistently said that they did not want to have to make decisions on their own. The issue of being listened to, taken seriously
and recognition of their voice and perspectives was what emerged as most important, not control or rights. This presents the possibility of children as reflexive moral agents, led by relational rather than individual concerns. Themes of negotiation, identity, context, fairness and respect characterize decision-making in families and children want to be part of this.

The third finding is about children valuing democratic relationships. Gillies, McCarthy and Holland (2001) found that children, teenagers and parents valued democratic family relationships, where negotiation about decisions took place involving all members of the family. This study was based on interviews with 16-18 year olds. They noted that there are also many different understandings of the idea of ‘support’. They found that the issues around support were complex, multi-faceted and inter-connected. Support covered various arrangements including emotional support, practical support, control and guidance, non-directive encouragement and crisis support. The young people in the study generally felt they had a responsibility to keep out of trouble to avoid disappointing or worrying their parents. Some of the young people in the study talked about how the support of parents is sometimes contingent on whether young people are ‘deserving’, sometimes feeling they didn’t deserve support because they had done something wrong. This debate about the range of issues involved in ‘support’ has parallels with those discussed earlier about ‘listening’. Both these concepts are used throughout the guidance and legislation in unproblematic ways. The research above could be seen to be at odds with social policies that emphasise children need greater control and discipline, or just protection.

A fourth finding to emerge from these studies is that of the importance of dialogue for children. An example to illustrate where attention to children’s rights was in conflict with those of their parents was that of young carers (Williams, 2001). It was argued that children’s
needs were given higher priority than the needs of their disabled parents and this contributed to pathologising disabled parents. Wates (2001) showed how dialogue is important and the Disabled Parents Network is now talking to the young carers’ organisations to help inform future policy, which should be able to provide for children’s well being without it being at the expense of their parents, nor vice versa.

What do these four research findings mean when looking at policies for children in social care settings? This research evidence is important in highlighting the value placed upon ‘fairness’, democratic decision-making, listening and dialogue by children and young people. My study concerns children, who have either been abused, often by a family member, or where relationships within the family have broken down and necessitated the child needing alternative care. I argue that although this makes for a different constituency of children than those who are experiencing family separation or divorce the findings are still relevant. Within the later chapters I will analyse the data for evidence of different constructions of children, for example, either as active moral agents or as passive recipients of welfare needing protection.

8.0: Conclusions

In this chapter I argued that the contemporary contexts, discourses and debates currently shaping children’s participation within social welfare in the UK include the changing management in social care. I argued that the discourse of managerialism has become firmly embedded and that the New Labour government have increasingly emphasised the discourse of failure which has become embedded within the policies and guidance introduced since the late 1990s. Quality Protects provides an illustration of New Labour’s modernising agenda for
child welfare. The discourse of managerialism establishes a significant analytic lens for reading the policy documents relating to children’s participation. It is a framing context within which participation is constructed and implemented. In chapter 4 the discourse of managerialism is analysed further in relation to the policy texts.

I argued that the material contexts of welfare included depleted resources, child poverty, staffing crises and low morale of social care staff have shaped and undermined the way participation is interpreted, negotiated and performed in the institutions of social welfare.

I outlined the legal contexts for children including the Children Act, the CRC and key guidance and social policy texts as representations of the contemporary legal framework for policy and practice in relation to children’s participation in decision-making. In this section I argued that the legislation and policy guidance create the impression that participation is simple, transparent and procedural. I argue, however, that this conceals the complexities and contestations involved in negotiating and performing participation. I wanted to capture the way that children’s rights are situated in a complex field of rights including parents, families, carers and children, for example. In this research I view ‘the best interests of the child’ as complex and problematic. This complexity then paves the way for the rise of ‘experts’ who interpret the complexity around ‘the best interests of the child’. I argued that representation is neither innocent nor transparent. The child’s ability to state opinions, make choices and participate in decision-making is linked to and negotiated via the complex variables of difference and maturity of the individual child but also on professional interpretation of difference and maturity. In addition I argued that participation increases competence and understanding which in turn enhances the capacity to participate.
I argued that children are problematically placed within the field of citizenship rights. This research problematises the linearity produced by some arguments about citizenship that simplify the debate to one of exclusion versus inclusion where the complexities of the trajectories of change are not adequately captured. I used the idea of differentiated, subordinated or pathologised inclusion to capture the difficulties and unevenness of the concept of inclusion in the field of rights for adults and children. Participation was viewed as one of the means for developing competence, which in turn enhances the ability to participate. I argued that care-ethics, solidarity, care and affection go alongside independent judgement, responsibility, loyalty and autonomy within the conception of citizenship developed here.

I proposed that viewing children as active and creative moral agents provide an alternative framework to the developmental and psychological models of children ingrained within the legislation and policy guidance. In my research I aim to capture something of this more active and dynamic view of children and young people. I argued that children are wedded to the ideas of fairness, democratic relationships, negotiation and dialogue. This was viewed as being at odds with a Government agenda intent on pathologising young people. Children want to be listened to, taken seriously and involved in decision-making, but they do not want to make decisions on their own.

In this chapter I argued that despite some resistance children’s participation in decisions about their lives can be seen to be taking hold and has become firmly embedded within policy, guidance and legislation. All SSDs now have policies and procedures relating to children’s participation and it has become part of the solution to the perceived failings of SSDs for children. The various interpretations of what participation involves and the complexities around its negotiation are explored further in the later chapters where I analyse the policy and
interview texts through the various legislative, policy and rights discursive frameworks.
Chapter 3

Research Methodologies and Methods

1.0: Introduction

My interests and concerns around this topic of children’s participation required research methods that emphasise interpretation and meaning and would allow me to discover more about the competing constructions in some depth. The topic therefore led me to the methods and the decision to emphasise qualitative and interpretative analysis as the main methodological approaches. Within this chapter I will outline the research process and methods I used to explore the area of children’s participation in social care contexts.

Researchers in some parts of the social sciences have worked around critical and post-structuralist theory. The epistemological claims underlying research conducted within qualitative research traditions relies on non-positivist methodological orientation (Smith 1998,
Taylor, 2001). Such researchers generally do not aspire to capture ‘the truth’ or reality but instead the emphasis is on interpretation, meaning and significance. It follows that the researcher in these traditions does not offer an ‘objective’ unbiased view of reality but acknowledges a subjective, positioned, partial account. Following this, the approach adopted here is that we are all necessarily partial and situated in our ‘reading’ and interpretation of texts. The distinction between ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ becomes problematic when viewed in this way because all knowledge is viewed as relative and representational.

As I outlined in the introduction to the thesis, accounting for what we bring to our reading of the texts is important in terms of situating ourselves within the research field. Being reflexive also implies being aware of the fragile and contestable nature of our interpretations. Similarly high value is placed on being open in the process and this is taken here to mean acknowledging that we are involved in a process of discovery. As such I acknowledge the way that my own experience, perspectives, values and theoretical orientations have guided and shaped my research so that this can be used as part of the evaluation of the findings.

Within qualitative research therefore the researcher is not required to ‘forget’ who they are. Instead there is a shared troubling, a curiosity as well as anxieties between the researcher and the research data and this is then recognised, explicated and positioned within the research process. Stuart Hall argues that ‘we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always in context, positioned…’ (Hall, 1990, p222). Following Hall’s idea the approach adopted here is that we are all partial and situated in our ‘reading’ and interpretation of texts. Discourse and narrative approaches involve a critical dialogue with their own partiality and incompleteness as part of a reflexive process. This type of research method also suggests that separation of the role of the
researcher from the research data is impossible. The task is to consider the implications for the research of the identity, experiences and perspectives of the researcher. In this way the researcher becomes visible and present within the research. Detachment is assumed to be impossible; the researcher instead considers the influence their presence has over the account that is given (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

Following the choice of topic, I narrowed the field further. I was interested in policies relating to children who are Looked After by SSDs in residential or foster care and children on child protection registers. As I said in the introduction to the thesis, these groups of children were of interest because of my previous professional experience in social work as well as my political involvement in various youth, community and campaigning organisations and projects. Alongside this I had developed an interest in how the idea of participation was being negotiated and used within children’s services. I was intrigued by how policies relating to children’s participation were constructing children. This led me to focus in on policy texts as the main data for the research. I wanted to know how the policy texts were producing children as welfare subjects. The idea of using policy texts as the main part of the analysis emerged from reading discourse analysis and realising that this would be an area of social policy which builds upon my previous experience and knowledge as well as my academic interest in social policy and children. The research questions therefore emerged and evolved during the early stages of the research process and were refined and re-defined within the first year, alongside the literature review. Silverman (1993) warned about the mistake of attempting to research problems or areas too wide-ranging or large, arguing that this is often the point where the research stops. The task is one of translating broad areas of interest into questions which the research can provide some answers to and on a scale which is manageable within the scope of
the research project. This was important as I narrowed down the field of enquiry within the first year.

The research questions I eventually settled on were as follows:

1. How does the concept of participation construct, produce and reproduce children as subjects within social work/care and social policy?


3. What conditions of production allowed the discourse of participation to emerge during the 1990s?

4. How are the tensions being negotiated between competing discourses evident in the different texts?

2.0: The Research Process

In this section I will outline the process I used to investigate the topics outlined above. I will discuss the process of data gathering and then focus more specifically on the policy texts and the process of deciding to pursue a limited number of interviews as a further stage in the research. I also discuss in more detail the ideas raised in the introduction to the thesis, as well as above, about the reflective process and situating myself as the researcher. Lastly in this section, I outline the ethical considerations involved in this research.
2.1: Data Gathering

Once I had settled on the research questions, I decided I needed to gain access to a range of policy texts from various SSDs and these texts would form the main part of my data. In July 1999 I sent letters to all 192 SSDs in England and Wales requesting them to send me copies of any documents relating to children’s participation in decision-making within Looked After, child protection or children’s services (Appendix 1). I received written responses from 58 Authorities (30.2%) and documents and data from 35 (18.2%). In addition I received 20 letters from Authorities giving various reasons for not sending any documents. Many Authorities sent copies of several different policies, which meant I had access to 166 policy texts (Appendix 2)iii.

I started to analyse the responses from SSDs texts and I realised the material I already had was rich, multi-layered and provided sufficient material to engage in detailed textual, narrative and discourse analysis. This collection of materials comprised 166 individual policy texts. My initial reading of them indicated that they seemed to provide a possibly unique collection of materials relating to this area of SSD policy. In addition the methodologies I had chosen meant that the issue of representativeness of data was less significant than it would be within a quantitative study of SSD policy and practice, for example.

As I became immersed in analysis of the texts I found the reverse problem of too many sources which made the selection of texts to draw upon for extracts to use within the research difficult. It seemed that the texts told many different stories about participation and the issue would be about selection of texts rather than needing more data.
2.2: The Policy Texts

The policy texts were diverse both in terms of content as well as in form and format and they provided ample data for a focus in depth on the research questions outlined earlier. One way to differentiate the policy texts is to view them as being placed on a spectrum between formal and informal. The first group of texts were formal documents such as child care manuals, policies and procedures, relating to Looked After and Child Protection areas, this was by far the largest set of documents (48 texts in total) children’s services plans (4 texts), Quality Protects reports (5 texts) and minutes from various policy and strategy meetings. Some were reports for the local Area Child Protection Committee (7 texts), others were reports on various aspects of children’s rights and service user consultation (6 texts). I viewed this first group of texts as the most ‘official’ and formal texts, which were largely already within the public domain. Children’s Services Plans for example, are published on Local Authority websites.

A second group of texts were of a different nature and involved research findings. Eight Authorities sent me copies of pieces of research they had carried out or commissioned in relation to participation. This included questionnaires and surveys on parental involvement in child protection, children’s involvement in child protection, fostering and complaints procedures. In addition one Authority sent me a very detailed document relating to their implementation of Family Group Conferences (FGCs) which, they argued, enhanced children’s participation.

A third group of texts came from Authorities who sent me texts from consultation meetings with children about their involvement in planning of services (5). There were also reports from
young people’s forums where a children’s rights worker wrote the comments produced from a consultation event (5). Some were publicity information and leaflets about services, providing information for service users, usually either parents (18) or children (8). Significantly the amount of information produced for parents was more than double that produced for children (this is explored further in chapter 4). In addition a number of Authorities sent me forms they use for recording decisions in Looked After review meetings (17).

Finally there were also informal documents, letters, memos and notes with brief information on their plans for children’s participation (13). This group of texts represented informal and non-public texts sometimes marked ‘not for circulation’. The ‘private’ nature of these responses made for qualitatively different texts than the more official and public texts. The mode of address was more informal and the intended audience was either me or another individual within the organisation who had asked for the information to be collated before it was sent on to me.

I made a decision during the early reading of these texts that the analysis would incorporate all these different kinds of texts, as it would produce richer, more diverse, interesting and complex results. The decision to embrace all the different kinds of texts was also significant because it became clearer later in the research that it tended to be within the more informal texts that the ‘voices’ of children themselves made an appearance. There were only 5 texts out of the total of 166 that had children’s ‘voices’ in the first person in the form of direct quotations. This was intriguing and with analysis it became clear that the more formal the text the less audible the ‘voices’ of children became. This aspect of the research is discussed more fully within Chapter 5.
In analysing the policy texts I started to identify the narratives and discourses which were deployed and produced within the texts. Chapter 4 examines in more detail the competing, contradictory and sometimes complementary discourses, which I identified in the texts. Within some of the texts there are patterns and commonalities that emerge across several Authorities’ documents. On reflection, this did not seem surprising given they were all produced within the same legislative and guidance frameworks. What was more interesting, however, were the differences that emerged across and between the texts. Further analysis revealed that this sometimes involved specificities of location, histories or experiences that were produced locally rather than nationally. These differences involved the production of particular narratives or discursive strategies. These commonalities and specificities of the policy documents will be discussed further in the next chapter.

2.3: The Interview Texts

The interview texts form the second part of my data for analysis. During the summer of 2002 I contacted several of the Authorities a second time. These were all Authorities who had sent me policy documents already. By this stage the analysis of the policy texts was well underway. I wrote to Authorities who had both expressed an interest in being further involved in the research and where they had sent me texts which raised particularly interesting questions about participation which were becoming significant to the analysis. I requested the opportunity to conduct interviews either with policy officers who wrote the original policies I had reviewed, or other professionals involved in policy relating to participation within children’s services (Appendix 3).
I felt the interviews would add to the process of analysis in several ways. The first reason for seeking to carry out a number of interviews was that I wanted to introduce another kind of text to make the research more dynamic and reflexive. I wanted to avoid ‘fixing’ the discourses at the point I had collected the texts or within the interpretations I was generating from my reading of them. Discourse and narrative analyses I had read rarely seemed to incorporate this further level of analysis, involving talking to people about the production of the texts as well as their own reflections on them. I wanted to incorporate a degree of reflexivity within the research. Secondly I wanted to check how the participants themselves interpreted the texts I had been sent from their Authority. A third reason for conducting interviews was to explore how policy authors and professionals construct participation. I was interested to discover how professionals, involved in constructing policy and working with children, narrated the story of participation. Talking with some of the professionals involved in producing and implementing the policies about the benefits, difficulties and complexities of participation seemed invaluable. Fourthly some of the texts had generated particular and specific questions that I was extremely interested in pursuing further within an interview. Finally, possible future directions for participation of children could be discussed.

I conducted the interviews between August and November 2002. During this time I interviewed five people from five different Authorities. These were a childcare consultant policy officer (CCC), three children’s rights officers (CRO1, CRO2 and CRO3) and a participation worker (PW). I have used these abbreviations throughout the thesis so that in the substantive chapters the reader can make connections between the different extracts.

The interviews were tape recorded and within a month of carrying out the interviews I transcribed each interview while it was fresh in my mind. This was a time consuming task and
I spent approximately 8 hours transcribing each hour of talk. Transcription is a process by which material becomes data, by being ‘written down’. Many discourse analysts would not regard the talk itself as data without this process of transcription (see Taylor, 2001 for a general discussion on the different types of transcription). The basic data can be used in several different ways. For the conversation analyst interested in talk as interaction the focus is the features of talk common to printed language (words) as well as interruptions and pauses, the sequential organisation of utterances from different speakers (see Wooffitt, 2001 and Sacks, 1992). The researcher interested in ‘interpretive repertoires’ involving recurring patterns of word use, imagery and ideas within talk will work from extended sequences of talk with some other detail added (see Potter and Wetherell 2001 and Edley, 2001). The first approach requires more detailed transcription and the talk is more likely to be ‘naturally occurring’ as in informal conversation. The latter is more likely to take account of the contexts within which utterances occur ‘…even a small amount of additional information about context can throw into question what, at first, appears to be a reasonable interpretation of a person’s utterance’ (Potter and Wetherell, 2001, p205).

In my research I made use of the idea of ‘interpretive repertoires’, as discussed in chapter 1, because the contexts within which talk about participation took place were very specifically generated for the purpose of this research. The talk was therefore not ‘naturally occurring’ discourse but was specifically organised to produce further qualitative data relating to the issues generated from my study of the policy contexts. I was working from a prepared list of questions and discussion topics which had been produced from my interest in the topic as well as from reading and analysis of the policy texts. Discourse analysts interested in interaction sometimes challenge the use of research interviews of this kind on the grounds that the interviewer controls the interaction, influences the talk and makes assumptions that the talk is
about the ‘official’ topic of the interview. I was interested in exploring the relationship between the theorising and the discourses embedded within the policy texts and talk about children’s participation. Using policy texts as well as interviews seemed the most appropriate for these specific areas of interest and the use of both types of data was complementary and gave me access to a wider range of discourses.

The transcription is itself a construction and not a neutral record of the interview talk. A different researcher with a different focus could transcribe the interview tapes using different conventions and in doing so open up competing interpretations or a subtly different emphasis within the talk. Issues about how much extra information to add to the transcription to assist understanding are important research decisions and they relate to the type of analysis being undertaken from the interview texts. I have used punctuation and written in a more conventional form to represent the words spoken during the interviews. I have not used transcription styles including numbering sentences, timing pauses, indicated overlapping talk and so on. I decided to include a little information about pauses and laughs for example, as additions to the spoken word in the interviews. In one interview I also added a note about background noise which created difficulty in hearing all that the participant said. Issues about how much contextual material to include/exclude are complex and again relate to the focus of the research and the type of discourse analysis that is being undertaken. In section 4 below I raise issues around different possible interpretations of the texts and provide an example to illustrate.

One of the curious aspects of the Authorities’ responses to the request for interviews was the way that most offered an interview with a CRO or similar professional. This struck me as interesting because I had requested interviews with professionals who were responsible for
writing policy. Although some of the CROs are also involved in policy-making they are not usually wholly responsible for policies and indeed in the interviews I asked a question about the process of policy making which confirmed that in general the CROs were not directly involved in that process. It was certainly the case that the CROs I interviewed offered extremely enlightening and generous perspectives to my research. Only one Authority offered an interview with the professional who was directly responsible for writing policy. During this interview the participant frequently mentioned the Authorities’ CRO whom she felt knew more about this and was more involved in implementation of the departmental policies on participation. This raises interesting issues about gaining access to participants and getting past the ‘gatekeepers’. Originally I wrote to all Directors of SSDs and they usually passed my request for data to a senior manager within Children’s Services. The approach was therefore via senior management within SSDs. This route into the organisations undoubtedly affected the way the interviews were negotiated.

One interpretation of being mostly directed towards CROs was that I had not been clear enough in my letters about whom I wished to interview. A second interpretation, which I find more persuasive, was that Authorities that have a CRO in place are likely to delegate questions of participation to that person. This alerted me to the process whereby CROs are being constructed as the ‘experts’ in participation within SSDs. This raised fascinating questions about how CROs are positioned in relation to policy formulation and how the comments and feedback they receive from children are given voice within this process. Whatever interpretation one puts upon this it became clear that this was the group of practitioners whom SSDs constructed as having most involvement in children’s participation. This discovery provided me with further insight into the way participation is being constructed and negotiated.
within SSDs and how ownership of participation may be being located within the remit of the CROs rather than within the organisation as a whole.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format with open-ended questioning. This format was chosen as it allowed the participants to talk at length (each interview lasted approximately one and a half-hours) about issues relating to their experience of children’s participation within Children’s Services (see interview schedule in appendix 4). I used prompts throughout the interviews to guide the interviewees through the areas I wished to discuss. I built in enough flexibility in time as well as within the question format for the participants to discuss issues that were important to them. This was a good way of exploring their interpretations of meanings of participation. The flexibility also meant that I was able to change the order of questions if the talk moved to another area and rather than disrupting the flow of the dialogue I could let them continue talking about that area. This also enabled the research participant to exercise some control during the interview. This approach generally worked well because participants quickly started to talk in depth about their experiences and views of participation.

The use of a semi-structured interview format allows the research participant to lead the conversation in parts and for the exploration of complexity, ambiguity, contradictions and process, which are not possible within a structured interview. During some interviews it became clear that the participant had ‘a story to tell’ about participation. This format allowed for these stories to emerge within the interviews. One of the interviewees (CRO3) had heard informally about my research and asked to be interviewed and was clear that she wanted some of these stories ‘out there’. This was the only person I knew personally before the interview and it is interesting to reflect on how this changed the nature of the interview and the material
produced. Because we already knew one another and could anticipate, to some extent, each other’s perspectives on participation it meant that the interview rapport was quickly established, the ‘stories’ emerged rapidly and the level of disclosure about difficulties of participation were higher. It may also have resulted in some things being less fully explored in the interview because we both made assumptions about understanding one-another’s perspectives. In some of the other interviews I had noticed that the rapport building was slower and we engaged in more detailed dialogue about the research questions. This raised further issues about the way the researcher gains access to research participants affecting the data produced.

One of the criticisms levelled at qualitative interview methods is precisely addressed to this issue of rapport between researcher and research participants. Unlike in my example above where rapport worked positively this is sometimes viewed as a weakness of the method in that potentially it allows the interviewer to influence the outcome of the research interview. This area of potential bias has been discussed extensively in various research guides where the focus is on positivist empirical research (see Bell, 1993, Borg, 1981, for example). During interviews many factors can influence the participant’s response to the questions. I was mindful of these issues as I prepared the interview schedule and carried out the interviews. Qualitative research focuses on the depth of exploration and interpretation. In places I acknowledged my own perspectives or experiences within the interviews, particularly towards the end of each interview when I was sometimes asked questions about the research in a wider context. My previous experiences in interviewing as a social worker helped me to be able to listen to interviewees’ ‘stories’ and on most occasions avoid telling them ‘a story’ of my own. I was keen to ensure that the questions were open enough to allow the participants to discuss their experiences of participation rather than mine. This way of communicating with people
During interviews is one I learnt as a social worker, particularly in interviewing, assessment and court work where use of leading questions must be avoided. These are skills I previously ‘took for granted’ although on reflection they have been helpful during the research process. The other issue (discussed in more detail within Chapter 6) was the way that during some of the interviews problematic areas of practice were raised, which I found difficult not to acknowledge and respond to during the interview itself. I viewed this ‘shared troubling’ as part of a building of trust and rapport with the research participants and as a contributory factor in producing high quality interview data.

During every interview an area of discussion emerged about resourcing and staffing crises in social welfare even though this was not an area I had asked a specific question about. The important point in relation to the methodologies is that the use of semi-structured open-ended interviews allowed for this dialogue and these stories to be produced. Each person interviewed insisted on telling the story about depleted resources in SSDs and how this constrains children’s participation. It was an important lesson to me in how dynamic the process of producing texts is. I had not wanted to write about resource shortfalls, although I am aware of the difficulties from past experience in social work. I felt that this was an area that had been written about and well documented previously. I made the decision after I had transcribed all the interviews that this was an area I had to include in the analysis since it had been raised consistently in every interview, without any question or prompting. I reflect further on how these issues of scarcity are being negotiated within social welfare and policy contexts in chapter 4.

My experience of this group of research participants was that they were all committed to furthering the interests of children. All were thoughtful and conscientious in how they
presented the information they gave me. They all felt a responsibility to represent fairly the issues which children had told them about in relation to participation processes. They were also conscious of the issues around ‘speaking for others’ which came up in the interviews in relation to young people who represent the views of other young people. Given that SSDs had all nominated these professionals as the professionals most involved in participation work this seems unsurprising perhaps. The weightiness of the sense of responsibility they felt sometimes came across during the interviews.

To conclude this section, the interview texts added further richness and depth to my analysis. The interviews created a space for some issues to be produced which rarely appear within the policy texts (such as those relating to depleted resources and staffing vacancies). The discussions about the negotiation of participation by this group of professionals demonstrated the frustrations, complexity and emotional dimension of the work as well as the joy of participation work with children. Lastly the level of energy, creativity and commitment among this group of practitioners made interviewing them a privilege.

2.4: The Reflexive Process

An important part of qualitative research is the idea of situating oneself as the researcher, making the process more visible and open to scrutiny. I have included some brief biographical details in the introduction to the thesis as a way of being open and reflexive about the research process thereby giving a sense of my perspectives, politics, policy and practice experience which affect my perspectives about children’s participation. I was explicit that these professional and personal experiences have been an influential part of my choosing this particular research topic and they have provided me with a multi-faceted set of concerns,
reflections, challenges and contestations that have all assisted, strengthened and shaped the research process. As I stated earlier, it was my interest and involvement in the field of work with children which led me to the methodologies and methods adopted in this research thesis. Being reflexive throughout the research process means being open about the areas of interpretation, which have troubled me or caused difficulties.

An important part of the research process was the use of a reflective journal (a notebook) to note important, challenging, surprising, or puzzling aspects of the research throughout. This allowed and encouraged me to reflect upon the developing work as I went along. I made notes of aspects of the research I wanted to think about further, return to later or discuss with my supervisors, friends or colleagues. Being reflexive assisted me in accounting for the process used to produce the readings and interpretations.

The process of producing a reflective journal was important in forming ideas and tracing the shifts in theorising and analysis as I developed the research. I noted themes which were starting to appear to offer fruitful analysis at an early stage as well as those that did not fit neatly into the thesis at that particular stage but which I wanted to reflect on further. I made notes about the process used to analyse the data. This process itself was part of a cycle of reflection and was added to, amended and changed as I went along. This continuous circuit of reflection, evolving ideas, writing, discussing and reading has been an integral and embedded part of the process of producing this thesis throughout.

The process involved in interpretive analysis is difficult to describe in a logical or sequential way because it does not usually happen like this. In the spirit of openness I aim to capture something of the dynamic nature of the process without making it appear more clinical or
fixed’ than it was. The temptation, particularly when writing up the research or transcribing interviews was to ‘tidy up’ the process, but I tried to avoid this.

Attempting to be explicit about the process involved in reading and interpreting texts was important. Horton-Salway argues that ‘in making such relativist claims about the constructive nature of descriptions, the authors of social science research texts become implicated in reflexive consequences because they cannot transcend their own constructive practices’ (Horton-Salway, 2001 p148). This is often referred to as the reflexive dilemma for social science researchers. The reflections in this chapter are part of an invitation into the process of authoring meaning which is itself a negotiated and constructive practice between the author and the reader. Such constructive practices and dialogic processes become apparent in interpretive and qualitative based research. In my analysis of the data I wanted to avoid implying that my own reading represented a ‘fixed’ or objective ‘truth’. As discussed earlier, if all interpretations are partial and situated it follows from the epistemological underpinning of this form of analysis that the knowledge produced will also be partial. The interpretation is part of a dialogic process of producing knowledge and making claims. In doing this I hope to persuade others that my reading is relevant, plausible, illuminating or convincing, but not that I have arrived at ‘the true reading’. I am offering a possible reading rather than ‘the truth’ about these texts. I am conscious that other readings are both possible and likely.

I also wanted to capture the way that my own readings of the texts have developed over a period of time. An initial reading of the texts produced analysis which has been continuously developed, reworked and amended since. I have the feeling that I could keep returning to the texts and discovering new aspects I missed earlier. I think of this as in part a reflection of the
richness of the texts as well as the way these methods assist us in gaining access to that richness.

Each text is unique and the narratives and discourses produced within it are always dynamic, sometimes accepted, resisted, refused or contested. As such each text produces new relationships and positions between subjects. Being reflexive also involves acknowledgement of discourses in practice and the consequences of discourse. One of the consequences of discourse analysis is that the knowledge produced by it is more contingent, open to challenge and more dialogic than the claims to truth made under traditional empiricist forms of knowledge. In some ways this requires the analysis to be more robust than quantitative or empirical research as the research process becomes dynamic and open to challenge. I feel that the research is stronger as a result of this process of openness even though for the researcher it feels slightly less controlled than more empiricist approaches to research.

