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**Learning from Experience:  
The case study of a primary school**

by

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**Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a case study about learning from experience in a primary school. The enquiry applies a psychoanalytic idea in an educational context. The focus arose from Bion's idea: 'Container-contained' (Bion, 1962) which proposes that the capacity to think is emotionally rooted in our first relationship, which informs the qualities of our subsequent 'learning relationships' (Youell, 2006). Within a psychosocial, interpretivist framework, research questions ask: How does the learning that children bring to school affect their relationships and learning? How can school provide flexible-enough containment for thinking and learning from experience? What have I learnt about learning from experience?

As a researcher/mentor, an interpretation of Bick's (1964) clinical observational method was deployed to generate data, including written-up observations of four case study children who communicated their stories of everyday events in school during mentoring sessions. An auto/biographical approach complementarily composed part of the methodological bricolage. The inductive method supported evolution of a relational approach to mentoring, permitting reflexive interrogation of the observational texts. Interviews with teachers and parents added a biographical dimension. Mentoring took place during half-hour, weekly, individual mentoring sessions with children over two terms.

Findings confirmed that children brought early experiences of learning to school which affected relationships and posed barriers to learning. The research method provided a subjective tool for making unconscious qualities of relationship in the transference and countertransference between researcher, children and adults at an institutional level, explicit. Reflexive interrogation illuminated the interrelationship between researcher and children's learning. Findings showed a need for flexible boundaries for supporting children's self-efficacy and personal agency, and teacher's learning about learning, when school is seen as a 'container'. Findings confirmed the need for time and space for children and adults to reflect on experience in school, towards fostering emotional well-being and the capacity to think and learn.

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## **Glossary**

**Additional Needs: Additional Educational Needs (AEN)** apply to a child who has needs which need to be met by a differentiated approach in the classroom, sometimes by use of an extra adult.

**ADHD: Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder:** is a developmental disorder characterised by distractibility, hyperactivity, impulsive behaviours, and the inability to remain focused on tasks or outcomes.

**ASD: Autistic Spectrum Disorder:** All children with ASD demonstrate deficits in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviours or interests. In addition, they will often have unusual responses to sensory experiences, such as certain sounds or the way objects look. Each of these symptoms runs through a continuum from mild to severe. Each child will display communication, social, and behavioural patterns that are individual but fit into the overall diagnosis of ASD.

**Aspergers' Syndrome:** People with this syndrome have difficulty interacting socially, repeat behaviours, and often are clumsy. Motor milestones may be delayed.

**Autism:** A severe disorder of brain function marked by problems with social contact, intelligence and language, together with ritualistic or compulsive behaviour and bizarre responses to the environment.

**Class teacher:** In a primary school, the class teacher is usually responsible for teaching all National Curriculum subjects, to a single age group of pupils, between the ages of 5-11 years. The class teacher may be responsible for a group of up to 30 pupils. The class teacher usually remains with a cohort of pupils for an academic year i.e. three terms; Autumn, Spring, Summer.

**Child initiated:** Activity initiated by a child's interest or enthusiasm

**Co-construction:** The notion of one person finishing another person's thought.

**Cognitive:** **Cognitive** psychology is a sub-discipline of psychology exploring internal mental processes. It is the study of how people perceive, remember, think, speak, and solve problems.

**Cohort:** A cohort in a primary school usually refers to a specific class of pupils within a year group.

**Co-dependency:** This describes a tendency to behave in overly passive or excessively caretaking ways that can negatively impact on one's relationships and quality of life. It can involve putting one's needs at a lower priority than others while being excessively preoccupied with the needs of others.

**Constructivism:** This is a theory of knowledge (epistemology) that argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. During infancy, it is an interaction between their experiences and their reflexes or behaviour-patterns. Piaget called these systems of knowledge *schemata*.

**Core subjects:** Traditionally, in the primary school, the core subjects are seen as mathematics, English and science

**Counsellor: (in a secondary school)** A knowledgeable person who gives advice or guidance to a pupil

**Cursive script:** Cursive is any style of handwriting that is designed for writing notes and letters quickly by hand.

**Dinner Lady:** A Midday Supervisor of mealtimes in a school

**Dyspraxia:** A motor learning difficulty that can affect planning of movements and co-ordination as a result of brain messages not being accurately transmitted to the body.

**Educational Psychologist:** Educational psychologists are part of local authority educational services. They are usually part of a team of outside agencies attached to schools, concerned with how students learn and develop, often focusing on subgroups such as gifted children and those subject to specific disabilities.

**Eleven Plus -11+:** Refers to an assessment system used to determine a child's transfer into a selective secondary phase of education.

**Ethnography:** A research approach that is employed for gathering empirical data on human societies and cultures through participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, etc. Ethnography aims to describe the nature of those who are studied through writing.

**External Agencies:** Organisations normally outside a school structure utilised to support work in a school – sometimes referred to as ‘outside agencies’.

**False-self:** A compliant child denied recognition of his or her destructiveness. S/he may lose the capacity for spontaneous, authentic relating.

**Formative assessments:** Ongoing assessments of a pupil’s progress by a teacher.

**Further Education:** Education undertaken outside the statutory requirement of schooling, normally 5 to 16 years.

**Grammar Schools:** Grammar Schools operate in the secondary phase of education. They provide schooling for pupils who have been assessed and deemed to have reached a high enough academic standard to merit places.

**Infant:** The first phase of statutory education, usually 5 to 7 years, to the end of KS1.

**Intersubjectivity:** A term used to describe a condition somewhere between subjectivity and objectivity, one in which a phenomenon is personally experienced (subjectively) but by more than one subject.

**IT:** An abbreviation for ICT

**ICT:** Information Communication Technology:

**Kar2ouche:** Innovative Tools for Creative and Personalised Learning

**Kent test:** An assessment system used by Kent Education Authority to determine a child’s place in its secondary phase of education i.e. access to grammar schools

**Key Stage 1 (KS1)** This describes classes of children between the ages of 5 – 7 years who have traditionally been referred to in the primary school as ‘infants’.

**Key Stage 2 (KS2)** This describes classes of children between the ages of 7-11 years who have traditionally been referred to in the primary school as ‘juniors’.

**Language Department:** A department attached to a mainstream school, separately funded and staffed to support statemented pupils with language and communication difficulties, to enable them to take their place in a mainstream school.

**Learning Mentor:** Learning mentors provide a complementary service to teachers and other staff, addressing the needs of children who require assistance in overcoming barriers to learning, in order to achieve their full potential.

**Learning Support Assistant:** Adults, usually without formal teaching qualifications, who support the work of teachers and their pupils in schools.

**Level Descriptors:** National Curriculum (2001) attainment levels of a pupil.

**Link person:** Member of staff identified by Brompton school to liaise with an external researcher

**Literacy:** A term used to describe the teaching of all aspects of English in schools.

**LSA's:** Learning Support Assistants (as above)

**Macro level:** The macro level looks at how the institutions within a large population affect the lives of the masses. In this enquiry 'macro' refers to policy makers in education

**Mainstream school:** A school provided by the state for the statutory schooling of pupils without additional educational needs.

**Mentor:** See Learning Mentor above

**Mentoring:** See Learning Mentor above

**Mentoring Project:** The researcher's project

**Mentoring sessions:** Sessions carried out with the researcher

**Meso level.** The Meso level is the middle ground, for example organisations that are on a mid scale, such as communities or neighbourhoods. In this enquiry 'Meso' refers to the institutional organisation of school in relation to the experience of individual learners (micro) and policy making in wider society (macro).

**Micro level:** This is the smallest of the levels of society. In this enquiry, 'micro' refers to the first intimate familial relationships that deal with the daily actions and interactions of people in society. Micro level study in this enquiry focuses on smallest elements of intersubjective, social interaction in relation to meso and macro levels.

**Multi-sensory:** A teaching approach combining information from the different sensory modalities, such as sight, sound, touch, smell, self-motion and taste. A coherent representation of objects combining this approach enables pupils to have meaningful perceptual experiences.

**National Assessment Agency:** A government organisation responsible for co-ordinating and collating assessment data collected from mainstream schools.

**National League Tables:** Data collected from mainstream schools collated and reproduced in tables illustrating pupil performance.

**NQT:** Newly Qualified Teacher

**Numeracy:** A term used to describe the teaching of all aspects of mathematics in schools.

**Occupational Therapist:** An **occupational therapist** (OT) is trained in the practice of occupational therapy. The role of an occupational therapist is to work with a client to help them achieve a fulfilled and satisfied state in life through the use of "purposeful activity or interventions designed to achieve functional outcomes which promote health, prevent injury or disability and which develop, improve, sustain or restore the highest possible level of independence.

**Outside Agencies:** Organisations normally outside a school structure utilised to support the work of a school, see External Agencies above.

**PC software:** Programmes which can be added to a computer to perform set tasks.

**PGCE:** Post Graduate Certificate of Education. A qualification which enables the holder of a degree to teach.

**Physiotherapist:** A physiotherapist is a health care professional who specialises in maximising human movement, function and potential.

**Pre-pubescent:** Before the age at which a person is first capable of sexual reproduction.

**Primary:** The phase of statutory education, usually 5 to 11 years, to the end of KS2.

**Psychosocial** refers to one's psychological development in and interaction with a social environment.

**Public Service Settings:** For example Health and Education.

**Pupil Teacher Ratios:** The number of pupils in a class to one teacher.

**Reading Age:** The age level to which a pupil is capable of reading.

**Reception Class:** The youngest year group in the primary school – rising 5's

**Ritalin:** A psycho-stimulant drug approved for treatment of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

**SAT's: Statutory Assessment Tasks:** These are government tests administered to pupils in primary schools in England to count their academic attainment. These are undertaken within primary schools at the end of Key Stage 1 and again at the end of Key stage 2.

**School Field Trips:** Visits out of school to support pupil learning

**Secondary phase:** The final phase of statutory education, usually 11 to 16 years, to the end of KS4.

**Secondary School:** A school providing secondary education.

**SENCO: Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator:** A teacher in a primary school who is responsible for organising and monitoring support of pupils with special educational needs, or additional educational needs

**Sensory integration:** The neurological process that organizes sensation from one's own body and the environment, thus making it possible to use the body effectively within the environment.

**Signing:** A form of communication using the hands in place of the voice

**Socio-cultural contexts:** An umbrella term for theories of **cultural evolution** and social evolution, describing how cultures and societies have changed over time.

**Special School:** A school which educates children who cannot be educated in a mainstream school because of their special or additional needs.

**Specialist Teaching Service:** The organisation operated by Local Education Authorities to support statemented pupils in mainstream schools.

**Springboard group:** Maths work designed for children in groups of 8–12 who need help to reach level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2 mathematics. It consists of 10 weekly units of work which will ensure that they are adequately prepared for the work they will face in Year 6.

**Standardised tests:** Assessment tests which have been developed through trialling and give a score which identifies a pupil operating at a particular age level.

**Statement of Need:** A statutory statement authorised by a Local Education Authority that identifies a pupil's specific special or additional needs and identifies any extra facilities or support needed to educate the pupil effectively.

**Summative assessments:** Tests taken at the end of a particular stage of a pupil's education to determine attainment.

**Supply teacher:** A teacher employed to take the place of a permanent member of staff for a defined period of time.

**Support Assistant:** Teacher/Teaching Assistant

**Systemic:** This refers to thinking about the way different levels e.g. micro, meso and macro structures within a system, connect, interact and affect each other in terms of human relations. In this enquiry systemic relations refer to the way home, school and wider educational systems connect and separate experience.

**Teacher/Teaching Assistant:** In a primary school, a teaching assistant is usually employed to support children, individuals or in groups, under the direction and guidance of the class teacher. An interchangeable expression, teacher/teaching assistants sometimes work with children with SEN, as advised by the class teacher

**Transitional objects:** Usually a physical object, which takes the place of the mother-child bond. Common examples include dolls, teddy bears or blankets.

**Transitional spaces:** These are play spaces that can be created in the research context by the researcher and participants for exploring the experience of living lives.

**Transitional year:** The year of transfer from one phase of education to another.

**Year 1:** The year group that begins to work on the National Curriculum - 5 year olds

**Year 2:** 6 year olds - Key Stage 1 SATs

**Year 3:** The beginning of Key Stage 2: 7 year olds

**Year 4:** 8 year olds

**Year 5:** 9 year olds

**Year 6:** 10 year olds – Key Stage 2 SATs





## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Research questions**

This enquiry explores in depth some of the emotional factors at play in relationships between a small group of pupils, teachers and adults in a village primary school in East Kent. At the core of the thesis are four case study children I name as Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo, with whom I engaged as a researcher/mentor in the school, to help me get to the heart of the emotional experience of learning. The mentoring project is central to the study and the basis, working reflexively, using a number of different methods, for composing what I would term a methodological ‘bricolage’. I used mentoring to explore and contain emotions that presented both at an individual and organisational level in the primary school research context.

In this chapter I introduce my personal and professional stance as part of this reflexive, psychosocial enquiry, including the struggle to find and bring together apt disciplinary and methodological approaches to address the following research questions:

1. How does the experience children bring to school affect their relationships and learning in school?
2. How can school provide flexible-enough containment for thinking and learning from experience?
3. What have I learnt about learning from my own experience?

Theoretically, the study draws on the ideas of Bion’s notion of ‘Learning from experience’ (1962) and ‘Experiences in Groups’ (1961).

‘Learning from experience’, which changes or transforms the learner is distinguished from, ‘learning about’, which only adds to his stock

of information.’ (Meltzer et al, 1982:190)

Meltzer encapsulates the contribution of psychoanalytic theory to this school based investigation. In my experience as a student of education and teacher of learners ranging from four to fifty years of age, in a range of settings, over the past twenty five years, the development of learning policies, practices, cultures and behaviours in schools are largely externally referenced, managed and implemented at a practical ‘content’ level, (Greenhalgh, 1994). Learning in school is seen as a conscious, material transaction that takes place through pupils learning about National Curriculum subjects, during lessons planned and taught by teachers.

The distinction between ‘learning about’ and Bion’s notion of ‘Learning from Experience’ (Bion, 1962), most simply defined as becoming a walker rather than learning about walking (Harris, 1987), can be aligned to the notion of authentic engagement:

‘Nearly everyone has been taught to bother about other people, to be concerned for them. That can also be one of these tricks learnt in the course of one’s life – how to be just like an affectionate or loving person takes the place of becoming one. That is one of the solutions that puts a stop to growth and development.’ (Bion, 1961:9)

Bion’s work specifically refers to the first psychological interaction between mother and child. His concept, ‘container-contained’ (Bion 1962), represents the prototype of human intersubjective development, described by Youell (2006) as the ‘learning relationship’ (Youell, 2006). He suggests that human processes, both conscious and unconscious are at play in emotional interaction which form the roots of thinking and transformational experience of learning (Meltzer, 1986).

This enquiry aims to explore some of these interrelational processes and their relevance to learning in school for the four case study children. Unconscious

human factors are considered in this investigation to be illuminated by relevant aspects of object-relations theory. Melanie Klein was Bion's clinical supervisor and his ideas were developed from her theory of object-relations, particularly regarding early ego-formation. Theorists, such as Klein, Bion and Winnicott, believed that early relational patterns continue to exert influence throughout our lives. Object-relations is the psychodynamic theory within psychoanalytic psychology that describes the process of developing a 'self' in our relationships with others. The people or things we relate to are described as 'objects', both real and also internalised images of others from our world or environment.

In this study, object-relations theory is used to highlight parallels between the first, significant mother/infant learning relationship and the teacher/learner, mentor/case study child, as well as the interactive researcher/participant relationship emphasised in the auto/biographical strand that is deployed as part of the methodology.

The auto/biographical dimension of the thesis, combined with the observational method, including my subjectivity as a researcher, is reflexively interrogated. I draw on the work of Stanley (1992), Merrill and West (2009) and C.Wright Mills (1959) to explain an auto/biographical approach, but chiefly on the close observational method of Esther Bick (1964) to introduce the containing observational process. I also refer to relevant educational research literature that reflects a view of learning as situated, relational, dialogical and unconscious (Illeris, 2007, Hermans, 2004 and Hollway, 2008). This reflects the interpretivist epistemological assumptions and methodological approaches of the research. I will include my understanding of 'learning mentors' in relation to the research project which enabled my role as a researcher/mentor. At the end of this chapter, I

also introduce the case study children and themes that emerged from my observations of our interactions in the research.

### **Relevance of the research**

There have been specific endeavours, from applied psychoanalytic 'health' and Human Science perspectives, towards understanding what happens psychodynamically, at both individual and group levels, in relation to emotional well-being in public sector institutions (Menzies-Lyth, 1988, Obholzer, 1994, Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983, Rustin, 2008, Jackson 2008). These ideas have informed this study, yet the work may be seen to remain at the margins of education and social science research (Bainbridge and West, 2012).

In Education, in the closing decades of the last century and into this present one, social and emotional 'well-being' has emerged as an agenda item of successive governments. The role of the learning mentor, as part of 'Excellence in Cities' (DfES, 1999, 2000, 2001), which was initiated to help pupils overcome barriers to learning and improve their performance in school, may be seen as part of that agenda. Other examples include Personal, Social and Health Education (PHSE, 2000) which has become a discrete curriculum subject, Every Child Matters; 2003, particularly motivated by the Victoria Climbié (2000) child abuse case. Also, The Children Act (2004), National Healthy Schools Status, 2005 and the Early Years 'Sure Start' (1999, 2003) project aimed at supporting families. An international precedent was set at the World Health Organisation conference in 2005:

'There is no health without mental health. Mental health is central to the human, social and economic capital of nations and should therefore be considered as an integral and essential part of other public policy areas such as human rights, social care, education and employment.' (WHO, 2005:3)

At the same time the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL, DfES 2005) programme was rolled out into primary and secondary schools nationwide. More recently 'well-being' was included in the Ofsted Inspection Framework (2009). A 'UK Resilience Programme' (UKRP) has been piloted with the intention of increasing positive behaviour and well-being through an eighteen hour programme that utilises cognitive behavioural therapy techniques (Evans, 2011).

Impetus for such school 'programmes' may also have increased concerns about child mental health and happiness. For example, UNICEF (2007) put the United Kingdom at the bottom of a list of twenty-one industrialised countries for childhood well-being. In the Barnado's Index for Wellbeing in the European Union, during the same year (2007), the United Kingdom was ranked 21 out of 25 countries. Informed by education stakeholders, the pitch of government concern can be seen in 'Safeguarding Children' (Ofsted, 2008). The report incorporates the main tenets of the Children Act (2004) and Every Child Matters (2003, 2005):

'The process of protecting children from abuse or neglect, preventing impairment of their health and development, and ensuring they are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care that enables children to have optimum life chances and enter adulthood successfully.' (Ofsted, 2008)

Following the apparently bottom of the 'well-being' league table position, together with a Conservative report entitled: 'Breakdown Britain' (2006) in a series of articles during December, 2007, the Guardian newspaper fuelled the debate on social decay deploying the phrase 'Broken Britain'. This was an expression repeatedly used by David Cameron before he became Prime Minister in May 2010.

The infant abuse case of baby 'P', (2009) heightened anxiety in schools and more widely about infant safety in families, making child-protection awareness and policy an additional priority amongst learning and teaching tasks in schools. Some

strands of government 'well-being' and recent 'happiness' initiatives seem to be aimed at individual learners, some at 'whole school' systems, some at supporting and influencing family as well as school cultures e.g. breakfast and home-work clubs. A more recent column in the Telegraph newspaper reported on the aforementioned SEAL initiative.

'Labour's 'happiness lessons' aimed at improving the emotional well-being of secondary school pupils have been dismissed as ineffective.' (Evans, The Daily Telegraph, 2010)

Difficult to define, commodify and theorise within an increasingly complex multidisciplinary field, the role of children's 'well-being' in education may be seen to be in its infancy. Bion (1961) wrote:

'Society has not yet been driven to seek treatment of its psychological disorders by psychological means because it has not yet achieved sufficient insight to appreciate the nature of its distress.' (Bion, 1961:14)

There is action in the form of research prompting policy directives from, for example, established institutions such as National Foundation of Educational Research (ECM, 2006, 2007), the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU, Smith et al, 2010) and C4EO (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services, 2010). There is concern at international, national, local and individual levels, yet links between emotional well-being and applied psychoanalytic ideas seem, as suggested, to be marginal.

### **Why a psychoanalytic approach?**

It is recognised that psychoanalytic ideas have been developed from Freud's concepts of the conscious and unconscious mind. It is also acknowledged that applying psychoanalytic concepts in educational settings was neither usual, nor mainstream in school practice at the time of the research project. There is, for

example, a counter argument, amongst educationalists (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009) that a perceived therapeutic ethos emerging across the education system is developing a negative, unhealthy pre-occupation with 'self'. This is seen to fundamentally undermine traditional academic aspirations and the pursuit of knowledge.

If intellectual and academic rigour were at risk of being marginalised by therapising and/or pathologising school and education such concern may be valid. Yet, despite the rhetoric of aforementioned government programmes and initiatives, as Bainbridge and West (2012:12) point out, such a view 'is largely anecdotal and hardly recognisable to professionals who work in the environment'. Also, the argument hinges on how knowledge is theorised and how learning is experienced, which are central themes of this study. A psychoanalytic approach sanctions 'understanding' that may be seen as intellectually and academically empowering as well as emotionally demanding. Far from therapising and/or pathologising schooling and education, proposing a therapeutic approach within a psychosocial framework in this enquiry is part of a conversation about re-humanising the learning and teaching experience, alongside deepening understanding of it. In relation to learning and knowing in educational settings, Bega (2008) asks how, as human beings before all else, we think we can prevent the messy business that is life?

In statutory schooling, psychological learning theories in the multidisciplinary field of education, have traditionally relied on behaviourist perspectives (Skinner, 1957, Pavlov, 1927) and developmental stage theories, (Piaget, 1972), humanistic taxonomies (Maslow, 1972) or cognitive psychology to help us understand learning. It is suggested that these fail to engage, in any depth, with the emotional experience of learning. In spite of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), the

constructivist approaches of Bruner (1986) on enculturation and Vygotsky (1978) on language and thought which extend a socio-cultural perspective, I see, along with some other researchers (Bainbridge and West, 2012) the marginalisation of psychoanalytic ideas in education and social science research as rejecting the visceral connections between our internal lives and everyday human experience in social contexts.

Cognitive psychology which traditionally viewed the brain as a computer (Roth, 1992, 2007) is underpinned by experimental research and a suspicion towards interpretivism and subjectivism, which underpins the methodological approach of this research, as a valid method of investigation. Cognitive enquiry has focused on information processing linked physiologically to the way in which human beings perceive, remember, think, speak and problem solve. The associated scientific status of a current sub-discipline, neuroscience (study of the nervous system), may partly explain its particular appeal to the Economic and Social Research Council and a developing alliance with Education.

‘In a recent survey of teachers, almost 90 per cent thought that a knowledge of the brain was important, or very important, in the design of educational programmes. Unfortunately, these programmes have usually been produced without the involvement of neuroscientific expertise, are rarely evaluated in their effectiveness and are often unscientific in their approach.’

(Teaching and Learning Research Programme, 2007:4)

As a teacher interested in thinking and perception, I recall being disappointed to find, when studying cognitive psychology during the late nineties, that experimental research gave little insight into the complexity of human minds (Illeris, 2002), or how we make meanings in our internal, interpersonal and wider social lives.



Since then, the success of Schore's (2001, 2007) work on integrating neuroscience and psychoanalysis (neuropsychanalysis) by scientifically validating and extending, for example, Bowlby and Ainsworth's research on Attachment Theory (1969) may describe something of an emerging relationship. Neuroscience acknowledges subjective, interpretive mental processes, but uniquely, psychoanalysis acknowledges unconscious phantasies involved in physical sensory functioning. Psychoanalytic ideas foreground experiences of 'self' and engagement with the world. Crucially for the purposes of this research, it seems to provide a narrative of mind, or what we know, that is different from that which can be found from data about unconscious (automatic) information processing, that is evidenced neuroscientifically. Bainbridge and West (2012) suggest the interdependent relationship between neuroscience and meaning-making may be illuminated in a linguistic analogy. The analogy allies neuroscience, and other kinds of more mainstream psychology with syntax. Meaning-making, a prime preoccupation of psychoanalysis is aligned with semantic processes, so neuroscience can be seen to offer a complementary, rather than an alternative frame to notions of psychoanalytic interpretation and meaning-making.

Extending a focus on unconscious emotional processes, involves analysis and interpretation of subjective human experiences in specific and wider social contexts. It also tends to draw just as much on phenomenological and imaginative disciplines including philosophy, history and literature, as it does on biological sciences. In this research, applying psychoanalytic ideas, together with auto/biographical research methods, in contrast to popular and traditional cognitive psychological approaches to learning (Merrill and West, 2009), is part of a conversation about stretching aspects of object-relations theory into the realms of social relations. It is a way of interrogating a received 'split' between the affective and cognitive domains of learning (Clarke et al, 2008). As Hollway points out:

‘A psycho-social approach which draws on psychoanalytic paradigms of subjectivity at the same time as understanding the social construction and situation of identities has potential to transcend troublesome binaries that abound in identity theory: natural-social, universal-particular, freely chosen – heavily regulated...’ (Hollway, 2008)

### **Seeking a methodology to connect personal and professional interest**

C. Wright Mills reminds us, in his seminal work: *The Sociological Imagination*’ (Wright Mills, 1959), that we are creatures of history and that our individual biographies relate to wider social issues. He calls for a form of understanding that connects the micro and macro; *‘from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and the relations between the two’* (Wright Mills, 1959:7). This psychosocial study uses some psychoanalytic understandings of ‘self’ and ‘other’, together with an auto/biographical and observational approach to engage with the dynamic interaction between the internal worlds of a small group of learners, including myself as researcher/mentor, and the ‘external’ realities of specific educational context, at a particular time.

Motivating factors were firstly, the lived experience of being a special educational needs teacher working with young children and their families, particularly between 1992 and 2003. Secondly, learning from a Tavistock Centre course entitled ‘The Emotional Factors of Learning and Teaching’, between 2002 and 2004. This fuelled my interest in the relationship between the individual learning behaviours and emotional responses of children I encountered in school and the prevalent issues at the time of truancy, disaffection and exclusion (Parsons, 2000, 2005). I learnt, when teaching as a Senior Lecturer on undergraduate ‘Inclusive Practice’ courses at Canterbury Christ Church university, that addressing these issues had become part of a national government drive for educational ‘Inclusion’ (Clough

and Corbett, 2000, Cheminais, 2001, Mittler, 2000). This may also be seen to link internationally to the Human Rights movement (Ainscow and Booth, 1998, Rustemier and Walsh, 2002).

Problems identified as being to do with school based 'Inclusion', defined as a process of striving for access, engagement, participation for all (Blamires, 1999), prompted the government's 'Excellence in Cities' policy initiatives (1999, 2000, 2001). Employing learning mentors, particularly in inner city secondary schools, was part of the drive towards '*overcoming barriers to learning*' (DfES, Code of Practice, 2001), raising standards and improving schools.

My professional concerns, surrounded the conflicts I experienced as a special educational needs teacher, between fostering holistic inclusive practices, policies and cultures (CSIE, 2001, 2004) in a primary school setting, within what seemed an increasingly positivist educational context (Giroux, 1988, Freire, 1970, Illeris, 2007). By positivist (Comte, in Slee and Shute, 2003) I mean the pursuit of scientific truth, the spirit of which, in present times, can be seen as being played out in the idea of evidence-based policy, with its mantra of objectivity and preference for quantitative forms of data. At times I found it difficult to hold onto my own ideas about development, growth, learning that I associate with a 'progressivist' (Dewey, 1933, Piaget, 1972, Bruner, 1966, 1986, Vygotsky, 1978, Rousseau, 1991, Peters, 1973, Dearden, 1968, Illich, 1970) ideal that seemed to become, during my teaching life, a pejorative term in education. By progressivist, I mean the democratisation of education with an emphasis on experiential learning that values the emotional, artistic and creative aspects of human development.

My anger and frustration with these tensions, exacerbated perhaps by working for one of the few remaining local authorities that implements a selective education

system, partly informed the motives and bias I brought to the project. In the course of this study, I interrogate such professional and personal assumptions that are embedded in my own auto/biography.

In an enquiry about subjectivity where I am, as a researcher part of my own data, I acknowledge from the outset that my perspective and assumptions have been inexorably shaped and informed by my own learning from experience. And, I want, at this introductory stage, to say something of this, and its potential to find expression in the relationships at the heart of the study. I realise that some of the cognitive conflict and struggles that I have encountered in the course of this research may reflect some of my own early emotional patterns. For example, tolerating, integrating and holding onto both the sociological and psychoanalytic strands of the methodology proved problematic from the beginning. Resolution, from the beginning of my life as an only child in a single parent family has tended to be a singular notion, possibly because I was on my own.

As one of forty six illegitimate children in every thousand born in 1955 (Kiernan, K. and Land, H. and Lewis, J. 1998), I grew up feeling the weight of my mother's unspoken sense of shame within the shape of our family setting, as well as the family's unspoken disgrace in the post-war social setting of pre-pill, pre-Abortion Act Britain intent on celebrating the virtues of the nuclear family.

‘In 1951, the proportion of adult women who were (or had been) married was 75%; .....At that time ...’ “marriage was more popular than ever before.’ (Lewis:1984:3)

I grew up with my mother, and grandmother for some of the time, in a seaside town in East Kent which has a history of unemployment and social deprivation. I observed the regular nuclear forms of family life that surrounded me, seemingly without exception on our council estate in 1960. I found the stable structure of

school offered a welcome 'uniform' or uniformity that was a social and emotional leveller. This changed for me in 1966 with the selective education experience in Kent, when although in many ways helpful, I found that new school friends' assumptions and expectations of life in terms of cultures of family experiences and narratives of achievement, matched neither my own, nor my friends' on the estate. This difference prompted further unspoken and unanswered queries about myself, my family and others. Aspects of social and cultural clashes inherent in a grammar school structure, chronicled by Jackson and Marsden (1966) suggest this to be a common experience for working class pupils.

For me, characterised by an unsatisfactory interruption to formal education, from which I felt prematurely excluded at the age of seventeen, the experience has also been revisited through subsequent immature patterns of dedication to and disillusionment with school. Attached perhaps, to an early idealisation of the transformational properties of education, this has been supported by a pursuit of academic endeavours as a lifelong learner. At the same time, the 'split' (Hollway, 2008) between the affective and cognitive domains of learning, which I first became aware of at school, may also be personally and professionally relevant.

My formal learning, similar perhaps to many generations of pupils, may be seen to have been systematically shaped into separate cognitive and affective 'subject' domains (Hirst, 1975) through a psychosocial process that positioned 'subjects' hierarchically. This is plainly re-inforced in, for example, pupil school reports where English, Maths and Science, currently termed 'core' subjects (National Curriculum, 2001) can be seen to remain at the pinnacle of the objectified knowledge hierarchy. 'Subjects' associated with the affective domain, seen as academically 'soft' (Bailey, 2000), or associated with vocational or practical activities almost always appear just above the signatures at the bottom of the page.

Formenti (2008), suggests that *'It may be difficult to accept that rationality has an emotional foundation, when 2000 years of philosophy have convinced us to think these processes in a dualistic and competitive (either/or) logic.'* I have, as a teacher, found myself colluding with and perpetuating deep-seated epistemologically ingrained academic traditions for the past twenty five years. The struggles I relate, of integrating my own with others learning at an emotional level in this enquiry, inevitably relay some residual effects of this enculturation process, which can be seen to marginalise emotionality. My experience may be an example at micro level of educational and social issues played out at meso and macro levels in the wider context, whilst connected also to the intimate features of my individual human self (Wright Mills, 1959).

Nonetheless, I now recognise that my continuous professional mission to include learners socially, emotionally and intellectually may unconsciously have to do with my own earliest feelings of exclusion, as much as it was to do with illuminating the inner worlds of case study children Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo. Such developing recognition provided a continual point of reference in terms of my perspective in this enquiry. Also, at a personal as well as professional level, it may have provided an opportunity to revisit, think about and voice some of the unspoken emotional interaction between children and adults in a formal school learning context.

Realising the emotional connection between my personal and professional motives also gave, through the methodological mix, an opportunity to reflect on the researcher-participant relationship. Some confusion of 'self' and 'other', in the research space where the 'story' of our relationships emerged, showed up aspects of the 'messy' nature of what happens between researcher and participant that is not always readily, or easily discussed. (Merrill and West, 2009)

As in any research journey, it became important to articulate and interrogate the 'mess'. Whilst I make my own struggles clear, I think it is important to state, from the outset, that the point of the enquiry is to try to chronicle and theorise the painful nature of learning from experience. It was the emotional intensity and potency of this engagement that made the work difficult. A basic human drive, as Bion suggests (1961, 1962), to avoid pain may also perhaps explain something of the marginality of this work in educational research.

My interest in social inclusion and vulnerable learners, led me, as stated, to the post-graduate D1 course at the Tavistock Centre in 2001, to study 'The Emotional Factors in Learning and Teaching', which I shall refer to from now on as the D1 course. Being given time and space to engage with and reflect on experience, in a formal learning situation, was new and revelatory for me, as was participating in the group learning experience. The ideas, particularly Bion's (1962) 'container-contained' and some of Klein's psychic defences seemed to make immediate sense.

This was perhaps because I was able to relate my learning immediately to my professional role in school, where at a personal level I was aware of my own angry feelings towards pupils who hurt or bullied others. This embodies too something of the tensions experienced between professional and personal identities referred to above. Also, I began to recognise how my own earliest experiences shaped in turn, some of my responses to my own family.

Undertaking this research has been a personal, reparative journey. A concern about the capacity of schools and teachers to contain the learner by engaging thinking, may be related to concern about my own capacities as a 'thinker', both professionally for those I have taught and personally for those I have loved. The

research has provided some valuable time and space for engaging with and reflecting on my own 'learning from experience' along with the problems and possibilities of thinking at its heart.

The D1 course was also significant in introducing me to the notion of mentoring in schools which shaped the methodological mix of the enquiry. Having moved from teaching in school to a university setting, part of the difficulty with beginning the study was finding a way of researching learning that takes place in school. Also, part of the struggle was in letting go of old knowledge and recognising my own resistance to adopting an auto/biographical method. This idea was introduced by my first supervisor and was new to me, although I had encountered the interpretivist paradigm in the 1990's when undertaking an MA research enquiry into the way children receive text (Holub, 1994, Jauss, 1982, Iser, 1978, Saussure, 1915, Althusser, 1969, Derrida, 1978). Integrating psychoanalytic ideas with an auto/biographical research method has been a central feature of the learning from experience in the research.

Exploring stories, at an emotional level, in the social setting of a primary school deployed a mix of methods that evolved as the investigation proceeded. This depicts the researcher as 'bricoleur' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Methodologically, I have adapted and brought together broadly, related strands: the psychoanalytic observational method drawn from Esther Bick (1964) and an auto/biographical approach that values subjectivity and interpretation. To operationalise these strands, I adopted a learning mentor role, introduced into schools in 2002. The role enabled access to participant children and to engage in depth, with their and my own responses. It also enabled me to apply psychoanalytic and auto/biographical approaches in a school setting. Mentoring worked to draw together the complementary strands of the methodology and as the



experiential focus as well as methodological vehicle, it provided a key narrative thread and my interpretation and practice of mentoring, is woven through the thesis.

### **Why mentoring?**

The interrelated links between the learning mentor role and this project are threefold. First, I met newly appointed learning mentors during the post-graduate D1 (2002-4) course. I became curious about their emerging role - how it related to teaching, how it was managed in the school context and how this was experienced by what was to become known as the 'New Children's Workforce'. This was an initiative set up by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2005) to professionalise those caring for and working with young children to support the implementation of 'Every Child Matters'(2003).

A 'Functional Map' for the provision of learning mentors was initially drawn up (2003, Suave-Bell). The aim was explicitly to develop inclusive practice, ensure school attendance, improve children's communication, social and emotional development and increase performance so that by 2008 'in all schools at least 50% of pupils achieve level 5 or above in each of English, Maths and Science. (Greany, 2005). However, the role then, as now was less definitive.

'The learning mentor role is wide ranging, but the key aim is helping pupils and students of all ages and abilities achieve to their potential. This involves working in one to one and group settings, in identifying barriers to learning and ways in which they can be dealt with well. These barriers can be wide ranging and often very personal to the individual pupil. They include the need to develop better learning and study skills, personal organisation, difficulties at home, behaviour, bullying, dealing with bereavement, relationship issues or just general disaffection and disengagement from learning. Learning mentors work with

caseloads of pupils, largely on a one-to-one or small group basis, but also run clubs and "drop ins". They liaise closely with teachers and other support professionals and often act as a supportive link between the family and school.' (CWDC, 2009)

The second mentoring link came between the years 2003-2008, when I taught at Canterbury Christ Church university. I had the opportunity to develop a Foundation degree pathway for learning mentors (2005-7) as part of the university's response to 'up-skilling' the children's workforce. At the time I held a nagging and deep seated assumption that mentoring was essentially part of teaching. Separating it off into a 'new' role seemed to uphold the false split between the cognitive concerns of teachers and emotional concerns of the learning mentor. I was concerned that professionalising mentors might simultaneously contribute to de-professionalising teachers. Nevertheless, learning and working with the mentors I taught, who were all practising in an east London borough, further developed my interest in and contributed to my understanding of the role.

These associations led to the third link which was taking on the role of a voluntary learning mentor in a research project, once a week in the academic year 2006/7. This meant that for the duration of the research project I adopted the dual role of a researcher/mentor. It involved introducing mentoring, to the rural primary school setting where the research took place. It also involved interpreting the role in a way that would integrate the methodological strands of the study. At one level 'mentoring' acted as a pragmatic vehicle for the research project. At another it created an opportunity to explore and engage aspects of the 'relational' qualities and potentials of the emergent role in the primary school setting. The illusive nature, together with my interpretation of mentoring are introduced in Chapter 2.

Part of my dual role essentially meant engaging with children as a learning mentor whilst simultaneously closely observing and reflecting on my interactions with the

children as a researcher. It was problematic, not least giving rise to boundary issues such as, for example, holding in mind both aspects of my role, engaging empathically with participants as a mentor whilst remaining detached enough to respect the boundaries of the research enquiry. These problematics are raised in Chapter 3: Methodology, and issues arising are considered further in Chapters 9 and 10. Supervision from my first supervisor was particularly helpful in developing an awareness of the need for both immersion and detachment in the study. Attending to and maintaining ‘boundaries’ was essential to the ethicality of the project, particularly at the time of this research, when the requirements of the University Ethics Committee were necessarily exacting. ‘Safeguarding’ (Ofsted, 2008) children was of paramount importance throughout the study, as outlined in Chapter 3. Crucially, my aim was to use mentoring to create some therapeutic time and space for children to reflect on their experiences of everyday events in school.

Creating therapeutic space and time was characterised by being a non-curriculum agendered, out-of-class, free choice situation with one-to-one attention. As a researcher I applied my learning from the D1 course in the role of a learning mentor. This was different from ‘therapy’ that is practised by a professional therapist, counsellor or clinician with the intention to treat or remedy a health problem. Such practice necessarily has its own independent code of ethics.

### **The thesis structure**

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework of the thesis, with particular reference to Bion’s notion of learning from experience. To help situate psychoanalytic approaches in relation to the educational context, the chapter begins with a brief review of educational policy that specifically contextualises my stance, highlighting historical tensions between child-centred and curriculum-centred approaches in education. The concept of mentoring is also introduced and I relate

how my interpretation of this role is informed by Bion's ideas on learning from experience.

I focus on explicating Bion's psychoanalytic idea about learning and knowing: 'container-contained' (Bion, 1962), drawn from Melanie Klein's theory on 'object-relations'. I will introduce relevant ideas on early ego formation, psychic defence mechanisms and psychic positions. This chapter also includes relevant ideas from Winnicott on 'transitional' objects, 'false self' and 'play'. As learning and teaching in school predominantly takes place in groups, Bion's ideas on groups are relevant and I introduce these, together with Menzies-Lyth on the 'social defence'. The theoretical base of the study is revisited in Chapters 9 and 10, in the light of the case study chapters.

Chapter 3 explains and justifies the qualitative research design and methodology. As suggested above, I justify what may be depicted as a 'bricolage' approach to this interpretive, inter-disciplinary, reflexive, psychosocial study that interrogates educational process and their emotional dimensions, through a psychoanalytic frame and an observational and auto/biographical methodology. I introduce key methodological strands, highlighting the complementarity of close observation and the auto/biographical approaches as building reflexive research. I also explain how my interpretation of mentoring became an authentic vehicle for unifying and implementing close observation in the research project with young children in the school setting. I describe the details of a layered observational process that emerged, as well as how I collected narrative data from child and adult participants. The chapter explains how validity is tightly bound to ethicality in this research.

Chapter 4 focuses on the ethnographic details of the school within its setting. I introduce the school, the village and their location within a rural community in East Kent. I explain the phased introduction of the mentoring project and how I began to build a relationship with key members of the school staff and the children during the first term of the project. I paint a picture of the mentoring room and describe my choices of activity, materials and time-tabling with the individual children. There are also some thumbnail sketches of 'Tim', 'Conrad', 'Isabel' and 'Leo'. From the broader picture of the research context to the complex stories of intimate lives, I move onto what happened in the mentoring sessions in which the next four chapters form the heart of the thesis.

Chapter 5: 'Too close and too far apart' is about a child called Tim. Tim was a year 5 pupil who was very anxious, particularly about moving onto secondary school. He had a very good memory for facts, and a precocious use of language, but struggled to make meanings, communicate socially with his peers and adhere to others' agendas. He was quirky but generally well liked and he related particularly well to adults. I was easily drawn into Tim's world. Tim projected his fears and persecutory anxieties and, as will be described, he found it difficult at times to distinguish phantasy from reality. Conclusions at the end of each case study chapter reflect on how my understanding of the child developed through the mentoring process. I consider how the child may have benefitted from this.

Chapter 6, which I have entitled, 'Absence and Loss' is about Conrad. Conrad was a year 6 pupil who was popular with his peers and teacher as the class 'joker'. He struggled with reading, writing and generally found it difficult to engage with the curriculum, apart that is from football, which he loved. His stories are about separation and loss. He often acted-out his anger and frustration in class and his

communications were characterised by avoidance and absence. Conrad was a troubled and troubling boy whom I found particularly difficult, at times, to contain.

Chapter 7: 'Adding it all up' is about someone I call Isabel. Isabel was also a year 6 pupil from the same class as Conrad. She was a 'good' pupil, popular with peers and teachers. She particularly enjoyed English, but found maths difficult. Her stories are about frustrations with having to comply with the hopes and demands and losses of others' in her life. These pressures, that she could not quite understand, seemed to take up much of the time and space that she needed to develop her own sense of agency. Her difficulties seemed to prevent her from finding and becoming her 'true' self.

Chapter 8: 'The Limpet' is about Leo. Leo was a year 2 pupil who was a very quiet, non-identical twin. It was difficult to think about Leo without thinking about his opposite twin who was always in trouble in school and who was born ten minutes before him. Leo's presence and his seeming invisibility in the classroom characterised this identity struggle. His stories were 'thin', and rather like his sense of 'self', barely discernible but together we used every second and every millimetre of available time and space in the mentoring room to engage with and attend to Leo.

Following the case study chapters, Chapter 9: 'Mentoring – a relational approach and experiential focus of the research', emphasises findings from developing a relational approach to mentoring Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo in the research project. Following concluding reflections about individual children at the end of each case study chapter, Chapter 9 considers the children as a group, in relation to their responses to the mentoring project. I reflect on the demanding emotional work involved in building relationships with the school and participants. Also, I

consider how mentoring that includes engaging to a degree with feeling states may be a beneficial strategy for others working with children in school. I revisit aspects of the conceptual framework in relation to 'container-contained' (Bion, 1962) and consider how this idea shaped my thinking and containing practice in interactions with case study children, when the school was also seen as container. Findings address, in part, research questions which ask how the experience children bring to school affects their relationships and learning, and how can the school provide flexible-enough containment for thinking and learning from experience. I also consider the validity of the research design, revisit ethical issues and the extent to which the methodological 'bricolage', facilitated this interdisciplinary, reflexive, interpretive psychosocial study. At the end of the chapter, I relate some intersubjective experiences at micro level to defences acted out by children and adults in Brompton school at an institutional level. I suggest links may be made to wider social anxieties and defences surrounding learning.

Chapter 10: interrogates 'My own learning from experience'. I attend to research question three, including some of the 'struggles' I encountered from beginnings, through transitions and with endings related to the research. Reflecting on my own learning also encompassed question one through considering learning children bring 'within' to school. I also revisit the question of providing flexible-enough containing boundaries and will reflect on refining my understanding of the transference and countertransference. Through interpreting some case study themes that emerged in the intersubjective 'psychic space', I will give examples of how my subjectivity at times both supported and inhibited learning. I will also emphasise, as a contribution of the research, how reflexive interrogation highlighted some of the relational tensions between researcher and participant. I will identify some of the emotionally 'messy', as well as reparative qualities of the research process.

The thesis will end by suggesting implications of the research, including a need for adults and children to have time and space to reflect on experience in school. Yet how difficult this can be, given the colonising of the space by diverse agendas and also the 'busyness' (Hoggett, 2010) that can be seen as a defence against anxiety and not knowing, in diverse educational settings.



## **Chapter 2: Learning from Experience**

### **Introduction**

At the core of this chapter is the idea of ‘learning *from* experience’. I will explain what this means and introduce the language of psychoanalytic thinking through key ideas. These will be revisited and linked in Chapter 10, to Bion’s conjecture, ‘container-contained’ and the emotional experiences of learning in a specific primary school setting. The research project explored learning, and resistance to it, that took place between learners, both children and adults, at an emotional, relational level in a particular school at a particular time. It considered how these learning relationships may have been affected by qualities of earlier relationships and also how this was acknowledged and thought about in the primary school setting.

Before introducing Bion’s ideas which form the conceptual framework of the research, I will briefly introduce two areas of relevant literature that anchor the study in the multidisciplinary field of education. The first acknowledges the historical relationship, between psychoanalysis and education:

‘The essential roles of education and psychoanalysis are similar, in that each seeks to bring the individual into an understanding of their worlds and selves, to enable more thoughtful, life-enhancing decisions to be made.’ (Bainbridge and West, 2012)

Something of this may be illustrated by the way young children’s learning in particular has been embraced holistically, in varying degrees, by primary education. Just as child-centredness has a long history in English education, so do more curriculum-centred approaches which may explain something of the aforementioned marginalisation of psychoanalytic ideas in education.

The second area concerns the concept of ‘mentoring’, which I adapted to apply my understanding of ‘container-contained’ (Bion, 1962). It therefore formed an important methodological device and supported the conceptual framework – as suggested in Chapter 1, throughout the thesis.

I will introduce Bion by giving a brief biography of his early life, from his autobiography (Bion, 1982), that helps to situate his perspective. This approach is in keeping with aspects of the biographical values of this enquiry. A synopsis of Bion’s ideas will introduce some of the less familiar language and terminology he uses - including ‘object-relations’. As Klein’s ideas closely influenced Bion’s work I will summarise relevant aspects of her theory, plus some of Winnicott’s ideas which particularly helped to illumine my observations of the case study children. Bion’s analytic training was supervised by Klein. Hinshelwood (1991) asserts that all Kleinians today would consider their practice and theory to have been significantly shaped by Bion’s work. He goes on to suggest:

‘His achievements were second only to those of Klein herself, though some (Meltzer et al, 1982) would say their potential far outstrips those of Klein. If there is yet a post-Kleinian school or tradition, Bion is it.’ (Hinshelwood, 1991:231)

‘Relevant aspects’ of Klein’s theory here, means those that describe unconscious, invisible ‘unknown’ (Klein, 1958) yet felt, psychological states, evoked and experienced at individual and institutional levels.

As ‘container-contained’ underpins the epistemological assumption of the enquiry - that learning is an emotional experience - I will return to Bion to give a more detailed account of his ‘imaginative conjecture’ (Meltzer, 1986:22). I will also use Bion’s ‘Experiences in groups’ (1961) to introduce Menzies-Lyth’s (1988) idea of the ‘social defence’. I link this to a concern about a seemingly overwhelming

preoccupation in school, at the time of the research, with measurable outcomes, compounded by dependency on fixed accountable systems that objectified knowing through emphasising learning ‘about’ the contents of the National Curriculum (Meltzer, 1982, Illeris, 2007, Hoggett, 2010). My educational stance and interest in applying psychoanalytic ideas, may be illuminated by relating some aspects of a particular ideological shift. These aspects underline some of the above concerns about the current epistemological emphasis on learning ‘about’ rather than learning from experience.

### **Child-centred and Curriculum-centred approaches to primary education**

I will briefly map the ebb and flow of some historical recursive shifts in primary education values, from the elementary tradition to date. I will refer to some key reports that broadly depict deep seated socio-political tensions between product and process values in learning and teaching in England. Such ‘structural’ differences have been highlighted in final findings from the Cambridge Primary Review (2005-12). This has been the most extensive review of primary education undertaken in this country and it used the Plowden Report (1967) as a key point of reference for reviewing changes.

I locate the research in an historical and continuing debate, to reveal my own ideas and assumptions that are sympathetic to child-centredness. However, I went into the situation wanting to illuminate things as they were, in their lived complexity and in a deeply reflexive way, rather than to see what I wanted to see. I sought to be open to the children and to truly learn from experience.

It is important to keep in mind that primary education in this country was drawn from the ‘elementary tradition’. This tradition was very gradually influenced by Romantic and progressive ideologies in education. However, in 1867, Lowe, a

leading liberal statesmen of the time (Lawton, 1978:121) publically defined two distinct types of education that were to take place in England. The first was the already established classical education concerned with the passing on and preservation of the nation's high culture heritage, to be enjoyed by a privileged few. The elementary tradition, on the other hand, was to become a way of educating the masses for life in an increasingly industrialised society – its features epitomising economy and utility. It became instrumental in formally teaching the working classes no more than a little reading, writing and a few sums. Lowe wrote in the pamphlet 'Primary and Classical Education':

'I do not think it is in any part the duty of the Government to prescribe what people should learn, except in the case of the poor, where time is so limited that we must fix upon a few elementary subjects to get anything done at all....the lower classes ought to be educated to discharge the duties cast upon them. They should also be educated that they appreciate and defer to higher cultivation when they meet it, and the higher classes ought to be educated in a very different manner, in order that they may exhibit to the lower classes that higher education to which, if it were shown to them, they would bow down and defer.' (Curtis, 1967:256)

Such views evidence deep seated power relations inherent in schooling. The familiar term 'payment by results', was originally part of the educational scheme introduced by Lowe, devised to ensure a rudimentary standard of literacy and numeracy amongst the working people (Galton and Simon, 1980). The regime had the double benefit of keeping teachers as well as children in their place, and this level of organisation could be seen to be a way of ensuring that stability and social hierarchies were perpetuated (Hargreaves, 1982). In those days, the 'hidden curriculum' (Galton and Simon, 1980) was to do with tensions between deference and aspiration. Lowe's wishes were realised as the academic standards of a privileged education were considered a virtuous aspiration, so that the public

school curriculum became in part 'aped' (Blenkin and Kelly, 1981) by both grammar and secondary schools alike.

From the end of the nineteenth century, education was ordered from the top down, to the extent that primary schooling evolved in some ways as the poor relation. The rise of public examinations (Maclure, 1965) helped maintain the role of the elementary school:

'The public examinations emerged not only as a new instrument of social selection but also as a new instrument of determination of the curriculum.' (Eggleston, 1977:28)

The 'determination' of the curriculum involved elementary, and from the Hadow Report (1931), primary schooling in the educationally 'thin' task of preparing children for examination and selection into secondary education. It was, perhaps, not until the rise of the comprehensive ideal, ostensibly freeing the sector of official secondary phase jurisdiction, that the primary school began to develop an identity somewhat different from its traditional patron. Some aspects of progressivism came to be associated quite distinctly with primary schooling.

Amongst broader socio-cultural and philosophical influences, the Romantic movement has been associated with various strands of progressive ideology. For example, the writings of poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, inspired by the work of Rousseau on 'Emile' (1991), established the child as a human being with a developing life of inner thoughts and feelings to be respected in a way hitherto reserved for adults. Child-centred philosophies upheld a belief in the innate goodness of man and the notion that society was a corrupt influence on the innocent child. The poetic ideal of childhood innocence has since been repeatedly contested and critiqued (Postman, 1996, Cunningham, 2006). At the time, Rousseau's influence was complemented by interests in the growth and intellectual

development of the infant by psychologists, as well as the emotional life of the 'child as father of the man' (Wordsworth, 1968) in the emerging field of psychoanalysis.

The 'shifting of the centre of gravity', as Dewey (Entwistle, 1970:11) described the progressive concerns of education, from outside to within the child, carried implications for the curriculum and the teacher's role. Different from the perceived passive 'empty vessel' image of the classical regime, the child was seen as a developing individual with intellectual and psychological needs. Progressive ideology was given impetus by empiricist theories of knowledge. Although John Locke had presented the first real challenge to the idea of knowledge as external and absolute, with his statement: 'Everything that comes into the mind enters through the gateway of the senses' (Blenkin and Kelly, 1981:18), the notion of the learner's active physical, sensory, emotional participation in the process of knowing developed much later. The psychodynamic theories of Freud and developmental stage theories of Piaget challenged aspects of behaviourist ideas about human learning, as the increasingly multidisciplinary field of education was influenced by psychology as well as philosophy. Piaget valued 'play' as children's 'work' (Bigge and Shermis, 1999) and investigated the cognitive development of the child. His findings, from experiments with his own children, supported the idea that the child learns through active experience and interaction with their environment. The notion of actively learning through 'play' also linked education and psychoanalysis, in the work of Susan Isaacs, Freud, Froebel and Klein. Klein, like Bion as described below, was concerned about interactive learning at an intimate, interpersonal level, in terms of the infant's earliest relational experience with human 'objects' encountered in the learning environment.

For the American pragmatist John Dewey, a difficulty arose when trying to justify or determine certain curricular activities above others, as for him experience was subjectively peculiar to the individual. He saw children as natural decision makers and problem solvers, For Dewey, (1933, 1958) the only criteria for evaluating one set of activities against another was to assess the extent to which each is progressive in terms of experience and development. Thus learning can be seen as:

‘a continuous lifelong process...which offers us the principle by which we can reach decisions concerning the content of each child’s curriculum, that principle being always to choose that activity or those experiences likely to be most productive of further experience.’ (Kelly, 1982:57)

By helping the child to structure her own knowledge towards progression and continuous development in an holistic, open-ended way, the teacher was cast in the role of facilitator, rather than ‘teller’. Whether or not a practised reality, by the late 1960’s this creative, exploratory approach was deemed to be characteristic of English Primary education.

However, Dewey’s reconstructionist formulation acquired generally unsympathetic connotations, perhaps due to mis-application of the idea by teachers (Entwistle, 1979:168) and mis-interpretation by the public, sometimes informed by mis-representation of the term ‘progressive’ by those with powerful, conflicting ideological stances. For example, the Black Paper writers saw the term as being synonymous with ‘indiscipline illiteracy and innumeracy’ (Cox and Boyson, 1975), ‘wild men of the classroom’ (The Times leader, October, 1976) and a general ‘decline in standards’ (Cox and Boyson, 1977). At the time, Entwistle (1970) summed up the derogation that progressivism evoked in some quarters by suggesting that child-centred education was seen as the source of all society’s ills.

The Plowden Report (1967), which has been described as representing ‘the height of progressive euphoria’ (Cox and Boyson, 1975) seemed to manifest, even in the first paragraph, a synthesis of progressive, child-centred ideology reminiscent of the time:

‘At the heart of the educational process lies the child (Plowden,1967, 1:7) .....and not just the child, but the individual child. Individual differences between children of the same age are so great that any class, however homogeneous it seems, must always be treated as a body of children needing individual and different attention (Plowden, 1967 1:25)...One of the main educational tasks of the primary school is to build on and strengthen children’s intrinsic interest in learning and lead them to learn for themselves rather than from fear of disapproval desire for praise’. (Plowden, 1967 1:196)

In 1966, I can clearly recall the then innovative practices in my own primary classroom. We worked individually on subjects motivated by personal interest and also in small groups, on a range of cross-curricular topics. We also used ‘cuisinaire rods’, to support a multi-sensory experience in maths, alongside learning times-tables by rote. A complex educational debate that is oversimplified by polarisation, Alexander (2009) might recognise my recollections as ‘sanctifying’ Plowden. He would describe this as part of the second of at least three ‘versions’ of the famous, or infamous report. The first he identifies as the actual published version, the second he suggests is subscribed to by enthusiastic mythologisers who collectively form what he describes as unhelpful ‘Plowdenism’. He points out that in fact HMI inspectors found only 5% of classrooms in 1978, ‘exhibited wholeheartedly ‘exploratory’ characteristics and that didactic teaching was still practised in three-quarters of them’, (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead,



1992, in McNamara, 1994). The third versionists he describes as ‘demonists’ - those:

‘shaped by a belief that the 1960’s and 70’s were years of educational and moral decline, of plummeting standards in the 3R’s, of permissiveness, self-indulgence and- the ultimate insult- the final loss of empire.’ (Alexander, 2009:2)

Against this emotive backdrop, The Great Debate, following James Callaghan’s famous Ruskin speech in 1976, concerning the future of education began a series of what became known as ‘The Black Papers’, cited above, that contested ‘progressivism’ and that introduced the idea of a ‘core curriculum’:

‘Let me repeat some of the fields that need study because they cause concern. There are the methods and aims of informal instruction, the strong case for the so-called ‘core curriculum’ of basic knowledge; next, what is the proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance; then there is the role of the inspectorate in relation to national standards; and there is need to improve relations between industry and education.’ (Callaghan, 1976)

Whatever it’s validity in terms of accountability, the Great Debate, came to represent for some teachers, a reactionary return to more formal teaching methods. At a time when words such as ‘implicit worthwhileness’, ‘intrinsicity’, ‘eclectic methods’, and ‘discovery learning’ shaped educational discourse, I can also recall, as an undergraduate, feelings of confusion and dismay when the ORACLE survey (Galton and Simpson, 1980) was first publicised as research that evidenced the failure of ‘group work’ in primary schools.

In a period when teachers and learners were under close political and thence public scrutiny, the 1980's saw the development of a National Curriculum (The School Curriculum, 1981). 'Curriculum Matters' (1984-9) set out a series of seventeen different subject discussion documents from Her Majesty's Inspectors and was refined in 1987, National Curriculum 5-16 – a consultation document in which the government set out its plans for curricular 'breadth and balance' with the introduction of the national curriculum and associated assessment procedures. Since, successively slimmed down, the major 1988 Education Reform Act formalised curriculum organisation and practice in the primary classroom with a discussion paper that became known as the 'Three Wise Men Report'. Welcomed by many parents and teachers, relieved perhaps by the consistency and certainty that such a prescription suggested, for others planning and delivering the extensive objectified curriculum, meant teaching focus and methods seemed to become increasingly led and defined by the curriculum 'object', rather than the 'subject who is the learner' (Bainbridge and West, 2012).

The Dearing Review, the National Curriculum and its Assessment: Final Report (DfES, 1994) was a landmark review which set out the Conservative assessment regime which broadly led to what has been described as the commodification and marketisation (Coren, 1997) of education during the Thatcher years. A 'back to basics' curriculum emphasis focused on particularly developing standards of literacy and numeracy (1998 and 1999). The standards agenda was driven by assessment of learning (national Standard Attainment Targets for all pupils at ages 7, 11 and 14), as well as assessment for learning (formative ongoing teacher assessment and pupil target setting), 'with objectives in mind' (Bloom, 1984). By the turn of the century, education in the global market place, was to become an increasingly definable product that could be bought, sold and measured by targeted objective outcomes. Assessment culture, embedded within such a positivist regime

can be seen to implicitly test and assess teaching and teacher performance as well as pupils. In this way, pupil failure became synonymous with teacher failure - as well as success, whilst school assessment and improvement became public property in the form of school published 'league tables'. The gradual re-direction of teacher attention may be seen to have moved away from engagement with the pupil, towards an emphasis on transmission of the curriculum. Although the final findings from the Cambridge Review (Alexander, 2012) do not use the phrase 'learning about' in terms of 'what is to be known', the unique 'dispositions of the learner' seem at least to be recognised:

'Since the 1967 Plowden report there have been a number of significant structural changes in English primary education, many of them initiated as a consequence of the 1988 Education reform act. These have resulted in an increased standardisation of the primary school curriculum, teaching, inspection assessment arrangements across the country (8/1). Yet 'education should become more fluid, with a greater emphasis on the dispositions of the learner than exclusively on what is to be known'....Despite a changing landscape it is not easy to shift existing paradigms and long established practices.

(Conroy, Hulme and Menter, Futures Primary review research report 3/3, 2012)

Equally, education specifically viewed as an instrument of social change has not been so transparent since Lowe, 1870 (Sylvester, 2006). Building on the accountability agenda driven by the Conservatives during the 1980's and 1990's, New Labour from 1997 to 2010 engaged with and lent impetus to, at both policy and practice levels, a range of important issues that affect inclusive learning and teaching: 'Diversity and Citizenship' (Crick, 1998, Ajegbo,2007), Disability Rights (Code of Practice, 1995, 2001), Special Educational Needs (DfES 2001, 2012), Human Rights and Social Justice movement agendas, not least those affecting young children. For example, at the time of this research, 'Every Child Matters'

(2003-2009) informed by the Children Act (2004), the Children and Young Persons Act (2008), The Steer Report (2010) 'Behaviour and the role of Home-School Agreements' towards including and empowering parents within the educational framework. This work has followed to a greater or lesser extent, as suggested in Chapter 1, government concerns about children's well-being as well as exclusion and disaffection experienced in schools.

Also, since Plowden (1967) and also the Bullock (1975) report, the principles of Early Years practitioners, particularly those who work outside statutory education in the public, private, voluntary and independent sectors, have continued to be influenced by psychosocial philosophies that prioritise 'play', holistic approaches and nurture social, physical, emotional development and experiential learning. Those ideas, promoted as suggested, for example, by Dewey, J.S Mill, Bruner, Piaget, Froebal, Isaacs, Winnicott and John Bowlby continue to inform educational practices with young children, however much they be in conflict or tension with the contemporary zeitgeist. More than this, working on the margins of the education system, forging multi-disciplinary links with professional partnerships through government sponsored research such as 'Birth to 3 Matters' (DfES, 2005) the EPPE report (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, 2004) have continued to impact on policy, exemplified in government initiatives such as 'Sure Start' (DCSF, 1998) and the subsequent development of Children's Centres. These have begun to recognise and exemplify patterns of social and cultural change, building systemic links between Early Years settings, schools, children and their families.

Further, links between education and psychology have also continued to flourish in the practice led work undertaken by psychoanalytic psychotherapists in centres such as, for example, the Tavistock – both a clinic and academic learning centre in London. Historically, home to the work of Freud, Bowlby, Winnicott, Bion and

Klein, there is also an established nursery school attached to the centre, where a full programme of research conferences and courses are held. Some of these are aimed at school professionals, including learning mentors, such as the D1 that offer students a therapeutic framework for thinking about learning and teaching in educational settings. The Tavistock's perpetual initiative to support children's learning continues to be recognised and practised internationally. Initiatives that have sprung from work at the Tavistock include Boxall's (2002) development of 'nurture groups', both influenced my professional practice in school and my thinking about mentoring in this research. Whilst psychodynamic ideas remain, as suggested in Chapter 1, at the margins of education (Bainbridge and West, 2012), the Tavistock provides the ongoing keystone tradition of promoting emotional well-being in learning and teaching from a psychoanalytic perspective. Yet, findings from the Cambridge Review (2012), that comment on the complexities of cultural change in relation to the curriculum today, seem to uphold the relevance and motives of an in depth inquiry into the emotional experience of learning, from a teacher's perspective, which fundamentally informs my research perspective:

'As shown in previous reports in this series (notably 3/1 and 1/40), reform of the primary curriculum cannot be separated from changes in the fabric of the national life. 'We have seen a radical move away from a dependence on the historic resources of industrialisation and towards a knowledge-based economy.....Migration has created new ways of looking at education which depend less than in previous ages on the transmission of a homogenous culture, though this remains under review...There is a perception that these shifts in population demography, together with the growing influence of mass media, have left youth bereft of the emotional resources to deal with an ever more complex culture (3/3)'

The present study is thus to be located in a debate and dispute with long antecedents: there is nothing new at issue here, except the research seeks to

illuminate the place of the emotions in child development and well-being; and how a neglect of these dimensions, as chronicled in fine-grain detail, really does matter.

### **What is mentoring?**

The concept of mentoring has a long, diverse history and as Miller (2002) points out is a fluid notion that continues to evolve, in many different ways to facilitate the requirements of a variety of professions. This fluidity may be appropriate to any process that facilitates support and guidance for people at different times, from diverse cultures, in different contexts by providing opportunities to develop flexible, eclectic approaches to practice. It may also, however, tend to confuse or blur boundaries between various notions of mentoring, coaching, supervision and counselling that tend to distort, rather than connect thinking about professional roles. Egan (2002), suggests that this eclecticism should be systematically interrogated to ensure coherence and clarity. In a generic sense, mentoring is about helping people to develop their potential and has become part of a 'family' that may include counselling and coaching. Whitmore (2007) distinguishes counselling as taking place in a clinical setting and assumes questioning helps to resolve underlying issues, whilst coaching may be seen to be concerned with immediate improvement of performance:

In spite of a variety of definitions of mentoring (and the variety of names it is given, from coaching or counselling to sponsorship) all the experts and communicators appear to agree that it has its origins in the concept of apprenticeship, when an older, more experienced individual passed down his knowledge of how the task was done and to operate in the commercial world.

(Whitmore, 2007:12)

Seeking a root source, the term 'Mentor' can be traced to the Greek myth of Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus entrusts his friend 'Mentor' to guide the development of his son, Telemachus, whilst he fought in the Trojan war (Miller,

2003:24). This example contains features that are relevant to the role of learning mentors, and also aspects that point to other forms of guidance.

Odysseus' choice and intent point to the belief in a one-to-one relationship with an adult who provides moral support, advice and guidance to a younger person. 'Mentor' may also have been something of a professional role model as Telemachus is positioned as an apprentice warrior, fusing a personal and potential professional alliance. In this way, the mentoring relationship can be seen to be bound to social contexts and cultural practices as well as being motivated by the emotional, psychological concerns of the individual caring parent. Difficult as it is to tease out, or separate these complex processes, it will perhaps be more helpful to keep in mind the way they perpetually combine through time, space and place as relationships develop.

The mythical example above also illustrates something of what has been described as a 'natural' mentoring relationship, as the arrangement emerged through the mutual respect and friendship of adults known and trusted by the young person to be mentored. This also illustrates the significance of a connected, mutually supportive relational network surrounding the mentee and mentor. However, unlike other 'natural' mentoring relationships between, for example, peers or friends, there is also an hierarchy or inherent power relation as the mentor is older, and obviously deemed to be wise, reliable and trustworthy by the mentee's parent. It may also be seen to be 'planned' rather than natural, with specific, planned motives for the alliance, that surround learning and care. These integrated motives are drawn from social values and human instincts that seem, in mentoring, to unite a sense of moral purpose with learning and love. Such combinations are often a source of conflict, and issues between 'natural' and 'planned' mentoring, continue to be fundamental in determining the function and boundaries of the mentoring

relationship in a range of settings. They are particularly relevant to shaping discussion about learning mentors in schools. Moreover, the example touches on the nature of mentoring: generally a one-to-one relationship, and includes key themes such as family histories, friendship, communication, trust, responsibility, agency (personal choice), reciprocity and learning. These themes are bound to recur when prioritising relationships through mentoring in the school setting.

Colley (2003) describes mentoring as a ‘fledgling profession in a changing children’s workforce’, noting the contingent practices of mentoring in a range of social professions such as, for example; careers work, youth work and teacher education. Professional fields such as these have developed through clear theoretical models, but she notes that mentoring itself appears to lack such theoretical models or ‘anchors’ as she calls them.

As introduced in Chapter 1, rather than a theoretical model, ‘New Labour’ provided a ‘Functional map’ for the role of learning mentors who would provide support and guidance by removing barriers to learning and promote participation and achievement in school (Suave-Bell, 2003). In 2001, the ‘Good Practice Guidelines for Learning Mentors’ was published by the DfES which usefully described mentors as, for example, ‘professional friends’, ‘active listeners’, ‘Target negotiators’, ‘advocates and supporters of young people’. As suggested in Chapter 1, the learning mentors I met when undertaking the D1 course at the Tavistock in 2002, were unsure about what this meant, or how to do it amidst the diverse contexts of their school systems. In response to a need for training and as part of the DfES (1999) Excellence in Cities initiative, Liverpool Excellence Partnership (2005) developed a comprehensive five-module training package for learning mentors, followed, as referred to earlier, by responses from other Higher



Education providers such as Canterbury Christ Church university and the Tavistock.

When ‘barriers’ are seen as impacting on the child’s capacity to engage with the curriculum in school, a functional directive for the ‘fledgling profession’ may falsely assume a common understanding of the fundamental relational complexities of supporting young people and their families within whole school inclusive policies, practices and cultures (Booth and Ainscow, 2004). .

Towards a relational interpretation of the role, I aim to pick-up on a seemingly lost thread that may help pull together a more holistic experience of learning in schools that makes sense to children and those adults who work with them. The lost thread, it is suggested surrounds learning as an emotional experience. Rustin (2006) identifies two underpinning assumptions for this assertion. First, feelings are an inescapable element of the functioning of our minds. Second, learning is a form of relationship that is to do with reciprocity, growth and conflict - which are all primary human functions.

When working with young children at a time when the ‘medical’ model (Wall, 2003) of special educational needs was a dominant discourse in education, which may have lent a sense for some children of not being quite ‘good enough’, I was influenced by the central tenets of Boxall’s (2002) ‘Nurture Groups in School’ which emphasised growth, by recreating the process of the child’s earliest learning, rather than pathology:

The orientation of the work is not ‘what has gone wrong?’ but ‘what has not gone right?’ and provides a way of putting it right.....the model is normal development and normal parenting’.

(Boxall, 2002:10)

Boxall's work came from the tradition at the Tavistock of working with small groups of children in primary schools. The descriptions and analysis of nurturing small groups of children described by Rheid, Fry and Rhode (1977), demonstrates the wider context in which psychoanalytic ideas, led by the Tavistock, have been applied by psychoanalysts in educational settings. In this research, I chose to work with individual children to help me engage, to look more closely, at micro level, with how learning relationships (Youell, 2006) are made. Similarly, as an Early Years teacher committed to the principles and practices of 'creativity' (NACCCE, 1999) and 'play' (Nutbrown, 2006, May in Nurse (Ed.), 2007) I used my experience of observing how children with language and interaction difficulties, sometimes relaxed and became more communicative when engaged in an activity of their own choice. In this research, as detailed below, I drew on relevant aspects of the work of Klein and Winnicott on play, but observing what happened in the transitional play space of the mentoring room was my intent, rather than trying to emulate any particular form of 'play therapy' (McMahon, 2009). In this enquiry, the play activities we engaged may be seen rather as a generic feature of the bricoleur's methodological tool set, as explained in the next chapter.

### **Bion and his idea of learning from experience**

Bion's own experiences of separation and loss may have prompted pursuit of a question that seems to encapsulate his life's work, which asks: How do we survive emotionally? As a small boy at boarding school, separated from his beloved family home in India, he later recalled; 'I learned to treasure that blessed hour when I could get into bed, pull the bed-clothes over my head and weep', (Bion, 1991:34). At the age of eighteen, he joined the army and became a tank commander during the First World War. He felt ill-equipped for this, likening it to 'Dante's inferno' (Bion, 1982) and recalls it as being an equally bewildering experience.

‘The DSO, the tank itself, were very inadequate protection. Even after Cambrai...I felt (my crew) looked at me as if to say, “What, *you?*” recommended for a VC”...I might with equal relevance have been recommended for a Court Martial. It depended on the direction which one took when one ran away.’ (1982:278)

Following these formative experiences, Bion enjoyed a ‘new beginning’ at Oxford, where he read history. He studied science and medicine later in London before becoming a psychiatrist. Influenced by his friend, colleague and former analyst John Rickman, they worked together with ‘groups’ at Northfield hospital, where their role was ‘to remoralise troops who had become demoralised in combat’ (Grotstein 2003:11).

Bion’s interest in the emotional experience of learning is epistemologically driven (Lipgar, 2003, Hinshelwood, 1991, Grotstein, 2003). The emotional experience of learning, that engages with how we come to ‘know’ and how we avoid knowing, is revealed in a story he recalled more than once in his writing:

‘I remember John Rickman telling me about his experience at York railway station when a soldier came up to him and said; ‘Sir, weren’t you at Northfield?’ Rickman said he was. ‘It was the most extraordinary experience I ever had –just like being at university’, said the soldier. That man hadn’t a hope of ever getting to university – as far as we know. His educational and financial background, his cultural background, were all against him. So it was probably the only chance he had had. I don’t know why, out of all the people at Northfield, that idea was transmitted to a particular person and changed his whole outlook – it certainly sounded as if it had. Whatever may have happened to all the pampered darlings of my generation at Oxford and Cambridge, they could pass through university without having the faintest idea of what a university was. But one man, who couldn’t possibly know what a university was, most certainly did.’ (Bion, 1976 in 2005:4)

A rebellious streak, that comes through in his autobiography 'The Long Weekend' (1982), may have nurtured his interest in extending the benefit of psychiatry and psychoanalysis to the general public. Grotstein (2003:9) suggests; 'Bion was a 'social-psychiatrist' prior to becoming a psychoanalyst.' When trying to take in some of his ideas, it has been helpful to remember that his language, its associations and the allusions he makes also reflect those of a man of his time, culture, education, gender, class and military experience.

### **Synopsis - terminology**

The 'alpha function', central to Bion's notion of 'container-contained' locates the roots of thinking in emotional experiences. Bion drew on the work of Freud and ideas made available through Kleinian 'object-relations', which focuses, as explained below, on relationships between the '*developing ego and the 'objects' (people or parts of people) with whom it comes into contact.*' (Frosh, 2002:109). From Klein's idea of 'projective identification,' Bion suggests the infant projects (expels) into the mother's mind a state of anxiety and terror that the child is unable to make sense of and that is felt by the infant to be intolerable. Through introjection (taking-in) of a receptive, understanding mother, the infant may gradually begin to develop her/his own capacity for reflection on his own state of mind. When the mother, for whatever reason, is incapable of this, what Bion terms '*reverie*' (Bion, 1962) for reflective meaning, the infant is unable to receive and thus develop a sense of meaning from her – instead the infant may experience a sense of meaning being 'stripped away,' (Coren, 1997), resulting in a frightening sense of what Bion (1962) terms 'the nameless dread'.

This *reverie*, when the mother acts as an emotional 'container' to successfully 'contain' the infant's anxiety, Bion (1962) calls the '*alpha function*'. Significantly, the initial experience that illuminates the intersubjective quality of relationship

between mother and infant, takes place at a psychological as well as physical level. It is essentially the reciprocal emotional engagement in 'learning *from* experience' through '*alpha function*', between mother and infant that Bion (1962) sees as initiating the child's capacity to think. Further, it is this thinking or essentially creative capacity to process thoughts, that for Bion makes growth of the mind possible.

When 'good enough' (Winnicott, 1957) containment does not occur, the infant's mind may remain in an unintegrated state, where chaotic thoughts which cannot be processed force the imperative to expel or get rid of ensuing psychic pain. Bion calls these indigestible thoughts 'beta-elements'. Beta-elements prevent thinking in a creative, operational sense. Defences, such as 'projection' and 'splitting' which I expand on below under 'Klein', are seen as internal psychic mechanisms called on by the individual's ego at times of anxiety. Obviously, as human beings, we all necessarily have experience of utilising psychic defences to some lesser or greater degree to negotiate and maintain a sense of psychic balance in our everyday lives.

Successful containment develops emotional tolerance and resilience to stress as the infant moves to a more emotionally mature, or what Klein would describe as the 'depressive position'. This occurs when the infant has learnt the rudiments of thinking through predominantly positive emotional learning *from* experience. This leads to the secure prediction that her or his needs will be met, so that a bond of trust in the parent begins to emerge. However, Bion asserts that poor 'container-contained' experience, for whatever reason, does not secure this emotional foundation for processing thoughts, and that may lead to regressive states of psychological fragmentation in later life experiences and/or relationships.

Further, Fraiberg (1980) suggests that through this regressive process, unintegrated aspects of early intimate relationships that make up our personal histories, may be relived and passed on, in an intergenerational sense, in varying degrees of morbidity:

‘In every nursery there are ghosts. They are the visitors from the unremembered past of the parents, the uninvited guests at the christening.’

(Fraiberg, Adelson and Shapiro, 1980:164)

It is suggested that in favourable familial circumstances our ‘ghosts’ fail to take up residence, but in the least favourable instances unresolved feeling states may be passed on in families for up to two or more generations, so the baby becomes ‘a silent actor in a family tragedy’ (Fraiberg et al, 1980:164).

The idea of ‘container-contained’ can be conceptualised and re-enforced at many different levels – literally and metaphorically. It may therefore be bound to relationship forms throughout our lives. At times of emotional crises we may regress psychologically to earlier psychic positions that recall the same feelings of anxiety to a greater or lesser extent – depending perhaps on our earliest experiences of containment.

If object-relations essentially focus on the mother-infant relational dyad, Bion’s work ‘*Experiences in groups*’ (1961), works to relate understanding of individual psychological states to the creative potential of group processes.

‘Bion (personal communication) often stated that man is born a dependent creature and needs others for emotional support. The group idea was implicit in these statements. The kind of dependency he had in mind was not just that which Klein had propounded, i.e., the infant’s dependency on the breast. What he clearly had in mind was what Joseph Lichtenberg (1989)

terms the need for ‘affiliation’, i.e. a need to belong to a group.’

(Grotstein in Lipgar, 2003:13)

With this in mind, the idea that school, as well as teachers, may be seen as a ‘container’, is central to this research. Inability to contain anxiety in ourselves and others may trigger defensive behaviours which pose barriers to learning, initially within our most intimate family relationships that may gradually extend, to relationships at school. For example, Rendall and Stuart’s (2005) research about a group of twenty excluded pupils in a group of inner city Secondary schools, showed two correlations. One was the quality of early attachment relations experienced by the excluded pupils and the other related to their sense of personal agency. Significantly, in terms of relating emotional development to, for example, pupils learning about the curriculum and/or school improvement issues, containing anxiety may also be seen to be part of the institutional or organisational life (Menzies-Lyth, 1989) of the school, as I later describe.

### **Melanie Klein – object-relations**

Object-relations is about human relationships. It particularly focuses on how our first experiences of the external physical world become internally represented in our minds to shape our sense of ‘self’ and our identity. As suggested, the relevance of Klein’s work to Bion’s notion of ‘container-contained’, surrounds a common engagement with what happens at conscious and unconscious levels in the first relationship between mother and infant. This involves the interaction between external, physical sensations and internal, intrapsychic and intersubjective processes that occur during and following the traumatic experience or ‘cesaura’ (Bion, 1962) of birth.

The experience of being essentially flung into a world and exposed to limitless space, evokes conflicting feeling states of pain at separation, as well as to the

pleasure of becoming. Such conflicting, extreme feelings that give rise to primitive phantasies are both psychically internalised and expelled through projection by the infant and mother (Klein, 1957) from birth. This first, necessarily reciprocal human interactive ‘to-ing’ and ‘fro-ing’ (Waddell, 2002) characterises the relational learning process. As Winnicott (1945) pointed out:

‘There is no such thing as a baby...if you set out to describe a baby, you will find that you are describing a baby and someone. A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship.’

As suggested, the following summaries of aspects of Klein’s ideas (drawn from Freud on ego formation that also informed Bion’s work), serve as terms of reference here, in the process of helping to illumine the observations at the heart of my study.

### **Early ego-defences:**

Bion drew on Klein’s ideas about defence mechanisms and identified these as ‘factors’ of ‘*alpha-function*’ (Bion, 1962). I will summarise relevant aspects of ‘splitting’ and ‘projective identification’. Examples of these interrelated defensive ‘factors’ were present in the forms of transference, countertransference relationships observed and/or acted-out in behaviours, my own as well as those of case study children. These processes are also revisited in Chapters 9 and 10.

### **Primitive Phantasies**

Klein asserts that the primitive ‘subject’, ‘ego’ or ‘self’ (she used the terms interchangeably), can at the very beginning of life, experience ‘good’ or ‘bad’ sensations (Hinshelwood, 1991). The baby who cannot at this stage physically or mentally distinguish him or herself from external objects encountered in a world beyond the womb, is for Klein, primarily driven by life and death instincts. S/he



initially does not perceive the mother as a whole object or person, rather, the phantasy of the mother's 'breast' is experienced as the first 'object'.

For Klein, the breast was a metaphor for primary maternal functions such as feeding, gratifying, satisfying, whilst for Bion the breast was a metaphor for the mind (Waddell, 2002:29). The core of the personality, first described by Freud as the 'ego', Klein saw as being psychodynamically shaped, by sensations experienced in relation to the first 'object' that the baby encounters. Object-relations for her are essentially about early ego formation. (Klein, 1958, Hinshelwood, 1991, Segal, 1973, Meltzer, 1986, Weininger, 1992, Waddell, 2002)

'The ego is the core that motivates a human being to survive and flourish, and exists at birth.....Klein's conception of ego development can thus be epitomised; we are –and become what we do with – and to-our objects!' (Weininger, 1992:25)

In the context of this enquiry, it is recognised that whatever we are, become and do with our 'objects', does not exist in a vacuum but must be situated in wider, complex socio-cultural relations and discourses that are subject to perpetual change. A singular notion of an essential 'self' is interrogated by the psychosocial approach and auto/biographical method adopted in this research, as described in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, aspects of an inter and intra-psychic focus on becoming and knowing, offered by Klein and Bion, can be seen to contribute to understanding human experiences (Clarke et al, 2008, Rustin and Bradley, 2008) in broader social relations if they '*illuminate micro-processes in learning and teaching*' (West, 2010:1).

## **Introjection and Projection**

Klein suggests unconscious, protective defence mechanisms, called up by the embryonic ego, are engaged in the painful psychic process of taking-in or 'introjection' towards gradually assimilating and accommodating external realities. Satisfactory maternal care, leads to an internalisation of a 'good' object. The process of identification that is initiated, eventually integrated and prevailingly experienced as love and gratification, ensures the ego is, *'supported by the internalised good object and strengthened by identification with it'* (Klein, 1958:240).

Projection was first described by Freud (Frosh, 2002, Hinshelwood, 1991) and subsequently used by Klein and Bion. It is used in a variety of related ways which involve the aforementioned phantasy of expulsion of unwanted feelings and primitive anxieties. For Klein, projection was related to identity: *'Projection....originates from the deflection of the death instinct outwards and in my view helps the ego to overcome anxiety by ridding it of danger and badness'* (Klein, 1946:6). Klein developed her analytic approach by observing children playing with toy 'objects', in a way that also suggested projection was a way of 'acting out' internal conflicts in the external world through play. Another important aspect, projection of part of the 'self', is described below under 'splitting'.

## **Projective Identification and Splitting**

For Klein and Bion projective identification assumes that both projection and introjection of 'good' and 'bad' versions of objects take place psychically within the developing interpersonal relationship that is a key part of personality development. Both focus on processes of introjection and projective identification to describe the way the subject or learner is influenced by *their* particular,

internalised objects. It is suggested that the nature of our symbolic, internalised 'objects' constitute qualities of learning relationship (Youell, 2006) which, from a psychoanalytic perspective, are seen to be revisited throughout our lives. They may inform our emotional responses, 'positions', psychic relations towards ourselves and others in personal, interpersonal and social group relationships (Bion, 1961). However, Bion goes further by seeing projective identification, as a normal pre-verbal form of communication between mother and infant that is part of the 'alpha function'.

Splitting as an early defence occurs through projection and can take many forms. Frosh (2002) suggests that the notion of splitting, given that we are split between the conscious and unconscious areas of our minds, is central to psychoanalysis. Two related aspects are first, the splitting of the object. *'The object is seen as split into an ideally good and a wholly bad one'* (Segal, 1955: 396). Through observing children's play, Klein saw that young children endow their toy 'objects', with either wholly 'good' or wholly 'bad' qualities (Hinshelwood, 1991:434). Such 'acted-out' primitive play phantasies can be seen to lend 'emotional meanings' (Segal, 1973), to both the pain of separation (of birth) and the pleasure of survival (beginning life).

Such infantile, unintegrated psychic defences may be revisited, particularly at times of stress, throughout our lives. I re-iterate this point to help keep in mind that any adult human being, including those of us who work with children and young people in schools and other institutions, are as susceptible to 'acting-out' as any infant. Emotional development and maturity denotes a psychological tolerance of relational complexities so that a gradual integration of these originally polarised 'good/bad', 'love/hate', psychic states or what Klein describes as psychic positions, as described below, emerge.

The other aspect of splitting here is Klein's idea of the 'splitting' of the ego, or 'self'. This is to do with *'splitting-off of aspects of the self which were feared as bad, usually with the projective invasion of them into an object'* (Hinshelwood, 1991:434). This 'splitting' of objects reflects fragmented mental states that Klein saw as attacking the ego and Bion saw as attacking the linking of thoughts. In this way splitting may be seen as a necessary defence, as Segal (1973) suggests, because splitting allows the ego to survive chaos and order its experiences. More than this, by identifying split-off parts, that have been projected into an 'other', as parts also of the self, the *'ego forms its first most primitive symbols'* (Segal: 1973:36)

To help illustrate this, I shall pick up on my earlier split-off description of the infant who experiences the 'good' breast phantasy – which was only part of the story. When the baby is not attended to and if this discomfort continues, the psychic distress engendered is experienced as the reality of the object's persecutory intent (the phantasy not physical perception of the maternal breast). At this stage when external reality and internal phantasy are undifferentiated, the infant's feelings and physical experiences of the mother's care are very closely connected. Faced with the overwhelming fear that the mother's absence triggers and in order to retain the frail integrity it has, the infant's primitive ego 'splits' itself. It does this by splitting off and 'projecting' its own bad feelings of fear and anger back into its maternal object, that is the infant's only 'object' at this stage of life. An act of survival for the infant ego, this invests the mother 'breast' object with both 'good' and 'bad' experiences.

'This earliest defence mechanism is a natural extension of the desire to survive and become. With the creation of the complex paradox of the good and the bad breast, the infant begins the long

and arduous process of growth and self-definition.’

(Weininger, 1992:3)

In the infant, projections of suffering and distress can, from the beginning of life, be externalised through prolonged screaming and crying. This is characteristic of the psychic position Klein describes as ‘paranoid-schizoid’. In the paradoxical process of growth, the ‘good’ part of the primary split object comes to represent love, security, safety and all that is positive and life enhancing. This is the source of what Klein describes as the ‘epistemophilic’ libidinous life-drive and initiates interest and curiosity about the world (Youell, 2006).

### **Psychic positions: The paranoid schizoid and depressive positions**

Psychic ‘positions’ suggest fluid dynamic states that reflect internal emotional conditions of mind. Rather than ‘fixed’, procedural or incremental stages of development, reminiscent of cognitive approaches towards maturity, psychic positions remain, develop, regress and are revisited. Psychic positions interactively reflect our emotional responses, each day of our lives, towards sustaining a semblance of psychic balance. Our emotions, subject to external stimulus and therefore a mixture and continuum of pleasure and pain, regulate these internal feeling states. Psychic positions, are served by human defence mechanisms, deployed by the ego, to protect us from pain and anxiety as described below, in the form of, for example, personal fears and stresses related to home, family, friendship and work settings. Klein described these states as the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ and ‘depressive’ positions (Segal, 1973). To help clarify these terms I will try to separate what, it must be remembered, are essentially interrelated, interdependent psychic interactions.

The ‘paranoid schizoid’ position is characterised by the aforementioned sense of overwhelming anxiety and frustration experienced by the new born baby following

the traumatic interruption of birth. In the fragmented feeling state of the paranoid schizoid position, intolerable sensations are psychically expressed or expelled through 'projection', as introduced above. Klein describes 'projection' as the baby's fundamental response to pain and that remains our most spontaneous reaction throughout our lives:

'....against feelings of pain, of being attacked, or of helplessness – one from which so many others spring – is that device we call projection. All painful and unpleasant sensations or feelings in the mind are by this device automatically relegated outside oneself; one assumes that they belong elsewhere, not in oneself.....we blame them on someone else..' (Klein, 1962:11)

The 'depressive' position is characterised by more realistic, mature psychic states. Maturation and emotional growth is seen as moving away from the aforementioned primitive splitting of 'good' and 'bad' part-objects towards a more integrated position where, through consistent loving maternal care, the infant becomes increasingly able to tolerate both 'good' (idealised) and 'bad' (persecutory) phantasies of the first maternal object ('breast') experience. For Klein, this brings with it a sense of ambivalence, concurrent with the depressive position, which also seems to depend on the successful development of symbol formation (see below). In light of human psychic positions, maturity can be seen as being a life-long learning pursuit rather than specific destination in any literal sense. This view is perhaps encapsulated by Winnicott's 'good enough' (1971) description of the mother, who is able to provide a loving, secure enough, but essentially human and therefore fallible emotional base for her baby.

### **Omnipotence and envy**

As it seems with all defences, omnipotence and envy can take many forms and present in different ways. For Klein, in the arduous process of growth of 'self', idealisation of the good 'breast' by the infant needs to be tempered to subdue

inevitable feelings of omnipotence and envy, that are always part of love, towards a mature sense of reality. Initially, in the fragmented paranoid schizoid position the baby exists in a world of extremes where in order to survive s/he is totally dependent on maternal care. However, if the infant experiences total gratification, perhaps from a loving but anxious mother who may be too available, the baby may not have the experience of developing sufficient tolerance of pain to foster growth towards a more integrated 'depressive' position.

Without perhaps sufficient containment, the emotional maturity and resilience required to bear the pain of loss and separation cannot be born by the infant. S/he may also find the experience of seemingly infinite omnipotent power extremely frightening. The fragile ego may also develop destructive controlling and envious impulses, particularly when s/he realises the idealised mother 'object' may be 'with an 'other', hated being (Waddell, 2002). This may be seen to impact eventually on transition through the oedipal stage of development.

