

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Trust me, I'm a student:

An exploration through Grounded Theory
of the student experience in two small schools

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by

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Abstract

The majority of literature about democratic education has been written from the perspective of teachers or educators. This thesis is different. It has a clear intention to listen to and learn from the experiences of students.

Empirical research was conducted using grounded theory methodology. Two secondary schools were selected as cases: one was explicitly democratic; the other was underpinned by democratic principles. Extensive data sets were gathered. This included conducting interviews with eighteen students; undertaking observations of lessons, meetings and social spaces; and holding informal conversations with teachers, staff and other students. Documentary information was also collected. All data were systematically analysed until the researcher was able to offer a conceptual model through which to understand the student experience.

This thesis argues that the quality of learning is likely to improve if schools pay attention to how students feel. In particular, students with a strong sense of belonging and those who feel accepted as individuals are likely to be less defensive, more open, and more able to be constructive members of a school community. A theoretical model is presented which identifies key factors which contribute to these processes. This model presents a challenge to the way in which school effectiveness is assessed within the current education system.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

i am fifteen years old

somebody
is trying to
make me
add up

when all that i
want to do
is multiply

(Cited in Mason, 1970:5)

This thesis was born out of frustration.

While working as a youthworker for many years, the researcher met hundreds of intelligent, creative and inspiring young people. Many of these had left school with no qualifications. They claimed that education was not for them. They were disillusioned and disaffected. The school system had failed them. Through getting involved in youthwork, however, and participating in a range of accredited and unaccredited learning opportunities, many found something to interest them. They were enthusiastic. They wanted to learn. Some progressed to qualifications, to college, to university, to employment, but the unanswered question remained - why were they disengaged in the first place? Year after year, day after day, young person after young person - the story was the same. They hated school. They felt they were stupid. They thought they could never achieve anything. Why were they

not achieving in the mainstream education system? Why did they feel alienated by school? Did alternative education providers have any answers?

This thesis attempted to address the third question on this list – to learn from alternative education provision. Although the researcher wanted to explore a wide range of alternative provision, including Montessori and Steiner schools, the decision was made to focus upon democratic education. The initial research question was open: *What can be learnt from student's narrative about their experiences of democratic education?*

Two schools were selected as cases. The researcher had no previous connections with these schools. There was no attempt to prove anything in particular. The researcher made no assumptions about whether either of these schools were models of good practice. There was no hypothesis. There was one key aim - to listen to the experiences of students and to learn from them. Their opinions and experiences were central. The researcher hoped to understand more about how the schools operated and the impact of this upon students' experiences. If possible, it was hoped that this might shed some light upon young people's experiences of education in a wider sense.

After deciding to use grounded theory methodology, a research framework was developed which was consistent with the aim of creating an exploratory thesis.

Chapter Two outlines the development of grounded theory and offers a clear statement as to the way in which it has been used in this research. **Chapter Three** explores the research design in more depth, including information regarding research techniques and ethical considerations.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven form the bulk of this thesis as they contain data¹ from the schools. **Chapters Four and Five** relate to Sands School.

Chapters Six and Seven concern The Small School. In each case, the first

¹ Data is identifiable in this thesis by the use of `courier font`

chapter contains data which were gathered directly from student interviews - given the choice of grounded theory methodology, the researcher decided to include substantial quantities of student narrative. The second covers observational and documentary evidence and serves to add a context in which to conceptualise the students' experiences.

Chapter Eight describes the researcher's attempt to offer an interpretation of data and to generate theory. This is the first stage at which data from both schools are taken in combination - this results in a theoretical model (Fig 8.1). The importance of developing strong relationships is highlighted as they appeared to contribute to students having a sense of belonging and of feeling accepted. Schools which create environments where particular types of relationships are developed, it is posited, are in a strong position to support students with learning. This presents a challenge to the way in which school effectiveness is measured within the current educational system.

As was consistent with grounded theory, an extensive literature review followed the process of theory generation. This is compiled as **Chapter Nine**. The aim of this is to situate the theoretical model within a wider context, to find areas of convergence and divergence between the theoretical model and existing literature, to highlight areas of resonance and to identify possible gaps.

Finally, **Chapter Ten** offers a summary of the research process and draws together the theoretical model and the literature review. A modification of the theoretical model is presented (Fig 10.1). At this stage, the two schools were re-visited, and information from the discussions that took place is included. Issues of originality, assessing the quality of the research, researcher reflexivity, and limitations are considered. A series of tentative generalisations are offered as part of the concluding comments.

This thesis represents a personal and intellectual journey. It started with frustration but ended with optimism. There are schools which have managed to create

positive learning environments, where students are open and non-defensive, where they have felt lucky to be. One student's words have been inspiring, and have led to a new question – could all schools feel like this?

I love school.
I can't wait 'til the holidays are over, I get to come back here.

Chapter 2

Grounded Theory Methodology

2.1 Introduction

Grounded theory was an approach for undertaking research. Although initially developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), ideas have diverged and there have been intense debates as to the true nature of 'grounded theory'. These discussions have involved a large number of other researchers, including Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2008), Bryant (2002, January 2003), Dey (1993, 2004, 2007), Locke (1996), Rennie (2001), and Turner (1981, 1983) who, in different ways, have attempted to develop, adapt and change the theory to fit a variety of research settings.

This situation led Dey to explain that *"there is no such thing as 'grounded theory' if we mean by that a single, unified methodology, tightly defined and clearly specified"* (2004:80). McLeod concluded that *"there are three, and possibly four or five, formally described versions of grounded theory analysis"*, in which he included the versions by Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, Rennie, and Turner (2001:86). For a new researcher, this presented challenges: there was no manual to follow, no clear guidelines which would be agreed upon by all grounded theorists. New researchers had to sufficiently understand the variations in approach so that informed research decisions could be made.

This came with a word of warning. Most grounded theorists, regardless of which 'school' they came from, agreed upon the danger that grounded theory could become diluted. By the late 1990s, two-thirds of published qualitative research claimed to use grounded theory (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007:47). Smit and Bryant identified that many researchers used the term 'grounded theory' loosely, and did

not make mention of, or acknowledge key aspects of it. They warned that grounded theory could become a “*non-method*”, linked with vague and undisciplined data gathering (2000:6). They argued that:

The Glaserian and Straussian approaches to research, however, each present a different approach to the research process, and more importantly may well yield different results. The implication is that researchers should study the divergence, contemplate the purpose or expected product of the study which they plan to undertake, and, based on the aforementioned, make a conscious decision on which approach to follow. It is then also important to document this process of selection when sharing their results with the community (2000:13).

In an attempt to adhere to this advice, this chapter starts with a description of the development of grounded theory, including the key differences between Glaser and Strauss. Contributions of more recent writers are explored, particularly those of Charmaz, Bryant, Rennie and Turner. Core elements of grounded theory are identified. A clear statement as to the position of grounded theory within this research is given. This includes information on processes that have been used in terms of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation.

2.2 Development of Grounded Theory

In order to understand grounded theory, it was essential to go to Glaser and Strauss's book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*². It started with this statement:

Most writing on sociological method has been concerned with how accurate facts can be obtained and how theory can thereby be more rigorously tested. In this book we address ourselves to the equally important enterprise of *how the discovery of theory from data - systematically obtained and analyzed in social research - can be furthered*. We believe that the discovery of theory from data - which we call *grounded theory* - is a major task confronting sociology today, for, as we shall try to show, such a theory fits empirical situations, and is understandable to sociologists and layman alike. Most important, it works - provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications (1967:1, italics in original).

² According to Glaser's website, a paper written by him in 1965 has recently been discovered, the implication being that Glaser was the original founder of grounded theory, prior to his working with Strauss on *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (see Grounded Theory Institute, 2008).

Glaser and Strauss presented an alternative to the dominant model of research. Until 1967, quantitative research had dominated, with qualitative research being seen as a weaker model - woolly, nonspecific, unverifiable and unscientific (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:105). Glaser and Strauss challenged this by providing a way of doing qualitative research that was specific, scientific, and verifiable. They also challenged the perception that research was largely about verification of preconceived theories and hypotheses. They wanted researchers to have the capacity to develop new theories.

Grounded theory was a move away from a model where research was devised to test out '*a priori*' hypotheses³. To illustrate their criticism of the latter, Glaser and Strauss wrote, of grounded theory:

This situation is in contrast to the risk of testing a logico-deductive theory, which is dubiously related to the area of behavior it purports to explain, since it was merely thought up on the basis of *a priori* assumption and a touch of common sense, peppered with a few old theoretical speculations made up by the erudite. The verifier may find that the speculative theory has nothing to do with his evidence, unless he *forces* a connection (1967:29, italics in original).

In contrast, Glaser and Strauss were insistent that theory must be *grounded* in data. They argued that data analysis should not be divorced from data collection - rather, researchers engaged in an iterative process whereby one procedure informed the other, and vice versa. Researchers moved around the process in a circular fashion rather than through it in stages. Through engaging like this, new theory could be generated. This theory was grounded in data - hence the name 'grounded theory'. In most methods, a theory (or hypothesis) came first, which was then tested and verified or refuted by data.

Some writers drew a distinction between the 'Grounded Theory Method' (GTM) and Grounded Theory (GT) (See Bryant, 2002). The GTM was the *approach* by

³ This was where research findings were "*based on theoretical deduction rather than empirical observation*" (Pearsall, 1999:65)

which theory was generated. A GT was the name given to the *theory* that was generated. The distinction was important because a 'grounded theory' could be generated through using other methods, such as Action Research. Indeed, the method could also be used without generating a grounded theory, such as by verifying an existing one. For the purpose of this piece of work, however, it was assumed that a GTM would be used to generate a GT and therefore the phrase 'grounded theory' was used to encompass both aspects.

Glaser and Strauss introduced three key concepts which were essential to grounded theory: Theoretical Sampling, Theoretical Sensitivity and the Constant Comparison method of analysis. It was crucial to understand and engage with these concepts in order to use the methodology.

2.2.1 *Theoretical Sampling*

Theoretical sampling was:

... the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory ... (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:45, italics in original).

Theoretical sampling contrasted with more well-known sampling techniques such as purposeful or random sampling. With these, researchers decided upon their sampling strategy in advance, usually by trying to secure the most representative sample of participants. For example, names might be selected at random from a list of those who met basic criteria. With theoretical sampling, however, there was no attempt to be representative or random. Cases were selected on the basis of *theoretical interest*. For example, if the researcher highlighted differences in attitudes of females or males, further cases could be explicitly sought to explore this further. The process was ongoing, which could only be done if data collection and analysis were iterative, otherwise all data would have been gathered before areas of interest could be identified.

2.2.2 *Theoretical Sensitivity*

Theoretical sensitivity was a concept which warranted only two pages of explanation in the original text (1967) but nonetheless remained a crucial concept for both Glaser and Strauss. It was developed in more depth in their later books, and was to become one of the issues over which they conflicted. Their original explanation of the concept was to *“have theoretical insight into his area of research, combined with an ability to make something of his insights”* (1967:46). The inference of this was that theoretical sensitivity related to the ability of the researcher to approach data with an open mind, and to ‘see’ categories and concepts which might have led to theoretical insights. By way of illustration, they explained what might happen if this sensitivity was absent. Researchers might be drawn to one particular angle, or theme, and because of this, might miss something in terms of the rest of the data.

The divergence between Glaser and Strauss came when they attempted to explain how researchers attained this theoretical sensitivity. This linked to issues of how researchers were involved in, influenced by, and influencing of, the process. McLeod offered one perspective on this debate, arguing that:

The key to achieving a satisfactory grounded theory analysis lies in the immersion of the researcher in the data. The emphasis on researcher reflexivity that is found in other qualitative genres is not highlighted in the grounded theory approach in an explicit manner. However, it is clear that a researcher could not possess sufficient theoretical sensitivity without being able to reflect on his or her biases and assumptions (2001:71).

The issue of researcher reflexivity was a central one in understanding the different ‘schools’ of grounded theory. Although theoretical sensitivity was important to all grounded theorists, the incorporation of researcher reflexivity into this remained controversial. This will be explored in more depth later.

2.2.3 *Constant Comparison Method*

Glaser and Strauss presented Constant Comparison as a method for analysing data and generating theory. This involved data coding / memo-writing, integrating categories, solidifying theory, and writing. Both writers, together and separately, emphasised the importance of generating new theory - the constant comparison method was designed to assist with this process. The four stages of constant comparison will now be outlined.

2.2.3.1 Data coding / Memo writing

Data were coded into as many categories as possible. There were two kinds of categories - those which the researcher had defined, and those which came directly from the language of participants (known as in-vivo codes). Whilst coding, the analyst compared incidents with other incidents in the data. This started to generate theoretical properties of categories, such as dimensions, the conditions under which it was pronounced or minimised, its major consequences, and its relationship with other categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:106-7).

Throughout the coding process, the researcher reflected on the categories and the theoretical implications, at which point, the rule was to “*stop coding and record a memo on your ideas*” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:107). This was designed to enable researchers to put their own ideas to one side before re-immersing themselves in data. Memos were crucial within grounded theory.

2.2.3.2 Integrating categories

After coding, the researcher started to find ways of integrating codes into categories and then to find relationships between categories. This process started to highlight areas of theoretical interest. If more data were needed, the process of theoretical sampling meant that the researcher was able to return to the field to investigate particular areas of interest.

2.2.3.3 Delimiting / solidifying the theory

As theory became more solid, categories were modified and underlying connections became clearer. Categories became *theoretically saturated* when the researcher decided that there was nothing of significance remaining.

2.2.3.4 Writing

Theory needed to be written in a way that others could understand. Memos could be used to explain particular categories. Coded data could be quoted extensively to illustrate why conclusions had been drawn.

2.2.4 Conflict between Glaser and Strauss

When Glaser and Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, they hoped to motivate other researchers to publish new approaches to research. They wrote:

Our principal aim is to stimulate other theorists to codify and publish their *own* methods for generating theory (1967:8, italics in original).

They also stated that:

In our own attempt to discuss methods and processes for discovering grounded theory, we shall, for the most part, keep the discussions open-minded, to stimulate rather than freeze thinking about the topic ... (1967:8-9)

In the years to come, this stance changed. Rather than keeping discussions open-minded, both writers published books which were prescriptive about how grounded theory should be carried out. Their disputes have polarised researchers into two camps: Glaser's and Strauss's. The divergence between Glaser and Strauss will be explored, as understanding their underlying differences sheds light on ongoing debates. It also has implications for the conduct of the present study.

Glaser published *Theoretical Sensitivity* in 1978. In this, he acknowledged that there were weaknesses in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* that made using the approach difficult for new researchers. In particular, this related to how theory was

generated. The key issue he identified was how researchers developed theoretical sensitivity. He explained that:

The first step to gaining theoretical sensitivity is to enter the research setting with as few predetermined ideas as possible - especially logically deduced, a prior hypothesis. In this posture, the analyst is able to remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events and detect happenings without first having them filtered through and squared with pre-existing hypotheses and biases. His mandate is to remain open to what is actually happening (1978:3).

Glaser attempted to make grounded theory more user-friendly by being clearer about processes such as theoretical sampling, coding and memo-writing. In his chapter about coding, for example, he broke down the process into more detail, introducing stages of 'open coding' and 'selective coding'. Open coding was where researchers used as many codes and categories as they needed. Selective coding was an attempt to find one core category and relate all other categories to this one (Glaser, 1978:56).

Glaser stressed the importance of using memos. He was emphatic that:

The *core stage* in the process of generating theory, the bedrock of theory generation, its true product is the writing of theoretical memos. If the analyst skips this stage by going directly from coding to sorting or to writing - he is *not* doing grounded theory. *Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding* (1978:83, italics in original).

This paragraph has been highlighted for two reasons: the first was to show the importance of memo-writing to Glaser; the second was to demonstrate that by this point, Glaser claimed an authority on defining what was, and was not, grounded theory. The open approach of 1967, with its use of the phrase 'open-minded' had gone.

In 1990, Strauss and Corbin published *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. The emphasis of this book was contained within its title - it had a clear focus on procedures and techniques, and as such, has

proved popular with those new to grounded theory who wanted a step-by-step guide (Charmaz, 2006:61).

Strauss and Corbin wrote prescriptively, again the open-minded position of 1967 was gone. They stated:

One must study, not merely read, through the procedures as described in various books, and be prepared to follow them. The procedures are designed to systematically and carefully build theory. Taking shortcuts in the work will result in a poorly constructed and narrowly conceived theory that may not be an accurate representation of reality (1990:25).

There were two key differences between this book and Glaser's *Theoretical Sensitivity*. One concerned coding, and in particular, the insertion of a middle stage, 'axial coding'. The second concerned theoretical sensitivity and will be explored shortly.

Strauss and Corbin argued that after open coding, axial coding was to take place. They explained this process in great detail - this was a summary:

In axial coding our focus is on specifying a category (*phenomenon*) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the *context* (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action/interactional *strategies* by which it is handled, managed, carried out; and the *consequences* of those strategies (1990:97, italics in original).

Appreciating the significance of axial coding was fundamental to understanding the conflict between Glaser and Strauss. Glaser was insistent that axial coding was unnecessary. He argued that different types of data and research questions led to the need for different categories. By using such a fixed way of coding, he believed that Strauss betrayed one of the key principles of grounded theory - that categories, and then theory, came from data (Dey, 2007:202). He argued that Strauss and Corbin's approach was not grounded theory at all, as explained by Charmaz:

Glaser declares that Strauss and Corbin invoke contrived comparisons rather than those that have emerged from analytic processes of comparing

data to data, concept to concept, and category to category. He views their approach as "full conceptual description", not grounded theory (2000:513).

The second major difference related to the concept of theoretical sensitivity.

Strauss and Corbin suggested that researchers "*Periodically step back and ask:*

What is going on here? Does what I think I see fit with the reality of the data?"

(1990:44). They claimed that theoretical sensitivity came from three places -

literature, personal experience, and professional experience (1990:42). They saw

the role of the researcher as active in relation to data, and they argued that

researchers could benefit from bringing their own personal and professional

experience to the field. This interpretation contrasted with Glaser who advocated a

disciplined, restrained role. Locke used the terms "*active provocation*" and "*passive*

constraint" to illustrate the two positions (Locke, 1996:241-2). These distinctions

were essential. They indicated a fundamental division in the perception of the role

of the researcher. This connected to the issue of researcher reflexivity, as

discussed earlier. Strauss and Corbin's version of theoretical sensitivity linked

closely with the concept of researcher reflexivity - Glaser's version did not. This will

be explored in more detail later through outlining the perspective of constructivists.

Following the publication of Strauss and Corbin's book (1990), Glaser quickly

published another book, provocatively sub-titled *Emergence versus Forcing*, in

which he claimed that Strauss and Corbin's approach 'forced' data into categories

(Glaser, 1992). He directly challenged them, arguing that they had moved away

from the original ethos of grounded theory. He re-branded his own approach as

'Classical Grounded Theory' and set up the Grounded Theory Institute. It was

reasonable to suggest that Strauss and Corbin had moved away from the 1967

version of grounded theory. However, by naming his approach, 'Classical

Grounded Theory', Glaser inferred that he had ownership of the concept. This was

not the case - he too had moved away from original version, albeit in a different

direction. His writings on theoretical sensitivity and on the role of the researcher,

for example, were much more rigid and prescriptive than in the initial book. This

has led to an ongoing and unanswered question - who has ownership of grounded theory?

In literature written by other researchers, there has been a clear focus on examining and understanding the split between Glaser and Strauss (see for example Kelle, May 2005, Locke, 1996, Pidgeon, 1996). Although useful in terms of development of the methodology, there was a danger that dedicating so much energy has been all-consuming. In effect, Glaser and Strauss have acted as gatekeepers to the approach - and others have allowed them to do so.

2.3 The Constructivist Challenge to Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss's divergence over issues of 'emergence versus forcing' (Glaser, 1992) and 'passive constraint versus active provocation' (Locke, 1996) inferred an environment in which there were two sides to grounded theory: Glaser versus Strauss. In her paper *Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods* (2000), Charmaz cut through this perception and presented a challenge to them both. She placed Glaser *and* Strauss on one side of a debate, with herself (and colleagues such as Bryant) on the other.

Charmaz critiqued grounded theory through the lens of constructivism. In short, the questions under examination were that of how theory was generated, what constituted truth and reality, and how meaning was constructed. Charmaz claimed that Glaser and Strauss wrote from a positivist stance (2000, 2006). This was the view that research was scientific, that facts existed in themselves, that there was a truth out there, waiting to be discovered. She argued that:

Both Glaser and Strauss assume an external reality that researchers can discover and record - Glaser through discovering data, coding it, and using comparative methods step by step; Strauss and Corbin through their analytic questioning, hypotheses, and methodological applications. In their earlier writings, Glaser and Strauss (1967) imply that reality is independent of the observer and the methods used to produce it. Because both Glaser and Strauss and Corbin follow the canons of objective reportage, both engage in silent authorship and usually write about their data as distanced experts ... thereby contributing to an objectivist stance (2000:513).

In contrast, Charmaz argued that:

Constructivist grounded theory celebrates firsthand knowledge of empirical worlds, takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism, and offers accessible methods for taking qualitative research into the 21st century. Constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings (2000:510).

In essence, constructivists took a different view as to how meaning was created.

They did not concur with the perception that the truth was out there, waiting to be found. They believed that meaning was *created*, not *discovered* (Dey, 2004:88).

Whereas Strauss and Corbin claimed that "*The data themselves do not lie*"

(1990:44), Charmaz argued that "*Data are narrative constructions*" (2000:514).

This meant that researchers were not neutral observers who saw situations as they really were - they were co-creators of meaning. They perceived situations through their own personal, professional and theoretical lenses, and were given information by participants who filtered it through their own lenses.

Charmaz explained that:

The grounded theorist's analysis tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. The researcher composes the story; it does not simply unfold before the eyes of an objective viewer. This story reflects the viewer as well as the viewed (2000:522).

This view was shared by Bryant who stated that "*Ideas about 'data', the 'emergence of theory', and the essentially passive stance of the researcher to the research context are just not tenable*" (2002:34). He argued that seeing participants and researchers as actors-in-contexts was a more valuable way of conceptualising the research process.

The perspective of constructivists was far from a small variation. It altered the underlying assumptions upon which grounded theory was based. In practice, it meant that Charmaz and Bryant were striving to explore a reality, rather than *the* reality. Theory was still grounded in data, the categories still fitted, but there was

acknowledgement that there was more than one way of doing this. The role of the researcher, therefore, became integral to the process, an active participant in the creation of meaning. In order to understand, and possibly to limit the role of the researcher in the process, the need for researcher reflexivity became obvious.

Constructivist grounded theory placed the researcher as *part of* and not *separate from* the process of making meaning. This affected the way in which researchers designed research, gathered data, analysed data, created categories, and wrote. It did not, however, give researchers a green light to do whatever they liked. If this was grounded theory, then key principles applied. To wander too far from these principles might have provided rich data, but it would not have been grounded theory. It would be another form of qualitative analysis.

Constructivist grounded theory was consistent with Glaser and Strauss in that:

- Everything started from data – there were no pre-defined categories or pre-conceived hypotheses. Theory was thus firmly grounded in data;
- The process was iterative, moving from collection to analysis to collection;
- Cases were selected on grounds of theoretical sampling;
- Theoretical sensitivity (linked to researcher reflexivity) was important;
- Cases were analysed through the constant comparison method.

The key difference with Glaser's approach concerned the role of the researcher. The researcher was an active co-creator of meaning. The researcher did not strive for passive constraint, but rather, immersed themselves in the research process. Researchers did not approach research settings without bringing their previous experiences with them. They accepted that these inevitably affected the process. Instead, they made a commitment to researcher reflexivity in terms of acknowledging the role that they played.

The key difference from Strauss and Corbin's approach was about techniques and procedures. They instructed readers to "*Follow the research procedures. The data collection and analytic procedures are designed to give rigor to a study*" (1990:45).

Given that constructivist researchers allowed for flexibility, they might or might not, therefore, choose to use axial coding and selective coding procedures. Decisions were based on the nature of the research question.

The constructivist critique of grounded theory has not been well received by Glaser. He argued that the main context in which Charmaz had conducted research (pain management in chronic illness) was very specific, and therefore, her case for constructivism limited. He also argued that, *"It appears that constructivism is an effort to dignify the data and to avoid the work of confronting researcher bias"* and went on to state that *"Constructivism is used to legitimate forcing. It is like saying that if the researcher is going to be part of constructing the data, then he/she may as well construct it his way"* (Glaser, September 2002). Glaser has misunderstood Charmaz's case - she explicitly outlined the process for generating theory, including the line-by-line coding of data, memo writing, the use of constant comparative methods, theoretical sampling and writing strategies. Considering that these processes had been taken directly from *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, the criticism seemed unwarranted. She at no point suggested that researchers could construct whatever they liked, regardless of data.

Strauss died in 1996 and therefore has not been able to make a specific response to the arguments from constructivists. However, an article published two years prior to his death gave possible clues to his attitude. *Grounded Theory Methodology* (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) had a different tone to Strauss and Corbin's previous work. Far from being prescriptive about how grounded theory should be carried out, they wrote a précis of the development of the methodology over the previous 25 years, acknowledging that theirs was just one perspective. Although stating that they would be more comfortable with future versions that stuck closely to their own, they implicitly gave 'permission' for difference. One interesting aspect of this article was that they firmly identified themselves as anti-positivist. They acknowledged the role of the researcher in the making of meaning, and recognised that there were multiple interpretations of reality. This linked with the arguments that Charmaz was still six years away from publishing, which

suggested that one of the originators of the theory was already moving in this direction.

In 2007, *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* was published which included contributions from 34 different authors from at least five different countries. Although dedicated to Glaser and Strauss and containing one chapter by Glaser, it was edited by Charmaz and Bryant, leading voices from the constructivist school. This indicated a movement on a journey for grounded theory, where the book was edited not by Glaser, but by those who came after him. The editors were explicit in their introduction that rather than seeing grounded theory as a single approach, they viewed it as a “*family of methods*” (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007:11-12), where different approaches had “*family resemblances*” rather than being identical. This was a permissive view, giving room for diversity and variation.

2.4 Other Perspectives on Grounded Theory

2.4.1 *Rennie and the field of psychotherapy*

David Rennie and colleagues were psychotherapists who published articles advocating the use of grounded theory in psychological research (Rennie, 2001, Rennie et al., 1988). Their interpretations of the approach were largely informed by Glaser and Strauss’s original book and by Glaser’s later work. Given this, they still made several small changes which fitted with their particular research field. For example, they undertook research which aimed to understand the therapeutic process from the perspective of the client, and instead of using a line-by-line coding process, they broke data into “*meaning units*” (Rennie et al., 1988:142). They also changed the name of “*theoretical sampling*” to “*theory-based data selection*” (Rennie et al., 1988:142). This indicated that even ‘classical’ grounded theory was adaptable in different contexts. With reference to this research project, this insight was important. The researcher understood that there were key elements to grounded theory, but also that there was no manual to follow. The

researcher was responsible for making decisions about how best to use the methodology.

2.4.2 *Turner and the field of organisational behaviour*

Barry Turner was a sociologist who became familiar with grounded theory only after accumulating extensive experience of large-scale research projects (Turner, 1981, 1983). His account of the methodology was largely consistent with Glaser and Strauss's original work, but he too developed some variations. In particular, he rejected the notion that data analysis should lead to the creation of a single overarching category, instead preferring to study phenomena which resulted in "*complex, multi-level explanation*" (Turner, 1983:347). He argued that this was particularly important when undertaking research in organisational settings. This was pertinent to this research project. Although the research had an emphasis on exploring the experiences of students, there was also a clear organisational focus - an interest in how the structures and processes of the schools contributed to the experiences of the students. The researcher accepted, therefore, that it might not be possible to reduce codes and categories to one. It might turn out to be more complex.

2.5 This research project

For this research project, understanding the constructivist position was particularly important because the nature of the research question lent itself to an alignment with this stance. An exploration of students' experience as described by themselves was automatically one of perception, which in turn, became one of the construction of meaning. Student narratives were a construction – the researcher did not observe or participate in the original experience. The positivist stance would have involved searching for truth. This was not possible. If the researcher had visited at another time of the year, or if a different researcher had gone to the schools, different data would have been gathered and other conclusions might have been drawn. This project was thus firmly positioned within the constructivist

school. The ways in which the researcher interpreted grounded theory from within this stance will now be outlined.

It was accepted that meaning was co-created between participants and researcher, but Glaser's criticisms of constructivists were taken as a word of warning. He was concerned about forcing data to reflect researcher bias - the concepts of **theoretical sensitivity** and **researcher reflexivity** were thus crucial. These were interpreted as coming to the research process with an open mind, but not an empty head (Dey, 2007:176). This meant genuinely engaging in a process of discovery, of not having pre-conceptions and pre-set categories, of not having a covert hypothesis. This included letting go of hunches that were not backed up by experience. It meant recognising when prior experience and knowledge were getting in the way of being engaged in a here-and-now experience, and when they were providing helpful insights which enabled understanding.

Theoretical sampling was important. Given that there was only the capacity to visit two schools and to interview a small number of people, it was crucial to generate rich data. This meant learning from each individual, and being guided towards the next. If there was something missing, the process of theoretical sampling helped find data to address this.

The **constant comparative method** was used. Memo writing served a useful function, particularly for hunches and ideas which started from the researcher. This helped separate in vivo categories from researcher ideas. It aided in ensuring that the coding process was not contaminated by researcher hunches. Without memos, the coding process might well have led to descriptive analysis rather than the development of theory. Codes were descriptive and theory was not – the memos helped fill the gap between the two. Further explanation of processes that were used for analysis is given in Chapters 4-7. These include examples from particular data.

The choice of how to code was difficult, given that coding in itself was a contentious issue. For a new researcher, the step-by-step guide offered by Strauss and Corbin was appealing, yet the process of axial coding seemed overly complicated in the context of this research. A process of **open coding** was therefore chosen as a first step, which took place largely on a line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph basis. This was intended to mirror “*meaning units*” (Rennie et al., 1988:142) - in some cases, a ‘meaning unit’ was a word, a sentence, or a specific section of a paragraph. Field notes were analysed on a scenario-by-scenario or observation-by-observation basis, as suggested in the context of ethnographic research (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001:166). The computer programme ATLAS-ti was used to assist with open coding. Further exploration and solidification of categories was conducted on paper. Examples of these processes are given at the start of each data chapter.

The process of **theory generation** was anticipated to result from the exploration and solidification of categories. The researcher accepted that the theory might require a “*complex, multi-level explanation*” (Turner, 1983:347). It was crucial that theory was firmly grounded in data and thus built in procedures for returning to the code list and data sets to assess this. Further explanation about how theory was generated is given at the start of Chapter 8.

At the point at which theoretical ideas were generated, a **literature review** was undertaken in order to identify similarities and differences with existing research and theory. This was intended to situate the new theory within relevant academic fields. It was anticipated that this research might resonate with existing theory, but might also provide new insights.

2.6 Summary

This research was underpinned by grounded theory methodology, originally devised by Glaser and Strauss but later used and developed by a number of other researchers. In order to be clear as to the version of grounded theory that has

been used in this research, it was important to explore the development of the theory since its inception. This has demonstrated that there were key aspects of Glaser and Strauss's original methodology which remained core regardless of which 'family group' was represented. First and foremost, the main emphasis was that theory was to come from data, and that data must be collected and analysed in such a way as to allow this theory to be generated. The research design needed to be consistent with this principle.

The constructivist perspective on grounded theory has been particularly influential, and this project is firmly located within this school of thought.

Chapter 3

Research Design

3.1 Introduction

Grounded theory was a methodology. It did not prescribe particular methods for data collection. These were dependent upon the nature of the project. Research decisions nevertheless needed to be consistent with the underlying methodology. This chapter explores this research design including research methods; sampling strategy; verification strategy and ethical issues. Information is also provided about the research process in practice, including statistics about numbers, genders and ages of students involved.

The research intended to explore students' experiences of democratic education. Two schools were selected as cases. The researcher aimed primarily to listen to students' narrative through open-ended interviews, but also to observe practices and processes in the schools. This included observing teaching sessions, school meetings, staff meetings, and informal interactions between staff and students. Documentary analysis was also planned. The research focused in particular on students aged over 14.

The initial research question was: *"What can be learnt from students' narratives about their experiences of democratic education?"* This was an open question and was to be explored as a 'working question' rather than a prescription. Due to the nature of data that was collected at the schools, it was later refined and became:

"What can be learnt from students' narratives about their experiences of small alternative schools?"

The influence of democracy was highlighted as a key area of interest. Rather than exploring democratic processes in large mainstream schools, the researcher chose to focus upon small schools with an explicit commitment to democracy. Schools with this philosophy were few and far between - consequently, the researcher also identified schools which were democratic in nature, even if they did not describe themselves in this way. The research focused upon secondary schools.

At the point of designing this project, there were two 'democratic schools' in England: Summerhill School in Suffolk and Sands School in Devon⁴. Both educated children up to secondary age and both were independent and fee-paying. The former was a boarding school and the latter a day school. Summerhill and Sands School were visited as part of the initial process of decision-making. Sands School was selected, largely because it was a day school. The researcher felt that students' experiences of democracy would be dramatically influenced by whether the school was a boarding or day school. Had Summerhill students been interviewed, it might have been difficult to identify which of their experiences had been affected by being in a democratic environment, a boarding environment, or both. It was hoped that at Sands School, the effect of a democratic environment might have been easier to ascertain.

Schools which were democratic in essence were harder to identify. Two recent publications directed the researcher towards one school: The Small School in Devon (Carnie, 2003, Spencer, 1999). This was the only school which was described as democratic and also educated children up to secondary age. The school was visited as part of the initial process. The researcher had reservations as to the extent that democratic processes permeated the school, but nonetheless felt that there was enough evidence of a commitment to warrant further exploration. Sands School and The Small School were thus chosen as cases.

⁴ These were identified through consulting the International Democratic Education Network. <http://www.idenetwork.org/index.htm>. One other English school was listed, but was referred to as a Learning Centre rather than a school. A fourth school was in Scotland.

The researcher initially proposed that data consisted purely of transcripts from student interviews. Having received advice from others, however, this was extended. It was decided to undertake observations of classes, meetings, breaks, teachers, room arrangement, timetabling, documentation, and to talk informally to teachers, staff or parents. These processes were to act as triangulation⁵, and would add a context to the students' narrative. For example, if students said that they felt listened to, was this seen in practice, and how did it transpire? Thus, data consisted of transcripts from interviews, field notes / memos from the researcher, and additional documentation from the schools (eg. timetables, pamphlets, websites).

In advance of the research visits, the researcher consulted school websites and read other materials produced *directly* by the schools. This was to increase awareness of the schools in question and was consistent with a commitment to developing theoretical sensitivity and researcher reflexivity.

3.2 Research Methods

This research used two schools as cases. There were three key methods for gathering empirical data: interviews with students; observational activities; and documentary analysis. These will be explored in turn.

3.2.1 Case Study

Given that this research focused upon individual schools, it made sense to explore the relevance of using a case study approach. This was a valuable method for conducting research, as explained by Bell:

All organizations and individuals have their common and their unique features. Case study researchers aim to identify such features, to identify or attempt to identify the various interactive processes at work, to show how

⁵ Bell explained that *"if possible, efforts should be made to cross-check findings, and in a more extensive study, to use more than one method of data collecting. This multi-method approach is known as triangulation."* (2005:116, emphasis in original)

they affect the implementation of systems and influence the way an organization functions (2005:10).

Case studies usually focused on a single incident (such as a critical issue within a school) or a single case (one school) (Yin, 2009). This project was different. Not only did it explore two cases rather than one, it also did not set out to study the schools *in themselves*. There was no attempt to select research methods through which to systematically gather information on the schools, such as looking through financial information, attending governors meetings, interviewing parents. Instead, it set out to listen to students' narrative. Observational activities and documentary analysis *did* provide extensive information about the schools, but the purpose of this was to provide a context in which to conceptualise the student experience. This gave the research a different focus. The researcher, however, still felt it was appropriate to consider the two schools as 'case studies' in a loose sense.

There were criticisms of the case study approach. One of these was: how could generalisations be made from a single case (Yin, 2009:15)? Their value diminished if they had limited value in wider settings. Yin's response was to distinguish between "*analytic generalization*" and "*statistical generalization*" whereby case studies were used to generalise theories if not to enumerate frequencies (2009:15). Bassey took this to a different level, and argued for the use of "*fuzzy generalisations*" which meant that researchers could suggest that their theory *might* be applicable to other settings. It allowed for uncertainty (Bassey, 1999:51-2). This concept will be explored further in Chapter 10, and a series of "*fuzzy generalisations*" will be presented as part of the conclusion.

3.2.2 Interviews

Interviews with students took place on a one-to-one and group basis. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Details of how many interviews took place in each school, and the genders and ages of participants are given later.

Wider debates about interviewing were considered. Researchers held contrasting opinions as to how interviews should be conducted – from those advocating a highly structured question-and-answer process to those arguing for open-ended, unstructured dialogue (Fontana and Frey, 1998, Oakley, 2005). The role and behaviour of the interviewer changed depending on which approach was adopted. Given the decision to use grounded theory, a highly structured interview process was untenable - themes and categories would, to some extent, have been set in advance by the researcher. Given the aim of listening to students, a wholly unstructured interview process seemed appropriate, but this felt risky, precisely because the research was with students. Despite being educated within democratic or semi-democratic environments, they might have felt anxious about unstructured conversation with an unfamiliar adult. The ethical decision, therefore, was to find a compromise.

Open-ended interviews seemed most appropriate. These allowed structure, but could be facilitated in such a way as to give power and control to participants. The initial research question focused on learning from students' narrative. Although this was not a specific narrative inquiry, this approach informed the way in which interviews were planned and conducted. In particular, narrative inquiry researchers recommended that interview questions should relate to life experience, and that participants be invited to talk about specific situations rather than long periods of time (Elliott, 2005). The researcher took a list of questions to each interview. These acted as a guide rather than a prescription. Questions were designed to invite the sharing of stories, as well as reflection upon experiences. They were deliberately worded in everyday language to help participants feel at ease. The interview questions were these:

1. Imagine I was from Mars. I know nothing about schools. What would I need to know about this place so that I would understand?
2. Can you tell me a bit more about
3. Can you tell me a bit about yourself [How long have you been here? Where were you before? How did you come to be here?]
4. Can you tell me your story of being at this school? Where did you start? What are the key points of the story? [Option of life history grid / timeline]

5. What does it feel like to be at this school?
6. What do you think schools are for?

In the event, these questions were not asked in this format. On meeting the students at Sands School, the researcher felt that the first question was patronising, and so changed the wording to: “Assuming I know nothing about this school, what would I need to know so that I really understand how it works?” Question 5 was not asked as most participants had already addressed this in previous comments. An additional question was added: “Thinking back on your time here, can you think about any particular highlights, or significant points for you?” followed by “And any low points?” After the first interview, another question was added because of comments that had been made by the first participant. This was consistent with theoretical sampling within grounded theory. The question was asked last and was: “how much do you think school is about passing exams, and how much is it about other things?”

A large number of additional questions were asked to individuals, depending on comments that they made. This enabled participants to develop ideas and stories, and the researcher to test out possible areas of interest. This meant that the interview transcripts read more like loose conversations with common themes, rather than formal interviews. This flexibility was available due to the choice of interview method.

The questions were changed slightly at The Small School because they were asked in a group setting (the explanation for this is given later). The questions were more open so that anyone could respond, followed by the invitation for others to add to what had already been said. The researcher frequently asked “does anyone else want to add to that?” and “does everyone feel the same about that”?

3.2.3 **Observations**

This research involved observational work - of being present during teaching sessions, school meetings, staff meetings, and of observing how rooms were organised, how the school was laid out, and so on. It also involved having informal conversations with staff, students, parents and ex-teachers. The purpose of this was to try and understand the context in which students were educated.

The observational aspects of research were to some extent connected to ethnography. This project did not, however, fit with the definition of ethnographic research, which was:

the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner ... (Bell, 2005:16)

Ethnographic researchers attempted, as far as possible, to share the experiences of participants, to 'live with' or 'be part of' the community. This research did not share this aim. There was an explicit commitment to *not* attempt to be part of the community. Rather, the researcher attempted to *observe* the process. The researcher did not comment upon items at the School Meeting for example or offer to support with any chores.

The elements of ethnography which did influence the research were connected to how data were collected. Ethnographers wrote descriptive accounts of processes rather than attempting to be reflective and analytical. These processes came later. The term "*thick description*" was used to illustrate the descriptive nature of field notes (see Charmaz, 2006, Geertz, 1993). This research also attempted to be descriptive at the initial data-collection phase. The researcher made notes during observations; an unedited version of events. Examples of these 'field notes' and explanations as to how they were analysed are given at the start of Chapters 5 and 7.

3.2.4 *Documentary Analysis*

The researcher was given a range of documents from each school. This included timetables, information packs and newsletters. Both schools also had websites which contained extensive information as to their histories, philosophies, policies and practices. These were all analysed alongside the observational data and using the same method of breaking data into 'meaning units' (see Chapter 2 for further explanation of this).

Information which was not produced directly by the schools was not considered as part of the analysis. OFSTED Reports were not consulted as part of data gathering or analysis processes on the grounds that the opinions of external assessors might sway the researcher (OFSTED, March 2010, September 2008). Books written by one of the founders of Sands School were also considered external and were only used as part of the literature review (Gribble, 1985, 1998a, b).

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The research was designed to be consistent with key principles of grounded theory, one of which was theoretical sampling. Cases were selected on the basis of theoretical interest (explanation on these decisions given in 3.1). At Sands School, students self-selected for interviews. At The Small School, students self-selected in terms of what they contributed to interviews.

During the main research visits, the researcher listened to recordings from interviews and made notes of key points. All observation notes were re-read and further notes made as necessary. Three categories of 'memo' were written: themes, hunches, and questions. These were examples of memos from the first day:

Themes (from interviews)

- Equality
- More like a group of friends / family
- Want GCSEs – but not why I'm here
- Ownership – appointing teachers / accepting new students
- Assumptions about mainstream schooling
- Social relationships
- Responsibility as positive and negative

Hunches

- All questions are taken seriously – permission-giving and affirming
- Processes and relationships equally important
- Developing critical thinking is key approach
- Social side very important to young people's ability to learn

Questions

- Who decides the 'useful work' rotas?
- Who decides the layouts of rooms?
- Is teaching older and younger students different?

These memos acted as a guide for the following day. During informal conversations, answers to some questions were gathered. Hunches were pursued and discussed in either explicit or subtle ways. Themes were present in the mind of the researcher when undertaking observations. Students were asked some additional questions as part of interviews.

When the researcher returned from the main research visits, all interviews were re-played and transcribed. Additional memos were written with key themes and questions for the next stage of the research process.

3.4 Verification Strategy

This research used a process of triangulation during data gathering. This was a way of seeing the research subject from several angles (Bell, 2005:116). If data gathered in a variety of ways led the researcher to the same conclusion, this added to the robustness of the research. Interviews with students were the key method of gathering data. The researcher also undertook extensive observations of classes, meetings and social time. Informal discussions and conversations were held with other students, teachers, parents, ex-students, and other support staff.

Documentary information was collected. In combination, these data were analysed. Particular attention was paid to any inconsistencies between data gathered from students and that gathered from other sources.

Once data had been analysed, an additional process of validation took place.

According to Strauss and Corbin:

Validating one's theory against the data completes its grounding. One does this by laying out the theory in memos either diagrammatically or narratively (1990:133).

In short, the validation process involved returning to the original data and checking to ensure that the generated theory was genuinely grounded in data. This took place by checking through every code and double-checking that data contained within each code could be explained by the new theory. If not, it indicated that more work needed to be done on developing the theory.

In some research projects, data were also verified by going back to the original participants and checking accuracy. For example, participants might be asked to read transcripts to verify that they were a fair representation of what had been said, or a third party might be asked to listen to recordings to check accuracy of accompanying transcripts. Options for verification were limited with this particular research project. It was not considered viable to ask students to check transcripts. This was, in part, because it took time for transcriptions to be made, by which time,

students were unlikely to remember the content of interviews. In addition, the researcher had no way of contacting participants without going through the schools, and this would have compromised the anonymity of the project. A third party could not listen to the recordings to check the accuracy of transcription because the researcher had informed students that no one would hear the recordings; with hindsight, this was an error, which once done, could not be changed.

There was one verification mechanism that had been built in to the process. When negotiating the research, the schools were asked whether they wanted to receive a copy of the final document to check factual accuracy. Both schools requested this. This meant that the schools could insist that factual errors be changed, such as the numbers of students in the school, the structure of the timetable or the admission policies. This process tallied with a final research visit to each school, designed to provide an opportunity for the researcher to share the theory that had been generated (see 10.5). This process proved extremely useful in the final stages of theory modification.

3.5 Ethical Issues

Ethics has been defined as a “*set of moral principles and rules of conduct*” (Morrow and Richards, 1996:90). In a research context, this was interpreted to mean the ways in which research was designed and conducted in order to ensure that the process did not harm participants. With this piece of research, ‘participants’ could be taken to mean students, staff, parents, or the schools themselves.

As this research intended to explore students’ perspectives of their own education, it clearly involved active engagement from young people, some of who were legally

defined as 'children'⁶. The ethics of undertaking research with children was complex, as Mauthner explained:

Researching children's lives raises a number of methodological issues to do with consent, access, privacy and confidentiality. Although these are not unique to children, they do present researchers with specific dilemmas to do with unequal power relationships, mainly age related, that exist between adult researchers and children as participants (1997:17).

The issues of consent, access, privacy and confidentiality, and the power relationship between researcher and participants were specifically addressed. Before these are outlined, it was important to consider the methodological framework in which children and young people were viewed.

3.5.1 *Methodological standpoint on children*

Christensen and Prout (2002) proposed four ways in which children might be seen by researchers: child as object; child as subject; child as social actor; children as participants / co-researchers. These overlapped with categories proposed by James, who used 'developing child', 'tribal child', 'adult child' and 'social child' (James in Morrow and Richards, 1996:99). These related to perceptions of children's social competence, which, in turn, influenced the ways in which children were involved with research. This research was based on a view of children which correlated most closely with the third and fourth categories. Children were seen as an 'adult child' in that they were socially competent, separate from parents, and social actors in their own right. They were not the same as adults as their particular needs were taken into account when deciding which research methods to use and how to use them. Children were also seen as 'participants / co-researchers' in that they were given some degree of control over the process of the interviews. These categories were important to explore, because as Thomas and O'Kane pointed out, *"Where ethical issues are different for research with children, the position one*

⁶ In law, 'children' were sometimes defined as under-16, and sometimes under-18. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the term 'child' applied to anyone under the age of 18

takes will depend in part on one's perspective on children and childhood" (1998:338).

Part of the reason why the third and fourth categories fitted this project was because of the environments in which the research took place. Students were educated in small, independent schools which parents / carers / guardians (in conjunction with students themselves) had voluntarily chosen. These schools had explicit commitments, to a greater or lesser degree, to treating students as active, autonomous citizens. Students were involved in discussions and decision-making about their schools, including, in one case, whether this particular piece of research could take place. By enrolling their children in these schools, parents / carers / guardians gave implicit consent for their children to be involved in this level of decision-making. It would have been inconsistent to treat students in any way other than as social actors in their own right.

The ethical issues for this research were therefore considered in the light of students being viewed as independent, autonomous and competent. Students were considered able to make their own decisions about whether to participate in the research. Adults (parents and teachers) were asked to support students to make their own decisions, but not to make decisions on their behalf. The ways in which this happened will now be explored.

3.5.2 *Consent*

There were three ways of looking at consent: informed consent, assent, and dissent (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Informed consent was an active process of ensuring that decisions to participate in research were made voluntarily, and after having information on, for example, the aims of the project; the research methods; the likely audience for the final report. It also included understanding that the participant had the right to choose to participate without coercion and to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent could, in theory, be given by students themselves or by those *in loco parentis*. Assent and dissent were more

passive processes for the student, with responsibility for consent being given to the parent / carer / guardian, followed by the student agreeing (assenting) or refusing (dissenting) to participate.

As this research was based on a premise of students as autonomous individuals, the notion of informed consent seemed appropriate. Students were in schools where they were trusted to make decisions. They should therefore be trusted to decide about participation in this project. Yet good research practice suggested that parents / carers / guardians should be informed about the nature of any research involving children and should be given responsibility for consenting (BPS, July 2004:3.10).

The issue at stake related to 'competence'. This was contentious particularly in relation to under 16s. Were students capable of making these types of decisions? In 1985, the House of Lords considered this dilemma with reference to whether children were able to consent to medical treatment without the knowledge of their parents (known as the Gillick case). These ideas have been translated to research settings:

The primary moral argument for the application of Gillick competency in the arena of research is that this would better respect children under 16 who would be able to consent on their own behalf and who wish to participate. The primary argument against the application of Gillick competency in the case of research is that it might expose children to harm, by being inappropriately applied (Hunter and Pierscioneck, 2007:660).

Given this, the matter which needed to be addressed with this research related to potential risk. There was a possibility that this research could harm students. As Elliott explained: *"any research that asks respondents to reflect in detail on their lives and experiences is likely to have an impact on respondents and that it is difficult for researchers to predict in advance what issues will be raised by research"* (2005:139). Asking questions about previous experiences of education, for example, might have drawn attention to unresolved or difficult memories. The

researcher had no way of knowing if this might have been the case, or what questions might have provoked this.

There were several ways in which the researcher attempted to reduce potential harm to students, particularly by ensuring that they had control over their own information (Martin, 1996, Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). On balance, it was felt that the potential harm was small, and that the overriding principle of the autonomy of students was paramount. Students were asked, therefore, to give informed consent for themselves. The schools were given information in advance which they agreed to distribute to students. The researcher gave further information to students in groups and as individuals. All students who participated in one-to-one or group interviews were asked to sign consent forms (Letter and consent form attached as Appendix A).

In order to adhere to good practice, schools were also asked to gain consent from parents / carers / guardians. This was based on a practice whereby *active* agreement was sought from the student, and *passive* agreement from the parent / carer / guardian (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998:339). One of the schools was more proactive in gaining this consent than the other; more details will be given later. Although this research intended to seek informed consent from all students, in practice, the concepts of assent and dissent were also applicable. This related to issues of access.

3.5.3 Access

According to Judith Masson:

Children and young people are rarely free to decide entirely for themselves whether or not to participate in research. The enclosed nature of children's lives in families, in schools and in institutions means that they are surrounded by adults who can take on the role of 'gatekeepers', controlling researchers' access and children and young people's opportunities to express their views (Masson in Lewis and Lindsay, 2000:36).

Given that this research took place on school premises, during school times and that the role of parents as consent-givers was passive, the issue of access was largely located with the schools themselves. This was apparent at two distinct stages: at the initial point of giving permission for the research to take place, and at the point when the researcher was in schools for the main research visit.

During the initial visits, representatives from both schools were willing for the research to take place. They agreed that the researcher could interview students and could observe classroom sessions and meetings. They took copies of the paperwork and agreed that they would seek permission from parents. Following this, Sands School had a discussion about the research in their School Meeting, and collectively agreed that the research could take place. In essence, the School Meeting (which included all school students) acted as gatekeeper. Once the researcher arrived at the school to undertake the research, many students were aware of the overall aims, and had already thought about whether they wanted to participate. Interviews took place with students who volunteered. There was no one acting as gatekeeper to this part of the research. The researcher was invited to observe all classes and meetings, with the proviso that they check with everyone in the room before attending. This meant that the individual teacher, in conjunction with students in the room, acted as gatekeeper. In the event, the researcher had open access to everything that took place within the school, with the exception of one small section of School Council. This meeting, comprising entirely of students, was discussing a sensitive issue - the researcher was asked to leave on the grounds of confidentiality. The students themselves were gatekeeper to this.

The experience at The Small School was different. On the first morning, the Head Teacher explained that the researcher was unable to interview students on a one-to-one basis. This was due to child protection issues because the researcher had not been CRB⁷ checked (the researcher had, in fact, been CRB checked, but this was not adequate as it had not been done by the same local authority). The Head

⁷ In England, applications can be made to the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) about criminal history. This process has the intention of helping to safeguard children and vulnerable people from potential harm.

was clearly acting as gatekeeper. Instead, the researcher was invited to facilitate two group-based interviews with students as part of their normal timetable. The Head Teacher, as the usual class teacher for these sessions, would be present. Again, she acted as gatekeeper. Although the impact of this cannot be known, Mauthner points out that *"Different results can emerge when interviewing teenagers alone or with their parents"* (or, it was assumed, other adults) (1997:19). As well as potentially affecting the quality of data, this also raised issues of consent. As students attended interviews as part of normal lessons, did they actively consent? The researcher outlined the aims of the research at the start of each group, and explained that participation was voluntary. No direct questions were asked to individuals so that students had a choice whether to participate. Even so, participation might more accurately be described as 'assent' rather than 'informed consent'. They did all choose to participate, but the voluntary nature of this must be questioned. Although this does not weaken data that students provided, it does remain a limitation of the research process. With lessons and meetings, the researcher was given free access to attend; as a courtesy, the researcher sought approval from teachers and students before observing any sessions. In effect, they were the gatekeepers to these. There were no occasions when the researcher's access was restricted.

With regards to parents / carers / guardians, the two schools handled this issue differently. Sands School requested parental consent *after* the interviews had taken place (students took forms home), which emphasised that parental consent was passive rather than active. The Small School did not request parental consent at all, and given the fact that the interview groups took place as part of regular lessons, the researcher chose not to pursue this. All students signed individual consent forms.

3.5.4 *Privacy and Confidentiality*

The ability of the researcher to offer privacy and confidentiality was affected by the access arrangements within each school. Student at Sands School chose to be

interviewed. In a practical sense, this involved them approaching the researcher and offering to be interviewed. A time and meeting place was then arranged between researcher and student. Most chose to be interviewed in the gardens, which offered privacy (they could not be overheard) but safety (they were in view of others). The researcher recorded all interviews, and explained that they would be the only person to hear the recordings or see the transcripts. If the student's words were to be used, the researcher would attempt to make these anonymous by removing any identifying features. Students seemed satisfied with these arrangements - in fact, more than one stated that they did not mind if anyone heard the recording or saw the transcript.

Students at The Small School were interviewed in groups, which meant that their peers as well as the Head Teacher were present. Privacy and confidentiality were thus compromised. Students could not share anything which they would have liked to be kept confidential from these particular individuals. In a wider sense, however, issues of privacy and confidentiality were still important. Students might have shared information which they would have liked to be kept from parents, other students, other teachers, or the wider community. In this way, the process was the same as at Sands School. A recording was made, but students were informed that the researcher would be the only one to hear the recording or read the transcript. Any direct quotations would be made anonymous. Again, students seemed satisfied. None seemed concerned as to who would hear or see their words.

There was one notable exception to the issue of privacy. A representative from each school signed a consent form on behalf of the school - this included explicit permission that the schools could be identified. This was fortunate, because the unusual nature of the schools made it impossible to ensure anonymity. If either school had requested this, it would have meant that the final thesis could have been written, but it would have been embargoed from publication in any form.

3.5.5 *Unequal Power Relationship*

Exploring the power relationship between researcher and participant was crucial in terms of reducing potential harm. In essence, this meant that the more control that students had, the better. The pertinent issue was: how should this be done?

Thomas and O’Kane argued that the adoption of more participatory research methods were central to equalising power. They stated:

The use of these participatory techniques greatly assisted in breaking down imbalances of power, not only by giving children greater control over the agenda and more time and space to talk about the issues that concern them, but also by creating an atmosphere in which there were no right or wrong answers ... (1998:343).

With this research, ‘participatory methods’ included open-ended interviews where students could answer any or all of the questions posed. Interviews were facilitated in ways to suggest that there were no right or wrong answers. Open questions were asked about *experiences* and not about opinions or ideas. This was an attempt to encourage students to share stories, rather than feel as if they had to defend or promote their schools.

When observing teaching sessions and meetings, the researcher attempted to reduce any influence upon the process by being passive. Although having an additional person in a room was bound to make a difference, this approach was viewed as preferable to one in which the researcher was an active participant. The researcher was aware, however, that being neutral and objective might be perceived as aloof, and tried to overcome this by introducing herself, asking permission to attend, and being friendly and non-defensive. If the researcher wanted to ask questions of a teacher, these were written down and asked at a later date.

3.5.6 *Gaining Ethical Approval*

As this research took place as part of postgraduate study, it was important to gain ethical approval from the University of Hull before any research took place. A proposal was submitted to the University's Ethics Committee in December 2007. This contained information about the proposed research process, how informed consent would be obtained, and how data would be gathered and stored (see Appendix B).

Ethical approval was granted before the researcher undertook the initial visits to the schools. This enabled the researcher to have in-depth conversations with the schools as to the precise nature of the research. Copies of consent forms were left: one for students; one for parents / carers / guardians; one for the school.

3.6 Research in Practice

3.6.1 *Sands School*

Sands School had 65 students. The school was visited three times in all: once for an initial meeting, once to undertake in-depth data collection, and once for respondent validation of the theory that had been generated (see 10.5). The main research visit went as planned, with students being aware of the research in advance. On the first morning, the researcher was invited to give a brief explanation of what the project was about. This took place at a School Meeting where all students and staff were present. There were a few questions, such as "are you a teacher?", "what other schools are you visiting?" and "if we do your interviews, will we be on TV?" Staff and students seemed relaxed about the research and raised no concerns about taking part in. Following the meeting and during the research visit, six students volunteered to be interviewed. The staff played no significant role in selecting students or encouraging particular people to participate.

The researcher was given access to all areas of the school, including School Meetings, Staff Meetings, classes, lunchtimes and social spaces. Informal conversations were held with almost every member of staff. The School Council asked the researcher to leave for a few minutes. This was the only point in the entire visit where there was not completely open access.