Some of the different approaches to discourse theory were outlined within chapter 1. I identified how the affirmative strand of discourse theory emphasised the way discourse operates, and is embedded, as well as its social effects and consequences. This research is loosely positioned within this strand of discourse theory because I am concerned with the consequences and social effects of discourses of participation upon children and welfare professionals. I acknowledge this as a way of situating myself within the range of possibilities that this form of analysis creates. Later in this chapter I will discuss the way that discourse theory has tended to cohere around several different types of analysis and similarly situate myself within the field. Choosing an emphasis, however, which falls most within a particular strand of discourse is not to imply that the debates about discourse are complete or finished. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to enter into great detail over these debates but rather I aim
to situate myself within them and explain which elements I found useful in discovering things about children’s participation within the policy and interview texts.

One area that interested me was consideration of the way the researcher has to manage her/his own emotions in relation to the identifications with and distancing from some of the accounts. At times I found the research texts troubling. In the interview transcripts I occasionally express my frustration, bewilderment or disturbance produced by the stories of participation being told. This links back to the discussions around emotion within the psychoanalytic perspective in chapter 1. Although I consciously attempted not to influence the outcome of the interview I found it difficult not to acknowledge these feelings during some of the research interviews. One of the issues I reflected upon when analysing the texts, and in particular the interview texts, is the slow pace of change, in some respects, within large institutions like SSDs. The consistent messages from children across many Authorities at various consultations and ‘participation’ events suggested that some of the difficulties experienced by children have been known about for a long time. Evidence from Inquiry reports and SSI inspections, for example, has repeatedly confirmed that practices in relation to children who are Looked After need to change (DOH, 1991, DOH, 1997). Yet the evidence from the research is that change is not so easy. The focus within this research is on analysis of policy rather than practice, although in the interviews there were inevitable discussions of practice issues. Since I have worked as a practitioner in this area of social work, again I found it difficult to remain aloof from these issues. On reflection my ‘sense of knowing’ the issues in this field will undoubtedly have led to different kinds of interview materials being produced. An example of this is that in one interview the participant specifically wanted to talk to me because she wanted some of her experiences of participation to be ‘out there’. The emotional as well as
political aspects of the interviews are discussed further in chapters 5 and 6 where the texts are explored in detail.

2.5: Ethical Considerations

A range of ethical considerations arises in this research. Some of the texts were considered sensitive and some SSDs sent me policy documents and texts even though they sometimes contained self-criticism as well as external criticism, such as an unfavourable Inquiry Report. One of the issues I considered early on was the need to maintain anonymity throughout the research. The texts are therefore anonymised so that the Authorities as well as the individuals interviewed or referred to in the research cannot be identified.

Early on during the research I applied to the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) for approval to contact and involve SSDs in the research. The ADSS issue their own guidelines on the ethical issues relating to research, including a statement about the protection of vulnerable people and the preservation of confidentiality of information. Most of their guidelines cover areas of importance to those wishing to interview service users or view their records. Although I was not wishing to do this within this research the issue of maintaining anonymity of information I received from SSDs was an important consideration. Throughout the research I have used codes to identify the Authorities. Similarly when I conducted interviews I reassured the interviewees that all information and discussion would remain unattributable. The anonymising of extracts is important in this because of the risk that the words could be attributed back to a particular person. Anticipating potential negative outcomes for the participants in the research and aiming to protect them from this is part of my responsibility as a researcher. This was important to them and to the research because some
provided information that was critical of social work, children’s rights services, their own practice or their employer, for example.

I relied on my previous experience within social work to ensure that my research did not breach any areas of confidentiality. As a social worker I was used to maintaining confidential records of interviews and assessments with service users and of the conditions under which confidentiality should be broken such as if someone disclosed information which meant a service user may be potentially at risk. I was also experienced in working with recording which would be shared with a service user and issues of third party confidentiality which arise from this. Alongside this I was also aware of the issues around data protection and access to records.

Another ethical consideration for me as the researcher relates to the power relationship between the interviewer and participant. The selection of material for extracts within the analysis raised associated issues about the power relationship which existed between myself, research participants and the data. Following the discussions within chapter 1 about power being disparate and diffused I wanted to capture the ways that I had more power than the research participant, in the analysis, transcription and selection of the data, which all raised significant questions about power. The interviewee having the power to tell a lie, to withhold information or to privilege or silence particular stories of participation raises another dimension about the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee.

The issue of fully informed consent before interviews raises another aspect of power. Within this research I explained the purpose and aims of the study within the letters and communication I had with SSDs and with individual research participants. I sent the
interviewees a copy of the research aims and questions and I also spent time at the beginning of the interview explaining in further detail what I was doing with the aim of giving participants as much information as possible about the implications of their involvement. This negotiation of consent to be part of the research process is important in ensuring that research participants have full information about the aims of the research, possible outcomes as well as any consequences of their involvement. I was also able to reassure them about confidentiality and anonymising of the research data as discussed above.

3.0: Methods of Analysis

In narrative and discourse analysis there is an understanding that there is no correct, ‘true’ or definitive way of interpreting a text. The process of analysing the texts using interpretive analysis is rewarding because it provides the tools and vocabulary to trace the way we read and understand texts. The process is also challenging because the readings and analysis have to be both convincing and persuasive. There is a dilemma built into the process because the meanings must be temporarily ‘fixed’ while at the same time acknowledging that meaning is never permanently fixed, is constantly redefined and struggled over.

Qualitative analysis is viewed as offering insights into ‘texts’ that would be unavailable within empiricist and positivist research methodological frameworks. ‘Social scientists who wish to address the complex issues of meaning, values, understanding and representation in social interaction may need methods informed by positions other than that of positivism’ (Yates, 2004 p134). In my research I use narrative and discourse to analyse textual data and discover things about children and participation. The use of existing documents and texts as the basis
for discourse analysis in social policy is well established (see for example Fairclough, 2001; Van Dijk, 2001).

As discussed in chapter 1 the key methods used within the research are derived from post-structuralist, social constructionist, feminist and psychoanalytic theoretical orientations. I use the qualitative and interpretive methods of narrative and discourse analysis. These are used to explore the construction of children and participation within various policy texts. I make use of narrative and discourse analysis to analyse how linguistic practices are implicated in the texts and how they construct children’s participation within social welfare contexts. The interviews with the authors of some of the policy documents provide further narratives around these themes and issues. In the next section of this chapter I will discuss these methods in more detail.

3.1: Text, Narrative and Discourse Analysis

Following the discussion in Chapter 1 about discourse theory this section of the chapter seeks to shift the level of analysis to the use of text, narrative and discourse analysis within my research. Discourse analysis involves a wide and unstable field of research activities and data. Taylor (2001) argued that discourse analysis was settling around several different nodes or styles which have emerged since the 1980s. These nodes are conversation analysis, discursive psychology, Foucauldian research, critical discourse analysis (including critical linguistics), interactional sociolinguistics and Bakhtinian research. Each includes a distinctive understanding about discourse, epistemological claims, concepts, procedures and theoretical domain.
In this research I have made use of three of Taylor’s six nodes. The research uses Foucauldian methods to offer insights into the theorising around participation. I have made use of some of the discursive psychology, in particular Potter and Wetherell’s conception of interpretive repertoires and the insights produced from there into the emotional aspects of institutions such as SSDs. I have also borrowed from critical discourse theory the idea that context matters and has relevance to our understanding about social welfare and participation. I have concentrated on interpretations of text and talk in relation to children’s participation produced within SSDs. I was interested in representations within welfare organisations in terms of the stories they tell about participation within policy texts.

Lemke (1995) identifies the terms text and discourse as complementary. He argues that when we want to focus on the specifics of an event or occasion we speak of texts, but when we want to look at patterns, commonalities and relationships that embrace different texts it is more useful to speak of discourses. Analysis of policy texts from this perspective means trying to identify the discourses that are deployed within the text as well as the discursive strategies involved. This is a narrower definition of text than that used by Burr (1995) who argued that anything that could be read for meaning and thought of as manifesting one or more discourses can be referred to as a text. She cited examples of buildings that evoke ‘civic pride’ such as Town halls and uniforms or clothes suggesting class position, status, gender or subculture as examples of texts. This ‘life as text’ idea underpins some discourse approaches. Yates, for example, offers a broad ranging understanding of text based analysis as ‘the study and analysis of ‘cultural artefacts’ as well as things spoken and written by participants – things that are now broadly called ‘texts’ in social science’ (Yates, 2004, p134). My own use of the idea of text within this research is narrower and closer to the Lemke approach above, with a focus on the written word and discourses within policy. We can see that there is a debate about the
relationship between discourse, symbolism and culture. On the one hand discourse can be viewed as a linguistic concept which has a narrower reach. On the other discourse can be viewed as including symbolic and cultural analysis which includes ‘meanings’ that may be produced outside of language, including visual, multi-sensual analysis and music (see Finnegan, 2002 for example).

Following the arguments in chapter 1 we can see how a base level definition of discourse analysis is that it analyses the way systems of meaning or ‘discourses’ shape the way people understand their roles in society (Howarth, 1995). Fairclough (1989) looked at language as social practice and emphasised the performative aspects of talk. This involves the idea that as well as saying something we also do something. Hajer identified discourse analysis as ‘analysis of a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities’ (Hajer, 1995, p44). Taylor offers a loose definition of discourse analytic research as looking for patterns in language use which may be patterns within language or patterns of activity (Taylor, 2001).

We can see therefore that the focus on the symbolic is wider than language and discourse. Within this research I focus on organisational discourses to analyse the systems of meaning within social care organisations about children’s participation. Narrative analysis is closely related to discourse and involves an interest in how stories are constructed and told, for example, in interview or policy texts. Narratives intersect in complicated ways with discourse analysis in that they reveal the way discourses operate, are developed and compete within texts. In my research I use both narrative and discourse analysis to analyse texts.
Neo-Marxist and Feminist writers working within discourse analysis have focused upon the interests which particular discourses serve. This focus has been on the ideological effects of discourses and the unequal access to resources such as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). These insights have been used to show how social policies privilege particular groups and marginalise others, examples include analysing the way this works within schooling and how discourses reproduce relations of oppression (Gewirtz, 1995 and Young, 1990).

Plummer (1995) described narrative analysis as analysis of both the formal properties and social roles of stories and was concerned with the analysis of how stories marked out identities, difference and ‘the other’. He was also interested in how ‘the other’ helped structure the moral life of cultural, group and individual identities. In these contexts issues of identity construction and ‘othering’ become critical within the analysis. Another strand of narrative analysis involves analysing the production of narratives with a focus on the process of association, building connections between action and events and then negotiating them with the readers (Czarniawska, 1998).

I wanted to carry both these meanings of narrative analysis into my research. This means being concerned with the narrative structures and formal properties of stories as well as the social roles of those stories. Within my research the concept of narrative has been used to understand the construction of children’s participation by professionals as well as by the institutions of social welfare. In this way it has helped to analyse the stories told within and by the institutions of social welfare about participation.

By using interpretive methodological tools it is possible to discover how discourses sometimes compete, complement and conflict with one another within the same text. Using these
analytical frameworks the idea of texts as internally homogenous and cohesive is challenged. Instead texts are viewed as troubled, unsettled and straining with competing discourses and interpretations. I was also interested to see how discourses are sometimes actively resisted, refused or criticised as well as accepted.

Narrative analysis can be of interviews, photographs, other images, newspapers stories, media reporting as well as stories told within official documents and organisations. The emphasis within this research is given to analysis of formal and informal texts produced by local Authorities’ SSDs and children’s rights services as well as texts produced during interviews with practitioners involved in this area of work. The research process involved analysis of these texts to discover the narratives produced within them.

Within this research I used narrative and discourse analysis to understand representations about participation within the texts. Following the work of Hall (2001) I was interested in the rules which govern what is ‘sayable’ and ‘thinkable’ about participation for children in specific SSD settings at this particular historical moment. Furthermore I wanted to explore the subjects who personify the discourse, such as ‘the Looked After child’. I was interested in how knowledge about participation acquired authority and became embodied as ‘truth’ within the texts. Lastly I wanted to know more about how institutions of welfare, such as SSDs organise and develop practices around children and participation. One part of narrative analysis involves discovering how concepts and ideas within the text are made sense of and which discourse registers they seek connections to. Within this research my interest in the topic led me to focus on text, talk and narrative, which in turn led me towards discourse. The emphasis on discursive practices became useful in making visible the practical consequences
of discourse, the competing claims for legitimacy and whether the narratives had social and political effects.

Used in these ways narrative and discourse analysis helped me understand the ways language is used in the construction of social relations within the institutions of welfare, such as SSDs. They did this by making it possible to identify the claims, ideas and values that discourses consist of and then locating examples of these in language use within the texts. It allowed consideration of how language works and in particular how it constructs credible and persuasive versions of reality. It was then possible to see how these accounts related to the broader social processes and practices. Used in this way discourse and narrative analysis forms part of the critical social policy project committed to progressive social change (Fairclough, 2001) or an expansive politics of welfare (Clarke, 2004). In such contexts the analysis can be used to scrutinise and challenge existing, dominant, normative or hegemonic discourses and in doing so create a space where alternative discursive constructions are possible.

4.0: The Process of Analysing the Texts

The process of analysing the texts involved four distinct phases. The first stage took place during the first year of the research and involved familiarising myself with all the texts and developing a thematic approach to select texts and extracts which said something about these themes. The second stage of analysis involved further detailed analysis of a small number of texts and this produced a number of discourses. In the third stage I analysed the interview transcripts which produced a further set of concerns. The fourth phase took place early on in the writing up period of the research and led me into a further process of selection based upon re-reading all texts.
4.1: Selection

The difficulty of selection from the wide range of possible texts for illustration and further analysis has been raised in the earlier discussion about power and the researcher. It also links in to issues of the ethics, as material could be selected which supports a particular perspective of children and participation. In the analysis of the texts I looked for evidence of counter perspectives and arguments but, as discussed earlier, part of using qualitative and interpretive research methods is knowing that the readings here will only ever be partial and situated readings. This multi-layered approach to selection allowed me to be general at the outset of the research, then thematic in selection and lastly to select on more specific criteria and topics. At each stage of selection I checked back that there were not counter narratives I had overlooked that disrupted the account of children and participation I was beginning to develop.

Given the vast range of possible texts to focus on from both policy and interviews texts (171 in total) it was important for me to be clear and explicit about how I selected the materials I have used within the thesis. As discussed earlier selection of data is an important issue in interpretive analysis. The approach I used is consistent with Taylor who argues that conducting analysis involves going over data again and again, whether listening to recordings or reading transcripts or documents, noting features of interest but not settling on these. It involves working through the data over quite a long period, returning to them a number of times. Data analysis is not accomplished in one or two sessions … As possible patterns emerge, it is useful to note them but continue searching. Eventually there will be a range of possibilities to explore further. It will almost certainly be necessary to focus on some at the
expense of others, leaving unfinished avenues for further exploration. Discourse data are ‘rich’, which means that it is probably impossible to reach a point where the data are exhausted, with nothing more to find in them because the analysis is complete (Taylor, 2001, p38-9).

4.2: The four stages of analysis

The first stage of analysis involved detailed reading of all the texts. I made notes summarising the sorts of materials and documents I had been sent from each Authority. After reading and re-reading all the texts, to familiarise myself with the range of issues and concerns as well as the main developments within policy around children’s participation, I found that several common themes were emerging across many of them. At this early stage I made a note of a number of possible themes and coded the texts accordingly. I did this initially by using sticky notes throughout the texts and when the number of these became unmanageable I changed this to a system of colour coding within and across the texts to make links about themes I was discovering. Alongside this I used a flip chart to note emerging themes and issues across the 171 texts. I then used a scanner to input sections of texts into a word processor so that I could eventually cut and paste extracts of text into a word processor document. This process of noting and recording recurring themes and issues gradually evolved as I immersed myself in the analysis. When I began the process the themes were loose and not particularly coherent. As the analysis developed I noted more about the links between different themes and across the texts. This led to a gradual grouping of some aspects of the texts which seemed to offer useful insights or examples of the themes.
I had some general questions in mind when I started to analyse the texts. These questions are a mix of other qualitative researchers questions (see for example Hastings, 1998 and Stone, 1989) and my own. Further questions emerged as I entered into the process. The first set of questions concerned the conditions out of which the text emerged. Related to this were questions about the contexts of the production of knowledge. What were the conditions of production, which were required to read or to create the texts? Following the approach used by Plummer (1995) I was interested in the production and reproduction of new stories about participation and the concrete and institutional effects of these as well as the connections between emerging stories, counter narratives and social change.

Another area of analysis was about what kinds of ‘problem’ were being constructed within the texts and what kinds of solutions either emerged or were proposed? Was success in dealing with ‘the problem’ dependent upon anything such as partnership, multi-agency working, departmental reorganisation and so forth? This follows the work of Bacchi (1999) outlined in chapter 1. This relates to issues around causality of problems identified within the text. In this study I was interested to explore the relationship between policies, texts and practices in participation work with children so I was particularly interested in parts of the text where participation was discussed and in the ways in which it was being discussed. The relationship between text and effect is rarely clear but I was interested in what sort of effects and consequences the texts sought.

A further area of interrogation of the texts involved questions about authors and assumed readers of texts. Who authored the text and who did they assume to be the likely readers of the text? Related to this was the idea of how the texts were accepted, resisted, refused or reinscribed by different readers or social groups. Did the text privilege particular interests,
positions or perspectives? When I read and re-read the texts I kept these sets of questions in mind at each stage. The aim was to treat the texts as a dynamic object of analysis to discover the narratives and discourses carried within them.

The second stage of analysis involved further detailed analysis of a smaller number of texts. I selected seven texts at this stage because they each seemed to be saying something different, distinctive, clear or illustrative of the themes I had discovered when reading across the range of texts. In stage 1 I had identified the broad range of themes and issues which emerged across the whole range of policy texts. In reading and re-reading the texts in the first stage a number of themes, concepts, contexts, stories, narratives and discourses had emerged. These ranged across issues including managerialism, customer and consumer perspectives, children’s rights, parent’s rights, family rights, ‘voice’ of the child, essentialism, protectionism, child development, ‘place and ‘space’ discourses and legal contexts for participation. These themes, contexts and discourses formed the basis of selection of the seven texts for detailed analysis because in reading across the whole range of text they each contributed something specific to illustrate or exemplify one or several of the themes. This further sampling was necessary in order to engage with some of the texts in a more detailed way.

During this stage I was concerned with how coherent the text was and whether there was evidence of tension or competing discourses. I was interested in who or what was invisible or absent from the text. This enabled me to focus on what was present within the text as well as considering what might be absent. Evidencing an absence is a tricky issue. Within the later chapters I show how some issues were visible within particular texts whereas others were only hinted at. Other possible accounts were left out or marginalised within the policy texts but
emerged instead within the interview texts. The issues of diminished resources in social welfare settings provided a good example of this.

Within this stage of analysis I was making detailed notes on discourses, contestations and absences. I was particularly interested in constructions of children’s participation and the area of how subjects are categorised within the text. This was significant because of my concern with how children are produced and represented within the texts (Fairclough, 2001). As I read the texts I made notes on the use of agentless, passive formulations which absented human agency. I was curious about whether any ‘victims’ or ‘villains’ emerged from the text and whether there was any pathologising, essentialising or ‘blaming the victim’ within the texts. These concerns form the basis of further discussion in relation to images and representations of children in chapter 5.

The third stage of the process was my analysis of the interview transcripts. As I outlined earlier in the chapter, the Authorities I wrote back to request interviews with were also selective. This selection was based upon the analysis in stage two above about the themes, discourses and contexts which were emerging as significant to the research. The analysis of the interview texts involved me listening to each interview several times and making a note of the themes, narratives and discourses as well as keeping a written summary of the themes discussed in different parts of each interview.

A significant moment in this phase of the research was presenting a research seminar to academic colleagues. This was an extremely useful aspect of the research process and again made me further reflect and rethink parts of my analysis. Part of the discussion, for example, made me think further about the issues of anxiety and strain within the texts. The theorising
and discussion on this within Chapter 6 is in part a response to particular questions raised within the seminar. The seminar also made me consider further the issues involved in transcribing and the responsibilities of the researcher in transcribing the interview tapes. A good example of this is that one of the extracts from an interview transcript caused some discussion about the laugh at the end of the difficult story being told by the CRO. The discussion within the seminar was about the interpretation of the laugh. This made me reflect on how detailed the transcription needs to be and on how different interpretations and readings can be made of such a small point. I had interpreted the laugh in a particular way and some of the audience of the seminar were asking questions about my interpretation as well as offering alternative possibilities. One of the issues it raised for me was how the process of how we ‘read’ texts is highly interpretive and linked to our previous experiences, politics, perspectives and knowledge of the specific context.

The other issue this discussion raised for me was how when we interpret texts we rely on information and knowledge from the whole context of the interview as well as any previous knowledge we have of the interviewee. In this instance I knew the participant (from previous work and friendship contexts) and because of this I felt protective of her and wanted to assert that she would not laugh at the difficult predicament of a service user. This led me to interpret the laughter in a particular way. The seminar discussion alerted me to the possibility that I was part of the reason this participant laughed during this interview. The use of humour could be viewed as evidence that I was ‘inside’ that story with that particular interviewee. Other people who were interviewed were strangers so this previous knowledge and context did not exist with them. This reminded me that when we present extracts of transcripts we have a responsibility to present the audience with as much information as possible to assist the interpretation. This reinforces the idea of the research process being ‘open’. It also affirms
the idea that interpretations are just that and that no one interpretation can ever achieve the status of ‘truth’.

The discussion during the seminar was extremely supportive and it reinforced and affirmed many of my own interpretations of the texts as well as providing me with some possibilities of slightly different interpretations on parts of the material. As part of being open and reflexive within this research, the seminar was an important point. Allowing my colleagues critical access to research material as ‘work in progress’ was both daunting and thrilling. It added a dimension to the research that again introduced some further dynamic tension. This is something I have embraced and welcomed throughout the research as I have talked with and discussed some of the ideas with my supervisors as well as various friends, children and colleagues. They have been contacts from my family and friendship group, from social work, voluntary organisations and children’s rights backgrounds as well as academic colleagues. These informal discussions have helped to keep the research dynamic and alert to other themes, narratives and discourses that I may have missed.

The fourth stage of the research analysis involved re-reading all the texts again but this time with the themes, narratives and discourses in mind. At this stage I was looking for evidence of competing discourses. I was also interested to discover evidence of strain or anxiety within the texts which relates to issues discussed within chapter 6. I wanted to discover the main discourses at work within and across the range of texts. This stage of the analysis included a check on whether there were other narratives or discourses which I had missed during the earlier stages. During this period I added some further extracts from across the full range of texts that seemed to illustrate themes and discourses I had not so far focused upon. It was this
stage that made me feel more secure that the discourses I was now focusing on were the ones of particular significance to the research questions on children’s participation.

Early on in the research process I familiarised myself with the literature and theoretical accounts of participation and children’s rights discourses. During the analysis I continued to read such theoretical accounts and found this moving back and forth between theory, texts and the analysis an integral part of the process of the research. At the time this sometimes felt chaotic and disorganised because I was trying to hold so many discourses, themes, strands and ideas in my head at the same time. I now believe that this circular process of continuous reflection between reading the data, reading the theoretical accounts, amending the process, writing and the analysis has been an informative and dynamic part of the research process. I acknowledge that at times it made the analysis feel difficult and unsatisfactory. Taylor argues that ‘a researcher who accepts the idea of reflexivity will not necessarily edit out problems and false starts: the aim is not to ‘smooth’ or idealize the research process’ (Taylor, 2001 p41).

Throughout the next three chapters extracts are presented using a Comic Sans font rather than Times New Roman font used elsewhere. These selected extracts are important in giving the reader the opportunity to read, first hand, the issues being raised and decide whether my analysis seems convincing. They also allow the reader to situate her or himself within the different interpretations that could follow from the extract. Again this is an important part of interpretive methodology and gives the reader direct access to selected parts of the original texts. As discussed earlier I am aware of the difficulties involved in selection of extracts but the formal limitations of word length means that it has been necessary to be selective about which texts and which parts of them I included within the thesis. I have tended to select
scripts that added something to the arguments, or presented a complex view of participation and so forth. In addition I have, in places, and again because of limitations of word length sometimes had to edit the text to make it shorter. I was conscious of the responsibilities on the researcher and the possibility of taking a comment out of context or misrepresenting the interviewee or the Authority within this editing of policy and interview texts. From the full range of texts available the choices were endless but I have tried to keep the sense of the text within the extracts. In addition, the full transcripts from their interviews have been made available to each of the research participants.

5.0: Conclusions

As I said in the introduction my initial interest was in the area of children’s participation in social welfare contexts. It was this interest combined with past experience which led me to the topic. The choice of topic, in turn, led me to the methods. Interpretive analysis of texts using narrative and discourse offers richness and depth of understanding which is both enlightening and intriguing. The research methods have been presented including the data gathering, selection of texts, the interview process and the analysis of the data. I have situated myself within the research process both in this chapter and in the introduction to the thesis as part of being open and reflexive about the experiences I bring to the research questions. I have outlined the process I used to address the research questions. In addition I have attempted to capture something about the process that felt ‘untidy’ or difficult while I was immersed within it.
The use of narrative and discourse analysis has allowed me to discover insights into the way policies of participation are constructed, negotiated, contested, reconfigured and appropriated within SSDs. In addition it has allowed me to interrogate a diverse range of texts to view the various constructions of children and participation that are embedded within them. The next chapters of the thesis will engage more fully with a range of these selected texts to further explore the complex issues relating to the constructions of children’s participation. As discussed earlier in this chapter the readings I offer within the next three chapters are all partial, situated and open to different interpretations. Part of the aim of this chapter was to give the reader access to the process, theory and methods I used to reach the readings I have about the texts.

Chapter 4

Textual Analysis: Competing Discourses

1.0: Introduction

Within this chapter I analyse the policy and interview texts with a particular interest in how the discourses are evident within and across these texts. The analysis takes on two aspects of discourse in relation to texts. The first part of the chapter demonstrates how the productive power of discourses works across the texts. This involves acknowledging the capacity of discourses to constrain, shape and define the limits of what can be said and what is known within the policy texts. Particular texts have been selected because they exemplify particular
discourses and bear their marks. I have identified four main discourses running throughout these texts. They are the discourses of protectionism, developmentalism, rights and managerialism, which appeared to be the most significant. I argue that the protectionist and developmentalist discourses establish the terrain against (or within) which the others have to work and as such they are the framing discourses which permeate all the texts. The rights discourse challenges and disrupts both of these earlier discourses. Together these first three discourses constitute the professional basis for social work with children. I will argue that managerialism is the fourth discourse, which then seeks to displace, subordinate or appropriate professional discourses of social work with children. Separating the discourses in this part of the analysis is an act of abstraction on my part because they are demonstrated by using extracts which inevitably exemplify more than one discourse. These discourses are pervasive and uneven across all the documents but I aim to illustrate the way they are made visible, articulated, negotiated, produced, worked and reworked throughout the texts.

The second aspect of this chapter concerns what policy documents do with discourses and here I analyse the impact of Quality Protects, as it appears in my texts. In chapter 2 I outlined Quality Protects which was introduced by the New Labour Government in 1998 as part of their modernising agenda for social services with children. In this chapter the emphasis is on the way the policy texts are the unique, idiosyncratic and sometimes distinctive outcomes of these discourses. I use Quality Protects as an example to illustrate the process of constructing unique positions within a field of discourses. All the texts are, multiple, complex texts where echoes can be heard from competing discourses. The analysis of Quality Protects, as it appears in my policy texts, explores the interesting ways that discourses are articulated as a new configuration within a specific policy framework.
One way of interrogating the different kinds of discourses within these texts is to examine how they are produced in relation to the different kinds of texts. My analysis of the texts suggests that the discourses of protectionism and child development, for example, are embedded within the more formal and official policy texts whereas the rights discourse is more evident within the informal and unofficial texts (as discussed in chapter 3). I argue that this gives an indication as to where these discourses are being produced and the relative weight being given to them. One way of viewing this is to see protectionism and child development discourses as produced by the ‘centre’ including institutional and central government sources whereas the rights discourses have generally emerged from the ‘margins’ such as challenges from campaign/service user groups (Cochrane, 1993, Taylor, 1993). This distinction helps in some ways although the CRC, which came out of the United Nations (UN) context, is problematically situated at neither centre nor margins. The UN would seem to be a powerful international body which would place it at the centre, however, the resistance by UK government to some of the CRC rights for children indicates that it is being marginalised in some ways.