### **Symbol formation**

Symbol formation, as suggested, is an emerging feature of the 'depressive position' and part of the ego's attempts to deal with anxieties in relation to the 'object'. Segal (1955) considers symbolising as a three term relation:

'In psychological terms, symbolism would be a relation between the ego, the object, and the symbol.' (Segal 1955: 197)

In the depressive position the main change in the object relation is that the object is represented, symbolised internally and therefore experienced by the developing ego as a more integrated whole, rather than the part-object of the paranoid-schizoid position. Although reflecting a more mature state, there remains a sense of loss as the internalised symbol of love and care is not the same as the physical, sensory

presence of the mother. It resembles the psychic state of the infant who has experienced satisfactory containment through Bion's 'alpha function'. Alpha function successfully promotes growth of mind, so the infant is more able to psychically differentiate phantasy from reality. Bion's notion of maternal 'reverie', as an element within the 'alpha function', supports the infant's gradual differentiation of unconscious primitive psychic phantasy from the conscious reality of her/his external world. He defines this crucial dynamic that is a prerequisite of symbolisation (Segal, 1955) and being able to process thoughts, as the 'contact barrier'.

It is the notion of emotionality being at the heart of learning and the way Bion roots capacities for symbolisation and 'thinking' in human relationships, that specifically prompted this enquiry about emotional learning in the school setting.

'I think it is correct to say that Bion was the first to call attention to the problem of genesis of thought. In the extraordinary (and infuriatingly difficult) books from *Learning from Experience* onwards, he spelled out an integrated theory of thinking...'

(Meltzer, 1986:22)

### **Wilfred Bion – Container-Contained, the Alpha-Function and Thinking:**

'*Learning from Experience*' (1962) begins with what Meltzer might describe as one of Bion's 'infuriatingly difficult' descriptions of the relationship between 'factors' and 'function' of the mind.

'Function' is the name for the mental activity proper to a number of factors operating in consort...factors are deducible from observation of the functions of which they, in consort with each other, are a part...'Factor' is the name for a mental activity operating in consort with other mental activities to constitute a function.' (1962:2)



Bion suggests that conscious qualities of observable mental ‘factors’ such as, for example, attention linked to memory, as well as a range of unconscious factors such as, ‘splitting’, ‘projective identification’ and ‘symbol formation’ (1962:5) are at play within the function he described as the ‘alpha function’. He defines a ‘factor’ as a mental activity that is a subset, along with other factors, of a ‘function’. These conscious and unconscious dynamic factors, are called up and work intersubjectively, between infant and mother in the first relationship, to shape the particular function he explicates in his work that is known as the ‘alpha function’ phenomenon, which defines learning from experience.

When a mother engages with her baby at the beginning of the baby’s life, she is also at the beginning of a relationship that involves caring for another human being who is entirely dependent on her for survival. Beginnings mean tackling the unknown, which at this stage may be frightening for both mother and baby. At first, without language, interaction relies on physical and sensory responses, as for example, ‘mirroring’ suggested by Winnicott (1971), or the ‘rhythmic dialogue’ suggested by Trevarthen (1980). These levels of physical care, attention and communication are also related to the mother’s mental capacity to think about the infant’s needs. To engage her mind the mother has to make herself available emotionally, by metaphorically opening some containing ‘space’ in her mind to engage with her infant (Briggs, (Ed.), 2002).

By making her mind, as well as her physical presence available, the mother is able to provide an attentive, ‘thinking breast’ (Waddell, 2002:33) object, able to take-in the infant’s projections without becoming overwhelmed herself. She is able to think about the baby’s distress which also involves sustaining her own distress as a sense of not knowing whether the baby’s needs involve sleep, hunger, tummy ache and/or a nappy change. The sensitive mother does not know, but observes,

interprets, empathises and reciprocates in order to learn about her infant. Bion saw interpretation as a responsibility of the 'thinking breast': *'It's no good anyone trying to tell you how you look at things – no one will ever know except you'* (Bion, 1976, p. 245).

In this reflexive, interpretive way the mother is able to use her own internal human resources to manage or 'mentalise' (Fonagy et al, 2002) the infant's projections and responsively return the infant's fears that have been modified by such qualities of thinking. Through this psychic re-integration, the infant's anxiety can be dissipated as the mother is able to communicate to her baby a sense of being understood. It is through this experience of 'alpha function' that the mother metabolises the infant's projections, so she can be seen to have successfully contained her baby, hence Bion's expression 'container-contained' (1962:93). Klein, as suggested, might consider that sustained experiences of satisfactory containment, very gradually enables the infant to move from a 'paranoid-schizoid' to a more 'depressive' psychic position. Bion suggests that this takes place at a psychological level so that the infant will gradually introject this learning pattern until it becomes part of her or his own personality. This learning relationship (Youell, 2006) where the mother is initially the 'thinker' very gradually builds the infant's emotional resilience which helps her/him to tolerate the painful uncertainty or 'not knowing', in order to learn.

'Learning depends on the capacity for the container to remain integrated and yet lose rigidity. This is the foundation of the state of mind of the individual who can retain his knowledge and experience and yet be prepared to reconstrue past experiences in a manner that enables him to be receptive of a new idea ..... Tolerance of doubt and tolerance of a sense of infinity are the essential connective in growth of the 'contained' if knowing is to be possible.' (Bion, 1962:93)

Bion points out, the relational operation of the container-contained dynamic reflects a necessarily flexibility, so it enables and facilitates growth and change as the infant ego develops. In this way, as Waddell (2002) suggests, as the child matures, ideally the ‘thinker’ mother thinks *with*, rather than *for* the child. The idea of flexible containment is important as the research questions the capacity of the school to be a flexible-enough container. The question is related to the internalisation of the curriculum object, how this is undertaken and experienced by learners and teachers, also to how it facilitates learning and creates barriers to learning.

Currently I work as a specialist teacher in primary and secondary schools across two counties. Each day I interact with children, teachers, adults and other outside agencies. I see a prioritisation of dedicated commitment and engagement with the curriculum rather than with children. As suggested, objective target setting and measuring outcomes support education as a commodity (Coren, 1997, Illeris, 2007). My concern is not to disparage the importance or value of learning about the curriculum, but to realise crucial human, emotional factors involved. There is a concern that accountability, however necessary, focuses an over-emphasis on curriculum learning at the expense of recognising the relational nature of ‘knowing’ and ‘thinking’, as conceptualised by Bion. This ensuing pressure may distort the pedagogical balance and the emotional well-being of learners and teachers.

Harris (1987), encapsulates something of Bion’s notion of ‘alpha function’ by articulating the meaning of the term ‘engagement’, a term I have found myself continually using to describe container-contained.

‘Bion differentiates between ‘becoming a walker’ and ‘learning about walking’ – a distinction between an extension of the capacities of the self, by contrast with an addition to the stock of

knowledge. Experience is transformed into growth when it is possible to learn from that experience. This process is dependent on the quality of interaction between container and contained, on the integrity and reciprocity of that interaction, by contrast with the 'subtle proliferation of mythology and lies which in differing degrees obstruct the search for truth.' (Harris, 1987:322)

Harris (1987) points out, as does Waddell (2002) that it is the mother's emotional engagement with the infant's learning and the level of reciprocity that this engenders, rather than an explanation or instruction that provides the infant with containment. The sense of being able to share the painful experience and being understood eases the infant's distress in a way that fosters learning and knowing.

Whether in relation to discussing mother/infant, teacher/learner, mentor/case study child, research/participant, it is the notion and learning potential provided by such authentic emotional engagement that is the subject of this enquiry. This intent, informed by Bion's concept is also demonstrated in the self-conscious reflexive methodology and ethicality of the mentoring project (Hollway, 2008).

Within the alpha function, the levels of attention and memory through observation and emotional availability are actively engaged by the mother's mind. Bion describes this as being in state of 'reverie' (Bion, 1962:36). Weininger describes 'reverie' as an active state of 'thinkingness'.

'When we say thoughtfulness', we are not using a descriptive word to plead for a pleasant state of mind; it is not simply a matter of a pleasant voice, saying 'nice baby, nice baby, keep quiet'. It is an active state of 'thinkingness' or 'reverie'. It is not an immediate response or action, but a continuous easy attention to the baby and a thinking about what's going on, a steady sensitivity to the baby's whole experience.'

(Weininger, 1992:17)

Weininger's view questions Holmes' (2005) suggestion, when comparing 'alpha function' with 'mentalising', that the mother's role *'is relatively passive, as the term 'reverie' implies. Her job is to 'dream' her infant.'* (Holmes, 2005:193). The mother's role as a thinker can clearly be seen to be active. However, the notion of the mother's love or 'reverie' actively holding a dream-like, imaginative state, between the consciousness and unconscious, does make sense.

'...reverie is that state of mind which is open to the reception of any 'objects' from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant's projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad. In short, reverie is a factor of the mother's alpha-function.' (Bion, 1962:37)

Processed emotional experiences, or 'objects of sense' (Bion, 1962:6), made available and stored in memory, through 'alpha function', are called 'dream thoughts' or 'alpha-elements'. These are also produced unconsciously through dreams during sleep, so Bion saw the ability to dream as central to alpha function (1962:8). He suggests that if we cannot 'transform' (Bion, 1962:7) emotional experiences into alpha elements, then we cannot dream. Being able to dream and to imagine seem central to the 'transformational' process of learning from experience. Bion acknowledges (1962:7) Freud's recognition that one of the functions of a dream is to preserve sleep.

'Failure of alpha function means the patient cannot dream and therefore cannot sleep. As alpha function makes the sense impressions of the emotional experience available for consciousness and dream-thought the patient who cannot dream cannot go to sleep and cannot wake up. Hence the peculiar condition seen clinically when the psychotic patient behaves as if here in precisely this state. Dreaming is an important function preserving sleep where we process emotional objects of sense.'

(Bion, 1962:8)

For Bion, without 'alpha function' there is no differentiation between conscious and unconscious, waking or sleeping. He described sensory stimuli accrued by the infant and projected or evacuated, as 'beta-elements'. He deploys an alimentary, nutritional metaphor to describe his model of mind, so that nourishment and growth are seen to occur through the food of 'truth', or 'true experiences', thinking, language and symbol formation associated with alpha-elements. When starved of authenticity, such growth is seen to be 'poisoned' by false experiences (Waddell, 2002:30), such as the unintentional behaviour, instinct, automatic and learned social responses (Meltzer, 1986:21) that Bion associated with 'beta-elements':

'Beta elements are stored but differ from alpha-elements in that they are not so much memories as undigested facts, whereas the alpha elements have been digested by alpha-function and thus made available for thought.' (Bion, 1962:7)

This idea of thoughts being made available for thinking, through alpha function, reverses the more familiar notion that thinking gives rise to thoughts and distinguishes Bion's idea. For the first time thinking was seen as being brought about by emotional experience and as Meltzer (1986:23) points out: *'only Bion has seen emotion as the very core of meaning in human mentality.'*

If, for whatever reason, the mother's mind, symbolised for Bion by the breast, is not sufficiently available to contain the infant, the crucial elements of the 'alpha function' are absent. This absent breast-object or, for Bion the absent 'mind', means there is no thinker to modify, make sense of and re-integrate the infant's evacuated frustrations and phantasies. There is no 'container' to contain and hold the infant together in a psychic sense.

This is experienced by the fragile infant ego as falling apart, turning to liquid, or spilling. In this situation there is insufficient experience of containment to hold the

infant together psychically. When this occurs, and ‘pre-conception’ (expectation) is not met with the ‘realisation’ of the breast object, Bion suggests frustration, rather than leading to thoughts for thinking through ‘alpha-function’, leads to the development of a ‘bad object’. When ‘thoughts’, or beta-elements, do not have a ‘thinker’ they are fit only for evacuation.

‘a product of the juxtaposition of preconception and negative realisation, becomes a bad object, indistinguishable from a thing-in-itself, fit only for evacuation.’ (Bion, 1961:308)

Continuous, negative experiences of frustration, fear and hostility mean that unprocessed ‘beta-elements’ predominate and impact on the fragile, infant ego and personality in a destructive way. In Kleinian terms, without a ‘good enough’ experience of love and trust, the infant ‘self’ remains in a paranoid-schizoid position. Without the experience of being understood, the infant cannot understand.

‘If the projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore reintrojects, not fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread.’ (Bion, 1961:309)

In such dire circumstances, the infant must develop other defensive strategies to hold herself or himself together. Esther Bick (1964) wrote about the primal function of the baby’s skin in binding together parts of the personality that at first cannot be differentiated from parts of the body. Through successful alpha function, the concept of internal space emerges and our skin functions as a containing boundary. In the absence of satisfactory ‘container-contained’, Bick describes the phenomenon that replaces integration as a muscular, shell-like ‘second-skin’ formation to hold together ‘self’:

‘The need for a containing object would seem, in the infantile unintegrated state, to produce a frantic search for an object – a light, a voice, a smell, or other sensual object – which can hold

the attention and thereby be experienced, momentarily at least, as holding the parts of the personality together....this containing object is experienced concretely as skin.’ (Bick, 1968:484)

Later, Bick (1968) developed the idea by describing this form of infant identification as ‘adhesive’. She writes of the baby at birth being ‘*in the position of an astronaut who has been shot out into space without a spacesuit*’. (Bick, 1968 in Briggs, 2002). Without a containing sense, physically and psychologically, of being ‘held’ together, ‘second-skin’ development defends against a feeling of falling through space or liquification. She relates case study observations which suggest that, in place of being maternally ‘held’, the infant resorts to holding onto to a continuous sensory stimulus that is available – holding on, as it were, to life. She considers this may convey a pseudo independence that misrepresents the infant’s true feeling states. Bion describes the frightening sense of falling apart as the ‘nameless dread’. When beta elements cannot be assimilated, neither thoughts can be distinguished from feelings, nor reality from phantasy, as they are when digested, assimilated and accommodated through the alpha-function, by the embryonic ego.

Defences can be self-destructive and give rise to mis-understanding that sometimes becomes part of a ‘beta-screen’ (Meltzer, 1986) that the psyche deploys and which may include for example, psycho-somatic disorders, (Lipgar, (Ed.) 2003), meaningless talk or actions and group behaviours, as described below. In this situation, frustration leads to evasion. For Bion, Klein’s epistemophilic life drive and Freud’s pleasure principle are thus replaced by the instinct to avoid. Avoid, that is, what he describes as the ‘truth’, or the necessary pain of learning from experience.



‘Bion (1962a) conjectured that what enabled a baby to bear these pains and frustrations was a rudimentary form of thought.....  
He saw the conflict as the predicament of having the desire to know and understand the truth about one’s own experience on the one hand, and the aversion to that knowing and understanding on the other. The authenticity of the quest for the truth of one’s experience is lodged, he maintained in the capacity to actually to *have* the experience, in the sense of staying with it, of really undergoing and suffering it, rather than seeking to dismiss, or to find some way of bypassing it.’ (Waddell, 2002:30)

Bion extended Klein’s focus on conflicts between love and hate instincts, to exploring conflicts between Love, Hate and Knowledge and minus, or ‘anti’ Love, Hate and Knowledge. He saw engaging with, or avoiding engagement with the truth of experience as intrinsic to the notions of ‘container-contained’ and ‘learning from experience. For Bion, according to Meltzer,

‘An emotional experience is an encounter with the beauty and mystery of the world which arises conflict between L, H and K, and minus L, H and K.’ (Meltzer, 1986:26)

The extreme and distressing reversal of ‘alpha-function’ does, however, clearly bring into view how Bion identified Klein’s idea of ‘projective identification’ as ‘*an early form of that which later is called a capacity for thinking*’ (Bion, 1962:41). When the infants ‘normal’ (Bion, 1961:9) projection of unwanted ‘unknown’ frustrations are seen as an ordinary part of communication that takes place in the containing relationship between mother and infant, alpha-elements that sensitively build the infant’s capacity to tolerate frustration and uncertainty, can be seen to transform beta-elements into thoughts for thinking, which fosters learning from experience.

## **Donald Winnicott**

Winnicott, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, is regarded as a member of the British 'object-relations' school (Hinshelwood, 1991) and some of his ideas were particularly relevant, both in helping me to interpret my role as a learning mentor, as described in Chapter 3 and also in making sense of some of my observations of case study children within the research project. I will briefly outline those specific ideas, before moving on finally to introduce Bion's 'Experiences in Groups' (1961) and Menzies-Lyth on the 'social defence'.

Winnicott suggests that for the new born infant unable to distinguish her/himself from the primary object, the process of building a separate identity can be supported by what terms a 'transitional object'. This can take the form of thumb sucking, then perhaps a favoured blanket, teddy bear or toy. This close-by 'object' can become a vital part of the infant's daily routines and rituals, representing an intermediate state of coming to terms with their inner world and outer reality. The infant assumes rights and ownership over the object which s/he can use to explore a range of emotions which the loved and hated object usually manages to survive. In this way, such 'reality testing' can be undertaken in a safe, secure space that is neither inside the child or outside in the world at large.

As the child develops a more mature sense of 'self', the need for the transitional object that creates what may be seen as a 'play' space usually disappears, but the important link here is between transitional phenomena, play and wider relational experiences.

'There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences.'

(Winnicott, 1971:151)

Transitional, creative play spaces (West, 2007), linked to the wider relational experience of mentoring within the school context in this enquiry have also been interpreted as potential learning spaces.

For Winnicott, being able to engage playfully depends on the infant's confidence in their own ability to manipulate their environment, so also their sense of personal agency. These factors depend on the level of trust engendered through nurturing, loving familial relationships. As with 'container-contained', the kind of 'emotional holding' that Winnicott identifies, describes what he termed 'good enough' adaptive mothering that is essential to emotional well-being.

### **Winnicott's concept of 'False Self'**

Winnicott suggests this unconscious defensive mask is brought into play when the infant experiences a less than good enough adaptive situation, so s/he seeks to anticipate the demands of others in order to maintain relationships. When the mother is unable to respond optimally to her infant's needs, perhaps substituting her/his own, the dependent infant may comply for survival. S/he then introjects a pattern of responses that instead of strengthening an nurturing a robust, healthy ego, the 'show' of being 'real' or 'true' can sap vitality and lead to psychic distress: *'only the true self can be creative and only the true self can feel real'* (Winnicott, 1945).

### **Learning from experience at an organisational level**

As well as engaging with learning from experience at an individual level, much of Bion's early work focused on what happens at an emotional level in groups. We bring our emotional selves to the life of the group. This work began with his group therapy strategy piloted at the aforementioned Northfield Military Hospital (Bion, 1982), followed by writing up some of his own experience, working as a therapist

with groups of patients in 'Experiences in Groups' (1961). The work was innovative and difficult to the extent that the Northfield project was interrupted and discontinued, but Bion continued his approach with groups in his own practise. Bion's identified two kinds of mental functioning in groups. These he describes as 'Basic Assumption' and 'Work Group' mentality.

Mental functioning within the Work Group describes the capacity for the kind of thinking usually associated with clear identification and focus on task. That is clarity, organisation and taking responsibility for pursuing the task in hand. Alpha-function capacities, such as the ability to symbolise and use language effectively are distinguishing features of the kind of problem solving used by the Work Group engaged in the primary task. For Bion, the Work Group epitomises the capacity to engage, think and act independently and creatively. Basic Assumption mentality describes three forms of primitive human mental anxieties, or beta-elements. These get in the way of thinking, or 'linking' as Bion (1961, 1967) sometimes described it. These three forms are 'Basic Assumption Dependency' (BaD), 'Basic Assumption Fight/flight' (BaF) and 'Basic Assumption Pairing' (BaP).

As with 'container-contained', Bion focused on identifying processes that take place at an unconscious level, which makes Basic Assumption mentality difficult to recognise. Our own patterns of participation when engaged in group interaction are particularly difficult to detect (Menzies-Lyth, 1988, 1989; Obholzer, 1994). Bion uses the term 'regression' to describe primitive, infantile emotional responses, to which we are all susceptible, when exposed to the psychic tension evoked by actively maintaining our sense of 'self' or ego (Segal, 1973) functioning, whilst simultaneously trying to establish our identity and contribution to the range of social groups in which we engage each day.

‘The adult must establish contact with emotional life of the group in which he lives; this task would appear to be as formidable to the adult as the relationship with the breast appears to be to the infant, and the failure to meet the demands of this task is revealed in his regression...’ (Bion. 1961:142)

Bion identifies seven qualities that he describes as necessities of a ‘good group spirit’ (Bion, 1961:25). Each of these qualities seemed to be relevant to my experience of negotiating a place within the established school ‘group’. This was true in my dual role as a researcher/learning mentor as well as in my observations of individual child participants, in my attempt to gain some purchase on learning from experience in the setting.

The first quality Bion describes as ‘a common purpose’. He sees the common purpose as providing the ‘primary task’ of any group. In this research context it seems reasonable to consider the primary task of the school institution to be learning and teaching. He also defines a ‘group’ as having a minimum number of three people. This changes the quality of interaction from an interpersonal relationship, which takes place between two people. The mentoring project focused on exploring qualities of learning relationship between myself and child participants. However, those interpersonal relationships were interactively and interdependently embedded, influenced and shaped by the wider social learning group represented by the school, as part of the common cultural group practise of schooling in our society, as described in Chapter 4, The school context. Interviews with adult participants including teachers and parents of child participants contributed to the ‘group’ fabric of the research, as well as providing vital biographical details crucial to making meaningful sense of my observations of case study children.

Bion considered another important element to be the common recognition by group members of 'boundaries' relating to the position and function of group in relation to other, larger groups and functions. The development of 'sub-groups', when necessary must be recognised as of value to the function of the whole group – as opposed to the development, perhaps of 'cliques'. Aspects of group life were relevant to the mentoring 'sub-group', and 'boundaries' both personal and professional.

Bion recognised that each individual member of the group should be valued for their input to the group, and should enjoy free movement within the group, limited only by 'generally accepted conditions devised and imposed by the group.' (Bion, 1961:25) The other two qualities are particularly challenging as they involve change, conflict and growth, through what Bion considers to be the transformational process of learning.

The first of these challenging qualities involves the group being able to tolerate loss of members and the arrival of new members, without fear of compromising group individuality. This means the character of the group must be flexible. The second involves having the capacity to face up to discontent with the group and having the means to cope with it. I think this means that for growth and development to take place, the group need to be able to confront inevitable difficulties and disagreements arising between a range of different minds and personalities within the group, so that individuals take responsibility for their thoughts and feelings in relation to the task, by being open and honest with themselves as well as with the other members of the group. In this way, as Bion observed, individual psychology cannot easily be differentiated from group psychology as *'we are constantly affected by what we feel to be the attitude of the*

*group to ourselves, and are consciously or unconsciously swayed by it.*' (Bion, 1961:32)

The mature capacity for taking such responsibility seems to distinguish the 'Work Group' from a Basic Assumption mentality. Bion refers to the group's hatred of emotional 'truth' (Bion, 1961) and the regressive use of primitive defences such as splitting and projection deployed by members to avoid engagement with reality. This group phenomenon again echoes Bion's ideas about our individual innate desire, or drive to avoid the painful experience of authentic engagement that makes the transformational process of growth and learning emotionally challenging.

As previously discussed, anxiety can give rise to unprocessed, unassimilated thoughts or 'beta elements' that may be psychically projected or expelled by the individual into an 'other'. A similar emotionally charged phenomenon, according to Bion (1961), can take place collectively at a social, group level so projections may be discharged into the group. If, at an individual level, a thinking 'container' is required to help metabolise, transform, assimilate and contain defensive anxieties or unprocessed 'thoughts', at a group level a comparable apparatus for thinking is also required. Such 'alpha function' apparatus for thinking is likely to be provided, according to Bion, by Work Group mentality.

My own understanding of this idea was forged in teaching experiences. For example, when I began working with part-time mature students, as a Higher Education lecturer in a Further Education setting, I encountered many examples of student groups being in states of mind reminiscent of those Klein (1931) described as the 'paranoid-schizoid' position – particularly when students received assignment marks, or were preparing for an exam. This is an extract from a reflection I wrote as part of a task set on the D1 course:

‘During transference at these times, students expel or project their anger towards the organisation and ‘abandoning’ tutors that I represent, sometimes trying to split assumed pairing between myself and partnership colleagues. At a conscious level these protests take the form of complaints about administrative oversights, disappointing assignment marks, or other tutor’s poor teaching. I have tried to contain groups by making sense of some of these issues for them, but also by ensuring that I talk regularly to partnership staff about students and courses each week so that when I actually re-meet students the discourse reflects that they have been held in mind by both the partnership tutor and myself throughout the course - even though I have not physically been with them each week. I have not yet found a route or opportunity to take this back to the team effectively as I have bumped into an attitude that suggests our students are adults and ‘life is hard’. I feel life is probably already hard enough for the students we encounter.’

This reflection indicates the way Basic Assumption Dependency (BaD) mentality in the group seemed to invest me as leader, with the primary task of solely satisfying their needs and wishes. This BaD, Bion might see as typically inhibiting growth and development as the group projected their anxieties in the form of complaints into me as a distraction or defence against the demanding task of engaging with and taking responsibility for their own learning. It is interesting how, in this example, I reveal my own dependent anxiety by perpetuating the culture of passing on the blame to others, and to systems which equally felt at the time, beyond my control. It also suggests, perhaps, that the container also needs a container, an issue developed further in Chapter 10.

When faced with a given difficulty or task, Basic Assumption Fight/Flight mentality (BaF) describes the human tendency and tension between fighting one’s way through a problem, or simply running away in an attempt to escape a perceived danger or enemy. A common assumption of Basic Assumption



mentality, according to Bion (1962) is avoidance of pain which echoes his ideas about the pain of learning from experience in 'container-contained'. As I write this chapter, I can also recognise something of my own fight/flight dependency in a current workplace. I now work in school with a fifteen year old called Mia who has a statement for speech, language and communication needs. Mia has lived with her grandparents since being abandoned by her mother, taken into care and separated from her sisters. This separation and loss form barriers to learning compounded by her language disorder. Her body language, silences and verbal assaults communicate aggression and fear. I have worked hard to build a relationship with Mia and after a more positive academic year, last summer her father, whom she was seeing occasionally, had a baby with his new partner. Defensively, Mia assumed he no longer wanted to see her and she refused to see him. She is also frightened about looming GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams.

When attacking, in a one-to-one, situation I have found she can tolerate me attending by sitting quietly beside her while she attempts to engage with her work. This seems to be containing for Mia as when I offer to go, she says 'No!' straightaway and becomes agitated. However, in the bottom maths group setting, in front of equally anxious peers who do not want to be there, Mia can be very hostile and I find myself fielding very painful projections from the group that sometimes make it difficult for me to stay in the room. When I can find other students to support in the group, she seems to check from time to time, perhaps just to see if I am still there. Perhaps Mia feels more contained by her peers than by me, but I think she also wants me to feel some of the terrible pain she has experienced, including some of the rejection she may be currently feeling. If I fight back, or run away and abandon her as she feels others have, I think I would simply be confirming her worst assumptions, yet in this group situation we are both

‘stuck’ and cannot seem to create a plan to find a way forward to engage with either the maths or the learning problems we both seem to face, or rather trying to avoid.

Bion (1961) describes the third form of mental dependency at play in group situations, as Pairing (BaP). This occurs when a partnership appears to emerge within the group. For the group this alliance may evoke defensive escapist phantasies, such as, for example, a partnership or coupling, related to the birth or promise of something new – an idea or saviour that might ultimately rescue, or provide the answer. In this sense the group is fixed on the future. Bion, according to Hinshelwood (1991), attempted to relate Basic Assumptions characteristics to the work of social institutions.

‘The army, for instance, the armed forces clearly represented the fight/flight assumption, and the Church, he believed, represented the dependency assumption. The pairing assumption he saw in the aristocracy, an institution concerned with breeding.’

(Hinshelwood, 1989:228)

The significance of and attitudes towards traditional social institutions in our society have changed in the last sixty years. For example, during the run up to the royal wedding between Prince William and Kate Middleton during the summer of 2011, the media drew attention to what seemed a mixture of public disinterest, apathy and hostility towards such a seemingly socially antiquated, irrelevant event. However, it was interesting that during current economically and socially troubled times, one million people turned out to watch the event in London and 24.5 million viewers watched the wedding on terrestrial television (The Independent newspaper, 30.4.11). BaP regression perhaps defends against the difficulties experienced in the present situation and evokes a sense of hope.

When I first encountered these ideas my conscious defence was to try to disassociate myself from Basic Assumption Dependency, but I have gradually begun to see the interdependence between work group and basic assumption mentality as a dynamic, fluid, unstable phenomenon, as with the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions at an individual psychological level. The capacity of the group to function creatively seems sometimes to rely on a kind of healthy, oscillatory conflict between Work and Basic Assumption mentality. We may all have, perhaps at different times in different places, within different group situations, various capacities contingently related to such states of mind and capacities in the group setting.

Neri (in Lipgar, 2003:141) talks about the relationship between sophisticated work group and primitive group mentality.

‘In Experience in Groups, Bion describes the two mentalities... as co-present and opposing. In other words, primitive mentality and work group mentality do not constitute a sequence. This is a very precise point in Bion’s work. It is necessary to clarify three points. First, in Bion’s thinking, both primitive mentality and work group mentality are a genetic endowment of human beings and thus cannot be annulled. Second, there is real growth only through conflict of that which is primitive and that which is mature. Only growth occurring on the developed side is apparent and is built upon sandy foundations. Third, development of technology doesn’t coincide with growth of man.’

Neri (in Lipgar, 2003:142) goes onto suggest that ‘evolved’ man as an expression of the work group and ‘regressed’ man as an expression of primitive mentality, are present in both the caveman and his descendent, technological man. This may be partly evidenced perhaps by lack of a worldwide movement that opposes any form of war or destruction. At the same time, it is the ensuing conflict between work group and primitive mentality that produces growth and the kind of learning that

Bion describes as ‘transformational’ development of the group, or indeed the individual, who is engaged in continual conflict between love, hate and knowledge.

Bion (1961) uses the term ‘valency’, more often associated with chemistry and chemical reactions, to describe our Basic Assumption mentality, emotional tendencies or, the primitive herd-like impulses to ‘go with the flow’, when engaged in group experiences. An everyday example of this is drawn, again from my reflections, on the experience of working as part of an Higher Education team who were anxiously preparing for a Quality Assurance inspection.

‘Despite this and other unspoken, yet persistent waves of resistance from the group, the Programme Director valiantly continued in a business like way with her primary task of allocating files for completion by individuals in the team. Dave, when asked to produce further evidence, pointedly tried to clarify procedures but was easily cajoled into smiling compliance by Jane who flattered him about his power point presentations. Jill eventually agreed to give the rest of the morning over to collating more information. When I was asked to evidence work based tasks, I found myself unwittingly adopting the general begrudging air by responding ‘oh that’ll be nice’, which raised a giggle and clearly demonstrated my own dependent valency again, for which I immediately felt guilty as I knew this meeting was hard work and the PD had been extremely supportive to me during these early days.’

As Bion (1961:153) suggests: *‘Participation in basic-assumption activity requires no training, experience, or mental development. It is instantaneous, inevitable and instinctive’*. My responses in the group example above revealed something of the way these instincts work and also, I think, how reflecting on experience has engaged my learning. I will adopt this strategy to explore emotional processes at play at an organisational level in the school context within this research project and discuss my observations in Chapter 10.

### **Isabel Menzies-Lyth – The Social Defence**

Menzies-Lyth described Bion's work on groups as 'definitive' (1989). She considered Bion's seminal use of the group *per se* in his work and the dilemma this creates for the individual group member, further illuminated aspects overlooked in individual psychology. She refers to Bion's, aforementioned, basic assumptions that have in common splitting, projective identification and loss of '*individual distinctiveness or depersonalisation, diminution of effective contact with reality, lack of belief in progress and development through work and suffering*'. (1989:21)

Menzies-Lyth draws on the work of Jacques (1955) who explored the socially constructed defence system of the institution. She focused on the hospital as the social institution liable to suffer, in their work function, from basic assumption phenomena. Using this example, she formulated a way of thinking about social structures as a form of defence, that is ways of avoiding anxiety, guilt, doubt and uncertainty that reflects the lifelong human struggle against primitive anxiety.

As a psychoanalyst, Menzies-Lyth's team was consulted by a large general teaching hospital in London, to help develop new methods of carrying out tasks in nursing organisation. Caring for patients in a hospital setting is a stressful task. The team immediately found evidence of extreme anxiety amongst nurses and wondered how they, particularly trainees, sustained the tension and found many could not.

'In one form or another we found withdrawal from duty was common. About one-third of student nurses did not complete their training...Senior Staff changed their jobs appreciably more frequently than workers at similar levels in other professions....sickness rates were high..especially for minor illnesses requiring only a few days 'absence from duty.'

(Menzies-Lyth, 1988:46)

Menzies-Lyth's team worked to understand the reasons for this intensity of anxiety. Because of the primitive human phantasies that nursing sick patients evokes, the nursing-patient relationship is particularly complex as the nurse is at risk of being '*flooded by intense and unmanageable anxiety*' (1988:50). However, the team turned their attention to how this was contained and modified within the organisation and found numerous socially structured defence mechanisms. These appeared as elements in the 'organisation's structure, culture and mode of functioning'. As such, these defences were made invisible, unconscious and unknown: '*membership of an institution makes it harder to observe or understand that institution.*' (Obholzer, 1994:5)

In Menzies-Lyths's study, social organisational defences presented in a variety of ways, including, splitting up the nurse-patient relationship through planned restricted contact using the 'shift' work time system, depersonalising, categorising and denial of the significance of the individual e.g. 'the liver in bed 10' (1988:52). Also denial and detachment of feelings, frequently moving wards as 'A good nurse doesn't mind moving' (1988:53), and the attempt to eliminate decision making by ritualising task performance e.g. standardised ways to lift patients and make beds. Ironically, such standardised systems within the organisation were set up to protect nurses from anxiety, but as Menzies-Lyth points out, avoiding confrontation was neither a solution, nor way forward, as:

'Little attempt is made positively to help the individual confront the anxiety-evoking experiences, by so doing, to develop her capacity to tolerate and deal more effectively with the anxiety'

Menzie-Lyth, 1988:63)

Suggestions that Menzies-Lyth's team proposed to change nursing organisation were considered too revolutionary by the institution at the time, which reveals

something perhaps of the resistance to acknowledging the idea of the social defence, but another example of her work in a hospital, showing similar organisational defences, was more successful. For example, nurses of terminally ill children were encouraged to develop real relationships with an allocated number of specific patients on specific wards. This re-connected them to their patients in a more holistic, human as well as professional way. Personal anxieties remained high, but attrition rates and staff absence dropped and the general well-being of nurses and patients improved. Work such as this confirmed for Menzies-Lyth that *'the success and viability of a social institution are intimately connected with the techniques it uses to contain anxiety.'* (1988:78)

### **School**

As well as our earliest individual experiences of family life, group experiences engage us in negotiating a place in larger spaces, systems or organisational cultures that usually involve working with others. If as Bion and Menzies-Lyth suggest, we live with the perpetual tension of reconciling our personal, individual and social lives in the group, one of the first groups we encounter beyond the family is the school, where the primary task may be seen to be learning and teaching. In line perhaps with Bion's experience of the armed forces, 'school' has also been identified as being part of the educational, ideological state apparatus (ISA) that may have in some ways replaced the dominance of the church in our society (Althusser, 1969).

At the time of the research, part of the school task was characterised by teaching and learning *about* the contents of the National Curriculum (2001). Equally, as introduced in Chapter 1, the social and emotional well-being of children and young people, linked to inclusion in schools has been an issue for successive governments since the turn of the century. Balancing and integrating these priorities may be

seen to be complex for school institutions and those who work and learn within them, particularly as success and failure has become increasingly measured by external, material outcomes. This emphasis, in terms of the identity of the school in the research project, emerges in Chapter 4.

From the psychoanalytic perspective outlined in this chapter, beginnings, transitions and endings in our individual lives can point to internal states of emotional vulnerability and risk. (Youell, 2006, Waddell, 2002). With this and Menzies-Lyth's 'legacy', 'the concept of social defence' in mind (Hoggett, 2010:202), the school may be seen as an example of an institution that links wider social policy, individual histories, individual and group learning experiences.

A consideration of the way social defence mechanisms tend to exist at an unconscious level, where the system and the individuals work within it do not recognise themselves or the way their contribution perpetuates the system (Obholzer, 1994), are helpful when investigating how school provides flexible enough containment for learning *from* experience. Most particularly, for four case study children I engage with in the primary school context of this enquiry, I reflect on the theme of institutional defences in relation to my experiences of the mentoring project in Chapters 9 and 10.

By the time the child reaches school age, s/he has developed a complex pattern of relationships with self, family and others. The research asks how this learning *from* experience affects the child's relationships and learning in school. Depending on individual experiences of family cultures and relations, pupils may be seen to bring their own internalised emotional learning patterns to school, which may affect both consciously and unconsciously, their interactions with and responses to subsequent 'objects', including teachers, friends and the objectified curriculum



knowledge they encounter in the formal learning context of school. I wonder how those who cannot adequately attend and/or engage sufficiently well with the curriculum think and are thought about in school? With such queries in mind, that I will revisit in Chapter 10, I now turn to finding a method for investigating these concerns.

### **Chapter 3: Researching learning from experience: developing a methodology**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I describe the different strands of the methodology at work in the study and how I sought to bring them together. At the core of the work was acting as a researcher/mentor, a dual role that gave me access to a group of children and those with whom they interact. One aspect of the researcher dimension of this involvement was the use of an observational method, derived from the work of Esther Bick (1964), which involved a systematic chronicling of all aspects of the experience of engaging with a small group of children in this particular school. This was then subject to some intense discussion and reflection during supervision sessions with Linden, my first supervisor and Kate, my second supervisor which supported the systematic, reflexive process of analysing observational texts. As will be explained, this was different from Bick's use of sustained group analysis of observation that has been developed at the Tavistock Centre in the form of 'work discussion' (Rustin and Bradley, 2008).

I also used a research journal to carefully chronicle all aspects of my relationships in the school as they evolved, to record some of the emotional dynamics at work, in the form of an ethnographic description of the school. I also made use of an auto/biographical method. This included biographical interviews with relevant staff and the parents of Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo to help build a more informed, richer understanding of the children and the complexities of their lives. The 'auto'/biographical element of this was initially problematic. In seeking to make sense of others' learning from experience, I came to realise I was struggling to make sense of my own, in what was, at times, a confusing process. There was a constant muddle over what belonged to the other and what to self, as well as between past and present in my own learning – a problem to which I return in

Chapter 9. In this chapter I describe and justify how interrelated aspects of observation, a reflexive auto/biographical approach and mentoring combined to compose a methodological ‘bricolage’. I include how the ethical dimensions of the study, were vitally integral to the validity of the psychosocial research. The chapter ends with a brief description of the school as research setting, on which I will expand in Chapter 4. I begin by situating the notion of ‘bricolage’ within the qualitative psychosocial framework.

### **Research Design, Methodology and Validity**

Exploring the emotional experience of learning, within the multi-disciplinary fields of psychology and education, involved observing myself reflexively as a researcher, as I engaged subjectively with subjectivity. As perhaps in all qualitative research, in this study there were many different things going on at the same time (Merriam, 2009). This necessitated moving outside single research approaches within experimental, quantitative or even traditional qualitative research paradigms associated with the social sciences that cannot always help with meaning-making:

‘If quantitative survey-based research is not up to addressing ‘what does this mean’ and ‘why’ questions, it does not follow that that the other qualitative research tradition has ready ‘answers’ to such questions.’ (Jefferson, 2000:2)

Jefferson (2000) in ‘Doing research differently’ provides a more relevant basis for this study. He refers to the problematic assumption of ‘transparent self’, the notion that research participants are willing or able to give information or ‘tell’ in a clear, consistent way. Or, for example, the ‘survey’ can capture the emotional defences or complex, nuanced subtleties perpetually at play in language and communication between what is said, what is meant, what is heard and its interpretation in particular contexts. Instead of overlooking, or striving to minimise such

complexity, he proposes that research, as a formalised and systematic way of knowing about people, should utilise everyday subjective human interactions:

‘We intend to agree for the need to posit research subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world and whose experiences in the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner world allowed them to experience the outer world. This research subject cannot be known except through another subject: in this case the researcher. The name we give to such a subject is psychosocial.’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000:4)

A psychosocial approach contests traditional referential research norms in terms of validity and reliability. As Merrill and West (2009:164) point out, ‘validity, at root, in much mainstream social research, is seen to lie in statistical significance, standardised procedures, reliability, replication and generalisability’. However different, the task of finding an ethically valid and justifiable research design and method for this psychosocial enquiry remained . It was problematic. I no longer worked in a school context, also researching children is a sensitive research area and investigating emotional factors in depth is by its very nature uncertain, unpredictable and difficult to plan.

Led by my research questions, the experience of writing and teaching courses for learning mentors, a belief in containment brought about through Bick’s observation technique, together with a reflexive auto/biographical approach informed a mixed methodology, that to some extent developed with the research. This mixed method can be seen as inductive as I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis and strove to derive meanings from the data. I sought to ground understanding in understanding of whole cases, psychosocially, by living, breathing and incubating the material, rather than prematurely disaggregating ‘data’ to form categories.

Influenced by biographical researchers Merrill and West (2009), the mixed method included aspects of a 'narrative' approach. I was attempting to make sense of participant's stories – including others' biographies, whilst reflexively engaging with my own, as participant observer. Merrill and West (2009) cite their biographical research roots in a critical realist approach. Motivated by the humanistic purpose of building a more just social order, their research endeavours to link personal histories with wider social issues through narrative interviews, mindful that these are always provisionally constructed and mediated in the present through language and relationship. So, in terms of validity:

'What matters is the quality of research relationship, and the extent to which this facilitates deeper forms of insight and wider meaning.'

(Merrill and West, 2009:164)

The French term 'Bricolage' may helpfully be applied to aspects of the mixed method of this study. The concept is brought to life by the metaphor of the interpretive researcher, or 'bricoleur' as a quilt maker who 'makes do' through piecing together representations to fit the specifics of complex situations and engages in pragmatic improvisation, blending and overlapping to form a composite (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). I deployed some aspects of close observation, some biographical narrative, essentially reflexive engagement, an interpretation of mentoring and a slight ethnographic stance. The method was critically driven in the sense of attempting to link micro to macro issues, as introduced in Chapter 1. I brought together aspects of each, across multi-disciplinary fields and the enquiry was exploratory in the sense that I wanted to use Bion's hypothesis to authentically learn from experience how relationships are made – at micro level and how this learning may impact on learning in school.

In short, I had to create the relationships that I wanted to investigate. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) aptly liken the quilt maker to a jazz improviser,

‘The process creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to interpretive experiences’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008:5)

In this research, the case study stories of what happened in the mentoring room were in part, though not primarily drawn from analysis of interviews. Rather, the fine detail was reflexively engaged with and extrapolated from texts. The texts were generated from observational ‘write-ups’, detailed below in what I describe as the ‘layered observation’ process, following mentoring sessions. This highlights the inherent irregularity in ‘piecing together’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:4) methods from different approaches and contexts, which can in itself be problematic and was present in the research.

Firstly, for example, I recognised the close observation technique, derived from my experience of the D1 course, as a research tool but this was different from interviewing techniques associated with researching lives in biographical research established at Canterbury Christ Church university. My first supervisor, introduced a proforma for use at the absorption stage of field work that involves analysis of transcripts of research interviews. Helpful for clustering and coding emergent themes in a transcript, in practice I found the structure interrupted the free flow of thoughts and feelings when writing up my experiences of what happened during mentoring sessions.

As analysis came much later in the observational process, I adapted by abandoning the proforma but retained critical, reflexive engagement with the auto/biographical ‘I’, thus maintaining the crucial criticality of biographical approaches. As explained further on in this chapter, reflexive engagement with observational texts

not only replaced work discussion in this study but permitted interrogation of the intersubjective space between researcher and participant. This opened an unplanned for dimension.

Secondly, as noted, in this research a ‘work discussion’ group was not available to help me reflect on and process the experience of mentoring case study children. As I will describe in this chapter, some intense supervision from my research supervisors replaced this. Whilst both may be seen as valuable resources for reflecting on professional and research practice, it was through the absence of work discussion as an essential part of the observational process, that I gradually came to realise its importance. I discuss this further in the final chapters of the thesis but these examples show how bringing together piecemeal adaptations towards the methodological patchwork can be creative and enriching, other parts may inevitably be missed and missing.

Rich, or ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) is more generally associated with other interpretive, cultural and ethnographic research methods, yet my involvement and embeddedness in the setting as a researcher mentor, as described in Chapter 4, is reflected in the ‘thick description’ of my observational texts. Another ethnographic element may be seen in the enquiry’s intent to investigate, through the mentoring project, ‘learning relationships’ (Youell, 2006), which equally inform and are informed by the cultural fabric of the school. The consistent, systematic level of authentic engagement with participants throughout the research, linked as later described in this chapter, with a constant, active ethical consciousness both define and meet the criterion for validation.

The school context represents education in this enquiry that is inextricably part of the complex socio-political fabric of our society, in which all participants lived and

endeavoured to formally learn at a particular time. The methodological bricoleur: 'is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, ranging from interviewing to intensive self-reflection and introspection' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:6) and the interpretive bricoleur, 'understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her own history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and by those in the setting .' (Ibid.) The methodological bricolage, permitted a range of different types of evidence from different perspectives, some planned, others emerged in a way that continued to shape research experience and findings.

Reflexive engagement with and analysis of observational data was designed to illumine communication at an emotional level between researcher and participants. Interviews with adult participants, including parents and teachers, provided different narratives, a strategy designed to gather stories of case study children's learning from different perspectives. At the same time, parent and teacher narratives could be seen to represent the transition between small, family cultures at home and the primary classroom, further illuminating patterns of developing learning relationships. I used extracts from these interviews in the case studies to enhance validity and support findings. Introducing the role of mentor into the primary school context lent a further perspective which involved me as a researcher in wider and regular interaction with staff, particularly with the school Senco, Trish. As well as pragmatically providing access to a small group of children, the mentoring role in the organisation, at one level, represented a current government initiative in a school shaped by social policies, systems, structures and procedures that impact on learning relationships. Simultaneously, my interpretation of the role worked to prioritise and practice learning from experience in the same organisation. Merriam (2009:216) reports that Kincheloe has used the term 'bricolage' in educational research to denote the use of multiperspectival research



methods. She notes that 'triangulation' assumes a fixed point that can be triangulated, that there are many more than three ways of approaching the world that dispute a narrow conception of 'triangulation' for achieving research validity. For example, the alternative, infinitely varied and multidimensional image of the 'crystal', may be more relevant to the bricolage of this research, so that triangulation becomes:

'Viewed as a crystalline form, as a montage, or as a creative performance around a central theme, triangulation is a form of, or alternative to, validity.....Triangulation is the display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously...to create simultaneity richer than the sequential or linear. Readers and audiences are then invited to explore competing visions of the context to become immersed in and merge with the new realities to comprehend.'

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:6)

With this multiple lensed, crystalline image in mind I will explain how I brought together three main parts of the methodological bricolage to reflexively engage with Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo: observation, mentoring and the auto/biographical 'I'.

### **Observation**

The tradition of 'Infant Observation' began in 1948, when it was first introduced by Esther Bick into the training program for Child Psychotherapists at the Tavistock clinic. It drew on the work of Klein and Bion. Martha Harris referred to her introduction of infant observation as 'a stroke of genius' (Briggs, 2002), and Donald Meltzer describes her strengths in a way that has been useful to keep in mind whilst bringing together the narrative themes of this study.

'Although she had been well trained as a psychologist in scientific method, she had very little use for evidence and

linear, logical thought or causality. Her thought was unequivocally intuitive, lateral and poetic.’  
(Meltzer, in Briggs, 2002: xvii)

For Bick (1964), the observation process involved first year student psychotherapists engaging in pre-clinical observations of infants within their family settings. She stressed the importance of close observation taking place in the family setting, for approximately two years, after the infant’s birth. The observations were usually for an hour each week, and proved invaluable for supporting a student’s learning and understanding about how first relationships take shape.

Finding a place in the family context to observe was a particular issue for Bick’s students, just as finding a place in the school context proved to be problematic for me as a researcher/mentor in this study. The tensions that arose for Bick’s students would be brought to the ‘work discussion’ group. As a researcher, I was fortunate to have two supportive supervisors, still the lived experience of the research re-enforced the realisation that there was no ‘cover’, objective position, or culturally neutral ground for the observer researcher within the school institution, than within the intimate relational setting of the family. Aspects of unconscious processes acted out in the school setting are considered in Chapter 9, along with other issues related to my own learning from experience during the mentoring project.

For Bick, observing the baby’s first social context includes experiencing patterns of cultural embeddedness and family dynamics that compose the complex relational world into which the infant is born, so a family rather than clinical setting was key. Applying something of this here, the child’s experience of their external world is important in this project, for exploring how qualities of relationship inform

learning and understanding in the first large social group beyond the family. Most children in our society encounter this in the primary school setting.

Bick recognised the problematic dual aspect of the observer's role that can be seen to be replicated in some degree for the auto/biographical researcher/mentor.

'Much thought had to be given to the central problem of the role of the observer in the whole situation. The problem seemed to be twofold, as it involved the conceptualization of the observer's role, and also the conscious and unconscious attitudes of the observer.' (Bick, 1964, in Briggs, 2002:38)

As a learning and teaching method for child psychotherapists, conceptualisation of infant observation has two interdependent parts. The two part process of 'close observation' followed by 'seminar' reflection, helps to differentiate and support firstly, students' learning *from* experience (as defined by Bion, 1961, see Chapter 2) and secondly, students' understanding of the relevance of close observation for developing satisfactory containing relationships.

The first part involves individual students observing infants, so that they become exposed to the feeling states at play in the family context, finding themselves in a situation not entirely dissimilar to aspects of the mother's experience of a new born infant. The second part involves a small group of students, who reflect on the experience of their observations exploring their conscious and unconscious attitudes in a seminar setting with supervisory, psychoanalytical tutor support. This opportunity to process experiences has been developed in the Tavistock Centre and become known as 'work discussion' (Rustin and Bradley, 2008). The 'work discussion' seminar helps the student to share, 'look at' and engage with thinking towards understanding anxieties, their own as well as the infant's and families they observe, that have been encountered during observation.

This reflection both models and provides a shared thinking, containing space for students which helps them, in turn, to develop their own observation skills. These skills are towards being able to create ‘*a mental space in which to receive communications, reflect and respond.*’ (Miller, L, 2002:57) In this way Bick’s students, whilst engaged in closely observing infants’ earliest relationship experiences, were in a sense, authentically learning *from* experience themselves. Just as Miller realised (2002), Bick knew that we do not just use our eyes to observe, we use our minds and she too saw thinking and observing as inseparable. As this is an in depth study of how children learn *from* experience relationally in their school setting, it seemed appropriate to use a method that utilised the containing process that I was investigating. As with Bick’s students, the research methodology positioned me, in a sense, to authentically learn *from* experience.

Bick’s observational method has been developed, as suggested, with the ‘work discussion seminar’ at the Tavistock Centre, as a psychoanalytic teaching model over the course of many years. This development, and growing application to professions associated with caring for children and young people, is confirmed for example, in the work of Miller, Rustin, Rustin and Shuttleworth in ‘*Closely Observed Infants*’ (2002).

‘Most observers feel they gain some real understanding of the observed infant from inside, becoming not only able to empathise with the baby’s internal world, but also to grasp its shape and structure, and to recognize the pattern of internal object-relationships. Infant observation therefore serves as a splendid introduction to the study of the early development of children, as well as to an understanding of family life.

While.....a central part of all the recognized trainings for child psychotherapists, it has also proved very valuable for professional development of other workers in a variety of roles with children.’ (2002:8)

As a post-graduate student at the Tavistock between 2002 and 2004, whilst engaged in the D1course, I experienced something of the ‘transformative’ value (Maiello, 2007:42) and learning potential of engaging and attending through observation. Also, particularly relevant was what Linda Miller (2002:55) describes as ‘*observing oneself in one’s work setting, in relation to the children with whom one is working*’. In this research, as suggested earlier, my observations were different from those of Bick’s students, as I aimed to be reflexively aware of the part I played in the mentoring interaction with others, within the school setting, rather than being in the more detached unobtrusive position of observer visiting the mother’s interactions with her infant.

Observing others’ interactions may be seen to be less emotionally obtrusive perhaps for Bick’s students as they may have been able to detach and position themselves outside the primary observational interaction. In this study the dual researcher/mentoring role meant that I intentionally positioned myself within, as it were, the emotional observational field.

For Bick (1964), it quickly became apparent that note-taking during observation interfered with the observer’s attention and engagement, ‘*and prevented the student from responding easily to the emotional demands of the mother*’. (Briggs, 2002:38) So, following the observation event, when writing up observations, she encouraged students to use ‘everyday’ language to maximise a fresh, non-judgmental descriptive flow of thoughts, feelings and associations experienced by the observer to provide simple, first person, descriptive accounts. This helped to prevent students from making premature evaluations, interpretations or analyses in their writing. The seminar provided further time and space for reflecting on these written-up observation experiences, with peers in training, and a psychoanalytic

facilitator or supervisor, within a small group. Bick (1964) reflects on the place of the seminar in relation to close observation:

‘I thought this important for many reasons but, perhaps mostly because it would help the students to conceive vividly the infantile experience of their child patients.....It should also increase the student’ understanding of the child’s non-verbal behaviour and his play, as well as the behaviour of the child who neither speaks nor plays. Further it should help the student when he inter-views the mother and enable him to understand better her account of the child’s history. It would also give each student a unique opportunity to observe the development of an infant more or less from birth, in his home setting and in his relation to his immediate family, and thus to find out for himself how these relations emerge and develop. In addition, he would be able to compare and contrast his observations with those of his fellow students in weekly seminars.’

(Bick, 1964, in Briggs, A (Ed.) 2002:37)

When close observation and the seminar group was first used by Bick, child psychotherapy was a relatively new field, but interest in her ideas have become renowned worldwide. Although current applications, outside child psychotherapy, include small groups of professional workers, from a range of disciplines, systematically discussing their experience of work, two aspects distinguish its importance to this methodological strand. The first, was its absence. As stated above, the specific internal and external space that ‘work discussion’ creates for reflecting on narrative observations, was not available in the context of this research project. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 9, I came to realise through the enquiry that intensive supervisory meetings and the layered reflexivity I develop in the methodological bricolage described below, did not provide the equivalent in this enquiry, but rather an alternative. The second, was my realisation of this absence. It informs my interest and enthusiasm for the possibility of using ‘work discussion’ as a necessity when undertaking close observation in future research:

‘Might work discussion prove as fertile as infant observation has done, in developing from what has been primarily a method of learning into a source of new understandings of different fields of professional practice? What would it take, in other words, for work discussion to become a method of research?’

(Rustin and Bradley, 2008:271)

### **Mentoring – a methodological vehicle for applying Bick’s close observation**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the relevance of mentoring to this enquiry. I explored the concept of mentoring in Chapter 2 and described how my interpretation related to Bion’s idea ‘container-contained’ as I strove to imitate factors of the ‘alpha function’ in the role. Here, I want to clarify my use of mentoring as a methodological vehicle as, following on from the above exposition of Bick’s close observational technique, I was able, in the role of researcher/mentor to closely observe my interactions with individual child participants in the mentoring room. The point I want to make is that my interpretation of mentoring, focused on developing authentic emotionally containing relationships with case study children, worked synergetically as part of the methodological bricolage to create a composite (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) that was greater than the sum of its parts.

I observed the environment, staff, and children I encountered as well as our responses to each other from my first visit to the school, which I refer to in this study as ‘Brempton School’ and recorded these observations in my research journal, entitled ‘The Mentoring Project’ (please find an extract in Appendix 2 (iii)). Focused observations of my interactions with Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo formed the raw material of the case study chapters. These occurred during half-hourly mentoring slots, one morning a week over the second and third terms of an academic year. The first term involved a phased introduction towards embedding the project in the school. In a study intent on investigating relational aspects of learning, this phased approach to developing a relationship with and within the

research context was an important application of the methodological bricolage. I describe how this worked in this chapter and introduce participants in the school setting at the end of Chapter 4.

To create a 'secure base' (Holmes, 2000) as a mentor, as well as to facilitate my own capacities as a containing 'thinker' I needed a mentoring room. The observations took place in this room, allocated by the school for the research project. I wanted the mentoring room to represent, for the case study children, a containing therapeutic space that would give them time to communicate and reflect on their experiences of everyday events in school. As a researcher I wanted to look closely, to bring to the surface and to articulate some of the communicative ingredients that informed our emerging learning relationships.

The mentoring role essentially permitted allocation of some external and emotional space and time in a school context to work with children where there was ordinarily no non-curriculum time available for pupils, beyond the contrasting and sometimes threatening space of the playground. My interpretation of mentoring also allowed me to develop and practice, in an educational setting, the kind of observational skills that I considered compatible with my understanding of the containing process. Crucially, my interpretation of the mentoring role within the research space facilitated the auto/biographical reflexive approach described below.

Engaging in the process of attentive observation - physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally - assumed observation is a cognitively active and interactive involvement between self and other (Bandura, 1986). Particularly relevant to my experience with case study children, a distinguishing feature of Bick's psychoanalytic method of observation, is that it can illuminate what happens



psychologically between the observer, whose mind ideally acts as the ‘container’ and the child whose feeling states may be unconsciously communicated or projected into the observer’s mind. However, if it is impossible to observe without using our minds (Bick, 1964, Miller, 2002, Meltzer, 1986), then our own anxieties about observing and the defences against anxiety we deploy, will also be part of ‘what happens’ during observation experiences. This essentially describes what I found to be the challenging work of the research project and why it was necessary to reflexively interrogate my observational narratives using an auto/biographical approach. This reflexive interrogation was vital to interpreting the stories children communicated which formed the narrative of what happened in the mentoring room. Commensurate perhaps with Harris’s (1987) useful analogy which distinguishes ‘learning about’ from ‘learning from experience’, Formenti (2008) points out:

‘The narration of experience is not ‘to speak about emotions’, but ‘tell the story of what happened’ and how people behaved in certain circumstances...nomination of emotions cannot substitute the story of what happened. The story itself brings about emotionality.’

Importantly, in terms of the methodological bricolage, it was the complementarity of the observational and auto/biographical, in this part, that were intended to inform the systematic, reflexive interrogation of my own thoughts and feelings. The layered narrative interpretative process I describe, augmented by the aforementioned intensive supervisory sessions, became the necessary containing space for my learning from experience in the research.

I must re-iterate that my version of observation, was not the same as Bick’s close observation of infants. I am a teacher, not a clinician. The research focused on containing primary aged children in a school setting. The containment I sought to

offer case children was a simple interpretive derivation that paralleled Bion's notion of 'container-contained'. Elements of those ideas, reminiscent at times of 'alpha-elements' (Bion 1962), as described in the previous chapter, were very much in my mind and directly influenced my thinking and approach to observing Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo.

At a practical level, I planned and provided materials that were intended to represent 'transitional objects' (Winnicott, 1971). I intended to use these to enhance development of some transitional play space within the research context (West, 2006, 2007), between, that is, myself and the children to facilitate communication through shared experience. I envisaged this contributing to developing the rudiments of trusting, learning relationships, as described by Clare Winnicott.

'In other words we participate in shared experiences about which both we and the children feel something about something else, a third thing, which unites us, but which at the same time keeps us safely apart because it does not involve direct exchange between us. Shared experiences are perhaps the only non-threatening form of communication which exists e.g. walks, car rides, playing, drawing, listening to something, talking about something. Shared experiences form invisible links between people which become strengthened as they begin to have a history.' (Winnicott, C, 1964:88)

As noted in Chapter 2, activities I made available were play activities. To situate the research within the school and in turn, the school within its rural village community, I describe the process of introducing the project, including the 'The Mentoring Room' and its contents in more detail in Chapter 4.

As suggested, I carefully observed as a mentor, the children's verbal and non-verbal responses to the environment, trying to pick up clues about their interests, to

help me adjust activities accordingly throughout the project. In this way, I saw emotional attunement (Greenhalgh, 1994, Winnicott, 1964, Stern 1985, Trevarthen, 1980) as very much part of the quality of observation I was aiming for, towards developing an empathic rapport with the case study children.

The main focus of my attention through each observation was my interaction with the child and their communicative engagement with activities they chose. This was unpredictable, uncertain and at times triggered my own anxiety during the research. Whilst the University Ethics Committee at the time were keen for me to pin down exactly what it was I intended to do with children in the mentoring room, a central concept of the role for me was giving the children a range of choices, observing and following their lead. Choosing what they wanted to do, albeit within the structure of provision I made available, was specifically about encouraging a sense of agency, which also lent an element of uncertainty to mentoring sessions. This in a sense necessitated what Menzies-Lyth described as the uncomfortable '*ability to stay with ignorance and uncertainty*' (Menzies-Lyth, 1989:22). Building a relationship with case study children from scratch characterised something of such ignorance and uncertainty. In this way, the reflexive observational method helped me to position myself authentically as a learner in the research.

A text that particularly helped me think about using 'my mind' to observe (Miller, 2002) as a learning mentor in this project was Winnicott's case study '*The Piggie*', (1977). In a play therapy situation, when communication seemed impossible, Winnicott reflects on how he was finally able to connect with the child by tuning in, learning and adopting the language idiosyncratically developed by the 'Piggie', whilst she engaged in play. To achieve this connection, Winnicott could be seen to have used something akin to Bick's 'close' observation, which '*enables the*

*observer to develop a particular state of mind that allows for closer and more authentic observation*'. (Meltzer, in Briggs, 2002:3)

The kind of attentive, open, imaginative state of mind that Meltzer (Briggs, 2002) refers to, which involves waiting for something to 'emerge', may also be seen to imply a capacity in the observer to wait and to sustain a level of uncertainty, or 'not knowing' what will happen next. This may also require a level of emotional resilience and maturity (Bion, 1962). The act of consciously putting oneself in a position of 'not knowing' and 'discovery' in therapeutic communication, as occurred with 'The Piggle', permits the observer's emerging insight into the child's imaginative world. This kind of imaginative insight links not only with Bick's ideas on observation but also with Bion. He uses Keats (1999) term 'negative capability', to confirm what he feels is at the heart of close observation (Meltzer in Briggs, 2002:6) *'that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'* (Bion,1970). Meltzer (Briggs, 2002:6) reads 'negative' as implying a 'sympathetic receptive intensity'.

Usefully, Monti and Crudella (2007) bring Bion's use of the term 'negative capability' into the classroom, as they draw attention to the 'time and space' required by the teacher-observer when using infant observation in the nursery setting.

'For a sustained receptivity, the teacher should have 'negative capability' (Bion, 1970), that is the capacity to wait, to give time for perceptions and thoughts to emerge in order to recognize and share mental moods. Therefore, the teacher's mind should not be too pre-occupied...or fleeting, but bright and curious, that is active and observing, sharing and containing.'

(Monte and Crudeli, 2007:52)

'Negative capability', far from taking a passive observational stance, as Maiello (2007) goes on to suggest, is more about actively making one's mind susceptible to intense and sometimes painful emotional states that involve *not* understanding what is happening or going on. Reading about and reasoning this was, however, different from experiencing it during the research project, when I was emotionally engaged with something of this process. When trying to write-up my feelings and thoughts about what happened during observations, my sense of not knowing, and not understanding was emotionally painful, as discussed in Chapter 9.

Meltzer suggests that a strength of Bick's approach rests on her realisation that what is seen and understood about the child who is observed, depends on the observer's subjective states of mind, at any one time. He observes that the importance of her method is '*her focus on the emotionality of the observer as a means by which to gain a clearer view of the infant.*' (Meltzer in Briggs, 2002:3). It is my subjectivity as an observer-researcher that in this study necessitates an interrogative auto/biographical approach as I proposed to use my subjectivity as an instrument of knowing (Hollway, 2008).

During mentoring sessions, I did not record or take notes in any form as this would have been an interruption and distraction for both the children and myself, disturbing the sustained, focused 'holding' state I wanted to create and 'sympathetic receptive intensity' (Meltzer in Briggs, 2002:6) to which I aspired. Part of providing an attentive level of emotional holding (Winnicott, 1964, Greenhalgh, 1994), involved being able to recall and pick up events, talk, activities and threads of communicated stories that I had digested, processed and accommodated, through reflexively engaging with observational 'write-ups', from our previous meetings. This was intended to give the children the experience of being listened to and held in mind. It also testified my interest and level of

commitment to building a more continuous, coherent narrative or 'story' which gradually composed the shared experience of our emerging relationships. The story telling theme of the mentoring project was in keeping with the methodological 'bricolage'. Also, links have been made between being able to relate narrative reasonably sequentially with emotional well being (Roberts and Holmes, 1999). I envisaged observing 'stories' being dialogically communicated in a variety of ways, including for example, speaking and listening, actions, drawing, play, silence and 'making'.

Whilst finding a place in an unfamiliar school was in itself a challenge, taking on the dual role was helpful to the extent that it was as new to me as to those in the setting. As I had not taught children in Kent, the assumptions I brought as a researcher were not to do with pre-conceived ideas or opinions about the school. I was simply delighted to have the opportunity to work with children and reconnect with practice, from a research perspective. I also trusted and felt confident from my experience of the D1 course that close observation was a powerful intuitive human containing resource that I wanted to deploy as a learning tool for reflexive research, as well as for informing vital skills that could be seen as an important aspect of the learning mentor role.

I explained to each child that I was a researcher/mentor. Neither of these terms were familiar to them but I think they experienced me, during our sessions, as a mentor rather than researcher. As referred to above, the dual role was sometimes problematic, but my interpretation allowed me to apply my understanding of some of the emotional factors in learning and teaching, including observation skills, within the project. When I left the school each week, I wrote up the lived experience of each mentoring session, describing as truthfully as I was able, recalling in as much detail as possible my feelings and thoughts during the

interactive experience. I approached this as a diary task to foster an intimate, informal, authentic single draft flow of writing – as I had learnt from the D1 course.

### **Reflexive engagement with observational texts**

Writing-up observations, as described above, provided rich or ‘thick description’ (Geertz,1973) which became the raw data of the research, on which I could reflect further and was the beginning of an intense, reflexive, refining process that generated further layers of narrative, as I describe in the ‘layered, reflexive observation process’ below. This lengthy, puzzling and at times painful learning experience was eased when aspects could be shared during the project in some intensive supervision meetings with Linden, my first supervisor and some regular text-sharing supervision sessions with Kate, my second supervisor which replaced group ‘work discussion’. These followed the mentoring project and helped me to process, question my interpretations, think about and engage with ‘what happened’ at an emotional level with the raw data of the case studies, as I describe when reflecting on learning from experience in Chapter 9. Kate also advised that I pursue personal therapy whilst undertaking this work partly to safeguard myself emotionally. This was very helpful advice that not only provided additional containment but also supported the ethicality of the work, described below.

As well as the helpful aforementioned supervisory meetings, I relied on the layered process described below, of engaging with observational texts to provide the containing, thinking space which replaced the D1 course group ‘work discussion’. Before introducing the auto/biographical strand of the methodological bricolage, I will describe the layered method I developed. It is essentially the level of reflexivity in this process that worked to integrate the observational and auto/biographical strands of the methodology.

### **Layer 1**

I ‘used my mind’ (Miller, 2002), as introduced above and related below, to observe, through listening, attending to and engaging with individual case study children during half hour sessions each week for two academic school terms. Importantly, I observed my own interactions with these children and their engagement with the mentoring environment. Similarly, I used my mind to observe my interactions with others in the larger group setting of the school setting for the duration of the project which spanned three academic school terms.

### **Layer 2**

Each week, when I had left the school, I wrote-up (using a PC Word document), in narrative form, my experience of each meeting with case study children. This followed the non-judgemental guide lines suggested by Bick (1964) as explained above. I had some experience of practising what I refer to in the thesis as ‘write-ups’, during the D1 course at the Tavistock.

### **Layer 3**

By the end of the field work that was the mentoring project, I had amassed a rich, observational, narrative diary of my interactions with Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo (see an example of this in Appendix 2: i).

At the end of the project I conducted and tape recorded interviews with the parents, teachers and teaching assistants of case study children (Appendix 3:i-xviii). These provided an additional data set of biographical narratives that gave different perspectives which helped to illuminate the complex interrelatedness of interpersonal lives. The interviews complemented the observational approach as I describe in the auto/biographical strand of the methodology below.



#### **Layer 4**

I used the narrative produced by my observations as well as tape recorded interviews with adult participants to reflect on the whole 'story' of my interaction with each child participant. This was supported through intense focused discussions during supervision meetings with both of my supervisors and involved early written drafts to explore different ways of structuring the case studies. This process finally led me to engage closely with the observational narrative to explore exactly what happened in the mentoring room, as described in layer 5.

#### **Layer 5**

I systematically engaged with and reflected on the observational material of each case study child. I began to work through material in chronological order, focusing on identifying conscious and unconscious processes, through interactions that characterised our developing relationships. This process developed a new narrative of feelings and thoughts, drawn from the original material. In this way, the observational narrative began to form the transitional learning space of the research. The work was difficult, took time and was painful as it also engaged, evoked and chronicled my own learning from experience. To help process this learning, I was supported by regular, monthly meetings with my second supervisor at the Tavistock. I also began personal therapy which took place once a week.

#### **Layer 6**

I coded the new narrative generated in layer 5, to help me identify examples of defences and psychic states presented by myself and case study children such as, for example, splitting, projection, transference (example in Appendix 2:ii). This helped me to trace the development of our relationships and identify specific emerging themes. I thought this coding would also help me draw on specific examples of experiential learning for later discussion in the thesis.

## **Layer 7**

I primarily used the narrative developed in layers 5 and the interview transcripts, but also referred to in layers 3 and 6, to write the case study chapters of the thesis. In the process of writing, the layered approach was about refining, rather than filtering out material.

The narrative texts generated from my observations formed the data of the research to which I applied the above layered reflexive method to compose the case study chapters. As stated in layer 3, I also gathered a range of interview material from adult participants at the end of the project. These semi-structured biographical interviews (see Appendix 1.xi, xiii and xiv), posed questions, that were pre-viewed by participants to alleviate perhaps my own as much as their anxiety and provided another important perspective that helped me to make holistic sense of the children's stories, in relation to my own. Particularly therefore relevant to the auto/biographical methodological strand, the relevance of this material is discussed in Chapter 10, when drawing different threads of the research together'. However, I must stress that different from the in-depth analysis of tape recorded interviews more usually associated with biographical and auto/biographical research methods (Merrill and West, 2009), in-depth, layered reflection and analysis was drawn in this research from my observations of Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo rather than from the taped interviews of adult participants.

### **An auto/biographical approach**

Auto/biography is part of a growing multidisciplinary family of biographical methods currently being used and developed in social research. To clarify, biographical research is about researching others lives and auto/biographical research is about how we use others lives to construct our own, as well as our own to construct others lives (Merrill and West, 2009). The auto/biographical strand is

important here because it emphasises the dynamic, interactive notion of the researcher as being central to the process of illumination and understanding in the research experience. The word ‘dynamic’ in this context is clarified by Merrill and West (2009:1) as suggesting *‘the idea of human beings as active agents in making their lives rather than being simply determined by historical and social forces’*.

The notion of human ‘agency’ in terms of personal choices, fundamentally challenges the values of empirical research methods in the social sciences that traditionally measure the reliability and validity of research in terms of scientific objectivity. It also questions areas of cognitive and developmental psychology where the objective stance of the researcher is particularly scrutinised, to ensure findings may be generalised. Biographical researchers interested partly in the political, socio-cultural positioning of researcher in relation to the participant, consider this ‘story science tells itself’ (Stanley, 1992, Merrill and West, 2009), to be part of the politics of social and historical approaches that is contested in researching and writing about lives.

Liz Stanley, (1992) ‘a feminist sociologist’ who first used the phrase ‘auto/biography’ notably with a forward slash, has been highly active in the ‘biographical turn’ which Merrill and West (2009) introduce as:

‘The pervasive interest in biography may be understood by reference to living in a postmodern culture in which intergenerational continuities have weakened and a new politics of identity and representation have emerged among diverse groups. Women and men, gay and lesbian, black and white, young and old, may increasingly seek to live lives in different ways from parents or grandparents and doing biographical work has been one means to this end.’ (Merrill and West, 2009:2)

Stanley uses auto/biographical research to interrogate the way life histories have been traditionally privileged through patriarchal structures in our society. The now, to some extent historic, sociological shift Stanley envisaged, occurs through the discourse of 'cultural politics' i.e. class, gender, religion, ethnicity, age and race by bringing to light and disputing what she sees as elitist, conventional academic disciplinary and social divisions.

There can be a particular emphasis on social justice (Freire, 1970, Vincent, 2003) and making the unheard, heard, the invisible, visible to help those amongst marginalised groups in our society, to find and exercise their 'voices'. This is exemplified, in feminist writing since the mid 1980's (such as, for example, Steadman, 1986, Walkerdine, 1990). Stanley argues that in auto/biographical research, the notion that all lives are intrinsically interesting is axiomatic and that this has been overlooked by history and conventional interpretive biographical accounts which cannot '*recover the past, understand it as it was experienced and understood by the people who actually lived it*' (Stanley, 1992:7).

Engaging with ordinary people's lived experience and valuing experiential knowing as authentic, in the pursuit of meaning making, contests what can be seen as the hegemonic perpetuation and historicist phantasy of success and failure, regulated by privileged groups in our society. Stanley (1992) suggests this standardisation is conventionally, symbolically constructed through the linear structure of western narrative, as perspectives that inform our perceptions are also socio-culturally inscribed and mediated through language (Bruner, 1986). This, it is suggested, takes place in the form for example, of the received canon of literary biography and traditional autobiography which lays claim to 'facticity'.

'Most auto/biography is also concerned with 'great lives', and these almost invariably those of white middle and upper class

men who have achieved success according to conventional –  
and thus highly political – standards.’ (Stanley, 1992:4)

Cultural politics provides an important sociological root of the multidisciplinary approach which at the same time eschews ‘psychological determinism’ and ‘psychologically reductionist accounts of the individual’. Stanley’s work supports the idea that ‘individual people are social and cultural products through and through’ (1992:5). Integrating this view with a psychoanalytic approach that prioritises development of the human mind or psychological ‘self’ in relation to others, as part of that socio-culturally produced experience, has been part of the task and part of my struggle with ‘learning from experience’ (Bion, 1962). However there are established researchers who are engaged in similar work, (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, West, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2009, Bainbridge and West, 2012), as referred to through the thesis.

I reflect on my initial resistance to auto/biographical interrogation, to do perhaps with my own life history and socio-cultural associations, in Chapter 9. I understand there are important and relevant issues and shared assumptions here, central to subjectivity and intersubjectivity which surround notions of perspective, interpretation and intertextuality implicit in researching lives. A focus on lived experience brings into view the complex and continuous referential dynamic of human narratives. Biographical and auto/biographical research works to enrich and broaden individual and cultural narratives of experience by offering reflexive insights into the way histories are co-constructed by people rather than imposed by social systems.

Crucially to this study, Stanley suggests a ‘realist version of ‘truth’ as something single and unseamed, is jettisoned’ by the subjective complexities engaged in

auto/biographies, arguing that ‘perspective is all’ (1992:14). Perspective is seen as necessarily partial, subject to change and provisional, so that meaning making between people, located in specific settings at specific times, rather than essential truths, becomes the aim. This relativist, post-structural position recognises there is no neutrality, the biographer researcher too is a ‘socially-located person (1992:7), so meaning-making is always interpretative and subject to perspective. As suggested earlier, in this research, auto/biographical interrogation is used to illumine unconscious processes in the researcher/participant relationship.

For Stanley, partiality of viewpoint when discussing the lives of others needs to be recognised and owned by the writer as representing just one competing, negotiated version of what happened at a particular time and place, which is liable to tell as much about the author as those s/he is writing about. Valuing competing perspectives acknowledges the presence of a subjective researcher through interrogating the political, ideological reality of their assumptions.

Recognition of subjectivity re-positions the research relationship by closing the gap between researchers and researched. At the same time it prompts questions about identities of ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the research project. This discussion is supported by psychoanalytic ideas, including the unconscious, introduced in Chapter 2, which inform the observational methodological strand of the research described above. Significantly for this research project Hollway (2008) when discussing research methodology and the ‘relational turn’, which brings together social and object-relations, sees researcher subjectivity as ‘an instrument of knowing’ (Clarke et al., 2008:148).

Aside from shifting the relational ‘Gulliver among Lilliputians’ (Stanley, 1992:9) dynamic between researcher and researched, which can be seen when the

researcher is invested with authority and expertise, an auto/biographical approach demanded a focus which explored the active, engaged tensions and interactions between myself as researcher and case study children. For the duration of the mentoring project, this formed, as Merrill and West (2009:58) describe, ‘a living relationship’ that potentially co-constructed meanings.

Acknowledging subjectivity, is seen as empowering for the researcher. The idea of subjective versions competing with other interpretative subjective perspectives, equally socially and culturally defined, supports criticality and analysis as well as opening further discursive biographical dimensions. These may shed a further array of divergent light on seemingly singular human experiences. It may bring into discussion, the otherwise unknowable feelings, thoughts, actions, interactions, and experiences of others. At times offering agreement, at times conflict that further questions assumptions, critical dialogical engagement creatively keeps thinking open and learning alive by both knowing and not knowing, in a way that equates with learning from experience. The capacity to stay with uncertainty, a relevant theme introduced in Chapter 2 and also seen as an important part of the observational process as described above, may give the biographer as well as participants, an appropriate sense of fallibility (Greenman and Deckman, 2004) in the research relationship, or perhaps what Stanley terms an ‘ontologically shaky character’ (1992:14). West suggests a simpler way of expressing this is for the researcher to ask, ‘whose story is it?’

Hollway (2008) sees the theoretical, psychosocial terrain as being reducible to neither internal, nor social processes but rather to be about;

‘the understanding of identities in the context of settings,  
practices, relations, and biographies, as well as intrapsychic,  
intersubjective and discursive processes...’

(Hollway in Clarke, Hahn, Hoggett, 2008:141)

An awareness of psychosocial processes in developing relationships demands that the researcher 'subject who is the learner' (West, 2009), takes responsibility, through an iteratively reflexive stance, for the intersubjective relationship between researchers and participants.

'the presence of the researcher, more often than not, remains uninterrogated. Intersubjectivity and auto/biography are still largely neglected in a great deal of social research, including using biographical methods.' (Merrill and West, 2009:181)

At a rational level I recognise that my perceptions are subject to ways of viewing or 'seeing' (Berger, 1972) which have been socially and culturally shaped, just as those of all participants in the research setting, introduced in Chapter 4, to the extent that 'I see it when I believe it' makes more sense perhaps than the adage 'I believe it when I see it'.

At an emotional level however, the concept is liable to slippage, is more difficult to hang on to and I found, to consistently apply as a researcher. Reflexivity engaged through sensitivity to case study children in the research project was a priority of the research. It helped me to monitor and explicate my own difficulties with regulating levels of emotional immersion and detachment as a learning mentor in the research project. Confirming that 'subjectivities can potentially offer rich resources for research', at the same time reflexivity insists on:

'sensitivity toward the self and others, to feelings as well as thoughts, and to what is difficult for us, as researchers, to engage with and understand, because of our own histories and psyches'.  
(Merrill and West, 2009:181)

Examples of this can be seen as I continually endeavoured to question my own and other participants' positions, thinking and feelings, in case study Chapters 5 to 8. In this way the complementarity of the observation and auto/biographical



methodological bricolage can be seen in the reflexive, layered process I developed, as described above.

Writing about narrative work in schools, Wagner and Watkins (in Vetere and Dowling, 2005) pin down definitions by identifying three *locations* of ‘narrative’ in ‘*texts, in accounts, and in all life and action.*’ (2005; 239). They discuss the ‘multi-storied’ nature of our lives, asserting that no single story can voice the individual’s lived experience, suggesting that when single, ‘thin’, stories dominate and become ‘problem-saturated’, they can embody or represent the individual’s whole life experience in a negative and limiting way. The idea of exploring narratives of learning is helpful when thinking about how to find out what children learn from experience in school. I wanted to create some therapeutic time and space, in effect a ‘play’ space (Winnicott, 1971) for child participants to communicate the narratives of their learning in stories, that took many dialogical forms, of everyday events in their school lives.

### **Ethics**

Researching children, as suggested earlier, is a sensitive issue (Robert - Holmes, 2005). I began the field work following protracted scrutiny from the University Ethics Committee. This experience is revisited in Chapter 9. There was a specific anxiety that the subject matter of ‘stories’ children discussed should be confined to every day events in school, to safeguard participant privacy and ensure that no harm would come to participants engaged in the mentoring project. A focus on ‘stories of everyday events’ was confirmed in my application for permission from the committee and the experience ensured that I planned and prepared to undertake the project with as much care and detail as possible.

The care and sensitivity involved in systematically and collaboratively planning the introduction of the mentoring project to the school represents part of the ethicality of the study as outlined below. The embeddedness of the project, in keeping with the conceptual framework and methodological bricolage relied on building relationships within school cultures, including staff and participants from the outset. I saw becoming part of and participating in the day to day life of the setting, as well as being an observer observing personal and professional identities, as being very much part of the limited, ethnographic stance of the research. To illustrate this, the story of beginning the mentoring project, including the introduction of key characters in the school, is detailed in Chapter 4, 'The School Context'.

There was also an initial concern from the Ethics Committee, as explained and justified above, that the interpretive, contingent role of mentoring as a methodology in this study, involved an element of uncertainty that prevented a statement about an essential activity that would take place in the mentoring room. In the mentoring room, the 'play' activities that children and I engaged in were the kinds of games and activities perhaps familiar to any family household or indeed those found in 'wet playtime' or lunchtime club activity boxes in any primary school at the time, there were wooden and metal puzzles, 'Connect 4', 'Jenka', card games, dominoes, plasticine, a box of making and drawing materials, buttons and a book box. Each child had an 'About Me' scrapbook to keep any stories about themselves that they expressed on paper. These were stored in a wooden box on the bottom shelf of a bookcase, where the other games were positioned in specific places so that the children could predict where to find them again each week.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were assumed for all participants involved in the research, as well as for the name of the school and village setting. The thoughts and feelings of child and adult participants were particularly and constantly, reflexively consulted and attended to throughout the project. The chart below gives the pseudonyms of participants. In the chart, pseudonyms of case study children are aligned with their teachers and teaching assistants.

<b>'Link' Person/ Senco</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Child Participant</b>	<b>Year Group</b>	<b>Teaching Assistant</b>	<b>Head Teacher</b>
Trish					Mrs. Merton
	Miss Hendry	Leo	2	Andrea	
	Mrs. Hill	Conrad	6	Heather	
	Mrs. Hill	Isabel	6	Heather	
	Mrs. Peel	Tim	5	Liz	

The name of the village has been changed to 'Brempton' and the school is referred to as Brempton School, an approximately 280 place rural primary school in East Kent. My basic criteria for child participant inclusion, set out in my introductory letter to the Headteacher which outlined the project (Appendix 1.i), was used as a starting point for negotiating the inclusion of case study children with Trish, my 'Link' person (please find Glossary):

‘Child participants will be those, identified by teachers and parents, as having additional educational needs. They may be at School Action Plus on the SEN register, or have a statement of need. Participants’ primary need may be identified as social, emotional behaviour difficulties, but children are also likely to present difficulties with language and literacy and/or maths activities.’ (Appendix 1.i)

This criteria was merely a starting point as inclusion in the project also depended on Trish’s knowledge and understanding of children’s families in relation to the school and the proposed research project.

<b>Child</b>	<b>Barrier: Literacy</b>	<b>Barrier: Numeracy</b>	<b>Barrier: Social, Emotional, Behavioural</b>	<b>*SEN Register: School Action</b>	<b>*SEN Register: School Action  Plus</b>	<b>Statemented</b>
Tim			√		√	
Conrad	√	√	√		√	
Isabel		√	√			
Leo	√		√			

\*SEN registers were kept by schools internally to evaluate and monitor pupil progress. SEN stages usually reflected a range of formative teacher assessment and summative assessments related to the child e.g. SAT's

To ensure transparency, during the project I wrote a short summary of the activities undertaken during each session with each child. I added the summaries to a file each week where they were collated and centrally located in the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator’s office, to facilitate easy access to all participant adults in the school setting (Appendix 1.ii – Record of Mentoring meetings).

Particular attention was paid to ending the project, including the offer of continued support to the school beyond the duration of the project.

At the time, I recall Ethics Committee concern as being frustrating and obstructive, but also perhaps understandable in light of taboos in social science research that Hollway (2008) points to, which both relate to this study.

‘I am bringing into qualitative, empirical social science research two principles that are commonly regarded as unsafe; the use of researcher subjectivity, and the use of interpretation (particularly as it is outside the testing ground of the ongoing analytical relationship’. (Frosh and Emerson, 2005)

Following Hollway’s thinking, in this enquiry, where researcher subjectivity and interpretation were central aspects of the methodology, I ‘self-consciously’ (Clough 2002) maintained four, dynamic, interactive and continuous safeguards through the duration of the research to ensure ethicality.

The first safeguard was my active and scrupulous sensitivity as a researcher to all participants, throughout the project. My respect for participant well-being and the positions they undertook during the research, as well as respect for their situation in the school setting was fastidiously kept in mind. Participant rights to withdraw from the project at any stage were kept alive through the project. This was facilitated through an ongoing weekly dialogue with adult participants, particularly my ‘link person’, who was also the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator in the school. My collaborative relationship with Trish, who became the school based ‘link person’ was vital to the implementation and success of the project. It was supported by planning meetings and careful preparation of the mentoring project which took place in the setting during the autumn term of the academic year in which the research took place. It included the process of identifying child

participants for the study, based on the criteria tabled above. I will describe how this methodological requirement was interactively interpreted and shaped by parents, teachers and myself within the school context, in Chapter 4.

Individual mentoring sessions with case study children, which took place during consecutive half-hour sessions, one morning a week, began in February and continued through the Spring and Summer terms. Specificities of time and day of the week were negotiated with teacher participants to suit school time-tables and my own teaching work schedule. I worked with four case study children, three class teachers, three teaching assistants and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator who was also my 'link' person, as shown in the table above.

I arranged meetings and undertook semi-structured, tape recorded interviews with the adult participants who worked in the school, plus the parents of case study children (Appendix 1.xi-xiv). Five interview questions for teachers asked for their thoughts on children's strengths and difficulties as learners, enquired about children's progress during the academic year and also how they thought the children felt about their own progress. The final questions asked how the teacher would describe the child's relationship with others. Four questions for Teaching Assistants asked them to describe the ways in which they supported children, enquired about useful strategies they had developed. The other two questions asked how they thought children felt about their own progress and also to describe the children's relationships with others.

Parental interviews asked four questions that gave parents an opportunity to talk about their child's development as babies and to compare their children's experience of school with their own. Parents were also asked how they felt about their child's progress in school and how they thought their children felt about their

own progress. Questions were composed to help participants think about and reflect on their children's, as well as their own experiences, thoughts and feelings.

The interview questions were sent to adult participants before the interview dates to provide thinking and preparation time. This arrangement was designed to ease their possible anxieties, as well as perhaps my own anxieties about the interviews. Appendix 1.i-xvi contains copies of interview questions and other relevant papers that were approved by the Ethics Committee before commencement of the project.

Additionally, parent participants were invited to a pre-project meeting to meet me and engage in an informal discussion to raise any issues related to the project. I also negotiated some staff meeting time to talk to teachers and teaching assistants about the project. This took place during two different slots on one day. The first was with teaching assistants and the other with teachers, so I was able to discuss the project with the whole school staff, including the Headteacher.

The second ethical safeguard, interrelated to the first outlined above, was an explicit acknowledgment of my responsibility for child and adult participant well-being through the reflexive approach, as described in this chapter, which was an integrated aspect of the methodological bricolage. The reflexive approach was particularly made explicit through the layered processing of observational data. A description of this layered method has been outlined above. Following mentoring sessions each week I remained in school to be available for teachers and teaching assistants and to field any reactions or incidents that may have been relatable to the morning's mentoring sessions. This safeguarding was implicit in the collaborative planning and preparation I undertook with Trish, my 'link' person in the project, as suggested above, outlined below and exemplified in more detail in Chapter 4. Also, as agreed by the Ethics Committee, all tapes and transcriptions were returned

to adult participants with invitations to contact me to discuss any concerns or issues regarding the material or their participation in the project. I received no such requests.

The third aspect which supported the ethicality of the work was the regularity of supervision tutorials with my PhD supervisors, both of whom were psychoanalytic psychotherapists, so were able to provide emotionally containing supervisory support before, during and following the mentoring project. This included monthly supervision with my second supervisor, alongside my own reflexive, layered auto/biographical interrogation of observational data as described above.

The fourth safeguard was undertaking my own weekly personal therapy, beyond the dual supervision from which I regularly benefitted from at Canterbury Christ Church university and the Tavistock Centre. This additional support was undertaken to safeguard my own well-being through the emotional experience of learning from experience that this research prompted. This also provided further thinking space to reflect on the experience and ethicality of the work.



#### **Chapter 4. The school context**

In this chapter I want to describe the school context and situate the school within the village. I use a range of sources to paint a portrait of the community, including data from the Office of National Statistics, the Indices of Deprivation and local Parish Council documentation. I also use observations of and conversations with particular members of staff, drawn from my research journal. I specifically use material from an interview with Heather, who had lived in the village for many years and was working as a teaching assistant in the school at the time of the research. Her story gives another view of the diverse community that lived, worked and sent their children to Brompton School in 2006/7, at the time of the research.

I want to use these fragments to represent the partly ethnographic aspect of the enquiry which highlights some of the complexities of lives within the research setting. I also want to realise something of what was going on from the point of view of participants, as I introduced the research project to the school and how the project gradually came to inhabit the school during the first academic term of the enquiry. In keeping with the methodological bricolage and ‘multi-storied’ (Vetere and Dowling, 2005) nature of our lives, I will introduce key characters in the setting, case study children, Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo, as well as describe the mentoring room, to set the scene for Chapters 5 to 8.

#### **The School**

The school I refer to as Brompton School, was a village primary school located in a primarily rural area outside Canterbury in East Kent, with a mixed catchment area. At the time of the research, there were 265 children on roll in the school, between the ages of 4 to 11 years. The school had good links with an attached pre-school that children usually attended before joining the Reception class. The prospectus

showed the school had a full governing body, 96% pupil attendance rates, a parent partnership and equal opportunities statement, a school uniform, clear curriculum aims and pastoral policies e.g. a graduated response to behaviour sanctions and a special educational needs register. I do not know the precise number of children who were on the special educational needs register (please find Glossary) at the time of the enquiry but Ofsted reported, following an inspection in January, 2006: 'The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties is broadly average.' The average proportion of pupils with learning difficulties in schools at the time of the research was 20% of pupils on roll (DfES, 2001).