Table 3.1 Profile of participants interviewed at Sands School

Gender	Age	How long they had been at Sands School
F	15	4 years
F	17	4 years
F	14	3 years
M	16	3 years
F	16	7 months
F	15	2 years

3.6.2 *The Small School*

The Small School had 23 students. It was also visited three times. The main visit did not go as planned. The researcher was unable to undertake one-to-one interviews and thus had to be flexible. Two groups of students were interviewed using a group interview process. The questions were the same as would have been asked in one-to-one interviews, although more follow-up questions were asked in response to student comments. The planned sampling strategy did not work - students were selected on the basis of the timetable - they did not self-select. In meeting with 12 students, however, the researcher did have the opportunity to talk to over half the school students, and all of those over the age of 14.

The researcher was given good access to all areas of the school, including circle time, classes, lunchtimes and social spaces. Discussions were held with most members of staff. An informal conversation was also held with a former teacher; this provided useful insights into the historical position of the school as well as the current context.

Table 3.2 Profile of participants interviewed at The Small School

Gender	Age	How long they had been at The Small School
FIRST GROUP		
M	14	2 years
M	15	4 years
F	14	3 years
F	15	3 years
M	12	1 year
F	15	1 year
F	11	1 week
SECOND GROUP		
M	16	3 years
M	15	4 years
F	15	4 years
F	16	5 years
M	15	5 years

3.7 Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity, allied to theoretical sensitivity, was central to a constructivist perspective on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008:403). This related to the ability of the researcher to identify their involvement with and impact upon the research

process. The purpose of researcher reflexivity was not to undermine data or the generated theory. Rather, it was a way in which the reader could understand the context in which the research took place, so that they could make an informed judgment as to the quality and robustness of any new theory. The format of researcher reflexivity was important, as Elliott explained:

The aim is therefore for researchers not simply to provide their readers with detailed confessional accounts of their experiences of conducting research, but rather to produce an analytic discussion of how their own theoretical and biographical perspective might impact on their relationship with research subjects, their interpretation of research evidence, and the form in which the research is presented (2005:155).

With this in mind, a brief overview of the researcher's background will be outlined. Further information as to the influence of this upon research decisions will be offered throughout the thesis.

The researcher brought a particular theoretical and biographical perspective to the project. As an experienced youthworker, the researcher was familiar with working within democratic and participatory environments. She had been responsible for establishing and managing a project which re-engaged socially excluded young people with learning. This project developed innovative approaches to education and was underpinned by principles of empowerment and inclusion. This experience led to an interest as to how these approaches might be transferable to school settings. There was a firm belief that schools with a strong commitment to democracy would have an impact upon students - but the researcher did not know what this impact would be.

The researcher's personal experience of compulsory education was that of attending a large comprehensive school in a small village in the South East of England. With hindsight this was an excellent secondary school, but at times the researcher felt lost. Despite gaining good academic grades, she held an instinctive belief that students would benefit from being part of a smaller school, and was keen to find evidence to either support or challenge this view.

The professional background of the researcher undoubtedly had an influence upon the way in which the research was conducted. Through her work, the researcher had developed skills in building rapport and establishing trust with young people. This included having good communication skills, having confidence in being in one-to-one situations, and using accessible language. The background of the researcher was also a useful way of building relationships with staff at the schools. There was a shared understanding, a common language. Teachers did not appear to feel threatened by having their classes and meetings observed. Possibly they felt that a youthworker would be more understanding and supportive - their willingness to share dilemmas and difficulties appeared to reflect this.

Although the researcher held strong opinions about education, democracy, and young people, care was taken to ensure that these did not unduly influence the research process. This was particularly true during the analysis stage. If the researcher had wanted to prove a point, it might have been possible to find data which would support this. In order to counteract this, the researcher's choice to use the constant comparison method was one way of attempting to ensure that themes were drawn directly from data. When using researcher categories which did not come directly from the words of participants, particular attention was paid to make certain that they could be linked back to data.

In short, the researcher attempted to engage in the research process with an open mind. This meant working hard to see what there was to see, rather than making pre-judgments. It was also acknowledged that the researcher brought particular knowledge and experience to the research setting. There was a passion about democracy, an interest in democratic schooling, and a significant amount of knowledge about alternative ways of offering education, training and learning. It was hoped that with a sufficient level of reflexivity, these might be an aid, rather than a hindrance, to a high quality and rigorous research project.

3.8 Summary

The research design for this project took account of the methodological decision to use grounded theory. Research methods were designed in a way to be consistent with this approach. Two schools were selected as cases. Interviews with students, observational activities and documentary analysis were the three methods used.

Ethical considerations have been a key part of the process of research design, particularly because some participants were under 16 years of age. This presented a range of dilemmas with regard to: consent; access; privacy and confidentiality; and the unequal power relationship. These have been addressed through the lens of viewing children and young people as independent, autonomous and competent. This was consistent with the nature of the school environments.

An outline has been given of the research experience within the two schools. One went according to plan, the other did not. Numerical information has been provided about the gender and ages of participants, and the amount of time that they had attended their respective schools.

Finally, the issue of researcher reflexivity has been considered. Some biographical information about the researcher has been provided. Reflecting upon the impact of this on research decisions will continue to be explored throughout this thesis.

Chapter 4

Sands School: Student Interviews

4.1 Process of Analysis

Sands School was visited three times. The main research visit consisted of one-to-one interviews with students, observations of lessons and other activities and informal conversations with staff and students. The first stage of analysis was restricted to data gathered from student interviews and is contained within this chapter. Other data were analysed subsequently and can be found in Chapter 5.

Interviews with students were recorded onto a digital recorder. The researcher listened to the recordings on the evenings of interviews and wrote notes. Memos were also written. After the research visit, the researcher transcribed all interviews in full.

The process of analysis took place in eight key stages:

1. Open coding on paper;
2. Open coding using ATLAS-ti;
3. Merging and deleting codes;
4. Writing vignettes;
5. Statistical analysis;
6. Micro analysis of individual codes;
7. Diagrammatic mapping of relationship between codes;
8. Writing up.

These processes will be described in detail, although it should be stressed that they were not linear. The researcher moved back and forth between stages: memo writing took place continually; mind-mapping of possible relationships between

codes was ongoing. This was consistent with the iterative nature of grounded theory (see Chapter 2).

4.1.1 *Open coding on paper*

The researcher printed all transcripts, read through them in detail, and annotated the margins with potential codes. All transcripts were analysed twice using this method. This 'open coding' resulted in approximately 100 codes. These were loosely organised into themes and categories in an attempt to find connections between codes. These were visually represented using a large piece of paper, as shown in Fig 4.1.

It became apparent that there were too many codes and categories for the researcher to hold in mind at one time. There was a risk that key points could be missed if, for example, they had only been mentioned once. The researcher also had no way of assessing how many times particular issues had been mentioned - open coding had highlighted potential codes, but no attempt had been made to count the number of times these had occurred. The researcher therefore decided to use a computer programme to assist with the process of analysis. All transcripts were imported into ATLAS-ti.



Fig 4.1 Open Coding diagram – Sands School

4.1.2 Open coding using ATLAS-ti

The process of open coding using ATLAS-ti was more comprehensive. Transcripts were systematically examined. Codes were allocated: in-vivo codes taken directly from student narrative, and researcher codes. Memos were written to separate researcher ideas from the process of coding.

The first question that the researcher asked to students was *“What are the important things that I need to know so that I really understand how the Sands School works?”* This was the first student’s response:

Well, I think for me the most important thing is the fact that we’re all equal, and unlike most schools, the staff are not, like the adults, are not on a higher level than us at all, and if they do something wrong, then they’ll be punished or they’ll be told off or they’ll be talked to, in exactly the same way as any of the students would, and that is obviously a part of the democracy – and democracy is a large part of it with the meetings, and we have to decide what happens, and the staff can’t decide anything past their own lesson plan without asking the school first but the equality is something that is really important – you can’t come here without understanding that

The researcher gave the text nine codes: ‘equal / same level’, ‘different to mainstream / other schools’, ‘battle’, ‘previous school experiences’, ‘fairness’, ‘democracy’, ‘lessons’, ‘School Meeting’, ‘sign of ownership and belonging’. The ATLAS-ti programme highlighted which code had been allocated to which particular word or phrase.

Each transcript was read at least twice, first on a line-by-line basis, and later as a whole. The first reading enabled precise coding of words, lines, phrases and paragraphs. The second reading enabled the researcher to ‘read between the lines’, for example, by asking the question: *“what is happening here?”* (McLeod, 2001). This latter stage was frequently accompanied by the writing of memos.

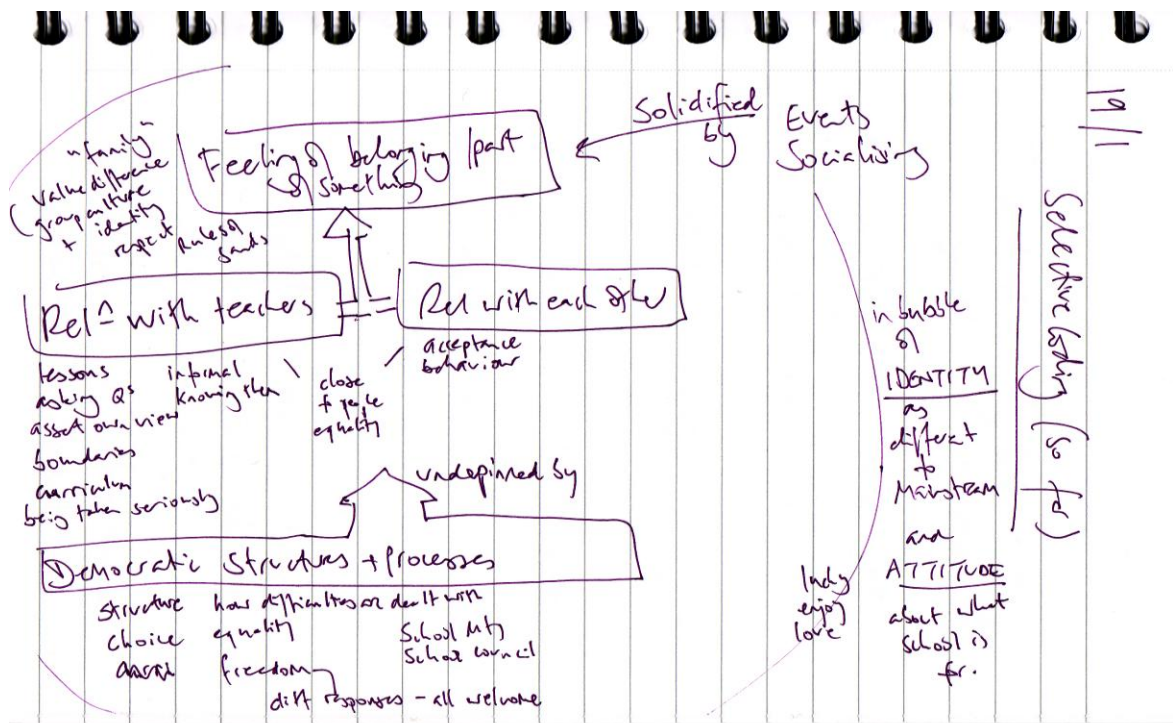
This piece of text was accompanied by the following memo:

people were getting really frustrated so I just said 'look, I'm gonna organise a day when we can really think about this, really look at what Sands has said we're doing, and see if we're sticking to it and if we're not, do we want to change it?'

MEMO "Change things: seems to be a feeling that you can really change things if you want to. No pessimism or cynicism about things never changing, or people not really listening. Feels powerful. See Ethos Meeting for example"

At several points during the open coding process, diagrams were drawn to illustrate potential connections between codes. These had the same status as memos. They served a useful function in terms of enabling the researcher to record hunches and ideas. They were separated from the coding process. An example is given in Fig 4.2.

Fig 4.2 Rough Diagram showing possible connections between codes (student interviews – Sands School)



4.1.3 *Merging and deleting codes*

Once all transcripts had been coded, a 'Code Table' was printed. This showed the codes used, the number of occurrences per transcript, and the totals. Initially there were 181 codes. Thorough analysis of this table revealed that some codes were similar. For example, one code was 'meetings'; another was 'School Meeting'. At the point at which 'meetings' had been allocated, the researcher did not know how many meetings would be referred to. As it happened, the reference within 'meetings' actually referred to the School Meeting and so the codes were merged. In order to merge codes, the researcher returned to the transcripts to check the specific text that the code had been allocated to. They were only merged if this did not distort the coding. This process reduced the number of codes to 158. This list is attached as Appendix C.

4.1.4 *Writing vignettes*

After open coding, the researcher expected to move on to the next stage where connections between codes could start to be found. The researcher felt that there was a risk however, that this could merge the transcripts into one. It might cease to be relevant whether Person 1 or Person 3 had made a specific point. This was a problem for this particular research project. The researcher had noticed, for example, that some students referred to democratic processes more than others - and that those that did were more likely to be members of the School Council. If the researcher lost sight of 'who said what', there was a danger that key observations could be lost.

An additional stage was thus inserted into the process. Short vignettes were written about each student. These included the following information: gender; age; how long had they been at this school; previous school experiences; feelings about coming to Sands; initial response to question of 'what's important to understand about Sands'; likes; dislikes; connection with democratic structures; on School

Council?; most likely to say; least likely to say; what do they want to do next? An example of a vignette has not been included in this thesis because they contained identifiable information about students. Their anonymity could not be assured.

Writing these vignettes was useful in that it helped to 'put the students back together'. For example, one student used the phrase: "I'm glued now for life to this school". How long had this student been at this school? How did they feel when they first arrived? What were their previous school experiences? The vignette was able to provide this information, and thus, to provide a context for this comment. The vignettes were used extensively during the process of writing, as the researcher was able to cross-reference between the code list, the vignette and the transcript.

4.1.5 Statistical analysis

Even having merged several codes, the researcher still had difficulty in conceptualising 158 codes. It felt impossible to form a conceptual map which did justice to this quantity of data. The researcher decided to undertake a process of statistical analysis with an aim of exploring the relative importance of each code. The codes were put in order of frequency. Table 4.1 shows the top 16 codes.

Table 4.1 Sands School - Codes with highest frequency (student interviews)

Code	Transcript 1	Transcript 2	Transcript 3	Transcript 4	Transcript 5	Transcript 6	Total
Difference with mainstream / other schools	14	11	3	4	18	6	56
Lessons	12	6	6	12	9	6	51
Behaviour towards each other	10	1	11	1	12	3	38
Rules of Sands?	13	1	6	5	9	2	36
What am I like?	0	5	6	10	11	2	34

Responsibility	15	2	6	4	2	4	33
Love / enjoyment of school	9	3	4	6	5	5	32
Sign on ownership and belonging	8	5	3	5	7	4	32
Democracy	14	0	6	7	0	3	30
Relationship with teachers	9	2	6	4	6	3	30
Trial week	5	2	3	3	11	5	29
Vote	8	3	7	4	0	3	25
School Meeting	4	2	8	5	2	3	24
Equal / same level	8	0	5	0	6	4	23
Previous school experiences	4	3	2	4	7	1	21
What is school about?	4	6	4	3	1	2	20

It was important to recognise that although some codes occurred more frequently, this did not mean that other codes were not important. A code which was only mentioned once might have been of as much theoretical interest as one which was mentioned fifty times. Nonetheless, the statistical analysis acted as a guide for the researcher. Research findings needed to be grounded in data. Codes were grouped into three categories: those with 20 or more occurrences (Table 4.1), those with between 8.2 and 20, and the rest (between 1 and 8.2). The figure of 8.2 was important as it was the average. The 45 codes which had more than 8.2 occurrences were perceived as particularly relevant.

4.1.6 *Micro analysis of individual codes*

During the coding process, several attempts were made to form a conceptual map. These were rough spider diagrams showing connections between codes. Some connections were obvious: lessons were connected to relationship with teachers, democracy to freedom, choice to responsibility. These diagrams, however, were based on the *names* of the codes, and did not take account of the dimensions within each one. Some codes contained over 50 different occurrences, for example, the code of 'lessons' included the structure of lessons, the content, the students' feelings about them, the issue of whether they were optional or

compulsory. In addition, there was not one 'single voice' about lessons; there were six distinct voices.

The researcher explored each code in more depth, focussing initially on the sixteen codes which occurred most frequently. The researcher named this process 'micro analysis'. It involved a thorough exploration of each occurrence of the code, the highlighting of key points, and the extraction of direct quotations. The micro analysis of the first code led to the exploration of related codes: the code 'different to mainstream / other schools' linked to 'battle', 'state school as survival', 'informality' and 'equal / same level'. Any memos which were associated with these particular codes were noted. Once each code had been thoroughly analysed, it was deemed to be "*theoretically saturated*" (see Chapter 2).

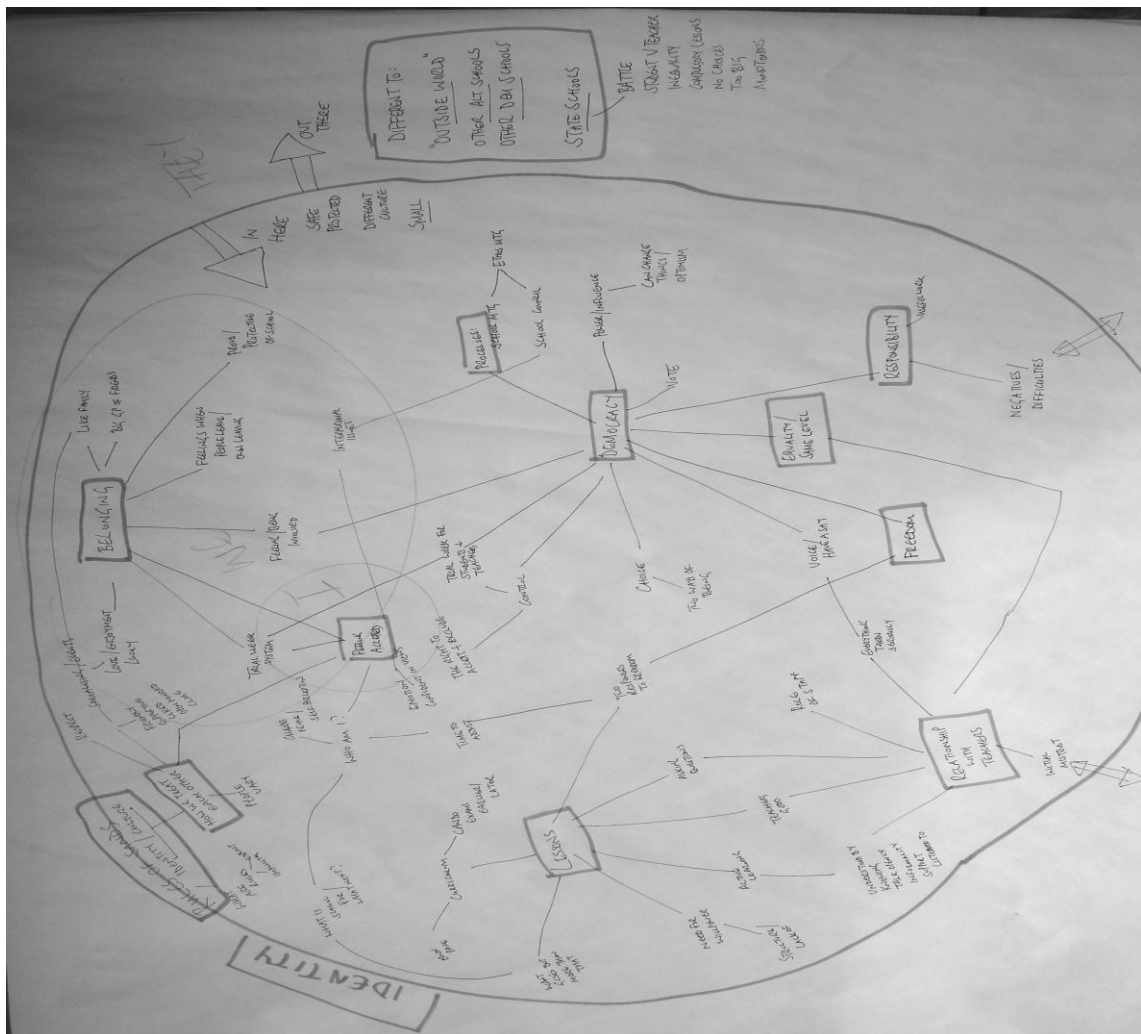
Each 'micro analysis' consisted of three to eleven pages of text, each containing key points, direct quotations and related memos. In all, there were ten 'micros', which incorporated data from 150 of the 158 codes. These were, in effect, a detailed description of the content of data, supported with initial but as yet unexplored researcher idea and hunches. The eight codes which had not been incorporated into any of the 'micros' were explored. These included 'dog', 'garden' and 'used to talking about Sands'. These were not ignored but they were put aside at this point.

4.1.7 *Diagrammatic mapping of relationships between codes*

The process of writing the 'micros' started to firm up the connections between codes. Individual codes were still visible, but they were becoming connected by the formation of overarching 'categories'. Some of these categories contained full codes and some contained dimensions of codes. For example, the code of 'freedom' was linked to components of the code 'lessons', but also to 'democracy', and 'rules of Sands?'. Data from codes linked to more than one category.

The micros were printed out and the researcher created a diagram which started to connect the code names, category names and the dimensions contained within them. This is shown as Fig 4.3. This diagram was more than a description of the codes - its formation moved the researcher on to forming theoretical ideas. The thick line on the outside of the circle was one theoretical idea. It separated some codes from others, and symbolised “us” and “them”. It formed part of the identity of the school, and was described as a “protective bubble”. The concept of ‘identity’ did not come directly from data and was not in itself a code. It was, however, grounded in data, and as the researcher would argue, it was central to the experience of students at this school.

Fig 4.3 Diagrammatic Mapping – Sands School



4.1.8 *Writing up*

The process of writing this chapter took place over an intensive period of three weeks. The format of the chapter flowed from the diagram illustrated as Fig 4.3, particularly in terms of three central concepts: identity, culture, and belonging. The writing was not a re-description of the micros. These were taken apart and reintegrated in a different format. The micros were instrumental, however, in ensuring that key points were not missed.

To aid the reader, each student was allocated an initial, so that it would be apparent that direct quotations were taken from different transcripts. These initials (A, B, D, E, L, and R) were not related to the names of the individuals, and were not connected to the order in which data was collected. This was in order to try and ensure anonymity.

4.2 Information from interviews

4.2.1 *Overview*

Sands School had a strong **identity** - one that held the school together, and helped to create a sense of **belonging** for students. This identity had several aspects: it was **oppositional**, in that students could clearly define what the school was not – it was not a state school or another alternative school, it was not the same as the ‘outside world’. In contrast, the school was something different; an ‘inside world’, where the cultures and norms of the outside did not apply.

The identity of Sands School was not purely oppositional. There was a strong **positive identity**, which was made up of a number of important aspects which students could clearly describe. This incorporated **cultures, values** and **norms of behaviour**. There were explicit and implicit ‘rules’ which students and teachers

adhered to, such as treating each other with respect, valuing individuality and being supportive.

The identity of the school was comprised of a number of elements, including cultures, values, norms of behaviour, equality, freedom, responsibility, flexibility, democracy, control over decision-making, lessons, respect and acceptance of individual difference. These were interrelated and thus difficult to separate. For example, the issue of freedom was connected with democracy and lessons. Equality was linked with lessons, respect, acceptance and flexibility. Some of the processes of the school, such as the School Meeting were linked with every one of these elements.

The research also demonstrated that students experienced a strong sense of **belonging**. They reported feeling that Sands School was their family, that they felt accepted, understood, and indeed, loved. This caused powerful emotions when students (or staff) left, and an anxiety about their own leaving. Belonging created a strong sense of 'we', and a collective sense of **'we' inside here as opposed to 'they' on the outside**. Leaving, for some, meant stepping back into the 'outside world', where they feared they would not experience the same level of acceptance and understanding.

There was also, however, a clear sense of 'I' within the 'we'. Students articulated strong personal identities and felt accepted as autonomous individuals. They seemed to be able to differentiate between 'I', 'We' and 'They'. There were individual identities within the overall school identity.

The researcher will propose that there was a connection between the identity of Sands School and the sense of belonging which was experienced by students. The relationship between these concepts and the extent to which one affected the other will be explored in more depth throughout this thesis.

4.2.2 *Identity*

There were 56 instances where students mentioned the difference between Sands School and mainstream / other schools. This was the most prolific category and one which included data provided by all six participants. This was interesting for two reasons: first, because many of the students referred to mainstream schooling in answer to a question about “what is important to understand about the Sands School?” and second, because all six students used examples from mainstream schooling, even those who had never personally attended these schools. One explanation for this might have been that students were using a short-hand way of describing their experiences to an outsider. However, the frequency of this type of description suggested that it was more than this - that in fact, asserting the difference between Sands School and other schools was important in itself. It suggested that the distinction was part of how they saw themselves – as different, separate, indeed better – than mainstream or other schools. The researcher posited that this was part of their identity, and labelled it as “oppositional” or “this is what we are not”.

The comments which students made about mainstream / other schools were broadly similar with several characteristics being awarded particular significance – inequality between teachers and students, compulsion, rigid structure, lack of control over own education, formality of lessons and conformity amongst students. These perceptions were shared, even amongst students who had not attended mainstream schools. Those who had attended were able to give more personal and vivid descriptions.

This oppositional stance operated simultaneously with a strong, internal identity, which the researcher labelled as “positive” or “this is what we are”. This contained information derived from over 100 codes, which in combination, formed a powerful identity for Sands School. This included a wide range of characteristics which were held up in contrast to the mainstream / other school descriptors, such as equality, freedom, flexibility, power and influence, informality of lessons and acceptance of

individuality. It involved exploration of cultures, values, norms of behaviour, as well as structures and processes.

This part of the identity was more complicated. There was not one single, unified version of Sands School; there were several. Four students placed great emphasis on the importance of 'democracy'. They used this word freely, and in two cases, offered in-depth analysis of democracy as concept and process. The remaining two students did not use the word 'democracy' at any point during their interviews. Nonetheless, the six transcripts did not contradict one another. They all offered pieces of a jigsaw of student experience which fitted together to form a consistent picture. This suggested that students co-existed in one environment with a shared culture and values, but each in their own individual way.

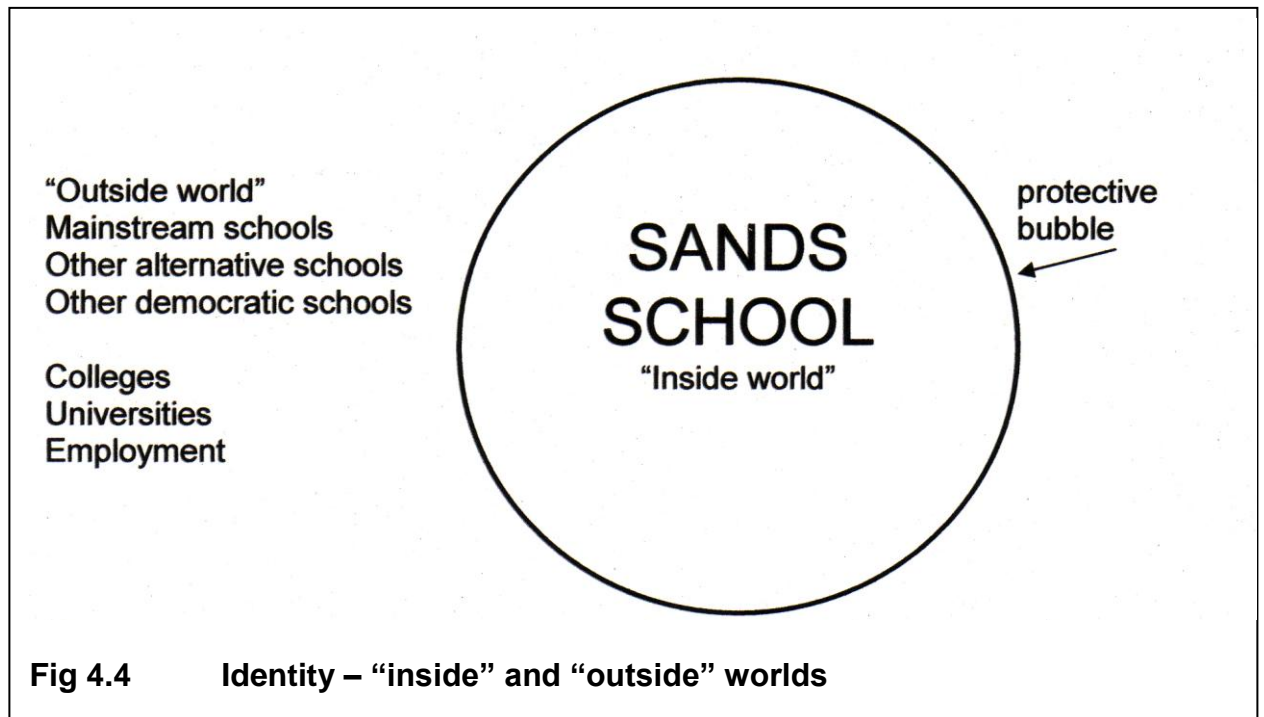
These two aspects of identity worked together to form a coherent whole. The oppositional aspect provided the external context in which Sands School could be understood and conceptualised. The meaning, significance, and evaluation of the school experience were made in comparison to the alternative. For example, five students expressed feelings of being 'lucky' to be at Sands School. This assessment was unlikely to have been made unless they had a sense of what 'unlucky' might have been. Even students who had never been to mainstream / other schools were able to make this comparison.

The phrases "protected in a bubble" and "outside world" were taken directly from student interviews, and offered some insight into the way in which students experienced Sands School:

you're not always gonna be like, protected in this bubble, basically ... when you go off and you go into University or college ... it's not, you're not always gonna have somebody to watch out for you for the rest of your life (D)

people in the outside world aren't going to be your family, they're not gonna want to treat you nicely because a lot of people are bastards (A)

Fig. 4.4 showed the Sands School identity in terms of the outside world (oppositional) and inside world (positive). An arrow was drawn to illustrate the protective bubble which separated the two. The components which made up the identity of Sands School will now be explored in more depth.



4.2.3 Relationship with Teachers

Students experienced mainstream schooling, both at primary and secondary level as “a battle”. One student described this in the following way:

Well, at primary school, it was things like, you were often trying to get in trouble, not trying to get in trouble, but you were doing things that would break the rules cos you wanted to like, piss the teachers off, cos they were in charge of you and you don’t want teachers to be in charge of you ... you would like, get really angry with them, and it would be like students-versus-teachers, like a big battle the entire way through primary school (R)

The description of a battle (also described as a “students-versus-teachers mindset”) suggested that relationships with conventional teachers felt conflictual,

based on notions of winners and losers. This was reinforced by most of the students, but by one in particular. This student had recently started at Sands School, having been “on the verge of suspension” from their state secondary school.

... in a state school, the teacher always treats you like you're completely different, you're stupid, you're thick, you're there to be taught by them because they seem to have all the knowledge of the world all in their heads (A)

The perception that teachers were completely different from students and indeed “on a higher level” was common. This gave them a level of power, which meant that students had to do what they were told. For example,

you have to do this lesson and that lesson, even if you like really don't wanna do that lesson, you're still forced to do that lesson (D)

The inequality did not just refer to the organisational status of teachers. It also affected the way in which they interacted with students. As one student explained:

teachers were always always above the students and they were always right in state schools (A)

Students responded to mainstream schooling in a variety of ways. One student felt that one teacher “started picking on me and stuff”. This was also expressed as “bullying”. The response was to become withdrawn, and indeed, to withdraw from classes. After two years, her parents realised that the situation was irresolvable and started looking for an alternative school. Even having started at Sands School, this student felt nervous of teachers and had a level of mistrust that lasted for some considerable time. In response to a question about what they wanted out of school, this student simply answered:

I wanted to actually be able to do my lessons without being scared of the teachers (D)

Another student had a different response to mainstream schooling. Rather than being scared, this student rose to the challenge presented by the notion of 'the battle', and endlessly fought the teachers:

I was very very cocky. I did like to have, always have the last word, and always, everything had to go my way (A)

Relationships with teachers were not just negative in mainstream schools. One student had spent some time in a different alternative school, a place that they described as "appalling". This was partly because the relationship between teachers and students had broken down. Staff tried to teach, but lessons were not good:

it looked they were struggling to keep law, order, blah-de-blah, and so that would obviously affect negatively on their education, so for example, music classes was essentially just everyone messing about, and the er, music teacher just every single time losing his temper and all but kicking everyone out (E)

Another student had been to a Steiner School. The concept of 'a battle' was not used in this context. Instead, this student felt missed. In some ways, they did not have a relationship with the teachers at all:

OK, I'm a very, I don't know, I like to do well, I'm quite a self motivated person, and in Steiner School, I didn't get the support, I don't know, I didn't feel appreciated, and um, I don't know, I felt like I was just another kid that was going through the school (L)

By way of contrast, students experienced Sands School differently. The code of 'equal / same level' occurred 23 times. The level of equality felt by students was important in itself, but it also had an enormous effect upon the quality of relationships between teachers and students. The notion of "a battle" was gone, as had the "students-versus-teachers mindset". One student talked extensively about this; the following comments were all taken from the same interview:

Well, I think for me the most important thing is the fact that we're all equal ...

unlike most schools, the staff are not, like the adults, are not on a higher level than us at all, and if they do something wrong, then they'll be punished or they'll be told off or they'll be talked to, in exactly the same way as any of the students would ...

you wouldn't be able to shout or swear at your teacher if you were upset or angry at a state school cos you'd get told off for it, whereas here, if I'm in a really bad mood or really really upset about something, and it's either one of the staff's fault, or they just get in the way, then I'll shout at them and I don't get in trouble for it cos they get it, and they'll shout back if they're in a bad mood (R)

The impact of feeling equal to teachers meant that the power dynamic had changed. Students did not feel the need to fight or rebel against teachers. Instead, they were able to have relationships which were based on equality and respect for the other. As one student explained

if the teachers relate to you on a one-to-one level, you don't need to shout at them, you don't need to have a go at them (A)

In addition, teachers did not act as if they had "all the knowledge of the world all in their heads". Learning could therefore be more collaborative. Two students described this when talking about their experience of lessons:

Being able to talk to adults in the exact same way that you would talk to children or students is really incredible(R)

here, they say 'look, if you don't know it, I don't know it sometimes, and you can learn it together' (A)

Students at Sands School also felt as if they *knew* their teachers. They respected and appreciated them. One student described the teachers like this:

Teachers, guardians, people to talk to, people to look after, people to entertain you, everybody, like, they do feel like my parents, my grandparents, my brothers, my sisters, they're so there for you, to support you and help you and they are, you know, so interesting, such interesting people, and they always talk to the students like they're really interesting

people, you know, so it's, they're really excellent people, school would not be anything without them there, they're amazing amazing people, each in their own different way, they're really incredible people (B)

Another explained that:

the teachers treat you as equals, or as friends, or you know, parents, you know so, so you can talk to them about anything, and you can talk to them on their level without feeling minor or less than they are (L)

This was not to suggest that relationships with teachers were idyllic. Two students mentioned that they struggled with one particular teacher. This person was described as someone “who’s actually very strict” and “too much like a state school teacher”. Good relationships with teachers were clearly not automatic. They had to be developed over time. Teachers had to earn the trust and respect of students. Being similar to mainstream school teachers was not appreciated - being strict seemed to remind them of teachers who wanted to be “in charge of you”.

One example was given of an occasion when conflicts between students and teachers were positively resolved:

Um, I was in a lesson a little while ago and one of my teachers was in a really bad mood which is fine cos everyone gets that one day, and um, we were just all joking around like we normally do, and he got a bit angry and we, I pretty much said, you can't do that. And it was really, I don't know, it's not exactly a power trip cos that sounds really like power crazy but it made you feel better about yourself cos he really listened to me and all the other students around me were saying 'yeah, that's really out of order, don't shout at students when, don't shout at one, or don't kick a student out of a lesson for something that ridiculous' and it sometimes happens like that or sometimes even not in a lesson someone just gets really angry and [we] just say 'that's out of order, stop doing that' and the staff will do it to the students the same (R)

This example has been cited in order to highlight the way in which Sands School resolved issues. First, the student said “one of my teachers was in a really

bad mood which is fine cos everyone gets that one day". This indicated an underlying level of respect between students and teachers and the willingness to accept teachers as individuals. Second, when the student challenged the teacher for getting angry, they said "it made you feel better about yourself cos he really listened to me". This suggested that neither teacher nor student perceived this situation as a battle in which there had to be a winner or a loser. Finally the student explained that: "it sometimes happens like that or sometimes even not in a lesson someone just gets really angry and [we] just say 'that's out of order, stop doing that' and the staff will do it to the students the same". This illustrated a culture in which it was acceptable for people to freely challenge each other about their behaviour - this was reciprocal between staff and students. It would have been unequal if teachers could only challenge students, or vice-versa. This was very different from the students-versus-teachers mindset.

There was also equality *between* students, which contributed to a relaxed and friendly atmosphere:

you can just sit there on the sofa and have a cup of tea and just talk about anything, and just relate to anything as well cos everyone's on the same level, so no-one thinks they're better than anyone else here (A)

Equality made an enormous impact upon the relationships at the school. It enabled students to relate to teachers in an equal and accepting way. It encouraged supportive relationships between students. It enabled a collaborative environment in lessons. This contrasted with experiences in mainstream or others schools which centred on the concept of a battle, or where relationships with teachers were poor or even absent.

The ease with which students spoke about equality indicated that this was something that they felt from *within*. It was more than a stated aim or value of the school. It permeated into all areas of structure and process. Everyone's opinions and ideas were taken seriously by others. Everyone had a vote and decisions were

made based on the majority view. Equality was inseparable from the democratic processes of the school. These will now be explored.

4.2.4 *Power and Influence*

Students had a perception that in mainstream schools, teachers were powerful and students were powerless. Some of this dynamic has been explored in terms of looking at the students-versus-teachers mindset in the classroom. This power differential could also be conceptualised in terms of student control over learning and the learning environment.

Students gave examples of how they thought students lacked control, power and influence in mainstream schools. This was one:

in a state school, people, you don't choose who comes into school so there could be people who distract your lessons or your concentration or are just, plain irritating (D)

In contrast, students felt that they had some level of control over everything that happened at Sands School. For one student, this felt like:

'oh my god, I rule my own life at the moment' (A)

Students used a variety of words to articulate the degree of control they felt, including "choice", "having a say", "being listened to", "feeling involved", "making my own decisions", "being a democratic school". In turn, these linked to "freedom", "trust", "respect", "we can change things", "voting". Nearly 30 of the codes used during analysis could reasonably be linked to this issue (19% of the total). The level of influence which students had over the school, and indeed, over their own lives, appeared to be of central importance and consequently was seen as a key part of the identity of the school.

Sands School had several processes which students felt it was important for the researcher to understand, such as the School Meeting, School Council, trial week system, staff reports, being able to make personal choices about learning and the role of democracy. These were described by students and will form the next six sub-sections. Most of these processes were also observed by the researcher. Data on this will be presented in the next chapter.

4.2.4.1 School Meeting

The School Meeting was mentioned by all six students and was crucial to the life of Sands School. Several students expressed the sentiment that this meeting was what held the school together, as illustrated by this comment:

Um, I think the main thing of Sands, I think that holds Sands together and makes it work as a school is the meeting, and you know, because every single point can be brought to the meeting, and things like, someone's lost a shoe and they'll go to the meeting, or whether we want to spend £1000 on you know, a new building or something, anything, and then that's chosen with all the students who want to be in the meeting and the adults and teachers who are part of the school (L)

The School Meeting was held every Wednesday. Lessons finished at 1.15pm, leaving most of the afternoon free for the meeting. All students and staff were encouraged to attend. Decisions were made by voting. Every individual had one vote, usually expressed by putting hands into the air. The rare exception was for sensitive issues which required a secret ballot.

One student explained the process of student involvement in this way:

If we didn't like it, we would go into a meeting and say 'I don't think this is working for the school' (D)

The remit of the School Meeting was broad. Anyone could put an item on the agenda. This could be:

anything from 'someone's broken my nose' to 'someone's nicked my handbag' to 'I want a new skate ramp'. It can be anything you have a problem with, or anything you think we could do to improve the school or anything you want to do that involves the school (R)

However, as another student explained, getting things *agreed* at the School Meeting was different from having the freedom to raise them:

Theoretically we can do everything and anything, theoretically. For example, if I so felt like it, I could raise in the School Meeting 'I don't want buses to drive out of school' just because I feel like it. I can theoretically propose that to the School Meeting, but it's unlikely that people would support me (E)

If a student raised "a real stupid thing", then the response would be:

They'll listen to your argument but you're most likely to get shot down unless you've got really really really good and convincing one (E)

Nonetheless, the meeting was the central governing body and all decisions were made there. This included changes to the curriculum, appointment of teachers, agreement to accept visitors (or researchers) into the school, changes to the usage of rooms, proposals for new rules or guidelines. A recent example given by two students concerned a request to teach Japanese. One student had arranged to study Japanese at GCSE level. Several other students expressed an interest in learning too, and after discussions at the School Meeting, it was agreed to run basic lessons for anyone interested.

The Meeting also had responsibility for discussing student issues, such as accepting new students to the school (see trial week system) or disciplining, suspending or expelling students. These discussions could at times be tense, controversial, and stressful, as explained by this student:

What's difficult about Sands, because we're all really close, is that if someone does something that serious, which we consider to be really bad, then it's gonna get out and it's gonna be a really big problem. And then we had meeting after meeting, talking about how they'd done it many times before, and they'd broken lots of rules and really they should be expelled for this. We get that once in a while and it's really horrible to be voting on whether we should expel them or how we should punish them, whether the next time should be their last chance. It's really not nice, really really horrible (R)

Clearly, being involved in decision making processes like the School Meeting brought a level of responsibility to students. Given that some were as young as 11 years old, there might have been some concern as to how they would manage this, however, as one student explained, "they can take serious decisions very seriously (E)". The School Council members, however, were a group of students who chose to be even more involved with the running of the school, and took even more responsibility.

4.2.4.2 School Council

One student described the democratic processes at Sands School in terms of the organs of the body:

If Council's going well, then the school runs well. I'd say the meeting was the heart of it, and the Council is something else really, like the spine or something, that keeps it all together, and sorts out all the problems that lie underneath that nobody ever really sees (B)

This was evocative language, conjuring up images of the meeting as a vital organ ("the heart"). The description of the School Council as "the spine" suggested something equally important, but more structured - something that helped the school keep its shape.

The School Council was an elected body of students and teachers, although at the point at which the researcher observed them, it comprised of six students. They were elected at the start of the year, when nominations were sought for people

who might be good on the Council. Everyone could cast three votes. This was the first year for some time where the Council had consisted entirely of students.

According to one, it had been tried in the past, but “they had nobody in charge, and it had just totally fell to pieces and didn’t work (B).” Consequently, this time, they had decided to have a Chair for the Council to play co-ordinating role. This student was 14 years old.

The School Council had responsibility for dealing with issues that were delegated by the School Meeting. This was described by one student:

before each meeting, which is once a week, we’ve got, they get together and talk about the points that either have been decided that the School Council should talk about or things that need to be a little more private than the entire meeting, like is someone has a serious personal issue with someone else and it’s not reasonable to bring it to the meeting, then they’ll come to us, or sometimes if we have issues with people taking drugs or something, which we don’t really get very often, and we have to investigate it, the School Meeting will hand it to us and we’ll sort it out (R)

Students also explained why they thought the School Council was good:

it’s a good place for younger children to come and stuff, and for the stupid business, if somebody’s stolen my shoe and that sort of thing, just everyday sort of social stuff mainly, and then sometimes when we have bigger issues it’s like, we had a boy on trial ages ago who, who was quite difficult and we interviewed him and we worked with him, and, yeah, we do that, a lot of that, you know, talking to people about why they’re being disruptive and being horrible to so-and-so, or whatever, and it usually works out really well cos they like talking to other children about it (B)

These summaries suggested that the key functions of the Council were to deal with sensitive student issues (e.g. drugs), and interpersonal issues or conflicts between students. During the research visit, the Council dealt with an issue of drug taking - one student was suspended for a week. They also handled “all the boring stuff ... like if visitors want to come in for more than a day, we read through their letters and CVs and give the meeting a

recommendation (B)". In combination, these were clearly significant responsibilities.

Given that Council members dealt with such important issues and were privy to sensitive information, it might be assumed that they had more power and influence than students who were not on Council. One member was keen to stress that this was not the case:

we don't have any power, we can't, everything still has to go through the whole school, we're not allowed to, you know, punish somebody or you know, say yes to anybody or anything, we have to just talk about it, and then propose what Council have said, and we usually, you know, people usually go 'yeah, that's right, cos you know all the inside stuff about it' (B)

The work of the School Council should, therefore, not be taken out of context. Its responsibilities were delegated from the School Meeting, and it was *this* body which had to agree the recommendations. In response to a question about where power rested, the student was unequivocal:

In the school. Everybody. Cos everybody has their own single vote don't they, nobody has more votes than anybody else (B)

This response clearly summarised the democratic position of the school. Everyone was equal which meant that everyone had a vote. The School Meeting was the heart of this system, and the most obvious place in which everyone had the chance to influence decision-making. The School Council was a part of this process and could only be understood in relation to the School Meeting. The School Council served a useful function in relation to the democratic process. It was able to connect the School Meeting to the everyday reality of school life. School Council members were very clear about their role, the responsibilities that came with this, and the limits to their sphere of influence.

4.2.4.3 Trial week system

As the trial week system was mentioned 29 times and by all six students, it was clearly an important process for the school. In a nutshell, it meant that all potential new students or teachers spent some time at the school, usually one week. If after this trial, they wanted to stay, their name was taken to the School Meeting. New students or teachers were only accepted if they were “voted in” by a majority. If the School Meeting could not agree, the individual might be rejected outright or invited to return for a longer trial. The trial week system was more than a mere formality. Several students talked about trial weeks where the person had eventually been turned down.

Giving students the responsibility to decide who could come to the school could be seen as problematic. Were they responsible enough to be able to make judgements on behalf of the school? Would they be likely to vote in people that they simply liked, rather than those that needed it most? Were they in a position to decide about who would be a good teacher?

There was no doubt that the trial week system caused some difficulties for students. Several described stressful School Meetings where it was hard to reach a collective decision about a potential new student. Conflicts sometimes arose. One particular example highlighted the tensions:

There was a student here that goes to um, um, [name of school], that's the one, and um, he came here but he had a very very big reputation outside of school being a drug taker and being very very very involved with drugs, whereas I know, and another student, [name] also knows that he's not completely like that, he's also a lovely person, there was a lot of umming and ahing whether or not he was gonna be allowed in (A)

The student who described this situation wanted this potential new student to be given a place. In the end, he was invited to return for a second trial. Students took their responsibilities seriously. They felt protective of Sands, and were careful

about who came to the school, but they were also keen to give everyone a chance. As one student said,

it's just like, you need to give [them] a fresh start, you did with me, so why change it now? (A)

Students placed great value on the trial week system. They liked having some control over who came to the school, as illustrated by the following comment:

I think it's majorly important because if teachers did it all for us then I'd be a bit worried that the school would be full of straight-A students that's gonna make the school look amazing, you know, that teachers are great because we have all these perfect students that are just great at everything, whereas when we decide, because we let people in that are our age, we can relate to them (A)

It seemed as if students *were* capable of taking the level of responsibility that was given to them through the trial week system. They were willing to have lengthy discussions in order to make the right decision. This was an important school process.

The trial week system was also a significant process for individuals, a 'rite of passage' of sorts. Without exception, all six students remembered their trial, and most talked about how they felt when they were voted in. The following were examples:

I had a trial week here and I went to have a look around [a different school], but I just, well, it sounds really corny and sort of bad soap opera style, but it just seemed like the right place to be here, I fitted in here, more than I fitted anywhere else, it was like, it became my home the moment I walked through the gates, it was just, this was a much better place for me to learn (R)

I think that helps lots of people with their confidence, especially because you have to get voted in to get into Sands, so that if you're a really unconfident person, and you get voted in, it gives you a confidence boost straight from the start (L)

Yeah, it helps you feel like you belong here, and that you're welcomed and that people want you here. And that's a really

nice feeling, yeah, and it is a bit scary cos there's a chance that you couldn't get voted in (L)

Having heard about the importance of the trial week system from all six students, the researcher concluded that it was a very clear part of the democratic mechanism of the school. It also directly connected to feelings of acceptance and belonging.

4.2.4.4 Staff Reports

Staff Reports were only mentioned by one student but seemed an important way in which students were able to influence teaching. On an annual basis, students were asked to complete a questionnaire about all of their teachers. "Then there's a committee of students who go and meet with the teachers after it's been done, and we get big bar charts put up on the walls of what everybody's said." The outcome, according to this student, "means that they polish up all the bits that aren't going so well for them, which is excellent" (B). This process was one clear way in which students had direct influence over teaching.

4.2.4.5 Personal choice about learning

Another way in which students were able to influence their own learning was by taking control of, and responsibility for, their personal decisions. Students were able to negotiate an individual timetable, which for some students included very few formal lessons. One student talked of another student explaining that:

He's the crazy inventor who makes everything, and he's amazing, and he doesn't do very many lessons but that's a positive choice, because he sits all day making robots (B)

They also spoke of their own experience, stating that:

I have space and freedom to be able to, you know, use the art room for a whole day if that's what I wanna do ... the first

year I was here, I was obsessed with art and that's all I did, I lived in the art room (B)

This should not be taken to assume that when given a choice, all students chose not to attend formal lessons. One student described themselves in this way:

I do really well, and I don't know, I just enjoy it so much, because I go to, I don't know, I go to all of my lessons except for, I don't do geography or music, but all the other lessons, I go to all the time, I do loads of art cos I love art, and love my science lessons. I love to do really well and I think that you can get the help to do really well if you want to do really well (L)

The control which students had over their own learning meant, of course, that they also had to take responsibility for the outcomes. One student who had missed many lessons explained that there were still limits to personal freedom:

They discuss what they would like to make as a boundary as to you know, not going too far and over-stepping the line, like you know, missing a year's worth of lessons and then still expecting to be able to go there and have all the perks of what comes with it if they're doing a practical in Science (A)

Students clearly exercised considerable control over their own learning and were willing to take the consequences of their actions. This was starkly different from their perception of the mainstream experience where choice over timetables and content of lessons was limited. The context of learning will be explored in more depth later.

4.2.4.6 Democracy

Sands School described itself as a 'Democratic School'. If democracy was seen in a simple way as 'one person – one vote', then it was clear that many Sands School processes were democratic in nature. It was interesting to notice therefore, that only four of the six students chose to use the word 'democracy' in their interviews. What added to this observation was that three out of these four were members of the School Council. The remaining two students were not.

The researcher considered the codes in more depth in an attempt to determine whether some students were more involved in democratic processes than others. There was overwhelming evidence that this was true: 17 out of 24 references to the School Meeting and 10 out of 13 references to the School Council were made by School Council members. In contrast, two references to the meeting being at times, “boring”, were made by the people who were not on Council.

The references to “boring” were these:

we have big discussions about that sometimes which can get quite boring but you're part of the school so you should stick around and listen to it (D)

sometimes they drag on for a bit and you get a bit bored after like, two and a half hours going round in a circle, but if we didn't have them, we wouldn't have such a great atmosphere and such a great amount of people at Sands as we do now, if we didn't decide what goes on in it, cos if everybody else decided it for us, then it just wouldn't work, because that's not we want (A)

These quotations suggested that students who found meetings boring still understood the importance of them and valued the impact that they had upon the school. They appreciated the freedom of being in a democratic school, even if they personally chose to limit their involvement in democratic processes.

The researcher felt that it was important to make a distinction between the democratic *processes* of the school (such as the School Meeting and the School Council), and the democratic *attitude* that underpinned these. For example, although students paid differing amounts of attention to ‘democracy’, they all placed similar emphasis upon equality, freedom, choice, having a say and responsibility. These concepts were all linked to democracy and were indicative of an attitude which enabled the democratic processes to be effective. The researcher concluded therefore, that being in a democratic school extended beyond engaging in the processes that were in place. It also encompassed an attitude and a set of values which underpinned these. This was reinforced by one student who used the phrase that:

Um, I think democratic is different for everybody isn't it? Cos a lot of people would say that this school isn't democratic for them, well, I would say that a lot of people don't use it democratically, cos I think that there's two sides to it, you can be in a democratic school and then use it democratically, that's two separate things (B)

There was one key attitude that seemed to underlie the student experience of democracy and that was "freedom". This received 14 references, many of which related to freedom whether to attend lessons. However, the student who mentioned the difference between being in a democratic school and using it democratically meant something slightly different:

you can contribute more or less, and I think that means that you use the democracy here more or less (B)

The freedom to contribute - or not to contribute - was therefore centrally connected to democracy.

There was another issue which connected to democracy, or in particular, to the democratic attitude. It was so engrained that it had become part of the culture. Students felt that they could change things. They and their ideas were taken seriously. This gave them confidence, which helped them to use their power and influence. The most obvious example of this was an Ethos Day which had recently been organised. In brief, some students (and one in particular) felt as if there were some issues to discuss regarding the school. They wanted time to discuss these in depth and felt as if the School Meeting did not provide time for this. The issues were wide ranging and concerned the very fabric of the school. They included questions such as 'Should lessons be compulsory? Is there anything we could do to improve the School Meeting? Should we change the rules?' Lessons were cancelled for a whole day, and instead, students facilitated small groups which included all students and teachers. Proposals were made from these and then fed into a full School Meeting. One student explained what they thought the day had achieved:

I think it was good, and I think the older kids enjoyed sort of, being able to talk about things in depth, and be able to really talk an idea through, and say, you know, actually, we could be like this, just because it's been vegetarian for ever we could not be vegetarian, there was so much possibility came out of it, and so much option, which was really positive for everybody (B)

The sentiment of this paragraph was that students felt that they had control of Sands School. The sentence of "actually, we could be like this, just because it's been vegetarian for ever we could not be vegetarian" was illuminating. Students *believed* that they could change things. At no point, in any of the six interviews, did the researcher get any sense that students felt "what's the point?" or "nothing ever changes around here." Conversely, the attitude was simple - if you do not like it, then change it. This was perhaps one of the most significant differences between the students' experiences at Sands School and their perception of their counterparts in the mainstream system.

However, this power and influence came with a level of responsibility which was not always easy for students. Students used the words "stressful", "horrible" and "difficult" about some of the discussions that they had been involved with. This is the way that one person talked about the School Meeting:

it's difficult, I feel amazing like to be a part of it, but it's really hard (R)

However, given a choice of staying at Sands School or going back to a conventional setting, the answer could not have been clearer:

Once in a while, I'm like, what would it be like to go to a state school and have all of that taken away from me, but I just don't think I could bear it, I don't think I could bear having my entire education taken out of my hands cos it's something that, the only person it's going to affect is me, so it doesn't make any sense for someone else to be in charge of that (R)

4.2.5 *The Learning Environment*

As schools were educational environments, it was perhaps unsurprising that all six students talked extensively about their experience of lessons. Lessons were arranged to correspond with six year groups – named O1, O2, O3, Y3, Y2, and Y1. These roughly corresponded with Years 6 to 11 in mainstream schooling.

The school day started at 9.15am. The timetable for lessons started at 9.45am and ran until 1.15pm. Lessons ranged in length from 30 minutes to one and a half hours. Most lessons were for individual year groups, although some combined two or even three year groups. The afternoons were more flexible, combining some lessons, ‘choice’ activities, sports or outdoor activities, and School Meetings. The day finished with a 15 minute ‘Useful Work’ slot in which everyone was expected to help with cleaning and tidying a particular area of the school. School officially finished at 4.30pm.

The lessons on offer every week were: English, Literature, Maths, History, Geography, Science, Art, Drama, I.T, General Studies, Sport, French, Woodwork, Music and Cooking. There were additional subjects which were not included on the timetable such as Japanese and Spanish. The GCSE subjects studied by students who were interviewed were: Core science, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, English, Japanese, Maths, History, Geography, French, Music, I.T., Art and Literature. This list did not necessarily represent all subjects available at this level.

Students perceived two central differences between the learning environment at Sands School and mainstream education. There were no detentions, and there was not “stupid amounts of homework”. Work done outside of classes was usually coursework for exam subjects. There were similarities, however, as one student explained:

They’re very, a lot of the teachers are very similar to conventional education system, because obviously a school can’t say ‘I’m going to create an entirely different grading

system just because I feel like it' because I won't be generally accepted amongst a college if I was going to take that system with me, so they teach the same thing (E)

However, the next part of this sentence was "but they do it again, a lot more freely". This was perhaps the most significant difference between Sands School and other schools - freedom. This was apparent in two ways: freedom for students, and freedom for teachers.

Students had freedom to choose whether to attend lessons, and if so, which ones. In theory, students could choose not to attend any lessons at all. Two students, however, were keen to put this into perspective. They both stressed that although lessons were not compulsory, students were strongly encouraged to attend. This was what one said:

it's not actually like that at all. You may, you know if you're having a really really bad day and you don't want to do a lesson and you've spoken to the teacher, then you can skip it, and you always have the choice to do that, and if you really hate a subject then you can drop it if you talk with your tutor, but because everybody wants to learn, or the majority of people want to learn, and want to do most of the subjects, there's nobody that doesn't do some lessons in school, you know, that isn't passionate about something (L)

There were some students, however, who chose not to attend lessons. One of the students interviewed reported that "in the past month, I've been to about three". This was their explanation:

Since coming here I've taken advantage of the freedom a lot, so it was like, 'ah, it doesn't matter if I miss English, I'll go and make another cup of tea' or 'actually no, I'll miss Maths for today because I can't be bothered to learn this' and then it goes on a week, a week, a week and a week and you decide, 'oh shit, I've just missed a month's worth of lessons' and um, I suppose it's because I'm quite lazy, but I've never had the freedom, um, I don't really suppose that's much of an excuse but to just be able to have the choice whether or not you go to lessons is really really nice (A)

This particular student had been at Sands School for seven months. Their experience of taking “advantage of the freedom” was apparently not uncommon for newer students:

some people come because they've either been expelled from state school or they just couldn't handle it there or lots of different reasons and they've just come, and it can completely change people, because you've got more freedom here than anywhere else which is really strange for some people. I've watched some people go off the rails a bit once they've come here from state school from being really tightly confined to a certain set of rules and certain space and you're not allowed to go out of there and you can't do this and then you come to Sands and most of those boundaries are taken away and sometimes people just go a bit crazy and say, don't go to lessons for three weeks (R)

There was a common view that new students took time to adjust to Sands School, and in particular, to the level of freedom. This was explained by one student who used the phrase “freedom just gets them if it's too contrasting with their previous one”. Usually, issues resolved themselves with time, as “later on they do, develop more maturity anyway”. By the time of doing exams, most students chose to take several GCSEs and some took as many as eleven. It seemed therefore, that having the freedom to choose meant that in the main, students chose to learn.