There are many similarities across the texts I looked at which should not be surprising given they are all shaped and framed by the same legislation, policy, inquiry reports, conceptual frameworks and guidance. They are all seeking to address the policy and practice issues arising from social and welfare work with Looked After or ‘at risk’ children. The more surprising and significant feature of my analysis is the degree of differentiation between the different Authorities’ policies in relation to children.
There are several ways to account for this differentiation between the policy texts. One is to acknowledge the ways in which the texts bear the marks of the specific conditions of their production. The context within which the text was produced is relevant. If a CRO produces a text after a consultation event, for example, the text may be making a case for a specific resource or raising an issue on behalf of children. Others are produced within a more formal setting such as reports produced for the Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC). Specific places or localities have a history, politics or context which becomes embedded implicitly or explicitly within the texts. The texts are therefore produced and constituted by, as well as constitutive of, the context of the specific place and space. Specific histories or events create a ‘space’ within the texts. Although an Inquiry Report, for example, is sometimes named in the introduction to a written document, more usually it becomes a ‘visible absence’ in that it is not explicitly discussed but the reader knows that it is there. Some of the Welsh Authorities, for example, refer to the North Wales Inquiry into abuse in children’s homes (Waterhouse, 2000). Others name an Inquiry Report or refer to an SSI inspection within their child protection procedures.

A second way to account for the differentiation between texts is to consider the different ways audiences and readers are implied within the texts. The authors of the policies, consciously or unconsciously, imagine the readers and this imaginary audience may shape or constrain the text. All the texts are produced for a specific audience and the mode of address used within the text gives some clues to this. The style in which the text is written gives further clues about the different author/s and imagined audiences.

2.0: The Protectionist Discourse
In chapter 2 I argued that the protectionist discourses have become the normative and dominant position within social and welfare practice and policy. My reading of the more formal and official policy texts showed that the protectionist discourse is pervasive across these texts. When a discourse is so pervasive and successfully embedded within policy texts it becomes almost invisible within those texts. It becomes a framing context which is everywhere but nowhere. By this I mean it is rarely explicitly argued within the policy texts in my research. It becomes ‘taken for granted’ or assumed and achieves the status of ‘truth’ within the texts. In this way it becomes established as a powerful discourse against which others have to work. The consequence of the success of this discourse within the texts means that it is more difficult to identify texts which exemplify this discursive position. This is a significant methodological and analytical point and in the extracts which follow I am attempting to make this discourse visible.

It is in the child protection policy texts, as the name implies, that we find the clearest examples of the protectionist discourse at work. The first examples of protectionism are taken from policy texts where there are concerns a child may be ‘upset’ by participation:

*Children should not be re-exposed to details of their abuse in discussion between adults which is not part of the therapeutic work with the child. Children should not be placed in a situation in which they may feel responsible for the abuse, their parent’s anger/guilt/distress, or their own protection.*

(Department D)
‘Careful consideration will need to be given to the child’s presence in the conference, in order to ensure that it will not add to the abuse, by the child having to listen to details being presented at the conference’.

(Department H)

They might … hear things they should not hear.

(Department K)

All three Authorities view children as needing protection from participation, but for different reasons within each. Department D argues most explicitly that the child must be protected from ‘upset’, suggesting it is participation itself which will cause upset rather than the abuse. For Department H it is information that children need protecting from. It is implicit within these texts that the professionals involved in the meeting are assumed to represent the child’s ‘best interests’ in situations where they judge that they would not benefit from attending or that they would be ‘upset’. Department K raises the idea of children as ‘corruptible’. It poses the question of what ‘things’ are considered inappropriate for the child to hear and know. The assumption is that it is children who need protection but there is also the possibility that adults may need protecting from knowing about children being abused. This possibility disrupts the imagined normative child discussed within chapter 2.

The claim embedded within these texts is that talking about abuse with children can be abusive or ‘corrupting’. Some professionals may believe that the consequences of intervention may be worse than the abuse itself although there is research evidence that counters this idea
Protecting children is being constructed here as not talking to them about anything related to topics which adults and professionals consider outside the realms of ‘normal’ childhood. Children who have been abused often know things which adults consider ‘beyond their years’ and experience.

In many of the policy texts it is clear that social workers are expected to make decisions ‘in the best interest’ of the child. It is assumed they should ‘know’ in an unproblematic way what that means. Within most Authorities it is the assessing social worker that makes the recommendation regarding the child’s participation within meetings.

The following extract is interesting in the way it articulates a clear view that children’s rights are negotiated in complex ways via adults and professionals:

*Attendance of any of the above persons will be at the discretion of the PSW Child Protection who will be chairing the child protection conference. Before any arrangements are made with the parents and/or child, arrangements should be made with the PSW Child Protection who will be chairing the meeting.*

(Department D)

In this extract the child was on the list of people who may be invited to attend the meeting. Being in a list of people who may (rather than must) be invited already displaces the child from being central to the process of child protection. In addition, adult and professionals act as ‘gatekeepers’ to children in child protection conferences. The area of discretion for the principle social worker (PSW) is one which could mean that children could be marginalised by
this process. The assumptions underpinning most of the policies are that children’s rights and needs can be effectively represented by social workers or other professionals involved within child protection.

The policies generally speak about a fear of burdening children more than they already are and the desire to relieve them of responsibility, which represents another version of protectionism. One of the fundamental therapeutic issues in work with children who have been abused is to help them to understand that the abuse was not their responsibility or fault. This contrasts to earlier approaches that blamed children and held them responsible for their own abuse. As discussed in chapter 2, feminist discourse successfully challenged this ‘victim blaming’ in child sexual abuse approaches during the 1980s. I am arguing that this discourse has been appropriated in selective ways and reinterpreted within the policy texts in a way which leads back into protectionism. The other part of feminist discourse on child abuse was to insist that children should be empowered and have agency within the process. This part of the feminist discourse has not been taken on in the same way. This is an important example of what policy texts do with discourses in that some challenges are resisted while others, which are more consistent and fit more easily with the normative and protectionist discourses around children, become part of policy and practice.

This next extract comes from an interview with a CRO discussing the issue of children being protected from ‘upset’. It is interesting because the interviewee offers a challenge to the idea that the protectionist discourse is pervasive:

SP Can I go back to something you said earlier about children and young people sometimes not being included in meetings because of fears they might get ‘upset’? Do you have any
concerns about participation in relation to children and young people becoming ‘upset’ or hearing things they might not be able to deal with or understand?

CRO The idea of children and young people not being able to hear things that have and are affecting them is erm … if that young person hadn’t experienced those things … fair enough, but they have already experienced it, so what is the point in saying … However, it is my absolute belief and it is supported by theory and my work with young people … that if you are going to repair somebody’s life in any meaningful way or help them to build any small amount of resilience … then you cannot exclude them from decision-making processes. And I am not dictating how you include them … and young people have got a lot of ideas themselves about how you might do that, and I have too, but it’s kind of before that you have to accept that you can’t protect someone from something that has already happened to them.

(CRO3, Department A8)

For the CRO participation means working with the child in a way which acknowledges abuse rather than avoiding the issue and this challenges the protectionist discourse in a particular way. It captures a more dynamic and active view of the child than that within most of the formal and official policy texts. The idea of a child developing resilience is given more importance than them being protected from ‘upset’. The protectionist discourse leads to practices which negate children’s agency. The child who is considered to be ‘at risk’ of significant harm is generally being constructed passively within the texts where the emphasis is on the vulnerability, risks and the need for protection. The suggestion is that children should be freed from responsibility and that adults/professionals will protect them. This approach assumes that adults/professionals will and can protect children. An alternative view would be to construct children as active agents who have a part to play within the process of their own protection, without making them solely responsible. This more complex view was generally
not articulated within the formal policy documents. It was within the informal texts produced by CROs that this alternative perspective became a possibility. This last extract and discussion provide an illustration of the way that the discourses are never ‘pure’, undiluted or completely closed to challenge. In this example the challenges to protectionism come from a children’s rights perspective and are articulated by a CRO. In this interview extract we see the emergence of challenge and resistance to protectionism, which lends support to the argument about its pervasiveness and the way it acts as a ‘framing’ discourse in social and welfare work with children.

In these extracts we see the way the protectionist discourse has shaped the practice of participation in particular ways.

3.0: The Developmentalist Discourse

A second framing discourse identified in the texts arises from the discussion in chapter 2 where I outlined the way the developmentalist discourse emerged within social work training where the focus on psychology and the individual is dominant. Fendler talks about the discourse of developmentality where ‘normalisation operates through the discourse of developmentality when the generalizations that stipulate normal development are held to be defined and desirable … (and serve) as the norm and the lives of individual children are evaluated with reference to that norm’ (Fendler, 2001, p128). The argument is that children are governed through the normalising effects of psychological classifications. Developmentalist theory articulates a view that children mature in certain linear stages and that age is a reliable way of determining what stage of maturity a child should be at. Developmentalist discourse is closely related to the protectionist discourse above because it is
assumes that there is a gradient of development or maturation that reduces the child’s need for protection.

Department L’s Mission Statement says that they are

*Committed to involving children and young people in Child Protection Case Conferences because they have a right to participate in information sharing and decision-making about them, as is consistent with their welfare, age and understanding.*

This Authority, like most others, starts off with a commitment to involving children although the commitment weakens as the sentence continues. The key issues are revealed as the professional assessment of the child’s age and understanding. In this extract we can see the discourse of developmentalism at work.

The general view embedded within the texts is that participation is closely linked to age, hence it is assumed that younger children need or are able to manage or cope with less participation than older children. The text also suggests that participation only involves being present at a meeting, rather than part of a process of involvement in decision-making. The extent to which age is a reliable way of determining level of maturity is not questioned within the texts. Department C, for example, says that the older a child becomes the more they should be allowed to participate in their own meetings. Many Authorities suggest a specific age at which participation in a specific event or meeting becomes possible. Some Authorities are prescriptive about age and suggest a particular age for participation whereas others suggest secondary school children and above are more likely to benefit
No child aged 12 or under should attend

(Department J)

It is not practical for children under 12 years to be in the meeting

(Department K)

Parents attend 90% of child protection case conferences, but the number of children is much lower. It would be unusual if they attended if they were under 10

(Department A3)

Sometimes it is helpful for an older child to attend the conference to give their own views. This will depend on the family’s situation and the social worker will talk to you and your child about this. You are asked not to bring young children to the conference and to ask someone to care for them for you.

(Department H)

These extracts illustrate some variability of age considered appropriate for a child to be invited to participate in their child protection meeting. Many Authorities said they did not invite children to attend their child protection meetings:
It is the responsibility of the chair and all those attending to ensure that the voice of the child/young person is heard and that the child's interests are the focus of the case conference

(Department A)

In the extract above we see again that participation itself is not being problematised. Although there are many variations in the age considered reasonable for a child to participate in child protection meetings, the variations in development of individual children discussed in chapter 2 are not generally considered. Instead many Authorities impose a fixed, blunt or vague definition of the age a child is likely to be considered to be able to participate. Within the context of these policy texts, age is privileged and signifies a developmental stage and the underlying assumption is that the older one becomes the more responsibility and competence becomes likely. 16 Authorities (out of the 58 who sent me documents and data) explicitly discussed the issue of children’s attendance at child protection conferences. Several of these said they were still considering this and were in the process of re-writing their procedures in line with Quality Protects guidelines. The construction of participation within Looked After policy documents was different than in child protection in that children were more likely to be viewed as active participants in these processes. This is discussed in more detail below.

The developmentalist discourse is not always expressed so explicitly in terms of age. Many Authorities use a checklist like the one below to determine participation:

If children are to attend a Child Protection Conference, the following should first be considered.
— The degree to which the child wishes to attend the conference
— The ability of the child to understand the conference structure and express him/herself in it
— Whether the child has a relationship with a trusted adult, e.g. social worker, teacher, etc. who can prepare the child and assist him/her during the child protection conference.
— The degree of conflict, or inhibition, experienced by the child from his/her parents, or in relation to the professional group.
— Whether the child would prefer to send a letter, drawing or message to the meeting instead of attending.

(Department D)

What is interesting is that age is not mentioned in this extract, instead it is the child’s ‘ability to understand’ which is the determining factor. Unlike the earlier texts, here participation is determined in more complex ways than by age alone. Instead it is negotiated and mediated via adults and professionals, who assess and make a judgement about the child’s level of understanding and expression. The criteria for participation being constructed within these texts are based on children being considered by adults/professionals to have ‘sufficient understanding’ and this becomes critical to participation rights for children. As we saw in chapter 2 this assessment of understanding needs to be problematised and there are variations in interpretation of ‘the best interests’ of the child in any given situation. In this extract we see
that some Authorities considered the level of understanding rather than age to be the key
factor and this shows institutional awareness that age itself can be a crude indicator of
understanding.

Another aspect of these texts is the various ways professionals become gatekeepers for
participation of children.

NB. Always seek the views of child psychiatry if they are involved.

(Department L)

We saw in chapter 2 that the ‘experts’ involved in assessments of children will range from
child psychologists or psychiatrists, social workers, health visitors as well as various other
health professionals who have a background and training in either medical or psychological
perspectives of child development. Here we see assumptions made about the relative status
and hierarchy of the different professionals working within the multi-agency framework of
child protection. The underlying assumption is that these experts know, or can discover, the
developmental ‘truth’ about people. Alternative models of child development including social
and cultural perspectives are given less credibility within texts emphasising ‘expertise’. More
recently, what has been called the ‘new’ sociology of childhood has challenged the dominance
of psychology in childhood studies (Hobbs, 2002, McKechnie, 2002). Despite the challenges
to the traditional orthodoxy of the psychological and medical models discussed in chapter 2
these formal policy texts bear testimony to the way these discourses remain dominant. I have
argued that the view in the texts about children and participation is one that derives largely
from psychological perspectives of child development.
4.0: Rights Discourses

In this section I argue that rights discourses are mobilised around different subjects, such as children, parents’ and families. Secondly, I show that these discourses are internally contested between the various constituencies within the texts.

4.1: Children’s Rights

I argued in chapter 1 that the children’s rights discourse developed from within the NSMs and post-structuralist perspectives, where the discursive space was created for the children’s rights movement to develop. The children’s rights discourse as ‘claims making’ appear mostly in the informal documents and interview texts. Children’s rights discourse is less apparent in the formal policy texts than the two discourses discussed earlier. The discourse contains a wide range of perspectives and approaches and it is unsurprising that the texts similarly encompass a range. One of the significant features to emerge from reading all the texts in relation to children’s rights discourse was the way that the first person voices of children were more likely to be incorporated into informal policy texts, generally produced by the CROs and related professionals. The voice of children only being heard in the informal policy texts produced by CROs is significant in showing that children’s voices have not yet made an appearance within the formal policy texts of SSDs. This is interesting because most SSDs now have policy statements about listening to and hearing the voice of children.
Department F has the strongest representation of the ‘voices’ of children throughout their texts. These texts are among the few containing direct quotes from children regarding their experiences of Looked After services. The following are taken from a text authored by a CRO after a consultation event with children about why SSDs should listen to them:

- Because we’re our own people and should have some privacy and make our own decisions
- We’re not kids and they should treat us the same as adults
- Because without children Social Services would not exist
- Because what we say is important
- We think Social Services should listen to us because it’s our lives and we know what we want
- By listening, Social Services will enable us to achieve what we want.
- Because they have to listen!
- Because we know what we want and how we feel
- Because Social Services is here for young people not the other way round
- There is no reason why not
- Because I want you to

(Department F)

The first striking feature is the effect of the change in mode of address from ‘they’ to ‘we’ in the comments made by children here. This is significant because it changes the subject
position and becomes children talking about themselves, their expectations and aspirations rather than being represented by a professional or ‘expert’. Here we see the children have agency and instead ‘they’ become SSDs and professionals. The issue raised in the introduction to the chapter about authors and imagined audiences is relevant here. This Department has a children’s forum organised by a CRO. The imagined audience for this text could range from children, parents, carers, social workers, managers, elected members and the ACPC.

The following extract helps us to understand some of the tensions around children’s rights between professionals and SSDs. This extract comes from an interview with a CRO who regularly organises consultation events:

**SP** ... so where do those informal comments to you go?

**CRO** well at the moment it goes from us to our management but it doesn’t go into a strategic plan. There is no system in place that feeds those day-to-day comments into a strategic plan.

SP that’s really interesting in relation to the process of policy making and how the informal processes feed into the formal policy documents and plans. Do the comments you receive from young people feed into any formal processes and policy?

**CRO** Not really no. My experience ... I'm not trying to be really negative here ... but my experience is that young people can be helped on an individual basis sometimes depending on the issues they raise. But there is nowhere that is gathering this information and correlating it and asking has this arisen before? Is it something we can integrate into our policy and practice? And that is not
just comments to me I'm also thinking of the complaints procedure and reviews. Where does information from reviews go? It goes in a box and doesn't get looked at and evaluated. It’s the same with complaints and recommendations, transitions reviews for disabled children ... where do they go to? SP ... so nobody is taking the strategic overview and evaluating the information which is there? It isn't making a difference to what happens? CRO No it’s not. The only time it makes a difference is if there’s an SSI inspection where they pick up things and ask organisations like ourselves or ask young people directly. (CRO3, Department A8)

This extract illustrates some of the difficulties and tensions within the processes of participation and consultation from the perspective of children’s rights professionals. We feel the CRO’s sense of dismay and frustration of not being able to make any difference after hearing what young people say at participation and consultations events. This provides a comment about children’s rights work being a difficult arena to work in because of the slow pace of change and limited evidence of the impact and outcomes of children’s participation. This may be a common experience of consultation and service user participation in different policy and service delivery contexts (Danso et al, 2003; Carr, 2004).

The children in Department F above make a range of comments about the reasons they feel they should be listened to and similar comments are made across a number of informal texts from different Authorities. These comments range from assertive statements to more cautious
ones about why their views and opinions should be valued. They are all clear that SSDs should listen to children. This juxtaposition of the consistent messages from consultation events with children and the sense that welfare organisations are not able or willing to listen to these comments creates a tension between the advocates of children’s rights and SSDs which is evidenced throughout the texts.

Department D has what it describes as a ‘child centred’ approach and uses an information pack designed for helping children understand what is happening when they are Looked After. They are unusual in using legislation and referring to children’s rights explicitly to establish the framework for the policy and guidance in relation to information provided for children. They set the context clearly for the right to information within legislation as follows:

Children and young people who are looked after by the Local Authority have a right to information about what is happening to them and why, and about how to get help if they need it. This right to information is backed by:

(1) The UN Convention on the rights of the child

(2) The Children Act 1989

(3) *** Children’s Services Plan.

The Children Act Guidance and Regulations specify that the information should be provided in written as well as verbal form.

(Volume 3 sections 2.47, 6.34, 8.23, 9.22, 9.31, 10.16).

(Department D)
Authorities are starting to produce extensive ranges of leaflets for children. The CROs within this Authority went on to produce information packs to be used with Looked After children. The following extract is from the interview with a childcare consultant within this Authority problematising the use of these information packs:

_CCC_ But I think social workers were overloaded. Social workers who aren’t thinking of things from the young person’s point of view, they have other priorities, they get shoved in a cupboard and get forgotten about. And I do feel a little erm (pause) cynical about how much benefit came out of all the hard work that came out of developing them … I don’t know - I think the Reviewing Officers are probably still using the ‘Review Decisions’ cards and I’ve repeatedly plugged social workers to use the ‘What’s happening?’ cards so that kids have got a copy of their Care Plan. But I think it is disappointing that it still isn’t happening as much as it should be. Repeatedly when you ask young people ‘and have you got a copy of your care plan?’ they say ‘what’s that?’ And it’s not just young people, carers should also have a copy and yet there’s an experienced social worker in this office who was chairing a meeting with some foster carers recently and erm … started talking about the Care Plan … and the foster carers who were admittedly belligerent, falling out with the Department … were saying ‘Care plan, what’s a bloody care plan? I’ve never seen any of these … nobody’s ever sent me one’. And I was saying well … (social worker) will have given you a
copy of it. And you could see her sitting there thinking 'oh, am I supposed to give a copy of the care plan to the carers?' And I think my God, if that message hasn't got through to somebody who works with us regularly then ... and so I think even less gets through to young people.

(CCC, Department D)

This text raises critical questions about the way that consultation with children is being constructed and negotiated within SSDs contexts. Within the formal policy text there is an emphasis on children’s right to written information. The above extract illustrates some of the complexities involved in performing this and that written information on its own does not deliver children’s rights.

In one Department children are given more rights than their parents in Looked After reviews: ‘There is no reason why the young person - as the subject - should not chair the meeting’

(Department C).

In this example the young person is constructed as the active subject and given ownership of their Review meeting. In relation to children’s rights this represents a contrast to child protection meetings, where professionals own the meeting, invite parents and assess whether a child has ‘sufficient understanding’ to attend. It is not made clear, however, how young people gain the experience, confidence and skills to be able to chair their own review meeting, or whether it actually happens in practice. Interestingly parents are not on the list of invited
people at these review meetings. This represents a contrast in institutional attitudes from those we saw earlier. The variations that are emerging in participation policy and practice across different aspects of services for children are discussed further later in this chapter.

What we can see here is the way aspects of the children’s rights discourses have become embedded in a variety of ways within the welfare frameworks for children. I will develop this later in the chapter to argue that a form of children’s rights has been appropriated and mainstreamed within Quality Protects frameworks, where consultation with children is made into a requirement. I will interrogate my texts further in chapter 5 to draw out the impact of these developments upon children.

4.2: Parents’ Rights

In chapter 2 we saw how the legislation reflects a tension between the rights of children and parents. The Children Act is clear, however, that parents have ‘responsibilities’ rather than rights and this can be viewed as a taming of the parents’ rights discourse by aligning rights with responsibilities. The extracts below illustrate the complex ways the rights of parents were embedded and negotiated within the texts:

Parents are seen as the primary decision-makers and, in negotiating with the service, individuals play an important part in determining its shape.

Child care has a long history of producing detailed and individualised plans for children, taking into account the wishes and feelings of children and their parents.
Feedback about child protection conferences which is routinely collected from all parents who attend.

(Department A2)

Here the balance is tilted towards parents’ rather than children’s rights. The guidance acknowledges that the Children Act laid down the framework for children’s participation although this is not reflected strongly in their literature. Another Authority conducted research into parents’ views of child protection processes. They concluded that:

It was pleasing to note reports of good practice when parents said they felt supported and informed. All the more gratifying since it is known that customers find it easier to complain than compliment, especially in such a sensitive area.

(Department A5)

This research was part of the department’s ‘working in partnership’ framework. The use of the customer discourse will be discussed later in the chapter but what is interesting is the way parents’ rights and customer discourses converge within this text whereas children’s rights do not make an appearance.

In *** there is a presumption that parents and children of appropriate age will be invited to attend ...
When parents are to attend the Child Protection Conference they should first be advised by the social worker, that they cannot be present for the duration of the Child Protection Conference.

Whilst there may be exceptional occasions when it will not be right to invite one or other parent to attend the Child Protection Conference, exclusion should be kept to a minimum and needs to be especially justified. A strong risk of violence, with supporting evidence, by the parents towards the child or professionals might be evidence that the conference would be likely to be disrupted. The possibility that one or other of the parents may be prosecuted for an offence against the child does not in itself justify exclusion.

(Department D)

This extract exemplifies the parents’ rights discourse but it is tempered by the risk of potential disruption. Similarly some of the departments invite parents to evaluate and offer feedback to their services; aware of the need for consultation and evaluation but not always extending this to children.

Department G offers parents a video and leaflet guide to ‘have your say’ in child protection meetings though an equivalent guide for children is not provided. Some Authorities, such as Department E, actively encouraged parental participation in child protection meetings but not children’s. They, like many other Authorities, were reviewing their strategies for listening to the views of children and families. Many Authorities produce leaflets for parents to help to explain child protection processes. A few Authorities have similar leaflets for children. This
would seem to indicate that parents’ rights have a longer and more established history in partnership and participation working than children’s rights.

My analysis of the policy texts reinforces the argument that participation of parents within child protection is now firmly established as a norm whereas children’s participation is still being negotiated, contested and fought for. In the following extract attention is turned to parental participation for Looked After children:

We will maximise the involvement of parents/carers in decision-making about children whom we are 'looking after' in so far as this is consistent with the welfare of the child. 

(Department A)

Interestingly in this policy text it is parental participation which is dependent upon the assessment of the social worker. This is a reversal of the situation within child protection meetings where it is now routine to invite parents and carers but still unusual to invite children. One conclusion from this is that the relationship between welfare agencies, the family and the child is constructed differently within Looked After and child protection arenas. Within the Looked After context, children are constructed more actively and the discourse of protectionism is less apparent. For Looked After children participation is assumed, though not unproblematic, as we will see in the following chapter. Within child protection, participation is circumscribed and negotiated via a range of adults, ‘experts’ and professionals.
The issues of the delicate and difficult balance of power between parents and children, discussed in chapter 2, is clearly one which causes concern for most Authorities and this is reflected within the texts:

To ensure that whilst maintaining an overriding concern for the child’s welfare, all agencies work in partnership with parents and carers and respect the views and wishes of the child in the light of his or her age and level of understanding. To ensure that where the interests of parents and children conflict, the interests of the child remain paramount (this does not in any way conflict with the desire to work in partnership with parents).

(Department M)

The statement in brackets is interesting in that it speaks to the tension between parents’ and children’s rights but in a way which attempts to reassure the imaginary reader, a social worker in this instance, that the desire is still to work in partnership with parents.

As discussed earlier, what is evident in these texts is that the balance between parents and children is different across child protection and Looked After services. Within child protection services and policy the balance of service-user participation at formal meetings is generally in favour of the parent/s. The social worker is usually given the task of representing the views of the child at the meetings or assessing whether they have sufficient understanding to attend. Within Looked After policy the balance is reversed towards children and young people. The Looked After child is generally constructed as an active subject and this becomes stronger the
older the child becomes. The parents on the other hand, are often marginalised within the policies, particularly regarding after-care of young people. This seems to represent a different construction of the relationships between welfare agencies, parents and children. In child protection the agency is with professionals and occasionally with parents or families, but rarely with children. The paternalism which is inherent in protectionism plays a more significant role within child protection rather than Looked After policies. This suggests that children who have been harmed by parents or other adults brings out the paternalistic aspects of protectionist discourses and makes them into ‘victims’ more easily than the different scenarios which may have resulted in them needing to be Looked After. This may be because Looked After children tend to be older and consistent with developmentalist discourse they are assessed as being competent for participation. The parents play a less significant role as the state has taken over some of the responsibilities of parenting for these children. In chapter 5 I develop the idea that Looked After children are more likely to be constructed as ‘villains’ than as victims.

The other feature of discussions about parents in these texts is that they are usually undifferentiated. What is absent in the texts is any distinction between mother and father or between abusing and non-abusing parent. The only place this appears is in relation to the potential for disruption of the meeting discussed earlier. However, given the long-standing contestations and challenges to perspectives around parents in relation to child abuse it seems unsurprising that the current policy texts avoid these issues. In chapter 1 we saw how feminist perspectives challenged interventions and policies in relation to child abuse generally but sexual abuse in particular. Within these texts it seems that the idea of working in partnership with ‘parents’ is offered as a gender neutral and less controversial way forward. The use of gender-neutral term ‘parent’ obscures the different patterns between mothers and fathers in
relation to abuse (Saraga, 1998c, Milner, 1995). This is consistent with the Children Act, which similarly avoids discussions of issues of gender power and inequalities within families. The policy texts therefore reflect and bear out this avoidance of issues of power and gender inequalities within families.

4.3: Family Rights

Discourses on ‘family rights’ as distinct from ‘parents’ rights’ are most evident in Departments which have developed specific policies to support families. The development of Family Group Conferences (FGC), often viewed as a way of ‘empowering’ families, is an initiative which merits further attention here, as it represents the clearest expression of family rights within the texts. Most of the family rights work stems from the Family Rights Group who have long been active in challenging policies and practices relating to support for families (FRG, 1988).

The Family Group Conference is a new way to try to develop more effective partnerships between families and professionals in the child care decision-making process.

(Department W)

A number of the Authorities sent texts relating to their use of the FGC. The conferences have been represented in many of the documents as a way of power sharing between the Authorities and families, which pay dividends for the welfare of children. They are also often referred to as the way the Authority encourages children’s participation in decision-making.
A family group conference offers family members a chance to get together, to find out about what is happening in the family, and to discuss how to sort out any problems.

(Department F)

In their leaflet for families explaining the way a FGC works there is a section on what to do if the child does not agree with the family decision or plan:

The view of the professionals is that children and young people should be involved in the Family Group Conference and their wishes and feelings taken into consideration by the adults. Families do usually include the young person or child in making plans, but if there are any real differences, the family can ask the Co-ordinator to help.

(Department F)

In this text we see that it is ‘the family’ that is viewed as an undifferentiated group. This gives the impression that ‘families’ may include parents but not necessarily children or young people. The other point is that it ‘the family’ who can ask for help and this raises questions about who is the voice of the family? Lastly children are being marginalised further here by having their views ‘taken into consideration’ by adults and professionals. In their evaluation of the FGC the department acknowledges that
It would be a great mistake to imagine that Family Group Conferences resolved all the difficulties and tensions that arise in the complex area of child welfare practices.