The school also had a 'Friends' association – an active indicator of parent-partnership relations, a well attended daily after-school club and a statement that acknowledged the value of developing and maintaining links with the extended village community. Children enjoyed a choice of school meals cooked on the premises or bringing a packed lunch from home. There was also a free school bus for children who lived in an adjacent village but attended Brempton School. They published their own teacher assessments and SATs (Glossary, Appendix 4) results at the back of the prospectus. I wrote my first impressions of the school in my research journal.

'I parked outside the school gate at about 8.50 am and other cars were pulling up to deliver children, as well as parents walking children to school. This is the second week of a new academic year and a very busy time for school staff when, I recall, it feels as though you're at the bottom of a mountain and have a long climb ahead. The children I saw seemed to be walking happily to a school behind high beech and hawthorn hedging. It was a warm September morning, girls wore summer dresses and boys were in royal blue sweat shirt tops with the school symbol on the front. I found the path leading to the entrance and noticed a sign to the left pointing to the nursery. I entered a porch and then rang a buzzer to request entry. Once inside there was a reception

hatch and I was greeted by (presumably) the secretary who asked me to sign in, don a visitor's badge and take a seat while I waited for Trish to come downstairs from her office. As I sat in the entrance hall, a mother came to the hatch with a little boy wearing a sling and several children came into the entrance from another door (I later found from the playground) put bags on cloakroom pegs and walked across the entrance to the left. Some smiled back at me. There was a generally calm, composed, warmth and purposeful activity in the entrance. There was also a water dispensing machine and I noticed several awards on the walls, particularly for sporting activities.'

This fortress-like entry procedure represented the levels of safeguarding (Ofsted, 2005, 2008) that emerged in schools, particularly following tragedies such as, for example, the 'Dunblane' disaster that occurred in 1996. Amongst those awards that caught my eye in the entrance hall, was a 'Healthy Schools' quality kite mark which was part of the 'Every Child Matters' (2005) well-being initiative at that time. National league table results (DfE, accessed online, September, 2011) showed that in 2005, by the age of eleven, pupils at the school who achieved National Curriculum level 4 (the national average level) or above in English and Maths were between 8% and 13% higher than constituency, district, county, regional and national results. Between 2006 and 2008 scores fluctuated, particularly in Maths which were, during that period, below local and national scores. However, in 2008, English results at Brompton School were 2% above national scores. In an Ofsted inspection in 2006, the school achieved an overall Grade 2 'Good' in an assessment report which began: 'This is an effective school that provides good value for money'. (Ofsted, January, 2006)

Because of varying cohort or year group sizes at the time of the investigation, there were some parallel year group and split classes. I knew, for example, that there were two year 2 classes as Leo's twin brother Danny was in a different year 2 class

and also that there was a divided year 6 class. One class contained both year 5 and year 6 pupils because Conrad and Isabel were in this class. In terms of staff, there was a Headteacher, nine class teachers, a part-time Senco and eleven part-time teaching assistants who worked closely with teachers to support children's learning, particularly those children with additional needs, in the classroom. The nature of these professional partnerships became apparent firstly through the level of support I saw teaching assistants engaged in with case study children. Secondly, through the knowledge and understanding of children they showed during the adult participant interviews (Appendix 3). Class sizes were on average 30 children.

At the time of the study there were some staff absences due to ill health and pregnancy. A year 6 teacher was on long term sick leave and the Deputy Head was taking Maternity Leave. Mrs. Hill, who taught Conrad and Isabel, was the Acting-Deputy at this time and I knew from observations and conversations with case study children, teachers, teaching assistants as well as from my interviews with parents that Mr. Chatwell, the absent year 6 teacher, seemed to be missed by everyone in the school.

The school was a two story building set in six acres of grounds (Parish Council, 1992) about a mile away from the centre of the original village. There were wonderful views of the Kent Downs across the extensive playground and playing field areas at the back of the school. The school had been purpose built as a secondary school, its earliest admissions register dating from 1958 until 1990 (Centre for Kentish Studies, archives accessed November, 2011). The school was extremely spacious and during the research project parts of the building that were not in use as classrooms were still in the process of being reclaimed by the primary school. I wrote impressions from my first visit in my research journal.

‘In a beautiful rural setting, the spacious two storey building has a welcoming entrance hall with a variety of achievement awards on the walls. The painted brick walls and tiled floors give the two-floor building an early 60’s feel and spacious classrooms lead off arterial corridors. The school has a dining room for lunches made on the premises and beyond this and the hall for assemblies and P.E, is another wing of the ‘secondary’ building that is in the process of gradually being reclaimed by the developing primary school.’

There were two entrances, one to the school reception area and another at the far end of the building which led directly to the flight of stairs that led to a second floor room that was occasionally used for running Local Authority information technology courses. I am uncertain as to whether this was initiated internally by the Headteacher, or directly by the Local Authority.

The size of the school was helpful for the project as there was a small unused room in the second floor area of building that was suitable for mentoring. This was perhaps mutually beneficial as the location of the room established perhaps a judicious distance between the school, who generously hosted the research and for me undertaking and setting up the mentoring project. The following extract from my research journal captures some of my thoughts and feelings at the time about this task.

‘Starting from what feels like ‘scratch’ is probably about negotiating a mutual meeting place for our (all participants) merging narratives...I think the specific requirements of the Ethics Committee have pinned some of this down, so I can begin to learn about a new context, the way it works; its people as individuals as well as parts of families/groups/teams (Dowling,1994, Rendall 2005 on systemic approaches). I need to do this in order to build positive, trusting relationships – something that at the moment feels at best an adventure, and at worst a fairly complex and formidable task. Formidable because

at every stage the process is reciprocal, and unlike more organically developed 'natural' relationships, my research motive means the relationships I make here are essentially 'planned'.  
(Miller, 2002)

The need to embed the project was problematic. I was, in the interests of the research, imposing on the school what Bion would describe as a 'sub-culture'. The mentoring project, quite apart from my individual 'alien' presence, was inevitably bound to affect us all, both individually and dynamically at an institutional level. Some of those affects are particularly highlighted in Chapters 9 and 10.

The school's physical position, not far from the coast and its proximity to the historic, cathedral city of Canterbury, meant it would be possible to trace records from as far back as 871, when Ethelred was the Archbishop of Canterbury (Parish Council, 2007). Canterbury as a cultural centre, traditionally a place of pilgrimage, remains an international and national tourist destination, also benefits from having two universities which have become major sources of employment in the area.

The Parish Council (accessed on line, July, 2011) describes a large rural parish of 25 square kilometres, of which only 5 square kilometres were built up. The remainder was given over to farmland, with arable, orchards, hops and woodland on the higher ground. Different sources indicate a fluctuating population but The National Statistics Census (2001) listed the population as 3,351. Information from the 2001 census (accessed on line, August, 2011) also identified the broad ethnic group of the catchment ward as being white and the religious denomination as being predominantly Christian.

To give a sense of the wider community context, a 'Health Profile', accessed from the Canterbury District Community Portel (online, 2011) gave a picture of health in the area, compared with people in the rest of England. In the following categories

of deprivation, the proportion of children in poverty, statutory homelessness, 5 A\*GCSE's achieved (including Maths and English), violent crime and long term unemployment, Canterbury district scores fell between the 50<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of England's least (1<sup>st</sup> percentile) and most advantaged (100<sup>th</sup> percentile) communities. However, situated in the extreme south easterly peninsula of England where the land meets the English Channel, Canterbury lies between some of the most socially deprived pockets in the country i.e. Newham London, some forty five miles west and Thanet, sixteen miles to the east. The Geography of Deprivation shows up such anomalies in the south east which is otherwise generally regarded as the most affluent area of the country:

‘The South East however remains more uniformly less deprived than any other area region, despite having some pockets of deprivation, principally in the larger urban areas such as Southampton and Portsmouth, but including some former resorts such as Margate and Hastings.’

(Indices of Deprivation, 2007)

Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA's) used in the government Indices of Deprivation are standard divisions deployed across Wales and England for collecting, aggregating and reporting statistics. During the same year (2007), Margate in Thanet, the easterly adjacent district some 16 miles from Canterbury, was ranked 37 out of 50 of the most deprived districts in England and Wales. These statistics may relate in terms of a ripple effect, to the demographic mix of the wider school community in relation to employment, health and well-being.

The ‘mixed catchment’ mentioned earlier, specifically referred to the diversity of family cultures that made up the population of children who attended Brompton School. This diversity may also be expressed socio-economically, based on occupational status, defined by the National Statistics- Socio Economic Classification (NS-SEC) index devised by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992). Drawn

from this, neighbourhood statistics from the Indices of Deprivation which were compiled from the 2001 Census ([www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk)), accessed November, 2011), collated the following information, using approximated social grades (UV50), of 1,111 people in employment, aged 16 and over in households within the area ward of the school. The balance of those not in paid employment at the time, included those people in the ward who were elderly and/or retired, those with a limiting long-term illness, those providing unpaid care and those who were under the age of 16.

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Number in the village</b>	<b>Description of classification</b>
<b>A/B</b>	229	Large employers and higher managerial occupations Higher professional occupations
<b>C1</b>	275	Lower managerial and administrative occupations
<b>C2</b>	184	Skilled manual workers
<b>D</b>	220	Semi-skilled and unskilled workers
<b>E</b>	203	Unemployed and on state benefits

From these rather broad social stratification grades, something of the mixed social composition of the school catchment that can be set alongside material from an interview with Heather, a teaching assistant participant who had lived in the village for many years. There were no prepared or specific questions for this interview. Because of her interest in and experience of living in the village, I invited Heather to talk about the village and school as she experienced it (Appendix 3.xviii). She offered a version of various sections of people within the community which may give a flavour of the social and geographical ‘mix’ that made up the school context.



Her perspective was also informed perhaps by her involvement with the village church situated on the green and as the wife of the church rector.

She told a story about a village of many parts. There was the original village with a church, railway station and village green and first location of the primary school. There was also an adjacent settlement that continued for about a mile out of the village, where the school was relocated, as pupil numbers grew, to occupy the empty secondary school building. So the primary school had been moved from its original location by the village green. Two areas of the village, divided from the original settlement by a major trunk road, were part of the North Kent Downs area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Parish Council identified an additional separate settlement of the village as a new, large development of 500 houses and apartments, built on the site of a former hospital. They also emphasise the rurality of the setting.

‘The character of the parish of Brempton is that of a thriving community which still retains its rural atmosphere and setting. Although comprised of five scattered settlements, each with its individual characteristics, this does not detract from its overall community spirit. Together each settlement contributes to the local distinctiveness of an active, self-contained community, surrounded by open spaces, farms and woodland.’

(Parish Council, accessed online, July 2011)

The physical divisions may have echoed some of the socio-cultural divisions between groups of people in this community and the school. The geographically displaced primary school included children from each section of the community and certainly through their stories Conrad, Isabel, Leo and Tim seemed to represent some of the different aspects of the diverse cultures and social groups that Heather described and which made up the pupil population of the school.

Heather began her story by describing the 'working' nature of the village, in contrast perhaps to other historically more affluent villages in the area. Extracts below are from our interview. E= Erica and H=Heather.

H: Yes and that is very much the feel of the village because it has been a working village more than a picture box village.

At the time of the research there was no longer a secondary school in the village. Since the 1980's expansion, shift, and loss seem to be indicators of change that may have impacted on the identity of the village, the school and relationships between people from different parts of the village. Through their occupations Heather identified five groups of people in this 'working' community, rural or land workers, mill workers, travellers, land owners and those whom Heather described as 'executive' commuters. The UV50 social grades illustrate something of the diverse range and mix of employment in the village.

The tone of Heather's narrative clearly embodied the different perspectives of those within the community whose children attended the same primary school. For example:

H: Yes, because the village consists of the Green, which is the original centre. Then the whole of Whittle Way which the school is on now was a village of its own, that is why it is called Whittle Way and people who live in Whittle Way live in Whittle Way..... They don't live in the village.

She went on to talk of another, more historically rooted section of the community. Hitherto, I was unaware that the settlements across the trunk road were in any way associated with the village and perhaps, as Heather seemed to suggest, this aptly describes how these areas, seemed to have socially disassociated themselves from the original community and perhaps to some extent its 'working' image.

H: The third area of the village is the village Harpton, on a hill which is on the other side of the A37 up the hill and until fairly

recent times, Harpton had a school of its own which residents, existing residents, were educated in, which was a small village school and there is also a fourth, called the original area of the village, is Thurwell, which was originally the seat of the Dorley family, the big family estate, which is now being... the house itself has been divided up into very select residencies, flats and houses within houses.

E: So is it quite a sort of divided..... Community?

H: So Thurwell is a separate entity. The village Harpton. likes to keep its own identity and it does well at doing that. A lot of things centre round what was the school, is now the village Hall in the village of Harpton.

The landowning group, 'developed around the original 16<sup>th</sup> century grand mansion with its farms and parklands' (Parish Council accessed July, 2011), may be seen as being subsumed in the A/B social grade, and those who continued to work on the land may have been classed as part of the semi-or unskilled workers social grade D. Until relatively recently the mill and the hospital had provided the main sources of employment within the village. The mill industry, according to Heather, employed about 600 workers from this and surrounding villages and was thriving before recession hit in the 1980's. At the time of the research this workforce was reduced to just 70 workers who mostly travelled from the surrounding villages and seaside towns. In terms of social mix, those who worked in the mill may have included a range of employees from social grades C1 (lower managerial, administrative occupations) to D (semi-skilled and unskilled workers).

Loss and dwindling employment at the mill, combined with moving the school from the heart of the community to the margins of an 'other' place, considered, as Heather suggested, to be hardly part of the village at all, doubtless affected the social fabric of the context. Interestingly, the old school by the Green became the

village hall and helped to retain something of the social cohesion that the mill had generated in the community.

H: .....it did have its own social club which has now been sold to the village as a village hall because there isn't the need for people at the ..... mill to socialise because when their shifts have finished they go off to Herne Bay, or wherever they live. There are not so many live in the village.

In her interview, Heather also talked of a 'gravel pit' that had been 'here forever' that employed locals and also farm labourers which match perhaps the fundamental rurality of the context. Again farming would engage a range of occupations, possibly from the landowning farmer employers (social grade A) to unskilled and occasional labouring employees (social grade D/E). Aside from the mill and the land, another important source of employment had been a large hospital which had finally closed in 1992. The land was eventually sold to developers and an estate of 500 homes (Parish Council, 2011) replaced the institution that had become a landmark in the area. Those who lived on the new estate were composed, according to Heather, of 'commuters' who worked in Canterbury or Ashford or London. The small railway station still operated, connecting the village to these and East coast destinations.

H: ..It has brought in a whole middle class band that wasn't here before.....and professionals'

These professional commuters might be broadly classed as being part of grades B (higher professional occupations) and C1 (lower managerial and administrative occupations). However, the estate that replaced the hospital brought more than a single new expansive influence to the village and to Brompton School. There was a further difference between the newcomers. Another group of families were migrated from inner city London boroughs which contributed to the demographic

profile of the research context. Migrants occupied 'housing association' homes, which at the time of the research had become an obligatory part of new housing developments on the estate.

H: ....there is an area off Bryn Hill which is called The Farn...., so it is tucked back between the railway and the existing Bryn Hill, which is Farn Housing Association .....and originally it wasn't full of problem families, but it has now become the area where a lot of problem families are housed, some of whom come from London.

There may have been many occupants of housing association homes who were commuters working in managerial, administrative, skilled and semi-skilled manual occupations. There was likely also perhaps, to be some unemployed people in this section of the community and this mix could be seen to bring a further community dimension that may have inevitably impacted on the school catchment.

The final group of people associated with the village that Heather was keen to talk about, because of their historic and continued presence in the school, was the traveller community:

H: ...the traveller population in ...has adopted the cemetery as their resting place, so every time there is a traveller funeral, as there was on Friday.....then the entire traveller population in Kent and Sussex turn up at the church - there were ten limousines.....

Some of the travellers were woodland workers, tree-surgeons, representing professional and skilled manual workers and others who were scrap metal dealers. Heather also pointed out the 'respect' that traveller children showed for the graveyard when groups went from school to visit the church. She went on:

H:...So there is a definite traveller culture in this village and we have had the girls who come to the school...they try and one or

two of them have had some sort of success, have gone through secondary school completely...a lot of the travelling children go through primary school, until they get to secondary school...they fall out quickly...

Some of the children lived in a row of council houses close to the school, where members of several generations of travelling families had eventually settled. Ironically it seemed the traveller community, characterised by a nomadic way of life, contributed this coherent thread of tradition and constancy in the school context.

Heather also mentioned other social clusters in the village, such as the Mormons and a group of parents who chose to send their children to the Steiner school out of the village. In this way the setting can be seen as a tolerant as well as in some senses, a fractured and diverse rural community struggling in many ways with the social and economic changes that perhaps affect all communities in every part of the country. If, through Heather's eyes, the traveller community held a secure position in the heritage of the village and the school, she also communicated some of the challenges and pressures that newcomers brought with them.

She described the new wealthy 'executives' from the estate as being particularly discerning about which schools in the area they aspired to and wanted their children to attend.

E: Do the newcomers want to be part of the community do you think? It's such a big estate....

H: Well some do, some do, but others, because their work takes them abroad or to London..... some of them aren't sending their children here. They are sending their children to what they regard as slightly smaller, slightly more precious schools, like Burne and Preed, that also have definite church connections, but I am sure it is the sort of 'niceness', not a general... and the families, whereas

this is far more mixed, but as a school it has a reputation for discipline and caring.

The primary school, now situated in the secondary school building, was faced with the challenge of providing for 'newcomers' whose expectations of village life included a school that could also compete in the educational 'league-table' culture and context of the time, for local grammar school places and perhaps exceed 'a reputation for discipline and caring'. At the time of the research, a recent 'good' Ofsted report seemed to indicate that Brempton school was rising to these challenges.

### **Beginning – introducing the mentoring project to Brempton School**

The choice of school was opportunistic as a chance conversation with a colleague at Canterbury Christ Church university, led to her giving me the Headteacher's name. I wrote to the Head requesting a meeting to discuss the possibility of undertaking my research project in the school. She emailed, confirmed her interest and later referred me to Trish, the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (referred to from now on as the Senco, please see Glossary), who also became my all important 'link' person within the school.

At this stage I was awaiting confirmation from the University Ethics Committee that I could start the project, but reasoned that permission to do so was likely to occur before September, so I needed to have prepared myself and the school for beginning the project before then. I realised that in an unfamiliar setting I needed the experience and knowledge of a member of staff, or 'link person' who knew the needs of children. In addition she would know the circumstances of families in the school context well enough to advise me about pupils who would benefit from being in the project, as well as match the criteria I had in mind, as outlined in Chapter 3.

Choosing children who were to take part in the project had to be carefully thought about, negotiated and re-negotiated during the first term of our association. I planned to begin visiting the setting during the Autumn term to share this planning with Trish. I wanted to use this time to familiarise myself with school cultures, as well as give people in the school an opportunity to get to know me as a researcher/mentor who visited their school weekly. I realised that ideally mentoring would be a facility within the school, available on a needs based level for children each day. This was not a practicable possibility within this enquiry but I hoped that if the project worked in the setting, Trish might use our shared experience of setting up mentoring in the school, to carry on with the work. I made the time span of the project clear from the beginning but also offered continued support and liaison to Trish if she should want or need it. In fact, following the success of two staff meetings with teaching assistants and then with teaching staff, including the Headteacher, Trish spoke enthusiastically about continuing mentoring following the research project.

During my initial meeting with Trish I introduced myself and explained my interest in exploring learning from experience, using the learning mentor role. Also, I outlined my need to find a small group of case study children, between the ages of five and eleven, who might be struggling to engage with reading, writing or maths and who might sometimes present as resistant, angry or frustrated by the demands of the curriculum. I suggested that such children may have communicated their frustrations in ways that were unacceptable in school and therefore may be considered to have behaviour difficulties.

I explained that children, perceived as having 'barriers to learning' (Code of Practice, 2001) might be identified by the school on their special educational needs



register at either 'School Action', 'School Action Plus', or may even be Statemented (see the Glossary for descriptions of these phased levels of additional needs in mainstream schools at the time of the project). It is important to recognise that participants in this study do not necessarily represent a specific group of 'needy' pupils amongst a general, wider population of non-needy pupils. At the time of the research, the Statementing process involved individual cases being presented and considered at Local Education Authority level by multi-agency panels of experts. However, a school's decision to identify a child as functioning at 'School Action', or 'School Action Plus' depended on each individual school's pupil population at any one time. More of an internal, house-keeping tool to help teachers target, regulate differentiation and monitor individual pupil progress, a phased approach to the identification of special educational needs (Code of Practice, 2001) was, within the population of the school catchment, arbitrary.

During my initial meeting with Trish, I also described how mentoring in this project would involve meeting individual case study children in a specific place at a specific time each week during the following Spring and Summer terms, to provide consistent time and space to observe, to listen and to attend to their 'stories' of everyday events in school.

The need for a room in which I could work with the children as a learning mentor was emphasised. Uninterrupted spaces outside the primary classroom are sometimes difficult to find in school buildings. Carrying out the project in corridors, in chaotic public spaces or thoroughfares such as the library, would not have been appropriate. Fortunately, this was not a problem, as suggested above and Trish assured me that a mentoring room would be found.

Trish seemed immediately interested in the project, expressed her concern as a Senco about social and emotional aspects of learning and felt it would be a relevant learning opportunity for her in the role of my 'link' person and for the school. She talked about a course she had attended where the work of Freire (1970) had been introduced and from this first meeting I felt optimistic that we could get along and work together. She presented as an enthusiastic woman of about thirty who seemed a little overwhelmed by the paperwork involved in her part-time post (three days a week) as Senco. Recalling my own experience as a Senco in a school of a similar size, I thought how difficult it must be to have to catch up with incidents and events that occur each week over five days in school, in the space of just three.

Although I had no pre-conceived opinions of Brompton School, as I had previously been a Senco in a primary school for ten years, it quickly became apparent that I brought assumptions and attitudes about this role that impacted on my relationship with Trish, on which I reflect in Chapter 9. Trish explained that she was trying to complete a number of lengthy special needs referrals by the end of term, but felt caught up in the sudden rush of sports days, school visits and the familiar, to me, 'breaking-up' turmoil and anxiety (Youell, 2006) for children and staff that tends to come at the end of summer term. In this way, my presence in the school and the roles I had constructed for Trish and for myself, impacted on her and others in the setting, from our first meeting.

I was focused and excited about the enquiry but realised that for the school the idea, method and concepts involved were new, or at least additional to the current working practice in the school, which involved a process of adjustment for those adult and child participants involved in the project and also perhaps for those in the context who may have felt they were excluded from the project.

The priority to ensure the most authentic, collaborative experience for children and adults in the school, within the scope and timescale of the mentoring project, was realised through a phased introductory process. This involved planning regular meetings with Trish during the Autumn term to provide time for us to think together about the project. It also gave us time and space to reflect on issues that arose with children and teachers between our meetings, as Trish discussed and gathered information from her teaching colleagues about the case study children she had in mind. This ongoing dialogue helped me to develop a working relationship with my 'link person' and also seemed to be an appropriate way to ensure Trish and staff were talking, thinking and asking questions. I hoped this would also help them to develop a sense of ownership and involvement in the project.

Trish and I met early in September to begin work on assembling a list of children to participate in the mentoring project. This lengthy process involved Trish using her own experience of children and families as Senco, bringing staff views and suggestions to me and then seeking parental permission. I wrote in my research journal:

'I suggested the children I would mentor may present with behaviour difficulties but would also have literacy/numeracy difficulties. I also said, as well as the children, it's important for Trish to use her knowledge, experience of the children's family to decide their suitability for the project. In addition support from the class teacher is vital, so we began to explore the multi-dimensional nature of choosing apt participants for the project and agreed that investment of time and thought about this is a major priority.'

There were many revisions. As an Early Years teacher I was naturally interested in the youngest pupils but the Reception teacher was, as I understood from Trish, particularly protective towards her class and declined the opportunity to be

involved in the project. I had been a Reception teacher and at a rational level completely understood this response, but emotionally, I experienced a sense of my presence being intrusive and I felt excluded. Some revisions to the participant list were due to children already being involved with other initiatives and forms of support, either in or beyond the school e.g. specialist teaching or educational psychology services. Another reason was that some pupils' parents did not consent to their children's participation. I do not know whether this was because they objected to my aims and/or that my explanatory letter to parents (Appendix 1.iii) was confusing, too detailed or lacked clarity. Or whether those families felt involvement would simply compound pressures they or their children were perhaps already experiencing in relation to home and/or school at that time.

The final list of four children who lived either in the village or nearby, included three boys, Conrad, Leo, Tim and a girl, Isabel. Conrad and Isabel were in the same year 6 class (age 10/11 years). Their teacher was Mrs. Hill. Heather was Mrs. Hill's classroom support assistant who ran small, out of class groups in a room near the mentoring room during the time of the research. Both Conrad and Isabel struggled with mathematics and were in a small group, called the 'Springboard' group where they received additional help, three mornings a week.

Conrad also struggled with reading and was in another small support group for English. He was included in the project because he also acted out some of his frustrations and difficulties in class which made often made him the centre of attention and influential amongst his peers. His teacher, Mrs. Hill sometimes found this affect and his unpredictable behaviour disruptive.

Isabel was described by her teachers as being in many ways a 'model' pupil. She was quiet, seemed to pay attention, popular amongst peers, hard working and

particularly good at English. However, as suggested above, she struggled with maths and her teachers were concerned that she was too reticent, too quiet in class and that she felt pressured by others' expectations.

Year 6 is a particularly pressured year for pupils and teachers as they prepare throughout the year for statutory SAT's tests (see Glossary). Pupils at this school also sit the Kent test during year 6 which determines their secondary placements in either Grammar or Secondary schools in the area. Such major transitions, in an especially competitive local authority educational climate, can be traumatic. (Youell, 2006)

Tim was a year 5 pupil (age 9/10 years). His class was being taught by a temporary teacher, Mrs. Peel. He was in the process of being assessed for an autistic spectrum disorder (see Glossary) to support referral for a Statement of Need. Such a statement would secure additional support in the classroom for Tim. He was, at the time of the research, being supported by a teaching assistant called Liz during morning class sessions. Trish was concerned about his difficulties with social interaction skills, particularly with transition to the secondary phase being relatively imminent. Tim's mother was working in the school as a supply teacher during the research project.

Leo was a year 2 (6/7 years) pupil and his class teacher's name was Miss Hendry. She had a part-time classroom assistant who lived locally called Andrea. Leo was a quiet twin whose brother Danny was in a parallel class in the school. Danny was being seen by outside agencies for social, emotional behavioural difficulties. His teacher was concerned at Leo's general slow work rate and also his progress with reading.

The main idea of giving some individual space and time to pupils for reflecting on experience seemed to capture the staff's interest and it was interesting that Leo, Conrad, Tim and Isabel were all described by Trish as having rather fragile self-esteem, as the following extract from our interview (Appendix 3.xvii) shows. Conrad was at 'School Action' and Tim 'School Action Plus' on the special educational needs register (see Glossary). Neither Leo, nor Isabel were on this register. (E= Erica, T= Trish).

E: How did you choose the children who participated in the project?

T: We chose children that we thought would benefit from have time and space out of the classroom, that were vulnerable children.

E: Do you mean sort of social immature, or emotionally or intellectually vulnerable?

T: Socially vulnerable, perhaps lacking in confidence and self esteem and some children with social skills problems who we thought would benefit from having time on a one to one basis...

E: How is that evidenced? Was it from the classroom, or was it sort of fed back to you from teachers and...

T: It was fed back, mainly by teachers and from my own experience with the children.

E: Ok...that's good...and did you talk about it with Mrs., or, I know we talked about it because we kept composing lists didn't we...and then changing them and it was a kind of joint affair..

T: Yes...as a whole staff we decided on the children

I was also keen to include parents as participants. In the interest of the mentoring intervention being introduced as a research strategy that would also provide space and time for children to reflect on their experience of learning, participation was offered to parents in the spirit of parent partnership. When case study children and parents had given consent, I contacted and arranged to meet them after school. I arranged to be with Trish to explain in person and also to field any issues about the

research and mentoring project, before individual mentoring began. None of the parents turned up for the after school pre-project meeting. I was not entirely surprised as this response was, in my experience of organising parents' meetings, not unusual. I resolved to invite the parents later in the project, when parental involvement would have had a chance to grow in relation to trust engendered, as relationships with their children developed. Towards the end of the project I was able to interview the parents of the children which gave important insights into the complex lives and learning of children and their families. This material helped me to make sense of some of my observations of stories they communicated during mentoring sessions.

As well as meetings with Trish during the first term of the project, when the list of child participants was finalised and parental consent confirmed, I arranged through Trish to observe the children in their classes and small support groups where appropriate, working alongside their peers and teachers. We agreed these observations would be a helpful part of the project's phased strategy, introducing both the children to me and me to the teachers and children.

Sensitive to my presence as the interloping researcher/mentor 'other', I wanted to be scrupulously respectful to the cultures of this particular school context from an ethical and also human, moral point of view, as suggested earlier. I felt the chances of the project 'taking' effectively, depended upon the qualities of relationship I was able to build within the organisation with staff, case study children and their parents. The partnership with Trish was crucial as it legitimised the task of the research as a 'whole school' project.

In this way, from the beginning there was a sense of me trying to find a place in the setting which equally called on the capacity of the school to take me in. In spite of

many years experience of working in primary schools, I was at this beginning stage, surprised by the levels of anxiety I experienced, revealed for example, in the following extract from my research journal.

‘Beginning this process does not seem very easy as I need to be very proactive. I am unfamiliar with Kent schools (though I lived and went to school here as a child), have no professional contacts or networks in this area and therefore have no established relationship resources to draw or build on. This sense is particularly acute as I invested eleven years in my previous job carefully building these kinds of invaluable relationships which would have easily facilitated this research project. However, this uncomfortable position is helpful to focus on, by replicating and giving glimpses of the kind of emotions young children may experience when encountering beginnings: school/nursery, or moving into a new class, meeting a new teacher or perhaps experiencing anything for the very first time (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983).’

At an emotional level the parallels between my experience of beginning the mentoring project and the infant’s emotional experience of learning (Bion, 1962, Klein, 1946, Waddell, 2002, Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983, Youell, 2006) were evident from the start of the research project. Whilst learning and teaching is essentially about working with groups, group processes, as introduced in Chapter 2, can be understood and illuminated through engaging with emotional states first experienced at an intersubjective level, embedded within the first, familial group.

### **The Mentoring Room**

Trish showed me the mentoring room following our first meeting in September. All but two of the classrooms plus Trish’s office, were located on the ground floor, arranged on either side of a long corridor in this building that was formerly a secondary school. At the end of the ground floor corridor, beyond the doors that led to a hall and dining room was another entrance hall, outside door and set of



stairs that led to another level and separate wing of the school. Upstairs were two 'occasional' classrooms, used for taking groups and special classes. Perhaps it was their 'occasional' nature that gave the rooms a sense of being incomplete and un-lived-in. There were also piles of materials and equipment in both rooms that looked as though they belonged somewhere else.

Another room was used as a computer suite for occasional training and Continuing Professional Development courses run, as suggested, by the Local Authority. Yet another large room on this floor was packed high with desks, chairs and classroom equipment. Trish explained that they were gradually reclaiming useful items for the growing primary school. It was a luxury, in many ways, to have so many spare rooms in a school of this size, but their redundant nature lent a rather desolate air to this part of the building, certainly compared to the 'calm, composed, warmth and purposeful activity' I experienced when entering the school at main Reception.

Opposite the top of the staircase were three small rooms, one of which was being regularly used by visiting outside agencies, the middle room was a kitchen and the other looked completely abandoned. I wrote in my research journal:

'The room is small – maybe 2 x 2.5 metres, but big enough I think.... The location of the mentoring room is in this part of the building – a small, windowless, upstairs room (with a bright skylight window) sandwiched between an IT suite and other rooms that are gradually being inhabited for small group work. Other rooms seem to contain an overflow of furniture waiting to be used or disposed of which gives this part of the school a slight sense of neglect compared with the purposeful vibrance of the rest of the place.'

On a subsequent visit I made a label for the mentoring room as I did not want to lose it in an area where everything was, as Trish inferred, generally up for grabs.

My experience of working with young children informed some of my thoughts about creating a welcoming and comfortable environment. During my visits in the Autumn term, I also thought carefully about the materials that I wanted to make available for children. When Trish was unable to meet because of illness, a course she was attending, or she was covering absent teaching staff in classes, I turned my attention to creating the mentoring room.

My inclination for clay was impractical so I made plasticine available. I painted the walls yellow to reflect the light from the skylight ‘to cheer the room up a bit as the paint is rather crumbly’, as I noted in my research journal. Following a conversation with a colleague I posted plans of the school, the village, East Kent and the British Isles on the walls, in a Russian doll sequence to help the children position themselves, to foster that important sense of ‘place’, particularly in what felt like the no-man’s land wing of the institution. On reflection I was probably concerned at the time about my own sense of place, as considered in Chapter 9.

I soon joined in with the institution’s reclaiming process by finding a bookshelf from another room which I also painted yellow. On this I arranged variously on its shelves, the plasticine and a selection of puzzles and games that I thought the children might choose to work on individually or with me collaboratively: e.g. Jenka, Connect 4, dominoes, card games and puzzles. I wrote in my research journal:

‘On the top shelf of the bookcase are two table top puzzles – a cube in parts that needs putting back together and an hexagonal jigsaw where insect heads and tails need to be matched as in dominoes – but the extra angles make matching more puzzling. On the shelf below are maze puzzles with silver balls to steer into various positions and shapes, also knotted nails to separate and a colourful, beadlike plastic ‘snake’ that can be snapped apart and reassembled in various ways. There is also a magnetic game

where iron filings can be moved with a wand to resemble hair on the outline of a face. The shelf below houses coloured and plain A4 paper and on the bottom shelf there is a large wooden box, some A3 zipped plastic folders in which to keep anything children make and an 'about me' scrapbook for each child.'

I placed the bookcase against the wall which was to the left of the door as the children walked into the room. At home, I found an old trunk-like wooden box that I put on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. In the box I put four scrapbooks – one for each child. These were to be autobiographical scrapbooks, which would comprise stories that case study children wanted to communicate on paper, to help build up a larger picture or autobiography of themselves and their experiences.

I envisaged their work would provide points of reference for me, as I got to know them, to develop, change and make available different materials in the room to accommodate their interests. I also thought the ongoing scrapbook might represent, should any of the children choose to sustain the activity, a sequential 'thinking' map of our meetings during the mentoring relationship. This would also give a very concrete version of those shared experiential meeting points I envisaged. Such a scrapbook would also be helpful for looking back on, together at the end of the project to help us hold onto some of the 'good' experiences we had shared in the mentoring room and also to bring some satisfactory closure.

Having gathered some of my own children's poetry books and a selection of books and some 'Story Sacks' (Griffiths, 2000) with Trish's permission, from the school library I created a book box. I planned to add to this when I knew more about the children I was working with. I put the book box against the wall under the Russian-doll map sequence, between the two most comfortable, orange, armless easy chairs I could find in the abandoned rooms, that I placed in each corner.

Aside from the easy chairs, I found a small table and two desk chairs that just fitted into the spare corner of the room which the door opened into. I kept the top of the desk clear to provide a space for drawing, writing, playing games, or 'making'. Next to the table, opposite the door I filled a large box with 'making' materials that included fabric, coloured paper and card, string, wool, coloured threads, lollipop sticks, art straws, glue and scissors and shiny materials such as sequins. In this way the room began to take shape.

Trish and I negotiated a timetable of mentoring sessions for case study children that was sensitive to the individual class timetables devised by Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo's teachers. We agreed that I would see children on a specific day of the week, in a specific order at specific times, as negotiated with class teachers. It was recognised that during sports days, school assessments and visits, continuity of mentoring would be interrupted. Mentoring sessions began at 9.30 am, following assembly and each session lasted for half an hour. We agreed that I would initially collect children from their classes for the first session, then negotiate an arrangement for future meetings that suited participants, when children were familiar with me and the mentoring room setting and location in school. Morning break would interrupt mentoring sessions. I was invited to take coffee in the staffroom with the staff and although I felt awkward about this at first, it provided another opportunity to take part in, as well as observe, the everyday practices of the school. Before leaving the school, following the morning session of mentoring meetings, I agreed to write up the actions and events that took place during each session with individual children and leave a copy in a folder in Trish's office. This supported transparency and if there was any acting out or issues with children following mentoring sessions, I would still be available and the content of our sessions could be traced.

The first individual mentoring sessions began just before February half-term. What happened during those sessions is the subject of the following four chapters which form the core of the thesis.

## **Chapter 5: Tim – Too close and too far apart**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is about the boy I call Tim and tells what happened in our individual mentoring interactions. I begin with him because he was the first child I mentored each week for the duration of the project. Tim liked to be first. We began our mentoring sessions at 9.30 in the morning, following the school assembly. On Tuesday mornings, however, during assembly Tim had a one-to-one IT session with his teaching assistant Liz and then he came to the mentoring room. In this and all the case chapters, I will include and refer to indented extracts from my observational ‘write-ups’, research journal and interview material from adult participants.

The chapter begins with a biographical account which includes extracts from interviews with Tim’s mother, teacher and teaching assistant, plus observational material I collected in the class setting during the Autumn term before individual mentoring began. It also includes relevant background information that Trish, the school Senco, my ‘link person’, communicated. I always went to her office when I arrived at the school to see how she was, how the case study children were and what kind of a week it had been.

Trish was particularly important in this case study as she was a friend of Tim’s mother, who also worked in the school. Tim’s name was the first she suggested for the participant list and the only one that remained from our original planning, as described in Chapter 4. Following the biographical background, I write about the relationship between Trish, Tim, his mother and me, which seemed to echo some of Tim’s confusion, at an organisational level, to which I return in Chapter 9. I then describe what happened in the mentoring room. The case study ends with a

brief conclusion that gathers some key themes about Tim and learning from experience.

### **Biographical background**

Tim was a year 5 (9/10 years old) pupil, who was in the process of being assessed for an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD – please find Glossary). ASD has been recognised in educational settings as a ‘Triad of impairments’ (Wing and Gould, 1978, DfES, 2001) that involves the interaction, on a graduated spectrum or continuum of disorder, between impairment of social relationships, social communication and the imagination. For example, Asperger’s syndrome, the diagnosis Tim eventually received, would be categorised as a high functioning autistic spectrum disorder.

He was particularly interested in history and when I first met him his class were studying a World War Two topic. His teacher’s name was Mrs. Peel, and his teaching assistant’s name was Liz. I first observed him in a class literacy lesson to do with composing a myth. They were using ‘Pandora’s Box’ as the model; a story that the class had read the previous week. It was about keeping the lid on chaos and so particularly relevant to Tim, for whom this seemed a perpetual battle. Both in class and during mentoring sessions he complained of being under ‘attack’. I wrote the following in my research journal after this first meeting:

‘Others were chatting, smiling, seeking contact, but it was difficult to read Tim’s expression. He simply ‘looked’ steadily; slowly took off his coat, hung up his bag and made his way in the direction of the carpet without exchanging a look or a word or actively communicating with anyone else. Tim is taller than many of his year five peers. He has a pale complexion, is of average build with short brown wavy hair, glasses and large brown eyes.’

Although he showed little interest in attempting to ‘read’ i.e. infer meanings, or comply with others’ social conventions, he was adept at constructing his own rules and routines which seemed to help him to navigate school procedures, and to ease the anxiety he presented:

‘Mrs. Peel asked the children to line up for assembly, Tim quickly approached the door and finding himself fourth in line asked politely; ‘can I go to the back because it gives me a headache?’ The girl standing behind him replied: ‘yes you can go to the back’

If Tim could not be first, then he had to be last in line. It was a characteristic split in that nowhere in between these extreme, polarised positions would do. This was translated into his school work by always wanting to be the best, and led to constant disappointment with himself when this did not happen. Perhaps Tim feared being lost, or ceasing to exist in an in-between place – in every way there just did not seem to be any ‘good enough’ position for Tim, it was just failure or success. However, I noticed the tolerant response of other pupils to this quirky, controlling behaviour and this in itself seemed to separate him. There was something separate and alone about Tim. For example, he always sat alone in a desk at the back of the classroom, and until persuaded otherwise by Liz or Mrs. Peel, he preferred to work alone on the computer. During this particular session, when asked to plan his story, in spite of Liz’s hard work, Tim started to panic:

‘The teacher said: ‘ Tim you’re usually very good at coming up with ideas’. Tim turned his head away when put on the spot, and replied rather exasperatedly: ‘ I don’t have the answer. I’m not good at these things.’ He began to moan, slid down in his chair and began rocking his head back and holding his head in his hands, complaining; ‘I’m confused’ to Liz who was trying to keep him focused.’

He may have articulated what many others in the group were feeling, but his outburst lent a sense of turmoil to the classroom that could have been disruptive.



Instead, everyone else seemed to be well versed in working hard to stay calm and hold it all together. Tim was managing to project his fear about ‘not knowing’, extremely effectively. I wondered whether this kind of communication was usual, and whether my presence as a stranger was also provocative, so I deliberately turned my attention from Tim and went to help another child in the room:

‘I went to work with Sally on the table next to Tim for the next twenty minutes. Mrs. Peel praised Tim’s ideas and I turned round to look at his work. It was difficult to read as his cursive script was tightly bunched, so I asked him to read it to me. He was required to invent a God for his myth – he read – ‘A God, someone I know, she’s female, it’s my mum.’ When the teacher asked him to read his ideas aloud, Tim put his hands over his ears, wriggled and mumbled: ‘Oh no...stage fright’. Jim, a lively boy on an adjacent table tuned straight into Tim and said something encouraging to him. Liz later told me Jim was Tim’s best friend but they squabbled and had something of a love/hate relationship. I asked Tim if he could draw what he was thinking about. This was very helpful because apparently Tim loves to draw and he quickly engaged in elaborate cartoon like outlines in his rough book. He used the words ‘explosion, atomic bombs, attack me’. Liz explained that he is pre-occupied by the history topic on World War Two.’

I include this extract from my initial observation because it shows several recurring features of Tim’s personality that seemed to impact on his learning. For example, even his ‘tightly bunched’ cursive handwriting appeared to exclude all the spaces. It seemed to fit in with his anxieties about being in-between and separation and perhaps the lack of space in his mind for sorting things out. He also communicated his idealisation of Mum as God from which I inferred something of their closeness. Jim was his best friend with whom he had a love/hate relationship, and this all or nothing, polarised pattern of emotional response resonated through the spiky profile of our mentoring meetings.

Mrs. Peel was Tim's class teacher. She was quick to tell me she was a long-term supply teacher covering a member of staff on long-term sick leave. At first I thought this must be Mr. Chatwell, who was much missed by year 6 participants Isabel and Conrad, but then realised Mrs. Peel was covering a different year group. New to teaching year 5 (9/10 year olds), she seemed a little highly strung or perhaps nervous about my presence and intent, but she appeared to enjoy a structured, orderly classroom, which I thought suited Tim. I also noticed that, rather like Trish in her room, she did not really seem to be very at home in her environment. On more than one occasion she reminded me that it was not her classroom and she did not think she would be there for long. In our interview, Mrs. Peel talked about the difficulty she experienced of holding Tim's attention in class as he constantly struggled to filter out the noise of others; about the surprisingly creative ideas he sometimes contributed, and also her concerns about the way he saw himself:

'When he speaks about his progress it is a very negative thing. He is often coming out with phrases such as – I am not good enough. Doesn't always say – I can't do this – like a lot of children do, but he will say – I am no good at this, I am a failure. Now whether that, I actually believe that that is his opinion. I don't feel that he is saying that because he thinks that is what I need to hear.'

Tim's support assistant Liz, worked closely with him during morning lessons, mostly in one-to-one sessions on maths and a social communication programme called 'Kar2ouche' – a very visual way of building and sequencing stories using the computer, but she also worked with Tim in the classroom. She confided that she was fond of Tim, but she also found the work intense, and too demanding at times:

'It is really.. really hard work sometimes because you are not getting a break from him and he is not from me and I don't think

that is good. So if he is having a bad day, or I am really tired, it is not good.'

There was a sense that she felt overlooked and left to get on with containing Tim's sometimes negative projections. At the same time she recognised the care and concern the school demonstrated for Tim. The fact that he was allocated the level of support she provided would significantly affect the budget of a small primary school. I think it was more to do with needing to feel thought about and receive some communicative attention herself. Perhaps to feel contained, as Tim's needs were complex and his responses sometimes bizarre and difficult to understand. I currently support some children who have autistic spectrum disorders, and their designated teaching assistants seem to value opportunities to share and reflect on the confused and confusing experiences they share with such pupils. However, there has never been any culture of supervision (in a clinical sense) associated with teachers or adults working with pupils in school in Britain. Interestingly, whilst in the school I began to feel guilty because I too seemed unable to find time to talk regularly to Liz about Tim during the project. Was it that the difficulties involved with engaging with Tim individually, seemed somehow to permeate and play out at an organisational level that even I, as an interested outsider, was unable to resist? The experience of this organisational, social resistance is discussed in Chapters 9 and 10.

Avoiding this painful engagement may not be uncommon, in my experience, in primary and secondary schools where taking responsibility for the learning of pupils with additional needs is hard to reconcile with the burgeoning priority of teachers transmitting curricular information. Sometimes attending to pupils with the most significant learning needs is left, it could be argued, to those least qualified to deal with them. Liz left the school shortly after the project, to begin training as an Occupational Therapist at the local university, and when we bumped

into each other from time to time on the campus, we shared some warm recollections of Tim. Rather like other Asperger's children I had worked with, he was the kind of pupil who was difficult to stay with, but who was also difficult to let go as he somehow seemed to get-under-your-skin.

One of Tim's expressive strengths I learnt was that he was able to create powerful cartoon drawings to tell stories of his fears and pre-occupations, in some graphic detail. Another important clue about Tim that occurred in my initial observation involved his constant feeling of being attacked. Some of this may have been related to his own, and his teachers, fears that he was being bullied by other children in the school, but Tim seemed to have a strong sense of being victimised and persecuted. Later, in our interview, Liz (his support assistant), talked of the difficulties he encountered with social interaction, and her observations seemed to suggest something of Tim's actively destructive, rather than passive, participation in peer relationships i.e. 'he is quite powerful'. In supervision we discussed how Tim seemed frightened of his own aggression which he seemed to project into others, so that they in his eyes somehow became the frightening aggressors. It was difficult for Tim to own his controlling, rather destructive impulses and behaviours:

'What I have seen is him going in and not understanding the dynamics and the priorities of relationships and play etc. and therefore him getting it wrong and the other children being scared off because of that, because he is also quite tall as well and he is quite powerful and he does get angry and frustrated....'

Tim's pre-occupation with being under siege seemed to be facilitated by the class history topic, and was revisited during my next classroom observation. Contrary to his previous alarm about 'not knowing', he seemed to become quite excited and carried away when able to demonstrate his good memory, ability to read and articulate detailed facts about something he was interested in. Tim seemed to enjoy 'learning about', particularly history at a particular level, the kind of 'learning' that

Meltzer (1982) might suggest 'only adds to his stock of information'. Other children I have worked with who have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome have often been seen as academically successful in the school setting, in terms of GCSE qualifications attained, partly perhaps because they seemed to have very good memories for facts. The history lesson seems to trigger Tim's pre-occupation with some of his own primitive fantasies, and fragmented feeling states:

'Tim was sitting next to Liz in his seat at the back of the class. He sipped from his water bottle and looked out of the window. However, he must have been listening as he put his hand up and waited patiently. When his turn came to give a question he said: 'Were you warned they dropped gas bombs – the Germans? ...they did it in the 1<sup>st</sup> world war that's for sure...I looked it up.' Then he turned away in his chair to face and look at the back wall of the classroom. The questions continued until someone asked how bombs work. Tim said loudly: 'I know how bombs work...inside's a bit of dynamite and a hammer...the hammer is jerked into the ground – then boom into tiny pieces...broken into tiny pieces...ooh interesting'. Mrs. Peel thanked Tim for his expertise and the session finished.'

However, a little later when he was asked to complete some maths work on 'shape', his response was very different. Tim did not like maths:

'He couldn't find his ruler so drew a shape without it, Liz directed him to the shape he should be copying (rather than his own choice), he poked the little girl lightly on the arm with his pencil, looked at the interactive whiteboard and said: 'Have I got to write all that?' He successfully copied: 'A rectangle with 4 equal sides is called a square.' Then, surrounded by numerous pieces of paper he said: 'they'll kill me if I do that.....I'm very ill....I'm tired...I haven't had a very good sleep...no one understands me...no one cares for me really properly...I think I'll have to buy a rifle.'

Tim's physical, attacking approach to the girl sitting next to him may have been a characteristic way for him to attract attention, and it worked as at this point of interaction I could not resist responding to his distress. There was definitely something about Tim that drew some people in, and I seemed to be one of those people.

'I picked up one of the pieces of paper he was supposed to be attending to and said: 'this sheet looks as though it might be useful Tim. He gave me eye contact for the first time, picked it up, looked at it and said 'yes'. I suggested he stick it into his exercise book and he began the long process of saturating the sheet with glue before carefully putting it into his exercise book. It was now break time. I told Tim I had enjoyed working with him and hoped I could do it again. He went to his cloak peg and I asked him if he had some fruit. He said he had a bar with some fruit in it and we exchanged good-byes. I felt really pleased I'd made some contact with Tim.'

When I sat next to him, he seemed to calm down, and it was interesting on reflection, that our first bonding opportunity involved a 'gluing' activity which he undertook with some enthusiasm. I also felt encouraged by the 'fruit' event before we parted. In supervision, we discussed the idea that he was perhaps communicating that he thought I might have something 'good', or something nourishing to offer him.

Later, in an interview with my 'link' person Trish, she described his difficulties. As with all the interviews I undertook, I had given participants a short list of pre-prepared questions to give them time to think about their responses. However, this along with other staff responses seemed to be rather scripted, and I wonder to what extent they worked on them together:

'Tim is on the autistic spectrum. He is having particular problems at the moment I think in relation to his peer group who seem to be maturing and Tim is obviously maturing at a different rate and

erm, is erm... finding it difficult to communicate with his peer group and is becoming increasingly, well frustrated with heightened anxiety really about transition (to Secondary school).....’

He did not have a formal diagnosis of Asperger’s when I first met him, but later in the project Trish told me that the County was in the process of preparing a statement that identified the syndrome as his primary need. This diagnostic, medical label was also confirmed by his mother during our interview, when she talked with concern about finding him a Special School place for the Secondary phase. She also recalled some painful early experiences of Tim’s responses:

‘He never they used to tell you that your baby will babble to you and he didn’t do that, and they said your baby will turn to look at you when you come into the room, but he never did that, and there were various things that didn’t happen, which we were told would happen, but we really didn’t think much of that. He didn’t talk, he actually didn’t talk really much at all until he was 3 but we didn’t notice.....we didn’t notice how different he was until we had Jack.’

Jack was Tim’s younger brother. During mentoring sessions Tim often talked about him and about his Dad supporting school field trips and coaching the football team that brother Jack played in. They presented as a close, supportive family unit. Mum confirmed this during our interview when she conveyed the sense of loss and grief she may have been experiencing:

‘I think I was actually quite....., at the time although I kind of knew it was coming,.... I was actually quite shocked and Don’s very different to me character wise and he was completely, ‘It’s fine, it’s not a problem. It doesn’t change who he is.’ Whereas I just felt I needed to rethink my mental furniture. I think I continue to feel that as he grows up, but I suppose you see the things.. Yes in his Year 3 and Year 4, he integrated very well, he coped very well and we thought well actually maybe he will be

fine in mainstream school. He seems to be managing ok. There were a couple of little things he struggled with but nothing major, but then at the beginning of this year he seemed to find it really, really hard. I think as his peers matured and he didn't change in the same way.'

Tim had joined the school following a difficult start in another school, and Trish (Senco) told me at the beginning of the project that his mother was sensitive about use of the 'A' word (autism), and advised that it should not be mentioned in relation to her son. On reflection, her anxiety comes through during our fragmented interview, mine too as we both seemed to struggle to maintain coherent threads of such, in many ways a traumatic story and I found myself continually appeasing: (M=Tim's mum, E=Erica, and I will use the same abbreviations when apt throughout the case study)

E: Good, good. Well, he's learning about his own capabilities and he's trying to push himself..

M: I think so, yeah, yeah. He has a go. And he loves going out on his bike round the roads and that..

E: Good..

M: We try not to keep him from doing anything....much as I want to protect him (laughter)

Trish (Senco) had been working closely with Tim, his parents and outside agencies, to make a case for referral during the time that he was involved in the research project. I will introduce Trish in more detail because, on reflection, a kind of adhesive quality of relationship (Bick, 1964) sometimes associated with Asperger's syndrome (Mitrani, 2008), between participants involved with Tim, seemed to emerge as a feature of this case study.

As well as this, some of the primitive defence mechanisms Tim deployed and that I became caught up in, seemed to be played out at an organisational level. For example, at the time of research, Trish was having similar anxieties about her own



son's social communication difficulties. She had also developed a close friendship with Tim's Mum who was working in the school, and she successfully communicated to me her struggles with 'boundaries' between professional and personal roles in school.

### **Trish, Tim, Mum and Me within the organisation**

The following question and answer extracts from my interview with Trish, when enquiring about her roles, reveal something of the significant nature of our relationship in this study, and my reflections that follow, suggest some of the 'sticky' qualities referred to above (T=Trish, E=Erica):

E: Well both.... your role in the school and you have been a fantastic partner for me in this project and I...so I am interested in two things really, your role in the school generally, but also how you feel you have contributed in the Mentoring Project Role, in which your contribution has been enormous.. but it would be interesting to hear it from your perspective?

T: I think my role within the school is to ensure that children with additional educational needs have access to the curriculum and that their needs are being met... and to support the staff ...in helping them to provide programmes for those children and to make sure that they are generally happy, and more content with their well being.

E: So you work quite closely with individual staff members and ...and outside agencies?

T: Yes... a lot of involvement with external agencies, Educational Psychologists, Specialist Teaching Services, providing programmes and making adjustments to the curriculum for the children.

E: And what about in relation to this project? We started about a year ago thinking about it and.....

T: (laughs)...I don't know how much help I have been. I hope I been some use in providing the insights into the children's background and their characters in some ways, and hopefully supporting you in being able to access staff.

E: Absolutely, that has been a key role really, because without you as a contact it would have been so much more difficult to establish the project, and to find some 'space' in the school – I mean you helped me find this room – erm...you paved the way with members of staff – explaining what it was all about erm... you identified children that would, you thought would benefit and whose parents would collaborate erm...and you generally made me feel really welcome in this environment .....

T: I hope so..... which has been massively erm helpful ...so...thank you for all that too...I think that everyone has been so grateful, erm including the children and I think we can really see the benefits.

E: Can you? Do you think it has made a difference to those individuals?

T: Yes...it has.

Through the project, as we began to get to know each other, Trish who was a single-parent of a four-year old boy, gradually intimated concerns about her own son's communication difficulties, and how he was struggling in the Reception class of his first school because his teachers did not seem to understand him – similar to the situation Tim's Mum described about her son's first school experience in our interview. This was obviously painful for Trish who worked part-time as the school Senco. She relied on her parents for child care while she worked, and had become increasingly frustrated with the way she perceived her son's behaviour was being criticised by teachers at his new infant school. Such was her concern that half-way through the project, she decided to move into the village where she worked so that her son could attend the same school. She felt this would enable both her and staff she knew and trusted, to work with him in a more sympathetic way – rather similar to the position Tim's Mum's had negotiated. However, this change was not easy or straightforward for Trish, and inevitably involved all the usual disappointments and let-downs associated with house moves so that each week she seemed to have new episodes of her ongoing crises to impart to me. I

was also in the process of moving myself at the time, but did not feel there was space or time to share this with Trish, as she seemed so pre-occupied and at times overwhelmed with her own worries – which took up all the space, rather like Tim’s and his mother’s anxieties.

Struggling with boundaries, negotiating emotional obstacles at home seemed, for Trish, to be played out in some ways at work. When I first met Trish, her office seemed a cold, uninviting jumble of old cupboards, desks, piles of papers and also an unreliable clock, all of which did not seem to belong or work together in the room. I knew the clock was unreliable as I borrowed it each week for mentoring and it was a continuous point of reference for Tim. In spite of a lovely photograph of her little boy with his Dad, Trish who was a pretty, petite woman with long hair, also seemed uncomfortable in this gloomy room. Through the project the room seemed to become more jumbled and chaotic, with the diminutive Trish less able to sort it out. Interestingly, it was Trish’s friend, Tim’s Mum who, during her interview, used the phrase; ‘re-think my mental furniture’ when describing her own emotional adjustment to Tim’s difficulties. It was not until the final weeks of the project, when the room was painted, re-carpeted, re-furnished, and Trish began to share her office with the bright and breezy Deputy Head who had returned from maternity leave, that some semblance of order seemed to take shape. By this time, both Tim’s and her own son’s diagnoses had been confirmed and the label ‘Aspergers’ acquired that seemed, from my teaching experience, to help parents relieve themselves of anxiety and guilt that sadly seems to be part of coming to terms with having children with additional needs.

Amidst the confusion of transition and uncertainty that Trish was experiencing during the project, I was also trying to find a place, some sort of punctuating space that would let me into the organisation to undertake the research. As with Trish,

this was not simply to do with the school organisation but, in my case, contingent external demands that I felt at the time were holding me back. Certainly, at an organisational level, the school was suffering from the absence of ‘ill’ members of staff e.g. the aforementioned Mr. Chatwell. Absences not only affected pupils’ learning experiences, but also meant that Trish was involved in ‘cover teaching’, as well as trying to manage her Senco role which alone continued to be, as I remembered from my own lengthy Senco experience, a demanding task. Perhaps because of my expectations of the role, even before I saw child participants individually, entries in my research journal began to show my irritation. Or, perhaps my anxiety about finding a way in to begin the project was an example of the pedantic, polarised defensive perspective I can sometimes take, and that I also found so compelling in Tim:

‘We both said we felt excited about beginning the project. However, I was a bit fed up when the following Tuesday morning just before I left for school to begin the first day of individual sessions with children, Trish rang to say she hadn’t been able to send out forms as she was confused about which forms to send. She asked me to bring some along. I was annoyed - perhaps partly because I know the forms are so copious and confusing – but also because the call was so last minute and although I realise I am just a speck on the horizon of their universe, I keep thinking I’ve organised things only to find it all needs re-doing. I suspect it will continue to be like this. I recall enough about school to realise how overloaded and stressed everyone is and I am also beginning to get to know the ups and downs of this school a little more. There never seems to be a ‘normal’ day in a primary school, so I guess I have to aim to be as flexible....’

During the project, Trish’s response to me was unfailingly warm and welcoming and I have no doubt, as suggested in the interview extract above, she represented the project supportively to other staff, as well as to the Head. Also, her

commitment to helping Tim with whom she felt she had a special relationship was apparent. He was the first child she asked me to see and the only name on our list of possible participants that from the beginning did not change. From the start, Trish said she thought that Tim's Mum would be very supportive as she was enthusiastic about any kind of help for him. On reflection, perhaps involving me was also something to do with sharing the pressure Trish and the school were experiencing with this family. I was quickly aware, as well as wary of becoming embroiled in this close triangle; Mum and Tim and Trish, but trusting the institution's professional judgement was an important feature of the methodological bricolage. In my research journal, following my first visit to the school, I wrote: 'I assured Trish that I was keen to fit into school systems and procedures and would follow her lead and expertise as she has agreed to be my 'link person', and was key to finding a way into the organisation.'

From re-reading my initial observations, however, it is clear that I was confused and unable to get to grips with the nature of Tim's Mum's presence in the school. I describe her variously in my observation notes as a Newly Qualified Teacher, as finishing her PGCE year, and as a temporary class teacher. In our interview she talked about leaving 'Further Education' at a stage when she was coming to terms with Tim's difficulties, and joining the school's staff as a 'dinner lady' as she 'felt I had to stop and needed to stand back a bit really and try to work out what that meant'. She always seemed somehow to be close by whenever I was there and was very keen to engage me in conversation about Tim. I found this a little stifling as it made me anxious about her expectations. It is interesting how I felt similarly confused and alarmed at times with Tim during the mentoring sessions.

I did not meet Tim's Dad, but I felt there was something about Tim and his Mum being the same. She seemed a little flustered when I asked how she thought Tim's

experience of school compared with her own. She recalled having little difficulty academically, yet she said she had found friendships more challenging:

‘I’m ...I’m ...The social side of it is something else, but in terms of academic achievement I didn’t.. feel I struggled at school. I don’t remember learning to read and write and I don’t remember having problems with things like that, and I really loved that, I loved going to school. I used to find friendships a bit difficult I mean as you do. Children can be funny. (laughs)’

Near the end of our interview, she talked about her own anxiety, and how Tim was able to tune into this and to support his mother so the child/parent containing roles appear a little muddled:

‘...and I try very hard not to get, but if things happen at home sometimes, say something gets spilled. On a bad day that might upset me. He’s ever so good at looking after me, he says ‘Oh well, it doesn’t matter. I’ll get a cloth’ and he wipes it. He actually talks to himself if he does that, he says ‘OK, I can mop it up’ and he kind of, it’s like he tells himself. He tries to reassure himself.’

After moving him from a school where she considered Tim to be ‘terribly unhappy’, she seemed to have invested all her hopes for the ‘solution’ in Trish and Brompton school. I do not know how helpful this was for Trish, but Tim’s Mum’s employment meant she was constantly there. Moreover, her friendship with Trish meant she had someone with whom she could share her worries, who would keep her up to date with school events relating to Tim, and to whom she could also give advice about coping with social communication difficulties based on her own, painful experiences –as she struggled with the process of coming to terms with Tim’s difficulties:

‘You know you don’t know if your child will cope in mainstream school and I suppose for a very long time I kept telling myself that it was something he would grow out of. You know at some point he’ll grow out of this. At some point he’ll just have a spurt

and that will be behind him, because lots of people used to say to me, you know my child is just the same, they used to do that.....they don't do it any more...and so I think part of me had thought that he would grow out of it..... ‘

Rather poignantly, she brought to mind one of the most important things I had come to understand when working with children with special educational needs. The entire family struggle externally within their socio-cultural contexts, and internally as they mourn the loss of their ‘perfect’ babies. Now I seemed to be observing their psychosocial fears and desires as part of the story the child brings and communicates through responses and learning behaviours in school. I wonder whether this school had thought or talked about this in relation to Tim; about the emotional load that staff, certainly Liz (Tim’s support assistant) and also I think Trish, less consciously, were bound to be carrying and trying to dealing with?

In this way, Tim and his Mum both seemed to continually stir emotional memories and evoke associations from my own personal and professional experiences. Perhaps part of the transference and counter-transference, I found myself struggling to manage some of the emotional boundaries between myself as a teacher/researcher/mentor, and participants during the research project. I include here the story about Jon – a child I had taught in a previous job. I wrote this in the ‘process’ section of my ‘proforma’ notes following working with and thinking about Tim because I think it shows how I began to wrestle with those boundaries, and to wonder what was happening in the transference processes that began to affect my thinking and relationships in the research project:

‘Jon, a pupil in the language department I ran before I came to CCCU, was 5 years old and could articulate only ten words - he was linguistically and physically dyspraxic. He also had bowel problems and we couldn't tell the level of cognitive delay. Including Jon in a mainstream setting, where his parents were

desperate for him to be, was problematic for him, and challenging for the language department. He was usually good humoured, quite brave and feisty, but also sometimes frightened and sad – as we and his parents were. We recruited as much support and expertise within and beyond the school as we could, involving continual visits from Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Educational Psychologists. We devised targets and timetables and programmes of work, we bought new PC software, we enrolled in ‘signing’ classes and started an after school ‘signing’ club, we created a sensory integration room, we harnessed the good will of the whole school and I felt pretty pleased with myself for instigating and ‘managing’ all this hyper-activity. However, when it came down to working with Jon, none of all that stuff was of the slightest help. I knew a bit about Jon’s expressive language difficulties but didn’t know what he understood, and was struggling to find a way to communicate with him. After one exasperating session on the computer, with me going through the motions of talking for him – again - he sat lopsided on a chair with his head down. Then, almost in an act of desperation – as a last resort – I knelt beside Jon’s chair and engaged with him. I wonder why such a simple thing was the most difficult thing to do. When I finished talking to Jon, telling him how much I wanted to help him, but needed him to try to help me to do that, he put his arms round my neck and hugged me – and that was a seminal, containing.... moment for Jon and I.. Through engagement we learnt, and we both began to make progress. So I guess I’m trying to locate the process of transference in relation to engagement and containment. I need to read about this – found something in Coren (1997). A basic motive for this research is a belief that ‘learning and teaching are less about an individual’s cognitive capacities, and more about how we allow ourselves to use certain forms of relationships’ (Coren, 1997, p.46) - which requires considering psychoanalytic, narrative approaches. So pupil-teacher transference is an important factor for all participants in this research – because working reflexively with child participants in this project, and linking this with my auto/biographical experience in considering



attention and ‘engagement’ to be the most important containing facility – is beginning to make me more aware of the potential power – positive and dangerous implications (Lacan, 1994) - of transference. With Jon, engagement seemed to bring us into a more real and authentic (learning) experience. Engaging with Tim on the other hand, is different...He avoids engaging with me by physically moving away if I ask or say anything he can’t bear to think about, but when I engage with him he successfully uses a variety of strategies at his disposal (humour, stories, knowledge, eye contact) to try to keep me tuned into his agenda, pre-occupations and fantasies – and he does this quite effectively. I wonder to what extent I should indulge Tim in this way because this is probably why he seems to increasingly enjoy coming to the mentoring room on Tuesdays. I want to be able to use the transference to contain him in a more positive way to help him engage more effectively with the reality of learning in school.’

Identity anxieties about ‘indulging’ him and losing myself by letting boundaries slip were resonantly there with Tim as he constantly strove to take control, to pursue his own agenda, and I found myself inclined to follow. Unlike Jon, I found Tim rather too easy to engage with. So my query in the above extract, about what was happening between Jon and I, and why something that should have been so simple (engagement) for me was a last resort, seems also to relate to understanding something about defences Tim and I made use of in the research project.

With Jon, the institution was organised to deploy services and strategies that seemed to work to help avoid the pain of thinking about his difficulties. The defence at an individual level may have been about my own fears of helplessness and inadequacy. Perhaps at some level I channelled my anger into ‘hyperactivity’ to rid me of the difficult feelings I had about Jon and his disabilities, which were hard for me to confront. Tim sometimes lapsed into hyperactive periods when he

was particularly anxious during mentoring sessions, and perhaps such anxiety was a heightened form of the kind I experienced with Jon.

Also, in relation to struggling with boundaries, in supervision we talked about how Tim found it extremely difficult to own and integrate the destructive parts of his personality. I observed and felt examples of this splitting defence many times during the mentoring sessions with Tim, described below. This and becoming more aware of combinations of my own psychological valency (Bion, 1961) – as described in Chapter 2, as part of the psychosocial interplay of social and internal worlds when working with Tim, who seemed to call up several roles beyond my researcher/mentor title in the project, reminded me of Winnicott's (1960) work on 'false-self', in relation to 'container-contained' (Bion, 1962).

In this project, whilst a social level of 'false-self' organisation was usefully deployed as I worked to maintain professional boundaries, I learnt that recognising and integrating my own destructiveness may sometimes be difficult at a personal level. Or, perhaps Tim's feeling states were just so pervasive that even as a teacher using a mentoring role as a research tool, I was liable to 'catch' some of them. Even with regular supervision from my research supervisors, I found some of this experience frightening enough to seek further containment in personal therapy. In Chapter 10, I reflect on possible beneficial and hazardous implications for the emotional well-being of teachers, in relation to some of the transference and countertransference processes at play when working each day with groups of pupils and students. These are clearly discernible in my observations of interactions within the case studies.

### **What happened in the Mentoring Sessions?**

I will use observations I made of my interactions with Tim during mentoring sessions. I wrote up observations – including my thoughts and feelings, following mentoring, as narratives to reflect on the experience of our interactions, as explained in the methodology Chapter, 3. The reflexive methodology may help to illuminate meanings and develop my understanding of barriers to learning encountered by Tim in the classroom setting that might otherwise be overlooked.

Liz (support assistant) revealed something of her anxiety about Tim when I asked her how he was before collecting him from class for our first individual mentoring session: ‘She said he responds well to specific, short activities’. This led me, based on my previous teaching experience with additional needs and diverse learners, to infer that he found open-ended, longer tasks challenging and that Liz may find it difficult to cope with his responses in such situations. When I entered Tim’s class:

‘He was sitting alone in the same seat as when I first met him – arms stretched straight in front of him on the desk with his face down resting on his arms. He looked up and frowned as though his thoughts were being disturbed, when the teacher called his name, adjusted his glasses purposefully and looked at me as I said ‘hello Tim’. I think he must be long-sighted as his glasses make his large brown eyes even larger and tends to make him look surprised.’

Tim alone, head down, arms out-stretched in the space around him seemed to emphasise his separation, and the distress he might be feeling. This fraught, familiar ‘left alone’ state was confirmed in my choice of words; ‘disturbed’ and ‘thoughts’ when I described the teacher trying to engage his attention.

The image of Tim looking surprised, through enlarged brown eyes was intense, sensory and evoked a primitive sense of infant vulnerability. I found myself slipping straight into a 'new mother' state when, anxious and confused by the infant I realised I was; 'still not entirely certain how to explain myself and the mentoring session to Tim'. Tim seemed to collude by dabbing his nose with a tissue and cueing my questions about his cold because, as I wrote in my observation, 'his nose looked sore'. I also recall making a mental note to bring a box of tissues the following week for such eventualities. Whilst happy to be cosseted in this way, Tim who seemed to be trying to take control of the situation emotionally, managed to communicate both his and my maternal associations.

He also established a clear relational hierarchy by intimating the magical powers his own mother possessed: 'He explained that he couldn't breathe very well but his mum put a special chemical on his pillow at night which helped him breathe in the night'. On reflection, I can see how I became drawn, rather too easily, into his world through the mother-son transference and countertransference processes that invisibly but certainly influenced our relationship.

Having taken charge, Tim proceeded to tell me how influential Information Communication Technology had become. I described this in my observation as typifying, based on my previous teaching experience, an Aspergers' pedantic monologue. 'During a fractional pause, I asked if he was expecting to see me today and he nodded immediately before continuing his monologue about I.T'. On reflection I can see how displaying this rush of information he had collected, and recalled, was about gathering himself together to extend his sense of control, but it also coincided with the likely anxiety he was feeling about the onslaught of an unknown mentoring experience. At this point, and subsequently, I noticed that the

more anxious Tim was, the more intense and lengthy the pedantic monologue defence became.

I realised that routines and regular frameworks were important to Tim, so made sure I pointed out the 'mentoring room' label on the door and explained that this quiet room was where we would meet each Tuesday morning, after his I.T lesson with Liz, his support assistant. I was optimistic about Tim enjoying the mentoring sessions as Liz had told me how well he responded in one-to-one situations with adults. When he entered the room the car 'maze' puzzle on the bookshelf immediately caught his attention. Tim liked vehicles and he then explored the other puzzles and games, excitedly. Claiming the 'maze' puzzle as his own, he held it tightly in one hand and moved a plastic chair from under the desk with the other, placed it in the middle of the room and sat facing me with his hands on his knees. He looked like King Canute at the water's edge trying to show me how powerful he was by holding back the sea, or whatever it might be that I was tempted to throw at him, and seemingly ready to let battle commence. I was slightly alarmed by this explicitly challenging, rather aggressive action but on reflection, there seemed to be several things going on between us.

Perhaps Tim was letting me know that he was the important, central person in the room. Certainly, negotiating his omnipotence and need to control, a characteristic identified by all the adults who worked with him, became a recurring theme in the mentoring sessions. Or, perhaps it was about retaining control of his own, sometimes frightening, aggressive impulses. At the time, I overlooked this - as a teacher might - assuming what seemed an attentive audience might also engage, so took the opportunity to explain the mentoring project. However, I soon stopped as Tim did not seem able to listen and attend, but appeared totally disinterested and distressed:

‘I didn’t explain my role or intentions further as, unlike the other children, Tim didn’t appear to require further information, he turned from side to side with his legs crossed, one elbow on the back of his chair resting his chin in one hand while he dabbed gingerly at his runny nose with the other. He didn’t seem very comfortable with the old, crumpled tissue, searching his pockets several times for a fresh one. I said I would have to remember to bring a box of tissues for next time.’

He did not seem to know which way to turn. It was a complete reversal from his King Canute challenge, or perhaps ‘pose’, as he moved from pedant to infant in an instant, he communicated conflicting feelings of helplessness and frustration, that I found equally confusing. Perhaps Tim was just pretending to be like somebody else, somebody he would like to be, but experiencing the emotional roller coaster that seemed to be part of being with Tim explained something of the fatigue that Liz sometimes talked of. He began to stare at the maps on the wall I had put up to help give participants a containing sense of external ‘place’, as well as seeking some internal mind ‘space’, in the mentoring room:

‘The maps on the wall caught his attention and he got up to inspect them. He easily found the UK on the world map and Canterbury on the UK map. I said it would be good to have a map of Kent but, seemingly disinterested, he stopped me talking by returning to the car maze. I watched him play and asked what he liked about that particular puzzle and he said it was probably because he likes cars and lorries and things with wheels that move and turn, so I offered the words ‘vehicles’ and ‘transport’ and Tim said ‘yes, especially trains....steam trains’.

Tim kept cutting me off, or ‘stopped me talking’ again by disengaging. Perhaps he wanted me to know that was how he felt. So instead, I stopped trying to persuade him to follow my agenda and began to try to tune into him. ‘I watched him play’

with his favourite puzzle and when I let him know that I understood something about his interests, he said ‘yes’, which seemed to signal a connection with Tim, as with our previous ‘gluing’ experience in the classroom. I knew he was quite ‘fixed’ on trains at the time, from discussion with his class teacher, and he took the opportunity to bombard me with detailed minutia of train ‘livery’, ‘stock’ and; ‘enthused about tenders, particularly when I said I did not know what tenders were’. I could feel myself becoming anxious:

‘Concerned about remembering the words Tim used – for writing up this first, important interaction, especially as Tim’s use of language is a particularly interesting feature of the way he communicates, I began to realise these thoughts were distracting me from engaging with him – what I perceived to be the logistics of the research motive were nagging. However, I decided at this stage the words did not matter so much as trying to tune in and build some rapport with Tim so I tried to let go of the worry and engage.’

It was interesting that I could not take-in Tim’s words, which I knew I would not remember because they related factual information which became a meaningless distraction as it disrupted the authentic communication I was seeking. This ‘information overload’ seemed to present me with a barrier to, rather than a vehicle for thinking, and I was quickly confused. Perhaps this was how Tim felt about the unfathomable noise of ‘talk’ in the classroom when it was less factual, ambiguous or needed interpreting. For example, being asked to generate ideas for a myth, after ‘Pandora’s Box’, that I had previously observed in the classroom, provoked in him a crisis about ‘not knowing’ rather like the ‘not knowing’ state I was experiencing with him at this time when trying to remember his precise words about the facts he imparted.

On reflection our focus on train ‘tenders’ was interesting. As Tim persisted with their importance not only to trains (see below), he might also have been concerned

perhaps, about how 'tender' I would be towards him in our new relationship. The interplay of psychic states, words and imago is interesting. His recurring fears, as suggested earlier, of being attacked, and sensitivity to others was re-enforced by his mother in our interview. The feeling I was left with was that she and Tim were rather 'done to' as they had to put up with others' conventional, seemingly misguided norms e.g. writing forms instead of cartoons and drawing. Also, Mum felt Tim had been treated badly in his first school:

M: He'd started Reception Class where we lived before and he was terribly unhappy. It was a very noisy class and he had quite a loud and aggressive teacher and I think he found all of that really difficult and we moved here after about half a term and within ...

During our first mentoring session, Tim started to recall a previous family holiday when he had visited a railway museum and seen two 'Rockets', it immediately brought into my mind memories of visits to York Railway Museum with my son when he was a boy, and also school visits with classes I had taught when I lived in East Yorkshire. I wrote in my observation notes: 'I must look out some photos or postcards and put them up in the mentoring room for the next time I see Tim'. I quickly found myself, through these associations, responding as mother and teacher as well as a mentor/ researcher to Tim.

The thing about being drawn into his world, and beginning to identify with Tim was that he seemed to make time slip, so it switched for me as quickly as his feeling states, from the present to the past and back, from one association to another. The difficulty I am currently experiencing, with trying to write about the mentoring sessions in a more or less chronological order seems to echo this.

He loved to draw and seemed, at this first meeting, to welcome the idea of composing a 'scrapbook' that would be all about him, and would be kept in a box



on the bottom shelf of the bookcase until he returned. He drew a 'very well practised, stylised circles and lines' streamlined train that 'he particularly liked', drawing into the platform where he and his brother (younger, year 3 pupil) were 'waving it in'. As though he was beginning to take me 'on board' as it were, I think the train represented me, and I took this to be a positive response to our first meeting. Or perhaps it was more of a reward for complying with his favoured agenda - although he did not seem to know, and neither did I, where the train was going.

By the end of this session, Tim seemed very relaxed and 'lingered happily over the puzzles on the bookshelf ', particularly the yellow cube, a puzzle that became a regular touchstone in our meetings. I reassured him that these things would still be there next time but he re-asserted a controlled, safe distance with an ambivalent response: 'He said he thought he might return but added; it depends...he'd have to think about it', so I was left feeling disappointed and uncertain about how the mentoring session had gone.

Later, during break the same morning, I saw him in the playground and he rushed up, excitedly as a much younger child might, fixed me with his large brown eyes and asked when I was coming again, and what we would do? These confusing switches, and mixed communications were characteristic of our interactions, with Tim projecting some of the uncomfortable uncertainty that was always there when he did not know what would happen next. Not knowing what would happen next was particularly acute for Tim during lunchtime and playtime sessions which were largely unstructured and therefore I suspected rather frightening for him. Perhaps that was why marshalling time and making plans were so important to Tim.

In the second mentoring session Tim brought with him many of the anxieties and pre-occupations that had been intimated previously, and which became consistent themes; confusion, death, bullying, attack, autism, Mum, his-story, and fear of the future (time). He began the session with such a fractured outburst, it left me reeling and whilst trying to stay with him, which he also seemed to be inviting me to do, I began to feel anxious and ill-equipped to cope:

‘Tim fairly bounced across the room when he saw me and he said he had remembered I would be coming on Tuesday as he led the way to the mentoring room. When I asked if he had had a good half-term, he said ‘yes’, and I noticed as we walked down the stairs from his classroom, he was wearing new shoes. He picked up the car puzzle from the bookshelf as he passed but sat in an easy chair straight away and started talking rather disjointedly about ‘old shoes flying off the bonnet....on his way to school....from London.....this morning...shoes flew off the bonnet all the way to Milawi’. I said ‘...that’s a long way for a shoe Tim, do you know where Milawi is?’ Tim replied: ‘No, but it’s somewhere in Africa....anyway I’m just making this up...old shoes.....it’s for ‘Blue Peter’ .... for old shoes.’ So, it became slightly clearer that this was something to do with a ‘Blue Peter’ appeal for old shoes, so I said: ‘I see what you mean.’

In supervision, we discussed Tim’s excitement and idealisation of me, as he was very keen to come to the mentoring room and I had already shown I was prepared to engage with him and his world in the previous session. It was interesting that he made a bee line for the car puzzle that had comforted him in our first session and which continued to be his ‘comforter’ in mentoring sessions, and it did seem to contribute to the transitional play spaces we sought. When I had assured him that, in a way I could make some kind of sense from his bizarre storytelling, he seemed to calm down and revealed something of the significance of those tricky unstructured lunch and break times:

‘Then Tim looked down at the puzzle on his lap and said; ‘I am an Aspergers boy.....that means I’m slightly different.’ He looked at me as though expecting some reaction before saying very quickly as he stood up, spun round, picked up a sheet of A4 paper and went to sit at the table with his back towards me: ‘Sometimes people with Aspergers get bullied.’

Following the pattern of his overwhelming, initial outburst, this little flurry of hyperactivity, that seemed to both push me away and insist that I attend, preceded his disclosure about bullying and it’s relation to being an ‘Asperger’s boy’. It certainly helped momentarily to illumine the chaos, but I did not know how to respond. I felt caught between shock, sympathy and fear about asking him leading questions. I had missed invitations to engage from other participants, Conrad came to mind, through fear and perhaps insecurity about my complicated role and place in the institution, but as Tim’s revelation was embedded, almost incidentally, in this hyper-action - as I found his revelations usually were - I was never certain whether he was trying to provoke reaction. Instead, and in an effort to keep my own sense of emotional balance, I decided to take a step back and keep listening, rather than pursuing the topic of bullying on his terms, amidst the climate of emotional turmoil he seemed to be stirring:

‘I went to join him at the table where he had started to draw a train and I asked him if he had ever caught the train from Brompton. He said he hardly ever travels by train – mostly car, then said: ‘We’re going on holiday to France I think but I’m afraid the boat will sink.....I’ve been before when I was two.....I don’t remember...but it was nice’, and he stood up and went to the bookcase and tried to put the cube puzzle together.’

I felt that for once he really did not want to talk about trains and was annoyed that I had side-stepped his agenda. At times of stress Tim often turned his attention to the yellow cube puzzle on the bookshelf. It was in pieces during this session, rather like our interaction – although trying to put the random geometric shapes

together before he left each mentoring session became a kind of ritualised default position for him. Each piece seemed rather like him, too exact and rigid to fit in easily with the other pieces.

During this session, Tim obviously needed to let me know he felt he was under attack from other pupils in the school, so he persisted. When I was finally able to respond to this communication through his barrage of historic facts about invasion, he briefly acknowledged how horrible this felt; 'Yes' before returning to his 'sinking' story. I think he was trying to tell me how he felt he was struggling in school:

'He selected another piece of paper and said he was going to draw Dover castle. I listened and watched as he spoke and drew....'Norman lighthouse.....Saxon's invaded.....Henry VIII lived there for a while.....used to be a military defence in WW2....'. Tim's talk is often littered with references to do with being under siege. I said: 'It must be horrible for people with Aspergers if they're bullied. 'Yes...can I draw 1912?' Tim replied, 'It's about the Titanic....'

Following the session, I felt worried about Tim and expressed my concern about his disclosure to Trish (Senco). She said there had been some teasing incidents and that Tim's increasingly physical responses were aggravating the situation, but she tried to reassure me that it was being dealt with. This confirmed something of a more reciprocal relationship between Tim as victim and the bullies that he so hated and feared. The theme recurred. At one stage he used part of the mentoring session to plan, using cartoon drawings, a complex revenge strategy including armoured vehicles to attack one of his enemies, someone he recalled having hurt him in the past. He also asked whether I could see the fatal flaw in his plan.

Feeling quite uneasy but trying not to show it, I said ‘no’, and he replied triumphantly that he did not have a driving license. I began to wonder whether his continuing traumas were all about the same trauma, but held onto the thought that the containing mentoring space may have been providing something of a safe place for him to play out and vent some of the vengeance he harboured.

At the end of session two, once I had acknowledged his pain, Tim relaxed and switched to drawing and telling me a more positive (and welcome) story about his cat, Lotty and the sanctuary he found at home:

‘He started to chuckle and I asked what he was thinking about. He said it was Lotty his cat. He said his family sometimes called Lotty; ‘soggy moggy’ when she got wet in the rain, and sometimes ‘the queen of I don’t know what’ (mum’s expression), when she sits on the windowsill with her tail wrapped around her, watching the world go by. Tim drew some lovely pictures of Lotty in these poses – he spoke warmly about his family – mum, dad and brother.’

My first thought here was that Lotty represented me in his mind at that moment, particularly in relation to his Mum who must in some ways have begun to wonder who I was and what on earth ‘watching’ Tim was about. I was more alarmed at the beginning of the following session when a now familiar flurry of movement, signalling Tim’s agitation, preceded a story about his cat being run over:

‘I said, ‘surely not Lotty, the queen of I don’t know what?’  
He smiled and said: ‘No, not Lotty, the other one....but at least we still have Lotty....it was the vet who told us’

Tim was pleased I had remembered and ‘held him in mind’ through his story about Lotty. At this early, idealisation stage of our relationship, I think Tim wanted to include me in his world. This came through variously during the next few mentoring sessions. For example, during the third session he said rather glumly;

'I'm going on holiday in the summer and you won't be there'. I reassured him that summer was quite a long time ahead and that he would have a happy time with his family. Continuing on what became our favourite 'train' topic, I mentioned wanting to travel on the Orient Express, so he immediately drew me, and his teachers on the Orient Express going to France:

'That's you, just getting on the train. I asked if he was there – but he'd already drawn himself in the engine room – 'of course', he said, 'I'm the chief engineer'

As always, Tim was most at ease when he felt in charge and in control, and as being the leader is not something I consciously desire, it was not in some ways a problem, so we began to play. The problem was trying to find a balance between indulging his agenda, and trying to help him tolerate the uncertainty of mine, and this tension at times proved difficult for us both. For example, when I introduced the Jenka game:

'I could see he was concentrating very hard and I asked him what he thought would happen if the tower crashed. Tim talked about the pieces going everywhere all over the floor and over the table. I agreed with his prediction and suggested that wouldn't really matter ...because we could soon pick the pieces up and put them back together on the table. Nevertheless, instead of removing blocks from the body of the tower, Tim resorted to taking single blocks from the top of the tower – that wouldn't cause collapse. As this was obviously a stress-free strategy, Tim chatted away, giving me advice about which blocks I might attempt to remove next. I prepared Tim for the crash he seemed fine when the bricks went everywhere – he just put them back into form straight away – and very carefully.....but he did not choose to play this game again during the project.

On reflection, I realise it would have been more helpful to have insisted on him keeping to the rules, as in a classroom situation, and I should have ensured we both

persevered and played the game again. I think one of the problems was that I felt nearly as excited as he did about not being in the classroom, but having some safe time and space to 'play'. Tim did not think much of the games I suggested, but on reflection, I was also trying to 'take the transference' (Mitrani, 2001) by going along with the roles he assigned, to support the identification process towards learning from experience. I wonder whether there is any room, or flexibility for 'going along with' in the mainstream classroom?

A further thought (as I finalise this chapter and past and present interweave), an autistic spectrum eleven year old child I currently work with in a secondary school, cannot find any time or space to do homework. He recently failed to complete a set English homework task, for which he automatically received a detention. He had however, instead, completed reading the whole class novel at home, in which he had become absorbed. Is it subversive to ask if some additional acknowledgement of such an autonomous learning initiative would really have threatened discipline, or undermined the authority of the institution?

Tim told me; 'I'm quite creative sometimes', and one of the games he introduced was 'a drawing game of charades':

'He drew a book, tv screen and film camera at the top and said; 'I have to draw and you have to guess what it is...' I watched while Tim drew 'A school like a castle..', 'a boy with glasses', 'A magic wand'....then I managed to guess it was Harry Potter and he was delighted that I guessed correctly. I was in a tight spot as I couldn't think of a character we both knew, so I drew one of those American drains in the middle of the road with steam coming out, a telephone kiosk and a cape ...and Tim excitedly guessed 'Superman'. I quickly guessed 'Thomas the tank engine' when Tim's now familiar drawing style began to outline the shape of an engine. He wanted to continue so I drew an open window with stars and a moon to indicate the night sky,

a child asleep in bed, a sparkly fairy on the bedside, an approximation of a small figure with a long shadow. As I drew, Tim said ‘oh, your bracelets are making a noise.’ I said ‘Sorry, they are noisy and do annoy some people’, as I took them off. He replied: ‘It’s alright – just abominable noise’ and covered his ears. I carried on drawing - even tried a crocodile with a clock inside as an extra clue, but Thomas didn’t guess Peter Pan – although he said he knew the story, and then he lost interest in the game.’

Apart from our interesting choices and me seeming to turn, at this stage of our relationship, into a rather annoying Tinkerbell character for Tim, there were three important points that this observation emphasised. First, it captured Tim’s sensitivity to noise, which I also learnt from the way he nearly literally jumped out of his skin when during one of our sessions the fire alarm went off. He subsequently drew a number of cartoon stories depicting the school burning down with him being the hero who rescued everyone, including a girl he liked in year 6. This and his response to the ‘abominable noise’ my bracelets made, underlines his sensitivity to sensory overload.

Also, even small disappointments, are crushing for Tim as he swings from great emotional heights to depths in a rather unregulated way. However, the third thing was that following this low position, Tim chose another piece of paper and began to make a cartoon story board of himself with thought bubbles coming from his head in all directions:

‘Tim drew thought bubbles coming from his head in all directions. There were two things on his mind, they were transport for getting to his new school and communicating with others – I was really relieved to see that bubble with a picture of Tim looking at and shaking hands with someone else.’



I felt relieved that Tim was beginning to think about future events, albeit events that were over a year away, in a more positive way and that he included positive social communication and interaction in his plans. As the following extract shows, time was a significant planning tool for Thomas that he wanted to deploy to help him to locate and organise his rivals in the project:

‘I moved to the bookcase and showed him the large box for his (and others) work. He liked the box and practised opening and closing it several times – I said it looks a bit like a treasure chest doesn’t it? He carried on opening and closing it, then sat beside me at the desk. He asked who the other children were who came to the mentoring room and keep their work in the box. I went through the names of the children and whose classes they were in and what time the children came to the learning mentor room. He, meanwhile was drawing a steam train called the ‘Tim Flyer’. He said: ‘Shall we make a time table.....for their arrivals and departures....and we could put them on the wall? Depicting the other children as trains coming into the mentoring room station, Tim decided and wrote down whether each child was a diesel or electric train (only he was a steam train) and he gave them names that included their own e.g. The Isabel Special, Conrad Commuter and Leo Express. He asked me again to go through their arrival and departure times and wrote them down like a train timetable. While he was doing this I was wondering how the other children would respond to Tim’s idea.’

At first I was glad that Tim was taking an interest in the other participants, but rather concerned about preserving the boundaries, and conserving a separate containing space for each of them. Perhaps Tim’s difficulties with separation informed his initiative that seemed to cut across personal spaces and intimate boundaries. It seemed as though he wanted to extend his territorial control to and intrude into the others’ time and space. In supervision, we talked also about the more likely destructive dimensions of Tim’s interest being motivated by jealousy.