The second aspect of freedom concerned the teachers. Although teachers did not have complete freedom over the content of their lessons (as mentioned earlier), they did have freedom about how to teach. Students described the lessons that they had at Sands School. Some of the main points were about being hands-on, informal, and about teachers providing individual support. Two students said that they preferred to learn in an active way, and mentioned woodwork, drama and art as examples:

I'm more of a hands-on. In drama I'm a perfect student. I do all the drama plays and like just to get round and scream and shout, but you'll sit me in a maths room and put divisions in front of my head and I'll just freak, I'll be like, no, I don't want to do it, cos it's too hard, I've never learnt

this before, you know, no, and then I'll go into woodwork room and be like, oh lots of tools, and I'll be hammering things around, I can make things and I'll be happy as larry (A)

Informality was also important. One student explained that interrupting teachers was permissible: "they don't speak to you like you're stupid, so you can ask them anything and they're not gonna say 'what a stupid question' (A)". Lessons, therefore, could be more student-led, leading one student to conclude that "it's more like a big group of friends who learn stuff from each other than a stressful education (R)".

Lessons also felt informal because of the culture of the school. Students were able to go to each others lessons if they chose to do so, for example, a student could sit in on an I.T. lesson if they had a piece of work to do on the computer, even if they were not part of the class. This applied to all ages of students – younger students could attend the classes of older students and vice versa.

Teachers were experienced as providing individual support to students. One student explained:

Um, all the teachers know what everybody's standards are and how well they can do ... so the teachers are there to find you, to support you in their own way (B)

Another talked of the importance of getting praise:

even just like a little bit of praise every now and then just goes a long way, it makes you feel so much better about yourself, which is why it's kind of annoying having [teachers name] cos he's always like, I know you can do this, you're amazing, you can do this, you're great, and it's like, but I can't, and he'll still love you whether or not you can't, and he'll praise you whether or not you got every question wrong, which is really really nice (A)

This level of support and praise was contrasted with this student's previous experience. They said that in their preceding school, they felt that "if you got your question wrong, you was the stupid one in the group." They no

longer felt like this, which motivated them to want to work harder and get GCSEs. Receiving this level of support also helped students to change their self-perceptions. One student explained that:

I definitely don't think of myself as so much of a stupid idiot now, whereas before I would just like, no, you're thick, you can't do anything, you're retarded, everybody hates you, and now I can come into school and be like, well, I've got an A in this subject before, why not do it again?
(A)

There were challenges with the learning environment at Sands School. As a result of having freedom, students were responsible for their own decisions. They would, therefore, not "be pushed" as much as they might in a different school. In order to succeed, students had to choose to work hard. This was explained in terms of will-power:

I don't know, some people really want to do better but find it really hard to do that at Sands because they don't have enough will power ... you have to work pretty hard to get your GCSEs, and you don't have to work harder at Sands, but you have to, because you're not going to be forced as much as you would in another school, it takes ever so slightly more will power to get all your coursework done (R)

Another student agreed that they needed more will-power, but they did not think that this was necessarily a bad thing:

I think it does teach you, and to be self motivated is a really good life lesson, because if you're not self motivated then you won't be able to keep on track with anything and keep a job, or motivate yourself to go to University, do College or anything (L)

For this particular student, it may well have been true that they learnt to be self-motivated. This was not always the case. Another student explained that a close friend had chosen to leave for this very reason:

Yeah, I mean, there are often some people who come who find it doesn't suit themselves. One of my really close friends came at the same time as me and I think it was Y3 that she just, it wasn't her parents, she decided that it wasn't

working for her and she needed more, she needed more of like a sturdy timetable so that she knew exactly which lessons she had to be in when, and she needed someone to force her to go to her lessons (R)

There was a consensus that Sands School did not suit everyone, particularly in terms of structure. Several students concurred with the view that:

there are people that sometimes work better in a routine, straight like, lessons first thing in a morning, then break, lesson, break, lesson, break, lesson, like whatever, lunch, then go home (A)

The issue of structure was highlighted. One student described mainstream schools in terms of rigidity, saying that “in state schools there’s bells, and rules (D)”, whereas another explained that at Sands School “there’s a structure, that’s, like, very malleable (E)”. This meant that things were more flexible and could be changed to meet needs. This flexibility extended beyond the format of individual lessons and to the curriculum as a whole:

if you want to do one kind of GCSE, for example, we’ve got two Spanish students here, and they’ve decided to take a Spanish GCSE, and so if you want to take a GCSE like media or any of the other ones then you could come and bring it up in the meeting and we’d see if we could find a teacher, and get that sorted (R)

Other students used examples of introducing French and Japanese to the curriculum. Students also used free time in the afternoons to undertake informal learning such as Tai Chi, swimming or woodwork.

There was also individual flexibility for students. Unlike conventional education, there was not a set leaving age at Sands School. Students could choose to stay for an additional year. They also chose when they wanted to take exams; they could take them earlier or later than at other schools. Consequently, some students staggered GCSEs over three or more years. This linked with what several students said, using phrases such as “Here, people learn at their own pace, how they like” (L).

This flexible, changing learning environment was contrasted with the mainstream environment by one student:

... if you go to state school, you'll see a lot of monotony. The food's all the same, like, Turkey Twizzlers once a week, er, everyone's wearing the same thing, er, the curriculum is not modified at all every year, it's sort of the same after the same after the same. At the most, 'ohh, new books'.
Whoop-de-doo (E)

In contrast, students at Sands School felt in control of their learning. This meant that they learnt in the way that they wanted to. Some students used the woodwork room or the art room for the whole day. Others attended all of the lessons on offer. Others chose to attend very few formal lessons. Some of the reasons behind these decisions connected with students' perceptions of the value of schooling. Some volunteered information about what they thought school was for, and others responded when specifically asked. There were a variety of views:

I think school should be like, ooh, getting exams and stuff, but I don't think it should be constant work. I don't think a child should be just placed in a school so they work for their whole life ... I think they should let you least, like socialise, have fun at school (D)

To me, I would say probably the whole lot is coming away with decent GCSEs, whereas a lot of people like to come to school because they know that they can get their GCSEs and still have fun, whereas I find learning is really difficult. My main goal is to come away from Sands with the GCSEs that I knew I would not get in a state school (A)

I want GCSEs and I want to go onto college, but I don't want, it's not why I'm here (R)

I think school is always partly about, to me, as a person, it's partly about getting my exams and doing well and going on to the next level, but it's also part, I don't know, of learning I think when you're being a teenager, like high school and stuff is really important time to learn, and it's when you start to more become your individual self and decide who you want to be and I think Sands really helps that in people and helps bring that out, so I think that's a really important aspect of school. It's teaching you to be a person (L)

There seemed to be a contrast between the desire to achieve GCSEs and the wish to learn wider skills. One student put this in terms of a percentage, where getting exams was “sort of 25% of Sands for me”. The other 75% was “about lifeskills and knowing what to do next and making my own decisions (R)”.

The Sands School curriculum clearly offered both of these types of learning. It offered subjects which students needed in order to pass GCSEs but it also offered opportunities to develop as people, to develop skills in managing in the world and to develop confidence in their own abilities. Most of all, Sands School seemed to value learning. The culture of the school demonstrated this, including in the way that students talked about lessons. The school also acknowledged that lessons were not always the biggest priority. When students wanted to run an Ethos Day, all lessons were cancelled. Although not specifically mentioned by any student, this was surely another significant difference with the mainstream system.

4.2.6 *Culture, Values and Norms*

Student perceptions of the different cultures of mainstream schools and Sands School could be characterised as two ends of a spectrum. At one end, there were “bells and rules (D)”, and at the other, students could “drink tea in class (A)”. One end was rigid and formal - the other flexible and free.

In order to explain the contrast between mainstream schooling and Sands School, some students referred to Sands as having “no rules”. This was what one said:

I didn't do well under rules, whereas here I have none ...

They have boundaries but I wouldn't say that they have major rules ...

I wouldn't really say that they had rules, just you know what's acceptable and what's not acceptable, and you should know that from your own common sense (A)

The researcher was interested in exploring this further. If Sands School had no rules, how did they ensure that their values were put into practice, for example, how did they ensure that everyone's voice was heard? A code was introduced to track this issue; 'rules of Sands?' This code generated 36 references.

It became apparent that Sands School had a small number of explicit rules. It had a much larger number of implicit 'rules'; perhaps more accurately described as 'norms of behaviour.' These might have been what the student above called "your own common sense". The explicit rules that were directly referred to by students were these:

- You are not allowed to make someone else not want to be here

I think the main rule of Sands, if I can remember it is you've got to ... I can't remember exactly how it's phrased, but it's pretty much that you're not allowed to make anyone else not want to be here, so if you're mean to someone or you bully them or you really piss them off intentionally, then that's breaking one of our fundamental rules (R)

- Respect / don't be disrespectful

I think it was good to reinforce our principles and to say, and to show, you know, a lot of older people, like I'd forgotten a lot of the stuff about rights and responsibilities and respect and stuff (B)

- We cannot break the law of the land

Obviously things like the law of the land can't actually be broken, because that would just have the school closed down (E)

- No Drugs

we've had to unfortunately kick some people out of the school because they've taken drugs and things which we don't allow in school so if you're caught with it, you get suspended, if you take it when you're actually in the school grounds, then you are put up for expulsion, no questions, and you go straight through to the meeting (D)

- **No Bullying**

all the Council members will gather up together and then they'll bring up the major points of the meeting, I mean really major stuff, like bullying issues (E)

The implicit rules or norms of behaviour were too many to list, but included the following statements:

- **Don't get in other people's way / be aggravating**

We've had recently one boy ... he's been really aggressive to a couple of other students like, verbally aggressive and getting really aggravating in their lessons and so we brought it to School Council and we went into their class ... they didn't think it was reasonable for him to swear as much as he did because even though swearing as a habit is acceptable at our school, they don't want to be listening to it (R)

- **Sometimes it's OK to break rules**

And there's things like, sometimes it's OK to break the rule if you know it's not gonna hurt anybody else, or you know that it's being discrete and it's not affecting anybody else (B)

- **Use common sense**

I'd say it's based more on common sense than rules itself, to be honest, which I think's a good thing, cos you can't really base a school on rules cos it just won't work (A)

- **People vary / we value difference / rejection of stereotype**

... as you can see, they all wear different things, whether the outfits they do decide to wear are good or not is a different question altogether, but everyone wears something different, well, most of the time, and also, the food is, changes pretty much day to day, though sometimes it does have to make the same thing again, but, yes, so it encourages individualism (E)

- **Supportive**

the students are really supporting of other people, like, you can always feel you can ask for help without being embarrassed to ask your friends for help or to work together on a project (B)

- Trust

I think probably, most people would think the important thing is that you're trusted (D)

Some of these norms of behaviour concerned the ways in which students related to each other. One student explained their view of how young people in society usually behaved towards one other:

it's how they work out how to be with each other, by putting each other down, and comparing each other (L)

This highly competitive, critical way of being was echoed by others, who used words such as "take the piss", "ridiculed", "talking behind their backs", "in the cool crowd." In contrast, Sands School students had a different culture of behaviour with one another. Most students referred to the supportive environment, using phrases such as these:

we're a family in the way that if someone's upset about something, we'll all group together to sort it out (R)

it's so nice to think that you can be looked after, you know, I hope everybody feels like that, I hope they do, I know that I definitely do (B)

The atmosphere, and the people within it were described as "small and friendly", "happy and chirpy", "smiling and hugging", and "getting on with each other". This seemed very important to students, and set a tone for new students when they arrived.

Students acknowledged that not only was the school different – they could be different too. One student explained that:

I got on very very well with a lot of people, and my opinion on things changed a lot ... I was a little sheep, followed the fashion, had to talk cool, know the latest words and have the latest CD or whatever, and since coming here now, I'm so chilled back and relaxed, my mum's like 'you're a completely different person.' It does change you a lot, coming to a school like this (A)

Social events and socialising in general were also important at Sands School. In response to the question about their highlights of being at school, the following answers were given:

I think that probably a lot of them are socialising things, like really close friends, being really happy (R)

There's things when I look back that were, ooh, that was great fun, like we used to have big waterfights and all the teachers would join in and then, we used to have snowball fights and we would all gang up on [teacher's name] and have loads of snowball fights and we'd always climb trees and we always chill out and sunbathe and go to Big Rock and swimming and play sports together. So we'd always be together, we wouldn't just be alone, cos there's always somebody to be with in school (D)

We're all on camp for like a week, and we go somewhere, and Sands is like, a family, in the way, well, it feels like a family, and when you're on camp together and everyone's like, 'let's go to the beach' and so everybody walks off and goes to the beach, and have a meal, and everyone's just playing the guitar and chatting, and talking, and getting on really well (L)

The social aspects to school life were an important part of the group culture. Time was dedicated to socialising, for example, the whole school closed so that School Camp could take place each summer. Great emphasis was placed on this camp, as well as other events – dances, parties, celebrations, snowball fights, water-fights. The school clearly valued having fun.

In combination, these norms of behaviour formed the culture of the school. There was a strong culture which, as it was so different from other environments, could take some time to adjust to. Student explained how they adapted to this when they arrived; how they learnt the 'rules':

You kind of copy it off other people, you notice that if they're doing something, then you tend to copy them, and then eventually you just, your common sense kicks in, you're like 'well, no it's a bit stupid to go and sit at the bottom of the garden and have a spliff', very very silly, because you don't see anybody else doing it (A)

I don't know. I think from the way people act around each other, and how people are always nice to each other (L)

So students learnt the rules by copying from peers. They learnt to fit in by behaving in the same way as others - and yet one of the parts of the culture was about valuing individualism. This seemed to be a contradiction, and was explored in more depth.

Students described state schools as being about conformity. In order to survive, students felt they had to fit in with the crowd. They had to be "a sheep":

Unless you were dressed the same way as everyone else, you would be absolutely ridiculed, everyone would just tease the hell out of you (A)

In contrast, students at Sands School were able to be individual. According to one, "People vary a lot. And the school encourages it (E)". Students could be who they liked, behave how they liked, and of particular significance, wear what they liked:

I just got up and I was like 'I just don't give a crap what I wear today' and I just grabbed whatever was on my floor, found a pair of shoes, and I looked like a right mess (A)

she's very small, half her head's greeny-blondy-blue, and she wears drainpipes and bright blue legwarmers (A)

Students could wear what they liked; there was no suggestion of a "sheep" mentality. Yet one student explained that there were groups within the whole, defined in part by dress code. According to this person:

If you look from one group to another, you can more or less recognise groups by like, just about recognise them by how they act, how they dress, how they speak (E)

Although students moved from group to group in a more fluid way than they might in another school, the notion of "fitting in" was still important. Therefore, new students learned the culture by watching others and copying their behaviour. They wanted to fit in and to belong. As Sands School had a strong culture, it could

almost be 'passed on' from one person to the next or from one year group to the next. This was almost explicit, as one student used this phrase:

it's always quite exciting to see what people are going to bring and how you're going to sort them out and get older and be higher up in the school and um, watch people who are now in the situation that you were in two years ago, and watching them turn into you (laughs) (R)

Sands School, therefore, could afford not to have a large number of explicit rules as it did have a powerful culture. New students did not need to be told what to do (or what not to do); they picked it up from others. Yet the feeling of not having a lot of rules added to the feeling of freedom, and of trust. Rules were restrictive. The ethos of using common sense was not.

The size of Sands School was also important to culture. Two students explicitly identified this factor as part of the reason the school worked well:

You couldn't have a democratic school like Sands with 1200 kids. You just couldn't. It couldn't be like this (B)

The other student stated that:

I doubt it would work if it was too big ... I mean, if it was much more than 100 ... (E)

The size of the school linked with its informality and the way in which the culture worked. Everyone knew everyone else, and it was possible to all meet together to make decisions. The size and the culture of Sands School were thus strongly linked to its identity.

4.2.7 *Belonging and Individuality*

There was no doubt that all six students felt like they fitted in at Sands School. They liked it, they enjoyed being there and they felt welcomed and accepted. There were 32 references to love / enjoyment of school. For some, these feelings started

during their trial weeks. For others, it took longer. These two statements demonstrated this:

I came on trial here, and from the first day I was absolutely, knew that I was never ever going anywhere else ever again (B)

sometimes it takes people two, maybe three terms to really find themselves a good social group, but, 99% of the time they get there in the end (R)

Students all spoke of their enjoyment of school. One of them expressed this cautiously, saying that:

I do generally enjoy it. I'm actually going to miss it actually, I think (E)

The other five were extraordinarily positive about their experiences. These were examples:

It's like, really really amazing. It's just an incredible place to be, and I don't think there's any other school that could make me happier than this one (laughs) (R)

every day is so good for me here, every single day is so good for me here (B)

I don't know, it's just that there's so little schools like this, it's such a different school, like the only one. The only democratic school really that works so brilliantly well I think, and I think that's why I feel so lucky to be here, because it just works so well, and it's amazing (L)

As well as enjoying school and feeling lucky, four students also expressed feeling that the school was "like family." There were 12 references to this, including:

it's more of a family in a house together. It's a nice place to be, it's not 'coming to school'. I don't like to call it school, I always say 'going to the house' or 'going to Sands' and stuff like it, because it is more of going home, although you're coming from home, if that makes sense. It's definitely nice to go to a place where you know that everyone you love will be there (A)

we'll all group together to sort it out, and um, there are different groups, like the younger ones who're obviously like the little brothers and sisters who will piss you off sometimes but that's just what they do, and then there are the older ones who are like your big brothers and sisters who are always going to look out for you, and if you're in trouble or, like in and outside of school, then they're always going to be there (R)

In addition, one student made the connection between being like family, and feeling sad when people left:

There's just so many amazing things that um, we're always, we're more like a big family really, which is why we all get upset when people leave (R)

This was reinforced by other students who talked about their feelings when people left, and their own feelings about leaving:

I think a lot of people are gonna struggle when they finish Sands because there's a lot of ex-students that come back because they're attached to it now, and they don't find the same thing when they're at college (A)

I'm leaving not this year but next year, so next year is my last year, which is really scary (R)

I'm glued now for life to this school (A)

In combination, these references were all grouped under the overarching category of 'belonging'. The researcher felt that the love and enjoyment of school, the references to family, and the sadness when people left were all indicative of a sense of belonging. The students felt as if they fitted in. Belonging was therefore given a code of its own, and was seen as a significant factor in the student experience.

Several issues emerged which reinforced that belonging was relevant in this context. First, students used language which implied belonging and ownership:

well, **we** just can't afford that, **we** can't afford to do that (E)

everybody sort of cared so much about **their** school

it makes it feels, as if you're part of it, and you actually want to contribute, and you want to be part of Sands, and you want to make it work because you've helped make it happen, and **you're part of it**, and because you feel part of it, I don't know, you get more involved and you want to make Sands work (L)

Second, some of the processes and systems explicitly linked to belonging, particularly the trial week system. As one student said:

it helps you feel like you belong here, and that you're welcomed and that people want you here (L)

Third, students felt proud and protective of their school. This was implicit in the way that they talked to the researcher - it was almost as if they had something to prove. One student, after explaining about how they had tried to support a new student, used the phrase, "Not so well that time, it's probably not a very good example (R)". This alerted the researcher to the possibility that students could choose examples to illustrate positive aspects of their school. They also made more explicit statements about how they felt about the school:

The people, all the people are quite proud of the place (E)

I knew nothing about it until I came here, and, then I found out about some of Sands reputation after I got here, and I was like 'you're completely wrong, you've never been there, you hardly know anyone who goes there so just shut up, go away' (A)

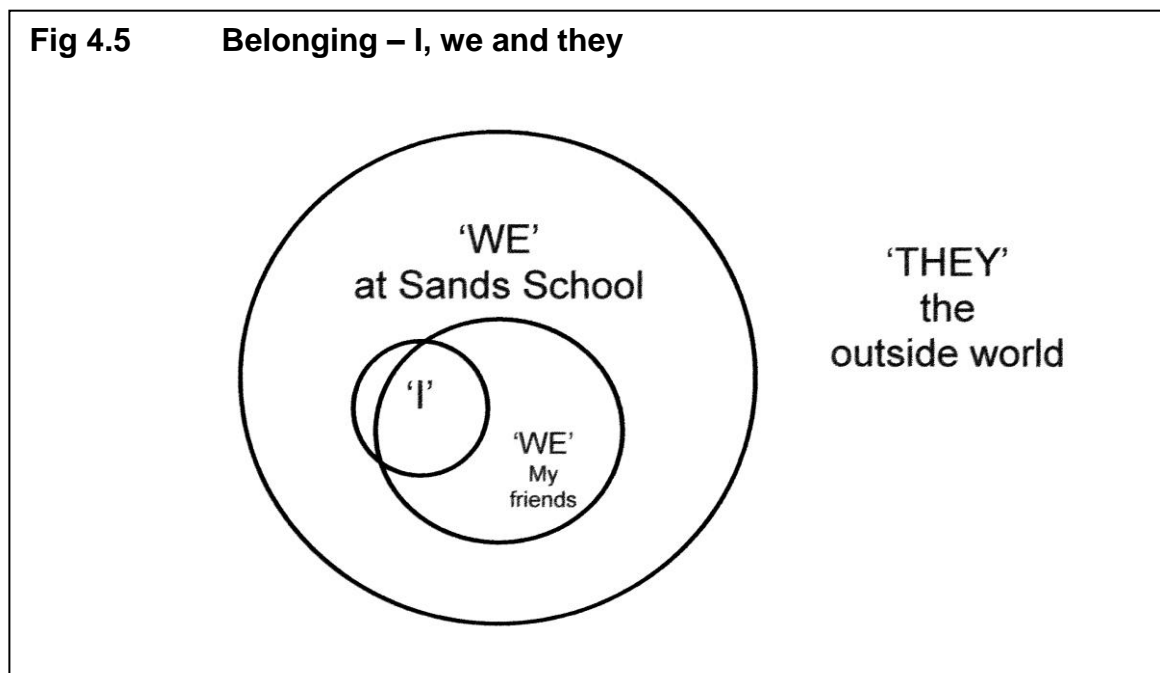
There was another facet to belonging. It was not just *as students* that they belonged to the school; it was *as individuals*. This was as separate, unique, different individuals. This was summed up by the following statement:

I feel like I fit in Sands just being me. It's nice, I feel that everybody fits in but in their own way, and at their own pace (L)

This shifted the emphasis from the students as a homogenous group to the students as individuals. There was a very clear sense from all six students that 'I' belong here, 'I' am accepted here, as separate and different from others. In a sense, 'I' can have my own very strong identity, and still feel part of a 'we'. This

was in contrast to their previous experiences, where in order to fit in, they felt a pressure to conform to a particular way of being, such as dressing, speaking or behaving in the same way. At Sands School, there was an acceptance of individuality and uniqueness.

Fig 4.5 illustrated the sense of being an 'I' within the 'we' at Sands School. The diagram also included the dimension of 'groups within groups', as described earlier. Students felt accepted as individuals, belonged to small friendship groups, and collectively belonged to the whole. This was in contrast to the 'they' that was outside Sands, representing mainstream schools / other schools, the outside world, and in some cases, family.



4.3 Summary and conclusions

Each student's experience of Sands School was unique and personal, influenced by their educational backgrounds, values and interests. Taken in combination, they presented a coherent picture which indicated that Sands School had a strong collective identity. This identity was oppositional in that the school was different

from the outside world, but it was also positive – it knew what it was. The identity consisted of several interrelated elements which were explained in depth by the students; relationships with teachers, power and influence, learning environment, cultures, norms and values.

Students felt as if they belonged at Sands School. As analysis progressed, the researcher considered the question of: if students felt as if they belonged, what was it that they belonged to? The issue of belonging was thus linked to that of identity. This was done with a level of caution, however, an anxiety that identity could be taken out of the context from which it came. The students at Sands School had articulated powerful *feelings from within* about a sense of belonging. The researcher had chosen to link belonging and identity - the students had not done so.

The researcher felt that there was a danger that if school identity was seen as the key to the student experience, this could be examined with no further reference to belonging. Instead, belonging was the key, of which identity played a part. Having a strong organisational identity, made up of any number of characteristics, would not necessarily mean that people could relate to it, understand it, or feel that they belonged. A sense of belonging would not automatically result from a clear organisational identity. This implied that having this identity and communicating this identity to newcomers would be enough. This paid no attention to how people *felt from within*, as in the case of Sands School. Nonetheless, having a clear identity *might* help to facilitate a process of belonging. It was hard to imagine a strong sense of belonging if the identity was unclear.

Chapter 5

Sands School: Observational and Documentary Analysis

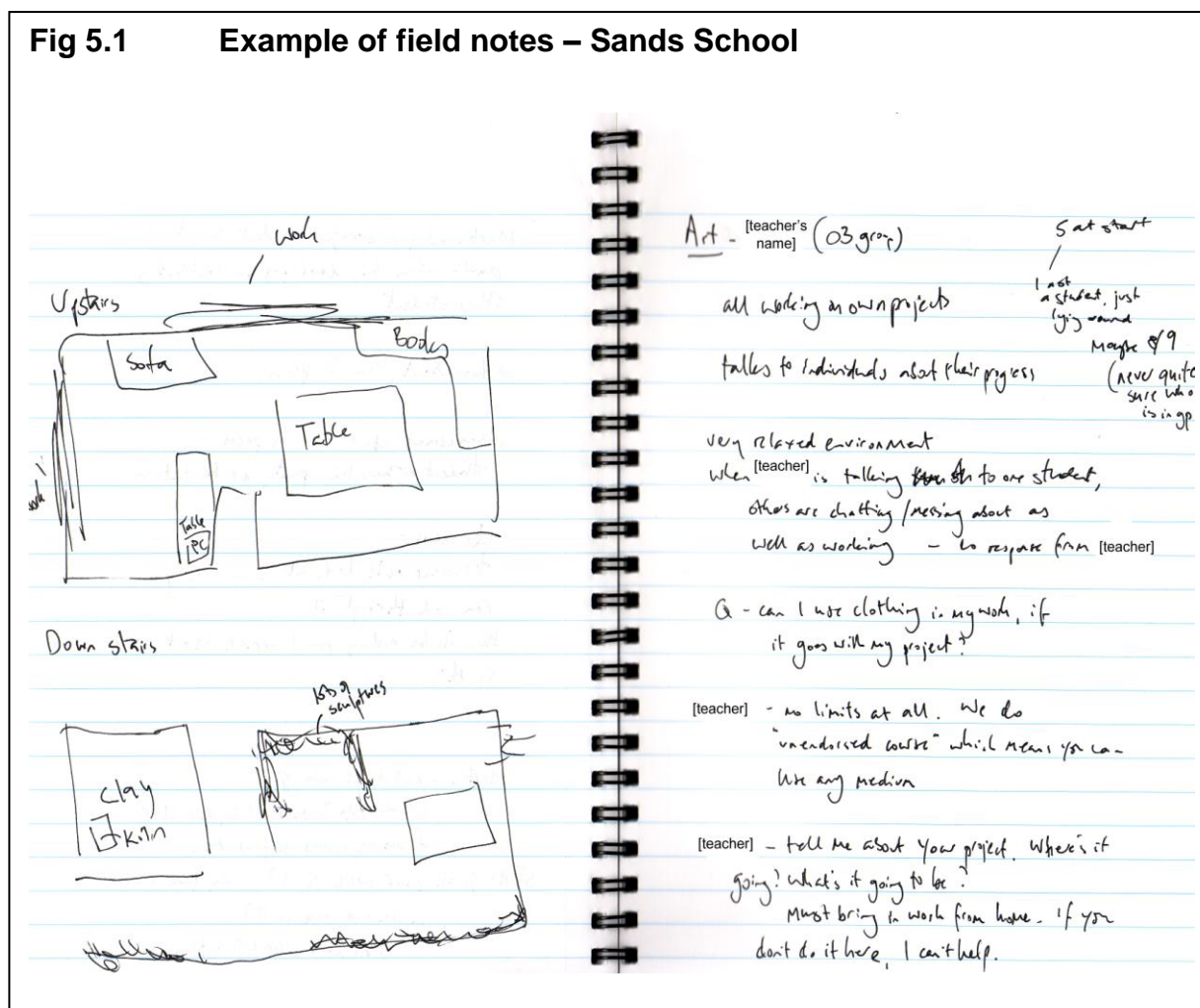
5.1 Process of Analysis

This stage of analysis comprised of two sets of data. The first were ‘field notes’ written by the researcher whilst visiting the school. The second were ‘documentary evidence’ collected during and after the visits. The former included notes taken during lessons or meetings, key points taken from informal discussions with teachers, and memos and hunches. The latter consisted of information provided by the school itself, such as the school timetable, handouts from lessons and website information.

The gathering and analysis of observational and documentary data served as triangulation. For example, students explained that they experienced “equality” with teachers and with each other. Was this equality observed by the researcher, and if so, how did it manifest itself? Given that this was constructivist research, however, the stance was taken that students created their own meaning (see Chapter 2). If they expressed a feeling of “equality”, then this was real. If the researcher observed something that contrasted with this, it did not mean that students were wrong. The task was to explore the discrepancy and attempt to understand how both perceptions might be understood.

The field (observational) notes were largely made in situ whilst the researcher observed activity. An example is shown as Fig 5.1. The left-hand side was a sketch of the layout of the room (an art class). The right-hand side was observations,

including how many students attended, how the class was run, how the teacher interacted with students. In all, 49 pages of observation notes were made.



The documentary information was largely taken from the school website, a comprehensive site which included ethos, philosophy, photos, testimonials, school policies, fee information and short biographies of teachers (Sands School, Home Page). The researcher copied key sections directly - this resulted in 6635 words of text. This was analysed alongside handouts from classes and the school timetable.

The observational and documentary information was typed into a word processing format and imported into ATLAS-ti. The analysis took place in six stages:

1. Open coding using ATLAS-ti;
2. Merging and deleting codes;
3. Statistical analysis of codes;
4. Micro analysis of individual codes / re-examination of content of codes;
5. Diagrammatic mapping of relationship between codes;
6. Writing up.

Given that these stages were similar to those described in Chapter 4, detailed explanation will not be repeated, but significant differences will be explained. At the open coding stage, the analysis started in the same way as with transcripts. Data were examined on a line-by-line basis (or 'meaning units' in some cases). Codes which were relevant from the previous analysis were applied and additional codes allocated. It was important to note, however, that the form of these data were different from transcripts. The observational data were created by the researcher which meant that by inference, certain decisions had already been made, albeit on a subconscious level. The researcher had written down things that seemed significant but it was not possible to note everything. For example, the researcher noted only once that "students bring teas and coffees into lessons". This was not because it did not happen again, but because in other lessons, the researcher paid attention to different things. Therefore, the number of times that one particular code occurred (e.g. drink tea in class) was not an indicator of its prevalence. All codes therefore, needed to be explored in depth and not just those which occurred most frequently. Once the notes had been coded on a line-by-line basis, they were read again, this time on a scenario-by-scenario basis. This was consistent with a grounded theory approach to ethnographic research (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). This time, the researcher asked: "what does this particular incident highlight?" It was a way of trying to discern the essence of the observation.

Open coding was followed by a process of merging and deleting codes. This resulted in a total of 116 codes: 68 of these had been used in the previous stage of analysis, 48 were new. The new codes included 'approach to learning', 'teaching

style', 'feelings of teachers', 'history of school' and 'physical environment'. A full list of codes is attached as Appendix D.

The codes were put in order of frequency. The average was 3.9 occurrences per code. The top 14 codes, all of which had more than 9 occurrences, are shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Sands School - Codes with highest frequency (observational and documentary analysis)

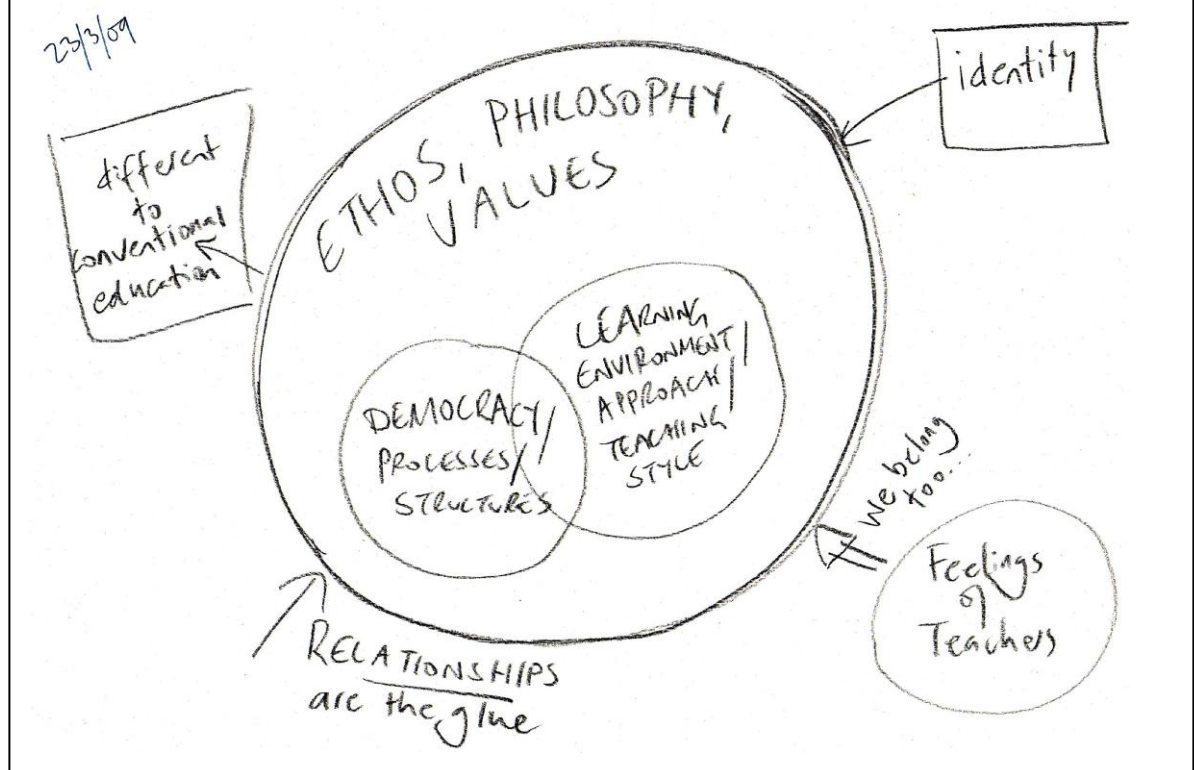
Code	Observational data	Documentary data	Total
Approach to learning	10	11	21
Responsibility	7	9	16
Control over learning	9	6	15
Lessons	13	1	14
Informality	13	0	13
Cater for individual needs	6	6	12
Role of staff	10	2	12
Teaching style	9	3	12
Democracy	5	5	10
Difference with mainstream / other schools	4	6	10
Dealing with difficulties	5	4	9
Ethos	1	8	9
Rules of Sands?	3	6	9
School Meeting	3	6	9

It was interesting to compare this highest frequency code list with the one generated after the student interviews. There were six codes which appeared on both lists: Responsibility; Lessons; Democracy; Difference with mainstream; Rules of Sands?; School Meeting. Five of the codes were completely new and therefore could not have appeared on the previous list. The three remaining codes of

'informality', 'role of staff', and 'dealing with difficulties' all appeared more than 12 times during the student transcript analysis.

At an early stage, this suggested that there was considerable overlap between data in student transcripts and the observational and documentary information. This initial hunch was reinforced as analysis progressed and eventually became a key part of the research findings. There was coherence between what the students experienced, what the researcher observed and what the school strived to do. An initial diagram illustrating the possible connections between codes was devised, shown as Fig 5.2.

Fig 5.2 Relationships between codes (observational and documentary analysis – Sands School)



5.2 Information from observational and documentary sources

5.2.1 *Overview*

There was consistency between what students experienced, what the researcher observed and what the school said about itself. There was overall **congruence** between ethos, values, structure, process and practice. In turn, this led to a coherent picture; what the students experienced made sense in the context of what had been seen and heard.

This was not to suggest that what Sands School did was simple. They did not say ‘the school is democratic’ and leave this as a four word statement. The teachers seemed grounded in clear values and a defined approach to learning. They understood it, engaged with it, and practiced it – consistently. There was **great depth** in the approach, complexity in the way that they put their values into practice, and many contradictions and conflicts which they sought to overcome.

Consistency did not equate with uniformity. Teachers were not the same as each other. Lessons were different. Teaching styles were unique. Relationships with students contrasted. This was not a one-size-fits-all approach. There was not a uniform in any sense of the word – in dress, in behaviour, in personality. Students felt as if they knew their teachers as individuals – and teachers behaved as individuals. This **acceptance of difference**, of individuality, was part of democracy.

As a consequence, teachers expressed feelings of being fortunate and excited to be at Sands School. One said “I had never really dared to believe that a place like Sands could actually exist.” They felt accepted, valued and that they fitted in. This sense of **belonging** was similar to that of students and linked with a feeling of being different from the outside world.

5.2.2 *Ethos and Values*

The ethos of the school informed everything that happened within it: the democratic structures and processes; the way lessons were organised; the types of teachers that were recruited; the systems for dealing with difficulties. The ethos, philosophy and values were seen as synonymous with the identity of the school, and were interrelated with cultures, values and norms that students had highlighted (see 4.2.2 & 4.2.6). The website gave an insight into the school ethos:

At Sands School, we value people as individuals. Students are free to be themselves, and to explore their own paths through education. Staff are able to teach their subjects to GCSE free of the strict guidelines of the national curriculum. There are no uniforms, no petty rules resulting in detentions, and everyone is on first name terms. All are equal ... We believe that everyone should be treated equally, be happy, and have access to good education. At Sands, no-one has more power than anyone else, the teachers and students are equal, and there is no headteacher.

The phrase “petty rules” was interesting. The school did not state that it had *no* rules, just no *petty* rules. This explained why there had been some divergence amongst students regarding the rules, where some had described having “no rules” and yet others had been able to outline what the rules were (see 4.2.6). The idea of having no petty rules made sense of this. It might have been the distinction that students had alluded to.

The website made four references to “common sense”. This phrase was also used by teachers during informal conversations. Two students had used these words during their interviews. The common sense approach to rules was thus seen as a key part of the philosophy:

The school prides itself on its common sense approach to daily life and from its inception in 1987 the use of petty rules and punishments has been avoided as much as possible and has been replaced by discussion, negotiation and conflict resolution.

Using discussion, negotiation and conflict resolution was part of the common sense approach. This was apparent in the processes for dealing with suggestions, complaints, or disagreements, but also, according to one teacher, it meant being led by experience and not by doctrine. Rules, processes and procedures could change over time. Just because something had not worked five years ago did not mean that it could not work now. The school could change and develop in line with its current membership, which meant that students really did have power and influence in the school.

‘Common sense’ also referred to the ways in which rights and responsibilities were viewed. The school aimed to live as a community. Everyone was free to make their own decisions, but some of these decisions had consequences. As the website explained:

Not having a tie done up correctly affects no-one; missing your washing up means the rest of the washing-up team has more to do.

Students and teachers were therefore expected to take responsibility for their actions and for their role within the community. The ‘Useful Work’ rota was part of this; everyone was allocated a task each day, such as tidying, emptying bins or washing up. The last 15 minutes of the day was dedicated to fulfilling these tasks. This was a “common sense” response to the demands of running a school.

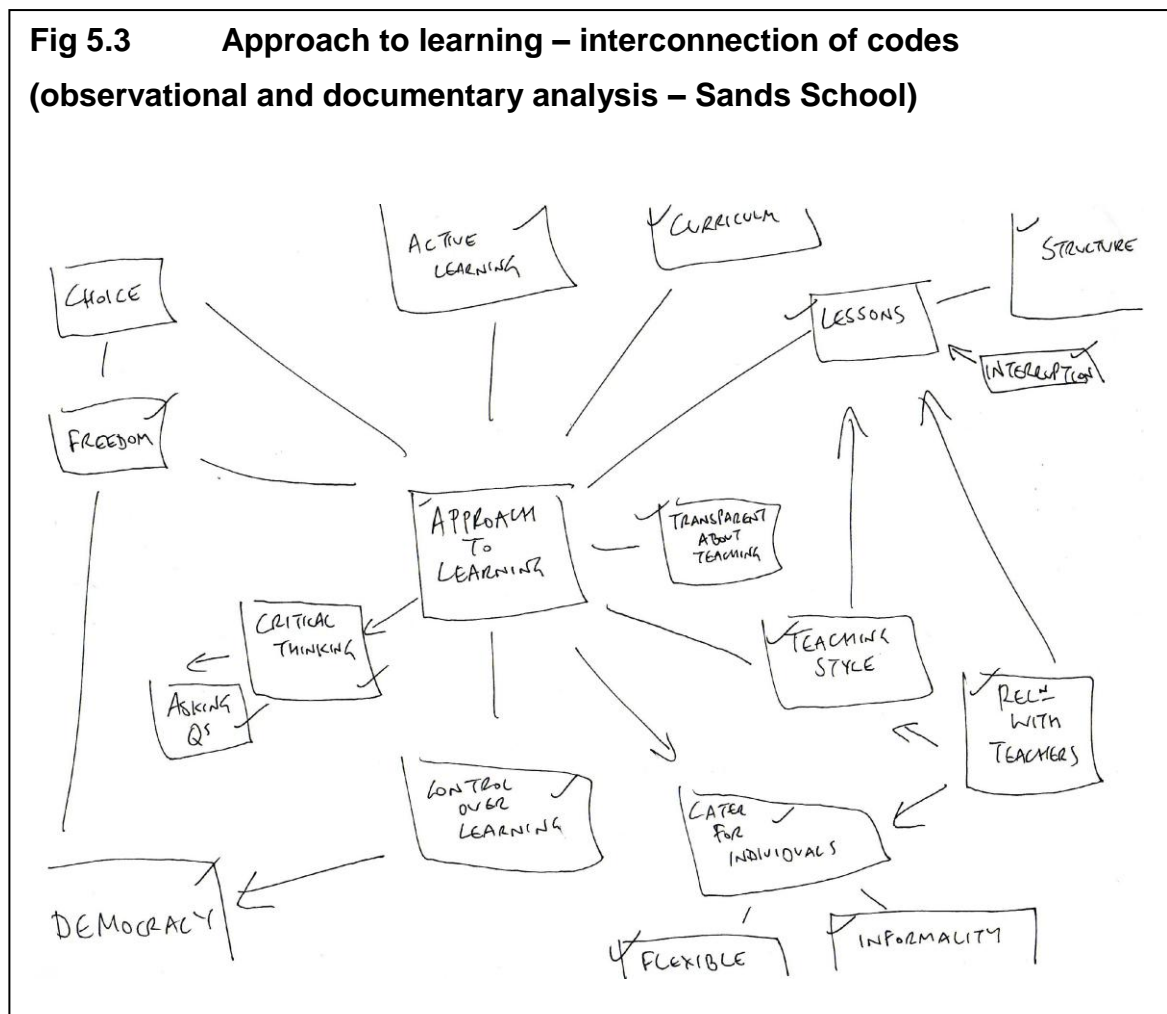
The common sense approach was not a value in itself. It was a practical, indeed common sense, response which came out of *underlying* values. These related to a deep trust and respect in students, as summed up on the website:

At the heart of what we believe is that children, when given the opportunity, are kind, trustworthy and responsible and that they are eminently capable of helping run the place within which they work. In fact, it is an expectation that in return for the freedom and trust they are offered, the students must respond by behaving in a responsible and trustworthy manner.

This was the ethos of the school. There was a powerful belief that students could be trusted, and that in return for this trust and the freedom that came with it, they would behave responsibly. These values informed practice, policies and procedures.

5.2.3 *The Learning Environment*

A new code was introduced which became prolific - 'approach to learning'. This was broader than the nearest equivalent existing code of 'lessons'. It included the underlying ethos of the school's attitude to learning. The connections between associated codes were illustrated in a rough diagram, shown as Fig 5.3.



The school's approach to learning was outlined on its website:

Learning happens both in and out of lessons, so both situations are valued.

This attitude was more than just a statement; it was observed in practice. Lessons were cancelled for a whole day to enable students to organise an Ethos Meeting (see 4.2.4.6). The school closed for a week for School Camp. Students who chose not to attend formal lessons were free to do so - the researcher observed one older student assisting in the building of a veranda - this student was not seen in any lessons or in the School Meeting.

The importance of lessons, therefore, might be questioned. Was learning outside of lessons given *greater* emphasis than lessons themselves? Was being involved in the democratic processes *more* important than formal learning? This did not appear to be the case. Lessons were valued by teachers and by students. This was apparent within minutes of arriving at the school, as illustrated by field notes:

Sands has a big commitment to learning, and to lessons. The school day is structured around a timetable, more for practical reasons than anything else. If it was possible to not have a timetable, then that would be preferable – but there are 65 students, and they all want to do different subjects, and they have to be split into age groups to some extent to ensure that the older students aren't doing the same things over and over again.

The walls were adorned with work created by the students – artwork, sculptures, photographs of drama performances and even full-size canoes made in the woodwork room. The entrance to the school was furnished with a huge sculpture of an elephant and a rhino, apparently created for a parade some years before (Fig 5.4). The atmosphere portrayed a positive message about lessons and achievement.

Fig 5.4 **Elephant and rhino – Sands School**



The school was clear that it expected students to be committed to learning. After a trial week, the School Meeting decided whether potential students were offered a place. One of the criteria to consider was:

Does the child show an interest in learning and do we believe they will take advantage of the academic environment at Sands?

The students behaved in ways which indicated that they valued lessons. Although lessons were relaxed, they had a degree of seriousness. Interruptions were tolerated to a point but students objected to serious disturbances. An example was in an O3 drama class. The teacher was called out of the room and they asked one of the students to take over as director of the play. Rather than messing about or waiting for the teacher to return, the group carried on rehearsing. When another student interrupted the class, the response was:

no offence, but fuck off, we're trying to have a lesson

This statement summarised students' relationship with lessons. They were important, students wanted to learn and they did not want to be distracted by others.

The question of whether lessons were compulsory was explored. Students had explained that although lessons were not compulsory, the majority of students chose to attend (see 4.2.5). The website stated:

Lessons are not compulsory but having a serious approach to learning, in the broadest sense, is a necessary prerequisite of being offered a place.

Before choosing a subject, students are encouraged to sit with their academic tutors to find out about the course. When a student commits to a subject, they are then expected to attend all of its lessons. If a student chooses not to study a subject, leaving them with a gap in their personal timetable, they are encouraged to find a constructive activity to fill that time. This may mean using that time for extra art, science, math, or helping to cook school lunches.

This fitted with the concept of "negotiated learning", a phrase used by one teacher. The researcher took this to mean that the school wanted students to have freedom to make choices but also to take responsibility for their decisions. Once they agreed to a particular timetable, they were expected to stick to it. If they only attended sporadically, the teacher's ability to teach in creative and interesting ways was compromised. Students therefore, had freedom, control and rights – but also responsibilities.

Sands School had a commitment to involving students in decision-making. They set themselves up as different from conventional education in this respect, as illustrated by this statement:

The rationale behind encouraging children to make choices about what they study is based on a belief that children are often powerless and voiceless in other schools and as such are often disengaged and passive learners. When children

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choose what to study then they arrive in class in quite a different and active state of mind and accept the challenges of learning with confidence and resilience.

One teacher explained that they saw Sands School as a “social democracy” but not as an “educational democracy”. This indicated that although staff and students could make many decisions at the School Meeting, they were limited in the level of control that they could directly exert over lessons. In this domain, a large degree of autonomy was given to subject teachers. This was outlined on the website:

We also believe that teachers have the right to deliver their curriculum areas as they see fit as long as the students and colleagues are happy with quality and integrity of the delivery within the confines of our particular philosophy.

In practice, this meant that teachers decided the topic areas and the way that they wanted to teach. The History teacher, for example, chose the topics of Israel / Palestine and Native America for the GCSE class. These were his particular areas of expertise and in order to be able to respond to student questions, he needed to feel confident about the subject. This did not stop him from also responding to student requests. The following interaction was observed by the researcher:

Student: - Can we do the Vietnam War?

Teacher: - We can put aside a week to look at it if we've got time

Student: - Great, I think I'd be interested in that

Even if students did not directly control the content of their lessons, teachers made considerable efforts to listen to students and to respond to their overt or covert requests. The Y1 Science class was learning about Series and Parallel circuits. Having recapped on circuits, one student asked “What's the maximum number of amps?” The teacher immediately answered with “Infinite”, but rather than simply returning to the point he had been making, he proceeded to get a box of wires from the cupboard and to answer the student's question in full. This engaged the class in a hands-on activity. The students were very involved and asked large

numbers of questions. He responded to all questions, adding additional information where appropriate. This seemed illustrative of the particular style of this teacher.

The teachers were all different. The Science and History teachers worked with a whole group, had clear aims for lessons, but responded to the pace and interest of the class. The Woodwork teacher offered a drop-in space for students to work entirely on their own projects. The Drama teacher was more directive in terms of deciding how performances should be rehearsed and how particular lines should be delivered. The Art and the Maths teachers enabled students to work on an individual basis within a group setting. All were transparent about their reasons for teaching in the way that they did - with the researcher, and with students. The following interaction took place in an art class:

Teacher [to student] - Talk to me about your project. Where's it going? What's it going to be?

[Student's response is vague]

Teacher - You must bring in work from home. If you don't do it here, I can't help you.

In conversation with the teacher, it became apparent that some students were reticent about engaging with all aspects of the art curriculum. Producing artwork was not an issue, but they were reluctant to engage in dialogue about their work – therefore, as in this case, they did their artwork at home. The response from the teacher was to be explicit about the demands of the curriculum, and to challenge students to engage with all its strands.

During informal discussions, two teachers stressed the importance of developing “critical thinking.” They wanted to create an atmosphere which encouraged students to think for themselves, to interact and engage with texts and to develop their own understanding. In practice, this was apparent through the numbers of engaged and active students in classrooms. There were numerous questions, discussions and disagreements. Students seemed confident to put their own opinions, to ask questions, to challenge views that were written in books and to

disagree with teachers. There did not seem to be any anxiety about getting it wrong or appearing foolish.

Even though teaching styles varied, there was commonality with regards to the atmosphere of each class. Teachers were informal in dress and manner. Some were in t-shirts, others in jeans, some in baseball hats and sunglasses. Apart from their age, they were in some ways indistinguishable from students. The students had described feeling equal to teachers and this was observed in practice. Everyone used first names. Students and staff brought drinks and snacks into the room. Rooms had open doors, and students came and went if they needed to. One teacher even brought a dog to school. All sessions felt relaxed and friendly.

The small size of classes (ranging from 3 to 11 during observations) meant that teachers developed strong relationships with students. They knew them personally and had accurate perceptions of their interests, skills and aptitudes. They organised their teaching to meet individual as well as group needs. The maths classes were a particularly vivid example of this. The Maths teacher had a series of box files which contained a folder for each student. The teacher taught every student in the school and knew all students personally. He explained that many students arrived with a preconception that “they were crap at maths”. His view was that in large classes in conventional schools, it was likely that everyone would get left behind at one point or another. His role, therefore, was to build confidence through a combination of gentle encouragement and ensuring that tasks were achievable for each individual. Through completing these successfully, students would develop confidence as well as their abilities to do maths. The researcher observed two maths groups, one for older students (O1) and one for younger ones (Y2). The researcher noticed that there was not a single student who said that they could not do maths. The closest to this was when one student walked out with frustration, shouting “maths sucks”. There was also no reluctance to ask for help or to say that they were stuck. The teacher stated that by the time students left the school, almost every one achieved a GCSE in maths, even if it was not at A-C grade.

This flexibility to respond to individual needs was crucial to the learning environment at Sands School. All teachers responded to students at a level they could understand and in a way that retained their interest, even if the academic competence of students in a class was vastly different. Teachers did not only respond to vocal and articulate students; they also paid attention to those who sat quietly. The commitment to doing this was explicit on their website:

There are as many right ways to deliver the curriculum as there are children and the school should stay aware of what works best for each child and each teacher.

This flexibility extended to the choice for students to decide how many lessons to do and to take exams when they felt ready. During a weekly staff meeting, the researcher observed this combination of flexibility with the commitment to attend to individual needs. Two students were identified as needing additional support. One recognised that she had not been attending enough classes and had asked the staff to support her in improving. Staff agreed that they would do this on an informal rota basis. The second concerned a younger student who had been the focus of complaints from classmates about disruptive behaviour. He stated that he wanted to learn but did not want to attend lessons. The staff agreed that he should be free to pursue his own personal learning, but that if he did attend classes, there were expectations about how he would behave. The researcher felt that these responses both fitted with the ethos of offering “negotiated learning.”

5.2.4 *Democracy*

Sands School website was clear regarding democracy:

Sands is a Democratic School. We offer a democratic education to all those children and parents who are attracted to its tenets. By the term ‘Democratic school’ we mean a place in which children and staff have the opportunity to be active, voting members deciding and/or ratifying decisions made by the school meeting and /or other delegated sub-groups. The ‘School Meeting’ which comprises all students and staff, has the authority normally invested in a headteacher and governing body and as such has an obligation to have final

say on all executive decisions that can be legally made by minors e.g. appointment of staff, pupils, approval of curriculum, disciplinary procedures, food, recreation.

Being a democratic school involved being transparent about structures, processes and procedures. The website contained information about the role of the School Meeting, the School Council, the Staff Meeting, Student-Led groups, Governors, and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). The researcher observed many of these in action.

The School Meeting was relaxed and friendly, with teachers and students sprawled on tables, chairs and the floor. The 'short meeting' on Tuesday was for information points, and was chaired by one of the younger boys. It was his first time to chair and he was given advice and feedback. This meeting lasted for half an hour and included short discussions on whether people should wash their feet if they had been outdoors, when the local swimming pool would re-open for group trips, and whether there should be guidelines for water-fights. The longer meeting on Wednesday was chaired by an older student, and included a discussion about whether boys and girls should be allowed to share tents on School Camp, discussions and voting about two potential students who had completed a trial week, and information from the School Council about a student who had been suspended. During the two meetings, a large number of students spoke, asked questions, gave opinions and voted. The teachers were active in their contributions but appeared to be careful about not overly influencing outcomes. They at no point implied that they were right or that the students were not in a position to make particular decisions. There was a degree of seriousness to the proceedings.

The School Council took place over lunchtime, so members were eating as the meeting took place, which led to an informal atmosphere. Council members were focussed, however - there was an agenda, they knew what issues to discuss, and they paid close attention to the time. The researcher was able to observe most of the meeting but was asked to leave for the discussion of a confidential issue. The items observed included a discussion with a teacher who needed support (see

4.2.5), and a discussion with a group of younger students who had been disrupting lessons. The latter were reminded of the importance of lessons, and were asked to make sure that they stayed away from classrooms if they wanted to be noisy. Although a reprimand, this message was delivered in a supportive and non-judgemental way.

The Staff Meeting was held on Thursday after the school day had finished. All teachers and one representative from the PTA were present. The meeting was informal yet efficient. It had an agenda and all points were covered in less than an hour. Topics included updates on the development of the garden and discussions on individual students. There were two other key issues. The first concerned one member of staff who wanted to go on 'strike'. This meant, in effect, that he would not teach any lessons nor do his 'Useful Work' slot. He would still come to school but he would do whatever he wanted (sit in the garden, drink tea, chat). His reason was frustration: students expected him to teach yet they were not sticking to their side of the bargain. Some turned up late or not at all, and many were not doing Useful Work. By striking, he hoped to illustrate that rights came with responsibilities, and if students wanted him to teach, then they had to do what they were expected to do. There was an interesting discussion about this. Some teachers supported him in terms of needing to address the issue but did not agree with his method. Others were happy with the strike, but did not want to join in for fear of turning it into a game. In the end, it was agreed that he was free to strike, but that other teachers would carry on as normal. If they were asked questions, they would suggest that students talked directly to this teacher. What was notable about this discussion was the spirit in which it was conducted. There was no criticism or defensiveness but there was a genuine desire to understand. There was absolute support for this teacher to do what felt right but there was in no way a "students-versus-teachers" or in this case, a "teachers-versus-students" dynamic (see 4.2.3).

The second issue concerned a decision from the School Council to suspend a student for suspected drug-taking. One teacher felt uncomfortable about a group of

students suspending another student. He felt that this might not be well received by the parents of the suspended student. Again, the discussion was supportive and non-defensive. The teacher articulated his feelings on the subject, and others acknowledged these and yet disagreed with his position. The school policy was clear: in the case of drug-taking, the student would be *immediately* suspended. This was stated on the school website:

When the drug or alcohol rules are broken then there is an automatic one week suspension during which the child will meet with their tutor and parents to discuss the offence and build a case for re-inclusion.

The School Council had not made the decision to suspend the student - they had merely upheld the school rule. This needed to be clear in order to protect the School Council from any criticism of unfairly wielding power. The process would be explained to the parents if any concerns were raised. At the end of the discussion, the teacher accepted that the decision *had* been made correctly but that he needed to think about his personal anxieties and what had fuelled them - indeed, he used the word “ego”. This level of honesty was indicative of an environment in which he felt accepted and valued.

The only Student-Led group which the researcher observed was the water-fight committee, set up at the short School Meeting. This meeting had decided that any students interested in discussing the guidelines for water-fights should meet at lunchtime. A group of students met and organised itself with no involvement from teachers. They talked through the issues. Where and when should water-fights be allowed to take place? Could there be a way of ensuring that no-one got hit unless they wanted to participate? Where would the water come from and could it be recycled for environmental reasons? A set of loose guidelines was drawn up, and taken to the large School Meeting for approval. The guidelines fitted the ‘common sense’ approach to rule-making. This process demonstrated many aspects that were integral to the Sands School ethos and philosophy: trust, control, rights, responsibilities, respect, freedom and fun.