This extract has an implication within it that although acknowledging the limitations of the FGC it is being held up as a solution to family problems. One of the issues this Authority highlights in its own evaluation of FGCs is the need to ensure that the voices of children are heard within the conference. The evaluation included family participants’ views where family members talked about the way they felt they had been given powers to make decisions. Within this Authority this was viewed as a shift in power relations between SSD and ‘the family’.

Families are able to make good decisions about their children given the opportunity and the information to do so.

The report included feedback from a number of parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, yet there was only one comment from a young person who had been involved in the FGC (in a 141 page report). Here it is significant that ‘families’ make decisions about ‘their’ children but it is not clear whether children are part of the family here. This is important in the way it represents the family as both a unity and also a hierarchy. Families are homogenised but it is unspoken that there are hierarchies of power within families, perhaps relating to gender and age, for example, just as there are within the term ‘parents’. It also represents an optimistic view of families being able to protect and provide for children.
What fascinated me was that the Authority that had the clearest initiative in terms of family group conferences also has the strongest policies in relation to children’s rights. This was unexpected as potentially the rights of children compete with those of parents or families. In an interview with a CRO in this Authority I was intrigued to pursue this dynamic further to try to discover the way the potential tensions between the different rights discourses are negotiated:

CRO ... they are also looking at the Family group Conferences because they recognise that sometimes in those, the children’s voice is not heard.

SP OK yes this is exactly one of the areas I wanted to talk with you about in relation to the documents I was sent.

CRO yes (laughs) and again it is a resource issue, it’s not that people are not aware of it; they are very sensitive to it.

SP Ok that is one of the 'particular' things I wanted to ask you about. When I read the documents I felt there were some tensions between the Children’s Rights initiatives and the Family Rights Group conferencing project. And I wanted to check this out further with you. I wondered if for you, as a CRO, you felt any of these tensions were real.

CRO yes erm ... I think that what’s important is that those involved in managing that whole area of work have also recognised that and are seeking ways to address this.

SP yeah so has there been consultation between both parts of the organisation?
CRO: yes well we work as children’s rights advisers, because my role is much more about supporting the organisation rather than supporting individual children. Because that is where you have the greater impact.

SP: ok so you have been involved in negotiations over this within the organisation?

CRO: yes

SP: mmm. Yeah that struck me in reading the materials because you have such strong initiatives around children’s rights and this might be a potential conflict between the two?

CRO: yes it is something we are looking at and FGC is being developed in the area of Youth Justice and reparation and at children with learning disabilities … It is about recognising and there are duties to lay foundations to ensuring that children’s voices are heard and that they can be supported within what can be done. It can be a very powerful situation that can be positive; it can also involve lots and lots of tensions.

SP: mmm yeah I can see that. And there have been particular concerns raised about the participation of children and young people in these conferences where sexual abuse is the main concern.

CRO: yes and one way of looking at their involvement is that they don’t have to be physically present in the room at the family time, they can do the piece of work
and get someone else to present it for them. So that is what we have been looking at.

(CRO2, Department F)

In this interview extract I worked hard to pursue the questions around the possible tensions between FGCs and children’s rights. There seemed to be some resistance to the idea of a discussion of tension between the two and it took a while for the CRO to talk about this. In chapter 3 I explored the idea of one interview where the friendship between the CRO and myself affected the interview outcome. In this interview, which was with someone I had met for the first time on the day of the interview, it seemed to work differently in that I had to pursue the idea of possible tensions at some length. The research participant perhaps felt more defensive about her employer and did not wish to say something which she felt would be critical of any part of the service. The issue of ownership of the initiative seems relevant in that the FGC and children’s rights projects belong to different parts of the Authority. In this interview I was interviewing someone who had not been directly involved in the development of FGCs.

Looking more widely at the literature regarding FGCs it has been argued that these conferences only give the appearance of power sharing between the Authority and the family (Lupton, 1998). In addition it has been argued that the dynamics of sexual abuse within families are disregarded (Barbour, 1991). If there is any power sharing between the Authority and families, it is not conclusive whether it is parents rather than children who gain from this. This initiative is one example of a policy that seems to privilege parents and families’ rights
over those of children and I use it to illustrate the competing field of rights in this area of practice.

5.0: The Managerialist Discourse

Managerialism is the fourth discourse I will examine in relation to the policy and interview texts. Managerialism cuts across the earlier three discourses and carries within it an anti-professional perspective. Managerialism seeks to displace, subordinate or incorporate ‘professionalism’ (Clarke and Newman, 1997). The rise of managerialism within social care has been documented within chapter 2. My reading of the policy texts reveals the extent to which managerialism has permeated social care contexts. For example, performance is increasingly defined as something to be measured and evaluated while audit and inspection have become common features of the social welfare landscape. These policy texts bear the marks of this rise of managerialism. The specific aspects of managerialism I will focus on in this section are the Looked After Children (LAC) framework, the customer discourse, the discourse of efficiency and issues of resources/scarcity. In the last section I will analyse my texts in relation to Quality Protects to illustrate the way these competing discourses permeate policies and represent a new configuration within policy.

The first example of managerialism which is evident throughout these texts is the LAC framework. It is cited in many of these texts as the framework many Local Authorities now use to assess Looked After Children. Garrett says 90% of Authorities now use the LAC forms (Garrett, 1999, 2000). The dominance of the LAC framework is therefore established. The LAC forms together with the Assessment and Action Record (AAR) are often used as the way for young people to provide their input into a meeting if they are Looked After (Appendix 5).
Some Authorities sent me copies of these forms. The other Authorities were either in the process of adopting the forms or developing their own forms based on the LAC framework.

A critical reading of the LAC forms, however, would suggest the AARs are designed primarily to be input into a computer so that Looked After Children can be counted, measured and analysed. The use of a checklist and multiple choice questions has been criticised for being overly directive (Francis, 2002). The data produced also enables the performance of different Local Authorities in relation to Looked After Children to be compared. The need for revision of the paperwork relating to Looked After Children developed because of SSI and Audit Commission evidence that record keeping for children who were Looked After was so poor (SSI, 2000). Concerns with the implementation of the LAC framework include the civil liberties and data protection implications of this system as well as the way the forms are viewed as constraining and defining the nature of the conversation between the young person and the assessing officer, usually a social worker (Garrett, 2003). What is absent from the framework and from the texts however, is any critical feedback or evaluation of the forms by young people themselves.

The second aspect of Managerialism I will focus on here is that of the customer discourse developing within children’s services. Following Clarke, I am viewing the customer discourse as part of Managerialism (Clarke, 1997). It makes an appearance within some of my policy texts although the idea of the child as ‘customer’ rather than ‘service user’ or ‘client’ is still fairly unusual although earlier we saw the emergence of parents as customers. The following two extracts, illustrate the way the customer discourse is starting to be applied in some Authorities:
The Department will ensure that all children will be afforded respect as customers of the Social Services Department. The principles of respect are as follows:

- **Privacy**
- **Children and young people should be allowed to make phone calls on their own**
- **Children and young people should not feel bullied into something by the department**
- **Children’s views should be listened to and taken seriously**

(Department A1)

This extract provides a good example of how the customer discourse itself derives from different imperatives embracing both rights and managerial discourses. The customer discourse is used here to outline principles of respect for children as customers not as children. The charter was drawn up in consultation with the children’s rights service and the language used bears the hallmarks of children’s rights, with its emphasis on rights, respect, children being listened to and taken seriously.

The following extract, from a document relating to the distribution of information and publicity leaflets within children and families division of SSD, also uses the language of ‘customer’ not ‘service user’:
Every customer should receive a copy of:

a)  Guide to children's services

b)  Complaints and representations procedure

... Any customer or potential customer of service provision should be given a copy of the brochure describing the service provided by that resource.

(Department M)

The customer discourse does not map easily onto public sector welfare services. The first problem is that these services are often imposed on people rather than being asked for. Child protection services are one example of this, as the family and more specifically the parent/s may refuse or resist social work intervention. The second related point is that ‘customers’ can conventionally take their custom elsewhere if they are dissatisfied but service users cannot usually exercise this degree of choice. As seen in chapter 2 the Children Act was clear in pointing out that it is the child who is the primary ‘client’ of social services in these settings, not the parent/s. The same legislation, however, urges departments to work in ‘partnership’ with parents. As discussed within chapter 2 this ambivalence is carried into the texts and within the above text it is not made clear if the customer is the child or the parent. The idea of viewing children as ‘customers’ of services within these documents represents a significant shift in the relationship between individuals, families and the welfare state. These themes will be picked up again in relation to one of the interviews with a CRO in chapter 5. What is intriguing are the different ways the customer discourse is being articulated and mapped onto both the children’s rights and managerialist discourses and as such, represents new configurations within these specific policy contexts.
The wider issues of the marketisation of welfare and associated contracting out or joint commissioning of services are exemplified in these texts. Specifically in relation to children’s services the Children’s Society has been commissioned to provide children’s rights services within many Authorities.

The pressure to provide services within budget and within the constraints of public expenditure limitations imposed by central and local government also forms part of the context for these texts. In some texts the idea of ‘best value’, ’value for money’, ‘efficiency’ and costs of services are explicit. The Consultation Policy for one of the Authorities, for example, sets out the aims and reasons for consulting within a business plan type format:

The reasons for consulting are for the Directorate to:

a) make itself properly accountable for its policy making;

b) comply with legislation and guidance;

c) tap into expert knowledge in the community and seek to improve initial proposals;

d) meet the requirements of Best Value (Best Value Performance Reviews must include consulting with taxpayers, service users and the wider business community in the setting of new performance targets).

(Department G)
Consultation with taxpayers and the business community is placed alongside consultation with service users. This assumes that service users are not either taxpayers or part of the business community but instead constructed as a separate group from those with ‘expert knowledge’ in the community.

At this point there is a conceptual shift. I argued earlier that managerialism attempts to displace, subordinate or displace professional discourse, but is rarely successful in complete displacement. More often there is an uneasy combination of subordination and appropriation. The question is what happens to subordinated and appropriated professional discourses. I am arguing that they persist as uncomfortably subordinated, uneasily appropriated, and often ‘lost for words’. But they also persist as points of potential mobilisation, resistance or ‘other voicings’ within and alongside managerial discourses of welfare. It is these displaced, subordinated and appropriated professional discourses which provide the analytical framework for interpreting the next set of texts:

**Resources and priorities:** Service provision will be focused where need is assessed to be greatest and in accordance with the declared principles and priorities of the Department.

... Family support services which can demonstrate effectiveness in preventing children falling into the above categories (child protection or Looked After) should also be provided. Targeting is essential and should be informed by good quality assessments, clear, rational eligibility criteria and an understanding of costs and service effectiveness.
This formal policy text, with its focus on costs and effectiveness of services, illustrates the argument in chapter 2 that efficiency and costs are increasingly constructed as central to decision-making on provision of welfare services. The next extract from the interview texts debates the issues of the difficulties around resourcing social welfare.

CRO … if your social workers are on their knees … a lot of the areas of Local Authorities I work in are 50% down in social workers in each team. That means each team is 50% short.

SP and are they using agency social workers to fill those gaps?

CRO No they can’t. They are just 50% down and can’t recruit.

SP So in that environment ‘good practice’ even if it’s in your head is not achievable?

CRO It can’t be, it absolutely can’t be. So you commission a children’s Rights Service and employ two part-time workers across a vast rural Authority.

(CRO 3, Dept A8)

In the next extract another interviewee discusses similar problems:

PO … And there are … sort of … problems unique to Social Services, like the turnover of social workers, which is a big problem in London. So it takes a while for the young people to build up a relationship and then they keep changing,
... I don't think participation will deal with this but that is a key problem for young people because they lose out.

(PO, Dept Y)

In this next extract from an interview in another Authority the consequences of constant staffing crises are explored further:

CCC ... and overall morale is very low, staffing is very short, everybody is under terrible pressure, workload is excessive and inevitably standards of practice drop because people just do the absolute minimum. And the important bits which are about the direct one to one relationship with the individual child are the bits that get lost when you've got too many cases.

... So with a lot of young people who are Looked After the case isn't even allocated to a social worker. And that is a worry. Last year I think we had about 20% of Looked After cases not allocated and the SSI was threatening us with 'special measures' if we didn't do something about it. And we employed a whole lot of unqualified people just to allocate these kids to ... and then recently there's been a cash crisis, so we've had to make them all redundant, so we've got the kids unallocated again. It's just a disaster.

(CCC, Dept D)
The limits of participation are explored within these texts. The sense of vulnerability and exposure for the young people in this situation as well as for the staff was a feature of these interviews. The idea of ‘special measures’ relates back to the climate of failure discussed earlier. One interpretation is to view this text as an illustration of how this can result in short-term solutions which address the ‘special measures’ but not the failure of support for children.

Later in the same interview there is further discussion:

CC... We’ve also had a shortage of Team Managers in parts of the County... so in (area) for example there’s been nobody to supervise social workers if they’ve had the social workers. In (another area) there’s been managers but no social workers. So it is really difficult. And it is quite difficult to carry on working and being positive in that environment.

(CCC, Department D)

This participant is deeply committed to working with children in a positive and dynamic way. The weariness and strain of the experience of continuously trying to work in this environment becomes evident during the interview. All five of the people I interviewed located participation work with children in the wider contexts of resource shortfalls and low staff morale. The comments generally reflect the situation across most Local Authority SSDs where ‘good practice’ is compromised by material shortfalls (Rapoport, 1960, Satyamurti, 1981, Pithouse, 1996). All the interviewees also insisted that this places incredible pressures on practitioners, professionals and Departments. The comment was made that it is surprising that anything at all happens in this environment. These texts lead me to view participation as a
socially constructed process accomplished by professionals and practitioners within the wider context and constraints of organisational and individual imperatives.

The evidence from my research interviews is that professionals feel they are too pressurised to be able to really involve, listen to, take seriously and treat children with respect and dignity. These interviews were conducted with staff who have a vested interest in, and commitment to participation of children. The interview texts illustrate an alternative view of a particular sort of ‘reality’, which is, what happens ‘in practice’ and what happens to social work and children’s rights professionalism within the conditions of managerialism. Part of these narratives can be viewed as the stories the profession tells itself about how difficult it is to deliver services in this environment and under these conditions.

Another interpretation is to view this as the discourse of liberal professionalism under pressure. Professional discourse may be displaced, subordinated and appropriated but material, ethical and emotional strain or discomforts are still voiced. They provide ways of talking about the material, ethical, moral and emotional ‘strains’ of being managerialised professionals in public welfare services. They also allow appeals to professional (rather than managerial) issues about resources and standards. CROs and similarly positioned staff are possibly uniquely situated as both radicalised and uncomfortably marginalised professionals within social and welfare work with children.

To conclude this section, I argue that these texts show that managerialism is increasingly articulated within Local Authorities’ SSDs policies and practices. Managerialism carries within it the idea that better management will improve services. This can be viewed in some part a response to the discourse of failure. In the interview texts we see evidence of the
supports the argument that policy makers and practitioners sometimes offer ‘resistance’ or
‘assimilation’ to subject positions created within dominant discourses, such as managerialism.
Resistance is viewed as a useful concept for the way it highlights attempts to disrupt power
relations and the undermining of ‘colonizing discourses’ (Marston, 2004 p 117). The formal
policy texts show an increased focus on management, efficiency, customers, best value,
accountability and performance. The extracts and texts show how managerialism forces the
procedural and customer version of rights. The question remains whether the particular
emphasis on rights within the customer discourse will enhance children’s rights.

6.0: Quality Protects

The Quality Protects framework introduced within chapter 2 is analysed to discover the way
these discourses ‘bump into’ one another within a policy framework. I argue that it
exemplifies the way managerialism, protectionism, developmentalism and rights discourses
compete and work together within a specific policy framework. As such analysis of these
policy texts make visible the dynamic interaction between the discourses. Many of the formal
policy texts within this research, especially the ones that had been recently re-drafted, included
the Quality Protects standards:

Quality Protects aims to improve services and outcomes for children nationally.
Through the Department of Health, the Government sets a series of standards
and targets. We aim to produce plans which improve services and increase the
quality of our work. An important part of this process is making sure we aim
towards local targets.

Some of the ways we check our progress are through using surveys, panels,
consultations and checklists to make sure we know how we are performing. We
also place great emphasis on our complaints procedure which we encourage people
to use when they feel unhappy about the service they have received.

(Department Y)

What is interesting is the particular kind of ‘knowing’ about performance in relation to Looked
After children that is produced in this extract. Here I am using the understanding of
performance as the process of ‘putting on a show’ (Clarke, 2003, p9). In Quality Protects
‘knowing’ seems to involve consultations, checklists and complaints procedures. Performing
performance involves a socially constructed agreement about performance and the evidence
used to mark success (Clarke, 2004; Paton, 2003). On this level the language of Quality
Protects exemplifies the discourse of managerialism throughout.

Department E was one of many Authorities who were rewriting their policy documents in the
light of the Quality Protects guidance. The layout of their report sets out the service, the
consultation method, and the aim of the consultation and some targets in terms of time/dates.
The staff development and training service lists involvement of children and carers in training
events, which have the aim of ‘enabling young people to have a voice’. Examples given of this
are young people talking to managers about their care experiences and giving information
about the experience of having the Local Authority as a parent. However parental attendance at meetings is discussed whereas children are explicitly absent from the framework. It is unclear whether children are invited to statutory meetings about themselves in this Authority.

Closer examination of Quality Protects texts also shows how they deploy children’s rights discourses as well as managerialism. This next extract is taken from a policy document reviewing progress of Quality Protects in year 3 (2001-2002):

Listening to what children, young people, their families and carers think of our services is central to the Quality Protects programme in (Department)

Progress so far:

• We have continued a project where trained care leavers talk to looked after children about their views, wishes and feelings
• We have produced a ‘filofax’ for older looked after children, which contains information and advice
• We make sure that social work staff attend training on listening to children. Our children with disabilities team have access to specialist training and materials to support them in communicating with children and young people with disabilities
• We have appointed a dedicated Children's Complaints Officer whose role is to develop a complaint service for children and young people that is accessible and responds effectively to their complaints.

Our plans for Year 3:

• We will appoint a CRO and Young Person's Participation Officer to make sure that children have access to an independent advocate and that we widen our efforts to include the views of young people in our planning.

• We will look at how to consult better with black and minority ethnic families.

• We will consult with children with disabilities who receive respite care services about their views and feelings.

(Department Y)

Following Fairclough (2001) referred to in chapter 3, we can see here how the use of the heading ‘Progress so far’ is used as a declarative sentence which asserts that progress has been made already as well as that progress will continue to be made. The use of the bullet points as a ‘listing syntax’ is used throughout the document. Fairclough refers to this as ‘paratactic syntax’ which means that it becomes compound rather than complex. It seeks to tell the reader as if it were fact rather than engaging in an argument or trying to persuade. In this way the text is non-dialogical and less open to counter arguments. Fairclough argued that this use of paratactic listing syntax ‘sets up a non-dialogical divide between those who are making these
assertions, and those they are addressed at – those who tell and those who are told, those who know and those who don’t’ (Fairclough, 2001 p260).

The mode of address throughout this document means the ‘we’ is the SSD who are actively engaged in listening, producing information, appointing and training staff and so forth. The Department, however, is not the same as its staff and reading this text leaves questions about the translation of this into practice. In contrast to the Department, the children have no active agency here. This passive construction of children is common across the range of Quality Protects documents. In addition to this passivity specific groups of children are also being constructed in particular ways. The difficulty here, in common with other groups, is when they should appear within the generic term ‘children’ and when they should have their particular needs acknowledged. This represents a tension between on the one hand, homogenising children and not recognises differences between them and on the other, pathologising specific groups of children.

Following the work of Phoenix (1990) on race, the appearance of disability within most of the policy texts can also be described as a ‘normalised absence/pathologised presence’. The assumption within the texts is that the policies will cover all children, regardless of ability/disability. This essentialism assumes that all children share the same needs, wants and experiences and it avoids acknowledging the specific and individual ‘needs’ of children. Other Authorities have specific policies regarding services for children with disabilities but often they become homogenised and the wide range of difference within this group are not acknowledged. Department Y appears unusual in acknowledging the needs of children with disabilities as well as the need for training and support for staff working with them.
The Quality Protects texts, as they appear in my research, seem to exemplify the formulation of children’s rights within New Labour policies which were discussed within chapter 2. It is in these texts that children are more likely to be constructed as ‘customers’. It seems possible that developments in the field of Quality Protects are being used to mainstream and appropriate selective aspects of participation agendas. Examination of these Quality Protects texts reveals the ways that children’s rights compete with protectionism and child development discourses. Mostly though Quality protects illustrates a new configuration of policy. I argue that a version of children’s rights is being absorbed, appropriated, mainstreamed and represented within more formal policy documents such as Quality Protects.

As I argued earlier managerialism attempts to displace, subordinate and appropriate professional discourses but it is resisted and is not completely successful. Quality Protects cannot simply be read as managerialist driven policy as it incorporates aspects of children’s rights and professional discourses about children.

7.0: Conclusions

In this chapter I have identified the discourses of protectionism, developmentalism, rights and managerialism within the data. I have argued that protectionism and developmentalism are dominant throughout the child protection policy texts. Together they represent discourses that others have to work within, around or against. The discourse of rights including children, parents’ and family emerged as part of the challenge from NSMs to the dominance of the earlier discourses. Managerialism was analysed as the fourth discourse that seeks to displace the professional. The dynamic interaction between the discourses can be viewed most clearly within a specific policy text such as Quality Protects.
The Quality Protects texts in my research, exemplified the way a particular policy project involving children’s participation works within a field of competing discourses. In this analysis I showed how children’s rights are being reformulated within the Quality Protects framework and together represent a new configuration within policy relating to children. I also argued that children’s rights are absorbed, incorporated, reformulated and appropriated within this specific policy framework where children are becoming customers and rights involve being consulted. The rights discourse and the challenges of the NSMs, feminism and service user groups are all subsumed under the influence of managerialism. In places they can be viewed as continuing to unsettle the discourse of managerialism but mostly they are destabilised by it. The policy texts can be viewed as the unique and idiosyncratic outcomes of these discourses. Quality Protects texts make visible the process of constructing unique positions within a field of discourses.

In the next two chapters I will continue to explore how particular aspects of these discourses work within specific policy and interview texts.

Chapter 5

Putting in an Appearance: The ‘Voices’ of Children
1.0: Introduction

In this Chapter I explore the ways in which children’s ‘voices’ are articulated within and across the texts. In chapter 1 I argued that post-structuralist analyses as well as the work of the NSMs opened up possible spaces where the voices of marginalised groups were able to assert their views and needs. This was viewed as part of wider processes whose aims were to democratise welfare and enhance ‘voice’ and participation from the 1980s onwards. This chapter analyses the appearance of the ‘voices’ of children within my research texts. There is an intellectual tension in the chapter which is about viewing some of the data as representations and other data, such as what children say, as ‘real’ testimonies. In chapter 6 I discuss the limitations of using the rhetoric/reality binary to understand and explain the differences between policy texts and practice. In this chapter I am tending towards viewing all the evidence as representations which carry echoes of other voices, representations and discourses within them. This tension, however, has consequences for the presentation of extracts within this chapter in particular.

The chapter is divided into 6 sections including this introduction. In the next section I explore the extent to which children are involved in reconstructing themselves as active, creative, social and moral agents who challenge, resist and re-work the pathologising and normative imagery of them reflected in social care policy texts.
The pathologised images and representations of children in social care policies are examined in the third section. I also explore the extent to which normative images of children are reflected and carried within many of the policy texts. I am interested in analysing the extent to which normative images often involving essentialist and pathologised constructions of children have permeated into policy.

Section 4 raises questions about the meaning of participation and consultation when it produces such a limited and constrained ‘voice’ for children. The rest of the chapter is devoted to analysis of ongoing struggles around participation and ‘voice’ and their consequences. In section 5 therefore I explore the themes and issues that have consistently emerged from various consultation and participation events with children. In section 6 of the chapter I analyse the difficulty for children who are either Looked After or deemed ‘at risk’ in constructing normalised narratives of self.

2.0: Children as Active and Creative Social Moral Agents

This section of the chapter is about the ways children seek to act as creative, active moral agents despite the difficulties and constraints. I use extracts to link back to discussions of children and agency in Chapter 2 to illustrate some of the ways children negotiate, refuse, resist, re-work and challenge the normative and pathologised images of them. I will link this section to the wider politics of children’s rights, participation and ‘voice’ discussed in chapters 1 and 2 and argue that these create a clear dynamic, a set of pressures and a tendency to view children in particular ways. I will explore this further by analysing extracts from the texts.
In this first interview extract the CRO is discussing access to the imaginary for Looked After children:

*CRO* ... But it was beautiful ... I loved it that her complaint was ‘that I am not that person’ and she was so refusing to be categorised as it. And she said I am that Enid Blyton person who wants those things, so you cannot possibly walk out of this door and leave me in this kid’s home. And I respected her for that ... they didn’t, but it made me laugh.

*SP* yes and sometimes you do get that refusing and resisting of those images and this always interests to me.

*CRO* Yes but her mental health was questioned and she ended up with a psychiatrist referral. She self-harmed and stuff. She was very clear where that was rooted ... she was quite good at writing essays and told stories in a few about why she was like this.

(CRO3, Department A8)

In this interview, the CRO invokes the idea of ‘Enid Blyton land’ as a representation of normative images of children with the freedom to have adventures and play imaginary games. In Blyton’s stories the children usually return to the safety and warmth of a family home after their adventures. In this case the young person insists that she wants access to this world and refuses the pathologised identity of the ‘streetwise’ Looked After young person which she
feels is being foisted on her within the care system. The CRO seems proud of this resistance and supportive of her making claim to a different identity for herself.

This next extract, from an interview with another CRO, raises the idea that children are realistic in their expectations about participation in decision-making:

*CRO* ... did a few years back and produced the resource pack, when they were finding out what was important for children, getting what you want wasn’t at the top of the list, it was actually just being involved, and being able to feel involved which was important. And I think that what really came out of that is that children and young people are really quite realistic

*SP* yeah

*CRO* mmm ... about what can be achieved and what their expectation is

(CRO2, Department F)

This links back to findings discussed in chapter 2 about children being more competent than often credited for, being realistic and reasonable in their demands for involvement, having a complex grasp of power and understanding of the constraints, and a strong attachment to the idea of fairness. In this next interview the CRO raised concerns about a different outcome of participation:
CRO I've heard people say ... oh you know ... the leaving care lot ... they're too empowered, you know, they're always moaning about things ... and they've got a false sense of what the world's like ... complaining about everything.

(CRO1, Department A)

This is a fascinating quote where, in contrast to the research evidence in chapter 2 and the idea discussed above about the reasonable nature of the demands of children, we see young people being constructed as having unrealistic demands and expectations. During the interview the CRO argued that their empowerment is the result of participation work and it was viewed as a triumph rather than a problem. For the CRO a clear sense of job satisfaction was gained by young people becoming empowered to such an extent that other professionals within SSDs are saying they are too empowered. The CRO perceives that some professionals find this empowerment problematic and threatening and become hostile both to the CROs as well as to young people. The reasons why professionals may feel hostile or unsettled by children’s voices are discussed further in the chapter.

The evidence from my research suggests that despite constraints and difficulties children strive to seek ways to resist the agentless, passive and pathologised formulations of them represented in normative discourse as well as in many of the policy documents. In my research I view this as part of the ongoing struggle for change and recognition in relation to participation, children’s rights and ‘voice’.

3.0: Pathologised Images: Children as Victims or Villains
In Chapter 2 I explored the complex representation of children. I argued that the imaginary child of normative discourses is that of a white, able-bodied and middle-class child and that this has consequences for the specific constituencies of children within this research because it serves to obscure differences and deny their experiences that may well be outside the norm. The underlying assumption embedded within populist literature is that this normative child will ‘inherit the future’. This discourse involves viewing children as ‘empty vessels’ who are on a path to maturity and adulthood (Moss and Petrie, 2004). The imagery is focused on the incomplete status of the child and conversely views adulthood as a complete, fully human status. In this section I am interested in exploring the contrast between normative images of children and those found within social policy texts relating to children who are either Looked After or have some involvement with social care agencies because of concerns about their care, protection or well-being.

I will use extracts to illustrate how the images of children within social welfare contexts are dynamic, complex and contradictory. The first sets of extracts are all taken from formal policy documents including child protection procedures manuals and children’s services plans.

Work with children and their families should be characterised by dynamism, creativity and clear, achievable objectives. The task being not merely to describe situations, but to produce positive change, which helps to meet a child’s essential needs.

(Department H)
Here we see the passive/active formulation of children/professionals which seems common to most of the policy documents. The professionals are constructed as active, dynamic and creative change agents, whereas children are constructed as having essential needs, which is a more passive formulation. The extract does not say what these essential needs are. Instead it is implicit or assumed that we all know what these are. In these next extracts I want to analyse a specific form of passivity including the way children are differentiated. I aim to develop an argument here that different groups of children are placed differently on the passive/active spectrum:

In keeping with the philosophy of the Children Act, discussions in **** about services for children with disabilities; their structure, management and financing took place on an interagency basis. Working groups met to decide on the format of the Register and on the criteria for registration. Consultation with parents and carers, both individually and in groups, took place before any documentation was finalised.