This event was perhaps a feature of a story Tim pointed out during an earlier session, when I asked him whether his friends would join us on the train trip to France he replied: ‘..ah, friends, well that’s the problem..’. Through all the fantasy, chaos and anxiety, Tim seemed to have a precociously powerful grasp of language. He sometimes seemed so able to lucidly articulate the thoughts I could hardly bare to bring to consciousness, including some prevalent and at the time painful issues to do with my ‘self’ and family relations. Two examples from later mentoring sessions come to mind, one being when he looked up at me from his drawing storyboard, when it crossed my mind that sometimes simply sitting quietly and observing Tim seemed to be a helpful containing experience for him, and said; ‘You’re a nice old woman’. I tried not to show it but this was extremely painful for me at the time as I was approaching fifty, rather sensitive about my age, particularly about looking ‘old’. In supervision we thought about this also being to do with some of Tim’s more primitive fears and anxieties, but he certainly tapped into some of mine.

The second example came later in the mentoring project, by which time I knew Tim had a sense of humour, in my experience usually more of a problem for children with Aspergers, and enjoyed wordplay:

‘As we played (Connect 4) Tim told me a story about going to a café with his family where he always eats super noodles. He says he asks for ‘snoodles’ and when I asked if the people in the café understood about snoodles, he said ‘No, they don’t really – I just said that to make you laugh’ - and it worked.’

So he enjoyed browsing through the book box in the mentoring room. After the Easter break, we had begun some shared reading which, again from teaching experience, I knew could create a very therapeutic space. He particularly enjoyed Michael Rosen’s (1985) ‘Don’t put Mustard in the Custard’, and once when glancing through this book he said:

‘You know, I think the bloke who drew these pictures is the same one who draws in Roald Dahl’s books.’ I said, ‘Well spotted, Quentin Blake’s drawings are very familiar in Dahl’s stories’, then I asked if he enjoyed his books – he’s sometimes rather cruel ... ‘to women’, replied Tim without looking up. Taken by surprise, as I often am with Tim’s responses, I said; ‘Sorry, Tim, did you mean cruel to women?’

Tim, characteristically, ignored my question and brought to mind a favoured Dahl (1990) story; ‘Esiotrot’, the details of which seemed to spring to his mind as he began to explain about tortoises being generally slow. I wrote: ‘I was beginning to feel a bit tortoise-like as I tried to get some purchase on his line and leaps of thought.’ And perhaps, on reflection, that was what Tim was suggesting.

However, between ‘lightning’ illumination, there were confused and confusing patches, some of which I have included here. Whilst reading a poem of choice called; ‘Nightmare’, about someone’s fearful experience of being in the underground waiting for a train to arrive, Tim lapsed into silence. I asked about the title and whether he had nightmares. Without looking up he said he did not know because he had never been on the underground. At first taken aback by Tim’s response and thinking I had touched on a sensitive issue, on reflection this also makes me think his grasp on reality was sometimes rather fragile.

However, we gradually began to develop a more continuous dialogue that picked up experiences from previous sessions and gave us, during the calm periods of our meetings at least, a kind of continuity; a story that we worked on together. He particularly enjoyed the rituals we established such as, for example, giving each week a score out of ten to help him describe the quality of his experience. Also, he often entered the mentoring room, sat on an easy chair and said; ‘Let’s have a little chat’. What happened in the mentoring sessions gradually began to develop a

more coherent narrative structure - with a clear beginning, middle and end that in itself seemed to contribute to the containing experience.

The best thing that happened for both of us was that during the final mentoring session, by which time his interest in me and in coming to the sessions was beginning to wane, to his and to my delight, Tim successfully completed the yellow cube puzzle. He managed to put it back together and proudly left it on the top of the bookshelf on a piece of paper with his name on it so the other participants could recognise this symbol of his achievement. This may have been something to do with asserting dominance over the other participants. He was extremely interested in the others and no one else had managed to complete the yellow cube. His class teacher and his Mum spoke about Tim being disappointed with his performance in school because only 'first' and 'best' would do, it brought a significant and satisfying ending to our relationship. Although I had thoroughly rehearsed the 'ending' of the mentoring project with him and we had gone through his scrapbook to find and remind ourselves of the 'good' experiences, it remained quite a sad goodbye.

### **Concluding Reflection**

I return to some themes of this case study for further discussion in Chapters 9 and 10. I focus on my own struggles to learn from experience, in relation to transference, countertransference and muddled boundary issues that working with Tim particularly evoked, in Chapter 9. Tim had an autistic spectrum disorder and was diagnosed as 'Aspergers'. He was part of a close and loving family and he seemed particularly anxious about separation that was perhaps apparent from his earliest experiences, as described by his mother in her interview. His mother worked in school so she was never far away, but Tim also worried about leaving primary school and the prospect of moving to the secondary phase.

Evidenced from our very first in class meeting, Tim felt he was under attack. To protect himself he seemed to have very rigid internal defensive boundaries. He was very split and could only cope with being either first or last – as seen in the class assembly line up from our first encounter. In keeping with the chapter title – Tim’s close somewhat ‘sticky’ attachments to adults - his mother, to Liz, to Trish began to extend to me as I began to sense the claustrophobic nature of these relationships. ‘Me’ became a central theme of his story and manifested in the interactions I describe between Trish, Tim’s Mum and myself. I identified with Tim’s tendency to be pedantic and polarised in a way that revealed the primitive level of his fears and responses to others – both real and imagined. This suggested in relation to my understanding of container-contained, that Tim had a rather split, insecure sense of self. At the beginning of mentoring, I learnt how instead of using language to think, he used it as a kind of ‘beta-screen’ to defend against meaningful communicative interaction. This was demonstrated, for example, when he bombarded me with ‘factual information’ about train livery during our first mentoring session and later the history of Dover castle. Tim was a frightened boy who particularly struggled with uncertainty and it was interesting how his certain attack of factual knowledge provided a palatable way of fending off or avoiding authentic engagement. I wonder the extent to which something of this defence might represent what other children and teachers, charged with engaging in learning in school may experience.

The claustrophobic pull of the relational vortex between Trish, Tim and his Mum in which I seemed to become caught, raised questions about the way fears and desires of parents of children with special educational needs are acted out in the school setting. For example, to what extent are teachers and parent aware of this and how is it thought about in the school context? Fruggeri (2011) draws attention

to the relational interdependence of the context within which children grow, an important issue to which I return in Chapter 9. Equally I became aware of being drawn into 'avoidance' at an institutional level, in terms of struggling to find time and space to engage with the significant burden Liz carried. Liz, who as a teaching assistant working individually with Tim, a pupil with significant additional needs, each day, may have benefitted from some containing supervision, particularly as she may have been the least professionally qualified amongst school staff to undertake her demanding role.

Another interesting thing about Tim was a pre-occupation – rather as with Liam – of 'time'. Tim worked hard to marshal time in the context of the mentoring room – he wanted to create a timetable for the other children yet his anxieties revealed his fragile sense of real time. For example, Tim was a year 5 pupil with another full academic year to complete before moving the secondary phase of his education, yet he was constantly tormented by phantasies of being bullied by others when he moved.

During the mentoring sessions, rehearsing the possibility of meeting new people in his new setting by drawing cartoon characters, which of course included Tim as the main protagonist to satisfy his narcissistic sense of self, seemed to help. Creating simple friendship dialogues with speech bubbles which worked to open a more tolerable narrative expectation for Tim, that seemed to defuse his anxiety a little. There were other ways in which time slipped for Tim too. Fixed on disaster, Tim's recourse at the thought of all travel, particularly the journey of life, held the uncertainty and trauma of Titanic proportions.

Finding some middle ground between being too far apart and too close it seemed was the difficult task for Tim as well as those around him. I talked about being

easily drawn into Tim's world as he projected infantile phantasies that evoked my maternal instincts. The countertransference was also strong and brought to mind Jon, a younger pupil with whom I had initially struggled to engage. There was something in that story about the need to let go of self in order to be receptive enough to engage with and relate to an other that seems to characterise Bion's notion of love in relation to hate and knowing. This was particularly relevant to Tim – and I had a sense of this too with Conrad. Yet, in the mentoring room I think I was able to give myself over to Tim, to stay with him and sustain his projections in a reasonably calm and containing way that helped him to feel understood.

He seemed to benefit from the regular, predictable pattern and structure of our meetings and it was interesting how he quickly strove to ritualise our activities into familiar scripts, again perhaps to defend against uncertainty. Scripts, rather like the inanimate historical facts he could sometimes produce in class were easy for Tim to recall and perform as a closed, structured academic exercise. Scripts, as for actors, may be seen as providing instructions, rather than engaging thinking. In the flexible, essentially social context of the primary classroom he felt perpetually ill at ease and exposed to the vicissitudes of human interaction. Tim seemed to lack the capacity to think, that Bion suggests is developed from knowing at an emotional level.

Tim had reasonable relationships with adults but he really struggled to communicate at an interpersonal and social level with his peers. As Bion points out, it is as difficult for the individual to establish contact with the group as it is for the infant to establish the maternal relationship and this was made visible in Tim's struggle to functionally interact with twenty nine others amidst the relatively chaotic demands of the classroom. For Tim, unpredictability and chaos seem to be

synonymous with 'not knowing' – that terrifying bottomless void that Tim may have experienced when faced with finding himself falling, perhaps disappearing into the ambiguity that 'in-between', represented for him. This was clearly communicated when I first observed Tim in class complaining: 'I don't have the answer...I'm not good at these things'. For Bion, knowing is an emotional, epistemologically driven experience and I think making myself emotionally available to Tim through the struggle to attend, emotionally attune and receptively engage, created an emotional space where he could begin to bring his experiences, both real and imagined, to a safe place. This represented a 'secure base' that allowed him to project some of his fears and phantasies.

Working with his projections, 'Taking the transference' (Mitrani, 2001) as for example, in the Blue-Peter-boot-on-the-bonnet-interaction, I was able to 'hold' Tim emotionally. This seemingly simple interaction engaged me in making sense of his bizarre story in a way that related to a real world context. Towards understanding, the pattern of dialogue that took place reciprocally at literal and emotional levels, drew on personal, interpersonal and culturally embedded memories to make meaning. In the poignant example his mother gave of Tim comforting her at times when she becomes anxious at home, he seems to intuitively understand her need for a thinker, when in fact that is what he most needs. Tim idealised, was very close to and protective towards his mother and his frustration and anger seems to spill out irrationally in the direction of others. When Tim's teacher expresses the concern she feels when he tells her he is 'not good enough', perhaps Tim is really protesting about all the teachers in his life who cannot seem to provide the containment he needs to achieve a more emotionally resilient, depressive position. Movement towards this position at a psychic level may have increased his capacity to think and engage with others, in life-enhancing rather than defaulting to destructive ways.



I felt more optimistic about Tim as our mentoring relationship developed as I discovered he was sometimes able to engage with language in a more playful and expressive way, which in conjunction with his drawing skills provided a powerful outlet for his anxieties. In the mentoring room, through the course of our relationship, Tim became able to attempt, fail, leave and return again to the unsolved problem of the cube puzzle. I think to some extent this aptly reflected the emotional progress he, or rather we made.

On reflection, a mentor continuing to work with Tim in this way, who might work in partnership with the class teacher and liaise regularly with the school Senco and parents to share and disseminate findings such as these, may have been helpful for understanding and enabling Tim's learning and transition to the secondary phase.

## **Chapter 6: Conrad – Absence and its associations**

### **Introduction**

This case study is about Conrad. The structure is slightly different from Tim's and is in four parts. The first gives a biographical background which includes information and material from interviews with his Mum, teacher and teaching assistant, plus material from small group observation undertaken during the Autumn term before we began individual mentoring sessions. This is followed by what happened during our interactions in the mentoring room. Then, before the conclusion, which highlights themes for discussion in Chapter 10, there is a reflection on extracts from my interview with Conrad's mother. Her narrative material was important, in fact crucial, for making sense of the experience of interacting with Conrad, but I want to keep it till the end. Mainly because doing this mirrors the process of how I came to learn from Conrad and the time I spent with him, enabling the reader to share some of the self same puzzles and frustrations.

### **Biographical background**

Conrad was a year 6 pupil (10 years old at the start of the research), who had a reading age of 5 years. He also struggled with maths concepts. He lived with his mother who told me, during our interview, that she worked as a counsellor in a local secondary school. He also lived with his two older sisters, and sometimes his step-father who was in prison when I began the mentoring project. Wondering who was there and who was not there seemed to be a key theme with Conrad. Trish, the school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (the acronym; 'Senco' will indicate this role from now on), described him as a boy with some learning and behaviour problems:

‘.....I talked to Trish about Conrad. She said he has a lot of family difficulties at the moment and was struggling with behaviour and work in school. She said she'd talk to the Head

about sharing some of those difficulties with me as she isn't sure how much of it can be shared.'

A child who struggled to symbolise, and with behaviour difficulties matched the criteria for participants, as outlined in Chapter 3 and that I specified in my initial meeting with my 'link' person, Trish who was also the Senco. I sensed she thought the school was quite successful at containing Conrad, but his unpredictable, disruptive behaviour in school had become a chronic source of annoyance to staff and also, at times to other pupils, and they also felt the unsettling and imminent transition to the Secondary phase at the end of the academic year, made Conrad a particularly vulnerable pupil, and therefore a suitable participant for the mentoring project.

More detailed information was not immediately forthcoming, but I found the expression; 'family difficulties', whatever it meant, seemed to be a kind of precept to any discussion with adults who worked with Conrad. I understood this aptly satisfied the 'need to know' basis generally used in schools to protect confidentiality, but with Conrad I noticed that 'family difficulties' came to mean 'not knowing' for me, and also came to be voiced in a pejorative way by at least one member of staff, who felt he had become adept at hiding behind the label, to excuse some of his unacceptable behaviours.

There were two members of staff, other than Trish, with whom I was involved in relation to Conrad. Mrs. Hill was Conrad's class teacher, and Heather who worked at the time of the project in the school as a teaching assistant. The Headteacher was also involved with Conrad, but we were not in day to day contact during the project.

My relationships with Mrs. Hill and Heather were in a sense, like my relationship with Conrad, uneasy at the beginning. Perhaps some of the organisational anxieties about my intentions as a researcher and learning mentor in the school were played out through some of the rivalry and resentment that seemed to arise between us. As Conrad was our conscious concern, some of those tensions emerge as part of this specific case study, but some of the unconscious organisational processes that arose, introduced in Chapter 2, will be explored in Chapter 10. My first meeting with Mrs. Hill was rather prickly, and I felt like an intruder in her classroom:

‘She (Trish) took me to meet Conrad’s class teacher; Mrs. Hill – again the teacher wasn’t expecting me even though Trish and I had discussed the schedule the week before. She seemed concerned that Conrad would be working in a small group on Monday mornings and thought it might be generally better to observe him during the afternoons. However, we could go ahead this morning. I probably need to find some time to talk to Mrs Hill a bit more about the project and research.’

The small group she referred to was called ‘The sparrow hawks’. Groups within primary school classes are often given labels associated with a current class project. The group name may also indicate pupils’ levels of ability, as was the case here. All the groups in Conrad’s class were named after birds during this particular term, and members of his group were those pupils who had difficulties with literacy and numeracy – as Mrs. Hill explained a little later the same morning:

‘Conrad’s teacher talked about Conrad when she returned from the hall. She said he has a low reading age (5 years), low self-esteem and likes to be noticed. He attracts attention by ‘being funny’, but he’s also a generally ‘nice’, well liked person. He has difficulties at home with his family, particularly his Dad which does not help him concentrate on work at school, so on Monday to Wednesday mornings he works in a small group (sparrow hawks) of six children (two girls and four boys) upstairs with Heather on literacy and numeracy.’

‘Upstairs’, referred to an empty classroom that was adjacent to the mentoring room. The upstairs area of the school where Heather and Conrad and I worked was used as a kind of annexe as both the classrooms and furniture situated there, were gradually being reclaimed by the growing primary school – as explained in Chapter 4. However, compared to the cheerful and purposeful atmosphere of the rest of the building, this part of the school felt slightly abandoned and cold and dispossessed.

While Heather worked with the ‘sparrow hawks’, the rest of the class prepared for the end of year 6 SAT’s (Statutory Assessment Tasks). In this rather ‘scripted’ interview extract - I had given participants the questions I intended to ask, to help them prepare for interview, as explained in Chapter 3 - Heather clearly described her role:

‘I was responsible for their literacy and numeracy working three mornings a week. My aim is to make learning fun and work at a pace appropriate to the children’s ability. His behaviour and attention spans are partly due to very poor reading skills which he is very conscious of. He avoids reading and writing if he can.’

It was really in our more incidental meetings in school, that I began to realise how she sometimes felt about her difficult responsibilities, as discussed in Chapter 9.

‘I went to the photocopier to copy my mentoring record sheets for Trish and while I was in there Heather joined me to ask how Conrad had been. I mentioned about him wanting to change his time, but she said this had a knock on effect for herself and others. She said she had had a terrible time with him and there needed to be some decisions about him. I said I thought he was really struggling and she said she realised that but he was disrupting the other children’s ability to concentrate and engage. I said I’d talk about changing his session time and convey her concerns to Trish.’

Perhaps feeling hunted at times by this aptly named little sparrow hawk, another factor exacerbated Heather's task with Conrad. His class was made up of a mixture of year 5, as well as year 6 pupils. Trish (Senco) explained this was to do with the particularly large year 6 cohort. The youngest half of the group, including Conrad, was joined with the smaller year 5 group, so that Conrad was separated from some of his friends. This was an issue for him, and also for another participant who was in the same situation. He was also disappointed not to have his favourite teacher, Mr. Chatwell, who would have been teaching the regular year 6 class, had he not, much apparently to everyone's dismay, been on long-term leave due to illness. The further absence and 'split' of being separated from his remaining friends when directed to join the 'sparrow hawks', seemed to compound his frustrations.

I observed some of Conrad's distress about being in the 'sparrow hawks', and also some of Heather's, before I began individual mentoring sessions:

'Conrad was late and seemed reluctant to join the group. Heather explained that Kim, the only other boy in the group had left and moved away from the area, so Conrad was not happy about being in the group. The children were having a spelling test – Mary was the only child to have completed her homework, Conrad explained he had been away last Wednesday so he had not received or completed it. He sat, frequently sipping orange from his water bottle and seemed reluctant to embark on spellings whilst Heather reminded the group how adding an 'e' at the end of a word changed the sound of the first vowel. When it came to the test Conrad had forgotten his spelling book so asked for a sheet of paper and wrote his name and the date on the sheet. The first word was 'cage', followed by 'damage'. Conrad said: 'Do we have to do 'damage' – I don't like the word 'damage'? Heather replied; 'You know what it means though?' Conrad replied: 'You damage your house'. Conrad wrote painstakingly in a neat cursive script, but took frequent gulps from his water bottle. Then the first opportunity to escape occurred when

Heather asked them to take out their whiteboards. Conrad said:  
'I don't have a whiteboard...'

Conrad was desperate to absent himself from this stressful situation. He sucked on a his water bottle like a suckling infant, and the exchange between him and an exasperated Heather about 'damage' seemed particularly relevant to Conrad's predicament. I also learnt how important Conrad's friends were to him, and how he could use humour to distract himself from pain, and to charm others:

'While the group are carefully copying words for next week's spelling test, Conrad asks: 'Does Kim have to go?' Heather replies: 'He's gone – he has to go because he needs a roof over his head'. Conrad replies: 'I...a boy next to me...I'll pretend he's here'... (pretends to be Kim writing words in the seat next to him), the others laugh and Heather stands over Conrad until he finishes his spellings, then congratulates him.'

I learnt more about Conrad from this group observation. When he finally succeeded in escaping from the situation, an extraordinary thing happened, everything about the group changed. I even found myself engaging in the group text Heather had chosen, so I found out something about the powerfully disruptive influence Conrad's absence and presence could exert on the group:

'When it's Conrad's turn to read he points to the words and attempts to sound some of them out.. He read 'ducked', instead of 'dodged' and managed to complete his turn, though his reading was disjointed and pained. With this ordeal over his second plan for escape occurs when he asks; 'Can I go to the toilet please?' and puts his head on the desk. Heather lets him go but asks him to be quick. When Conrad left the room, the reading process developed a smooth, coherent pattern – I began to engage with the extract and the group seemed to work. Conrad was away for a full five minutes and when he returned the group were all participating in discussion about the extract he had missed. Conrad fiddled with his orange juice bottle until it was time to go out to play.'

In spite of our difficult beginning, Mrs. Hill (Conrad's class teacher) gradually relaxed a little and began to want to communicate with me about Conrad. It was half-way through the project and our exchange was useful in clarifying the absence and presence of Conrad's stepfather, as well as exposing the anxiety he provoked at the school:

'I went into the staff room to get a cup of tea before seeing Leo at 10.30 am, and Mrs. Hill, (Conrad's teacher) was working on her laptop in the corner. I chatted to a teaching assistant while I made the tea and as I was about to leave the staff room (thought I'd write up some of the observation on Tim, for the folder), Mrs. Hill caught my eye and asked if I had a minute to talk about Conrad. I sat beside her and she began to talk about how difficult the situation was. She re-iterated a little of what Trish had said first thing this morning – about a meeting with Conrad's parents, but Mrs Hill relayed how aggressive Trish had found Conrad's step-father who has just returned to the family home from prison. Mrs Hill clarified that step-dad was 'dad' so far as Conrad was concerned and although he had missed him, Conrad 'adores' his mother.'

I felt rather alarmed by this as Mrs. Hill successfully communicated her fear of Conrad's stepfather so that it frightened me. I was however, also grateful that Mrs. Hill took the opportunity, in this new found intimacy, to tell me in a much more authentic way, than the interview situation perhaps permitted (discussed in Chapter 9), about some of the struggles and anxieties she experienced with Conrad in the classroom:

'She said she was very relieved he and Conrad's mum told her during their meeting that Conrad liked her and enjoyed being in her class. She also said she has not encountered a child quite like Conrad before – usually she is able to 'get through to them' but doesn't feel this is the case with Conrad at the moment. She said she felt Conrad was mirroring in school, the kind of aggressive



attitude he experiences at home and she was finding his negativity towards work difficult at the moment. She thinks he's influenced by older children and said he'd turned up on 'book' day describing himself as dressed as a 'Chav'. She feels he wants to take 'control' and that he is not prepared to compromise with any suggestion she makes at the moment. Mrs Hill mentioned an afternoon activity when she gave him something specific (within his capabilities) to do, but he protested that he wanted to do what everyone else was doing, and became angry. She also mentioned that she knows he would have preferred to be in the other year 6 class with his friends, but that this was a decision made elsewhere and not to do with her.'

On reflection, I think Mrs. Hill's concerns reveal something of the complicated relationships Conrad had with his teachers, and their recurring concern about him trying to take control seemed to be part of his presence and absence, from the very first mentoring session.

### **What happened in the mentoring sessions?**

From the beginning Conrad was conspicuous by his absence. As we walked along the corridor together to the mentoring room, he seemed a long way away and tightly wound up in himself and his own thoughts. He gave no eye contact and faced the way he was walking as I tripped along sideways trying to see his face, intent on my task of establishing a rapport. Trying to find Conrad, and to find a 'way in' was on my mind. I remembered my conversation at break with Heather, his teaching assistant, who had described a difficult, confrontational morning with Conrad, so I broke what was growing into a heavy silence by saying;

'You don't look very happy Conrad, are you having a bad morning?' He moved his head from side to side deliberating, looked up at me and said 'yes'.

‘I said I was sorry and suggested we had a bit of time now away from classroom work that I hoped might help, and he seemed relieved.’

He seemed to slow down and loosen up a little – just enough to make his sidelong glance and ‘yes’ feel to me, like a reward. He had only uttered one word so far, but he communicated a confusion of aggression and frustration, with just enough hope to warrant a cautious acceptance of my offer. This glimpse of curiosity from Conrad gave a sense of optimism at the start.

However, moving his head from side to side in deliberation like a bear with a sore head, confirmed his caution, as though he did not know which way to turn, turning to me – a virtual stranger was for him an obvious risk. It also showed how far his feeling states were wrapped up in his physical, sensory responses – rather like an infant. Conrad’s mood overrode any social interaction skills he might ordinarily have deployed in this situation. His intense feelings also seemed to be catching, as his ‘deliberation’ over whether to take in and accept what I proposed, lasted just long enough to keep me feeling on edge. Although I was at last relieved, I experienced his uncertainty as my own, and his unpredictability made me feel slightly uncomfortable. This may have also been connected to a level of careless, detached indifference I discerned, and I thought of Heather’s struggle with Conrad in the group observation, as I began to experience the switchback of feelings Conrad seemed to stir in others. I let him lead the way into the mentoring room and we sat on the easy chairs.

‘He sat back in the chair with his legs extended, crossed at the ankles. I thought it was important to let Conrad know my role is not as a teacher – at which point I thought I detected another relieved smile – but as mentor/researcher and the room was about identifying some time and space each week for talking and

listening and thinking rather than doing literacy or numeracy or science.’

I found myself working hard to find Conrad, to communicate with him, to capture his interest and as I knew he was an elusive and difficult person for his teachers to manage, I thought that telling him I was not a teacher in his school might help him to relax. It may also have been about me trying hard not to be a teacher. Rather than relaxation, ‘his legs extended and crossed at the ankles’, seemed to present me with a kind of passive resistance, that seemed to be saying, ‘ok, so now what?’ His hands remained firmly locked over the ends of the wooden arms of the chair, and he was looking at me rather intently and nervously in what for him was a new environment.

In the mentoring room I had created the intended therapeutic, containing space – now I was faced with the more demanding prospect of finding emotional spaces in my mind for developing, observing and reflecting on containing relationships with participant children, whilst at the same time hanging onto my own sense of self. I found the kind of emotional immersion and detachment this required, challenging. The transference and countertransference became muddled, as Conrad seemed to represent parts of myself but also projected parts of his inner world into me. This worked at times to confuse my personal and professional boundaries whilst engaged with this project.

In this session I learnt how hard it was to make myself emotionally available to Conrad – and how difficult he made it for me. He resisted, and I resisted defensively as at times his projections were overpowering and they left me reeling, so I avoided engagement. When I began the individual meetings, I had arranged to see Leo after Conrad. I had to change this order as I found myself still thinking about Conrad when I was trying to engage with Leo.

Sitting in the chair opposite Conrad at our first individual meeting, I had an overwhelming sense that he was waiting for me to help him. Confronted by what seemed like a direct, though unspoken demand, I focused instead on the material objects and physical space that I knew I was good at providing. This defence was about avoiding the panic of inadequacy I felt in what was beginning to feel like a confrontation of silence. I thought I was using the silence to give him some calm thinking space, but felt he used the silence - as in the parallel walk along the corridor - to shut me out. This was particularly difficult with Conrad because it reminded me of equally deadening experiences I had with other troubled and troubling boys in my life. My auto/biographical experiences seemed to be constantly there in the transference experience with Conrad. Not only was he disturbing my calm, he seemed to represent something 'bad' for me. On reflection, this complicated matters as my perceptions may have been to do with my projections as much as his:

'I showed him the puzzles and felt that although he was not remotely interested in any of them, he feigned a bit of interest for my benefit.'

I talked him through the objects on the bookshelf that I envisaged might contribute something to the transitional play space that the mentoring room represented. It did not work, he was unimpressed. I noticed Conrad, unlike other participants, did not look around the mentoring room or show any curiosity about the objects I had carefully planned, chosen and placed on the bookcase, as described above. All his energy seemed to be focused on holding himself tightly together. He glanced briefly at the games as I introduced them, but these were not what he wanted. I had nothing more to tell Conrad. I wanted to be receptive and responsive and observant so that I could tune into his feelings, but the wall of silence and disinterest he communicated was difficult for me to bear. On reflection, all I had

done so far was tell him about things in the room and invite him to play *my* games – another imposed agenda. ‘Telling’ Conrad did not work. I felt disappointed, or perhaps Conrad felt disappointed as I revealed my own fear and ambivalence about sustaining the emotional challenge I had so eagerly set up.

I once observed a four year old in a classroom. He had a very runny nose and this was obviously bothering him so he went to his teacher who immediately saw his distress and gently invited him to take a tissue from the box on her desk. Whilst he did this, she became absorbed in a clambering group of children who were practising drawing letters and noisily vying for her attention. The little boy successfully found a tissue, held it in his hand and looked at it, but was not quite sure what to do with it. He played with it, but in the end, he went back to his teacher and waited patiently until eventually she noticed him standing beside her and said; ‘That’s right Ben, now go and put it in the bin.’ Ben immediately followed her instructions, but what he had learnt from this experience, directed by his hard working, pre-occupied teacher, was that when he has a runny nose, he should find a tissue, wave it in his hand for a short while, then put it in the bin. I felt like this teacher at that moment with Conrad.

The research project was essentially about taking the opportunity not to be like that teacher who was unwittingly looking the other way, but to consciously attend and tune into the child’s needs at a more holistic and emotional level, in order to understand and vigilantly support their learning from experience. I felt the mentoring role I had in mind was sympathetic to this approach, but at this moment I was in the same stressful position as Conrad on our first individual meeting; at the beginning and struggling. My default position, when anxious, seemed to be to slip into my more familiar role as a teacher which this time prompted me to ‘tell’, rather than to ‘attune’. I needed to find a way to become attuned to Conrad; to find

a meeting place where some shared experience would facilitate a learning relationship, rather than assuming that what I thought I was teaching bore any resemblance to what he learnt.

However, my sensibilities were not totally blunted as at this point I did manage to take a step back. I sat back in my chair and waited, wondering what would happen next, and whether I would be able to sustain Conrad's anxieties - that were palpable, and that I imagined would be like opening a can of worms. The powerful emotions he harboured aroused my own anxieties, and I recognised this uncomfortable treading-on-eggshells feeling might always be part of my experience of being with Conrad.

Later, Mrs. Hill, his class teacher, told me the story of the way he rather cynically 'accused' his teachers of just pretending to be interested in football and resorting to asking him about it only when they wanted to persuade him to do something. Certainly, I often observed myself and other adults as well as children trying to appease him, but he obviously recognised and despised appeasement - it possibly confirmed for him how frighteningly powerful he must appear to others, and thus compounded his own fears about himself. It was difficult to spot Conrad's sensitivity through sometimes careless, sometimes jocular, sometimes confrontational defences, that masked his vulnerability and pain.

In this, our first meeting, when I managed to back off - the most authentic response I had offered so far, he backed off too, and reached for a square, plastic 'tic-tac-toe' puzzle, bent his head and focused intently on getting the silver balls to form a single, continuous line:

'He sat on his chair attempting to manipulate the balls in a tic-tac-toe game and I knelt beside his chair as we held the puzzle together trying to get some control, but as it became apparent he

could not distinguish the pattern that amounted to a diagonal line,  
I realised this was not helpful for Conrad.'

He had it seemed for the second time, chosen to go along with me, to try something of what I had to offer, so perhaps there was a vague pattern or rhythm of reciprocity, amidst the chaos, beginning to develop. Perhaps Conrad had had 'good enough' experiences of loving, trusting relationships to chance engagement in this cat-and-mouse game he was playing with me, and that seemed to initiate the distinctly fluid ebb and flow of our sessions together.

He made tutting noises and giggled as he shook the puzzle, as though he was enjoying playing and wanted to share the experience – like a baby with a rattle. Watching him, it suddenly dawned on me how strange and difficult this whole experience was for Conrad, and that he may be in the process of trying to appease me – I may have seemed formidable to him and I felt sorry. At the same time, and as Conrad had pointed out to his teacher, appeasement could be contingent to control, and control became a theme of my relationship with Conrad. I only began to understand this when I interviewed his mother at the end of the project, as discussed in the final section of the chapter. I keep this interview till the end of the chapter as that appropriately reflects my position of learning through reflecting on experience . It also reflects the chronological process of the mentoring project.

This moment was something of a crisis point because, in an uncharacteristically impulsive way, I got up from my chair and knelt beside him so I could see the maze, and held two sides with him to help steady the puzzle - and perhaps less consciously to help try to hold this fragmented beginning together. We seemed to be trying to get to grips with each other here, but there seems to be a fine balance between containment and control that we had to learn to negotiate as our relationship developed.

My action seemed to make him feel more helpless. When he appeared to struggle to recognise what I meant by making a diagonal line, I also sensed my proximity was not helping. Later, in supervision, we discussed the difficulty of our diametrically opposed position and how this to-ing and fro-ing action represented something of the struggle we engaged to regulate our interaction throughout the project. At the time, I felt I was being intrusive and retreated to my chair to give him some space. Interestingly, in a later session when we had developed some trust and a repertoire of successful games, he returned to this puzzle, engaged with it much more confidently and asked me if I remembered the first time we played tic-tac-toe. In our first mentoring session, Conrad put the game back on the shelf and sat back too, so I asked him what he enjoyed about school:

‘He said he liked football and was going to play a match with school that afternoon, but he couldn’t enjoy thinking about it because he was worried about his dad. He looked at me as though wondering whether I knew about his dad – which I didn’t, neither did I want to find myself asking about him.’

Conrad wanting to talk about his Dad was another significant theme introduced during this first session, for both of us. I was aware that he had family difficulties, in fact that morning at break, Heather, his teaching assistant, had suggested that he uses ‘worrying about my dad’ as an excuse for all his unacceptable behaviour in school, and I recall thinking her comments were harsh and wondered whether they represented the view of the institution, or just her bitter experience of working with Conrad.

Most importantly, he was giving me the opportunity to ask about something that really mattered to him and I actively chose to avoid it. At the time, I was hypersensitive to the directives of the university Ethics Committee regarding my



research project, as noted earlier. Although I think aspects of Conrad's home background would most certainly have helped to make sense of some behaviours in school, I was keen to make the project happen and therefore anxious to adhere to agreed boundaries. These explicitly confined my data collection to child participant stories of everyday events in school – if this was at all possible, a theme further discussed in Chapter 9. However, whatever conscious excuse I can reason, the prospect of some disclosure about experiences that were too frightening for the school to share with me, was also it seems too frightening for me to want to hear. On reflection, I think I was beginning to experience some strong identification with Conrad. My own painful feelings of wanting, and not wanting to know about some of my own confusing early family experiences and other relationships, formative in terms of my understanding of gender roles, were touched upon in this emotional exchange.

For the first time, Conrad took the initiative by offering something of himself and it was my chance to reciprocate in a positive, creative way. On reflection, I regret being too scared to help Conrad. I simply mirrored his comment to reassure him that I understood it must be difficult to concentrate if he is constantly worried about his dad, but it seemed to amount to jollyng him along. He nodded, participating in some interactive dialogue for the first time – so I asked whether he was able to talk to Mrs. Merton (Headteacher) and his class teacher, and he said he could. Perhaps Conrad was pushing boundaries here, I felt backed into a corner, but he gave up and the conversation ended. Later, in supervision we discussed how he may have been giving me a second chance here to share his experience, and I think if I had been able to stick with him and sustain the uncertainty of disclosure, it might have changed the quality of the containing relationship we were able to develop.

Conrad told me again how much he enjoyed sport –especially football and swimming, but that he disliked science and found it difficult – I did not think to ask him why? He fiddled with the tic-tac-toe game as he spoke and he needed to move. He was constantly fidgety and seemed to have enormous physical energy – I described him as ‘bouncing’ along the corridor when I first set eyes on him, and he continued to influence the dynamics of our interaction as unpredictably as one of those dense rubber balls that bounce randomly all over the place. I imagined how confined he must feel at a desk in the classroom, and also perhaps in the mentoring room. The session had been intense, so we moved to the table and I explained the scrapbook idea (described in Chapter 3). Conrad took a sheet of paper for the cover of his book and I watched him draw a cartoon self-portrait:

‘He drew himself as cross-eyed with very prominent front teeth and spiky hair. It’s strange but I have very clear mental pictures of the four children I see – except for Conrad. He is dark haired, olive skinned, slim, wears gel in his hair and is a generally good looking boy, but I can’t recall the details of his face as easily as I can with the other children. He drew legs and feet coming from the large, cartoon head and I admired his ability to draw in this way. He said his best friend in class had taught him how to draw cartoons and he enjoyed watching cartoons on TV.’

I was puzzled about not being able to visualise Conrad’s face at this time, although I now have a very clear picture of him in my mind. This makes me think that in the course of our relationship we made some progress as he did make himself more visible and available to me, as I did to him, as well as becoming more at ease with some aspects of his learning during the course of our relationship. In supervision, we discussed the cartoon characterisation he made of himself. I admired Conrad’s stylised, if primitive, drawing skills but told my supervisor that at the time I was

really reminded of how I cannot actually bear cartoons. She suggested this might be something to do with Conrad not being able to bear being himself.

This was the most relaxed part of our meeting. He said he missed Kim, the boy who used to be in the 'sparrow hawks' group with him, and I agreed it was hard when people we care about move away. He mentioned one of his sisters who was sometimes 'nice and makes cakes' with him. This sister appeared again, in a later session, when Conrad described a dream:

'He dreamt he and his sister fell into a lake at the bottom of their garden and drowned. He said when he woke up he was terrified and when he told his sister about the dream she said she'd also had a bad dream and they hugged each other (this must be the same sister who bakes cakes with him). I said it must have been a frightening dream and he agreed it had been.'

Conrad appeared to like and make positive relationships with women, but it was interesting that his sister was the one who contained and comforted and made him 'nice cakes'. Perhaps they both felt as though they were sometimes drowning in the same bad dream. His favourite colour was pink, and later his class teacher recalled a story about Conrad to illustrate how 'funny and popular' he could be, when once during a drama lesson, he swathed himself in a length of pink silky fabric and danced around the room, to everyone's delight. He spoke fondly of his Mum, during this session, as he often did, and I hoped he would begin to associate me with internalised 'good' objects. He had a girlfriend in the other year 6 class, and Heather, in our interview, commented on his sexual awareness: 'Well, he is aware of his sexuality. He has a great desire to impress and show off to the girls.'

In contrast, the men in his life seemed conspicuous by their absence; his dad, his step dad, Mr. Chatwell, who was the missing year 6 teacher and Kim, who was the boy from the 'sparrow hawks' group who had recently left Brompton. I think this

amounts to some substantial loss. I thanked him for the work he had done and said I looked forward to seeing him next time. He gave me another 'yes', smiled and we walked back to the classroom together, in a much more relaxed way.

In spite of, or perhaps because of the turmoil we experienced, I think this was a very intense, hard working first meeting for us both. I wrote at the end of the observation: 'The session seemed quite disjointed and I felt we both found it quite difficult to adequately hold it all together.' On reflection, the conflict and tensions we encountered in this session provided material to support learning from experience, particularly my own, and I hoped I could use this to provide a more containing experience for Conrad in subsequent meetings. In this important first meeting, many of the themes, issues and emotional processes at play were resonant through our learning relationship.

At the beginning of our second session, following the half-term break, I asked Conrad:

'What kind of week he was having at school and he said 'horrible'. He said he didn't like anything except P.E and he had missed about three P.E lessons lately because of the rain. I asked if he wanted to play with any of the puzzles on the shelf, he looked down and shook his head. I asked if he wanted to draw or write in his scrap book and he responded in the same way. I explained about the fabric box and making a classroom/playground/football pitch model – but this provoked a similar shrugging headshake. Then I asked what kinds of games he would like to see on the bookshelf that he would enjoy playing. Straightaway he brightened up and said 'snap' and 'Connect 4.'

Again, I felt that Conrad came to the mentoring room full of hate and gloom. He felt deprived of P.E, the only joy school had to offer and he repeatedly made it

clear that what I had to offer in the mentoring space was no consolation for his disappointment. During the group observation, and also during our first individual session, I saw something of his capacity for resistance that verged on the kind of refusal I had, as a classroom teacher always dreaded, and seemed to be revisited, rather as many of the feelings I dreaded were called up with Conrad.

With Conrad, I think his refusal was confrontational, a struggle for control or perhaps a need to exert some personal agency, rather than avoidant. He was telling me, more explicitly than the last time we met though I should have clearly recalled, that he did not want to be told, he wanted to be asked so that he could tell me. He successfully managed to make me feel something of the hopelessness and helplessness that he, and possibly many of his peers, perhaps experienced in the classroom, maybe even on a regular basis.

At the time, it was more my own feelings of panic at his endless rejection, that prompted my exasperated question, rather than understanding his frustration at being put in similar situations each day and expected to engage with what seem difficult, and sometimes to him, meaningless tasks.

However, reflecting on and thinking through these feelings, I was beginning to realise, or learn *from* experience, that an authentic commitment of self to an ‘other’ was the priority in this learning relationship. I wonder whether this level of authentic commitment between learners and teachers can be seen as a realistic goal in a mainstream classroom where teachers work sometimes with as many as thirty pupils. Thinking and learning from experience as an aim in learning and teaching in school would seem radical in the current educational climate. It is further discussed in Chapter 10.

In spite of the hard time I felt that Conrad had given me (and me him) in our second meeting, I did eventually manage to ask the question that allowed him to exercise the sense of control he sought. The games he chose; 'Snap' and 'Connect 4', suggested that he might want to connect, or develop some kind of connection with me. I was relieved and pleased that he felt able to ask me for something he wanted, and I promised to bring 'Connect 4' the following week. Perhaps sensing my gratitude, or beginning to trust me, or exploiting my willingness to accommodate his wishes, or as his teachers suggested wanting to take control, at the end of the session Conrad told me something else that he wanted:

'We cleared up the game and I said it was nearly time for lunch.

Conrad went to sit back in the easy chair and said he didn't like working in a small group for Maths and English. He asked if he could come to the mentoring room on a Tuesday morning at 9.30 a.m. instead of 12.00. I said I would ask his teachers what they thought and I also said it would mean changing Tim's time so I would need to talk to him too, so I couldn't promise, but would see what everyone involved thought. I also said I would definitely bring Connect 4 for next week. I said I hoped he had a good afternoon and managed to get out for P.E lessons this week.'

As in the first session, I did not quite know how to respond. I felt torn between personal wishes to please, and the kind of professional responsibilities which reminded me that the order and timings of mentoring sessions had been carefully planned, had just about settled into place and affected others. Conrad was adept at testing boundaries in this way, and I was beginning to realise that mine were distinctly wobbly. In supervision, we talked about Conrad perhaps being jealous of other participants taking up space and time in the room that he was beginning to want for himself.

On reflection, I think it was more to do with the way he felt about Heather, about being in the 'sparrow hawks' group, and about me. I had observed the struggle between Heather and Conrad, described in the group observation above. Sometimes agitated about his responses to the literacy and numeracy tasks she offered, Heather often approached me to seek advice about working with him. I knew she was also curious about what went on in the mentoring room.

Heather was perhaps envious of the time and space Conrad and I shared, and she may have been carrying those feelings for other members of staff in the school. The rivalrous position in which we found ourselves in relation to Conrad, manifested in different ways as she and I were perhaps beginning to respectively represent something 'bad' and something 'good' in his mind. This seemed to be reflected in his pattern of responses to us, in ours to him and also in our responses to each other at the early stages of the project. As we made progress, these extremes became a little more integrated, as Heather revealed in some of her comments during our interview: (E= Erica, and H= Heather. The format of using my initial and the initial of the participant's name will continue, when apt, throughout the case study)

E: Right. How do you think he feels about coming here, to these sessions?

H: He was enthusiastic, certainly to start with, because it meant coming out of my group.

E: And coming out of the work group and doing something where he felt he was playing?

H: Yes. I am not sure. I think perhaps it is wearing off.

E: Yes, me too

H: But I am not in contact with Conrad .... For this term Conrad, K. and C. are all in Mrs H's class that I am not working with.

E: Back in the fold?

H: Yes, but when he sees me, in the corridor now, because he knows I am not teaching him, he will have a, make some polite conversation, or, you know be nice to me. (Laughs)

Conrad's desire to attend mentoring sessions, after his early enthusiasm, began to lapse half-way through the summer term. On reflection, I could have been more helpful and spent more time with Heather. I knew she was struggling with him and she asked me often enough, but our conversations were snatched and squeezed out by other, continually pressing events, and at times I seemed to be resisting her – just as I experienced Conrad resisting me.

When he suggested I rearrange his mentoring slot time, it seemed to propose a further split, perhaps synonymous with his own experiences, between the couple Heather and I had come to represent to him. I also noticed how my own history of family relationships were revisited, and may have contributed to the state of uncertainty I experienced when faced with what I perceived as the competing demands of others. As an only child of a single parent, there was largely only ever one, single resolution. I had little experience of trying to reconcile conflicting views, and the thought of interpersonal conflict still tends to make me anxious.

However, I could identify with the complex family situation and stories of loss Conrad intimated that he was living through both in and beyond the school organisation, and was certainly acting out in school. Also, thinking about how these auto/biographical associations can begin to be voiced through the narrative of my research experience, may in turn have some resonance with others engaged in the wider learning and teaching world – as discussed in Chapter 9.



There was an issue of further significance communicated by Conrad with the request to change our session times, that made me squirm. Though still to do with being caught between competing demands of others, I think this may have been connected to a more pervasive process of ‘splitting’, as suggested in Chapter 2, that was taking place at a collective institutional level in the school and beyond, but which in turn compounded Conrad’s personal anger and sense of loss.

Earlier, during the group observation, I had witnessed Conrad’s distress at being separated from his peers three mornings a week by being put in a small group with ‘additional needs’ for literacy and numeracy. As well as supporting his needs, this segregation was designed to give his teacher an opportunity to prepare the rest of the class for necessary SAT’s tests that take place at the end of year 6. At this time, the results of these assessments determined the reputations of teachers and national league table positions that affected the popularity, thence economic viability of primary schools in England, as introduced in Chapter 4.

Institutionally, these separations were mere adjuncts of an earlier organisational strategy to split Conrad’s year 6 class into two, so that the younger half of his large year group were placed with a much smaller cohort of year 5 children. In terms of balancing cohorts numerically and pupil-teacher ratios, this must have been a neat, easily rationalised management decision. Conrad however, among the younger year 6 pupils, found himself destined not only to be divided from his closest friends, but also importantly from Mr. Chatwell, whom Heather described in her interview as ‘a lovely person’.

The kind of unwitting emotional erosion that this collusive institutional action may have supported, may have been exacerbated, for Conrad, by the mythical

proportions Mr. Chatwell's presence and absence assumed. Although much talked about by participants and adults whilst the project took place, he was undergoing extended leave from school due to illness, so unfortunately I did not meet him, and rather like Conrad's Dad, he became another mysterious, missing man. During one of the last mentoring sessions, when Conrad told me of six goals he had scored in a school football tournament, I congratulated him and asked what his teacher had said, 'he ignored this question but said he wishes Mr. Chatwell could have been there'. Perhaps Mr. Chatwell, at that moment, also represented Conrad's absent father.

In Chapter 10, I explore some institutional defences in relation to learning in this project. As learners such as Conrad are the raw material and human capital of schools in society, the emotional experience of learning may be seen as important enough to be explicitly thought about and discussed. However difficult, it needs to be taken up given how disruptive and time consuming the lack of attention to emotional life can be. Conrad was a participant in the mentoring project because he was seen in the school setting as a troubled and troubling pupil with literacy and numeracy difficulties. As his case begins to illustrate, burgeoning personal anxieties can be simultaneously caught up in, reflect and impact institutional processes. Inexorably, the wider social implications for overlooking, rather than investing thought and dialogical engagement in such closely enmeshed relationships may turn out to be far more difficult, time consuming and costly.

In early mentoring sessions, I observed that despite his enthusiasm for 'winning' and 'Connect 4', he was not able to predict, devise or apply any discernible strategy during the games we played. There seemed to be an underlying assumption of chaos, or disorder. Conrad also communicated something of his

apparent inability to look ahead, plan or organise, for example, when he did not know or care to know whether he had PE – his favourite subject, on his timetable for that day.

In this extract, he offers the word ‘surprise’ in a strained tone of false hope. At the time I thought he was referring to the curriculum, and that this was just another example of his impulsivity, but I came to realise later, particularly after interviewing his mother, how the ambivalence embedded in ‘surprises’ carried huge anxieties for Conrad:

‘...he shrugged and said he didn’t know, so I asked whether they had a weekly timetable and he just didn’t look at it. He said they did have a timetable but he didn’t bother to look at it, so everything was ‘a surprise’.

This links to a significant story in a later mentoring session. The lengthy extract which follows demonstrates the extent to which our relationship developed into a much more trusting secure base. It also picks up the thread about ‘surprises’. As was becoming usual, Conrad bounced into the mentoring room and on this occasion I was greeted with ‘I’ve gone hyper – it’s my birthday today’:

‘I said he could choose what he wanted to do, specially as it was his birthday, and I asked him about how he was celebrating. He talked about money he had received and how he was using it to buy a new bike that he seemed excited about. He said he wasn’t having a party but was going out with his mates, including Laura, his girl friend. Then, out of the blue, he said that he had spent the weekend with his real dad. I asked how this went and he responded with a non-committal ‘ok’ – he was fairly edgy - and sat on the edge of his seat whilst he explained the story surrounding birthdays. He went on to describe how being with his dad had meant he had missed his sisters 16<sup>th</sup> birthday party and was unhappy about that, and I got the impression that his sister had been upset about him not being there too – so seeing his dad had been quite disruptive and not entirely satisfactory for

Conrad and/or his family. I thought it odd that his sister's party was at a time when he was away and asked about this, but he said that seeing his dad was not planned, it 'just happened'. He chose to play 'headbanz', and Jenka (tower of 40cm that we worked on together). He seemed to calm down a bit and I explained that I would not be here next week because of SATs, but I would the week after. I said I wanted him to know because planning ahead can help us deal with and cope with things when they come along – instead of being taken by surprise – I was thinking about the chaos meeting his dad seemed to have triggered. When I finished telling him about next week, he said that next week; 'I'm not doing any special activities.'

When Conrad said that next week; 'I'm not doing any special activities', which seemed to link to my offer of 'choice' to celebrate this 'special' occasion at the beginning, I think he was saying that he would not choose to repeat this birthday 'surprise'. As I listened to Conrad spilling out this complicated, unhappy story, I could see how powerless and torn he felt, between members of his family. He also managed to convey how this meeting that 'just happened' with his father seemed to spoil the rest of the family's birthday celebration plans.

As identified in session one, 'boundaries' as a key issue recurred in various perplexing forms that seem to relate to thinking about 'self' and 'other'. Switching back to the beginning of session three; still on my mind and anxious to let him know as soon as I arrived in school, I saw Conrad outside his classroom on the morning of our third individual meeting. I took the opportunity of telling him that our meeting time would remain the same as it affected so many others' timetables. He shrugged carelessly and said; 'oh, that's ok', as though he had forgotten all about it, which in turn made me feel foolish for thinking it mattered to him, as much as it mattered to me. By now, I recognised the 'shrug' as being part of an abrasive defence, so I added that I had remembered the 'Connect 4' game he asked

for last time, which brought a wide smile to his face and I hoped this made him feel as though he was being 'kept in mind'. During this session, Conrad was keen to play the game and this, following such strong themes of resistance and rejection in the first sessions, I felt at the time, marked some progress in our relationship.

'Conrad set the game up and chuckled as he told me he was good at this and always won. I remembered how much Conrad likes to win. I asked him about patterns of winning lines and he said it could be a row of four in any direction – he seemed to know/recognise a diagonal line here and I remembered how he struggled with tic-tac-toe previously –'

The puzzle was about creating connected lines – rather like boundary lines which continued the theme of challenging 'boundaries' that emerged in Conrad's responses from our first meeting. A difference between this and the tic-tac-toe game we played then, was that he did not have to construct his own boundary lines. Rather than struggling to self-regulate, in 'Connect 4', he could legitimately engage in disrupting those 'boundary' lines I tried to construct - an apparent tendency that seemed to fill him with delight. The idea of competing with me certainly engaged his interest. I wondered whether winning helped him to feel in control, and also to what extent this was a healthily aggressive life-drive in light of other recurring themes such as 'absence', 'loss' and 'hopelessness', that he communicated in the course of our relationship. In a later session, described below, when I asked him how it felt to win, he roared: 'It's GREAT!'

I recall Heather complaining that during their group 'sparrow hawks' work he baited her for 'sport' - acting in the way a 'sparrow hawk' bird might hunt - pursuing her willingness to negotiate with him to unreasonable lengths. Heather was easy prey for Conrad. 'Winding' others up was the expression used by Conrad's mother when describing his relationship with his sisters. Perhaps he wanted his opponents to feel lost and beaten in some way, to experience the defeat

and dejection that he himself sometimes felt. Trying to think about how feelings to do with aggression, competition, control, and winning and losing related to Conrad's responses became rather muddled in my mind, just as it had I think for his teachers.

This confusion may have reflected Conrad's own confusion and troubled feelings. It could also be that these muddled thoughts touched on areas with which we both struggled. For example, his desire to win confronted some of my own formative personal and social experiences, probably gendered, that involved fearful anxieties about 'winning' and 'losing'. On reflection, I noticed that most of the games I chose in the hope of creating therapeutic transitional 'play' spaces for participants, were essentially competitive. In spite of the conscious, reasoned efforts I made to exclude threatening activities, and to avoid replicating a challenging classroom hierarchy in the mentoring room that might communicate; 'teacher knows, child does not know', I found myself, at an emotional level, as in this example, perpetuating such ideas by teaching it how I learnt it.

The sense of fragmentation and intensity surrounding the theme of 'boundaries' in our first session, seemed to recur, and when at the end of session three I asked Conrad to put the 'Connect 4' game back on the bookshelf:

'...he nudged a shelf and all the counters fell on the floor all over and behind the easy chair where Conrad usually sits. I got up and we picked the pieces up together and put it on the shelf. Conrad seemed pleased to have this help.'

I think it was important that we picked the pieces up together. The togetherness that this simple task conjured, made me wonder to what extent Conrad received consistent emotional support and containment from those who cared for him – and to what extent he felt overwhelmed by being left to pick up the pieces and sort

them out on his own, for perhaps too much of the time. His ambivalence towards connecting in regularised ways, that form conventional patterns or templates within the clearly defined boundaries that, for example, school demanded, was beginning to make sense.

Many of the ‘connections’ he had experienced in his young life seemed to involve disruption or interruption of some kind. For example, his father was not there, his step-father going to and returning from prison, the suggestion of repeatedly fragile and transient relationships at home and school. It is possible that a sense of ‘falling apart’ may have accompanied the feelings of loss and separation Conrad experienced. This occurred amidst the burden and turmoil of loss and separation experienced by those who remained. Whilst I noted in my observations that he was fond of his mother and siblings, I wonder to what extent he also felt angry, disappointed and possibly burdened by struggling adults in his life who should perhaps ‘know’? Additionally, I wondered how these family members were represented in those he encountered in the school culture, where his anger was consistently vented and felt by others.

On reflection, I think Conrad’s need for ‘control’, was possibly less to do with being in charge and controlling others, as feared by his teachers, and more to do with feeling in control of himself – having to hold himself together emotionally, perhaps in the absence of others being able to provide satisfactory containing experiences. This would certainly link to the ‘dense rubber ball’ I encountered in our first session.

Yet we somehow managed to find our way through the foggy, sensitive boundaries - that seemed to separate and connect us in what felt at times like an emotional battlefield. We abandoned games that constructed boundary lines that

categorically distinguished winning from losing, chaos from order. Instead we played those that demanded a much more contingent, permeable, and eventually collaborative engagement. This proved a more positive and creative learning experience for both of us. However, unlike Conrad's P.E lessons, it did not just happen – I had to make some conscious adjustment. I repeatedly took a step back, as had intuitively occurred in our first session, and gave Conrad the space, time and opportunity to see and take in what was going on more holistically. Playing three-dimensional games, such as Jenka, dominoes and geometric jigsaws, gave him more opportunity to make sense of what he was doing from different viewpoints. I found the multi-sensory engagement that was required much more demanding, and this seemed to help form the kind of authentic level playing field (a long way from engineering two wins each), that seemed to support reciprocal engagement and shared learning experiences:

‘The Jenka was a different story. He worked very swiftly and confidently at removing blocks from the tower – and very successfully. He laughed because I was slow and made several false starts which looked like toppling the tower. As I pondered, he said he knew exactly which block he would take next – he seemed to have it sewn up spatially, seemed in control..’

In the games we played he often mocked my slow, deliberated actions – and at one stage,

‘Conrad began to act out his moves in slow motion – in a teasing/mocking sort of way. I laughed and said I was trying to win and tried to take the opportunity to talk about his experience of winning. I said ‘You seem to enjoy winning Conrad – how does it feel when you win?’ ‘It feels GREAT!’ he roared in reply. I ventured that perhaps being in the classroom was so difficult at times because they don't give him activities that make him feel he can win. He seemed to pause to think about this before nodding in response.’



In this important containing moment I was at last able to communicate my understanding of the way he sometimes feels when he loses or fails in the classroom. Winning seemed to represent an answer or antidote to the loss and failure Conrad experienced that affected the way he felt about himself and others, and which he seemed to aggressively pursue. Perhaps he simply needed more opportunities to enjoy feeling ‘great!’ in school, and needed help to find a way of broadening the narrow, confrontational narrative in which he found himself in school, and that was stuck in the minds of the adults who worked with him. During the course of our meetings I came to think that winning for Conrad was about developing a sense of agency and stronger sense of ‘self’.

As I lost myself in the activity, he seemed to find himself and gain confidence. Letting go, relinquishing control to make room for an ‘other’ seems to be a central reciprocal task of the containing process – sometimes difficult perhaps for those in a teaching situation. In the early stages we were still competing, but as ‘Jenka’ became Conrad’s favourite occupation during the mentoring sessions, it became a kind of emotional analogue of our relationship; ‘I love this game’, he remarked during one session. He gradually began to verbally guide and facilitate my choices towards successfully removing and replacing blocks. I suggested that rather than competing with each other to destroy the tower, we could work together to build the tallest tower possible. Conrad liked this idea which I think helped him, a little, to explore the possibilities of achieving through working collaboratively. I did not take the notion of working together for granted. For Conrad this marked a level of mutual faith and trust that had tentatively grown between us. And we had certainly progressed a long way from our ‘beginning’ position at the start of mentoring.

When he experienced something of the sense of agency this trust lent, he engaged in the activity intently, carefully leading and coaching me towards a reciprocal,

collaborative success that we were able to enjoy together. Similarly, creating spaces to receptively engage with his choice of ‘dominoes’ play, I began to learn that, contrary to conclusions I had drawn earlier, he was able to plan, think strategically and work systematically:

‘I watched him carefully positioning pieces, testing them out and re-positioning until he was sure they were in the correct position to ensure a cause-effect progression. As Conrad worked, I reminded him that he had told me before that he found science the most difficult classroom subject. He agreed it was, but I likened his approach to problem solving in this domino activity to science and commented that he was systematic, tried out solutions and adjusted his approach just in the way a thorough scientist would. He carried on and just said: ‘that’s cool’.

In this way I began to discover the extent to which our learning was interdependent. His learning depended on my understanding about him as a learner. Another significant game that Conrad chose repeatedly to play, and that I eventually helped him to see as a symbol of his responses in the classroom, also involved the dominoes. He loved to construct domino rallies – something he did with his Dad (I think he meant his step-dad here):

‘I said I had remembered the dominoes and he looked pleased.....He shared them out, we played the simplest matching game. He seemed relaxed and seemed happy to add up the number of dots he had left at the end. He was keen to construct a domino rally and as he did so, he told me about doing the same thing with his dad and how he and his dad had made one that stretched round the living room and out into the hall to the front door – but, he said, that was a long while ago. I watched as he carefully constructed a pathway for the dominoes. Again, he was keen for me to build a rally also, and when some pieces stuck, he quickly nudged them to keep them going in order, it would seem, that I could also experience the success he had enjoyed’

It was interesting that when Conrad trusted that I acknowledged and understood his competences, he became quite generous as the facilitator, and wanted to share his success, or perhaps he had learnt this from the way his step-dad facilitated him at home. His step father appeared to be with us in a card game Conrad was also keen to show me:

‘He said he wanted to play a card game that his dad had taught him where we had to take it in turns to put down cards until they add up to 21 – he said he would show me how to play, but it was difficult because with every card he played, he changed the rules.’

Although mental addition was not one of Conrad’s strengths, I wondered whether he was trying to pass on some of the confusion and frustration he faces at home, where the rules and the players seem to be in a constant state of flux. However, the domino rally, and maybe step-dad in light of his Mum’s interview comments, seemed to come good by the end of the mentoring project.

‘He said he wanted to make a domino rally and I watched as he positioned the dominoes carefully and accurately until he pushed a single domino to start the whole rally. This brought a smile to his face and I asked him if it was a bit like what happened in the classroom - the teacher sets everything up and then he does one little thing –a bit like tapping one domino – and ‘everything begins to fall apart, and you get into trouble?’ He looked at me, before picking up the stray dominoes that had fallen on the floor, and murmured; ‘mmm...’

I asked him to try to think about what happens in the domino rally in relation to his actions in the classroom, he nodded slowly and he said he would try. The end of the mentoring project with Conrad was I think more difficult for me than for him. Conrad’s reluctance to attend mentoring meetings seemed to coincide with the school’s end of the year SAT’s (Statutory Assessment Tasks, please find Glossary). This meant there was no longer a need for Conrad to be part of the ‘Sparrow

hawks' group, and he relished being able to rejoin his class for literacy and numeracy lessons. This underlined the, aforementioned, importance of him being with his peers:

'He came out (of classroom) and asked me if he could stay to draw with his friend today, but that he would come next week. I have to say that I felt terribly disappointed, but was glad at least that he had come to explain. I said that would be fine. I wondered whether I had been too critical last week, so he just did not want to come anymore.....I also thought, having worked to give Conrad opportunities to choose during mentoring sessions, I should be glad that he was able to exert this agency in a...productive way for him....I recognised this was probably the beginning of the end of our mentoring relationship. We had a gap leading up to and including half term, and it has been difficult since then to pick up momentum again. This coincides with this time of the school year – the summer term coming to an end and things beginning to break up....it's a difficult time and I feel quite sad about the project coming to an end.'

I struggled to let him go, perhaps in the process also revealing something of my own associations and anxieties about separation. We did manage to meet briefly for the final mentoring session, whilst evidence of the 'breaking up' defensive states (Youell, 2006) persisted. Something that seemed to be important was that he knew his Mum and I were at last going to meet:

'From the start ...Conrad seemed edgy and uneasy. He said he couldn't stop long as he wanted to go to the book fair. This was quite a revelation as I couldn't persuade him to even look at a book during the whole mentoring project! I guess he just did not want to be with me in the mentoring room this week – our last meeting. 'Not stopping', seemed to be the main story of the session. He said he had time for just one game of Jenka. He undid the tower too quickly and it soon toppled. He played with the wooden bricks after they had fallen and told me that he had

practised building a bridge last night at home with the Jenka blocks. He also talked about his mum coming to parents 'evening the previous day, and I said I had met her and that she was coming to talk to me about him and the mentoring meetings. He smiled and said, 'yea, I know'.....

.....I said I would walk down to the book fair with him and he disappeared into the hall.'

### **Reflections on extracts from an interview with Conrad's Mother**

I met Conrad's mother during the final week of the mentoring project. I arranged the interview so that it occurred on the afternoon following a parents' meeting that Mrs. Hill (Conrad's class teacher) had assured me she would attend. I went to school to catch her on that day to remind her about our meeting, in case she had forgotten. By this time I was keen to meet her and was afraid that she would not come. This pre-meeting meeting turned out to be a good idea, as it gave me an opportunity to reassure her about the interview, and the following afternoon she returned.

I asked about Conrad as a baby and she explained that he fed and slept well. She described his siblings as; 'his eldest is almost 20, one older sister of 16, and a step sister of 15', and she confirmed that he enjoyed a lot of freedom and enjoyed being outdoors, playing sport, rarely spending time or playing in the house. Then she disclosed the significant trauma that Conrad had experienced as a toddler, and that seemed to add the missing pieces that could help make sense of 'absence and its associates'. In these extracts E= Erica, M= Mum:

M: I think he has got a very low self esteem. That was due to, I think, the trauma that he had when he was about three from his biological father and erm he erm had quite bad behavioural problems because of what happened..... and I don't know if you

are aware of what happened or if they have updated on it or anything?

E: No it is just on a need to know basis I think and they tried to maintain confidentiality...Conrad's record....but he's had a difficult time?

M: He did. (Voice drops, takes a deep breath – emotional) erm..oh dear.. he was about three and a half,..and I was a victim of domestic violence.. but it got progressively worse until I was actually assaulted in front of the children and I had to call the police and he was hand cuffed out of the house. The marriage was over at that point. Em...We had a...well we had bought a house together, so I wanted to sell the house ...in the Midlands...we got rented accommodation and the three children and myself and we had been in rented accommodation for about a month or 5 weeks and his father decided to ram my house until he actually drove his car into my kitchen and snatched Conrad.... it was about 2 o'clock in the morning and he was drunk and they had armed police after him...and they was intercepted about three hours later and Conrad in the car remembers it vividly. I mean every time.....

E: Conrad was about 3?

M: About three and a half when it happened.

The image of the Conrad's father ramming the car, brought to my mind one of the later mentoring sessions when I went to collect him from his class where he was giving the supply teacher a difficult time. He remained in his chair as though stuck, but began to use it to move, rather like a bumper car, through the classroom towards me. He said, while the rest of the class laughed; 'I want to get my car into the mentoring room?' I found this very strange and disturbing at the time, but after listening to his mother's story, I began to see how it might explain some of his destructive feelings towards me. Also, some of the story I had, perhaps, stopped him disclosing in our first mentoring session, and I had not given him another opportunity to disclose in the mentoring room, and of course, some of the anger and fear he continually communicated. The interview continued:

E: It must have been very traumatic for you all.....

M: Yes, very, very traumatic and he went up the police and the hospital to be checked over. There was nothing physically wrong with him, but he, em his behaviour, from being like this very good little baby, very contented to ...he turned into.. absolute nightmare. He used to asleep...I found him one night ...he slept with a big carving knife in his bed because he had to have it in an emergency. Then we were made homeless and we had to live in a bed and breakfast for about 5 weeks and they re-housed us temporarily for two years and I had the three children in one room...and Sam got up to go to toilet one night and he said he saw ....Conrad like with a knife in his hand....and Conrad was frightened that his father was going to come back for him. So he had a lot of difficulties. He would do really dangerous things like hang out the bedroom window...even though it was locked, he learnt how to unlock the windows. And he would be running off climbing over the fence to try and get away from the house and I actually had him erm tested for ADHD because of his behaviour was so, so vile.... climbing the walls basically... type of thing ...and they said that he was borderline and he had ...it had become a learnt behaviour..... so they put him on Ritalin and after a couple of months I looked into it and realised what it was and took him off it .....and just really worked hard at putting strict boundaries around him, and trying to keep him on track. He had a difficult time and I think he found school really hard initially....and he's been .....quite traumatised by that.

On reflection, the difficulties with 'absence' and 'boundaries' that recurred during mentoring sessions in the transference and counter transference experience seemed now to make more sense. One of the people who should have been creating safe, secure, containing boundaries for Conrad in his early experiences, had in fact violated and destroyed the privilege in a life threatening, and psychologically damaging way. I came to see that Conrad's 'absence' was something to do with

his experience of the absence of appropriately containing boundaries in his young life.

Her distressing story continued, and she attributed Conrad's difficulties with reading, to this early trauma:

E: It was a difficult beginning.

M: I think (big sigh), because of that, it sort of put him right back that...I think his em.... I obviously don't know how he would have achieved at school if that hadn't have happened, but em he just couldn't sort of focus on anything and he found it really hard to concentrate and like his, like his very.. em...very short term memory span... erm he couldn't retain anything so, so like whenever he would try and do a spelling list he would learn it all and he would remember it all, but if you asked him 10 minutes later he wouldn't remember anything and time and time again I found reading with him is a real problem...

E: Reading seems to be a bit of a sticking point. I've desperately tried to interest him in some books and things, but he really has kind of switched off....

M: He doesn't want to know and I just sort of try, I don't even bother reading with him at home now because it was just a battle and it was ...

I had a book box in the mentoring room because I knew from teaching experience, that 'shared reading' with children (rather like 'work discussion' with adults) can provide a containing and intimate communication space for learning. Following his successes with the three dimensional games we play, I thought it was a sign of his growing confidence when he brought a copy of a 'Simpsons' comic with him to one of the mentoring sessions. When I asked, perhaps too excitedly, if he wanted any help with reading, he replied:

'No, I don't like it, I don't want to.' I said it might help him read 'The Simpsons', but he said he already reads it – but I know he mostly reads the pictures. Conrad did not talk much during our



session today – it was as though he just went through the motions – rushing at some points - of doing what he expected to do and what he thought I expected of him - but the puzzles at least seemed to distract him from whatever it was that may have been on his mind. At the end of the session I said I looked forward to seeing him next week and hoped we would be able to talk a little. This seemed to register as he gave me some direct eye contact for the first time this session and said ‘ok’ as we walked through the door.

This was the most explicit and forceful negative verbal response Conrad articulated during the whole mentoring project. On reflection, I think he felt a sense of shame about his poor reading skills and maybe thought I could help. I think I could have done rather better here than simply project my own disappointment and then wonder why he seemed subdued. There were probably many other matters on his mind that day but sadly, I felt something of Conrad slipping away in this session, rather as he had absented himself during group observation I made of him and the ‘Sparrowhawks’.

He did not risk asking me for help with reading again, and neither did I risk morphing into teacher mode by offering it again. It was however, interesting how in my write-ups, I dismissed his claim to be a reader with the derisory; ‘he mostly reads the pictures’. I should have been more respectful as this, along with so many of his responses during mentoring sessions, let me know that he had developed a range of strategies for inferring many meanings that symbolic forms carry. He was just rather stuck when it came to decoding written text. Perhaps Conrad’s immature decoding skills ‘not being there’, symbolised something of his characteristic ‘absence’, and were part of the emotional regression that finally began to make more sense when I interviewed his mother.

### **Concluding Reflection**

The traumatic and early learning from experience Conrad engaged with as a very young child, seemed to be revisited and played out in the school setting. His stories were those of absence and loss, particularly of significant male figures in his life. This was acted out destructively in class and sometimes in the mentoring room, through what presented as a resistance to learning. He struggled to read. The formidable task of trying to decode, in order to make sense of reading texts, a fundamental requirement of school life, he encountered each day and painfully symbolised absence and its associated losses for Conrad.

Conrad's confusion, frustration and absence of knowing how to read was also played out at an institutional level concerning the absence or avoidance of information sharing about Conrad's particular 'family difficulties'. Inherent in this was an equally relevant adherence to tight boundaries set by the school and university institutions concerning ethicality in relation to confidentiality. It was interesting how containing Conrad from the outset focused on negotiating boundaries, as introduced below and considered further in Chapter 10.

However professionally plausible, by avoiding information sharing, along with other adults in school, I did not know what 'family difficulties' meant. This evoked a range of unhelpful phantasies but moreover a collective absence of knowing that seemed to leave Conrad, painfully stuck in a thin narrative of 'family difficulties' that came to be seen as his excuse for inapt behaviours.

As with Tim, my relationship beyond the mentoring room with Conrad's teacher and teaching assistant became important in terms of realising the significant conscious and unconscious emotional demands and complexities which all adults and children in school are exposed each day. Sometimes disturbed by Conrad's

responses, conversations through the mentoring project with both Mrs. Hill and Heather, suggested that further opportunities to reflect on their experiences of working with Conrad would have been welcomed. The relational role of the learning mentor in school may inform and be linked to the development of peer support groups amongst school staff, to support adult, thence pupil well-being.

In a range of ways, not knowing for Conrad was communicated and acted out through continual attempts to absent himself both physically and mentally. Conrad was a popular, influential character amongst his peers but he was also angry, impulsive, volatile and resistant. He also desperately wanted to be helped. He was both frightened and frightening. I felt the pressure of this confrontation which demanded engagement and proved to be hard work for me, emotionally. It was this uncomfortable engagement with conflict perhaps that was particularly significant in terms of learning about Conrad and learning about learning.

His powerful projections evoked, in the countertransference, some residually painful associations from my own life. This undoubtedly affected my responses to Conrad and the quality and progress of our relationship, so I came to recognise that the mentoring sessions were just as demanding for him as they were for me. I hope they were as equally rich for him, in terms of learning from experience, as they were for me.

In fact, Conrad's material evoked many questions about the struggle to learn. The first thing I learnt was that 'telling' or expecting Conrad to respond to my choices, my unwitting default position as a teacher, was inapt and so had to be relinquished. Emotional engagement meant I had to learn to listen to Conrad and I found it hard to endure some of the silence. His sullen disinterest projected a sense of helplessness that made me experience something of the same, replicating what

he may have experienced at times in classroom. He also queried the time boundaries between participants I had carefully planned, so his 'edgyness' that I repeatedly experienced, was indeed reciprocal. The relational dance for Conrad and I seemed to hinge to on contingency and control, as I observed that we made progress when I learnt to hand over some control to help him develop a sense of personal agency, in the school setting. For Conrad and reparatively for me, this simultaneously involved gradually re-working together the notion of a flexible enough containing boundary that remained integrated.

I learnt that Conrad's sense of personal agency grew through my trust and belief in him. Consciously taking a step back, observing, mentally noting and recalling during our mentoring sessions, details I had observed about his abilities in the simple table top games we played, such as dominoes and Jenka and Connect 4, I think provided some helpful containment for Conrad. Working actively at a practical, multi-sensory level allowed him to demonstrate important thinking skills that may not have been immediately apparent in the classroom in relation to learning about the curriculum. In feeding back the 'knowing' observed, I began to see Conrad and I think he began to see himself differently. Sometimes I was able to link his skills and strategies to events concerning behaviours in class. When he began to feel that I trusted and respected his abilities, he became more receptive to working collaboratively, as well as competitively. Through this experiential learning I came to understand how trust lends agency and also how healthy relational interdependency supports learning.

It was not all plain sailing with Conrad and his interest in attending our sessions seemed to fade, just when I thought we seemed to be making progress. Following the interview with his mother, I saw much more clearly the extent of his difficulties. In light of his fractured early relationship patterns, aspects of Conrad's

sense of self and identity struggle seemed to make sense. Keeping and breaking boundaries was an underlying theme that made our mentoring relationship both a challenging and important learning relationship for us both.

## **Chapter 7: Isabel – Adding it all up**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is about Isabel, the only female child participant. With Isabel, the biographical section brings together perspectives from the school and home, to outline Isabel's strengths and difficulties as perceived by her parents, teachers and also how they presented in the school learning environment. I reflect on some observational material, and also fragments from individual interviews that I held with her teachers and with her mother, at the end of mentoring project. I also include dynamics at work in the material that I reflect on as a researcher. This aspect is revisited in the final chapters. The second part of the case study tells the story of what happened during our interactions in the mentoring sessions and the conclusion draws together some key themes.

### **Biographical background**

'Isabel was a tall, slim girl with long fair hair' and 'a broad smile'. I wrote this in the first paragraph of my observation 'proforma', described in Chapter 3, following our first mentoring meeting. A year 6 pupil, Isabel was part of a year group that had been split into two classes. The youngest half of the cohort were combined with a smaller, year 5 group, and as one of the youngest Isabel became part of the class that was made up of both year 5 and year 6 pupils. Mrs. Hill (class teacher) taught her, and the other 28 children in the class, National Curriculum (2001) material each day, with particular emphasis on statutory 'Core' subjects (please see Glossary): Literacy, Numeracy and Science.

Year 6, was a particularly important transition year for Isabel and her peers, as it marked the gateway to the Secondary phase of education. There was also the pressure of taking SAT's, which because of their significance to this case study, I describe below. Also, Kent operated a selective secondary school system, where

the Grammar school system remained at the time of the research. The stress for Isabel, her teachers and her family, surrounding the 11+ exam, or the 'Kent Test' as it was known, seemed to be particularly relevant.

During the third, summer term of the academic year, year 6 pupils traditionally undertook Statutory Assessment Tasks (SAT's). These summative assessments were standardised tests used to measure individual pupil attainment against government prescribed criteria known as; 'level descriptors'. The results of individual assessments were collated from every school in England, and statistical outcomes were submitted to a national assessment agency, where they were ordered to form national performance tables. These tables would have been scrutinised by the Ofsted (January, 2006) inspection team that found Brompton school to be an effective school that provides 'good value for money', not long before the start of the research project.

Part of the education accountability agenda which began in the 1980's, published league tables of school performance illustrating these standardised outcomes, were placed in the public domain. This was ostensibly to inform parents about the standards of education their children were receiving, and also to assist external school assessment agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted - please find Glossary) to maintain 'standards' by explicitly monitoring and assessing school performance. This also, implicitly, led to measuring teacher performance. Some implications of this policy and practice, in relation to the emotional experience of learning, are discussed at the end of the thesis.

Isabel was ten years old when I first met her in Mrs. Hill's classroom, when introduced by Trish, my 'link' person and the school Senco. Mrs. Hill, Isabel's class teacher, who was at the time also 'Acting' Deputy Head to cover maternity

leave, seemed slightly put-out by my initial classroom group observation. She brusquely suggested an afternoon visit would have been more useful. This, she explained was because Isabel would be out of class with her numeracy group for most of the morning. This cool beginning, alongside other responses from staff, is discussed in Chapter 9 when I describe some of the emotional processes that emerged at an organisational level.

There were other significant people in Isabel's life in school and at home, who she seemed to bring with her and who informed the stories she communicated during the mentoring project. Isabel lived outside the village, with her mother, father and elder sister Rosie, with whom she seemed to enjoy a close and rivalrous, sisterly relationship. Rosie was thirteen years old, had passed the 'Kent Test' to achieve a much coveted, both socially and academically, local Grammar school place, and seemed to have set something of a bench mark, in relation to Isabel, for achievement within the family.

Isabel's mother and father seemed concerned that her achievements and progress in school did not resemble that of their elder daughter. Isabel and her family learnt during the project that she would be attending a local secondary school when she left this school, not a Grammar school. Isabel was popular amongst her peers, but had a best friend, who was also the daughter of her mother's best friend, whom she occasionally visited in Ireland with the rest of her family. She seemed fond of her Uncle Robin who lived in a local seaside town, and also her maternal Grandfather who lived a little further along the coast.

Isabel was also attached to Mr. Chatwell, a popular teacher in the school whom I did not meet during the project, as explained. She had hoped he would be her teacher during this particular academic year. The 'numeracy' group, referred to by



Mrs. Hill, that Isabel attended during three morning sessions a week, was taken by Heather, who lived locally and, at the time, was working as a teaching assistant in the school. Isabel was in one of two groups that Heather worked with, to improve pupils' basic number skills, for example, multiplication tables.

The following views were taken from my own observations and from the individual interviews that I held with adult participants at the end of the project. The interviews were fully transcribed and covered a small range of agreed, pre-prepared questions. Adult participants were given copies of questions before the interview, as described in Chapter 3. In an interview, Isabel's class teacher - Mrs. Hill, described Isabel as:

'Keen to please, she works very hard and she tries. She does ask for help if she feels she needs it. She has a positive attitude to her work...there are particular strengths that she has, literacy being one of these. She reads beautifully and has a good understanding of the texts she reads....yes, she...has a sort of close circle of friends...'

This was the second year that Mrs. Hill had been her class teacher. She had also taught her in year 3, when Isabel was 6 years old, so she felt she knew her well. However, a sense of ambivalence surrounding Isabel was evident, when Mrs. Hill later in the interview, expressed concern about Isabel's ability to ask for help:

'She is quiet and sometimes I do worry that she doesn't put herself forward and ask for help. She will struggle on her own. So I do have to keep an eye on her.'

It seemed that despite being particularly competent at literacy, evidenced from formative and summative assessments (please see Glossary) used through the school from year 2 to year 6, she seemed to lack confidence, was very quiet in class, and did not volunteer answers to teacher questions without being prompted.

She also appeared to have a kind of ‘mental block’ when it came to numeracy, that seemed to worry and puzzle her teachers, her mother and herself.

Isabel’s mother and Mrs. Hill both said they had talked to Isabel about this, and confided in her that they too had struggled as children with maths, so understood something of her frustrations. Isabel’s mother described her as a ‘worrier’, and presented as a rather worried, anxious parent herself. (In this extract E= Erica and M=Isabel’s Mum. I shall use similar abbreviations in all subsequent extracts in this case study):

M: Yes, she’s a worrier...she has tremendous problems with anxiety..that she finds diff....it’s out of proportion with the problem in front of her.

E:...yes...

M: but she can’t control that..she does worry terribly and we get physical manifestations of that...tummy ache, headache sometimes...that kind of thing..

Trish, the Senco and my ‘link person’, expressed her reasons for including Isabel in the project as:

T:...I think we felt that she was perhaps lacking in confidence and so did her parents. That erm she would benefit from having time to show her own talents and raise her sort of self-esteem a bit..

And Mrs. Hill (class teacher) gave her view of Isabel’s difficulties:

Mrs. H: ..but in the maths she definitely needs the support and she has had support at home, but I do get the impression, I am allowed to say that, but I think there are elements of friction at home. Her Mum is a teacher, her sister is very, very able, so I do have worries that she is trying, you know she is living in the shadow of her sister really and I wonder whether that is sort of putting up barriers for her, but I taught her a few years ago when she was in Year 3 and she had similar difficulties then.

Isabel, benefited from some regular out-of-classroom, small group support for numeracy on three mornings a week, with some other children who were identified by their teacher as struggling with numeracy. These ‘out-of-class’ sessions were held in a room that was adjacent to what became the ‘mentoring room’. The group was taught by Heather and known as the ‘springboard’ maths group which as the name seemed to suggest, meant they needed a little extra help to achieve.

Heather talked about Isabel being a popular member of the ‘Springboard’ group – noting her generosity to others, but also the spirited way Isabel retaliated and stood up to Conrad when he tried to ‘wind up’ the girls in the group. There was another piece of shared school history between Isabel and Conrad, beyond being members of the same class, with the same teacher. Isabel and Conrad were both part of the year 6 pupils who were expecting to have Mr. Chatwell as their class teacher during that year. I knew from a brief conversation with Trish, simply that Mr. Chatwell was unwell and although he was absent at this time, he seemed to have been internalised in the organisation as a kind of ‘good object’ by pupils, staff and parents alike. Isabel and Conrad were particularly disappointed by his absence, but unlike Conrad, she seemed to continue to be sustained by, and able to draw on the qualities of relationship they had enjoyed.

In the mentoring sessions participants told their ‘stories’ partly through drawings and writings in a ‘scrapbook’, ‘All about me’ that I provided. In one session, Isabel carefully recalled and drew a picture showing planets of the solar system. She checked that she had included all the names of the planets by using an acronym that Mr. Chatwell had taught her class in a topic during the previous academic year. Mr. Chatwell, rather like her sister Rosie, seemed to be with us

during some of those sessions, even though neither were physically present.

Isabel's mother also recalled this important figure in the school:

E: ...very popular and she has friends and likes the teachers...she talks a lot about Mr. Chatwell...

M:...Oh yes, you see Mr. Chatwell...was a hero

E: ...yes, I think he still is..(laughs)

M: Yes..he was, I mean ..she was nervous to start with because he was her first male teacher....

E: ...mmmmmm

M: ...and of course he was absolutely delightful...I mean he...how he coped with that class I don't know and I don't know....always.....been repercussions....but she's missed him terribly – they all have and they all talked about him and they've been very concerned and I think perhaps they could have been given more information than they have...not about his condition or anything... (gasp) but about how he was and I think they have really missed him...'

I do not know what the 'repercussions' she mentions specifically referred to, but there was a decision, at an organisational level, which may have shaped Isabel's learning experience during year 6, that may also have linked with Mr. Chatwell not being there. Due to pupil numbers, the younger half of the year 6 group were placed in a different class with the small year 5 group. This meant that Isabel (and Conrad) were separated during lessons from friends they had been with since beginning school, and were working with pupils, who were up to a year younger. This arrangement evened class sizes, and may have made sense logistically, but Isabel and Conrad often bemoaned, during mentoring sessions, the consequences of their split-class. Being with their friends was very important to them. Heather, in her interview also talked about Isabel's struggle with maths:

H: I began supporting Isabel in numeracy only when she joined the Monday to Wednesday group of four girls and one boy... Although very literate and proficient at reading she appeared to have mental blocks and lacks confidence in numeracy. And

subsequently we wonder if she does not suffer confusion of space. Her work on time - she found it hard to remember clock wise and anti-clock wise and mirror images very poor.

E: Not very spatially aware?

H: No, no, or gets confused, which direction things are going in. Erm...There is no problem with Isabel engaging. She wants to succeed and so do her parents. She relaxed more with our group because we played more games where appropriate and we went at a slower pace. When she struggled to understand a process I did give her one to one attention, trying to explain things in different ways, until one clicked and it also stopped her getting in a tizz because she..... gets a bit panicky.

Here, Heather makes a link between Isabel's 'confusion' with direction, time, mirror images and states of anxiety e.g. 'getting in a tizz....a bit panicky', and her need for support and attention in the more 'relaxed' small group setting where she can, perhaps find some space to breathe, as it were, more easily. The caring ethos of the school was apparent in some of the ways staff talked about pupils in the school, such as for example, Heather's warm attitude to working with Isabel: 'But she looks a lot happier I think since she has been with our group than when she was with the rest of the children downstairs. She looked anxious for numeracy.'

Despite the stress of school assessment that they both seemed to be wrapped up in, it was interesting that Mrs. Hill and Heather both focused on the pressure they felt Isabel was under from home, to achieve in school. In this description, when I suggested that Isabel craves help and support, Heather drew attention to both Isabel's and her parents fears and desires for 'success' in school:

E: She is desperate for support, seems to think: 'I need support to help me...'

H: Yes, yes because she wants to succeed. Isabel wants to succeed, but she is aware of pressure.....around her, that's in parents and tests.

E: Yes, and that seems to numb her a bit....

H: It does, tests cause her to be panicky, what she is trying to do is to learn not to worry too much. Do her best, but I do think she has a sense of failure in her parents' eyes.

E: Why do you think that is?

H: I think she has an older sister who is very capable on all fronts and I don't know much about her parents but they are both professionally able I think.

Rosie, Isabel's 'clever' (this is Mum's word) older sister was also at the front of Mrs. Hill's mind, in relation to Isabel:

Mrs.H: Her sister is very, very able, so I do have worries that she is trying, you know, she is living in the shadow of her sister really and I wonder whether that is putting up barriers for her...

Isabel's mother switched, during our interview, between talking about Isabel, Rosie and herself in such a disjointed, fragmented way, that I found it difficult at times to follow and to hang on to the main thread of the stories she told. It was as though something continually interrupted her thinking, and perhaps that in some way reflected her experience. Unwittingly, my responses during the interview began to mirror this fragmentation. Perhaps in an effort to take it all in and empathise, towards understanding, I projected something of my own confusion. As observed in Chapter 2, Bion described empathy as 'a benign form of projection.' (Bion, 1976:245):

M: So...er...er our first child was completely ...er..a girl as well, but erm very talkative, you know very into everything, very bright...that kind of thing...Isabel was slightly more laid back really..erm certainly at first....

Following a rather dissatisfied; 'but', when talking about Isabel, she particularly emphasised the sisters' close relationship:

M: ...but she's a delightful child..very happy and...er yes, she talked at the right time and she loves her sister...they've always been very close, very close..

Although I did not meet Rosie, she often seemed to be present in Isabel's mind during mentoring meetings. Isabel's teachers seemed to realise the pressure that Isabel experienced, and on reflection, perhaps Rosie as the 'ideal' pupil, and 'perfect' daughter was an invisible but emotionally charged part of that pressure. In this way, Isabel seemed to have her work cut out trying to please everyone, and that was certainly the impression she gave me from the very first mentoring session.

However, before moving on to thinking about what happened in the mentoring sessions, an essential part of Isabel's biography was the traumatic birth she and her mother experienced:

E: I wonder whether you'd like to tell me a little bit about Isabel as a baby?...

M: Mmmm....well, er Isabel (sigh) unfortunately when she was born she ...aspirated,...er... so for the first week...she.e was in intensive care...special care baby unit on a ventilator..

E: 'aspirated'...what does that mean?

M:... she inhaled liquid in her first breath

E: Ah ....

M: So she had a.. you know, or could have developed a very bad chest infection so she...her first week was extremely traumatic

E: So she was in intensive care?

M: mmmm.in...in K... and C.... when, when it still had a special care baby unit

E: In an incubator?

M: yes, she, she was ventilated and she was in an incubator yes, and for the first 3 days she was critically ill...she was on 100% oxygen, she was sedated, she was...and em..

E: It must have been very traumatic for you and your husband...

It appears that Isabel almost suffocated as she struggled to take her first breath. Interestingly, a sense of Isabel suffocating and grasping some time and space to breathe, seemed to be a recurrent theme during our mentoring relationship, that related to her feeling states and learning. For example, as mentioned in our first session, unlike the other case study children, Isabel was hungry for the opportunity to talk, barely drew breath until there was literally no mentoring time left. Also, her own voice seemed stifled by others, both past and present, in a way reminiscent of ideas expounded in 'The ghosts in the nursery' (Fraiberg, 1980). I will relate this further to my experience of learning with Isabel in Chapter 9.

Her mother continued this emotional story, and went on to describe how Isabel was born at home and then had to be transferred to hospital by ambulance, to another place where specialist help and support was available. According to Mum, Isabel liked to talk about her beginnings; 'well I wouldn't say morbid, but she'll say things like...she well, 'I almost died' and, 'what would you think if I had died?...She's quite sensitive about it'. Mum agreed that Isabel had been a very precious baby, and I had experienced Isabel, during the mentoring project, as someone who seemed to see herself as being quite vulnerable, and who wanted help. In her interview, Mum revealed that she was a nurse herself, but was shocked at how harrowing the birth experience had been:

E: And how were you?

M: Erm...Well thinking back on it now ...I think I was just in complete shock...you know as in...I was there in the hospital with her, but I couldn't be with her because they had all these rules and regulations...you know...once you'd had the baby you can't go and stay in the baby care unit for three days... because you might contaminate it or whatever..

E: Mmmmm..



M: So I had to then literally live on the maternity ward and then go in and visit her..(gulps) and then do all the expressing milk and that kind of thing..em.. so it was vital that I was there, but I don't think I actually took in..the.. er..e-normity of what could happen...I mean....I was a nurse myself,

E: ...Gosh...

M: ....And I was an intensive care nurse myself and I..of course...I knew all those things, but I completely shut that side of myself off...I knew I was doing it, but I could not ...you know ...when it's your own child you, you have to just focus on that...and fortunately, amazingly and still it amazes me now ...