5.2.5 Relationships

The attitudinal qualities of staff seemed inseparable from the atmosphere at Sands School. They demonstrated an unshakeable ability to trust students, to stand back and to not let egos get in the way. There was not an abdication of responsibility. It was not a question of 'let them get on with it, it's got nothing to do with me'. Rather, the staff made a deliberate choice about *when* and *how* to act. These attitudes seemed to result in good relationships with students, based on trust, equality and respect. These worked as the glue which held the school together. The strength of relationships enabled the structures and processes to work effectively and to create an atmosphere where people learned and grew. Two examples will be given as illustrations.

The first took place in a drama classroom, where one student struggled to engage with tasks that had been set. Her constant interruptions and disruptive behaviour had caused the teacher to shout and to say that she would lose her temper. At one point the student made a suggestion which the teacher seemingly did not hear. The student persisted:

```
Student - "[teacher's name], you're not listening to me!"  
Teacher - "No I'm not, what did you say?" ...  
Student explains her idea again  
Teacher - "That's a brilliant idea"
```

Despite having been shouted at, the student still felt confident to challenge the teacher and to demand that her idea was listened to. The teacher was able to admit that she had not been listening. The suggestion was put into practice and the session continued. The student / teacher relationship was clearly strong enough to withstand the fact that the teacher had been annoyed *and* that the student had been frustrated. They clearly felt confident in their relationship with one other which enabled them both to be genuine and transparent with their feelings.

The second example was from the School Council. A new member of staff came to the meeting for support. He struggled with some students who did not seem to

listen to him. He wanted to make changes to how his classroom was used by students. He wanted to bring in new rules. One student suggested that the teacher could think about how he used language. He suggested, very gently, that the phrase “mind the room” might be preferable to “own the room”. His implication was that the teacher’s tone was likely to aggravate students. Another student explained that the school could be a loud and boisterous place for a newcomer and that it might take some time to adjust. The Chair reassured him that the Council was there to help and asked if there was anything specific that he needed. It was agreed that he would take his proposals to the School Meeting, and that the Council would explain that they had talked to him and supported the idea of trying out some changes on a trial basis. There was no defensiveness on either side during these discussions; the teacher wanted help, and the students were caring and compassionate. They managed to deliver what was a difficult message (i.e. the way that you speak has been antagonising students) in a non-critical and non-judgemental way. This illustrated the quality of relationship that was present and the way in which all were committed to overcoming problems.

These two examples were representative of dozens. In virtually every interaction between students and teachers, the quality of the relationship was apparent. These were based on equality, informality, respect and a genuine acceptance of the individual. These relationships were not necessarily automatic; they appeared to have developed over time. Nonetheless, they were the result of the way in which the school operated: its ethos; values; philosophy; structures; and processes.

5.2.6 *Belonging*

The school website included a short biography of each teacher. These varied in format but most included a brief history of teaching experience and their feelings about being at Sands School. These were extracts:

I was one of the lucky ones: I got out before it was too late. I had never really dared to believe that a place like Sands could actually exist. Too much Orwell and Huxley had

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fed my cynicism and convinced me that, in fact, it could never work.

The friendly family style and atmosphere make Sands an inspiring place to both learn and teach.

During the teaching placements, I didn't like the way I was forced to intimidate the pupils and not allowed to talk to them as humans. About half way through I was ready to quit, then I found out about Sands. When I visited, I was very impressed and immediately felt at home. I knew it was where I was meant to be and after a few visits, I was offered the job. I completed the course so I could accept my dream job. Now here, I hope to be here for a very long time, I never thought I'd work in a place that made me happy. I hope everyone here feels as privileged as I do.

These biographies indicated that teachers, like students, felt lucky, privileged, and happy to be at the school. Although their statements were not as overt about “fitting in”, phrases such as “immediately felt at home” and “family friendly style” indicated that this was important. Belonging was essential for staff as well as for students.

Sands School had an ethos which valued individuality in students (see 4.2.6 & 4.2.7). This clearly extended to teachers as well, as they felt able to be themselves and to express themselves as individuals. During an informal conversation, one teacher described himself and his fellow teachers as “mavericks”. This suggested that they were unusual as teachers and different from conventional ones. He also suggested that some students were mavericks who had not fitted in at mainstream schools. This observation was not backed up through the student interviews as such as none of the six students in question described themselves in this way. Their reasons for not feeling comfortable in the conventional educational system were about feeling bullied, disempowered or disengaged. Through informal conversation with several other students, however, the researcher sensed that the teacher's comment was accurate. Some students, who had either chosen not to be interviewed, or were too young to volunteer, clearly communicated that they had not fitted into mainstream schooling. One 12-year old in particular fell into this category. His Mohican hair, studded denim jacket and Doc Marten boots were a

visual indication of his desire to be 'outside of the system'. He described feeling misunderstood and alienated by previous school experiences. At Sands School, he had the freedom to express himself how he chose, and to explore who he really was. As an individual, he seemed to belong.

5.3 Summary and conclusions

The researcher walked into Sands School for the first time on a cold day in March. The initial impression was one of a warm, relaxed and friendly atmosphere, where teachers and students were welcoming and keen to talk about their school. There was an open and non-defensive tone to all conversations, and a willingness to answer questions and share ideas. On some level, the researcher was left with a feeling that this was almost too good to be true; that this was some sort of veneer. This was reflected in notes written at the end of the visit:

I feel as if I have to find a way to get deeper than this. I maybe need to think about structuring my interviews a bit more to get to the depth.

Having spent more time at the school, the initial impression did not change. There was a friendly and informal atmosphere but there was also incredible depth. By listening to students' experiences, by observing lessons and meetings, and by talking to staff, the researcher developed an understanding of the complexity that came with the ethos of the school. There was no hint of veneer. This school was solid.

This was a non-defensive school because it had nothing to defend and nothing to hide. There was congruence between what the school claimed to do and what it did in practice. The student interviews illustrated this, but also shed light upon the impact of being trusted, respected and valued.

Chapter 6

The Small School: Student Interviews

6.1. Process of Analysis

The Small School was visited three times. The majority of data were gathered during the second visit. This included two group interviews with students; observations of classes, meetings, social time; and informal conversations with staff. The group interviews were not pre-planned. The format for these was developed in situ as a result of an enforced change to the interview method (discussed in Chapter 3). The first stage of analysis was restricted to data from the group interviews, and is contained within this chapter. Other data were analysed subsequently, and can be found in Chapter 7.

Group interviews were recorded onto a digital recorder. The researcher listened back to these on the evenings of the interviews. Comprehensive notes which included the names of individuals were made so as to aid the process of transcription. Memos were also written. After the visit, the researcher transcribed the interviews in full. This was harder than transcribing one-to-one interviews, as students spoke over one another, some voices were fainter, and there was non-verbal communication which was not audible on the tape. The researcher worked from memory to include significant moments (e.g. points to notice board, looks towards Head Teacher).

The process of analysis took place in seven stages, although many of these overlapped:

1. Open coding using ATLAS-ti;
2. Merging and deleting codes;

3. Statistical analysis;
4. Drawing together key themes;
5. Micro analysis of individual codes;
6. Diagrammatic mapping of relationships between codes;
7. Writing up.

Given that these processes were the same as with Sands School analysis, detailed description will not be repeated, but significant variations will be outlined. One notable difference was that vignettes were *not* used. This was because the researcher felt that there was insufficient information to differentiate students. In short, the same depth of information had not been gathered because of the nature of the interview method. This was a clear limitation of the research method.

6.1.1 Open coding using ATLAS-ti

The open coding process was slightly different because interviews took place in group settings. This extract demonstrated the distinction. These responses were to a question about what had changed in the school:

I think, er, money is a thing that's changed (10)
Yeah money's changed (8)

I was just thinking that (9)
in the school (10)

I mean we're getting progressively less money, so it's (10)
We did have grants (12)

Progressively less (11)
Yeah (10)

This text illustrated two key coding issues. First, the transcript read as if the students spoke in order, one after the other. This was not the case. The first and second lines, spoken by two different students, were said virtually simultaneously. The second student interrupted the first after the word "money". The third student

interrupted them both with “I was just thinking that”. With the second interview group, this type of interaction happened frequently; students finished each other’s sentences. This was challenging for coding purposes as it was hard to discern exactly what each student said.

The second issue concerned the frequency of coding. In this example, all five students were involved in the discussion on the financial situation of the school. Should the code “money” have applied five times, or just once to indicate one particular piece of dialogue? This dilemma was encountered on numerous instances when, for example, a student made a statement, and murmurs of “Mmm” or “yeah” could be heard in the background. The researcher felt that there was no right and wrong way to code these, but that consistency was the important factor, otherwise, the overall totals on the code list would be skewed. In this particular case, the code “money” was allocated twice in order to highlight two separate points - first, that the school was getting “progressively less money”, and second, that “we did have grants”.

Another difference related to the order that the transcripts were analysed. With the one-to-one interviews at Sands School, each transcript was analysed twice using ATLAS-ti before moving on to the next transcript. After all six had been analysed in this way, some were revisited and additional codes added. With only two group interview transcripts, the researcher felt that it would be more effective to cross-correlate codes at an earlier stage. Thus, the first interview was analysed once, then the second one, then back to the first one, and so on. Each transcript was coded three times.

6.1.2 *Merging and deleting codes*

As with Sands School interviews, the code list was refined by deleting and merging codes (see 4.1.3 for full description). For example, “second family” and “not

like second family" were merged to become "second family - or not". The result was a list of 189 codes, which is attached as Appendix E.

6.1.3 *Statistical analysis*

A process of statistical analysis took place. Codes were grouped into three categories: those with 10 or more occurrences, those with between 4.1 and 10, and the rest (between 1 and 4.1). The figure of 4.1 showed the average. The 54 codes which had more than 4.1 occurrences were perceived as particularly relevant, especially the top 18 which are shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 The Small School - Codes with highest frequency (student interviews)

Code	Interview 1	Interview 2	Total
Slightly negative / negative	12	12	24
Learning	13	9	22
What's good about school	14	4	18
Fun	7	10	17
Size of school(s)	12	5	17
Money	6	9	15
Banter / teasing	11	3	14
Previous school experiences	8	4	12
Relationship with teachers	3	9	12
Size of classes	3	9	12
Used to - things different now	12	2	12
Challenge each other	5	6	11
Dislike teachers / crap	0	11	11
Impact of [Head] being in room	6	5	11
Role of teachers	6	5	11
Freedom	0	10	10

GCSEs	4	6	10
Older / younger student dynamic	0	10	10

Statistical analysis was a useful indicator of the important issues to consider, but it did not illuminate the weight given to particular topics. For example, one student making an offhand comment had one code, whereas a conversation involving five students also had one code. The researcher frequently returned to the transcripts to ensure that all students' voices were fairly represented. It was important to use not only their words, but the spirit in which they had been said.

6.1.4 *Drawing together key themes*

The combination of the statistical analysis and a thorough re-reading of transcripts led to an initial attempt to highlight key themes. These were:

- Freedom;
- What is school for?;
- Relationship with teachers;
- Lessons;
- Small school;
- Money;
- Learning;
- Ages;
- Systems;
- Rumours / reputation;
- Preconceptions / prior knowledge;
- Behaviour with each other;
- Can be individual / different;
- Fun;
- Youth club.

It was interesting to note that the themes highlighted by the first and second groups were significantly different. The first group were more descriptive about lessons,

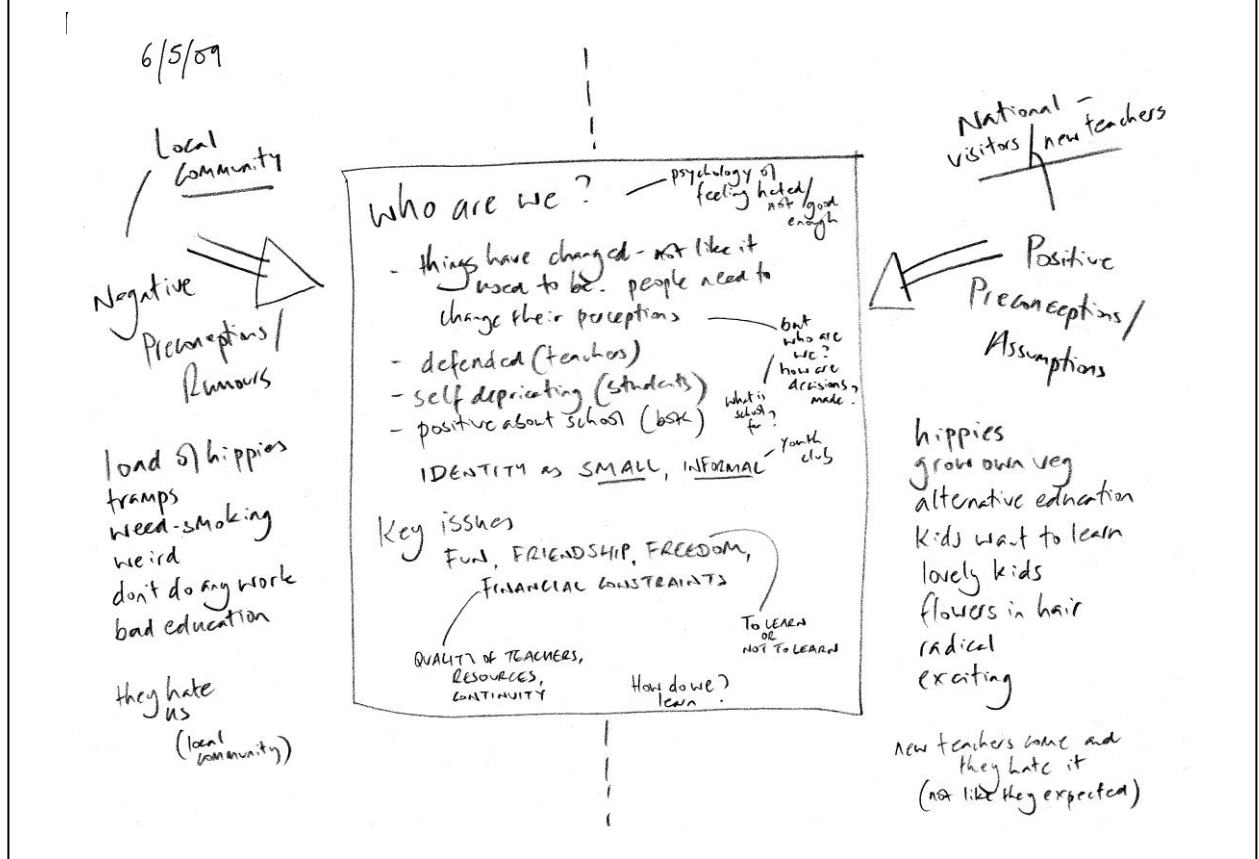
special weeks, circle time and student council. The second group were more evaluative about their experiences as students, including making some harsh and unedited criticisms. This might have been because of the age of the students, the length of time that they had been at the school and the proximity of their leaving date. It might have also been affected by the behaviour of the researcher. The first group were less forthcoming and so were asked more direct questions, for example: "Can anyone tell me a bit about the school council and the circle time and how those two work?" These undoubtedly influenced the direction and content of the discussion. The second group were more vocal and in many ways led the direction of the interview.

6.1.5 *Micro analysis of individual codes*

The key themes led to a detailed exploration of codes and the production of 'micros' (see 4.1.1.6). Eleven key topics were developed and attention drawn to interconnected issues. "Freedom" was connected to "money" and to "crap teachers". "What is school for?" went with "fun", "learning" and "importance of friendship". The codes related to "rumours" were put with those for "preconceptions".

6.1.6 *Diagrammatic mapping of relationships between codes*

One persistent theme emerged from both interviews: this school could not be understood in a vacuum. Students were highly aware of and affected by a series of rumours and preconceptions held by others. Some were negative, some positive - all were damaging. This idea formed the basis for the first attempt at diagrammatic mapping (see Fig 6.1). A box was drawn on the paper. This was initially empty. The area outside the box, representing the external context, was fairly easy to fill with ideas. Only after this had been completed was the researcher able to focus on the school itself. Putting ideas inside of the box (the school identity) was then done.

Fig 6.1 Diagrammatic Mapping – The Small School

6.1.7 Writing up

The process of writing this chapter involved many drafts and re-drafts. This was partly because interviews took place on a group basis and the researcher wanted to ensure that the voices of all students were represented and not just the more vocal ones. It was also because the information given by students was at times contradictory.

In order to protect anonymity, students were given a number. The first group were numbered from 1 to 7, and the second group from 8 to 12. This numbering was not related to the order in which they spoke nor to the order they arrived in the room. The researcher felt, however, that it was important for the reader to be able to distinguish between the two groups and thus the numbering was sequential.

6.2 Information from interviews

6.2.1 *Overview*

The Small School was heavily influenced by its **external context**. A series of negative rumours contributed to a strained relationship with the local community. National and international preconceptions amongst educationalists gave an outdated impression to newcomers. Students were caught in the middle of these, unsure of how to describe the school in a positive yet accurate light. The **identity of the school** was affected.

Some students described their school as a “good school” and many were glad to be there. Reasons for this were related to the size of the school, the ‘special weeks’ and the friendships that they had developed. Students valued informality and freedom. Their feedback was not all positive however - students, particularly older ones, were sometimes critical in their evaluation of the school.

Students of all ages were able to offer examples of how the **school had changed** since it had begun and since they had arrived. There was a range of misgivings and criticisms, mostly centred on the lack of money and the subsequent impact upon freedom and the quality of the learning experience. Their ability to change and influence the school was limited by this perceived lack of finance, but also, to some extent, by the decision-making processes that were in place.

6.2.2 *The external context: rumours and preconceptions*

It seemed obvious to suggest that all schools operated within an external context. No school existed within a vacuum. The external context of The Small School however, seemed particularly significant as issues about it were raised unprompted by both groups of students. The first group spoke extensively about how they were perceived within the local community. They talked of a range of rumours and

negative assumptions, including that they were “a load of hippies”. The second group talked of this too, but also added another dimension. They described the school in terms of its national image as an alternative to mainstream education, as “the perfect education”, and the preconceptions that came with this portrayal. They felt that this was outdated, inaccurate, and indeed “damaging” to the school.

6.2.2.1 Load of hippies

The Small School was located in Hartland, North Devon. Some students were born in the village, others had moved especially to come to the school, and a few travelled in every day from nearby villages or towns. Despite having been in the same place for over twenty years, students perceived the school as separate from the village. They described hostility between the two - both interview groups used the word “hate” in terms of how villagers felt about them:

Everyone hates the school (7)

but they hate us so much (9)

The school had a negative reputation amongst the local community, one that was fuelled by rumours. These were examples:

I think it's mainly cos loads of vicious rumours have been put around, and people just go 'ah, that's gotta be right', cos I mean like, people go, yeah, 'it's a grass smoking school, everyone smokes weed' and stuff like that (2)

I've lost loads of friends since coming to this school, because they're all 'Small School's rubbish', or 'it's for hippies', or whatever, so I don't want anything to do with them anymore (4)

The word “hippies” was used on nine separate occasions. Interestingly, however, “hippies” as a negative statement was challenged. Several students made comments which defended hippies, such as:

Hippies are cool, I don't know why people slag them off (5)

In addition, both groups implied that there was some basis to the rumour of being "hippies". This is what the groups said:

First Group

And we're now, we're not hippies anymore, **even though we used to be** (5)

Actually it was just one teacher (4)

Second Group

People just think we're hippies, really (9)

We're really not (10)

We are, most of us are, **we're hippies at heart** (11)

The idea of being "hippies at heart" indicated that students had mixed feelings about the rumours. They did not want to be called hippies and yet they were ambivalent to it being used as a negative word.

There were some perceptions that students definitely wanted to challenge. These included that they were "all tramps" (4), that "they don't think we do any work" (7), and even that "we ate babies" (2). Although the students responded with humour to these, using phrases such as "I find it really funny" (2), there was evidence to suggest that its image amongst the local community had a direct impact upon the school.

There was an impact in terms of social cohesion. Relations between the school and its neighbours were strained. An example was given concerning a football going over a fence:

And then the really grumpy bastards who live over there (points) who always take our ball when we kick it over the fence, they called the police the other day as well, it was well out of order (4)

Another example concerned the local shops. Students spoke of the treatment that they had received from one member of staff in particular. One used the phrase, "She used to be really bad to us", although they did go on to add, "she's a lot better now" (7). Others concurred that there were signs of change, one using the phrase "They like us now" (2). There was no explicit explanation as to why this change had occurred, but one possibility might have been that the school was making efforts to integrate with the local community by starting initiatives such as a Farmers Market and a youth club.

The Farmers Market was organised by The Small School every month. It was an attempt to raise money and to create a stronger connection with the community. Local producers were invited to sell their goods and the school provided lunch. The youth club was run in the school hall, organised mainly by students but open to local children from the village. Whilst mentioning the youth club, one student said:

since we've had the club, a lot more people have come to the school and a lot more, we've got a lot more sociable, more people outside, it's got a lot better (7)

Changing the relationship with the local community had not always been smooth. The Farmers Market might have helped the school to integrate with the community, but two students described how some local people had initially responded to the event:

It's so bad though, cos, um a lot of people stopped coming to the Farmers Market ever since they knew the Small School runned it, they didn't wanna give the Small School any money (7)

Someone wrote on the poster, on the Farmers Market poster, I think it was the first or the second one said, 'don't go to this, because it's a Small School event' (4)

The students had their own explanations as to why the local community were hostile towards them. This was the conversation that took place in the second group interview:

I don't know why the Hartland villagers have such a problem with us though (10)

Cos they're all like, farmers and that (11)

yeah, I know, but like (10)

but they hate us so much (9)

yeah I know but (10)

Because (11)

well look at you (8)

laughter

we're so (11)

shut up (9)

Laughter

Because we're so different (11)

One member of the first group drew this conclusion:

It's cos they don't think we do any work, because like, they see us go out at break, they see us go out at lunch and then they see us like, you know, going down to shop with cooking, we go down to get food or if we're outside doing art, they just see it as we're not doing work, but we actually are, **it's just that they don't understand what we do in the school** (7)

It was concluded, therefore, that students felt that their school was (and possibly, by inference, themselves were) different from others and misunderstood. This was compounded by feelings of being "hated" by the local community. The impact of this will be explored in more depth later.

6.2.2.2 The perfect education

The Small School was established in 1982 by people who wanted to provide an alternative to large mainstream schools. It used innovative ways of fundraising, such as recruiting "*shareholders*" who gave money but had no input (Spencer,

1999:5). It also raised money through charitable trusts and from voluntary contributions. The school's philosophy was strongly influenced by *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher, 1993). One of the founders of the school, Satish Kumar, had an international profile, and had been heavily involved with *Resurgence Magazine*. As a consequence, the school and its philosophy had been promoted on a local, national and international level.

The students in the second group talked extensively about the impact of the school's profile in terms of attracting teachers. This is what one student said:

people who think this is like, like, the perfect education
and everyone's really nice, organic, and they grow vegetables
and things like that, and we just all really want to learn,
and they, and they come here and they give up everything,
they've got no money, they come and live here to teach (8)

The students went on to describe what the preconceptions might be. This was their conversation:

Well, it's just that disillusion that we all, we're all
really organic and (8)

nice (9)

like yoga (8)

flower children (11)

wear robes made out of grass (11)

The students explained that in their view, the school had changed. It was not how it had been, and yet visitors and new teachers expected it to be the same. They argued that the school had changed even since they had started as first years:

it changes depending on who, who the teachers are and who the
students are (8)

it depends on who the fifth form are (11)

The students did not offer any explicit philosophical ways in which the school had changed. Their examples were more practical, and often included the phrase "it

used to be ..." or "we never used to". The first group, consisting of younger students, gave the following:

yeah, we never used to, it's just something that just happened recently ... we still like, see each other and stuff, but like, everyone just kind of seemed to drift apart (7)

RE: Special weeks

Although they've started getting kind of bad (2)

Yeah, they have, especially in the (5)

They're getting worse and worse each year (4)

The second group, made up of fifth years, offered this example:

Well, when I first came there was some, I don't know, er, I think they, it was a bit crazier because the fifth form were quite crazy so ... so there was crazy things happening, like balcony wars out there, one team stands on the balcony, and another down there, you just chuck books and shit ... and that's like stopped since they left ... and just other things that were a bit more wild. It just used to be a bit more wild (8)

Although these could be seen as small practical changes, such as the quality of the 'special weeks', or the 'craziness' of the fifth form, more concrete examples were given which suggested a bigger challenge to the notion of the "perfect education" where everyone wants to "grow vegetables", and "we just all really want to learn." These included:

we're all just a bunch of dossers that don't want to learn anything (11)

if they come here, and they can't teach us, then, then we just rip the piss out of them until they leave (11)

they just need to make us learn stuff and they can't (9)

None of us want to grow vegetables (8)

The students felt strongly that the school had changed since it had first started. They were irritated that new visitors to the school wrote about it as if it had not changed. This conversation involved two students:

And people still write, when they write about the school, like, from the school, out of like, they might write in like Resurgence or something (8)

They still say it's really good (9)

Yeah. They say, they say all these lies about how it's so amazing, and there's some people who've been on TV and stuff, on the radio talking about the school, and like, Satish, he does some stuff at the school, and when he brings people here from like, um, (8)

other countries (9)

like from other countries, um, he, I don't know, he gives this impression that it's still how it was 20 years ago, and it's just not at all (8)

The students were not complaining about what they saw as an outdated portrayal of the school simply because they were concerned about accuracy. They were complaining because it was "really damaging to the school" (8). They argued that new teachers who gave up everything and moved to the area in order to work in the school became disillusioned:

they just hate it because nobody's like that, nobody's like what they imagined (8)

The students were in no doubt that the school that they experienced was different from the one that was described in national arenas. What was less clear was the reason why this might have been the case. Students did not discuss the philosophy of education, and there was little to suggest in their conversations that the school's approach had explicitly changed. All examples given were practical - such as the way that learning was organised, the quality of teachers or the motivation of students. To the researcher, these seemed to be linked by two key concepts: freedom of students and financial constraints. These will be explored in more depth later.

The use of the word “hate” in relation to the feelings of new teachers was interesting. Students experienced “hate” from the local community, fuelled by rumours and negative assumptions. They also described a situation where new teachers in search of the “perfect education” ended up feeling “hate” for the environment. The researcher felt this would inevitably have an effect upon students. This will now be explored.

6.2.2.2.1 Impact on students

In response to a question about how they felt about the negative rumours and preconceptions about the school, students gave the following responses:

Well, it does, it's a bit annoying sometimes, but like, I find it really funny at the same time (2)

I don't really give a shit (7)

At the end of the day, it's not true so (5)

Despite their protestations, there was no doubt that the rumours and preconceptions were significant in that they gave students an external focus. They knew what other people felt about them. According to students, some of these were negative and critical but others were overly positive and outdated - none were accurate in terms of how they felt about their own school, as it was now. This left students with an interesting dilemma; how to define and label themselves, and indeed, their school.

Most students spoke of liking their school. These were examples:

I came here and I liked it straight away, because all the people were nice (12)

There's three in our year, so yeah, we get a lot of like, attention and help and stuff and that, so that's good (1)

Yeah, and like, I mean, in big schools, you just wouldn't know anything about the teacher, but I mean like, I know a bit about the teachers, which I think's quite good (2)

We're here because we wanna be here and we learn if we wanna learn, like, there's no like strict rules that we have to follow, apart from a few obvious ones, but, like, no-one enforces anything on us really, which is quite good, everybody like, it's basically teaching us to make our own decisions, more than anything (11)

When viewed as a whole, the key issues that some students liked were:

- Involvement in decision-making;
- Lessons in the afternoon (choosing from options);
- Small size;
- Mixing with students of different ages;
- Support when upset;
- Playing games / having fun;
- Knowing something about teachers;
- 'Special weeks' (theme weeks taking place three times a year);
- Everyone getting on;
- No strict rules to follow.

There was, however, a definite edge of negativity (24 references in all). Students joked, or made aside comments which suggested that there were some aspects of the school that they were unhappy about, for example:

She said, 'it's a really bad education, they haven't got any decent teachers', which might actually be true, but still (4)

it's falling to pieces a bit (10)

I'm not saying it's bad but it's not everything that it's made out to be (8)

It's not the best place in the world, Hartland (9)

Students were also self-deprecating in relation to themselves and to each other.

One student used the phrase:

there aren't many crap teachers here, there's just crap students (11)

The response to this comment was not related to the assertion that they were “crap students”; rather, the challenge was in terms of wanting to reiterate that there had indeed been “crap teachers” – “there was some. There has been some” (10). This suggested that other students either agreed with, or chose not to challenge the assertion that they were “crap students.”

The researcher concluded that negativity and self-deprecation were *in part* a response to feeling attacked, criticised and hated by others: an internalisation of negativity that was experienced from others, a defence mechanism. This seemed to provide only a partial explanation. Students *also* communicated a sense of dissatisfaction, based on feelings that their school or parts of it were indeed “rubbish”.

6.2.3 *The school itself*

Students had a firm idea of how they were perceived from outside, and as a consequence, they were very clear about what they were *not*. There was general agreement (despite the language) that “we are not hippies” and “this is not the perfect education.” Students found it much harder to state what they *were*. One student made the suggestion that “It’s small, that’s a good thing, well, obviously ...”, and the immediate response was “Well I don’t know about that.” Students’ attitudes, opinions and experiences varied. There was no single, clear, undisputed identity.

6.2.3.1 Identity

During the group interviews, the researcher started with one question:

Imagine I know nothing and I was coming to this school for the first time like I am, what is it that I need to know about this school so that I understand how it works?

The response from both groups was startlingly similar – silence. This might have been due to nerves or a reluctance to be the first one to speak. It might also have been that students were not sure how to answer the question. When students finally spoke, these were the first responses:

First Group

Um, it's more like a group, like we all have a say, in a way, like, obviously the teachers have the main say, but like, if anything comes up for discussion, then we all get to have a say on what we want ... (7)

Second Group

It's small, that's a good thing, well, obviously, but the classes are small so I think that's good (9)

These two concepts - that the school was more like a group and that it was small - were raised several times throughout the interviews ('more like a group' or 'youth club' were raised five times, 'size of classes' and 'size of school' were raised 12 and 17 times respectively). Although at times disputed and discussed, these concepts were raised so frequently that they were considered to be part of school identity. Other issues such as learning, friendship, fun and freedom were also deemed important and contributed to the identity.

6.2.3.1.1. Identity as informal / youth club

Students in both groups offered information which suggested that part of The Small School's identity involved informality, or a feeling of a "youth club":

It's like a, like a, just a group, I mean, a group of people like, get along with each other, usually, it's like a, I don't mean to say this, but it's kind of like a family, we're all kind of very close and we know each other (12)

It's more like a youth club (11)

It's very informal (8)

I think it's just that youth club kind of idea, just really relaxed and do what you want (8)

This informal, flexible environment where a student could “do what you want” was spoken about in contrast to other educational environments. Students raised concerns about how they would manage when they moved on to college. Three students intended to go to a college which was “really strict.” One student explained that at:

the college that we’re going to, we have to **go back** to sort of, calling them, Mr and Mrs and all that stuff, it’s gonna be like, strange **going back again** (10)

The use of the phrase “going back again” indicated that many students had come from a mainstream environment into the alternative environment of The Small School. They recognised that their experiences of an informal, flexible “youth club” were unusual for a school setting.

6.2.3.1.2 Identity as small

The name ‘The Small School’ indicated that the size of the school was important at the point at which it was established in 1982. Conversations with students suggested that this was no less important in 2008. The first group was adamant that the school should remain small. Their discussions were different from the second group and so the two groups will be treated separately. This is what the first group said:

Would this school work if it was bigger? (Researcher)

No (7), No (6)

How much bigger could it be and still work? (Researcher)

Apparently the most they’ve had is about 40 people (4)

About 40? (Researcher)

But that was a while back (4)

I reckon about 30 people is the most. And that is quite a lot (5)

You think about 30? You think they've had about 40?
(Researcher)

I think about, um, 27 (6)

That's what we've got anyway (7)

Is it? (6)

So just perfect as it is? (Researcher)

laughter

So you think about 27. Could it go bigger than 40? Could it go to 60? (Researcher)

No, because they wouldn't fit (4)

No, it wouldn't be the Small School then (5)

The final sentence of this dialogue suggested that the size of the school was crucial to the identity of The Small School; if they had 60 students, then it would not be The Small School. Students were able to explain some reasons as to why they felt strongly about this:

I think, just because if you have too many people, I don't think you're as close to everyone (2)

And also it's sort of cosy being little (6)

Students in the first group were also keen on having small classes as well as a small school. They explained:

I felt more comfortable here, and I've learnt much more, because like, there's not so many people in a class as like, only like 6 or 7 tops, so like, the teacher is just talking to you, she's not talking to a group, and it just felt more like I was learning, and I was learning for me (7)

There's three in our year, so yeah, we get a lot of like, attention and help and stuff and that, so that's good (1)

Only one disadvantage to being small was raised by the first group. This was it:

I've still got loads of friends, but I do sometimes miss like, loads of people being here, like meeting loads of different people and getting friends, more people my age (7)

The second group, however, had some disagreements about the virtues of being small. One student started off the discussion:

it's alright having small classes, but just having hardly any people here means there's no money, ever, and that means it's so restricting on what you do, and the small classes aren't always good cos, it's fun, but I don't think you learn as much, cos if it's three people in a class, you just get distracted and you all start talking and like, even the teachers ... but if you've got a big class, teachers can just shout at you and you'll stop, or people who want to learn can just carry on and learn (8)

This extract contained three crucial elements: one, issues with money, two, small classes being more fun, but three, possibility of distraction in a small class. The issues of money, and of fun, will be addressed later. The third point was contradicted by another student:

I think I learn more in a smaller group, I mean, yeah we get distracted sometimes but you'll get distracted in any kind of class, but I think if you're in a smaller group, you have more time with the teachers than you would if you were in a bigger group, so you kind of, you're balancing it out I suppose (10)

A different perspective was offered by another student:

Well, I don't know, if I'm gonna get distracted, then I'm gonna get distracted in any group, it just depends what mood I'm in ... Some days, it doesn't matter what group I'm in, I'll like, do loads of work, but some days I'm just not in the right head space so it doesn't matter if I'm in, like a group of three or a group of twenty, I'll still mess around and not do anything (11)

It seemed therefore, that the preference for group size came down to individual choice, and to whether the student wanted to learn or not. There was a loose

consensus that if a student really wanted to learn, then they could learn in a group of any size.

Another discussion was held by the second group. Students felt there were definite *disadvantages* to being a small school. Within a few minutes of the start of the interview, the following points had been raised:

There's not much selection here though (11)

You've gotta be close to the little kids all the time (11)

Well, yeah, there's good things cos you're close to everyone, but then, if there are people you don't like, then you can't get away from them (11)

This led to another discussion about the balance between older and younger students. The fifth years were concerned that when their year group left, consisting of seven students in all, the balance of the school would change. As there was only a very small fourth year, they would 'move up' to become a very small fifth year. In contrast, there would be a higher number of first years. These students felt that the character of the fifth year group had a key influence over the school as a whole.

One student explained that there would be "just no real like role models for the students" (12). This was an important point as far as how the school created and maintained its culture and values. As the students had already explained, the school changed depending on who the students and the teachers were. By inference, therefore, having a small fifth year changed the school as the younger students had no-one to learn the culture from. It was interesting to remember, therefore, that these particular students had described their memories of starting school as "the fifth form were quite crazy" (8). If they learnt the culture from this particular group of "wild" students, could that explain why they were so committed to the concept of "messing about"?

Despite the disadvantages, however, the majority of students interviewed were in agreement that the small size of the school was important. It was therefore seen as a central part of the school identity.

6.2.3.2 What is school for?

Both groups of students were asked about what they thought school was for. The responses were different depending on age. The younger group gave the following answers:

Making friends and learning (5)

Being social (2)

Messing about (4)

Being in a community (5)

The older group gave this response:

Get GCSEs so that you can go to college and do something more fun (11)

This statement was agreed with by most other students, many of whom stated that they had not paid any attention to their GCSEs until their fifth year, and even until Christmas of their fifth year. When asked how they might have responded to the question if they had been asked a year previously, this was what they said:

Mess around (9)

Having a good time (9)

Not doing anything (10)

We do learn stuff, it's just, mess around too (8)

These responses to 'what is school for?' were thus grouped into three categories:

- Learning / including GCSEs;

- Making friends / Being social / Being in a community;
- Messing around / Having fun.

6.2.3.2.1 Learning / including GCSEs

Students from both groups agreed that learning was important in school. These were some comments:

You're learning something new everyday (7)

learning is very essential for when you're older (5)

The younger and older students had contrasting ideas about lessons in themselves, possibly explained by the fact that the older ones were due to sit their GCSEs within a few weeks. Most comments from the younger students related to the size of the classes. They also said that:

I think learning should be interesting ... and fun as well (6)

we do quite a few different, like, we get a tutor, we do in the afternoons, as lessons, which is good, like art, extra art, um, photography, media, um, pottery, there's lots of different various things (5)

We can go outside, and learn and draw in art and stuff (2)

The younger students also appreciated the nature of the relationships that they had with teachers. Although not a long conversation, two points were made which highlighted the informal nature of the relationships:

Yeah, and like, I mean, in big schools, you just wouldn't know anything about the teacher, but I mean like, I know a bit about the teachers, which I think's quite good (2)

in bigger schools you're more treated as a number, but at like, this school, I think as well, it helps that like I call [the Head] by her first name, and she calls me by my first name, so it's sort of, it's not sort of just being treated as a number. It's like being more individual (2)

The older students made far more comments about their lessons, including some highly critical ones about their teachers. They said:

we've had like, seven Maths teachers in the whole time we've been here (10)

we take advantage when we know we're not gonna learn anything because we think the school's employed such a crap teacher we may as well just go for it, and piss around, that's what we did recently (8)

they just need to make us learn stuff and they can't (9)

The overall consensus seemed that lessons could *either* be fun *or* students could learn. There was no middle ground. This was summed up like this:

It depends whether you want to learn a lot and have a shit time or have a good time and not learn very much (11)

They did offer one exception to this statement. Students described their experiences with a poetry teacher who had been at the school in a previous year. This particular teacher had lived at the school and so had been around for a lot of time. This was how she was described:

she lived just there, so she was basically part of the school, she was always in and out, **she was really fun**, and **she actually knew the subject** she was teaching which was poetry, and she was a poet, um, and **she was just really involved in everything about the school** (8)

and she was really **enthusiastic** (11)

she just really liked, **liked actually being here** (8)

Yeah, she took us places as well (12)

and she, like, taught us to love poetry, not just to see it as a form of getting through GCSEs (8)

she was more **spontaneous** than anyone else (8)

she was always really **energetic** (10)

It seemed as if this teacher had managed to strike the balance between learning and fun. Through her energetic, enthusiastic and spontaneous teaching style, she

engaged students with the topic and helped them to love poetry. She was also involved with everything about the school and importantly, she “liked actually being here.”

The quality of relationships between teachers and students was clearly crucial to the learning experience. This was alluded to by the younger group in their comments about knowing a bit about each other and using first names. It was more explicit from the older group when they explained why they appreciated this particular teacher, and why, by inference, they labelled other teachers as “crap”.

Students acknowledged that it sometimes took time for teachers to adjust to being at the school. They gave an example:

But he learnt the freedom as well, though, towards the end, and it was like, really difficult because there was sort of a divide between the students and that teacher for ages, and then just before he started, when he was just about to leave, we just, we started to like him, because we understood where he was coming from, and he understood where we were coming from (10)

The phrase “there was sort of a divide between the students and that teacher” seemed indicative of the relationships that existed between students and teachers in the school as a whole. There was not a culture of negotiating a productive learning process where the students wanted to learn and the teachers wanted to teach. There was a culture where students divided teachers into “good” and “bad” and altered their behaviour accordingly.

It was difficult to tease out further explanation about what differentiated a good teacher from a bad one. The researcher asked whether it was because they were strict, but the response was unequivocally “no”. In fact, some students appreciated it when teachers were strict. Two students gave this example:

One of the English teachers that we had we used to do quite a lot of work because he was quite, scary (10)

we hated him but we did loads of work (9)

yeah, he did help us quite a lot actually (10)

The best explanation that students offered was that “it’s just them as a person” (9) or “personality” (12). In short, if students thought that an individual was a good teacher, they focussed. If they did not, then “If the kids don’t like a teacher, then they’re gone, really” (10).

6.2.3.2.2 Friendship / Being social / Being in a community

Students frequently mentioned ‘having friends’ as important. Indeed, for some, it had been a key reason why they had left previous schools:

I absolutely hated it, cos I had really um, only like, two friends, one of my which was my brother and one had been my friend since before I went to [name of school] (3)

I wasn’t getting very well along with everyone and stuff (9)

I went there for like, 6 months, just couldn’t handle it, I just got really down and just like, wasn’t learning, just wasn’t making any new friends (7)

At The Small School, students gave the impression that they were able to make a lot of friends, and that this helped them to feel comfortable and to be able to learn. Two students used the phrase “it’s like a second family” to describe their feelings about each other. When asked whether this phrase made sense to others, there were nods and murmurs of agreement, though little elucidation upon what it precisely meant. The only explanation was this:

Well, everyone sort of, everyone cares for each other most of the time (5)

There was an active minority of students, however, who explicitly stated that they would not use the phrase “second family”, although they chose not to expand upon why they felt so strongly about this.

The concept of a “second family” indicated that relationships extended beyond the parameters of the school experience. Students talked about how they had maintained friendships with people who had left the school:

we just, we all like, got on really well, and we still do now even though they’ve left school, we still like, see each other and stuff (7)

Even in very small classes, there was a sense that students got on well. The researcher asked whether interpersonal conflicts could be difficult in a group as small as three students and the response was unambiguous:

Don’t know really, that’s never really happened (1)

Both groups emphasised that it was possible to be “an individual” at The Small School. This was what one student said:

You can be individual, and I mean different, in this school (5)

What does that mean, be an individual? (Researcher)

Well, liking different music, wearing different clothes, you have suburban, stuff like that kind of clothes, and you can have you know, taste in a reggae music instead of dance or techno or rock or classical or beat or whatever it’s called, uh, as well you can er, well, the good thing about being different is that, you know, everyone gets on, I know it sounds weird, but everyone gets on because everyone has different points of view (5)

This was confirmed by other students who agreed it was possible to be an individual. There were, however, some limitations to how “individual” someone might be:

You can’t be really really individual though, like some people (8)

An example was given in the first group, although the student was unable to finish their point as they were silenced by another person who clearly felt as if these details should not be shared:

I think that, like, we say that we get along with everyone and we do try, but sometimes they might come off a bit like, standoffish, and we just like, we just sort of get fed up with that, cos like, we try, we try and get on with them, but then we get like, really fed up with it so then we start going, ah yeah, and then we start slagging them off because they're just not trying to, what? [to another], it's true (2)

What was this student about to say? Was it that "they're just not trying to ..." Fit in? Be like us? Get on with us? The researcher attempted to return to this issue, but the student was reluctant to expand any further:

So you're saying that if people are a bit standoffish, then that's not the way to be in this school? (Researcher)

No, not really (2)

You're gotta be kind of friendly and (Researcher)

Yeah (2)

The conclusion drawn by the researcher was that individuality was welcomed and accepted within the school – to a point. There were also unwritten rules which students adhered to in order to make good friends and fit in to the school. These rules were about ways of behaviour, such as being friendly, joining in, and not being "standoffish".

Having strong friendships with people seemed to deepen the sense of "community". This was also enhanced by the roles that students took in the school, particularly in terms of cooking and cleaning. There was a cooking rota, and each student was expected to help prepare the school lunches. Cleaning took place at the end of every day, with each student undertaking a small amount. Although the term "community" was only actually used once, in terms of a group of people who knew each other well, involved each other in activities and decision-making, and socialised together, The Small School could certainly be seen as a community.

6.2.3.2.3 Messing around / Having fun

During the first interview, one student said that school was for “messing about.” The particular student who used this phrase had also said that the morning “circle” was for “extra sleep time”, and made jokes in response to researcher questions or student comments. It was interesting, therefore, that the phrase “messing about” or “messing around” was used five times and by four different students. It appeared as if the researcher’s initial assumption, that this student was indeed, “messing around”, was incorrect. The concept of “messing about” was important to these students. This was seen as similar to “piss about” and “having fun”. These were examples of what they said:

You’ve gotta choose whether you want to work, or **mess around**. It’s not like, the teachers try and make you work but they can’t really, it’s just up to you whether you want to learn or not (9)

I just thought it was **fun** to wind him up (8)

the small classes aren’t always good cos, **it’s fun**, but I don’t think you learn as much (8)

The code “boring” was used on five occasions, and was viewed as the reverse of “fun”. Students did not like to be bored; it was a negative experience. For example:

Er, I’m not sure I’ll be on school council for very much longer. I think I’m gonna give up in a bit, cos it’s a bit, er boring (5)

I think it’s having fun but learning at the same time as well, cos otherwise it’s just like boring and you don’t want to learn anything (6)

School was about having fun and not being bored. This explained why some students rebelled against teachers who they perceived as poor. They were not having fun; they were bored.

6.2.3.3 Freedom

There was another concept that students felt was important to understand: freedom. This is what was said:

You just get loads of freedom, that's what I think, we always complain that we don't get enough ... but we do get quite a lot (8)

when I was in my first year, I just didn't do anything for a whole year, just got into trouble and just did nothing and didn't pay attention in my lessons, so, I mean, you can do whatever, ever you want really, just, yeah, there's nothing stopping you (8)

Get to make teas and coffees and stuff, from like, the freedom again, just do stuff (9)

In these examples, freedom meant being able to do what they wanted to do, but also, *not* doing what they did *not* want to do. Students stressed however, that the degree of freedom that they experienced depended, to some extent, upon “what kind of mood the teachers are in” (8). As one student explained, “There's no like, set freedom” (8). This suggested that freedom was not a right or an underpinning value of the school. It was a gift that could be given, and indeed, taken away by teachers.

Interestingly, there was at no point any reference to rights, responsibilities, negotiation, power, and control – only freedom.

6.2.3.4 Financial constraints

The Small School struggled financially. It was not a fee paying school. It was financed by voluntary contributions from parents, from donations from charitable trusts, and from money raised through initiatives such as the Farmers Market. If the researcher had been in any doubt about the financial insecurity of the school, fifteen separate references by students confirmed this to be the case.

One student said:

I think, er, money is a thing that's changed ... in the school ... I mean we're getting progressively less money (10)

Other students agreed, and went on to explain why:

the reason is when you get grants, as a kind of, er pilot project, you need to invest it and they didn't get enough money to invest it and keep the school running, so people don't want to invest it an old project that's losing money, or is, you know, staying kind of the same, same pace. It's just really, there's nothing interesting (8)

There were many consequences for the students. One was very simple, in that "it's falling to pieces a bit" (10). Others were less obvious, and included this observation:

it's alright having small classes, but just having hardly any people here means there's no money, ever, and that means **it's so restricting on what you do** (8)

The latter part of this sentence seemed particularly significant. If having little money meant that students felt restricted in what they did, what impact did this have on their sense of freedom and on the quality of teaching and learning?

6.2.3.4.1 Impact on freedom

One of the ways that students influenced decision-making within The Small School was through the Student Council. This body consisted of the Head Teacher and three students who volunteered for the role. The students were aged 12, 14 and 15. The Council worked in the following way:

we have student council, which is where every Wednesday at breaktime, about half an hour, we er have a suggestions box, just there (coughs), and people who have written suggestions put them in, we er take it into, er, we just go and look at them and see if it's OK, and if it's good enough then we put it through to er, the, what's it, the ... trustees, yeah, the trustees group, and um, yeah (5)

Two of the three students on the Council described it as “boring”. One said that he was planning to give it up soon, as “I’d prefer to go out on a lunchtime” (5). The reason that was given for the Council being “boring” was that “the suggestions are slightly, or, they’re not very good” (5).

One example of a recent suggestion was given. The person describing the suggestion was one of the Council members:

They’re mostly stupid things like ‘get a motorbike, get a moped’ or stuff like that (4)

The response from two other students were “That’s good” (6) and “That’s part of engineering though” (7). At this point, the explanation was given:

We’ve haven’t got the money to get it (4)

The role of the Student Council was restricted as a result of having little money. They could not put forward suggestions on behalf of students because they knew that the school could not afford to carry them out. As a result, many students ceased to take the body seriously. On most weeks, the number of suggestions in the box would be “mostly none” (4), or they were silly suggestions or jokes.

Students therefore, were seen as having freedom, but little power. They could not make meaningful proposals to change things if these required money. They could make suggestions or requests to the Student Council, but these would only be viable if they had no cost implications.

This also had consequences for the control that students had over teaching and learning. Rather than having meaningful influence over the curriculum, students were restricted by the range and quality of teachers who were available to work at the school. As the school was unable to pay competitive salaries, they relied upon people who had a commitment to the school, such as parents. It goes without saying that having a commitment to the values of the school did not necessarily equate with being a skilful teacher.

During a discussion about how teachers were recruited, students acknowledged that there was often little choice. One used the phrase, albeit with a humorous tone, that

if they're desperate, they just pick the nearest tramp who has got some kind of qualification (8)

At a more serious point, this student explained that the Trustees and the Head Teacher were responsible for choosing teachers, and explained that:

I don't know, if there's, sometimes there's a lot of choice so it's quite difficult for them to choose the right one (8)

It seemed from the students' experiences, however, that often there was not a lot of choice. Teachers came to the school for short periods of time, which meant that there was a lack of continuity. This was in part because if students disliked the teachers, they behaved in such a way as to make them leave:

But it does come down to the teachers, whether we want to learn. If we don't like the teachers then we won't learn ... and they'll get kicked out (8)

Teachers also stayed for short periods of time for financial reasons. In essence, they could not afford to stay for long. Many teachers were parents of existing students, and at the point at which their child left the school, the teacher left too. As a consequence, turnover was high. This particular group of fifth years had already had seven Maths teachers, including having had a new one just weeks before their GCSEs were due to start.

An impact of having poor financial resources meant that students (and indeed teachers) had little control over the quality of teaching and learning. They had to accept what was available. They could not impose rigid standards or have high expectations. Students exercised the only real freedom that they had - the freedom to disengage, to mess about, or to behave in such a way as to get rid of a teacher. They had little freedom to exercise positive influence and control over decision-making, over their own learning or over the school itself.

6.2.3.5 How decisions were made

The most striking thing about hearing from students about the school's decision-making processes was the uncertainty. Some of them knew more than others, but most seemed unclear about processes. If asked a direct question about processes such as the Student Council, the recruitment of staff, or the ways of dealing with bullying, a frequent reaction was to turn to the Head for a nod of clarification. This suggested in itself that students were disconnected from many decisions that were made in the school.

The best example of this came towards the end of the first interview:

What happens if there's like, issues in the school like bullying or somebody's breaking the rules or whatever, how's that dealt with? (Researcher)

These were the answers:

Um (4)

Ask [name of Head] (7)

Never really been bullying (5)

Ask [name of Head] (6)

It depends, like, if someone's broken the rules, it depends whether it's actually a problem, so I mean like, if it's a little thing, it's like, 'alright, ok' (2)

It was possible that students' answers were uncertain because there had never been bullying or any issues with the breaking of rules. Given that some of these students had been at the school for four years, however, what seemed more likely was that issues were dealt with behind closed doors, away from students.

The very first comment made in the first interview provided the clearest position statement on decision-making at The Small School:

Um, it's more like a group, like we all have a say, in a way, like, obviously the teachers have the main say, but like, if anything comes up for discussion, then we all get to have a say on what we want, like, um the other day, we got chickens, and like, some people wanted to get rid of them, and some people wanted to keep them, so we had the whole circle, cos we have circle in the morning, and a circle, like in the afternoon, um, and we had the whole school to say, like, whether they wanted them or whether they didn't want them, and we decided we did, so it's not just what the teachers want, it's what the whole school wants, so that's like, the nice thing about this school, that everyone gets a say (7)

This paragraph put the involvement of students into perspective: "we all have a say ... obviously the teachers have the main say." Although students certainly were consulted, the balance of power was weighted towards teachers and trustees. There were three clear example of this in practice: the Student Council, circle time and the selection of themes for 'special weeks'.

The Student Council used the suggestions box to gather ideas from students. They met weekly to sift through these ideas, and "if it's good enough then we put it through to er, the, what's it, the [looks to Head for clarification] ... trustees" (5). The trustees, therefore, made the final decision. The role of the Student Council was to put forward suggestions, ideas that might have come from just one person rather than being discussed with the wider student body. During this process, there was no mechanism for gathering a collective voice from students. In addition, members of the Student Council volunteered for the role. The researcher was not aware of any attempt to make this body representative of all students.

There was one process which operated on a school-wide basis, and attempted to involve all students and teachers: circle time. The Small School had a "circle" at the start and end of each day. This was a place for anyone to raise issues, such as whether to keep chickens, as cited above. As issues raised could be discussed and a vote taken, this could be seen as a collective voice for students. The process was explained by one student:

everyone just kind of put their point of view, and um, when everyone put their point of view, then we had just a vote, and said 'who wants to keep them, put your hand up', 'who doesn't, put your hand up' (7)

In principle, circle time was the most democratic and egalitarian decision-making process in the school. It was also an opportunity to meet together as a community. In practice, however, students implied that circle time was dominated by teachers. As one explained:

Everyone joins, take the register, and normally, er, different teachers take on different things, so like, [Head] might read a poem, or read a bit out of newspaper or, whatever the teachers seen that week that they wanna do, and sometimes kids can do it, but I don't think, like, they've really thought about it in the morning, having just woken up and stuff ... it's just whatever the teacher fancies doing in the morning, they can talk about, it's not very long really, you get like 15 minutes so you can't really plan anything that brilliant (7)

Another student described circle time as "Extra sleep time" (4). These comments suggested that although students *could* use circle time as a way of raising issues, having discussions, voting, and even facilitating activities, most chose *not* to.

Special weeks took place three times a year and had mixed reviews. One student felt that they were one of the best things about being at the school. Others agreed that they were good, but felt that "they're getting worse and worse each year" (4). The main reason seemed to be the chosen theme. One student explained that the idea was that they would be something completely different, but that a recent special week had been about maths and science. This had been "rubbish" (4) because "It didn't really work, it was just like having a lesson for the whole week" (2). The question therefore was:

Who decides what the special week should be about?
(Researcher)

The response was this:

We had a suggestion thing, we had a poly pocket up there about a month ago, and everybody put in suggestions and then I think that the trustees, I don't know, [name], a trustee, someone, picked them out and sorted them out, about what was reasonable and what could be done and what would fit in to that week (7)

The same pattern had emerged. Students could make suggestions but the final decision was made by trustees, depending on "what was reasonable and what could be done and what would fit in to that week". The unasked and unanswered question was therefore: how was the decision made about what was reasonable?

In this context, it was worth noting that the vast majority of trustees were, or had at one time been, parents of the students. This was also the case for some teachers and for the Head Teacher. This presented interesting dilemmas concerning power and the possibilities of replicating traditional familial power imbalances. The students (or children) could make suggestions but the trustees and teachers (or parents) would make the final decision.

There was one decision, however, that was slightly different, and this concerned the recruiting of new members of staff. Although a similar mechanism was used, in that "the trustees ... and the headteacher" made the choice, new teachers were invited to come on a trial week. This trial week gave the students the opportunity to test them out. There was not a formal mechanism in place for canvassing students' opinion, but students were in no doubt that they had some degree of control. In short, "if they come here, and they can't teach us, then, then we just rip the piss out of them until they leave" (11). This level of influence extended far beyond the trial week. Through their behaviour, students knew that they could exert considerable influence over the effectiveness of lessons and the retention of teachers. In some ways, they had power to *dissent* if not to assent.

6.3. Summary and conclusions

Students' experiences of being at The Small School were heavily influenced by the perception of outsiders. They felt hated by the local community, for reasons of being different and misunderstood. They also felt that newcomers had an inaccurate and idealised image of "the perfect education".

Rather, students recognised two clear elements which contributed to the identity of The Small School. These were its small size, and its informal, youth club atmosphere. These were enhanced by three other elements: fun, friendship and freedom. There were also observations about the financial situation of the school and the ways in which a lack of money affected their school experiences. This was particularly apparent in terms of the impact on freedom and on the quality of teaching and learning.

Decision-making in the school was weighted towards teachers and trustees. Although students were consulted, the power to make a final decision was not with them. There were several ways in which students could have played a more active role in influencing the school, such as making suggestions to the Student Council, or using the circle time more productively, but it appeared that most chose not to do so. They used their power and their freedom to dissent rather than to assent.

Chapter 7

The Small School: Observational and Documentary Analysis

7.1 Process of Analysis

Data collected at The Small School were of a similar nature to that obtained at Sands School: 'field notes' written by the researcher whilst visiting the school and 'documentary evidence' collected during and after the visits. The quantity of data was not as extensive. This school had 23 students compared with 65 at Sands School, fewer members of staff and fewer classes.

The field notes were largely made in situ whilst the researcher observed lessons or meetings. The exception to this concerned an informal discussion held with a former teacher; this was arranged through the owner of the guesthouse at which the researcher stayed. This conversation was used as a way to check out hunches and served a useful purpose of triangulation. Given that this individual was no longer involved with the school, however, information was treated with caution and opinions expressed were not seen as representing those of the school.

Documentary information was taken from four main sources:

- The school timetable;
- The school website (Small School);
- A school information pack;
- A copy of SmallTalk, the school's newsletter (dated 1996).

The observational and documentary information was typed into a word processing format and imported into ATLAS-ti. Analysis took place in six stages:

1. Open coding using ATLAS-ti;
2. Merging and deleting codes;
3. Statistical analysis of codes;
4. Micro analysis of individual codes / re-examination of content of codes;
5. Diagrammatic mapping of relationship between codes;
6. Writing up.