(Department N)

Here children with disabilities are constructed passively by not being invited to take part directly as part of the consultation. Interestingly parents and carers are constructed semi-actively within this consultation process where professionals and managers are active and act as brokers for feedback from adults/parents. In this next extract we see another specific form of passivity being developed:
All staff should be aware that not all black children/young people will understand
the role of a social worker

(Department A)

A particular essentialism is carried within this text about ‘black children’. The idea that any
child (or social worker or other professional) may need an explanation of processes involved
in social work assessments is overlooked and instead the ‘black child’ receives specific
attention. They are not only constructed passively but a deficit model is invoked in describing
them as lacking knowledge and understanding of social work processes. The same text
continues as follows:

The Council acknowledges that children and young people can manipulate the child protection
system as a way of discrediting their family, culture, or community. Workers should therefore
be conscious of how their intervention can reinforce this negativity. Some Black
children/young people may request care with the knowledge that their families will be viewed
as “dysfunctional” and exploit this.

(Department A)

By contrast in this extract we see ‘black’ children constructed as having active agency, but the
active agency is formulated in such a way as to construct those children as manipulative. This
particular form of active agency leads back into pathologising ‘black’ children. Reading this
text invokes a particular moment in the fiercely contested history of ‘race’ and social work
during the 1980s (Ahmed et al, 1986, Lewis, 2000d). What is surprising is that despite these
contestations this document was still in use in the late 1990s. The focus on ‘blackness’ in this
text leaves ‘white’ as an unproblematic, normative and undifferentiated category. The same text later identifies ‘black children with disabilities’ as a category of children who have particular needs and thus constructing a hierarchy of oppression.

The essentialism embedded within these documents and texts has implications for participation of all children and more specifically for the groups of children who are being pathologised. This moves the active/passive formulation into much more complex territory and this is where the idea of ‘normalised absence/pathologised presence’ discussed in chapter 2 (Phoenix, 1990) becomes really useful. In the texts above we see that particular groups of children are essentialised and pathologised. This distinction between ‘normalised absence’ and ‘pathologised presence’ reminds us both that children in general and particular groups of children are often either absent and ignored or present but pathologised.

As I outlined in chapter 3 I analysed the policy texts before I conducted the interviews. It was during the analysis of the policy texts that I was alerted to the area of representations. I therefore asked a specific question of each of the research participants about images of children. I wanted to understand more about how they and young people interpreted and negotiated the images of children within social care settings. One particular image arose in several interviews:

SP What do you see as the main images of young people in social care literatures and policy?

CRO OK there was one young person who came up to me and said that the idea of a child or young person in care being ‘damaged’ was a really horrible expression to
use ... as if they are damaged goods. And it really made me think because I’ve used that expression and in my mind I know what I mean. I mean that adults have done something terrible but it never crossed my mind that the young person would think there was something wrong with them. So I suppose that is an example that somebody said to me. Yeah like I say I was really never thinking of that young person as ‘imperfect’ really in my mind I was thinking of all those horrible adults who have done terrible things (laughs) so that was very interesting.

(CRO1, Department A)

The idea of children being described as ‘damaged goods’ invokes some complex imagery here. One is a retail environment where ‘goods’ that are purchased and are faulty are returned for a refund or a replacement. Another level of analysis is about abused children as ‘damaged’ because of their experience of abuse. The possible consequence of being described as ‘damaged goods’ are feelings of being tainted and rejected. In contrast the idea of ‘undamaged’ implies purity and innocence, which relates back to the ideas discussed within the earlier part of the chapter about imagining childhood as a time of innocence. This discourse of children as ‘damaged goods’ disrupts and unsettles the narrative of childhood as a time of innocence. The other point it alerts us to are the tensions between meaning constructed by children and meaning constructed by adults and professionals.

In the extract below another CRO talks about the use of the idea of children as ‘damaged goods’:
CRO we think back to front about it ... we think of children as 'damaged goods' so we can treat them in this way. I've been told by a complaints officer that it's not the same as your or my children, because they've probably grown up on estates where worse things happen. So they won't be as damaged by what happens to them in care.

(CRO3, Department A8)

This extract goes further than the earlier ones and spells out the consequences of the representation of children as ‘damaged goods’. Another aspect to this extract is the way that constructing children as already ‘damaged’ is defensive and means that SSDs are not to blame for what happens to them once they are Looked After. The contrast set up here between ‘the damaged’ Looked After child and ‘your or my’ child is a powerful one. In chapter 4 I argued that protectionist discourse seeks to protect children from being corrupted. In this chapter I develop this idea further to see how children are being viewed as ‘damaged’ in different ways. They are constructed as being ‘damaged’ by circumstances (living on estates), by abuse, by care and also by participation.

Talk about children in care frequently invokes this image of ‘damage’. In 2002 there was a row within the Conservative Party about adoption by unmarried couples. The then Conservative Party chairman Theresa May said:

There is no debate in this about whether unmarried couples can provide a loving home and a loving relationship and background for children - of course they can. The question is for these
particularly damaged children, these very damaged children, what is the best way to provide the most stable background that we can? (Guardian Unlimited, 4/11/2002)

Denise Platt similarly invokes the idea of children as ‘damaged’: ‘Councils are struggling to fulfil their legal duty to act as corporate parents for children in their care. Many of the children now looked after by social services are damaged and difficult to care for’ (Denise Platt, Chief Inspector of SSI, 1998)

In these two extracts we see images of children in care as ‘damaged goods’ being invoked to promote and support different political and policy positions. In the first chapter I reviewed how language actively constructs social reality and was viewed as a social practice with important effects and consequences for the production of meaning. In this chapter we see how the use of language such as that describing Looked After children as ‘damaged goods’ acts as a discourse register and calls up pre-existing narratives about these children as needy, difficult and as victims. This is an example of how language has social and relational effects and consequences for children. What emerges in my research are some of the contestations from children and children’s rights professionals arising from this use of language and pointing out the ambiguity, effects, implications and consequences of terms such as ‘damaged goods’. This links back to chapter 1 where I argued that NSMs and feminism significantly challenged language use and created a politics of representation.

A different example of representations of Looked After children within the communities they live emerges from the next extract:
CRO Yes I mean that came across from the young people I interviewed. One of them said something like … she was in a children’s home in a rather posh residential area… and there was a lot of hostility to it … and she said ‘people round here look at us as if we've got televisions on our heads or something, what do they think we are, we’re just a bunch of kids who haven’t got anywhere else to live?’ And they think you must be a murderer or a rapist or something if you’re in care. When you say you’re in care people say ‘well what did you get done for?’

(CRO1, Department D)

In this extract the CRO is talking about young people challenging the dominant representations of Looked After children. This is partly achieved by treating them as representations, which then opens up the possibility of alternative constructions. The underlying assumption is that being in care means wrongdoing on the part of the child rather than that they are more likely to be in care as a result of having wrong done to them or through family breakdown. In chapter 1 I showed how feminism challenged this ‘blaming the victim’ particularly in relation to domestic violence and child sexual abuse. In this extract and the next we see those dominant representations being challenged significantly.

CRO Even down to the posters you put up in a children’s home … that to make it relevant it’s got to be a baseball cap wearing kid who is being very streetwise. There is no Enid Blyton land there is there?

(CRO3, Department A8)
This CRO describes the way the wearing of a baseball cap has become symbolic of being ‘streetwise’ and this image of the child in the care system starkly contrasts with the normative child who inhabits ‘Enid Blyton land’ discussed earlier. The world where children are allowed access to the imaginative without being demonised is the one being invoked here. The extract is also about representations of ‘care’ and who is being cared for. Another lens to refract this through is the way the posters themselves can be viewed as an outcome of struggles about representations. Earlier struggles would have been to have images which were representative of diversity of children. During the 1980s the baseball cap became symbolic of street/male youth.

The earlier discussion about pathologised presence is particularly relevant to these extracts as Looked After children seek to find ways to challenge the image of themselves as villains. Within this next extract children are similarly challenging the images of themselves as objects of pity or as demonised ‘damaged’ pathologised subjects. Here the CRO is discussing children objecting to images of themselves within adverts for the recruitment of social work staff.

CRO...but they also objected to the sentiments, they didn't like being portrayed as pathetic victims that need rescuing, or demons.

(CRO2, Department F)

The implication of the next extract is that for children in public care, access to play and the imaginary is problematic:
And a 9 year old I saw last week said 'I'm nine, I should be able to have fun shouldn't I?' And that's what he wanted and of course he should be able to have fun.

(CRO3, Department A8)

In chapter 2 we saw how NSMs struggled over rights, images, language and representations. Examples which were and continue to be challenged include images used for fundraising such as those of malnourished children, children living in poverty or as victims of abuse. This has parallels with challenges from within the disability movement where pathologised and victim focused images of disability were viewed as largely deriving from charitable images. These generally constructed people with disabilities in passive and agentless ways, as the object of pity (Hughes, 1998).

The extracts above illustrate how the imagery of children within social care texts carries pathologised images of them as ‘damaged’ victims or dangerous villains. This imagery relates to the discourse of protectionism discussed in chapter 4. The extracts also show how children sometimes actively resist, refuse and challenge these images. We also saw how professionals such as CROs facilitate and gives expression to the child’s resistance and refusal to accept the identity and the implied subject position and this struggle is often expressed through language, as in the example of children being described as ‘damaged goods’. In this next extract the research participant is a child care consultant:

CCC I have quoted my colleagues a lot because I see them as being most ‘in tune’ with participation. And I think their construction of young people is rather
different than other people in the organisation. And I think they see them absolutely as human beings who have the right to be themselves and to realise their ambitions just as any member of staff or carer or anybody else. I suspect that probably on the whole within the organisation more of us, and I fall into this myself, see Looked After young people as an undifferentiated mass, rather than a set of individuals. I know they are individual human beings and respond to their individual story but at other times we forget that they are individuals and we see them as part of a service or as numbers. Or as something which is lower on a hierarchy than adults are, slightly lesser human beings. And we justify that by saying that they generally have less understanding of the situation and so full involvement is going to be unhelpful or unrealistic or whatever. But I think that that can be a dangerous way to justify things. Because sometimes we just use that out of laziness to exclude the extra effort involved in listening.

(CCC, Department D)

Generally the research participant argues that children are viewed in essentialist ways, but an interesting distinction is made between different professionals within the organisation. The CROs are seen as constructing a different view of children than most others within the organisation. It raises the question of why occupational groups within SSDs differ in their views on children and participation. The CROs are being positioned as the professionals who argue for children’s rights and this dynamic creates a tension with those who argue from the perspective of families’ or parents’ rights, for example. Here we see that the tensions between
the competing discourses discussed in chapter 4 are being played through and refracted within policy and practice contexts.

In this section we have had CROs and other children’s services professionals talking about constructions and representations of children. The active/passive tension is played through differently for different groups of children. In some they are represented as passive victims needing rescue. In others they are represented as having agency and as being more active, although this is sometimes represented in pathologised images of them as villains, criminals or as manipulative.

4.0: Constrained ‘Voices’?

This section of the chapter seeks to explore the ways that children’s voices are constrained and how their appearance is rare. It is important to acknowledge that the appearance of the ‘voices’ of children came within a specific and limited set of texts produced from consultation or participation events with children. In chapter 3 I showed how only 5 out of 166 policy texts used the first person voice of the child. These texts were usually authored by a CRO and this is significant because even in these texts the ‘voices’ of children are still being mediated, brokered, articulated, interpreted and refracted through various adult and professional lenses. These texts were usually informal and unofficial texts as opposed to the formal and official policy texts such as child protection or Looked After children’s procedures. The status of the texts where the ‘voices’ of children are heard is relevant because it tells us that they remain at the margins of social care policy despite the clear commitment to consultation and participation of children in policy texts such as Quality Protects.
What I examine here is the extent to which, and in spite of these constraints, the ‘voices’ of children disrupt and challenge the normative, essentialist and pathologised constructions embedded within the wider range of texts. During the interviews I was able to explore these disruptions to the normative representations of children in more detail by asking a specific question about images of children.

This next extract raises some important questions about the nature and meanings of participation and consultation. The CRO is discussing the ways that what children say at consultation events gets reported back to SSDs:

**CRO** For example at the consultation events the report goes to the whole … (organisation). And it is just so amazingly in line with the (organisational) aims for that year. So we get this list of views that children and young people have put forward and they are so uncannily in line with the strategic overview of the (organisation) for that year, which is uncannily in line with the Government agenda that year, which gives us the funding.

**SP** Yeah … so to you it feels like it is not meaningful consultation with children and young people?

**CRO** Well it is what they’re saying and it’s either that children and young people are articulate and politically aware and can see the link to how you get funding or they’re young people who are very influenced by the workers’ approach.
SP OK so their articulation is constrained?

CRO yes. The comments are not reflective of the feedback I get in my role. I haven’t ever met a young person who says I think my main priority is more support for young mothers … ever. And that is one of the things that recur throughout the reports (laughs).

(CR03, Dept A8)

In this extract there is a shift in thinking about the meaning of consultation and participation which was flagged up earlier. The idea is introduced that the voices of children are constrained by the organisation of formal participation events and the Children’s Rights Service itself. This adds weight to the view developed in Chapter 2 that children experience a form of subordinate inclusion. The text also raises questions about who is speaking and on behalf of whom. This idea of the children’s rights service chasing the funding means that the participation agenda is reframed slightly so that it fits the resource framework set by Government. The level of reflexive self-criticism here is interesting because the CRO is articulating a strong view that the spaces for children to articulate their ‘voices’ are constrained by the framework in which she is employed.

When viewed through this lens the construction of participation work with children within the social care arena becomes highly problematised. We see here, an argument that the testimonies of children coming out of participation and consultation events are shaped, in part at least, by the professionals who are involved in helping children articulate their views. The professionals here are CROs and this interviewee is suggesting that their knowledge of
funding arrangements and Government priorities are being used to skew participation reports towards those areas which will enhance opportunities for their further work and funding.

The next interviewee raises other issues about representation of children and young people in consultation events:

**CCC** There’s a young woman who was involved in a project I was involved in about five years ago looking at residential care. She has now gone on to university and she was a very bright young woman. She also went on to be one of those who get ‘wheeled out’ at DOH conferences to talk about what it’s like being a young person in care. She’s a sort of professional young person yes. A professional Looked After young person. And some of us have some worries about whether that is positive for her in every way.

**SP** yes most authorities have a few young people who …

**CCC** … are the sort of star performers?

**SP** … the ones who feel confident, articulate and able to stand up and talk to an audience.

**CCC** yes and to be fair she was not a very typical Looked After young person in that she came from a very middle class family and she had that confidence and was already articulate.

(CCC, Department D)
In this extract there is some scepticism about the nature of participation and the voices it sometimes produces. Another thread running through my research is the way in which particular sorts of events and consultations produce specific ‘voices’. The representation here is of the ‘expert’ Looked After young person. There is some evidence of ‘involvement fatigue’ and increased cynicism from children and young people who have been involved in participation events and felt they were tokenistic or that they were not listened to, or if they are, nothing changes as a result (Carr, 2004). This idea links back to earlier discussion within Chapter 2 that these ‘voices’ themselves can also be viewed as representations. The layers of representation are complex in the interview texts because they involve the interviewees representing young people’s representations of representations about young people. Similarly in the policy texts these are CROs representations of children’s representations of themselves at participation events. Peeling away the layers of representation is part of the analysis in this study. This might also be constructed as representative of a protectionist and slightly paternalistic view of participation when the professionals worry about the benefit for the young person. Carried within this is the sentiment that professionals know what is best for young people.

5.0: Issues for Children

This section contrasts with the earlier part of the chapter because here I want to discuss a number of specific issues emerging out of the analysis of the policy and interview texts. I wanted to avoid presenting this set of texts as ‘real’ and in doing so privileging particular representations, which may be representations by professionals of representations by children who are representing other children. I will discuss the effect of this layering of representation
later in the chapter. I am presenting the issues as a set of arguments made consistently across several Authorities in various parts of England and Wales and as such they merit closer attention. In this section I acknowledge that participation emerged out of struggle and the extracts used here acknowledge the ongoing and unfinished nature of this struggle for children. Most of the extracts in which the child speaks in the first person are taken from the five texts mentioned earlier, which are the more informal written accounts of events organised by the Children’s Rights Services. The rest are extracts from interviews where these issues were raised and discussed. The implication of this is that the issues are raised by different groups of children independently of one another around different locations and organisations around the country.

I have selected several extracts to illustrate various themes that emerge consistently across the five groups of children who took part in a consultation or participation event organised by SSD and the CROs. A second and related point here is that most of these concerns have already been recognised as problematic within formal policy guidance and I use brief quotes from some of these within the chapter. Thirdly the consensus among the CROs and policy staff I interviewed seemed to be that these are the issues requiring urgent attention within Children’s Services. The term ‘wicked issues’ is sometimes used to identify issues that seem difficult to resolve and often fall outside the remit of any one service or organisation. Wicked issues become tamed when they are identified and a solution is found (Clarke and Stewart, 2000). The issues raised here are untamed because they have been identified by children, within academic research and in policy guidance but they continue to be problematic.

5.1 Distinguishing the Public and the Private/Personal
The right to privacy is one many of us as take for granted and is enshrined in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (1998):

**Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence**

(Baker, 1998)

In the Human Rights legislation the right to respect for privacy has some caveats about national security, public safety, crime prevention and protection of health, morals or rights and freedoms of others. In contrast to the legislation, children in public care raise issues about the problematic nature of private/personal spaces from their experiences. However, children’s rights are not specifically mentioned in the Human Rights Act and it is not clear where children in public care are positioned in relation to these rights. Stratford (2002) argues that the Human Rights Act is capable of being invoked successfully for children in public care.

On the one hand … ‘Facilities should also be available for children to store personal possessions in their own cupboards and/or chest of drawers’ (HMSO, 1991. Volume 4, s1.72). On the other hand, the issue of privacy and safekeeping of personal belongings is part of a wider concern about the construction of the private/personal that children share with other groups who are thought to be in need of surveillance and control. Denial or invasion of privacy is a feature of many groups of people such as those living in institutions such as prisons, hospital, psychiatric units, homeless hostels or residential care for elders, for example.
Generally these groups are viewed as ‘incompetent’ and therefore in need of surveillance and control.

The following extract is taken from a consultation event organised by a CRO for Looked After children. The worker asked children to post comments throughout the day and these are two of them:

- *Why do we only get 20p for a telephone call? Why can’t we get more money?*
- *You never know if you can pull the chain to the loo when you first go into a foster home*  
  (Dept F)

The first point is not immediately obvious in being concerned with the private/personal. Wanting more money might be viewed as an almost universal claim from children. In this context however, the money is needed to make telephone contact with friends, family or other sources of potential support. This raises an issue that was discussed within chapter 1 about the significance of ‘the adult gaze’ for children in these settings. In brief, in some areas of work with children the adult gaze is experienced negatively. A ChildLine study found, for example, that young people in care had difficulty with access to telephones. They complained of lack of privacy and restricted access to telephones, such as having to ask a member of staff to make a call or use the telephone in the staff office. Within foster care telephones are likely to be located in a lounge or public part of the house. Many callers preferred to use public telephones but again other people waiting to make calls often interrupted them. Carers or other
children interrupted thirteen percent of calls to ChildLine Counsellors. In addition, children were found to be more likely to be teased or bullied because they were known to have telephoned ChildLine (Morris and Wheatley, 1994). This example demonstrates the specific significance of the adult gaze for the children within this research. Use of the telephone is one example where the normalisation of the adult gaze means that children feel constrained or inhibited in seeking help and support while they are Looked After. The Foucauldian gaze was discussed generally in chapter 1 and here we see how the adult gaze is intensified for these specific constituencies of children where their care is ‘public’. Here it is also the ‘knowing’ that a telephone call is being made that is problematic as well as ‘privacy’ for the actual telephone call. The irony of this is that the adult gaze on children is usually constructed within a protectionist framework as being to enhance their protection. In this example that backfires and instead the consequence is that some children have less protection and are constrained in seeking independent help and support.

The uncertainties about the rules when you move into a new home seem to be a comment of a different order. The sense of vulnerability and uncertainty about changing environments is illustrated by the example of the child who worries whether it is acceptable to flush the chain to the toilet during the night. This makes unsettling reading and raises broader issues of empathy for the reader by putting yourself in the position of the child. This comment also helps us reflect on the way that particular aspects of private and personal become a source of concern for the child and exposes them to a disapproving adult gaze.

The next section relates to personal information and property. There is a well-established body of work about the personal and individual within institutional settings (Goffman, 1968, Haney et al, 1973). The following is a brief extract from a Department that developed personal ring
binders for Looked After children to keep information about their life story. The packs included information cards with titles like ‘What’s happening?’ and ‘My Review’; these were intended for making a ‘child-friendly’ record of important meetings, decisions and events. In the guidelines about use of the folders there was a note about keeping the folders safe:

Since the ring binder is likely to hold confidential personal information, a discussion should be held with the child about where it would be best to keep it.

(Dept D)

The fact that this issue appears and is discussed in several places within this Authority’s document suggests thoughtfulness about use of these records as well as an acknowledgement that there is a potential difficulty here. The reasons why it might be difficult for children in public care to keep their belongings safe is not addressed. The Authority presents the information for children in the format of colourful information cards which make it look attractive and similar to a school project. It is implicit that sharing of information from the folder could potentially raise difficulties for the child, particularly within their peer group, though this is not discussed within the guidance documents relating to use of the folders. There is a veiled suggestion here that the idea of safekeeping might be wider than the practical issue of space and privacy.

The same authority also invokes some powerful imagery and also acknowledges that children in public care have difficulty keeping hold of their personal belongings. The organisation A National Voice has campaigned against the practice known as ‘binbagging’ (transporting children’s belongings in plastic bin liner bags, when they move placement). The ADSS is
urging its members to back the pledge to end the practice although at the time of writing the pledge has only been signed by 40 out of 150 of England’s SSDs (Smith 2005). The checklist for a child’s admission to care/accommodation includes the following:

**Ensure the child has clothing and toys.**

The return home checklist reminds the social worker to

**As far as possible ... return the child home with all clothes, toys and possessions.**

What we see in my research is that for children in public care the social construction of ‘privacy’ and the private/personal involves a complex and problematic relationship between ‘public and private’. One aspect of this is that these children are already positioned within the ‘public’ care and in these specific contexts ‘the private/personal’ is in tension with public surveillance, ‘the adult gaze’, control and non-competent imperatives.

5.2: Negotiating Meanings of Participation at Formal Meetings

Formal meetings are held regularly within SSD to review and make future plans for children either Looked After or on Child Protection Registers. ‘Regulation 7(2) requires that the responsible authority, where they consider it appropriate, should involve the child and his parents in review meetings’ (HMSO, 1991, Volume 4, section 3.15).
Depending on the assessment of ‘age and understanding’, children are invited to participate in these meetings. Within chapter 4, I argued that protectionist and developmentalist discourses often result in children either being excluded or marginalised within some of these processes and especially within child protection meetings.

This next extract raises concerns about the process of decision-making and participation for Looked After children. In this next extract the young person raised issues in a consultation event with a CRO.

**Reviews are too structured - the book to fill in is stupid - no room for comments - & they don’t tell you where to send them - they are dull - no pictures. Dodgy questions - ‘where would you like to be in 5 years time?’ it’s stupid – a question says ’is there anyone who was at your last review who you don’t want to be at this one? - but you only get the form a week before so it’s too late to stop them’. (Department A8)**

The frustration about children being ill-prepared for meetings confirms Thomas and O’Kane’s (1998) argument that participation is a process and involving children in meetings should involve preparation and communication before and after the meetings. The comments confirm the ongoing problematic nature of the experience of participation at formal meetings from the perspective of children. In this research I wanted to build upon this established research evidence to examine how the various professionals interpret, seek to manage and negotiate
participation in these settings. In this next extract the CCC raises issues about written
information for children:

CCC I did also do a leaflet for young people on Assessment and Action Records ... basically we put a lot of work into developing this and I'm afraid I don't think it was ever used to the extent that we might have hoped.

SP Why was that do you think?

CCC Well part of me thinks actually ... are leaflets a good way of communicating with young people? And probably a lot of social workers were thinking that too. And although we are always saying we should have something in writing (pause) I suppose what really matters is that the right things are being said. But I suppose it is useful to have something in writing to back it up because you often get young people saying well nobody ever told me, or they can't remember. But if they have something in writing to take away then maybe they'll remember if they have been told kind of thing.

(CCC, Department D)

This extract raises questions about the meanings of participation for children. If they cannot remember the discussion or what was agreed, it raises questions about preparation for meetings as well as skills such as chairing meetings so that children who do attend gain some benefit and are able to express their thoughts, views and plans.
The following extract from an interview with a CRO raises different concerns about the process of participation itself:

CRO ... if we get far more concerned that participation happens, and what we end up doing is thinking more about it in mechanical way rather than something which is much more organic or systemic to use those type of words.

SP yes is this about how participation can be developed in a way which reduces it to one model and a tick list?

CRO yeah because it may be down to inviting young people to a meeting and, well no, young people don't want to come to a meeting. And I think that is what concerns me, that there is more focus on young people participating rather than what they are going to get out of it. It's the tick box exercise idea, because in fact what should be happening is the very experience of engaging with young people in a more equal partnership, although one has to accept that because of statutory requirements it can never be truly equal because of other power and resources ... but recognising that I think you can still engage openly and honestly with children and young people ...

And that is where you don't get the true participation.

(CRO2, Department F)

The first concern about the process of participation being reduced to attendance at a meeting emerged in many of the interviews and also within some of the informal policy documents.
The concern is about the way that participation is operationalised within Local Authority structures in a way which means it is reduced to a form-filling exercise rather than being part of a process of engaging with, empowering and power-sharing with children in decision-making about their lives. This links with the discourse of managerialism discussed in chapters 2 and 4 where I argued that objectives such as participation became subject to increased bureaucratisation and organisational imperatives. In contrast to this I also argued how listening to children is complex and time consuming. In a climate of resource shortfalls and increasing workloads this becomes increasingly unlikely. Organisational tensions and problems get resolved through managerialism, which then resolves these tensions and problems in plausible ways. Research evidence shows that children experience these meetings in various ways with some finding attendance difficult but positive and feeling listened to whereas others feel marginalised and experience difficulty with the process. Most children do not think they can influence the outcome of the meetings (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998).

Within this extract the idea of ‘true participation’ is raised although it is not explicit what this would involve. Most of the interview participants held up the ideal of ‘real’, ‘meaningful’ or ‘true participation’ and in doing so implied criticism of current practices as sometimes involving something which falls short of these ideals. From my interviews and previous experience and knowledge of social work, this level of criticism about current practices of participation is widespread among the CROs who are the professionals charged with implementing the Quality Protects agenda.

5.3: Residential Care: A bullying culture?
Various Reviews, inquiry reports, inspections and audits of children’s homes have repeatedly criticised SSDs for failing to protect children in its care (DOH, 1991, DOH, 1992, DOH, 1997; SSI, 1998, Mitchell, 1997). ‘Failures to protect children in residential settings and in foster care are only too well known’ (HMSO, 1998). One example of this failure to protect Looked After children is the bullying, harassment, violence and intimidation experienced by some children within the care system. The following extracts are taken from reports on consultation event with children organised by a CRO:

I am not happy about a boy’s behaviour in our unit; he can be threatening and violent towards me, other children and staff
(Dept F)

• I was most bothered about other kids in the unit - I've seen kids get bullied and staff not do anything - they were getting kicked all over the place.
• I got restrained loads of times - that was one of the worst things about being in care.
• Managers come in, wind you up and go home.
• I wouldn't want to work with kids in care - I've seen members of staff be assaulted - but staff do wind you up.
(Dept A8)

The testimonies within this research suggest that forms of violence and bullying continue to be a ‘taken for granted’ feature of the experiences for children and staff within the care system.
Issues of identity, powerlessness, lack of ‘voice’ alongside feelings of helplessness and vulnerability all feature in the accounts given by children in this research. Within Chapter 2 we saw evidence of how powerlessness of children and staff can lead to the conditions which allow an abusive culture to thrive within institutional care (Myers et al, 1999). My research is consistent with earlier research findings that articulate the complexities in the way institutional abusive cultures thrive.

Linked to the issues of bullying, violence and abuse is the related area of safeguards for children. The next extract is an example from an Authority where there is explicit discussion on these issues within the texts. The extract is part of the informal notes from a consultation meeting between children and staff:

We talked about who to talk to/contact if a young person was being abused within a home and the role of the Children's Rights Service. *** said that the recruitment of staff had been examined recently and that there was now a 'whistle blowing' policy in.... All young people going into residential or foster care should automatically be given a children's rights pack telling them about their rights and the complaints procedure.