I think that being separated from Isabel in the hospital at this early stage, directly following the first anxiety of separation, birth (Youell, 2006), must have been particularly distressing for the whole family, particularly Isabel, her mother and her father. Such anguish may have been compounded perhaps, by the parents' underlying anxieties about Isabel's recovery:

M: ...er possibly, possibly...erm but she started....and of course we were also worried ...specially in the first month....whether she had some residual brain damage because of the fact that by the time she got to the special care baby unit she was blue and she was, you know, very blue and for those first three days she will have had a tremendous amount of oxygen which, well you know of course, in itself can damage...

Isabel's mother went on to talk about making a demanding career change not long after Isabel's birth: 'I started a Post Graduate Certificate in Education when Isabel was four months old and we had a full time nanny'. She also talked about Isabel's unhappy first institutional experience at nursery school. However, the above extracts alone may prove valuable when thinking about, and trying to make sense of Isabel's learning in an holistic sense. This particularly relates to question two of the thesis, and I wonder how the emotional, lived experience of the family-in-the-child (Dowling, 2003) can be flexibly-enough contained in school, where policy

and practices can be seen to focus on learning as the product of a discretely constructed pupil-teacher-curriculum relationship? (Tod et al, 2004). Also, part of this question, discussed in Chapter 10, is about asking whether there is any capacity in 'school', for thinking and linking love, hate and knowing. When love is considered to be a fundamental human motive, or life drive as proposed by Klein's (1931) 'epistemophilic instinct' and hate includes the primitive drive to avoid the painful process of knowing and learning as Bion (1962) suggests.

The following part of this case study describes and reflects upon some of the ways in which qualities of Isabel's early relationship experiences are played out, replicated and revisited at an emotional level, in the stories of everyday events in school communicated to me during mentoring sessions.

### **What happened during the mentoring sessions?**

In this part of the case study I use extracts from my observational narrative texts, that formed the raw data of the research project, to highlight emerging themes. I also include material which came from the biographical interviews. On reflection, Isabel's rather fragile start, her uncertainty, and confusion, her need for containment and her fear of failure all seemed to be interrelated threads of a key theme; the development of her own identity and sense of self-efficacy. The sense of feeling perpetually under pressure that came with Isabel, was there from our first individual mentoring session. Afterwards, in my 'write-up' I described how:

'I collected her from her classroom, reminding her of our meeting in class last week. As we walked to the mentoring room I asked whether her parents had talked about working with me. She asked hesitantly if it was about counselling and I said I was glad they had discussed mentoring, but also wished I had had a chance to meet and discuss the project with parents. TH had spoken to parents and I wondered whether she had used the term

‘counselling’ during those interactions. I wedged the door open at the beginning of each meeting as the room is small and I don’t want the children to feel shut-in. I closed it when they had had a chance to acclimatise and told them to open the door anytime they felt too warm or uncomfortable.’

We both seemed nervous and uncertain as we walked into the mentoring room for the first time. The word ‘counselling’ seemed to trigger my anxiety about the role I was about to undertake. I was reminded of my frustration when the pre-project meeting I arranged had not been attended by participant parents, and I was afraid that my role and intentions lacked clarity, not just for parents but also for Trish (Senco), with whom I had spent a great deal of time carefully planning and explaining the project, as described above. I was concerned the term ‘counselling’ was misleading and conjured curative connotations of magical proportions in my mind at that moment, which I felt unable to deliver. From the start, I became caught up in some of the disabling uncertainty, confusion and constraint that seemed to be a key theme in the narrative of my experience with Isabel. On reflection, it may also have been playing out some of the dynamics of a family system that was struggling for survival.

Filled with my own, and perhaps some of Isabel’s self-doubt and fear, I wedged the door open in an attempt to prevent her feeling shut-in, and perhaps to demonstrate that it was my intention to create some space rather than to confine or imprison her. This anxious act fleetingly seemed to tap into fairy-tale proportions, as Isabel ‘with long fair hair and wide smile’, was sent with her parents’ blessing into the wild woods to meet a stranger invested with a weighty sense of magical knowing. ‘Hansel and Gretel’ came into my mind, and on reflection, I think we both felt the risk and uncertainty surrounding the kind of witch I might turn out to be.

My own fears about being able to adequately contain Isabel were exacerbated by what felt like the pressure of her expectations of being counselled or cured. She was perhaps projecting something of the unwanted pressure she was under, given some of the expectations from home and school, introduced above. From the start, I felt Isabel was needy and hungry for support, rather as a new born infant.

Defensively, I talked very quickly, carefully using the word ‘mentor’, to explain that I was not a teacher but would come each week to give her some ‘space’ and ‘time’ out of the classroom to talk about things that happened in school. She smiled reassuringly, seemed to listen and attend so, like a teacher I assumed she was engaging and went on to talk a little about the research project until I became aware, through her silence, that I was doing all the talking. I stopped and

‘I invited her to explore the contents of the room which she did enthusiastically. She liked the puzzles and said ‘I’m having fun already’ as she played with the cube.’

Although she appeared to relax a little, on reflection I think it more likely that she slipped into a familiar acquiescent ‘role’, perhaps in this instance to smooth the wheels of our first interaction. This seemed a rather exaggerated enthusiasm towards exploring the room, followed by what felt like an overly gleeful remark; ‘I’m having fun already’. This precocious, ‘Alice in Wonderland’ response felt inauthentic at the time, and on reflection it gave a glimpse of the way Isabel may have consciously deployed seemingly sophisticated social skills, and perhaps at a less conscious level, defences to lead others into thinking she was compliant and happy to go along, to get along.

This seemingly avoidant ‘splitting’ defence, introduced in Chapter 2, brought to mind a young man I worked with in a Secondary school who had a speech and language disorder. He had a stunning smile that he realised everyone appreciated,

but I learnt that the more he struggled to understand what was going on, the more persistent his nodding, and the wider his smile became. Perhaps he used the smile to feign interest and to mask the pain he sometimes experienced in the learning situation.

During supervision, we reflected on Isabel's contrary 'drowning not waving' communication as perhaps being part of what Mrs. Hill, her class teacher and Heather, her teaching assistant, described respectively as Isabel being 'eager to please', and 'easy to please'. Perhaps that was not the case at all, perhaps it was more to do with Isabel sometimes finding herself trapped into colluding with, and playing out others' projections and fantasies. Perhaps she then struggled to find herself amidst the fairy tale world in which others, including me it seemed, tended to place her.

Or, perhaps the identification that seemed to be occurring in the intersubjective mentoring space, was more to do with my own projections, as tuning into Isabel also meant tapping into some of my own conflicts surrounding complicity. Just as I sometimes fail to integrate unwanted, split-off aspects of myself, I imagined the same may have also applied to Isabel, whose mother repeatedly described her as 'delightful'. Heather described her as having a 'lovely nature'. In Isabel's case, I was reassured by Heather's story about Isabel being 'not as angelic as she looks', following her spirited responses to Conrad 'winding up' the girls in the 'springboard' group, when she 'gave as good as she got'. This more spirited, steely trait was confirmed by Isabel's mother when relating stories of Isabel's 'fights' with her sister, Rosie, and the resistant 'tempers' she showed at home.

However, my confusion here may exemplify how helpful it might be for adults who work with children and young people, beyond clinical settings, to have some

understanding of the way transference and countertransference relationships manifests in educational settings. Such recognition might help to substantiate the intimate, unconscious emotional interaction involved in learning when applied for example in social science research and in public service settings, such as by teachers in schools.

Even so, something of what she may have faced in the 'pleased' and 'pleasing' trap in school, linked with the first story she told me in the first mentoring session. She moved from her chair to sit on the floor at my feet, and began to pour out, or project, many of the uncertainties she had perhaps stored, been unable to process and that now she seemed unable to contain. I felt anxious and slightly overwhelmed by the intensity of her outpourings, which during our first session made the mentoring room feel more like a confessional and took me by surprise.

Isabel was keen to talk. Fidgeting on her knees and smiling, she began to tell her story. She was articulate, and whilst talking, played nervously (her hands began to sweat), with a small, colourful snake she had chosen from the shelf. It was made of small, curved plastic sections. As she spoke, she pulled pieces of the snake apart and then snapped the pieces back together again. I wrote in my observation:

'She said she played the piano and was going to take an exam but was not quite ready. I asked if this was grade one, and she said it was and her music teacher was giving her jazz pieces that she 'quite' liked but found it difficult to keep practising.'

Suggestions of uncertainty and ambivalence were communicated in this observation through her descriptions of not being 'quite ready', along with 'quite' liking the jazz pieces that her piano teacher had chosen, but found 'practising' difficult to sustain:

‘...especially when her Dad was there because she was scared she gets it wrong. She said he was very musical and sang in three choirs and wanted her to practice more, and she picked herself up on the word; ‘scared’ by saying she wasn’t really ‘scared’ of her Dad, but just found it difficult to communicate with him sometimes because he plays more than one instrument and sings so much.’

Isabel was afraid, not of her father as she was quick point out, but of getting ‘it wrong’. Isabel seemed to be demonstrating, in a rather pre-pubescent way, her mature use and understanding of language by being able to repair and clarify meanings, yet her fear of failure, and of feeling overwhelmed by others’ expectations, seemed to be threads of a continuous theme about finding her true self and own identify.

I did not meet Isabel’s father, but in her communications it seemed that rather than being someone she could turn to for support, he seemed to be rather pre-occupied at some level, with Isabel fulfilling his own narcissistic wishes. On reflection, it was interesting how at first I felt angry with Isabel’s father, judging him to be a ‘harsh’ male other, rather similar I also imagined to Isabel’s Grandfather (Mum’s Dad, see below). This may have been more to do with me projecting my own distorted auto/biographical fantasies of the mother, father relational triangle, which affected the countertransference experience. In supervision, we also discussed how my responses have been about deflecting some of the criticism I felt Isabel’s parents’ expressed towards her, back towards them.

Nevertheless, despite her apparent underlying uncertainty and ambivalence, Isabel made it quite clear to me that she did not want to play the piano, or sing in three choirs like her father. It was interesting that Isabel’s determined resistance was objectified and dissociated by her parents who seemed to attribute Isabel with

character deficits, such as lack of motivation and lack of perseverance. On reflection, they seemed to be wondering; ‘what’s wrong with Isabel? And I wondered how their anxieties may have been linked to their earliest fears that Isabel’s traumatic birth might result in some form of ‘damage’:

M: Yes and we tried all...and of course the other thing with Isabel as well she, it is – she - she’s very hard to motivate her ...she’s got very little self-motivation erm she won’t persist with anything – if it’s difficult, well she stops...

E: Yes...

M: ...And this is one of the things we tried, you know we’ve tried really hard to approach that in different ways...and I think this, these sessions have arisen from a conversation with Mrs. M (headteacher) and em Mrs. H (class teacher) to you know, to try to get Isabel to you know, to just keep trying....and we did, oh (sigh)..I think we went through two years altogether of piano lessons..

E: I think she’s mentioned piano lessons..

M: And un-fortunately my husband has exhibited more patience mostly than I ever thought him capable of (both laugh)...he’s not a very patient person...but we’ve had some major battles, and Isabel’s got a serious temper an she had ..she..

E: I don’t think they see that in school, no ...she has talked to me about it and I said I can’t imagine you Isabel..being angry..

M: I remem...I can remember her as a baby she would....absolutely obstinate child...and she would fight ooooh and she..she really has got a really, really...

E: So, so she’s quite strong?

M: Yes...when she has to be...yes...although when it comes to rows about homework.... and she doesn’t want to do it uggghh! Anyway, piano – well really came to a ....and obviously, well, she ...she just didn’t want to do it in the end....the, the thing is I think my husband felt di-disappointed...is that he had invested a huge amount of time because he plays piano quite well...but he sings a lot and that’s his great hobby that he does and Isabel has got perfect pitch..



Interestingly, when I asked Isabel's mother how Isabel's experience of school compared with her own, she said it was more or less the same; 'well, do you know I think Isabel and I probably had a very similar experience', and she talked about her own father being the 'Headmaster...which probably didn't help', of her own small village school, and how she was 'frightened, and very anxious'. Although here the anxiety surrounded maths, rather than music:

M: 'Maths is something we both have in common and we do very badly – am frightened and we get very anxious about it and I do remember that..

In this extract, Mum combined her own and her daughter's fears and anxieties with a confusing 'we', in a way that made it difficult for me to distinguish, or separate her experience from her daughter's. I wondered whether Isabel sometimes experienced this kind of confusion too. It struck me that perhaps nothing seems to quite add-up for Isabel, as expressed in her anxiety, or 'mental block' regarding mathematics. On reflection, this would make sense if she was living-through-again, a number of anxieties and fears that seemed to be stuck in her mother's own internal world. This would, perhaps, sometimes leave little space and time for Mum to help Isabel develop her own mind, and sense of agency. Or, again perhaps this simply occurred to me as I, equally struggling to provide 'good-enough' containment for Isabel, similarly projected my own auto/biographical experiences of introjecting, and subsequently projecting, unresolved conflicts in this '*ghosts in the nursery*', (Fraiberg et al, 1980) intergenerational way.

Yet, this may explain something of the force of Isabel's projections, and the urgency with which she seemed to grasp the opportunity to find some space in my mind during the first mentoring session. At the time, I felt that my plan for our first meeting was being sabotaged as she obviously had no intention of sticking to the agenda I had in mind. I wrote in my observation:

‘Although I had prompted the idea of beginning the ‘scrapbook’, Isabel had so much to say there was only time to write her name and we agreed we would start next time.’

Isabel’s inauthentic behaviour at the beginning of the session, and being ‘stuck’ at the beginning of the ‘scrapbook’ in our first session, seemed to resonate with her identity being ‘stuck’ at that very difficult beginning of her life. She seemed caught between wanting to please her mother and to live up to her father’s ideals. Before the end of the first session I asked her whether, like her Dad, she could sing,

‘..and she grimaced and said ‘sometimes’. She also said her sister played the piano and had already passed grades. As she spoke, in a clear, smiling, articulate way, she was gradually pulling apart the plastic snake until it was completely undone in a little heap in front of her– this was not easy as the links were small and tightly fastened together. She struggled with a couple of pieces and shook her hand at one stage saying ‘my hands are really sweating now’. She attempted to fasten some of the pieces back together but they were too fiddly and her hands were too hot. I said we can leave them like that on the bookshelf for someone else to play with.’

Through the stories of her father being a better singer, and her sister being a better pianist, I began to take-in the enormity of what seemed an insurmountable task for Isabel. I watched her pulling apart and then trying to fasten together again the pieces of plastic snake in her sweltering hands as she talked about her father and her sister, until the pieces lay in a fragmented heap in front of her. Isabel’s actions betrayed her confusion and fear, perhaps anger, even through her continuous, reassuring smile. The emotional weight of trying to keep-on trying to please her mother, and to meet what seemed like her father’s musical ‘princess’ ideals must have been exhausting for Isabel. Although I could not understand it at the time, on reflection, I must have absorbed some of the fatigue she projected as, in my

observational write-ups, I noted on several occasions feeling extremely tired when I was working with Isabel during mentoring sessions.

She seemed alarmed when faced with her own destructive actions towards the plastic snake which may have, unconsciously, represented her father. I tried to reassure her that it would be alright, and suggested that the fragmented snake could be put on the shelf. Perhaps I should have said that we could put it back together again but I did not have the presence of mind to say that at the time.

In this intense first meeting, Isabel also introduced another important character in her life. Uncle Robin, her mother's brother was also a musician who seemed to represent all that was creative, unpredictable and bohemian in the family. Isabel admired him, even though her mother disapproved. Following the session, I wrote-up:

'I asked what kind of music she enjoyed and said she really liked 'rock' because it reminded her of her Uncle, her Mum's brother, who is an artist and lives in H..... He has a band with a 'bizarre' name Isabel and her sister find amusing, and his group have made a 'terrible' version of 'The Snowman' at which point Isabel broke into song to describe her Uncle's noisy cockney version of; 'he's walking in the air..' and giggled (she has a lovely singing voice). She said she really likes him because (and she gestures to describe the way) he uses a special, playful communication with her and her sister when they meet. She also says she likes his flat but has not been very often because it's very small and there's paint and mess everywhere and Mum doesn't like it much.'

It was interesting, how the internalised presence of Uncle Robin prompted her to find her voice, and to literally burst into song. Through sharing some of the rituals of their relationship, generously including her sister here, she seemed to be communicating the hope that I too would offer some of the playful, transitional

space that gave Isabel room to become Isabel; a separate person with competencies that she trusted me enough to share:

‘I said he sounds very creative and she nodded enthusiastically. I said that perhaps she could find a way of using her time and space in the mentoring room to be a bit messy and creative if she wanted, and she smiled again.’

On reflection, sharing such intimacies as their personal greeting rituals and breaking into song, seemed to be the first spontaneous and authentic responses Isabel volunteered. Perhaps it was the voluntary nature of the singing performance that gave me a glimpse of a more relaxed Isabel, free to make her own choices, rather than complying with others’ demands:

M: She can sing anything, in tune – which for a child is amazing...she’s got fantastic rhythm and I think he really wanted....I mean she’s great, but she ...she hates performing in public ...and so I was saying to my husband that maybe sort of we should be starting thinking about singing lessons because she can do that...she doesn’t have to try and learn that...it’s

E: It’s something she’s good at..

M: It’s something she’s already good at and we also have to try to do it in the right way, because we also tried you know danc..you know a bit of ballet but again...she seemed to like while she was doing it and she, she’s well co-ordinated but she wouldn’t do...’I’m not doing it in front of people’...but doing ballet – there’s no point in doing it unless you’re doing it in front of people...(breaks into laughter)

There seemed to be an underlying anxiety that Isabel was unable to learn. However, perhaps Isabel’s resistance to performing in public for her parents’ was an attempt to communicate that she was not a lifeless puppet, and did not want to dance to everyone else’s tune.

An uncertain, overly eager to please Isabel returned for our second mentoring session, when; 'she told me how Tuesday was now her favourite day'. Even so, I felt our first powerful meeting must have been a helpful experience. During this session, she began her 'scrap book', 'All about me':

'Isabel spent a minute or two deciding what she wanted to put on the cover of her book, before she carefully drew a self-portrait in the centre of the A4 sheet, surrounded by the things she likes to do. These things included a swimming pool, some chocolate and a picture of herself asleep in bed.'

It was interesting that she chose to draw a picture of herself asleep in bed, like 'Sleeping Beauty'. Perhaps sleep represented rest and respite from the emotional conflicts and burdens that sometimes seemed to overwhelm her waking time. Perhaps, she was projecting her destructive fears and desires that were difficult to own, by passing on the fairy tale 'sleeping' curse to me, as she always made me feel sleepy.

She seemed to relish the opportunity that some time and space gave her, and watching her slowly draw and deliberate over the colours she would use seemed to establish our own mesmerising ritual of being together in the mentoring room. Following a later session, I wrote:

'She seems to bask in the attention I give her – I imagine she's used to being chivvied along according to others' timescales and agendas, so she welcomes someone fitting into hers. The trouble is, I've noticed each week, this nearly sends me to sleep.'

I found that waiting a 'minute or two' for Isabel to decide, was quite demanding. Isabel took a long time to make decisions. I wrote in my observation proforma how this stretched my patience;

‘I’ve noticed Isabel takes a long time to make decisions – and note how for some reason this stretches my patience – odd when I know how indecisive I can be. This reminds me of my son at her age – perhaps she isn’t given many opportunities to make decisions.’

On reflection I recognise that my own impatience may have been similar to the impatience her busy parents’ may have experienced when Isabel took a long time to make up her mind e.g. choosing which musical instrument she would prefer to play. I can also see how the research experience carried reparative value for me at a personal, as well as at a professional level. For example, as well as hoping that Isabel would be able to use the research time and space to reflect on her experiences towards learning, the mentoring experience also gave me the opportunity to understand and therefore to improve on some of the choices I may have made with my own child.

Also during the second mentoring session, Isabel talked about the proximity of her family and friends. There seemed to be a sense of neither her friends, nor her extended family members being quite close enough geographically for her to access when she needed them, but also perhaps at an emotional level of them not being there:

‘She talked about her dad converting the garage so she could have a new, bigger bedroom – as big as her sister’s. Her sister was at home unwell this week so Isabel was cross that she wasn’t able to stay home too. She said she had also visited her Granddad over half-term who lived near R.... I asked about her friends at school and she said she sometimes sees her classmates out of school, but they mostly live in C.... while she lives in T... which is further away so it takes some organizing. Her best friend, the daughter of her mother’s best friend, lives in Ireland and she doesn’t see her very often.’

Isabel introduced the rivalry between her and her sister, which became a feature of mentoring sessions from time to time. Rosie was not only clever, she had a bigger bedroom, better clothes. Isabel was even envious of her sister being ill because it meant Rosie could stay at home while Isabel remained in school, and perhaps this kind of sibling resentment is the usual situation in family life. In a later session, Isabel talked further about the envy she felt:

‘She sat in the easy chair and talked about squabbling with her sister...how they had had a ‘sisterly’ day in C... together on Saturday and how her sister had bought a lovely dress that she would have liked. Isabel complained that all she had were her sister’s hand-me-downs and that it wasn’t fair. She was playing with her boots and I admired them – but she said they were old and just another ‘hand-me-down’.’

It was a relief to see a more ‘difficult-to-please’ side of Isabel, in relation to her sister as, on reflection, her squabbles reminded me more of the ‘ugly sisters’ Cinderella scenario, than the usual heroic role her stories evoked. There was also something about being ‘ill’, alluded to in an above fragment from my observational ‘write-up’, that Isabel presented in one form or another during numerous subsequent mentoring sessions. She complained of a sore-throat, a cold, a sprained ankle, feeling unwell until I began to think these general feelings were more to do with her fragile inner states and the way she felt as though she was not quite up to scratch. Perhaps sharing some of these possibly somatic conditions was a way of asking for help, or perhaps it linked to earlier reflections about her needing help, and hoping to be ‘healed’ in some way in the mentoring room.

During the following session, Isabel directly talked about not having enough help:

‘Isabel was working with Heather when I collected her (Conrad half got up and said ‘is it me?’- but it wasn’t). She went into the mentoring room, sat in an easy chair and said Tuesday was now her favourite day of the week...the only thing she doesn’t like

about Tuesday is it's table tennis and she doesn't enjoy that. I said I liked tennis and she said she used to play but had given up because she couldn't get enough help.'

However, it seemed that it was not just help for herself that she wanted, it was help for her family too, including Grandfather. I wrote, following our mentoring interaction:

'I asked if she had had a good week and if she could score it out of ten, what number would she give it. Isabel said, 'well...five really'. When I asked her why, she explained that her Granddad had rung home drunk and upset her mum and she was worried about this. She explained that since Grandma had died (a long time ago), he lived alone in R.. and gets a bit down sometimes and drinks too much. She added that he has quite a nice life with friends and hobbies, but sometimes he rings up drunk. I said that must be upsetting for her and her family, but I recalled she had spoken about visiting him in R.. and she said that she does visit and also uncle Robin (artist –lives in H....) visits sometimes, but not very often and Granddad worries about him.'

Isabel seemed to be bearing quite a range of family worries about her mother's familial relationships that may have been difficult for her to make sense of; Granddad, Uncle Robin, and even Grandma whom she had not met:

'She told me Granddad has an attic where he keeps a lot of Grandma's things, and she found an old teddy bear there that Grandma had had since she was a child. Although Isabel didn't know Grandma (died before she was born), she kept the old teddy on her bed at Granddad's so when she stays there, she talks to the teddy as though it were Grandma.'

Trying to cope with, make sense of, or 'add-up' to some satisfactory answer, like the sums in maths lessons, she not surprisingly found equally puzzling, other people's emotions related to old stories may have been confusing and draining for Isabel. I do not know what kind of comfort the symbolic teddy provided for her, or



for Granddad. Similarly perhaps to Isabel and not quite knowing myself, what to make of this rather distressing story, I instinctively, tried to lighten the situation in a way that, on reflection, I realise was anxiously avoidant rather than containing:

‘I asked Isabel what she would like to do and her eyes fell on the Jenka. She showed me how to play by putting the removed blocks back on top of the tower – a different version from Tim. She was very hesitant and cautious about removing blocks – and she really didn’t want to cause the tower to fall – she couldn’t look when she thought that would happen. As we played, I asked her whether she had thought any more about the musical instrument she wanted to play. She said not really, maybe the guitar – and I told her I thought she had a lovely singing voice. She said this week was ‘book day’ and her class were performing ‘Mc Cavity the mystery cat’ for the whole school – and she recited her lines. I said it was a great poem and asked her if she liked poems, but she looked puzzled and embarrassed and said she was ‘lost for words’, which was rather odd.’

She became uncharacteristically silent before saying: ‘lost for words’, signalling perhaps her feelings of fear and uncertainty being revisited, or maybe still reeling from my response to her disclosure about Granddad. Woven through the early mentoring sessions, the story of our interaction at an emotional level, had evoked a range of primitive fairy tale fantasies that perhaps aptly reflected some of the primitive conflicts she was struggling with; Hansel and Gretel, Alice in Wonderland, The Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella. In supervision we talked about the incantation, or spell-like qualities of ‘poetry’, and Isabel’s vulnerability bringing to mind a ‘Snow White’ figure. The story, perhaps, of the princess at risk of being poisoned by the wicked witch offering a rose red apple. I wonder whether she felt I would prove trustworthy enough.

At the end of the interaction, Isabel reminded me that she did not think she was very good at maths and needed help. On reflection and bearing in mind her

parents' view of her difficulties, I wondered to what extent disappointment in herself, or the self-deprecation she communicated was really her own, part of some learned behaviour or simply a reflection of others' views:

'It was time to go, but Isabel lingered at the door fiddling with the cube puzzle. I asked how she felt her maths was going and she said she used to be in a higher group but she wasn't anymore, but this was good as she was getting more help and it was ok. She seems to welcome all the support/help she can get.'

It was the following session when Isabel began to tell me how poorly she felt, and also her anxiety, later confirmed by her mother during our interview, about performing in front of others:

'Isabel sounded as though she had a sore throat this morning – she said she didn't feel very well but had brought some paracetamol along to take at lunch time. I said I was sorry about her cold, but asked whether her teacher knew about the medicine? She said she did, but Isabel thought she might go home after lunch if she still felt unwell instead of taking anything. I asked how the book day had gone last week and she said it was quite good but the whole school watched.'

My observation 'write-ups' from subsequent sessions began with:

'Isabel was still full of cold today and said she was feeling 'under the weather'. She talked about last week being only a one and a half out of ten week because she was unwell.'

And:

'Isabel limped into the mentoring room – she has sprained her ankle, but at least she has shaken off the cold she's had for a few weeks.'

Although, as with the other participants, I offered Isabel a choice of games and activities, she usually chose to work on her 'scrap book'. She seemed to relax and

enjoy this situation, always with me closely engaging, attending to, and emotionally ‘holding’ her in a containing way:

‘She said she wanted to do some work on her scrap book and I directed her to the box where it was kept. Isabel found the picture of herself surrounded by the things she likes, and seemed pleased with her work. She found some coloured pencils and began to colour her work. As she coloured, I sat in the easy chair and listened to her telling me about the Secondary school she would be going to. She said she was going to the C.... school – this meant nothing to me, but I got the feeling she was trying to convince herself this was the school she wanted to go to. I asked whether any of her friends would also be going and she thought there were a few and she said she had visited the school with her Mum and Dad and it seemed quite nice. I asked which school her sister went to, and she said the L... – which did rang a bell as I played tennis against the same school as a teenager. I began to get the impression that Isabel was a little worried about the prospect of moving to a new school, but was pleased with the prospect of being reunited with some of her year 6 classmates in this transition.’

In this way, she began to articulate some of her anxieties about the forthcoming transition to secondary school, but also there was something more hopeful about her being re-united with her friends. During a later, similarly calming ‘scrap book’ session, she revisited her pre-occupations about exams and split friendships:

‘She talked about SATs practice that’s going on at the moment and her worries about not being very good at maths. Like Conrad, Isabel talked about looking forward to being with her real friends in year 6 again when on the school visit. She also expressed concern that some friends in her current class were rather clingy and she worried they wouldn’t share her with her other friends. She seems to feel pressured and torn by the demands of her classmates whom, she says she’s happy to spend some of her time with, but not all of her time.’

It was interesting that Isabel found even some of her friendships intrusive and demanding, and once again re-iterated her desperate need to find some space from what may have felt like the competing demands of others in her life. Others' demands seemed to have made her feel as though she was being either 'torn' apart or suffocated, rather than respectfully nurtured and valued. This would account for the feelings of anger and frustration that Isabel sometimes projected during mentoring sessions.

As our mentoring relationship developed, I came to recognise something of her spontaneous warmth and 'generosity', as Heather described it, towards others; 'She noticed Leo's picture of Max the cat on the wall said; 'That is so sweet'.' Leo was another, younger child participant. She was never quiet in the way her class teacher had described her, but perhaps her self-imposed silence in class provided a kind of peaceful, problem-solving 'space' for Isabel. In the classroom setting, perhaps she used prescribed curriculum objects and activities to 'tune-out' in some way, and they may have successfully pushed her apart from engaging with others in a way that may have sometimes been an emotional relief, as in mentoring sessions.

Although during the summer term, many of our sessions were interrupted by year 6 and whole- school events, Isabel continued to enjoy coming to mentoring sessions. We seemed to relate well to each other, and she used the therapeutic space to revisit anxieties, and to think more hopefully about her friendships, her family and moving to her new school in the future. I hope she made good relationships with her new friends and teachers, but I remained a little anxious when with her, and about her throughout the project, as even the mentoring space did not seem to be Isabel's alone. Following one session I wrote:

‘I wonder whether her mother tells her/asks what she talks about because at one point she mentioned ‘counselling’ and at another; ‘mum said I should talk about...’

### **Concluding Reflection**

Similar to the other case study children, themes surrounding identity and sense of ‘self’ emerged in our developing mentoring relationship, even though each child presented differently, in terms of their own histories and responses to their learning from experience. Isabel’s qualities of earliest relationship were characterised by her own birth and her mother’s post natal trauma. Some of Isabel’s confusion, as illustrated in her difficulties with maths, seemed to be closely bound to her mother’s unresolved relational conflicts. For example, the headmasterly presence of her own father and struggle with maths that she relates as part of her own story – may be reminiscent of Fraiberg’s (1980) notion of ‘ghosts in the nursery’, introduced in Chapter 2.

In this way, Isabel’s sense of self-efficacy seemed to be inhibited by others’ feeling states. Her learning patterns seem to have been influenced by compliance with the expectations of rather harsh super-ego demands. She appears to be caught between the exhausting task of maintaining unsatisfying, emotionally false relationships and the fear of pain she may exert and loss of love she might encounter should she risk becoming a truer self.

Isabel provided another opportunity, as experienced with Tim and Conrad, to learn to listen, look, attend as a researcher/mentor towards developing a deeper understanding of the learning relationship. Isabel’s uncertainty and confusion were pervasive themes in the mentoring room. To understand, as discussed in Chapter 2, the developing infant requires an experience of being understood. As a mentor, the work of containing Isabel was about listening and attending to her stories,

thinking about what she told me and feeding back her material in a way that would help her feel her fears were more manageable.

Emotionally, Isabel was confused, frightened and her anxieties seemed inseparable from her family from the very beginning. Isabel was frightened about not being able to play the piano, or sing as well as her father, about getting it all wrong, about not being as clever as her sister, about not knowing what instrument she wanted to play, not knowing what was wrong with her, or her Grandad, or her favourite uncle. Fear of failure or getting things wrong may be a powerful motivator for avoidance. Yet for Isabel, avoiding authentic engagement seemed to be part of a deeper defensive strategy she had learnt to deploy for survival, to maintain her rather fragile sense of self.

Split between trying to appease those she loved by living up to their perceived expectations and being true to herself, her real desires eluded her. The exhausting deceit that masked appearance and reality for Isabel, seemed to be causing emotional distress. Providing a containing experience in the mentoring room involved me engaging authentically with Isabel. The level of attention this engaged, fundamentally modelled and gave her the opportunity to reciprocate authentically, for this to be mutually experienced as 'good enough'.

A torrent of stories about her family and friendships poured from Isabel. The complex personal family histories and intergenerational issues that she carefully articulated and felt should be important to her, were at the same time puzzling and did not quite add up in relation to her real, and current concerns about school, friendships, her sister too. I listened carefully and was able to make some useful interjections as, for example, when she talked in an animated way about her creative uncle of whom her mother did not approve, which seemed to sadden her. I

suggested that we could use the mentoring time to engage in some creative experiences of her choice and she seemed to brighten.

It became very apparent that Isabel had little experience of making her own choices. However, it seemed helpful for me to sit with her and observe her painstakingly struggle to choose colours for decorating her simple drawings – as one might with a much younger child. I noted in my write-ups that I was puzzled when Isabel chose to draw herself asleep in bed and I recorded how working with Isabel made me feel very tired. In the transference, she projected some of the excruciatingly draining level of compliance that wearing the false ‘pleasing’ defensive mask evoked. In spite of the positive relationship we developed, I remained concerned that the stream of physical symptoms Isabel brought to the mentoring room during the summer term suggested she might have benefitted from some more help.

The congruence between Conrad and Isabel as case studies was interesting. They were in the same year group and class, about to experience transition to the secondary phase, both already struggled with being separated from long standing friends and both missed Mr. Chatwell, the absent year 6 teacher. They were both precocious in their own ways and, according to Helen, engaged when the opportunity arose, in some healthy pre-pubescent banter.

If personal agency, in terms of his sense of owning some control of his life experiences, was a barrier for Conrad, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), in terms of her belief in her own ability to succeed, could be seen as an emotional barrier to learning in school, for Isabel. These specific traits came to attention through my observations and interactions during mentoring. For Conrad and Isabel, such issues of identity, rooted in the development of self, as described in Chapter 2, are

clearly bound to qualities of earliest intersubjective experiences, embedded in wider, complex socio-cultural patterns of relational learning and development, of which the primary school is part.

The impact on learning and relationships in school, in the cases of Conrad and Isabel, was presented by school as an inability to engage with symbolic representations, such as those encountered by Isabel in maths and by Conrad in reading. How these difficulties were seen as being closely related to inner emotional states was less clear. 'Self-esteem', a now familiar general term used in school, may have been loosely associated with Isabel's outcome of underperformance in maths, rather than the root source.



## **Chapter 8: Leo – The Limpet**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is about Leo who was the final and also the youngest child I saw each week. Ironically, this chapter is about learning from experience that Leo really wanted to be first and to be the eldest. He was faced with the conscious and unconscious dilemma of needing to be seen whilst at the same time trying to escape the shadow of his twin. Leo was identified as a participant because the mentoring project specifically identified some time and space for giving pupils individual attention. Although aware of this specific need, his teacher's concern was that there was something about Leo that made him difficult to attend to. It was as though he was barely there and this quality was reflected in his work. The chapter begins with some biographical background that includes relevant material from classroom observation of my first interaction with Leo and also material from interviews with his mother, teacher and teaching assistant. What happened in the mentoring room follows and dominant emotional themes are gathered in the conclusion, to be returned to in the final chapter.

### **Biographical background**

Leo was a quiet twin. One of five siblings, he lived in the village with his mother and father, twin brother Danny, two elder sisters, and a younger sister – Kay to whom he seemed particularly close. He lived in a house with a big garden where the family kept chickens, and where Leo spent time with Danny and Kay engaged in imaginative play. Leo liked animals, especially his cat, Max, and he also enjoyed watching 'Dr. Who' on television.

At the time of the project, Leo was just six years old, and had just moved into his year 2 class. At this time, year 2 pupils undertook end of Key Stage 1 SAT's

(Statutory Assessment Tasks) during the summer term, which marked a transition from the 'Infant' phase, into Key Stage 2, traditionally known as the 'Junior' phase of primary schooling. Possibly because of this imminent transition, there was some concern from teachers about Leo's reading, his self-confidence and also that he worked painstakingly slowly in class. Leo was cautious and careful; 'he wants it to be just right', his mother said during our interview. Her sensitivity towards Leo and her anxiety that his lack of confidence being was linked to Danny, who did not seem to share the same barriers to learning, came through when she said:

'..I think what it is, is because being a twin, the other one is very domineering, very loud. They're the complete opposite and I think Leo probably, he has said 'I wish I could do it how he does' and you know, it's awful, but I think that he..he feels he can't do....he should be able to do what Danny does but he can't and I think that goes with him. At pre-school though they were in separate classes, because I didn't want them together.....I think that's still with him and he has got the ability even if he thinks he hasn't.'

The infant classes were located at one end of the school, near to the adjacent nursery, and separated from junior classrooms by the central school entrance hall and Reception office. The infant and junior classes had separate entrances and exits into the playground, and also staggered morning break times. I think this was partly to protect the younger ones from older pupil's ball games, but I observed that football games were also very much part of the year 2 class' play and Leo enjoyed playing football.

Leo's classroom was bright and cheerful, with carpeted and practical areas, plus a sand tray, his favourite place. His teacher, Miss Hendry presented as an enthusiastic, well organised, gentle young woman who was enjoying her work, her first teaching job. She seemed to work quite closely with her teaching assistant,

Andrea with whom she discussed pupil responses, shared her planning and together they seemed like a caring team. Andrea lived near to Leo, so she knew Leo's large family quite well, and seemed to have a warm relationship with him. As part of the layered observational method, described earlier, I used interview material from adult participants, including parents, participant teachers and participant teaching assistants:

'Andrea (teaching assistant) talked about their concerns that Leo receives little time and attention at home or school because there are so many others, and also because so much attention is taken up by his brother Danny.'

In her interview, she said:

'...he is very very quiet and like you say he will blend in very easily with the class because he is very quiet. You can hardly see he is there.'

There was some concern about Leo's literacy skills, and 'so many others' at home and school as if to render the quiet twin invisible. However, the major concern about Leo was bound up with his brother, Danny. Danny (not an identical twin) had behaviour difficulties that, at this time, seemed to be dominating the time and attention of teachers in school. Some of those behaviours involved hurting other children. He was also receiving support from external agencies, such as the Specialist Teaching Service and the school's attached Educational Psychologist. Trish, my 'link' person and school Senco, described the twins, as did their mother, as being 'opposites'. She and Leo's teachers felt that Leo struggled in the relationship with his dominant twin and was rather too quiet and 'self-contained'. It was felt that he might benefit from some extra time and attention. She expressed some of her concerns:

'I think Leo we found was quite.... he often is reserved and won't always express his emotions...erm..because of his very dominant twin brother we felt that he may be, well not

intentionally..... being neglected, but a little bit in the background and we thought he needed time and space....’

At the very beginning of our interview, Leo’s mother also described him as the ‘quiet’ one. She also said, ‘to start with he had trouble feeding... Ermm...but he wasn’t too bad’. He had to be the first of the two’, and she then went onto say something about the twins’ birth order, which seemed to be an important and recurring theme: (M= Leo’s Mum and E=Erica in this extract and I will use the first letter abbreviation of participants, when apt, throughout the case study)

M: As a twin he’s the quiet one. Ermm He was always quiet, liked his cuddles, Ermm

E: Was he born after his big brother?

M: Yes. He’s 10 minutes older than him. He was a lot smaller than the other one.

This time difference and birth order between Leo and Danny, and something about Leo really wanting ‘to be first’, seemed to be significant and manifested in a variety of ways through the mentoring project. The first occurred, in an unscheduled meeting, when I happened to meet Danny before I met Leo. The twins were placed in different classes, but I was trying to make contact with Trish the Senco, before going into Leo’s class, and found her cover-teaching for an absent member of staff. I wrote-up in my observation:

‘In the class Trish was taking, was a little boy called Danny who refused to go to assembly and did not respond to cajoling by Trish, or the teaching assistant, or me. I learnt later that Danny is Leo’s twin (not identical) brother who apparently has behaviour issues and is being closely supported with various strategies and people in school at the moment. As I came out of the classroom, Miss Hendry (Leo’s class teacher) greeted me to check that I would be in her class with Leo after break.’

After break I went into Miss Hendry's classroom and the children were quietly sitting on the carpet, looking and seemingly listening to her - she reminded me, as I wrote in my observation 'so much of my niece who had started teaching in September'. Leo was silent, still, hard to find and, paradoxically, these characteristics that led to him being overlooked, seemed to be what made him most noticeable, and therefore a particular choice for this project. Amidst a sea of mousy-haired year 2 children in his classroom, when I eventually managed to locate him, I observed: 'he looked waif-like; slight, pale and wore a rather solemn expression. He looked as though he needed some attention, and I liked him straightaway'.

Such an immediate identification with him may have been something to do with feeling, at the time, a bit 'mousy' myself, not only as a stranger in this environment, but also in my relatively new personal and professional environments, where I may also have been feeling slightly muted and overlooked. Perhaps it was also that being in Leo's classroom reminded me of working with younger children, and how much a sense of belonging and feeling crucial had been key to that period of my teaching life. Before I left teaching in school, a young newly qualified teacher, rather like Miss Hendry, said: 'you can't leave this school, you're Centre-point.' In my new role as a Senior Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church university, some of my own infantile responses to aspects of it made me feel more like a tent pitched in the Palace gardens.

From the outset reaching Leo proved challenging. An extract from my first observation of Leo in his class group describes how, unlike the other children, he seemed to slip away and again, his invisibility became his most defining feature:

'.but whilst it was a complete delight to be in this classroom with little ones, what was really interesting was that I couldn't seem to observe Leo very well at all because the other children latched

onto me and completely took my interest and attention. I think this tends to happen to Leo which is why he's been chosen to take part in the project.'

As well as this group of lively and enthusiastic others, another small, round faced, stocky, dark haired little boy appeared in Miss Hendry's classroom before she had a chance to address her class:

'Before she began the literacy lesson, another child came in (Danny, Leo's twin), handed her a piece of paper and she spoke quite seriously to him.'

Leo and his twin were physically very different. The rest of the class sat patiently waiting on the carpet with their legs crossed. Leo did not move or say a word. He seemed impassive; as cautious perhaps, as his brother was apparently impulsive. I found out later, when I sat next to Leo where the folded piece of paper remained unopened on his desk, that it was a note of apology from Danny, who was in trouble for hurting Leo during break time. So, at the beginning of the mentoring project, just as at the beginning of Leo's life, Danny – the very different 'other' was with us, and the difficulty of keeping Leo-without-Danny in mind persisted.

This group observation, that took place just before Christmas, was an important point of reference for our mentoring relationship. It gave us an opportunity to establish an early rapport, and also revealed some of the key recurring themes surrounding Leo's feeling states, particularly about his twin, that may have affected his learning. I draw directly on narrative observations, written up immediately after my time with participants. The narrative texts described my feelings and thoughts about the experience of observing Leo in the classroom.

Miss Hendry read the class a poem called; 'The Waiting Game', about having to wait to open Christmas stockings. The title aptly reflects something of Leo's

experience; both tortuous and exciting when faced with his twin brother, on a day-to-day basis, except unlike others in the class, Leo did not seem very excited. He was also unmoved by the apology note in front of him. He tackled the prospect of drawing a Christmas stocking full of all he could wish for, with a similar kind of stoical resignation:

‘I joined Leo’s table and sat beside him. There were six children in the group (one was away, ill) – we circled the table for names and I listened and watched. Leo was painstaking about writing the date and his name – others were quickly onto drawing. I asked Leo about the football he might like to find in his stocking and he confirmed that’s what he wanted. I think he was pleased to be asked and there followed a long conversation about the dinosaur he had last year and how Jim (at the end of the table) wanted a digger like his brother Danny. He said he’d had a dinosaur last year. I asked him about the piece of paper next to him that was a note apologising for hitting Leo at playtime. He said it was from his brother Danny who I had seen talking to Miss Hendry at the beginning of the session. I asked him if he had any other brothers and sisters. He told me about his little sister Kay, Danny his twin, and two other older sisters, one in year 6 and one at Secondary school. He also pointed out the sandpit in the classroom which he said was his favourite. Leo gave me constant eye contact and seemed very communicative. I also spent some time talking, working with the other members of his group before finally admiring his work. He had managed to put initial sounds of words next to his drawings and drawn a recognisable (if small) sock shape for his stocking.’

In this extract Leo seems rather too aware of others’ wants, and I wonder if he found my attention intense, or intrusive as he tried to re-direct me to Jim at the other end of the table, and also to his brother Danny. Or, perhaps it was really Leo who wanted the ‘digger’, or to be the ‘digger’. Maybe he was experiencing Jim as another aggressive ‘digger’, like his brother. This also seemed to be an early clue

that Leo was interested in the magnetic and resilient qualities of metals, as he demonstrated from the very first individual mentoring session, below.

When the children were called back to sit with Miss Hendry on the carpeted area for the plenary, she invited a child to read with Andrea (Leo's teaching assistant), and also kindly invited Leo to read to me. Following this experience, I wrote in my observation:

‘I think I shall really enjoy working with Leo – perhaps because the engagement we shared has already created some kind of rapport.’

That short, early interaction of reading with Leo, reconnected me to a delightful emotional intimacy that surrounds the shared experience of reading, rooted perhaps in my own earliest memories of sharing books with my mother, and that I later repeated with my son. It reminded me how shared reading can provide creative, transitional spaces for engagement when working with young children that I had also previously enjoyed professionally. Leo seemed to bring my maternal feelings to the surface. Whilst teaching large groups at university, I had perhaps forgotten the affect this level of focused attention can provide, and the experience prompted my feeling memory:

‘It was a story about a limpet and when I asked Leo to tell me about the story he directed me to the front page title. We read the pictures a bit and he explained the child playing in the rock pools had a limpet stuck to her finger. The words were difficult for Leo so we read a bit together and I left him to manage those I was sure he could tackle. He was delighted to find we'd finished the book and I told him I liked the way he read to me and said I hoped he would read to me again another time.’

He certainly responded to the close support I gave to ensure he experienced a sense of success by finishing the story. He may of course, simply have been glad that the



experience was over, but I felt that this kind of shared, focused ‘attention’, and reciprocal ‘engagement’ was typical of the level of communication we sustained at times in the mentoring project.

In supervision, we discussed this first interaction, and how such reflection led me to describe our reading interaction as an essentially reciprocal learning experience. We talked about a psychoanalytic perspective that might explain the empathic rapport between us in terms of transference and countertransference, as the qualities of the experience I described were co-constructed from our own internal, affective worlds. Co-constructing knowing in school today can be seen as largely externally referenced and focused on curriculum activities that specifically meet prescribed learning objectives. However, I am not suggesting that ‘learning about’ the contents of the curriculum is unimportant or uninteresting. I am concerned that the emotional, intersubjective, creative potential of learning from experience, which carries complex tapestries of personal and social histories, is too easily marginalised and overlooked, rather like Leo.

It was particularly interesting that his book was about a limpet, as ‘stickiness’ links to Bick’s (1968) idea of ‘adhesive identification’ noted earlier. Something of this theme was also there in his pre-occupation with magnets in the mentoring room and the resilience of metal diggers to which he drew my attention. I wonder whether Leo chose a book which reminded him of himself. Leo having to focus on holding himself together, silently, like a limpet, and hiding in a shell when feeling uncertain or unsafe, was an image embedded in themes revisited during individual mentoring sessions.

### **What happened in the mentoring sessions?**

From the beginning of our first individual meeting, I unwittingly began to repeat the patterns of experience to which Leo seemed sadly resigned, and it seems that I may have been deluding myself about the ‘rapport’ I thought we had developed during the classroom observation, as our first individual mentoring meeting was less successful. Or, perhaps it was that the ‘rapport’ of our first meeting had more of a mutual limpet-like ‘adhesive’ quality than the trusting ‘reciprocal engagement’ my initial reflection acknowledged. This idea is revisited in the final chapters. In the first paragraph of my first individual observation, I wrote:

‘I must make sure I see Leo before Conrad next time because the difference between Leo and Conrad was too great – not just in terms of age but everything about them. And Conrad was still on my mind when I collected Leo which I think affected the way I engaged with him. In fact I had gone to collect Leo before Conrad, but as Leo was watching a TV Programme he seemed to be enjoying, I arranged with his class teacher to pick him up half an hour later. Miss Hendry, his teacher, called Leo to her to explain the arrangement. He nodded and went back to his seat in silence.’

Just as Danny took up the space in everyone’s mind in school, straightaway Conrad, an older child participant, was taking up the space in my mind that should have been reserved for Leo during his mentoring interaction time. This observation also signified the emergence perhaps, of Conrad as another ‘opposite’ twin, who competed with Leo for time, attention and being first. Leo played his part, completing the established pattern, by responding with a silent acknowledgement.

Echoing to some extent the birth order pattern of the twins, Conrad was older, had his first mentoring session before Leo and was also a rather troubled and troubling young man, just as Danny was described to me by Trish. Unaware at the time of

my part in the organisational play, but concerned about the rather ‘raggy’ start to mentoring, when I finally reached Leo, the issue of ‘time’ would not let go:

‘As his teaching assistant approached holding Leo’s hand, just outside his classroom, (so I felt late) I said ‘hello’, she smiled and Leo looked up hesitantly as though he was a bit uncertain about being out of class, about who I was and about what would happen next. I tried to reassure him – as I hadn’t observed him since before Christmas – by reminding him of my name and of how when I last visited I watched him draw a Christmas stocking full of the presents he had wished for. ‘Mmmmm’ he murmured – I suspect it was too long ago for him to recall very readily. I tried a different tack as we walked along the corridor and through the dining room. I said; ‘Ooh lunch smells good Leo, you’re so lucky to have this nice dining room’. Leo replied that he brought a packed lunch from home.’

I was trying hard here, but the minimal and ambivalent, ‘Mmmmm’ that he uttered on several occasions during the first mentoring session was powerful, and seemed determined to keep me at arm’s length. I felt disappointed and uncertain, and perhaps this reflected Leo’s feelings as it seemed that his defensive actions shut me out, but helped him to hang on tightly, like a limpet, until we reached the mentoring room. Neither could I seem to let go of the way timings, just as with Danny, pulled Leo and Conrad together and kept them apart, like the polarising actions of a magnet, as I wrote:

‘I must sort the timings out more aptly next week. Overall, unlike the others this morning, I did not feel this was such a successful first meeting – although I also felt concerned about Conrad.’

I relate some of my own struggles here as they aptly reflect some of the difficult task of staying solely with Leo. Throughout the project, I was conscious that when I was with Conrad, Leo was often in my mind, and when I was with Leo, I often

thought of Conrad and made comparisons between their responses, as they seemed so different perhaps. Also, following a later observation of Leo I wrote; 'I asked about Danny and he said; 'Danny is calming down now' – this reminded me of the 'calming down' phrase Conrad's peers used with him in the cloakroom the week before – it must be a school phrase.' This also illustrates how I was struggling at a personal, emotional level, beyond my professional stance as a researcher/ mentor, to keep clear boundaries in mind. I wonder to what extent this may also happen to teachers, who work with multiple combinations of complex personalities every day and, are human beings too?

From the outset, the younger child seemed to represent all that was 'good'. When reflecting on the first mentoring session, I wrote in the 'Gestalt' section of my observation proforma:

'Timings/order of seeing children – ... the way combining colours can be harmonious or discordant.. make a difference to me and the way I respond and so therefore to the participants – so paying attention to who I see first, second etc. counts in terms of quality of learning experience for the children and for me. I'm conscious of being disappointed when it's time for Leo to go back to class – everything with Leo seems to take a while to develop and we just begin to communicate when it's time to take him back.'

Following this, I arranged to meet Leo earlier in the mornings, before seeing Conrad as I reasoned that Conrad seemed to project such strong and sometimes disturbing feelings, that I often struggled to contain. I seemed to want not only to protect Leo from the aggressive 'other' that Conrad represented, but also to selfishly enjoy being with Leo, uncontaminated by those 'bad' feelings. Such conscious and unconscious emotions may have contributed to his teachers' responses as they, for example, chose to split Leo from his brother by putting him

in a different class, and the conversations I had suggested, though not explicitly, that the twins evoked very different feelings and responses in the adults who worked with them. There was another interesting example of wanting to expel or project the 'bad' preceding a later mentoring session:

'When I met Leo from his classroom, his teacher asked; 'Leo, do you want to show Mrs. Ashford your photo?'. Memory jolted, Leo found a small newspaper cutting in one of the classroom trays and waved it as he came towards me with a big smile on his face. The photo from the local newspaper showed Leo with his face painted like a zebra, stroking a rabbit at Howlett's zoo. He was very proud of this photo and described how his mum had helped him discover it when the newspaper arrived at their house. I asked whether all the family had gone to the zoo and he said they had and that Danny had his face painted too – I wonder why he wasn't on the photo?'

During the first mentoring session, Leo's fascination with the magnetic puzzle on the bookshelf began, and persisted through the sessions, perhaps underlining the theme of ambivalence in the form of attraction and repulsion, that seemed to characterise the qualities of relationship he endured with his twin brother, Danny:

'I got the feeling that Leo was taking everything in and he looked around carefully. He found the puzzles and was drawn to the face with the magnetic filings. I asked him if he had seen the game before and he shook his head while he continued to look at the puzzle and use the magnetic wand. He said: 'Is this a magnet?...(yes)...I've got some magnets at home like this..' Then he picked up the puzzles with silver balls, and used the magnetic wand on the puzzles to make patterns by moving the balls through the plastic. 'Look!' he exclaimed and I, very impressed, passed him the metal nail puzzle wondering whether the magnet was strong enough to work through them. Leo tried but it didn't work. I said his magnets at home might be stronger so we could maybe try it with them if he was able to bring them next time. He replied with a look and 'mmmmmm'.'

Until then, I had experienced an over-cautious, rather flat six year old, but Leo seemed to come to life, demonstrate his curiosity and express some excitement about his discovery with the metal puzzles. Unfortunately, I seemed to revive his uncertainty, expressed in ‘mmmmm’, when I mentioned bringing some material from home. My observation continued:

‘At this point Leo continued to play with the puzzles and I sat back on the chair diagonally opposite the door. After about thirty seconds, I asked how Danny was – Leo’s twin brother. Leo stopped fiddling with the magnets, turned and sat on the chair next to the bookcase. He pushed himself to the back of the chair so his legs were stretched out in front of him and he clasped his hands in his little lap. He looked at me in a very calm, composed way (almost the opposite to Conrad) and said; ‘he’s fine’. For some reason I was a little disarmed by this measured response, and again wondered how my role had been described to him, by his parents, through Trish.’

I do not know what provoked me to ask about Danny, perhaps a destructive reaction to ‘mmmmm’, but at first I felt ‘disarmed’ by the way he recoiled and sat back like an inscrutable little old man. On reflection, by insensitively bringing up that other material from home, his brother Danny, I imagined he felt as though I was suggesting that the mentoring session was not after all about him playing, but about the serious business of talking about his brother – the subject who was really on everyone’s mind. It was the kind of familiar disturbance he was after all used to dealing with and also perhaps the kind of response he evoked. Through our mentoring interaction I came to see how Leo used the silences, sometime as a defence as above, but at other times he seemed to relish the containment that simply being with him, engaging with and observing him silently seemed to provide.

I had invited parents to meet during the Autumn term, to discuss the project and my intentions in the researcher/mentoring role. However, as noted, none of the parents came to the meeting, which meant that such explanations, as well as enrolling their support, rested with my 'link' person, Trish. I trusted her experience and understanding of participant families that she engaged with as the school Senco, but at this moment, rather as I sensed Leo was feeling, I was not sure what had been said. My growing anxiety is discernible in the narrative of my observation:

'I began to talk about coming to the mentoring room each week so we could get to know each other and talk about things that happen in school and on the playground. He looked worried and nodded silently. I felt a little concerned about how this was going as the last time I met Leo was such a positive experience and I felt we established a rapport straight away – and, I'm usually most at ease with younger children.'

I found myself talking very quickly, and I wonder whether some of the discomfort I was feeling might have been to do with a kind of defence Leo projects when he fears some kind of invasion. I felt particularly dismayed at the time as I thought I was spoiling what had seemed during our first interaction, or what I had idealised as, such a 'positive experience'. I wonder whether Leo sometimes resorted to this rather destructive and powerful projection when defending himself, or perhaps he sometimes even found himself using it to instigate a reaction from his impulsive and physical brother?

When I mentioned creating the 'scrap book', that was to be all about him, it was clear Danny was at the front of his mind:

'Leo's face lit up and he started, for the first time to express:....  
'Like Danny's book, he has a book all about him, now me.....now I will..... and he smiled for the first time.' I didn't quite grasp what he meant at first, but when we sat at the table, it began to dawn that one of the various agencies who were

working with Danny must have the same idea as me, and I suddenly wondered whether it was a mistake to ask Leo to do the same – as Danny’s support was linked to his behaviour difficulties.’

The fractured pattern of Leo’s speech in this extract was quite typical, particularly during early mentoring sessions. I was concerned about ‘twinning’ Danny’s behaviour book in this way, as I thought that working with Leo was going to be about having some time and space to attend to him, and to celebrate him not being Danny. I consulted Trish about this and she thought Leo would be delighted to have his own version, and bearing in mind his Mum’s words about Leo saying; ‘I wish I could do it how he does’, perhaps the scrap book idea was apt. Straightaway, it seemed to provide the kind of transitional play space where we could meet. Leo told me he liked cats, and thankful for this tiny beach head, I confirmed that I liked cats too, so we had a starting point and could begin what I hoped would become a positive reciprocal, mentoring relationship. As it happened Max, Leo’s cat was to become an important, and positive thread in this case study:

‘Genuinely relieved to find we had something in common that I could maybe build on, I asked if he had a cat and he said yes, his name was Max and he was black and white. I said I used to have a black and white cat called Graham who was mostly naughty. Leo quickly replied that Max was a good cat.’

His unusually quick, defensive interjection, led me to think that Max, the ‘good cat’ represented Leo, but it was interesting that Max’s colour should confirm the school’s, and his mother’s, extreme perceptions of the twins’ personalities. I wonder to what extent Leo acted out his own or his mother’s phantasies and projections about her twins’ identities. I watched as Leo drew Max extremely slowly and carefully and then a picture of himself playing, or perhaps teasing the cat:



‘I stopped talking, sat at right angles at the desk with him, watched and listened while he carefully drew a very small, colourful picture of himself playing with Max, by dangling a paper fish on a piece of string in front of him...’

Leo seemed to bask in the attention I gave him, rather like the first group observation, as I quietly watched him draw. At the time I was sure that his picture was about Danny teasing Leo. However, I wonder whether this might also be something to do with Leo teasing Danny. I also wonder whether Leo, because of his desire to do it ‘how he does it’ and really wanting to be first, was always able, or even wanted to, distinguish himself from his twin? In this way, there seemed to be a constant tension for Leo between wanting to be the same, and wanting to be different. Also, at the end of the first mentoring session, I caught another glimpse of what may have been ‘..that roar which lies on the other side of silence’ (Eliot, 1994) as Leo slipped away from me into his enduring limpet state:

‘I said it was time to go back to class to get ready for lunch, (I must remember the infants have lunch at 12.00 noon and KS2 have theirs at 12.30 pm) and thanked him for the work he had done, but as we approached the dining room it was apparent that children were already eating. Realising how important it might be for Leo to be with his friends in his usual place, we quickly went back to the classroom to collect his lunch box. In the classroom two teaching assistants were sitting chatting and welcomed Leo in a relaxed way, but I could tell Leo was tense by his silence – he collected his lunch without a word and I filled the silence with some chatter about supposing they will only have just started - as we scooted down to the dining room where we found his usual place next to his twin brother Danny. He seemed OK and I got the impression he was used to, even resigned, to this kind of thing happening in his life, but I knew I had not done very well here, and I apologised to the lunchtime supervisor for our lateness. I must sort the timings out more aptly next week.’

Equally, perhaps my perceptions are more to do with my own projections and the countertransference process. Leo captured my interest from the start because I recognised something of his impassivity. His ambivalent responses not only touched on some of my own responses at times, but also recalled those of my son at Leo's age, when we were both experiencing bullying behaviours from an 'other' at a difficult time in our lives. There was something about the way he withdrew that I seemed to recognise and understand. In this way, attending to Leo was also, for me, an act of reparation at an emotional level, as I felt protective and maternal towards him.

At the same time, an initial sense of a cat-like elusiveness, invisibility and others' not having had quite enough time to attend to Leo, and to get to grips with who he was, to help him begin to understand himself, seemed to become a central task of our mentoring relationship. In the first individual session, there were aspects of what seemed to point towards adhesive identification (Bick, 1968) as the magnet game became Leo's touchstone in the mentoring room that also linked with the way he needed to hold himself together by slipping into his shell, as in the limpet story and also when I overlooked his lunch time slot. In her interview, his mother recalled him as a younger child:

'Yes and as he got a bit older he was very happy to sit, he was normally happy to sit and amuse himself....he would sit in the same room but he would be happy playing on his own.'

The intersubjective quality of these feeling states made my experience of reflecting on, thinking and writing about Leo, quite challenging. Trying to tease out closely related themes, that seem to be difficult to separate, has made me feel 'stuck' at times myself. In supervision, for example, we discussed the 'thinness' of some of my observational material on Leo, compared with other participants, which perhaps echoes something of Leo's 'thin', or insecure identity, or fragile ego-formation.

The interdependence, or perhaps it was co-dependency between Leo and Danny, seemed to be similar to the way 'negative space' works in a drawing, by sculpting and supporting the form and perspective of the whole piece.

At the beginning of the next mentoring session when Leo had greeted me with a smile, remembered how to find the mentoring room and had tested every metal object in the room to see if it was magnetic, I asked him whether he had told Danny about his 'all about me' scrapbook. Perhaps this question was more to do with my own nagging concern about unwittingly 'twinning' their activities when I really, at this stage, wanted Leo to have a different experience from his brother:

'Without turning round Leo said his brother had called him a liar when he'd tried to tell him, and Leo began to talk a bit about Danny, always starting sentences with; 'That's why Danny....' Leo started to talk about his garden and the 'tree-house' place where he had found some of his toys. I got the impression that Danny had put some of Leo's things in this garden space, place, den – but couldn't quite get to the bottom of it. Leo wanted to make a drawing of his 'tree house' and I 'm not sure whether he has a tree house, or would like to have one. He explained; 'that's why we keep the house because it has a big garden..'that's why Danny.. he is slightly heavier than me..'. He drew the tree and explained that to get into the tree he would have a bouncy - trampoline I think – that he would catch as he bounced and take it up with him into the tree house so 'that's why...' Danny couldn't get up there at all to fight with him.'

This amounted to a torrent of talk by Leo's standards, but I was conscious of struggling to piece together the story that he articulated in a fragmented, 'almost there', way that became quite familiar during early mentoring sessions. At such times, Leo reminded me of; 'Trees', ...coming into leaf like something almost being said' (Larkin, 1988) and I could not quite catch everything. Perhaps he was

not quite sure whether he could trust me, or perhaps it reflects his own a lack of understanding and feelings of not being understood.

Following this session, I wrote in the 'process' part of the observation proforma, that I must remember to take time to explain what we were doing and why we were doing it in the mentoring sessions, and to give him feedback following every activity in a containing way, because when talking about Danny he seemed above all to be asking 'why? I gathered that he wanted a trampoline, instead of ladder, to access the tree house, real or imagined, in his garden so that on the last bounce he could take the trampoline with him so that Danny would not be able to reach and fight with him. Leo drew and carefully coloured a lovely tree in full leaf in his scrapbook. Communicating this thought out strategy was the first time Leo intimated a desire to escape, or need to get away from his brother. Disturbed by the thought of Leo not feeling safe, the following session I introduced and explained about the wooden box where his, and the other participants scrap books were kept:

'As he pulled the box off the shelf and looked at it he said it's like a 'safe'. Recalling Leo's talk last week about escaping to the safety of his (make believe/real?) garden tree house, I took the opportunity to explain that the learning mentor room was a safe place for him to do and talk about the things he wanted to, and that the box was a 'safe' place to keep anything he made when he was in the room – like a box in a box. Leo seemed delighted with these thoughts....I think I ought to take every opportunity to explain the things we do in the mentoring room for Leo...'

However, the theme of Danny disturbing or spoiling Leo's fun continued:

'He also talked about Danny jumping on him and fighting on the sofa when he was trying to watch T.V.....and one time how he had put the sofa cushion on his feet and pushed Danny away successfully with his legs and feet - he told me this story twice.'

Leo related this story about the brothers' play fighting, and how successful another strategy had proved in overcoming Danny's intrusion. However, the way Leo related this ordinary enough rough and tumble story, at the time, communicated his own and then my fears that he was being bullied by his brother. Leo told me several stories about Danny, including this:

'He said it had been a 6 out of 10 week because of Danny. Danny had ridden Leo's bike down the road and when Leo ran after him, Danny hurt him. I asked why Danny was riding Leo's and not his own bike, and Leo said that Danny's tyres were flat so he used his. I asked what his mum said and he said she was cross with Danny and sent him to their bedroom.'

I do not know whether this is usual sibling behaviour, but Leo felt hurt and I empathised. The story continued:

'I asked if they had bunk beds. Leo said they did and that he slept on the bottom and Danny slept on the top bunk. Leo said he liked being on the bottom but Danny mostly sleeps on the floor. I said that didn't sound very comfortable, but Leo said Danny brings his covers and pillows down onto the floor beside him. I asked if that was ok for him, and Leo said it wasn't because Danny could easily get him.'

At the time, I felt very anxious about Leo being unable to secure some safe time and space each night, even in his own bed. I said that it must be difficult for him to get to sleep. I wondered whether he told his Mum because in a subsequent session Leo was glad to tell me that his Dad had rearranged the bunk beds so that they became placed at right angles. This meant that Danny could still see Leo and settled down more happily, and Leo felt safer further away. I began to see the bright, lively, troubled Danny as a needy, dependent twin and this story seemed to illustrate something of their aforementioned interdependence and/or co-dependency. On reflection, the resourceful conscious and psychological survival

strategies Leo used to get away from some aspects of his 'sticky' brother, to preserve and develop his own identity, were key and seemed to recur through the mentoring interactions.

To return to Max the cat, towards the end of our third mentoring session I was watching him playing with the magnet and said I remembered he was a scientist and an investigator. Then:

'I asked him if he remembered we talked about 'making' last week and he said ...'yes, my tree....'. I said that as an explorer he might like to find out what was in the making box and he pulled out a ball of grey wool and said 'Max'(cat) fur'. Then we had a bit of a problem as it was nearly time to go but I knew Leo was keen to make – he was excited and bouncy. I asked him if he needed to draw or plan his model first and he said he did, so drew a picture of Max. I was wondering how he would set about this project and he was particularly keen to find material for the eyes, nose and ears of the cat and rooted around the fabric box until he found what he wanted. I said we would have to keep these pieces in the 'safe' for next time. He seemed pleased and chatted about Max until we reached the music room.'

It was interesting how freely and happily he talked about his cat. During the following session Leo wanted to retrieve his work:

'Leo looked, pointed and remembered the 'safe, in a safe room' where his work was kept. He jumped over to the box and he opened it to find his picture of 'Max' the cat from last week. He talked about other children coming into the room and finding his work – but it wasn't completely coherent.'

It was interesting that he was not completely convinced that the 'safe' box was safe from others. Perhaps he was becoming curious about the other participants, perhaps suspicious, or perhaps he had just not had enough experience of 'safe' spaces:

‘Anyway, he seemed pleased to find it still there and we both moved to the table top to continue this work. We found the pieces for Max’ eyes, nose and ears and Leo began to squeeze rather large amounts of glue onto the sugar paper to stick them down. He chose string to make the cat’s whiskers and we struggled with the scissors to cut each one. Then I asked how he would make Max’ fur and Leo remembered the grey wool. He pulled it out of the making box and we began to cut small pieces. Leo began to sing as he put even more glue on the sugar paper and I teased out small threads of grey wool to make fur.’

Leo began to sing when I started to participate and became more involved by trying to make the cat’s fur, rather badly, but Leo watched approvingly. I think this had become a happy, collaborative project for us both. I wrote in my observations how quickly the time seemed to pass when I was working with Leo. The practical multi-sensory nature of the task created a transitional play space where by working together to make Max, we also seemed to be working together at an emotional level to make Leo. This creative, intimate scenario, seemed to be enabling Leo, by allowing him to experience an other tending to his ideas, to take the lead and be number one in his own terms and in a safe place. Then it seemed as though Leo confirmed that he was Max:

‘Leo stopped singing and said he would tell Max about the picture he was making - in cat language. I asked whether Max would understand, and Leo began meowing in a loud voice to demonstrate the communication.’

We continued to look at and talk about and work on Max in subsequent weeks, although we ran out of glue that Leo seemed to use in copious amounts, the cat we had in common seemed to be part of the glue that held our meetings together. Perhaps in a similar way, Max or rather Leo was the glue that held him and his brother together in their rather ‘sticky’ relationship. I eventually asked Leo whether he would like to take his work home, keep it in the mentoring room box,

or put it up on the wall. Leo showed me exactly where he wanted it to go on the wall in the mentoring room, so the others could see it:

‘We looked at Max and I said I liked his pink ears and suggested some cats had pink tongues too, so Leo began the task of cutting away at some pink paper until he’d made the right shape and size to fit his picture, then stuck it on. I found some blu-tack while he cleared away and asked Leo to remind me where he said he wanted it to hang, then we both stood back and admired his work. He said the others will be able to see it and I said I’m sure they’ll like Max and they’ll know you made it because your name’s there. Leo seemed pleased with all this, so I asked him to think about what he might like to make next time. Picking up the plastic folder he said; ‘I’ll put this in the safe’.’

Interestingly, in her interview Miss Hendry revealed that she had brought Danny to the mentoring room to see Leo’s work:

E: You mean you brought Danny up here?

Miss H: Yes, because there was a meeting for his twin...and I said oh well I am going to look at Leo’s work, come up and have a look. So he came up and I’m saying oh that is very good isn’t it Danny, hasn’t he done well, and then next day I had both Leo and Danny in my ‘code breakers’ group... so I made a point of saying to Leo in front of Danny, that we had been to have a look at his work and how good it was. He had a lovely big grin on his face.

E: So you think he has been quite happy....

Miss H: Yes, I think he was extremely pleased that his twin had seen what he was doing .....I said how good it was and that gave him a boost as well.’

Danny was rather coerced into responding positively to Leo’s work, and I was a little nervous about him coping with Leo as a rival in this way. Nevertheless, I think a teacher drawing attention to his brother’s work as an exemplar may have been a first for Danny, as well as for Leo.



During our mentoring relationship, the experience of shared reading, described in the group observation, did not occur again. I tried to interest Leo in a range of books, particularly about the animals he often talked about e.g. chickens, cats:

‘I had found a copy of ‘Six Dinner Sid’, a popular picture book about a greedy cat who lived, and therefore ate every day at six different houses in the same street. This worked well for Sid until he became ill and had to take six doses of medicine from each of his owners. I thought Leo might like this story as it’s about a black cat so I asked him if he’d like me to read it to him – no response. He continued to build the cube into a tower. I offered to read to him again later in the session but again he ignored the offer.’

I gradually learnt that his engagement depended on him being given time, space and enough trust to make and communicate his own choices. Thinking further, ‘Six Dinner Sid’ (Moore, 1990) was probably not the best choice considering Danny’s appetite for all that was Leo. The quality of our engagement seemed to rely on me sensitively following and fitting in with him, so when he told me that he enjoyed playing ‘Top Trumps’, and his favourites were about ‘Dr. Who’, I seized the clue. How interesting it was that much of the mentoring relationship had been about trying to help Leo find out who he was, in relation to his twin, and that this new game would also pick on the thread of time, as the Time Lord became part of our story. I wrote in my observation:

‘This is his favourite programme on TV and I agreed it was good, but could be a bit scary sometimes, and he pulled a face and nodded. Then Leo started to tell me about his remote control Dalek and Danny’s remote control K9 that have both run out of batteries for the time being.’

In supervision we talked about his allusion to batteries having run out and wondered if this might relate to the way their relationship did not quite work sometimes. It was interesting how Leo saw himself as Dalek Kahn, an autonomous

survivor whose role it was to come up with strategies to outwit and destroy the enemy. I wondered whether this was how he unconsciously saw his task with Danny:

‘Leo talks about pretending to be ‘Dalek Kahn’ in his playground play. Dalek Kahn, according to ‘Top Trump’ Literature is one of four daleks that belong to a secret, surviving group ‘more autonomous than the Emperor’, called the ‘Cult of Skaro’. ‘The cult’s job was to think like the enemy and come up with new ways of exterminating them.’

I do not know why Leo wanted to be frightened by, or take on the persona of these metal monsters, but perhaps through them he was able to own some of his own unbearable, vengeful feelings that he seemed only able to act out through projection into his twin brother in real life. I was unable to find the ‘Top Trumps’ card game, but found a colourful paperback about this television programme, which he devoured enthusiastically. Rather like the grim resignation he seemed to show in his response to Danny’s note of apology at the beginning, I was surprised because I associate this kind of science fiction story with children a little older than Leo:

‘I’d put it in the book box beside the chair where Leo always seems to sit – though he does not appear to be interested in any of the books I usually put there. I pulled the Dr. Who book from the box and Leo recognised it immediately, took it from me and began to turn the pages like someone who knew quite a lot about how books work. He scoured the pages, recognised some key vocabulary, pointed and read them aloud and appeared to know the names, and could distinguish different kinds of Dalek as well as other monsters as they appeared on each page. I asked whether he had seen the episode on Saturday night evening which was about Daleks and he enthusiastically recalled some of the events. In fact, as we both sat forward holding the book, Leo turned the pages explaining the pictures to me as he went. He did not miss a single page, scrutinised

every visual clue and appeared to be keen and excited to turn over to find the next promise of information packed pictures. He was rapt and able to identify characters and story lines he recognised from the series.'

I found his knowledge and interest extraordinary. Recalling the 'limpet shell' image from the other reading experience we enjoyed, the notion of resilient metal doors shutting down for safety is resonant in the magnet-like sliding door action of a space-ship or even the safe-guarding closure of the Tardis door. In each episode of Dr. Who, the battered but enduring doors separate external chaotic alien pursuits from the limitless space and time dimensions of the Tardis' womb-like calm. Such a safe, if rigid, containing space provides security and a 'feather' (Dickinson, 1976) of hope by consistently allowing the story to continue to the next episode, so the Time Lord holds on and survives, rather like Leo, to keep on keeping on.

Within the framework of the mentoring project, aside from his interest in Dr. Who, the significance of 'time' for Leo emerges in various ways; from the seeming lack of attention he was afforded by others, to my confusion over timing sequences in our early individual meetings. As mentioned earlier, at the end of many mentoring sessions with Leo I observed that the time with Leo seemed to pass too quickly. Also, the story he repeatedly told, re-iterated by his mother in her interview, about the ten minute difference in time between his own and his brother's birth. There was a sense he projected of time being denied, or lost, or stolen from him, and the mentoring sessions we enjoyed seemed to evoke this fantasy of stealing back some time for Leo.

Through the shared multi-sensory projects we engaged in, we came to know each other and I think Leo started to enjoy coming to mentoring sessions each week. He began to relate stories of every day events more coherently and cohesively about

his experiences, often using the pictures he drew and the models he made as prompts and props, or vehicles to support the narrative. For example, in the summer term he told the following story:

‘I went to the beach yesterday’...and ‘I had a 10/10 week because Danny played with me’. Leo made a colourful family at the beach picture. He talked about jumping in the waves, having a picnic, his family sunbathing and Danny playing in the sea.’

It was heartening to hear a positive story about Danny and Leo having fun. This more positive feeling seemed to be played out at this stage of the mentoring project, at an institutional level as when I had taken Leo back to class, Mrs. Merton the Headteacher stopped me in the corridor:

‘She stopped me and said ‘Can I just say ...how lovely it was to hear Leo chatting away to you in the corridor this morning....I just happened to be walking behind you both and could see how animated he was.’ I replied that he was telling me about a visit to the beach with his family at the weekend and she interrupted, saying..‘yes, but in school he’s usually so silent and just doesn’t talk like that’. I said I was glad, and was particularly glad as this was really the first interaction I’ve had with the Head – that she has initiated.’

The other thing Leo talked about regularly was his garden. In light of his tree house story, and the animals his garden housed, I imagined it to be something of a farm yard, with attendant hazards, as his favourite playground. The chickens seemed to be important to Leo:

‘He reached for some yellow plasticine and brought it to the table. It was hard so I broke it into smaller pieces to soften it up and Leo said he was going to make a chicken. I asked what colour would be good for the chicken’s beak, but we couldn’t find any orange or red so he decided to use pink. I had to hurry him up a bit - again there’s never quite enough time for Leo –

and he put the chicken on top of the bookcase before we went back to class.’

The top of the bookcase in the mentoring room became something of a showcase for participant’s creations, and when something had to be left at the end of a mentoring session, I made sure that the object, or puzzle was left there until the next time. I thought this not only supported the continuous narrative dialogue of the mentoring relationships, but also signalled that I valued the participants, and kept their work-in-progress in mind. It never failed to re-assure:

‘Leo spotted the plasticine chicken on the bookshelf where he left it last time and seemed delighted to find it.’

One of the stories that Leo told me about the garden and the chickens towards the end of the project, was particularly encouraging and led me to think that what happened in the mentoring meetings might somehow have helped his relationship with his brother:

‘The game seemed to tail away as Leo talked more about his garden, and then he mentioned the chickens. I said that his garden sounds such an exciting place...there’s a trampoline (and a swing he reminded me), a base and a tree house where the ‘small woods’ are, a pond that used to have frogs (but Danny kept killing them), a sandpit (no sand though) - and chickens as well! So I asked Leo to tell me about the chickens and he explained that it’s Danny’s job to feed the chickens after school every day. I asked whether Danny remembered to do this and Leo said yes, but sometimes it’s hard for him to do it on his own – to manage opening the pen where the chickens live and to carry the food - so he usually calls for Leo to help. I asked Leo if he was able to help his brother with the chickens, and he said he was and that he liked doing it. Then it occurred to me that this was the first positive interaction with his brother Leo has ever described, so I suggested to Leo that sometimes then he and his brother could

work well and have fun together, and he nodded as he packed away the Connect 4 game.'

I was encouraged by the rich range of experience that Leo seemed to find available, and that he could discuss. Amidst the wonderful play objects at large in Leo's garden, there were some things that worked well such as the trampoline and, of course the heartening chicken story. There were other things that used to work but needed attention (the sandpit), some things that were destroyed by Danny, such as the frogs, but others that were full of promise, such as the 'small woods' and the 'pond'.

As with all the child participants in the project, I prepared Leo for the end of the mentoring sessions by carefully going through and using his 'scrap book', the models and picture he had made, to share the 'good' memories from our meetings and to assure him that I would be keeping him in mind. During the final mentoring meeting, Leo chatted about visiting 'Pizza Express' with his Mum, while finishing off some of the work he had not completed during mentoring sessions, and he admired the tree-house den he had drawn. He also talked about Dr. Who's relationship with 'The Master', suggesting it was 'good and bad, like me and Danny'. I was glad that he was able to talk more directly about himself and his brother, and although his reference to the sci-fi characters suggested this remained a polarised, un-integrated sense of 'good' and 'bad', at least he recognised that they went together, made a pair.

He also talked about enjoying making 'Max' and, although I was sorry that I would probably not see Leo again, I felt the mentoring relationship had been a positive learning experience for him, as well as for me. Miss Hendry in her interview remarked on his progress:

‘I think he is beginning to come out of his shell. I think this is the most positive thing above and beyond any academic progress he has made, it is his character that I feel is developing more and is coming on and I suppose he has had to develop quite an early resilience, really and so he is quite self-contained, quite steady, but it is lovely to see that disappearing sometimes and watch him, say at child initiated times, really enjoying working with constructions, with Lego or something and loving that.’

### **Concluding Reflection:**

As with Tim, Conrad and Isabel the mentoring experience enabled me to reflexively engage with aspects of Leo’s struggle to understand self in relation to other. As with the other case study children, working within the intersubjective psychic space, my own struggle was inexorably part of that learning, on which I elaborate in Chapter 9. Leo’s identity issue was to do with developing a more robust sense of self in relation to his twin brother, a theme that dominated his stories and the narrative of this case study.

Leo’s uncertainty and sensitivity were evident in, for example, his hesitant fragmented speech from our first mentoring interaction. Again, as with each of the case study children, the interview with his mother shed useful light on Leo’s earliest experience that provided relevant information and insight into some of his responses. From birth, arriving ten minutes after his brother Danny was significant in terms of understanding Leo, as he was quietly envious of his brother being first.

Danny, the first, bigger more expressive twin, was described by Trish as the ‘very dominant twin brother’ in relation to Leo. By comparison, there was something rather porous about Leo’s personality, into which, I found it was easy to project, the phantasy of a rather fragile boy who needed protection. Like a limpet, to re-

iterate the image reflected in the title of the story Leo chose to read at our first meeting, he developed and seemed to inhabit a shell-like defence into which he withdrew for safety. In this way, both time and space were metaphorically represented for Leo in the phantasy world of Dr. Who, to which he was particularly attracted and to which I return in the final chapters.

This withdrawal worked to preserve him as the 'good' brother and project all that was 'bad' into Danny. The defence was supported at an institutional level which perpetuated the 'thin' and saturated 'toxic' narrative (Vetere and Dowling, 2005) that Danny acted out in school. This defence did not help Leo to own and therefore to integrate the destructive, primitive parts of his own personality, towards a more integrated sense of self. However, I think Leo's experience of mentoring did support his development in this direction. Leo and I worked hard to use the transitional play space made available through mentoring.

Max the cat became the linking motif of our mutual interest and shared experience. If Max the good cat represented Leo, our time in the safe space of the mentoring room was well spent. We carefully worked together, with Leo appropriately making choices and regulating the use of available materials. He took the lead and I attentively facilitated the process. In line with the course of the mentoring sessions, the image of Max gradually came to life, rather like Leo. This was verified by the positive comments from the headteacher, who overheard our lively conversation one morning following a mentoring session, as we walked back to the classroom. Max the cat (and Leo), emerged during our mentoring interactions, yet there was further evidence that Leo's development, at an interpersonal level was noted and extended in the wider context of the school. Max the cat was proudly displayed by Leo, not only to other case study children, but in the event to his teacher and twin brother too. In this way, a relational interpretation of mentoring



as applied to Leo, can be seen to have worked positively at both an individual, micro level and also, more pervasively to impact on his relationships and learning beyond the mentoring room, in the relatively wider social setting of the school.

There was also something important too about successfully completing this task for Leo. Towards the end of the mentoring sessions, we revisited some of the activities that Leo had begun in his scrapbook. He recalled and set about completing his drawings quite industriously and talked more freely about his experiences with his family and Danny. Leo seemed more able to cope with his brother's spoiling tendencies and articulated that there were times when they played and worked well together. Gradually, as a more tangible sense of who Leo was emerged, his flow of stories, drawings and speech at the end of the mentoring project were very different from when we began.

## **Chapter 9: Mentoring - A relational approach and experiential focus of the research**

### **Introduction**

This interdisciplinary, reflexive, psychosocial research became, I suggest, a systematically planned and sensitively implemented project designed to illuminate learning from experience, in a specific primary school. I was able to deploy and develop a repertoire of teaching knowledge, skills, experience and expertise to successfully establish, sustain and eventually complete the study. This included applying an understanding of some crucial emotional factors in learning and teaching to work with and to contain, a small group of children through individual mentoring interactions. Based on findings from the case study chapters, this chapter reflects on the development of the mentoring approach undertaken, as described in the case study chapters.

I will revisit the methodological design, including validity and ethical considerations, as well as the adapted observational technique and approaches that made the mentoring process an experiential focus for understanding emotionality in different ways, in the lived experience of the research. It is suggested that development of relational mentoring provided a contribution to knowledge in the research.

I will reflect on emergent themes arising from the group within the research context, particularly issues of fostering personal agency and self-efficacy in the complex intra, interpersonal and interrelational experiences observed in school. I will consider how the mentoring approach was implemented as part of the inductive multiperspectival methodological bricolage (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). I will reflect on how an intervention, based on a relational approach to mentoring can benefit some children, teachers and schools; but also, as suggested the researcher too.

This chapter also considers how the school's responses to the mentoring project were systemically situated within a broader social context; one that gave rise to institutional anxieties that may be seen as part of a social defence against learning. Following concluding reflections at the end of each case study chapter, I will begin Chapter 9 by focusing on the children's learning as a group.

### **The case study group**

I worked with Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo individually, yet recurring themes in the psychic space of the mentoring room were common to all the children as a group. As explained in Chapter 2, what happens intersubjectively between people at an interpersonal level can be linked to emotional defences that emerge at group level in social settings, noting how schools operate, in the main, as group phenomena (Bion, 1961, Menzies -Lyth, 1988, 1989). As previously noted, along with curriculum attainment, the social and emotional well-being of children has been an issue for successive governments, particularly since the turn of the century. Balancing and integrating these priorities may be seen as being complex for schools, for teachers, for children and for their families (Harris, Rendall, and Nashat, 2011). Tensions within the institutional dynamic may also be seen to reflect wider anxieties in society (Menzies Lyth, 1988, 1989, Hoggett, 2008, 2010), as considered below.

Observing Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo at micro level, enabled me to illuminate and better understand how the life-long adaptive work-in-progress of linking new human experiences to previous learning, perpetually shapes and fosters thinking, growth and development; or their antithesis. Price (2005:47) points out, 'the self is...what the past is doing now'. Striving, in daily interactions, with those around us to make meanings, actively engages us in co-constructing cultures and

environments (Green, 2012) in ways that link our individual histories to wider social dynamics (Wright Mills, 1959).

Underpinning an understanding of people being active ‘producers’, as well as being ‘products’ of society (Giroux, 1988), is a belief in the learner’s sense of agency. Bandura (2001), identifies personal agency, that is being able to exercise control in one’s life, as the ‘essence of humanness’, which affects the nature and qualities of our lives. As noted, our capacity to exercise personal agency, through belief in our own ability to succeed, is described by Bandura (1992) as ‘self-efficacy’. A sense of personal agency may be seen to be contingently bound to developing a robust, healthy sense of self (Winnicott, 1964).

In the mentoring room, defences were often presented, through processes of projective identification, in a range of complementary but also different ways, with each child. The struggle to learn, through negotiating internal and external realities, preserving and developing self in relation to others, was constantly there. What was apparent, as chronicled in conscious and unconscious dialogic interactions for individual case study children, was also part of the children’s learning, as a group, in the school and its dynamics.

I found that my relational interpretation of mentoring, brought into play via the case study group, raised questions of the complex struggle of and with self, in terms of agency and self-efficacy. Processing and thinking through difficult thoughts and feelings, towards a more mature integrated, ‘depressive’ psychic position (Klein, 1946), may be seen as central to the notion of ‘container-contained’ (Bion, 1962). And to doing effective research.

As suggested in concluding reflections at the end of Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8, the case study children benefitted from forms of mentoring that created some containing time and space for reflecting on experience. The containing space, understood psychoanalytically, provided emotional space for thinking, where, echoing aspects of Bion's 'alpha function', I became in effect, something of the 'thinking' container. It was done, I came to realise, by making my mind emotionally available to the children, through close observation and subsequent systematic, reflexive interrogation of the observational experiences.

Recognition of the transference and countertransference, as described in the final chapter, also enabled me to better understand, in conjunction with valuable biographical interviews undertaken with parents, teachers and Teaching Assistants, how the children's emotional histories, in relation to the development of 'self', were acted out in the mentoring room, in the containing process. The theme of 'time and space', is an example of a mentoring group theme, which was played out by case study children in the classroom and further, at an organisational level.

Conrad's efforts to absent himself could be seen as protestations about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They may have been, as with Isabel, communicating a frustration with being separated from his real year group friends, who were in another class. Or, more poignantly, they may resonate with the disruption and negation of time Conrad regressively acted out in school, following his early childhood experience of loss and separation. I recall, during one unplanned absence, Conrad bursting from the cloakroom followed by three concerned peers, repeating the institution's scripted mantra: 'calm down Conrad!', to no avail. Conrad's destructive actions included challenging the time-regulated boundaries of school and a refusal to acknowledge the time-table. His powerful

projections caused anxiety in those children and adults who worked with him in the organisation.

I also recall my anxiety about the disruption Conrad provoked when he asked me to change the mentoring timetable. When I saw Conrad and Leo consecutively, Conrad dominated my thoughts, echoing the later 'second twin' position that Leo silently resented and was played out in his pre-occupation with his fictional Time Lord hero, 'Dr. Who'. For Tim, 'time' was a very slippery concept as he sometimes struggled to distinguish real time from phantasy. In an effort, perhaps, to defeat chaos by tidying up, he sought to martial mentoring times. From the beginning, he wanted to know exactly who else I was seeing, when and for how long. I think it would have been distressing for Tim to have changed his mentoring session time.

Isabel, aside perhaps, from being haunted by unresolved intergenerational family difficulties, struggled to find, even from the moment of birth, sufficient space and time to breathe, in order to become, quite simply, herself. Leo, like Conrad, but for different reasons, sought to negate time. He defiantly withdrew into a timeless, Tardis-like defensive shell. There was also something adhesive (Bick, 1968) about Leo, who avoided thinking by 'sticking' to his brother, but in so doing, it emerged, found himself emotionally caught between a rock and a hard place. This was true too of Isabel whose internal world seemed to be intrusively peopled by significant others' histories and complex object relations. Isabel and Leo may have learnt from their earliest experiences, that they had to work hard to hold themselves together, developing something of what Bick (1968) described as a 'second skin', or perhaps in Isabel's case, what Winnicott (1960) described as 'false-self'.

As noted, Conrad's early experience of the containing 'space' had been traumatically interrupted, consequently affecting his capacity to think, but for Tim, the very concept of 'space' was frightening. He strove to get rid of the spaces in every sense – even those literal spaces between letters and words in his handwriting. To avoid the perpetual persecution of 'space' that perhaps for him represented nothingness (Briggs, 2002), he also attacked the spaces for thinking, sometimes deadening them with meaningless words. This was played out more pervasively in the school, as suggested, in the form of relationships that emerged between Tim, Trish, Tim's Mum and me, which seemed to embody some of Tim's anxieties about being 'too close and too far apart'.

### **Developing Relational Mentoring**

In this study seeking theoretical 'anchors' (Colley, 2003), for mentoring, meant drawing on psychodynamic and psychoanalytic ideas. Relational mentoring developed in a creative way, commensurate with the methodological bricolage that evolved this research, so from the start mentoring worked at different levels and in a variety of ways.

As a mentor I was able to access a small group of case study children and to work with them individually. The role allowed me to apply some psychoanalytic ideas in an educational setting. Not merely a methodological vehicle, mentoring in this study can be seen, essentially and simultaneously, as an experiential focus for the play of different ways of understanding emotionality, as lived experience.