These processes were virtually identical to those described in Chapter 5 and so will not be repeated here. There were a total of 73 codes: 51 of these were new. These included 'attitude of teacher', 'demographic', 'Human Scale Education', 'local / rural setting' and 'overseas connections'. A full list of codes is attached as Appendix F.

During statistical analysis, the codes were put in order of frequency. The average was 3 occurrences per code. The top 11 codes, all of which had more than 5 occurrences, are shown in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 The Small School - Codes with highest frequency (observational and documentary analysis)

Code	Observational data	Documentary data	Total
Curriculum design	5	7	12
Relationships between teachers & students	11	0	11
Teaching style	10	1	11
Attitude to learning	10	0	10
Local/rural setting	1	9	10
Behaviour of students in class	9	0	9
Finances / uncertainty in funding	4	4	8
Attitude of teacher	7	0	7
Parental involvement	1	5	6
Small	2	4	6

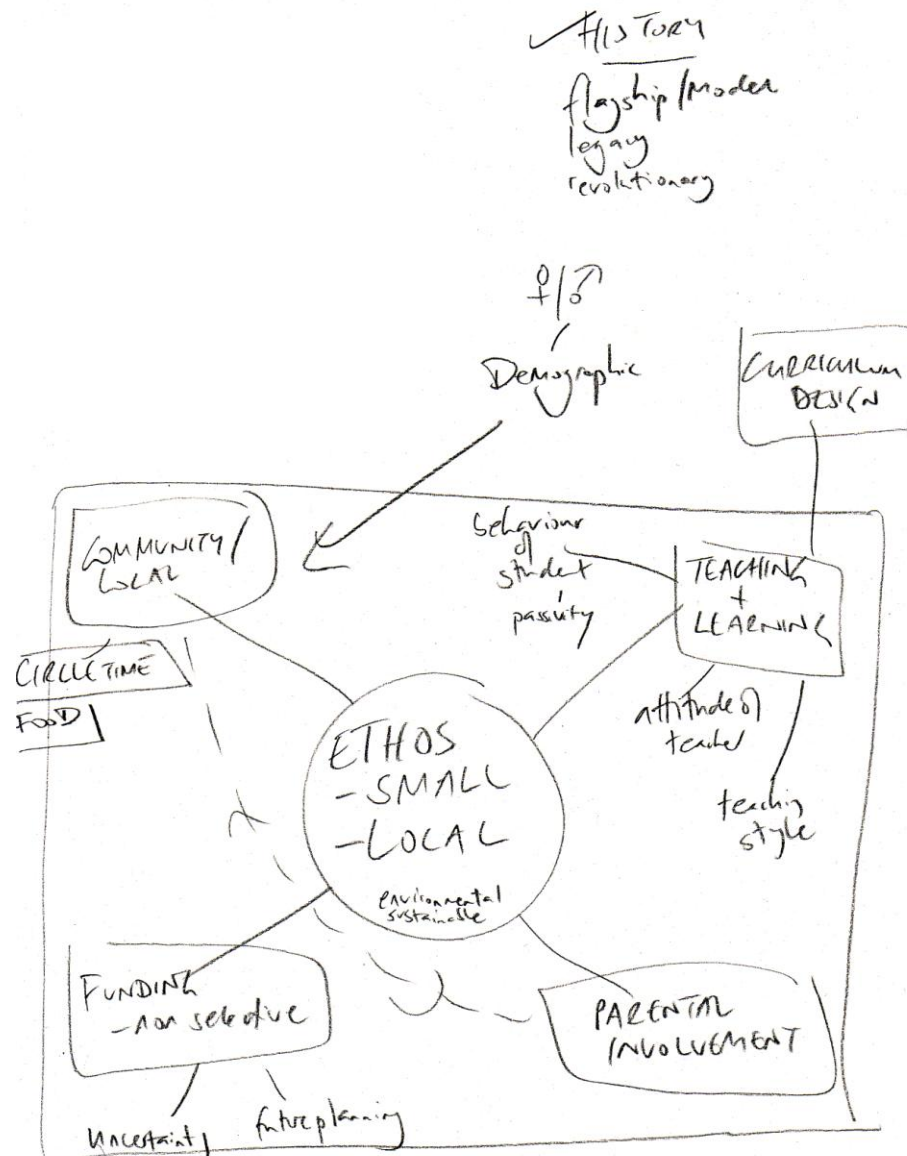
Democracy	5	0	5
Ethos	1	4	5
Passivity	5	0	5

It was interesting to compare this highest frequency code list with the one generated after the student interviews. There were only 3 codes which appeared on both lists: Small size; Money (Finances); Relationships with Teachers⁸. This reflected the high proportion of new codes which were used for this stage of analysis. This could have been taken to indicate that the student experience was at odds to what was observed and documented – but this was not necessarily the case. Further exploration of data was needed before drawing conclusions.

Possible relationships between codes were plotted. One of these was illustrated as Fig 7.1. This particular diagram attempted to ascertain the connection between the ethos of the school and its teaching practices. This was explored in depth.

⁸ The code names were slightly different, but in essence they were the same

Fig 7.1 Relationships between codes (observational and documentary analysis – The Small School)



7.2 Information from observational and documentary sources

7.2.1 *Overview*

The Small School was unique. Having been established over 25 years ago, it claimed to be a flagship for the Human Scale Education movement and a model for others to follow. The students had described a divide between external perceptions of The Small School and their own experiences of it. As one student had explained, “I’m not saying it’s bad but it’s not everything that it’s made out to be”. The researcher wanted to explore this differential.

Observational and documentary data suggested that the school had changed since its inception. There was a difference between what the school originally aspired to do and what it managed to do in practice. Although in essence the school’s ethos had not changed, two key explanations were found for the discrepancy between ethos and practice. First, **financial instability**, and second, **a lack of clarity regarding teaching and learning**. Given that the organisational culture was formed by the people who were involved in the school – trustees, teachers, parents and students - **high turnover** led to an **inconsistency for students**.

Students had strong affiliations with one another, but their connections to the school as a whole were weaker. They enjoyed the **informality** and the **freedom**, but many used this freedom to **dissent** rather than to invest in the future development of the school.

7.2.2 *Historical Development*

In 1982, some parents in Hartland shared concerns about the education of their secondary age children. Having been educated in the village, children were expected to travel long distances on public transport to attend secondary school.

Parents were anxious about this and devised their own solution - The Small School was born. Their motto was "Better to light a candle than curse the darkness" which, as the information pack explained, was an indication that parents wanted "to act rather than to criticize the education system." The Small School was the first of its kind in the country and was highly unusual. Indeed, according to the school website:

The Small School was, and still is, a revolutionary project.

There were two separate parts to this assertion – first, that The Small School was revolutionary, and second, that it *still is*. This distinction was fundamental as it linked to a key issue raised in group interviews with students, namely that

[there is an] impression that it's still how it was 20 years ago, and it's just not at all

This comment raised a key question: how did students know whether the school had changed as they were not there at the beginning? They clearly had their own idea of what The Small School had been like, based on what they had heard or read. Nonetheless, whether this was accurate or not, the fact remained that they *felt* that the school had changed. This in itself affected their experience.

In assessing whether The Small School was and / or is revolutionary, it was important to pay some attention to the development of the school. This issue will be addressed throughout the chapter. There were two main questions. First, did the ethos, values and aims of The Small School suggest that it was revolutionary when it was first established, and second, could it still be described in this way after more than 25 years?

A definition of the adjective "revolutionary" was provided by The Oxford Dictionary:

1. involving or causing dramatic change or innovation
 2. engaged in, promoting, or relating to political revolution
- (Pearsall, 1999:1226)

At the time of its inception, the school appeared to be ground-breaking. It did not model itself on any other. It was created by local people to meet what they perceived as a local need. As the website explained:

It began in 1982 in response to a few local families' wish for their secondary-aged children to be educated in their own community.

The Small School became well-known locally and nationally. The school's own materials described it as a "flagship", "a model for teachers" and "an example for others to follow". This was backed up:

The school grew in numbers from the original nine children and began to attract more and more attention. We received enquiries and visits from parents in the community and from further afield, from the media, from environmentalists, from teachers and others working in education in this country, and from as far away as the United States, Japan and India.

This interest led to the foundation of Human Scale Education ... The Small School thus became the flagship for Human Scale Education, and a working model for a fresh initiative within state education.

A review of the dictionary definition suggested that The Small School was indeed "revolutionary" when it was first established. It was instrumental in causing dramatic change to the local community's options for education. It caused change or innovation to occur elsewhere through having a high profile and attracting local, national and international interest. Through working collectively with other small schools in the formation of Human Scale Education, it aspired to promote political change in the education system, and particularly in the area of state funding for alternative provision.

The question of whether The Small School was *still* revolutionary was more contentious. Students felt that it had changed since its inception and that it was no longer "the perfect education". Part of their rationale for this was:

it changes depending on who, who the teachers are and who the students are

They also argued that “money is a thing that’s changed” and gave many examples of how this affected their school experiences. They did not, however, give any indication that the ethos or the values of the school had fundamentally altered. It seemed important, therefore, to explore this in detail and through this, to identify factors that *had* changed.

7.2.3 *Ethos*

Satish Kumar, one of the founders of The Small School was quoted on the website:

The only thing we had in mind was that it will be a local school and a small school.

The two elements of *small* and *local* were clearly fundamental to the founders of The Small School. There was considerable evidence to suggest that these were still crucial to the school. They will be explored separately.

The size of the school was so important that it became enshrined within the name; The *Small* School. The information pack emphasised this: “What are we offering in terms of real choice? Our obvious difference is our scale.” The website stated:

We are small enough for all children to know each other, for all teachers to know all the students, and for parents to know all the teachers.

The issue of size came to the fore during negotiations with the Government about the feasibility of receiving state funding for independent schools. This was outlined in a copy of SmallTalk in 1996:

We are discussing the maximum size for a “Small School”, the implications of implementing the full national curriculum, the additional facilities and buildings demanded by a larger curriculum and more pupils. One thing is clear. While the school would benefit greatly from the financial security of Grant Maintained status, there are limits to the compromise which the staff and the community can accept. A change too

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far could sacrifice the very values and approach which are the heart of the Small School.

The last sentence of this paragraph was powerfully worded with “sacrifice”, “values and approach” and “heart of the Small School”. These phrases indicated that the size of the school and the flexibility over curriculum were at the core of the school. They would not be changed easily. As it transpired, The Small School and others from the independent sector were unsuccessful in their negotiations regarding state funding. Decisions about size, therefore, remained within the jurisdiction of the school community, and it has remained a very small school. This was not to suggest that it could not get any bigger at all, but there seemed to be a consensus that “*small is beautiful*” (Schumacher, 1993).

The concept of being local also remained important. This was emphasised on the website under “Frequently Asked Questions”:

Q What is your catchment area?
A As local as possible: Hartland and nearby villages.

The school was eager to stress that it was involved with the local community. The information pack said:

We shop locally (in Hartland) whenever possible; we employ local people as teachers, local artists and administrative staff (up to 15 posts including part time). We keep the teenagers as part of day-time life in the village. We organize many local events such as a poetry day.

It was clear that a great deal of energy was invested in the local community. The concept of being local was also put into a context of understanding the wider world. The website said:

We want to be firmly based in the community of Hartland, and be able to respond to this special place, but we also offer opportunities for students to travel beyond the village for cultural experiences.

The basis for this emphasis was not explained, but a reasonable assumption might be that the school was trying to challenge any ideas that being “local” equated with being parochial or inward-looking. Materials produced in the school’s information pack reinforced this, using the phrase “We are very local but still open to the wider world.”

Being a “local” school presented dilemmas. In 1982, the school was started by people who lived in Hartland. They wanted a school to be firmly located within the village in which they lived. Once The Small School became established, however, it became of interest to people who lived outside the village, some of whom were prepared to move to Hartland in order to meet the criteria of being “local.” According to the former teacher, this was part of the reason why The Small School had a difficult relationship with the local community. The people who moved were not typical of the local population - they were “artists” and “hippies” who did not easily integrate into village life. This discussion reinforced what had been said by students in terms of the school having a strained relationship with the local community. Moreover, the reason for this was because families had to live locally to be eligible to attend the school – this tension was the polar opposite of what the school’s founders had intended. They wanted to provide a local school that would strengthen the community, not divide it.

One consideration with being local was the demographic of the population. Two staff members informed the researcher that Hartland was located in an economically poor area. In fact, one person stated that it was “one of the poorest areas of the country” as it relied so heavily on seasonal tourism. This was one of the reasons why the school was adamant that it would remain non-fee paying so that it did not exclude anyone on the grounds of income. This linked to another key issue. The entry criterion for attending The Small School was to live locally. There were no other obvious methods of selection. In short, this school had a deliberate policy of being comprehensive or non-selective. This phrase was mentioned only once in the materials studied, but the message was clear:

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The school is **comprehensive**; it offers a **non-selective** education with a balanced curriculum that ensures that students have a range of options open to them at the next educational level. We want there to be diversity and choice in rural as well as urban areas. Choice should not be based on ability to pay or location.

In theory, this meant that the school had an open door to all secondary-age children living in the area. They would not select on the basis of gender, race, family background, financial circumstances or academic ability. The process in practice was outlined on the website:

Q How will I know if it is the right school for my child?
A All prospective students and their parents are welcome to visit the school after making an arrangement with the Head Teacher. Your child will have the opportunity to spend a prospective day and a prospective week here to gain a sense of how the school works and whether or not it suits them, and for the school to decide if it can offer them a place. The most important decision rests with the student: they must decide for themselves if they want to come to the school.

This passage was worth exploring in more depth, particularly the sentence “for the school to decide if it can offer them a place.” This suggested that the principle of being non-selective had some limitations, although it was not apparent what these were. Why might the school decide it could not offer a prospective student a place? Was it due to their behaviour, learning needs, attitude, way of relating to other students – or was it purely down to the numbers of students in each class and whether there was a space? The researcher was unsure of the answers to these questions, but nonetheless was clear that the decision would not be on the basis of ability to pay, personal circumstances or family background.

Another point was that “The most important decision rests with the student: they must decide for themselves if they want to come to the school”. This signified that the school was committed to ensuring that students actively wanted to attend. They did not want students to be there under duress. It did not suggest, however, that the decision was *solely* for the student.

Parents also had a decision to make. They had to be amenable to sending their child to The Small School because, unlike many schools, there was an explicit expectation that parents would be involved. This was not optional - it was part of the agreement to allow a child to enrol. This was explained on the website:

We are a small charity school, and we ask parents to make a contribution of both time and money. **We have the expectation that parents will understand that they are joining a parent group** in which they must play a full part in meetings, fundraising events and maintenance. In return, we offer you the opportunity to be more involved in your child's education.

The reasons for wanting parental involvement were twofold. The first of these was undoubtedly financial. Although the school did not charge a fee, parents were encouraged to make a significant voluntary financial contribution to the school. In addition, parents were asked to organise fundraising events. They also volunteered their time to the school, in the form of helping with cooking, cleaning, maintenance, administrative work or teaching. On average, parents were expected to volunteer for half a day every week. These tasks were all essential to the school and helped keep direct costs as low as possible.

The second reason was connected to the values of the school. The phrase "In return, we offer you the opportunity to be more involved" pointed towards an underlying assumption that parents would *want* to take an active part in their child's education. This message was also given by the Head Teacher during the researcher's initial visit to the school. The researcher asked what would happen if a parent did not want to be active within the school. The response, said almost incredulously, was "why wouldn't they be?" The researcher felt that there were many reasons why a parent might not want to be involved; these might have been practical such as shortage of time or lack of skills, but they could have also been philosophical, in terms of making a choice to support a young person to develop autonomy and independence. Nonetheless, if a student wanted to go to The Small School, parental involvement was part of the arrangement. In some

ways, the school might be viewed as a “parent group” or “home education network” which collectively organised education for the children.

The researcher made one observation that connected the non-selection policy to the stance on parental involvement. The school was committed to allowing any local child to attend the school. They also expected parents to be heavily involved with the running of the school. By inference, therefore, there was a non-selection policy when it came to parents as well as students. When the school first started, parents had *shared* values about what they wanted in a school. Would this necessarily be the case twenty five years later? If parents had different perspectives on education, these might have explained some of the changes that students had alluded to. These will be explored later.

7.2.4 *Teaching and Learning*

The curriculum of The Small School was designed to address the holistic needs of students. The website said:

Our aim is to achieve a balance between the academic, the practical, the artistic, and the spiritual.

This aspiration challenged the conventional education system with its National Curriculum and emphasis on GCSE results. The Small School saw students as whole individuals with a range of learning needs. The founders wanted to create a school which catered for all these aspects.

The school constructed a timetable to organise the learning programme. Structured lessons in mornings focussed on academic subjects. The afternoons were for workshop options which included practical and artistic subjects. Practical aspects of cooking and cleaning were also learnt through being part of the school community and being on the rota. The twice-daily circle time was used for all of these four areas as activities could be facilitated by staff or students. Several times a year, “special weeks” replaced the normal timetable and offered the

opportunity for integrated learning in mixed age groups. In theory therefore, The Small School curriculum was different from most other schools in terms of aims and structure. It could be termed “revolutionary” in the way that it addressed holistic learning needs. In the opinion of the researcher, however, there were constraints upon the curriculum which restricted the school’s claim to be revolutionary.

According to the information pack, this was how the school operated:

We have a timetable that is developed by the teachers with some input from the students at the beginning of each academic year. On the whole the mornings are for academic work and the afternoons for the Arts, practical subjects and physical activities. Classes are at set times and all students must attend. Each student has a copy of his/her timetable.

This statement contained two points that were worth exploring. First “We have a timetable that is developed by the teachers with some input from the students ...” and second, “Classes are at set times and all students must attend”. The first point suggested that students had input into the timetable. This was a clear statement of intent. The school *wanted* to involve students in the development of the timetable. In practice, however, even teachers had little control over the timetable given that they were so dependent upon who was available and what they were willing to teach. The best example of this came during a conversation with one teacher. This individual was one of three part-time Maths teachers, all of whom started at the school in the previous couple of months. The class did not take place at the time that was prescribed on the timetable; this had changed due to the availability of staff. The students in the class observed were fourth years who were working on the GCSE curriculum. GCSE Maths was a compulsory subject. This particular teacher wanted the subject to be optional and hoped this might change when a new Head Teacher started in a few weeks time. This suggested that curriculum and timetables were prone to change depending on who was involved. Teachers had little control, and students had even less. This strongly echoed what the students had said.

The second point was that “Classes are at set times and all students must attend”. The Small School was clear that lessons were not optional. Given the limited number of GCSE options, most students followed the same timetable. Real choice was thus limited. The school indicated, however, that the afternoons involved a range of choices. This list was in the information pack:

Creative Writing, Circus Skills, Woodwork, Climbing,
Photography, Gardening, Games, Yoga, Music, Pottery, Sketch
Book, Debating

During the research visit, choices were limited. On one day, students chose from a craft session, a music group if they were in the school band, or there was a GCSE exam. If a student was neither in the band nor doing the exam, they had only one choice. On another afternoon, it was cross-country running, and this was compulsory for all students; again, no choice.

This lack of choice extended to the content of the main timetable. The school aimed to meet “the academic, the practical, the artistic, and the spiritual”. In the opinion of the researcher, there was little doubt that the curriculum was heavily weighted towards the academic and the artistic. Opportunities for practical learning seemed restricted to involvement in cooking and cleaning. There was little evidence of involvement with gardening or maintenance work. Students had alluded to a keen interest in “motorbikes” but this had been disregarded as a result of cost. Spiritual aspects might have been best met at circle time, but the examples of these that were observed by the researcher seemed to be no more than an opportunity to take the register. They were very short, and the only additional activities were the reading out of a letter from an ex-teacher (accompanied by the rolling of eyes by students), and a stern warning from a teacher to stop dropping litter in the village. There was no yoga, meditation or any other activity that could be perceived as spiritual.

Meeting holistic needs of students could also be interpreted as developing wider life skills, such as supporting students in learning to learn, taking responsibility for

themselves and building confidence. The researcher observed several instances which suggested that this did not happen in a consistent way. An informal conversation with one fifth year student revealed that he did not know what time lessons started or ended, or what time the lunchbreak was, despite the fact that he had been at the school for three years. In order to be in the right place at the right time, he just “followed everyone else”. When observing a GCSE preparation class, the researcher noticed that students did not have books with them, and none were writing notes. Their exam was in a fortnight, yet they did not know when it was or how long it would last. The teacher was insistent that they needed to revise but they did not seem interested in doing so. They said it was “boring”. In another class, students were reluctant to get off their seats to get equipment. They only worked on the prescribed task if the teacher passed them materials. Students seemed to lack motivation and interest. These examples all reinforced the impression given by the students during the group interviews. They felt that they had freedom, but this freedom was used in terms of choosing *not* to participate, to dissent. It was not linked with being free to learn or to take responsibility for themselves.

If the students had limited choice or control over the curriculum and the timetable, did they have any more influence over individual lessons? The researcher’s observations suggested that this varied depending on the lesson, the teacher, and the teaching style. Lessons were extremely different from each other. There was not one standardised approach to teaching and learning. Three particular classes illustrated the variation. The first was very informal and involved students wandering around and participating in the task to a greater or lesser degree. Some students came late or left early. The role of the teacher was that of informal facilitator who encouraged and supported students but did not direct the lesson in any way. This class had an atmosphere of a youthwork session. The second was still informal but much more organised. This class involved students working at their own pace on a particular piece of work, supported on a one-to-one basis by the teacher. The teacher had an overview of what each student was doing. If an individual finished the task they were doing, they were given another one. This

session had an atmosphere of an adult education class. The third lesson involved the teacher stood by the whiteboard, directing the class from the front of the room. The teaching style was mainly question and answer, with students responding to the instructions of the teacher. The students seemed engaged in the lesson, yet this class felt formal, and not dissimilar to a conventional classroom.

The researcher also observed a range of attitudes from teachers. According to field notes, one was "softly spoken and gentle" and another was "calm, patient, responds to all questions." In contrast, one was considerably less warm towards students, as this interaction indicated:

Teacher	"Where are you going?"
Student	"To get a drink of water"
Teacher	"Did you come and ask me?"
Student	"No"
Teacher	"Well, I'm your teacher, and no, you can't have a drink of water as you didn't ask"

In this case, the student returned to their seat. In this classroom at least, there was not a culture of questioning the teacher or answering back. This surprised the researcher as an assumption had been made that the school operated on principles of equality, respect and personal responsibility.

Students did exert some level of control over the atmosphere of classrooms. They were observed being far more focused and engaged in some classes than in others. These notes illustrated the contrasting atmospheres in two classrooms:

Class 1
Sat round one table
All have folders
Going through key points
Asking questions and checking out rememberings
Students seem quite engaged
Are remembering info / looking through notes

Class 2
Pretty disengaged but do participate
Lots of throwing paper around
One young man playing guitar
Teacher not really heard above the noise

These observations led the researcher to question why students were demotivated and disengaged in some settings. Was it connected to the teaching style, their feelings about that particular teacher or the subject matter? A comparison between observation notes and interview transcripts was useful in addressing these questions. Students had distinguished between good and bad teachers – between those who “can teach us” and those that “can’t teach us”. With the exception of one teacher who was identified as being particularly good because of her spontaneity, enthusiasm, and knowledge about the subject, students gave little indication of how they measured a “good teacher”. From the classes observed, which, if any, counted as “good”? Students suggested that “personality” was a key factor – but what sort of personality? With anonymity in mind, particular individuals and their subjects will not be identified, but it was noted that teachers who students had named as “good” did not all use the same teaching style. There was no clear-cut connection between “good teachers” and teaching style. One teaching style was not necessarily better or worse than another; it was the “personality” of the teacher that made the difference. This was taken as more than whether students *liked* a teacher. It meant something about whether the teacher was able to *engage with* students.

In some ways, the lessons observed at The Small School were not unusual or revolutionary. One thing that was different, nonetheless, was the size of classes. Although the school materials suggested that “Our class sizes range from 6 to 15”, most classes observed by the researcher were smaller than this, ranging from 3 to 6 students. This had an impact upon the nature of relationships that teachers were able to have with students. Teachers knew all students well and had time to pay considerable attention to individual needs and learning styles.

Another difference was freedom for teachers. According to the former teacher, one of the positive things about working at the school was “being trusted from Day 1” and “having the freedom to do more or less anything.” In this case, the individual cited this as positive, but they acknowledged that it could also be

negative. If teachers experienced complete freedom, what was the connection between this and the school's aim to provide a high quality education? If there was no monitoring of poor teachers, could this explain why the students felt that they could "rip the piss out of them until they leave"? Was this the only way that the school measured the effectiveness of teachers? It seemed as if this was the case. The school did not appear to have a formal system for assessing quality and students did not have a clear process for giving feedback.

To conclude this section, it was worth returning to comments from the founders of the school:

The only thing we had in mind was that it will be a local school and a small school.

If "the only thing" that the founders had in mind were about being local and small, what did this suggest about the approach to teaching and learning? A school could be small, local *and* religious, atheist, democratic, rigid or flexible. It could use traditional didactic teaching methods or less conventional facilitative ones. When The Small School was established, was there a clear philosophy about how teaching and learning should take place? The researcher felt this was a key issue for The Small School, and might offer an explanation as to why, according to the students, it had changed. Approaches to teaching and learning were not shared. One teacher perceived the school as a "home education network". Another argued that the circle time was the most important part of the day and should take priority over lessons; they were disappointed that at times it felt like "assembly". One teacher alluded to feeling that students were lazy and should be pushed to take classes more seriously. In combination, these contrasting attitudes suggested that The Small School did not have one ethos, but a range of values and attitudes depending on who was involved. The principles of being "small" and "local" remained strong, but beyond that, there was considerable variance about the purpose of the school. The school did not have a principled stance about teaching and learning. This issue was exacerbated by the high turnover of parents, teachers and trustees as attitudes changed from year to year, or even term to term. This

affected not only the quality of the learning experience for students, but also the credibility of the claim that this school was a model, a flagship, or revolutionary.

7.2.5 *Parental Involvement*

Embedded in the ethos of The Small School was a commitment to involving parents. They took part in fundraising, cleaning, cooking, gardening, administrative work and teaching. This was an essential element to the ethos of The Small School, and resulted from underlying values as well as financial necessity. Involving parents to this extent was highly unusual for a secondary school, even in the independent sector, and could be seen as adding to The Small School's reputation as a model for others to follow.

It was interesting to note, therefore, that during group interviews with students, they made no specific mention of parental involvement. It was as if they took it completely for granted; it was a non-issue for them. The role of parents was mentioned only twice: once, when a student said that "my dad" grew the vegetables, and once, when another student mentioned that her parent was a trustee. The researcher learnt at a later date that at least two parents of the students interviewed were teachers. It also transpired that the Head Teacher was the parent of one of the students in the group interview. The researcher was intrigued by the absence of conversation about parental involvement, and struggled to believe that it did not affect students' experiences of being at school - for better or worse. For example, the researcher noticed that students behaved differently when a teacher was also their own parent. One student in particular was more defensive and less open to interaction with their own parent than with other teachers.

The emphasis on parental involvement also had another implication. Parents had to be involved whilst their child attended The Small School and most ceased their involvement when their child left the school. Some parents, however, continued to dedicate time and energy to the school, if in the words of one student "you're

determined to keep it going". This led to a researcher hunch about attachment and belonging. Was it possible that some parents felt more attached to the school than students? Did *parents* feel a sense of belonging? What impact did this have upon students' attachment to the school? The specific issue of parental involvement was not studied in isolation, and therefore the extent of analysis limited. The researcher was not able to talk with parents about their experiences of the school unless they were also teachers. No conclusions could therefore be drawn about the impact of parental involvement upon parents themselves, but it was highlighted as a potential area of future research.

Having a high amount of parental involvement had been important to The Small School since its inception. There was no indication that this particular aspect had changed over time. What had changed, however, was the unity in approach amongst parents. Those who first established the school had overlapping values; those who joined at a later date were potentially more divergent. This issue might have been overcome if the school had a clearer stance to all aspects of its work, including teaching and learning. Parents would have then been aware of what they were 'signing up for'. As it was, some elements of the school were dependent upon who was involved, and thus appeared flexible and negotiable. This contributed towards the inconsistency that students had experienced.

7.2.6 *Finances and Funding*

When The Small School was established, its founders wanted it to be part of the state sector. This was explained in the information pack:

The Small School at Hartland has always wished to be part of the state sector, to work with, change and be changed by other secondary schools, part of diversity and choice in the education system.

By inference, this meant that the school hoped to receive state funding. In the past, they worked hard, along with other small independent schools such as the

Quakers, to convince the Government to give them sustainable funding. The difference between The Small School and other independent schools in the partnership was that the former had a clear policy of not charging fees. As a consequence, its avenues for potential funding were more limited. It used innovative ways of fundraising, such as a 'Guardians' scheme. It raised funds from charitable trusts, and from organising fundraising events such as catering for the annual Schumacher Lectures and Triodos Bank Conferences.

The school was sustained through the combined efforts of fundraising and voluntary donations. This was not enough. The school struggled to raise enough money to keep going. One consequence of this was that "teachers accept a very small salary". Another was that "Some parents also undertake administrative tasks or offer part-time teaching." The school's only full-time member of staff, the Head Teacher, earned about £12,000, of which £1000 was donated back to the school as she was the parent of one student. It was obvious that a salary of £11,000 for a full-time teacher, let alone a Head Teacher, was uncompetitive. It was unlikely to attract any individual who did not have a personal investment in the school.

The shortage of funding affected long-term sustainability. By relying on part-time volunteer teachers, the school was not certain which GCSE subjects they could offer in the future. The researcher observed Classics students who were not sure whether they would have a teacher for the following year. The curriculum changed frequently: a comparison between the information pack and the website revealed that in a one-year period the number of GCSE subjects had decreased from 13 to 9. Given that GCSEs took two years to complete, the researcher assumed that students had been forced to change subjects mid-way through their studies.

According to the former teacher, one of the consequences of this instability was that students became disengaged from school processes. She argued:

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How much control can students have if there is no stability of funding? Why would they invest in processes if they don't know that the school will exist?

These arguments offered an explanation for some of the comments that students had made. They had explained that they experienced “freedom” and yet in practice seemed to express this by “messing about”. They lost interest in the Student Council and the Suggestions Box. They looked forward to leaving school as it was “falling apart”. They did not seem to have an investment in processes, or indeed in the long-term future of the school. They lacked any sense of control.

Teachers themselves also had limited control. Without assurances of funding, existence was hand-to-mouth. The curriculum was limited because there was a shortage of available teachers and the teaching rooms had a scarcity of resources such as reference books and computers. In this environment, good teaching relied on the creativity and flexibility of teachers, and yet there was a limit to the number of skilled people who were available to work in the school. Teachers could be seen as being in control and yet having no control at all. Quality was affected.

The students themselves suggested that the school changed “depending on who, who the teachers are and who the students are”. This was reinforced by the former teacher who argued that the school was very reliant on who was willing to be involved, particularly the Head Teacher. Given that The Small School had a high turnover of teachers with for example, as many as seven maths teachers in five years, this presented interesting questions regarding the culture of the school. The shortage of funding meant that teachers were paid low salaries, or were volunteers, and as such, were unlikely to stay for a long time. The culture of the school, although clear at its inception, could conceivably have changed as frequently as the staff team had. Secure funding would have made it easier to maintain a strong culture and a coherent set of values. The school could have taken a principled position on teaching and learning, and it could have recruited, inducted and monitored its staff to ensure that they were working in a

consistent way. This would have offered stability for students. They might have felt able to invest more in the structures and processes as they would have felt more certain that the school would be there until they finished their education.

The researcher concluded that the uncertainty over long-term funding made a tremendous difference to The Small School. It turned a revolutionary project which struggled to change the education system into one which struggled for survival. The impact of the uncertain financial situation upon students was immeasurable.

7.3 Summary and conclusions

The Small School was started in 1982 and was the first of its kind. It was, as the website claimed, “revolutionary” in that it challenged many assumptions about secondary education. It was an alternative to mainstream education system, providing a small and local choice for parents and children living in Hartland. The more controversial statement, however, was that it was “still” revolutionary.

The ethos and values of The Small School had not changed since its inception. It could in some ways, therefore, still be described as revolutionary. The predicament with The Small School, however, was not about ethos or values - it was its ability to translate these values into practice, given the context in which they operated. Financial constraints in particular presented considerable limitations to the freedom of trustees, teachers and students to run the school in the way that they might have chosen. They were restricted in their choice over teaching staff, resources and facilities, which in turn, influenced their ability to meet a range of needs and demands. The unreliability of funding was a key factor which affected the “flagship” nature of the school.

There were also issues with the philosophy of teaching and learning. In short, the school was dedicated to being small and local, but was less clear about what it believed about education. As a consequence, the school changed depending on

who was involved. The style of teachers varied enormously, and the quality of relationships that they had with students were different. The school did not have a defined ethos or philosophy in this regard, and new teachers were not clearly guided or monitored. The result for the students was that the quality of their learning experience depended upon the relationships they developed with individual teachers, or, in their own words, the “personalities” of these people.

When it was first established, The Small School was revolutionary, a flagship and a model for others to follow. Having spent time in the school, observed lessons and spoken to staff and students, however, the researcher felt that the constraints placed upon it by funding seriously undermined this claim. In order to be considered revolutionary, staff and students needed more freedom to experiment, to take risks and to challenge the norm. The school also needed a clearer sense of its own ethos in relation to teaching and learning.

Chapter 8

Generation of Theory

8.1 Introduction: Theory Generation within Grounded Theory

The previous four chapters have outlined and explored data. These have provided description and preliminary analysis. Methods used during these processes have been explained, and substantial extracts from data have been included as part of the text. The next stage was to compare data from the two schools - to take it apart and to re-assemble it to form a coherent picture. The aim was to generate theory.

When Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory, they explicitly sought the “*discovery of theory from data*” (1967:1). It was integral to grounded theory that researchers were led by data rather than by preconceived hypotheses. Where grounded theorists were less clear, however, was about the precise ways in which data would lead to new theory. Positivists (such as Glaser) argued that the process of theoretical sensitivity was enough to ensure that theory would naturally *emerge* from data. Conversely, constructivists argued that theory was *generated*. This research project was underpinned by the constructivist perspective, and as such, worked on the principle that theory would be generated through the researcher engaging in a number of rigorous processes. These included constant comparison, theoretical sensitivity (linked to researcher reflexivity), open coding and memo writing.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that this chapter naturally followed on from the previous ones. The process was not linear. Key elements of the student experience became apparent through data analysis, such as the importance of

belonging, the strength of relationships between students and teachers, the self-awareness of students, the balance between getting GCSEs and having fun – but what were the *connections* between these? Was it possible to offer a theoretical framework which made sense? The researcher engaged in a process which lasted several weeks. This was made more difficult by the fact that the explanation had to fit the data from *both* schools and from *all* students. The researcher created many rough diagrams. Key elements were joined together in a variety of ways. The researcher kept returning to student vignettes and to data in order to try and ensure that the ideas were directly linked. If a component of the new theory did not seem to fit, it entailed going back to the drawing board and starting again.

The theory that has been presented in this chapter has been a direct result of these processes. It starts with a brief summary of the overall theory, followed by a detailed explanation of all the components. A diagram of a new theoretical model is included.

8.2 Summary

Student interviews yielded responses to questions about how students felt about their schools, their highs and lows and their ideas about the purpose of schooling. Observations and documentary analysis provided information which offered insight into the school environments.

There was strong evidence to suggest that the way that students *felt* about themselves and their schools made a significant contribution to the experience of being at school. This was not just in terms of their levels of satisfaction or enjoyment of the school experience, but also crucially, on their ability to engage constructively and meaningfully in learning. This was summarised by the researcher in the following way:

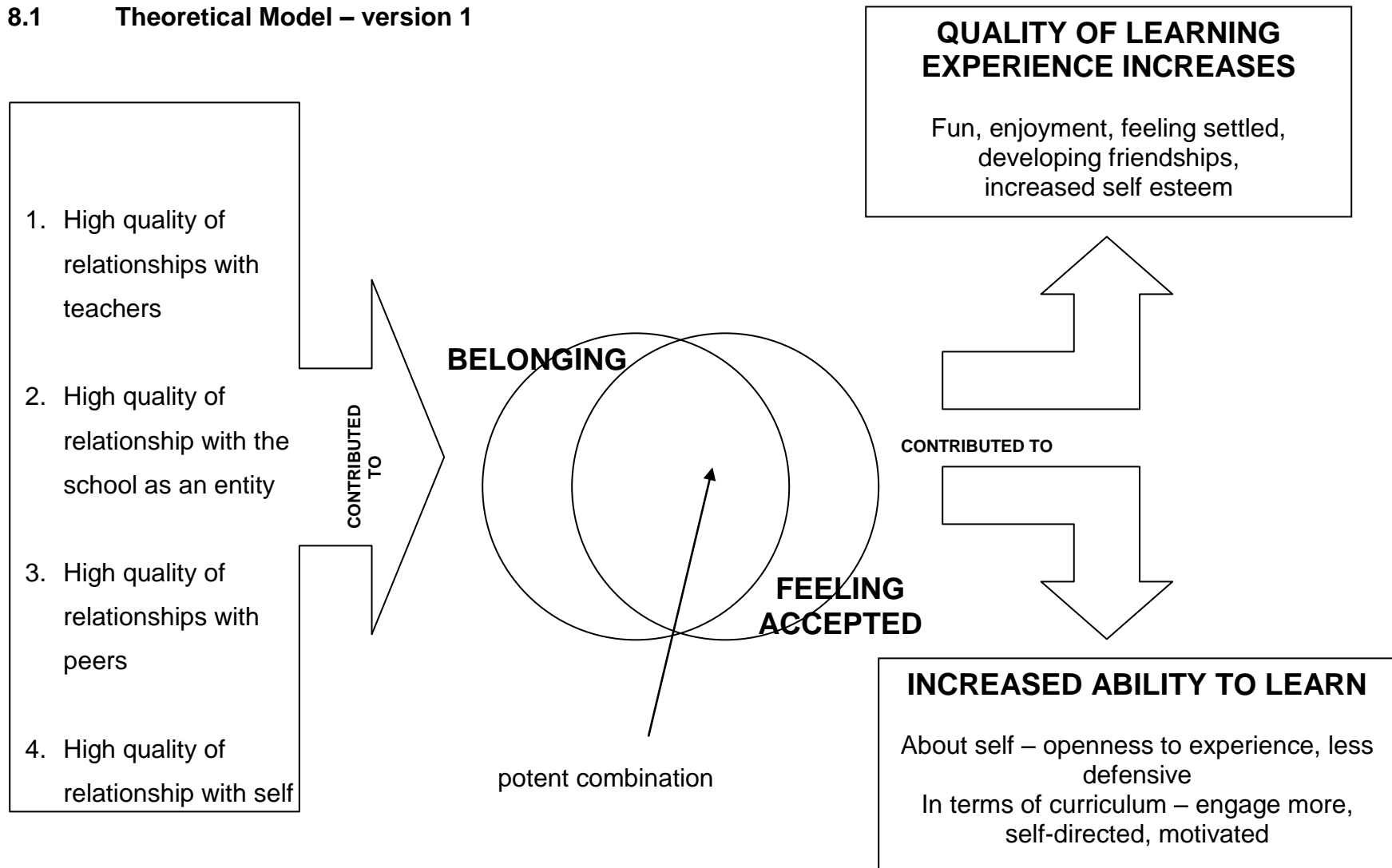
The issues of **feeling accepted as an individual** and feeling **a sense of belonging to the community / organisation** were fundamental – in terms of **the quality of students' experience** and also their **ability to engage and learn**

Data offered considerable insight into what 'belonging' and 'feeling accepted' looked like. They appeared to be pivotal issues, key factors which made the essential difference as to how students experienced their education and how they engaged in learning. It was crucial therefore, to offer some explanation as to how they might have developed.

Several issues were identified which gave strong indications as to what had helped, or in some cases, hindered the processes of feeling a sense of belonging and of feeling accepted. These were categorised into four key areas:

1. Quality of relationships with teachers;
2. Quality of relationship with the school as an entity;
3. Quality of relationships with peers;
4. Quality of relationship with self.

Data indicated that the better the quality of relationships that a student had in these four key areas, the stronger their sense of belonging and of feeling accepted as an individual. In turn, these contributed to a higher quality experience of being at school and an improved ability to engage in learning. If their relationships with teachers, the school, peers and their own self were weak, they were less likely to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, and were less likely to engage well with learning. This was illustrated as a theoretical model (Fig 8.1).

Fig 8.1 Theoretical Model – version 1

8.3 Belonging

According to the dictionary, the word 'belong' means to *"fit or be acceptable in a specified place or environment"*. The word originated from the Old English word *"gelang"* which meant *"together with"* (Pearsall, 1999). Within this project, belonging was viewed as being about fitting in, feeling included, being part of something and feeling together with others.

Students at both schools reported feeling a sense of belonging, of 'fitting in', of school feeling like 'family'. This applied to relationships with peers, with teachers, and in some cases, with the school as an entity in its own right. This sense of belonging was apparent to some extent in both schools. This might have been explained by the small size of the schools. Belonging appeared to be stronger at Sands School, however, which was approximately three times the size of The Small School. This indicated that belonging was influenced by more than just school size. A further explanation might have been that Sands School was democratic, meaning that it had an explicit aim of including everyone. Data indicated, however, that the sense of belonging at Sands School was stronger for some students than for others. The issue of belonging was complex and required considerable exploration.

At Sands School, some students felt a sense of belonging on the day that they walked into the school and some during their first (trial) week. For others, the process of being 'accepted' after the trial week was instrumental to feeling that they belonged. For several students though, the process took longer – two terms, or even a year. This suggested two things:

- There was something about the school that was communicated early on, so that students felt they belonged very quickly. It might have been the organisational culture, ethos, or 'rules of Sands' that were immediately *felt* by students;
- The process of feeling a sense of belonging was a personal one. It was an internal psychological process that was different for every person. For some

people, it happened quickly ('I fitted in straight away', 'it felt like coming home') and for others, it was slower ('they took time to develop trust').

Despite the fact that Sands School strived to be democratic and worked hard to ensure everyone had the opportunity to be included, creating a sense of belonging as such was not an explicit school aim. 'Belonging' at Sands School was not imposed from the outside and yet the sense of belonging that was felt by many students was too strong to have been coincidental. Something was happening within the school which aided students to feel that they belonged. Teachers also felt as if they belonged too. This was not explored in depth but an assumption was made that there was some overlap between teacher and student belonging.

At The Small School, the sense of belonging was not communicated so strongly during the research interviews but was nonetheless present. It was strongest in terms of relationships with peers ("you're close to everyone"). This made sense in the context of this particular school: peers were a consistent presence, whereas in contrast, the turnover of teachers was high. The quality of teachers was also mixed, which created complex feelings about teachers as a whole. Some were described as "crap" and others "good". There were also issues with connecting with the school as an entity because it was perceived as having a confused identity - the clearest descriptions related to the "youth club" atmosphere and the "small size". The sense of belonging was still evident at The Small School, and included several interesting facets:

- Many of the students had come to the school because they had not been happy in other educational environments, and a large proportion of students alluded to not fitting in at previous schools. To feel a sense of belonging at The Small School, therefore, seemed particularly powerful;
- The Small School had a strained relationship with the local community. It did not easily fit in with the village. The school and the students within it were seen as outsiders. The sense of belonging within the school might have been strengthened by these factors (i.e., us and them);

- Parents were heavily involved within The Small School, and the researcher speculated that parents might feel a stronger sense of belonging to the school as a whole than some of the students did. As adolescence was a development stage when young people formed a sense of identity as separate from their parents, this might have explained why students' attachments to their peers were stronger than to the school as a whole.

8.4 Acceptance as an individual

At both schools, students felt accepted as individuals. There was considerable freedom to make choices in terms of self-expression and self identity. Students could dress how they liked, they had freedom to pursue their own interests and they could make choices about how to engage with learning. There were organisational cultures and 'norms and values' in both schools, but these still allowed a great deal of autonomy for individuals to develop in their own way. Students talked of the importance of the freedom to be themselves and by inference, to be freed from constraints of having to conform. Some explicitly talked of the pressure they had felt in other schools to follow the crowd and behave in a certain way in order to fit in. They contrasted these experiences with their current ones.

Being accepted as an individual was connected not only to students' relationships with one another and with teachers, but also to their relationships with their own selves. In order to feel self-acceptance, students had to have a sense of who they were, as distinct from others. This process was aided if they had high levels of self-awareness and self-understanding.

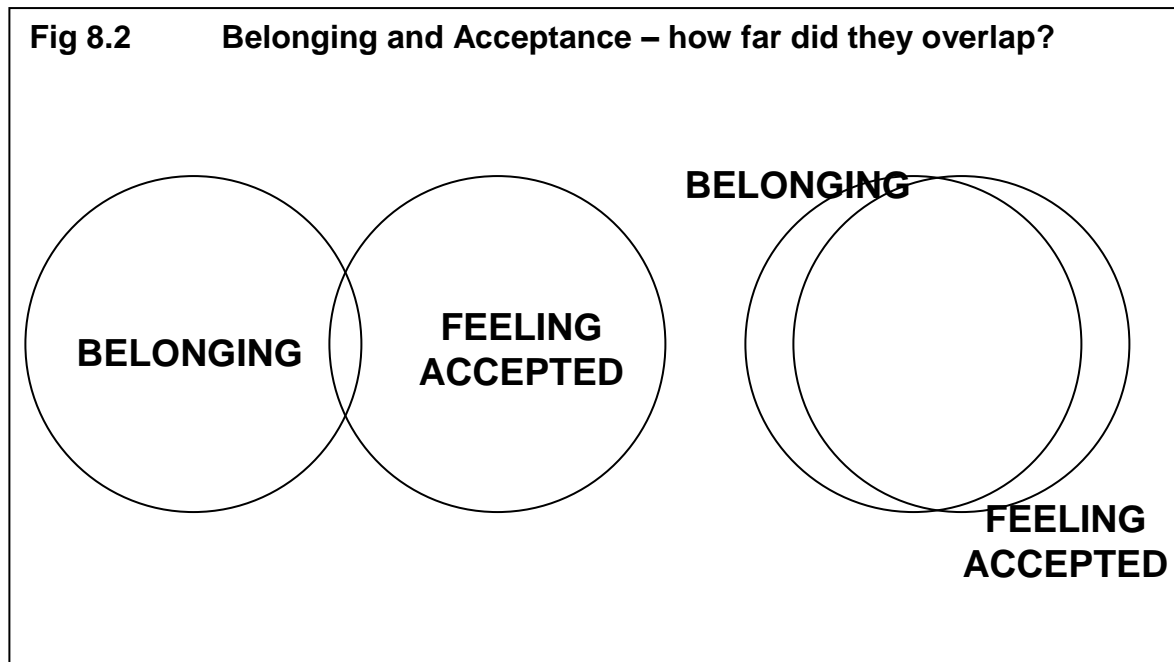
At Sands School, there was an organisational culture which clearly valued individuality and difference ("don't be a sheep"). 'Respect' was a key word and this thread ran through the school. Teachers and students respected one another. Students respected their peers. Individuals developed self-respect. The concept of

'respect' linked very closely to freedom. Students were respected and valued in the choices they made. Individuality was encouraged. Students could develop autonomy and be themselves. There was also a strong sense of 'we' alongside 'I'. 'I' can be myself, and be accepted as an individual, and yet 'I' belong to something bigger, the 'we' that we are together. 'I' have rights, but with those rights come responsibilities. In order to have the freedom to exercise my rights, 'I' have to take account of the needs of others in the community. This linked with concepts of a collective as well as an individual voice.

At The Small School, there was also a strong emphasis on individuality, and on self-expression ("You can be individual, and I mean different"). Students within the school were different from one another, and the school was different from the outside world. Students dressed as individuals, and behaved how they liked. However, having completed the analysis from The Small School and compared data with the analysis of Sands School, the researcher concluded that it was hard to find such a strong sense of 'we' in The Small School. There was more emphasis on individual rights than on collective responsibility. The students had the freedom to behave how they liked without taking account of the impact of this behaviour on others ("you can do whatever you want really ... there's nothing stopping you"). Students had freedom, but they used this mainly to dissent or to mess about. Students felt accepted as individuals, and they felt a sense of belonging with peers, but the lack of collective responsibility would suggest that attachment was not as strong to the school as a whole.

The research indicated that the feeling of being accepted as individuals was powerful, and aided in a process of developing a strong autonomous personal identity. This connected with increased self-confidence and self-esteem. The researcher considered that these feelings of acceptance were particularly powerful for young people of secondary school age as they were at a crucial stage of the development, in the midst of the transition from child to adult.

8.5 The overlap between belonging and acceptance



Belonging and feeling accepted were identified as pivotal issues for students at the two schools. If both of these occurred, there was an increased likelihood of having a higher quality school experience and of being more able to engage with learning. It should not be assumed, nevertheless, that the two processes were automatically intertwined.

It appeared to be possible for a student to have a sense of belonging without feeling fully accepted as an individual. For example, at The Small School, students alluded to one particular instance where a student had been “standoffish” and consequently had been rejected by other students. The inference was that there was an unspoken yet generally accepted ‘way to be’. Student could belong if they behaved like other students - there were norms of behaviour which were subtly communicated to new students (you can’t be really really individual though). Thus, if a student had to edit parts of themselves in order to belong to the group, they might not feel completely accepted as an individual. This may well have been the case, to a greater or lesser extent, for many of the students at either

of the schools. In these cases, the two circles shown in Fig. 8.2 would have little overlap.

Students might also feel accepted as an individual yet not experience a strong sense of belonging. This would perhaps be the case if they chose not to engage in many collective school processes. For example, one student at Sands School was seen on his own for most of the time. He did not seem to attend any lessons, or the School Meeting, nor did he interact much with teachers or peers. The researcher's perception, though, was that he was warmly accepted as an individual. Certainly, several students spoke earnestly about him during interviews. It would be hard to imagine, nonetheless, that this individual would describe feeling a strong sense of belonging (although it would be interesting to find out). As an example then, this individual might be someone who felt accepted, yet did not have a strong sense of belonging. In Fig. 8.2, this would also be illustrated by the circles not overlapping.

If a student was to experience a strong sense of belonging *and* feel accepted as an individual, the right-hand diagram in Fig 8.2 would be representative. This appeared to be a potent combination. For students to feel genuinely and wholly accepted as an individual *and* to feel a strong sense of belonging was powerful. They could form a self-identity as an autonomous person and yet feel part of a collective.

8.6 What contributed to a sense of belonging and / or acceptance as an individual?

Neither school had an explicit aim to create a sense of belonging nor did they state that they wanted students to feel accepted as individuals. It was concluded, therefore, that these processes were influenced by a number of other factors. The researcher explored data in considerable detail and tried to address issues raised in the memo-writing processes. Data were taken apart and put back together in a variety of different ways. The conclusion was reached that there were four

overarching factors which contributed towards the development of a sense of belonging and to feeling accepted as an individual.

These were:

1. Quality of relationships with teachers;
2. Quality of relationship with the school as an entity;
3. Quality of relationships with peers;
4. Quality of relationship with self.

These factors will be explored in detail, but put simply; data indicated that the higher the quality of relationship that a student had in these four areas, the more likely they were to experience a strong sense of belonging and to feel accepted as an individual.

8.6.1 *Relationship with teachers*

Many students in Sands School spoke of the quality of relationships with their teachers, referring to them as “family”, and “friends”. They reported feeling valued, respected, and loved. They knew their teachers and felt known by them. There was equality and informality in the relationships. They knew them outside of the classroom setting as well as within lessons. They felt understood as individuals and were able to learn at their own pace. Within lessons, there was a consensus that most teachers were good, even though they had differing styles and approaches. They felt supported in their learning and felt that individual needs were taken into account. They were taken seriously, felt able to question their teachers, and were safe to make mistakes. The experience of “a battle” in previous schools, where there was a “students-versus-teachers mindset” had been replaced by cooperative and negotiated learning. The school had a clear philosophy about teaching and learning. Students were involved with the recruitment of teachers and in offering feedback through staff reports.

In The Small School, students had mixed experiences with teachers. Students valued the informality of the setting and appreciated being on first name terms with teachers. They liked the small size of classes and felt that their individual needs were taken into account. They liked creative and hands-on experiences. Yet there was a clear division between teachers and students (“they just need to make us learn stuff and they can’t”), which resulted in students “messing about” in lessons. There was a lack of continuity of teaching staff, as illustrated by students having seven Maths teachers over five years. The financial insecurity of the school meant that they could not retain teachers for long periods of time. In addition, the school itself did not have a clear philosophy about teaching and learning, which led to a huge variety in teaching approaches and methods. The students highly rated some teachers, but not others. The distinction between good and bad teachers seemed to come down to “personality”. Students were not involved with the recruitment of teachers, so chose to voice their opinions through the way that they behaved in classrooms.

8.6.2 *Relationship with the school as an entity*

The matter of how students might have a relationship with a school was considered in depth. At first, it seemed that there was considerable overlap between this category and the others; relationships with teachers (as spokespeople for a school), for example, might at first glance appear to be similar to relationship with a school.

Having a relationship with ‘the school’ was viewed as having an understanding of and a connection with all of its constituent parts. There was a human element to this – teachers, other students, parents groups, management committees – but there was much more which made up ‘the school’. This included the ethos, values, philosophies and principles. It encompassed structures, processes, policies and procedures. It even included physical aspects such as buildings and grounds. If the school was viewed as an organism in its own right, it included all of these elements. One student at Sands School even used this analogy, describing the

School Meeting as “the heart” and the School Council as “the spine”.

Students who had a strong relationship with their school as a whole might be expected to be able to explain their school, promote it, defend it or feel proud of it.

Data indicated that having a relationship with ‘the school as an entity’ was important to feeling part of the school, to feeling a strong sense of belonging. The small size of both schools undoubtedly made it easier for students to have a relationship with their schools. On a practical level, for example, it meant that all members of the school could meet together at the same time. In both schools, there was a sense of community, of everyone knowing everyone else. Students were on first name terms with each other, teachers, parents, ex-students and supporters.

The democratic nature of Sands School significantly increased students’ ability to have an active relationship with their school. It was a congruent school with a strong identity. Democracy underpinned processes and attitudes. Students had a voice, they made choices and they had control. They could, if they chose, be engaged in a two-way relationship with the school, a relationship whereby they could change, and be changed by the school. For some students, particularly those who chose to play an active part in school processes, this was important. They felt a strong sense of belonging to their school because the school worked hard to make sure that they did belong. Their opinions were taken seriously. They voted. They chose who was able to join the school. For some students, being actively involved with democratic processes was a key part of the school experience. Democracy meant choice, however, and for some students, being active participants in school processes was less important. They did not want to be on the School Council. They found School Meetings boring. They chose not to attend many lessons. Nonetheless, data indicated that students who opted out of democratic processes *still* felt a strong connection to the values and ethos of the school. They recognised that it was these that offered them freedom to opt out. Therefore, students actively involved with school processes – and those that were not - were seen as having a high quality relationship with the school as an entity.

The Small School set out to be small and local. It also had other facets to its identity, some of which confused students as they struggled to reconcile the reputation of the school (both locally and nationally) with their experience of it. Consequently, it was a less congruent organisation with an unclear identity. Students were able to articulate why the school was different from other ones, but they were unable to progress much further than issues connected to size, informality and the “youth club idea”. Although the school had some structures and processes which were designed to involve students such as circle time and the suggestions box, many of these did not work well in practice. Students were disengaged from these processes as there was a culture of ‘what’s the point?’ There was a strong sense that the school had changed over the years, but not that students had changed the school. Students rarely alluded to any sense of control or power to change the school, and thus, any notion of a two-way relationship with the school was weak. Students therefore were not seen as having a high quality relationship with the school as an entity.

8.6.3 *Relationship with peers*

Students in both schools valued their relationships with each other, using phrases such as “it’s more like a big group of friends”. The connections between individuals were strong, both inside and outside of school. Several of the students contrasted this experience with previous feelings of being isolated, bullied, or pressured to conform. Having open, honest relationships with peers, where students felt able to be themselves was crucial. Relationships were based on equality where no one thought they were better than anyone else. Students valued, respected and listened to one another. Students provided emotional support networks for one another. The pleasure that came from these friendships and from the social side of school was important in itself and was connected with being part of a community, having fun and enjoying school.

There were indications that having good relationships with peers helped students to learn in the classroom. For example, “you can always feel you can ask

[your friends] for help without being embarrassed". However, having strong friendships did not automatically equate with an increased ability to learn in a formal setting. In both schools, there was examples of students distracting one another from their work, where the desire to be with friends preceded the desire to work. This suggested that this factor in particular must be taken in combination with the other factors (relationships with teachers, school and self). In isolation, it did not appear to be enough.

8.6.4 *Relationship with self*

This could be viewed in two ways - first, in terms of developing a sense of self and a strong personal identity - second, in terms of understanding themselves as a learner and taking responsibility for their own learning process. It was slightly different from the other three types of relationships as it was more personal and less visible.

At Sands School, the researcher was struck by the levels of self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence of some students. This indicated that they had a strong sense of self and personal identity. They knew who they were and what they thought. The school was run on "common sense" which meant students were explicitly encouraged to think through their actions, to take personal responsibility for their behaviour, and to learn to trust themselves. Many students also had a deep understanding of themselves as a learner, their preferred ways of learning and what helped motivate them. There was acknowledgement that students needed "willpower" to do well at Sands School because they were not pushed as much as in other schools. They could choose whether to attend lessons. The staff worked from a position of "negotiated learning" which clearly offered shared responsibility. Staff also had a clear agenda to develop "critical thinking", which was the ability to engage with and interact with material on a personal level. The behaviour of students in classrooms indicated high levels of commitment to learning. If a student chose to go to a lesson then they expected to

work. They would support others to do so and they would challenge anyone who interrupted this process. On the other hand, some students took advantage of the freedom offered to them by choosing not to attend lessons. Some of these did this because they had chosen an alternative way of learning (for example, spending all day in the art room); others did so because they enjoyed the freedom to spend time with friends. Whatever they chose, students were expected to use the freedom they had to make their own decisions, and in turn were expected to take responsibility for these decisions. In general, therefore, students were seen as having good quality of relationships with themselves, in terms of self-awareness and in understanding themselves as learners.