(Department G)

I would want to question the idea that giving children an information pack provides protection from abuse. This links back to managerialism discussed in chapter 4 where I argued that children’s rights are being appropriated within managerialism. The idea that rights can be
delivered by an information pack is a procedural response to the problem of institutional abuse.

My analysis of all the texts from this Authority suggests they are seeking solutions following a critical report into child abuse within their children’s residential services. Explicit discussion of the Inquiry report is absent, but a reader with any experience or knowledge of wider discourses in social work would know it is present because of the tone of the discussion. The texts contain statements of intent to change practices and involve children in decision-making within the authority. From reading the texts it appears that this change has been externally driven by the SSI or other regulatory body.

In a different document from the same authority there is a text on listening to children which is interesting in the context of the discussions above. Here the problem is posed as emerging from different views of how to respond to children’s voices:

There is at the present time a tendency to either dismiss what children say as too bizarre or fanciful or to believe everything a child says without question. Both approaches contribute to the confusion around dealing appropriately with what children say.

It is essential that children who are the subject of Child Protection concerns are seen and given an opportunity to talk about their perceptions, views and feelings.
Once a child has made a comment or comments it is important to evaluate what is being said, to check it against other facts that are known and to try to establish the accuracy of the comments.

The text seems to provide an illustration of why a bullying culture can thrive within SSDs when there is contradictory advice and messages within the policy texts about listening to children. What we see is an organisational attempt to strike a balance between believing everything children say and being sceptical of their accounts. With closer analysis however, we can see that the guidance seems to fall more into the sceptical side of the spectrum. A tension emerges for the professionals involved between listening sceptically to what children say and the rights based approach being emphasised within the consultation document above. If children are treated with scepticism when they talk about abuse, it seems unlikely they will feel confident in pursuing the allegations further and making formal complaints or statements.

5.4: When things go wrong?

Within chapter 2 we saw how The Children Act introduced a complaints system for children. This emphasised the need for a robust complaints system that children can easily access as a safeguard for children when things go wrong. Below are some of the views about complaints processes from young people in different authorities:
Complaints - you fill them in and months later you get a reply - and a stupid
****** phones you and months later they tell you it’s dealt with but not how - not what happened to that member of staff.

(Dept A8)

Complaints should be improved - it is very difficult to make a complaint

(Dept F)

Research evidence supports the idea that complaints are still difficult to make and that children are unlikely to report abuse or bullying within residential care and also that there is widespread concern that that the complaints system does not work well for children and young people (Aiers, 1998, Morgan, 2005). The next interview extract raises further complex issues about the complaints process:

CRO One of the young people put in a complaint to say he wasn't involved in the process and it wasn't upheld despite the fact, interestingly enough, that I was at a meeting where the investigating officer for the complaint told him that they were in the final stages of adoption and he had no idea. So she knew at the time that that was news to him and still managed to not uphold the complaint ... If you give that scenario to anyone in the street they would say that’s outrageous, so how the complaints procedure can say no that’s fine, I don’t know.

(CRO3, Department A8)
The extract supports research finding that for many staff in SSDs, complaints are not taken seriously. Other studies suggest that some professionals view complaints as an expensive distraction from their ‘real’ job (Simons, 1995). In the extract above it is the Complaints Officer, who has the power to investigate complaints, who is seen to be not taking the complaint seriously. The policy and interview extracts in my research support the research findings that children experience difficulties with the complaints systems. Another of the Authorities conducted their own research about complaints:

The report then describes further examples of confusion and ambiguity regarding how this stage should be taken forward, links 'solving problems' with the 'investigating complaints' process and suggests that a clear framework, even at the informal stage, might be helpful. Without this framework problem-solving promotes discretionary, even casual responses, leading to issues being discounted or minimised in the quest for compromise ...

In short, the impact and effectiveness of the complaints procedures is determined by the context in which they operate. If a young person is upset about something and the response is to be given a form and told to make a complaint, a process set up to resolve can be seen and felt to be a means of being 'fobbed off’ and not taken seriously.

(Department Q)
The research within this Authority confirms the findings generally that complaints are often handled casually and the children and young people often feel they are not taken seriously.

The next lengthy extract is from an interview with a different CRO talking again about the difficulties with the complaints system:

**CRO** ... it's still quite a challenge for local authorities and social and personal services to be looking at complaints as a positive way of getting feedback, as information, as part of management information systems, it is telling us something about performance and what we are doing and I think most people would find it quite difficult to respond to a complaint. So I think there can be difficulties about the imagined audience for example young people need to know it is ok to make a complaint and that there is a particular way that it will be responded to and that they will listen, they will take it seriously, they will look into it and we were actually quite taken aback when we looked at some feedback from the work that we did because in preparation for the complaints leaflet we had a whole series of events that were focussing on the good thing about complaints, the bad thing about complaints ...

... SP yeah?

**CRO** We produced a comic in relation to the complaints leaflet and there was a funny picture really and the last speech bubble we asked children and young people to complete ... as part of a competition really. The scene was last October
floods and a flooded playground, with all these children and an adult under a tree and not one response was a humorous response. They were all things like ‘yes but will it really work?’, ‘yes but do we have the courage to make a complaint?’ The only humorous input was actually from erm ... the child of a social worker who said ‘what do you mean you’ve left your mobile phone in the car?’

SP yes

CRO yes and we were all taken aback, even the cartoonist, after all that positive input, all those days that children had been supported and surrounded by people who gave positive feedback and affirmations ... that they still did not believe that the process would work.

(CRO2, Department F)

These extracts raise questions about the meanings of participation when children report so often that their ‘voices’ cannot be heard either within decision-making meetings or within the complaints systems. Further questions remain about whether complaining is participating and about the nature of the ‘voices’ that can be heard and under what conditions? Within these accounts the ‘voices’ of children are being mediated through professionals, which is reported as problematic at times. Earlier in the chapter we saw evidence that professionals perception is that children complain too much. Given this, the children’s lack of confidence in the complaints process does not seem surprising. The impetus of the complaints system for children may have originally been about voice but in this section I have started to unravel some of the complexity and compromises involved in these new institutional arrangements.
5.5: Placement Changes

The following extracts from the Patterns and Outcomes Report discussed in chapter 2 remind us that in the early 1990s there was concern about placement changes and instability for children:

Placement change continues to be a serious problem. The negative effects of breakdown are well known but the damage done by discontinuity of relationships due to administrative moves and staff changes deserves wider recognition. Every effort should be made to maintain and preserve friendships and affectionate relationships with the important people in each child’s life (DOH, 1991, p35).

Research underlies and supports the requirement in the Children Act 1989 (S23(7)(b)) that siblings should be accommodated together whenever ‘reasonably’ practicable and consistent with the child’s welfare (DOH, 1991, p27).

In this context it is interesting to consider the following extract from a training event involving Looked After children and their social workers. The idea of this training was to give children the opportunity to speak directly to social work staff about their care. This type of training event is commonly organised by the Children’s Rights Service.
• I keep getting moved around when I have settled down.

• I didn’t have that – I was only 6 – I’ve been in 47 placements, I settled for 4 years in the one place.

• I don’t want to never see my Brothers again – it makes me cry a lot.

• You shouldn’t be moved to a different town – you don’t know anybody. I had to travel 3 hours to see my sister.

(Dept A8)

The children express concern at the frequent placement changes and how disruptive this is to their relationships with siblings, family and friends. The third bullet point above is part of a wider narrative I have called ‘adoption stories’ and is discussed in more detail within Chapter 6. This next extract considers how involving children in decisions sometimes means supporting them through changes they do not want:

CRO yeah and I think they want the situation to be managed because the young person often has a very strong view about say, a change in placements or where they're going to go, and in fact in taking that into consideration the professionals make a decision based on all the information they have and its not actually what the young person wants, we need to make sure that we then manage that situation for the children and young people and that we recognise that there are going or be difficulties because they're not going to buy into this. And maybe ... they are right and we're not always very good at, is managing their pain, their
difficulties, and their feelings and supporting them through that decision-making.

(CRO2, Department F)

In Chapter 2 I discussed the way children have an appetite for fairness and justice. Within this context this means that children can accept and understand that the outcome may be different than they wanted, but they desire involvement, being taken seriously and feeling listened to throughout the process. When this happens even if the outcome is different than they would have wished, the CRO supports the idea that children are more likely to be able to come to terms with it and reach a position of acceptance. The other point is about participation work being about listening to children talk about their pain and distress. This aspect is developed further in chapter 6.

14 years after the publication of Patterns and Outcomes (DOH, 1991) my study suggests that placement breakdown, instability and changes are unresolved problems as far as children are concerned. This is testimony to the slow pace of change within welfare organisations or to the intractability of the problem. For children, this adds to their sense that despite participation, consultations and reports, change is difficult and this feeds into a sense of demoralisation and lack of trust in the process itself, which comes across in several interviews with professionals as well as within the informal policy texts.

This section of the chapter captures the ongoing sense of struggle for these children, also the way that participation often becomes subsumed under bureaucratic and organisational imperatives including surveillance, control and monitoring of children. The tension, as I
outlined earlier, is about whether to view these as representations or as the ‘real’ issues. I have presented and analysed them as text, which contain a set of arguments, made consistently within policy and interview texts about the difficulties faced by either Looked After or ‘at risk’ children.

6.0: The Difficulty in Constructing Normalised Narratives of Self

The last section of this chapter brings together some brief extracts in which the difficulties for Looked After children in constructing ‘normalised’ narratives of self are discussed. This material follows on from earlier discussions about the problematic nature of the private/personal for these children:

*When you go out with carers you see family or old foster carers it’s awful.*

*Foster carers talk to you in the street and ask really formal questions - you lived with them for God’s sake.*

(Dept A8)

This creation of distance when they have shared intimate space in the home is experienced as hurtful and embarrassing for the child. The following extract raises various examples where children feel they are singled out and treated differently because they are Looked After:

*CCC One of the things we've been trying to clarify our policy on would be the issue of in care medicals, which is always a big thing for young people. They don't*
like having to have a medical every year because it makes them feel abnormal.

And there was a lot of recommendations on that came out of the last consultation. And I know we've had endless working parties with health trying to come to some agreed protocol. I'm not sure to be honest, how much of the young people's views got fed into the erm planning. But the planning is like stirring treacle anyway. There are two Health Authorities involved who both have different views. People keep changing when you think you've got something sorted.

(CCC, Department D)

This extract from an interview reports how children feel they are stigmatised and marked out as different because they are Looked After. The issue of medicals has been a long-running one since it was being discussed over ten years ago when I was working in social work. The difficulty of change is illustrated well in this extract. This extract also raises a question about how we understand professional talk about frustration within their work with children. All the interview texts reveal a level of frustration and dissatisfaction about the work they are engaged in. This relates to the discussion within chapter 4 about professional discourses being mobilised as resistance, points of mobilisation and other voicings. In this section we can see how professional discourses are being utilised to talk about the material strain and frustration of being a managerial profession within public services.

During the same interview a second example was raised:
CCC they had a big consultations project again with young people and staff about the health needs of young people Looked After and how best to meet them. And they got some very clear messages out of it. One of the strongest ones I remember was about young people not wanting to have stigmatised separate health provision; they wanted to be able to go to mainstream services ... perhaps fast-tracked into them, but not picked out as being different because they were Looked After. The thing they particularly liked was something called ‘The Yes Service’ locally and it is run by the Youth Service. It is a kind of young people’s equivalent of a Citizens Advice Bureau and young people can go in there for advice on anything. And they very much liked going to ‘The Yes Service’ because any young people could access this.

SP yes so they weren’t being viewed as Looked After?

CCC yes and to them that was one of the best ways of accessing services like contraception, counselling, all sorts of things.

(Department D)

This extract again highlights the demand from children in care that they are able to normalise aspects of their lives, and access mainstream advice and support services rather than specialist services for them as Looked After. In the same interview a third example about staying over at friends’ houses was discussed. This has to be read in the context of various concerns about children being allowed unsupervised contact with inappropriate adults who may pose a risk to them:
CCC Yes and that came out very strongly from early consultations ... and one of the big issues that came out of that was that they didn't want friends' parents to be checked. And there was then a policy decision made by councillors in response to that that the carers for the children should make a reasonable decision based on what they know about the friend and the friend's parents, like any caring parent would. And ordinary children don't have to have their friends' parents police checked so why should Looked After young people? Now that was down as a policy and it was agreed that a memo would be sent to every member of staff saying this policy has now changed and this is the new policy.

SP OK so that is a good example of something changing as a result of participation and consultation with young people?

CCC Yes except I've heard young people saying that their carers are still saying you can't go there because they have to be police checked. So somehow the news hadn't filtered through. So, it is a good example of the change being agreed at the top and yet there is still ... not necessarily information getting out to everybody who needs to know it. And I imagine that information went to staff, some of who took it on board and some who didn't read it and some read it and forgot and it didn't necessarily get out to carers.
These extracts illustrate the difficulty of change in the organisation’s culture and way of working, even when policy has changed as a result of challenge from service user groups, research evidence (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998), participation and consultation. This then feeds into the malaise that children often report about nothing changing as a result of their participation.

Within this next extract another aspect of difference is raised by a young person:

Friends who don’t know are shocked they keep so much info on you – it’s awful.

Here the child’s sense of difference is highlighted in relation to their friends. The next section is specifically about narratives of self from children with disabilities:

- If I had a magic wand I’d make them employ more disabled carers - people in wheelchairs and that.

- If you had a teacher or carer who was disabled you might feel better about asking them for help with personal care like toileting. Like if you wanted to stop using pads or something, your parents might say they will rub your nose in it if you have an accident - that would be frightening. A carer who had had the same kind of personal care like toileting would understand.
Some people go to foster care and they get bullied - like for having hearing aids. The thing I don't get is the independence - I asked my foster carer once if I could go for a walk but she shouted at me and was really nasty “No you can stay here where I can see you”.

(Department A8)

These comments, from children who position themselves as ‘disabled’, assert that they need support from staff and carers who understand or have experience of this themselves. The use of the active voice contrasts with the passivity used within the extracts from policy texts analysed earlier. Here we see that passivity is challenged by participation. These comments also relate to the earlier discussion about bullying and violence but add another specific dimension in relation to the specific vulnerability and needs of children with disabilities. This next extract is taken from a consultation meeting with children with disabilities:

I don’t like to be classed as a special person i.e. I want to go to ‘normal’ playscheme activity.

(Department G)

This relates both to the difficulty of constructing normalised narratives of self as well as to the dilemma raised earlier about the difficulty in referring to children with specific needs whilst avoiding pathologising those children. The extracts within this section involve children’s perceptions that they are not listened to, respected, or involved in decision-making in a way which is meaningful for them. The examples provide illustrations of the ways that Looked
After children have difficulty maintaining a normalised narrative of self as they are constantly reminded of their subject position and identity as Looked After children. Throughout this chapter I have shown how these issues have been raised in several reports, policies and research but continue to be experienced as problematic.

7.0: Conclusion

The chapter began by analysis of examples from the texts where I argued that children were constructed as active creative moral agents involved in the dynamic process of resisting, challenging, claiming and sometimes subverting images of themselves. I made links back to earlier discussions about NSMs in chapter 1 and the idea of children’s rights discussed in chapter 2. I argued that together these identified the pressure for institutional change around voice/participation for children. I discovered images of children both as pathologised victims and as villains. The normative and policy images of children were explored within the chapter and I discussed the tension between viewing these images as representations versus viewing them as ‘real’. I problematised the practices of participation in relation to the constrained and limited voice for children produced from it.

The chapter then moved on to look at what has happened following this pressure for change in ‘voice’/rights and participation by analysing the ongoing and persistent issues for children that have been resistant to policy solutions. I argued that these issues continue to be about negotiating and maintaining the public and private/personal, problems with the complaints process, issues about placement planning, participation in formal meetings, the continuing institutional culture where abuse and bullying can thrive and specific issues relating to children with disabilities which make them even more vulnerable. The sense of frustration,
anger and low morale of children and young people, as well as professionals such as CROs, about the slow pace of change is audible. The last section of the chapter was about the difficulties for these children in constructing and maintaining normalised narratives of self.

I argued that other possible conceptions of children’s voice are imaginable and that despite the constraints children are able to act in ways which challenge, resist, make claims and sometimes subvert the normative and policy constructions of themselves. The analysis within this chapter explored the dynamic interaction between children, adults/professionals and social policy practices and texts. The analysis assumed that children are more capable than they are often credited with being and that viewing them as active and creative agents within the policy process creates different possibilities for participation than those currently available within either Quality Protects and Children’s Services frameworks.
Chapter 6

Troubling Encounters: Emotions and Anxieties in Participation Work with Children

1.0: Introduction

Chapter 1 and 2 opened up the possibility of viewing the emotional and affective aspects of children’s participation and in this chapter I develop this to discuss the way the psychoanalytic lens adds richness to the analysis of my texts. In this chapter I am seeking to explore this aspect in more detail with reference to the texts, in order to explore the ways emotion and anxieties are articulated, negotiated and managed in participation work with children. What has become evident during my research, in the interviews in particular, is that this arena of work provokes an emotional response for the range of professionals and organisations involved. This was crystallised by the texts which capture a sense of both potency and disjuncture:

We regard the interests and welfare of the individual child as paramount at all times, even when these interests conflict with others. This is both a legal requirement and the Department’s policy.

(Dept A)

PO yeah they don’t always want the child there to speak because they wouldn’t know what to do with the information. And I don’t think it is protecting the child. I think they are actually scared of what could potentially be said. And
then they are in a position of ‘now that we know that what are we going to do with it’? And I think there are occasions where it has been like this. I think if the young person says something they then want to see or hear something as a result.

(PO, Department Y)

The two extracts above contrast in that the first is taken from a policy text and the second from an interview. The first text illustrates the way that generally ‘the best interests of the child’ is presented in the formal policy texts as if uncomplicated even though a conflict of interests between the parent and child is acknowledged. There is insistence that such conflict should not detract from the paramountcy principle. In contrast to the formal policy documents the interview transcripts are littered with references to the emotional aspects involved in this work with children. One reading of the interview narratives illustrates that anxiety and strain is part of the everyday experience of work with children in these settings. What emerges is a more complex story than appears in the policy texts where the statements tend to be clear, prescriptive and generic in style. What this does in the policy texts is remove and silence the emotional aspects of work with children. I will explore further the disjuncture between the formal policy texts and the interview texts in this chapter.

This arena of anxieties and the emotional and affective aspects of welfare work were explored in Chapter 1 (Gunaratnam, Y & Lewis, G, 2001; Shilling, 1997). We saw there how organisations operate on different levels to insulate themselves and their staff from the emotional. Firstly, the organisational systems distance professionals from the people they are working with (Hoggett, 2000). Secondly, post-war welfare institutions separate society from
difficult and ‘dangerous’ individuals. Thirdly, welfare professionals and welfare organisations experience stress and distress in work with service users and they seek to manage and negotiate this in a variety of ways. This also involves managing the emotion, stress and distress experienced by service users. Fourthly, on an institutional level organisations like SSDs develop socially structured defences including elaborate guidelines and procedures which constrain the way individuals work. Welfare organisations working in high-risk areas, such as child protection, where the highest anxiety is aroused expect high degrees of accountability from staff. The institutional response is one which, it has been argued, can lead to defensive, procedural, checklist, regulation and control driven practice (Froggett, 2002). It is individuals and teams, however, who are left to manage the tensions produced by the work itself.

Strategies for managing the anxieties provoked within this area of work include individual as well as institutional responses. Individual professionals sometimes seek to avoid ‘difficult talk’; others seek to create distance by developing a bureaucratic and defensive way of working which reduces stress by channelling energy into task or assessment completion. Some hide behind ‘professionalism’ by becoming inflexible in their role or using their autonomy and discretion in ways which lead them into defensive practices. Despite these efforts SSDs are unable to provide containment for living in a risk society. The intolerance of living with risk and uncertainty bear down heavily upon individuals within these organisations. The anxieties generated for the organisations as well as for individuals within them are high. It is these areas that I wish to analyse further in this chapter. I will interrogate the policy and interview texts to analyse the idea of managing anxiety and emotions within participation work with children further. I will use a range of extracts to illustrate the complexity involved in negotiating and managing participation, as well as showing how this
provokes a range of anxieties, strain and emotion for individual professionals as well as for their organisations, such as SSDs.

Before I do this I wish to acknowledge and manage my own emotionality as the researcher. Gunaratnam and Lewis (2001) discuss how, during their research into ‘race’ and social work they similarly had to manage their own emotions as ‘black’ women researchers. This involved some identification with, as well as distancing from, the accounts which they were given. For me, the process of interviewing various professionals similarly involved the management of my own emotionality. In places during the interview transcripts my own emotional response to the narratives became visible. One example discussed later in the chapter was during the interview where the ‘adoption stories’ were produced. In other places I found myself agreeing with and empathising with research participants, for example, when they discussed issues of staffing and resource shortfalls. I felt it was necessary to manage my emotionality for several reasons. Firstly it was because of the nature of the material I was listening to and reading and the ways in which these narratives would seep into my life. In chapter 3 I explored how my own experiences of work with children in a variety of settings as well as my perspectives on inequality and social justice affected my own emotional response and interpretation of the data. Secondly, the experience I had previously as a social worker meant I was trained to be able to listen without adding in my own experience or distress. Alongside this was something about the idea of being a ‘proper’ researcher conducting ‘serious’ research interviews. It was the interaction between these factors which made me want to manage my emotionality within the process.

During the analysis of the policy documents I was interested to discover the ways they refer to subjects in relation to emotionality. I was also interested to analyse the difference between the
expression of this within the range of texts including informal, formal, policy and interview
texts.

The second area of analysis in this chapter seeks to discover the ways that strain and anxiety is
revealed through the texts. I am fascinated by how we see or hear the emotional register. I
also want to make visible any attempts to settle the competing voices and form a view based
on the analysis on whether this works. The interview texts are a central part of this analysis
because it is here that strategies for dealing with the emotional are most evident. It is in the
interrogation of the interview texts therefore that I gain access to a deeper understanding of the
dynamics involved in the emotional aspects of these texts.

2.0: Problematising ‘the best interests of the child’

The paramountcy principle within the Children Act requires SSDs to act in ‘the best interests
of the child’. The following extract from policy texts is typical of statements made across
most of the formal policy texts:

To ensure that where the interests of parents and children conflict, the
interests of the child remain paramount (this does not in any way conflict with
the desire to work in partnership with parents).

(Department M)

In chapter 2, I argued that the legislation did not resolve the conflict between the child’s and
parents’ or other adults’ interests. Here we see that this dilemma is similarly reflected within
the formal policy texts where there is an acknowledgement of the possibility of conflict of interests but it is framed in such a way that it reads more like denial of conflict.

In the next interview extract the arena of negotiating the tensions around ‘the best interest of the child’ is explored further:

SP Ok can I just ask a little about advocacy and representation of and for young people within social care settings. I’m thinking in particular about any tensions and difficulties embedded within this role.

CRO I think that social workers make decisions as professionals about the child’s ‘best interests’ and what they think is in their ‘best interests’ but for me … I would always go from what the young person says (pause)

SP Ok can you think of an example?

CRO Ok yeah there was a situation recently where a young person … the social worker thought this young person should have an abortion, because it was in their ‘best interest’ … for many reasons … emotional, health etc. But the young person said ‘no’ and they felt they were being pressurised. Now, I might have the same view as the social worker but I felt it wasn’t for me to even give that opinion because it was up to me to support that young person, to say what they wanted to say, and to explain that they felt pressurised.

SP mmm
CRO So I guess that’s the difficulty for me is that it’s not up to me really what my opinion is … I could say to that young person, and I did say to that young person, what I thought that Social Services would do if she continued with the pregnancy. Ok so I could do that … but I need to support the young person.

SP OK so as an advocate … you’d be saying to the young person, these might be the consequences of this …

CRO Yeah but no persuading.

SP So in this situation there was a clear demarcation of role between yourself and the social worker?

CRO The social worker had a view of the situation that they got from their managers. I was able to say to the social worker that some of the things that were being said were ‘unreasonable pressure’. This is just an example (pause) … it was very difficult … because as I say my personal feeling was the same as the social worker but that really wasn’t the point at all.

SP no …

CRO I suppose it felt a bit like just walking along with the young person while they … (pause) because the most important thing was, they felt like they were being pressured and I felt that would be very damaging for somebody to feel they never made the decision themselves.

SP And did they make the decision themselves?
CRO Yeah they did in the end but then again ... (Pauses) I'm never quite sure if they did feel pressured by adults.

SP Did they make a decision which was consistent with what the social worker had advised?

CRO Yeah, yeah in the end.

... I think 'best interest' is a very difficult topic ... because young people, they know what they want to happen, but I think they need a very balanced view from people around them. And as adults we sometimes know that some things will be disastrous for them

(CRO1, Department A)

Here we see that the issues are not as uncomplicated as they are presented as being within the policy documents. Some of the complexity of the negotiation and contestation involved in ‘the best interests of the child’ starts to disrupt the narrative and demonstrates how assessing and determining ‘the best interests of the child’ can be multi-dimensional and complex. A tension emerges between the different professionals involved about the possible interpretations of ‘the best interests of the child’. One way of viewing this tension would be to differentiate between the different roles of the professionals involved, for example, between the social worker and the CRO.

SP Do you think there are any tensions in balancing and negotiating parent’s and children’s rights?
CCC Oh yes, there can be. Clearly there are in Child Protection. And clearly there can be in 'Looked after' proceedings and adoption. Sometimes the young person's rights or 'the best interests of the child' can be in complete conflict with the parents'. An example, I was having an argument, a discussion yesterday at the Adoption Panel about the relative rights of the birth Father, the birth Mother and the child where a young woman is placing her baby voluntarily for adoption and won't name the Father. And the court won't accept her not naming the Father; so have told us we've got to find out. So you've got her right to privacy, his right as a Father to know something about his child, and the child's right to know something about their Father, and the child's right to possibly live with the Father if he knew and said yes I'll have the child.

SP mmm tricky one

CCC Very tricky. The Human Rights Act has led to a stronger emphasis on the Father's Rights, but there's also another issue there which is the damage possibly done to the child by delaying placement while we try and trace the Father, when we have no evidence to go on. So balancing all those things is really difficult. Personally I'm more concerned about the damage to the child if it's an extra 6 months placing them than I am about most of the other things.

(Department D)
It may be considered that the policy documents are not the site to engage in this complexity and that practice guidelines are produced which address some of this. It may be that policy texts and legislation simplify and exclude complexity but what I am interested in here is what complexities they exclude and with what consequences. In this extract the effect is to devolve anxiety and stress to the individual worker. In chapter 3 I detailed the wide range of texts both formal and informal, covering policy, procedures and practice. The complexity represented in the interview texts, however, does not seem to be captured in any of the formal policy texts. There seems to be two levels of anxieties that are provoked in this process. Firstly there are the anxieties and stress of the organisations themselves as they try to balance the rights between parents, children and professionals. Secondly there is the anxiety and stress experienced by individual professionals within those organisations who are working directly with children and trying to balance children’s rights within a complex field of rights. The interview texts make visible the difficulty of working with this complexity.

3.0: Coping, Avoiding and Distancing Strategies

Building upon the analysis of the emotions above as well as in Chapter 1, I will develop an argument that several strategies for coping with or avoiding the difficult and emotional terrain involved in participation work emerge in the interview narratives where it quickly becomes evident that direct work and talking openly with children is a problematic area for the welfare professionals involved. The analysis of the interview texts reveals how professionals either consciously or unconsciously develop ways of working and talking with and about children which seek to minimise their own anxieties and defend them psychically from stress. Froggett (2002) called these socially structured defence mechanisms which she identified at work in social welfare organisations. Pithouse argued that ‘while workers define their relationship as
‘caring’ it is also a subtly but firmly managed affair, an art of skilful self-presentation that balances an affective and official identity. In short they create a sense of normative distance between themselves and their clientele’ (Pithouse, 1996, p92). In this account emotional management involves both distance and control.

Part of the next extract was quoted in the introduction to the chapter. I reproduce it here as it illustrates one of the ways professionals sometimes manage the emotional aspects of participation work with children:

SP Do you think any professionals have more anxieties than others about this (participation)?

PO Yeah I don’t really know. I wouldn’t really single out any group. I think sometimes that the idea is ‘in the best interests of the child’ and need to protect them from things; I am not always convinced by this. The anxieties are around listening to the child. And it is about them not being able to deal with that and how to act on it.

SP you mean the professionals are sometimes anxious because they don’t know how to listen to the child and what to do if they hear what they are saying?

PO yeah they don’t always want the child there to speak because they wouldn’t know what to do with the information. And I don’t think it is protecting the child. I think they are actually scared of what could potentially be said. And then they are in a position of ‘now that we know that what are we going to do
with it? And I think there are occasions where it has been like this. I think if the young person says something they then want to see or hear something as a result.