The 'Good Practice Guidelines for Learning Mentors' (DfES, 2001), identified the importance of 'communication' (DfES, 2001:4), recognised that 'barriers to learning need to be addressed' (DfES, 2001:27), valued 'trusting relationships' (DfES, 2001:8), and listed the importance of 'listening' and 'observation' (DfES,

2001:8) Yet, neither this document, nor the subsequent 'Every Child Matters: 'Change for Children', (DfES, 2005), attempted to unpack, or drill down more deeply. In terms of creating a new profession of learning mentors, I felt it was necessary to further explore and expand on how communication works, how trusting relationships are made, to relate how learning from experience may impact on learning and relationships in school. At the time, I wondered how practitioners could begin to make sense of highly complex pupil communicative behaviours, if mentoring skills were predominantly externally referenced and constructed as functional competencies, directed towards National Curriculum outcomes.

To facilitate investigating the emotional experience of learning in school, I drew, as described, on aspects of 'alpha function', as expressed in maternal 'reverie', that Bion (1962, 1967, 1976, 2005) associated with engaging emotional truths. The level of engagement I aimed for was embodied in what Bion described as 'alpha function' factors such as 'attention' (Bion, 1962). Attention was facilitated at micro level through observation of case study children. I used, as explained, an understanding of aspects of Bick's (1964) close observation, of Bion and Klein's 'projective identification' (Bion, 1962, Klein, 1957, 1958), of Winnicott's (1945, 1957) notion of emotional 'holding' and of Bion's allusion to 'negative capability' (Monti and Crudella, 2007:52), as explicated in Chapter 2. I also drew on my experience of applying something of Boxall's (2002) approach to 'nurture groups' in school, in order to contain the case study children's anxiety and facilitate some learning from experience.

Informed by these ideas and my teaching experience, I saw mentoring as an opportunity to make explicit and practice, what I came to describe as 'relational mentoring' in school. This meant working to gain insights into emotional barriers to learning, through in-depth relational engagement with case study children.



Engaging with such complexity (Harris, Rendall and Nashat, 2011) in this enquiry, was motivated by wanting to know and understand how the emotional experience of learning impacts on learning and relationships in school:

‘One way of managing complexity is to reduce it by examining parts of the system. This reductionist model will work perfectly well for non-human systems....this will not be effective in addressing the complexities of human relationships...A more appropriate and meaningful approach is to find ways of understanding the complexities rather than reducing them.

(Rendall and Stuart, 2005 in Harris, Rendall and Nashat, 2011:182)

The process foregrounded key assumptions about ‘knowing’ embodied in Bion’s idea of ‘container-contained, as introduced in Chapter 2, that are revisited in the final chapter. Learning from experience means, for example, we learn to understand by being understood, we learn to listen by being listened to and learn to attend by being attended to.

Although this can seem far removed from specifically improving pupil’s National Curriculum attainment levels, which originally described the mission of learning mentors in school (DfES, 2005), I think the emphasis of the mentor as ‘container’ helped the case study children to feel understood, heard and attended to. This may, in some small way, have impacted on their emotional well-being, by nurturing a sense of their own capacity to act purposefully, to exercise some personal control in their learning environment, thence desire to learn and to know. Whilst such internal, emotional progress cannot be formally measured, authentic engagement with the learner may provide an experience of learning and thinking that motivates a more productive interaction with the curriculum for the learner towards achieving more measureable outcomes.

Within the boundaries of the research, relational mentoring worked to build the children's sense of personal agency and self-efficacy, through emotional attunement. Such engagement respectfully afforded the case study group some time and space in school to choose what they wanted to do and how they wanted to do it. In so doing, mentoring simultaneously modelled and embodied something of the school's potential capacity for providing flexible-enough containment, towards fostering the growth and development of young minds. This would seem a sound and priceless investment in emotional well being, that may at the same time, have impacted positively on the children's National Curriculum attainments, and school improvement in an holistic, emotionally true sense.

A psychoanalytically informed, psychosocial interpretation of mentoring, prioritised the creation of containing , therapeutic time and space for children to reflect on their experiences in school. Relational mentoring facilitated this and the finding was evidenced by the children and staff's explicit and implicit responses. For example, Isabel remarked 'Tuesdays are my favourite day now', Tim ran over to me in the playground to find out when I was coming to school again, Conrad leapt up from the 'Sparrowhawks' group when I went to collect Isabel, saying: 'Is it my turn now?' In our interview, when I asked Leo's Mum how she thought he felt about mentoring sessions. She replied:

'Oh, I think he likes it. He does like it and he has mentioned it a few times and I think it makes him feel a bit special 'cos he has to go off and do some work with someone and like you say it's one to one, and I think he thrives on that...' (Appendix 3.xiii)

Trish, the school Senco, commented positively about the effect of the mentoring project on the case study group as a whole:

'E: ...I wanted to ask you if you see a place for mentoring time and space for other children in the school?

T:...Yes definitely...we've seen..we feel this has been a great benefit to

the children who have participated this time and we have already started to identify children that we think would be good candidates in this type of work again....' (Appendix 3.xvii)

From such feedback, together with other indicators described below, I learnt that in acknowledging the unconscious mind, relational mentoring might be instrumental in providing flexible-enough containment for pupils, not only in Brompton, but also in other schools. Significantly, the relational role of mentoring was an interactive, reciprocal learning experience. As a researcher, mentoring facilitated reflexive engagement with all participants in the school setting. I found that teachers, including the Headteacher, began to identify other children who might benefit from mentoring. Also, through weekly interactions and two staff meeting experiences, I came to realise that teachers and teaching assistants themselves would have enjoyed some time and space to reflect on their experiences of working with children. The experiential focus of mentoring in the setting illuminated not only my own need, but the general need for a containing experience that a 'work discussion' group would provide for adults working with children. Such a group would support ways of understanding thoughts and feelings engaged in the emotional experience of learning and teaching. Through the research process, I came to realise the relevance of work discussion.

### **Mentoring as part of the methodological 'bricolage'**

As noted above, trying to observe and feel how relationships worked and developed was aptly facilitated through mentoring as an experiential focus of what I described in Chapter 3, as a form of methodological bricolage. This involved bringing together adaptations of Bick's observational approach as part of an evolving interpretation of mentoring. It also included developing the critical reflexivity of the auto/biographical 'I' through the course of the research. I reserve discussion about building reflexivity as a researcher until the final chapter, yet

suggest here that the inductive, adaptive approach generated rich observational material which, over time, illuminated the psychic spaces of the project. Alongside biographical interviews and a reflexive journal, the bricolage facilitated the creative ‘transitional’ research space for reflexively engaging with the lived feelings of what happened, at auto/biographical and systemic levels. ‘Thinking’, in Bion’s sense, arguably, being the outcome of what was, on occasion, a difficult process that I reflect on some detail in Chapter 10: My own learning from experience.

The unfolding development and application of my interpretation of mentoring, embodied in part, the inductive nature of the methodological ‘bricolage’ (Denzin and Lincoln, in Kincheloe, 1995) I described in Chapter 3. Reflexively observing the children’s uncertainty and my own sense of ‘not knowing’, which the role of researcher/mentor evoked, also facilitated insights into the complex relational work of the mentor. At the same time, the systematic, interrogative reflexivity of the layered observational method ensured a sustained level of authentic engagement with the children that, in the case study chapters, demonstrates the qualities of interaction that underpin validity in this interpretive, psychosocial research.

The approach worked at micro level with each child, offering glimpses of the interrelational, interactive relevance and multiperspectival, ‘crystalline’ (Kincheloe, 2005) play, as illustrated above, for example, of time and space in our internal and external worlds. It also worked to show how this presents in interdependent interactions with others in familial and the wider social school culture of school. Really reflexive research (West, 2009), and some engagement with complex meanings may not have taken place if the mentoring process had been simply viewed as a linear chronology of actions, events, competencies and

outcomes. The lived experience of relational mentoring shaped the transitional play space of the research, for finding ways of understanding emotionality.

### **The emotional task of building relationships**

Once I had found a setting for the enquiry, aware of the contingency between validity and the quality of research relationships I was able to foster (Merrill and West, 2009), developing a relationship with the school, as related in Chapter 4, was the main task. Trish, the Senco and my 'link' person was pivotal to this relationship. Her approval, via the Headteacher, lent authority to the research and the rapport we established during the first term of the project, as suggested, eased my 'alien' presence within the institution. There were, however, inevitably tensions to overcome in developing our working relationship. Some of these were to do with my own assumptions and expectations. I learnt in this enquiry that inclusion is engaging with, respecting and accommodating difference at a psychic level. This was something I had previously 'learnt about'. For example, I had discussed the process with colleagues, encouraged students to embrace difference, was committed to practising and endeavoured to implement respect for difference in the range of educational settings in which I had taught. I had even written a chapter about it in an Early Years book for students (May, Ashford and Bottle, 2006) - so I assumed that I knew.

Those within the social contexts and cultures that I sought to include and bring together through the ideas and method of my research enquiry were diverse. Brompton was different from the school contexts in which I had previously worked in other parts of the country. Canterbury Christ Church university had different research priorities from my experience of learning and research at the Tavistock. The role of Senco in Brompton School was different from my lived experience of the role. At an emotional level I experienced frustrations with tolerating and

negotiating some of these differences. For example, although I was keen to organise dual supervision from the Tavistock and Canterbury Christ Church university, which was in many ways apt and beneficial, at times I did not feel contained in the process of having supervisory ‘parents’ coming to the work from different directions. Something of what Fruggeri (2011) describes as the ‘triadic’ contextual tensions of ‘relational interdependence’, when describing qualities of learning relationships between parents, child and school based professionals, may have been played out in my experience of being the learner ‘other’, supervised in the professional ‘parental’ partnership:

‘In triadic contexts – as all contexts of interactions are – the interdependence is relational: the relationship between two partners has an effect on the relationships that each one of them has with others.’ (Fruggeri, 2011:169)

At the same time, within the school setting, Trish and I, for example, were somewhat united by being subject to, in various ways that were variously experienced, educational expectations which as noted, can be seen to be externally driven. Illeris (2007) refers to the dual dimensions of situated learning as being the close, immediate situation of the school and the underlying social situation of which education is part. At micro level my learning from experience was situated and psychosocially positioned. In different educational settings, both Trish and I were caught up in paper-chasing exercises.

For example, prompted by my own sense of persecutory anxiety, stemming from the bureaucracy of the University Ethics Committee, as described below, I left a sizable package of research paperwork with Trish at our initial meeting in July (Appendix 1). Ostensibly this was for her to read and digest, in the hope that she would then share my cherished research proposal with relevant others. I did this

even though she had clearly expressed a sense of already being overwhelmed with her own paperwork, which I had also acknowledged. In this action, the psychosocial intertext of our lived experience through the research began. We may both have also been engaged in the 'busyness' that Hoggett (2010) describes as the reality of the 'perverse social defence' against learning, experienced by teachers amongst others and which I will consider later, in relation to institutional defences in Brompton school.

Trish and I agreed another meeting date at the beginning of September 2006, to feedback responses and confirm the school's agreement to host the project. I was aware, as previously mentioned, that I had a clear idea and was excited about the mentoring project. For the school, the idea, method and concepts that came with it were new, or at least different. At our next meeting in September, my 'write-ups' revealed dismay that my own intensity and sense of urgency was not shared:

'Trish arrived and took me up to her room – she works as a non-teaching Senco for three days a week: Monday to Wednesday. She confessed she had not really had time to read the material I had left, but had discussed the project with the Head who was happy to go ahead...'

It was interesting here that however focused I was on investigating the emotional experience of learning, I was not aware of my teacher-like, matronly tone of expectation – revealed in the above extract by use of the word 'confessed'. This tone, on reflection, aptly described some of the qualities of our relationship. Having felt that I had already explained everything, I assumed Trish would have taken in and acted upon all I thought I had imparted at our first meeting. My irritation may have been to do with my own infantile expectation and wish to be

noticed and remembered. It may also be reminiscent of qualities of teacher-learner interactions that I interrogate in the final chapter.

Perhaps at some level I feared rejection after the seemingly 'curt' responses I had hitherto experienced from the Head, following my cancellation of an initial meeting with her. In the course of the mentoring project this unfortunate first impression was repaired, as related in Leo's case study. One morning, when the mentoring project was embedded and working well, Mrs. Merton was walking behind Leo and I chatting, as we made our way back to his classroom. Seemingly amazed, as noted, she stopped me to say how lovely it was to hear the 'usually so silent Leo' engaged in such animated conversation in school. She also asked whether I could take on another child about whom she was concerned.

At that first September meeting, Trish also began to share some worries about her son, which was a story she continued to communicate during our meetings. In one way such conversations helped to build our rapport, but it also made me wonder whether she imagined that I, or the mentoring project, might be able to help her and her son. This engaged me in a complex and at times claustrophobic relational network between Trish, who was a friend of Tim's Mum who also worked in the school. All this may indicate, as suggested by Bion (1961), the close relationship between individual psychic states and what happens in groups.

Whilst Trish consciously expressed some professional interest in the project, there may also have been some less conscious anxiety or doubt about me that she felt or carried for the school. Representing the privileges that may be associated with the university, I, together with my excitement about the project may have given rise to feelings of jealousy and envy that were difficult to engage with or to think about. In Chapter 3, I related my concern to establish the research as a whole school



project, yet my direct involvement was with a relatively small group of children and adult participants in the setting. I do not know how, at the beginning of the project, the rest of the children and staff viewed my weekly presence in the school. Then there was the institutional ‘need to know basis’ regarding Conrad’s ‘difficulties with his father’. Trish presented this institutional defence, to construct, from our earliest interactions, the distinction between those who did and those who did not need to know. She said she would consult the Head as to whether it would be apt for me to know about Conrad’s current family situation.

With this in mind, it is easy to see the fragility of the professional veneer. The way unconscious infantile, primitive human feelings that exist beneath the surface, whether or not they are acknowledged, will find expression in some form. I explore this further in relation to ‘roles’ and particularly to ‘institutional defences’, with the ideas of Menzies-Lyth and Bion on groups in mind, later in the chapter.

To return to the main idea, giving some individual space and time to pupils for reflecting on experience, generally seemed to capture the interest of staff. Through discussions, facilitated for staff and children by Trish and negotiated at our meetings during the first term, Leo, Conrad, Tim and Isabel were all, for a range of reasons, described as having fragile self-esteem. Although I had talked about emotional well-being, I wondered at the time how I, my presentation, or their previous knowledge of mentoring had communicated that developing ‘self-esteem’ was the main theme, or the difficulty to which I would most likely be able to attend.

In supervision, we talked about this possibly communicating something of the collective psychic state experienced and represented in the school. In many ways, as outlined in Chapter 4, the school was a complex, fractured community, like all

institutions. Like other schools, it was also subject to pressure from the culture of audit and league tables. During the same calendar year as the start of the research project, Brompton school had come through an Ofsted (January, 2006) inspection. The outcome was positive but the experience may have been stressful. I wonder to what extent Trish and the staff were communicating something of their own individual and collective need for support and containment, as much as for those of the children they identified as having what they termed: 'self-esteem' issues. This might also explain some of my own anxiety about being able to live up to their expectations.

Findings, as related above, suggest that terms such as poor 'self-esteem', used to objectify underachievement, as suggested for example, by Isabel's underperformance in maths, need re-thinking. If emotional engagement and attunement with the learner was prioritised and applied towards fostering personal agency and self-efficacy, such invaluable attention would be woven into the cultural, systemic (Harris, Rendall and Nashat, 2011), essentially human fabric of learning and teaching in school through, for example, relational mentoring.

### **Mentor as 'container'**

#### Observation and reflecting on experience

In this study, the adaptation of Bick's (1964) process of observing, through receptively engaging with case study children, writing up observations and reflecting on my observations, described an application of Bion's 'container-contained' process. Following mentoring sessions, I wrote-up descriptions of my thoughts and feelings about the mentoring experience and found the free-flow of this part of the process essential as the 'pro-forma' (Appendix 2.i), suggested by my first supervisor, inhibited flexibility for the particular observational approach I had adapted. Then, as explained in Chapter 3, I reflexively interrogated the

observational texts generated from close observation of case study children. The observational 'write-ups', as noted, produced a form of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) as the raw data of the research. Reflexivity, which replaced the 'work discussion' group in this study, involved using my own subjectivity as a research tool, working as an intrinsic part of the methodological 'bricolage' (Merriam, 2009, Denzin and Lincoln in Kincheloe, 2005). There were in effect three elements to the observation process – the observation, the 'write-ups' and the layered process of reflexive interrogation that took the place of 'work discussion' in this study.

Reflexivity was double-edged. It was not an equivalent substitute for work discussion in terms of Bick's containing observational technique. At the same time, reflexivity, as suggested, aptly facilitated the idea of researcher subjectivity as a tool for interrogating the intersubjective space between researcher and participant. Reflecting on the researcher-participant relationship is a major focus of Chapter 10: My learning from experience. The process stirred up my emotions, as evidenced throughout the case study chapters. I found the undertaking emotionally complex as I was reflexively observing myself as a researcher-participant in the developing relationships with Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo. What happened in the mentoring room and indeed the school at large, was essentially filtered through my own professional and personal assumptions, conscious and unconscious. This experience included the dual role of being researcher/mentor and was necessarily related to my own life history, including teaching and early patterns and qualities of relationships. As I relate in Chapter 10, this was obvious and yet difficult to learn.

The substitute for 'work discussion'

Bick's (1964) close observation technique includes the containing group process, developed at the Tavistock Centre, as 'work discussion' and describes the third part

of the observational process. In this research, a work discussion group was not available and was replaced, as noted, by some intense supervision from my research supervisors. My struggles with the transference and countertransference, as outlined in Chapter 10, serve to emphasise the importance and value of supervision for attending to the well-being of those who work with children, particularly in, for example, educational settings as noted, where the notion and rhetoric of 'reflective practice' (Rustin and Bradley, 2008) is now widespread. Whilst there is an established tradition in health settings, there is no culture of supervision in the British education system. This was confirmed in the school context of the enquiry. However, my lived experience of researching the emotional experience of learning, confirmed the necessity for a form of 'work discussion' that performs a supervisory role. As related in Chapter 3, to support the ethicality of the research and safeguard my own sense of emotional well-being, I also undertook additional personal therapy.

As a method for those involved in education, Rustin and Bradley (2008:267) distinguish between the educative and formative strengths of 'work discussion' and Bick's therapeutic conception of infant observation. Like Bick's students, allied professional workers from diverse settings bring observations of their choice to the group. Such a professional dynamic can be enriching and can foster collaborative understandings about the underlying assumption of 'work discussion': *'that the provision of human services nearly always takes place in the context of a significant relationship between provider and client.'* (Rustin and Bradley, 2008:279)

Also, those who work for example, in teaching settings, bring chosen observational material that reflect the conscious and unconscious emotional experiences of working within the institution in which they are personally and professionally

embedded. This may be seen to extend the ‘transformative’ learning process from the understanding of the individual observer, towards developing understanding that will improve practises at an organisational level. (Rustin, 2008, Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983, Youell, 2006, Menzies-Lyth, 1988, Coren, 1997):

‘As a contribution to professional formation, work discussion has thus come to be seen as a way of improving institutional practices through enhancing the capacities of practitioners and the contributions to understanding that they can make. As a source of hitherto neglected dimensions of relational or institutional processes, work discussion has contributed to the understanding of the ways that educational and care systems actually work and has provided new concepts and descriptions for understanding these.....It is, after all, because unconscious mental processes *are* unconscious, and because understanding of them is sometimes resisted by both individuals and institutions, that they are difficult to observe and to take account of, yet they may be potentially powerful and disruptive.’ (Rustin and Bradley, 2008:272)

In terms of research and policy making, Rustin and Bradley (2008), criticise the way evidence-based policy currently takes precedence over ‘practice-based evidence’. They argue the potential, at this early stage in the development of using ‘work discussion’ as a research method, for formalising methods of analysis of descriptive reports. In this research the narrative observational material may represent descriptive reports. They also make a case for ‘work discussion’ to be seen to belong to the ‘context of discovery’, rather than the ‘context of validation’ of new knowledge. (Rustin and Bradley, 2008:277).

Part of the conversation about adapting Bick’s observational research method, including a version of ‘work discussion’, is currently taking place in a research partnership between Canterbury Christ Church university, in Kent and the University of Nanterre, in Paris. Claudine Blanchard-Laville and Philippe Chaussecourte continue to develop a psychoanalytically-oriented clinical approach

in education that has emerged from a synthesis of psychoanalysis and pedagogy. This is an established part of educational sciences in the French academy. Using Bion's ideas about thinking, Blanchard- Laville,

'Offers several key notions to describe psychic aspects particularly to the teaching environment: such as the notion of the mental space of the classroom, the idea of didactic holding, and the concept of the didactic transfer. She has been able to show in her research that, in relation to the teacher's learning, his/ her psychic positioning in the teaching profession, and or to his/her subject, in the didactic transfer, is of crucial importance. (Blanchard-Laville and Chaussecourte, 2012)

Together with Professor Linden West and researcher colleagues, who bring a substantial biographical perspective for researching lives, the development of 'professional practice analysis groups' is emerging. In terms of my research experience of using a reflexive observational method, it would also have been a beneficial containing experience to have had access to a research focused work discussion group. I did, however, benefit from some helpful supervision from my second supervisor.

Supervision with my second supervisor:

Reflexive interrogation, as iterated, provided an opportunity to explore what happened in the intersubjective psychic space between researcher and participant. However, the absence of a 'work discussion' group, which would have provided a containing, transformational learning space for reflecting on experience, worked in part, to realise the notion of 'work discussion' as a necessary part of the observational process. This realisation was informed by the perpetual struggle for reflexive enough interrogation, but also by developing understanding of the interrelational nature of learning, whilst engaged in this largely solitary pursuit. Such recognition was re-inforced, not only from working with case study children,

but also from some helpful supervision sessions with Kate, my second supervisor, which replaced 'work discussion'.

Supervisory sessions took the form of taking, for example, a layer 5 extract (as described in Chapter 3) of material from a particular case study mentoring interaction, to our meeting. I would make sure Kate received an emailed copy of the extract beforehand so that we both had hard copies to work with during our meetings. Sitting in her office, extracts on knees, we exchanged some general comments about the child, my responses and progress with the work. Then she would ask me to begin to read aloud from the beginning of the extract and she would follow, sometimes making her own notes on the text, as I read. I did not at any stage have copies of her notes, but made my own during the course of our meetings.

Whilst reading aloud, I sometimes verbally annotated the writing to clarify or add information or reflections that the containing reading-aloud-and-being-listened-to process seemed to evoke. As suggested above, there was something containing in the words themselves. This I think illustrated how my written observational descriptions were not a complete, fixed description of events, but rather a starting point. During reading, I found myself adding, changing and omitting words because my memories and feelings and thoughts, were provisional, fluid and perpetually subject to change. This linked with the 'storied' qualities of narrative, fundamental to the auto/biographical strand and the mentoring approach. Reflecting on the use and meanings of thoughts, described by words in the observational narrative of experience, kept the experience alive with every new reading, just as stories told by the same person can be told in different ways, to different audiences, with different emphases at each telling, illustrating some of the subjective complexities of making sense of the storied nature of our lives. When

words composed the narrative of observations, it seems their importance could not be overlooked, as my interpretive assumptions were revealed in every nuanced word and phrase.

Kate asked questions, often related to words and phrases that I had written which were perhaps ambiguous or carried more tacit meanings than those I had consciously intended at the time of writing. Particular observations and the way I put them together in the text, at times conveyed my own anxieties and defences in relation to the researcher/mentor role that deeply touched, as illustrated above, on personal associations, or equally perhaps illuminated aspects of the children's fears and pre-occupations.

The different perspective Kate's questions prompted, helped me to think more imaginatively and metaphorically about actions and events that took place during interactions with children. Sometimes we agreed meanings and sometimes there was disagreement and conflict. The main point about our interpersonal shared engagement with observational texts was that these monthly discussions opened an enriching dialogue that was certainly containing for me and that followed the pattern of the work discussion group seminar I experienced during the D1 course. In these intensive containing interactions, my supervisor was the thinking 'container' who helped me to feel understood. Feeling understood, helped me in turn to understand and I became more able to deploy this way of thinking to the layering process when working alone with the rest of the text.

When working alone, interrogating the text in this way involved visualising, tapping into my 'feeling memory' (Klein, 1957) reliving the mentoring experience, questioning and trying to differentiate my own from the children's projections. This included identifying recurring themes (Appendix 2.ii, layer 6), linking



responses within the room to experiences beyond the mentoring room, introducing and integrating different perspectives from adult participant interview transcripts. Additionally I revisited, refined and interpreted experiences in relation to my understanding of psychoanalytic ideas. In this way, through the reflexive process my understanding gradually became more integrated with the complementary auto/biographical approach.

Engaging reflexively with the text in this creative, playful way may be seen to represent my use of a transitional research space (West, 2006) and the interrogative layered narrative process helped me to scaffold (Bruner, 1986) my own learning in a containing way. Convinced that the container needs a container, on reflection, in a non-clinical setting, this could take the form of regular staff, peer mentoring group to support the well-being of adults who engage daily with the relational and systemic complexities of working with colleagues, children and their families. The format could echo aspects of the work discussion group if, for example, each member took turns to present an example of an interaction they have experienced or observed in school that evoked uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, concerns. Such a group, free from the 'house-keeping' concerns of general staff meeting agendas, set in a secure containing and contained professional group, would give adults who work with children, an essential opportunity to be listened to and attended to by their peers. Also, time and space for reflecting on experience fosters thinking. Learning to observe and become attuned to pupils may actively engage reflective practice and support learning from experience in a strategic, humanising way at an institutional level.

### **Ethics Committee**

At the beginning of this research neither I, nor those within the research context held the monopoly on anxiety. The idea of researching the emotional experience of

learning also gave rise to an acute level of anxiety amongst certain members of the university Ethics Committee, as noted earlier. The subjective focus of engaging with emotions in research was a contentious matter at Canterbury Christ Church university at the time. My project seemed to become caught up in wider paradigmatic issues in the research department and opposition to auto/biographical research. My work, alongside others, in some small part, according to my first supervisor, was instrumental in bringing about positive change.

The rigour of the committee was helpful in focusing my attention more keenly on the ethics of researching children's experience, as described in Chapter 3 and which remained alive throughout the project. I was constantly attuned and sensitive to participant privacy, confidentiality, rights to withdraw, ownership of tape recorded materials. The Committee's vigilance ensured my vigilance to the methodological details of the research. Also, they were correct. The priority of safeguarding the well-being of children ensured the moral validity and ethicality of the research. From the researcher's point of view well-being was also an issue and the task was more difficult and emotional than I had envisaged. Some intensive supervision with Linden and regular supervision meetings with Kate, my second supervisor described above, as part of layer 5 of the applied observational method, were central. Supervision, together with regular personal therapy, nurtured what can be called a reflexive ethicality and became important for maintaining my own sense of emotional well-being.

However, the protracted deliberations of the Ethics Committee worked as well to delay the field work. I experienced this resistance, in spite of reassurances from both of my supervisors, as an unwelcoming, obstructive presence that I found difficult to shake off. This feeling impacted on my early individual interactions with case study children, as suggested, for example, with Conrad, as described.

A condition prescribed by the Ethics Committee was that I should explicitly confine my enquiry to children's stories of everyday events in school. Always at the front of my mind, I consciously adhered to this by confining questions to what happened in school, including the playground. However, part of the 'negative capability' (Melzer in Briggs, 2002:6) I had in mind in terms of being an observer, explained in Chapter 2, meant following the children's lead in terms of their interests, activities and actions. This approach may have been considered imprecise but it accurately described the unique and unpredictable quality of our shared experience of what happened in the mentoring room. The dialogue that emerged, in all its forms, created the lived experiential 'story' of our developing relationships, including the opportunity to explore the reciprocal transference and countertransference responses evoked from our personal emotional histories.

The reaction of the Ethics Committee mirrored perhaps, the academy's fears and resistance to the intrusion of emotion into the established world of empirical, social science research in education, which more traditionally aspires to conventionally objective and, or 'scientific' validity. The committee's response seemed to embody and act out some of the hostility and marginalisation faced perhaps by those researchers working in the field of psychosocial enquiry which, as Clarke (2008) points out:

'...is a relatively new area of research. These inroads challenge masculinist notions of rationality structured not only in positivism, but in the social sciences in general, and can be seen as a relativist challenge to the duality of the researcher as the purveyor of all known knowledge.' (Clarke, 2008:119)

Other researchers, such as Hault (2012) refer to an overly positivistic (scientific) orientation in educational research, intended to inoculate against subjectivity rather

than engage with it and relates to institutional defences against engaging emotionally, found in this enquiry.

Retrospectively, in light of my learning from experience in the mentoring room, the notion that children could confine their stories to everyday events in school, seems absurd. The idea that stories could be ‘ring-fenced’ in a way that might be relationally disconnected and emotionally disembodied from the internal worlds of their psychosocial selves, can be seen to be a fallacious assumption. It also echoes something of the ‘thin’ narrative (Vetere and Dowling, 2005) quality of ‘learning about’ that, as suggested, may be seen to override learning from experience in educational institutions.

The research project confirmed that pupils’ brought diverse experiences of ‘families-within’ (Dowling and Osborne, 2003) to school in all their complexity. The enquiry also gave me the opportunity to observe children playing out some of the qualities of their early learning relationships that were formed in their family settings. Their stories of events in school could not be tailored to meet the externally specified parameters of the research project, but communicated a more holistic psychosocial sense of their life experiences in relationships in school that may, in turn, have affected their emotional responses and capacities to take-in the prized curriculum ‘object’.

### **Institutional defences**

I want to draw attention to some of the defences I encountered as a researcher/mentor, that seemed to communicate unconscious dynamics at work in Brompton school. Before giving examples, I would emphasise that observations of such defences are not criticisms of Brompton school, where I felt privileged to be able to undertake the research and work with the case study group, their teachers

and parents. It is rather a realisation of the way human anxiety, to which we are all subject, may reflect the complex 'interplay of the known and the unknown' (Bainbridge and West, 2012), at an institutional as well as at an individual level.

Consider, for example, Conrad and Isabel who were separated from their peers three mornings a week for maths lessons. Ostensibly, this was an arrangement to help them overcome their difficulties which were by virtue of their inclusion in this study, to some extent, emotional. Their emotional barriers to learning may have, at a less conscious level, been seen to affect and therefore hold back their peers' progress or achievements in Year 6 Statutory Assessment Tasks. This fear of contamination may also have tacitly informed the decision by management to split the class group, particularly if it was seen as a common cultural practice amongst the primary school 'group' at the time. It has been noticed that teaching to test was becoming a pervasive school practice at the time of the research (Firestone, Schorr and Montfils, 2004).

In this study, the experience of 'catching' 'group anxieties about underachievement affecting the school's league table position and thus its reputation as a school that provided, as noted, 'good value for money' by Ofsted (2006), may also have been at large. Competition for grammar school places amongst parents, including parents of child participants in this enquiry, was very real. Market forces might impact on Brompton's ability to attract the growing 'professional' sector parents in the school's mixed catchment. As pointed out by Heather in our interview, this was also a factor. Following on from this, it is not inconceivable that pupil numbers in the school may have also been at risk. The accumulative pressure of these emotive emotional tensions whether hypothetical or actual, may have been in the collective consciousness of teachers' minds, inevitably influencing the teaching and learning spaces, or aforementioned 'psychic envelope' created and shared with children and

other adults in the classroom, and therefore the 'didactic transfer' (Blanchard-Laville, 2012).

The human repercussions, the ripple effect at an emotional level of such accumulative external pressures, may be seen to be 'acted out' within my interactions with some adults at Brompton school. For example, Heather who 'taught' Conrad and Isabel in the out-of-class small group during the first two terms of the mentoring project, may sometimes have felt as isolated and excluded as those children with whom she worked. On numerous occasions I looked up to find her standing in the doorway of the mentoring room, neither in nor outside the room, keen to engage me in conversation about her frustrations with Conrad. Perhaps intrigued by what was going on in the mentoring room and envious of the privileged space and time I had to develop one-to-one relationships with individual children in that space. Too pre-occupied at the time with my own anxiety about interactions with case study children to engage adequately with her feelings, Helen jolted me to attention one morning when following another story about Conrad's disruptive attention seeking behaviour. She suddenly announced, 'I want Erica's space'.

She was perhaps trying to communicate that she too needed a containing thinker to understand her anxiety, to help her in turn to understand and contain Conrad. Nevertheless, in this incident she successfully found a way of passing his unmanageable projections onto and into me. In these early days of the research process, it did not occur to me that the staff, as well as myself, would have benefitted from some work discussion sessions, which may have proved to be an enriching learning process for us all. Trish (Senco) did arrange staff meetings for teachers and for teaching assistants so that I could talk about the project, field questions and feedback to the whole staff. Trish fed back that these sessions were

helpful and well received by staff. It was significant however, that staff meetings were arranged, splitting teachers and teacher assistants into separate groups.

Similar consideration might be given to Liz, another Teacher Assistant who had little experience of children with Asperger's syndrome and no teaching qualifications. She was able to express the difficulties and isolation she experienced when working alone each day with Tim, mirroring feelings perhaps projected by Tim. Tim was prone to unpredictable emotional outbursts both in and beyond the classroom that were difficult for those around him to tolerate and to understand. In this way, the unconscious drive to avoid or get rid of feelings that cannot be tolerated, within individuals or collectively at an institutional level, by excluding children and those who help them was present consciously, as well as unconsciously in the research setting. Coincidentally, Liz left her employment in the school setting at the end of the academic year.

Avoiding 'learning from experience' can be seen as being expressed literally and metaphorically by excluding pupils with emotional barriers from the classroom, as well as those adults who supported them, whom seemingly by association became part of the whole 'messy' emotional problem to be expelled. Such splitting may be seen to work as an attempt to preserve 'learning about' as a privileged occupation of the emotionally sanitised classroom. Observed in the research context, similar practices that deny inclusion at a psychological level remain the norm in both primary and secondary schools across the four counties in which I have worked during the past three decades.

Teacher assistants who are often the least professionally qualified and enjoy the lowest status in terms of pay and conditions of service, are charged with the most demanding task of being emotionally available to 'teach' pupils with the most

complex learning difficulties. This raises the question of what this really communicates about feelings in school towards pupils with barriers to learning, as well as those who work with them. A piece of research into teacher assistant effectiveness (IOE, 2009), confirmed that they helped to ease teacher and pupil stress. Reflecting more pressing priorities of current concern that are also measurable, this important allusion to teacher and pupil well-being was sidelined, by the publicised finding that their support was not effective in terms of raising pupil progress in core curriculum subjects. In light of the noted tasks facing teaching assistants, from findings in this enquiry, this is hardly surprising:

‘Teaching assistants have made teachers' jobs more productive and provided invaluable personal contact for struggling pupils. Unfortunately, though, we found no evidence that their support has helped pupils make better progress in English, maths and science in any of the seven year groups we surveyed.’ (Blatchford, 2009, BERA conference)

Current educational values and aspirations, as noted, are also established in material published by the National College of School Leadership (Greany, 2011) who when considering strategies to improve learning, identify teaching assistants as ‘very low/no impact for high cost’.

An example of institutional anxiety and resistance to my presence was embodied by the actions of Mrs. Hill, who was also Isabel and Conrad’s class teacher. As previously explained, I had reclaimed the unused mentoring room through negotiation with Trish during one of our initial meetings. Since that allocation, I had re-painted (and labelled) the room to create a cheerful, warm containing space to work with case study children. On the morning of the first individual mentoring meetings I arrived early to add the last touches and make sure everything was ready. When I pushed open the mentoring room door, which was ajar, I was



astounded to find Mrs. Hill sitting at the desk, working on her laptop. We exchanged greetings and perhaps the look of consternation on my face betrayed my dismay, prompting her to smile and explain that she was doing her 'planning' and that she often used this room on Tuesday mornings. I apologised, with the image of the hitherto uninhabitable room distinctly in mind, withdrawing with the protest that I had planned with Trish to use this room for mentoring on a Tuesday morning each week.

Mrs. Hill was perhaps, in that moment, the teacher who carried and acted out wider school fears and resentment about my interloping 'alien presence' in the research context. Some of her personal anxiety may also have been present in our first meeting, as noted in Chapter 6, when she was 'rather prickly' and made me feel like an 'intruder' as I observed Conrad in her classroom for the first time. Confirming my aforementioned anxieties about not belonging, I felt a sense of being in the 'wrong place' at the 'wrong time' as she asserted that an afternoon observation would have been preferable. I also recorded in my observation 'write-ups' that she did not seem to be expecting me - rather as I had not been expecting to see her sitting in the mentoring room.

I do not know whether this was a conscious or unconscious retaliatory action, but I had wrongly assumed on both occasions that my plans and intentions, as agreed with Trish had been passed on to staff. As described above, I realise this responsibility, clearly revealed in my high expectations, was extremely demanding for the part-time Senco to undertake and sustain through the research project. My expectations of institutional flexibility may have been unrealistic. Equally, the incident may have been an example of primitive rivalry (Salzberger-Wittengberg, Osborne and Williams, 1983).

### **The social defence**

If, as Bion (1961) and Menzies Lyth (1989) suggest, we live with the perpetual tension of reconciling our personal, individual and social lives in the group, one of the first groups we encounter beyond the family is the school. With this in mind, the school may be seen as an example of an institution that systemically links wider social policy, individual histories, individual and group learning experiences.

Recently, cultural theorists have focused on the fragmentation of patterns or social 'templates' that traditionally wove the cultural fabric of our lives. In recent decades leading up to and into the twenty-first century, economic and social change continues to be a dominant political theme leaving once seemingly secure institutions, such as schools, in states of flux, particularly in relation to what can be seen as the primary tasks of learning and teaching. Aspects of globalisation, the information revolution, secularisation, together with power shifts in world economies have accelerated pluralism, facilitated social diversity, highlighted individualism and atomised ideologies in ways that support the values of a neo-liberal paradigm (Giddens, 1996, Hoggett, 2010).

Such pervasive changes may have, through the language and values of the market place, been absorbed in common cultural practices such as education and schooling. The language of market logic, efficiency, consumerism, the individual, can be seen to have gradually moved into our social, intimate emotional lives and relationships. Hoggett (2010) includes teachers among 'welfare services' and cites Menzies-Lyth's concept of 'social defences' being used by those working in social organisations to protect themselves against anxiety:

'Different kinds of defences tend to be used to manage the problems of seeing, feeling and thinking. Defences against thinking include hyperactivity, a phenomenon very common to

the public services where underfunding connects to a professional disposition not to 'say no' to needy cases....Working life in such front line teams often has a manic edge of busyness about it but it is precisely this busyness which also protects workers from thinking about what they are doing.' (Hoggett, 2010:204)

The argument is that a pre-occupation with testing, assessment and performance indicators serve to produce a kind of 'virtual reality' encouraging teachers, for example to 'live within the lie', that standards of learning and teaching are enhanced by this regime:

'..the major, independent and influential national review of primary education being conducted at Cambridge University indicates that British school children and their teachers are subjected to more testing and monitoring than anywhere else in Europe. And the test results look good, with more children year on year reaching required standards in English, science and maths. However, the review also reveals that these tests report more improvement than teachers' own assessments of student's achievement levels (something regarded as too subjective by successive Labour governments). Perhaps more crucially.. the abilities of British teenage children in reading, maths and science have actually declined between 2000 and 2006..' (Hoggett, 2010:210)

The contingent points Hoggett is making, endorsed by my own experience as a primary school teacher between 1985 and 2003, is that British children and their teachers have improved their skills in passing tests and, perhaps partly because of what he describes as 'test induced regression', their capacity to think, explore and engage meaningfully in learning may have declined. From a psychosocial viewpoint, it could be argued that in British primary schools, the reality of '*perverse social defence*' Hoggett identifies, may be seen as a defence against learning.

### **Concluding reflection**

In the lived experience of the enquiry, the development of relational mentoring worked towards theorising ways of understanding emotionality, in relation to learning from experience in school. Within the conceptual framework, the psychosocial research sought to engage with complexity at individual and group levels to make emotional truths explicit, by identifying, reflexively interrogating and naming observed emotions. The absence or avoidance of engagement also became apparent and was communicated in both individual interactions, as well as those 'acted out' at an institutional level. Emotional interactions at micro-level were seen to be played out in groups (Bion, 1961), such as those described in the nurturing, successful learning environment of Brompton school, and linked to the wider social context, as suggested above. Some unconscious conflicts that gave rise to emotional tensions, fears and anxieties, were communicated in observable forms such as 'acting out', as seen in the behaviours of children and adults.

The research design and methodological 'bricolage' enabled the creative development of relational mentoring through the research. Informed by aspects of object-relations theory, particularly Bion's idea 'container-contained', the conceptual framework, permitted observations and insights into pupil and adult behaviours and responses to learning in this study. Yet, in education, as outlined from the beginning of the thesis, the place and use of psychoanalytic ideas remains marginal. It is interesting that established and applied psychological theories and concepts, such as, for example, Bruner's notion of 'scaffolding', Piaget's notions of accommodation and assimilation, and Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' are recognised, accepted and utilised in education – a field characterised by its multidisciplinary range. These ideas hinge too on the recognition of cognitive processes, of which emotion is part, that cannot be 'seen' or measured in any literal sense.

On reflection, it would have been helpful to provide and develop the use of a work discussion group, for reflecting on the experience of the mentoring project. I recall being disappointed, at the time, with some of the teacher's interview responses which seemed rather 'scripted', as though the staff had worked together on the prepared questions (Appendix 1.xi and 1.xiii). This may, however, have demonstrated something of their need to get together to share their feelings and responses about the project, the children, my work and expectations of them. Far from feeding back what they thought I wanted to hear, their responses may have been an attempt, to which I did not attend, to engage with the language of mentoring that I gradually introduced and cultivated each week in their setting – in the staff room, in interactions with individual teachers, teaching assistants and Trish.

As suggested, the struggle to find a space for thinking in school at the time of the research, was not solely to do with my capacity to think or not, but also connected to wider, socio-cultural issues that can be seen to be invested in educational institutions. Yet, if I had attended to adult interactions more closely, the opportunity to feedback my insights into the children's relationships and learning, to those with whom they worked, may have developed a more dynamic dialogue. In time, such reciprocity may have contributed to a broader narrative of learning and teaching and barriers to thinking in school. Reflecting on experience, as suggested, can be reparative (Klein and Riviere, 1964), providing hope for the future.

In this chapter I have focused on findings from the children's individual and the group experience of relational mentoring in the school. In the final chapter I will reflect on my own learning from experience as a researcher-participant and explore

some of the 'messiness' that occurred in the intersubjective space between researcher and participant.

## **Chapter 10 – My Learning from Experience**

### **Introduction**

The aim of the enquiry was to explore and theorise the emotional experience of learning, in depth, by closely observing relational interactions between myself and the case-study children, as well as by utilising biographical interviews. As seen in the case study chapters and Chapter 9, the process necessarily involved and implicated my own learning from experience, auto/biographically. This final chapter illumines, from psychoanalytic and auto/biographical perspectives, some of the emotional states evoked for the researcher-participant in learning from experience. I reflect on some of the struggles encountered in building reflexivity. Reflexively interrogating the intersubjective space between researcher and participant is a further contribution of this research. As noted in Chapter 1, the researcher-participant relationship is not always readily or easily discussed (Merrill and West, 2009). I seek to make such learning as explicit as I can.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the experience of beginnings, transitions and endings can help illuminate and to better understand internal states of emotional vulnerability (Youell, 2006, Waddell, 2002). I have used such a pattern to structure the story of my learning from experience in the study, as the ‘messy’, recursive, to and fro, interactive dynamic of my learning did not respect a tidy, continuous linear trajectory but something quite different. Bruner points out that ‘psychic reality dominates narrative’ (1986:14) and the observational/auto/biographical ‘bricolage’ of the enquiry worked, as noted, in a multi-dimensional, crystalline way. Bearing this in mind, and in signposting an unpredictable, accumulative process, I map certain examples of learning from the beginning of the enquiry.

'Beginnings' includes revisiting Bion's idea 'container-contained' which shaped the conceptual and epistemological framework of the research and which helped me to better understand his ideas about 'knowing' and avoiding 'knowing'. Reflection includes resistance to taking in new knowledge about biographical and auto/biographical approaches and a difficulty of integrating these methods. I also comment on how the complementarity of the auto/biographical and observational methods eventually enriched the quality of reflexivity in the 'transitional' (West, 2006) space of the research project itself.

In the second section, which I call 'transitions', I note primarily how 'transference' and 'countertransference' dynamics were pervasive and how I gradually refined my understanding of these key concepts. Projective and introjective processes were alive in the transference and countertransference. The interactive, relational nature of my learning with and through the children includes some recurring themes that relate to 'self and other', as found and noted in Chapter 9.

Persistent themes of 'boundaries' and projective identification surfaced, further related to Bion's (1962) idea of 'container-contained' and the emotional roots of thinking. I revisit too the interdisciplinary method which brought together primarily psychoanalytic but also the socio-cultural, which allowed me to reflexively engage with four case study children and adult participants. I use extracts from case study chapters to illustrate the way I learned how intersubjective, unconscious psychic processes worked in the enquiry. All of which explains how I came to see the containing mentoring room as the 'psychic space' (Chaussecourte, Blanchard-Laville, 2011). The material illuminated how, at an emotional level, children brought their experiences from home to school and crucial ways in which this affected their relationships to learning. 'Endings' like



transitions, were personally and professionally marked and various. At the end I suggest some implications for learning and teaching arising from the study.

### **Beginnings:**

‘Container-contained’

Bion, it will be recalled, asked how we survive emotionally. Having lived and worked as a teacher in schools during an intense period of educational, societal and political change since 1985, as introduced in Chapter 1 and elaborated in Chapter 2, I became concerned with how children and adults survive emotionally in school. As noted, the process of ‘container-contained’ can take place in many forms, at many levels. For Klein, projection related to identity and for Bion, projective identification related to learning. In this study, through investigating and illuminating aspects of participants’ learning identities, including the researcher’s, parallels between container-contained and adult-child relationships in the school context are drawn.

As a teacher I was interested in the psychoanalytic idea that our earliest relationships found the root source of thinking and form the original pattern and qualities for our subsequent learning relationships. This involves the infant coming to know her/his first (m)other ‘object’, through the dynamic interactive process of projective identification. ‘Coming to ‘know’, here refers to *‘being in touch with the core and essence of something or somebody’* (Miller, Rustin, Rustin and Shuttleworth 2002:8). For Bion, ‘knowing’ hinges on our capacity to actively engage with, rather than to avoid, the painful uncertainty of every day conflicts. Learning relationally, in an authentic, experiential way is a transformational experience that engages us in emotional truths. Bion (1962) suggests such engagement, permits growth of mind and the capacity to tolerate thinking about ‘thoughts’, rather than avoiding thinking through projective defences.

Our capacity to sustain uncertainty, according to Bion, depends on our first relational learning from experience through maternal love, hate and knowing. 'Knowing', in relation to the mother's own capacity to learn, think and teach by helping her infant to make sense of experience. The vicissitudes of love and hate can be seen to be perpetually experienced and played out in human interactions from our beginnings and revisited, regressively and reparatively throughout our lives.

If Bion associates 'knowing' with modification through thinking, he associates avoidance with evasion of 'knowing' and the emotional experience that it represents. For Bion (1962), 'knowing' is not after fact or reason. He points out that in any case 'facts are very few' (Bion, 1976), but rather an epistemological idea that roots 'thinking' in relational qualities of learning and teaching from our very first relationship. Bion considered the maternal 'alpha-function' to be the emotional source of developing our capacity to think:

'I am here supposing that projective identification is an early form of that which later is called a capacity for thinking.'

(Bion, 1962:42)

As a non-clinician, learning from experience as understood psychoanalytically, proved to be a formidable task from the beginning. I was emotionally unprepared because, as a researcher, I assumed the learning I would investigate would be the children's, more or less in isolation, given that my interest in children's learning prompted the research in the first place. Instead, I learned from the highly interactive, reciprocal process of building relationships with the case study children that learning was inescapably about 'us' rather than simply 'them'. This recognition makes it difficult to discuss my learning without also talking about the

children and vice versa, as seen in Chapter 9: learning is of course fundamentally about relationship, with actual people as well as the symbolic order.

Beginning the research:

In the beginning, however, having enthusiastically set myself up as the containing 'thinker', I faced some of the excruciating uncertainty, reminiscent of the mother and newborn infant which is Bion's 'prototype' (Hollway, 2008) for intersubjective communication. I feared that I might not know 'how' to closely 'look', or recognise what I was looking at. As Bion (1976:245) points out, no one could tell me how to 'look'. We see psychosocially so the way we 'look' and what we see depends on who we are. As noted in Chapter 9, the adaptation of Bick's (1964) process of observing, through receptively engaging and emotionally 'holding' case study children with a 'sympathetic, receptive intensity' (Meltzer in Briggs, 2002:6), along with writing up and reflecting on my observations, described my application, as a mentor, of 'container-contained' (Bion, 1962).

I was also insufficiently aware of the *'exposure to some of one's own personal problems as a consequence of the emotional impact of the observation'* (Miller, Rustin, Rustin and Shuttleworth, 2002:8). Being able to tolerate the uncertainty of 'not knowing', during the mentoring interactions was a difficult pre-requisite for my learning. Whenever I came close to 'knowing', it was through that 'benign form of projection' (Bion, 1976) known as 'empathy'. Empathy permitted interpretive insights but at the same time prompted the question Bion asks about who the emotional experience belongs to. In a similar way, from an auto/biographical research perspective Merrill and West (2009) ask, whose story is it? This problem presented a persistent confusion of how best to differentiate my own from others feelings in the project; a problem that never entirely dissipates. The notion of staying-with and positively utilising 'not knowing', as part of an

epistemological method for understanding teaching and learning relationships may be seen as unconventional in the current educational climate of schooling. I will consider this further, later in the chapter, in relation to acknowledging the ‘unconscious mind’ and the aforementioned work of Chaussecourte and Blanchard-Laville (2012), alongside Bainbridge and West (2012).

Auto/biographical writing – learning to build reflexivity as a researcher-participant: I was unprepared, as noted, for the intensity of feelings evoked from the very outset. When I started, I reluctantly began a piece of auto/biographical writing, as suggested by Linden, my first supervisor. In one way I was reluctant because I suspected this to be narcissistic self-indulgence. I was also unfamiliar with biographical research approaches at this stage and could not immediately relate auto/biographical writing to my interests in ‘Container-Contained’ (Bion, 1962). In another way, my life history was something I had hitherto avoided sharing with anyone beyond my most intimate and trusted circle of family and friends. I had always suspected that unconscious assumptions unwittingly overrode conscious responses.

It was however topical as I had recently returned to my home area of East Kent after what had sometimes felt like a thirty year exile. Returning was partly to do with re-connecting with some family roots from which I had been prematurely separated and that were difficult to own. Returning was also prompted by a range of personal events and professional circumstances, including my learning experience from the D1 course and also securing a lecturing post at Canterbury Christ Church university.

I began my auto/biographical writing with the words, ‘School has always been a good place for me’. I was keen to establish and present that my concerns regarding

'inclusion for all' (Blamires, 1999), were not motivated by any personal failure at school, or being anti-school or anti-intellectual. I have come to realise this defensive presentation exposed that 'learning about' the emotional experience of learning bore only a superficial resemblance to my learning from experience through the research enquiry. I take personal responsibility for this as tensions and splits between my conscious intent and unconscious defences typified some of the disparities between appearance and reality that arose in the investigation. I also wonder to what extent 'learning about' defends against the deeper, authentic knowing of learning from experience for other researchers and teachers and learners. Also, to what extent my preferred 'pond-skater' position – one that avoids disturbing or rupturing the smooth surface skin of, in this case 'learning', is consciously and unconsciously constructed and played out in school?

### **Transitions:**

#### Transference and Countertransference

I knew from the D1 course, that 'transference' was in general terms to do with responses in current relationships being unconsciously affected by experiences from past relationships. I had previously related this to experiences from my earlier teaching days, when children sometimes called me 'mum' by mistake when they were in school. This was perhaps partly because as a teacher of young children I was situated in a loco parentis role and partly because school is the first larger than family group the child encounters, so s/he may unconsciously slip and associate what happens with adults in school with what has happened with adults in their lives at home (Youell, 2006). I was even less familiar in an operational sense, with the notion of 'countertransference', but thought it was to do with how, as a teacher, I was affected by and responded to the child's projections - evoked by their previous relational learning experiences. Investigating learning from experience through the mentoring project involved building a more refined account

of what transference and countertransference means and to that extent, led me to endow the research experience with ‘meanings’ (Bruner, 1986), as seen in the case study chapters.

Hinshelwood (1991) asserts that ‘transference’ was known from the beginning of psychoanalysis and has many meanings which are still unfolding. Freud (1955) noticed the way his patients developed feelings for him and identified the transference as an unconscious defence that involves displacement. This occurs when our intense feelings about a person are directed to someone else (Frosh, 2002) which may involve to some extent reliving or ‘re-enacting’ (Hinshelwood, 1991) past experiences. We may all consciously understand and respond to current experiences and interactions with others, in terms of our previous experiences, yet the ‘transference’ experience is distinguished from other relational interactions by its irrationality, given as it takes place at an unconscious level:

‘unconscious feelings from the past dictate irrational responses to the present: indeed that is what betrays them as transference feelings – that their fervour is out of line with what the situation demands’ (Frosh, 2002:89).

Freud noticed that his patients brought experiences from their personal emotional histories which they seemed to re-enact by attributing him with those feelings that fitted their own internal world view (Youell, 2006). Although transference is a familiar clinical term in psychoanalysis, significantly for this enquiry such human phenomena are not restricted to clinical settings but may be seen to be part of the psychic reality of any human interaction. (Youell, 2006, Frosh, 2002, Hinshelwood, 1991). Equally, the professional who engages with people, clients, patients or pupils is also subject to unconscious feelings about those with whom they work on an everyday basis. In this case, within the research context of the school, the feelings that I experienced during mentoring sessions in response to,

what I came to understand were projections from case study children, infused with some my own transference, can be described as ‘countertransference’.

Countertransference seems to be a more controversial issue in the professional clinician’s world as it necessarily involves considering the analyst’s emotional involvement in the analysis as a two way process:

‘Countertransference was seen as a sort of ‘resistance’ in the psychoanalyst towards his patient, resistance due to the arousal of unconscious conflicts by what the patient says, does or represents to the analyst. These unconscious conflicts could prevent the analyst from getting a clear view of the patient’s troubles, and in particular might inhibit the separation of the patient’s transference feelings from realistic aspects of the situation. The source of the countertransference would then be unanalysed aspects of the analyst’s own personality, and as such the task would be to reduce the effects of these unanalysed conflicts as far as humanly possible.’ (Frosh, 2002:100)

This confirms the reciprocal nature of transference and countertransference. From my viewpoint, as a teacher in the role of researcher/mentor, gradually becoming aware of these phenomena through reflexive observation of mentoring interactions, gave me opportunities to interrogate my own experience, or ‘emotional baggage’ and to consider how this affected the learning relationships I developed with case study children. The observational, auto/biographical methodological bricolage included composing a systematic and subjective research process for illuminating ‘what happened’ at conscious and unconscious levels, between researcher and participant, in a specific educational setting.

As referred to in Chapter 9, Claudine Blanchard-Laville (2011, in Bainbridge and West, 2012) alludes to the way the countertransference works between teacher and pupil in the classroom as the ‘didactic transfer’. Importantly, the psychic imprint of

the teacher's relationship with knowledge is seen as being part of this concept. Her work with Philippe Chaussecourte (2011) in the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Nanterre, in Paris, builds on an already established synthesis between psychoanalysis and pedagogy. It is committed to developing an epistemological research method, or way of knowing.

They use an adaptation of Bick's close observation to illuminate the unconscious dimensions of pedagogical processes, by examining what occurs in the 'psychic space', particularly the 'didactic transfer' within the wider 'psychic envelope' of learning and teaching relationships in the classroom. I eventually came to equate the mentoring room with such psychic space. A focus on the psychological nature of interaction between children and adults, particularly the countertransference may be helpful for teachers.

Transference and countertransference, as suggested, seemed to manifest in various ways, working within the intersubjective learning spaces. Trying to find an 'in-between' professional and personal space to observe, as related below, these phenomena characterised the emotional experience of learning in the research. The following examples relate transitional struggles I encountered when engaging with some of those problematic 'in between' intersubjective relational spaces. Such conflicts, that exercised my capacity to regulate professional and personal boundaries, were essential to my own learning from experience and clearly illuminate tensions 'in-between' the researcher-participant.

### **Boundary issues - tensions between self and other in the researcher-participant relationship**

Containing the case study children gave rise to a range of what I describe as 'boundary issues', that relate the difficulty encountered in discerning my own



feelings and projections, from those of the children. The matter of immersion and detachment was drawn to my attention by Linden, my first supervisor, early on and his clarity made it seem manageable. Whilst my ability to engage emotionally and be able at the same time to think about what was happening during interactions, developed through the enquiry, it was at first problematic. I was so concerned about paying attention, becoming emotionally attuned to and empathising with Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo that losing boundaries was sometimes enacted during mentoring. Some tensions encountered, for example, between the professional roles of researcher, teacher and mentor as undertaken in the research project are described below.

Professional roles:

Miller, Rustin, Rustin and Shuttleworth (2002:11) usefully describe the psychoanalytic observer's problem, as suggested in Chapter 3, as being to do with tensions surrounding finding and maintaining '*a relationship which is something in-between the personal and professional*'. As I focused on observing intersubjective states, locating 'in-between' states characterised much of the challenging work I encountered. Looking at what happened subjectively in-between the children and myself, using the layered observational approach, meant engaging with intersubjective conscious and unconscious processes. More prosaically I was trying to locate an 'in-between' position with Trish and other adult research participants. I was also trying to fit in-between being part of the school and being a visitor, fit in-between two research supervisors from different settings, trying to fit in-between researching, mentoring and teaching.

In terms of observation, finding an 'in-between' position particularly seemed to rely on having both a reasonably robust sense of 'self' as well as having a stable sense of professional identity. My sense of professional identity was invested in

teaching, but for the purposes of accessing children to undertake the research, I merged, as described, identities to take on the dual role of researcher/mentor.

In many ways, such adjustment facilitated the mentoring project and I managed this pragmatic arrangement to all intents and purposes quite adequately. The roles provided clear professional boundaries that presented, supported and sustained the ethicality of the research. At the same time, repressing my teacher identity and moving between different professional roles became something of a defence that at times distanced me from the task of being both learner (as researcher) and teacher (as mentor). As I endeavoured to make my feeling states more explicit and intelligible, the interplay between external appearances and psychic realities was ever present.

Dual role as researcher/mentor:

Following my attempt to assimilate the mentoring project together with the dual role of researcher/mentor into the school context, I soon encountered problems in being both researcher and learning mentor. Reference can be made to that first individual meeting with Tim when he seemed to bombard me with information about 'railway livery'. I could feel myself becoming anxious as I felt split between staying with him emotionally, whilst at the same time worrying about remembering the words he used, not least for the business of writing up my observations which after all, was my job as a researcher. It would ultimately constitute the prime research data, as this extract from my observational 'write-up' noted:

'Concerned about remembering the words Tim used – for writing up this first important interaction.....I began to realise these thoughts were distracting me from engaging with him – what I perceived to be the logistics of the research motive were nagging.'

I tried at times such as this to engage my authentic, emotionally attuned ‘self’ and this sometimes meant letting go of externally referenced professional identities (Hoggett, 2008). As suggested, on the outside, truncating my actions as a researcher/mentor was helpful for explaining my intent and purpose. With expertise, though not an expert in either part, I assumed that I would easily manage the fluid and flexible positions within dialogic interactions between children and teachers. The inner reality, when putting the idea into practice was more problematic as I sometimes felt split, as suggested in the example above. The tension between external appearance and internal realities was compounded in terms of roles, by my underlying position and identity as a teacher, which I discuss in more detail below.

I had little formal experience or systematic understanding of self-regulating psychic boundaries, or professional understanding of the way unconscious emotional dynamics might work. This developed, but initially gaining purchase on the intersubjective, ‘in between’ observational space proved elusive. Professional and personal boundaries began to slip and merge which, in the research context made me anxious. With Tim and Leo, for example, I noted how I was drawn into their worlds through the mother-son transference and countertransference processes that invisibly but certainly influenced our relationship.

At other times, with Conrad for example, I seemed to unconsciously resist such engagement. The emergence of emotional tensions in the case studies was painful but at the same time useful in exposing how my subjectivity provided the instrument for knowing (Hollway in Clarke et al, 2008). I gradually came to recognise some of the countertransference at work in the mentoring room, as the following example from Conrad illustrates:

He said he liked football and was going to play a match with school that afternoon, but he couldn't enjoy thinking about it because he was worried about his dad. He looked at me as though wondering whether I knew about his dad which I didn't, neither did I want to find myself asking about him.

The extract is from the first intense individual observation of Conrad when I thought that any disclosures about his father might ethically breach my prescribed role as a researcher/mentor in the school. Beyond consciously using the demands of the Ethics Committee as an excuse for my inability to make myself emotionally available in a containing way, I think the powerful projections of this boy together with the school's defensive 'need to know' stance, gave rise to an unconscious countertransference defence, related to my own family history. Notably, the countertransference seemed to transcend, or slip through regardless of the professional boundaries I consciously recognised or dwelt upon.

Quite aside from the institution's resistance to knowing, my avoidance suggested Conrad's pain was too difficult for me to take in as it touched on some of my own anxieties about wanting and not wanting to know about my own father and the closed familial reactions I experienced. In our developing learning relationship at that present moment of need, my capacity as a thinker to contain, understand and to help Conrad's feelings become more manageable, was simply not there. This is an example of what may happen in the 'didactic transfer' (Blanchard-Laville, 2011 in Bainbridge and West, 2012). The teacher's countertransference may affect the quality of learning relationship experienced by the child. This is informed by the teacher's own relationship with knowing. Some implications of this realisation in relation to learning and teaching in school will be discussed later in this final chapter.

Researcher/Teacher/Learning Mentor:

Further tensions arose through acting as a learning mentor in the research context because my 'real' professional identity was largely defined by teaching. The issue may have arisen partly due to an aforementioned disillusion with what I perceived to be an increasing emphasis on 'learning about' that I equated, as suggested, with positivist, 'evidence-based' values. This had to some extent prompted my interest in more therapeutic, humanising, holistic approaches to learning, that led to the D1 course and introduced me to the notion of learning mentors in schools, as previously related.

Equally, as mentioned in Chapter 1, at the beginning I had some underlying reservations about the role of 'mentoring' as a discrete occupation because I believed 'mentoring' to be an essential part of the teaching and learning interaction. I struggled to reconcile this view with what I saw as a defensive attempt to split-off the emotional experience of learning from the teacher and to pass on what I saw as the fundamentally moral responsibility of teaching, to someone else. I feared this functional split might dehumanise, objectify learning and instrumentalise teaching further. As the relational approach to mentoring developed and unfolded, in keeping with the methodological bricolage, I came to see mentoring as augmenting, rather than diminishing the professionalism of the teacher by providing the opportunity to form a creative, containing partnership.

In the mentoring role I drew both on my experience of teaching whilst also striving to respond to children rather as a learning mentor. Sometimes I found myself slipping unwittingly into teacher mode. For example, with Conrad in our first meeting, I made a point of telling him that in his school I was not a teacher, but came to realise that:

‘My default position, when anxious seemed to be to slip into my more familiar role as a teacher which this time prompted me to ‘tell’, rather than to ‘attune’.’

I was surprised to find that throwing off my teacher identity at an emotional level was not possible, particularly at times of stress. I recall Conrad, in our second meeting, rejecting all my attempts to connect with him, and how his projections began to call up old teaching anxieties from my primary school teaching experiences:

‘I saw something of his capacity for resistance that verged on the kind of refusal I had, as a classroom teacher always dreaded, and seemed to be revisited, rather as many of the feelings I dreaded were called up with Conrad.’

Through the layered reflexive observational method, I also came to recognise the negative transference when engaging with Conrad. Some of his projections, were resonant with my own experiences, expressed above as ‘troubled and troubling boys in my life’ and perhaps triggered the countertransference phantasies that gave me a sense of failure and sadness with this child. This was not entirely the case however, as my relationship with Conrad proved to be a particularly important case study and learning experience for us both. Through the weeks, I did manage, as indicated previously, to stay with Conrad more successfully and together we began to develop a broadening narrative that mirrored shared understandings. I was then able to link our interactions to some of his experiences and feelings. To link this to the original point in this section, I learnt that in the process of projective identification, ‘taking the transference’ (Mitrani, 2001) was not role specific, yet as an observer trying to find that intersubjective, ‘in-between’ space (Rustin and Bradley, 2008) the personal and self-imposed split professional roles of researcher/mentor/teacher were, as suggested, subject to emotional slippage.

There seemed at times to be so much going on as projective processes worked during mentoring interactions to evoke both real and imagined object-relations of the past, in the present. These tensions were revisited through the layered process of reflexively engaging with observational 'write-ups', when using the containing words of the narrative, to bring emotional states to mind, or consciousness. I found this work demanding. An example of how this reflexive process worked may be seen in Chapter 5, when my interactions with Tim triggered a vivid emotional memory of Jon, a little boy with whom I had previously struggled to engage. The intensity of this experience was confusing and at times painful. Equally, it highlights something of the aforementioned 'messy' psychic relations that may take place between 'self' and 'other'. Not least between participant and researcher in the process of researching lives and learning relationships that is at the core of the study and of wider relevance.

The messiness between myself and participants involved the inseparable to and fro of introjection and projection (Bion, 1962), seen to be involved in early ego formation that may also represent the human urge to connect with others in the external world whilst simultaneously maintaining one's own internal sense of self as a separate entity. This, as described in Chapter 2, begins at the moment of birth, with both the promise of life and sense of loss through separation. I realise that my emotional over-receptivity, over-identification at times with Tim, Conrad, Isabel and Leo touched on and reflected some of my own personal history, including anxieties about identity, attachment, separation and loss.

My perceptions and insights into the children's barriers to learning were inevitably filtered through my own introjected sense of 'self' that forms, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the core of personality. This permitted a potent countertransference, that could also be considered to be auto/biographical, a view

partly complemented by the biographical perspectives of teachers, teaching assistants and parents. Composing a vital dimension of each case study chapter, I found engaging with adult participants and reflecting on tape recorded interviews, at times both poignant and intimate. However, in terms of immersion and detachment, this was less emotionally demanding and more manageable than extrapolating ‘self’ from ‘other’ within observational interactions. I also found the problem of distinguishing ‘self’ from ‘other’ to be closely linked to ‘time and space’, as discussed in Chapter 9.

The struggle to engage without over-identification, to be separate without detachment was ever present. There were a number of examples of the push and pull of ‘love’ and ‘hate’ and the desire to know and to avoid knowing (Bion, 1962) that gave rise to tensions that re-inforced the themes of ‘self’ and identity. Such themes underpinned the case studies and my learning from experience in the research. This also relates to relational theory in a broader sense, that conceptualises:

‘the struggle to be an individual as an inevitable dialectic conflict between the wish to connect and to experience one’s distinctiveness while understanding that one can only connect with another if one is distinct and one’s distinctiveness has been recognised.’

(Orbach in Clarke et al, 2008:31)

For example, Leo’s love-hate relationship with his opposite twin brother Danny, can be seen to be about his struggle to develop his rather flimsy ego state. The agonising tension between being and not being, wanting to be and not wanting to be Danny, became manifest in Leo’s most defining quality, invisibility. This was characterised by the seemingly resilient shell-like defensive ‘hide’ that he deployed at times of stress. This may have falsely presented as a more mature response than his twin brother, who drew teacher attention by acting out his anger and



frustrations in school. Leo's self-containing shell, held his presence, marked his existence but also his rather brittle, fragile, sense of self. He retreated to this stuck on 'limpet' state when overwhelmed with fear, anger or sometimes envy.

Like Leo, during the research process I too felt overwhelmed at times with the project and lost belief in myself, particularly it seemed in relation to those around me in my relatively new working environment at the university. Some of my anxiety took the form of becoming 'stuck' like Leo, but in my case it was with writing. At these times keeping on keeping on, meant clinging on, rather like the limpet I saw in Leo. As with Leo, feeling I had to take care of myself, included focusing on the protective, defensive 'second-skin'-like professional shell (Bick, 1964) I developed. Just as for Leo, this defence, presented a sense of independent self-containment, but it also meant disconnecting, shutting down from others by constructing a false, inflexible boundary. From Bion's viewpoint it was an avoidant strategy, also perhaps reminiscent of Bowlby's (1969) avoidant pattern of attachment theory. It may have prevented both Leo and I, from connecting with others, at times, who may have offered the possibility of life enhancing, psychologically nourishing containment towards growth and learning.

It was interesting to find that similar defences presented in different forms with different children. With Leo, as perhaps with other self/other issues evoked in the research, this was related to finding some 'time and space' or 'place' – that space we invest with our own sense of belonging. To be satisfactorily contained, attentively engaged with and held in mind by an 'other', towards developing a stronger sense of being and belonging. For Leo, the place was a tree-house in his garden, or perhaps a mentoring room in school for reflecting on his experiences with a 'good' or 'safe'-enough object. Max the cat, or me, for example, who could

help him think about being more himself, towards enriching and substantiating his sense of being and belonging.

Tim, as noted, did not seem to have a very integrated sense of self and other. He seemed to have a very rigid internal organisation of psychic boundaries that presented in his relationships with others, when he sometimes struggled to discern internal phantasies from external realities. He could not seem to find or exist in any 'in-between' times or spaces. He clearly demonstrated this when we first met and he had to be either first or last in line at the classroom door. When he had a specific place and position, he knew who and where he was, but in-between he felt lost – rather as I felt at times, as an observer in the researcher/mentor role. Split between being a researcher, mentor, teacher – the mantles that I gave myself – complicated the task of maintaining boundaries between 'self' and my professional identity, particularly at times when I became pre-occupied with distinguishing those positions as a defence against authentic emotional engagement.

As a teacher, sometimes prone to taking what I describe as a pond-skating position, rather like Tim, I recognise that the quasi-professional occupation of organising and managing people through neat systems such as time-tables and National Curriculum level descriptors, is infinitely easier than the emotionally complicated task of engagement with others. Engaging socially and emotionally perpetually carries risk and with it the uncertainty inherent in interpreting and reading social and cultural cues. This inevitably raises the agonising and chronic human dilemma, perpetually faced by Tim, of negotiating being too close or too far apart. Some of this fear became apparent and was acted out at a micro level with Tim as I struggled to contain and make sense of some of his anxious and bizarre responses during early mentoring sessions.

Isabel, as observed, may have been rather split between wanting to become what we might call her true self and wanting to please others. In her case study I noted that our first individual meeting left me with a fear that I would not be able to deliver the ‘counselling’ expertise that she, or her parents perhaps assumed ‘mentoring’ would offer. Her projections seemed to sum up her own pain and anxiety about not quite living up to others’ expectations. Isabel was resentful, puzzled and tired of bearing the burden of feeling she had to relive the unfulfilled dreams and unresolved issues of those she loved.

Faced with the difficulties of integrating self with other, the strategy Isabel deployed to defend her fragile, infantile ego was different from Leo’s or Tim’s. At an emotional level, Isabel may have split off the undesirable, unwanted thoughts, primitive impulses and parts of ‘self’ she feared made her unlovable. The sense of ‘false-self’ (Winnicott,1957) this evoked, however, seemed to hold her and her relations with others in the primitive phantasy of a fairy tale world, as seen and felt in the transference and countertransference related above. This remained unsatisfactory in terms of her emotional growth and well-being. Learning from a nurturing experience of ‘container-contained’, according to Bion (1962) psychologically develops our capacity to tolerate, to own and to very gradually move towards emotional maturity, by integrating aspects of our destructive, as well more benign selves that define us all as humanly fallible beings.

I think I was able to help Isabel just as she was able to help me, in a reparative way, with our respective journeys towards emotional maturity. Her story touched on some of my own experiences of family relations, so I could begin to understand her difficulties with owning unwanted feeling states. I could also understand the pain, perhaps instrumental in posing barriers to her learning and to mine, of grappling with the ‘*tattered script*’ (Fraiberg et al, 1980:165) of an oppressive

family past with which she seemed to be ‘stuck’ and that simply did not seem to add up.

Conrad’s story, as described, was one of broken boundaries that in turn gave rise to breaking boundaries in school which were frequently revisited during mentoring interactions. I detail some of these in the section below when describing how I sought protection from Conrad’s strong projections in the false boundaries of my ‘roles’. What I mean is that Conrad was a powerful boy whom I found difficult to contain as he had me emotionally reeling from the outset. Significant in terms of ‘self’ and ‘other’, in his short life Conrad had experienced traumatic absences and losses that impacted on his sense of ‘self’ and personal agency.

He repeatedly, as noted, tested those around him by acting out his own fears of the omnipotence and power that his early experiences of ruptured boundaries seemed to unleash. At the same time, still angry and shocked from exposure to the fallibility of trusted parental boundaries, Conrad needed the reparative opportunity to reflect on his experience. I learnt that for Conrad, the mentoring relationship was about helping him to restore a more positive sense of ‘self’. That is, the sense that could he begin to take control and responsibility for some of his own impulsive reactions in relation to others in his social world.

The various ways in which my own difficulties with ‘self’ and ‘other’, can be seen as emerging themes within the case studies became apparent, as suggested, through the reflexive, layered observational approach. This, together with invaluable material from the biographical interviews, lent meaning, giving additional perspective and further insights at an emotional level into children’s stories. It also confirmed the way personal histories infuse the qualities of our relationships that can be seen to be communicated and played out through the transference and

countertransference. In this way the complementarity of the methodological bricolage became clearer and more alive.

Reflexivity as key to observing the researcher-participant relationship:

The complementary methods of observation and reflexive, auto/biographical interrogation particularly brought into view my presence and interactions as a researcher. The combination, as suggested, illumined some of the messy relational factors, particularly at play between researcher-participant in the intersubjective research space. Interrogating my assumptions and interactions within this space painfully exposed my own struggles to sustain uncertainty and ‘not knowing’.

The reflexive process seemed to reveal anxiety around that which was not, or could not be talked about. These were nameless ‘things’, reminiscent of ‘beta-elements’, that could not find a thinker, to be thought about at individual or institutional levels. They seemed to be defined by absence. For example, Mr. Chatwell’s mysterious absence was keenly felt but never explained. Isabel did not understand why, but suspected she should not talk too much about her favourite uncle. At first, with Leo, the mention of his brother’s name in the mentoring room provoked a marked silence and physical withdrawal. Tim’s chronic state of uncertainty was there from the start, as noted, when during the first group observation, in answer to the teacher’s question he shouted, ‘I don’t know!’

Conrad wanted to know, he wanted to talk but was prevented, not by his own ‘difficulties’ but by the ‘need to know’ label institutionally deployed that made authentic engagement unthinkable for those around him.. I became part of this systemically, but also personally. As Obholzer (2004) points out, it is difficult to perceive group relations when within the group. Material from biographical interviews, particularly with parents, lent meanings to some of the complexities

that arose in the psychic space of the mentoring room. If, for example, I had known something of Conrad's traumatic early history, I might have understood some of his responses in the mentoring room more keenly. As a relative stranger in the school, the steadfast adherence to the 'need to know' basis was perhaps apt. However, it served to disconnect me and others in the school, from his experience in school. A less defensive, one-fit-for-all policy, in this case might have helped to break down barriers to communication and learning. This example, iterates, at an organisational as well as individual level, Bion's (1961,1962) notion that to ensure healthy growth, containing boundaries need to be flexible.

Sustaining engagement with the ensuing lived experience of the enquiry, including the 'messiness' and pain of not knowing, was therefore pivotal in my learning. Learning that the internalised histories of 'self' and 'other' which the teacher brings into school are projected through the countertransference, or 'didactic transfer' (Blanchard-Laville, 2012), as surely as the internalised histories of 'self' and 'other' that the child brings into school are projected in the transference, became a central insight. Some awareness of the sensitivity of this intersubjective experience may help educators to realise the extent to which learning is relational and therefore personal, biographical and emotional. Needless to say however, every learning corner that I struggled to turn, opened a new and expansive horizon.

### **Knowing and not knowing**

As suggested from the beginning, psychoanalytic ideas offer a different perspective and narrative of knowing that may usefully complement other learning theories deployed by educators. Also, the notion of thoughts giving rise to thinking rather than thinking giving rise to thoughts is epistemologically radical in terms of traditional Western traditions of cognition and the nature of knowing, which can be seen to inform learning in formal educational settings. Traditions of cognition and

learning that, as considered below, are deeply inscribed in traditional educational institutions, tend to privilege 'thinking' that is considered to lead to logical thought.

However, before considering 'knowing' and the uncertainty implied in 'not knowing', in relation to teacher pupil relationships in school, I want briefly to revisit Harris' analogy (Harris, 1987) introduced in the first chapter, to clarify an important point. Harris, helpfully distinguished 'learning about' and 'learning from experience', as being for example, the difference between 'walking' and 'learning to walk'. I have allied 'learning about' to narcissistically stockpiling information (Meltzer, 1982, Illeris, 2007, Freire, 1970). Over a period of thirty years, the information revolution has made access to knowledge, at the press of a button virtually global. Despite this, in the market place a symbolic business-like knowledge exchange rate seems to materially represent social success, in the form of employability and economic well-being. 'Knowing about' is functionally introduced to children and systematically held to account by policy makers and stakeholders through teaching the National Curriculum (1999, 2001) in school, from the age of five years. There is a concern that a pre-occupation with 'learning about' may neglect and marginalise learning from experience as a source of authentic, creative, deep learning and emotional well-being for learners, including teachers. This is made apparent in this enquiry by drawing parallels between the learning and teaching relationship and the first containing learning relationship (Youell, 2006).

Nonetheless, I want to emphasise that the focus on 'learning from experience' in this enquiry does not deny the importance of 'learning about'. It is acknowledged that 'learning about' may be seen to be essential to human development and progress through the evolution of ideas, science, rationality and technology at

every level of human enterprise and endeavour. 'Learning about' objectified knowledge has in many ways marked mass education and schooling as a flagship of progress and achievement of civilised society in the western world. If we want to become athletes, doctors, anthropologists or artists, learning about the physiology, for example, of walking may become an objective priority.

Through the experience of walking we come to 'know' how to walk. Significantly, we do not need to consciously commit the process of each step to memory, because we know. Such secure knowing is deeply physically, emotionally and therefore cognitively embedded and may be seen as helping to source what Klein describes as the epistemophilic instinct (Youell, 2006). That is, the drive to a lesser or greater degree, that may motivate our curiosity to keep on keeping on 'learning about', as well as learning from experience. The necessary interrelationship between learning from experience and learning about is realised. This enquiry queries the marginalisation of 'learning from experience' in school, as underpinning the kind of relational knowing that, as a central cognitive function, may be fundamental to motivating and understanding 'learning about'.

Bion 'introduced the epistemological debate into psychoanalysis as no one had done before.' (Torres, in Lipgar, 2003). Knowing and not knowing seemed to characterise the tensions between learning and teaching that became apparent in this enquiry. This in turn gave rise in case study examples of trying to tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing, through providing containment, as well as examples of avoiding knowing. However, in school knowing and not knowing could broadly be seen to be embodied and enacted every day in the form of the teacher being the one who knows and the learner who does not know. A realisation through the enquiry that particularly took me by surprise - perhaps because in education it is axiomatic, is the fundamentally asymmetric nature of the learner-teacher relationship.



This realisation also made clear, at a micro level, my own struggles with the pupil-teacher relationship, for example, when negotiating containing 'boundaries' with case study children, particularly, for example, with Conrad. Engaging emotionally with tensions, through containing conflicts communicated by Conrad in our emerging relationship, also mirrored some anxieties and conflicts rooted in my own personal history. I came to realise how personal experiences permeated my professional assumptions and practices in teaching and learning and mentoring. I will explain how this shows something of the way personal histories and professional tensions may link, as suggested by Wright Mills (1959), to wider social issues that are represented in policies and practises implemented in the school context.

Something of the way teaching may be played out as a market place transaction may be seen to suggest there is a simple, direct correlation between that which is taught and that which is learnt, reminiscent as previously alluded to, as Freire's (1970) concern about collecting information by 'filling up' pupils in what he describes as the 'banking' method. The naivety of this assumption is captured by an anecdote from a friend who, teaching in Further Education, was trying one evening to encourage a group of council office trainees to consider some of the subtleties of communication involved in learning and teaching. Unable to tolerate this flexible discussion, an exasperated student remarked 'Look, we're talking about teaching here, it's not exactly rocket science is it?' To which my friend quickly replied, 'No, you're absolutely right, it's far more complex than that!'

In the primary school sector, as described in Chapter 2, I had experienced learning and teaching increasingly assume a 'thin narrative' (Dowling, 2003). This involved passing on discrete bodies of knowledge that provided accountable measurable outcomes for assessment, represented to some extent by the statutorily

imposed National Curriculum (2001). I saw this as a prescription towards eroding teacher autonomy and the sense of professional and therefore personal agency.

As a school teacher, fleeing the 'shades of the prison house' (Wordsworth, 1995), that the aforementioned curriculum-centred approach had come to represent to me, I moved closer to Early Years practices, literally and philosophically, which allowed me to engage more holistically and creatively with children's development through play (Bruce, T, 1991, Winnicott, 1971, Nutbrown, 1994). For example, I idealised regimes such as that of 'Reggio Emilia' (Hall, Cuneen et al, 2010), a community in northern Italy where from nursery age, children's interests are facilitated by adults, many of whom are resident artists and craftsmen committed to developing creativity, sometimes referred to as the 'hundred languages of children' (Malaguzzi, 1993). This regime flourished in an entirely different socio-political and cultural context from here and, as suggested, I realise that cultures and contexts are not interchangeable.

The point is that, however different from the harsh 'telling' teacher object I had internalised, the children's learning was facilitated by more able others. By this I mean that it was planned, organised and carefully thought about by adults who worked with the children. The adults who were attuned to pupil capacities and interests, were the children's teachers. Such a facilitative teaching role may be encompassed by familiar educational theories such as some of those associated with child centred approaches discussed in Chapter 2. For example, Vygotsky's (Wood, 1998) 'Zone of Proximal Development', which emphasises how the individual's learning can be maximally encouraged through the support of a more able other. As in the mother-infant 'container-contained' (Bion, 1962) relationship,

the more able or experienced other, in education, is likely to be the adult teacher, represented in this enquiry by the researcher/mentor.

Concerned to emphasise my position as a learner in this enquiry, I consciously put myself in the position of uncertainty and 'not knowing' in the researcher/mentor role in order to foster authentic learning relationships. In so doing, in spite of my experience and expertise, I seemed to emotionally suppress or deny the essentially asymmetric nature of the less experienced learner requiring a more experienced other or 'thinker', or teacher. I confused and polarised an idealised egalitarian, democratic reciprocity, which I saw as part of positioning the teacher as a learner too, with a less conscious phantasy of the teacher who had perhaps in my internal world had become something of an oppressor.

Such a primitive phantasy may be seen to have construed teaching and learning as a power relationship that for me gave rise to fear, conflict and resistance. My anxiety to discard the role of teacher was rooted in fractured boundaries and may have mirrored, for example, some of Conrad's experiences. His teachers described his behaviour as 'controlling', which may have reflected their own similar levels of anxiety, instinctively giving rise to tightening individual psychic and institutional boundaries. This muddle of conscious and unconscious phantasies may illustrate how the breakdown of emotional boundaries may have brought about Conrad's and sometimes my own misunderstandings and distorted responses to learning and teaching, which essentially relies on flexible containment.

'Learning depends on the capacity for the (growing container) to remain integrated and yet lose rigidity. This is the foundation of the state of mind of the individual who can retain his knowledge and experience and yet be prepared to reconstrue past experience in a manner that enables him to be receptive of a new idea

(container+contained) must be held by a constant (emotion) that is capable of replacement...’ (Meltzer, 1982:322)

It was interesting to find that countertransference anxiety in this study served to trigger more rigid responses to behaviours, in terms of interpersonal and organisational containment. Flexibility relies on a resilient sense of agency, self efficacy and professional autonomy that can bear the uncertainty of risk taking that, it could be argued, has been undermined by aforementioned ‘thin’ narratives of teaching and learning. Evident in my struggle at times to contain Conrad, anxieties that distort or diminish container flexibility may also unwittingly re-enforce what are described in school settings as ‘barriers to learning’ (Code of Practice, 2001). An instinctive response to making boundaries clear through rigidity and tightening resembled some of the brittle, defensive reactions at play in the research context in adult responses to Conrad’s behaviours, including my own at times.

For Conrad and for me, in different ways, personal histories of overly rigid and broken boundaries had meant teachers, just as parents, may at an emotional level have represented unreliable, authoritarian rather than authoritative figures. I recall Conrad’s palpable sense of relief, surpassed only by my own, in our first individual meeting when I reassured him that in the mentoring project I was not a teacher. Struggling through conflicts together in our emerging relationship helped me (and perhaps Conrad) to regain sight of the good, authoritative teacher ‘object’ who has the capacity to engage our learning and in so doing also develop her own understanding. This realisation underlines the reparative possibilities of using self as a subjective research tool in reflexive research,

I recognise the sanctity of flexible, containing boundaries that distinguish the necessarily asymmetrical relationship between learners and teachers and

understand that this should be respected and thoughtfully attended to, rather than destructively or irreverently disregarded. I also realise that the teacher as the 'more able other' can draw on and deploy their experience and expertise in an abundance of appropriate ways that may indeed include telling, asking and facilitating depending on the time, context and purpose of the interaction in relation to the learner and the learner's situation. However, as a researcher, investigating what happened intersubjectively in relation to the learner, I became particularly interested in how the 'more able other', can be seen as simultaneously learner and teacher. For example, though seemingly rarely discussed, it may be argued that it is the intersubjective *quality* of relationship between learner and more able other that brings into existence, makes available and activates Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (Wood, 1998).

My findings from the enquiry acknowledge and posit the more experienced subjective 'other' as learner as well as teacher. In practice, this meant authentically sustaining the uncertainty of 'not knowing' that Bion (1962) describes and realising the sometimes painful emotional vulnerability of being a learner, that all pupils and indeed teachers, sometimes in some circumstances, may experience. I found that developing learning relationships depended on my capacity to affectively attend and contingently adjust to the children's communications about fears, anxieties, pre-occupations, desires and interests. This in turn made me susceptible to my own.

In short, my learning depended on learning about the learner, towards understanding potential barriers to learning. In this way, I realised the interactive, interdependent nature of the learning relationship in this study, necessarily involved myself as 'more able' adult engaging with children in a state of 'not

knowing', symbolically representing the (m)other in 'container-contained'. 'Not knowing', in the Kleinian sense of being in the 'depressive position' and capable, in a Bionic sense, of tolerating the uncertainty of not immediately being able to predict the outcome of the complex interaction of learning and teaching. Instead, as the more able 'other' containing thinker, I worked to engage with emotional truth, understand and feed back the learner's thoughts towards fostering their capacity to think and reflect on their experience of learning.

I realise assuming 'understanding', as a corollary of 'thinking' is problematic in relation to learning and teaching in school. My extensive experience of setting targets for children and young people with barriers to learning, as well as learning outcomes for students on Higher Education courses, specifically preclude use of the term 'understanding' as it is not a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound) enough objective. As a teacher of children with additional needs, I understand that 'With Objectives in Mind' (Bloom, 1984), SMART targets may be useful for effectively differentiating and structuring learning in small steps for some children, for some of the time, in some situations and some contexts but it is questionable whether an education system can be built on such an reductionist view of learning and teaching. Equally, as Bion suggests, the 'object' can never be completely known, so understanding is always partial and of course subjective. As such, it could be argued, 'understanding' presents a humanising relational aim or motive that implicitly identifies flexibility, contingency and personal experiential professional judgement as primary points of reference in educational institutions.

Acknowledging the complexities of learning and teaching, the idea of the more able other - engaged in the constant tension between knowing and not knowing,

and thus recognising the teacher's emotional susceptibility as being as real as the pupils', requires further attention. I use the term 'susceptibility' with care, as recognition of and sensitivity to the transference and countertransference became an asset, a subjective tool of learning and interpretation in this research. In terms of school providing flexible-enough containment, awareness may be key. Without such awareness and recognition, it is suggested that teachers may be emotionally vulnerable to ubiquitous (Bainbridge and West, 2010) emotional processes at play in everyday interactions.

A key factor in the aforementioned example of 'Reggio Emilia', may be seen in the level of professional autonomy and agency the teacher or more able other is at liberty to exercise and inevitably pass onto the learner within the institution. Such organic cultures and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) may not be directly comparable to the way epistemological values are driven through mainstream education in British society. Yet, whether or not the uncertainty and susceptibility of the teacher, as well as the learner, is recognised at a macro level, I found anxiety surrounding learning and teaching even in Brompton School, some of which surfaced as described in Chapter 9, as institutional defences.

## **Endings**

In the end, it became apparent that through the psychosocial process of observing others, I also saw myself. 'Also' is the operative word here as the focus in this and the previous chapter has emphasised the interactive, co-constructed nature of the researcher-participant relationship in terms of meaning making in this research, from a psychosocial perspective. To summarise, an interpretation of aspects of 'container-contained' (Bion, 1962), reflexively applied in the role of researcher/mentor, to subjectively investigate intersubjective processes, illumined

what happened at an emotional level in the mentoring room and also illuminated aspects of the researcher-participant relationship. Reflexively engaging with my own learning from experience was integral to, and facilitated development of, a relational approach to mentoring that inductively evolved within the methodological bricolage and enabled the experiential focus of the research.

In this investigation, endings have taken many forms. Over the course of that academic year I became attached to the case study children and began to feel more relaxed in the school environment, reciprocally reflecting also perhaps a development of the school's trust and acceptance. Interviews with staff and parents at the end of the project gave me an opportunity to thank individual adult participants as well as the children. Teachers and parents left me with the impression, as evidenced from transcriptions of tape recorded interviews in Appendix 3, that they had valued the mentoring project and felt the children had benefitted from some individual time and attention in school. Trish said that she thought the project had made a difference to participants and wanted to develop the mentoring role in the school. I hoped that she would contact me to help as she seemed enthusiastic about this possibility. This would also have also given me the opportunity to revisit the children and the setting.

In the event, regular contact did not materialise. I may have been more proactive in pursuing the relationship if I had not, following completion of the fieldwork, been in the process of moving away from the Canterbury area myself. Then, the following year I left my job at Canterbury Christ Church university when commuting became impracticable. On reflection this 'flight' (Bion, 1961) undertaken for a range of reasons, may in itself have been partly connected to the research experience and the level of anxiety to which moving forward with the



work gave rise. Also, working with the case study children had stirred up and re-connected me, to the joys of working directly with individual children in a school setting which, through the research enquiry, I began to realise I missed. In part, reflexive engagement re-connected me also to some of my aforementioned, rather bleak associations and memories of a childhood in East Kent. I had perhaps forgotten some of this in my enthusiasm for coming back to a 'home' I began to see I had in some ways idealised. This led to an unsettling sense of disappointment and loss of the myth I had imagined would nurture a deep sense of belonging.