At The Small School, many students had also developed a sense of personal identity. They were able to think and act as autonomous individuals, including challenging one another and stating their own points of view. Some students seemed to understand themselves well. As far as their identity as learners, however, this was weaker. The sentence "it does come down to the teachers, whether we want to learn. If we don't like the teachers then we won't learn ..." was indicative of the attitude of many students. There was a lack of internal motivation. The responsibility for learning lay with the teachers. Lessons were compulsory and students did not make an active choice to attend. They turned up to classes without books or pens, having not done the homework and appearing disinterested in doing any work outside of the classroom. There was no sense of negotiating with teachers or taking personal responsibility for learning. Students did not appear to be active learners. They were passive recipients of teaching. In general, therefore, students were seen as having good levels of self-awareness, but were weaker in terms of understanding and taking responsibility for themselves as learners.

8.7 What were the outcomes of belonging and / or acceptance as an individual?

Where students experienced a strong sense of belonging and felt accepted as an individual, there appeared to be two important outcomes. These were:

8.7.1 *The quality of experience for the student increased*

Students felt settled. They had more fun. They enjoyed, even loved being at school. They felt part of something bigger than themselves. They had increased self-esteem, self-acceptance and self-confidence. They had a stronger personal identity. They developed strong friendships, separate from their home and family environment. They felt accepted for who they were and wanted to be in that moment. In terms of being well-rounded, constructive members of a community in the future, these were very valuable experiences for young people to have.

8.7.2 *Students learnt more*

Students were less defensive, which meant that they were more open to experience. They were able to make mistakes and ask questions without feeling stupid. They were able to find something they were passionate about, and be supported to develop their learning in this direction (for example, art, electronics, science). They were encouraged to be reflective about their interactions with other people, which meant that they could continue to become more self-aware in terms of themselves and the impact that they had on other people.

The ways in which students at these two schools 'learnt more' could be subdivided into two categories:

8.7.2.1 Students learnt because they were part of a community

Students learnt through being engaged in experiences which helped them to develop life skills, such as communication, dealing with conflict, empathy and assertiveness. This type of learning took place through informal interactions, group meetings, lessons, social activities and tutorials. These could be categorised as ‘non-academic outcomes’.

8.7.2.2 Students learnt more through being ready to engage with a formal curriculum

When students negotiated their own learning, they were more motivated. They were switched on to learning. They understood themselves and the ways in which they learnt best. In short, they developed a relationship with themselves as a learner - which might help them in the short term (such as passing GCSEs) but also in the long-term (College, University, work environment). These were all connected with developed skills and interests as learners, but might conceivably lead to improved ‘academic outcomes’.

8.8 Concluding comments

Sands School and The Small School were unique in terms of histories, philosophies and processes, which in turn, offered students very different experiences. Furthermore, students within each of the schools had experiences that contrasted with one another. Nonetheless, when the mass of data had been transcribed, categorised and analysed, common themes started to develop. Through exploring and re-exploring data, a coherent picture started to form. A theoretical model (Fig 8.1) was developed which was intended to offer an explanation as to how the student experience might be conceptualised. It was not intended to illustrate how every student experienced the Sands and Small schools. It was certainly not the case that all students were fully engaged in learning or indeed enjoyed being at school. The model suggested that *if* they had good quality relationships, these were *likely* to contribute to a sense of belonging and

acceptance which were *likely* to improve school outcomes. Conversely, if they did *not* have good relationships (and not all students did), then they were less likely to feel belonging and acceptance. The picture that was developed was not intended to be prescriptive. Each student had their own experience of the school and as the processes of belonging and feeling accepted were internal psychological processes, it was clear that they would be unique to each person. Nonetheless, it was hoped that the generated theory was complex enough to incorporate all individuals and both schools, and to offer insight into the student experience.

Chapter 9

Review of Literature

9.1 Introduction: Role of literature within Grounded Theory

As grounded theory was the underlying methodology for this project, it was important to understand the position of a literature review within this. Charmaz explained that:

The intended purpose of delaying the literature review is to avoid importing preconceived ideas and imposing them on your work. Delaying the literature review encourages you to articulate *your* ideas (2006:165, italics in original).

This meant that the literature review took place *after* data collection, analysis and theory generation. In order for the theory to be grounded in data, it was important that the researcher was not overly influenced by other research findings or theoretical arguments. As the researcher did have some previous knowledge, however, it was important to be reflexive in order to ensure that data were not forced into preconceived categories (Glaser, September 2002). This was explored in Chapter 2.

An extensive literature review was undertaken in an attempt to situate Fig 8.1 (henceforth described as the 'theoretical model') within related academic fields. This model was described in Chapter 8 and attempted to make sense of both schools and all data. The researcher could not hope to describe all literature. It was important to be selective so as to ensure that work cited had direct relevance to this project. The intention was to find areas of resonance and convergence, but also to identify whether this research offered anything original.

The literature review was structured to tally with key aspects of the theoretical model. First, educational philosophies were explored as these were expected to have an influence on students' experiences of education. This included an examination of democratic and person-centred approaches to education, as well as research pertaining to the size of schools. Literature on encouraging citizenship in schools was also explored. Literature within this section related to the theoretical model in terms of students' abilities to have a relationship with teachers, school, peers and selves. This had been connected with having an increased sense of belonging and of feeling accepted. There was an overwhelming body of literature which argued that students with genuine involvement in decision-making had more positive relationships within school - this also connected with improved school outcomes. This had clear resonances with the two schools in this study.

Second, the researcher searched for literature which related to belonging and to feeling accepted. These linked to the psychological experiences of students. There was a small but significant body of research about the importance of school belonging. This shed light on this issue and the potential consequences for students who felt connected to their teachers, schools and peers. Literature on the development of personal identity and self-concept was studied - in particular that which related to these in adolescence. There was a strong argument that environments which encouraged the development of self could have a positive influence upon school outcomes.

Third, an overview of the literature on school effectiveness and school improvement was undertaken. This was because the theoretical model as a whole offered a challenge to conventional perceptions of quality. The dominant values underpinning school effectiveness and improvement were examined. The case of Summerhill School's battle with OFSTED was used as an illustration of the contentious nature of some measures. Assessments made by OFSTED of Sands School and The Small School were explored through this lens and compared with the perspective that had been gleaned through data.

Finally, a summary was presented which drew together one key theme from literature and offered an overview of issues of resonance between this and the theoretical model. This highlighted several ways in which the literature shed light upon this particular research project.

9.2 Educational theory and philosophy

In 2009, there were 24,246 primary and secondary schools in operation in England, of which 2346 were in the independent sector (DfCSF, May 2009). Every one of these institutions was established for a reason and their founders were influenced by educational thinkers such as Aristotle, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Montessori (see Bresler et al., 2001a, b). As part of a literature review, it was important to locate the Sands and Small schools within an historical context. They did not develop in a vacuum. Their founders were influenced by educational philosophies and their values and practices fitted within these perspectives. A wide range of literature was explored in order to place the Sands and Small schools within a theoretical framework. In particular, literature relating to democracy, freedom, person-centred learning and size will be outlined. The political context of education was also explored. The Citizenship Agenda was highlighted as it had connections with both schools. This has led to an increased interest in 'participation' and 'pupil voice'. Research about the impact of these processes upon students and classrooms were studied as although largely conducted within mainstream schools, they seemed pertinent to this project.

9.2.1 *Democracy, Person-Centred Learning and Freedom*

Sands School was a 'democratic school'. The Small School did not use this label but it was underpinned by some democratic values. It felt important, therefore, to explore the historical development of democratic education so as to understand the influences upon the schools. Democratic education was one in which:

Teachers and students have an equal vote in the decisions about their learning and their social lives (International Democratic Education Network, 2010)

There was substantial literature about democratic education (see Apple and Beane, 1999, Faure et al., 1972, Gribble, 1985, Gribble, 1998a, b, Harber, 1996, Hewitt, 2006, Woods, 2004, 2005). Two people frequently mentioned were John Dewey and A.S. Neill (Dewey, 1910, 1940, 2004, Dewey and Dewey, 1915, Neill, 1937, 1962, 1973, 1985, Vaughan, 2006).

Dewey (1859 - 1952)⁹ was heavily influenced by Plato and Rousseau. He argued that education needed to be democratic in order for democracies to sustain themselves:

Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife (Dewey in Hewitt, 2006:47).

Dewey was interested in how schools educated young people to become active and constructive citizens. He argued that they should model the democratic ideal rather than merely teach it, believing that students learned through experience. His phrase *“An ounce of experience is better than a tonne of theory”* (2004:138) inferred that schools which attempted to educate about democracy must be democratic in structure and process. This mirrored the research from Sands School which suggested that consistent, congruent structures enabled students to feel part of their school and to engage fully in learning. Students understood about democracy and their responsibilities as members of communities through their experiences at school.

Dewey's interest in experiential learning was informed, in part by the work of Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952). He was drawn to her discovery-based approach which enabled children to take control of learning (see Montessori, 1992). He believed that all situations provided opportunities for learning, explaining that:

⁹ It seemed worth noting the dates when Dewey developed his ideas – the connections between democracy and education were not new.

Hence one of the weightiest problems with which the philosophy of education has to cope is the method of keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional (2004:9).

This emphasis on *“the informal and the formal”* fitted with the research from both schools. Dewey inferred that learning could take place away from the formal curriculum; that important discoveries could happen in informal or incidental ways. Students gave numerous examples of how they learnt in informal settings. This included learning about themselves, their identities and aspirations and how to live as a community.

Dewey’s interest in learning from experience also had implications for the way in which teachers operated in classrooms. He asserted that:

... no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. ... Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think (2004:153-4).

This language suggested that students needed to be actively involved with thinking and thus with creating meaning. The concept of “critical thinking” had been raised at Sands School. Teachers explained that they wanted students to be critical thinkers. Apple and Beane connected this with democratic education:

In a democratic society, no one individual or interest group can claim sole ownership of possible knowledge or meaning. Likewise, a democratic curriculum includes not only what adults think is important, but also the questions and concerns that young people have about themselves and their world. A democratic curriculum invites young people to shed the passive role of knowledge consumers and assume the active role of 'meaning makers' (1999:15).

Encouraging critical thinking implied a different role for teachers. Students could only question their teachers if they did not see them as infallible. Teachers needed to be willing to be challenged. Teaching and learning needed to be a collaborative endeavour:

In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher - and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better (Dewey, 2004:154).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Freire developed the ideas of teaching and learning as collaborative processes. He was highly critical of “*the banking concept of education*” which characterised teachers as depositors of knowledge and students as empty vessels. Liberating education required a change to this dynamic:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing ... Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information ... Through dialogue the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow ... here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught (1970:53-61).

Freire wanted education to be a liberating process. Teachers needed to enter into meaningful dialogue with students and to acknowledge the power differential. Liberation came through the development of equal relationships where power was shared. These processes were apparent to some extent in both schools in this research project. One student at Sands School said: “it’s more like a big group of friends who learn stuff from each other”. The “*banking concept of education*” sounded like the “students-versus-teachers mindset” where the teachers acted as if they had “all the knowledge of the world all in their heads”.

The learning environment at Sands School was based on collaborative and negotiated learning. This was inseparable from the ‘quality of relationships with teachers’ that had emerged as an important facet of the student experience and been placed in the theoretical model. Had teachers harboured a desire to operate

from the banking concept of education, these collaborative relationships would have been impossible. Hence, the attitudinal qualities of teachers profoundly affected their abilities to create high quality relationships with students.

The banking concept of education originated from a view that teachers were experts in their subjects and in knowing how to transmit information. Students were passive recipients. The opposite of this was humanistic education. This emanated from a philosophical position that:

... emphasises the potential for individual freedom and for individuals' ability to take personal responsibility for their experience. It stresses the importance of free will ... (Merry, 2002:18).

Henson traced the roots of humanistic education back to Socrates and Confucius, and gave an overview of its development through Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Vygotsky and Piaget (2003:10). Approaches connected to humanistic education have variously been labelled child-centred, learner-centred, student-centred, person-centred and person-to-person (Doddington and Hilton, 2007, Ferch et al., 2006, Henson, 2003, Nuckles, 2000, Paris and Combs, 2006, Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). These phrases were familiar language within educational circles and have often been used interchangeably. Their definitions, however, have not always been clear and their advocates have not always meant the same thing (Paris and Combs, 2006). There was agreement from all about the need to actively involve students - this was the key distinction between humanistic approaches and conventional education. The banking concept of education had been replaced by a more active one based on meaningful dialogue between teacher and learner. The variations rested on the issue of sharing power and, in particular, how much power might be available to learners. To put it simply, were students actively involved in sessions that had been *designed by the teacher*, or were they given *shared responsibility* for curriculum design and delivery?

In the context of this research, it was clear that both schools had been influenced by learner-centred approaches. To differing degrees, teacher took account of the

needs of individual learners. They had mechanisms for students to give feedback. Class sizes were small and teachers were able to build individual relationships with students. If viewed through the lens of the banking concept of education, it was apparent that these schools were quite different.

The literature on person-centred education, as described by Carl Rogers, took this analysis to another level. Although best known as a client-centred psychotherapist, Rogers wrote extensively about education. He argued that conventional education had too much emphasis on cognitive learning:

They have focused so intently on *ideas*, have limited themselves so completely to "education from the neck up" that the resulting narrowness is having serious social consequences (1980:267, italics in original).

Rogers argued for an alternative approach to education, one where teachers assumed the role of facilitators. There was a proactive attempt to share power between teachers and students and to enable individuals to take control of their own learning (1980:302). In practice this meant students were trusted to take part in decision-making inside and outside of classroom. Students took control of their own learning in practical ways including deciding what, how, when (and if) they wanted to learn. Student involvement was extensive, real and genuine - they were co-creators of their own learning.

The role of facilitator was crucial. Certain qualities were essential if facilitators were to establish the necessary type of relationship. These were congruence, positive regard and empathy (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). Facilitators who developed relationships based on these conditions were able to genuinely share power and control with students. This argument closely mirrored data in this project. The importance of particular attitudinal qualities of staff has been highlighted. These have been seen to contribute to the quality of relationship between teachers and students.

Rogers argued that if teachers acted as facilitators, then the classroom atmosphere was better for students. Person-centred education had enhanced outcomes:

The conclusion to be drawn from these many studies is that it pays to be personal and human in the classroom. A humane atmosphere is not only more pleasant for all concerned; it also promotes more - and more significant - learning. When attitudes of realness, respect for the individual, understanding of the student's private world are present, exciting things happen. The payoff is not only in such things as grades and reading achievement, but also in more elusive qualities such as greater self-confidence, increased creativity, and more liking for others. In short, such a classroom leads to a positive, unified learning by the whole person (1980:278).

To back up his claims, Rogers made reference to research which had been conducted by Aspy and Roebuck. They had designed research to test Rogers' hypothesis and their conclusions were unequivocal:

The process scales for the facilitative conditions (E, C, PR) identified variables which related significantly and positively to students' (a) academic achievement, (b) attendance, (c) cognitive processes and (d) intellectual measures (Aspy and Roebuck, 1974:169).

This study was conducted from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s. Cornelius-White added to it in 2007 by publishing the results of an enormous piece of meta-analysis where he reviewed 1000 articles from 1948 to 2004. He concluded that:

Overall, learner-centered teacher variables have above-average associations with positive student outcomes ... Positive relationships, nondirectivity, empathy, warmth, and encouraging thinking and learning are the specific teacher variables that are above average compared with other educational innovations. Correlations for participation, critical thinking, satisfaction, math achievement, drop-out prevention, self-esteem, verbal achievement, positive motivation, social connection, IQ, grades, reduction in disruptive behavior, attendance, and perceived achievement are all above average ... (2007:133)

If research had so soundly reinforced the value of person-centred education, it seemed important to explore Rogers' other claims about the outcomes of education. He introduced the idea of the *"fully functioning person"* through which he

explained that given this type of education, individuals started to possess the following characteristics:

- More open to experience;
- Greater desire for authenticity and genuineness;
- Greater wish for intimacy;
- More caring, gentle, non-judgemental;
- Higher level of trust in their own experience and locus of evaluation (1980:350-1. This list has been edited).

These characteristics were worth considering. How did they relate to the two schools in this research? Some seemed similar to observations from the researcher. Students at both schools, but Sands School in particular, were more open to their experiences, did want to be authentic (be who they really were) and did want intimacy (belonging, closeness). They were caring and non-judgemental in relation to peers and teachers. They did trust their own experiences, especially those who had high levels of self-awareness and self-acceptance.

Neither school used the phrase 'person-centred', but it seemed apparent that both operated from a humanistic educational philosophy. This was different, however, to whether they could accurately be labelled 'person-centred'. In order to establish this, issues of power, control and the nature of the teacher-student relationship were explored. At Sands School, students exerted a great deal of control over teaching and learning. They influenced the design of the curriculum, the recruitment of teachers and they gave formal feedback through 'staff reports'. Students engaged in 'negotiated learning'. They were trusted to make decisions, and were expected to take the consequences of these. The Small School was set up to be a small village school, and its structures and processes for involving students were not as robust. There was evidence, nonetheless, of sharing power, as demonstrated by circle time and the suggestions box. These were formal methods, but the small size of the school also meant that students developed informal relationships with teachers and offered feedback through conversation. Both schools could arguably be described as 'person-centred', although the

amount of shared power at Sands School was greater, and thus, the case for this school being described in this way was considerably stronger.

The person-centred approach to education affected students' relationships with teachers, but also their relationships with one another. Research by Schmuck found that when teachers were empathic in class, students related better to *each other* (1963). These findings connected with Dewey, who argued that collaboration in the classroom had a positive impact on students' relationships with peers. This was seen in both of the schools that participated in the research: students had strong relationships with other students. Dewey called this spirit of cooperation "*fraternity*" (1940:22). Both schools described themselves as "a community".

Being part of a community brought responsibilities for all concerned; members had self-interest, but they were also committed to the whole. This connected with the concept of freedom. Dewey gave great consideration to this – how could an individual be free and yet function as part of society? This dilemma was clearly linked to this project. Students wanted to be able to do what they liked and yet there were school rules and organisational values to consider. The work of J.S. Mill offered insight into this:

The only freedom that deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it (1859:72).

This distinction was helpful. It put freedom into a context of existing as part of a community. It gave balance between rights and responsibilities, between individualism and community. At this point, the publications of A.S. Neill proved invaluable. In 1921, A.S. Neill (1883-1973) founded "*the oldest children's democracy in the world*" - Summerhill School in Suffolk (Vaughan, 2006:ix). Offering children freedom to develop, to learn, to play and to be themselves was central. This was clear from the aims of the school:

- to allow children freedom to grow emotionally
- to give children power over their own lives

- to give children time to develop naturally
- to create a happier childhood by removing fear and coercion by adults (Vaughan, 2006:viii).

Neill held strong convictions about the importance of freedom, but he was equally committed to democracy – to the individual *and* to the collective. These ideals were translated into how the school was structured. The School Meeting was the focal point of the school, the place where issues and disputes were resolved. Although meetings were not compulsory, they were well attended and all members of Summerhill had one vote, be they students or teachers. Decisions were made by majority (Neill, 1937, 1962, 1973, 1985, Vaughan, 2006).

Even though the School Meeting worked well, there were still issues with finding the balance between freedom of individuals and the needs of the community. Neill reflected upon this dilemma:

In Summerhill, there is one perennial problem that can never be solved; it might be called the problem of the *individual vs. the community*. Both staff and pupils get exasperated when a gang of little girls led by a problem girl annoy some people, throw water on others, break the bedtime laws, and make themselves a perpetual nuisance. Jean, the leader, is attacked in a General Meeting. Strong words are used to condemn her misuse of freedom as license ... It is this distinction between freedom and license that many parents cannot grasp. In the disciplined home, the children have *no* rights. In the spoiled home, they have *all* the rights. The proper home is one in which children and adults have equal rights. And the same applies to school (1962:53 & 107, italics in original).

The key phrase was “*her misuse of freedom as license*”. Freedom was something that could be misused. Freedom was central to Summerhill, but it was freedom allied with responsibility to the wider community. Students could be themselves, but they also belonged to something bigger than themselves. This closely mirrored data from this research project.

9.2.2 Size

Students at the Sands and Small schools indicated that they felt that the small size of the schools was important to the quality of their experiences. It was difficult, however, to isolate this factor. It could be argued that the theoretical model was not specific about *school size*; rather, it identified that students' *relationships with their teachers, school, each other and self* were key factors which contributed to an increased sense of belonging and a feeling of acceptance as individuals. The question that the researcher sought to consider through this literature review was, therefore, what was the connection between the size of the schools and the four key relational factors that were identified?

The arguments of E.F. Schumacher were studied first as the founders of The Small School stated the significance of his book *Small is Beautiful* (1993). Schumacher cited numerous examples of how organisations, companies, governments, cities and even countries had become too big, losing any possible economies of scale and becoming depersonalised and overly controlled. He was not specific about what size schools should be, but he implied that education was an activity which required active participation rather than estrangement or alienation. This meant that *relationships* needed to be established (between teachers and students, for example) – and these were more feasible in smaller organisations. This sentiment was consistent with the findings of the research because it resonated with the argument that building relationships was crucial. What had not been addressed, however, was how small was small?

OFSTED undertook a study which compared the effectiveness of small and large primary schools in England. They defined a “*small school*” as one with less than 100 pupils, and a “*very small school*” as having less than 50 (OFSTED, 2000:2). This meant that Sands School was a ‘small school’, and The Small School a ‘very small school’. Much of the literature on school size came from the United States, however, and many of their examples had 200-400 students on roll, and so were considerably bigger (see, for example Biddle and Berliner, 2002, Klonsky and

Klonsky, 1999, Meier, 1996, Vander Ark, 2002, Wasley and Lear, 2001). Given that the average size of US high schools was bigger, in relative terms 200-400 was still small, and so literature from the US and the UK was considered as part of this literature review.

There was considerable evidence that small schools were not only effective, but in many cases, were *more* effective than their larger counterparts. Tom Vander Ark concluded that:

Studies show that small schools have higher attendance rates and lower dropout rates, their students have higher grade point averages, and students and teachers report greater satisfaction with the school experience (2002:55).

Given this, it was easy to assume that the size of the Sands and Small schools was the keystone to how they functioned. However, a further examination of literature revealed a common theme. This was that “*small is not enough*” (Tasker, 2003:2). Effective small schools also exhibited a number of other crucial characteristics:

Students do best in places where they can't slip through the cracks, where they are known by their teachers, and where their improved learning becomes the collective mission of a number of trusted adults (Wasley, 2002:10).

This statement summarised a key theme in the literature - there was consensus about the importance of relationships. Vander Ark, for example, stated that: “*Fundamental to the success of small schools are the relationships they foster*” (2002:58). This was important as it connected strongly with the theoretical model. The researcher had argued that the quality of four key relationships was crucial to students' abilities to learn - the small schools literature made a connection between these factors and the smallness of schools. Literature indicated that the size of schools was not enough, but it was “*an enabler*” for these relationships to develop (Davies, 2009:8). As small schools operated on a smaller scale, they offered a better chance for students to know and be known by everyone else.

Meier brought a slightly different dimension to the issue of relationships. She argued that all schools were made up of smaller units. Students always split into groups “*for survival's sake*” (1996:12). Students often developed strong relationships with each other, but the problem was that only a small minority of students were in groups that contained adults. One of the enormous benefits of small schools was that:

Every kid is known, every kid belongs to a community that includes adults. Relationships are cross-disciplinary, cross-generational and cross-everything else (1996:12).

The emphasis on belonging to groups which contained adults was interesting in the light of this research project. During the process of developing the theoretical model, the researcher had argued that relationships with peers were not enough. Although students in both schools were in communities with adults, there was a greater continuity of teachers at Sands School than at The Small School. This might have explained in part, why the students’ sense of belonging *to the school* was stronger at the former than the latter. Discussions about belonging and its connection to school size will be explored in 9.3.

Given that there were many advantages to being small, and in particular, the way in which this enabled good relationships, it might be deduced that all schools should be small. This argument was countered by two teachers:

Just making schools smaller without revolutionizing the approach to educating students would be a wasted opportunity. Student outcomes can be utterly transformed when schools adopt the *characteristics of smallness* (Haimendorf and Kestner, 2009:9, italics added).

The ‘characteristics of smallness’ were not synonymous with size. Large schools could, it was argued, break into smaller communities and fundamentally change their learning environments. The move to make large schools smaller, by creating “*mini-schools*” or “*schools-within-schools*” has gathered momentum in recent years, but the idea was not new (Harber, 1996). In the 1970s, Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire experimented with creating smaller “*teams*” within one

school - this school was also known for its commitment to freedom and autonomy of students (Watts, 1977). In recent years, the charity Human Scale Education has been supporting large secondary schools to adopt the characteristics of smallness (Wasserberg, 2009).

The literature on small schools suggested that the ‘characteristics of smallness’ that were exhibited at the Sands and Small schools were inextricably intertwined with the quality of relationships at the schools. In particular:

- the quality of relationships with teachers was enhanced by being small, not only in a classroom setting, but because students were in intergenerational communities with adults;
- the quality of relationship with the school itself was dramatically improved by the smallness of the school, as students were able to understand, feel part of and change the school;
- the quality of relationship with self was affected by the nature of the pedagogy that was used within the schools, and this was more possible (though not automatic) within smaller schools.

9.2.3 *The citizenship agenda*

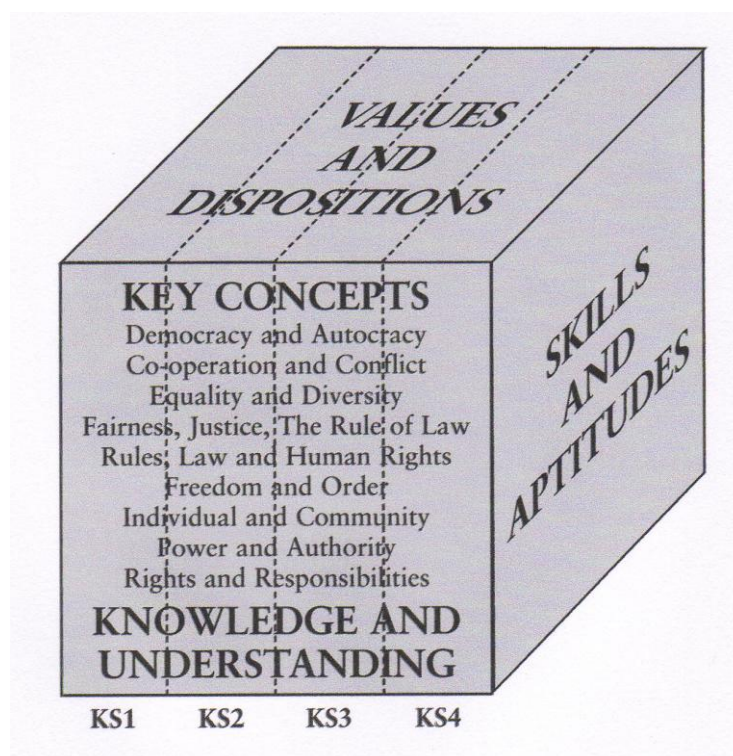
In recent years, the British government has developed ‘citizenship’ in schools, illustrated by its explicit introduction to the National Curriculum and the emphasis upon developing ‘pupil voice’. This trend was described and evaluated in a series of booklets entitled *Inspiring Schools* (Davies et al., Spring 2005a, b). In the context of this research, the focus on citizenship was interesting. The Government wanted this to be improved in *all* schools, but the Sands and Small schools were ahead of government thinking. They were already convinced about the importance of involving and listening to students. Literature on the citizenship agenda was explored in this light - not because it had influenced these schools, but because research into the citizenship agenda was connected to what these schools were already doing.

Literature fell into two categories. The first related to citizenship in classrooms, which included curriculum content and the nature of the learning process. The second concerned pupil voice and in particular, the development of school councils (Maitles and Deuchar, 2006:252).

9.2.3.1 Citizenship in classrooms

In 1998, the Advisory Group on Citizenship defined the citizenship curriculum and devised learning outcomes for each academic level. These included concepts such as respect, rights and responsibilities, fairness, forgiveness, justice, discrimination, equal opportunities, rule of law and civil rights (Crick, 1998). This was illustrated as a diagram (Fig 9.1).

Fig 9.1 Diagrammatic representation of citizenship curriculum



(Crick, 1998:45)

Although this was clear in terms of content, one key practical question remained.

How should students be taught? This was outlined by Maitles and Gilchrist:

A crucial but difficult area relating education for citizenship to schools is whether one only learns about democracy or also lives it. Are pupils in schools citizens or citizens-in-waiting? If the former, then there are implications for our schools and indeed for society as a whole (2006:68).

In practice, schools had a choice. They could teach students about the subjects of democracy, equality and fairness - or they could enable students to learn about these through offering real-life experiences. The latter required teachers to offer a democratic environment in classrooms whereby students learned through active engagement (see references to Dewey in 9.2.1 for expansion of these ideas). This research project focussed on two schools which, to a greater or lesser degree, chose this option.

Maitles and Gilchrist undertook action research to evaluate the impact of a participative environment on the outcomes of citizenship (2006). They argued that students who experienced this type of learning environment were more accepting and tolerant, had enhanced self confidence and showed greater respect to teachers and peers. Similar research was conducted by Covell and Howe. They conducted an experiment whereby some students were engaged in classrooms where they were explicitly taught about children's rights through the use of a democratic teaching style. Another group received the conventional curriculum. After a six month experiment, they concluded that:

The adolescents who were taught about their rights described in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child showed higher self-esteem, higher levels of perceived peer and teacher support and indicated more support for the rights of others (2001:36).

These two examples were accompanied by many more, indicating that students who were taught about citizenship from the position of being actively involved as participants learned more than those who were taught from a teacher-led perspective. A comprehensive overview of seventy five studies was published in

Inspiring Schools (Davies et al., Spring 2005a, b). These had many resonances with data from the Sands and Small schools, particularly in terms school practices (structures and processes of lessons and meetings) and outcomes (increased self-confidence, respect towards others).

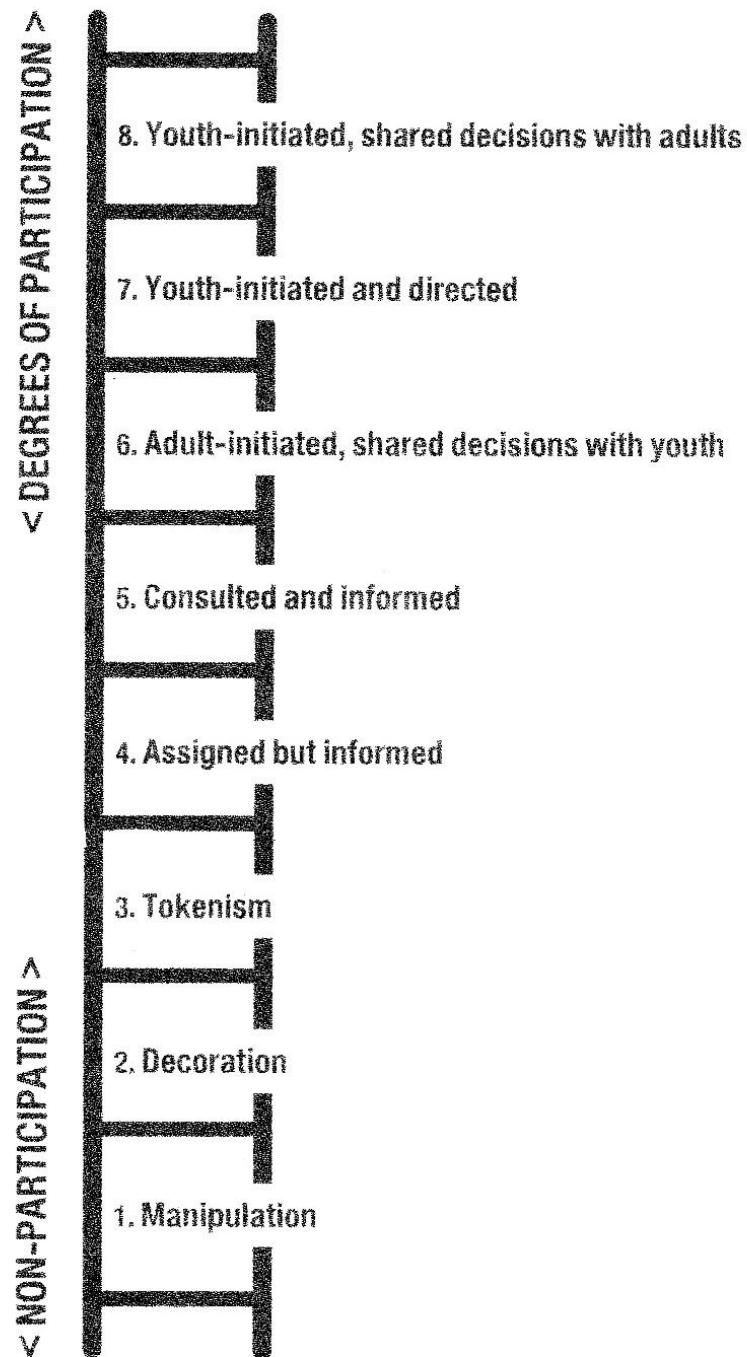
9.2.3.2 Pupil voice

In recent years, many schools have developed mechanisms for increasing student participation, largely through the use of class and school councils. 'Participation' has been defined as:

The term 'participation' is used ... to refer generally to the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship (Hart, 1992:5).

Class and school councils have had mixed reviews, particularly in cases where they were seen as tokenistic (Maitles and Deuchar, 2006). These criticisms were illustrated using Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' (Fig 9.2), which clearly demarked degrees of genuineness with which children and young people were invited to participate in decisions which affected them.

Sands School had School Meetings and a School Council with delegated decision-making powers, and so might arguably be located at numbers 7 or 8 on the ladder. Students at The Small School had processes for involvement, but slightly less power as final decisions rested with teachers and trustees. They appeared to fit at 5, 6 or 7 on the ladder. Given the high levels of student involvement within these two schools, this literature review focussed upon research into schools which also had strong and genuine student involvement processes.

Fig 9.2 Hart's Ladder of Participation

(Taken from Davies et al., Spring 2005b:11)

One article (Gold and Gold, 1998) advocated the importance of school and class councils, and argued that they made a tremendous contribution to school outcomes. Using extensive empirical research, it explained that:

... pupils make better use of their time at school. Pupils who actively participate in the day-to-day affairs of their school become involved in caring for their fellow pupils and in taking responsibility for school property ... The culture of "them and us" [students and teachers] is changed to one where mutual understanding and care play an important role in the school ethos, freeing teachers' precious spare time from the time-consuming role of disciplinarian. The outcome is an improved and happier learning environment (1998:1-4).

These findings mirrored those from Sands School in connection with the improved quality of students' relationships with peers, school, teachers and self. The phrase "*them and us*" was reminiscent of the "battle" and the "students-versus-teachers mindset". The resulting "*improved and happier learning environment*" was consistent with the outcomes in terms of overall quality of the learning experience.

Another study (Baginsky and Hannam, 1999) concurred with these findings. Having conducted a survey which measured students' attitudes and opinions about school councils (in conventional schools), the percentage of students which rated each aspect as 'excellent' or 'very good' was as follows:

- Making sensible rules 83%
 - Positive contributions to school life 80%
 - Make changes in school life 73%
 - Being taken notice of by staff 73%
 - Improving relationships between students 73%
 - Improving the school environment 67%
 - Valued by other people 50%
 - Improved staff-student relationships 50%
- (Baginsky and Hannam, 1999:4)

The researcher made several observations. 'Making sensible rules', 'positive contributions to school life' and 'improving the school environment' seemed to be consistent with the factor of 'quality of relationship with school' on the theoretical model. The 'improving relationships between students' was incredibly high at 73%

and suggested that this was a significant outcome of the student involvement processes - this tallied with 'quality of relationship with peers' on the model. The statistics for the quality of relationships with teachers were interesting. 'Being taken notice of by staff' scored 73%, and yet 'improved staff-student relationships' only scored 50%. This suggested that there was a qualitative difference between feeling *heard*, and feeling that *relationships* had improved. This distinction might well have been the result of the student involvement processes being isolated to one aspect of school life - school council. In contrast, at the Sands and Small schools, the commitment to involving students was integrated into all aspects of school life. School processes as a whole were more congruent. Students felt heard, respected and equal in school council, but *also* in lessons, in meetings, during informal contact, social events, and one-to-one discussions with staff. Thus, the relationships with teachers were of a higher quality. This linked to a point made by Maitles and Deucher. They argued that schools struggled with the "*thorny issue*" of "*whether democracy can be developed in authoritarian structures*" (2006:251). By inference, they suggested that schools with a genuine commitment to pupil involvement needed to review all structures and processes to ensure that these were consistent with the citizenship agenda. In short, they argued for the importance of congruence between one process and another. This strongly reinforced points made throughout this research project.

The findings of one further study were worth describing (Mitra, 2004). This research argued that student participation led to marked growth in "*agency*", "*belonging*", and "*competence*" (2004:31). These outcomes clearly linked to the Sands and Small schools. *Agency* and *competence* were included within the phrase 'quality of relationship with self' in that they related to an individual's capacity to think and act for themselves. *Belonging* was linked to the sense of being part of something bigger - a community.

9.2.4 **Section summary**

A range of educational philosophies and theories have been explored in order to locate the Sands and Small schools within an educational context. Of particular note were the ideas of Dewey, Freire, Neill and Rogers which related to democracy, freedom and the person-centred approach to learning. Debates about the importance of school size have been explored and attention drawn to the *“characteristics of smallness”* (Haimendorf and Kestner, 2009) which appeared to make a considerable impact upon school outcomes. The emphasis upon the Citizenship Agenda has been outlined. Research linking participative approaches and important educational outcomes has been cited. It was reasonable to assume that the Sands and Small schools, which had been committed to involving students in decision-making since their inception, were likely to have achieved similar outcomes. This was reinforced by research data.

9.3 **Belonging – and being an individual**

Research at the Sands and Small schools indicated that students felt a sense of belonging – with the school, with the teachers, and with each other (“I fitted in here, more than I fitted in anywhere else”). Although the researcher did not make any direct causal link, it was posited that the quality of relationships with teachers, school, peers and self contributed to the development of this sense of belonging. In turn, it was suggested that a strong sense of belonging had positive consequences in terms of quality of the experience and an increased ability to learn. Teachers also felt a sense of belonging.

The researcher also argued that students felt accepted. They developed their own identities as individuals. The organisational cultures of both schools valued individuality (don’t be a sheep) and explicitly encouraged students to “be themselves”. The researcher suggested that the process of feeling accepted was

strongly influenced by the quality of relationships that students had with the school, teachers, peers and themselves.

Literature was sought which linked first, to belonging and second, to personal identity. Finally, the complex interplay between the two was explored.

9.3.1 *Belonging*

Belonging has been seen as important for human beings during all aspects of their lives. As far back as 1624, John Donne published the now famous phrase “*no man is an island*” (Donne, 1975, Meditation XVII). Human beings were interconnected and could only be understood in the context of relationships with one another. Kehily outlined this position:

Belonging is not an option for any of us - a sense of belonging is vital for our wellbeing (2007:173).

The significance of belonging, however, has taken on different emphases at various stages of human development. During childhood, children needed to feel they belonged with their families. By adolescence, they were becoming more independent, and feeling a sense of belonging *separate* from family was important (Johnson, 2009, Jones, 2009, Kehily, 2007). This project focussed on students aged over 14. This was precisely the age at which developing a sense of belonging outside of the family was expected to take on particular significance.

Exploration into the concept of ‘belonging’ in schools yielded a small but notable clutch of articles, mostly citing research conducted in the United States. One explanation for the recent interest in the topic related to the issue of increased alienation in schools, resulting in absenteeism, truancy, disruptive behaviour in class, and in extreme cases, violence towards teachers and classmates (Finn, 1989). These cases highlighted a concern with schools which operated as large, anonymous institutions in which students felt lost, withdrawn and insignificant.

Research into the impact of students experiencing a sense of belonging (also described as relatedness, connectedness, bonding, collegiality, feeling part of a community) has revealed overwhelmingly consistent findings. Students who felt a strong sense of belonging were more pro-social, less likely to be involved with bullying, more engaged in learning and more likely to attain better academic results. Conversely, research into alienation (described by Osterman, 2000, as the opposite of belonging) revealed a correlation with anti-social behaviour, disengagement and truancy. This was summarised as follows:

In recent years, a small but important literature on school belonging has emerged. Results of a variety of studies converge on the consistent finding that perceiving a sense of belonging or connectedness with one's school is related to positive academic, psychological, and behavioral outcomes during adolescence. Although different researchers operationalize and study belonging in various ways, there is a general consensus among a broad array of researchers that a perceived sense of belonging is a basic psychological need and that when this need is met, positive outcomes occur (Anderman, 2002:796).

The language used to describe belonging has varied. The phrase 'school bonding' described the attachment that students had to the institution itself and not just to the people within it (Finn, 1989, Maddox and Prinz, 2003). The words 'relatedness' (Furrer and Skinner, 2003) and 'connectedness' (Shochet et al., 2006) indicated the quality of relationships between students, teachers and peers. 'Collegiality' (Osterman, 2000) emphasised the dimension of relationships between peers. This was similar to 'fraternity' described by Dewey (see section 9.2.1). These terms all connected with the theoretical model, particularly relationships with school, with teachers and with peers.

Research into the importance of belonging was viewed through the lens of motivation theory, a body of literature which explored the human condition. One of the best known theorists was Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). He developed a hierarchy of needs with five layers. These were described as 1) physiological; 2) safety; 3) love and belongingness; 4) self-esteem; and 5) self-actualisation (1970:17). One criticism of Maslow related to the way in which he ordered his

hierarchy, and in particular, of the balance between pro-social needs (belonging, love) and individualistic needs (self-esteem, actualisation) (Hanley and Abell, 2002). The critique was that the model was based on Westernised, male assumptions about the importance of autonomous living, and thus did not take sufficient account of the importance of relatedness. The need for belonging, or love, it was argued, was not a stage that an individual ‘went through’ as part of the process of achieving self-actualisation. It was a valid end result in itself.

Another criticism connected to the positioning of belongingness. Maslow argued that *“if both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs”* (1970:20). This inferred that there was a systematic order to needs - that physiological and safety needs had to be met *before* love and belongingness became important. Recent developments in neuroscience have challenged this claim. In *Why Love Matters*, Sue Gerhardt gave a compelling summary of scientific data which indicated that relatedness was crucial to infant development. Rather than being a higher order need, she argued that:

We are shaped by other people as well as by what we breathe and eat. Both our physiological systems and our mental systems are developed in relationship with other people – and this happens most intensely and leaves its biggest mark in infancy (2004:10).

Gerhardt gave detailed information about brain development. She explained that the orbitofrontal cortex developed entirely post-natally and played a crucial role in emotional life, such as the ability to empathise, to identify and articulate feelings and to respond to other people’s emotional cues (2004:36). The orbitofrontal cortex developed not through food or warmth, but through learning from experience with other people - which meant through relationships. If these were absent, such as in documented cases of Romanian orphans who were fed and sheltered but had no human interaction, there was a *“virtual black hole”* where the orbitofrontal cortex should have been. The children struggled to develop relationships with others (2004:38). Longitudinal studies indicated that malnutrition or physical neglect could

be repaired with time, but the effects of the lack of emotional stimulation were long-lasting (Chugani et al., 2001).

These findings closely tallied with the work of attachment theorists. Attachment Theory was originally devised by John Bowlby (1907-1990) and Mary Ainsworth (1913 -1999). It was developed from studying the behaviour of young children with their mothers (or primary care-givers) (Bowlby, 1979, 1988). In essence, it argued that children formed “*attachment patterns*” in their early years which could either be “*secure attachment*” or “*insecure attachment*”. These referred to the ways that children responded to their care giver, indicating whether they felt confident that their physical and emotional needs would be fulfilled in the relationship. Bowlby outlined the pattern of secure attachment as one in which:

... the individual is confident that his parent (or parent figure) will be available, responsive, and helpful should he encounter adverse or frightening situations. With this assurance, he feels bold in his explorations of the world. This pattern is promoted by a parent, in the early years especially by mother, being readily available, sensitive to her child's signals, and lovingly responsive when he seeks protection and/or comfort (1988:124).

Attachment theorists argued that strong attachments provided a “*secure base*” for children. When they felt confident in their relationships, they felt freer to explore the world. Children with insecure attachments lacked this secure base and felt fearful about being left on their own. These attachment patterns were seen to “*characterize human beings from cradle to grave*” (Bowlby, 1979:129), which meant that they influenced the way the child behaved in relation to others throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. Numerous longitudinal studies have reinforced this claim (see Parkes et al., 1991).

Attachment theory and the research from neuroscience presented a challenge to Maslow. There was no debate about *whether* belonging was a need, but rather, the argument was about how important it was. Rather than viewing human needs as a hierarchy, they might more accurately be perceived as a complex web of

interconnection. The need for love and belonging were integral to the healthy development of a child. They were not a higher order need.

Baumeister and Leary were two psychologists who concurred that the need for belonging was crucial to human development. They expanded upon this in an article which described the 'belongingness hypothesis':

the belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships (1995:497).

According to the belongingness hypothesis, individuals "*must believe that the other cares about his or her welfare and likes (or loves) him or her*" (1995:500). The desire to feel a sense of belonging was so important, they argued, that it should be classified as a fundamental human need. The importance of satisfying this was crucial, and individuals engaged in "*goal-directed activity*" in order to ensure it was met; in other words, they changed their behaviour to achieve the outcome. Belonging was not an optional extra - it was essential to life. This hypothesis was used in the majority of research into the importance of school belonging and has proved a useful mechanism for explaining student behaviour.

In 1992, Goodenow published some of the earliest research about the importance of belonging in schools. It differed from previous research because she assessed students' attitudes to school from their *own personal experience* and frame of reference, as opposed to merely asking about the atmosphere in school. This clearly tallied with the approach used in this project. Goodenow argued that:

... there is a growing consensus that motivation is not purely a interpsychic state, but rather one which grows out of a complex web of social and personal relationships which can either support or inhibit academic participation ... A key element in all of these social processes is students' sense of psychological membership or belonging in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which they feel personally accepted, rejected, included and supported by others in the school social environment (April 1992:3).

This research was reinforced by other studies (Pittman and Richmond, 2007, Shochet et al., 2006, Wentzel, 1998). One of these was Johnson (2009), who undertook a comparative study between two schools. One school was specifically structured around meeting the developmental needs (including belonging needs) of adolescents. The other was a traditional school without these characteristics. The research indicated that students at the non-traditional school experienced increased levels of teacher support, felt more accepted, respected and included and felt higher levels of belongingness. Incidentally, the characteristics identified by Johnson about this school were extraordinarily similar to the organisational processes of Sands School in particular - school decisions were made democratically, curriculum was developed by teachers and students, classrooms were collaborative learning environments and lessons were not compulsory. The quality of relationships between teachers and students was deemed to be very good.

According to literature, having a sense of belonging improved the quality of the school experience for individual students, but it also had significant outcomes for the school. These included increased interest in school, higher commitment to work, higher expectations of success, lower levels of anxiety, increased autonomy and self-regulation, increased engagement and participation (Anderman, 2002, Osterman, 2000). There was also some evidence that a sense of belonging led to increased academic achievement, although the extent of this differed depending on the nature of the 'belonging'. Feeling a sense of relatedness to teachers and to the school as an entity were more influential than having strong connections with peers (Furrer and Skinner, 2003). This was because relationships with peers *could* have a positive impact on engagement in the classroom but also a negative one. This resonated with data from the Sands and Small schools.

The benefits to having good relationships with peers included reducing isolation and overcoming risks of alienation. If relationships in the classroom were positive, it made a difference to the quality of the learning environment, with classrooms being open places for discovery. Students who felt supported and liked also had

higher levels of self-esteem and motivation, which in turn, had positive effects upon achievement (Furrer and Skinner, 2003).

There was debate, nonetheless, as to whether relationships with peers made any measurable impact upon academic outcomes (Furrer and Skinner, 2003:150).

These relationships *could* have negative consequences. This was because belonging was a fundamental human drive, a need rather than a want. Students worked hard to have this satisfied - if they did not have their needs met at school, they would find other ways. Beck and Malley summarised this position:

... when students who are failing don't feel accepted in the mainstream, they tend to seek their "own sense of belongingness" in a context that is more antisocial. In other words, it is better to belong to an antisocial group than to no group at all (1998:134).

This provided some explanation for student behaviour such as truanting, joining gangs or conforming to negative peer pressure. Students were not lacking belonging as such; they lacked a feeling of belonging to their school (Goodenow and Grady, 1993:61). It was therefore crucial that students felt a sense of belonging to the *school as an entity*, and *to their teachers* and not just to peers. This matter was raised by the researcher when developing the theoretical model.

Literature also indicated that there were differences in terms of belonging and gender. In short, it appeared as if girls had a stronger desire to experience belongingness than boys. This was summarised by Osterman:

Girls had higher needs for affiliation, spent more time interacting with others, and enjoyed that time (2000:336).

The research data in this project did not indicate that the need for belonging was stronger for girls than boys. However, at Sands School, the majority of data had been gathered through one-to-one interviews; five out of six of these had been with girls. The school itself had an approximate 50:50 ratio in terms of gender. At The Small School the group-based interviews had involved six boys and six girls, but the school itself had a higher proportion of boys in its student population. The

views of girls were therefore over-represented in data. It was not possible to draw a conclusion as to whether the sense of belonging was stronger for either gender, or to separate gender from other significant student characteristics such as socio-economic background, age, previous academic experience and other issues such as having Aspergers. This was identified as a potential area for further research.

There was no definitive explanation in the literature as to why girls seemed to experience a greater need for belonging than boys. Although it might be argued that this was somehow biological or innate, a more compelling argument was connected to the societal expectations of males and females in terms of expressing emotion, and in particular, the assumption that boys were more emotionally self sufficient. This related to the social construction of gender (Alsop et al., 2002). This was backed up by Osterman who argued that:

Those boys with high needs for affiliation viewed themselves as feminine, and felt worse whether they were alone or with others than did boys with lower affiliation needs (2000:336).

Even if boys were less likely to express a desire for belongingness, the case remained that they were still affected by a lack of it. This manifested itself in different ways. Boys were more likely to experience “*externalizing behaviour problems*” such as alienation, aggression or ‘delinquency’. Girls were more likely to have “*internalizing behaviour problems*” such as depression and low self-esteem (Newman et al., 2007).

One way to overcome issues of alienation was for schools to focus upon forming stronger connections with students. This fitted with the “*secure base*” described in attachment theory. Although traditionally seen that parents or care-givers provided the secure base, it has been applied to school settings. Geddes argued that secondary schools in particular should be structured to provide a secure base for students (2006). The portrayal of school as a secure base was interesting. It suggested that students could feel a sense of attachment to their schools and not just to the individuals within it. This fitted with the theoretical model in terms of

students having a relationship with the school as an entity. Geddes offered a list of features which would be present in a school that provided a secure base. These were:

- respect for all pupils no matter what their skills and difficulties;
- a building which was safe and adequately supervised;
- empathy;
- predictable, reliable routines;
- fast response to absence;
- consistent roles and expectations framed around keeping pupils, staff and the building safe;
- familiar long-term relationships – pupils feeling 'known';
- modelling of good relationships between adults;
- informed reflection about incidents rather than reactivity;
- a disciplinary system which was fair to all (2006:140).

The Sands and Small schools exhibited many these characteristics – with one key difference between the two. This related to turnover of staff. Most staff at Sands School had been there for some years. Students had long relationships which developed over time. On the other hand, students at The Small School were not able to develop long-term supportive relationships with many teachers as the turnover was high and most staff were part-time or voluntary. Relationships with peers seemed stronger than those with staff. According to Geddes' criteria, therefore, Sands School might well classify as a secure base. The case for The Small School was weakened by the inconsistency of staff.

Characterising schools as a secure base was one way of seeing how schools might facilitate the development of belonging. If they could provide the security that students needed, then anxiety was lessened, and students were able to explore, develop and make mistakes. They could feel part of a community and be assured that the school would be there for them. It was important to realise, however, that schools were not able to guarantee that this would happen. As Kehily explained:

It is not simply in the power of professionals to 'give' young people a sense of belonging (2007:173).

This meant that teachers, or schools as a whole, could not *make* students feel that they belonged. This resonated with the research data. Developing a sense of belonging was a psychological process, one which schools could encourage but not control. The most they could do was to provide facilitative environments. This entailed taking some practical steps. A recurrent theme in literature was about the importance of actively involving students in decision-making and thus enabling them to feel a sense of ownership of their school (Kehily, 2007). Another was to reduce the size of schools so that students could feel part of a smaller community; one in which they were known, understood, and accepted as individuals (Anderman, 2002). Another was described as the “*pedagogy of belonging*”. This referred to the ways in which teaching and learning were organised and specifically, the nature of relationships between teachers and students:

... democratic values, social responsibility, and a sense of efficacy grow out of a person's sense of connectedness and one's identification with the community ... A pedagogy of belonging emphasizes the importance of the teacher-student relationship and actively involves all students in the life of the classroom and school community (Beck and Malley, 1998:135).

The description of the pedagogy of belonging was highly consistent with the teaching and learning processes at Sands School, and to a lesser extent, The Small School. The benefits of a smaller school size and of involving students in decision-making have already been explored (see 9.2), but the inclusion of these in research about belonging served to reinforce arguments already made - namely, that they encouraged a sense of ownership which had positive benefits upon student engagement, peer relations and learning outcomes.

9.3.2 *The development of personal identity*

Data indicated that students at the Sands and Small schools were grappling with questions of personal identity – ‘who am I?’ This was consistent with literature in that:

Adolescence seems to be a time, at least in many technologically advanced western cultures, when one is confronted with the problem of self-definition (Kroger, 1989:1).

Students used many descriptors for themselves including: "I am really full on"; "I was loud, gobby, arrogant"; "I'm quite a self motivated person". The frequency of these comments suggested that students were self-aware. They knew themselves, and by inference, they knew how they differed from others. In addition, students felt accepted as individuals, for their personalities, their opinions, and for the ways in which they chose to express themselves. This was summed up by the comment, "everybody fits in but in their own way." They felt accepted by others - and they welcomed diversity in others.

The process whereby students developed self-awareness and self-acceptance was not explicit but the researcher assumed that the organisational cultures of both schools contributed to this. This process was explored for two separate facets – first, how did students develop their own sense of self, and second, how did this relate to acceptance of others? It was acknowledged that family and other external factors might have contributed to the personal development of students but the specific nature of these influences was impossible to determine.

The notion of 'self-awareness' was described in a variety of ways in literature and was linked with 'self-understanding', 'self-image', 'self-concept' and 'identity'. Literature using all these terms was explored. The range of material was considerable, although as two researchers pointed out:

The literature on "self" has now reached gigantic proportions, and ... one may be inclined to describe it as a somewhat ill-disciplined field (Hansford and Hattie, 1982:123).

As a result of the size and nature of the literature, two key concepts were chosen which had particular relevance for this research project. These were Erikson's theory of 'identity crisis' and the definition of 'self-concept'. These will be explored, followed by a suggestion about how these linked to being accepting of others.

Erik Erikson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis* was published in 1968 but was referenced in much more recent publications, indicating that his ideas had become integrated within mainstream sociological thought (Baumeister et al., September 1985, Erikson, 1968). Erikson's central premise was that adolescence was a period of transition, where young people questioned the attitudes and values of their parents and started to forge their own identities. He suggested that most adolescents experienced an "*identity crisis*". Behaviour associated with these included dropping out of school, leaving jobs, withdrawing, becoming self-absorbed and self-obsessed (1968:130-33). There were a variety of ways of resolving identity crises, including assimilating an identity which had been prescribed by parents or other authority figures, or rejecting these and assuming new identities.

There were some questions to consider with relation to the Sands and Small schools. Was identity important within the schools? Was there any evidence that students were experiencing an 'identity crisis'? The first question was easily answered by using quotations from students at both schools:

[Sands School] If you look from one group to another, you can more or less recognise groups by like, just about recognise them by how they act, how they dress, how they speak

[The Small School] We can be really individual here, you don't have to follow anyone

This indicated that identity was important in both schools, but could it also be assumed that students had experienced identity crises? The students were of the age when, according to Erikson, they would have been expected to do so. One answer to this question related to the previous educational experiences of students. Students identified their schools as being different from mainstream or other schools. They also described *themselves* as different from other school students. It might reasonably be assumed that some students at least had had their 'identities' as learners, as students, challenged. This might have constituted an identity crisis. In addition, some individuals had been described as "mavericks" by staff. They were clearly questioning their personal identities which might conceivably have fallen into the category of an identity crisis. It was also

acknowledged that the notion of an identity crisis might *not* have fitted some students within the research cohort.

According to Baumeister et al, *"Little is known about how identity crises are resolved"* (September 1985:416). Literature implied, however, that adolescents needed to 'try out' different identities and search amongst alternatives (Orlofsky et al., Aug, 1973). A school environment which positively welcomed diversity therefore, could perhaps be seen as supportive of this process, as indicated by this quotation from one student at The Small School:

You can be individual here, and I mean different, in this school ... liking different music, wearing different clothes ... taste in reggae music instead of dance or techno or rock ...

Students also implied that their relationships with one another were not fixed in terms of their identity as a member of one particular group. They were friends with everyone, which must have made changing identities more possible. A student might have arrived at the school as a punk but moved away from this and towards something else.

Some individual students gave indications that they had questioned or changed their identities. One, for example, said:

When I first started coming here, I was you know, I was a little sheep, following the fashion, had to talk cool, know the latest words and have the latest CD or whatever, and since coming here now, I'm so chilled back and relaxed, my mum's like 'you're a completely different person'. It does change you a lot, coming to a school like this

There was acknowledgement that the schools had the capacity to "change them". This was not just in terms of behaviour and attitudes but also in the way that they felt about themselves. This could be seen as part of the process of the identity development of adolescents. They were in a period of transition where they were working out their ideas, attitudes and values and trying to construct their own place

in the world. It was at this point, where identity linked to the way that an individual felt about themselves, that the literature about 'self-concept' became relevant.