SP mmm yes

PO ...and I think they sometimes go in with a clear idea of this is how it will go and where we’ll end up and (pause) you know, to explore the child’s point of view on it, it might be like a box of worms, and I think that’s maybe what they are a little bit worried about.

(PO, Department Y)

The PO (employed under Quality Protects) moves the focus away from the ‘best interests of the child’ and describes his sense of ambivalence about social work professionals’ ability and willingness to listen to children. Here we see that listening is being constructed as involving a responsibility for taking action. The ‘they’ implies it is other professionals, such as social workers, not himself, who are avoiding hearing what young people say. What is interesting here is that the PO identifies the emotional/professional dynamic in the work between children and professionals and projects this onto social work professionals. There may also be an issue here about whether the ‘voice’ of the child adds uncertainty or an element of unpredictability to a situation that professionals are trying to control, direct and manage. In this extract it is possible to see and read the level of anxieties and sense of frustration for this professional. This frustration comes from a sense that it is not always able to make a difference or change anything to demonstrate to the child that they have been listened to. This relates back to the complexities involved in listening which were first explored within chapter 2 where I outlined
the different ways that adults and children listen as well as the different ways they assess
whether they have been listened to.

Within the next extract from an interview with a CRO a different set of issues are raised about
professionals managing their anxieties about difficult talk with children:

CRO ... like I was talking to you earlier about a young woman aged 17 yrs who had been in care, got pregnant, had the baby removed at birth and was having contact with this baby. And this was a surreal child protection situation where the conference was about to make a decision to have the child adopted and it was all going through. And they were saying things like 'when the board have met' and 'the panel have met' then the baby will be adopted. So they were referring to ... instead of talking about timescales ... they were talking about processes which only they were aware of. I was having to sit with this mother and say 'how much time is that going to take?' and 'when is that?' and it turned out it was in 5 weeks time. And this girl (pause) ... it just looked like someone had punched her in the stomach because she had no idea that that was the kind of timescale because for her 'when a panel met' just meant nothing. Yet all the professionals there understood that that would be a matter of weeks and that for a newborn baby there'll probably be a family waiting ... we all know that but nobody had the balls to say to this young person that on 23rd June this year that
will be the last contact you will have with your child. And you have to force them to do that in the Conference.

SP So is this a lack of moral courage within the organisations dealing with this?

CRO Well yes it’s the same thing as earlier … because it is an awful thing to have to present to somebody so you present it in coded ways.

(CRO3, Department A8)

What is interesting is that this extract could be interpreted in several ways. In chapter 1 I discussed how the psychoanalytic lens provides an understanding of the way social care professionals seek to manage, avoid, suppress or negotiate a variety of complex emotions in their work with children. Following this, one interpretation is to view ‘talking in code’ as an avoidance strategy being used by professionals. Viewed in this way it becomes a way of professionals avoiding dealing with the pain of talking directly and openly with children about what is happening or has happened to them. Another interpretation is to view the ‘talking in code’ as an illustration of performance anxiety by professionals who are avoiding acknowledging that they have more power than children or service users, for example. Professionals may know it is important to have power, but somehow it becomes impolite or inappropriate to show they have it. Various studies have shown how welfare professionals such as social workers are often reluctant to use their considerable statutory powers (Satyamurti, 1981, Pithouse, 1996). When viewed in this way the ‘talking in code’ becomes significant as an exercise in power. One reflection from analysing these texts is that organisations like SSD live in terror of power. This terror may be associated with several aspects of power. Firstly there is loss or erosion of professional power in relation to changing practices or policies (in New Labour’s modernising agenda for welfare or in participation with
children, for example). Secondly there is concern about power in relation to its use and abuse (as in child abuse inquiries into residential abuse, for example). Thirdly concern is about undermining or diffusing of professional power (as in partnership or multi-agency work and so forth). These interpretations relate to the discussion in Chapter 1 of power as relational and constituted within all exchanges between professionals and children. When viewed through this lens we can see how power is constituted, in various ways, within the organisation and practice of relations between different groups of professionals as well as between professionals and children.

This extract also illuminates part of the process embedded within social welfare organisations whereby children are marginalised within decision-making arenas. The CRO in this instance finds herself compromised in the situation because she understands the ‘codes’ but realises the young person does not and this is another aspect of the power, knowledge and understanding nexus. She views it as her responsibility to interpret the situation to the young person within the conference otherwise she feels she would be complicit in the marginalising process. The emotionality for the CRO in being implicated in this way is evident throughout the extract although it is unclear whether she had the power to act and explain the situation to the child.

In the next piece of narrative from another interview slightly different issues about power relations between professionals and children are raised:

SP Thanks. If I can just move on to talk a bit more about the process of participation in your experience.
CRO Managers quite high up, they want consultation, they do genuinely want to know what young people think, but I don’t know how keen they are at actual participation … as in handing over some power.

SP Oh I see …

CRO … to change some systems and to change the way they run panels for example. I imagine that that will be the most difficult thing because I think that is about their comfort zone and I think they are really comfortable now with consulting young people.

SP Because they’ve been doing it now for a while?

CRO Yeah they’ve been doing it for a few years now … and it’s all right and it’s still in their control because they get to listen and they address the issues. But I don’t know (pause) … I just … I don’t know how comfortable they are going to actually be (pause) with young people taking a bit of control of other things and other forums.

SP What kind of other things? Do you have an example of a scenario which you think would create discomfort?

CRO Yeah well I’m thinking of the leaving care committee. They (young people) have a list of what they want and they have someone helping them and asking questions and chasing the Director about it (laughs) … and I think that some Managers find that quite threatening. I’ve heard people say … oh you know...the
leaving care lot ... they're too empowered, you know, they're always moaning about things ... and they've got a false sense of what the world's like ... complaining about everything. And I think well no ... that's just your comfort zone and you're just going to have to allow that to happen with younger children as well.

(CRO1, Department A)

Here the CRO develops an argument about professionals operating within established ‘comfort zones’ which I am viewing as providing an area of security and boundaries for discourse between professionals and young people. As a result participation becomes acceptable only if it is containable within these zones. My argument is that welfare professionals have become comfortable with a particular and appropriated model of participation which is not threatening or challenging. The idea of young people as sometimes being ‘too empowered’ is a fascinating one, alerting us to the way that participation can create resistance. This extract reminds us of the potential backlash or resistance to children’s rights within social welfare organisations and has parallels and echoes of arguments made against women, ‘black’ people and various other groups who campaigned for social inclusion and equality (Faludi, 1992). In Chapter 1 we saw the post-structuralist understanding of power as dispersed and relational. Here it seems that part of the professional anxiety is about the potential loss or erosion of power, which is quite different from performance anxiety discussed earlier. In these extracts we can view power as operating in various aspects between professionals and children. Another significant aspect of power here is the power of understanding the codes. This is part of the power-knowledge nexus discussed in chapter 1. In this extract professionals have the power derived from knowledge of the language being used within professional discourse. This power and knowledge creates its own discomfort as it
implicates the CRO professional in a particular way and means they have to decide whether to explain the ‘codes’ to the young person or be complicit in keeping difficult information away from them.

4.0: Listening to Children

In this section of the chapter I want to develop the ideas raised earlier and in chapter 2 about the complexities involved in listening to children. The Policy documents all make clear statements about the area of ‘listening to children’ and it is usually presented as something that is unambiguous and easy to do:

Staff in senior posts are committed to listening to children and parents, and to those people in closest contact with them and to do so in a variety of informal settings. In children’s services information obtained informally is often more important than statistics or reports.

(Department U)

The idea that it is senior staff that are committed to listening to children raises the question about who it is who usually does the listening in practice? The idea of listening to children informally as well as in formal meetings is emphasised. This is consistent with the idea that listening to children should be part of a process rather than a one-off event. In the following interview extract the CRO raises questions about SSDs’ ability to listen:
CRO ... I don’t think organisations are truly child or customer focussed. For example if every time I went into Tesco’s they said you can’t have your bag of shopping until you’ve committed to coming next Thursday to a consultation day to tell us how you feel about your shopping experience, I’d stop shopping there. But they find out that information on a day-to-day basis by knowing what my pattern of buying is ... and there’s no reason why we can’t do the same. I get told all the time about things young people are dissatisfied about ...

SP OK thanks and anything else you want to add about children and participation in Children’s Services before we end?

CRO Just the thing at the beginning that if I could change one thing it would be that we built systems that listened on a day to day basis to what children were saying, in whatever way they chose to tell us. So that whether that was that they told their dinner lady or a children’s rights officer or a social worker, that information had to go somewhere. Because to me that is the kind of information we should be listening to, not the participation events and the specific stuff ... because it’s almost like you can’t remove participation and make it into a little side issue, it’s not an add-on, we should be living that and listening to them all the time.

(CRO3, Department A8)
As in the policy extract above the CRO raises the idea of listening as part of a process rather than as an event which seems to be an important idea being developed by CROs within the participation agenda. The policy document quoted earlier suggests that this is slowly starting to filter upwards into policy. The argument is made in this extract that SSDs are currently not functioning as listening organisations either formally or informally. The reference to Tesco’s is a significant one given that public services are being encouraged to think of their users as consumers or customers. The view proposed here is that in commercial and private organisations ‘customers’ are monitored in a way which enables the organisation to discover what it wants to know without organising a visible, formalised event. In this way customers are monitored and then targeted (particularly if they have a loyalty card) by marketing to enable the supermarket to sell more products to their customers. This is an interesting use of the Tesco supermarket as a key reference point. The sense of frustration felt by the CRO is that SSDs cannot similarly develop ways of listening to children in an ongoing way rather than through specific consultation events. What is particularly interesting is the way the CRO appropriates the customer discourse as a way of improving the organisation’s ability to listen to children. This reworking of the customer discourse into children’s rights by the CRO (and it is possible to see it in other interviews with CROs though not as explicit as here) may be one way the children’s rights professionals are seeking to ‘piggy-back’ their agenda onto New Labour’s modernising agenda for welfare. This may be viewed as acknowledgment that the customer discourse which has taken hold in the reshaping of welfare services, particularly in Community Care services, is now impacting on services for children. The difficulties of mapping the customer discourse onto children’s services have been rehearsed elsewhere (Pinkney, 1998; Clarke, 2004). This briefly involves arguments that social care is different and cannot be commodified in the same way as a bag of groceries, that service-users do not have the same choices that customers or consumers have in choosing where to shop and that
children may become quasi-customers in marketised welfare services with social workers, CROs or care managers negotiating on their behalf. This mapping of customer discourse onto children’s rights discourse is fascinating because it may be a marker of the way the NSMs including children’s rights are being re-branded and packaged within New Labour’s modernising agenda for welfare. For the CROs, presenting their arguments for children’s rights as part of the consumer discourse gives them a point of leverage within the political framework.

What became evident in my research interviews were the range, complexity and depth of anxieties experienced by professionals in listening to children and hearing what they have to say. This is consistent with findings discussed earlier in Chapter 2 from previous studies (McLeod, 2000). One part of this anxiety is that disclosure of experience or information might make them responsible for some action as a result. This sometimes makes them into ‘reluctant listeners’.

The following interview extract discusses children’s efforts to ensure they are listened to:

*CCC (Reviewing officer)* would be able to tell you more but basically it involved her doing a residential with the young people in the group. And she was saying how funny it was having these discussions with them where they were saying ‘so how are we going to get these adults to listen to us?’ and she was saying it was just absolutely mirroring how you would get adults sitting around saying ‘so how are we going to get these young people to listen to us?’ (Laughs)
The idea presented here, of young people trying to work out strategies for getting adults to listen to them, presents an image of young people as wise about the way adults will avoid listening and as mature and concerned about needing to be listened to. That they have to plot ways of getting adults to listen gives us a clue that their experience is more usually one of not being listened to. Underpinning this is the idea that children have to demonstrate ‘competence’ whereas adults are assumed to be competent. This links back to the discussion in chapter 2 where I problematised the assumption that children are essentially incompetent and how this often becomes part of a justification for not involving them in decision-making. In the next interview extract the CRO also discusses issues of complexity in listening to children:

*CRO* so that I think to make sure that children’s voices remain pure you have to look at the way, *erm* … focus on the way that you are really listening and that’s not just about hearing its actually about understanding.

(CRO2, Department F)

The CRO use of the idea of ‘pure’ voice is an intriguing one. ‘Pure voice’ evokes the innocent child of normative discourse discussed in chapter 2. The CRO does not say ‘real’ or ‘true’ but ‘pure voice’. An ‘impure’ voice, in this scenario, might be one that was mediated, muffled, directed, coached, constrained or interpreted. This involves an understanding of the way children’s voices are sometimes appropriated by professionals or adults who use them as ‘decoration’ or to add weight to their own arguments or perspectives. The other distinction made here is that listening is about understanding, again emphasising the complexity involved
in listening to children. Later in the same interview the idea of listening to children was further discussed:

... we have a group that was set up very early on called 'The Lively Trainers' and that is again about listening to children's voices and children being the experts. In the mid 90s when this was still very new and any group that was up and running was invited to go to the House of Commons or talk to Ministers, address national conferences or talk to managers. And what the young people were saying is this is, you know, quite interesting work and we like doing it but we're actually very angry about the things that happened to us and the things that happen to other children and young people and we're not very good at managing that anger but the adults are not very good at seeing beyond the anger. So what we need are the skills to be able to do this work. So that grew out of hearing young people's voices.

In this extract the difficulties for adults/professionals in hearing children express strong emotions such as anger helps to illustrate another aspect of discomfort around listening to and hearing children. Angry children disrupt and seriously challenge the normative image of childhood as a time of innocence, playfulness, ‘pure voice’ and happiness. The other part of the extract is about the skills needed for ‘voice’.
Taken together, these extracts provide illustrations about the complexities involved in ‘listening’ to children. On the basis of the evidence in this study I argue that listening to and hearing children is not as simple as it is sometimes presented within legislation and policy. I have looked at ways that the institutions of welfare sometimes appear to be organised around practices which give the impression of listening although the children involved do not feel listened to. Individual professionals also find listening difficult and sometimes develop strategies that mean they avoid listening or hearing, especially when children are angry. Children continue to make the demand to be listened to and heard but continue to find the process frustrating. The psychoanalytic framework, discussed in chapter 1, assists in understanding this avoidance of listening to and hearing what children say. I used the work of Klein (1975) to develop an understanding of how ‘splitting’ can be used by professionals as a way of closing off the emotionality involved in listening to children.

5.0: Working Together?

Following the concerns raised by professionals of working across different organisational structures discussed in chapter 2 I want to analyse how these arrangements work for children. The differences and tensions between various professionals in multi-agency forums were discussed in chapter 2 where I argued that the implications of different organisational structures, perspectives and outlooks for multi-agency working and cooperation are vast. Child protection conferences and meetings are a practice example where the differences between professionals in ways of talking, thinking and working with children are played through and often become tense. The following extract is from one of the policy documents about multi-agency working:
Multi-Agency Working: Good working relationships with other agencies based on a clear understanding of each agency’s role and responsibilities are essential for the effective planning, development and delivery of children's services. Joint working should be centred around shared objectives which aim to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in need in ... For Looked After children a clear understanding and commitment to the responsibilities of corporate parenting is essential.

(Department H)

The extract shows how multi-agency working is assumed to be unproblematic. During the 1990s I was involved in training various professionals in ‘Working Together’ following the publication of the 1991 guidance. The training typically involved teachers, social workers, education social workers, health visitors, GPs and police officers. It was necessary because multi-agency working was acknowledged to be complex because of the various agencies’ differing cultures of supervision, management styles and so forth. The Inquiry Reports of the previous decade had all highlighted the importance of co-ordination and co-operation across agency boundaries.

In this section I want to emphasise how multi-agency working can be difficult for children as well as professionals. The following interview extract explores the way one particular group of professionals is situated in a complex position regarding participation of children.
CRO: I think social workers really want the young person to contribute to their reviews more but young people don’t tend to like reviews and how they’re set up. And there are certain people who they don’t want there. Consistently we are told they do not want their teachers at their review.

SP: Really, why is that?

CRO: Absolutely consistently. And it is very upsetting for young people to have their teachers at review. Mainly because young people will say nobody knows about me at school, and there’s that thing that they just want to be another young person in school.

SP: That is an interesting one. Teachers are assumed to be part of the multi-agency framework and are routinely invited to attend.

CRO: It’s almost about their particular experience ... how it affects them, not even about their identity or anything. Because it’s easy to think well yes obviously they don’t want to be singled out but actually it’s about sitting in your classroom and looking at your teacher and you have to see that person every day who has just sat and listened to all that horrible stuff about you. And they find that really really difficult. And we’ve often been told well if someone needs to be there can’t it be the Head of Year, so that in their heads they know that the form teacher must have had information passed on but they didn’t have to sit in a Review and look at them.
CRO: Yes well my kid’s teachers don’t come to my house and ask about personal details and I wouldn’t want them to and my children wouldn’t want them to. And I think it is very damaging to their identity in school. Also they don’t think their form teacher needs to know all that stuff. And I agree with young people to a certain extent on this because it would be easier if we shared information on a ‘need to know’ basis. If someone in the school knew that information and passed on aspects of it but the form teacher doesn’t need to know all the details.

(CRO3, Department A8)

The difficulty here seems to be located in children’s anxieties and the problems they face in attempting to construct ‘normal’ narratives of self when they are Looked After. This and the later point in the extract about perceived breaches of boundaries is an interesting one relating back to the discussions in earlier chapters about the problems of constructing and managing personal/private boundaries. In this extract multi-agency working is perceived by young people as compromising their participation in decision-making meetings.

The issue of the adult/professional gaze may also be significant here. In Chapter 1 I argued that Foucauldian analysis has focused attention upon the idea of the gaze. In this extract it is the specific gaze of the teacher that is being constructed as problematic for children. This alerts us to the idea that there are differentiated adult gazes, with differing implications and consequences for children. Organisations such as ChildLine have argued that sometimes it is the absence of the adult gaze that is crucial to their work in providing confidential support to children. This then raises different issues from the child’s perspective about multi-agency
cooperation, communication and working together than the earlier ones. This suggests that the issue of the differentiated adult gaze needs to be acknowledged within child protection and Looked After processes, for example, and this may be more significant for children than has been accounted for so far within policy and practice frameworks in social care.

6.0: ‘Adoption Stories’

This last extract is a lengthy one and I am using it as a case study to illustrate a number of themes raised within this chapter. I am calling this ‘adoption stories’. It is part of a story which was told, in several places, within one interview.

CRO One little girl said she didn’t want never to see her Brothers again. It makes her cry all the time thinking about it. And this is something I’ve come across a few times. I’ve got more than a handful of young people at the moment whose siblings are being adopted and they haven’t been made aware.

SP you mean they haven’t been told as part of the plans, reviews and ongoing work?

CRO they might have been told maybe about 3 or 4 years ago. So if you put in a complaint they could say well we’ve got a note here that says in 1993 you were told … but consistently they haven’t had work put in. I’ve got one girl at the moment who thinks she’s going for access when she’s in fact going for her last contact. He (brother) is being adopted and the recommendation is she has no contact with him.
SP And she wasn’t prepared for that?

CRO No she has no idea about that. She rang our Helpline to say that she wanted help because every time she goes for contact she cries all the time. She’s 11 years old. It upsets her so much to leave her brothers behind. And when I looked into it I found that they are in the final stages of adoption and she is absolutely unaware of this.

SP So why wasn’t anyone talking to her about the plans? It seems outrageous.

CRO She lives with Grandparents who haven’t come to terms with it themselves and are frightened that it will upset her … so they don’t talk about it … and the social worker has gone along with that.

SP Oh … the kind of thing where the fear of a child being ‘upset’ is used as a way of avoiding talking about difficult things with them?

CRO yeah, I’ve got three people at the moment where siblings are being adopted and they haven’t been involved in the process.

At a later stage in the same interview the CRO returns to talk further about one of these young people.

CRO I was sat having something to eat with that girl I mentioned earlier to you, and we talked about what she was going to say at the next Review. Erm and because the news had just come to me that her Brother was going to be adopted,
erm well she was saying 'he wasn’t at the last contact and I think he must be poorly, can you ask about that?’ That made me want to be sick, I felt physically ill ... and it wasn’t the right place to talk to her about it and now I have to get a social worker to talk to her and sit with her. And that is just the worst thing, you can’t pay someone enough money to do that job but in respect for a child, and you just think ... (pause) I’m sorry I just feel so passionate about this (pause) ... if that girl went to a Review and complained she didn’t know, they would say well you were told about it in 1996 and this piece of paper tells us this. And I think well fine but at home with children who you would die for, and somebody has to feel that about children, you wouldn't say well I told you once when you were four that your Dad left because sometimes they need to know that for years, to live that, to be told repeatedly, different circumstances ...

SP ... to be offered ongoing and different kinds of support?

CRO ... Yeah different kinds of support and different ways of building up their lives despite that occurrence. And yeah you've ticked your box and you've done what you have to do, but every child has a right to information ongoing.

SP Yes and these examples are startling aren't they?

CRO well yes they are to me, in this day and age.

SP mmm ... so despite all the policy, procedure and guidance about honesty, openness, involving children and young people in decision-making, and participation ...
CRO yeah ... it is rhetoric ... they might as well be shipping them off to Australia.

To me that is absolutely no more shocking than this. They have lived with them as siblings, we are not even talking about siblings who have never met; they have grown up with these as brothers and sisters.

(CRO Dept A8)

The first thing to say is that for me as a researcher the stories are shocking and in several places during this interview I express this as well as my sense of outrage that this should be happening to young people within the care system now. In Chapter 3 I discuss some of the methodological issues involved in this research and this is one of the places where the issue of my own affect became part of the interview. This emotionality undoubtedly affects the interview and the interpretation which follows. The CRO expresses her own frustration, anger and anxiety about this during the interview and her sense of discomfort is evident throughout the interview.

Secondly, it is worth noting that this CRO is an ex-colleague and friend who offered to be interviewed. Part of her reasons for this apart from being interested in the research was that there were issues around participation work with children, which she wanted ‘out there’ and these adoption stories clearly formed part of the story she wished to tell about participation. In chapter 3 I suggested that the relationship and knowledge of one another before the interview undoubtedly affected the interview process and content. The level of trust between us is reflected in the interview material. This works on several levels and involves the identification with one-another in terms of knowing the other is a mother as well as knowledge of and
respect for previous work with children. These aspects have affected the level of disclosure in the interview as well as my interpretation of the material generated during the interview.

One of the ideas that came across in many of the interviews with professionals was their shock and discomfort about the event or story being told but also about their own organisations. My interpretation of this was that these are a group of professionals who are passionate and committed to working with children within a rights framework and their discomfort arises from the way they see their organisations working against this and undermining the child’s participation and rights. The emotionality of the professional is touched on and displayed within these interviews whereas this aspect is absent from the policy texts. In this interview, as in some of the others, there was a strong underlying criticism of SSDs in the way they are interpreting and operationalising participation.

This interview text also reveals the tension between the different professional roles here. The CRO expects to be part of a discussion about the impending adoption but is clear that the discussion is for the social worker to set up and ‘own’. Part of the strain might be about how the CRO or the social worker will explain to the young person why neither told her earlier about the plans for adoption. It is not clear from the interview why the CRO did not feel able to talk to the girl about the plans. The avoidance of difficult talk emerges here (as in several other interviews). The avoidance is multi-layered and the girl’s grandparents, the social worker and to some extent the CRO have been complicit in not talking openly to the girl about the impending adoption. We can see here how professionals are avoiding difficult talk with children. Each may believe that the responsibility to share the plans belongs to someone else and are using this as a defence against the pain of telling the child what is happening. The strain of knowing but not telling is clear in this extract.
The level of discomfort and unease of the CRO is evident throughout the interview (as she returns in several places to talk further about these ‘adoption stories’). Managing her own anxiety and distress, continuing to offer support to the young person and being involved in various professional and multi-agency meetings is clearly difficult. This sense of outrage led to the comparison between contemporary adoption practices and the forced migration of children to Australia which took place mainly during the 1950s (Humphreys, 1994). Linking these events is a way of arguing that this situation is a contemporary illustration of an equally shocking part of the history of social and welfare work with children which will one day be viewed with similar distaste. Fink (2003) showed how the child migrant story became a powerful claims-making lobby resulting in Britain’s newly elected Labour Government setting up a Health Select Committee which reported that ‘Child migration was a bad and, in human terms, a costly mistake’ (Department of Health, 1997-8). Fink argued that the child migrant lobby became symbolic of anxieties about children not being ‘heard’ within public welfare discourses in the 1990s. In my research this calling up and invoking of child migration to illustrate contemporary practices in participation and adoption practices is a powerful narrative device which adds weight to the story being told. Used in this way the child migrant story becomes a rallying call to illuminate the undermining of rights for children in a contemporary setting. This story disrupts the narrative that professionals will always act in ‘the best interests of the child’ and instead alerts us to the way what is constructed as being in ‘the best interests of the child’ will vary historically and can be used to support a variety of practices. This includes forced migration or incarceration of children in detention centres or ‘boot camps’, for example (Muncie, 1998).
In terms of participation these narratives tell us something about the way it can sometimes be experienced as ‘subordinated participation’. Here the professionals’ anxieties and discomfort, as well as the Grandparents’ avoidance of talking about the impending adoption, has led to complicity on the part of the Authority and the family which meant that the young person was not given information in a way which she could understand. The extract also links with the idea of emotional literacy and competence of professionals to be able to communicate with children about difficult and sensitive issues. This is a powerful illustration of the importance of participation as part of a process rather than a one-off event which is ‘done to’ a child. We are left with concerns about the child’s understanding of the situation and the impact this may have on her future well-being and development.

When I wrote to the SSDs in England and Wales I was not originally sent documents from this particular authority. As I said earlier, the CRO was a friend and ex-colleague who had heard about my research and asked if she could be interviewed. The materials I can draw upon for analysis are the documents I was sent from other authorities relating to adoption. The following is an example from one of them:

An adoptive placement is more likely to succeed if the child is properly prepared for it, so direct work to help the child manage the transition is an essential part of the task of placing a child for adoption. This work is often most appropriately undertaken by the social worker, but there may also be a role for the carer(s), the child’s parent(s), or other significant people.
[...] taking things even further back, if children have felt consulted and involved from an early stage, and believe they have had some choice in the matter, they are more likely to view their new family positively.

[...] Placements are particularly at risk where a child is completely cut off from old networks so thought should be given to ensuring there are some continuities in the child’s life, for example by maintaining contact with previous carers, or keeping the same social worker.

(Department D)

What was consistent across several policy texts were clear statements about the child’s involvement in decision-making about her/his life and being informed of decisions even when they don’t accord with the child’s own preferences and views. This approach would be consistent with the guidance and advice frameworks offered within the Children Act, CRC and Quality Protects. From this general policy framework we can assume that this authority has similar guidelines and policies to others.

As discussed in chapter 2, the Patterns and Outcomes Guidance produced in 1991 advised that sibling placements needed closer attention. Despite this the relative academic and policy invisibility of the importance of sibling relationships has been challenged by more recent academic work arguing for greater recognition of the social and emotional significance of sibling relationships (Mullender, 1999, Mauthner, 2005).
Another feature of the interview above is the way the research participant uses the rhetoric-reality binary. This was a common feature of several interviews and was used as a way of talking about the difference and gap between what is stated in policy (rhetoric) and what happens in practice (reality). This idea of policies as ‘rhetoric’ and the evidence of practice as ‘reality’ were initially attractive as an analytical distinction for this study as it seemed to offer an explanation for the gap between the two. For me, however, this became increasingly problematic and needed further exploration and thinking through in relation to my own research findings.

The first set of questions this binary raised was about the nature of ‘reality’, such as whose perspective was this? Whose version of ‘reality’ was being represented and privileged in these accounts? These questions are important as we read and interpret the texts. Secondly I found the binary distinction reductionist and unhelpful in the way it closed down ways of thinking and talking about the differences between policy and interview narratives. It potentially limited my interrogation of the texts in that it closed off certain aspects of both sets of texts, which I wanted to explore further. Thirdly I was conscious that policy texts themselves are representations of how organisations view themselves and wish to present themselves to other organisations or constituencies who have an interest in the work of the organisation. This could be a wide range of audiences including audit and inspection units such as the SSI, Department of Health or it could be service user or voluntary organisations for example. When viewed in this way these representations are the stories organisations tell to a wide-ranging audience about what they do. In this sense they represent aspirations, policy, guidance, best practice and so on. In this sense, rhetoric is never ‘merely’ rhetoric – a poor
thing compared to the weight of ‘reality’. Furthermore when viewed in these ways producing policy also became a form of practice. Corvellec, for example, discussed how organisations produce narratives of achievement (Corvellec, H 1997) to tell a story about how successful they are. Success becomes a political resource and organisations must tell success stories within competitive and marketised welfare. Clarke suggests that welfare organisations have an inflationary interest in producing success as part of a ‘success spiral’ although there are problems with how audiences perceive and respond to these success claims (Clarke, 2004). On reflection, these questions and complexities about ways of thinking, talking and theorising served to problematise the binary categories of rhetoric and reality within my research. I needed to be able to capture the complexity of the texts and not be reduced by the binary above. I wanted to be able to think in more flexible and fluid ways about what the different kinds of texts gave me access to, in the hope this would offer access to a richer, more complex and satisfactory way of thinking about the policy and interview texts than the original rhetoric reality-binary suggested.