I have, however, been in contact with the school and participants since the research project, for example, to return the tapes and transcriptions of interviews, as agreed with the Ethics Committee. This led to conversations that revealed Tim, Isabel and Conrad and Leo have made successful transitions, happily settled and are doing well in local secondary schools. There have been some staff changes in the school. Mr. Chatwell has returned, Ms Hendry has moved, Mrs Merton remains as Headteacher, Ms Hill and Ms Peel still work at the school, along with Andrea who is still a teaching assistant in the infant department. Heather is enjoying her retirement in Canterbury and Liz undertook a course in Occupational Therapy at Canterbury Christ Church university. Trish now enjoys working for the Specialist Teaching Service with Early Years children, based in North Kent.

### **Implications**

When, as seen in this research, it is recognised that children bring qualities of earliest relationships into school which impact on their relationships and learning, there are implications for schools in realising and acting on the importance of qualities of relationships engaged by learners and teachers. As acknowledged, in this country there is a history, continued today in Early Years settings, of ideas that

endorse the importance of holistic and imaginative play approaches to learning and teaching that includes valuing social and emotional development. However, beyond the Foundation Stage (DfES, 0-5 years), which describes all the child participants in this research, social and emotional values can be seen to be subsumed by an incremental ladder of academic achievement constructed to promote competition at interpersonal, interrelational and institutional levels.

If resilience, uniqueness, positive relationships, enabling environments and learner diversity are seen as the overriding principles of the Foundation Curriculum (DfES, 0-5, 2012), the research found that such fundamental foundations need to be continuously fostered and attended to beyond the age of 5. 'Selves' are never complete. Further, as our fears and anxieties may be revisited throughout our lives, we are all implicated as children and adults living our lives. This may be so when engaged in the organised social setting of school, where the uncertainty of knowing and not knowing is characterised by the asymmetric relationship between children and adults, pupils and teachers.

An awareness of the everyday projections at play in the transference and countertransference may be empowering for professionals in school, as the complex struggle to understand self in relation to other remains central to human communication and social interaction throughout our lives. Some awareness of object-relations theory may help by offering a different narrative of knowing, as well as those already established, to schools and wider educational settings. Far from becoming pre-occupied with fossilised events of the past, in this study our personal histories were instrumental in co-constructing learning relationships and psychoanalytically informed insights, in ways that actively supported engagement with and understanding of children's current barriers to learning. Barriers that had hitherto remained puzzling to their teachers and parents were made available for

thinking and working on in terms of the children's future learning experiences. It may be beneficial to find ways of prioritising engagement with the emotional experience of learning in school through listening, looking, attending and keeping in mind children's thoughts and feelings, as has been found in this study. Deep learning from the experience of our personal histories may be seen to affectively transcend, trouble and be troubled by entrenched, inflexible frameworks for learning.

The thesis is part of a conversation about using a psychosocial research framework, to think about re-humanising learning and teaching experiences in school. Re-humanising refers to realising the relational, emotional nature of authentic learning. Re-humanising also refers to broadening the narrative of learning and teaching in school. Recognising and extending internal and external 'transitional' play spaces for both learners and teachers to reflect on and share their experiences of learning and teaching necessitates time and space for thinking, emotional well-being and growth of mind. Something of this necessity was embodied in this study, through the emergence of relational mentoring.

Such implications involve reviewing the cognitive-affective split. As Hollway (2008) suggests, putting people first is not about therapising education, but creating some therapeutic external spaces that aptly reflect internal psychological needs for reflection on learning from experience. Children and adults who work in school need time and space to think.

Some awareness of the emotional experience of learning, embedded in initial teacher education would provide the pre-requisite understanding for augmenting, sometimes repairing, sometimes developing, sometimes extending the familial secure base that is required for taking-in the curriculum object. Connecting an

external sense of professional autonomy, with more fundamental inner senses of self related to personal agency and self-efficacy may also need to be considered as important aspects of the emotional work of learning and teaching. This work, is complicated for the teacher today by perpetually shifting and competing socio-cultural, political, educational agendas. Findings from this research suggest, learning is relational, dialogic, situated and subject to unconscious emotional processes. In light of this, a working partnership with a learning mentor able to practice and develop relational mentoring, may be reciprocally professionally and personally beneficial. It would echo and/or model something of a communicative 'parental' partnership for children striving to engage with the curriculum in the classroom who need to iteratively experience psychological, emotional containment.

Developing a more reflexive approach, partnered perhaps by a learning mentor, may help teachers to give themselves and their pupil's permission to be 'uncertain'. Developing an emotionally robust tolerance of uncertainty may help teachers to better understand and tolerate their own and their pupils' feeling states that present in the 'didactic transfer'. For all learners this may work to gradually erode the cognitive split.

Bion's notion of 'container-contained teaches us that learning from experience is about engaging with emotional truths. Such engagement, learnt from experience in this research, may be cognitively demanding and can be painful. An awareness of unconscious processes at play in the psychic space of the classroom may help teachers to recognise their emotional susceptibility. Such realisation may empower teachers, rather than unwittingly expose what may be seen as their emotional vulnerability.

Teachers may benefit from being aware of, or in touch at both a personal and professional level with, the part they play in the 'psychic space' or 'envelope' of the classroom, in terms of 'didactic transfer'. Reflexivity and sensitive awareness may work to prompt authentic engagement with learners that supports emotional well-being and social inclusion as every day in the learning and teaching situation, transference and countertransference processes may be at play, experienced and felt. Creating space and time to think, facilitated perhaps by the teacher and mentor partnership or a peer mentoring group as suggested below, may encourage teachers to creatively 'take the transference' (Mitrani, 2001) to help themselves and their pupils experience the transformative process of learning from experience.

Other researchers, using psychosocial approaches to explore the vulnerable identities of teachers as learners in the current learning and teaching context may find aspects of the reflexive observational method engaged with a complementary auto/biographical approach to researching lives, useful. Used as a research tool here, close observation may help to turn the rhetoric of 'reflective practice' for teachers and other adults in classroom, into practice. In this way, developing a reflexive, observational approach in the classroom may also be seen to support research through teaching as well as teaching through research.

As the more experienced, more able other in the asymmetric teacher-pupil relationship, the teacher may be morally responsible for learning about the learner, to foster growth and development by providing flexible, containing professional and personal boundaries. Becoming attuned to the learner may be facilitated through the process of close observation. As part of this, to consistently, professionally support learning from experience, the teacher who is the thinker, in turn, requires a thinking container.

In school, clinical supervision or a work discussion group is unlikely to be available. Creating time and space for staff to reflect on experience could take the form of regular peer support group meetings in school settings. Findings from this research suggest that attunement with the learner engages the teacher or mentor, or more able adult in the intellectually and emotionally demanding task of learning about the learner. Linked to the containing values of attunement with the learner, that close observation in a psychoanalytic framework implies, reflexive engagement with observational material from workplace interactions that can be shared in a peer group, may permit, as suggested, opportunities for developing an ongoing professional discourse towards supporting emotional well-being. At the same time, reflexive peer mentoring may develop levels of trust that permit and open spaces for sharing, identifying and discussing institutional dynamics that systemically impact on learning relationships. This may work towards developing a mature sense of the vicissitudes of personal and professional identities.

Recognising emotion as the root of thinking remains an epistemologically radical notion in education. To safeguard emotional well-being in school, learners and teachers require time and space to reflect on the emotional experience of learning. Realising the intellectually demanding task of learning from experience may be fundamental to developing the capacity to think thoughts that is central to cognition and knowing, learning and teaching.

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## **Appendices:**

### **Appendix 1.i Overview of Research Project**

#### **Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories: exploring the place of emotional learning in school**

#### **Research project being undertaken for MPhil/PhD at Christ Church University, Canterbury Kent**

<p><b>Name of researcher:</b> Erica Ashford <b>Supervisor:</b> Dr. Linden West</p>
--

#### **Working with children as a mentor-researcher:**

1. The research aims to explore the relationship between children's ability to reflect on their experience and to engage in learning in school. I am interested in exploring the place of emotional learning in educational settings. The opportunity to reflect on everyday experiences can be facilitated by the increasingly familiar role in school of the learning mentor. As both learning mentor and researcher, I will have a dual role. As a learning mentor I will work to develop trusting relationships with participants to support their engagement and learning in school. This relationship will rely on time and space (provided by school) and my ability to listen, reflect on, engage with and to develop empathic relationships with participants. As a researcher I will record my observations of children's stories about their everyday experiences and reflect on this data to help me understand their emotional learning. As a learning mentor I will draw on twenty years experience of teaching primary aged children, including ten years experience as a school Senco, and six years specifically working with children with speech and language disorders. I will also draw on a model of mentoring that utilises the notion of 'storying' (Jennings, 2004). As part of my work at CCCU is about teaching learning mentors on a new Foundation degree, I am interested in working voluntarily as a learning mentor regardless of the research dimension I propose. As a researcher, my reflections will draw on a range of theoretical perspectives, particularly a psychological conceptual framework that considers the work of Wilfred Bion, whose ideas have been directly related to thinking about emotional learning and counselling in educational settings.

2. Child participants will be those, identified by teachers and parents, as having additional educational needs. They may be at School Action Plus on the SEN register, or have a statement of need. Participants' primary need may be identified as social, emotional behaviour difficulties, but children are also likely to present difficulties with language and literacy and/or maths activities.

3. My role as a mentor-researcher school will be subject to the guidance and policy of the school. I will negotiate every stage, and liaise each week with a 'link' member of the school staff who understands the aims and methods of the project, and who also has an empathic professional relationship with the child, parent and teacher participants involved. Following each mentoring session I will leave a record in a folder with my 'link' person so that class teachers and all participants have access to a description of activities that have taken place (see appendix 2).

3. I will aim to create an environment where child participants feel comfortable and at ease. I will provide a range of puzzles/games that, in my experience, children

may be drawn to engage with individually e.g.: 3-d puzzles such as, for example; rubik cubes, tic-tac-toe. I will keep a range of other games and puzzles that children need a partner to play with to facilitate interaction. These will include games such as, for example; Connect 4....There will be a table and materials available where children may draw, write, read. I will also provide sensory material e.g.; mirrors and clay and found materials in school. There will also be potted plants that may need to be tended/watered and objects/papers that need to be sorted. These artefacts will offer a variety of strategies for engaging with participants that may be different from the usual classroom curriculum agenda. I will observe, monitor and record the activities the child engages with at the beginning of each session.

5. I will allow children to set the agenda by adapting my responses to their choice of activity. Sometimes I will join in and 'mirror' the children's choices of materials/activities, at other times when appropriate, I will ask them to help me sort/organise complete practical tasks. If the child chooses to share a book, and is able to engage, I will attempt to prompt expression by asking for interpretations of, for example, characters' actions, or, where apt, model associations by matching characters/events to my own everyday recollections of experience. These playful bridging or 'transitional' (Winnicott, 1964) activities will be arranged to help children feel comfortable with me in the mentoring environment. Only if, and when they feel at ease enough to engage in my research, will I ask them questions that will facilitate story telling of every day events such as; for example; 'What kind of week are you having?', or 'How's the .....project going?'

6. I will develop engagement by using specific questions such as: What would that look like? Show me what that is...or....help me get a better picture of that... to encourage children to illustrate their talk/versions of their stories by using either drawing, writing, or making (clay/found materials).

7. By the end of mentoring time (up to thirty minutes with each child), I would summarise and feed back my experience of their responses/everyday stories during the session, thank them for sharing their thoughts and feelings and tell them I will be looking forward to seeing them the following week, so they feel they are being kept in mind.

8. In the record file (please see appendix 2) I will write up the contents of the session and include drawings/writing children have generated. In my personal journal I will relate my observations/perspectives of the participant's responses to the theoretical framework underpinning the research.

9. I aim to include parent and teacher participant contributions, as well as keeping a personal journal to track my own perspective as a researcher. Interviews with parent participants will include a checklist of questions that will help to compose their stories in relation to child participants. Parent questions will include, for example: 'What are your perceptions of your child's learning?', 'How do you think your child's experience compares with your own experiences of learning as a child?' Interviews with teacher participants will include questions such as, for example: 'How would you describe (child participants) strengths and difficulties as a learner?' 'How do you support (child participants) learning?' Interviews will be recorded on audiocassette, transcribed in full and sent to teacher and parent participants who will be able to read, amend or add to their interview stories. I will arrange an interview review meeting with parents and teacher participants to facilitate such amendments with my 'link' person, when consent for this material to be used for research purposes will also be sought.

10. As some of the interview material will be personal, participants have a right not to answer questions, as well as to withdraw themselves and/or child participants from the project at any stage. I will ensure that parent and teacher participants have a full list of questions to be asked before the interview to precipitate reflection and give the opportunity to omit any questions that may cause concern or discomfort. Great care will be taken not to push participants in directions they do not wish to go. Confidentiality is a key concern and within the participant group every effort will be made to maintain anonymity in the presentation of the research at all times, in every form. However, the research project will take place with six child participants, parent and teachers in a specific school setting, so it is unlikely that full anonymity of participants and therefore full confidentiality will be maintained. Pseudonyms will be used for participants when the research is written up.

11. Parent and teacher participants will be given tapes of their interviews as well as original and/or edited transcripts. I will keep copies of the recorded material and final version transcripts. Any other access to the material will be with participant's permission only.

12. As the duration of the project will take place through an academic year, feedback to parents and teachers and children related to children's progress in the mentoring group will be ongoing and given either individually or as a group, on the advice of my 'link' person in the school. A summary of my reflections on participants' responses to communicating their 'stories' for the research will be discussed with all participants and this will provide a further opportunity for participants to withdraw retrospectively consent given and to require that their data be destroyed before the research is published.

13. These procedures are in line with the CCCU Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee guidance on specific kinds of research involving children.

14. Thank you for your help and contribution to the research.

If you have any questions or comments about the research, please contact me, Erica Ashford. on 01227 767975 or ea26@canterbury.ac.uk





## **Appendix 1.iii – Information for parents on behalf of children**

### **Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories: exploring the place of emotional learning in school**

#### **Research project being undertaken for Mphil/Phd at Christ Church University, Canterbury, Kent**

These guidance notes correspond to affirmation points on the child participant assent form (appendix 3a)

Dear Parents,

Reading this information sheet through first will help you talk through and explain the project to your child before either of you agree to take part.

1. Your school has agreed to take part in a research project that aims to explore how feelings are related to learning in school. The researcher will investigate this by asking your children to talk, write or draw stories about everyday events they experience in school. She will be in school for a morning each week and during that time your child will meet with her in the 'learning mentor' room. The learning mentor will bring a range of games and activities to help her get know your child. It would be helpful if you could explain that you and your child's teachers will also be involved by talking to the researcher/learning mentor because the learning mentor is not a teacher but someone who wants to listen and learn about the things your child enjoys and the things your child finds difficult in school.
2. When your child meets the learning mentor each week, there will be a variety of games available for your child to play with. There will also be paper and pencils for drawing or writing, some boxes and materials for making, books and sometimes clay. Your child will be able to choose from these things. The learning mentor will be there to talk to, share games, join in with activities or your child may choose to play and work on their own. Your child will spend up to half-an-hour each week with the learning mentor.
3. The learning mentor, who is also the researcher is interested in listening to your child's stories of everyday events because telling stories helps us to express our feelings and thoughts, and also shows how we make sense of things that happen to us such as, for example; events that happen during playtime sessions.
4. It's important to explain to your child that the learning mentor/researcher has talked to you and your child's teachers about their strengths and also about the things in school they have some difficulties with. Your child needs to know that through discussion and thinking about ways to help them engage in the classroom, the learning mentor/researcher has chosen your child and five others in school to take part in the research project.
5. Your child needs to know that the project has also been explained to you and that you will guide them through a 'child assent form' by carefully explaining the project to make sure you are willing to take part. It is important to let your child ask questions so they feel comfortable about you giving your consent and also supporting their consent to being part of

the mentoring/research group. Please remember, participation is entirely voluntary so if you or your child is in any doubt, there is no need to take part.

6. It is important also to explain that your child is at liberty to withdraw from the research project at any stage, and that any stories that your child tells the learning mentor will then not be used in the research.
7. You and your child need to know that at the end of each mentoring session, the learning mentor/researcher will write a record of activities that have taken place during the session and keep it safely in a file for the next time. Your child, or your teachers will be able to see and read this record if you wish.
8. The learning mentor/ researcher will remain in school over lunch times so your child might see her around the school at those times.
9. Respecting your and your child's privacy and confidentiality is very important to the researcher as well as being part of developing a trusting mentor-mentee relationship, but if there are any times when your child appears distressed, or the learning mentor feels uncomfortable with stories your child begins to tell, she will stop your child from continuing before explaining that she may need to share such information with others, if such a story continues.

Thank you for your help with this project which could not take place without your help. If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Erica Ashford,  
(Researcher/learning mentor)

## **Appendix 1.iv – Guidance for adult participants (parent and teachers)**

### **Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories: exploring the place of emotional learning in school**

#### **Research project being undertaken for Mphil/Phd at Christ Church University, Canterbury, Kent**

This guidance corresponds to points in the Adult Consent form (Appendix 3)

1. Please read appendix 1: outline of research, and appendix 5: guidance for the school ‘link’ person which together explain why, who will be involved, and how the project will be undertaken. Before the research begins, you will be invited to an arranged meeting at school to explain further and answer your questions. If you have any questions about any of these explanations, please contact the researcher (contact details below) at any time. Please remember participation is entirely voluntary so you do not have to take part in this project.
  
2. To give breadth and depth to the research, teachers and parents of child participants will be invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Both teachers and parents will be given a checklist of questions to be asked, a week before the interview so they will have both the opportunity to think about their responses and also the opportunity to refuse to respond to any questions they are not comfortable with answering. The interviews will be tape recorded – please see points 9 – 11 in appendix 1 which describes this procedure.
  
3. Towards exploring and understanding the relationship between reflecting on experience and learning, I am interested in teachers’ perceptions of child participants learning in the classroom.  
Examples of questions to be asked are: ‘How would you describe (child participant’s) strengths and difficulties?’, ‘How do you think (child participant) feels about their progress in the classroom?’ ‘How do you support (child participant’s) learning?’
  
4. Equally, an holistic approach to exploring children’s learning recognises the child does not stop being a vital family member when they enter the school building, but seeks to learn from and build on their important home experiences. I am interested to learn from parents their perceptions of their children’s progress, from early infant care to current school achievements. Examples of questions to be asked are: ‘Tell me about (child participant) as a baby?’, ‘How do you think (child participant) experience of school compares with your own?’ ‘How do you see your child’s progress in school?’ ‘How do you think (child participant) feels about their progress in school?’
  
5. I will negotiate with my ‘link’ person (appendix 5) appropriate ways, that respect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants, of feeding back development of the mentoring group work to ensure teachers and parents feel fully involved in considering emerging issues in the study at every stage.
  
6. To support confidentiality, fictitious names of participants will be used throughout the project, but because the research will take place in one

school setting with a small group of child and adult participants it must be considered unlikely that total anonymity will be achieved.

7. It is important to remember that all tape recorded data belongs to, you may withdraw your consent to participate at any stage, and I will remind you of this at intervals throughout the project. This would include retrospective withdrawal of any tape recorded data or interview material recorded at any stage of the project. A summary of results of the study will be sent to and discussed with all participants either individually or as a group – to be negotiated with the school and participants. I will leave a record of the content of mentoring sessions each week, in a folder with my 'link' person to which all participants will have access on request.
8. Parent participants have a responsibility to share the child assent form (appendix 3a), and parents information behalf of child (appendix 2a) participants with their children. Should the need arise, they should raise any questions and seek satisfactory answers from the researcher and/or school before giving their own or their child's consent to take part in the project.
9. Thank you for your help and contribution to the research. Without your support, this research would not be possible.

**If you have questions or comment of any kind about participant guidance, please contact me, Erica Ashford, on: 01227 767875 or ea26@canterbury.ac.uk**

**Appendix 1.v**

**Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories: exploring the place of emotional learning in school.**

**Research project being undertaken for MPhil/Phd at Christ Church University, Canterbury Kent**

**CONSENT FORM: Adult Participants**

- I have read and understood the information about taking part in this research.
- I have had the chance to ask questions about it.
- I consent to being a parent/teacher participant for this project.
- I consent to my interview contributions being recorded.
- I know that I can withdraw my contribution at any time until the results of the research are made public
- I agree to respect the privacy and confidentiality of other participants in this research

---

Signed

.....

Name (please print)

.....

Address and telephone number

.....

.....

.....

Date.....

**Appendix 1.vi**

**Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories: exploring the place of emotional learning in school.**

**Research project being undertaken for MPhil/Phd at Christ Church University, Canterbury Kent**

**CHILD ASSENT FORM:**

**To be filled in by parents with child participants**

- I have read, understood and explained the information about taking part in this research project with my child.
- My child has had the chance to ask questions about what will take place during mentoring sessions.
- My child has had the chance to ask questions about why they will be asked to tell stories of everyday events in their lives to contribute to the research project.
- My child has had the chance to ask why they have been chosen to take part in this project.
- My child has agreed to participate in this project.
- I consent to my child being a participant in this project.
- My child knows they may withdraw from the project at any time, and I reserve the right as a parent to withdraw their participation and contributions at any stage of the project.

---

Signed (child).....

(adult).....

Names (please print)

.....

Address and telephone number

.....

.....

Date

.....

## **Appendix 1.vii: Letter to Headteacher**

### **Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories of everyday experiences: exploring the place of emotional learning in school**

#### **Research project being undertaken for M/Phil/PhD at Christchurch University, Canterbury, Kent**

Dear

As part of the above research project, I write to offer my service to your school as a voluntary learning mentor for half a day each week during term over the next academic year. I can work with up to six individual children, in negotiation with you, who primarily have social, emotional behavioural difficulties, but who also may have literacy, language and/or maths difficulties.

As you know, the learning mentor initiative is part of a government Excellence in Cities project (2002) aimed at tackling pupil disaffection, truancy and exclusion, and at improving academic standards by supporting pupil engagement. Learning mentors build relationships with and advocate on behalf of pupils. They represent the interests of the school to children and their families, and the interests of children and families to the school. I am currently involved with teaching learning mentors on a new Foundation degree and would be glad to model mentoring approaches for non-teaching staff if you think continuing mentoring beyond the research project would be beneficial to any children in your school. In line with the holistic agenda of Every Child Matters (2004), I am interested in exploring the place of emotional learning in school. The research enquiry would be embedded in my mentoring practice by focusing on child participants' ability to make sense of and represent their own everyday experiences through the talk, play and literacy activities that I would provide (please find attached outline of research and consent forms). I would draw on a psychological framework that includes the work of Bion on emotional learning to observe and reflect on children's responses. I would also like to undertake interviews with child participants' teachers and parents to help me understand their perceptions of the children's emotional learning.

I realise research into the area of emotional learning needs to be undertaken with great sensitivity, and I am keen to learn and to follow your school's expertise and guidance about appropriate children taking part in the project, and also to cooperate closely with staff to ensure school policies, procedures and communications are aptly adhered to. In order to carry out the research it would be helpful therefore, if you could identify a 'link' person within school with whom I can regularly, collaboratively discuss and negotiate any issues arising from these important considerations (please find attached guidance for 'link' person). I would also need a consistent space or room to work as a learning mentor and to undertake the research.

I would like to begin as soon as possible and would welcome the opportunity to discuss the project in further detail with you at your earliest convenience. Please find my contact details below. Thank you for considering taking part in this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Erica Ashford  
Senior Lecturer  
Childhood Studies Department  
Christ Church University  
Canterbury  
Telephone: 01227 783185 or 01227 767975  
Email address: ea26@canterbury.ac.uk



## Appendix 1.viii – Guidance notes for school ‘link’ person

### **Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories of everyday experiences: exploring the place of emotional learning in school**

Research Project being undertaken for M.Phil/PhD at Christchurch University, Canterbury, Kent

1. The research aims to explore the relationship between children’s ability to reflect on their experience and to engage in learning in school. The vehicle I have chosen for exploring this relationship is their story telling of everyday experiences - using talk, drawing, writing and/or making. Sharing stories assumes that thoughts and feelings will be expressed and shared, which in turn assumes a secure, trusting relationship between adult and child participants. Story telling in this context will be facilitated by my role as a learning mentor – aptly described as a ‘listening friend’ (please find ‘outline of research’ for a description of the learning mentor’s role). In this way, my priority is to develop, as a voluntary learning mentor in the school, authentic containing relationships with child participants. In order to develop appropriate relationships in the school context, I will need to be sensitive to negotiating the systems, structure, procedures, cultural practices of the setting. This kind of negotiation would be enabled by a ‘link’ person in the school who has already established respectful, empathic relationships with staff, children and their families, and who would be willing to regularly liaise with me in the interests of monitoring and maintaining parameters, including ethical parameters, when exploring the place of emotional learning in school.
2. If the development of a learning mentor role is seen as useful to the school, at the end of my research project, as the ‘link’ person you will be in a position to continue the model for existing and other pupil participants. In this way, the high level of commitment to the project this role demands will be an investment in terms of continuing professional development for other staff.
3. Ideally, I would hope to meet with you before starting the project in order to learn about how your setting works, and to meet children and staff to create a mutual awareness. When I have discussed the project fully with you, I would welcome your guidance (through previous knowledge and experience) in terms of identifying appropriate child participants. I would also welcome intermediary support from you to gain understanding of the school’s in house and external referral system, as well as relevant behaviour/parent partnership policies etc. I will seek your advice regarding instigating individual or group meetings with participant parents and teachers. Also, advice about setting up individual or group meetings, their times, duration and frequency – as you are the expert in your setting or context.
4. I would aim to collaborate and co-operate with you as my ‘link’ person in an ongoing way throughout the project. You would act as a first contact intermediary between myself and all school based participants. For example, if, during a mentoring session a child participant disclosed material that I was in any way concerned about, I would consult you as my ‘link’ person. I would also discuss formative feedback from mentoring

sessions with you and seek advice about feeding this back appropriately to teachers and parents.

5. I will be happy to share any information with you as the 'link' person to do with the theoretical framework of the research, that will help to clarify the method, design or approach to the project.

6. It is important that all child and adult participants are made aware who is involved in the project. As a researcher participant I will reflect on data collected from child participants' stories, but aware of my own participation in this context I will also reflect on my own thoughts and feelings. With this idea of perspectives and viewpoints in mind, in order to broaden the narrative for reflection I will aim to interview parents and teachers of child participants, to explore their thoughts and perceptions of child participants' learning (please see outline of research for examples of interview questions).

I will ensure teachers and parents have copies of interview questions before interviews take place and seek advice and guidance from you as my 'link' person about apt times and locations for interviews.

7. As an essential 'link' between the researcher and the school setting, you may be seen as a participant able to contribute a rich strand of narrative data to the research (please see appendix...for teacher participants).

8. In general these guidance notes are informed by the Guidance on specific kinds of research involving children recommended by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Christchurch university, Canterbury.

9. Thank you for all your help and for your contribution to the research. Without your support in this role, the research would not be possible.

<p>If you have questions or comment of any kind about the 'link' person and their role in the research, please contact me, Erica Ashford, on: 01227 767975 or ea26@canterbury.ac.uk</p>
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**Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories of everyday experiences: exploring the place of emotional learning in school**

Research Project being undertaken for M.Phil/PhD at Christchurch University, Canterbury, Kent

- I have read and understood all appendices related to participation in this research
- I have had an opportunity to discuss the project and ask questions
- I am willing to act as a 'link person' between the researcher/mentor and child and adult participants in the project
- I am willing to guide the researcher through school systems, structures and procedures as outlined in appendix 5
- I agree to meet the researcher regularly to monitor and evaluate the progress of the project
- I agree to facilitate initial and feedback meetings between the research, teacher and parent participants
- I reserve the right to withdraw the school's participation in the project at any stage of the research
- I agree to facilitate links with other agencies should I consider it apt

**Signed .....**

**(printed).....**

**Title/position in school setting**

.....

**Contact details:**

.....

.....

**Date;.....**

**Appendix 1.x –Guidance for Parents – Script for younger children (KS1)**

**Creating spaces for children to tell and reflect on their stories: exploring the place of emotional learning in school.**

**Research project being undertaken for MPhil/Phd at Christ Church University, Canterbury Kent**

**Child participants' parents to read this with their child before completing the child assent form (appendix 3a)**

1. Erica will be visiting school one day each week to see you and some other children in school. Mrs..... (class teacher) will remind you on the day when she is coming and (LSA) will take you to her room.
2. There will be activities and games for you to choose from.
3. Erica might ask you to tell her about some of the things you like doing with (class teacher) and your friends in school.
4. She might also ask you to tell her about some of the things you do not like doing in school.
5. Erica might read or tell you a story about school, and she might ask you to read or tell her a story about school too.
6. She might ask you to draw pictures to help you tell your stories.
7. Sometimes she might ask you to help her sort the things out in her room.
8. Mrs. ...(class teacher) and I (mum/dad/family) know about Erica's visits to school and we will call her your 'learning mentor' which means she is not a teacher like (class teacher) but wants to become your listening friend.
9. Erica will be your listening friend who wants to understand more about how you and the other children she sees each week, learn in school.
10. If you do not want to see Erica when she comes to school, just tell me (mum/dad/family) and/or Mrs.. (class teacher) and you can stop seeing her.
11. If you want to ask Erica any questions about any of the activities you do or share with her, she will be happy to answer. You can also ask me (mum/dad/family) or Mrs. (class teacher) to explain anything.

**Appendix 1.xi – Class teacher interviews**

## Class teacher interviews

### Teacher

This is a semi-structured interview with 5 questions designed to give you the opportunity to tell your 'story' about ..... as a pupil in your class.

I will transcribe your tape and give you a copy of the transcription as soon as possible. Please feel free to edit this in any way you wish if you think the transcription does not represent your thoughts, feelings or words in any way. When you read the transcription, you may also wish to annotate or add to what you say today. When we have had a chance to discuss and finalise the transcription, the tape recording will be handed back to you as your property, and your agreed version of the transcription may be used as data that will contribute to the research project. I will endeavour to respect confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research project.

#### Question:

1. How would you describe .....’s strengths as a learner?
2. How would you describe .....’s difficulties as a learner?
3. How do you think ..... feels about his progress?
4. Are there any areas of .....’s progress this year that you feel particularly positive about?
5. How would you describe .....’s relationships with others?

Thank you for your time, support and participation in this research project.

Best wishes,

Erica Ashford  
(Learning mentor/researcher)

## Appendix 1.xii – Invitation to parents

Dear .....

Thank you for supporting the learning mentor/research project that.....has been involved in this year. To complete the project, (as outlined in appendix 2b) I write to arrange a meeting with you to talk about .....responses to the project, and to ask you to think about and discuss the following questions:

1. Tell me about .....as a baby.
2. How do you think.....experience of school compares with your own experience of school?
3. How do you feel about your child's progress in school?
4. How do you think.....feels about his/her progress in school

I will also be glad to answer any questions you may have about the project. Please fill in the proforma below to let us know which date suits you. Please return this to your child's classteacher by **Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2007**, then Mrs. Hampton will ring to confirm a mutually convenient time.

Thank you again for you support in this matter.

Best wishes,

Erica Ashford  
(Senior Lecturer – CCCU)

Tanya Hampton  
(Senco)

.....

**Please indicate by circling your preferred date and time:**

I can attend an half-hour meeting on Monday, 25<sup>th</sup> June between 11.00 am–12.30 pm

I can attend an half-hour meeting on Monday 25<sup>th</sup> June between 1.00 pm – 5.30 pm

I can attend an half-hour meeting on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> June – morning, or afternoon

Signed: ..... (parent/carer)

Tel: .....

**Appendix 1.xiii – interviews with T.A's**

**This is a semi-structured interview with 5 questions designed to give you the opportunity to tell your ‘story’ about .....as a pupil in your class.**

**I will transcribe your tape and give you a copy of the transcription as soon as possible. Please feel free to edit this in any way you wish if you think the transcription does not represent your thoughts, feelings or words in any way. When you read the transcription, you may also wish to annotate or add to what you say today. When we have had a chance to discuss and finalise the transcription, the tape recording will be handed back to you as your property, and your agreed version of the transcription may be used as data that will contribute to the research project. I will endeavour to respect confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research project.**

**Question:**

- 1. Can you describe some ways in which you support .....?**
  
- 2. Have you found any particular strategies or approaches that seem to help .....to engage?**
  
- 3. How do you think ..... feels about his/her own progress?**
  
- 4. How would you describe ..... relationships with others?**

**Thank you for your time, support and participation in this research project.**

**Best wishes**

**Erica Ashford  
(Learning mentor/researcher)**

Dear Trish,

I hope we can meet soon – I'll ring you on Monday if that's alright? Below are some questions I'd like to ask you that will complete the information I need to collect for my mentoring/research project. The questions are intended to support your story of the project:

- How did you choose the children who participated in the project?
- Could I have any summative (e.g. SAT's, reading ages) and/or formative assessments (reports) for the participant children – July 06 and July 07? (The project is qualitative, but just in case I need any quantitative evidence)
- How would describe your role?
- What is your perception of the participant children's needs?
- Do you see a place for mentoring 'time and space' for other children in school?

Thanks Trish.

All best,

Erica

**Appendix 2:**



## Appendix 2.i Example of proforma

### Case Study

#### Auto/Biographical Interview/ Case Study Proforma

The intention behind this proforma is to develop a way of recording the process of engaging with and developing a case study, including identifying key issues about interviews, in relation to a particular person, in a more standardised format (without jeopardising the flexibility of the whole process i.e. more open-ended forms of interviewing and bringing different and diverse interpretations into play, including our differing perceptions of material). And to explore, iteratively, themes, and interpretative and conceptual issues as they arise; identifying relevant literatures too and any autobiographical resonance. This would include issues that are not understood and need to be explored further. The point is to be inclusive and to use the document as an evolving text.

The focus is on five main aspects:

- A chronological account of the interactions with your 'subject', providing thick description
- The themes, which seem important, such as aspects of a child's biography and responses to learning. Patterns in relationship; role of significant others, transitional space etc etc. This section could include a commentary, extracts from field notes; and a summary of themes to be explored further.
- The third aspect has to do with the process and observations about the nature of the interaction. It is important to include any autobiographical resonance, and to document any thoughts and feelings as they arise, even from dream material or free associations.

- The fourth, thinking more ethnographically, is about the circumstances of the research, the school and its sub-cultures and general impressions of the setting and what might have been happening in and around it.
- The fourth with any sense of a gestalt in the material: might there be an emerging theme around learning and relationship, family and school. Or around the interactions between you, the child, parents and others and what may be going on more widely in the child's life. This can be done tentatively, more a play of ideas as a basis for shared reflection

Please cut and paste relevant (and brief) extracts into the proforma and add any thoughts on content, process, context and 'gestalt'. And weave into the text, any quotations, readings or suggestions from the wider literature with particular reference to the role of mentoring, the psychodynamics of learning and methodological issues.

**Participant's Name:**

**Address, phone number and email**

**Contact 2? (date, time and place)**

**Commentary**

## Appendix 2.ii – Example of coding observational narrative – layer 6

### Case Study Conrad

Themes/processes – I've started to add temporary number and letter codes to the text to help me make links later, or where I could expand if necessary, or use as reminders when summarising etc:

1. **Absence** – Conrad literally absents himself from the literacy and numeracy group at every available opportunity – he is unable to access/take in what is being offered
2. **Control** – staff see him as seeking control in the classroom – he's certainly powerful – brings strong emotions to the surface in those who work with him..
3. **Helplessness** – linked to control
4. **Relationships** – Conrad/class teacher/TA/me/parents/sister
5. **Boundaries** –the way he continually pushes boundaries and others to their own
6. **Loss** – being separated from peers who are in the other year 6 class/friends/classmates/dad/step dad/Karl/Mr. Chatwell
7. **Institution related dynamics** – split year 6 class, 'need to know basis', fitting in with systems v people
8. **Anger/aggression** – resistance, assumption of chaos, teases/pushes boundaries, projections, disinterest, unpredictability

### **Emotional processes**

- a) Container-contained, - Bion
- b) learning from experience – Bion
- c) Defences – projection, denial (Klein)
- d) Transference/ countertransference

- e) Emotional holding - Winnicott
- f) Mirroring – Winnicott
- g) Transitional objects/spaces – Winnicott
- h) Object relations – Klein –love/hate, guilt, reparation, jealousy
- i) Intersubjectivity – Trevarthen
- j) Observation – Bick, Miller, Rustin

(An additional part of the chapter may be added at the beginning – to provide more general observational ‘fragments’, giving different perspectives of Conrad that I gathered before the individual sessions took place –so the chapter may be finally constructed in three parts: a) Fragments b) What happened in the individual meetings c) Reflection on observations from parental interview)

The focus of this part (b) of the chapter is on the first individual session during which all issues emerged. I will use material from the subsequent meetings to pick up on and explore those feelings and themes to reveal the shape of our learning relationship over nine individual sessions. The final part of the chapter will be a reflection on an interview with Conrad’s mother, when the mentoring sessions had come to an end.

## Appendix 2.iii - An extract from my Research Journal

### **Extract 1 - The Mentoring Project**

The model I have is emerging from a varied history of experiences. Firstly, from my reading of the government EiC initiative and surrounding documentation of rationale (many docs/dates), secondly my own experience of developing nurture groups (Boxall ...will expand/explain) in a school setting, and my experience and interpretation of learning as an emotional experience initiated by the Tavi course. Also, from developing and now teaching courses at Newham on the learning mentor pathway of the Foundation degree in working with young people and young people's services. Pragmatically, this can be seen as an instrument of the government's social vision for combating disaffection, re-shaping and professionalising (my interpretation – they probably use 'training') a new children's workforce. This combination of potentially competing government, educational, psychological and research interests carries a range of tensions and conflicts that inform both my position, perspectives and interpretations as a researcher, as well as participants' positions - and I realise these need to be explored and unpacked throughout the project.

However, for now the emerging mentoring model is: relationship with the self, family and others - which incorporates central, recurring strands such as, for example; reflecting on experience, developmental theory, story, language, inclusion. These themes, from my most current readings about the auto/biographical role of the researcher (West, Stanley, Alheit ...will expand/explain) seem compatible with a research approach that encourages children to express their stories of everyday events in school to explore the impact of emotional experience on their capacity to process thoughts (think...Bion, mentalise ...Holmes), symbolise and 'learn' in the way school explicitly requires.

.....

As Coren (1997) points out; exploration and curiosity is risky as it may mean having to unlearn what we may think we know in the interest of moving on – and this certainly applies to me engaged in this learning experience. But I'm interested in how well a 'learning about' curriculum sustains curiosity in school, and whilst developmental psychology stress relationships between learning and language development, not so much attention seems to focus on intersubjectivity and the sources of being able to learn from experience. Contemporary psychodynamic

theories take into account the social and cultural settings and the extent to which these may invade intimate and inner spaces. Schools are the focus of a range of influences which can affect the learning process and the quality of relationships between people (West...).

In spite of lengthy teaching experience, working with children with a range of needs, negotiating relationships with many colleagues, parents, other professionals it seems that whatever experience, knowledge, skills, understanding one brings – aspects of knowing are bound to be context specific, provisional and incomplete (Field on lifelong learning...need to attempt to explain...2000), and do not simply or easily map onto a new or unfamiliar setting. The building may be a familiar shape, the children may wear uniform, the NC may be taught, the time and space dimensions (Giddens, 1990) of the school day may be duly regulated –enabling instant recognition of standard systems, structures and school procedures, but this outward form offering a semblance of order may be a misleading like a mirage or an illusion, oversimplifying, or even defending against the complexity of diversity and learning within (Menziez Lyth, 1988...need to add more).

.....

## **Extract 2 – September Meetings**

### **Wednesday, 20.9.06**

I walked onto the playground at 8.30 am – again a beautiful, warm September morning. Someone in a uniform (looked like a traffic warden/policeman) was chatting with the crossing person as I walked in and said good morning. I asked Josie (R teacher) if I could sit on one of her benches to draw a plan of the playground – I want to make a model of the playground for the mentoring room, with some figures so child participants can recreate ‘events’ on the playground model. When I’d finished drawing the outline of the playground I went in and joined the children. Parents stood chatting with their children and other parents. At one end of the large, rectangular playground were football nets and some. Possible year 5 or 6 boys were playing football. At the other end several younger girls and a couple of boys were sitting on their coats/bags reading, chatting or looking at others. In the middle of the playground some year 1/2 boys and girls were playing a chasing game – one little girl came up to me to complain about two of the boys who chased her every day.

### **Appendix 3:**

#### **Appendix 3.i – Interview with Tim’s Mother**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford M = Participant Tim’s Mother**

E: When I do the actual transcripts I’ll change the names. Is that ok?

But I can’t pretend to be talking about Barry when we’re talking about Tim.. is that Ok?

M: That’s fine.

E: I want to have a talk about, sort of loosely round these questions Mrs C if that’s all right? Could you tell me a little bit about Tim as a baby?

M: He was very ... The first two days he slept, he didn’t cry and he wouldn’t feed ....and then after that he cried a lot, (laughs) but he was quite colicky I think .... but he was our first so we weren’t really sure what to expect. I think from....

E: Did you have a difficult time?

M: I was induced. He was overdue and I was induced for that. I wouldn’t say that it was particularly difficult. It was quite long, but I wouldn’t say it was a particularly difficult birth. But he was big. He was 10 lbs 3oz. .... I think reasonably early on I wondered if he might be a bit different, but equally I knew children are all different anyway. I wasn’t particularly worried at the time about getting him weighed or ticking off milestones and things like that.

E: You were pretty relaxed.

M: Yeah. He never .....they used to tell you that your baby will babble to you and He didn’t do that, and they said your baby will turn to look at you when you come into the room, but he never did that, and there were various things that didn’t happen, which we were told would happen, but we really didn’t think much of that. He didn’t talk, he actually didn’t talk really much at all until he was 3 but we didn’t notice.... .we didn’t notice how different he was until we had J.

E: How old was Tim when you had J.

M: 20 months. They were quite close.

E: Yes, that’s nice.

M: But J was always trying to smile at people and get their attention and gabble at them so it wasn’t until then that we thought that Tim was slightly different to J but then I think ... as he grew up we just thought he was just Tim and he was just a bit quirky.

E: He seems really close to J.

M: Yes. I think they are. They seem to miss each other. We’ve had a few experiments in giving them some time apart because sometimes they found it quite stressful. J went to stay at my parents at half term so actually he missed Tim quite a bit I think, ..... not having him to play with.

E: Tim does talk about him. You are obviously a very close happy family He talks about the cats and the things you do, going on outings and things and its lovely.

M: Yes. They generally get on. They do squabble but children do squabble (laughs)

E: Children often do.

M: Yes. ...

E: How do you think then, Tim’s experience of school compares with your own experience of school?

M: I’m ...I’m ...The social side of it is something else, but in terms of academic achievement I didn’t.. feel I struggled at school. I don’t remember learning to read and write and I don’t remember having problems with things like that, and I really loved that, I loved going to school. I used to find friendships a bit difficult I mean as you do. Children can be funny. (laughs)

E: And girls as well..... but friendships are very important in life?

M: But no.. in terms of actual learning I always enjoyed school. I never felt ...whereas I think for Tim it’s been much harder to get to grips with things like reading but he seems very well now.

E: And yet ... (A interrupts)

M: Yeah. But J's the same J speaks.. is very articulate, but he really struggles with reading and writing. But if he could tell you something, it's enough. But I think Tim has definitely picked up and he can ... he can write very fast, not very legible but he can write very fast. And he's found and we have noticed just recently, the more abstract maths concepts he's struggling with, and he says he does find school quite hard sometimes. There's certain things he loves but generally speaking I think he finds it hard..

E: He likes history?

M: Yeah he loves history.

E: He told me everything about Dover Castle.

M: He does a lot of that. He listens to history books and he reads them himself and he often chooses to watch things. If I've got something on he'll often want to come with me to see it and obviously you have to watch that because it's not very suitable.

E: But he has a lot of interests?

M: Definitely, yes. He's very .... I think if you can capture him then he'll really be interested.

E: I've found him very communicative.

M: Yeah. Definitely.

E: He seems to communicate more easily with adults?

M: Yes. Definitely. I think he feels he will be listened to and also that people will ... will respond in a way he can manage and he feels safe. Yes he does seem quite confident chatting to adults

E: The only thing I was a bit worried about is that Liz is not going to be here next year and I've told him I wasn't going to be here after the 3<sup>rd</sup>. I am thinking about Sports Day and I'd like to come to the production.... I need to begin to prepare him for that change. The last couple of weeks, he has not been quite so keen as ..... (A interrupts)

M: He finds the end of the year difficult and he seems to find the beginning of the school year and the ends quite difficult. He's OK in the middle. I think he is very aware that he is facing transition next year.

E: Have you talked a bit about it?

M: Yeah, I've now got a Statement for him.... very recently.

E: That's quite a long wait you've had for that,

M: Yes but we've told him he will be able to go to a school where the teachers understand about children with aspergers.

E: Is there a school like that?

M: There's one in Thanet, there's quite a demand for places, but we think it's ..... we're going to visit the Unit at The Abbey. But they try to give integrate into the mainstream ninety percent of the time and I think he will find that very difficult.

E: Right.... it's so cosy here?

M: At Laleham there are 8 to a class and 2 adults. So hopefully ..... I think it may be the only place we put down on the form actually because we think it's the best.. There are a few other Units attached to mainstream schools like the Abbey, but they are in Dartford and West Malling so really they are too far and there isn't another Specialist School for high functioning autistic spectrum disorders

E: How did you get his diagnosis? Was it privately?

M: No we moved here. He'd started Reception Class where we lived before and he was terribly unhappy. It was a very noisy class and he had quite a loud and aggressive teacher and I think he found all of that really difficult and we moved here after about half a term and within .... and we'd always felt sure everything was ok but equally .... What were we going to say 'what was the matter?' Because he wasn't ..., I'd worked previously with children with Autism,



he was not Autistic and he wasn't the sort of savant you might expect. A lot of people say, he didn't have any amazing capabilities, a number that would make you say 'Oh yes, this child has definitely high functioning autism. It wasn't like that at all, but within a

couple of weeks of us leaving here we had a Parents Evening with the Reception Class teacher who asked if we had had him assessed or anything because she said that his spatial awareness was very poor and he was crashing into things in the classroom and he wouldn't interact with the other children and we said "What do we do?" and she said "You're best bet is probably to go to your GP, so it was the GP who referred us to the Child Health ....., Dr P.... anyway, I can't remember what her technical term is and she said she could send us via George Turn House but that was taking about 2 years, so she went to Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational and Physiotherapy to sort of piece things together, So speech and language therapy.

E: They're very helpful there.... they sort of put people together.

M: Yeah they were. Well he had Speech & Language Therapy Assessment and the Occupational and Physiotherapy Assessment which said he had just slightly above moderate dyspraxia and we said once she's read all this report we would hand that to Dr P.... and she said it's an autistic spectrum disorder of an Asperger's type. It's about as clear as what you'll get.

E: Yes.

M: And that's it. The whole process took 18 months.

E: Yes. Was that a relief for you?

M: In one sense I was relieved because it helped. It meant we could help him go through the world a bit better and try and help other people understand him a bit better, and in another sense I think I found it really difficult because it's such an unknown quantity. You know, you don't know if your child will cope in a mainstream school and I suppose for a very long time I kept telling myself that it was something he would grow out of. You know at some point he'll grow out of this. At some point he'll just have a spurt and that will be behind him, because lots of people used to say to me, you know my child is just the same, they used to do that. They don't do it any more.. And so I think part of me had thought he would grow out of it, but actually I had just finished a course on Teaching Further Education and I when we got the diagnosis I just felt I had to stop and needed to stand back a bit really and try to work out what that meant so I just started working as a dinner lady which was enough at that point I think.

E: Was that here?

M: Yes. Just so I could get to grips with things.

E: Oh right. It sounds as though you have done very well but it just takes a lot of adjusting.

M: I think I was actually quite....., at the time although I kind of knew it was coming, I was actually quite shocked and D's very different to me character wise and he was completely, 'It's fine, it's not a problem. It doesn't change who he is.' Whereas I just felt I needed to rethink my mental furniture. I think I continue to feel that as he grows up, but I suppose you see the things.. Yes in his Year 3 and Year 4, he integrated very well, he coped very well and we thought well actually maybe he will be fine in mainstream school. He seems to be managing ok. There were a couple of little things he struggled with but nothing major, but then at the beginning of this year he seemed to find it really, really hard. I think as his peers matured and he didn't change in the same way.

E: They are a little bit pre-pubescent in Year 6.

M: Absolutely and I suppose it's now that I'm thinking longer term. Obviously you can't predict, you've got to let him do things and not hold him back because you're thinking, I can see that difficulty. Yeah. But at the same time making sure that you are, you know, providing the safety net. And it could be difficult with any

child, couldn't it? You don't know. You think – well by the time they're 21 they'll be so independent... (laughter).... I learn this from friends, other children.

E: Well how do you think that Tim feels about his progress in school?

M: He is quite hard on himself. He compares himself. He never used to. He's very aware now of the difference between himself and other people.

E: Do you think he's conscious of this?

M: I think he is. I think he's both, he said to me the other day "Why am I not good at anything? And he doesn't mean he's not good at anything. He means he wants to be the best at something, you know he wants to be better and be able to show other people that and I think he finds that.

E: He must be the best at history, surely?

M: He must be and I think he is very aware that he's work doesn't look the same as other people. He's aware that his writing is not the way he wants it to be.

E: Oh.

M: Yeah. But you see if you try and twist it positively, he'll say "Yes but it's not like that and it's meant to be like that. Or imply that it's not very good.

E: It's not as good as he wants it to be?

M: Yeah, yeah. But I think he's quite hard on himself and especially things like sport and that he finds very difficult.

E: Has he had any Occupational Therapy?

M: He had a few. They do a summer school and he went to it for a couple of years ago, but because of his other needs he often struggles to participate appropriately, and often there were things he didn't want to do and he also found it different and quite strange most of the time with all the people. He would not conform. You know he wouldn't participate in the way the ladies told him to and I could tell one of the helpers found it very difficult and was quite annoyed by the fact that all the other children weren't walking on the benches when they were told and Tim was just rolling round the floor and I couldn't get him to do anything.

E: And it made everybody anxious.

M: And then I got stressed. I mean he liked going. He really enjoyed going the two summers he went. At the end of two summers his movement, particularly his gross motor skills were within a normal range so he didn't really need.....

E: But he isn't really interested in football as such but he has mentioned it. He talks about his brother and Dad and the football coach.

M: He says he wants to try archery. ....

E: Right, there may be something you see that interests him.

M: Yeah and he did go on a Kent Scouts do and Activity Day for people with additional needs and he went on that last summer and he went on that independently. We took him and left him. He loved it

E: Right.

M: But no. He had a go on the climbing, he had a go at Archery, he did a couple of other things. There were some things he didn't want to do. Understandably but no I think he really enjoyed it.

E: Yes..

E: Good, good. Well he's learning about his own capabilities and he's trying to push himself.

M: I think so. Yeah, yeah. He has a go. And he loves going out on his bike round the roads and that.

E: Good.

M: We try not to keep him from doing anything. Much as I want to protect him. (laughter).....

E: Well that's really how he feels about his progress. How do you feel?

M: I think that he is doing very well considering what he has to contend with. I think as we develop more ways of teaching that encompass many learning styles and particularly ways of recording

E: You mean become more inclusive?

M: Yeah absolutely. I think that that can only benefit people like Tim, and all sorts of learners actually.

E: I guess it is mainly a case of keeping aware of all .....

M: Yeah, absolutely and you know for many children recording and pictures with a couple of words which explain is enough to show their learning, without it being paragraphs of writing.

E: His drawing is very succinct...

M: I find it interesting because I've been in the classroom today and I wanted them to record on a story board, and the people who wanted to do it with bullet points were the people who are traditional learners, and they said 'Oh, I don't like doing it in pictures, but I said 'I want you to try', but for a lot of people they are much quicker that way. You can still see what they have understood.

E: There's room for everyone....

M: So I think if that can continue I think that he will be fine but I think while it's all about writing pages of stuff, then I think he'll struggle with that, partly because it takes him so long to get the instructions.

E: Oh he has trouble with that? How did he get on with his extension sessions?

M: He loved it. He talks about it. He is not one who talks a lot about what's going on, but he'll often say "I'm seeing P today". He has enjoyed that.

E: I think it would be really good if it continues, but I don't know what the circumstances are but I can try to talk to Trish about it, it's just having this time out from the agenda of the timetable and sometimes I just sit and watch him and let him choose, I have to strike a balance between letting him totally control. Sometimes we negotiate and say well if we're going to have the things he likes to do and if there is something I want to do, he says 'Well, that's all right.' So it's striking a balance.

M: Yes he's getting better at doing that at home.

E: Good.

M: I mean we do try and forewarn him what's going to happen and when it is going to happen.

E: He needs to know

M: Yes. But we can also, we can negotiate you know, because we forgot we had to go to town to do this but if we do that now, we could do that later or one other time we could do this and he is better at that sort of thing, as long as he understands.

E: I mean that's why I told him last week I wouldn't be coming so that we could spend tomorrow looking back over some work he has done and thinking about it, and try to hang on to those things because he likes to know when I am coming.... knows I have him in my thoughts..... that's how we manage to move to the next thing. Sometimes he seems very anxious.

M: Yes, he gets very worried. He worries about things that I'm sure lots of children don't worry about. You know he worries about issues that he might catch on the news. He worries about things like what happens if we die and there's no-one to look after him? And he knows we will die one day, and I say well hopefully it won't be until you're very grown up. But he struggles to get to grips with things like that. I think he probably worries a lot more than most.

E: Yes he said he was going to go on a boat but he worries about sinking and he then talked about 'The Titanic'.... he has an idea about these sort of things.

M: Well, I doubt we'll do it now, but my friend has just moved to Canada and I thought one day we'll go and because I said I wouldn't go on my own, we needed to go as a family, it's too long to be away on my own, you know, and anyway

something good like that you want to share, and he said 'How would we get there... and I said on a plane.... and he said what about the terrorists?

E: Even things like the Jenka game, the one children enjoy playing, where you take out pieces... Tim played it once and hasn't wanted to play it any more because it's too..... But what I wanted to do was play it with him to show it was ok. Even if it falls all over the place, actually it's ok, it doesn't matter, we can pick it up.

M: He's been like that a couple of times if I get...and I try very hard not to get, but if things happen at home sometimes, say something gets spilled. On a bad day that might upset me. He's ever so good at looking after me, he says 'Oh well, it doesn't matter. I'll get a cloth' and he wipes it. He actually talks to himself if he does that, he says 'OK, I can mop it up' and he kind of, it's like he tells himself. He tries to reassure himself.

E: And then he does the same for you?

M: Because I want him to know that some things really don't matter. They're not worth getting upset and stressed over.

E: But I think the thing is when you can rehearse things in your mind and intellectualise them, it's the feelings, the feelings that don't seem to take any notice of your reasoning and I think that is how it is for Tim.

M: I do get worried because he's quite..... I had a panic after he started hitting himself and he got cross with himself ...

E: Did this happen just recently?

M: He hit somebody outside because they had....., no he hit them accidentally in a game, and then he started to stamp, scratching himself and biting himself and he was very angry with himself because he had hurt them. He knew he shouldn't have done it. He's done it a couple to times at home and he's also started saying what he wants to do to himself when he's cross with himself. And I try and play that down and try and not make a big panicky thing over it, because that is not going to help really.

E: But he does get angry.... everybody gets angry.

M: Yeah.... and those things I do find that concerns me. He says 'What if I go out and walk under a bus? I say 'You mustn't do that you know'. But it's quite hard to..... I can't resist thinking of.....

M: Yeah. And with the extra things on top as well. Anyway, thank you very much.

E: Ok.

**Appendix 3.ii –Interview with Tim’s teacher Mrs Peel**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford P = Adult Participant Mrs Peel**

E: Mrs. Peel thank you for coming. Can you tell me how you would describe Tim’s strengths?

Mrs. P: OK, Tim has a vivid imagination and I think that helps him particularly with literacy work. His descriptions of items or characters is very good. It’s the creativeness I think that’s...

E: I think you are right.

Mrs. P: That, that’s a bonus to him and then obviously placing it down on paper is where the support needs to be, but certainly he is very vocal in his opinion, very vocal in description of things as I’ve said before.

E: He seems to have quite a wide vocabulary.

Mrs. P: He does, he is not limited or fazed by new words either. He will take them on board and use them very, very well. He is very quick to go and gain an understanding of what the word is, or he will come and ask. He is very interested in learning and using.

E: He is quite communicative....

Mrs. P: He has, he has improved this year actually I believe, his ability to put things across or to show he has an opinion of things, which I think for him is a benefit, and a bonus. Obviously he still has difficulties in other areas, but ....

E: OK we will move on and think of any other strengths, of drawing or whatever. But how would you describe Tim’s difficulties?

Mrs. P: Well his difficulty is, his ability to focus on an activity for a long period of time, if it is not associated to something that is of particular interest to him, or a favourite topic for him. He will sit for a lesson looking at or delving into retrieving information on topics, particularly Model 2 has a huge fascination..

E: That’s history isn’t it?

Mrs. P: Absolutely and geography he is interested in we found too, but if it is something such as in numeracy, he struggles with the concepts. That’s where his attention sort of wanes really. But I have to say over the last year he’s wanting to record his work by himself even though he will still continuously asks questions. He has improved in the fact that he wants to do the work by himself, but his ability to do that independently from the very beginning is not there. So he does have to be settled very quickly, be given very strong guidelines and again that needs to be reinforced throughout the lessons as well.

E: Keep having to bring the attention to the task, is that Liz’s role?

Mrs. P: Partly Liz’s role when she’s in the classroom or when she is in a group working with him, but again it comes down to me as well. I give a lot of input during the class day with Tim, and with another little group of children as well, but I do try and focus on Tim as well at the beginning of the lesson because I know that if I don’t get hold of him at the beginning of the lesson then he will wander He has liked to wander round the classroom, which again is difficult to bring him back.

E: Yes

Mrs. P: Down to his table. Difficulties as a learner, he finds group situations very, very difficult.

E: The social aspect you mean?

Mrs. P: Very much so

E: All the sort of, well, I suppose the social aspect is linked to working together....

Mrs. P: Yes, it's taking on board other people's opinions or options to doing things, he has an idea and again his strength of coming up with ideas, ways of solving things, going about carrying out a drama for instance, he will come up with lots of lovely ideas, but when it is other people's time to put their options across.

E: He is not so sure.

Mrs. P: He finds it more difficult to take those on board and to work with those ...

E: Ok you have .....how do you think he feels? How do you think Tim feels about his progress?

Mrs. P: When he speaks about his progress it is a very negative thing. He is often coming out with phrases such as – I am not good enough. Doesn't always say – I can't do this – like a lot of children do, but he will say – I am no good at this, I am a failure. Ermm now whether that's, I actually believe that that is his opinion. I don't feel that he is saying that because he thinks that is what I need to hear.

E: Or he wants you to counter act it ..... yes?

Mrs. P: Ermm however I have managed to get to the point where I will pick out what he has achieved and what he has done very, very well and I see the smile on his face and he does recognise actually he can be good at something.

E: So that is your relationship growing isn't it and, and your understanding of him..

Mrs. P: Oh yes definitely it has grown. It has really grown this year and I think he is growing in confidence with me. He can talk more of how he feels about himself.

E: That is good.

Mrs. P: He is not happy a lot of the time I don't feel ermm when he trying to put across to other people what his positive aspects are .....

E: I was going to ask you then, how do you feel about, how would you describe Tim's relationships with others?

Mrs. P: It was very, very good a couple of years ago, lots of the teachers that have taught him throughout the years said that he had a good relationship with children, with his peers, because the children with him were more accepting of him and I think that now they are 9 and 10 year olds ...

E: They are pre-pubescent aren't they?

Mrs. P: They are and then I don't they are (pause) as forgiving of Tim, I think their understanding of how he deals with situations and how he can now become quite angry about things, then they are just seeing that as another child is angry. They are not seeing it actually as part of Tim's difficulty. So they are not very forgiving of him and, which means he becomes very angry, very upset with other children as the other children become with him too.

E: So he gets into confrontation situations.

Mrs. P: He does, he does more so now I think than there has been. And that happens in the play area and in class too. There is no distinction between different areas.

E: So it is difficult for Tim and it is difficult for the other children too. That is interesting.

Mrs. P: But I think he has a small group of friends who ermm. they are not as regular as you would know class friends to be. They sort of come of go, but you know that if he is in difficulty they will there for him and I think ...

E: They look after him?

Mrs. P: They do, and he has particular girls in the class that he likes to spend time with.. I think he feels comfortable with them and they don't judge him and his differences.

E: That is good, that is good. Do you think he is increasingly aware of his differences?

Mrs. P: I do believe he is, over this last year I have seen more, of that coming out, but ... ermm

E: What about any particular areas of progress that you feel that he has made?

Mrs. P: I think just progress..I think just communicating with the adults he is really coming into coming into understand when they are to be of benefit to him, which I think is really nice. It seems to me he working well with Liz as well.

E: She is a key figure.

Mrs. P: And he picks her out. He picks her out, which I think he now understands why she's there.

E: And they have a good, a positive relationship?

Mrs. P: They do, indeed they do. He does his ICT with her as well and obviously that has built a relationship, a working relationship with her.

E: How do you think he has .., what has been his response about coming to work with me on a Tuesday?

Mrs. P: I think he is enthralled to be coming actually, he is very much into a routine, likes to know what is happening, likes to know what he doing, even though we started this term back on a Tuesday he very much knew that he was going to come and meet you.

E: Good, good.

Mrs. P: And was very pleased to come and meet you and I.. he does chat a little bit about what he speaks about. I don't particularly ask him, but he willingly just comes every so often and says that he has done something or said something ..... so I think he very comfortable about you coming and sharing time with you.

E: Well, one of the things he expresses to me, that he is concerned about his secondary placement.

Mrs. P: Hmm

E: He is, even though it is Year Five, so towards the end of this term I am going to begin to talk to him about the fact that I won't be here in September, to prepare him for that ending, but hopefully if the Head decides that this project continues maybe there will be some continuity, somebody to work in this room or a room like this because he does need one to one, it does seem to be helpful.

Mrs. P: It does, like I said with the group situation he does like one to one. He does control. You have be careful that is something that staff or adults that work with him have to be aware of. He can lead the staff down a particular road that he wants to be and through discussion as well.

E: He does that with me, and I think if I had more time, and was here for longer perhaps next year if I were here I would be thinking I would like to work with Tim in the group situation, but I don't think I going to have time in what's left of this term but he is a very interesting child to work with and I feel quite fond of him.

Mrs. P: Lovely, thank you.

E: You mentioned more strengths.

Mrs. P: Yes just to go back, Tim, when he is producing a writing piece of work finds it very, very difficult to keep his letters at a particular size, and within a particular space. However that has very much improved this term. At the beginning of January we started on the touch typing and he is incredibly fast at typing now, very accurate at typing.

E: He is very fast at writing as well.

Mrs. P: He is now, he is now, and I have seen improvement in his writing, but actually a lot of his work is presented on the computer, which I think benefits him. It means he gets his work done within the time that needs to be set. Whereas his writing, hand writing, would probably take him a lot longer and he misses things when he's writing because his writing becomes big and overlarge.

E: His drawing is good?

Mrs. P: His drawing is fantastic and he will happily describe every little detail. It all means something to him, which I think is very precious so whether..and it is all rather cartoony as well and very black and white. He chooses not to use colour, whether there is of any significance I don't know, but certainly great detail, and good discussion when he has done his art work.

E: I will show you some of the drawings he has done while he has been here.

Mrs. P: One other thing that he is very positive about is, he is interested in ICT at the moment. Obviously there are rules to work by when you are working on the computer but he's picking those up very, very quickly, and I am wondering whether that's working because of the interaction that he has with Liz and the steps that he can see himself making using the numeracy and literacy programmes

E: They are really motivating him?

Mrs. P: Very much so, very much so and he is again eager to talk about that and that has boosted his self esteem.

E: I know you are using some very good programmes with him.

Mrs. P: Yes, yes. That is lovely. Thank you.

E: OK



**Appendix 3.iii Interview with Tim's Teacher Assistant Liz**  
**E= Researcher Erica Ashford L = Adult Participant Liz**

E: Liz thank you ever so much for doing this. We have had a couple of talks before and during that time you told me that you were leaving for a different role, could you tell me if people know now and if Tim knows how that happened?

L: About 3 weeks ago I told Tim after I was speaking to his mum saying that I needed to start preparing him for the fact that I am going and I haven't really noticed any difference, so I don't know. I just said to him that he would need someone else and that he would be meeting someone else in September and hopefully we could introduce them before I left, so there was a bit of a ..

E: How did he respond?

L: He just said OK. Didn't seem particularly worried, hasn't asked me anything about it or anything.

E: So it is a big change for you?

L: A huge change for me, can't wait.

E: You are starting an occupational therapy course at Christ Church.

L: I am

E: Fantastic, might see you there.

L: Yes, definitely. Looking forward to that.

E: But it has been a full year and I wonder whether you could describe some of the ways you have supported Tim.

L: Ermm. I support Tim one to one every day. I have him in the class room a little bit one to one, but I take him out and do lots of different activities with him. Some group activities, but only groups that may be up to six, but mostly it is one to one me and him. ICT, we do Fizzy together with the Social Communication Project on Cartouche together. So do a lot of work with him.

E: Every morning or at ....

L: Every morning hardly in the class at all. Usually out of the class.

E: What have you got to know about him?

L: That he likes trains. I have got to know that he, academically, works better if he's in peace and quiet and he can keep asking questions and that he can, there is not too much going on around him and it's his own space and place to work which he really, really needs.

E: So the classroom is quite difficult?

L: Classroom is quite difficult even though it is a big classroom and not a particularly big class.

E: Or crowded because ....

L: No, and he is sat on his own at the back. So it is really quite well set up for him. He still works better when he is taken out and given his own space, his own place to do things. Ermm. What else do I do? I make sure he has got a timetable so he knows what he doing pretty much during the day. That's it really.

E: What particular strategies have helped him which your learning about Tim has led to you use with him?

L: I think we really started to build a good relationship when I took him out first, to do the ICT with him every day. And from that we went on to do Cartouche which is the social communication spot with him as well. You ask him three different things at different times during the day. He has ICT which is in numeracy every morning for about half an hour, forty minutes, with me and another girl called Sophie, with just the three of us, and he has social communication three times a week for about forty five minutes which is on the computer again, on the Cartouche programme.

E: And he is much happier on a one to one,  
L: Much happier on a one to one.  
E: While he is on a one to one he is able to engage with the work?  
L: Yes.  
E: And perform really and complete tasks?  
L: Complete tasks, complete them happily with confidence, successfully, to, you know, a level that I want them completed at and I think as much because he is taken out of a noisy classroom and he can think and he can, you know with all that going on and you are unable to filter it out so much. It must be really hard to concentrate.  
E: So how do you think Tim feels about his work?  
L: I think in his ICT and his Cartouche I think he would be very confident and proud of his progress. You know he would be more than happy to show anyone all of the stuff that he has put together and you know it is to a high quality. In the classroom he quite often doesn't manage to finish things and I am not sure if he always understands what he has done, if it just me saying copy this out, write that out, that he just isn't completing things. Haven't really had enough sort of chance or ability to you know work out how much success is his own in the classroom.  
E: It must be quite intense for you being with him all the time?  
L: It is really, really hard work sometimes because you are not getting break from him and he is not from me and I don't think that is good. So if he is having a bad day, or I am really tired, it is not..  
E: You need a lot of patience with him  
L: He needs it with me as well you know,  
E: You are trying to get him to engage. It is quite an intense relationship really.  
L: It is.  
E: And you are caught because if you introduce other children into the group then it's tricky as well.  
L: Yes. So if another adult comes in and takes over and sort of share responsibility it doesn't work either.  
E: I get the sense that you feel quite lonely.  
L: Yes it is quite lonely. There is just me and him and another girl who sometimes comes into the equation.  
E: What about, you know, you have touched on it, how would you describe Tim's relationships,..... think first of all have view of you or his peers or other adults.  
L: With other adults I think he is maybe quite successful or confident maybe. Probably as much because the adults round him are out there for him and you know, probably want positive things for him, whereas I don't think children's process and sort of think like that.  
E: So he feels safe with adults.  
L: Yes I think so. I don't know that he has particularly got any friends of his own age. He certainly doesn't play with anybody or talk with anybody in particular. He seems to find other children, uhm,.. Ermm he doesn't seem to understand relationships with other children. He quite often says he is being bullied but I don't actually think he is. I think that..  
E: You haven't seen any evidence of it.  
L: I haven't seen any evidence of that. What I have seen is him going in and not understanding the dynamics and the priorities of relationships and play etc. and therefore him getting it wrong and the other children being scared off because of that, because he is also quite tall as well...  
E: Does he get angry?  
L: And he is quite powerful and he does get angry and frustrated  
E: And has he struck out at anybody?  
L: I have heard, yes, I haven't seen that but I have heard that.  
E: Whereas with an adult he can be quite communicative and yet he really struggles with his peers.

L: Yes, I think also he is aware that adults are not to be struck out at and you know ...

E: So you think really, yes, he has probably taken quite a lot in working with you or me. He likes rules and he knows the rules, but then when gets in the playground ...

L: The rules don't work do they, there aren't really rules, well there are but there aren't so many on a playground so he needs structure.

E: You said you think the children are frightened or very angry with him or ....

L: I don't think they are angry with him. I think most of the children are extremely tolerant of him and you know if he wasn't in such a sort of good school that he may have had quite a rough time with it, but I actually feel the children are very nice and kind to him, but I do think that sometimes, especially the little ones on the playground, that he can go in, he is probably the tallest I think in maybe his year and we sort of goad him a bit like a bull in a china shop and ....

E: Yes he is very tall.

L: Yes, that upsets them?

E: Has it been a good experience for you with Tim.

L: Oh yes, yes, I have only worked with secondary school children and adults before Tim so it has been very very different for me to go back right to the beginning of the, well not quite to the beginning because he is Year 5 and 6, but you know, the, yes, to go back a bit and see. I have found it very positive and I have really enjoyed working with him and will really miss him more than probably anyone else probably because our relationship is quite intense.

E: I think he will miss you.

L: Oh well yes, I just hope that ...

E: He says nice things to me about you

L: That's good.

E: I think I told you that time, but I didn't know you told him you were leaving. In the last couple of weeks he has been all over the place for me.

L: Well I am really, really hoping that before I go, I have only got about 4 weeks to the end of term, that they appoint someone so they could sort of take over.

E: You need that overlap.

L: Yes, but I don't know if they have organised that. I don't think they probably have and I don't think they'd pay for it, which is such a shame because Tim so needs that..

E: That continuity

L: He does

E: Because last week I told Tim that actually I have only got two more weeks here and he said right then I'll have to get used to that, but he's obviously at the same time getting used to the fact that you are going.

L: Yes, lots of changes for him, new class, new teacher, new classroom,

E: Yes he has got a lot on, bless him.

L: Yes he has and of course next year will be his final year here and then he will be looking at secondary school as well.

E: He already worries about secondary school, I'll show you some of his work in a minute and you can see, (pause) he's a very interesting little boy ...

L: He is, I really, really am very fond of him, I really do like him.

E: Now I hoping to come back to sports day and see him but my list individual session will be on the third. Is there anything else you want to say about Tim that I haven't asked you or – oh I wish she had asked me about that.

L: Only that I think that he just doesn't understand most of the things that are going on, especially in relationships

E: And socially,

L: Socially, yes

E: And emotionally

L: And emotionally and you know I wish I had more time to do those sort of things with him, because you know to at least teach him the rules, even if he learns them parrot fashion and doesn't quite understand the feelings behind, he just understands how ...

E: How to go through the motions.

L: Yes, yes, because he has learned that through life hasn't he. That was it really and oh I was going to put a timetable in for him, before I left, so he knew every half hour what sort of was happening and I thought that would help him, but apart from that no ...

E: What is the Cartouche?

L: Ah, Cartouche is really exciting. It is whole IT, ICT programme and lots of different areas from learning French or English or Maths, you know, or whatever whether it be a science, the Tudors, or anything you want to learn. But we do Social and Communication Skills and it is basically like a fill slide, lots of different scenes and you have a set scene to start off with which tells a little bit of the story and then you make your own, the next scenes yourself. So it could be there's a problem on the programme, someone has pinched our football, then Tim, or whoever is using it can then say well come on or whatever comes next.

E: That is really good.

L: And then we can look at what comes next and I can say, what about if we did it this way, or we did that way, would that help the situation, but it great because he can put sound effects in....

E: And he gets relieved about that, like he draws cartoon, I will show you some of the things that he's done.

L: It's the same as that isn't it because he does things like that by scene, like slides. So it must be how he sees it all mustn't it.

E: So it must help him. His family watching a train come in or video, (warm laughter) one is Play station. Dover castle, that's King Henry V111at the top left.

L: (Laughs)

E: That's Lottie, the Queen of I don't know what's cat. I do try to make a timetable for the children who are coming to see me here, interesting the hours that come, like a train timetable and then ah this is him thinking about how he is going to get to his new school, what he is going to find there, new friends, new learning, new teachers, that is not for a while yet, think of this year.

L: I have been doing that with him though, at well about how he will get to school and how does he feel about that, and different ways of doing it and you know different classrooms and things and so maybe we have mirrored each other a bit.

E: Yes, that is very useful. And then I gather it was some bullying, he was helping a little boy who was being bullied by a bigger boy.

L: Well good for him that he actually does see that he can go in and help.

E: The interesting one was when the fire alarm went.

L: Oh we were doing fire alarms as well, in the Cartouche, and maybe there has been a bit of mirroring

E: Well we were sitting here and the fire alarm went and he jumped up and screamed.

L: Did he?

E: He finished this but it took ages. This is his family and how he sees his family. There's Tim. I use these buttons and get him to identify himself in here. He likes the red gem. His mum was the blue gem and that is his dad there, little brother, very close, very close family.

L: But he sees himself and his mother as equal, and dad and J. slightly out, but part of it, very much part of it. That's good. He really does have a strong relationship with his mum.

E: I'm going to speak to him later today. And that's another thinking about alarms. And this is when he thought he was being bullied I think, in the class, he was going to get a brown, and paint someone's name. G. I think, he talks about G.

L: Oh G. does Fizzy with us and sometimes they clash.

E: Do you think that is because Tim wants you to himself?

L: Partly that, but I do do it with another lady, so he isn't, so there is only five children and two adults doing it. I think Tim just doesn't cope with how naughty the two boys are and he wants it structured.

E: Right. OK thank you.

(Tape ends)

**Appendix 3.iv - Interview with Tim's SENCO Trish**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford T = Adult Participant SENCO Trish**

E: And what about Tim? I have just see Tim with a very long face after sports day because he doesn't participate, but he didn't look very happy.

T: No, no he didn't participate today.

E: He told me that he doesn't participate because he gets bit wild and cross if he doesn't win. So he knows why he doesn't participate, but he still feels a little bit sad when the others are coming in and talking about it. So, tell me a little Tim because I know you are erm..are particularly involved with Tim.

T: Yes. Tim is on the autistic spectrum. He is having particular problems at the moment I think in relation to his peer group who seem to be maturing and Tim is obviously maturing at a different rate and erm, is erm.. finding it difficult to communicate with his peer group and is becoming increasingly, well frustrated with heightened anxiety really about transition (to Secondary school).....

E: Yes....he is another child who really I think is very communicative once we got to know each other we had a really good rapport ...on the last session we were both quite sad and I really feel he would benefit from a continuation...if that were possible .....he's only year 5 and he's already really anxious about changing school. Thank you.

### **Appendix 3.v Interview with Conrad's Mother**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford M = Adult Participant Conrad's Mother**

E: And really I suppose I would like you to tell me if you could, a bit about Conrad as a baby?

M: Em...he was a very good baby, and didn't sort of...the first one that slept through from about 6 weeks which was better than his older ...

E: Er..he's got er older siblings?

M: Yes, he is the youngest.....so em it was quite nice to actually have a baby that started sleeping through at about 6 weeks old.

E: That is good.

M: Very sort of contented, there wasn't any sort of real problem as a baby.

E: Did he feed well?

M: Yea ..he was bottle fed because I had problems breast feeding so I decided not to breast feed, but he took to the bottle fine..... He started walking at about 10 months.

E: So he had been quite active really from the start.

M: I was married quite young and he has older siblings

E: And what about other brothers and sisters, are they a similar age or ...?

M: His eldest brother was almost 20, one older sister of 16, and a step sister of 15.

E: Right...so he is quite, he must be quite erm..spoilt, in a nice way, but I mean by his older sisters?

M: Can do. I think he gets on their nerves because they are quite sort of maturer now, and the way they carry on..and he gets in the way...and winds them up a lot so..but he does it in quiet way.. so he gets them going..... So it's his way of getting a bit of power I think...

E: And he also I think wants to be grown up too?

M: He does, I mean he is very independent.....so he sort of has got a lot of freedom living on the estate where he's got the cricket field at the back of us...a cricket pitch with trees and woods and things, so he does play out a lot. He gets on with it. We very rarely have any sort of problems.

E: And do his older sister and brother play sport with him?

M: Erm ...Mainly friends, but his elder brother does go round the back and play football, he goes out and join him.

E: So he has got plenty of space at home to do really what he likes best, which is to run and play ball games.

M: He is not one for sitting indoors.

E: He feels quite confined in school I think....

M: He likes his space. He likes his freedom, but... we have got no games whatsoever indoors. We have got no board games, nothing, because as a child whatever I bought him he wouldn't play with anything..... He just wanted to be running about outside.

E: So he's quite physical, lots of energy .... I tell you what he is playing Jenka, you know that game with the tower block.

M: Yea..he liked..he actually got that out at home the other day. He got grounded for coming home late, so he actually got that out and we was playing with that and I thought then that is the first time I have seen him wanting to play with anything for a long long time.

E: Yes, well it's quite interesting, because I'm hopeless at it...I don't have very good spatial awareness and he has very good spatial awareness which I think he doesn't show as important.... So when we play that game he is better at it than me and he is directing me because he is reading the situation and we have talked a lot about how sometimes we can get along by working together on things. And he gets impatient...because I'm slow and that amuses him no end because he's so

quick and so fast.. but he seems to get quite a lot out of it...and that is what makes me think that he can think quite strategically. Erm... anyway let's move on..... Em... so how do you think Conrad's experience of school compares with your own experiences of school? Can you empathise your experiences..... with him?

M: I think he has got a very low self esteem. That was due to, I think, the trauma that he had when he was about three from his biological father and erm he erm had quite bad behavioral problems because of what happened..... and I don't know if you are aware of what happened or if they have updated on it or anything?

E: No it is just on a need to know basis I think and they tried to maintain confidentiality Conrad's record....but he's had a difficult time?

M: He did. (Voice drops, takes a deep breath – emotional) erm..oh dear.. he was about three and a half,..and I was a victim of domestic violence.. but it got progressively worse until I was actually assaulted in front of the children and I had to call the police and he was hand cuffed out of the house. The marriage was over at that point. Em...We had a...well we had bought a house together, so I wanted to sell the house ...in the Midlands...we got rented accommodation and the three children and myself and we had been in rented accommodation for about a month or 5 weeks and his father decided to ram my house until he actually drove his car into my kitchen and snatched Conrad.... it was about 2 o'clock in the morning and he was drunk and they had armed police after him...and they was intercepted about three hours later and Conrad in the car remembers it vividly. I mean every time.....

E: Conrad was about 3?

M: About three and a half when it happened.

E: It must have been very traumatic for you all.....

M: Yes, very very traumatic and he went up the police and the hospital to be checked over. There was nothing physically wrong with him, but he, em his behaviour, from being like this very good little baby, very contented to ...he turned into.. absolute nightmare. He used to asleep...I found him one night ....he slept with a big carving knife in his bed because he had to have it in an emergency. Then we were made homeless and we had to live in a bed and breakfast for about 5 weeks and they re-housed us temporarily for two years and I had the three children in one room...and Sam got up to go to toilet one night and he said he saw ....Conrad like with a knife in his hand....and Conrad was frightened that his father was going to come back for him. So he had a lot of difficulties. He would do really dangerous things like hang out the bedroom window...even though it was locked, he learnt how to unlock the windows. And he would be running off climbing over the fence to try and get away from the house and I actually had him erm tested for ADHD because of his behaviour was so so vile... climbing the walls basically... type of thing ....and they said that he was borderline and he had ...it had become a learnt behaviour..... so they put him on Ritalin and after a couple of months I looked into it and realised what it was and took him off it .....and just really worked hard at putting strict boundaries around him, and trying to keep him on track. He had a difficult time and I think he found school really hard initially....and he's been .....quite traumatised by that.

E: Well...it sounds as though you've had a really difficult time...ok.. how do you feel about Conrad's progress in school?

M: I think ...

E: It was a difficult beginning.

M: I think (big sigh), because of that, it sort of put him right back that....I think his em.... I obviously don't know how he would have achieved at school if that hadn't have happened, but em he just couldn't sort of focus on anything and he found it really hard to concentrate and like his, like his very.. em...very short term memory span... erm he couldn't retain anything so, so like whenever he would try and do a spelling list he would learn it all and he would remember it all, but if you asked



him 10 minutes later he wouldn't remember anything and time and time again I found reading with him is a real problem...

E: Reading seems to be a bit of a sticking point. I've desperately tried to interest him in some books and things, but he really has kind of switched off....

M: He doesn't want to know and I just sort of try, I don't even bother reading with him at home now because it was just a battle and it was ...

E: It was hard work.

M: And I used to get frustrated with him because he wouldn't try if he got it wrong – not because he got it wrong but because....he would ....

E: Be cross with himself.

M: Yes, and then he would say – I'm not doing this, and he would sort of like he wouldn't try and I was like thinking it was actually causing more problems to actually try and make him sit down and do it..... So in the end I said I am not going to force him to do it because at school he has to do it, but at home with me he knows he doesn't and it was becoming a real battle and I just thought it wasn't good for either of us really.....

E: Of course the more he goes through school they expect more and more reading, which is hard, hard for Conrad. I think one of the things that helped Conrad and I was that the first thing I said to him was 'in your school I'm not a teacher'...and he seemed to kind of relax a bit then. We sort of played games and talked and just...the idea was to give him just a little bit of time and space out of the classroom and he seemed to respond really well....OK so, how do you think Conrad feels about school and he's going to be moving on....

M: I think he's looking forward to going to Secondary school. I think he wants to be grown up, so .... the fact that his sister, his step sister is still at the same school, so she is going to look after him. She is quite looking forward to sort of having her little brother going there...

E: Mmmm, he told me that she bakes with him sometimes, and things like that so he seems quite fond of her.

M: Yes, they have got a good relationship. Yes I am pleased that she is going to be there because I do worry about whether he going to get to school or not because he sometimes... school he does and I am thinking of him getting on buses and getting into town and getting on another bus up to the school. What if he gets on the wrong bus and ends up in Margate, quite enjoy of the fact that she is going. So I just worry. I never had this worry with the others. They were just, they had the sense to get on with it, but I do worry about him...

E: Do his sisters look after him? Because you know he had a traumatic time at a crucial time in his life....

M: Mmm..I mean they wouldn't let anything happen to him...I feel really protective, but I think because he is a wind-up merchant I think they tend to sort of like tell him to get lost a lot of the time... they clash personalities...

E: What about his relationships, about how he gets on with others in the school?

M: Well the last teacher, she says he is very, very popular. He has a lot of, I think because he uses comedy as a distraction from his actual ability in class where he has ....

E: He has a big sense of humour doesn't he?....

M: I think because of that he has got quite a lot of fans, peer groups, that enjoy being in the classroom and so I think he is a bit of a distraction, but I think, I think he is well liked within in the school and I often hear from teachers that, you know, throughout the years he has been very well liked by the teachers. Although he's comical, I don't think he's moody, or ....

E: And one of the things I have picked up about him when I have played with him, is that it matters if I do make errors he thinks aahhh!...he wants to be in a position where he can actually give something, or do something to help...

M: Yes, because when he used to do Breakfast Club and he used to do 'time-out', and when he was at Breakfast Club some of the little ones that came along and

weren't quite sure how to sort of like do the food and things like that, he would be the first one there sort of helping them, pointing out the breakfast and showing them how to do it and if they were a bit worried then he would look after them. Sort of help them out so.....

E: So when he is given actual responsibility he rises to the challenge?

M: Yes, he does....I mean I have had this talk with him very often about the fact that he does lack confidence and self esteem, but if he is given the responsibility, I mean really take to it, there was an idea and I don't know if it will materialise and I really hope so that the school they were going to let him collect the sports equipment and be a monitor or something. I thought that would be really good for Conrad, but I have not heard anything about whether that ever came to fruition so...

E: Certainly he likes to talk about sport ...he can excel at this.., but of course when it is in the classroom it is difficult. He must feel ... it is finding the right situations for Conrad, where he can make a choice and feel in control.. let's hope the secondary school appreciate that. So a new start, a new beginning. One of the things I've tried to talk a little bit about is when he can't, when things don't go his way or when he doesn't know.. he's very quick then to give up..and we've talked about sometimes things are worth persevering with for the good feeling you get at the end of it...and I talked about things that I saw that he could do...I'm wanted to help him feel more secure in feeling that he can do things...I have also said that to him, but it is tricky and ..... I saw him on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, that was the last time I saw him, I did shake his hand and thank him for working with me and said he'd been a pleasure to be with, that he's a delightful young man and although I won't be coming to school on a Tuesdays, I was glad to know him. I had an image of him and I told him that I'd think of him and ...that we have to try to hold onto the good things and the thing I noticed about Conrad was that he listened and I feel that took things in, but he does need a bit of time and space to call his own.

M: Mmmmm

E: Do you find he will talk to you and listen?

M: He does.... I mean I have always brought my children up to....

E: I mean I know you're very close... it's always mum this and mum that....

M: I don't know if you are aware but I am actually a school counsellor so I work in schools with children, but I work secondary schools so as far as I'm concerned I think it's really important to have good relationships with your children so that they can talk to you and you're there to listen ....so he does, he sometimes...he sort of says he doesn't want to talk about it, so I say well, ok I'm here if you want to talk to me about it...

E: Which is great.

M: And sometimes if I can see he's a bit upset...I can try and coax it out of him and em.. eventually will talk to me about things..... and I..... after the trial was over, I got him into counselling quite quickly and he had play therapy for a while and then you know like he went past the road where the house that got damaged ...he'd always say..that's that house isn't it? And I'd say yeh, and he just needed to just talk about it and I'd check out how he was feeling about it and things like that.....and that went on for quite a few years and every time we went past he would actually mention it, and we'd just sort of process it together about things, and I'd just reinforce that although that was a bad experience, you're ok now and that you have got a good family around you now..

E: So you re-inforce that there's a lot of ongoing support which is really good .....and do you feel things are getting better?

M: Well ...leaps and bounds better than it was (laughs)... it was really hard work I mean in the first few years after that. There was a lot of trouble at school and he really didn't like himself...he was really struggling, but I think the last couple of years he has calmed right down, he is a lot more...can listen he would sit there and before if you were trying to talk to him about his behaviour he would just have

a glazed look in his eye and it would just sit there and I would say Conrad, Conrad, and he would look at me and then he would sort of come back to you, but again he would just...but now I find that he will actually sit and he really listens .. and we do a lot of this...like I say will you repeat back to me what I just said..and he wouldn't know what you were talking about...then I'd say listen and I'd really have to get him to.....get him to really focus on what you were saying, , but I find now that he does take things on better.

E: Good.

M: But it is a struggle this sort of thing because any time he can't do something, it all 'oh, I'm stupid, I'm thick, I'm a div...mmm....and I really sort of say; 'No you're not, you do struggle with certain things, but then we all do..and re-inforce the fact that you're really good at sport and there're a lot of people who aren't good at sports...and you're up for that..

E: Let's hope the Secondary school will support him in that direction.....

M: I think, he did want to go to Canterbury High because there are a lot of sports facilities and I do actually work there.

E: You don't think it would be a good idea to be in the same place?

M: No, it wasn't that it's the fact that the behavioural problems are quite bad at Canterbury High.

E: And St. A... is smaller?

M: Slightly smaller, but their discipline is a lot stricter there and I think he needs those firm boundaries around him because he will get in with the wrong crowd.

E: I think it really is important that he remains with a good set. I talked to his teacher and she has put him on a table with somebody who is really good to work with and he does defer.....

M: Yes he does, I found, I know that he has needed to go outside of class for extra help with his spelling but he just hates it and I spoke to his classroom teacher about this and I said I know he needs this extra support, but I think it is knocking his confidence and self esteem so much that he is adamant he doesn't want to go. So he is not switching on and he is not taking stuff in and it has got to the point where he said; "I didn't want to come to school and it is "I hate this" and " I hate that, I know that everyone knows that I am stupid" and it is just confirming his.....

E: His worst thoughts.

M: .....Yes, and they were thinking about Conrad and letting him stay in the classroom, he went for a little while and then he said no I am going back upstairs again.

E: Well after the SATs I think he's rejoined his class, but there's a lot of pressure on year 6 but then it is interesting when he was back in the class, he didn't want to come to see me on Tuesday and I thought about it and I didn't force him and said it was his choice....I think he needs to feel he can exert some choice ...did he say anything about it....or was when I saw you the other day, the first you knew about our sessions?

M: No because we were going to have sort of look at trying get him some counselling but because I was part of the school counselling team I knew a lot of the counsellors and I didn't actually want people that I'd worked with, working with Conrad...

E: Mmm, that's tricky....

M: But I ....I would have gone for that if that was the only option. I would have seen him go without help, but it was at the time that you were coming to school and I said well as you were already seeing Conrad at that point, I thought I would rather stay with that and Conrad had told me that he was seeing you and that he liked you and he said that he wanted to and he said a little bit about what was happening and I said are you happy for that to continue and he said yes, and I just thought time with you we will just leave it as it is then and I spent a lot of time one to one back home with him

E: Well I am not a counsellor, but a learning mentor, but I feel that his emotional well being is necessary before learning can take place and I think it has helped him a little bit perhaps to have that time and space I would hope he does get the opportunity to have something like this in his secondary school because he does need someone to tune in and listen to him and to understand...sometimes he doesn't talk at all....but sometimes he does....someone he trusts.