The term 'self-concept' described "*our perception of ourselves*" (Byrne, 1984:429). This was not the same as one's personality or the image that was conveyed to others. It was *personal* construct, an internal perspective on 'who am I?' Although intensely personal, it was not constructed in isolation:

The ingredients of self-concept are primarily social, obtained through countless interactions with persons, places, policies, programs, and processes. As a way of interpreting oneself, each individual attributes meaning to the acts of others (Purkey and Novak, 1996:26).

Given that students spent a considerable amount of time in a school environment, it was logical that "*Their experiences in school play a major role in determining what they think of themselves and their abilities*" (Purkey and Novak, 1996:27). The reason why this was important was because self-concept played a role in determining behaviour. The process was cyclical. Self-concept informed behaviour and behaviour further reinforced self-concept (Byrne, 1984). Self-concepts could be positive or negative, which meant that they could influence behaviour in positive or negative ways. A student who had a perception of themselves as a poor student would behave differently from one who had a self-concept about being self-motivated and hard-working. This linked in turn to self-esteem which was the "*evaluative component of the self-concept*" (Chiu, 1988:298).

Some educators focused on self-concept as a way of changing behaviour in schools (Purkey and Novak, 1996). The argument was that if students could be supported to develop a positive self-concept, it could have a significant impact upon their attitude to their own abilities, to engaging in school and ultimately to academic achievement. This would benefit the individual student, their peers, and the school as a whole. Before exploring the persuasiveness of this argument, it was important to consider another issue. The term 'academic self-concept' was used in literature. This made a distinction between the general facets of self-concept and the specific academic aspects (Byrne, 1984). At Sands School,

students described themselves as “very quiet”, “irritated quickly” and “very cocky”. These were indicators of general self-concept. At The Small School, one student used the phrase “we’re all just a bunch of dossers that don’t want to learn anything”. This gave a clear message as to academic self-concept. Making this distinction was important because some researchers argued that academic self-concept had a bigger influence over academic achievement than general self-concept.

The relationship between self-concept and academic achievement has been discussed at length (Brookover and Thomas, 1964, Calsyn and Kenny, 1977, Campbell, 1967, Caplin, 1969, Hansford and Hattie, 1982, House, 1993, Singh et al., 2008). Some of the earlier writers made clear statements about the positive correlation between the two factors, as illustrated by Caplin:

There was also a significant positive relationship between self concept and academic achievement. That is, those children having more positive self concepts had higher academic achievement (1969:13).

Most authors agreed that there was a correlation, but they differed in their interpretations of this. It was disputed whether self-concept had a direct impact upon academic achievement. The nature of the relationship as *causal* was questioned. Did students achieve in school because they had positive self concepts? Or did they have positive self concepts because of their achievements (Calsyn and Kenny, 1977, Hansford and Hattie, 1982)? Was it even possible that students could achieve academically and not have a positive self concept? This research project was unable to contribute to this debate as it did not set out to measure academic achievement. The theoretical model indicated that being accepted as an individual contributed to increased engagement in learning. It did not claim that this necessarily increased academic achievement.

Where the literature and the theoretical model did resonate, however, was on the issue of a positive self-concept in terms of engagement:

children who start off confident in their capacities engage with learning tasks in ways that lead to more success, thus reinforcing their initial optimism, whereas children low in efficacy tend to avoid challenges or engage in tasks so half-heartedly that they do not succeed, thereby cementing their initial self-doubts (Skinner et al., 2008:765-6).

Therefore, students with more positive self-concepts had higher levels of *engagement* in learning. This connected with increased motivation to learn. This engagement and motivation *might* improve academic achievement. This referred to the general self-concept and not just to the academic one. An example of how improved self-concept *might* have contributed to improved academic outcomes in Sands School was apparent in this student quotation:

I definitely don't think of myself as so much of a stupid idiot now ... now I come into school and be like, well, I've got an A in this subject before, why not do it again?

Beyond anecdotal quotations, it has not been possible to state whether students' perceptions of themselves (in terms of general or academic self-concept) had any notable impact upon academic achievement at these two schools. This would have required analysis of academic results, although even this would have only been useful if they could have been compared with predicted results in a different school.

A final issue was worth highlighting. The vast majority of literature on the impact of a positive self-concept was interested in academic achievement - and in this context, achievement meant grades. Researchers were interested in whether self-concept affected grades because if it did, then the energies of teachers could be re-orientated upon supporting students to develop positive self-concepts which would in turn lead to better grades. This emphasis originated from a specific educational philosophy which held that school was about academic achievement and that the way that this was measured was about grades. This will be further explored in 9.4.

Data indicated that students at the Sands and Small schools developed self-awareness but also that there were high levels of acceptance of one another. The researcher argued that these feelings of acceptance were particularly powerful for students. Rogers' theory of the fully-functioning person provided some explanation for how self-awareness might have been connected to the acceptance of others, because self-acceptance was connected to being less rigid and more pro-social (see 9.2.1). This was reinforced by others who argued that "*it is known that self acceptance precedes acceptance of others*" (VanKoughnett and Smith, 1969:253).

Jeffery Weeks offered an alternative perspective on this issue. In his writing about the formation of identity, he argued that:

The freedom to live your own life in the way you choose must imply an acceptance of others ways of life (1990:98).

This quote was particularly interesting in the context of this research as both schools had explicit commitments to freedom. This was mentioned by many students and by teachers. A.S. Neill also placed great emphasis upon freedom (section 9.2.1). The freedom to express oneself, to be individual and unique and to hold different ideas and opinions were welcomed by both schools as part of their implicit and explicit 'rules'. Having an acceptance of others and of difference was central to the values of both schools. It might reasonably be assumed, therefore, that these organisational cultures had an influence upon the experience of students at the schools.

9.3.3 *Interplay between belonging and personal identity*

The researcher argued that the need for belonging and the need to feel accepted as an individual were seemingly opposite and yet inextricably linked. This relationship between 'I' and 'We' was diagrammatically represented in Fig 4.5 and was seen as an important dynamic relationship. If students felt a greater sense of belonging (we) than they did individual identity (I), then they risked getting 'lost' in the crowd. If they felt a stronger sense of individuality (I) than they did belonging

(we), then their own needs, wants and desires would be prioritised above any sense of community.

Literature resonated with the stance that the concepts were interconnected. They were put together in numerous ways including attachment and separation (Gross, 1995), self and society (Billington et al., 1998) and intimacy and solitude (Dowrick, 1992). Andras Angyal used the phrases “*autonomy*” and “*homonomy*”:

The trend toward increased autonomy and the trend toward homonomy seem to form a dichotomy of diametrically opposed forces. The first trend is distinctly individualistic. It is a self-assertion of the organism, it tends to master and govern the environmental happenings, it aims at achievement and conquest. In the trend toward homonomy the emphasis is displaced from the individual to the collective, to superindividual wholes in which the person tends to submerge himself. The goals of the homonomous trends are sharing, participative, union (1972:173).

There were two key arguments which connected the two concepts. First, self-concept was formed *in relationship* with others and not in isolation. Developing an identity and a self-concept involved a process of differentiation whereby individuals answered questions such as ‘who am I?’ These could only be answered if there was a concept of ‘how am I different from others?’ For everyone, these processes began in childhood, when infants started to distinguish between where their mother ended and they began. This process of identity formation could not occur in a vacuum. It could only take place through relationship (VanKoughnett and Smith, 1969, Weeks, 1990).

The second argument was that a genuine sense of belonging could only develop if an individual had a strong sense of self. The stronger the self-acceptance, the more likely that acceptance would be offered to others (Rogers, 1980). Erikson specifically connected identity and intimacy:

It is only when identity formation is well on its way that true intimacy - which is really a counterpointing as well as a fusing of identities - is possible (Erikson, 1968:135).

Taken in combination, these two arguments meant that there was not a causal connection between belonging and the development of identity. They were connected in a cyclical way. Students needed to have a strong sense of identity and a positive self-concept in order to be able to feel that they belonged – but they could only develop these identities and self-concepts through their relationships with others.

9.3.4 *Section summary*

Literature on school belonging was explored in depth. The “*belongingness hypothesis*” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) was presented as a useful concept for understanding the significance of belonging. Research indicated that students who experienced a sense of belonging were more pro-social, more engaged in learning and less likely to be involved with bullying or disruptive behaviour. There was some evidence that they also attained better academic results, although this depended in part as to whether their sense of belonging was with peers, with teachers or with the school as an entity. This all resonated with the theoretical model. There were some indications that girls had a greater need for belonging. This did *not* correlate with data from the Sands and Small schools.

Literature also converged with the theoretical model in terms of the importance of identity formation in adolescence and the impact of a positive self concept upon engagement in learning. It was debatable whether this had any correlation with academic outcomes in particular.

An exploration of the connection between belonging and being accepted as an individual indicated that the two were inextricably linked. Belonging could not develop without a strong sense of identity. Self-concept could not develop in isolation. Students needed to feel ‘I’ and ‘We’.

9.4 Perceptions of Effectiveness

Data gathered during this project raised some important issues about the purpose of schooling. This was illustrated by these comments from students:

Sands means different things to every single person, you can't just, it's not, for some people it's about democracy, for some people it's just about the grades and they're just happier in a prettier place than they are in a concrete place (Sands School)

I think it's having fun but learning at the same time (The Small School)

There was consensus that getting GCSEs was important, but not at the expense of everything else. Students wanted to learn about themselves, to be part of a community, to have fun, to develop skills for managing in life and to develop as individuals. These were all important outcomes of education. This raised questions about how the quality of education should be assessed.

The academic debate about measuring school effectiveness has raged for three decades. It was not until the 1970s that there was widespread recognition that schools had an impact upon the life chances of young people. Until this point, it was broadly accepted that a child's family background, socio-economic situation and level of intelligence were pre-determinants to success (Harris and Bennett, 2001). By publishing *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, however, Rutter and his colleagues added to what was becoming a growing body of literature which changed these perceptions (1979). Their research demonstrated that schools of the same size and with similar intakes could have markedly different results. This led to an increased interest in discovering what schools could do to improve. The School Improvement Movement was born.

The School Improvement Movement tried to identify key characteristics of effective schools. Their interest was primarily in internal cultures and processes. The School Effectiveness Movement was slightly different as it attempted to find quantifiable methods for collating information which could be used to directly compare schools.

In England, these measures have included GCSE results and grades from SATS¹⁰, and the body responsible for inspecting schools and making judgements has been the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). It might be assumed that the School Improvement and School Effectiveness Movements worked in parallel. This was not always the case. At times they appeared to operate virtually independently of one another. At other stages they conflicted on underlying values. More recently, *“the voices calling for links between school effectiveness and school improvement have reached something of a chorus”* (Reynolds et al., 2000:216). For the purposes of this literature review, their contributions will be taken separately, with comments about the synergy between the two being reserved until the end.

9.4.1 School Effectiveness

In the first Prime Ministerial debate of the 2010 British General Election Campaign, an audience member asked this question:

I'm in my final year of school. I found that the system is incredibly grades-driven, so much so, that often education for its own sake is at sacrifice. We are over-examined and under-taught. What will the party leaders do to improve education?

The first person to answer the question was Gordon Brown, Prime Minister at the time. He said:

I want to see our education improve as it has done over the last few years ... As far as grades and standards are concerned, I myself believe in the highest of standards. I believe if we don't search for the highest of standards, then we will not in the end get the best pupils coming out of our schools (Brown, 15 April 2010).

Brown's response was indicative of the Government's attitude to education and to the maintenance of standards, and in particular, his conflation of *standards* with

¹⁰ SATS Tests were National Curriculum assessments. They were introduced in 1991, and were for students aged 7, 11 and 14. The tests for 14 year olds were withdrawn in 2009.

grades. The questioner had asked about education for its own sake; Brown did not specifically address this and nor did the other two party leaders. There appeared to be a political consensus that maintaining standards meant getting good grades.

The students from the Sands and Small schools gave a different impression. For them, 'standards' meant much more than this - it referred to the quality of learning in a wider sense. This position was summarised by one student:

I think school is always partly about, to me, as a person, it's partly about getting my exams and doing well and going on to the next level, but it's also part, I don't know, of learning I think when you're being a teenager, like high school and stuff is really important time to learn, and it's when you start to more become your individual self and decide who you want to be ... It's teaching you to be a person

The question of 'what is school for' underpinned the development of school effectiveness measures, yet assumptions and values were not always explicit (Slee et al., 1998). Alexander and Potter indicated that there were three broad camps within the educational field. There were traditionalists, who wanted good discipline and high academic standards, functionalists who emphasised skills and employability, and holists who were concerned with the whole person in terms of learning, community and society (2005). The problem with having three different perspectives was that when devising standards, the School Effectiveness Movement had to decide on what constituted 'good education':

Herein lies a fundamental problem of school effectiveness. What does it actually mean, and does it mean the same thing to different people? One simplistic definition of effectiveness is the production of a desired result or outcome. The question is, desired by whom? To arrive at a definition of a school as effective, people are forced to choose between competing values. What educators perceive as important outcomes of schooling may not coincide with views of pupils, parents, governors, the local community, government or the media (Stoll and Fink, 1996:26).

An initial review of literature suggested that the three main political parties and OFSTED itself were influenced primarily by traditionalist and functionalist arguments. The Sands and Small schools most clearly fitted within the holist camp.

It was predictable therefore, that judgements on the quality of education would be different.

Given the breadth and depth of literature on school effectiveness and school improvement, the focus of this review has been necessarily restricted. Issues about whether OFSTED provided value for money have not been discussed. There was no space for arguments about the quantity of paperwork which has been demanded from schools. There was not even room for debates about whether the inspections carried out by OFSTED led to improvements in school. All of these have been debated elsewhere (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2004, Slee et al., 1998, Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). Instead, this review has been limited to a discussion of the standards themselves.

One of the most frequent criticisms of school effectiveness measures was that they focussed too heavily upon academic achievement (Alexander and Potter, 2005, Brighouse and Woods, 1999, Harris and Bennett, 2001, MacBeath and Moos, 2004, Slee et al., 1998, Stoll and Fink, 1996, Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). In short, if schools achieved good GCSE and SATS results, they were seen as effective; if grades were poor, the schools were deficient. This was criticised for two key reasons. First, it was argued that the over-emphasis on academic qualifications had a negative rather than positive effect upon the quality of education, and second, this approach undervalued broader outcomes of personal and social development.

The first criticism hooked into the comments from the questioner at the Prime Ministerial debate; namely, that students were over-examined and under-taught. This echoed concerns of many educators, such as Gammage who argued that *"Nobody grew taller by being measured"* (Gammage in Meighan, 2004:27). This issue has been a major concern for teaching unions, culminating in the decision in May 2010 to boycott SATS tests for 11 year olds. They argued that SATS encouraged teachers to 'teach to the test' and that the quality of teaching and

learning suffered as a result. They wanted this system of testing to be replaced by more flexible assessments done by class teachers (Garner, 1 May 2010).

It was also argued that assessment systems such as SATS introduced an unhelpful sense of competition to students (Alexander and Potter, 2005). This view was reinforced by the Assessment Reform Group who argued that testing of this nature often did more harm than good as it damaged self-esteem of lower achievers and as such, put them at a double disadvantage. Being labelled as a failure affected their motivation and confidence to succeed at other points in their education. The confidence of students who did well in tests increased, thus creating a gap between the two (Assessment Reform Group, 2002).

Another criticism was that schools focussed their attention on students who were most likely to attain good grades. This was described as a 'triage system', meaning that decisions were made as to how best to prioritise resources. This was to the detriment of students who were below or above this point, as Wrigley explained:

Internally, schools are being driven to identify those animals which will fatten up best. The pressure of league tables, official accountability measures and high-stakes testing lead them to give special attention to pupils who are just below a key threshold (e.g. grade C or level 4) (2003:69).

In summary, far from being a measure of effectiveness, the over-emphasis on academic achievement skewed the focus of schools. They worked on achieving outputs rather than outcomes (Fitz-Gibbons and Kochan, 2000:263). They 'taught to the test' and they prioritised resources towards students who were most likely to achieve. It also introduced levels of pressure and of competitiveness which were unhelpful for student confidence and self-esteem.

The other key criticism about focussing upon academic achievement was that broader outcomes were missed. It was argued that "*Academic qualifications are crucial, but they are not enough*" (Wrigley, 2003:28), which concurred with the views of students at the Sands and Small schools. They wanted to get good grades, but not at the exclusion of everything else. Other things were important

too, such as the development of confidence and self-esteem, skills about living together as a community and personal and social development. These all connected to the Citizenship Agenda (see 9.2.3). To take these wider educational outcomes into account indicated that there should be ways of recognising and even measuring these.

In fairness to OFSTED, they at no point stated that GCSE results were all that mattered. In 1995, they commissioned *Key Characteristics of Effective Schools*. This publication listed eleven factors which contributed to school effectiveness, including “*shared vision and goals*”, “*concentration on teaching and learning*”, “*positive reinforcement*” and “*pupil rights and responsibilities*” (Sammons et al., 1995:8). None of the points specifically mentioned academic achievement even though it was clearly integrated within several. However, even if it was not OFSTED’s only goal, it could be argued that the way they sought to find comparable measures has contributed towards a culture where the results of formal assessments and examinations have taken priority. The effectiveness of schools in terms of supporting students to develop as individuals, or to contribute to their communities in constructive ways, has been harder to quantify.

Where OFSTED could be criticised was in the interpretation of their own criteria. They claimed to be neutral and value-free, implying that schools were inspected by a detached and objective observer:

The inspection of a school provides an independent external evaluation of its effectiveness and a diagnosis of what it should do to improve, based upon a range of evidence including that from first-hand observation (2010:4).

One of their criteria was about teaching and learning. In their inspection visits, they gathered information to help them make judgments. The criticism came when the way they assessed this was neither neutral nor value-free, but instead was constrained by their own interpretation of education. The case of a Summerhill School Inspection and the resulting court case highlighted this:

At the heart of the court case was the effectiveness question. Is effectiveness judged by how well a school meets its own aims and values or by a standardised (some might say 'political') definition of 'effectiveness'? (MacBeath, 2004:38)

The case will be explored as a way of illustrating this concern.

9.4.1.1 Summerhill School and OFSTED

The repercussions from OFSTED's visit to Summerhill School in 1999 made legal history. Unbeknown to the school, Summerhill had been on OFSTED's 'TBW' (To Be Watched) list for several years, an indication that Inspectors had prior concerns about the school. The inspection visit lasted five days, used seven Inspectors, and resulted in a report which was unfavourable to Summerhill. In particular, it was critical of the way in which teaching and learning were organised. OFSTED argued that the curriculum was fragmented, disjointed and narrow, and that the *"root cause of the defects is non-attendance at lessons"* (Carvel, 26 May 1999). A Notice of Complaint was issued which insisted that Summerhill address these issues. If they did not satisfactorily comply, Summerhill would lose its status as a school and be forced to close. Summerhill had a choice: to change its fundamental principles or to fight the judgement. They raised over £130,000 and in March 2000, took the Government to an Independent Schools Tribunal at the Royal Courts of Justice, London (Vaughan, 2006).

In court, OFSTED claimed that it was not challenging the educational philosophies of A.S Neill or of Summerhill School, but this was contested. Since its inception in 1921, Summerhill had been guided by the principle of freedom and this meant that lessons were optional. Children were free to choose what, when and how they wanted to learn. OFSTED claimed that this negatively affected the quality of teaching and learning but Summerhill argued the opposite. Their students attained results in GCSE exams which were higher than the national average. They claimed that when children *chose* to attend lessons, the quality of learning increased as they were ready to engage. In addition, Summerhill argued that the conflation of

lessons with learning was unfair. OFSTED's judgements were based on their observations of lessons, which was an indication of their narrow interpretation of 'learning'. At Summerhill, learning took place in the School Meeting, during informal interactions between teachers and students, and in every way that students engaged with one another. OFSTED did not take any of this into account. Being part of the community of Summerhill was learning in itself and this could not be measured through observation of lessons

The criticism of the OFSTED Inspectors was that they judged Summerhill on criteria which were not appropriate to the school. The school had never placed particular value upon formal lessons. This point was made by Zoe Readhead (Head Teacher) in 1997, two years before the infamous Inspection even took place:

... the inspectors are missing the point - judging and failing the school on conventional criteria that it was never trying to meet in the first place (Gardiner, 31 October, 1997).

The court case in 2000 was the time to settle this issue. Was OFSTED's judgment correct or was Summerhill right? In the event, a judgement was never reached. After three days, the Government made an offer to settle out of court. Readhead, unable to make a decision on behalf of the school, insisted that a School Meeting be called. The meeting, held in the court chambers, made a unanimous decision to accept the settlement. In practice, this meant that Summerhill dropped its action against the Government. In return, they had a guarantee that the Notice of Complaint would be withdrawn. It was also taken off the TBW list. The school hailed the outcome as a "*triumph*", claiming that:

This is our charter for freedom ... After 79 years, this is the first official recognition that AS Neill's philosophy of education provides an acceptable alternative to compulsory lessons and the tyranny of compulsory exams. With this one bound, we are free at last (Wells, 23 March 2000).

The school achieved one more concession. According to the Times Educational Supplement:

In March 2000 the school also extracted a legally binding agreement from the DFES: any future inspection had to take into account the aims of Summerhill and "the pupils' voice should be fully represented in any evaluation of the quality of education" (Shaw, 12 July, 2002).

When Summerhill was inspected in 2005, OFSTED Inspectors were accompanied by an independent expert. This person was selected by Summerhill, and was armed with the task of making sure that Inspectors took the educational philosophy of the school into account. This time, the report was positive:

"Pupils' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is outstanding," the inspectors conclude in their first full inspection report since 1999 ... Students are "courteous, polite and considerate", make "good progress" and are "well-rounded, confident and mature" when they leave (Shepherd, 1 December 2007).

With direct reference to learning, the wording of the report itself made clear that the educational philosophy of Summerhill had been understood, for example:

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory. It is relevant to the needs of pupils, with an appropriate emphasis on developing literacy and numeracy skills. The personal, social and health education curriculum *which permeates the life of the school* meets pupils' needs adequately (OFSTED, November 2007:2, emphasis added).

The Summerhill case made legal history, and was even discussed in the House of Lords (House of Lords Questions, Wednesday, 30th June 1999. 2.30pm). This was indicative of the prominent reputation of the school. Indeed, the fact that Summerhill managed to raise £130,000 in such a short time illustrated something about its unique position within the English education system. It was unlikely that another school which was unhappy with its OFSTED Report would command this attention. For this reason, the lessons learned through this case should be considered seriously as they shed light upon the role of OFSTED in relation to all schools.

9.4.2 *School Improvement*

One of the aims of the School Improvement Movement was to identify reasons *why* some schools performed better than others. This was different from school effectiveness, as explained by Harris:

School effectiveness typically focusses upon outcome measurement while school improvement is more concerned with internal process change (2001:21).

In the context of this project, the focus on internal process change was interesting. The theoretical model offered a particular perspective about internal school processes such as relationships between teachers and students and relationships between students and their school. Literature regarding the connections between these processes and democratic education, person-centred learning and school size has already been explored. The question to address therefore was: did the theoretical model resonate with the ideas of the School Improvement movement?

In 2009, OFSTED published a report about twelve schools which it classed as 'outstanding'. It explained that "*The schools described here show that excellence does not happen by chance*" (2009:2). These schools worked in challenging areas and the report aimed to identify common characteristics. The intention was to support other schools to learn from these:

- 1) They excel at what they do, not just occasionally but for a high proportion of the time
- 2) They prove constantly that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, that speaking English as an additional language can support academic success and that schools really can be learning communities
- 3) They put students first, invest in their staff and nurture their communities
- 4) They have strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently and never relaxed
- 5) They fulfil individual potential through providing outstanding teaching, rich opportunities for learning, and encouragement and support for each student

- 6) They are highly inclusive, having complete regard for the educational progress, personal development and well-being of every student
- 7) Their achievements do not happen by chance, but by highly reflective, carefully planned and implemented strategies which serve these schools well in meeting the many challenges which obstruct the path to success
- 8) They operate with a very high degree of internal consistency
- 9) They are constantly looking for ways to improve further
- 10) They have outstanding and well-distributed leadership
(OFSTED, 2009:6)

Four issues were worth exploring. First, the references to consistency (4, 8) resonated with congruence of structure and process which were highlighted at Sands School. Second, putting students first and being highly inclusive (3, 5, 6) were key features of the Sands and Small schools. Third, the development of communities (2, 3) was important to both schools in this study. Finally, the statement of distributed leadership (10) linked with sharing power, which was central to democratic education.

The first issue was resolved with further reading of the document. With reference to Sands School, the word 'congruence' was used to describe the consistency between values, actions, policies, behaviours, structures and processes. For example, "we treat everyone equally" was seen to filter through everything. Students trusted what they heard because it was reflected in their experiences. For OFSTED, 'consistency' meant something different. It referred to the importance of *uniformity* in how staff behaved:

One of the hallmarks of very good or outstanding schools is a high degree of consistency in approaches and responses, regardless of which staff member is involved (2009:19).

An example was given in relation to teaching and learning in one school. Teachers were expected to follow precise guidelines to ensure that they behaved the same as one another. Students were to have identical experiences in every classroom (2009:20). At the Sands and Small schools, lessons varied enormously: the classrooms were different; the approach to teaching changed with the personality

of staff. Congruence was not about uniformity of approach. It was about values. One of these was to recognise and appreciate individuality. Students were able to have genuine relationships with staff precisely because they understood that they were different from one another, not because they were the same.

The second issue of putting students first and being highly inclusive had more overlap with the Sands and Small schools:

All the outstanding schools have high regard for the needs, interests and concerns of each individual student. They are highly inclusive schools. They talk to students individually and collectively, listen to their points of view and consult them constantly (2009:27).

On the surface, this sounded similar to the approaches of the two schools in this study. A key difference was revealed through looking at case studies. One outstanding school explained that it:

... will not include students who have shaven heads or emblematic patterns in their hair, trainers which bear brand marks and conspicuous designs and other manifestations of group or gang culture (2009:19).

Given concerns about students getting involved with gangs, these rules were understandable. This school was also based in an urban setting which presumably gave it different concerns from rural ones - nonetheless, the statement also indicated that the values of the school were different from those of the Sands and Small schools. All of the schools in the report had strong work ethics. They wanted students to take their studies seriously; to work hard; to achieve. Anything in terms of behaviour which challenged these norms, such as shaven heads, was unacceptable. The schools were inclusive insofar as it was clear that students were at school to work and to achieve. They were not inclusive per se. The Sands and Small schools, on the other hand, came from a holistic view of education. They valued individuality and welcomed the expression of that individuality. They did not just accept students as academic beings, but as whole beings. This was a much wider view of inclusion.

The development of learning communities was the third issue to explore. The Sands and Small schools were inter-generational communities. Teachers and students had strong interpersonal relationships. Students learned from and with each other. The roles of students-as-learners and teachers-as-experts were frequently reversed through the collaborative teaching and learning styles. The word 'community' was viewed in its broadest sense.

Apart from mentioning the importance of a 'learning community' in the characteristics of outstanding schools, the OFSTED publication gave no further explanation as to what this meant. The phrase 'school community' was used frequently, but there was no suggestion that this meant school as a community, like it so clearly did for the Sands and Small schools. The researcher assumed therefore, that the phrase 'learning community' referred to schools as collections of learners, rather than the specific meaning ascribed by the Sands and Small schools. The overlap between the ways the phrase was applied was therefore perceived as small.

The final issue was that of 'outstanding and well-distributed leadership'. The report stated that:

All the schools have strong leadership teams and a large measure of distributed leadership. All the headteachers place a strong emphasis on creating effective leadership at all levels through their schools (2009:20).

Developing the quality of leadership in schools has been a major preoccupation of the School Improvement movement for several years, as indicated by the creation of the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services. They offered professional development opportunities for individuals in leadership roles, particularly Head Teachers and senior management teams (NCSL, 2010). The interesting dilemma in the context of this research project was that Sands School had no Head Teacher - and if there was no Head, who led the school?

Sands School had a very clear ethos, set of values, and a coherent way of putting these into practice. Issues which arose, such as students breaking rules, were dealt with quickly and effectively. This suggested that leadership was strong. But how did it take place? Decision-making processes were centred on the School Meeting. All decisions were based on one-person-one-vote which meant every individual contributed towards leadership of the school. Some roles and responsibilities were passed on to particular sub-groups such as the School Council. In laymen's terms, then, leadership seemed genuinely distributed.

Distributed leadership as a theoretical concept, however, meant something different. It did not mean that leadership was shared amongst all members of a school community. It meant that leadership was distributed amongst a senior management team or to staff more generally. It was a way of ensuring that Head Teachers did not get overloaded, but instead, shared leadership responsibilities with those best placed to carry them out (Harris, 2004, Timperley, 2005).

Although Sands School distributed leadership functions throughout the school, it was perhaps more appropriate to describe its leadership style as democratic. Philip Woods argued that these concepts should not be conflated. They were significantly different for one main reason - democratic leadership was based on conviction:

Democratic leadership could be seen as simply another way of referring to distributed leadership. But it should not be seen that way. One of the implications for school leaders is that they need to protect and promote the ideas, concepts and values of democracy in the language of education (Woods, 2004:22).

It was *values* which differentiated democratic leadership from distributed leadership. Democratic leadership was a principled stance which sought to create institutions which offered the best environments for people to learn and to develop. This meant that schools aimed to involve people; staff *and* students. Distributed leadership did not share this aim.

It seemed from initial analysis that the Sands and Small schools possessed certain characteristics of outstanding schools: a commitment to consistency, to putting students first, to being learning communities and to distributed leadership. However, further exploration of these concepts revealed that they were open to widely differing interpretations. 'Consistency' could mean rigid uniformity, or it could mean congruence in thoughts, actions and policies. 'A learning community' could mean a commitment to developing egalitarian inter-generational groups, or it could simply mean a group of learners. 'Distributed leadership' could indicate a sharing of tasks amongst senior managers, or a wider commitment to democratic decision-making. In terms of whether these characteristics had any overlap with the theoretical model presented in this research, these differing interpretations were problematic. There seemed to be no undisputable areas of resonance between the two.

There were some proponents of School Improvement, however, who expressed ideas which converged more closely with the theoretical model. These were explored in some depth. They fell into two main categories: those explicitly connected to the importance of relationships, and those advocating a particular climate and ethos.

9.4.2.1 The role of relationships

Using evidence from the Boston Pilot Schools in the United States, James Wetz proposed a new model for education, based on offering smaller and more personalised learning. He argued that:

... a focus on relationships [is] absolutely central for successful schooling. At first sight this may sound simplistic, but its implications are transformational (2009:43).

This view was reinforced by several School Improvement researchers (MacBeath and Moos, 2004, Trafford, 1997). David Reynolds in particular focussed upon the

importance of relationships (Gray et al., 1996, Reynolds, 2001, Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992, Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). He argued that:

... a new area of study has emerged in both school effectiveness and school improvement research over the past few years: the study of the relationship patterns that exist within staff groups and within student groups. This relational component constitutes the third dimension of schooling, joining the more frequently studied organizational and cultural components (Reynolds, 2001:37-8).

Within research about *ineffective* schooling, the quality of relationships was highlighted as a key feature. Dysfunctional relationships between staff were identified as having a significant negative impact on outcomes (Gray et al., 1996:154). Stoll and Fink made reference to the damaging effect of low levels of teacher-pupil interaction and pupil perceptions of teachers as people who did not care (1996:35). This suggested that the *absence* of good quality relationships was harmful to educational outcomes.

With reference to self-esteem, the Assessment Reform Group (2002) argued that self-esteem was an outcome of academic achievement *and* a factor in determining motivation to undertake further learning. This meant that there was no clear cause-and-effect; it was a cyclical process, but nonetheless, the levels of students' self-esteem were crucial. Self-esteem was developed, as has already been discussed, through relationships (see 9.3.3).

These references to the importance of relationships connected with the theoretical model. Reynolds emphasised the relationships *between* staff and *between* students - the theoretical model took this further. The researcher argued that relationships between staff and students, between students, between students and their school as an entity, and between students and their own selves were contributory factors to successful engagement in learning. In addition, Mortimore et al (1989) drew attention to the importance of school belonging in terms of school effectiveness. This too was a central feature of the theoretical model.

9.4.2.2 Developing cultures for learning

Some School Improvement researchers wrote about organisational *cultures* as well as structures (Brighouse and Woods, 1999, Harris and Bennett, 2001, Wrigley, 2003). They identified characteristics which appeared significant in terms of learning. The importance of this was outlined by Reynolds and Cuttance:

School improvement ... must deal with the culture of schools, as well as with their structures. It must concern itself with the informal world of the school, as well as with the formal world. It must concern itself with the deep values, relationships and interpersonal processes, as well as with the world of behaviour (1992:192).

The connection between this argument and this research project was obvious. Students and staff paid great attention to describing the organisational values, cultures and ethos within their particular schools. These were key ingredients of the school identities.

Stoll and Fink described the challenge to understand school cultures as a “*culture puzzle*”. They identified a list of cultural norms which influenced school improvement, all of which connected with how people related to and valued each other. They included: shared goals; risk taking; support; mutual respect; openness; celebration and humour (1996:92). Brighouse and Woods studied successful inner-city schools and highlighted the importance of having a climate of respect (1999:10). Wrigley argued for a culture of empowerment to replace traditional mechanisms of top-down control (2003:4). All of these were comparable with the organisational cultures of the two schools in this study - and all were directly relatable to the theoretical model in terms of relationships with teachers, with the school as an entity, with peers and with self.

9.4.3 *Connections between School Effectiveness and School Improvement*

The connection between the School Effectiveness and School Improvement Movements was summarised by Fidler:

The basic, often unstated, assumption between the two paradigms is that if school effectiveness research can identify the features which make a school successful then school improvement research can provide a means by which these features could be put in place and all schools could be made effective (2001:47).

This only made sense if the two movements had the same values about 'effectiveness'. As has already been seen, this was not always the case. The School Improvement Movement's arguments for the importance of relationships and for developing particular cultures, for example, were not necessarily consistent with the School Effectiveness focus on academic achievement.

The additional problem was that it was impossible to discover a clear causal relationship between *x* and *y*. Did the characteristics identified by the School Effectiveness and School Improvement Movements necessarily lead to improved outcomes (Elliott, 1996)? How could schools be sure, for example, that changing structures and processes would improve outcomes? This assumed a linear relationship which fitted with the metaphor of the organisation as machine. If schools were machines, then it was possible to change one component and be sure as to the effect on the rest of the machine (Morgan, 1997, Shafritz et al., 2005). Schools, however, were not mechanistic and teachers were not technicians. Schools relied on people to make them work, their 'products' were also people. This made them complex systems. Schools differed depending on the context, the size, the intake, the staff team and the educational philosophy. The precise cause of one particular outcome could not be reliably identified. The metaphors of organisations as organisms or brains were more applicable to the education context (McMillan, 2004, Morgan, 1997). The validity of a step-by-step approach to improvement has thus been undermined, as has the suggestion that characteristics

from one school could simply be transplanted onto another. This was crucial in the context of this project. The researcher could not assume that the experiences of students at the Sands and Small schools could necessarily be replicated elsewhere. The schools had their own specific contexts. This is discussed in more depth in terms of the wider applicability of the theoretical model (see 10.6).

9.4.4 *OFSTED Reports from Sands and Small Schools*

As part of the literature review, OFSTED reports for the Sands and Small schools were studied. This was a way of discovering whether assessments made by OFSTED correlated with the research data. There was a word of warning. This research set out to learn from students' experiences. It was not a study of effectiveness of either school. The purpose of the researcher's visits and OFSTED Inspections were different. A range of information was available to both but the information was not the same. For example, OFSTED Inspectors would not have spoken to students in the same depth as the researcher. The researcher did not analyse the information available to OFSTED, such as GCSE results.

The most recent OFSTED Report for Sands School was published in March 2010. The following passage was an extraction of key features of the report:

Sands School provides a good quality of education with some outstanding features ... Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding, as is their behaviour. The school's curriculum is good and students make good progress as a result of the good teaching and assessment ... A high proportion of the lessons are generally good in quality, and there are examples of outstanding teaching ... Students' motivation to learn is strong ... The school provides students with many opportunities during the school week to develop their learning beyond formal lesson times ... The school's successful philosophical approach to developing trusting and respectful relationships between all members of the school community encourages a highly reflective and positive ethos where nearly all students thoroughly enjoy their school life. Their behaviour both around the school, and especially in lessons, is outstanding ... Students make an exceptional and exemplary contribution to the school community ... The school's strong focus on developing students' skills and attitudes towards working with each other, tolerating difference and becoming

involved in community events provides a rich and rewarding range of experiences which prepare them very well for their adult lives and economic well-being ... Students and staff work together harmoniously and productively (OFSTED, March 2010).

At the end of the report, the quality of education was assessed as **good**. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development was **outstanding**. Areas for improvement suggested that some teachers should reduce the amount of time that they spoke, thus giving more opportunities for students to participate.

The Small School OFSTED Inspection was carried out in September 2008:

The Small School is a distinctive school, which provides a satisfactory quality of education and has had significant success in enabling its students to engage in learning and increase in confidence ... Students benefit from small group teaching, which provides well for their individual needs, enabling them to make satisfactory or better progress through a varied curriculum ... The school has many good features, for example it has had considerable success with some of the students who have not thrived at other schools and are now experiencing success, interacting well with their peers. Relationships are good at all levels with an atmosphere of mutual respect between adults and students ... The students' behaviour is generally good ... The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is good. The school's strong emphasis on treating students as individuals is evident in the way it successfully promotes their self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence by carefully tailoring the curriculum to match their interests and needs ... Many parents are actively involved in the school with a variety of tasks ... However, many were concerned about the high staff turnover and some felt that they were not kept sufficiently informed about their children's progress (OFSTED, September 2008).

There were some concerns. These included legal issues such as complying with the Disability Discrimination Act, but also curriculum issues like ensuring that new staff members were given adequate information about prior learning and attainment. Overall the quality of education was rated as **satisfactory** and the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development was **good**.

Despite the fact that the researcher and OFSTED had different purposes, the researcher was struck by the convergence between the observations of Inspectors

and her own. What was distinct though, was the emphasis placed upon particular characteristics. The OFSTED reports mentioned the quality of relationships between teachers and students and between peers, but the researcher also specified the relationships between students and the school as an entity, between students and their own selves, and the importance of belonging and acceptance. None of this was alluded to by OFSTED. Conversely, OFSTED made specific observations about student behaviour and judged this as either “*outstanding*” or “*generally good*”. The researcher made observations about behaviour, but saw this as a lens through which to assess the quality of relationships. Also, OFSTED commented on the school’s compliance with specific laws and guidance whereas the researcher did not.

9.4.5 *Section summary*

Perceptions of effectiveness have been analysed. An overview of School Effectiveness measures has been given and a critique offered as to the appropriateness of using systems which focussed primarily on academic achievement. This fitted with the “*holistic*” school of thought which appeared to influence the Sands and Small schools (Alexander and Potter, 2005). Information on Summerhill’s challenge to their OFSTED report was given as a way of illustrating the different ways in which ‘quality’ could be interpreted and assessed. Debates from the School Improvement movement have been explored with a view to finding areas of similarity between their arguments and the theoretical model. Two key areas were identified - the role of relationships and the development of particular organisational cultures. An analysis of the OFSTED reports of the Sands and Small schools has been given.

The theoretical model which has been developed through this research project presented an alternative perspective on the characteristics of effective schools. In short, it proposed that more prominence be given to assessing the quality of relationships between teachers and students, between students, between students and the school as an entity, and between students and their own selves. It was

argued that these influenced the sense of belonging and the feelings of being accepted as an individual, both of which contributed to improved school outcomes.

9.5 Concluding Comments

One key thread has run throughout this literature review. This thread stressed the importance of good relationships within education:

1. A democratic approach to learning enabled students and teachers to work together to create the learning environment. This improved relationships between teachers and students but also between students. In addition, it emphasised critical thinking which supported students to be confident and autonomous (Dewey, 2004);
2. The “*banking concept of education*” was criticised by Freire who posited that a new dynamic of “*student-teachers and teacher-students*” could offer conditions whereby education could be liberating and fulfilling for all. These new relationships were based on equality, trust and a profound desire to use education as a liberating force (Freire, 1970);
3. The person-centred approach to education had as its tenet the importance of three facilitator conditions – congruence, empathy and unconditionality. The ‘teacher’ was ‘facilitator’ in an equal power relationship where students were trusted to make decisions about learning. The outcome of this type of learning was the development of a “*fully functioning person*” who was open and non-defensive (Rogers, 1980);
4. Freedom was seen as individual *and* social. Being in relationships with others gave a context to this freedom, and meant that people moderated their own behaviour (Neill, 1985);

5. The small size of schools was not enough in itself (Tasker, 2003). Rather, the “*characteristics of smallness*” were identified as more important - namely, school communities needed to feel small enough for relationships to form (Haimendorf and Kestner, 2009). Social groups needed to include adults as well as students (Meier, 1996);
6. The “*ladder of participation*” was a way of assessing how genuinely students were involved in decision-making within schools - both in the classroom and through school and class councils (Hart, 1992). Data suggested that the more equal the relationships between staff and students, the more effective these processes were. Power imbalances which reinforced ‘them and us’ needed to be changed into a more collaborative approach;
7. Attachment Theory indicated that the formation of strong bonds between caregivers and children in early childhood were crucial in order for children to experience a “*secure base*” from which to explore the world (Bowlby, 1988). Neuroscience reinforced the importance of relationships in terms of developing parts of the brain that processed emotion (Gerhardt, 2004). Schools could be structured in such a way as to provide a ‘secure base’ for students - this entailed the development and maintenance of trusting relationships (Geddes, 2006);
8. The “*belongingness hypothesis*” posited that having a sense of belonging was a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). A sense of belonging was developed through the structures and processes (including size) of schools, and through the types of relationships they fostered;
9. The development of personal identity and self-concept were seen as crucial during adolescence (Erikson, 1968, Purkey and Novak, 1996). These were formed in relationship with others, Students needed a sense of ‘we’ in order to develop a sense of ‘I’;

10. The literature on school effectiveness and improvement identified the characteristics of successful schools. Much of this was criticised for its narrow focus on academic outcomes (Alexander and Potter, 2005, Wrigley, 2003) Some educators argued that relationships and organisational culture were at the heart of learning and thus, by inference, should be used as a measure of effectiveness (Reynolds, 2001, Wetz, 2009).

This key thread – relationships at the heart of learning – resonated with the theoretical model that was developed through this research. The model was thus firmly situated within an existing body of literature. What was interesting to note, however, was that the way in which this model was conceptualised was unique. Educators wrote books and articles from one particular area of interest: democracy; freedom; person-centred education; size; belonging; identity; school effectiveness. Occasionally, literature combined two or three of these, such as size and belonging (Tasker, 2003) or democracy and effectiveness (MacBeath and Moos, 2004) - but the researcher found nothing which cut across all of these areas.

It was with this in mind that questions as to originality of the theoretical model, and the quality of the research project could now be considered.

Chapter 10

Reflections and Conclusions

10.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis will include some looking back and some looking forward. A modified version of the theoretical model will be presented, followed by a table showing how this theory resonated with existing literature. Ways in which this research might be considered original will be offered, as will an exploration of how it might be assessed in terms of quality and rigour. Limitations will be stated and possible areas for future research will be suggested. The chapter concludes with a series of “*fuzzy generalizations*” (Bassey, 1999) which relate to how the findings from this project might be applicable in wider contexts.

Grounded theory was selected as the methodology for this project. This guided the whole process from the initial selection of cases, the choice of methods for data collection and analysis, the emphasis upon generating theory and the purpose of the literature review (see Chapter 2). For now, it felt sufficient to re-cap that grounded theorists were committed to ensuring that data were paramount rather than working from a pre-existing theory or hypothesis. The role of the researcher was to be open to what was happening in the field and as far as possible to not have (or to put aside) any pre-conceived ideas. This did not mean naively heading into a research setting (as this might have meant missing some important things), but it did mean having “*an open mind*” rather than “*an empty head*” (Dey, 2007:176). It was important for the researcher to be transparent about research processes so that the reader could assess how far they were convinced that the researcher had managed to do this.

Grounded theory methodology meant that gathering and analysis of data came *before* a comprehensive review of literature. Existing literature has been examined and the process of identifying ways in which this has resonated with the theoretical model has already begun. This chapter will go further by presenting a table (Table 10.1) which highlights key points of the theoretical model and connects these to data and to literature. The theory that has been generated through this research does have some connections with literature but it also creates a new position. This will be outlined.

The key principle of grounded theory was that any theory generated through the research process was thoroughly grounded in data. This did not just mean that data needed to be found which could support a theory – it meant that theory had to be generated *through* data. Taking a constructivist stance to grounded theory meant that the existence of multiple realities could be acknowledged. If students had been interviewed on a different day, or by another researcher, then data might have varied. Of course, this did not mean that research findings were entirely at the whim of the researcher. Qualitative data could be assessed in terms of its trustworthiness (Guba, 1981, Guba and Lincoln, 1994) and this project will be examined in the light of this.

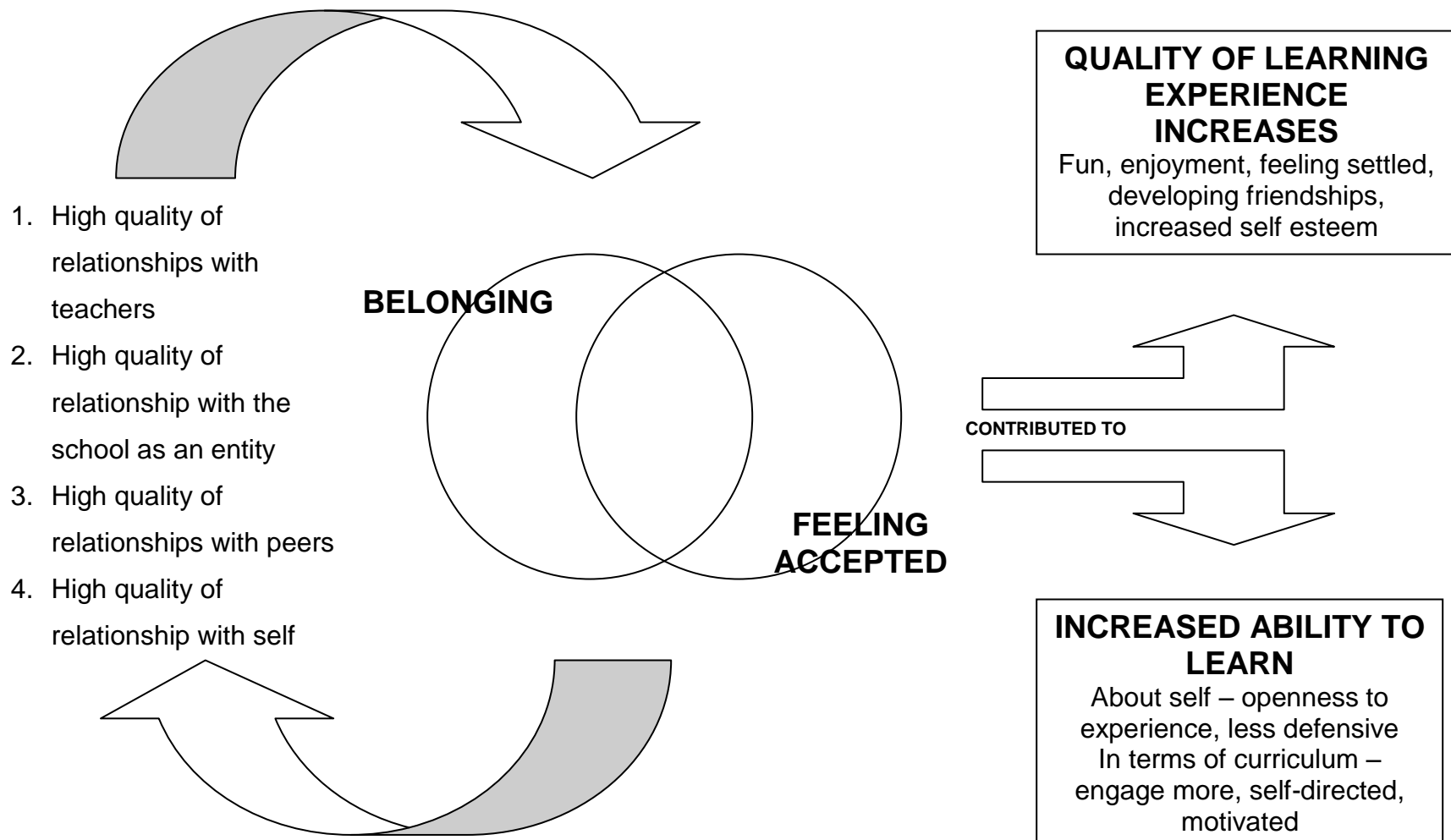
10.2 Model Clarification

The diagram representing the theory generated by this research (Fig 8.1) has been modified (see Fig 10.1). Through interacting with the literature, the researcher became aware that her original diagram had suggested a *linear* relationship between the quality of relationships with teachers, the school, peers and self - and feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance. What the diagram did not sufficiently illustrate was that having a sense of belonging and feelings of acceptance *also* contributed to better relationships. These processes appeared to be cyclical rather than linear.

This realisation came in part through considering the views of others, as presented in literature, and in part through further reflection on the original data. Using the literature in this way was consistent with grounded theory, as explained by Charmaz:

The constant comparison method in grounded theory does not end with completion of your data analysis. The literature review and theoretical framework can serve as valuable sources of comparison and analysis. Through comparing other scholars' evidence and ideas with your grounded theory, you may show where and how their ideas illuminate your theoretical categories and how your theory extends, transcends, or challenges dominant ideas in your field (2006:165).

The new diagram accounted for instances where students felt a sense of belonging *before* they had developed relationships with teachers, peers, the school, or their own self. Some individuals appeared to feel a sense of belonging from very early on, such as the one who felt "it became my home the moment I walked through the gates". Others took weeks or months to develop this. The reason why some students felt this sense of belonging immediately and others took longer was not clear from data. The researcher surmised that it was an internal psychological process, different for each and every individual. What was apparent, however, was that having this sense of belonging contributed to the development of good relationships – and vice versa. This is why the process was cyclical.

Fig 10.1 Theoretical Model – Revised Version

10.3 Resonances with literature

In contrast to most research methodologies, choosing to use grounded theory meant that the researcher postponed conducting a full literature review until *after* data had been gathered and analysed and *after* an initial theory had been generated. The reason for this was more than simply to reverse the order of tasks. It was to change the nature of tasks. Rather than using existing literature to familiarise the researcher with the research area and to deduce a specific hypothesis, Charmaz argued that the researcher should:

Draft your literature review and theoretical framework *in relation to your grounded theory*. You can use it to direct how you critique earlier studies and theories and to make comparisons with these materials (2006:164, italics in original).

The status of literature was therefore different from conventional studies. As part of an iterative research process, it was another data set. Some material might be pertinent to the current study, and others not. Whatever the literature said, it was important to remember that the theoretical model was *grounded* within data. If this had been developed through using appropriate and rigorous methods of data gathering and analysis, then it stood on its own. It was valuable in its own right. Reading the literature could not make the theoretical model right or wrong. It could only highlight areas of convergence and divergence. It was the exploration of these areas which would be helpful in terms of locating the model within a theoretical framework. Did it have anything original to offer?

Table 10.1 was developed to illustrate key issues of convergence and divergence between the theoretical model and existing literature. Exemplar quotes from data are given to serve as a reminder. Further information from data and from literature has already been outlined in the body of this thesis.

Table 10.1 Areas of convergence and divergence between data, theoretical model and literature review

Elements of theoretical model	Exemplar quotes from data	Convergence between theoretical model and literature review	Divergence between theoretical model and literature review
Importance of quality of relationships with teachers	<p>"Unlike most schools, the staff are not, like the adults, are not on a higher level than us at all"</p> <p>"I know a bit about the teachers, which I think's quite good"</p> <p>"teachers treat you as equals, or as friends"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of discovery-based methods of learning; balance between formal and informal (Dewey, 2004, Montessori, 1992) Rejection of 'banking concept' of education. Liberation as meaningful dialogue. Development of teacher-student with students-teachers. Importance of collaborative learning (Freire, 1970) Person-centred approaches to education. Attitudinal qualities of teachers paramount to being able to engage in meaningful dialogue (Rogers, 1980) Outcomes of humanistic education – attendance, higher grades, superior academic curiosity, greater self-confidence (Aspy and Roebuck, 1974, Cornelius-White, 2007, Henson, 2003, Merry, 2002) Schools need to have strong vision for teaching and learning (Vander Ark, 2002) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Researcher argued that these schools demonstrated something more substantial than 'pupil voice' – one voice active student participation into all structures and processes The phrase 'negotiated learning' was used, which included freedom to negotiate curriculum, or to not attend lessons at all Data highlighted the importance of attitudinal qualities of staff being embedded into the culture of the whole school rather than merely existing in classrooms
Importance of quality of relationships with school as an entity	<p>"If we didn't like it, we would go into a meeting and say 'I don't think this is working for the school'"</p> <p>"everyone just kind of put their point of view, and um, when everyone put their point of</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools should model democracy not merely teach it (Dewey, 2004). Connections with citizenship agenda (Maitles and Gilchrist, 2006). Hart's ladder of participation demarcated degrees of genuineness of school councils and pupil voice (Hart, 1992) Freedom – balance between individual and community needs (Dewey, 2004, Dewey and Dewey, 1915, Mill, 1859, Neill, 1962) Importance of small size of schools / characteristics of smallness, although acknowledgment that "<i>small is not enough</i>" (Davies, 2009, Haimendorf and Kestner, 2009, Tasker, 2003). Key factor in small schools was the "<i>quality of relationships they foster</i>" (Vander Ark, 2002) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Democratic structures and processes throughout school (rather than just school council) increased congruence of school and enabled students to engage better with all aspects of school Freedom could lead to dissent rather than assent if there was lack of genuine involvement in decision-making for students Funding affected students' abilities to engage with decision-making in school

	<p>view, then we just had a vote"</p> <p>"If the Council's going well, then the school runs well"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Democratic leadership meant that leadership and decision-making was genuinely shared amongst the school community (Woods, 2004) ▪ Outcomes of encouraging 'pupil voice' – students more accepting, more caring, mutual understanding, reduction in 'them and us' attitude, increased confidence, increased respect, more mature, happier learning environment (Baginsky and Hannam, 1999, Covell and Howe, 2001, Gold and Gold, 1998, Maitles and Gilchrist, 2006) ▪ Different between feeling heard and feeling relationship had improved – indicated more than 'pupil voice' – suggested need for congruence across structures and processes (Maitles and Deuchar, 2006) 	
Importance of quality of relationships with peers	<p>"everyone cares for each other most of the time"</p> <p>"it's more like a big group of friends who learn stuff from each other"</p> <p>"no-one thinks they're better than anyone else here"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefits of strong relationships between peers – reducing isolation and alienation, classrooms as open places of discovery, higher levels of self-esteem and motivation (Furrer and Skinner, 2003). This was in contrast to negatives – peer groups could be anti-social, anti-academic, with anti-school norms, and could have negative consequences for academic outcomes (Goodenow and Grady, 1993) ▪ Connection between teachers' relationships with students and peers' attitudes to one another – collaborative learning environments had positive impact upon peer understanding (Apple and Beane, 1999, Dewey, 2004, Schmuck, 1963) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Importance of inter-generational groups emerged through literature (Meier, 1996) – this offered one explanation as to why students felt a stronger sense of belonging at one of the schools than the other ▪ There was evidence from observations that students supported each others to learn when schools developed a strong culture of learning ▪ There was debate in the literature whether relationships with peers had any positive affect on academic outcomes (Furrer and Skinner, 2003). The researcher had argued that they could, but there was no definitive way of clarifying this
Importance of quality of relationships with self	<p>"I'm quite a self motivated person"</p> <p>"Here, people learn at their own pace, how</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Role of critical thinking in developing student's confidence in their own views and opinions (Apple and Beane, 1999, Dewey, 2004) ▪ Nature of pedagogy linked to development of understanding of self, particularly personalised learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Researcher argued that students with strong sense of self took more responsibility for own learning. No literature was found which made these connections

	<p>they like"</p> <p>"It does change you a lot, coming to a school like this"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Importance of feeling accepted in terms of developing self-acceptance (Rogers, 1980) ▪ Student participation led to increased agency and competence (Mitra, 2004) 	
Significance of belonging	<p>"It's definitely nice to go to a place where you know that everyone you love will be there"</p> <p>"it's like a second family"</p> <p>"it just seemed like the right place to be here, I fitted in here, more than I fitted in anywhere else, it was like, it became my home the moment I walked through the gates"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Belongingness hypothesis, neuro-science, attachment theory all stressed importance of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, Bowlby, 1988, Gerhardt, 2004, Kehily, 2007, Maslow, 1970) ▪ Belonging to something outside of family particularly important during adolescence (Kehily, 2007) ▪ It was not in power of professionals to give young people a sense of belonging (Kehily, 2007) ▪ Linked to being more pro-social, lower anxiety, increased autonomy and self-regulation, increased engagement and participation, improved academic achievement (Anderman, 2002, Johnson, 2009, Osterman, 2000) ▪ Practical ways to facilitate belonging included involving students in decision-making, reducing size of schools and paying attention to the pedagogy of belonging (Anderman, 2002, Beck and Malley, 1998, Kehily, 2007, Osterman, 2000, Tasker, 2008) ▪ Schools as a 'secure base' – importance of stability in staff team for this (Geddes, 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some literature argued that the need for belonging was higher in females than males (Newman et al., 2007, Osterman, 2000). Researcher did not reach this conclusion, nor did re-examination of data indicate this to be the case ▪ Use of the phrase 'internal psychological process' was the researcher's own ▪ Researcher argued that schools with a clear identity were more likely to inspire sense of belonging ▪ Belonging appeared to be strong for teachers as well as for students
Significance of feeling accepted as an individual	<p>"you can be individual, and I mean different, in this school"</p> <p>"it's when you start to more become your individual self and decide who</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Adolescence as important time for self-definition (Erikson, 1968, Kroger, 1989) ▪ Self-concept as personal construct (Byrne, 1984); self-esteem as evaluative component of self-concept (Chiu, 1988) ▪ Positive self-concepts had impact on academic and non-academic outcomes (Caplin, 1969, VanKoughnett and Smith, 1969) ▪ Students who felt supported and liked had higher levels of self-esteem and motivation (Furrer and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Erikson argued that identity was important for adolescents who experienced an 'identity crisis' (Erikson, 1968). Researcher argued that it was important for all students ▪ Researcher argued that school environments which positively welcomed diversity enabled students to try out different identities

	<p>you want to be ..."</p> <p>"it encourages individualism"</p>	<p>Skinner, 2003)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-acceptance has been seen as a precursor to acceptance of others (Rogers, 1980, VanKoughnett and Smith, 1969, Weeks, 1990) 	
Potency of interplay between belonging and acceptance	<p>"I feel like I fit in ... just being me. It's nice, I feel that everybody fits in but in their own way, and at their own pace"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Genuine sense of belonging only formed with strong sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Self-concept formed in relationship with others and not in isolation. Schools could play major role in development of self-concept (Purkey and Novak, 1996, VanKoughnett and Smith, 1969, Weeks, 1990) Inter-connection between I (Autonomy) / We (Homonomy) (Angyal, 1972) Balance between individual and social needs (Dewey, 2004, Dewey and Dewey, 1915, Mill, 1859, Neill, 1962) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Researcher argued that students who felt a strong sense of belonging or acceptance (but not both) risked getting lost in a crowd, or prioritising own needs above those of community. Balance was essential
Outcomes – quality of experience and ability to learn	<p>"You're learning something new everyday"</p> <p>"it's basically teaching us to make our own decisions, more than anything"</p> <p>"they can take serious decisions very seriously"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Fully functioning person' was more open to experience, had a greater desire for authenticity and intimacy, was more caring, more non-judgmental, had higher levels of trust, stronger internal locus of evaluation (Rogers, 1980) Connection with the Citizenship Agenda - were students citizens or citizens-in-waiting? When students who were encouraged to be citizens, this had important educational outcomes in itself – changing values, enhanced confidence, greater respect, more tolerance, 'life skills' (Maitles and Gilchrist, 2006) Students with positive self-concepts engaged more productively in classroom (Skinner et al., 2008) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature suggested that feeling a sense of relatedness to school and to teachers made bigger impact on academic achievement than attachment to peers (Furrer and Skinner, 2003). The researcher had no way of isolating one factor from another within the context of this research
Critique of way in which school effectiveness and school improvement were measured	<p>"I think learning should be interesting ... and fun as well"</p> <p>"I want GCSEs and I want to go onto college, but I</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set of assumptions about purpose of schooling (Slee et al., 1998) Three educational camps; schools in research fitted with "holist" camp; OFSTED and main political parties were in traditionalist and functionalist ones (Alexander and Potter, 2005) Criticism of measures which focused too heavily on academic achievement (Alexander and Potter, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work on importance of relationships in school effectiveness emphasised relationships between staff and between students. This research argued that relationships between staff and students, between students, between students and their school as an entity, and between students and

	<p>don't want, it's not why I'm here"</p> <p>"My main goal is to come away ... with the GCSEs that I knew I would not get in a state school"</p>	<p>2005, Brighouse and Woods, 1999, Harris and Bennett, 2001, MacBeath and Moos, 2004, Slee et al., 1998, Stoll and Fink, 1996, Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Importance of assessing schools against their own aims, as illustrated by Summerhill case (MacBeath and Moos, 2004, Vaughan, 2006) ▪ Relationships as central to effectiveness of schooling (Reynolds, 2001, Wetz, 2009) ▪ Development of particular organisational culture as important to effectiveness (Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992, Stoll and Fink, 1996, Wrigley, 2003) ▪ OFSTED's evaluation of Sands and Small schools largely mirrored data 	<p>their selves were contributory factors to improving outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Although OFSTED reports and researcher's observations in schools were similar, there were some areas of difference: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ research specified importance of students' relationships with school as an entity ○ research highlighted importance of students' relationships with self ○ research did not make assessment of student behaviour in way OFSTED did
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10.4 How was this research original?