By looking at the connections between rhetoric and ‘reality’ as well as the disjunctures I wanted to engage with the diverse range of texts as part of a more dynamic process. The policy texts seemed to disclose more about the negotiated positions, competing discourses, and different models as well as revealing some of the tensions between these positions. In contrast the interview texts revealed more about affect and how the emotionality and anxiety of managing and working in this difficult arena is experienced by professionals such as children’s rights workers who are at the forefront of developing participation for children and young people within social welfare contexts.

8.0: Conclusions
One of the aspects to emerge in this chapter was the way that within the more formalised policy texts subjects are constructed against emotions. In these texts we see the attempt to settle the anxiety and strain that is produced from welfare and participation work with children. Detailed analysis of the formal policy texts, however, reveals that in places the strain of the attempt to make participation work becomes exposed and emotionality is evident in various ways throughout the texts. One observation made from reading the whole range of texts and documents is that the more formal and official the text the more likely it is that the emotions and anxieties provoked around these areas of work with children are either absent or obscured. One explanation for this is the organisational imperative to write clear prescriptive documents. Another more persuasive interpretation is about the way welfare organisations and individuals seek to defend themselves from the psychological and emotional aspects of difficult work with children for a variety of reasons. It was in the interview texts that emotionality became most exposed. The formal policy texts can be read as an attempt to settle the voices arising from the competing discourses such as children’s rights and managerialism, whereas the interview texts reveal that this work is still incomplete and unfinished. When viewed through this lens the interview texts mark the failure of the policy texts to settle the voices arising from the competing discourses embedded within them.

In this chapter I used three examples to illustrate the way that policy texts construct an aspect of policy in a way which is problematised in the interview texts. Firstly, in these texts we see that ‘the best interests of the child’ are presented in policy as clear and unambiguous and as though determining ‘the best interests’ of the child is a simple procedural matter for professionals. The analysis of the interview texts reveals the tensions, anxiety and complexity
around assessments and interpretations of ‘the best interests’ of children in professional practice.

Secondly, similar issues arise in relation to the idea of listening to children. Again within the legislation and policy this is presented as a simple area of practice. My analysis of the texts reveals and demonstrates the ways organisations, groups of professionals and individual professionals avoid listening to and hearing what children say for a variety of reasons including being uncomfortable with the content of what is being said or being implicated in finding a solution, for example.

Thirdly, I explored the way the multi-agency framework and the tensions it creates for professionals impacts on children and participation. A focus on the differentiated adult gaze on children showed the consequences of the gaze for children involved in child protection, for example. It was sometimes experienced as awkward for children and reduced participation, as well as protection, in that the adult gaze in some circumstances limited their feeling able to seek support.

A final significant theme in this chapter is the analysis of power in relation to participation work with children. The texts revealed the way that organisations like SSDs are living in fear of power. I argued that this operates on several levels. It is sometimes about use and abuse of power. Conversely there may be problems around its perceived erosion or loss. While problems of abuse of power are much discussed in professional and policy settings, there is a more uncomfortable relationship to the possession and use of power in a profession profoundly shaped by notions of enabling, empowering and participatory ethics. This leads organisations into avoidance and denial in work with children. Individual professionals seek to
defend themselves from difficult work with children by using several different strategies including not listening to or hearing what children say or avoiding difficult terrain. ‘Talking in code’ was viewed as a way in which professionals marginalise children even when they are physically present and participating. Retreating to ‘comfort zones’ was viewed as another way professionals seek to insulate themselves from the anxiety and emotionality of welfare work in this arena. What we saw were the ways that these processes constrain participation for children alongside creating further anxiety for professionals such as CROs and social workers. The adoption stories were used as a case study to illustrate the way some of the themes and complexities of participation were played through in a specific practice and policy context.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

Children’s participation in decision-making about their lives has become a major theme of social and welfare work with children since the late twentieth century. Participation has gained favour and support within government and legislation within a number of fields, including social welfare policy and practice. The trajectory for this focus on participation is an increasing interest in themes of citizenship, equalities agendas, empowerment, principles of respect and dignity as well as recognition of the specificities in the way children are situated and positioned within families, social welfare formations and society. Alongside these, there has been general acknowledgement that children and young people are capable of understanding and being involved in decision-making. When children are given responsibility they often rise to the occasion and impress adults with their capabilities (Trinder, 1997).

This research is a culmination of my perspectives, politics and long-standing passion for understanding social and welfare work with children. My experiences in social, youth and community work led to a fascination with the way participation was being interpreted, developed and mainstreamed within social policy and welfare contexts for children. These professional experiences are a significant part of what I bring to this research project. In more recent years I have been interested in theorising on participation for children as welfare subjects. As part of a reflexive research project I situated myself in relation to my perspectives, politics and experiences openly.
In conducting this research I faced several challenges. The first is linked to my previous professional experience and involved avoiding the slide into discussing practice issues rather than policy and discourse. My own background and professional experience implicates me in a particular way within the policy texts. I could easily have written a different thesis about children’s participation from a practitioner perspective. The temptation to do this was strongest when I was analysing the texts in relation to what children say about being Looked After, for example. Some of the testimonies from children were heartbreaking and I had to manage my own emotions of frustration, scepticism and impatience that these issues were still around despite various Inquiry Reports, policy texts recommendations and various campaigns by and on behalf of children. My experience within social work practice, training and teaching made me want to make a contribution to the change process that seems urgent and necessary. This also linked to my earlier experience and involvement in rights campaigns. I took a step back several times to remind myself that analysing the policy texts, using discourse and narrative, assisted in understanding how children’s participation was being constructed in specific and particular ways within policy and the institutions and professional organisations of welfare. More importantly, this understanding assisted in imagining alternative constructions.

The second challenge was avoiding the slide into essentialism when researching children and young people. When I began the research I imagined my previous work with children and young people and my interest in children’s rights, equalities, justice and fairness as principles of work with children would enable me to proceed in a way which avoided essentialism. As I began analysing the texts I realised that essentialism is steeped in the way we think, talk, write and conceptualise developments within welfare relating to children. One aspect of this was the way that talking about ‘children’ as an undifferentiated group was common in the texts as
well as within social policy literature. In my own analysis I aimed to avoid this but became 
aware of slippage into another level of essentialism. This involved talking about ‘children with 
disabilities’, for example, in a way which acknowledged specific needs and positioned them in 
a particular way but was also essentialist. I was left with the tension between aiming to avoid 
essentialism by referring to children in specific situations and with specific needs, but also 
trying to avoid further essentialism and homogenisation of those groups of children. One way 
of overcoming this, which is often used in the policy texts, is to refer to all children as 
individuals with different needs, desires and wants. In my research I wanted to retain a space 
for talking about children in collectivities rather than individualising them. This is a delicate 
balance and one I have tried to maintain within my research. In future research I would like to 
develop further this idea of creating a space and a vocabulary for talking about children 
without essentialising or reducing everything to the individualist discourse.

Discourse and narrative analysis enables the different stories of participation to be told. These 
include children and young people’s stories, professionals such as CROs stories as well as the 
stories the institutions of welfare such as SSDs tell about children’s participation. The analysis 
also makes visible alternative constructions of children’s participation as part of a wider 
equalities and rights agenda. The data collection resulted in me having access to a possibly 
unique collection of texts from SSDs about children’s participation. These presented an 
exciting opportunity to understand how different Authorities interpret the legislation regarding 
children’s participation. During the analysis of these texts I discovered the way that individual 
Authorities vary in their interpretation. This led me to acknowledge the specificities of 
geographical locations and place; the way individual professionals or groups of professionals 
within one Authority can shape their procedures in a particular way and this led me to an 
understanding about the complexity of participation. This contrasted with the legislation and
policy texts, such as Quality protects, where participation seems to be being established as an unproblematic panacea within the policy and legislative framework. The developing consensus since the 1990s and following the recommendations of various Inquiry Reports has been that these particular groups of children are vulnerable and part of their protection involves their enhanced participation in decision-making and being listened to, heard and taken seriously. What became clear from analysing the various policy texts was the ways that many children and professionals feel that participation is being reduced to an event and a ‘tick-box’ exercise rather than viewing it as part of a wider process of involving children. My analysis made visible how participation is sometimes constructed as a procedural and bureaucratic mechanism within institutional and professional cultures, policies and practices. In this research I came to the conclusion that participation enhances children’s competence, which in turn enhances their participation. The subtlety of this process is not captured when participation is constructed as an event.

My aims and focus changed and developed during the analysis of the texts. I began with a thematic analysis but gradually realised that the competing constructions within and across the texts were fascinating and needed further analysis to understand both what discourses do with texts as well as what text does with discourses. I became more interested in the different discourses as well as their intersections. The discourses of developmentalism, protectionism, rights and managerialism emerged out of this analysis and were the most productive in making sense of the competing constructions and images of children which were making an appearance within and across the range of texts.

In interpreting these findings I drew on a range of theoretical perspectives. The social constructionist framework led me to view ‘participation’ and ‘children’ as contested concepts,
which are culturally and historically variable. I found that participation is being constructed differentially within SSDs, so that children who are Looked After are constructed as active agents and their participation is assumed (though not unproblematic). This contrasts with the child protection arena where children are generally constructed with less agency and more likely to be marginalised in relation to participation in formal decision-making meetings, for example. The protectionist discourse was stronger within child protection than it was for children in public care. I found Looked After children were constructed as ‘villains’ or even sometimes as manipulative social and welfare agents. The social constructionist perspective assisted me in carrying a relational aspect of meaning into the research and meant I was able to resist and problematise normative definitions and understandings of both children and participation.

Feminist theorising helped to expose the way that power and inequality works in families. Feminists made visible the fictional unity of families and how women in particular were positioned in relation to men within families. Campaigns on rape, domestic violence and child sexual abuse, for example, had helped to problematise the assumption that the family is a site of refuge and safety for women and children. I was able to use this theorising to question the way that children are positioned within families and to understand the dynamics that may have led to the child being Looked After or placed on the child protection register, for example. Examining the institutions of welfare through a feminist lens helped to highlight the gender dimensions to social and welfare work with children. The practice of FGCs was used as an illustration of the way that the dynamics of inequality between family members, on the basis of age or gender, for example, can be brought into a decision-making forum and children are sometimes marginalised in this process.
Social justice and an interest in children’s rights was one of my starting points. In my research I was able to use the ideas which emerged out of post-structural theorising and gave vent to the issues of ‘voice’, representation and agency. The NSMs were important to my research because of the way they foreground inequality and social justice in campaigns around gender, ‘race’, and disability, for example. The development of the children’s rights movement was viewed within this broad umbrella of NSMs. Age is another dimension of inequality and children and young people emerged as one of a series of groups seeking to challenge inequality, particularly in the social welfare field. During this study I treat age as an important social division which intersects in complicated ways with other social divisions such as gender, ‘race’, class and disability. During the 1980s and 1990s, the NSMs significantly insisted that collectivities and ‘voice’ were still important at a time of ascendancy of New Right politics and rugged individualism.

When I began the research I did not anticipate using the psychoanalytic lens but as the analysis developed I realised that through this lens I could provide an interpretation of the emotional aspects of participation work which were unavailable to me within the post-structural, social constructionist or feminist perspectives. This theoretical lens gave me access to the complex ways that welfare institutions and individual professionals experience, negotiate and manage the anxiety and tensions provoked by participation work with children. I used what I term the second wave psychoanalytic, which distinguishes it from the psychoanalytic frame developed in the 1960s and 1970s where it was used to understand ‘clients’ and ‘patients’. I used the more recent insights to assist with understanding how the professionals and organisations of welfare experience anxiety and distress in performing participation. The psychoanalytic lens therefore provided me with a way of understanding and analysing the texts in relation to the affective and emotional aspects of negotiating participation with children.
The Children Act, 1989 (England and Wales) and the CRC form the main framework for children to have the right to participate in decision-making about their lives. I showed how the complexities and contestations around the legislative frameworks matter because of the way they challenge the subject positions of children from viewing them as passive recipients to active dynamic subjects within welfare. It is clear that the contestations arising from the legislation and guidance around ‘the best interests of the child’, issues of children’s competence, representation and listening to children demonstrate that this area of policy is more complex and problematic than it would appear from reading the policy and guidance texts.

I discovered that the discourses of developmentalism, protectionism, rights and managerialism were unevenly deployed across the range of policy texts through their intersections. I argued that developmentalism and protectionism constituted the professional basis for social and welfare work with children. By contrast the rights discourse emerged more in relation to NSMs who had created a space for the articulation of a range of rights. This provided challenges to the professional basis of social work and a version of it was appropriated, incorporated and mainstreamed within social work policies such as Quality Protects. Managerialism, however, represents a different order of challenge to the way welfare services are conceptualised and delivered, with its emphasis on the customer discourse and the belief that improved management is the way to enhance and improve welfare services. The managerialist culture including the associated discourse of failure and ‘name and shame’ means that the institutions of welfare are not always positioned optimally for listening to children. Managerialism carries within it the attempt to displace professionalism. Despite the way that managerialism has changed the landscape of social welfare policy and practice, I
found evidence to support the idea of resistance to managerialism and a continued ethos of professionalism in social and welfare work with children. CROs are uniquely positioned as both radicalised and marginalised professionals within children’s services. Despite its appeal, reach and power, managerialism has not been wholly successful in displacing the professional within social and welfare work with children.

The Quality Protects policy represents the New Labour government response to growing concerns about children’s rights and participation and I found that it carries within it both children’s rights and managerialist discourses. It constructs a particular view of participation where children and parents become customers and management is viewed as the way to improve care services. Quality Protects illustrates the way that rights discourses are sometimes appropriated, mainstreamed and reconfigured within a policy framework. The outcome of this for children is mixed and they sometimes argue that, although they are being consulted and invited to participate, they still feel they are not listened to, taken seriously, or that what they say really makes a difference to what happens. Quality Protects also carries within it some of the challenges from the children’s rights perspectives and provides a framework for enhanced children’s participation within all SSDs. After analysing the wide range of texts in this research, I argued that SSDs are appropriating the children’s rights agendas selectively and in a way which subsumes children’s rights within managerialism and the consumer discourse. The implications of this is an uneasy settlement between rights and managerialism which represents a new configuration in the organisation of welfare policy and practice for children.

One of my key findings was how marginalised children’s voices were within the formal policy texts where children are both a normalised absence and a pathologised presence within social policy and social care representations. There is significant evidence that children are
sometimes able, however, to reformulate and rework these pathologised images to articulate a
different presence and identity, where play, imagination and creativity are available to them.

What I discovered was that the specific constituencies of children in my research struggle
continuously to assert normalised narratives of self. Testimonies from children in some of the
texts studied in this research show their capacity for generosity, humour and forgiveness
alongside their commitment to justice and fairness but this has to be understood alongside
expressions of pain, vulnerability, rejection, sadness, loss, grief, hurt, anger, betrayal,
confusion and disappointment. The implications of this for participation are that these children
have a growing scepticism about participation because they do not always feel that it makes a
difference or that they are being heard. My research supports earlier findings that children
have a commitment to justice, democratic decision-making and fairness which, in this context
means, many of them continue to participate even though their experiences are sometimes less
than positive. For others, there is evidence of participation fatigue emerging.

Despite their voices being marginalised, constrained, mediated and represented through a
range of adult/professionals there are several issues that children and young people repeatedly
say continue to remain problematic. One is around frequent placement changes and lack of
negotiation, involvement or understanding about the reasons for the changes. A second is a
persistent culture of bullying in the institutions of care coupled with a complaints process
which does not always work. Thirdly there was the issue of a problematic relationship
between public and private/personal space for Looked After children and I used several
examples to illustrate how these children have difficulty with privacy or safekeeping of their
belongings. Fourthly, I found that the adult/professional gaze on children is problematic
because it sometimes decreases rather than increases protection for children. The example I
used was inadequate privacy for telephone calls for Looked After children, who may need to
talk without being overheard. Underpinning all of this is a sense that some children and young people have little faith in the processes of participation and often find formal meetings with strangers a difficult place to express their views and wishes. These issues are not new and have been evidenced in Inquiry Reports and policy reports for many decades. From my own experience in previous years as a social worker, this feels frustrating because I know that these problems have been around for a long time. This sense of frustration and scepticism is evident within the interviews with professionals, such as CROs, who talk about the slow pace of change. Despite this a surprising number of children and young people continue to remain both optimistic and realistic about participation outcomes and show a sense of determination which is admirable in the face of so many obstacles and such resistance.

The last chapter demonstrated that the emotional and affective aspects of participation work with children have, until recently, been neglected in policy analysis. The psychoanalytic lens assisted in making visible the ways that individual professionals sometimes avoid listening to or hearing children. It also helped to conceptualise the problematic relationship between ‘voice’, listening to and hearing children and young people. The psychoanalytic lens revealed how various coping and avoiding strategies emerge in a specific professional context where staff experience high levels of stress and distress in their professional lives. The evidence was that institutions of welfare develop practices and cultures which serve to insulate professionals from difficult and distressing dimensions of work with children. For the professionals involved, performing participation can be a source of anxiety and managing and negotiating this anxiety was made visible in various ways. Some professionals seek to distance themselves from children by either avoiding listening to, or hearing, what children say. On a simple level, this may be because hearing what they say implicates the professional in then doing something about the situation. More subtle ways of avoiding hearing what children say
include professionals ‘talking in code’ or talking in a way which professionals understand what is happening but children do not.

One of the issues that emerged out of this study was the way the pressures of working within a context of depleted resources and staffing crises creates difficult conditions for professionals, which also affects children’s participation. This was an unexpected outcome of the research because although I am aware of the resourcing difficulties, I did not seek discussion on this within the interviews as I felt the arguments had been well rehearsed in earlier theorising on welfare. Despite me not seeking this information, it was raised within each of the interviews as being particularly significant because participation work with children takes time and involves a building of trust between children and professionals. It also implies continuity in staffing but in some Authorities’ staff are constantly transient and in others, vacant posts mean that children do not have access to an allocated social worker. Time is a scarce commodity for social care professionals and the implication of this for participation is that children and young people will sometimes experience it as a ‘tick-box’ exercise. Quality Protects changes the landscape of participation and some professionals argue that participation and consultation with children now has to be seen to be done. This is a point about participation being performed by the institutions of welfare as well as by professionals within them.

The gap between the legislation and policies of participation and practice appears to be wide. In this research I theorised beyond the ‘rhetoric/reality’ binary to develop a critical understanding of ‘reality’ and used the idea of representations of children’s participation to understand the different discourses and perspectives involved in performing participation.
It would be intriguing to continue to track the changes taking place in this highly contested field of social welfare and in particular to analyse further how this new configuration of welfare develops, is challenged and further contested. When I first sought ADSS approval for the research I agreed to disseminate the findings back to SSDs and I will produce a summary of findings for this purpose. I will present the findings back to children and young people to analyse further their experiences of participation. This study and any future research papers developed from this thesis will contribute to the ongoing debates about participation in a way that allows critical analysis of the way it is currently being constructed within social policy and social welfare work with children and young people.

In my research I found that despite the findings of frustration, scepticism and participation fatigue, there was also room for optimism. Viewing children and young people as active creative agents creates a point of leverage that can be used to articulate alternative constructions, identities, and subject positions for children within social welfare. Quality Protects provides an arena where participation is debated, contested and performed. It contains managerialist as well as children’s rights discourses. Engaging in discourse and narrative analysis creates the possibility of viewing the constructions of children within policy frameworks but more interestingly, alternative constructions also become visible. The participation framework potentially provides a space where children have voice and can create their own representations of themselves.

My research shows that children do not want to make decisions on their own, they want to be listened to, respected and taken seriously. They are capable of understanding and accepting when a decision has to be made by an adult/professional. The important point that was stressed repeatedly is that when the process of participation works it allows the child to be heard and
have their views taken seriously. Being involved in this process is more important than getting their own way and children can usually understand and accept the decision, even if it is not the outcome they desired, if they have been fully and appropriately involved in the process.

Participation of children in the widest sense will involve a change in cultural, societal and institutional attitudes to children and young people. At a time when the New Labour government is demonising young people with their focus on anti-social behaviour and ‘yob’ culture and when child poverty undermines the basic rights of up to a third of children in the UK, participation rights for these children seems unlikely. These attitudes are part of the wider ambivalence in a society that, on the one hand, seems to have a sentimental view of children and views childhood as a time of innocence but, on the other, does not hear when children say that they are being abused or victimised. While this is part of the wider context, the institutions of welfare, such as SSDs will reflect this ambivalence about the way children are situated and positioned as citizens and as welfare subjects.
References


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Department of Health (1993) Definition, Management and Monitoring of Children in Need, HMSO.


Parkin, W. and Green, L. (1997) ‘Cultures of abuse within residential care,’ Early Childhood Development and Care, 133, pp. 73-86.


APPENDIX I: LETTER TO SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENTS

July 23, 1999

Dear Sir or Madam,

RESEARCH: CHILDREN AND PARTICIPATION

I am carrying out research into children’s participation within social work decision-making processes. The requirement that children are involved in decision-making processes within the Children Act, 1989 has been widely interpreted by different local authorities and is part of the focus within my research. I am interested in the different ways children; parents and professionals experience and negotiate participation. At a later stage, I will be contacting a smaller sample of authorities to request permission to interview children, their parents/carers and social work professionals.

At this early stage of the research, however, I am requesting assistance in gathering information on participation from a wide range of authorities. I would be grateful if you could send me a copy of any policy documents, guidelines or other papers relating to participation of children and/or parents. Examples of participation in policy and practice may be in the form of guidance or departmental policy relating to participation with statutory meetings – child protection case conferences, reviews of children ‘at risk’ or ‘looked after’.

I am currently registered as a full-time research student with the Open University, supervised by Professor John Clarke and Dr. Esther Saraga. I will be writing up the research findings for PhD and for publication. I am also keen to develop a ‘best practice’ seminar series to disseminate the research findings to the authorities that have participated. I have 12 years experience within social work practice. I was previously employed as a social worker (London Borough of Islington) and senior care manager, children and families (Bradford). I currently teach and write on a range of Open University courses in social policy and social work.

I plan to begin working on the documents in September 1999 so if it is possible for you to reply by 31st August 1999, that would be very helpful. I enclose a pre-paid address label for your reply. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information.

Thank you in anticipation of your cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Ms. Sharon Pinkney
APPENDIX II: DATA RETURNED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Services Plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reports to ACPC on children’s rights, service user involvement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports on Family Group Conferences</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Protects Reports and Action Plans</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports on Service User Involvement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looked After Children pro-formas, review forms etc.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information leaflets (and a video) for parents</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information leaflets for children and young people</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research reports</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Rights Service information</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports on Consultation events</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti Social Behaviour Order leaflet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents with ‘voices’ of children and young people</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters with information on services</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo with information on services</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone conversation with information</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcribed interview texts</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total texts</strong></td>
<td><strong>171</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear

Re: Research – ‘participation’ of children and young people in Children’s Services

You may remember I wrote to you in 1999 to request copies of your Departments documents relating to the participation of children and young people in children’s Services. I was interested in particular in the contexts of children and young people either ‘at risk of significant harm’ or ‘looked after’. Thank you for responding at that time and sending me documents which have been extremely useful as part of the ongoing research project. You may also be interested to know that since that time the research has also been ADSS approved.

I am writing to let you know that the research is now into its later stages and I am interested to interview a number of people who originally sent me the documents. I am particularly keen to offer authors of the documents an opportunity to be part of the research so that it is reflexive. I wondered if you would have the time and agree to being interviewed by myself sometime at your convenience over the next few weeks. The interview would last approximately one hour and I would arrange a time, date and venue to suit you.

The analysis of the documents has been interesting. As they were originally collected in 1999 it seems likely that there have been significant developments since then which will affect young people’s ‘participation’ in Children’s Services. The interview would also therefore be an opportunity for you to update me on any such developments within your Department.

I would appreciate an early response on whether an interview would be possible. Please either write, email or telephone me to let me know. At that stage we can then negotiate times and I can give you any further information you require regarding the interview. I really appreciate you taking the time to be involved in this important research and I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely

Sharon Pinkney
APPENDIX IV: THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Preamble:

• Introduction and brief update of research
• Thank you for sending documents and agreeing to be interviewed.
• Outline the purpose of the interviews
• Use of tape recorder, note taking and timescale (approx. 1 – 1.5 hr) for interview. Interviews will consist of open-ended questions and the interview will be semi-structured around a series of questions and issues. I will prompt and ask further questions within these.
• All information will remain confidential and will be anonymised if used in the writing up of the research.

Questions:

1. You originally sent me various documents relating to children’s services and children’s participation. Have they been significantly updated or re-written since then? If so – is it possible to have copies of updated materials? Could you tell me in what ways the policy or guidance for children’s participation has changed in the last 4-5 years?

2. How do children participate in services within your Authority? Can you give me some examples? Are there ways you think participation could be improved? If so- how?

3. Could you tell me about the policy making process in your Authority? Have you been involved in this? If so, could you tell me about it? Are there any difficulties within this process? How do formal and informal processes relate to each other? If you are more involved in informal processes such as group work with young people, how does feedback from this work get fed into the more formal policies?

4. Who is the imagined audience for the policy documents? These might be reports from children’s forums or child protection procedures.

5. Who makes the decision about whether a child or young person can attend a formal decision making meeting, such as a child protection or Looked After review? What factors affect this decision?

6. What is your view of children’s participation in Children’s Services?

7. Often the social worker represents the views of children at a Child Protection Case Conference? Who else advocates or represents the child? Is this part of your work, if so can you tell me more about it? Are there any difficulties or tensions with this role? How are they resolved? What are the consequences for children?
8. In what other ways do children participate? Please tell me about any specific projects or initiatives you have been involved in.

9. Do you have any concerns about children’s participation in social work or social policy forums?
   Prompt: One example sometimes given is the concern they might become ‘upset’ or hear things they are not able to understand or deal with. Should this possibility affect their ‘participation’?

10. Which professionals would you say have the most anxiety about children’s participation? Examples might be in Child Protection Conferences or Looked After review meetings.

11. Do you feel there are tensions in balancing parents’ and children’s rights?
    If so – prompt to tell me how these are played out. Do you have any examples from policy or practice? How do professionals try to manage and negotiate these tensions?
    Is it difficult for the ‘voice’ of the child to be heard when there is conflict between parent and child?

12. What would you say are the main images or constructions of children and young people in social welfare contexts?

13. Are there any other points you wish to add about children’s ‘participation’ in Children’s Services within your Authority?

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

Sharon Pinkney
Consultation paper for a child or young person looked after by a local authority

Name ___________________________________________________________  

A review is an opportunity to make plans and decisions which will be very important to you over the next few months. It is a good idea to spend time before the meeting working out how you think things are going, and what changes you would like to see. Most people find it difficult to say what they think in front of other people, so you might find it helpful to write down what you want to say before the meeting.

Come to your review if you possibly can. You have a right to be consulted about the time and the place and you also have a right to say if there is anyone whom you do not want to be present. You may bring an adult friend to the meeting for support.

You can use this form to help you decide what you want to say. You might want to ask someone to help you fill it in. Bring the form to the meeting or give it to your social worker beforehand. If you are unable to come to the meeting make sure your social work or your carer has a completed copy of the form or a tape-recording of your answers to the questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What has gone well for you since your last review/in the last six months?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What has gone badly for you since your last review/in the last six months?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Has anyone talked to you about the reasons why you are being looked after, and the long-term plans for your care? Is there anything you would like to see changed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Has anyone discussed with you the day-to-day arrangements (Placement Plan) for your care? Is there anything you would like to see changed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Have you helped to fill in an Assessment and Action Record since the last review?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Has anyone discussed with you the arrangements for contact? Are you happy with them? If not, what would you like to see changed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Is there anybody who doesn’t visit you whom you would like to see?

8. Has anyone discussed with you the decisions from the last review? Did you understand and agree with them?

9. What decisions would you like to see made at this review?

10. Please say who you would like to invite to this review. Is there anybody you think should not be there?

11. If you are not coming to your review, please explain why.
Do you know that under the Children Act, 1989 you have the following rights?

You can apply for a court order to formalise arrangements for seeing your parents and other important Relatives.

You can apply for a discharge of your care order.

There is an official procedure for making complaints about the way a local authority carries out its parental duties. Area offices in social services departments will provide you with a copy of this procedure.