E: He seems to get on well with his stepfather....

M: Yes they had a lot of problems to start with because he is quite a strict disciplinarian and they clashed a lot and he resented somebody coming into the home....but time's gone on and he did spend a lot of time and effort with Conrad and em for quite a few years it seemed as if he was hitting his head against a brick wall ...and he said he'll end up hating me...he would do such dangerous things, it was a case of having to be really strict with Conrad and he just hated it, but as times gone on they've really come together..I mean Conrad does his football and his training is on Friday night and he takes him to his tournaments ...and won't miss a match and he loves watching football...and they play fight and mess about...they've got a good relationship now..

E: That's good. Well is there anything else you want to say about Conrad or, school or ....

M: Well I have my view on school as a whole. I just think that, I know the education system is as it is but there are just so many children that don't fit into mainstream school.. I just think ...I just wish they had a bit more leeway for children like Conrad, so that they could express themselves in a different way because I think they are so sort of startled by the fact that they are quite creative in other areas of their life, but that is not valued at all in the mainstream of education.

E: Which you must see that in your role.

M: Exactly and I think he is very good at sports and the fact that he's not academic but he does excel at sports but he represented the school in the League, and he went to play a match and it was against a very hard team and they won three nil and Conrad scored a hat trick, but there was no recognition of that whatsoever. No one actually said well done Conrad. And he just said it as a matter of fact, not ..... and I was really upset about that because I thought she knows he struggles in school. That is one thing she could have praised him for and I went to see the classroom teacher about three days after about other things that had been happening and I mentioned it to her. She said I was really surprised because I heard it, though actually Conrad never told me, I heard it from one of the other children and she said that would be a chance for me to really make it known in the class - you represented the school and you achieved that. I find that hard...Yes the fact that he good at sport but that side of it is not recognised and.....

E: When he gets to secondary there might be more opportunities.....

M: I think though in a secondary school sport is much more competitive. They do like their sports and there will be more sports and I think you, I think

E: If he can find a niche and maybe a teacher, a sports teacher, because I know how they have all missed Mr. Ch.....

M: Yes, he was lovely

E: Somebody like that might make a difference because it is the relationships and the people he meets that will make a difference....

M: I do have my concerns at the moment because I know that at primary school they sort of, they are a bit targeted

E: Yes, there is care and...

M: Exactly.

E: It's that transition, that first year or so, will have to watch

M: .....And I just worry

E: Are any of his friends from here going there?

M: He has got, I mean I think there are one or two from his year that he is going up with. I don't know the ones left. He did sort of just say oh none of my friends

are going up that side because a lot of children are going there. It'll be like that, a fresh start.

E: Well thank you so much for coming and sharing this with me. It is really helpful. As soon as I have transcribed it I will send it and you can read it, see what it sounds like or take apart if you want, and it will all be anonymous in fact it won't be totally anonymous because it is a small world, small school

M: Yes that is fine.

E: Thank you.

### **Appendix 3.vi – Interview with Conrad’s teacher Miss Hill**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford Miss H. = Adult Participant Conrad’s Teacher**

E: OK. Now I want to talk about Conrad. Let us start off by asking how you would describe Conrad’s strengths as a learner in your experience.

Miss H.: Conrad’s strength as a learner, I would say, he responds well on a one to one basis, rather than within the classroom. When I have worked with him, he has produced, well the best work that he has produced has been the one where he has very gentle encouragement and it has got to be very subtle. He does often seek reassurance that he is doing the right thing and actually he is very able at some particular things. I can remember one occasion I spent a lot of time with him working out a logic problem and I showed him how to set it out logically, but he was actually one of the few children within this particular group that was able to think it through brilliantly and he recorded it. Recording his, you know, thinking, it is very difficult for him. So sometimes I do scribe for him although over time he has got better. So he works well on a one to one with an adult that he trusts.

E: He is quite sensitive?

Miss H.: He is incredibly sensitive. If I have given him work that is different to his best friend who perhaps has more able, more challenging work, he will (pause)

E: He knows,

Miss H.: He knows, straightaway. There have been other occasions when we have done some practical experiments with science and he has really shown himself in a positive way.

E: Good, I am so pleased

Miss H.: There was a science experiment where we were investigating different circuits with light bulbs and batteries and he was in a world of his own. He was very animated and enthusiastic and when it came to the end of the unit test he had clearly learnt from that.

E: That is good.

Miss H.: And scored really well.

E: And yet he said to me that science is his worst because it’s the hardest and yet I have seen him in this room work well with scientific processes.

Miss H.: Absolutely it does depend on what is recorded, so I have to think quite carefully how I am going to ask him to record it. Quite often he will work with a buddy, next to him, his friend J. who sits next to him. They work brilliantly together and funnily enough this morning Conrad chose to do Year 6 maths with his buddy and did really well.

E: Good

Miss H.: So his buddy is very quiet, very gentle, encouraging, doesn’t mind Conrad constantly saying how do you do this? So it is interesting that Conrad chose not to do the work that I have actually given him.

E: It does seem that he wants to do well.

Miss H.: I think so, so there were some really positive aspects

E: You said you were going to talk about sport?

Miss H.: He loves sport, football is his main sport. Anything with team games, and ball skills. Anything like that. He is absolutely brilliant. He is very agile. He is very good at working with his team mates and it is very interesting, on one occasion because it was wet outside we had PE in the hall and I gave my class the opportunity of choosing what they would like to do and Conrad said – oh can we play this game. Forget what it was, bench football I think, and I said to Conrad well I am not quite sure how you play it. Could you teach us? And he showed us and he was amazing. He was the centre of attention and he was very good. He was very eloquent, explained it well. He was in control. Whenever the ball went off it was him that got it and started it back in the middle. So sport is a real strength for him. I

would like to see that nurtured. I am sure it will be. He does attend a football club at the weekends and he does have extra responsibility. He has done well in school. He behaves responsibly in school. We do give them extra responsibility, tidying up the PE cupboard, which he relishes.

E: He likes organising?

Miss H.: Absolutely yes.

E: OK, what about Conrad's, how would you describe his difficulties?

Miss H.: His difficulties, I would say, very low self esteem about what he can and can't do. He is a weaker reader. He can read a little bit. Now I think there is an element of can't read therefore he won't read and vice versa.

E: Once he feels he can't do something he won't attempt it.

Miss H.: That is right and that is very difficult to compromise with him, very difficult to cajole him if you like, to try and bring him round to our way of thinking. So I think he is quite a complex character from that point of view because it is quite difficult to reason with him, when he has got something dead set, he doesn't want to do something, it is very difficult to try and break down the barriers there.

E: Would you say he would rather compete than collaborate when he feels he's in that position?

Miss H.: He is very competitive, not just in the sporting, you know, areas,

E: Context

Miss H.: Absolutely, but he is very competitive I think in terms of some aspects of his work. He knows he has got to do it, but there are days when he will just come in and he will or won't want to do it.

E: Which days do they tend during the week?

Miss H.: I would certainly say at the beginning of the week, and definitely after a holiday because towards the end of the week he knows his name has got to remain on the Golden Board for him to have Golden Time and it is very interesting that for his Golden Time the only thing he wants to do is go outside and I have tried reasoning with him when we have not been outside he finds it very difficult to stay inside, no matter what lovely activities we have got. He needs to just release that energy outside and play football or basket ball.

E: Of course it is hard to monitor isn't it?

Miss H.: It is yes

E: OK. How do you think that Conrad feels about his progress?

Miss H.: I think he puts himself down a lot. When I have praised him on fantastic work that he has produced he doesn't always respond as positively as other children would. I mean for example he will just shrug his shoulders. There are occasions when he is really proud of himself and sometimes I have even gone overboard sending him up to the Head Teacher for a sticker, house points, Golden Times, extra Golden Time.

E: Does that help?

Miss H.: It does but, this is where again I wonder just how complex he is because he is not a straightforward individual, but the praise and the sort of tangible rewards if you like, they do work in the, you know, the split instant, but the minute he goes away, that is it. He can forget about it very quickly. So if he starts misbehaving again he has sort of almost forgotten about the reward that he has just had. Am I making sense?

E: Yes you do, yes you do.

Miss H.: So yes he is a very complex character to work with from that point of view where these rewards, intrinsic rewards aren't always .....

E: Useful or deep.

Miss H.: Absolutely, now initially when I first had him we started, I devised a behaviour chart for him and we designed it together, so many stars for him to collect every day would add up to so many stars by the end of the week and I asked him what he would like as a reward if he got all of these stars and for a long time

he kept saying – well I don't know – it wasn't , I want to go outside, but one of the responses he gave me – I would like my mum to pick me up from school, I would like to have more time my mum.

E: Really, that is very interesting.

Miss H.: And I thought that was quite an eye opener and quite heart rending really.

E: You've done quite a lot of deep thinking about that.

Miss H.: I think so. I wonder whether it was deep inside of him, perhaps he didn't have the language to vocalise to me that that was what he wanted. So that was very interesting, but he did find it difficult to think of a reward in school.

E: That would really mean something.

Miss H.: That would mean something to him and that is when he came up with the PE cupboard, clearing that up.

E: What about his relationships with others?

Miss H.: Despite his behaviour, he is a very, very popular individual. Now he, he is actually very comical and at times I have to laugh with him because he is ...

E: Amusing?

Miss H.: Amusing and actually I think he's quite clever in some of the things he says. I can't think of any examples off hand, but he does take me literally sometimes. Well, he will make a quip about it, by changing it.

E: Playing with the language, or playing with words?

Miss H.: Playing with the language and also, as a joke, taking me literally.

E: Right

Miss H.: Knowing jolly well that that is not what I meant. So he is well liked, in a general sense but, on the other hand, there are some children who feel that he does bully.

E: Yes, that is interesting.

Miss H.: So there is sort of two sides of the coin, within the classroom he is well liked, outside he is well liked but there occasions in both situations where he clashes.

E: So do you mean that some children feel threatened?

Miss H.: Yes they do.

E: Tell me about the pink?

Miss H.: The pink, his favourite colour is pink. Now there is another friend of his in another class that loves pink. Now Conrad carries off pink well. He does wear a lot of pink and anything that is pink in the classroom, if we have a pink border he has to have it. And there was an occasion before half term when we doing D&T and I was, we were making slippers and I was showing the children, teaching them how to sew, showing them how to cut out the paper template of the slipper, transferring it on to a fabric, pinning it, and the children were allowed to choose their fabric and of course Conrad very quickly found an enormous expanse of pink fabric and immediately he started dressing up with it, making a long dress and an Indian headscarf with a sari and this is where I reinforce the fact that he is very comical and of course the whole class loved, loved the fact that he was playing around, but he wasn't distracting the whole class.

E: He was having fun.

Miss H.: He was very funny, having fun, I was of course laughing because you couldn't not laugh, but he wasn't doing wrong and I didn't feel it right to reprimand him, but I did make a comment or ask him what would you do if Mrs. M..., what would you think Mrs. M.... would do if she came in and saw you?

E: Mrs. M.... is the head teacher.

Miss H.: The head teacher, and he very quickly responded – well she will probably laugh with me. So he knows he is funny, he knows he can make people laugh.

E: So he is confident about his ability to amuse people?



Miss H.: Definitely. And that is where I think he is well liked within the class, because he just makes everybody laugh. I mean there are some times when he does push the boundaries, and he has to know.

E: Does he know?

Miss H.: He does, I think he likes to push it further and I that is where, I often wonder whether he loses control and just continues without having any care or thought.

E: When you feel that he reaches that boundary and loses control, does he understand what you mean, I don't want to put words in your mouth but ...

Miss H.: He has got a sort of flippant side of him where he, I don't want this to sound disrespectful towards Conrad, but it is almost as if he couldn't care less. He doesn't want to know. I mean straight after our SATs exams it was very much – oh hooray, school has finished, exams finished, that is it, but he know he has still got to participate in the play.

E: Yes he told me about that.

Miss H.: He knows he still has Golden Time and other responsibilities.

E: Can I just ask you how you think he feels about coming up here with the interview sessions with me?

Miss H.: Very interesting because I don't think he likes to be singled out and I think he probably, he has never said anything, but I think he probably questions why he is the one going up and not his best chums. Now I don't think he feels threatened in any way, but I just feel that he doesn't want to be the only one.

E: It is another time when he is away from his peers. Ok. Thank you for your time.

### **Appendix 3.vii – Interview with Conrad’s Teacher Assistant Heather**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford H = Conrad’s Teacher Assistant Heather**

E: Shall we move on to Conrad? Over to you, because I know that you have a strong relationship with him (laughter from P) and have been through a lot with him really?

H: I began supporting Conrad in September 2006 in a group of 6 children, 4 girls and 2 boys. I was responsible for their literacy and numeracy working 3 mornings a week. My aim is make learning fun and work at a pace appropriate to the children’s ability. His behaviour and attention spans are partly due to very poor reading skills which he is very conscious of. He avoids writing and reading work if he can. In numeracy he is on a par with the group level of ability. His attendance and behaviour has been less dramatic here. He hates poor presentation of number work, will not cross out, will only rub out, will only use a short pencil. He snaps long ones in half.

E: Gosh that is interesting.

H: I have made every effort to improve the group’s grasp of the four basic rules through games, explanations, and exercises.

E: But it is hard work, isn’t it?

H: He has been hard work. (Laughs) Ermm So in order to get written work done, he initially worked with K. his fellow male pupil, and he would put in a fair share of input of ideas orally, but he copied what K. wrote. Unfortunately K. moved out of the town at the end of November.

E: I remember. It was quite dramatic wasn’t it?

H: At the start of the new term in January Conrad exhibited extreme behaviour in order to avoid joining the 4 girls and it wasn’t possible to move another boy into the group.

E: It was quite a turning point in Conrad wasn’t it really?

H: Yes, but his reaction wasn’t immediate. He survived the last couple of weeks in that term. It was when he came back in January. He had the whole of the Christmas holidays to think about it.

E: Yes, yes, interesting.

H: He would very occasionally accept one to one help from me. The times when he did engage were when we were producing adverts because he was able to use his cartoon drawing skills, which have very few words and when the teaching student produced a video clip on an area of school life with the group, he enjoyed performing before camera and he was also, had a good eye with shooting the films.

E: ... so he likes those practical things, yes. How do you think he feels about his progress?

H: Right, well ermm starting with numeracy sessions with a regular game style mental maths helped all the group but they obviously meant something to Conrad because if I missed it ...

E: He noticed?

H: He would comment and he would be the one of the few that would comment immediately – why aren’t we doing that? And in numeracy Conrad has a desire to achieve with the routines, but in literacy .....

E: He is not interested?

H: I think he is so, I think he is very sensitive to the fact that he is so far behind now in reading skills that he is virtually given up and I think he needs some very imaginative motivation work done, one to one, by someone who is stimulating. And I think also perhaps something more computer related.

E: Because he likes the computer?

H: Ermm I don't know how much he likes the computer, but I should imagine he likes it sufficiently because he, along with some others, right at the beginning of the term, went to Spitfire, which I don't know much about, but it runs at St. Lawrence Cricket Ground. So that is a sport's setting, but it is learning on the computer, it is doing exciting things on the computer. It is not thought related, but it is conducted by people who are good at sport.

E: Which he cares about.

H: He cares about.

E: How does he get on with his pals?

H: Well he is aware of his sexuality. He has great desire to impress and show off to the girls.

E: He has a girl friend doesn't he?

H: Yes. And the girls in the group sometimes respond but they do eventually get exasperated with his perpetual banter. Because the girls have got more ....

E: Other things to do

H: Well they have got more incentive to actually do some work than he has. But he does, he loves being with the lads and he does excel at sports so he is popular with the lads.

E: So it is not a social problem he has really?

H: No, and I think part of the problem, taking him away into a small group is he doesn't like to be picked out because I think, you know, deep down he is perhaps a bit reserved, shy.

E: Quite sensitive

H: Yes, very very sensitive.

E: When I have worked with him one to one, I am showing to him that he shows sensitivity towards me. When we've played this game for example, my spatial awareness isn't as good as his and he finds that quite amusing but he directs me, do that, try that. He does have things to offer in a way, but he is overwhelmed by what he can't do.

H: Yes, and I think he has a sense of family because when we were trying to write a story, a legend, and we were talking about relationship of one character to another, ermm he quite definitely wanted the situation to be resolved happily.

E: Yes, I am sure he would like some happy ending..

H: And it came out.

E: Right. How do you think he feels about coming here, to these sessions?

H: He was enthusiastic, certainly to start with, because it meant coming out of my group.

E: And coming out of the work group and doing something where he felt he was playing.

H: Yes. I am not sure. I think perhaps it is wearing off.

E: Yes, me too

H: But I am not in contact with Conrad .... For this term Conrad, K. and C. are all in Mrs H's class that I am not working with.

E: Back in the fold.

H: Yes, but when he sees me, in the corridor now, because he knows I am not teaching him, he will have a, make some polite conversation, or, you know be nice to me. (Laughs)

E: He has this kind of delayed reaction doesn't he to things, like K. leaving, and it not really hitting home 'till later, you know I am sure he really knows that you were trying to help him.

H: Yes, but the whole situation, he didn't want to be helped in that way, at that time, he would rather be with J. and the lads.

E: He is certainly a powerful child isn't he?

H: Very, and somebody would (pause) there are times nobody seems able to handle. I was relieved really to witness occasions when the class teacher, even the head, struggled, because I realised it wasn't just me.

E: Is it that so I don't care. When push comes to shove ...  
H: Yes. I think so, but I also think it is because all three of us are female and last year he was in Mr. Ch's class.  
E: Mr. Ch., now I have never met him, but he is big in these parts.  
H: He is a delightful person.  
E: Yes, the children often talk about him.  
H: Well he is caring, but he was also responsible for school sport, which is what Conrad excels at and he was always able to rationalize with Conrad and Conrad would respond which he would, he would never do with ....  
E: Is Mr. Ch... coming back? He is not well.  
H: I don't know. That is a very difficult situation.  
E: Well Isabel still talks about him, has drawn pictures about topics she has done with Mr. Ch. So it is interesting, but OK.  
H: I think actually your services in his direction would benefit him considerably.  
E: OK is there anything else you wanted to say about either Isabel or Conrad that I haven't asked or we haven't talked about?  
H: No.  
E: Well you have been really helpful. Thank you.

**Appendix 3.viii Interview with Conrad's SENCO Trish**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford T = Adult Participant Conrad's SENCO Trish**

E: ... and then and then Conrad? Conrad the most....difficult in some ways...

T: Yes, quite challenging really..I think he's exhibiting his teen behaviour at a very early age (laughs) ....lots of self esteem issues I think that raise themselves in attention seeking and mild E (emotional) behaviour and we felt that to give him some time on his own would...

E: Yes. In a one to one situation...

T: Rather than trying to act everything out in front of his peer group to get the attention that he might benefit from on a one to one to...for someone to focus in on his needs...although I do think he is well catered for within his family environment em...I still I think that he is still feeling that need ...

E: Mmmm...he's quite troubled and troubling....

T: Yes..

E: He certainly responded too to the one to one situation I felt and I hope he's going to be alright in his new school..

T: Mmmm.... yes

E: OK ...thank you ...

### **Appendix 3.ix Interview with Isabel's Mother**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford M = Adult Participant Isabel's Mother**

E: I wonder whether you'd like to tell me a little bit about Isabel as a baby?...

M: Mmmm....Well, er Isabel (sigh) unfortunately when she was born she ...aspirated,...er... so for the first week...she..e was in intensive care...special care baby unit on a ventilator..

E: 'Aspirated'...what does that mean?

M:... She inhaled liquid in her first breath

E: Ah ....

M: So she had a you know, or could have developed a very bad chest infection so she her first week was extremely traumatic

E: So she was in intensive care?

M: Mmmm..In...in Kent and Canterbury when, when it still had a special care baby unit

E: In an incubator?

M: Yes, she, she was ventilated and she was in an incubator yes, and for the first 3 days she was critically ill...she was on 100% oxygen, she was sedated, she was...and em..

E: It must have been very traumatic for you and your husband...

M: It was, it was...em ....she was born at home and then had to transferred by ambulance, so ...yes...that was very traumatic and she...she does talk about that quite a lot...we have photographs of the time, and my father-in-law has ....we have ...we've fantastic video collection of the children when they were young and there is video footage of that and 'em she does like to talk about it and she's quite...well I wouldn't say morbid...but she she'll say things like...she well 'I almost died' and 'what would you think if I had died'....you know, she sort of approaches things like that....she's quite sensitive about it...

E: ...She does have a sense of herself being quite vulnerable?

M: Mmmm...yes, I think, yes, she is ...and her self confidence is a really thin veneer....and she wasn't, I mean as a baby she was...erm..delightful really...she's a second child

E:...Yes..

M: So...er...er our first child was completely...er... a girl as well, but erm very, very talkative, you know, very into everything, very bright...that kind of thing....Isabel was slightly more laid back really erm certainly at first...

E: Do you think that reflected how you were?

M: ...Er Possibly, possibly...erm but she started....and of course we were also worried ...specially in the first month...whether she had some residual brain damage because of the fact that by the time she got to the special care baby unit she was blue and she was, you know, very blue and for those first three days she will have had a tremendous amount of oxygen which, well you know of course, in itself can damage...

E: And how were you?

M: Erm...Well thinking back on it now ...I think I was just in complete shock...you know as in...I was there in the hospital with her, but I couldn't be with her because they had all these rules and regulations...you know...once you'd had the baby you can't go and stay in the baby care unit for three days... because you might contaminate it or whatever..

E: Mmmm..

M: So I had to then literally live on the maternity ward and then go in and visit her...(gulps) and then do all the expressing milk and that kind of thing..em.. so it

was vital that I was there, but I don't think I actually took in..the.. er..e-normity of what could happen...I mean....I was a nurse myself,

E: ...Gosh...

M: ....And I was an intensive care nurse myself and I..of course...I knew all those things, but I completely shut that side of myself off...I knew I was doing it, but I could not ...you know ...when it's your own child you, you have to just focus on that...and fortunately, amazingly and still it amazes me now ...it was only a week, the following Sunday she was home

E: ...Gosh..yes..

M: ...You know so once she'd turned that corner you know...she was out, she was off, she was feeding she was you know..it was fantastic..

E: And she was fee..she picked up on the feeding?

M: Yes..yes ....straight away, straight away...but you sort of think 'thank goodness', but sort of for the first few months we were very conscious that we were looking for signs may be, that she... you know....developmental problems, but fortunately...there were none...er we did have one little trip to the ...centre because as she, you know when babies start to push up on the floor....before they start to sort of....she seemed to be over-arching her back – you know in the way some children do..

E: ...Yes..

M: Well, it was just her I think..we did have to go and get assessed...and er...I think we saw a physio.. and somebody..and said I don't think it's anything to worry about...but..

E: So she's been quite cherished because of that..

M: Yes, I think yes she has and I...and of course the other thing that ...I don't know how much bearing this had...but I then changed my career (muffled and difficult to hear) – I'd already done a degree and I went and I started a PGCE when Isabel was 4 –months-old and we had a full time nanny..

E: Oh, right...

M: Lovely girl, young girl, 19, absolutely delightful girl who looked after you know R and Isabel...

E: Yes...

M: So they had..so she had me for 4 months, then I was sort comp..not completely out of the loop, but I was absolutely exhausted because... (giggles) ...PGCE was the most exhausting thing I've ever done..

E: Yes..

E: But as I say we did have this delightful erm nanny and of course she took them you know..lots of social life and all that sort of thing..and..

E: Because there were two of them...

M: ... Because there were two of them and then of course they had the big 'nanny' circle, and they'd all go off and they'd have different afternoons when they'd all meet together..so ...there was that... I do remember that she, that Isabel did.. she slept... she slept more than the first, the first one...It very difficult to get the first one to go down for an afternoon nap when she was about sort of two...you know she sa...'no I don't want to do that...I'm not tired, whereas Isabel was asleep..

E: She liked to sleep – she likes sleeping...

M: Yes, she loves to sleep..and

E: Yes,,

M: But she's a delightful child..very happy and.. and er yes, she talked at the right time and she loves her sister...they've always been very close, very close..

E: Yes, you seem a very close family, she talks very fondly... she does like to talk...

M: Yes...yes..

E: Which is lovely, but slightly different from the impression I get of her in the classroom, which is very quiet so I'm surprised..she's very forthcoming and articulate and...seems very able...

M: Yes, she can...yes, yes..I mean, she's, well the interesting thing about Isabel is that she came up to the 'F...' nursery here when she was...four...she took a long, longer time getting out of nappies I remember, ...and she came up when she was about four and she hated it...she ab-solutely hated it...and....I'll say this because I know this is in confidence, but there were a couple of members of staff who were working up there who really should not have been working in a nursery...they used sarcasm, they used ...they were very brash...loud and she hated it, she absolutely hated it (whispered) , and she barely, I mean you know..friends of mine, other mothers, erm we used to talk about it and she was practically silent in nursery..she did not...

E: So did she stay? ..but she stayed...

M: Em...She stayed, she was only going for a sort of, for a couple of morning when I was going to work... and I was quite keen...I wasn't happy with it but I was quite keen to carry it on, simply because ...school...

E: Mmmm

M:...And she needed that sort of em soc..you know, sort of socialising and being with other children, but she would never answer her name for the register...

E: ..Really...

M: Specially when one particular person was there and that woman made Isabel's life a misery..she really did

E: Oh, dear..

M: ...And that was a shame.. erm and I and I, you know... was really worried that would put her off school, but when she started school that was such a relief

E: (relieved laugh)

M: ...Because she had this absolutely delightful ...erm...Reception teacher...Mrs. N...who was just ....perfect Reception teacher you could possibly wish for.....and Isabel loved her, they all loved her

E: ...Yes...

M: Brought Isabel out of her shell and of course, in fact, starting school was a relief, rather tha...because she no longer had to go to the wretched nursery...

E: ...and she seems very embedded here and...

M: Yes, she has been

E: ...Very popular and she has friends and likes the teachers...she talks a lot about Mr. Ch...

M:...Oh yes, you see Mr. Ch...was a hero

E: ...Yes, I think he still is..(laughs)

M: Yes..he was, I mean..she was nervous to start with because he was her first male teacher....

E: ...Mmmmmm

M: ...And of course he was absolutely delightful...I mean he...how he coped with that class I don't know and I don't know....always.....been repercussions....but she's missed him terribly – they all have and they all talked about him and they've been very concerned and I think perhaps they could have been given more information than they have...not about his condition or anything... (gasp)) but about how he was and I think they have really missed him...

E: ..And she's missed some of her friends because they are in a different class?

M: Yes..

E: That seems quite hard...

M: .... And I've noticed, certainly with Isabel, compared with R my older one...that they are so much more immature...there's a lot more of this sort of emmm playground.... I would call it playground, childish spitefulness but they have been...you know.... R had this stalwart group of friends that have been eerrr all the way through nursery together ...right the way through school, and you know there was the odd bickering, but generally they were absolutely sort of concreted together....



E: Mmmmm

M: About five or six of them, but Isabel's ...there's been a lot more movement between friendship groups...she's had a lot more....she...yes...not a lot...but I wouldn't call it bullying but she's had more things that she's worried about....and this is the other thing.....

E: .. Squabbles...

M: Yes, squabbles

E: Sorry you were going to say...

M: Yes, she's a worrier...she has tremendous problems with anxiety..that she finds diff....it's out of proportion with the problem in front of her..

E: ..Yes...

M: But she can't control that..she does worry terribly and we get physical manifestations of that...tummy ache, headache sometimes...that kind of thing..

E: Yes.. sometimes she has said that she doesn't feel well and hasn't been very well and certainly what I glean is that she does need to feel supported and thought about and you know she sort of needs time ....to think things through and to make decisions and of course there isn't always time in the classroom....

M: No, it's hopeless

E: .....Maybe we could just move things on.....how do you think that Isabel's experience of school compares with say, your own?

M: (giggles) ...Well, do you know I think Isabel and I probably had a very similar experience...I'm for the first couple of years I.. I ...we...I started school in the West Midlands...

R...Oh, right...

M: And I remember being totally bewildered for like ...eighteen months...I didn't know what I supposed to be doing ...I had no idea of who was what...I don't particularly remember having any particular friends at school – it was all a sort of blurr..

E: That you couldn't make sense of?

M: ...No...and of course it was a real old fashioned school..so the rooms all echoed and it was, it was just yeh – and then we moved to a very small village where my dad was the headmaster of the school...which probably didn't help but em it was better because it was a much smaller school, but I do sort of remember thinking you know for quite a long time – certainly for my early schooling – a lot of it kind of...I must have done alright because ...because I seemed to do alright in tests and I could read and you know I read...Maths is something we both have in common and we do very badly – am frightened and we get very anxious about it and I do remember that...and I think Isabel and I have that very much in common...and as she's gone up the school she's, its... it's depended very much on her teachers... and sh..of course she loved Mrs. N...and then she had Mrs. P...who she also liked..then we had another bad teacher experience for a year.....bad teacher experience also because she had absolutely no appreciation of a child...that a child might not be able to do maths, which of course is Isabel's..and of course we went a few steps back, unfortunately that year with everything...with her reading which is normally fine, and her maths and I really think that did a tremendous amount of damage to Isabel's self-confidence which...

E: She's still trying to make up..

M: ..Yes I think she is and I think perhaps in as far as maths goes...'cos...I have to say after that she's had a tremendous amount of support from the school with this 'springboard' group which I know she has appreciated, but she's she's still behind in her maths – not tremendously, but she...it's a confidence thing with her...she doesn't want to get it wrong...

E: ...As soon as she gets anxious ...then...lost...it seems to go together; when she's relaxed..she's...she blossoms.

M: Yes and we tried all...and of course the other thing with Isabel as well she, it is – she - she's very hard to motivate her ...she's got very little self-motivation erm she won't persist with anything – if it's difficult, well she stops...

E: Yes...

M: ...And this is one of the things we tried, you know we've tried really hard to approach that in different ways...and I think this, these sessions have arisen from a conversation with Mrs. M (headteacher) and em Mrs. H (class teacher) to you know, to try to get Isabel to you know, to just keep trying...and we did, oh (sigh)..I think we went through two years altogether of piano lessons..

E: I think she's mentioned piano lessons..

M: And unfortunately my husband has exhibited more patience mostly than I ever thought him capable of (both laugh)...he's not a very patient person...but we've had some major battles, and Isabel's got a serious temper an she had ..she..

E: I don't think they see that in school, no ...she has talked to me about it and I said I can't imagine you Isabel..being angry..

M: I remem...I can remember her as a baby she would...absolutely obstinate child...and she would fight oooh and she..she really has got a really, really...

E: ...Well at least she gets it out...

M: Yes...and I was quite worried at one time thinking is this all because everything's been bottled up but she but she'll stand her ground if she has to.. you know..and

E: ..So she's quite strong

M: Yes. ..which is quite good.

E: ..So she's steely inside..steelier than she might seem...

M: Yes...when she has to be...yes...although when it comes to rows about homework.... and she doesn't want to do it uggghh! Anyway, piano – well really came to a ....and obviously, well, she ...she just didn't want to do it in the end...the, the thing is I think my husband felt di-disappointed...is that he had invested a huge amount of time because he plays piano quite well...but he sings a lot and that's his great hobby that he does and Isabel has got perfect pitch..

E: ...She's got a lovely voice..

M: She can sing anything, in tune – which for a child is amazing...she's got fantastic rhythm and I think he really wanted.....I mean she's great, but she ...she hates performing in public ...and so I was saying to my husband that maybe sort of we should be starting thinking about singing lessons because she can do that...she doesn't have to try and learn that...it's

E: It's something she's good at..

M: It's something she's already good at and we also have to try to do it in the right way, because we also tried you know danc..you know a bit of ballet but again...she seemed to like while she was doing it and she, she's well co-ordinated but she wouldn't do...'I'm not doing it in front of people'...but doing ballet – there's no point in doing it unless you're doing it in front of people...(breaks into laughter)

E: ..Mmmmm

M: So that kind of...so we have tried to do different things...we've tried to get her to follow something through..and finish it to the end because she very sort of bad at doing that..

E: ... Mmmmm

M: ....But maybe it's just a maturity thing....maybe she's just got to get a bit of self confidence that she can do it..you know I just think...

E: ...Maybe the more you want her to do it the more difficult she find...

M: She can be obtuse like that, she can be...she can sort of say well 'they want me to do it so I'm not going to do it'

E: Or maybe not even be sort of consciously doing that...

M: Yes, possibly

E: ...She may even be a little bit frightened that she's going to let you down..

M: I think...I think that's a lot of it...I think that's a lot of it...but then every time she has done something...I mean my husband sort of took her to play in a little concert that they put on and he said she was easily...I mean there was S.. and J..sort of plodding through – there things were all over the place, and there's Isabel – you know, a bit hesitant, but the notes were all there in the right place and the rhy....and he said it was the rhythm that he said she'd got, you know the metre of the music...and he said it was...and of course we heap praise on her and give her...and she likes money, and you can give her money you know and it doesn't seem to stick...you know, she doesn't seem to get that.....that real sort of self-esteem that she'll think, right, or something, 'great, I can do that' ...she always says 'yeah, but it wasn't really good though, was it?' ...and she'll just decry it like that and you think; 'What a shame'..

E: But she does seem to want to please you..

M: Yes, yes, yeah she does and she's terribly...she's much more affectionate than than the other one was, terribly affectionate...still lots and lots of cuddles, still wants cuddles before bed at night, that sort of thing...

E: But maybe she needs..a little bit of space...to come to feel that she's in charge and to come towards you ...

M: ..But no, that's never been a problem...she'll say: 'Mum, I'm going.....it means I have to go in and I'll have to....so she's never been backwards at coming forward...she's very affectionate, always....and I mean even if you've just had a big shouting match or whatever, if she's in one of her strops, it's very important that she can come back and that she can have her cuddle and..

E: But I mean...in terms of choosing to do her own activities...

M: Yes..yeah..

E: If, if she thinks it's a little less important to you and your husband....than it is, it might not be such a risk for her...

M: Yes..

E:....She might gradually come towards you....she obviously does have ability and talent...

M: She does,,, and we've tried, we've tried not to ...I mean it's always difficult to know where to pitch expectations isn't it because you don't want, you don't want to be too low and think well, we're never do anything – because that's awful – but on the other hand if you, you know, make it too high then they are going to let you down and you can't set them up for a fall – you don't want to do that..

E: And you're wanting, as all parents, to do you very best all the time..

M: Absolutely, yes..yes ...and you

E: She's an absolute delight and it's been a privilege working with her..

M: Oh, good, that's good, I'm glad and think she...she's said very little about it I have to say but I think that's because that was something for her, that belonged to her ...because she said to me when I said I was coming to talk to you,, she said 'well, you won't say anything bad about me will you?' and I said, 'it's not like that...it's not that sort of, it's not like your teachers'..I mean I wouldn't say anything bad about her to her teachers either...but..

E: No, no...

M: I said it's like that....in fact, I think it's the other way round, because I'm going to be spoken to...I mean I haven't, but I said anyway; 'it's not that sort of thing' ...but she was very...

E: Concerned?

M: Yes, that I might say something, and you sort of belong to her, this is hers.....and I'm quite keen that she still thinks that's right ...and it is...I mean she's been coming..for weeks.

E: ..Since Xmas...we've missed several weeks because in year 6 they have all sorts, they have cycling proficiency and first aid,

M: And SAT's...

E: .....But she seems to have been very happy to come and to take the opportunity – well, for me to listen..

M: Mmmm..

E: ...She seems to like that...I mean there's lots of activities available but mostly, Isabel wants to talk...

M: Yes...

E: ..And em and it's been a good experience I hope, I hope..

M: Yes, oh well I'm sure it has...I think having somebody...a person outside school..

E: Well, I am teacher but in I, I, I said in this school I am not a teacher and I think that has...because I'm not making judgements...it really has been about just giving her a little bit of time out from the pressure of the classroom...which I think she feels quite keenly ...she is a serious student – she wants to do well and is, as you say, quite anxious about her maths – even though she's making good strides...

M: Yes, yes, she is, but 'em, and I think she she has, she has a genuine desire to please and think that perhaps that's a little bit of her downfall is that perhaps she needs to step back and say; 'What do I want to do?...although she can't just sit around on the sofa and watch tv all day – which I think she would probably quite like to do that too, so I think, I think she does also get very tired...the school environment tires her – there's a lot of noise, a lot of business – and she needs quite a lot of space out from that, which is why you know, going to the secondary school is really going to take it out of her, you know, I think, specially for the first couple of weeks because..

E: It's a big transition...

M: ..And she really does...I think 'em noise, and chaos and confusion...I'm just saying that the class is bad, but I mean there always is isn't there...there always noise, there's always someone.....

E: ..It's a big group...and I get the sense...Isabel talks about her sister and things they do, but I think she does like the opportunity...she needs her own space and to feel that there's somewhere she can retreat to....she talked to me about her new bedroom and that was very important to her...

M: Yeah..although that was a trauma...Isabel doesn't like change...she had a little bedroom before which she quite, well she loved and she's now downstairs, that was a big trauma...of going down...because we converted the garage so again she needs the time to do that...

E: ...She needs time..

M: And now she's used to it, now she's in this lovely big room –she's got a nice new bed and all that and I think, you know, she's settled in there now, but it took time...(laughter)...and her sister....if you don't want it, I'll have it, it's bigger than mine..

E: ..She also said about her sister going to Barcelona and how she missed her but she also quite liked it because she got all the attention...

M: Mmm...But the funny thing she's....she's a funny child...I found the – she does miss her sister when she's not there terribly, and I found her in R's room....cutting her hair – cutting bits of her hair.....and I said 'What are you doing?' I didn't shout... and she just sort of..(shrugged) and it was funny because I sent R a text in Spain and I said Isabel's obviously missing you because...and R text me back., sort of typical year 8 girl...oh well Isabel's turned into an Emo....and there was a little bit of that and I was talking to a colleague about it in school and she says well maybe there is a little bit of that sort of 'well, my sister's gone' ...you know it isn't that we didn't give her attention, we'd just spent...I think we'd just had supper or something – the three of us were just sitting round the table chat, chat, chat...she goes upstairs and starts cutting chunks out of her hair...(laughter)..which was very strange, I never did get to the bottom of it...

E: No.....it's important when they're together as well

M: Oh yes, I know that, but Isabel does, she very dependent on her really – in a nice way..

E: ..In a sisterly way..

M: Yes in a sisterly way and I think she certainly did miss her

E: I wonder...er, you said a little bit about Isabel feeling worried about how she's getting on but, but is there anything else you want to say about how you feel about her progress?

M: Erm...well, I think, yes I mean certainly the latest, sort of the last three years really, Mrs. H, then Mr. Ch, which she loved, and then she's had Mrs. H this year again which hasn't ...but I mean a stressful year having SAT's and things like that...

E: Year 6 is difficult...

M: It is, ridiculous, stressful...it's just so sad, it really is sad, they're at primary school still...erm I think you know she's had quite a lot of homework and there's been quite a lot of pressure from that direction um lots of timed maths test which stresses her out no end 'cos she can't do them..it's mental maths that kind of thing just you know..she's set up to fail really because 'oh mental maths' and she panics then she can't do it. Um...I think the other thing, the other difficulty is is um ...with my husband really who gets...I don't know if he's a typical man or what I don't know, but he's got a fairly short fuse when it comes to maths, and he'll occasionally..I mean like the other weekend he just had a go at Isabel because she didn't know her tables..

E: Mmmmm...

M: And I said to him that I didn't know my tables when I let primary school' ...you know..

E: Lots of children don't..

M: Of course they don't..you know, some children can't read..but you you sort of..and that makes me...I do get cross with him...because I said 'the last thing she needs is you shouting at her'...

E: ..But she's particularly good at literacy..

M: Yes, she is...though she doesn't read very much, though that's getting a bit better now, she does read more...her spelling is phenomenal – she can spell really, really well and I think, you know; where does that come from, because she doesn't read much...certainly no where near as much as her sister but she..

E: ..But she does have some really good strengths..

M: Mmm, She does...and she's a fantastic mimic...I mean absolutely fantastic...when she goes to tea with friends their parents get her to do Hermione and ....

E: .....Oh..in Harry Potter...

M: Harry Potter she was great at, but her best one has to be, and this is going to be completely bizarre, is the Major out of Fawltly Towers...

E: Really? (Laughs)

M: How a young child can sound like an old man is extraordinary...but she has us in absolute fits, and she loves it and will watch things over and over again and be able to do these long speeches and she's very, very good at that, so I think perhaps...but again, she doesn't want, she won't..perform..

E: How interesting...that she seems to be quite good at these expressive arts and yet at the same time she doesn't want to be watched...

M: Yes, although I think this performance now...she did a very good narrating job in .....I mean she was, she was incredible....poised, confident, there she was reading this thing with expression and timing and you think...and a whole school hall full of parents...so I think...we're getting..

E: It's complicated..

M: Very complicated, but she's got enough confidence in school to be able to do that, now we've got this Toad of Toad Hall coming up..

E: Yes..

M: And she's doing a lot of things in that..

E: Yes, I was hoping to be able to come to see that..

P : Yes, well we, we're coming to see that and we're going to drag the other daughter along as well....we've got to because it's the last time we'll be coming to Ch...

E: And it'll be good for Isabel for her sister to see her on...

M: Yes, yes that's it

E: And...how do you think she feels?

M: About her progress?

E: Yes...and about moving

M: Are about moving..well we're already getting the tummy aches...which like I say is one of her little stresses em she play...they are doing good things..that is better...you used to just be chucked in the deep end, you know; 'off you go to secondary school' and that's it...whereas now you have...she went to play some rounders or something whatever it was...no athletics!

E: ... And they have a transition plan..

M: And they've got a transition day next week on the 12<sup>th</sup> – when they'll go and meet their..you know and of course we went on the visits as well..so hopefully, and you also she's going with several other people – whether or not they'll be in the same form or not I don't know, but it seems they've got a new head there who came from A...Somebody I heard a lot about in A...and he did great things with the N...school and we went when we were choosing – she seemed to like him he was a very positive, huge bloke – big – open, but nicely spoken and very positive and she seemed to like that so we thought..well you know....but it's a big school, it's a busy school..they've a huge range of children...so it will be difficult for her, but I'm just hoping that she will – certain, hopefully for the first term....I mean my husband's job is pretty fluid at the moment, he might have to move to M....but at the moment he would be able to take her...

E: Yes..

M: In the mornings which would avoid her having to take the bus which I think would be a nice

E: That would be a nice transition strategy for her...

M: Yes ...and er they also 'set' for maths and English straightaway and that is a huge thing because at least...presumably they'll have her SAT's...I mean I'm sure her maths will be absolutely appalling so hopefully she will be...I mean I asked how she did when she came out of maths SATs and she said 'awful' (giggles)..

E: She might do better than she thinks..

M: She might...but in a way I hope she doesn't because her English is fine and she'll be in a good set for that – which is great, but she needs, she needs support and if she gets a learning support assistant or something like that, that would be really good – or small groups..

E: ..Or somebody to talk to in a 1:1..

M: ...And I'm hoping that they pick up on that and she gets that help...er if not I shall have to have words but you know, I mean, generally with the rest of it...trying to be positive, I mean being positive with her about it, but I know she's worried....

E: And what about progress....you talked a lot about maths and literacy but..

M: Well, I think she has, I think she's done very well here..I think..

E: Do you think she feels she has?

M:...Yes I think so..I mean I haven't asked her directly, although telling you...we had one of these school surveys the other day and the first question was; do you 'strongly agree, agree, half and half' 'em that your child enjoys school – and we filled it in with her, we said 'come on Isabel this is about you, so you do it...'

E: Mmmm...Great..

M: ...And we'll see...and she said I'm going to put 'neither agree, nor disagree'...I said 'what?' and she said; 'well I do like it, but there are some things that I don't' and 'I don't like it as much this year as I did last year'.

E: Wow, that's really interesting...

M: It is interesting...isn't it, because R just loved it here, full stop.

E: Perhaps something of that is perhaps about being ready to move in some ways?

M: Yes,, well certainly she was...and I think Isabel, you know, has said that I don't want to leave, and I said yes, but all your friends would go, you wouldn't want to stay here on your own would you? And I think a lot of it has had to do with Mr. Ch....I know...but they are only primary school children and he did make such an impact..on the children..

E: All the children I've worked with from Isabel's class have mentioned Mr. Ch....

M: Mmm

E: And perhaps as well, she has this year been separated from some of her friends...her close school friends because they are in the other class...

M: And I think as well Mrs. H...of course had her not last year, but the year before and now it's year 6, she has said Mrs. H ....isn't as nice as she used to be...and I think there's tremendous pressure on teachers as we know, to get these kids through these SAT's, and I'm sure poor old Mrs. H...has her job cut out so she can't be the same person that she was in year 4...

E: .. It's a very focused year...

M: It is and I think you know, they and I have said to Isabel..it's not the same, you know, you're not the same as you were in year 4 and you know, Mrs. H..got a lot of things, she's got a much more difficult class...and you can't expect her to be the same really...and erm so I think she's felt a little bit...she not as ready as her sister was...she's very much dependent on her comfort zone and that's not going to be around...so we'll have to see..

E: Yes, I hope that she, she finds somebody that she likes...

M: Mmm...

E:...In her teachers and TA's and I'm sure that she'll make good friendships because she does...she is very popular...

M: Mmmm

E: She talks about her friend in Ireland, so that when she feels that she's been 'em has felt let down by someone or people that she's squabbed with, she has held onto the fact that actually she has a really good friend who is important to the whole family and that's been a source of strength for her..

M: That's good ...yes I mean that's tremend.. they are ...this is sort of funny, I mean we were friends before..we were...and went through and..we were...I attended all her births and she attended both of mine and we are very close friends and of course they went back to Ireland in the end because they had to look after her mother..and they're more like cousins really to us than their real cousins...

E: She said they are like your family...

M: They are very much so and of course we all of us take up where we left off the last time....we literally sort of slot in together...and it's been...you know, we're very lucky to have friends like that....and it's been really good for the children as well....they've come along right at the right ages, and em...so they've got someone each if you like..and they are very close, they are very close.....they have very long winded...very silly sounding telephone conversations...but you know she does have this ability to cheer Isabel up...Isabel can also be quite, quite...and this sort of worried me a little, she can be sort of morose....

E: ...She gets a bit down?

M: ...She does and I think we need to keep an eye on that...when her hormones start kicking in really...it's a worry..

E: ..But being aware of that and being a close family...

M: Yes..

E: Knowing that relationships are so important, and as you've said, make such a difference to her....I mean she's lucky..having that

M: Yeah, well I think we are a close family...and I think we do try to make allowances for each other....some of us more than others... (laughs)

E: She certainly does need a lot of reassurance..

M: She does.. I think that's probably most important..she needs affection and she needs reassurance that we think she's alright...

E: Reassurance about her strengths....

M: Yes, mind you, we're all like that actually, we all like our space and in fact it works quite well because 'em we've expanded the house enough so that we can all disappear...you know we're all in different rooms doing different things (laughs) but you need to accept that it's part of our family life and you don't all have to be in the same room at the same time...

E: You have been ever so helpful.. thank you for doing this...is there anything else you want to say?

M: No, just to say thank you...as I say she hasn't said very much, but I have really left it to her really...em..and I think she has appreciated that...and I'm sure she's found it useful this year to have that sort 'time out' because it has been such a difficult year for her and I think it's a credit to Mrs. M (head)..because she actually made the suggestion at the last parents...that maybe Isabel would benefit from this..this what was going on and I'm grateful to her for doing that..em but..er...yes, so let's hope we've er all made a difference..

E: Yes...when I talked to Isabel that although....she's making a move and I probably won't be seeing her, how important it is to hang on to the good experiences and...

M: ...Mmm, to remember them...

E: Yes.. and to bring them out when necessary, because even though I won't be seeing her, because I've met and I know her a little bit...that she's in my mind and 'em I think for somebody like Isabel – as she pulls out her special friend in Ireland..that those kind of strategy is good for her...and specially when her hormones kick in and as you say she's a bit down, it'll be important to line up some of those things...

M: Those positive things...yes...absolutely..absolutely

E: But I'm sure she'll do really well..

M: Well, I hope so, I hope she finds something to do really well at – a friend of mine, used to be my PGCE tutor actually... who met Isabel when she was of course very young ..quite sort of...she was quite a sort of wacky child and when she was starting school he said 'I hope school doesn't crush all that kind of wacky side out of her' – 'cos she has got that sort of weird and yeah quite funny side to her that ...

E: Yes..

M: ...Sort of spontaneous that you don't want traditional institutions like schools to you know to stamp on and...

E: And I think she's creative and she does an outlet that she just can't quite decide yet...

M: ...What it is

E:....And I'm sure she will....

M: ...Yes...it's early days yet...

E: ..But she needs to choose it... (laughs)

M: ...She does, I think she needs to choose it...and I hope and I mean I hope it...I mean it would be wonderful if it did involve her using her voice and using those things that she has got naturally ..and I think that...that for me...that's the really important thing that I want to sort of nurture in her...is that to have that confidence...not to be brash about it..but so that she can draw on that and she can use that as her refuge, that she can go to choir, or she can join a band, or whatever



it is that draws on the things that she can do naturally and she get pleasure from...that's what I would love her to be able to do...something that's hers....

E: She did say that she hadn't decided what instrument she wants to play yet...that was quite early in our sessions, and I did ask her a few times, but she was quite irked by being reminded that she needed to make a choice (mum laughs) so I didn't ask her anymore because she hasn't, she said she doesn't know yet...and I found myself falling into that and saying 'come on!' – no, of course I didn't say that, but she doesn't want to be....she, she'll tell the world when she's ready.....but....thank you so much for your help

M: ..And thank you for all your help....

### **Appendix 3.x Interview with Isabel's teacher Miss Hill**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford Miss H. = Adult Participant Isabel's teacher Miss Hill**

E: Mrs. Hill is going to talk about Isabel. So Mrs. Hill how would you describe Isabel's strengths?

Miss H.: Isabel is very eager to please, she works very hard and she tries. Ermm She does ask for help if she feels she needs it. She has a positive attitude towards her work which is a good indicator of you know trying hard to improve in her own little way.

E: And she wants to?

Miss H.: Absolutely yes. There are particular strengths that she has, literacy being one of them. She reads beautifully and she has a good understanding of the text she reads.

E: She took part in the school play as well?

Miss H.: Absolutely, well she is very excited about this, the privilege of being in Year 6. She gets on very well with all of her peers, so I think, you know ...

E: Would you say she is popular?

Miss H.: Yes she is, yes but she has got a sort of close circle of friends, but I think you know that sort of happy balance has helped her to enjoy school and enjoy learning.

E: Good. So what about, how would you describe her difficulties as a learner?

Miss H.: I think her main, well her main difficulty is definitely numeracy ermm to the extent of I do wonder whether she has elements of dyslexia. There are other areas where I feel she has difficulty in just general understanding of perhaps some scientific concepts which is where the maths come in as well because they are kind of inter-related aren't they?

E: From a sort of logic point of view?

Miss H.: Logic is very difficult for her to work around, which again makes me question whether there are elements of dyslexia as well and I have noticed throughout the year if I do too many instructions or too detailed instructions ermm she will get very confused.

E: She talks to me quite a bit about how glad she is that she has support at home and at school. She sees herself as someone who just needs a bit more time and support.

Miss H.: She has extra support for numeracy which is her main, main weakness. I still support her as and when I need to or as and when she needs to in the classroom. That is not a great area of weakness, for her, but she doesn't need it generally, but in the maths she definitely needs the support and she has had support at home, but I do get the impression, if I am allowed to say that, that I think there are elements of friction at home. Her mum is a teacher, her sister is very, very able, so I do have worries that she is trying, you know she is living in the shadow of her sister really and I wonder whether that is sort of putting up barriers for her, but I taught her a few years ago when she was in Year 3 and she had similar difficulties then.

E: So it has been a sort of ongoing?

Miss H.: Ongoing... but in the numeracy aspect, and I have always said to her you know I was exactly the same when I was her age and with age I got better, with teaching I have got better so she doesn't feel quite so pressurised.

E: How do you think she feels about ... what she feels about her progress?

Miss H.: Her own progress. I think she has got, (pause) she knows she is good at literacy but she needs to be told to boost her confidence. I think she puts herself down and she is not as self assured as some children are in the classroom and I will say to her you know this is a lovely piece of work and she will quite often appear surprised – oh I thought it was so hard, thank you. She..

E: She appreciates

Miss H.: Absolutely, she appreciates praise and gentle encouragement and reassurance, but she is a delight to teach because you know that she is keen to do well. It is just that she needs to work at her own pace really.

E: And you have touched on the relationships, how would you describe Isabel's relationships with others?

Miss H.: She gets on very well with everybody in the class, she is very well liked and very popular. As I said earlier she has got a close circle of friends.

E: And with adults as well?

Miss H.: Yes she has a very good rapport with adults. She does get on well with her parents at home. I think with all the other teachers and other adults. She works with Mrs. B. She is very well liked by everybody.

E: She doesn't sort of stop talking, she does come in beaming when walks across in class. When I first met you, you said she was very quiet in class.

Miss H.: Not in a negative way, yes she is quiet and sometimes I do worry that she doesn't put herself forward and ask for help. She will struggle on her own. So I do have to keep an eye on her.

E: Do you feel she is very happy to come to me?

Miss H.: Oh most definitely, without a doubt, because she does smile a lot when she knows she is coming up to you.

E: Good

Miss H.: And so yes, there is no question of, she is very happy, but I think she enjoys it because you are not a teacher, you are not taking sides and she is just happy to talk to somebody else who perhaps understands her. So yes she definitely enjoys coming up.

**Appendix 3.xi Interview with Isabel's Teacher Assistant Heather**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford H = Adult Participant Isabel's Teacher Assistant**

E: Over to you Heather, thank you.

H: I began supporting Isabel in numeracy only when she joined the Monday to Wednesday group of 4 girls and 1 boy around November 2006. Although very literate and proficient at reading she appears to have mental blocks and lacks confidence in numeracy. And subsequently we wonder if she does not suffer confusion of space. Her work on time she found it hard to remember clock-wise and anti-clock wise and mirror images are very poor.

E: Not very spacially aware.

H: No, no, or gets confused, which direction things are going in. Ermm There is no problem with Isabel engaging. She wants to succeed and so do her parents. (Laughter) She relaxed more with our group because we played more games where appropriate and we went at a slower pace. Ermm When she struggled to understand a process I did give her one to one attention, trying to explain things in different ways, until one clicked and it also stopped her getting in a tizz because she gets a bit panicky.

E: She is desperate for support, she seems to think I need support, help me, help me...

H: Yes, because she wants to succeed. Isabel wants to succeed, but she is aware of pressure around her, that's in parents and tests.

E: And that seems to have done her a bit.

H: It does, tests cause her to be panicky, what she is trying to do is to learn not to worry too much. Do her best, but I do think she has a sense of failure in her parents' eyes.

E: Why do think that is?

H: (Pause) I think she has an older sister who is very capable on all fronts and I don't know much about her parents but they are both professionally able I think.

E: So those strategies you are helping her with really, is to, is what, as you've explained really. And – carry on.....

H: She is popular with other members of the group. She is generous sharing the contents of her pencil case. (Laughter)

E: That is real generosity. (More laughter) Well they are so precious, aren't they?

H: Yes, yes, particularly with the rest of the group who are more deprived socially and she is not.

E: So she is quite generous.

H: She is quite generous. But she not as angelic as she looks.

E: Ah, ah.

H: Because she was quite prepared to taunt Conrad in retaliation when he wound up the girls, in quiet way, but she gave as good as she got.

E: She talks about full battles with her sister and that she is told she is not quiet at home. I think she is quite used to a bit of rough and tumble in family life.

H: I mean she has got a lovely smile on her, lovely nature.

E: Winning ways.

H: Yes, but she can actually (pause)

E: But she can actually take others on quite nicely.

H: I think so, yes. And it is basically this being aware of not finding numeracy easy and she gets into a panic state that actually brings down this barrier in her mind.

E: She is aware of it?

H: Hmmmm but she looks a lot happier I think since she has been with our group than when she was with the rest of the children downstairs. She looked anxious for numeracy.

E: She would be aware of keeping up with the others. And her relationships with others, you say, she shows..

H: She's popular.

E: Yes. OK. That's Isabel.

**Appendix 3.xii Interview with Isabel's SENCO Trish**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford T = Adult Participant SENCO Trish**

E: ..... erm what about Isabel?

T: Isabel I think we felt that she was perhaps lacking in confidence and so did her parents. That erm she would benefit from having time to show her own talents and raise her sort of self-esteem a bit..

**Appendix 3.xiii Interview with Leo's Mother**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford M = Adult Participant Leo's Mother**

E: I am talking to Mrs B about Leo and it's about ten past nine, so first of all Mrs B thank you again for coming, and really I wondered whether you could tell me a bit about Leo as a baby. I know he's a twin.

M: As a twin he's the quiet one. Errm He was always quiet, liked his cuddles, Ermm

E: Was he born after his big brother?

M: Yes. He's 10 minutes older than him. He was a lot smaller than the other one.

E: But he's very tall now.

M: Yes. (nervous laugh) He was a very happy and content baby really.

E: He was just very quiet.

M: Yes and as he got a bit older he was very happy to sit, he was normally happy to sit and amuse himself, but when he wanted the company he would come and find it. He'd be in the same room but he would be happy playing on his own.

E: You mean he could amuse himself.

M: Yes, yes.

E: And I wonder whether as he was really tiny baby, was he an easy feeder? Did he feed easily?

M: I can't remember really. To start with he had trouble feeding Ermm but he wasn't too bad.

E: You had your hands full with two.

M: Oh yes. And the two older ones as well, at the time.

E: Yes, yes, you had got your hands full but it sounds, you sound like a lovely family, full of humour, the things that you do together.

M: Mmm Mm Yes.

E: OK and he sorted of stayed quiet even when he went to school.

M: Yes, yes.

E: He takes a bit of getting to know.

M: Yes. Hmm.

E: But he seems to really respond to one to one.

M: Yes. I suppose that's because he doesn't get a lot of one to one at home being with lots of kids and he probably would, he does enjoy one to one when he gets it.

E: Yes. And he seems get on really well with K.

M: Yes. He does

E: Very close.

M: Yes, very close and it's only been in about the last 6 months that they've really, all the time they're together, he's always thought the world of her obviously, but where she's got that bit older they can play. He's got a very good imagination

and K does all the role playing with him, which she likes to do. So....

E: OK. Tell me how do you think that L's experience of school compares with your own?

M: Long pause – Ermm.

E: Is he a bit like you or...?,

M: I think in a way, like me, he struggles a bit. Ermm. I think what is different to me, he'll take his time to do something because he wants it to be just right. So he might not actually get a lot of work done because he's trying to make it perfect.

E: I've noticed he's very careful worker, when he's drawing. He'll take a lot of time and trouble the whole time.

M: He's only really just started getting into drawing. He's never really liked it. He was never, if I bought him pens or anything he would never sit and draw or colour in, but just lately he's got.....

E: He'd rather be doing things. He says to me I like the sand best. He does some nice drawings now.

M: Yes, he does at home now as well.

E: I can't get him to be interested in any reading though.

M: No. I don't know if he struggles, I know he can read quite well, but I think it's a confidence thing. He thinks he can't, so he doesn't want to try.

E: Yes. I have a Dr Who book there.

M: Yes he loves Dr Who.

E: He goes through every page and tells me about every character and every action, you know, that's going on.' So he reads the pictures and can identify some of the words, so it's coming but it's got to be motivated by his interest I think..

M: Hmm Hmm Yes. And all his pictures are of Dr Who at the moment at home, anyway.

E: Yes he's mad about Dr Who. (laughs)

M: He is, but it's a bit scary for me.

E: I think it's scary when I've watched it myself. (laughter)

E: So you feel he's got a bit more stickability. He will have a go and finish things off and things like that.

M: Yeah, but he doesn't always get the time to finish because they have a time limit but I think it's also if he's interested or not, if he's not interested in it then he probably wouldn't do a lot of work.

E: So when you were at school you were the quiet one as well.

M: I was, but I was easily led. I didn't really put all my effort into my work. I could have done a lot more than I did.

E: Yes.

M: I just did what I had to do..

E: To get by.

M: Yeah.

E: Yes. OK. Well how do you feel about Leo's progress then, in school?

M: I think this year he has (pause) he has (pause) ermm got on ermm a bit better. I think with Year 1 some days all he got was to write the date.

E: Oh right.

M: Now, when it was Parents' Evening he managed to do the date and a couple of lines, which is a big improvement.

E: Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

M: It's only small, but it's an improvement. Ermm I think you know..

E: He's beginning to get down to it.

M: He is, yeah.

E: Well I know I only see him for a little while but he seems quite keen to draw and put the names of things on and label things so I think perhaps he's coming on.

M: Yes I think so.

E: And how do you think he feels about his progress?

M: Ermm. I don't know. He doesn't actually say anything. He never really comes home and tells me.....

E: He doesn't volunteer anything.M: No. Although to day he was saying that when he saw you, that I think he did a picture of the Daleks and Tardis and coloured them in.

E: I'll show you that in a minute. So you can tell him you saw it.

M: Yes. I think that personally he probably still feels that he can't do as well as others. Ermm It's not that he can't, it's just the confidence I think.

E: I talked to him today and said how much I've enjoyed working with him, and sometimes he can be very creative and investigative and he's quite..., he seems to be very interested in the way things work..... And I said sometimes you need to let people see how mature he is, you know, how much he has got inside, (P making affirmative sounds throughout) and unless he sort of gives people some clues, and says 'Hey, I'm here. I'm here. What about me? And he seemed to take that in. Because there is an awful lot there but it's just as you say, he isn't very assertive and...

M: Ermm. I think what it is, ermm is because being a twin, the other one is very domineering, very loud. They're the complete opposite...

E: I don't know H. I just know Leo..

M: No and I think Leo probably, because he has said, you know, I wish I could do what H. does', you know, and it's awful, but I think that he feels that he can't do, he should be able to do what H does but he can't and I think that goes with him (pause) through school. They were in separate classes, because I didn't want them together, I think that's still with him (pause) and he has got the ability, he just thinks he hasn't.

E: Yes I don't know H. I only know Leo and he has got an awful lot to offer and a lot to give.

M: Yes.

E: If he just gives people a chance to see it, that's the thing because you can't read minds, can you? It's encouraging him to get out there and say hold on a minute, what about me?

M: It's given him the confidence to actually speak up as well, which he hasn't really got.

E: How do you think he feels about coming to see me here?

M: Oh I think he likes it. He does like it and he has mentioned it a few times and think it makes him feel a bit special 'cos he has to go off and do some work with someone and like you say it's one to one, and I think he thrives on that..

E: And having some time and space just to pop in. Oh that's good.

M: Yeah.

E: Shall I just show you his Daleks?

M: Yeah, yeah.

E: We keep them here in a safe box. Here it is. This is his scrapbook all about him, and that's his den. That's M, and that's his family, his buttons, he loves to choose. We play the button game. He chose a butterfly theme. I can't find it now but it was rather nice, all different shapes and sizes,

M: Oh that's nice (Makes 'cooing' sounds throughout this section)

E: A big button for dad, and there is a little daffodil. That's K. ( M: Orhh) and drawings of when he went to the seaside and that's M. He loves M and the chickens, he talks about, and what I wanted to show you, you see his drawings are getting stronger and bolder, and this is what he did Tuesday.

M: This is what he was telling me this morning (laughs).

E: Look how big and bold his drawings are now though. And he wanted to show me when he writes Leo he joins.

M: Oh wow.

E: So that's rather nice isn't it? I can't remember the names

M: This is either Dalek Tarn or Dalek ...Dalek Khan.



E: Dalek Khan I think that one is. Anyway he did tell me. He's going to put Dr Who in it next week he tells me...

M: He doesn't normally colour his pictures, he's never got time, even though he has drawn on the chest of drawers. All Daleks. He never colours in any of them, just writes the names of them. It's nice to see one actually coloured in.

E: Yeah, yeah. He'll be really pleased that you've seen them. It's...

M: Yeah. I love that one of coloured M.

E: I know. He likes making and doing these creative things. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about with me or ask about L with me? I feel I am just getting to know him.

M: Don't think so.

E: OK. Well thank you ever so much for coming. I'll turn this off now, but if you've thought about anything else and want to have a meeting when we get the transcript, I'll be in touch.

M: OK. Lovely.

### **Appendix 3.xiv Interview with Leo's teacher Miss Hendry**

E = Researcher Erica Ashford Miss H = Participant = Leo's teacher Miss Hendry

E: Shall we start with the first question which is how would you describe Leo's strengths as a learner?

Miss H.: He has got a lot of strengths, Leo, he has got a real willingness to work very very hard and not to give up if he doesn't find something easy. He is not academically majorly above average, but he puts his head down and just keeps on going and doesn't give up if he finds something difficult. He is quite an even keel sort of person. He doesn't seem to get undermined and give up very very easily. Ermmm. He shows a real enjoyment of some areas. We've started a topic about castles and had OS maps yesterday and were looking at them and planning as if we were going to build a castle where we would build our castle on the map, looking at the rivers and the location of forests and so on, and he absolutely loved that and you can see his face really becoming alive and he was really, really enjoying it.

E: When I talk to him he seems to have a strong sense of his environment and he talks about what goes on in the garden.

Miss H.: Yes, yes, that is it. Yes and he obviously felt he could connect with me, and he absolutely loved doing that. He works well independently but also within a group he is a good group member. He doesn't feel the need to dominate and prove himself with his learning and he doesn't feel the need to sort of show that I am the best. I can do this. He can take a quieter role but he is not passive. It is not sitting back and letting other people do it. He just doesn't feel the need to sort of jostle in front.

E: So he's got a really good sense of group work?

Miss H.: Yes he has.

E: That is to do with having four siblings, in terms of that setting.

Miss H.: I think it could be. I think also the characters of his siblings, especially his twin, would mean that he has probably had to learn those diplomatic skills.

E: I found him like that too... (laughter)

Miss H.: Good, that's reassuring. I have been particularly pleased also with the way his numeracy has come on this year and his SATS result which obviously hasn't been made public yet., but he obviously finds reading a far more difficult area and so we put him with a smaller group for the numeracy SATS test where he had, first of all, the reading, the questions were read to the whole small group and the gradually they were allowed to work more independently throughout the rest of the test and he got a 2A which is above average on his numeracy.

E: That sounds a really supportive strategy .....

Miss H.: Yes and so obviously the understanding and the cognition was there, but he just needs that extra support to access the questions, but then he was fine to go ahead and work. So I hope when he also gets his results back that that boosts his confidence as well.

E: Absolutely that is brilliant news. Are you ready for the next question?

Miss H.: Yes. That's fine.

E: OK. How would you describe Leo's difficulties at the moment?

Miss H.: Well erm I think obviously we have touched on his reading as an issue. It is not that he doesn't enjoy books and texts. He loves accessing them and he can talk very very animatedly about them if that support is there to help him with it. It's the independent reading that he finds more of a chore. And he will keep plugging away at it but..

E: He's not refusing?

Miss H.: No, no, but he is quite.... he does use appropriate strategies. He will sit down and he will sound out, but he is doing it very quietly in his head and he doesn't venture a word until he is quite certain that that there is a good chance that it is the right one. He is not a wild guesser, 'oh I think that might be the word, I will have a go.'

E: Not massively confident?

Miss H.: No, he sort of holds back on that, but then again, when I did the reading SATS with him, I didn't put him in for the reading SATS paper. I did an individual reading task with him and we sat down and he was very animated when he was looking at the book and talking about it. It was when I said now you need to read this part on your own, you could see him....

E: He's reading the pictures really isn't he and reading the context?

Miss H.: Yes, and he has got very good understanding of the character and what is happening. It is just that he ...

E: Decoding?

Miss H.: Yes. Yes it's the issue ermmm and also I think there are no major academic concerns with him. I think probably his main difficulties do stem from his emotional background and he his sort of slight unsureness and uncertainty and I think that comes partly obviously from sibling characters at home and things like that, that he is just waiting for something to happen and I think that has had an impact on his character and his wanting just to go ahead and have a go.

E: I found him quite cautious. Once he feels he can trust, then ...

Miss H.: Then he does, yes and he is beginning now to come out and obviously this is straying into question 3, but he is beginning to come out of his shell slightly more, but it has taken a year really of me saying – 'well have a go, I don't mind, just do your best, I am not concerned if you make a mistake. It is not a problem,' but he is just beginning...,

E: But also your relationship is quite key ....

Miss H.: Yes, yes.

E: Let us go on to this question 3 then. How do you think Leo feels about his own progress? How does he feel?

Miss H.: He is progressively beginning to respond more to praise. His face is coming alive more when you say – 'well that is really, really good.' So he obviously does feel that it is an important issue and he is pleased when he succeeds, but at the same time I don't feel with him that his academic progress is the be and end all of everything he does.

E: This is because he doesn't mention anything to do with his emotional problems.

Miss H.: Yes, yes. He seems to sort of be able to keep it slightly separate. He doesn't get overly het up and anxious and worry about it and he does feel that need as well as we've said, to prove himself by showing how good he his, but nor, I had his twin last year and his twin would feel the need maybe to distract from his lack of ability in certain areas by his behaviour, whereas Leo doesn't have that issue. If he is struggling with something he doesn't try and mask it by playing up or distracting your attention away from it.

E: Perhaps he is quite happy with himself in some ways?

Miss H.: Yes, yes.

E: He likes himself quite well ....

Miss H.: Yes, exactly I do get that feeling with him. Yes.

E: OK. And are there any areas of progress, you have touched on them but let's summarise these, that you were particularly positive about this year.

Miss H.: I think he is beginning to come out of his shell. I think this is the most positive thing. Above and beyond any academic progress he has made, it is his character that I feel is developing more. And is coming on and I suppose he has had to develop quite an early resilience, really and so he is quite self-contained, quite steady, but it is lovely to see that disappearing sometimes and watch him say

at child initiated times really enjoying working with construction toys, with Lego or something and loving that.

E: When I first met him he was working in the sand tray because it gave him some time and space to play and now he is more adventurous than that and he is able to make choices that indicate that he has made progression.

Miss H.: Yes, and also when obviously he first came up here, and I came up to look at his work and I brought his twin up ...

E: Do you mean in the mentoring room?

Miss H.: Yes, because there was a meeting for his twin. I had his twin whilst this was going on and I said, 'Oh well. I am going to look at Leo's work, come up and have a look. So he came up as well and I am saying 'Oh that is very good isn't it Henry. Hasn't he done well?' And then the next day I had both Leo and Henry in my code breakers at the phonics group and so I made a point of saying to Leo in front of Henry that we had been to have a look at his work and how good it was and he had a lovely big grin on his face.

E: So you think he has been quite happy?

Miss H.: Yes. I also think he was extremely pleased that his twin had seen what he was doing and I said how good it was and that really gave him a boost as well.

E: And how did Henry respond?

Miss H.: I sort of partly played devil's advocate and tried to draw him out, and, well not make him say, but encouraged him to say to Leo 'yes' he did think it was good and how well he had done and it obviously did mean a lot to Leo.

E: Quite hard for him?

Miss H.: For Henry to say that, yes, to sort of give Leo the limelight, yes, yes, rather than having it for him because they are such different opposite characters.

E: And it is quite heartening for me the way that Leo is now able to tell me stories about things that he and Henry and Cassie do together. Some lovely play activities. I always make sure that they comment but it is really good to hear you, even though there are times when they fall out.

Miss H.: Yes, there is friction.

E: That is really interesting. Thank you Miss Hendry, for coming.

**Appendix 3.xv Interview with Leo's Teacher Assistant Andrea**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford     A = Participant Adult Leo's Teacher Assistant**

E: OK, shall we start? Do you want to start with the sort of working round the questions? The first one really is can you describe some ways in which you feel you support Leo in the classroom?

A: Right, OK, well Leo doesn't actually require any high level support , or one to one support, so really it is more on a praise and reassurance basis ... Ermm

E: That is what you feel he needs...

A: Because sometimes he lacks confidence and sometimes he is right and he doesn't actually believe that he is right and would rather look over at someone that is probably doing something wrong and then you have just got to – oh that is really good and reassure him. That is it – you are doing that absolutely right and then he will go off and do it, but he sometimes lacks that confidence of thinking, doing it right. If someone at the side of him is doing it slightly different he will...

E: Will he change his work?

A: Sometimes he might go with someone at the side of him rather than his own way. He sometimes lacks that confidence so ...

E: So you reassure him?

A: So I just reassure him, praise him and just try to make him feel valued really because erhh. He sometimes lacks that confidence.

E: So you sort of give him some 'strokes' in a way really so he feels ..

A: That is right

E: OK and you have mentioned that as a strategy that you find particularly works, anything else that you've noticed this year that has been particularly useful?

A: What I attempt to do is I try to encourage him to talk because he is very very quiet and like you say he will blend in very easily with the class because he is so quiet. You can hardly see he is there.

E: He is easily overlooked .....

A: Yes. I have know him for quite a while.

E: When did you first work with him?

A: Well I have actually, I know his family through my children, sort of having sisters in the same class. So I could have known him from quite little really, but I do find with strangers it is a while before he sort of opens up and talks to them. He is quite quiet, but with me he because he sort of I suppose knows he does tend to ...

E: Knows you out of school as well as in school?

A: Yes I don't know him that well out of school, but I do know him and he knows me. So I have never had a problem with trying to engage him in talking, but I try to catch him sometimes first thing in the morning, or on a one to one reading.

E: Brilliant

(Interview overtaped)

**Appendix 3.xvi Interview with Leo's SENCO Trish**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford T = Adult Participant SENCO Trish**

E: Erm.. so what is your perception of participant children's needs? Do you want to go, just to comment a little bit on each..... if we start with Leo .....

T: I think Leo we found was quite.... he often is reserved and won't always express his emotions...erm..because of his very dominant twin brother we felt that he may be, well not intentionally..... being neglected, but a little bit in the background and we thought he needed time and space and staff members have seen a difference in him..... with the sort of extremes of behaviour that his brother was presenting so we felt that he needed space really to explore his feelings.....

E: I think he has particularly benefitted actually ....I have developed a good rapport with Leo and I will really miss him.....

**Appendix 3.xvii Interview with Trish, 'Link Person & School SENCO**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford T = Adult Participant Trish**

E: Thanks for talking to me Trish. It is very kind of you to find the time. Erm.. We will start then with a question, how did you choose the children who participated in the Project?

T: We chose children that we thought would benefit from having space and time out of the classroom, that were vulnerable children.

E: Do you mean sort of socially immature, or emotionally or intellectually vulnerable?

T: Socially vulnerable, perhaps lacking in confidence and self esteem and some children with social skills problems who we thought would benefit from having time on a one to one basis....

E: How is that sort of evidenced? Was it from the classroom, or was it sort of fed back to you from teachers and ....

T: It was fed back, mainly by teachers and from my own experience with the children.

E: Ok...that's good...and did you talk about it with Mrs.. , or, I know we talked about it because we kept composing lists didn't we?..... and then changing them and it was a kind of joint affair.

T: Yes....as a whole staff, we decided on the children.

E: So the staff were happy about them participating and we also, you and I talked and talked about whether the families would be the kind of family who would support the Project.

T: Yes, families who we felt thought would be happy to be involved and would support and we thought actually had a good understanding of their children's needs already...

E: OK that's fine ...and you have already kindly given me some summative assessments which I have on paper which is really helpful, thank you..... Tell me how you would describe your role?

T: (Pause) In relation to the project? Or, just in my....

E: Well both, well your role in the school and you have been a fantastic partner for me in this project and I...so I am interested in two things really, your role in the school generally, but also how you feel you have contributed in the Mentoring Project Role, in which your contribution has been enormous, but it is interesting to hear it from your perspective.

T: I think my role within the school is to ensure that children with additional educational needs have access to the curriculum and that their needs are being met and to support the staff in helping them to provide programmes for those children and to make sure that they are generally happy, and more content with their well being

E: So you work quite closely with individual staff members and ...and outside agencies and those kinds of things?

T: Yes a lot of involvement with external agencies, Educational Psychologists, Specialist Teaching Services, in providing programmes and making adjustments to the curriculum for the children.

E: And what about in relation to this project. We started about a year ago thinking about it and

T: (laughs)...I don't know how much help I have been. I hope I been some use in providing the insights into the children's background and their characters in some ways, and hopefully supporting you in being able to access staff.

E: Absolutely that has been a key role really, because without you as a contact it would have been so much more difficult to establish the Project and to find some 'space' in the school – I mean you helped me find this room – erm...you paved the way with members of staff – explaining what it was all about erm... you identified children that would, you thought would benefit and whose parents would collaborate erm...and you generally made me feel really welcome in this environment .....

T: I hope so...

E: ... which has been massively erm helpful ...so...thank you for all that too...

T: Thank you.... I think that everyone has been so grateful, erm including the children and I think we can really see the benefits.

E: Can you? Do you think it has made a difference to those individuals?

T: Yes...it has

E: It has been lovely, if somebody could be here all the time ...to be here every day because then you get a continuity and you can pick up on what is going on...a day's a long time in school for a child ... so it has been rather piecemeal, but hopefully it has introduced a sort of way of working what might be useful.....

T: Yes.... definitely.

E: .....and then really I wanted to ask you if you feel or see a place for mentoring time and space for other children in the school?

T: Yes definitely. We've seen, erm... we feel that this has been a great benefit to the children who have participated this time and we have already started to identify children that we think would be you know good candidates in this type of work again.

E: Well please don't hesitate to contact me if you want to talk about it, or if I can do anything to help. I can't, because of my timetable, I can't come but I can certainly support anything you want to do.

T: I think we found a teaching assistant that we think will be a suitable person to do it.

E: Oh I am so pleased to hear that. I am sure that you will benefit and I think it is important this notion of a containing space, this little room I know it's a little room, but it's been quite instrumental in bringing quite a lot of security. For example Leo

called it his safe room and box where they kept their work was safe, particularly relevant in the light of his relationship and his problems.

T: I'm actually losing this room.

E: Oh no what a shame.

T: So I have actually been wracking my brain to see where there is a place which is similar to this.

E: Well in a way it isn't therapy, a mentor isn't a counselor but in a way it should be a therapeutic experience, so if it's in a corridor or somewhere where somebody keeps coming in, it does interrupt that sense of special containment. It's worth thinking about. So is there anything else you wanted to ask or say in relation to the children or the Project, anything that you thought didn't work very well that I might benefit from thinking about.

T: No I think it has been a really beneficial Project for everybody involved really. I feel I have really enjoyed being a part of it and I know the children have. The staff have found it very interesting and have seen the benefits to the children.

E: That's good. And I feel massively privileged having got to know you and the school and your staff and the children.

T: I think we feel privileged too.

E: I'll switch off now and hope we are going to meet again. Thank you.



**Appendix 3.xviii Interview with Heather talking about the history of the school setting**

**E = Researcher Erica Ashford H = Adult Participant Heather**

E: Heather is talking about the history of the village and the village school as she remembers.....

H: Well last week I actually learnt that the village's original name meant "settlement on rough ground".

E: Settlement on rough ground, well, well

H: Yes and that is very much the feel of the village because it has been a working village more than a picture box village

E: What was the work here?

H: Well it was St. Augustine's Mental Hospital. A big hospital with, they are all self sufficient so it had farm, it had its own banks and the..

E: A community?

H: It was a community and the inmates could work and shop, deal with their personal effects in sheltered surroundings.

E: Really, I wonder how, why was it closed?

H: Well it closed in, we arrived in 1992 and the closing ceremony was about that year.

E: That ties in with when people were pushed back into the community.

H: It does and a lot of the residents were just put into small homes, people's houses and of course the only place for them to socialise and do the things that they had done at St .Augustine's as in Canterbury and..

E: It changed the nature of Canterbury a little bit?

H: Not changed the nature of Canterbury, but it changed their activities, gave them less to do, because you can't go into Canterbury and sit down for a cup of coffee for 20p, for hours, because those facilities don't exist in Canterbury.

E: Some went to Herne Bay I think as well.

H: I don't know, they were sent fairly wide, scattered I think. There is a small group at Stoneleigh House which still is run by the Mental Health up at St. Augustines, but the land has now been developed with 600 new houses on it, so it has changed the nature of the village completely because the number of houses at St. Augustines is roughly equal, it has doubled the village's size.

E: And it has brought in a commuter belt?

H: It has brought in a whole middle class band that wasn't here before and professionals.

E: And the other people who didn't work together for the Institution were farm workers?

H: Were farm workers, well they were farm workers and they, there is the paper mill. The paper mill has been in the village, originally as a linen mill, it has been here for ever and the gravel works, Brett's gravel works, so it is the hospital, the paper mill and the gravel works. The paper mill did have, had, a vast number of workers, in the hundreds, and it is now down to about 70 because it has been computerized and it did have its own social club which has now been sold to the village as a village hall because there isn't the need for people at the paper mill to socialise because when their shifts have finished they go off to Herne Bay or wherever they live. There are not so many live in the village.

E: Is there a train here?

H: As I say we have had the station of course.

E: And that is not new, the station?

H: No the station has been  
E: And that means a lot of people commute.  
H: It does until the high speed comes through and they are going to reduce it to something absolutely ridiculous like 6 trains a day for the ordinary folk.  
E: What about the school .....that was at the centre of the village wasn't it?  
H: Well it was, can I just say one other thing about the village and its people first. It has always had a large traveller population.  
E: Oh really!  
H: But the original travellers, Romany travellers, there are still people who now live in council housing, or Housing Association who are speaking Romany.  
E: Oh really, the children here?  
H: Yes JB.  
E: Who is in your group?  
H: Yes, is and the traveller population in the village has adopted the village cemetery as their resting ground, so every time there is a traveller funeral as there was on Friday someone in Orpington, a young man in Orpington died, then the entire traveller population in Kent and Sussex turn up at the church and there were 10 limousines just for the, just for the entourage on Friday, plus hundreds of the 4 x 4s. (laughter) and they all turn up in church, you know, and they know what they want, although the congregation is largely illiterate. They have the Old Rugged Cross and they have their own  
E: Strong sense of identity?  
H: Strong sense of identity and the children that I have experienced here when the classes go down to the church, perhaps for a nose round, and children say - oh miss what are these stones here for or are there dead bodies under these stones etc. etc. - the traveller children are the ones who have the greatest respect for the graveyard, even though it is a closed one, in around the church. So there is a definite traveller culture in this village and we have had the girls who come to the school they try, and one or two of them have had some sort of success, have gone through secondary school completely, a lot of the traveller children go through primary school, until they get to the secondary school they fall out quickly.  
E: Do they go, do they run fair grounds and things, are they those kinds of travellers, or what do they do if they don't go to school?  
H: A lot of them are tree surgeons, and connected with wooding.  
E: It is all this kind of countryside down towards Wye really, from here down towards Wye, that area.  
H: I don't know where they actually work, but I know that a lot of them are..  
E: That is interesting  
H: Tree surgeons, or scrap metal  
E: Dealers  
H: We have got a lot of, in the last few years, on the Cockering Road between the village and Milton Roundabout, there is farm land, but I don't, that I think is used by the traveller connection and it is now has an awful lot of horses on it, of the sort, or that are being saved from the knacker's yard. What happens to the horses I am not sure but I think  
E: Being cared for by people who travel. That is so interesting.....  
H: So that is the people. Then education until the 1980s a lot of the village children were educated entirely in the village because this building was the Stour Valley School, it had the reputation for its training in the horticultural side of things, which of course.... People on the land, so there was actually any need for a lot of children to leave the village and there was a lot of sadness when it was closed  
E: So quite an insular place really?  
H: Yes. until the 1980s. I mean I can think of a couple of mums now who grew up

here, went to school here and are still living in the village who were people who in another setting would have travelled much more widely. It is not because of their level of intelligence. It is that..

E: It is the insularity of their.....

H: And their security level. You know,

E: When I talk to S for example she lives in a row with her grandma and her aunts – that’s unusual these days to find that kind of - so quite a community, quite a strong community while the school is here.

H: Yes, a very strong community, a friendly community, willing to help each other out and until recently when we have had the 600 houses (estate in place of St. Augustines) and other bits of building, a lot of people would know their neighbours and far neighbours.

E: Yes, yes, but now, the change, since St. Augustines change.. the nature of the...

H: It has changed the nature of the village. We were fortunate in having a couple who lived down on the Green

E: It is nice down there isn't it? It's pretty.

H: Yes, who were originally Baptists, very Baptist conscious people and when the first houses were being occupied up here they went up introduced themselves and welcomed people to the village and gave them a free magazine I think as well and the Parish Council also has devised a pack, a welcome pack, for newcomers. And this couple visited at least the first 100 homes I think. So that has helped knit the community together and there isn't a great divide, but there is a certain divide.

E: Do the newcomers want to be part of the community do you think? It's such a big estate....

H: Well some do, some do, but others, because their work takes them abroad or to London and some of them aren't sending their children here. They are sending their children to what they regard as a slightly smaller, slightly more precious schools, like Bridge and Petham, that also have definite church connections, but I am sure it is the sort of 'niceness', not a general, and the families, whereas this is far more mixed, but as a school it has a reputation for discipline and caring and it has obviously grown with the space that it has got available because originally it was half, the primary school was halfway down Bolts Hills on the left, which is now the doctors' surgery and the entire school was in a building that moved up here in the 1980s,

E: So it has really, really grown.

H: So it has grown,

E: It has shifted from that part of the village round the edges, are we in the outside edge for you or, is there a different centre here?

H: Yes, because the village consists of the Green, which is the original centre. Then the whole of Shalmsford Street which school is on now, was a village of its own, that is why it is called Shalmsford Street and people who live in Shalmsford Street live in Shalmsford Street. They don't live in the village.

H: The third area of the village is the village Hatch, on a hill which is on the other side of the A28 up the hill and until fairly recent times, but I can't tell you date at present but if you ask

VE she will be able to tell -you had a school of its own which residents, existing residents, were educated in, which was a small village school and there is also a fourth, called the original area of the village, is Mystole, which is originally the seat of the Fagg family, the big family estate, which is now being, the house itself has been divided up into very select residencies, flats and houses within houses.

E: So is it quite a sort of divided..... Community?

H: So Mystole is a separate entity. The village Hatch likes to keep its own identity and it does well at doing that. A lot of things centre round what was the school, is now the village Hall in the village Hatch.

E: Do they ..... come up here?

H: And those children come here, but there was a time in the last few years when the Kent County Council wanted the village Hatch children to go to Boughton, but that was fought against because of the ease of, or the difficulty of getting there.

E: Up the road there.....

H: Up the road.

E: Well

H: And we have got council housing, private housing a lot of obviously, and we have also got housing association housing.

E: That has been a sort of new wave thing... hasn't it? ... Mid 80 or 90's.

H: I don't know how long it has been there is an area off Bolts Hill which is called The Hyde, so it is tucked back between the railway and the existing Bolts Hill, which is Hyde Housing Association .....and originally it wasn't full of problem families, but it has now become the area where a lot of problem families are housed, some of whom come from London.

E: So they are shipping them out?

H: Yes

E: Do those children come here?

H: Yes, I think, C's mother, C's parents originally, CL's parents. I think they originally come from London.

E: Not Conrad's parents?

H: I don't know where Conrad's come from but he is in the other section of Hyde Housing Association houses which were built on the new St. Augustine's estate right at the back in the furthest point away from all the new posh private houses. So people there who have got less private transport have got to walk the length of each avenue in order to just get out of St. Augustine's let alone walk down to the shops or the station.

E: Not very well thought through?

H: No, it is this business of tucking away what we don't want to see, tucking it away, which is very much Kent.

E: Is it?

H: I think it is.

E: Do you think the people in the Housing Association or the Councils are aware of this?

H: I think they have people in the Hyde, and Sycamore Close which are the two housing association area are. The council housing area because the Government int

E: Buying in

H: ..... that is more mixed. I mean there is a little block of flats area in there that does get a lot of problem people, but that doesn't seem to be putting doubt in people's minds quite as much as the Hyde Housing Association..... So

E: That's interesting.....so quite a change?

H: Yes,

E: Since 1992 what do you..... I mean you live in the village.

H: Yes, on the Green.

E: Wow - It is lovely down there.

H: Yes it is. We are very fortunate because we live, you know on the river, which erm

E: And you have got the station as well.

H: And the station is there, yes.....because my husband is the rector. Our immediate reaction on arriving here was how spontaneously friendly everybody is and they are willing to support people in positions and respect people in positions. They put them a little bit up on a pedestal because they have always been working people.....

E: Which is like a sort of older 1950s, 1960s kind of....

H: Well the village that we came from, which was the other side of Canterbury was a village full of people used to running their own businesses. They were very

independent minded. They were less friendly, more critical and they certainly didn't put the vicar on a pedestal.

E: So it was welcoming coming here?

H: Very welcoming and it still is and hopefully that is not going to change because I think the people who have moved up into St. Augustines have got that .....flavour.

E: And obviously it has lot of heritage here and strong history and I obviously don't know, just coming this year, it is really, it has grown on me....and I come from Canterbury across the tops of Petham.

H: Oh beautiful.

E: I can't ..... the way you are, because of that big road, the Wincheap area. I face that way, but when I do go back ..... I think oh how beautiful it is here and how much this part of the..... it is really interesting to hear that.

H: And coming that way, because the other interesting point I suppose you would call it is there is a Steiner School which isn't in the parish of the village, it is in, I think, in the parish of Petham, but there is quite a collection of Steiner families who live in the village, a lot of them actually now live around the Green and their culture and way of education is creative, but it also makes for differences.

E: Yes, yes

H: Like on the Green itself, which is not supposed to be a play area because we have got memorial fields for playing on, but the Steiner children always play on the Green because their parents don't see why they shouldn't see them even though the children now are 11, 12 and 13, quite capable of looking after themselves.

E: So they are hanging around

H : The Steiner parents will say we want to keep an eye on what our children are doing, although the Steiner children seem as though they do more or less what they

E: Like?

H: Like. And that does frustrate local people.

E: That is interesting. What a fascinating....

H: And we also have two families, the two prime houses on the Green, until recently were owned by Mormons from America, who weren't resident here all the time, but they have been sold within recent years because I think the Americans had financial problems. So they have now been returned to local people and one of the houses was the original workhouse, so people were actually a little..... Bedford House, the lovely black and white timbered house.

E: I will have a look, I saw there were some new ones there, some town houses that have been..

H: Yes they are on the site of the original rectory.

E: Are they. I will have closer look when I go down there. It is very, very interesting and interesting when you think about the children that you are working with, how they fit into this sort jigsaw and to this culture, very strong sense of....

H: Yes, yes.

E: Well thank you Heather, it is so interesting.