Table 10.1 indicated that this research had something new to offer. There were many areas of resonance between the theoretical model and existing literature, but there were also a number of new insights. These could be seen in the final column of the table, and included: the importance of congruence in structures and processes across the whole of the school; that offering freedom to students could lead to dissent rather than assent; that forming an identity was important for all students and not just those with identity crises; that having a balance between a sense of belonging and sense of identity was essential ('I' / 'We'); that relationships between students and teachers, students and peers, students and their school and students and their selves *all* contributed to school effectiveness.

What was most distinctive, however, was the way in which this research put together *all* of these factors, and in this combination. Although literature was found which resonated with specific parts of the theoretical model, no literature seemed to combine all aspects. Some literature put together the quality of relationships between teachers and peers (Rogers, 1980); others the sense of belonging and the quality of relationships with the school (Geddes, 2006); others the importance of developing a relationship with self and school outcomes (Caplin, 1969) – but this research combined all of these factors and argued that the four types of relationships, feeling a sense of belonging, and feeling accepted were all important and **collectively** contributed to improved school outcomes. This was what made this research different.

There were two other main ways in which this research was original: the first concerned the selection of cases, and the second was the research methodology. In brief, the researcher was restricted in terms of selecting schools to those which were either explicitly democratic or at least underpinned by democratic principles. The two schools that were chosen were very different from one another. They had never been used as part of the same research project and thus they provided a unique opportunity for gaining understanding. In terms of the methodology, the

researcher chose to use grounded theory and to focus upon listening to student narrative. The vast majority of literature about democratic education (or small schools) was written by educators and teachers, particularly those involved with running these schools (Carnie, 2003, Gribble, 1985, 1998a, b, Neill, 1937, 1962, 1973, 1985, Spencer, 1999). Literature written by students or even using students' voices was sparse. One exception was *World's Apart*, a comparison between democratic and conventional education, compiled by David Gribble, one of the founders of Sands School. Many of the quotations were written by students, but they were written for a purpose. Students were asked to comment on particular aspects of their schooling. This research project was different as it employed open interview techniques which did not direct students to talk about particular aspects of their education. The theory that was generated through this research came from the researcher working with data, and not from a vision of the key topics which needed to be covered. Again, this made this research distinctive.

10.5 Revisiting the research settings

Both schools were revisited during the final stage of this research project. This provided an opportunity to discuss the theoretical model (Fig 10.1) with those from whom data had been gathered. This was importance because:

A grounded theory has a number of characteristics. It must *closely fit* the substantive area studied, be *understandable* to and *usable* by those in the situation studied, and be sufficiently *complex* to account for a great deal of variation in the domain examined (Locke, 1996:240).

In order to ascertain whether the generated theory was understandable and usable in the two schools, the researcher talked at length to two members of staff and to one student, all of whom had participated in earlier stages of research. They were presented with draft copies of thesis chapters and invited to comment and to correct any factual inaccuracies. The message from both schools was unequivocal – the generated theory was “interesting and true”.

Although reassuring, this statement masked the quality of the conversations which took place. Key points will be outlined from each school. The discussion with Sands School took place with a member of staff who had been one of the founders of the school. He looked at Fig 10.1 and immediately said:

As a theoretical model, I like it. And I wish that all children learned successfully – but they don't.

He explained that although students *felt* that that they learned more at Sands School, in practice their GCSE results did not reflect this. Some students attained A grades, but he argued that they would have achieved these in any setting, “due to their natural abilities”. Other students were capable of achieving As but did not do so. There was an inconsistency between the quality of learning in the classroom and the final grades. His explanation was that teachers focused on engaging with students and providing a high quality learning experience, but not on teaching students how to do well in exams. This would have required that they became “technicians”. In addition, the way the school was structured had an “in-built inefficiency” because it offered distractions to students. Some students, particularly teenage boys, lacked internal motivation, and often did not take the steps necessary to do well in exams. The school (teachers *and* students) was in a process of discussing these issues, but any changes would have consequences for the philosophy and values of the school. In short, if the school was to become more exam-focused, fundamental aspects of the school would change such as the non-compulsory nature of lessons and the teaching styles in the classroom.

The feedback from one Sands School student mirrored the discussions with the teacher, particularly those concerning exams. The student also argued that GCSEs were not an effective way to learn. She felt that lots of important things were learnt within the school which were not covered by GCSEs. If the school focused more on GCSEs, the learning environment in the classroom would change. She highlighted the importance of the relationships with teachers. If they felt pushed to teach in a different way, their flexibility to meet student needs would diminish. The only way

that this could happen and be acceptable to students was if they all agreed that this is what they wanted. She did not think this would happen; there was too much to lose.

When viewing Fig 10.1, the teacher did not dispute that students learned well in a holistic sense or that they were engaged in the classroom. He simply questioned whether this translated into measurable GCSE outcomes. This clearly linked with the debate about the purpose of schooling (see 9.4). In relation to this, he explained that Sands School had been established as a “social democracy”, but argued that this was at odds with offering an “educational autocracy”. By becoming “technicians”, the school might gain measurable outcomes, but might lose in terms of the quality of learning. This view was shared by the student too. This reflected the delicacy of issues regarding the effectiveness of education. A decision to focus on one outcome might have an adverse impact upon another.

This conversation did not change the theoretical model in itself, because the model did not make any specific claims about academic outcomes. It did, however, make the researcher reflect upon the way in which the theory had been explained in the thesis. A thorough review was undertaken to ensure that it had not been stated or implied that academic outcomes would be improved through developing good relationships and increasing students’ sense of belonging and acceptance.

The discussions with Sands School started with talking about outcomes, but continued on to a conversation about the ‘process’ aspects of Fig 10.1. The teacher was convinced that ‘belonging’ and ‘feeling accepted as an individual’ were key processes within the school. He stressed several points:

- There was a strong sense of belonging to a *community*, but not to an *institution*;
- The sense of connection was crucial. Students needed a foundation to base themselves in. When they felt they belonged, they could be experimental and

brave and reach out into the maelstrom that being a teenager was all about. If students felt accepted, they felt safe;

- Needing a sense of belonging was important for boys and for girls, although there might be some truth that it manifested itself differently in boys;
- Teachers could not make belonging happen. It was important not to interfere;
- The sense of belonging was essential to adults as well as students, as being at the school “feeds their hearts as well as their heads”. Almost all of the teachers at the school had been there for years. Teachers did not leave because of being burnt out - only if there was a strong pull elsewhere.

The student also agreed that having a sense of belonging and feeling accepted were important. She stated that “your theory is definitely true and I agree with it”, but also added that “you need to look at the students”. By this, she meant that the background of the students was significant. Many of them had come from other schools where they had had negative experiences. For these students, having a sense of belonging and of feeling accepted was essential. It might not be the same for all students. The researcher had contemplated whether this might be the case, although conducting further research would be the only way of learning more.

During these discussions, the teacher and the student raised issues which have been presented in this thesis, even though they were not aware of doing so. The teacher also looked at Fig 10.1 and stated that:

We haven't conceptualised what we do in this way before, although it makes sense. It is useful for us to think about it in this way (e.g. belonging) ... We don't know what is fundamental to our success, but we do know that we don't want to lose any of the elements.

Overall, the conversations with the teacher and with the student were affirming. Fig 10.1 indicated that students who felt a sense of belonging and felt accepted were more open to learning, and the discussions at the school had reinforced this. The only challenge had been about whether this learning included measurable

academic outcomes. The researcher felt reassured that the theory that had been generated through this research did closely fit, and was understandable and useable by this school.

During the visit to The Small School, the researcher learnt that the school had changed since the initial research visits. The school was on to its third Head Teacher in as many years, and each Head brought a different approach to the role. The current Head had been a teacher at the time of the previous visit and had been involved with the school for three years. She had been observed as a teacher by the researcher.

The Head was interested in the theoretical model and was drawn to several aspects of it, particularly in terms of relationships. She agreed with the importance of relationships between peers, but wanted to be clear that this was *across* year groups rather than simply in classes (aged 11-16). She wanted the school to be viewed as a family, and explained that the school tried to “run on a family model rather than school model”. This was consistent with the concept of “*cross-generational groups*” which had been highlighted in the literature review (Meier, 1996). She was also keen on the concept of belonging and felt that it was important that everyone “fitted in”.

The main focus of discussion, however, concerned the relationships between students and teachers. She emphasised that relationships must be two-way. To clarify her point, she explained that at the time of the main research visits, there were two students who “could have brought the school to its knees”. According to her, these students wanted the freedom that the school offered, but they did not engage constructively. By the time they reached their final year, they were extremely disruptive. In contrast, she explained that at the current time there were a large number of students who wanted to achieve good GCSEs and were keen to engage. They wanted to work, and the teachers responded to this.

The researcher was keen to discuss this issue in more depth. Data collected during the research visits had not come from just two students. In all, twelve students had been interviewed, many classes and other activities had been observed, informal conversations had taken place with staff and other adults and documentary information had been analysed. Although the two students in question had been interviewed, their information had no greater weight than anyone else's. Whatever had happened at the school, it was bigger than them.

This is where the Head's point about relationships was particularly relevant. These students did not arrive at the school with these attitudes. They "grew into it", which meant that the school had to take some responsibility for the situation. She explained that the school and the individual students had co-created the situation. The students were not challenged appropriately. The school was not clear in terms of its expectations. The teachers behaved differently - some were very authoritarian and others less so. There was no consistency. These students had settled into a way of behaving, and in such a small community, the influence of one or two students could be very influential over the whole. This explained how the researcher had interpreted data from the research visits – this was not the experience of just two students - it had become the organisational culture of the school. This perspective on the development of culture was interesting. Having revisited the original data, the researcher noticed that the older student group had themselves acknowledged that they had tremendous power to influence the culture of the school (see 6.2.3.1.2). They experienced this as younger students when the fifth year had been "crazy", and they described themselves as "role models". Indeed, they raised concerned that when they left, the school would not be as "wild". It appeared as if they were aware of the same dynamic which the Head was now describing.

The Head stated that if a similar situation occurred again, she would want to be clearer about what the school could offer, and if necessary, she would suggest that the students would be better off in another environment. The school offered a lot to students, but was not explicit about what was expected in return. It needed to

define its boundaries. She described the relationship between teachers and students as “equilibrium”; a balance of power that needed to be right. She felt that in most schools, the balance of power was in favour of the teachers, whereas at The Small School, it had tipped too far towards students. They could behave how they wished without any consequences. They had freedom, but they did not have to take responsibility. She wanted to restore a better balance of power, so that relationships of trust were central to the way the school operated.

The Head was aware that the research represented a snapshot in time. She was confident that the researcher’s interpretations of data accurately represented the school as it was at that point. She also warned that data might have been coloured by the experiences of a small group of students. In terms of Fig 10.1, she agreed with the proposed model and felt that it fitted for The Small School – but she added a proviso. It made sense *as long as* students wanted to learn. In the case of the two individuals described above, she felt that they did not want to learn. This was not just in relation to academic subjects; it was also in terms of learning about themselves. They did not want to be part of a community. They enjoyed the freedom and the power that they had. She did not know whether they felt a sense of belonging or felt accepted, but her hunch was that even if they had, this would not have contributed to their learning.

In the context of this research, this perspective was problematic. It sounded as if the Head was arguing that some students did not want to learn. How could schools, especially small schools, work with students like this? One response to this issue has already been alluded to – these students “grew into” their behaviour. When they started at the school, they might have been motivated but gradually lost this over time. Had the school responded to them differently, their attitudes towards learning might have been different. Another response was less optimistic, and if true, presented a great challenge to the ethos of this school. This was of course that students who were not internally motivated needed to be motivated by others – thus ensuring that the balance of power was with teachers or parents. This would have changed the values of the school in terms of viewing

students as having the potential to be positive and constructive members of a community.

A key question for the researcher to consider was: had the feedback from The Small School indicated that the theoretical model needed to change? The researcher felt that this was not the case. These students had described themselves as "a bunch of dossers" and "crap students". These data were taken into account when devising the theoretical model. It was intended to offer an explanation for all student experiences. It outlined a cyclical process where the quality of relationships between students and teachers, their school, peers, and their self contributed to the development of a stronger sense of belonging and of feeling accepted (and vice versa). If these were strong, then there was an increased likelihood that the quality of the learning experience increased, as did the student's ability to learn. Rather than identifying a weakness in the model, the case of these two students strengthened it. In essence, they did not seem to have good relationships with their teachers, their school, or their own selves. Their strongest relationships were with peers, as the analysis of the original data had implied. This was not enough. If they were to experience a sense of belonging and of acceptance, and if they were to be open to learning, they needed better quality relationships with their teachers and with the school. They were not examples of how the quality of relationships could influence students' abilities to learn - they showed the opposite.

Having received feedback from Sands School and The Small School, the researcher was confident that the theoretical model that had been developed closely fitted the data, was understandable and useable by the schools in question and was sufficiently complex to account for variation (Locke, 1996). It appeared to fit the criteria to qualify as a grounded theory.

10.6 Assessing the quality of this research

The methodology which informed this research was a constructivist interpretation of grounded theory (see Chapter 2). This made it different from research which stemmed from positivism as this paradigm stressed the importance of precision and dependability, and assumed that researchers were looking through one-way mirrors. A key aim of the latter was to elicit *replicable* findings which were *true* (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). A constructivist approach was not the same. It argued that findings were created through the interaction of the inquirer and the phenomenon. An aim of this type of research was to provide rich insight into human behaviour, but interpretations (or constructions) were not necessarily “*true*”, just more or less informed (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). One role for the researcher in producing a thesis or other research paper was therefore to persuade the reader that their particular interpretations were compelling and justified.

Using the concepts of **validity** and **reliability** were standard ways of assessing the quality of research projects. Bryman outlined criticisms to applying these to qualitative research. He explained that:

Some writers have suggested that qualitative studies should be judged or evaluated according to quite different criteria from those used by quantitative researchers (2008:377).

The reasons behind these arguments related to the particular research paradigm that underpinned research projects. Positivists, for example, wanted research findings to be replicable and therefore judgments as to reliability were important. Constructivists, on the other hand, worked from the basis that interpretations were created, not discovered, and it was therefore illogical to suggest that another researcher would be able to reproduce the study and draw identical conclusions.

This was not to suggest, however, that assessing the quality and rigour of qualitative research was unimportant. Guba and Lincoln objected to using conventional benchmarks of validity, reliability and objectivity, but devised an

alternative set of criteria for assessing qualitative research. These were **trustworthiness** and **authenticity** (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:114). Given the nature of this research, trustworthiness seemed appropriate as a measure of quality. The concept of authenticity related to the development of critical theory and will not be further explored.

Trustworthiness was broken into four sub-categories: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability (Guba, 1981, Guba and Lincoln, 1994). These were reformulations of the standard terminology of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and neutrality, but had been adapted to be more congruent with the research paradigm. These were presented as a table which showed how they could be assessed (Appendix G). Their applicability to this research project will be considered in turn.

10.6.1 *Credibility*

The credibility of this research project was strengthened through the way the research was designed and carried out. Schools were visited for the purpose of gathering in-depth data. The researcher engaged in processes of triangulation by undertaking interviews with students, observing classes, meetings and social times, having informal discussions with staff and doing documentary analysis. Discrepancies between data from one source and another were explored. Extensive quotations from data were reproduced in the thesis. The theoretical model was developed through the process of data gathering and analysis and was grounded within data. The researcher revisited the schools in the final months of the thesis to engage in “*respondent validation*” (Bryman, 2008:377). All of these processes were consistent with Guba’s definition of credibility (Appendix G).

10.6.2 *Transferability*

Assessing the transferability of this research project was challenging. The meaning of ‘transferability’ was outlined by Guba:

If the thick descriptions demonstrate an essential similarity between two contexts, then it is reasonable to suppose that tentative findings of Context A are also likely to hold in Context B (although, to be safe, an empirical test of that presumption should be made). For the naturalist, then, the concept analogous to generalizability (or external validity) is transferability, which is itself dependent upon the degree of similarity (fittingness) between two contexts (1981:81).

The concern with transferability in relation to this research project was that the two schools were unique, and not just because every school was unique. They were unique because they deliberately set themselves up to be different from others. They were oppositional, both striving in their own ways to present an alternative to mainstream provision, and indeed alternatives to 'alternative provision'. They were truly independent. This made transferability very difficult as it was dependent upon the similarity between environments. There were no identical, or even similar, environments. The theory developed through the research conducted at these schools could not be taken out of these contexts and transplanted elsewhere.

Nonetheless, it was worth emphasising that this research was conducted in not one school but two. Although selected because they were both 'democratic' secondary schools, the schools turned out to contrast greatly from one another. The sizes, structures, processes, pedagogy, values and ethos differed – as did the experiences of the students. The theory that was generated through the research was developed through data gathered from *both* schools. Data were analysed as two separate sets, but the theory was generated through looking at data and their analyses through a single lens. The researcher had to consider issues such as why students felt a greater sense of belonging in one school than the other. The theory that was generated, the researcher argued, offered an explanation for students' experiences at *both* schools. This made the theory stronger and more robust than had it been generated through a single case, and indicated that there might be some level of transferability to other small independent schools at least.

Michael Bassey proposed that case studies had the capacity to offer insight to a wider context. He has striven to find ways to make generalisations from context-

specific case studies, and referred to these as “*fuzzy generalizations*” (Bassey, 1999). A number of these are offered in the conclusion of this thesis.

Guba’s key message in terms of assessing transferability was about using “*thick description*” (Geertz, 1993). This phrase referred to the depth and breadth of data. Ethnographic research has developed the use of thick description as a way of enabling the reader to immerse themselves in the words and phrases of participants, rather than in the researcher’s paraphrasing of these experiences (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). By reproducing considerable quantities of data in Chapters 4-7, this researcher has attempted to do the same.

10.6.3 *Dependability*

It was hoped that the reader could make an assessment into the dependability of this research project for one central reason: the researcher attempted to leave an audit trail. The intention was that the reader could have an informed understanding of the *processes* that took place and thus make a decision as to the stability of the research. This was consistent with Guba’s explanation about the importance of “*trackability*”:

... consistency is a trickier concept for the naturalist than for the rationalist ... The naturalist thus interprets consistency as dependability, a concept that embraces elements both of the stability implied by the rationalistic term reliable and of the trackability required by explainable changes in instrumentation (1981:81).

10.6.4 *Confirmability*

Assessing the confirmability of research meant judging the extent to which the researcher had been successful in eliminating bias from the process. This was not to suggest that researchers were neutral or objective; rather, there was acknowledgement that researchers were immersed in the research and were active in the construction of meaning (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). What was

especially important in grounded theory, however, was that any theory generated was thoroughly grounded in data and was not the result of a researcher's preconceived ideas.

Guba's suggestions to assist with confirmability were that researchers engaged in triangulation and practiced reflexivity. The former has already been explained. The latter could be evidenced through providing an audit trail (Guba, 1981). Evidence of the process of reflexivity (an audit trail) has been provided in every chapter of this thesis, and included:

- Exploration of research methods and the potential impact of the researcher (Chapter 3);
- Transparency on how the researcher responded to unforeseen circumstances such as the enforced change to the interview method at The Small School (Chapters 3 and 6);
- Comment on the potential impact of the researcher's background as a youth worker when conducting interviews with students (Chapter 3);
- Detailed information on the processes used for data analysis, including the use of memos which connected to the researcher's own perspectives and opinions (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7);
- Explanation of the steps taken during theory generation to reduce possibility of researcher bias (Chapter 8).

Guba also argued that a confirmability audit was useful, in which the researcher ensured that they had provided documentation from at least two sources to back up every claim (1981:87). As this research used grounded theory, this had been substantially demonstrated through the provision of many more than two pieces of documentation for each aspect of the theoretical model.

Developing criteria for assessing the quality and rigour of research was important so that readers could make their own judgments as to how successful the researcher had been in providing compelling arguments for their interpretations of

data. Through providing extensive data, a clear audit trail of processes, and ongoing reflexivity, the researcher hoped that they had persuaded the reader of the quality and robustness of this research.

10.7 Limitations of research

The initial research question for this project was open. It set out a broad area of interest in terms of learning from students' experiences of democratic education. Two schools were selected to use as cases. One clear weakness of the research was that it became apparent that one of these schools was not as democratic as the researcher first thought. It had been described as "*democratic*" by others (Carnie, 2003), but did not itself claim to be democratic. Many of its structures and processes were not designed to be participative for students. On the other hand, it was considerably more democratic than the vast majority of schools in England; students and staff regularly met together and voted on issues; students had considerable freedom to express themselves as individuals; students could offer suggestions for improvement through using a Suggestions Box. At this school, the researcher had also been restricted in her access to students; interviews had taken place on a group basis, with the Head present (see 3.5.3). Despite these limitations, a decision was made to still include the school in the research because analysis of data provided considerable insight into students' experiences in alternative (and semi-democratic) environments. Through using these data alongside data from the other school, the researcher felt that the quality of the research project was strengthened. The focus of the research question needed to be slightly re-focused, however, as it was recognised that it was not accurate to describe the schools which both cohorts of students attended as being 'democratic'; the terms 'alternative' or 'small' were more appropriate.

A series of fuzzy generalisations will be presented in the conclusion to this chapter, but it should be stated that these leave more questions than they answer. This research was based on two schools, and as such, the capacity to make

unambiguous generalisations was limited. The only way to progress would be to conduct further research. It would be interesting, for example, to test out a hypothesis that 'small schools were better than large ones at fostering a sense of belonging'. This could be done by undertaking research in a range of schools, such as small ones with distinct yet non-democratic philosophies, large schools-within-schools, and other large schools. The nature of belonging for different groups of students could also be explored with a view to identifying differences according to gender, age, socio-economic background, previous academic experience, or disabilities such as Aspergers Syndrome.

Further research could be undertaken to address other limitations of this research. The theoretical model, though distinctive, left areas to explore. The researcher had been unable to disentangle one condition from another. The discussions with The Small School had confirmed that having strong relationships with peers were not enough in themselves, but were all of the factors equally important? If relationships with teachers were exceptionally strong, did that mean that relationships with peers became less important? If the sense of belonging was strong, could the relationship with self be lessened? Was it possible to eliminate one of the factors altogether, or was there a basic 'minimum standard' for *each* of the conditions? The only way to address these questions would be to conduct further research which specifically aimed to find schools in which the conditions might be separated from one another, such as those where relationships with teachers were strong but relationships with the school as an entity were not.

It would also be interesting to find out whether specific measures could be developed so that schools could ascertain how students felt within their particular schools. After all, this research has placed great weight upon 'internal psychological processes' which were unique to each individual. Assuming that schools agreed with this argument, how might they know what they were doing well and how they might improve? The School Effectiveness and School Improvement Movements have developed guidelines for schools in terms of improving outcomes. The researcher has been critical of these approaches and has argued

that effectiveness should be conceptualised differently. This argument would be strengthened if alternative perspectives by which to assess schools could be offered. For example, could students' sense of belonging be measured? And if it could and was found to be weak, what in particular could schools do which would be likely to make a marked improvement in this?

Another potential weakness – and considerable strength – of this project was the decision to use grounded theory. The researcher was drawn to the methodology because it offered a way for students' voices to be paramount and to limit any preconceptions. By choosing methods which were consistent with grounded theory, the researcher strived to ensure that the theory that was generated was thoroughly grounded in data. The difficulty with using this methodology, on the other hand, was that there were so many interpretations of how it should be used (as explored in depth in Chapter 2). As McLeod stated:

there are three, and possibly four or five, formally described versions of grounded theory (2001:86).

There was no rule-book with grounded theory. Different researchers argued about what did, and did not constitute grounded theory and many had contrasting suggestions as to how research should be undertaken (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, Charmaz, 2000, 2006, Glaser, 1978, Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For a new researcher, this was challenging as so many decisions had to be made, all of which had to be coherent with one another and consistent with the principles of grounded theory. There was of course, a danger that the researcher would make a poor decision which could have limited the research. In order to overcome this, the researcher attempted to be transparent as to why particular decisions had been made and how she felt this was consistent with the methodology.

10.8 Conclusions

This research set out to find out what could be learnt from students about their experiences of democratic (and alternative) education. Students' insights have been invaluable in terms of understanding school *from the perspective* of students. This has been backed up and reinforced by observing the schools in action, speaking with staff and analysing documentary information. A theoretical model has been developed and modified and a thorough literature review has been undertaken to find resonances between this research and previously published work. The argument has been made that this research offered some original insights and in particular, it offered a new theoretical model. This model combined a range of factors which were pertinent to the student experience and yet had not previously been conceptualised in this manner.

The research provided extensive information about the experiences of students in two small schools in Devon. The key question to address at the end of the process was this: was the theoretical model useful in any other context, or were these schools so unusual that it was appropriate only to them?

To try and generalise to other contexts required looking at these two schools in a little more detail. Could it be argued that these students *in particular* might have valued having a strong sense of belonging and of feeling accepted as individuals? Alternatively, could they be seen as representative of other young people of the same age? Arguments could be made either way. On the one hand, many of the students in these schools had not fitted in with mainstream education. They had enrolled in alternative schools because their previous educational experiences had been negative. The feelings of being accepted and of having a sense of belonging might have been particularly important because they had not experienced these in previous schools. This argument was explicitly given by one student when the schools were re-visited - she felt that the student intake was significant. On the other hand, literature argued that feeling a sense of belonging was a fundamental human need, and that in adolescence this was particularly strong in terms of

forming connections outside of family. The 'belongingness hypothesis' was not solely applicable to those who had not belonged previously - it was relevant to *all* young people (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). It might be reasonable, therefore, to make a "*fuzzy generalization*" on this issue. Bassey developed the concept of "*fuzzy generalizations*" as a way of supporting researchers to apply claims that they had generated through case study research to wider settings. He explained that:

A fuzzy generalization carries an element of uncertainty. It reports that something has happened in one place and that it may also happen elsewhere. There is a possibility but no surety. There is an invitation to 'try it and see if the same happens for you' (1999:52).

The researcher made ten fuzzy generalisations:

1. Fostering a sense of belonging in schools might have an impact upon students' abilities to engage in learning;
2. Students who felt accepted and supported as individuals were likely to be less defensive and more open to engage with learning;
3. Developing good relationships between students and teachers, between students and peers, between students and the school, and between students and their selves were likely to have positive consequences for students' internal psychological processes;
4. The attitudinal qualities of teachers might make a difference to their abilities to build good quality relationships with students, particularly qualities of empathy, acceptance and genuineness;
5. The use of alternative pedagogies which equalised power between teachers and students might be important in enabling students to feel in control of their own learning;

6. Schools which offered opportunities for students to develop strong relationships with peers were likely to create positive learning environments, provided that these relationships were not at the expense of those with staff, with the school as a whole or with self;
7. Students with a strong sense of self and an awareness of themselves as a learner were more likely to be able to engage constructively in school;
8. Increasing student participation in decision-making within their schools was likely to have a beneficial effect upon school outcomes, providing that the processes for doing so were part of a coherent and congruent school ethos;
9. Creating small schools, or introducing the 'characteristics of smallness' to larger schools might have a positive impact upon students' relationships with their schools;
10. If students felt a sense of belonging to their schools *alongside* feeling accepted as an individual, improvements in school outcomes were likely to occur.

Making these fuzzy generalisations was as far as the researcher could go. Making more certain propositions required undertaking further research, probably entailing the use of hypotheses which could be tested; some suggestions for what this research might explore have already been made. Therefore, at the end of this research, there was only one conclusion. This was only the beginning.

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Appendix A Letter and Consent Form for Participants

Dear

RE: Research taking place in your school

My name is Max Hope and I am coming to your school to do some research. I am hoping that some of you might be willing to talk to me about your experiences of being at school. I am doing the research because I want to learn about what it's like to be at a democratically-run school. Your school has agreed to be part of my research.

If you are aged over 14, then I am inviting you to become a research participant. If you are interested, I will meet you so that I could explain a bit more about what I am doing, and answer any of your questions. After this, I would meet with you for a longer period (about an hour) and ask you to talk to me about your experiences of being at school.

Being part of a research project is voluntary, so there is no obligation for you to do it. If you did decide to participate, you could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Everything you tell me will be anonymous. I would tape the interview so I could remember what you said, and this tape would be stored securely.

Your school has got more information about this research. If you wanted to know more, please talk to your headteacher. They can contact me directly, or they can contact the University of Hull where I am studying.

I hope that you will be willing to help. Thank you.

Yours sincerely

Max Hope

STUDENT TO
SIGN

The IFL ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSENT FORM:

I, _____ of _____

Hereby agree to be a participant in this study to be undertaken

by MAX HOPE (HULL UNIVERSITY)

and I understand that the purpose of the research is *(to be completed by researcher)*

Explore the impact of a democratic
environment on young people's experiences
of education

I understand that

1. the aims, methods, and anticipated benefits, and possible risks/hazards of the research study, have been explained to me.
2. I voluntarily and freely give my consent to my participation in such research study.
3. I understand that aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals.
4. Individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.
5. I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study, in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used.

Signature:

Date:

The contact details of the researcher are: MAX HOPE Contact via Sean at Sands School

The contact details of the secretary to the IfL Ethics Committee are Mrs J Lison, Centre for Educational Studies, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX.
Email: J.Lison@hull.ac.uk tel. 01482-465988.

Appendix B Ethics Form

07/026

A PROFORMA FOR

STAFF AND STUDENTS BEGINNING A RESEARCH PROJECT

Institute for Learning

Research Proposer(s): MAX HOPEProgramme of Study: MASTERS IN EDUCATION (BY RESEARCH)Research (Working Dissertation/Thesis) Title: 'WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM CHILDREN'S NARRATIVE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY USING TWO SMALL SCHOOLS'

Description of research (please include (a) object of research; (b) principal research question (c) methodology or methodologies to be used (d) who are the participants in this research.

(A) THIS RESEARCH SETS OUT TO EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF A DEMOCRATIC ENVIRONMENT UPON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION(B) AS ABOVE - WORKING TITLE(C) * CASE STUDY OF TWO SMALL SCHOOLS:

- THE SANDS SCHOOL IS A 'DEMOCRATIC DAY SCHOOL' IN DEVON. CONTACT HAS BEEN MADE AND INITIAL AGREEMENT GAINED.
- THE SMALL SCHOOL, AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL RUN ALONG DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES, ALSO IN DEVON. CONTACT HAS BEEN MADE AND INITIAL AGREEMENT GAINED, ALTHOUGH THEY WANT FURTHER INFORMATION ON NATURE OF RESEARCH.

* OPEN-ENDED ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS AGED 14-16:

- YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE ENCOURAGED TO SHARE NARRATIVE EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION. THEY MAY CHOOSE TO SHARE PERSONAL INFORMATION, BUT THEY WILL NOT BE ASKED ANY DIRECT PERSONAL QUESTIONS. RESEARCHER IS INFLUENCED BY PERSON-CENTRED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND NARRATIVE INQUIRY. DATA WILL BE ANALYSED USING GROUNDED THEORY, HENCE USE OF OPEN-ENDED PROCESS.

(D) TWO SCHOOLS + STUDENTS AGED 14-16 (APPROX 8 IN TOTAL)Proforma Completion Date: 20/12/07

This proforma should be read in conjunction with the IfL research principles, and the IfL flow chart of ethical considerations. It should be completed by the researchers. If it raises problems, it should be sent on completion, together with a brief (maximum one page) summary of the problems in the research, or in the module preparation, for approval to the Chair of the IfL Ethics Committee prior to the beginning of any research.

Part A

1. Does your research/teaching involve animal experimentation? Y/N

If the answer is 'YES' then the research/teaching proposal should be sent direct to the University Ethics Committee to be assessed.

2. Does your research involve human participants? Y/N

If the answer is 'NO', there is no need to proceed further with this proforma, and research may proceed now. If the answer is 'YES' please answer all further relevant questions in part B.

Part B

3. Is the research population under 18 years of age? Y/N
 If yes, have you taken the following or similar measures to deal with this issue?
 (i) Informed the participants of the research? Y/N
 (ii) Ensured their understanding? Y/N
 (iii) Gained the non-coerced consent of their parents/guardians? Y/N
 IF ETHICAL APPROVAL IS GRANTED
4. Will you obtain written informed consent from the participants? Y/N
 If yes, please include a copy of the information letter requesting consent
 If no, what measures will you take to deal with obtaining consent?
5. Has there been any withholding of disclosure of information regarding the research/teaching to the participants? Y/N
 If yes, please describe the measures you have taken to deal with this.
6. Issues for participants. Please answer the following and state how you will manage perceived risks:
- a) Do any aspects of the study pose a possible risk to participants' physical well-being (e.g. use of substances such as alcohol or extreme situations such as sleep deprivation)? YES NO
- b) Are there any aspects of the study that participants might find humiliating, embarrassing, ego-threatening, in conflict with their values, or be otherwise emotionally upsetting? YES NO
- c) Are there any aspects of the study that might threaten participants' privacy (e.g. questions of a very personal nature; observation of individuals in situations which are not obviously 'public')? YES NO
 PARTICIPANTS ARE IN CONTROL OF WHAT THEY DISCLOSE
- d) Does the study require access to confidential sources of information (e.g. medical records)? YES NO
- e) Could the intended participants for the study be expected to be more than usually emotionally vulnerable (e.g. medical patients, bereaved individuals)? YES NO
- f) Will the study take place in a setting other than the University campus or residential buildings? YES NO
 LAT TWO SCHOOLS
- g) Will the intended participants of the study be individuals who are not members of the University community? YES NO
- *Note: if the intended participants are of a different social, racial, cultural, age or sex group to the researcher(s) and there is any doubt about the possible impact of the planned procedures, then opinion should be sought from members of the relevant group.
7. Might conducting the study expose the researcher to any risks (e.g. collecting data in potentially dangerous environments)? Y/N

8. Is the research being conducted on a group culturally different from the researcher/student/supervisors?

If yes, are sensitivities and problems likely to arise?

If yes, please describe how you have addressed/will address them.

RESEARCHER IS EXPERIENCED YOUTH WORKER

Y/N? Y/N? YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 14-16

9. Does the research/teaching conflict with any of the IfL's research principles? (please see attached list).

If yes, describe what action you have taken to address this?

Y/N

10. If the research/teaching requires the consent of any organisation, have you obtained it?

If no, describe what action you have taken to overcome this problem.

Y/N INITIAL CONSENT, PENDING FURTHER INFORMATION

11. Have you needed to discuss the likelihood of ethical problems with this research with an informed colleague?

If yes, please name the colleague, and provide the date and results of the discussion.

SUPERVISOR - NIGEL WRIGHT 6/12/07
ISSUES WITH INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

Y/N

If you've now completed the proforma, before sending it in, just check:

- a. Have I included a letter to participants for gaining informed consent?

DRAFT LETTER TO SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS ATTACHED

- b. If I needed any organisational consent for this research, have I included evidence of this with the proforma?

INITIAL EMAILS ATTACHED, PLUS DRAFT CONSENT FORM FOR SCHOOLS

- c. If I needed consent from the participants, have I included evidence for the different kinds that were required?

DRAFT CONSENT FORMS FOR PARTICIPANTS AND PARENTS/GUARDIANS ATTACHED

Lack of proof of consent attached to proformas has been the major reason why proformas have been returned to their authors.

This form must be signed by your supervisor and the IfL Ethics Committee representative for your area. Once signed, copies of this form, and your proposal must be sent to Mrs Jackie Lison, Centre for Educational Studies (see flow chart), including where possible examples of letters describing the purposes and implications of the research, and any Consent Forms (see appendices).

Name of Student/Researcher MAX HOPE
Signature Max Hope Date 20/12/07
Name of Supervisor/Colleague NIGEL WRIGHT
Signature Nigel Wright Date 20/12/07
Name of Ethics Committee member MR BATEY
Signature Mr Batey Date 4/1/08

Appendix C Code List (Sands School – student interviews)

CODES	INTERVIEWS						Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
'real world' out the	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
active learning	0	2	1	0	2	0	5
age issues	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
anarchy and authorit	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
asking questions	0	0	1	2	0	1	4
assert own view	0	0	6	4	2	2	14
battle	5	0	0	0	8	1	14
behaviour towards ea	10	1	11	1	12	3	38
being liked	0	0	0	2	2	0	4
bit scared	0	1	1	0	1	2	5
bullying unacceptabl	0	0	0	2	0	1	3
can change things	0	0	5	0	0	2	7
changes people	1	0	2	1	7	2	13
changes self-percept	0	0	0	0	7	0	7
choice	0	2	3	3	1	1	10
choose teachers	0	1	0	0	2	0	3
close to people	5	1	1	0	2	0	9
confident in myself	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
control	1	2	0	2	2	1	8
couples	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
critical of others	0	0	1	0	6	0	7
culture amongst chil	0	0	0	0	3	2	5
curriculum	3	0	2	5	1	0	11
dealing with difficu	11	1	3	1	1	1	18
democracy	14	0	6	7	0	3	30
did not get in to fi	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
did not want to come	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
difference with main	14	11	3	4	18	6	56
different things to	3	0	1	0	2	1	7
difficult	7	0	0	0	0	0	7
disrespecting seen a	1	0	0	0	0	2	3
do exams early / lat	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
dog	2	2	1	1	0	0	6
don't have to do any	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
don't like school ho	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
drink tea in class	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
drugs	2	1	1	0	4	0	8
equal / same level	8	0	5	0	6	4	23
ethos meeting	0	0	5	0	0	2	7
events important	2	1	1	2	0	2	8
everything taken ser	0	0	2	0	0	2	4
express emotion	7	0	3	0	4	0	14
extra year	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
fairness	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
family background	0	0	2	0	2	0	4
family connection wi	3	0	1	0	0	0	4
family issues	0	1	0	1	0	0	2
feedback on intervie	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

feeling / being invo	0	0	2	0	0	2	4
feelings about leavi	1	1	1	1	0	0	4
fees and costs	0	0	3	1	3	0	7
flexible	0	0	1	3	1	1	6
freedom	1	0	2	4	6	1	14
friendly atmosphere	0	0	1	0	9	1	11
friends	0	6	0	1	3	0	10
fun / have a laugh	0	2	6	0	0	0	8
garden	0	0	1	0	3	0	4
good life lesson	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
got on with (one/mor	1	1	1	0	1	0	4
group culture	0	0	1	4	3	0	8
hard to understand S	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
hierarchy in school?	1	0	2	1	1	0	5
home-schooled	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
how they heard about	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
independent	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
individual	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
individual standards	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
informality	1	3	0	5	1	2	12
interpersonal issues	1	2	1	0	0	0	4
it's more like a big	3	0	0	0	0	1	4
Japan	0	0	0	3	0	0	3
keenness to learn	0	0	1	1	0	1	3
knowing my teachers	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
law	3	0	0	4	0	0	7
learning difficultie	0	0	0	4	0	0	4
lessons	12	6	6	12	9	6	51
like family	2	0	3	0	6	1	12
listened	1	1	0	1	0	0	3
live on own	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
love / enjoyment of	9	3	4	6	5	5	32
lucky	1	1	1	0	1	3	7
make the most	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
making my own decisi	1	0	1	2	1	0	5
mistrust teachers	0	1	0	0	2	0	3
negative feelings ab	0	0	2	1	2	0	5
negatives of democra	0	1	3	2	1	0	7
never liked school	0	2	0	0	2	0	4
no headteacher	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
open / open mind	0	0	0	1	3	0	4
own pace	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
parallel universe	0	0	0	0	7	0	7
people leaving	4	0	1	0	2	0	7
people make sands	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
people vary / value	0	0	0	3	4	1	8
power / influence	1	0	7	1	1	0	10
praise me	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
preconceptions about	0	0	0	0	12	0	12
previous school expe	4	3	2	4	7	1	21
privacy or confident	1	0	2	0	0	0	3
processes	6	1	6	2	0	1	16
protective / proud o	1	0	2	1	7	0	11
rebel / compete	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
rejection of stereot	1	0	0	0	2	2	5
relate better to tho	0	0	0	0	6	0	6
relationship with ad	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
relationship with ex	0	0	2	0	1	0	3

relationship with te	9	2	6	4	6	3	30
respect	1	0	5	0	0	0	6
response to rules	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
responsibility	15	2	6	4	2	4	33
role of staff	4	0	4	5	2	2	17
rules of Sands?	13	1	6	5	9	2	36
safe	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
Sands not suitable f	2	0	1	0	2	1	6
school as bodily org	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
school changes over	1	0	2	0	0	0	3
School Council	4	2	3	3	1	0	13
School Meeting	4	2	8	5	2	3	24
second chance	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
sheep / conformity	0	0	0	0	6	0	6
sign of ownership an	8	5	3	5	7	4	32
similarity with main	0	1	0	1	1	0	3
small size	0	0	6	3	1	1	11
smoke	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
socialising together	6	2	1	3	0	3	15
space	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
staff reports	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
state school as surv	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
state school better	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
stealing	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
structure	2	0	1	5	1	1	10
support / looked aft	1	2	6	0	1	0	10
swear	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
tailor own timetable	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
talk openly to teach	0	0	0	0	2	1	3
teachers good	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
time to adjust	5	0	0	1	6	2	14
travelling	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
trial week	5	2	3	3	11	5	29
trust	0	1	3	0	1	0	5
two levels of unders	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
two responses to fre	1	0	1	2	2	1	7
two ways of being in	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
understood by teache	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
use sands in differe	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
used to talking abou	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Useful Work	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
value	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
verge of suspension	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
voice / have a say	0	3	3	1	1	3	11
vote	8	3	7	4	0	3	25
want GCSEs but more	8	2	2	3	2	2	19
what am I like?	0	5	6	10	11	2	34
what is school about	4	6	4	3	1	2	20
what next?	4	7	2	2	3	1	19
what people wear	0	0	0	3	7	0	10
why do people come t	2	0	0	2	4	0	8
will power	8	0	1	0	0	2	11

Totals	278	116	249	189	336	127	1295

Appendix D Code List (Sands School - observational and documentary analysis)

First column - observational data
Second column - documentary information

CODES	Totals		
active learning	4	4	8
age issues	1	2	3
anarchy and authorit	2	0	2
approach to learning	10	11	21
asking questions	4	0	4
assert own view	1	0	1
attitude to OFSTED	1	0	1
Autonomy / homonymy	1	0	1
behaviour towards ea	3	0	3
can change things	1	1	2
cater for individual	6	6	12
choice	2	6	8
choose teachers	0	1	1
co-operative approac	0	1	1
common sense	0	5	5
communal support	0	1	1
congruence	1	0	1
constructive	0	1	1
control	1	1	2
control over learnin	9	6	15
critical thinking	4	3	7
culture	4	2	6
curriculum	0	4	4
dealing with difficu	5	4	9
democracy	5	5	10
difference with main	4	6	10
dog	1	0	1
drink tea in class	1	0	1
drugs	2	1	3
encouragement	1	0	1
equal / same level	1	3	4
ethos	1	8	9
ethos meeting	1	0	1
everything taken ser	4	1	5
express emotion	0	1	1
fairness	0	1	1
feelings of teachers	4	1	5
fees and costs	3	0	3
fitting in	1	0	1
flexible	2	4	6
food	0	3	3
freedom	2	6	8
freedom for teachers	0	2	2
friendly atmosphere	6	1	7
friendly challenge	5	0	5
fun / have a laugh	1	0	1

GCSEs	2	3	5
girls	1	0	1
good education	0	1	1
governers	0	1	1
happy	0	7	7
history of school	2	1	3
identity	1	0	1
importance of relati	2	0	2
individual	0	2	2
individual standards	0	1	1
informality	13	0	13
interested in feed	2	0	2
Interruption	6	0	6
lessons	13	1	14
like family	0	3	3
listened	1	0	1
love / enjoyment of	0	5	5
lucky	0	1	1
mavericks	1	0	1
my view of students	2	0	2
negotiated learning	2	0	2
no headteacher	0	2	2
non-defensive	1	0	1
numeracy and literac	0	3	3
own pace	0	1	1
people vary / value	0	2	2
physical environment	4	0	4
power / influence	2	3	5
praise me	3	0	3
processes	1	1	2
protective / proud o	1	0	1
PTA	0	1	1
relationship with pa	2	0	2
relationship with te	7	1	8
respect	1	1	2
responsibility	7	9	16
Rights	0	1	1
role of staff	10	2	12
rules of Sands?	3	6	9
safety	3	0	3
school changes over	1	1	2
School Council	3	2	5
School Meeting	3	6	9
school proud of stud	1	0	1
school review	1	0	1
self-aware	0	1	1
sign of ownership an	2	3	5
small size	0	2	2
socialising together	2	0	2
staff meeting	0	1	1
staff reports	1	0	1
strike	1	0	1
structure	3	3	6
student led groups	0	2	2
support / looked aft	1	0	1
tailor own timetable	0	1	1
teaching style	9	3	12
time to adjust	1	0	1

transparent about te	3	2	5
trial week	1	1	2
trust	0	4	4
tutorials	2	0	2
Useful Work	4	2	6
voice / have a say	0	3	3
vote	1	3	4
want GCSEs but more	1	2	3
what is school about	0	2	2
what next?	0	2	2
what people wear	2	1	3
why do people come t	3	0	3

Totals	244	208	452

Appendix E Code List (The Small School - student interviews)

CODES	INTERVIEWS		
	1	2	Totals
accept others point	1	2	3
admission policy	0	3	3
ages mixing	7	1	8
bad reputation of sc	5	0	5
banter / teasing	11	3	14
be close to the litt	0	1	1
be individual / diff	6	1	7
beat up	2	0	2
because people have	0	2	2
boring	5	0	5
broken the rules	1	0	1
called by first name	1	0	1
can raise ideas	2	0	2
can't get away from	0	4	4
cares for each other	2	0	2
censored by another	1	0	1
challenge each other	5	6	11
changed people's min	5	0	5
chavs	0	1	1
chickens	3	0	3
choose whether you w	0	4	4
circle aka assembly	3	1	4
cleaning	2	0	2
close to everyone	1	2	3
comments about class	1	1	2
community	1	0	1
compulsory	3	0	3
confident in own vie	0	2	2
cooking	4	0	4
cosy	1	0	1
crap students	0	2	2
damaging to the scho	0	1	1
day / week to try ou	2	1	3
defensive of hippies	4	1	5
defensive of tramps	2	0	2
depends on who's in	0	5	5
detentions	0	2	2
didn't know school e	1	0	1
didn't like it at fi	1	1	2
didn't work before t	0	4	4
discussion	2	0	2
disillusioned people	0	2	2
dislike teachers / c	0	11	11
divide between stude	0	1	1
do want to learn	0	3	3
doesn't want to lear	0	3	3
don't get on with th	1	0	1

don't understand wha	2	1	3
employing younger pe	0	2	2
enjoy it / like it /	6	2	8
enthusiastic teacher	0	2	2
Everyone hates the s	1	2	3
falling to pieces	0	3	3
family connection to	0	3	3
Farmers Market,	3	0	3
feelings about big s	1	0	1
felt comfortable her	1	0	1
formation of small g	2	0	2
Free Tibet	1	0	1
freedom	0	10	10
fun	7	10	17
fundraisers	1	0	1
GCSEs	4	6	10
get into trouble wit	0	2	2
get on with everybod	4	1	5
get rid of teachers	0	6	6
glad to be leaving	0	2	2
go back to real worl	0	2	2
go to the shops	3	0	3
good when teachers a	0	4	4
grow vegetables	0	3	3
hands on / practical	6	1	7
happy with decision	1	0	1
hated school	1	1	2
have a say	4	0	4
have to fit in	6	0	6
hierarchy depending	0	1	1
hippies	7	2	9
home tutored	2	0	2
how decisions are ma	9	0	9
how you want to lear	0	2	2
hurts	1	1	2
I didn't go to schoo	1	0	1
I have changed / I h	4	0	4
identity as Small Sc	1	0	1
impact of [Head] bei	6	5	11
importance of friend	7	1	8
importance of planni	1	0	1
influence	3	0	3
informal	0	2	2
interesting	1	0	1
is it good school?	2	0	2
it's not just what t	1	0	1
kids	3	1	4
know each other	0	1	1
knowing something ab	1	0	1
lack of clarity on s	6	2	8
lack of continuity w	0	2	2
learning	13	9	22
lessons	1	1	2
lessons in afternoon	6	0	6
Life skills	2	0	2
lost old friends	3	0	3
Maths teachers	0	4	4
Messing about	1	4	5

miss meeting more pe	1	0	1
money	6	9	15
mood the teachers ar	0	4	4
more attention from	0	2	2
more like a group	1	1	2
mutual respect	0	2	2
Never really been bu	1	0	1
no strict rules	0	1	1
older / younger stud	0	10	10
optional	1	0	1
passive	2	1	3
personal choice	0	1	1
piss around	1	1	2
playing games	7	2	9
preconceptions / pri	0	8	8
prefer to be out on	1	0	1
pressure on teachers	0	2	2
previous school expe	8	4	12
proud	1	0	1
puppies	1	0	1
recording	1	0	1
recruiting teachers	0	3	3
register	2	0	2
relationship with lo	5	0	5
relationship with te	3	9	12
reluctant to answer	3	1	4
response to negative	8	0	8
role models	0	1	1
role of parents	7	2	9
role of students	1	0	1
role of teachers	6	5	11
role of trustees	3	4	7
rumours	6	0	6
SATS	1	0	1
school council	7	0	7
school has changed	0	6	6
second family - or n	4	2	6
see it for yourself	1	0	1
selection	0	1	1
sense of being 'righ	5	0	5
sense of disagreeMEN	2	1	3
size of classes	3	9	12
size of school(s)	12	5	17
slightly negative /	12	12	24
slower pace	0	1	1
Snowdonia	3	0	3
some people don't se	2	0	2
some teachers good	0	1	1
Special weeks	8	0	8
spontaneous	0	1	1
start slagging them	2	0	2
stressful / scary	2	1	3
suggestions not very	7	0	7
supportive	2	0	2
tea and coffee	1	1	2
teacher's have the m	3	1	4
teachers are leaving	0	4	4
teachers take time t	0	3	3

teachers yelling at	1	0	1
teaching style	0	4	4
teaching us to make	0	1	1
the whole school	2	0	2
they can't teach us	0	5	5
think its perfect ed	0	4	4
treated as a number	1	0	1
tutor	1	0	1
unsure on systems	3	3	6
used to - things dif	10	2	12
used to be crazier /	0	3	3
village v town	1	0	1
vote	1	0	1
want to do well	1	1	2
we always complain	0	1	1
We've	1	0	1
what's good about sc	14	4	18
what is school for?	6	1	7
what next?	1	5	6
what we want	3	0	3
who chose school?	4	1	5
wind teachers up	0	3	3
Work experience	4	0	4
write about the scho	0	3	3
you're allowed	1	0	1
youth club	0	3	3

Totals	430	338	768

Appendix F Code List (The Small School - observational and documentary analysis)

First column - observational data
Second column - documentary information

CODES	Totals		
active in class	1	0	1
approach to learning	1	1	2
attitude of teacher	7	0	7
attitude to learning	10	0	10
behaviour of student	9	0	9
belonging	1	0	1
boring	1	0	1
Choice	0	1	1
circle time	1	0	1
community	0	4	4
compulsory	2	1	3
context for teachers	1	0	1
culture of school?	3	0	3
curriculum design	5	7	12
dealing with difficu	1	0	1
defensiveness	1	0	1
Democracy	5	0	5
Demographic	1	0	1
environmentalists	0	3	3
ethos	1	4	5
finances / uncertain	4	4	8
flagship / model	0	3	3
flexibility	2	2	4
freedom as teacher	1	0	1
Freedom v responsibi	1	0	1
Guardians	0	2	2
High turnover of sta	2	0	2
history	0	3	3
homework task	2	0	2
honest with teacher	2	0	2
Human Scale Educatio	0	4	4
identity	2	0	2
identity as differen	1	0	1
impact of Head being	1	0	1
inconsistency	2	0	2
influence of Head	2	0	2
informal	3	0	3
issue of selection	1	1	2
lack of coherence of	2	0	2
lack of control	2	0	2
lack of motivation	1	0	1
layout of room	4	0	4
league tables	0	1	1
Learning disabilitie	2	1	3
learning to learn?	3	0	3

limits to decision-m	1	0	1
living on legacy / s	3	1	4
local / rural settin	1	9	10
midday meal	0	1	1
more males than fema	2	0	2
motto	0	3	3
no future planning	3	0	3
no monitoring	1	0	1
overseas connections	0	4	4
parental involvement	1	5	6
passivity	5	0	5
progression of stude	0	1	1
question / hunch	2	0	2
relationship between	11	0	11
resentment in local	1	0	1
revolutionary projec	0	1	1
Satish Kumar	0	2	2
school dependent on	2	0	2
size of group	3	0	3
small	2	4	6
special weeks	0	3	3
student decides whet	0	1	1
teaching style	10	1	11
unclear ethos	1	0	1
without any loss of	0	1	1
work across age grou	0	2	2
work with other scho	0	1	1
youthwork	2	0	2

Totals	142	82	224

Appendix G The Naturalistic Treatment of Trustworthiness

The Naturalistic Treatment of Trustworthiness					
<i>To take account of which we:</i>					
<i>Inquiry can be affected by:</i>	<i>Which produce effects of:</i>	<i>During:</i>	<i>After:</i>	<i>In the hope these actions will lead to:</i>	<i>And produce findings that are:</i>
Factor patternings	Noninterpretability	Use prolonged engagement Use persistent observation Use peer debriefing Do triangulation Collect referential adequacy materials Do member checks	Establish structural corroboration (coherence) Establish referential adequacy Do member checks	Credibility	Plausible
Situational uniquenesses	Noncomparability	Collect thick descriptive data Do theoretical/purposive sampling	Develop thick description	Transferability	Context-relevant
Instrumental changes	Instability	Use overlap methods Use stepwise replication Leave audit trail	Do dependability audit (process)	Dependability	Stable
Investigator predilections	Bias	Do triangulation Practice reflexivity (audit trail)	Do confirmability audit (product)	Confirmability	Investigator-free

(Guba, 1981:83)